

THE NATURE OF MODERN AFRICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT: *It is poetry alone that has the consensus acceptance as being indigenous to Africa. With the coming of the European and the introduction of writing, the nomenclature of African poetry changed to modern African Poetry. This led to the assumption that modern African poetry emerged with the arrival of the Whiteman and writing culture. To this end, this study looks at the nature of modern African poetry using the poetry of nine poets, three each from the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. The modern-ness of modern African poetry is look at; the impact of orality in modern African poetry is also considered. Other things considered include: the assumption of African poetry as a colonial African poetry; the impact of cultural nationalism and the Negritude movement; the language question in modern African poetry; and the issue of gender. The study concludes that the collective experience of slavery and colonialism shaped the nature of modern African poetry. Also, the contributive impact of the contact with Europe cannot be denied but that African poets have long left the imitating stage and move to the stage of adept.*

Key Words: *Modern Africa poetry, Orality, Negritude, Diaspora*

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There is a universal acceptance and agreement by scholars and critics that poetry, unlike prose was not first introduced to Africa through colonial encounter. The origin of African poetry has never been subjected to any critical controversy. There are countless verbal expressions that can be broadly classified or labelled as poetry in African literature. These include the early ritual hunting, work songs, complex verbal/oral forms like incantatory poetry, chants and many more. Therefore, “the scope of the poetic practice in Africa is so vast as to defy easy summation.” (Simon, Gikandi, 2003)

The term ‘modern African poetry’ reveals a paradigm shift from the above mentioned kinds of poetry. The question that is now being raised is how modern is modern African poetry? James Tar Tsaaior (2005) says the word ‘modern’ is problematic; and this led him to ask “who and what determine what is the modern period in African poetry...?” and “can ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ be used synonymously?” The idea of ‘modern’ conceives a suggestion of an older tradition. Meaning, modern is ‘new’ while traditional is ‘old’. According to Tanure Ojaide (1995), the concept of ‘old’ or ‘new’ is relative in African literary history. Serious modern African poetry, according to Ojaide, started only in the late 1950s and it was in the second half of

the 1960s that most of the known modern African poets matured or established themselves as powerful voices.

Oyeniye Okunoye (2004) says modern African poetry “is defined in relation to European literary traditions, which provide the paradigms, conventions and critical principles that are either appropriated or negated in the process of defining the identity of the new literatures.” That is, African literatures tend to change in response to the socio-political realities of the time. This is foregrounded in the subject matter, style and form used as a taxonomy for the various generations of poets in the continent.

The pioneer generation of African poets engaged in what can be referred to as ‘apprentice literature’, which follows the Western conventions. Most of their poems lack African aesthetics and those that appear to have, tended to romanticise European culture. The practice of ‘apprentice literature’ can be viewed as a departure from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’. This has led some to assume that the advent of modern African poetry starts with the pioneer generation of African poets that imitate the European styles and forms.

A good example of the writing style of the pioneer generation of African poets is found in one of the poems of Mukula Kadima-Nzaji from Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire). His poem ‘Incantations of the Sea: Moando Coast’, anthologized by Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah (1999), cannot be said to have vividly conveyed the socio-cultural and political realities of Africa. A look at the first and last stanzas of the four stanzas poem:

Shocks of dizziness
my waves, my fear of the ocean
on the salty strand of my desire.

And I hear
stopped over the virgin insomnia
of altitudes
the savage cries of the sea
and the rough backwash of my being. (11)

A hasty look at the poem may lead to the assumption the poem belonging to the age of Romantic writers of nature. Again, the use of the word ‘savage’ is avoided as much as possible in African writing, because it is a derogative word used by the West for Africa. Nevertheless, the poet (using the post-colonial term) has left the ‘adopt’ stage and has moved to the ‘adapt’ stage. That is, despite dividing the poem into four stanzas, each stanza varies in arrangement. The four stanzas contain three, four three and five lines each and respectively. Again, there is no use of end-rhymes and the Western rhythmic metres.

The poem provides the image of the crab and the arrangement of the words of the poem reveals the imagery of the unsteady and clumsy movement of the crab. The poet also gives an imagery of chameleon's configuration, "Until I have exhausted my wardrobe/snake my tongue out to your fears/curl my tail round your sanctuaries". These and many more give a full description of all the animals involved.

The style used by the poet reveals the influence of the oral tradition of story telling in Africa. The last stanza, which starts with "The Kalilombe's ascent:" is full of esoteric use of language, coded in metaphors. Therefore, the foundation of modern African poetry is in the culture and oral background of the people.

