Reviving Modern African Poetry: An Argument

Introduction

It is an understatement to say that contemporary African poetry lacks vibrancy or popular appeal, compared to modern African poetry in the 1960s through the 1980s. African contemporary poetry appears to be suffering from generic exhaustion that has thrown avid readers and literary critics out of balance for what to embrace with passion. It is not that modern African poetry, by nature of being written, especially in European languages, in a society that has primarily been nonliterate and illiterate generally, has not always reached the general populace as the writers would have liked for their works to be read and studied. Also there has always been something in modern African poetry for readers and literary scholars to complain about. If it was not the naïve imitativeness of the “pioneer poets” of the 1930s to the 1950s, whose poetry was highly imitative of Western Christian hymns or Victorian writings, there was the obscurity, disjointedness, and difficulty of the African “euro-modernists” of the 1960s to the 1970s. And following that generation, there was the lack of form of the “alter/native” group of poets who paid much attention to revolutionary messages in the 1980s and 1990s. Now there is everything to complain about in contemporary African poetry from lack of a discernible African voice in the age of globalization to a palpable lightness that makes poetry seem irrelevant to the needs of the society and age.

Despite the limitations and complaints, modern African poetry in the past appears to have thrived well in comparison to the genres of fiction and drama. There was a time when the poets were aristocrats with a certain type of mystique around them. Where are the Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Kofi Awoonor,
Lenrie Peters, and Dennis Brutus of today? The poetry readers of the 1960s and 1970s knew the vagabond minstrel of Okigbo who would join the secessionist side of the Nigerian civil war and die fighting. Soyinka seized a radio station to make a broadcast; Brutus escaped the apartheid forces after being shot at; Kofi Awoonor was hunted by the Ghanaian military regime of the day for being associated with a coup plotter; and so on with the poet acquiring legendary status in his time.

Also in the past, one knew or heard of poems and their writers. Most writers, teachers, and students of African poetry in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s knew David Rubadiri’s “An African Thunderstorm,” Gabriel Okara’s “Piano and Drums,” Dennis Brutus’s “The sounds begin again,” J. P. Clark’s “Night Rain,” Wole Soyinka’s “Death in the Dawn,” Christopher Okigbo’s “Before you, mother Idoto / naked I stand,” Lenrie Peters’ “We have come home,” and Kofi Awoonor’s “Songs of Sorrow.” In the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps one would have read or heard of Odia Ofeimun’s “The Poet Lied,” Niyi Osundare’s “Poetry is,” and Tanure Ojaide’s “The fate of vultures.” How far back from now over the past 20 years can we remember poems and their writers? Has contemporary African poetry become so unimpressive that it is no longer memorable or quotable? Have poems become too many that none strikes the reader’s attention? Or is the problem with the reader and literary scholar that there appears to be not enough effort in generating interest in poetry in Africa today? These questions will hopefully be answered in the course of this “argument.”

Factors Marginalizing Modern African Poetry

There are multifarious factors today contributing to the demise of African poetry that appear to be beyond the control of poets and readers. Literature in general is suffering from inattention as literate people in Africa would prefer to spend their money on what they consider critical areas of existence such as paying house rents, school fees for children, and their subsistence than in buying poetry collections, novels, or plays. It is only in schools that literature is mostly consumed because such literary works are required textbooks that have to be studied to pass examinations. Thus, the poor or mismanaged state of African economies has contributed to the erosion of the special place of literature in contemporary African lives. Poetry appears to suffer the most when it comes to the genres, with fiction doing relatively well as a result of promotion by foreign publishers and