

Book Review

Gems and Flowers: Dissecting Nervous Adolescents, Spirituality, Cultural Revivalism Of Modern Igbo

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This work, *Gems and Flowers*, is a potpourri of didactic teachings that belies the age of innocence, and redirects the bohemian age. This is done using the means of short fiction, poetry and short essays. That this may appear to be far removed from present realities does no credit to the cultural rebellion being witnessed globally in every culture, but specially the Igbo culture. Hardly can modern writers think of the Romanticism associated with the era of *A Basket of Flowers*, which pursued child and adolescent Purity as a theme.

As one who has followed the work from conception to fruition, I can attest to the doggedness with which Uchenna Nnadi pursued his theme, even when his style appears to detract from the conventional protocol. But the target audience, the young and the restless, as well as parents, will be touched by this, inevitably. But this work is not only about nervous adolescents at the throes of love—the age of *butterflies-in-the-stomach* love—it is also about spirituality and cultural revivalism of the modern Igbo, nay, African mind; a rediscovery of the real meanings behind certain Igbo rituals and cosmography to appreciate deeper the meaning of our being on earth. It is a novel approach which seeks to bridge the gap between Orthodox Christianity and indigenous ways of life often termed African Traditional Religion. Hence it fluctuates between telling didactic stories, and reawakening the almost forgotten knowledge of forces of nature that took on forms.

He differs from other cultural revivalists who struggle to portray the Igbo culture as being an autonomous one whose growth has been truncated by the intervention of Christianity. Nnadi rather sought a bridge between the two, tacitly laying the blame of the non-integration of the two on colonialists who found nothing useful in the Igbo and African cultural heritage. He employed both allegory and symbolism as tools, as well as direct didacticism, as in his treatise of the sexual Power.

The book is divided into four parts, though all parts are organically related. Part one is entitled *The Romance of Innocence*, and tells a story of two teenage undergraduates who fell in love in what Italians describe as Thunderbolt Love. There is an Idealism

that has become scarce commodity in modern times-Ideal Parents, Ideal children still steeped in the age of innocence, and their romance, guided by their parents.

It may be assumed that modernism has made such romanticism obsolete, but that is not so. It actually holds the key to cultural revivalism and moral suasion. The message is that if such little gems are not identified and nurtured, the efforts to halt the current decadence - for there *is* a dangerously sliding decadence - will be futile. Religious organizations are more interested in morbid commercialism than moral compass of their flocks. Applying Kafkaesque symbolism and the psychologically probing symbolism of James Joyce, he tells the tale in disjointed converse, which actually underlines the psychology of the protagonists. Here he wove the threads of parenting through the distaff of pliant youths--and actually succeeded. This first part ended as abruptly as it started--actually out of design. Their future is an open book yet to be written.

Part two, entitled *Shuttle in a Shell*, can stand on its own as an anthology of poems. It is a journey of self-discovery and spiritual flight under the protective wings of love. If poetry is meant to be tearing the veil that covers the footprints on the soul, then this is a deeper representation of his poetry. From lofty themes as flight into paradise to an attempt to answer the question, *Man, Know Thyself*, he pursued his brand of poetry to a simplistic overlay of questions, most of them rhetoric. But he cannot escape from teachings and instructions, no matter how hard he tries. It is better enjoyed and analysed by the reader on his own terms. But one thing is certain: the poetry is encapsulated in a budding poetic promise.

The third part is entitled *Song of the Undead*. This time, it is the conversation between a child and his grandfather. Here, both the cosmology and cosmogony of the clan—and by extension the Igbo Society and African societies. Issues of guidance and the relations with—again—nature beings; the significance of the cult of the parrots, the cross-cultural conflict between the West and the rest of us—all these were laid on the table.

One thing that becomes clear is that Nnadi is using his native Igbo village culture and cosmology, Ns'ka, and specifically Ovoko, to portray our cultural heritage and link with the Oriental religion as well as Western Christian faith. But that is his comfort zone, and does not detract from the message. Neither does he have any apologies for that. You only need to transpose the Ns'ka dialect with the evolving centralized Igbo and you have yourself a new knowledge. This is particularly evident in the fourth part of the book entitled *Tearing the Veil*, which deals with the thorny social issue of rape, pregnancy, and birth, all taken from a novel spiritual perspective. Most activists and commentators on the issue takes a what-we-can-see approach to rape, but Nnadi went deeper, exploring, using simple local cosmology bordering on reincarnation, birth and death to underlie the trauma. It does not end with what the average counsellor does, for most are ignorant of these things anyway.

Uche Nnadi has been known for his socio-economic and political commentaries on social media, and already commands a very modest fan base, even among the corridors of power. If you have enjoyed his commentaries, you will definitely enjoy this work, which, in my opinion, is both timely and timeless.