Before the advent of 'writing', what we have in Africa is 'oral texts'; with the bards/griots as the custodian of these texts. The written poetry of Africa exist only in 'memory' and transfer from one generation to another through the words of mouth with use of various mnemonic devices to aid the production. Writing came as a medium of trapping down the evanescent nature of the oral text. Thus, creating a written word from the African 'oral text', which is capable of being refer to as colonial African poetry. This term 'colonial African poetry' suggests an African poetry that is subsumed by the European traditions. According to Isidore Okpewho (1992):

When African writers and scholars... saw it as their primary duty to dress African oral literature in a European language in such a way as to bring out the poetic quality, the charm, of the original. Unfortunately, some of them tried to be so 'fashionable' that in the end their translations sounded just as un-African as the ones that European did. (294)

However, the focus here is of a poetry that is orally inclined, though vested with the writing tradition. That is, the written word with oral techniques as employed by bards/griots. One of the techniques used by the bards/griots is repetition. It is usually employed for emphasis, to aid memory and for aesthetic purpose. Gcina Mhlophe, a South African poet, who started by writing poems in Xhosa while in high school, employs the technique of repetition in one of her poem anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999), titled 'Sometimes When it Rains'. Each of the nine irregular stanzas begins with the phrase 'Sometimes when it rains', which also double as the title of the poem.

The repetitive use of this phrase emphasises what happens when it rains 'sometimes' as against 'all time'. That is, what occasionally happens and not always. The repetitive technique also serves as an aid to the memory of the poet persona. From stanza two to stanza four, the first two lines read: "sometimes when it rains/I think of times". And in stanza five, she uses "I remember times' while other stanzas except the last, she uses "I think of..." Here, reminiscence of the past

is brought to the fore. Moreover, the repetitive technique has also produce aesthetic effects on the poem. It has enhances the rhythm and diction of the poem.

Cultural nationalism and the Negritude movement of modern African poetry came to be through the efforts of the Francophone poets. Negritude as a poetic concept celebrated the beauty of Africa and African ways of life. As one of the major proponents, Leopold Sedar Senghor (1965) defines Negritude as:

the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world.
It is not racialism, it is culture. It is the embracing and domination
of a situation in order to apprehend the cosmos by the process of
coming to terms with it. (99)

Basically, Negritude poetry is poetry that challenges the assertion of the French assimilation policy. It is a “timely response to the destructive impact of the French colonial arrangement” (Okunoye, 2005). That is, a reaction against the cultural debasement of Africa by the West and the need to showcase the intrinsic beauty of African culture. It is in the nature of Negritude poets to celebrate African and black heritage to contrast the picture painted by the West about Africa. Abiola Irele (1965) says PAN-Africanism has been described as ‘essentially a movement of emotions and ideas’, and this description is equally applicable to Negritude, which is its cultural parallel.

The tactful affirmation of European superiority over the assumed inferiority of the African culture is one of the major subject matter of the Negritude movement. The French assimilation policy tends to make Africa and African culture voiceless. Negritude poets therefore write to address this situation. A good example of this is found in the poem titled ‘Leaking Roof’ by Gahlia Gwangwa’a, a Cameroonian poet. The poem is also anthologized in Ojaide & Sallah (1999). The first stanza reads:

You said I could talk
When deep down
You knew no one could
Cough or smile (127)

The poet persona talks about the ‘French assimilation policy here. The policy says every member of the colony of France is a French man/woman, but at the deeper level, they are not. There is segregation: in the true sense, a European French man differs from an African French man. The policy is said to give voice to the African – “You said I could talk” but in the real sense, “You knew no one could”: this is the reality.

Another Cameroonian poet, Sim KomBem, took a different approach in addressing this situation. His poem 'Another Movement' anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999), an excerpt from it read thus:

I
stand alone
eager to hate the guts
you used in wooing a virgin who longed for
the chalk of civilization scratched all over her.

The assimilation policy is vividly portrayed here as 'the guts'. It has served as a means of brain-washing the Africans in their longing for Western civilization. The poet is showing disgust for the policy. In another line he writes "Your strange feelings for her, those framed words/of yours faked as affection that have destroyed older girls". That is, the so-called 'benefits' of assimilation has been used in the destruction of many countries where the policy is practised. It appears as if the policy is in the interest of the Africans but the poet persona is saying all is a "fake affection". The shared experiences in Francophone African countries are what the Negritude poets articulate. To romanticise the past is to reminisce about the glorious past of Africa before the arrival of the Whiteman who has come to destroy it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Francophone African poetry is not all about Negritude.

