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ADURA OJO

Monday Writer
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About Adura Ojo

Adura Ojo is a British-Nigerian Poet and Storyteller. She is the author of a full-length poetry collection: *Life is a woman Breaking Eggs*, published in 2014 & a second edition in 2017 by Lafia Publishers, and *Mania*, a chapbook (Words, Rhymes & Rhythm, 2020).

Her work has appeared in a host of journals, magazines and anthologies including Acumen, Sentinel Champions, Anti-Heroin Chic, Paris Lit Up, The Rialto, Stockholm Review of Literature, & Lockdown 2020, among others. A graduate of English Studies & Law, & a former mental health practitioner, she is doing her best to live-write while looking out for chocolate. Adura is currently working on some essays & a memoir.

The Monday Writer Interview

Adura Ojo

in conversation with Nnorom Azuonye

Adura, congratulations on the publication of your new chapbook, *Mania*. Tell me a little about the project and why have you chosen to offer it as a free download?



Thanks, Nnorom. The best projects are usually the ones that are not planned, one just goes with the flow and how it guides the creative process.

I had an idea for a chapbook, it was random but it took shape as time went on, to put together a collection of old and new pieces of mine plus an experimental visual experience of appreciation of the craft. I wanted that appreciation of poetry to be reflected in *Mania* and that's how it came into being.

I also desired to do something different with how we read poetry on the page. I thought about established conventions and why do poem titles come at the top of the page and not the bottom? When there is that urgency in childbirth to push the baby, so to speak, the mother is not necessarily thinking about the process, the urgency is such that she just wants the baby born and healthy in the world with her.

I wanted *Mania* out and I know the formal publishing process takes ages, but most importantly, I thought it best to offer free access so it would get to as many people as possible. I felt *Mania*, because of some of the questions it was asking, deserved to be read by as many readers as possible. If someone fancied reading it, they could just download it without thinking of the cost.

And the address to download it from is:

<https://www.wrr.ng/download/mania-adura-ojo/>

Yes.

Hope is the most powerful instrument that powers dreams. Your poem 'Smoke' in *Mania* opens with a line 'hope is like smoke'. Some readers might say that makes hope seem hopeless before it

yields gifts such as beauty. What picture of the human condition have you painted in this poem?

I don't think it makes hope seem hopeless, I think it could mean that we fight for it, that it takes work in much the same way as most of sustainable desire does. So, we huff and puff away until we get there. The smoke (from effort) permeates and sustains the 'puffer.' Mind you, 'hope' is both vice and virtue. It can kill as well as sustain, and when it kills, it's like teargas. I rather fancy the puffing away though. It is at least something to say for the effort put into hope to get a result, and we pray that existentialism does not get the better of us, that we remain hopeful particularly at a time like this that we have a pandemic on our hands. We need to keep huffing and puffing and not give up.

In the poem 'For Lucille Clifton' you seem to dig a knife into the sides of poetry purists and style gurus who don't see the merit in everyone's way of self-expression. 'Poetry needs no gods / A band of warriors exist / In many forms born, they come / They tell. They stay'. So, tell me, what is hurting the world of poetry more, bad poetry or bad critics of bad poetry?

What an interesting question you ask, Nnorom? I'd say bad poetry is in the eye of the beholder, and so, it is neither one nor the other. One of the great things about poetry is that there are really no rules. Poetry writes what it wants. It is up to the reader to decide whether they want it. I'm not a great fan of literary snobbery. I like what I like. I expect most readers like what they like. There is more than enough room in the Multiverse for every poet's creative expression. Ditch the rules and conventions. Let's just write. I say yes to unfettered creativity so long as it's about the craft.

Do you recall the first piece of creative writing you published? When was it published? How have your writing and thematic burdens changed or grown since that publication?

I used to write a column for a Sunday paper (Sunday independent) in Nigeria back in 2004/5. That was when I had my first pieces of work published, excerpts of a WIP about a dating couple and their families, titled "Tequila Secrets." And a diary titled "London Calling" which was about living in London. I got into poetry later from 2008. I remember writing this poem, "Oladunni" on my old blog: Naijalines, back then and it was well-received. It was a poem about a house help who was treated rather badly. I kind of got the bug for poetry from then on. My thematic preoccupations haven't changed. I'm essentially a humanist interested in human life in all its beauty, mystery, and sadness. I'd say for me right now, poetry is about finding new ways for the voice to be heard. Getting to say something entirely new is rare. A poet is lucky if they get to say something new. As far as thematic

preoccupations go, it's not just about what the poet says, it's how they say it.

