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Olatoun Williams: Reviewer of African Literature and Founder of Borders Literature for All Nations

“Initiative needs well-being.” -Olatoun Williams



I met Olatoun Williams at Felabration, an annual festival of music and arts commemorating Nigeria’s musical icon, Fela Anikulakpo Kuti. We were there to attend the “The Fela Debates”: Movement of the People, The Fela & Bob Marley Perspectives (2013). Like most lectures, one remembers little but what is clearly vivid in my memory is Ms. Williams astute questions for the panel. She was the only person who delved into the subject of the debate with a balanced and studied comment as one would expect from a seasoned reviewer.

Ms. Williams is comfortable in the arena of debate as well as a literary reviewer. She promotes reading of African books on television, radio and on-line platforms. Her broadcasts span: Channels TV “Sunrise” and NTA 2 Channel 5, “AM Express”, “Close Flow”, “City Lace” and Smooth Radio’s “Smooth Review”. She was TV host at the 1st Nigerian Cultural Trade show held October 2nd 2014 and organised by the Nigerian German Business Association, AHK (Delegation of German Industry & Commerce in Nigeria), Goëthe Institute (German Cultural Centre) and the Consulate of Germany in Lagos.

From a young age, Ms. Williams loved reading; she loved books and let’s face it, one must read lots of books to be a reviewer of books. Although born in Lagos to a well-known Lagosian family, Oshikanlu-Williams, from the tender age of ten, she attended boarding school at Northwood College and then to Bristol University in Britain.

After her schooling and university in Britain, she returned to Nigeria where she struggled to find her place in the Lagosian society. She was a child of a teacher of history who rose up the ladder to have a distinguished career in Nigeria’s Federal Government, Dr. Abisola Oshikanlu-Williams, and father, Dr. Gabisiu Ayodele Williams, a physician and public health pioneer. Her ancestors were prominent textile merchants; and her well-known grandmother, Al Haja Dosunmu—Mama Gabi, who married three times, educated all her children and sent them abroad for higher education. It took Ms. Williams a while to find a sense of belonging but it came in 2003 when she became a mother at 35 and then, at age 38, opened a foundation for children: Sponsor A Child Nigeria.



Olatoun’s parents – Dr. (Mrs). Abisola Williams and Dr. Gabi Williams



(L) Dr. Gabi Williams, Federal Director, International Health and Disease Control
(R) Late Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, Federal Minister of Health at a conference of the World Health Organisation.



Olatoun's mother was variously Director-General at the Federal Ministries of Finance (Exchange Control),
Police Affairs and Transport, Aviation & Communication.
In this photo, she is presenting a paper to Nigeria's **President Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985 – 1993)**



Olatoun's grandmother: generous, sociable and kind, Mama Gabi.



"I wanted to do something good with my life, I wanted to be useful. I felt I was just existed. It coincided with me becoming a Christian. (Of course, you don't have to be a Christian to want to help others). I joined a society in the church, Christian Circle, and we went to visit an orphanage, and I knew that this was where I wanted to give my focus. I went back the next week, got to know the staff and the children. I saw the kids had no focus and staff said they could not get sponsors to put kids in school so that is when it started, within 10 days I got sponsors for two children.

People are ready to overlook the fact that you don't sound like them because I was giving back, I was giving value. Anything to do with advocacy, on television and media, helped me feel a sense of belonging that I never felt before. Life got better and better, my self-esteem increased, getting around Nigeria because of charity work. Getting out of myself. Initiative needs well-being. "

From the work that she did in educating children with Sponsor A Child Nigeria, she began to see a gap between literature and readership in Nigeria. As many publishers and book sellers know, what is lacking in African literature are readers. To bridge the gap between a plethora of literature and the reader, Ms. Williams took on the challenge "to promote the reading culture in Nigeria and promote the reading of African books worldwide." To accomplish this goal, Ms. Williams founded Border Literature for All Nations. <http://www.bordersliteratureonline.net>

I asked Ms. Williams how she became interested in writing reviews as a profession.

"In university, I saw that my professors enjoyed listening to my reviews. I noticed they would put down their pen from marking and listen. I didn't know at the time that a literary reviewer was what I was being called to do."

The description of her instructors as intent listeners rings true when reading a book reviewed by Ms. Williams; prose flow and her passion is evident. Her well-researched study explores the themes of a book, balanced and entertaining, as if she is discussing the book with her closest friend.

"No matter what the book is about, when I approach it, I look at principles, things I can take away from the themes that I want my readers to imbibe because it makes the world the kind of place I want to live in, which is the world dedicated to God's principles: equity, justice, all those things, sharing, loving, inspiring, encouraging. When I am reviewing a book, I take from it those messages that I want to convey in my review: to have a greater understanding of one another, to have a far more generous perspective. I believe in a world that wants to understand, to have tolerance, and diversity. I would not bother to review a book that I could not share those values with people."

Recently, Ms. Williams has been involved in yet another foundation: The Gabi Williams Alzheimer's Foundation, the first foundation in West Africa to address Alzheimer's disease. With the support of long-time friends such as, Buki Akintola and Fola Adeola, the Williams's family celebrated the 80th birthday of Dr. Gabi Williams who had, in 2007, started to exhibit symptoms of memory loss. Now in the late stages of the Alzheimer's disease, the family decided to launch a foundation in honour of Dr. Gabi Williams on his birthday, September 11, 2017. Read about their mission

at: <http://gabiwilliamsalzheimersfoundation.org> and
at <https://guardian.ng/features/gabi-williams-set-to-launch-alzheimers-foundation/>

The last time Ms. Williams and I got together in Lagos, we spoke about identity and belonging. She pulled from her handbag a favourite poem and read it to me:

Love after Love
by Derek Walcott

*The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat.*

*You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you*

*all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,*

*the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*



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