The issue of language is central in the discussion of African poetry. Talking about language, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) says there is a dual nature of language: for communication and a carrier of culture. In modern African poetry, most writers write in European languages and this is seen by some critics as re-colonialism. There have been various arguments for and against the use of European languages in African literature. Speaking against, Obianjunwa Wali (1963: 14) warns that "until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African language, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration." Similarly, Ngugi's view of the use of European languages in the writing of African literature is that "African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages". (Jussawalla, Feroza and Dasenbrock, Reed Way, 1992)

From a different perspective, some regard the European languages as borrowed tongue; and Ismail S. Talib (2002) wonders "if the language will ever be returned to...its proud owners." Nevertheless, African writers have decided to domesticate the European languages. Thus, they've moved from the stages of adopt and adapt to the adept stage. While doing this, they are conscious of not altering the languages beyond international intelligibility.

Aligning with the nature of language as posited by Ngugi above, this study looks at a poem anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999) titled 'Ksimiso' by Musaemura Zimunya, a Zimbabwean

poet. According to Ngugi, language has a nature of communication and a carrier of culture: in the poem, the poet persona talks about the Western culture in terms of dressing and feasting:

The family were gathered
the eldest son from Bulawayo
boastful of his experiences in the city of knives and crooks;
...
into ignorance with the stupefying s'kuz'apo tongue
...
a sister, latest to arrive, from Gutu
blue-painted eye-lids, false eye-lashes, red lips
...
She covers her thighs with a towel when she sits (119)

The poet persona reveals the adverse effect of the European culture on Africans. The silent question the poet is asking here is, what kind of experience can a person gain in the city of knives and crooks? Nothing but a "stupefying s'kuz'apo tongue". The authors define s'kuz'apo as "urban slang for 'excuse-me there'". Also, the 'sister', despite imbibing the Western style of dressing, she is still uncomfortable, especially at sitting position, as she appears half naked. The poet persona likens 'Kisimiso' to the European style of feasting which involves combination of assorted foods. And when the Africans decided to partake in the feasting, the result is devastating; especially for the "eldest son" who boasts of his experience in the city. The poet writes:

and brother s'kuz'apo
filled the boys' hut with urine and vomit
and a powerful smell of beer gone stale.

The poet is saying that the language (as a carrier of culture) of the European contaminates the African language (culture). It makes people lose their Africanness. The negative effect of it is felt by all: "The next day/they talked of the greatest kisimiso/for many years."

Still on the issue of language use in African poetry, many writers have come to see the European languages as the lingua franca by which a large audience can be communicated to. Thus, Africans domesticate the language and words that cannot be easily captured by the European expressions are freely used in their natural sense. At times these words are defined/explained and other times are not. Hence, we come across some local colours in the above poem, part of which are kisimiso, s'kuz'apo and muchongoyo.

Consequently, the world has become a global village; to reach a large audience, there is the need for mutual intelligibility in communication. Language is a carrier of culture and culture should be dynamic. Any language that is not dynamic is at the threshold of moribund. English language, for example, as continue to wax stronger, expanding its horizons by acquiring many words from various language. Therefore, many modern African poets, after writing in their native languages, often translate it to European language(s) for it to reach the outside world. The use of these European languages should not be seen as re-colonisation/neo-colonisation but as globalisation. Africa is multiethnic and multilingual. The only thing Africans shared in common is colonisation (slavery included). This has awakened deep ideological consciousness in modern African poetry with a radical approach. Radical consciousness in modern African poetry can come from Marxism ideology, Feminism ideology and Negritude ideology. All these are employed by poets from various region of Africa in fighting colonialism. To this end Tsaaior (2005) avers:

It is not fulfilling enough to achieve cultural relevance and racial equity but to radically free the race from the cumbersome yoke of colonialism and imperialism through the alternative of revolution means. (121)

Thus, poets from various regions use any of the above ideologies to question and kick against colonial concepts and ideas in a more radically conscious manner. Jared Angira of Kenya, in his poem anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999) titled 'Obligato from a Public Gallery' shows the loathsomeness of the people to European concepts, systems and ideologies introduced to African. An excerpt from the poem read thus:

The public has no belief
In democracy:
It has mocked his expectations.

The public has no hope
In the party;
The party partitioned his self
...
The public has no confidence
In the "nation",
Has nationalised collectivity into individualism. (14)

The poet persona lends his voice to the people's condemnation of the imported concept – democracy. It was expected that democracy is for the people but they discovered it is for individual. Africans speak in terms of 'we' and not 'I' as European does. This concept of 'I' that is now encroaching into the African society is what the poet is voicing out against. The poet

persona does not approach the issue in a ‘diplomatic’ manner as done in the West, which is implicitly full of deceit; but he goes straight to the point. In subsequent stanzas, the poet writes:

The public now want bread
At least to breed tomorrow.

