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## Hymn of Praise A Review of

*Songs of Silence* by Abdullahi Ismaila (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2021, 74 pages, ISBN978-978-918-668-6)

Like many of his previous books, *Songs of Silence* has a longer poem at the centre brilliantly interspersed with shorter lyric forms, except for the book length poem, *Our Country Holds a Whip Against Us* (2017). But the truth is that the longer form appears to suit Abdullahi the best (as some kind of challenge to the minimalist idea, for instance, that the ideal poem will be haiku). It would be foolhardy to highlight (as it is the staple of most poetry book reviews) the so-called stand out poems; for every page of *Songs of Silence* has scintillating and excitable lines which only very few contemporary Nigerian poets may lay claim to.

In October 1945, the preeminent American poet, Robert Lowell, sent his friend and equally redoubtable poet, Randall Jarrell, the manuscript of his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). Lowell could not have wished for a more ecstatic remarks:

[This] will be the first book of poems since Auden's *Poems...* the best nine or ten of your new poems are better than any poem in *Land of Unlikeness*; not only that, I think they are some of the best poems anyone has written in our time and

are sure to be read for hundreds of years. I am *sure* of this: I would bet hundred of dollars on it. You know how little contemporary poetry I like—if I'm affected this way—unless I've gone crazy—it must be the real thing. I think you're potentially a better poet than anybody writing in English.

While Jarrell had the reputation of being harsh and a severe critic and least interested in people, I, on the other hand, will not wax as exuberant as Jarrell in ordaining Abdullahi Ismaila as the best thing that happens to Nigerian poetry in recent years. But I will say one thing: Abdullahi Ismaila is an endearing and technically gifted poet in this age of hollow, trite Instagram poetry. I will say this: *pace* Niyi Osundare and, to a larger extent, Tanure Ojaide who are still writing and headlining Nigerian poetry (at least in its academic conception). The above pronouncement may sound as sprightlier as excessive a strain in Abdullahi's "hymn of praise" as Jarrell would call it, but it can easily be forgiven and accepted as I hope to argue below.



If the choice for *ur*-Nigerian poets is, on one hand, the oral, free-wheeling proverbial line of Osundare and Ohaeto, and, on the other, the heavy, emphatic line of Ojaide, then Abdullahi Ismaila's new poetry clearly would have appeared to be getting the best of every poetic/critical world. The Osundare line of poetics is sorely in need of some fresh dramatic regeneration; the Ojaide line too is self-evidently lacking metaphor, imagistic density and, in the context of its early enthusiasts, short too on genuine influence. In this circumstance, Abdullahi Ismaila's poetic voice is refreshing clearly because it could not be pigeonholed into either Osundare or Ojaide or indeed any other cubbyholes—it is blazing, of course, but it is also intelligent:

These are three-some serenade  
of mendicants whose prayers  
are muted silences  
in street corners,  
feeling night pulses,  
always chanting silences  
of desert miseries,  
of fattened oil glut  
in wintry silences

These discordant songs  
of muted vices  
with tuneful smiles  
bear laughters  
and unified perceptions  
across borders of silences

Redolent silences, reek  
bordering on invincible pains,  
of pains visible in simmering

smiles, of dislocated speeches  
simmering with redolent  
silences  
(from "Songs of Silence" pp.12-13).

Even though Abdullahi Ismaila has indeed become like Lowell "craftier" and more sonorous since writing *Ellipsis* (2001), in nearly all of the new poems in *Songs of Silence*, his position—and increasingly, his positioning—remains indubitably the same: the frantic gnawingly enjambed lyrical lines, the belter of modern myths, occasioned by recent Nigerian political misadventures, and quasi-symbolisms, the impertinent and homiletic invocations, the closely handled expressive brio and the linguistic exhortation—both of the poet and the persona—so that the poet's notable anger will not easily tail off and of Nigeria's increasing woes (which, if it will not be saved from, indeed deserves poetic flagellation). *Songs of Silences*, like the earlier collection *Our Country Holds a Whip Against Us*, is characterized throughout its 46 poems by what Gabriel Pearson calls "unacknowledged flight into the omnipotence of manic verbal control".

