

# Anglophone African Poetry

## POESIA ANGLOAFRICANA

edited by Pietro Deandrea

*The mistake is to generalize. The very word Africa – that sonorous trisyllable – seems to invite grandiloquence. [...] the tendency has been for Westerners – and often Africans too – to seek to impose a single reality, a general explanation, on the whole place.*

John Ryle

The task of editing a section on anglophone African poetry, which I am starting from this issue of *Semicerchio*, inevitably faces the risk of falling prey to the mistake mentioned by John Ryle. How to write about African poetry in English without resorting to stale, facile stereotypes?

The following reviews focus on Nigeria, West Africa being one of my main research fields. Nevertheless, in order to show all the facets of African poetry and their local specificities, my plan is to move onto other areas, such as East and Southern Africa; one interesting volume for future reviews, for example, could be Robert Berold's *South African Poets on Poetry*, where the interviewed authors discuss, amongst other things, the role of poetry in the present transitional phase out of the 'struggle culture' of the apartheid decades. Besides, doing one's best to avoid generalizations should not be limited to reviewing volumes from all English-speaking African areas. What about other, 'more oral' forms of poetry, like songs' lyrics? John Ryle's article, for instance, mentions Sheng, the language of East African hip-hop, a mix of Swahili and English. Which leads one to other possible options: what about the poetry where English is fertilized by other languages? What about African literary magazines publishing poems of this kind, too, like the Kenyan *Kwani*? And what about initiatives such as *Lingo*, aimed at fostering literary translations (including poetry) among the eleven official languages of South Africa?

The abovementioned ideas all compose a list of good intentions for the development of this section. Future issues of *SemiCerchio* will tell whether this scheme can be fulfilled. For the moment, the following pages offer three reviews, three attempts at investigating into contemporary West African poetry in English beyond the usual trite stereotypes about the continent – swinging between tourist paradise and bloodthirsty hell.

Remi Raji's review of Mujidah Abdul Aleem's *Another Story* shows an original intersection of gender discourse and philosophical/religious reflection, possibly exemplifying in verse the pervasive relevance of the religious dimension in West African contemporary life.

With naked eyes, Sule Egya reads the bodily, life-of-the-senses lines from Uche Nduka's *Heart's Field*, conveying the peculiar vision by an outsider of Nigerian poetry. In his satirical list of dos and don'ts entitled «How to Write about Africa», the editor of *Kwani*?, Binyavanga Wainaina, adamantly states: «Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans»; I would like to consider Nduka and Egya's taboo-breaking, then, as a sort of good omen for my contribution to *Semicerchio*.

Finally, I have taken the liberty of including Esterino Adami's review of my translation into Italian of Niyi Osundare's prize-winning *The Eye of the Earth*: translations of African verse are so scarce in our country that I still feel immensely proud about this parallel-text volume. The section closes with a selection of poems by Osundare I translated for the online journal *El Ghibli - Rivista online di letteratura della migrazione*, no. 4, June 2004.

Incidentally, disheartening difficulties in being published probably constitute one generalization sadly close to daily reality. In Britain, the Arts Council and Spread the Word have recently produced the *Free Verse Report*. It deals with publishing opportunities for UK Black and Asian poets, and it was launched with the opening sentence: «Why have so few new Black and Asian poets been published in the UK in the past ten years?» If this is the scenario for British citizens, the prospects for African-based poets must be rather gloomy, given the never-ending economic crisis and its effects on the publishing industry.

Amongst other countries, this is certainly true of Ghana. There, though, Woeli Publishing Services have issued *An Anthology of Contemporary Ghanaian Poems*, a volume including lines by distinguished authors like Ama Ata Aidoo and Kofi Awoonor, and Kojo Laing's «Africa Sky»: «Once in the storm, / Africa is handled in a dance by lost girls, / who meet to make my thoughts wander / into places where roots are suddenly / fewer than the threads that bind them.» The book also contains some unpublished poets who submitted their work at the editors' nationwide invitation,

thus introducing a few promising voices. It is a precious collection, albeit desultory in its contents, offering a rich panorama of contemporary Ghanaian poetry and several reading suggestions.

