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OF PRIZES AND LITERARY GIANTS

NIYI OSUNDARE

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 form 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 novel 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.
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, conserver 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 descriptively 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 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 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,
A Celebration of West African Writing

Tai Ade FatO

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 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 publisher 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-realist 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 published.