...

The public wants to believe
That tomorrow will not be dead.

The public wants to believe
That behind tomorrow there is hope,
The conquest of man’s destiny. (14-15)

Here, the poet unveils the yearning and desire of the people. It should be noted that the use of “The public” by the poet indicate the communal way of life of the African society. The poet is not giving his own opinion or personal observation but the people’s. The tone/mood of the poem conveys a radical approach; the poet persona speaks bluntly and not persuasively. Therefore the poet finally says:

At least, the public wishes to sleep
In the understanding that on the morrow

He’ll rise above the grave
Having conquered the long arms of contradiction. (15)

African society, no doubt is a patriarchal society. In the nature of modern African poetry, the issue of gender is not treated the same way as obtain in the West. Though the ideology appears similar yet, differs to certain degree; especially in the approach. Thus, we have Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Positive Feminism, Femalism and Gynism; all these are Feminism in an Afrocentric mode. Despite the foregoing, women are said to be ‘marginalised’ in Africa. Sotunsa, U. (2008) observes that “African females were portrayed as a ‘voiceless’ lot who as a result of patriarchal subjugation remained silent victims of oppression”. This assertion is vividly portrayed in ‘The Women Sing...’ by Luvuyo Mkangelwa, a South African poet. This poem is anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999). The first, third and last stanzas read thus:

The women sing
songs of worship
to make their journey
only a step away

...

The women sing!
The women sing
to be free!

The women sing
to possess themselves
for a moment
at least!

The poem shows a longing for recognition by the women folk. Taking “a step away” suggests redefinition of a woman. According to the poet, they are in bondage to the African societal norms and values; that is why they sing “to be free”. The last stanza of the poem portrays what the women are craving for – self-definition. They desire to hold their destiny in their hands “for a moment/at least!” That is, not equating with man but be seen as playing complementary role with man. Therefore, Feminism in the Afrocentric mode is not like the European radical Feminist. In Africa, they accommodate men, enjoy complementary roles play by both sexes, believe in family and celebrate motherhood. All they want is to be seen and to be heard. They never crave for gender equality.

Modern African poetry had not only attained national/continental status; it has also attracted inter-national status. The African collectiveness experiences – colonialism and imperialism had made many poets to flee their father land. Earlier than this, some had been forced to leave via slave trade. Some of them were forced to go into exile. While in exile, they never cease in writing about their father land. The Africans in the Diaspora are never cut off from their root but stayed connected despite the difference. They write from abroad about their father lands because “they see themselves as agents of change... They write in the hope of moving their societies toward greater social freedom.” (Ojaide & Sallah, 1999)

A good example of this is seen in Frank Chipasaula’s poem ‘A Love poem for my Country’. According to Ojaide & Sallah (1999) the poetry of this Malawian “deals primarily with his exile from the dictatorship of Kamuzu Benda”. The poem is anthologized by Ojaide & Sallah (1999) and an excerpt of the first and last stanzas read thus:

I have nothing to give you, but my anger
And the filaments of my hatred reach across the border.
You, you have sold many and me to exile
Now shorn of precious minds, you rely on
What hands can grow to build your crumbling image.
...
I know a day will come and wash away my pain

And I will emerge from the night breaking into song
Like the sun, blowing out these evil stars. (26)

The poet voiced out his anger and bitterness against his country for the shoddy treatment given to him and others; in forcing them to exile. Despite this, the filaments of his hatred can only “reach across the border”; showing a kind of reserved feeling for the country. And this is why he is optimistic that a day is coming that he will never be an alien but a full-fledged citizen from within and not without; after the present “evil stars” of neo-colonialism is done away with.

CONCLUSION

The nature of poetry in Africa is large and complex. The continent’s wealthy culture and vast languages and dialects attested to this nature. Nevertheless, the collective experiences of slavery and colonialism brought about a shared experience and ideology. These collective experiences have led to the modernisation of African poetry. However, the change in the change in the nomenclature and taxonomy which occur as a result of the contact with the West does not necessarily define modern African poetry. No doubt, the West influence is evident in modern African poetry; so also is the oral culture. Therefore, the foundation of modern African poetry is the culture and oral background of the people. African poets never indulged in slavish imitation of the West but have long got to the adept stage. Therefore, the oral root and the socio-cultural and political milieu of the continent is ever projected by the poets either at home or abroad,

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