

**A REVIEW OF CHARLES EBEREONWU'S *LOST LAUREL*****Saviour Nathan A. Agoro**

Mr. Charles Eberonwu the novelist whose work is reviewed in the following pages is following in the noble tradition and practice of those who have learnt to write out of interest as they discovered their talent in the creative domain. It is always precarious to traverse an unknown path. But no one would do anything new without embracing the element of risk which is always associated with everything in life. It is good that our writer is not intimidated to embark on the journey of learning how to become a novelist. Since writing is a very solitary business, by this review we intend to celebrate the many hours of solitude our author spent in the course of producing this work.

I do not want to do you the disservice in telling you too much about a novel you could find on every bookshelf to buy and read. It is needful, however, that in keeping with the tradition of book review that I say few words about the work you will have the opportunity to devour.

The story of *Lost Laurel* is told in between a prologue in which a child is born who brings hope to a people who are coming out from the throes of a debilitating civil war, and an epilogue in which another child is born whose birth will serve to unite an estranged son, not only with his family, but with his clan and country at large. The birth of Chidi to Nze and Nwamaka brings joy not only to Umuopara but also to the whole of Umudiala since he is the first child to be born in the community after the civil war. His birth is greeted with great joy. He is an exceptional child who is endowed with intelligence of a kind that neither corruption of any category could stop him from getting what rightly belongs to him in the nation. He becomes the darling of the community as the people expect that he will play a 'saviour' kind of role among them. But along the line he misses the mark and becomes a thing of shame to his people. In fact, he runs away from his people preferring to live abroad than among his people because his wife Clara who is a white Australian manipulates him. The birth of his daughter whom he names Nneoma who looks very much like his mother Nwamaka forces him to think about the people he has abandoned at home. Chidi makes up his mind to return to Nigeria to his people. It is a difficult decision which he must make. But because he is resolved to do what is proper he is able to win his wife over to return with him

and live in Nigeria to serve the people who have contributed to his well-being in many ways.

Chidi does not set out in life to detach himself from his family whom he loves so much. He is considered a very lovely and an understanding son. His father at the risk of educating him even mortgages his Christian faith and goes to borrow money from a shrine. This act endears his father to him. Ordinarily such a son as he is would not want to hurt his father or mother. But he goes abroad to Russia to study Nuclear and Atomic Physics under a scholarship scheme arranged by the Nigerian and Russian governments. He meets Clara Cliff an Australian lady with whom he falls in love in course of his studies. In his third year in Russia there is a change of government in Nigeria following a coup. The new military junta cancels the scholarship arrangement. Since the Russian government alone cannot sustain his stay in the programme he becomes vulnerable to the manipulation of Clara who proposes that he marries her in exchange of sponsoring him.

Clara is the only child and daughter of a very rich Australian industrialist. His marriage to her estranges him from his people. They complete their studies in Russia. They return home to Nigeria but do not allow themselves to be integrated into the clan any more. They keep away from the immediate family as well as from the clan. They will not attend any launching programme in the clan neither will they allow even his younger brother to stay with them in Lagos. In fact, in order to maintain their undisturbed status as a nuclear family they depart the shores of Nigeria to go and live abroad in Australia. They would only return following the metamorphosis that takes place in the Chidi which affects Clara. The story of *Lost Laurel* spans the whole range of human emotion. In it you will find moments of joy, sadness, apathy, anger, anxiety and even lukewarmness. Take for instance this excerpt: "Nze wept as he recalled the life his mother had lived; a life of suffering; a life of thorns without roses; a life of sowing without reaping; a life of hills and valleys without streams; a life of clouds that had no silver linings" (19).

Ebereonwu grapples with many ideas in this novel. He exalts the place of hard work as the key to success in life. He makes his main character Chidi epitomise the idea of a man who succeeds because he works hard. About Chidi he observes: "he was a firm believer that a man reaped whatever he sowed. For him, the only harvest for hard work was success" (28). He makes Chidi counsel Nnamdi this way: "Finally Nnamdi, I must let you know that the only key, the only door, the only entrance to success is hard work. With hard work, one will always achieve one's

aims, no matter how Herculean the task involved. One fact has always survived the test of time; that is that whatever a man sows, he shall reap. If you sow hard work, you reap success and if you sow laziness, or what you call 'academic laxity', you naturally reap failure. This saying by the principal whom your father succeeded will perhaps remain my guiding principle; he told us, he who fails daily to prepare, daily prepares to fail" (60).

In another place he presents the idea of success within the context of a philosophical proposition thus: "Society has no place, no sympathy for people it considers failures, no matter the efforts such people might have put in to succeed." (29). But success is not an individual thing alone. An age group could be seen to have failed if they are unable to support one of its members in handling a problem. Similarly, a clan could be considered as a failure if it cannot brace up and help one of its own with a challenge that is weightier than him. Even a study group in a university should be concerned with the collective success of the group. Clara's relationship with Chidi grows within the context of the search for success. He is also interested in showing how the clan as well as a family in it is concerned with how to succeed in life. That is why the Umudiala clan is not happy that after assisting to make Chidi what he has become, he turns his back on them and does not make himself available to assist other people with their search for success in life. He, however, presents Chidi's desertion of the clan within the motif of the dynamics of interracial marriage and how it affects the people in it.

The author demonstrates the extent of his concern as an avid reader by letting us into the world of some of the books he has read. He aptly integrates some passages from those works into his prose. He also makes use of local idioms in writing; some, however, appear forced in the contexts in which they appear. A number of *Igbo* words, phrases and expressions adorn his prose. The beauty of their usage is in the fact that their meanings could be deciphered within the context. But not all his sentences are sharp. Some appear stilted, as they lack clarity. His narration is clear. But the dialogue is not as conversational as it should imitate human speech patterns. The work is largely devoid of descriptive passages in which the physical settings where the actions of the narrative occur are presented to the reader. Besides, factual references to some situations lack merit. For instance, the setting of the novel in the post-civil war period does not provide strong impetus for the motif of poverty of the Nze household to the extent that his children

should drop out of primary school for their elder brother to be able to go to high school. Following the civil war fees became virtually nonexistent in primary schools. A good reason may have been that since teachers are hardly around because of one unmet condition of service or another, the public schools are hardly in session many months of the year. A poor father like Nze may not be able to pay the high fees in order to take his children through the private primary schools which in some cases may cost more than some undergraduate programmes in a Federal university.

These observations do not in any way detract from the enormous job our newest novelist has done. Since this is his very first work, it is hoped that whatever are the short falls observed here will not militate against his desire to produce a sequel to this work in no distant date. My business in commenting a little about this successful work is just to prepare your mind to get ready to grab a copy of it, read and digest it yourself. I cannot determine what would interest you in it. A work of art is very much like the beauty of a woman which is in the eyes of each beholder. As T.S. Eliot would say every work of art communicates more than what the author imagines to say. So come to *Lost Laurel* and have a feel of what is there in it for you personally.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Professor Saviour Nathan A. Agoro** BA (Hons), MA, PhD, FCAI, MNIM, studied Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where he earned all his degrees. He is a Professor of Dramatic Literature and Head of the Department of Fine, Industrial & Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. He was former Acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Before coming to Niger Delta University, he served as the Dean, School of Languages, Rivers State College of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He belongs to the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists, Association of Nigerian Authors and Nigerian Institute of Management (Chartered). He was a Visiting Senior Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Arts at the Institute of African Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown, under the Nigerian Technical Aid Corps Programme (TAC). He has published many plays and has contributed to scholarship in Drama and Theatre Arts in many works.