

AGAINST THE ODDS (A NOVEL) by Ben Igwe

Comments by Emmanuel Obiechina

Dr Ben Igwe's novel, *Against the Odds*, has joined the growing body of works that one could designate the Afro-diasporic - fiction. In them, characters descended from the old African Diaspora interrelate, and sometimes, interfuse with those of new African immigration to create exciting and challenging possibilities, and, sometimes, ambivalent or problematic situations.

In this novel, Jamike Nnorom, a village boy from the south-eastern Nigerian Village of Aludo, falls in love with and marries Linda Johnson, a girl from a solid African American middle class background from Pittsburgh in preference to the village belle, Chioma, selected for him by his Family, thus causing considerable discomfort to all the people concerned. The successful resolution of the ensuing crisis proves the hallmark of Igwe's adroit control of both the narrative structure and the plot of the novel.

The novel begins in rural Aludo as Jamike's widowed mother struggles to provide him with modern education in the face of grinding poverty. Through the generosity of the local headmaster, Mr. Ahamba, Jamike completes his primary education and is sent by the Catholic Mission to train as a teacher. Subsequently, he proceeds to further his education in the United States with the advice and support of Paul Laski, an American Peace Corps volunteer who taught a school near his village. After four years of a brilliant career at Regius State College in rural Pennsylvania, Jamike bags the highest honors degree of Summa Cum Laude in Philosophy, and Political Science. He returns to Aludo, not only with his sparkling academic achievement but with his beautiful American wife, to introduce her to his extended family. Thus the novel begins and ends in Africa, but America is deeply embedded somewhere as its substratum.

This sketchy foreground does not begin to adequately suggest the density of this novel's topicality, its variety of themes and the different cultural and environmental settings described in the immense, all encompassing narrative. Nor does it indicate the acute observations and understanding that go into the portrayal of characters and the easy, expressive use of language to denote varieties of opinions and nuances typified by its variety of situations and circumstances.

It is a very educative novel, written to enrich the reader in all manner of significant ways. A few of its outstanding, qualities ought to be highlighted here. A reader who wishes to understand the nature of rural life, especially the stringent modes of economic survival under stressed conditions in Igboland should read this novel. The ways in which Uridiya, the widow, and her son, Jamike, attempt to survive and to provide minimally for themselves is not atypical of life in

the village. Also, those who romanticize the peasants and vest them with an idyllic culture of benevolence should pay attention to the torments and mental cruelties meted out to the vulnerable widow as she is driven to a point of near lunacy by the neighbors.

One of the central themes of the novel is the idea that prejudice, stereotyping, and the outright demonization of others, arises from ignorance, fear, and misconception. This is worthy of close examination. The cultural character of this novel is the idea that prejudice, stereotyping, and the outright demonization of others, arises from ignorance, fear, and misconception. This is worthy of close examination. The central character of this novel is used by the author to prove that contact between Africans and their brothers and sisters of the Diaspora is not only possible but an absolute imperative. This theme is central to the novel as a whole and will remain the centerpiece of its ideological appeal. For the first time one has seen a mature and convincing handling of the prickly relationship which arises between the so-called old and new African diasporas in America. Here is a book which readers could call a bridge-building work, a factor which should recommend it to a very wide reading audience.

Against the Odds has many other virtues to recommend it. It has many characters and many of them are unforgettable, beginning with Jamike, the chief character. He is more than a village boy who made good. He is a strong and dynamic person, humble, sensitive and humane; with a laser-sharp intellect that cuts through enormous intricacies and always searches for the relevancies that enhance human relations. He breaks down prejudices and tries to open doors that have long remained jammed in relationships. He is the constant seeker after the compromises that unify rather than divide the world. That explains why he succeeds where others remain stymied in negativity. His life, forged in the crucible of poverty, has not embittered or made him cynical, for he remains a noble soul, almost a true prince, as he matures into manhood.

Then there are these other memorable characters: Uridiya, the formidable widow whose fierce energy is devoted to protecting her only fatherless child; the wise educative headmaster, Ahamba, who, with his ever sensible wife Asamuka, is the steadying influence in the village life, a humane and thoughtful and humane man, who directs events with an even hand and fends off turbulences, reducing potential storms into manageable winds; then there is Linda Johnson, young, intelligent, affectionate, and self-assured, almost a female equivalent of her man; the village women of Aludo, with their peasants shrewd eyes for understanding people declare that "she is the real thing" and that she and Jamike "look like brother and sister." Other characters, Paul Laski, the Peace Corp Volunteer who helps Jamike crystallize his educational dream, Nnamdi who acts as his tourist guide to America and helps him navigate the intricacies of American life and cultural habits, and Jamike's African student friends, all help to give the novel its lively rhythm and depth.

