

Book review

Titre du livre: **The hair divide and other poems**

Auteurs : **Liyong Emmanuel Sama**

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Liyong Emmanuel Sama's collection *The Hair Divide and Other Poems* is a mesmerising exploration of shared emotions and the layered complexity of human experience. The poems were written between 1983 and 2019, spanning some 36 years and therefore demand careful reading from the audience. The poems are recollections of thoughts and emotions from various locations: Bamenda, Kribi, Buea, Akwaya, Kekem, Luanda-Angola, Hoedspruit- South Africa, and Calabar-Nigeria, suggesting the author's broad experience across the country and the continent. This review cannot help but be an incomplete analysis of such an expansive collection in time and depth.

The first startling reactions arise from the title *The Hair Divide and Other Poems*. The hair divide? Takes us to the dictionary of idiomatic expressions. What does this mean? Is it the splitting hairs? Is it the line that runs through Mandela's hair? Lumumba's? What is the meaning? The truth is, we may never know. So the poet invites us into a world where knowing is an illusion, perhaps because, in real life, we hardly know the forces that brought us about. Thus, the poems take us through a labyrinth of emotions. The reader goes through this until he meets the poem "The Hair Divide" on page 47, prompting the question of why the poem doesn't come first. The poem merits particular focus because it is the lead poem, giving the collection its name. Here, the speaker raises the idea of black and white hair suggesting that black kinky hair is more challenging to fix than white hair.

My sisters are two

The elder is black, like me

The other is white, Lucie

And her hairs are long –

I mean the ones on her head.

The younger sister “Infrequently to the salon went

Only for hair cutting and washing and shaping,” while the elder sister “Four times a month, my sister spends/time and cash/hairdos to change”. The speaker finishes by throwing the rhetorical question as to why one sister must spend so much on her hair and not the other.

I will classify the poems into four groups: poems of loss, poems of fear, poems of desire, and poems of hope.

POEMS OF LOSS

Under poems of loss, we have, among others, “Infamous Lake Nyos”, “Aids, Aids, Aids! All Over”, “Worry”, “Tribute to My Mother”, and others. “Infamous Lake Nyos” reminds us of the geological disaster on 21 August 1986.

NYOS,

Yes, infamous Lake Nyos

So much ink has flown like tears

Shed for our kins—your kills

Whom you flooded in the land they tilled

Their bodies buried en masse

Making the place a mess.

The poem is a sad recollection of the catastrophe as the speaker laments the dead. It also raises fears as to whether sufficient precautions are being taken to stop a future disaster. Closely related to this poem is “Aids, Aids, Aids! All Over” written in 1986 when the Aids pandemic was a death sentence. The speaker expresses both fear for the disease and the loss of lives that result from its spread.

AIDS! AIDS!... AIDS! ALL OVER

Many downcast by AIDS

Thousands and thousands perishing from AIDS!

Radio airwaves filled with AIDS!

News magazines and papers talk AIDS!

Reading the poem today doesn't quite bring out the terror because of the advances made in introducing antiretrovirals. Still, one can experience the agony of the speaker's writing in 1986 through hindsight.

“Tribute to My Mother” is a moving account of the speaker's mother's life and death. Written after her passing in 2011, the poem is autobiographical and intimate. We experience the courage of a woman who gave birth to fourteen children and buried ten of them. As the poet puts it “What a mothering machine you were / Not only for the fourteen you bore / ten of whom you buried.” The speaker recalls her challenges with dementia, probably caused by the highhandedness of her husband aptly named Samzanvah. The poet should explain this to us.

POEMS OF FEAR

Poems of fear consist of poems in which the speaker expresses fear about an event or thoughts of what might happen. “Spare Me Savimbi”, “Why Must I Cry”, “The Widow's Cross; A Widow's Cry”, and others. “Spare Me Savimbi” is a recollection of the poet's stopover in Luanda, Angola, on his way to Johannesburg, South Africa. The poem reads:

Nursing a can of Castle beer

In an Air Gabon flight for Jo'burg

And the hostess spelled:

“We shall make a stopover at Luanda-Angola.”