I hope the following reviews and poems will prove just as suggestive.

Pietro Deandrea

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## The Virtuous Imagination of a Female Voice in Recent Nigerian Poetry: A Reading of Mujidah Aleem's *Another Story*

By

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MUJIDAH ABDUL ALEEM, *Another Story*, Ibadan (Nigeria), Heinemann, 2005, pp. 78.

«Each word a living reality / That could change you / Or / Scare you / All it takes you / Is READ / In between my lines» (50). *Another Story*, published under the Heinemann Frontliners Series, is a confirmatory text, first of the commitment of the author as poet, and of her constancy of vision. Though she has undergone a slight shift of name-change, from «Mujidah Olaifa» to Mujidah Abdul Aleem (both surnames are the author's maiden names), her book betrays the consistency of her perspective about life and literature, even if there are signs of experiential development in the poems. The movement or transformation from *Daughters of Hauwa* (Malthouse, 1999) to *Another Story* is a matter of details for, surely, absolute constancy or immobility would be impossible

in a writer's life and experience.

What then is the intervening subject of *Another Story*, or why give the impression of a narrative or the narratological to a book of poetry? The collection has a deceptive but apt title. It is all about the telling and revealing of the mind's processing of events and perception of things; contained in the scheme of the tale is the variation of dream which forms part of the stories contained in *Another Story*. As given, the title poem of the collection («Another Story») apparently reveals the mission of the author: although concerned with the atrocities of men and women, «this story is about / Ideals / Realities / Truism, facts and / Obvious things» (60). The pedagogical or what I shall call the moral musings of the faithful is evident in the author's work.

*Another Story* is a collection of forty-eight poems arguably steered by a contemplative and philosophical tone.

Beneath the plain or effortless simplicity of Olaifa's poetry is the profound rumination of a careful observer of things and people. The readability of the collection is made possible by a somewhat deliberate narrative tone which permeates many of the poems and which gives the reader the feeling of an encounter with some rhythmic prose, sparsely adorned, but purposefully poetic in its delivery.

In recent times, readings of works produced by Nigerian female authors have turned attention to the inevitable discourse of gender and the state or condition of the woman in a patriarchal Nigerian society. Gender, I affirm, may be taken for granted in works produced by the Nigerian male, perhaps because the burden of sexist representation is not as heavy on the male as it is on the female. There is a sense in which one can say that the poems in *Another Story* contain the philosophic sta-

tements of a spiritualist (preacher/worshipper), and, doubly, the voice of a woman and mother. Poem after poem, the reader will find the revelations of the spirituality and the contemplative mind of the author; next to that, the womanist/motherist symbolism of Aleem's poetry is an important code to understand her authorial vision.

The poems in *Another Story* can be organised into three broad categories based on the overriding themes inherent in them. There are poems like «A Vision» (5) which are controlled by the contemplative and the philosophical spirit. There are poems which focus on the spirituality of the self and the experience of love for man and God, such as «We Pray» (61), and «How Love Feels» (75). The third category of poems includes those that reveal the author's response to some socio-political issues in the material world. Poems like «Name-Your-Price...» (47), «Sacrifices Are Made» (57-58), and especially «The Virgins are Pregnant» (40) are uncommon display of the author's engagement with the non-spiritual events of life. However, there are few other poems in the collection which have not been so categorised either because they deal with related themes in very unique ways or because they contain composite parts of the categorised subjects. For instance, «My Last Tear Drop» (3) and «Once Upon Two Times» (51) are narratives of women's experience of pains and feelings of betrayal with a tinge of fatalist resignation. «Like a Gaddle» (13-14) focuses on human pain, perseverance and instinct for survival, whereas the fatalistic tone of «My Last Tear Drop» is repeated in the poem «Zilzal». In «Gone», there is the narration of a personal experience of an auto-crash in which the poetic persona touches on the value of human life and care. There is also the poem «Afternoon», the subject of which is about female domestic work and which I have cause to define as 'home front verse'. Perhaps one of the most effective poems in this collection is the allegorical «The Day My Baby Fell Sick»: «The day my baby fell sick / Was Monday / And the whole world felt it / Firstly, / No one could leave the house / Because / The buses and taxis / Refused to take them // No one could eat / The markets were closed / And food items had / Become like gold to buy // The day my baby fell sick / Was a Monday / And it lasted nine days» (21-22).