Now, about that title of your first full collection, *Life is a Woman Breaking Eggs*. You know that is a serious statement. I have a few questions, Adura, why and how is life a woman and why is she breaking eggs? Briefly tell me how you came to conceive and prove your premise in the collection.

All life starts with woman. An egg must be in the womb for life to commence (before she meets her mate). Again, it's about (me) needing to push this one out. *Life is a Woman Breaking Eggs* (LIAWBE) was a personal project. The creative process was a shedding for me. And it's kind of prophetic now looking back, that around the time I was birthing LIAWBE - a project which started in 2012 and got published 2014, my body went into perimenopause at around the same time, which has been a traumatic experience. Though I had no idea back then that this was what was happening. What can I say? Poetry is spiritual and that's what happened back then. I needed to let stuff go, my body was grieving. A woman does get to her own place eventually, and when she does, it's not somewhere dictated by society or anyone, or even the biological process of making eggs or ceasing egg-making. She gets there despite all these experiences because she recognises herself despite it all.

In an interview you granted Geosi Gyasi you said your poems cover many subjects including 'identity, race, the diasporan experience, poverty, terrorism and poor leadership' not just the feminist experience. If you were approached to write a full collection of poems on just one of these subjects, which would it be and why?

These are all subjects that I care deeply about. Instinct tells me the other subjects have no meaning without the input of identity. Who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to the world is what drives us as human beings. Identity would tie in all the other concerns. I find that "How do [I] feel about this" is usually a good place to start.

You are probably not going to consider politics, but let's take a flight here, shall we?. You wake up tomorrow morning and find that you have been appointed the Minister for Women and Equalities by the British Prime Minister. What would your top priorities be in order to uphold the rights and dignity of women?

(Laughs) I don't think Boris Johnson is even in the slightest, remotely aware of my existence. So, yes, a flight is all we can attempt here. My objective in such a role would be to ensure that women are represented in all aspects of public life. Top positions in Academia, Industry and Politics are frequently highlighted in research as being areas where more should be done to

ensure women have equal access. Another area I'm concerned about is contraception. I would like to see a world where men took some responsibility for contraception. It's easier and less risky for men to do contraception effectively than it is for women. But the burden right now is still seen as that of women to bear. We need to make male contraception (injection) a more viable option for men through education. The male contraceptive injection is 100% reversible and can be reversed when a man is ready to have kids. Education should start in secondary (high) schools when males become sexually active. Until that day comes, women will continue to have unwanted pregnancies and risky abortions.

Safe landing. Hey guys, take note. Let's back to your writing, OK? In July 2011, your poem 'Four Corners' was highly commended by Bob Beagrie in the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition. Quite a feat! Your poem was in the top 6 of the 470 entries that quarter. How does such an achievement encourage you to make 'good' go to 'excellent' in your writing?

"Four Corners" was inspired by my experiences as a mental health practitioner. It meant a lot that the poem had the recognition it did. I didn't realise it did so well, thank you. Mental Health is one of those issues we still shy away from discussing, but it's so important.

I'm grateful for spaces like the Sentinel. As you know, Sentinel Nigeria was the first journal to publish my work. I remember it was a set of three poems in 2010, including "Old Boots", and this was what spurred me on to enter a few poems later in the Sentinel International Poetry competition where "Four Corners" was highly commended. Writer achievements are important. Writing is often lonely. Writers need encouragement, particularly poets. Poetry is often seen as the Cinderella of the writing sector. Recognition of the craft keeps poets going. It helps build and sustain careers. Personally, I want to do so much more. I want to be as prolific in my output as some of the poets I admire, like Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, and Uche Nduka. These are poets who are all about the craft and the art of writing.

You are one of only two Nigerians to place in the Sentinel competition series, with Peter Akinlabi winning the first prize in October 2009. Interestingly, since 2009 we have only had fifteen Nigerians in total enter the competition. In your thinking, why do we have such a low participation by Nigerians?

Wow, I had no idea this was the case. It's possible that Nigerians are not as aware of Sentinel as they should be. This may change soon with Sentinel's Monday Writer series featuring writers from all over the world, including Nigerian writers.

Oh, no I think they are aware. I am going to poll Nigerians in my spaces to understand how water got into the flute of the pumpkin. Thanks, Adura. Before I leave you, let's go back to the interview with Geosi in September 2014. You mentioned your novel was 75% completed. Where are we with that now?

Nnorom, you and I know not all projects make it to completion. My time is taken with poetry and non-fiction work. I have a non-fiction piece coming out next year which is part of an anthology. I will be doing more non-fiction work. I have no plans for a novel currently.