Twenty-five times my heart skipped its beat

Twenty-five times I minded my kids!

Spare me Savimbi,

So that I live longer

And grow a beard longer

And greyer

Than the Savimbi years of war.

Spare me, Savimbi!

The poet here expresses fear for the infamous rebel leader, Savimbi, fearful that his plane might be shot down from the sky.

POEMS OF DESIRE

A collection of poetry would hardly meet Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” poems of the eros. And so here and there, scattered among the collections, are poems of desire and love. The human condition depends on love and reproduction to keep the species on earth. For the sake of time, we shall mention only three poems in this category: “The Rise and Fall of Love”, “Village Belle”, “A Flame of Desire” and others.

“The Rise and Fall of Love” is an erotic poem in which the speaker experiences the thrills of erotic love with a woman.

Under the hazy smoke of moon tiger

Did we drill, drilled and mined.

Ah! The pleasures of Eve and Adam

When stealing the forbidden fruit!

This stanza clearly indicates that the couple are engaged in a sexual encounter and that it is perhaps forbidden. In the third stanza we are given images of an erotic encounter bringing to mind the recently gone viral images of Balthazar. “and so the hips rise and fall / our buttocks whipped / by the canes of desire. / Oh what a meal /of the unwanted end”. This love is, however, not the kind that binds forever but a temporal pastime.

“Village Belle”, presents the image of a village belle who falls short of the qualities the poet expects from a woman. However she is still the choice woman of flirtatious men who need her body for their sexual need.

She is the village belle

Sought by many for taste

Sought by none for keeps

Now multi-coloured from bleaching

O cherished model for modern cosmetics.

And yet she is, as the speaker puts it, “She is the one-eyed queen / In this jungle of untapped belles”. She is both desired and loathed. Her modern aspect revolts the speaker, who, however, must acknowledge the fact that she is still the village belle.

“A Flame of Desire” is another erotically charged poem in which the male speaker waits for his woman. The relationship is one of desire more than love. Given that this poem is written in Kribi, we may begin reading tourist signs in it. The poem begins:

Dearie, for you this chilly eve

Without knowing why

My love glows

As this fire licks

My thirsty heart.

The speaker hankers after the satisfaction his love will bring by quenching the flame burning hot within him. The poem ends with the speaker still in wait but hoping that his doctor will come and rid him of the pangs of desire:

And as I stay here in wait

When will you hurry

With the showers of your love to quench

This heart so yearning

This heart so burning

In this desert of want?

The poet here raises a universal theme of waiting. Men always wait for the woman to come, cook, deliver, get dry, and forgive. And it would seem that men always have to wait more.

POEMS OF HOPE

Great poetry exposes human fears, desires, yearnings, and hope. In the fourth category poems of hope we have the following: “Love is My Kalash”, “A Few Nights and Days in Dar”, “Jesus My Christ”.

“Love is My Kalash” is a tribute to love over hate and violence. The speaker recommends love as a solution towards peace building and uses the phallic symbol of an erection used to create love in a couple as a metaphor for love in society.

Love is my AK47

Instilling confidence and strength

And the zeal to conquer

Just by the soft touch of the smooth crotch

And a squeeze of the erect trigger

To tear down the walls of hate

So, instead of using the gun to fight, the speaker recommends using the phallus to multiply love and people.

“Jesus My Christ” is perhaps the poet’s only poem that deals directly with religion. Here, the speaker expresses his faith in Jesus Christ as his saviour, confirming the optimism lacking in the poems of loss and fear.

CONCLUSION:

When called upon to do a review, I resort to reader-response criticism. Texts have gaps that the writer leaves, sometimes involuntarily inviting the reader to complete the gaps. As I read through the poems, I was aware of what the poet put in them, but I was also aware of what was conspicuously absent. The poems one should have thought would capture the crisis of the moment, but few references exist. And although I leave more questions than answers, I find this collection to be just great.