The familiar feeling of tending for a sick baby is the means by which the author deals analogically with the intractable social problems of her country.

Here, the country is the baby and the sickness needing cure and sacrifice is a multiple social sclerosis of the system, especially in transportation, agriculture, medicare, and education. The symbolism is effective such that the personal becomes the collective as well as the political. Also, the choice of the filiative mother-child relation in this poem confirms the essential female voice embedded in the entire collection. It is possible to exert a relative discourse of gender-specific metaphors in *Another Story*. A school of criticism of recent Nigerian writing has indicated the insignificance of any attempt to deal with the possibilities of the female imagination in literary productions. One valid part of the argument is that the quality or the literariness of a work cannot be qualified by the gender of its author; the other contentious half of the formalist position is that no author sets out to write either as a man or as a woman, and therefore any critical assessment of a (male or female) writer's work through a range of gender discourses cannot be said to be valid. To this I will say that the evidence of authorial secretion into the literary text proves that no work can be genderless or sexless in spite of certain declamation to that effect.

Earlier, I referred to the constancy of the writer of vision. This is more highlighted in the intertextual relations between her first and second collections whereby poems speak to or echo each other. The poems titled «We are Different (iii)» (42) and «We are Different (iv)» (66) are apparently a continuation of the theme of a similarly titled poem in *Daughters of Hauwa*; «Decisions (Part I)» (32) and «Decisions (Part 2)» (69) are both extensions of the lyrical reflection contained in an earlier poem «Decisions» in *Daughters of Hauwa*.

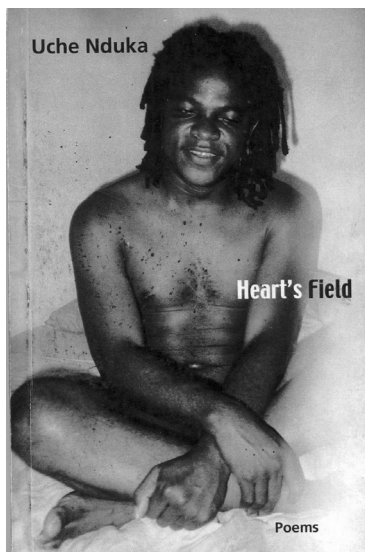
With the example of Mujidah Aleem's work, the assumption that all women write predictably on the same subject(s) remains a mere and indefensible assumption. She may have in her writings the deep personalising voice of the female as woman and mother, but the qualifying distinction of her writing lies in her commitment to the representation of human values through relation and reference to a spiritual being. When she writes about love, men, children, her ultimate referent is God, His infallibility, His constancy, and His resolution. For an author who claims to draw divine inspiration from the spiritual realm, to highlight the world's problems is not enough; *Another Story* is a remarkable departure from the essential materialist

slant of gender discourse in contemporary Nigerian poetry.

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*The Obscene, the Iconoclastic: A Review of Uche Nduka's Heart's Field* UCHE NDUKA, **Heart's Field**, Bremen (Germany), Yeti Press, 2005, pp. 94.



From the cover picture, the obscene, the iconoclastic, stares at you as Uche Nduka's photo, legs-crossed, arms-crossed, sitting naked – stark naked – on bed, a toothy, lecherous smile from a pseudo-shy face, creates a whole sparkling poem in your mind. The Nigeria-born, German-based experimental poet with an idiosyncratic formalism is out again.

