

## Of Earnest Poetics and Subtle Butterflies

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### Abstract

Poetry has over the centuries been envisioned as a butterfly-art with less didactics. Hence just as bridges are a solution to sea-crossing, African poets build their poems as solutions to the numerous socio-political problems of Africa. They build a utilitarian poetic corpus that is devoid of the luxuriance and aesthetic exuberance of butterflies. Their aim is to create a communal awareness that liberates and fosters the growth of the African spirit. Therefore this study adopts the postcolonial theory as its theoretical model and through its instrumentality challenges Eurocentric and aristocratic hegemonic values planted in the existential fabric of Africa. Issues ranging from poverty to superstition, Eurocentricism, gender prejudice, and cultural nationalism are succinctly expressed in Richard Nturu's *The Pauper, To the Living and Virgin Madre*. In Oswald Mtshali's *Men in Chains, The Marble Eye* and *A Voice from the Dead*, the reader sees radical consciousness, suffering, orality, protest and subjugation expressly evident while Jack Mapanje's *Visiting Zomba Plateau, Travelling in London Tubes and When this Carnival Finally Closes* feature the excesses of western civilization, Africans' irrational guests for European ideals, the international nature of African poetry, corruption and so on. The poems do the talking and elicit the necessary action(s) from the readers.

**Keywords:** Butterfly-art, Utilitarian, Communal Awareness, Hegemonic Values

### Introduction

Modern African Poetry has been variously envisaged as an aesthetic system of nostalgia, quandary, cultural dislocation, and imperial protest. According to Oyeniyi Okunoye (2004):

Modern African poetry, very much like other postcolonial paradigms, conventions and critical principles that are either appropriated or negated in the process of defining the identity of the newer literatures. Any appraisal of the critical reception of modern African poetry should underscore this problem by revealing why certain paradigms and methods are privileged and others marginalized. (1)

This assertion assumes the impression that what is termed "modern" in the discourse of African poetry is a bohemian attitude occasioned by the socio-political realities in Africa. It assumes a redefinition of what is theorized by the West as the norm with a view to questioning its form and content. This position is corroborated by Ademola Dasyuva and Oluwatoyin Jegede (2005:99) in their book entitled *Studies in Poetry*. In their view, "Modern African poetry is a product of conflict, political schisms and experiences which have characterized the African world since the coming of the Europeans in the sixteenth century." (99)

While Dasyuva and Jegede (2005:99) foreground the very genesis of socio-political topicalities in African literature and society in general, Okunoye (2004:1) traces the historical period of activism via an institutionalized poetic tradition that is proudly African. He says:

The inaugural moment of the scholarly engagement with modern African poetry is best seen as coinciding with efforts at making modern African literature a subject of academic enquiry in the 1960s, the most significant being the Makere, Darker and Freetown conferences, all of which were held between 1962 and 1963.

While Okunoye foregrounds the intellectual birthing of modern African poetry, S.E. Ogunde (1983) "locates the origin of African literature in English in the slave writings of the eighteenth century" hence giving the reader a centre and circumference that require definitive action(s) and enquiries. In another instance, Dasyuva and Jegede (2005:99) argue that "the term modern African poetry is a political term that connotes a departure from the old"; hence it has become "a subject of academic enquiry" (Okunoye 2004:1). It protests the rigidity and malicious tendencies of the old or classical western literary canons. With many western African colonies gaining independence in the 1960s, there was then an urgent need to rewrite African history and culture in a literature that would best capture the African peculiarities and experiences. This aim is vividly captured by Romanus Egudu (1978:5) who says that African poetry "is intimately concerned with the African people in the African society, with their life in its various ramifications – cultural, social, economic, intellectual and political". This is further corroborated by Tanure Ojaide (1996:30) who asserts that, "in fact, an authentic African world forms the back drop of modern African poetry".

It is then obvious that any discourse of modern African literature cannot be divorced from the numerous socio-political issues rearing their ugly heads in most African societies. Such a discourse would show some positive sentiments in reflecting and refracting African experiences. G.C.M Mutiso (1974:9) would argue that "in African societies, art has traditionally been highly functional." African poetry is not an art for art's sake

business; it is rather a serious business hinged upon the rectification of a ruptured history and culture by vicious Western powers. Toeing this path, Ojaide (1996:80-81) argues that “Unlike in the 1960s when the poets were culturally obsessed, nature oriented and universal, today, old and young poets are addressing their national issues more aggressively than before.” The earnestness of their poetics is so candid with less emphasis on aesthetic appeal.

