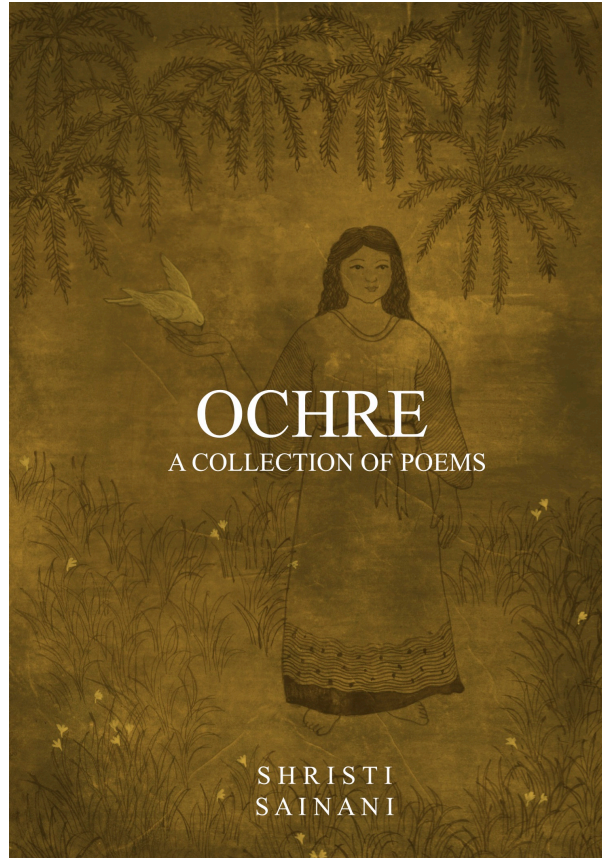


REVIEW
by Prof. Adebayo Williams



*Ochre : a Collection of Poems by Shristi Sainani with illustrations by
Puja Mondal*

This is a very rich collection full of wit, wisdom and pizzazz. It is the work of a brilliant and intensive creative imagination; a budding maestro of the written word.

Poems are mysterious creations indeed, enacted at the deepest recesses of the human communion and forged in the sacred smithy of the universal soul. They are walking warriors of the human condition as well as its wounded captives. As such, every poem is unique and so is every successful poet.

This is very much a collection of poems about coming of age in the time of the pandemic. Shristi Sainani is a unique specimen of a human being indeed. Born in Saudi Arabia of Indian parents, she was raised in Nigeria and went to university in Australia. This is a travelling theatre in splendid motion. Shristi is indeed a citizen of the world and a child of the globalised village.

In this young lady, the world's oldest continent collides with its youngest in the in-between continent of Mogul emperors and Arabian potentates. It is hybridity pushed to its utmost and ultimate melting point. But despite being a citizen of the world, Shristi has her feet firmly planted in her Indian antecedents.

There has always been something magical and fascinating about India. As attested to by its rich culture and variegated history as well as by those wonderful period films, India is the land where poetry meets passion; where children of the midnight encounter goddesses of small things and where unbelievable splendour exists side by side with incredible squalor. It is *Salman Rushdie* versus *Arundhati Roy*.

Despite her rather young age, Ms. Sainani unbelievably mines this rich trove of culture in all its alluring possibilities. The results are poem that are once personal and intensely introspective and others that are deeply engaged and committed to global political emancipation. It echoes and mirrors the gradual transformation of India itself. The midnight children are fast disappearing, giving way to the children of the midday.

As children of light, words are their principal weapon. As the author herself declaims in a poetic preface which reads very much like a manifesto and an opening declaration of intent:

"To me, words have the power to break me down and let me shed the wolf skin I glue to my sheep bones. They have the power to strengthen me, make me forget my sheep bones and focus on my lion heart."

This is brilliant phrase-making and poetry that is very much aware of its own healing power and therapeutic possibilities. It is poetry that revels and luxuriates in its own artifice and open versifying; poetry that is at once confessional and quietly confrontational. If a poem questions its own motives, it has won the right to question all motives and motifs. It is poetry that draws attention to its own conditions of possibility as well as enabling circumstances.

Nowhere is this confident gaming more evident than in the poem devoted to the title of the collection. **OCHRE** is a most unusual and strange sounding word. It is even more unusual as the title of a collection of poems.