Finally, one must commend the many cultural insights embedded within this novel. Anyone interested in finding out about such an important cultural institution of the Igbo people as marriage should read this book. It gives you both the sociological framework and the intricate rituals of actual marriage situations.

The novel's portrayal of Igbo culture and Igbo temperament is good and reliable. Here is a culture which is basically humane and not given to neurotic extremism, which recognizes the importance of compromise in human affairs and thus diminishes the incidence of tragic destructiveness. The novel's portrayal of American culture, especially its libertarian streak, is also worthy of note. Even though the reader of this novel must go to it for its human experience, the fact that the people subsist within a viable and authentic human culture is a great help to entering fully into the life and experience of the fictive characters. Because *Against the Odds* is immersed in the matrix of authentic human culture, readers will find it both entertaining and educative.

Above everything else, this novel will be remembered by the realistic way it has explored the growth and development of the chief character. Indeed, it could be read as a study in the growth of consciousness, how Jamike evolves from an ignorant village boy to an intellectually mature and emotionally stable young man. His progress is emotionally delineated as are the chief influences in his life and the people who make maximum impact on his ideas and his attitudes. Outstandingly, he is able to distil his own ideas and form his own views out of the welter of ideas to which he is exposed. He sets out almost as an innocent abroad, absorbing each new stimulus, learning from each new experience, and reviewing and revising his original attitudes as he is exposed to each new dynamic contact. The upshot of course is that he is growing all the time, improving and adjusting to the world as it impinges on his weakly formed profile vis-à-vis a vastly changing world. Coming from a primarily traditional/patriarchal background, he has to undergo radical adjustments in attitudes to fit into a postmodern, intensely transformed post-civil rights, unisexually-oriented world. He has to respond to such previously unfamiliar phenomena as the gay lifestyle and the feminist assertiveness of contemporary women. In all this, Jamike attains the unique advantage of understanding the values and assumptions of the old world and the new, of both the world governed by patriarchal ideas and that defined by feminist and homophile sympathies. Most importantly, he reaches a high level of self-definition while at the same time understanding the position of his traditionalist relatives, even while refusing to be overwhelmed by their pressures. He makes reasonable compromises to tradition without sacrificing his progressive principles.

It should be noted that Jamike is fortunate to originate from a traditional culture which has unique qualities, including built-in receptivity to change and recognition of the virtue of compromise. In that regard, his Igbo culture is not really archetypically traditional. It is

traditional in the broad sense that its values have been prepackaged in the past and are transmitted from one generation to another by the spoken word and through close face to face contact. But, it is also a culture that admits of compromise and negotiation of contested interests. Its philosophical focal idea is that where something stands, something else always stands beside it. It is, therefore, not a culture of absolutism. It is a culture that admits change, provided change is brought about through argumentation, and consensual agreement.

All of this is pertinent to a discussion of *Against the Odds*. The ingredients of a potential tragic conflict are certainly present in the general outlay of the plot. We have the special relationship between a widowed mother and an only child, the extreme self sacrifice of the mother to shore up the educational prospects of the child, the expectation of the mother very much ratified by custom and tradition, especially with reference to marriage and the mandated obligation of the son to accept a wife arranged for him by his surviving parent. The tragic prospect is the disappointment of the mother's expectation when the son takes a foreign wife to himself and rejects the wife chosen for him by her. Thus, there exists a real potential for conflict and tragic alienation of mother from son. That a workable compromise is achieved in the end is a tribute to the good sense of the people and the innate flexibility of the cultural environment within which all the actors subsist. Everyone concerned conducts himself or herself with considerable restraint and good sense. Even the so-called foreign wife begins to look much less foreign when she embraces her new family and is ready to learn their ways and become part of their communal life. Thus, symbolically, the cultural bridge that was broken by the expatriation of Africans to the new world of the Americas in the era of slave trade is restored by return of the African American daughter to her ancestral homeland through her marriage to a native son of the African continent. In this affirmation, the novel boldly announces in the end that "Linda Johnson, an American bride, has come home to Africa." To put the matter differently, it takes the process of modern education to bring Jamike Nnorom from an authentic African village to the United States of America to find his African American bride, but it will take the process of "de-schooling" in the village of Aludo, Imo State, Nigeria, for Linda Johnson to recuperate her African roots. Her being a student of social anthropology proves a mighty asset.

--Emmanuel Obiechina

Associate Fellow

W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University

&

Fellow of Nigerian Academy of Letters