



OF PRIZES AND LITERARY GIANTS

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The news of Ben Okri's Booker Prize could not have come at a more auspicious time. Arriving so close on the heels of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill sexual harassment fiasco, it brought a most welcome balm to our wounded psyche by confirming - for all who cared to listen - the need to shift attention from the myth between the Black person's thighs to the repressed genius between his/her ears.

And for Okri as a person and a writer, the award is an invaluable oasis on a long and famished road, a most-needed - and most deserved - reward for an author's single-minded, rigorous, and almost demonic dedication to the promise of the pen. Of course, I have always had problems with the melodramatic, sometimes scatological figurations in aspects of Okri's narrative, especially their pessimistic evisceration of the Nigerian landscape; but I am also forcibly struck by Okri's irrepressibly humane impulse, his angry, even pugnacious consciousness - at war with evil, at war with those who make the world too large or too small. No one can miss the tough intellectual energy in an

Okri fiction, his almost frantic devotion to art.

So, glad I was when news came of Okri's triumph. But I was also scared that soon, very soon, focus would shift from the novel that won the award to a specious archaeology of African writing. I knew literary statisticians would go to work, with a running spectacle of firsts: 'the first Nigerian novelist to....', 'the first African novelist to....', 'the first African to....', etc. I knew literary speculators would go to town with brave projections of the inestimable 'focus' the prize would confer on African literature, the much-needed 'attention' it would endow African writing with, the abundant 'recognition' that African letters would reap from it....

My fears emanated from a personal experience. Upon co-winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1986, I was flattered, then infuriated by commentators who kept congratulating me on putting Nigerian, nay African literature, 'on the map.' Remember this was the year the inimitable Wole Soyinka captured the father of all literary

prizes, the Nobel, a feat which many thought would convert, finally, the unknown beast called African literature into a venerable beauty toasted at cocktail parties from Dodan Barracks to Buckingham Palace. Now five full years later, another African has won a prestigious prize and the same 'focus-recognition-map' drums are loud in the streets.

The questions that keep coming to my mind are: whose 'recognition'? Which cartographer drew this 'map' in a way that Africa has to struggle for a place on it? When did literary prizes become an entire continent's entry condition to the artistic patrimony of the world?

In a curious but logical way, the focus-attention-recognition shibboleth is offspring of a deep-seated exofugal anxiety that is itself an offshoot of the centre-margin dichotomy that characterises Africa's relationship with the outside world. By the logic of this anxiety, Europe and the United States form the centre of the world; Africa and other 'Third World' countries are consigned to the margin. And, naturally,

the margin is that proverbial abode of the wretched of the earth, the roost of chaotic silence where nothing has a life of its own, by its own, without an enabling nod from outside. On the other hand, the centre, occupied as of right by powerful nations, is a model held up to the world, a place where everything happens, confirmer of value, even credibility, the ultimate arbiter of literary and aesthetic taste.

The pull in all directions, all respects, is therefore towards the centre. And this situation has generated an intriguing irony: to be fully appreciated at home, many African writers have to seek 'recognition' abroad. If a foreign critic decides that an African writer is good or bad, who is the home-grown critic to say it is otherwise? Who will hear his/her voice? The margin is the centre of silence. It swallows up the voice, complete with its echoes. The town crier's cadence is muted in dreary mists. Only ventriloquists of foreign gods are left in the streets.

The centre calls the shots, moderates the debate (which very often sidles from dialogue to monologue), apportions speaking (and hearing) right, dictates voice modulation, determines who is to be heard or hushed. The centre is where 'best-sellers' are born and bred. Which is why not a few writers would do anything, any thing, to get reviewed - or simply mentioned - in *The Times*, either of London or New York, but hardly of New Delhi or Lagos. As the Nigerian writer Kole Omotoso once remarked, to be worth real attention at home today, the African writer must have imported 'recognition' from abroad. Only few sympathetic newspapers would risk wasting their increasingly scarce resources on what in Nigeria is derisively called a 'local champion.'

African universities, those citadels of marginal silence, have done everything to advance this exogenous pathology. Until recently, books and articles 'published abroad' weighed heavier in

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the consideration for promotion. It was (is) more rewarding, more civilised, to do a study of Ben Johnson than of Wole Soyinka; to explicate the terminal 'e' in pre-Chaucerian English than carry out an analysis of Sierra Leonean *krio* or Nigerian pidgin. Just as our economists keep telling us to produce what can be sold in Europe, what can bring in the sorely needed foreign exchange, even at the expense of domestic wealth and subsistence, our writers are being urged to put their pen where their fame is, to write themselves out of marginal obscurity.

In a strange way, the margin fosters its own narcissism, its own hysterical craving for an image, not in its own mirror (the margin does not have its own mirror), but in that of the centre. The projection therein is usually not that of the self, but of the self as defined and determined by the other. And the centre that manufactures all these mirrors recognises its own replications, its own marginal copies. The gods can spot their own voice even in the darkest recesses of the ventriloquist's throat.

At work in the 'recognition' anxiety is a curious complementary

consciousness. On the one hand is a mindset of the centre that grants high-priced recognition to those African works which conform to and reinforce that traditional Euro-American opinion about Africa.

In this regard, some Western critics actually believe that their attention, their patronage, is enough to win instant 'recognition' for an African work. And, what's more, that it is their inalienable right to bestow such recognition.