Apparently drawing his premise from the earlier efforts of the pioneer African poets, Ojaide metaphorically foregrounds the internal source of inspiration of the younger generation of contemporary African poets who tenaciously continue the task of setting Africans free mentally, socially, economically, religiously and otherwise. The success achieved thus far is based on what Chidi Amuta (1987) describes below.

Without seeking to undermine the communality of kinship ties and historical experiences among the peoples of African, what is incontrovertible is that the social and cultural unity of Africa is very much a unity in diversity. (23)

Therefore, the seeming success recorded so far in modern African poetry/literature is a function of Africans’ relative unity in diversity which accounts for their optimism for a better tomorrow. In as much as we share some of the sentiments that “modern African literature also owes its existence to the phenomena of colonialism” (William 1998:16), African scholars out rightly protest and reject this assertion which obviously has some imperial undertone that disputes the possibility of a functional and unique African literature devoid of the literary values and legacies of colonialism.

Consequently, this study focuses its attention among many other things on the call of David Dorsey (1988:27) that “African poetry requires social attention to cultural particulars”. It is this deliberate attention to culture that would help Africans constructively tackle the numerous topicalities bedeviling their continent. The postcolonial theory adopted for this study further equips its perspective with all that is needed in rewriting the history of Africa written wrongly by the imperial western world.

### **The Poets and Their Topical Commitments**

Richard Nturu, Oswald Mtshali and Jack Mapanje are three poets who believe in the African project. In their bid to rewrite African history, these poets approach their poetry with a Marxist spirit of communal redemption. Their inspiration is perhaps mused from the words of Ngugi wa Thiong’ O (1985) in his *Barrel of Pen*:

When I used to write plays and novels that are only critical of racism in the colonial system, I was praised. I was awarded prizes and my novels were in hit syllabus. But when towards the seventies I started writing in a language understood by peasants, and in an idiom understood by them and I started questioning the very foundation of imperialism and of foreign domination of Kenyan economy and culture. I was sent to kamiti maximum security prison. (65)

These words summarize some of the experiences encountered by these poets. This is in line with Udentia’s (1976: XI) argument that “the revolutionary aesthetic method” can “domesticate a universal critical criterion to suit the temper and subjectivities of the African literary process”. In the selected poetry of Richard Nturu namely: *The Pauper*, *To the Living* and *Virgin Madre*, one sees the poet’s radical commitment to issues ranging from poverty to superstition, language, Eurocentricism, gender prejudice and cultural nationalism. In *The Pauper*, the Ugandan poet mourns the hypocrisy inherent in his society, a society of political villains who care less about the paupers hence the pauper “cranes” (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:114) his eyes “in all directions, in no direction” (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:114). This is as a result of extreme poverty which is more picturesque in the poet’s description of the pauper:

You sit alone on hairless goatskins,  
Your ribs and bones reflecting the light that beautiful cars reflect on you,  
Squashing lice between your nails and cleaning your nails with  
dry saliva. (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:114)

In this process of rewriting history, the poet wonders why the pauper would be suffering in the midst of plenty and abundance hence:

Pauper, pauper, crouching in beautiful verandas of beautiful cities and beautiful  
people  
Tourists and I will take your snapshots  
And your M.P with a shining head and triple chine will mourn your fate in a  
supplementary question at question time. (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David.  
1971:115).

It is ironic that such a good looking member of parliament would see the pauper and all he could do is to mourn the pauper’s fate in a supplementary question at question time. This shows how much Eurocentric mentality has destroyed the Africa man’s psyche to the extent that he does not recognize his own brother who is in abject poverty. Exploring further the major themes; the poet in *To the Living* echoes with oral literary

elements the cultural values of Africa. The poet creates a situation akin to a ritual performance to admonish living Africans on the need to be strong and face their problems squarely. The lines below sound like rites of initiation which are common in many parts of Africa. The poet says:

Only those who have survived the final anesthetization  
Those who have enacted the final epilogue  
Only these have the prescient perception of the inner idea of life and can partake of  
the spectral dance. (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:116)

These lines are direct adoptions from the poet's rich oral literary tradition; traditions that are symbolic of transition from childhood to adulthood. The imagery of "priest, mortal, art, amulets, virgin, pelvic, borne, amphorae, prenatal death days, thigh bone, and bridal night" (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:116) are symbolic of the African traditional world view. He further says:

These are they who have bared their bones and submitted to the Savage salvation of  
the caustic dew of the cold grave  
Only these understand the eloquence of the silence between two echoes in haunted  
cave. (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:116).

The poet obviously warns that when the going gets tough; the tough gets going. It is only true Africans that would be better in the end.