Fair enough. We have discussed re-issuing *Life is a Woman* through SPM Publications, and I have read you are rewriting and updating the poems right now. Exciting times no doubt. Are you also working on a second full collection?

Yes, we did talk about SPM re-issuing *LIAWBE*. The "*Rewriting Life*" collection which I just started last week (and which got some positive reception on Facebook) is exciting, experimental work. In "*Rewriting Life*," I'm exploring the poems in *Life is a Woman Breaking Eggs* (*LIAWBE*) and "rewriting" them to show where I'm at six years down the line in my journey both as a person and a poet. I'm aiming to show growth in both of those dimensions, and maybe this is one SPM will get involved with. I'm looking at form, format, and imagery for this "rewrite" which is a new collection by itself, but with links to the original work that gave birth to it. It's an exciting time for me right now. I have at least three collections I just started work on. It's too early to say but at least one of the collections will be a full one. I also plan to do more non-fiction work. All things considered, I'll have at least one chapbook out next year, so we need to talk!

Thanks Adura for talking to me. I wish you continued bountiful creativity.

It's been a pleasure talking to you, Nnorom. Thank you for all that you do to support the poetry community. Sentinel gave me my first break as a poet and so, for me, it's always nice coming home.

Middle Finger

It's not just middle finger that hurts
Left hand is in trouble. A nail served pain.
One hard-bitten fingernail pushed by teeth

Into the nail bed
An array of scattered clues
No links for a fix

It didn't start with the hard-bitten nail
It started with carelessness
Of taking it all for granted

And taking what is, not caring what
Trying to get out of motion while in auto
The middle finger finding a new way out of pain

Lying in bed helpless / I cry out for my daughter / who's watching a movie / with her 'mum's calling' ear on mute / school's out and she's online / I'm huddled up / head in hand / breathing as if to reassure myself / I can hear / though / the pain in my middle finger / it staggers up a jolt / this pain we give ourselves / middle finger is bolted as if upright / but it's really bent and doesn't care / I can hear my daughter laughing / I make to catch my own breath / to see if it will hold this pain and toss it out of the bedroom window / I'm screaming / she still can't hear me / my mind's eye is pleading with my daughter to take out her earphones and get me some water so I can breathe / make peace with middle finger

I ask how we got here / why raging bullets and horses speaking to my daughter's laughter / is all she can hear / and not the pain of her mother screaming for water / and does middle finger give a toss while trying to find a voice for its own guilt / that no one on either side of it can sleep / that serving this poison to the nail bed hurts / it hurts / it stings / and there's pain everywhere

My daughter came to me / she'd unmuted herself and heard me scream / and she said: mum?

Nearly Nine Minutes (& Counting)

Tell them it's noise
Send them flowers
What do you order?
Gladioli, lilies?
It's the job, see?
The spirit to carry on in the gaze of the world
The audacity of no weight to action in uniform
Uncompromising knee to a siren of anguish
A basket of new words to say it out loud
You / kill / me / with / the / knee

Tell them it's noise / say it with gladioli / it's the job / see?
Noise is when you swat a fly buzzing over your pork chop
Noise is when you mow the lawn just before you go to the store
Noise is when you yell at children to calm down with their water gun
Murder is when you're counting to yourself how many more seconds
it'd take to make me quiet.

Eyes

Peering this morning / I'm not searching for wrinkles / I mine enough
melanin / not that I mind / at least not now / not that I care to mop the
excesses her deep concentration secretes right now / searching for
answers / I'm mesmerised by her gaze / the way she draws me to royal
depths / her sea navy merchants in submarine / and I'm thinking / this is
how our voyage got made / splashes of blue / green and even turquoise
and brown / the story in the morning of how we got here in winter / made
our home in these hues / walked our Yesterdays free on the land.

Four Corners

What is it like to be in her four corners?
Mind like wild horses?
Colonized by an army of cockroaches
Scurrying for every inch of her soul
Four nurses and the prick of a needle
Price of a silent night in four corners

At nine she knew the tricks to save time
Not that she could have done it without stitches
Mum said not to go to the doctors, she could do it herself
So she did and the johns kept coming
When the cockroaches came crawling
It felt the same...
Same room, different occupants
Feeding on flesh without pay
Well, mum got paid...and she pays too
In her four corners.

And what is the price of free?
Never enough
No give in inches of four corners.

Get in touch with Adura

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Nnorom Azuonye is the author of *Funeral of the Minstrel* (a play), *The Bridge Selection: Poems for the Road, Letter to God & Other Poems* and *On the Record: Conversations with Writers & Artists* (12 July 2021, SPM Publications)

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