Bland styles (or plains styles as William Logan would say) are all the same, but every bad poetry—and there is a lot these days—is bad as bad can be. Abdullahi Ismaila has entered his third productive decade in "full possession" of not just his characteristic poetic mannerism but also (in the context of the present



book) his notable anger/angst towards the continuing corruption and political crisis in Nigeria. Abdullahi has always been a *political* poet most powerful when his politics seems *personal*, when the *shattered recollections* of a nation at war with itself are refracted through the *impersonal* brutalities, barbarism of country given to toxicity and the cheap hypocrisies of religion and ethnicity. The in-your-face, standoffish style which *Songs of Silence* has been ambling towards is chiseled out of an early sub-Soyinka, with its fusion and fissures, and a tad J.P. Clarkian agony and grandeur:

As scions of silence  
we inherit legacies of silence:  
patience silence  
tolerance silence  
humility silence  
timid silence  
which stare simoon laughters  
(even loud bunkum)  
and retreat into sheaths of  
silences  
sheathed colours of silence,  
silence of indifference  
that implodes with all  
drudgeries  
on the misery of our kinsmen;  
the misery silence of the elite  
are telling scar on threadbare  
silence of the urchins  
("Songs of Silence" p. 14).

Amidst the becalmed asinities and self-satisfying smugness of so much contemporary Nigerian poetry there is very little that dares or demands, and Nigerian poets distended with the fatuitous impulse should not be

reprimanded for attempting to imbibe an auto-poetry so increasingly submissive to the banal and the cobwebby. Why should we not rise in rapture and later reminisce in sheer delight with the poems in *Songs of Silence*? We certainly should do much more if not for anything then at least for Abdullahi Ismaila's handling of the poetic form.

*Songs of Silences* shows that the poet is adept at "revising" his poetic past as many contemporary Nigerian poets do not. The clipped and clever lines of his earlier books are different in the level of accomplishment if not embellishment, from his recent frolicking with the oral lore in *Our Country Holds a Whip Against Us*. But even in the shorter poems of *Songs of Silences*, such as "Master of Silence" for example, where the persona is "crushed/and bruised before/under the iron jackboots,/ and, phoenix-like, my groaning silence/only increased by inches", there appears the personal alienation, the private disarray a public grand trails, that has become as emblematic of Abdullahi's poetry as his mastery of the poetic form.

Form is almost always a form of refusal and there is a possibility any poet adept in such refusal will come to accept that a poet who commands form, as it were, commands the self. Endearing and urbane, Abdullahi's short poems have a smoothness of surface that cannot hide the seething shapes beneath. Whether probing the different guises of silence and the behavior of the silent/silenced in



different moods (as in the title poem), or salivating over honey (in “Kinship Song”), or being rudderless at the sea (in “Mad Sailors”), hankering for “carbonated air” (in “A Breath of Fresh Air”); or lamenting over the occult (in “Our Country”), the default fixtures of Abdullahi Ismaila’s poems mean all action is political, a protocol of relations gone awry in his poetic setting, Nigeria, in all its glory and gory.

In technical prowess (and occasional garnishment), technique, variety of voices— from angst ridden to the romantically tinted—and the welter of emotions, Abdullahi’s poems are unmatched in the annals of recent Nigerian poetry. Without mincing words, Abdullahi Ismaila is the most astute and accomplished poet of his generation, a generation now in its peak and as William Logan says of the poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg, he is fulfilling a tradition rather than furthering it. I could exalt these poems more deliriously than they merit since they come in an undelirious phase of Nigerian poetry. To readers who got through the tunnel of Nigerian poetry in English, Abdullahi’s craft may appear a tad familiar, but probably all the more pleasing for bespeaking how thoroughly radical formal precisions can seem. I have dawdled too long over Abdullahi’s formal nous since it is tempting in his oeuvre to be overawed by instant

fulfilments and ignore the fact that something bigger than the frantic exactitude of metaphor and the gratifying element of imagery makes these new poems beautiful.

There are so many good poems in *Songs of Silence* and I make no effort here to either discuss or list them all; the aim of this review nonetheless is to underline the kind of success Abdullahi achieves in *Song of Silences*. It is a success which allows him to attain dazzling heights in nearly all the poems: each poem bringing off one success after another. Reading the poems in the book, a discerning reader deservedly gets strayed into approbation for what they do so well that such a reader easily forgets how much they do not attempt.

*Songs of Silence* is beautifully written and testifies to Abdullahi Ismaila’s long standing dedication and passion for poetry and poetics. Every reader of poetry and writing generally will find their own surprises and pleasures in this remarkable debut collection, which marks a particular watershed in Nigerian poetry of English expression.

If Logan February, Richard Ali, Umar Sidi and Dami Ajayi are, like Rasaanq Malik Gbolahan, exciting but rare talents, Abdullahi Ismaila, whose poetic enterprise is profound, has overwhelmingly written to a level with which his contemporaries must be read.