The poets want Africans to look inwards and discover those areas of contradictions in their lives and manage them effectively. In *Virgin Madre*, we see the poet's attitude to gender issues which portrays him as a chauvinist. Biko (1986:41) laments this unbridled attachment of the very essence of life to the male being in his assertion that "one of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to man. Ours has always been a man centered society". The poet proves feminists right in not respecting the piety of the "Virgin Mary", (virgin mother), who is the mother of Jesus Christ; he uses images that portray her as an ordinary being with little or no significance:

Virgin Madre, daughter of her son,  
Mother of her son,  
Musaba's marriage was not meant to last,  
Divorce due to incompatibility,  
Perhaps there were antecedents  
She had a premarital son George  
Defied abortion.

Virgin Madre. (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:118)

Although these pictures are used to further explain the poet's commitment to his poetry and the African course, the images are anti-feminism; they tend to objectify and stereotype women. He is guilty of what Stella and Frank Chipasula in *The Introduction to African Women's Poetry* emphasized; that very fact that its "exclusive focus on women's poetry is a necessary first step towards reversing the objectification of women and rendering visible the invisible poets themselves" (1995:xxvii). This is an example of what Fashina (2006:158) calls "masculine Gender elements" (MGE). The poet did not hide his chauvinist features in the last stanza where he makes a woman suffer social violence from George. He says:

...George belched in her face and haggled for a dance  
The price was a bottle of Waragi Swig and it was gone  
She staggered on the floor a while  
She was led by the back door... (Cook, David. and Rubadiri, David. 1971:119)

The poet is symbolically and metaphorically critical of the patriarchal African society; a society where little or no good qualities are associated with women. The poem also tackles the issue of language in modern African poetry/literature; the poet also draws so much from oral literary traditions and his folklore. He also uses the English language in such a way that it portrays his African world view. He domesticates the English language in order to communicate in the language of his fore fathers thereby giving his wide audience the opportunity to draw from what he has to say.

Going through the poems of Oswald Mtshali: *Men in Chains*, *The Marble Eye* and *A Voice from the Dead*; one sees similar topical trends that range from radical consciousness to suffering, folkloric influence, protests and subjugation. Mtshali's poems represent the ordeals of the black South Africans in the hands of the Dutch. These colonialists experimented with the apartheid system of government that operated based on colour segregation. In his poem *Men in Chains*, Mtshali uses concrete images to create mental pictures and physical pictures of what an average black South African under the apartheid regime would have to go through. Just like in every other African literature based on colour and racial segregation such as Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*; the poet shares in the sufferings of these Africans. We see the pictures of mental suffering in these lines:

..... Men shorn of all human honour

Like sheep after shearing  
Bleating at the blistering wind  
Go away! Cold and! Go away!  
Can't you see we are naked? (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:85)

These pictures are characteristic of the life of Africans in apartheid South Africa; mental and physical sufferings were regular pictures. The poet protests these Phenomena through his radical awareness. Black South Africans living in apartheid South Africa were made to go about with passbooks, passports and all sorts of things that are elements of identity. Theirs was a life of bondage just as the poet puts it "They hobbled into the train on bare feet wrist handcuffed, ankles manacled with steel rings like cattle at the abattoirs shying away from the trapdoor." (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:85).

Their situation seems hopeless in the face of the mental and physical torments that confront them hence they would cry "...Oh! Dear Sun! Won't you warm my heart with hope?" (John & Obafemi 1996:85)

The hopelessness in this poem makes the poet to urge his people in *The Marble Eye* to get a marble eye; an eye that is immune to evil and pains, and does not cry. His, is a longing for a utopian society in which all men would be treated as equals not as slaves and sub-humans. He says that "The marble eye is an ornament coldly carved by a craftsman to fill an empty socket as a corpse fills a coffin." (Johnson & Obafemi 1996: 86) Such an eye is perfect as "It sheds no tears, It warms to no love, It glowers with no anger" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996: 86)

This kind of eyes sees everyone as one, because it is natural; blind to tribal sentiments, racism, ethnicity, nepotism and so on. Its blindness enables it to be impartial and objective in its judgements. Considering its value, the poet earnestly pleads, "Oh! The marble eye If only my eyes were made of marble!" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996: 87)

The poet finally drives into the metaphysical world to draw up ontological truths about the problems of his people since man as a religious being hardly doubts things associated with the supernatural. He explores this, making use of the African folkloric elements. He foregrounds the place of the departed ancestors in *A Voice from the Dead* which happens to be that of his departed mother. Africans generally believe that the departed loved ones have only gone to the world beyond to watch over the living; hence the poet's dead mother in a bid to continuing her maternal responsibility to her son comes back to give him assuring information on some issues that bother the living. He says "I heard it in my sleep calling me soft; it was my mother speaking from her grave." (Johnson & Obafemi: 1996:88)

This presentation of African world view is facilitated with oral elements evident in the dialogue between the poet and his departed mother. Mtshali in this poem seems to be harkening to the call of Albert Gerard (1981:31-32) that "African literature ought to include within the compass of its definition the ethnic literatures of Africa". The use of the exclamation "What!" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:88) shows the poet's surprise and shock at this supernatural revelation. He is also shocked to know that "God is no picture with a snow-white beard" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:88) rather he is "that crippled beggar sprawling at the street corner" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:88). The poet consciously deconstructs all the constructed Eurocentric ideals meant to cage Africans.