Short, sharp, staccato sounding and totally in your face, it is not casual reader-friendly. But so is the most outstanding poetry. *Christopher Okigbo*, a great Nigerian poet who died fighting during the civil war, famously dismissed his interlocutors who charged him with poetic obscurantism on the ground that he wrote only for poets. Others can get lost.

But there is a straining for understanding and special advocacy in most of these poems that suggests that the author is not about to go that route of solipsism and self-isolation. The title of the collection may well be an opening gambit to disrupt our normal and accustomed perception and habitual sensors. A deeper look indicates that Ms. Sainani might be stalking a bigger horse.

Ochre is an unusual colour; a pale, brownish yellow admixture. In Australia where the author studied Architectural Design and is currently a graduate student of Art Curatorship, ochre is one of the principal foundations of Australian indigenous art. It is an integral part of the Aboriginal attempt to make sense of the world through dreamtime stories, maps and cave-drawing.

The author steps forward boldly with her own unique interpretation of the symbolic import of the ochre colour. To her, ochre is the “colour

of delayed sunshine” and of “decayed plants, disease, puss, piss and wormed peas”. This is neither appetising nor inviting. But since the author’s entire being is “drenched”, suffused and “smeared” by the “disgusting” ochre, a powerful impression is created of something which has to be endured since it cannot be avoided.

These poems reveal a sense of linguistic capability, a sensitivity to nuances and a heightened awareness of the impossible drama of human existence. Each poem could tell its own story, like a self-contained monad, yet a unifying theme of humanity in all its failings and spontaneous heroism runs through all of them.

The use of single words as titles of each poem is concentrating in the extreme leaving much unsaid and a lot to the reader’s imagination to decipher. Their evocative powers are gripping and haunting.

In the poem **ROULETTE** for example, the allusion is clear and telling. Any well-informed reader knows that roulette is a game of musical chairs which usually ends in tears. The last line delivers the punch line and coup de grace. “The croupier is a cheat”.

This is a poem of about six lines. But it is pithy and pitiless in its drastic summation. The power of its stunning and astounding eloquence derives from its devastating brevity and epigrammatic wit.

Without being patriarchal or patronising, one sometimes strains himself to keep in mind that this is a twenty five year old woman. The insight is often precocious and reveals someone wise and worldly beyond her years.

There are also poems of an intensely personal nature. As *William Shakespeare* has noted, there is no art to find the mind’s construction on the face. It is a rite of passage and initiation that everyone must go through. It is not a site of emotions recollected in perfect tranquillity but one of acute displeasure and intense psychic disruption.

But the author romps through with customary sangfroid and insouciance. These are the themes of poems such as ***WITHIN LITERATURE*** where the author deploys the genius of James Joyce, the master escape artist, to negotiate existential dilemmas or Stench where the poet upbraids a serial delinquent for gross dereliction of duty.

However, it is not all about settling psychological and psychic scores. Things can also occasionally get busily and hectically political revealing a hidden side to the author which has been well subsumed under her worldly-wise introspective gaze.

She does not come forth as a flame-throwing radical or a starry-eyed revolutionary idealist. But as a citizen of the world, she must show concern for violated denizens of other lands that are an integral part of a cosmopolitan upbringing.

Consequently, in the poem titled, ***LAGOS***, she tips her hat to the oppressed of Nigeria, particularly victims of the *ENDSARS* protest against police brutality which convulsed the entire nation for almost two weeks last October.

In a moving authorial preface to the poem, Shristi notes:

“In October 2020, a place I called home was in ruins. ENDSARS was a decentralised social movement against police brutality in Lagos, Nigeria. 51 civilians died, 11 policemen, 7 soldiers and several left injured.”

The poem proper opened with an anguished cry: *“My heart hurts looking at your state”* and ends with the injured supplication: *“I pray for you to heal”*. The nobility of soul brings joyous tears to the eyes. This is feeling work bursting with empathy and genuine compassion. The author’s cosmopolitan upbringing has stood her in good stead.

All in all, this is a remarkable collection of poetry for a debut, brimming with talent and poignant insight into the human condition in all its universal possibilities and perversities.

Combining the penchant for daring experimentation and stylistic bravura of postmodernist poetry with the abiding concern for the plight of humankind of modernist poetry, this is not a collection to be forgotten in a hurry.