This attitude is enhanced and perpetuated by the mentality of the margin that no work can be deemed accomplished until it has been judged so by the centre. After all, all the canons, whether in creative writing or literary theory, have *always* originated from centres outside Africa. And when these canons boom, the margin scurries about like chickens, picking up fall-outs, basking in the hand-me-down vibrations of expiring idioms. Which is why in the prevailing discourse of the world today, the centre inaugurates the voice, the margin scrambles for the echoes.

This unequal discourse is heir to non-literary antecedents. Shake out the drawers of history, and you will discover that Africa has never played the name-giver in international affairs; on the contrary, she has always been the named. The Niger didn't exist until Mungo Park 'discovered' it; Kinshasa was not there until it acquired the name of Belgium's Leopold; that magnificent lake between Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania was a mute, indeterminate body of water until it was 'discovered' by Speke, 'explored' by Stanley, then named for Queen Victoria. Go through the length and breadth of this wonderful world, you will find no continent that has surrendered so much to foreign Adams.

But why will outsiders not be in a position to judge *for us* on what is good or bad about our literature? Why should we not die to gain their attention, win their recognition? Hasn't William Blake,

that fecundly revolutionary English poet warned that those who do not/cannot create their own system must be prepared to be enslaved by the system of others? Africa is not only a continent in the margin, but by every indication she appears inexorably, so fatally pleased to be there.

Just consider this: apart from the omnibus Noma Award which has come to be through the generosity and vision of a Japanese publisher, there was no single continental literary prize of substantial worth in Africa. This crucial lack must be laid at the door of a monster other than our perennial poverty. Or does one plead poverty in this regard in a continent where one country sometimes squanders several million dollars on hosting of a continental conference, a continent where a sit-tight dictator is so scandalously rich that he has been described 'walking bank account in leopard skin hat?' No, Africa's failure to institute her own literary prizes was due to monumental lack of vision by African rulers, their proverbial hostility to images and ideas of beauty, their rank philistinism, their eternal satisfaction at being 'movers and shakers' of the margin. No, the African strongman would rather build a prison for the writer than establish a prize for his/her artistic accomplishment.

But let us go back to our argument about foreign 'recognition' and the exogenous determination of the value of African literature and art. There are many reasons why we should not blame Africans who thank their prize-winning compatriots for bringing 'recognition' to the continent. Africa has remained for many centuries a victim of negation and absence. The accomplished writer from Africa is, therefore, regarded not just as a voice, but also as an antidote, a veritable medal to be waved in the face of a humiliating and relentlessly cynical world, a proof that we too have not come to the gathering of the world with empty hands. The book was a powerful instrument in the oppression and exploitation of the African; the book is also seen by many Africans today as a weapon of liberation. So whether they accept that mantle or not, modern African writers are regarded as warriors, the literary messiahs of a silenced and much-abused tribe.

To be sure and fair, foreign prizes and their attendant recognition have played a valuable diplomatic role in the lives and struggles of African literary ambassadors. But for pressures and outcry consequent upon their recognition abroad, Soyinka, Ngugi, Nawal el Saadawi, Abdilatiff Laabi, Micere Mugo, Jack Mapanje, and many

others would probably not have come out alive from the dungeons of African strongmen. The 1988 Commonwealth Fiction Prize came as an invigorating poetic justice to Festus Iyayi, a fine Nigerian novelist and leader of Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), who flew to London for the prize only a few days after emerging from a prolonged and gruesome detention without charge, without trial.

So this essay is by no means another vulgar attack on foreign prizes and awards. It has nothing against recognition provided it is healthy, genuine, and unpatronizing. The thrust of its argument is that there is something essentially universal about the genius of human creativity, no matter what its provenance. No part of the world has a right to lay a monopolistic claim to that genius, and proceed to lay out parameters any yardsticks for the artistic estate of other places. The world is a wide, miraculous *mbari* to which every people bring their own creation. Let no one play master in that gathering. Let no one accept to play servant. Let no canons terrorise talents with arrogant booming.

Above all, Africa needs to discover her own name without making other continents anonymous; she needs to find her own centre without marginalising other parts of the world. **GR**

A Celebration of West African Writing

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Literature has come of age in West Africa. Trying to trace it back to its very beginning now would be a futile effort. Oral literature has always been a part of the people. This art form had reached a very high level before the art of writing ever came here. What about the dance drama, the famous griots among the Senegalese and several others.

It is not surprising then that the British Council organizers of the West African Writers Exhibition had to state that the exhibition covers only written literature in English language and those whose

English translations are available. Another clause: only those currently in print are included - a situation which the brochure preface written by Dr. Stewart Brown of the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham describes as 'One of the frustrations of the present exhibition.'

He also acknowledges the lack of adequate representation of drama in the exhibition despite its being 'the most vibrant, the most fertile, arguably the most effective medium of West African literature in English over the last forty years.' But that is drama in performance

rather than written. Playwrights have been finding it more and more difficult to get a publishers for their scripts in recent years.

Nevertheless here is an impressive collection ranging from Olaudah Equiano's work first published in 1789 through Negritude and other colonial era writings to the recent magic-realism writings in the novel, short story, poetry and drama genres as well as critical works and essays. The works cover a wide range of writers as well as well as publishers. **GR**