Another radical poet who consciously explores the topical issues in modern African literature is Jack Mapanje. In his selected poems *Visiting Zomba Plateau*, *Traveling in London Tubes* and *When this Carnival Finally Closes*, The poet reacts to the excesses of western civilization, African irrational quest for European ideas, the international nature of African poetry and corruption. In *Visiting Zomba Plateau*, The poet explores his visit to a favourite spot in his hometown which is now a shadow of itself. The poems show the poet's disappointment at the way things have gone bad. He says:

Could I have come back to you to wince?  
Under the blur of your negatives,  
To sit before braziers without the glow of charcoal,  
To cringe at your rivers (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:77)

There is this traveling motif in most of Mapanje's poems and this portrays him as a poet probably living in the Diasporas. But his ostensible absence from home still does not deter him from facing the social issues of his society. He wonders the where about of "praying mantis who cared for prayers once? Where is the spirit that touched the hearts lightly? Chameleon colours of home?" (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:78)

The poet foregrounds this traveling motif more explicitly in *Traveling in London Tubes*, where he contrast two different settings; his homeland and the London underground trains. He says:

There is something funny about the dust back home  
The way it blows naively with the wind  
And carelessly settles on flowers and maize gardens  
Blemishing the green the way it rolls behind the big cars on the dusty roads  
(Johnson & Obafemi 1996:79)



But this contrasts with the situation in the poet's base in the Diaspora:

...but here, even the dust is subtle the way it blows with the seemingly fresh breeze  
and settles on your window  
still if your eyes and nose, even the dust is subtle here. (Johnson & Obafemi  
1996:79).

One thing that is obviously common with the two environments is the fact that they both do something negative to the human health, while there is dust back home, there is this bad substance from the charcoal that one hardly notices until it has caused a serious health damage. Hence it could be so serious:

That you begin to see how much charcoal was in your nose, eyes, lungs;  
Traveling in those lovely tubes. (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:79)

These experiences betray him as a writer who writes from the Diaspora. According to *literature British council.org*:

Jack Mapanje lives in York, and is currently teaching creative writing and literatures of incarceration in the school of English, University of Newcastle... His book, *The Last of the Sweet Bananas: New and Selected Poems* was published in 2004, and his latest poetry collection is *Beasts of Nalunga* (2007).

This semi-biographical sketch of the Personality of Napanje provides us with good information relating to his residential base which inspires and reflects in most of his poetry. In his last selected poem *When this Carnival Finally Closes*, the poet probes into the problems associated with leadership and issues of corruption. It shows how brothers betray brothers, the sycophants in politics who are there with you when all is rosy and when the cheeks are down; they abandon you. The poet says:

When this truthful carnival finally closes, brother when your drumming veins dry,  
these very officers will burn the scripts of the praises we sang to you and shatter the  
calabashes you drank from  
Your charm, these drums, and the effigies blazing will become the accomplices to  
your lie-achieved world! Your bamboo hut on the beach, they will make a bonfire  
under the cover of giving their hero a true traditional burial, though in truth to rid  
themselves of another. (Johnson & Obafemi 1996:80)

The western emphasis on capitalism and materialism obviously did not spare Africa the bad effects of its influence. This explains why many African elites pursue materialism at all costs.

## Conclusion

This study has been an exploration into the many socio-political topicalities in modern African poetry. Just as Dubem Okafor (2001:1) would say "African literature is not only a contested terrain, but the medium of its production and of its discussion is, to say the least, cacophonous" this is not far from Barkan's (1985:27) assertion that "...African literature reflects and responds to political and social realities". The focus of an African poet is not aesthetics even though it is preached. All the African regions adopted for this study are copious epitomes of the fundamental topicalities in African poetry although this is relatively contrary to what Nadine Gordimer (1981:31-32) would have us believe; that assumption that "without Nigeria, English-Language African literature would be a slim volume affair." In as much as this may be true to some extent, African literature could be argued to be an evolving literature which has to evolve in unison in order to project that age long unity in diversity which stood up the tests of time until the "Whiteman put a knife in the things that held us together" (Chinua Achebe: 1958).

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