Entry into the poems convinces you that the collection is aptly titled. *Heart's Field*. They are strings of blunt memories from a lover, surefooted, veteran, arrogant and self-righteous in his chants. The persona, aware of his long-acquired personal power, bursts out with life, love and sex.

The poems in this collection are untitled, but numbered in figures. Apart from that, most of the poems, in what has now come to be traditional with Nduka's poems, are in short, few lines, the words creating a hunger for more words in you. All the poems defy capitalization. A sentence – either conventional or not – begins with small letters, although preceded by a full stop. This is Nduka's style. The Nigerian literary scene is yet to beget a poet more acrobatic with style. For him, everything that drops from the pen is poetry, and ought to be poetized, formalized.

The stream of semantics that floods out of the thematic issues presents you with a poet-persona who is obscene, vulgar and iconoclastic. Out of the heart's field spring love poems that carry sensual images definitely repulsive to a puritan. But Nduka, through his disquieting style, *un* African poetry mannerism, and palpable individualism, has, since his stay in Germany, forged a stubborn gospel for himself which, interestingly, gives us a breathing allowance from the choking political poems churned out in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Which is why some «one-note johnny critics» (this is the chuckling metaphor he uses to condemn Nigerian critics, coughed out in an interview with me, soon to be published) will not be surprised that Nduka's heart's field produces these poems stained with European-American slang and sexual frankness foreign to Nigerian poetry.

In poem 1 the lovers seem to be in a friction whereby «dog looked at mouse / mouse looked at dog» (3-4) and there is something about dishonesty («fiddle», 5). Yet the male lover, the one who leads us into the trajectory of the sensual, states his position: «I am curled in you. / knitted in the knot / that is you» (7-9). If she, the female lover is a «knot», then indeed she does not come through as a straightforward lover. A metaphor, rather askew.

The poems that follow, however, present fleshly pleasure between two lovers, so that you forget whatever it is that makes the female lover a «knot». In poem 4, the lover-persona chants: «I praised the simple / sincerity of the parted / moon between your legs» (3-5). You will imagine the lips of vagina giving way to the «moon» – the pleasure land every man wants to arrive at. This is Nduka's bluntest but captivating metaphor. He summons her: «around a sacred right / let's fuck / to the covert rhythm / of a thinking tree» (71). The persona yearns for copulation, not on a bed, not in a room, not in a befitting privacy, but to the openness of a «thinking tree». Another strange avenue for sexual intercourse is portrayed in

poem 6: «a cuddle is flowering. / around a woodstove / is where we're sitting. // we'll join the sexsmiths. / swinging is good if / we're going to roll joints / on our thighs» (1-7). Whatever is meant by «woodstove» certainly does not create an atmosphere for sex for human beings with a sense of decency. But the lovers here seem liberated from and unchained by any morals.

Their lovemaking is also indoored in a peculiar way. It is done to the taste of the assertive male lover as poem 11 shows: «some like it not / but I do: wear an apron / with nothing underneath. / I want you nude – no, almost / nude in this adhesive kitchen» (7-11). The lover-persona is just bothered about the pleasure he derives: the pleasure of sex.

The ideas in the poems progress from preoccupation with coitus to deep philosophical statements about exposing the personal feeling of the poet-persona towards his lover who says little or nothing throughout the collection. Like poem 1, poem 13 tries to house the theme that love affair is often not smooth, with flowing fleshly pleasure. The whole poem here: «sometimes they tied you / to a grave, sometimes / they leashed you to a bed, / and you never knew / which was which / at the bananary. / back there and then / our love was out of / place and time. our / ties were out of luck.» The image of forced action in the early part of the poem shows you some subjugation that the female lover is under.

Nduka's *Heart's Field* contains ninety-four poems that explore the numerous nuances of love affair with frank tones and blunt words. The amoral images are fluid and consistently create the kind of sensuality that religiously or culturally restricted people will most frown at. Subtly, beyond the fleshly pleasure of unbridled instincts and open sex, you encounter anguish and frustration, courage and bravery, and the insistence to outlive conventions. Nduka's poetry has always battled against the standards of African literature. The lovers have, in fact, collapsed into emotional, social and moral upheavals. But it is a world of theirs where there are no regrets, no emotional manacles and no ego-suppressing shame. As naked and *unwordy* as the poems are, they are muscled by the complexity of universalism where you can most probably dump the species of love poems.

Nduka once called attention to himself by saying «I subscribe to a poetry of experience which objectifies itself freely, stylistically and thematically on the page» (*Daily Times*, October 28, 1989). *Heart's Field* demonstrates this subscrip-

tion a great deal. It is a strange entrance into Nigerian literature. So, we must still agree with the «one-note johnny critics», like Wumi Raji, that Nduka is not just becoming stranger to Nigerian poetry, his poetry bears the danger of becoming a distant, piping sound in Nigerian literature. But his poetry is another globalised side of our literature.

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NIYI OSUNDARE, *L'occhio della terra (The Eye of the Earth)*, con testo a fronte, traduzione e cura di Pietro Deandrea, Firenze, Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 2006, pp. 129, € 16,50



Casa Editrice Le Lettere

The notion of African literary cultures is frequently associated with outstanding examples of novels, which have received much critical attention and have become rather popular in the West as well. However, we should not forget poetry, a paramount genre deeply rooted in African cultures, intermingling as it does with oral traditions, religious customs and ancient beliefs. Given such a premise, the publication of Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* in a bilingual volume edited and translated into Italian by Pietro Deandrea is particularly significant, for a double reason: on the one hand it constitutes another approach towards a genre often marginalised or even considered elitist, on the other it makes a fascinating literary corpus accessible to a wider readership. The Nigerian author was born in the rural region of Ikere-Ekiti, in Ondo State, and belongs to a traditional Yoruba

family, in which the sense of poetry and storytelling is a sort of boon linking together different generations. From such a background, it comes as no surprise to find an author with an intense feeling for words, mixing Nigerian English and vernacular terms at the same time.

This collection of poems was originally published in 1986 and was awarded the Commonwealth Prize. Its structure includes three main sections, respectively entitled «Back to Earth», «Rainsongs» and «Homecall», cum a further short intermezzo, «Eyeful glances». The themes and issues that they explore pivot around the gist of nature, human life and the environment, as the opening epigraph clearly demonstrates: «Dedicated to / OUR EARTH / and all who struggle to see / it neither / wastes / nor / wants» (p. 20). Osundare endorses a traditional vision by highlighting the meaning of poetry combined with music: indeed many of his lyrics should be accompanied with musical instruments: for «Forest Echoes» the poet indicates «flute and heavy drums» (p. 34), with the poem «The Rocks Rose to Meet Me» he prescribes it «to be chanted with agba drum throbbing in the background» (p. 52), while «Harvestcall» ought to be «chanted to lively bata music» (p. 62). Such «stage directions» emphasise the «natural» bond between African poetry and oral traditions by giving birth to public performances, verbal negotiations and religious rites. Artists, *griots*, shamans and poets, but even laymen bargaining in the teeming markets of Africa, are aware of the power of words.

Several literary devices are employed to build up a complex thematic frame: the expressivity of phonic structures and the idea of personification in particular reverberate throughout the poems. The phonic symbolism that Osundare conceives is actually a stratification of numerous elements, ranging from euphony and dissonance to phonic parallelism, alliteration and assonance. A stanza from «The Rocks Rose to Meet Me» provides an instance of such peculiar blend «The rocks rose to meet me / Tall rocks, short rocks / sharp rocks, round rocks / some with staid steps / of war-wise warriors / other with the gaysome gaits / of pandering pilgrims» (p. 58). The repetition of words, phonemes or letters operates to achieve a semantic reinforcement with a delicate balance between elegiac songs and colloquial speech. Dealing with the creations and treasures of the earth, the writer extensively uses the strategy of personification, in different forms, for example by focussing on natural products, vegetables

and trees. In «Harvestcall» we are shown «where yams, ripe and randy, / waged a noisy war against the knife» (p. 62) and also «[...] where yam wore the crown / in the reign of swollen roots» (p. 62). The presence of yams (*Dioscorea batatas*), a starchy tuber extremely common in many African countries, anchors the idea of everyday life to a collective celebration of the environment, within a harmonious alliance between man and nature. The same technique is exemplified in «coy cobs» (p. 64), nearly an instance of paronomasia and it further emerges in the fourth section of the same poem: «But where are they? / Where are they gone: / aroso, geregede, otilli, pakala, / which beckoned lustily to the reaping basket / Where are they / the yam pyramids which challenged the sun / in busy barns / Where are they / the pumpkins which caressed earthbreast / like mammary burdens / Where are they / the pods which sweetened harvest air / with the clatter of dispersing seeds?» (p. 66). These lines (in which the author presents the local Yoruba words for different types of beans) accentuate a maternal, «human» characterisation of the earth, expressing itself through the generous harvest of bygone times. The implicit accusation towards the squandering of natural resources, namely a warning that lies at the very heart of the entire collection, darkens the festive tones of the poem with the closing couplet: «With our earth so warm / How can our hearth be so cold?» (p. 66) and predicts menacing shadows for the future.

On the linguistic level, we cannot ignore the mechanism of unusual collocations, whose function is to foreground the innermost emotions and thoughts concerning nature, the coming of rains, the growing of vegetation, the threat of drought, the peril of desertification, or the blooming of life. In «Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed» the poet mentions a «boil of anguish» (p. 78) as a sort of invocation requiring a nourishment for both humanity and the land, while in «Who Says that Drought Was Here?» water becomes an element of life and therefore the meaning of regeneration surfaces anew when «palms have shed the shroud of brown» (p. 88). In concentrating on the endangered earth and the possible consequences of catastrophic environmental changes – an argument that ecocriticism has recently brought to light, the author does not eschew personal or autobiographical references, although they are markedly evident in his other poetical works.

In his preface the author defines his lyrical compositions as «journeys» into the labyrinth of memory since, as he

points out, «in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forwards; the visionary artist is not only a remember, he is also a reminder» (p. 24). Thus a full recognition and value are given to the salient role of the poet, the man who magically treats the words and creates verses, songs, stories and myths. The Yoruba origin of Osundare can be traced by taking into account autochthonous genres like praise poetry, chants, sacred invocations as well as inspiring names. A particular type of these traditional communicative practices is represented by *oriki*, a name or praise poetry that aims at «opening up» or «extending» a person's head, bearing in mind of course that «head» has to be interpreted in a metaphorical way, as a sign of identity and morality, rather than a physical part of the body. The etymological structure of this word refers to Ori, one of the most forceful deities in the Yoruba pantheon, but simultaneously the term means «head», hence its magical and ritual essence. Niyi Osundare adopts both forms of *oriki*, namely the act of naming, or bestowing a name upon people, animals, plants and things, as well as the praising of nature and environment in a holistic manner.

Editing and translating a work like Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* is a very complex and problematic task due to all its lexical, idiomatic and evocative features. As a matter of fact, the question regards not only the scope of translation, a mere permutation of codes from a language into another, but rather the translation of cultures. The author's colloquial and fruitful style illuminates the malleability of Nigerian English, with a wealth of colourful puns, Yoruba interferences and bizarre coinages. Nonetheless, the translator has managed to render these lyrics accessible to Italian readers thanks to a variety of successful solutions, adapting verses, combining words and conveying inner meanings. Pietro Deandrea has also compiled a glossary of specific African terms, with the support of Osundare himself, which represents a further valuable tool for nearing the African world.

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