

Publishing Literary Works in Africa: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The mood is uninspiring when the discourse is about publishing of African literary works. As a contribution to this conversation, this article studies the challenges besetting literary publishing on the African continent. Many African writers watch their manuscripts gather dust on the bookshelves. Even some of them who are published are under published. Having interacted with literary artists and reading about disappointments expressed by various budding literary writers, the author opines that all is not well with publishing of literary materials in Africa. The researcher discovered that some of the problems are economic, security, political, poor readership, poor authorship, harsh social environment, piracy, poor literacy and the culture that promotes orality, distraction by home video and social media, lack of support by state, non state players and significant others. To improve the situation, education in Africa must be revolutionised. Reading of literary materials among students and the populace must be encouraged. Government should increase its participation in the development of education. Endowments must be instituted to advance literary creativity. Copyright laws must be enforced to check piracy. On the part of authors, they must hone their skills to attune to publishable standard. These will enhance and fortify literary publishing in Africa.

1.0 Introduction

It is usually argued that the bad economic climate in Africa is one of the reasons why the continent's literature is not faring well. This assumption hardly conforms to new realities in some African countries, of which Nigeria is one. If anything, Nigeria has been growing fat in recent times from crude oil sales. In that wise, people may be tempted to think that the Nigerian economy could help to lay the foundation for a re-launch of the country's literature. Certainly, the boom in an economy has a way of explaining the accomplishments of individuals in various fields. However, one cannot draw conclusions

on such assumptions, because this development may be happening to the exclusion of some categories of people.

In whatever situation writers may find themselves, the observer wants to be certain that good books are being written by these writers. It will be good to know if so-called new writers are being assessed by the same standards that writers before them were assessed. Various commentators regret the ways whereby Western imperialism maintains its hegemony over African literature.” In Africa, literary criticisms are in short supply even for the large volume of works being produced. It is one of the reasons why some people claim that the de-colonization of African literature, a process that has been going on for decades, is ineffectual.

A society that takes itself serious will not want observers to believe it can dispense with basic publications like academic journals. This reality goes hand in hand with the reality of a people who have not experienced the flavor of literature written in indigenous languages. Generally, it is pertinent to ask what part the standard of education plays in intellectual growth in creating readers. It appears that the social media quickens the exposure of writers and boosts writing. The social media may also have accelerated the decline in reading, as the platform for entertainment has widened and altered people’s habits. The social media network Facebook, for instance, takes too much of users’ time and falsely presents a reading reality. When people have the time to spare on reading, they may be constrained by security challenges. Security also becomes an issue whenever we read reports in Nigeria that suggest that a certain group of people are moving back to the country. For a returnee who has been used to a fairly secure life, how an insecure life replaces the previous one will help explain the state of things in the country.

Success in different sectors in Africa is measured according to the economic well being of various African countries. Many writers share the same views on what a badly performing economy reveals. Hans Zell is among these writers. He ranks Nigeria among the many African countries that have unimpressive economic indices. The majority of the African countries, he declares, are in the grip of soaring oil prices, corruption, capital flight, and bad management. He believes that these countries are also afflicted with more than their own share of drought and diseases.

There is no end in sight for debt and interest payments. He cites the ill-advised step taken by Nigeria as the country proceeded to take an IMF loan from which the country has not recovered. That action denied the country any competitiveness in the international market, to the end that it is responsible for the country not fulfilling various obligations. Further, cut backs from governments affected production of textbooks.

2.0 Problems of Publishing

2.1 Poor Economic Condition

In effect, with the paralysis occasioned by poverty, people cannot buy books to read. In economically hostile conditions empty book shelves will become common place. It does not end with primary school children but a development which translates into whole generations being deprived of books (Zell 65).

2.2 Aversion to the Printed Material

Like many analysts, Hans Zell may not have correctly assessed the situation. While there is little evidence that tends to indicate that normalcy has returned to the book industry, the Nigerian economy and the economies of many African countries have been doing well. We become aware of the economic boom in Nigeria through the strong voices that have emerged in the music industry, in the film industry, among the clergy, the numerous scandals involving the politicians, etc. (Zell 65). Discussions have been on going on why there has not been a desirable outcome for literature. Contributors to this debate have noted people's aversion to the printed material, among others. People were confined to their homes, and cinema meant nothing to them, until one Ben Bruce committed funds into a successful cinema project.

Today, cinema forms part of people's lives just as the home videos have won back fans on television. People changed their opinions about comedy and now go along with friends to visit theatres to watch comedians. Some of the comedians have become increasingly popular as far away as the USA. Against all odds, the populace began to amuse themselves almost exclusively with local songs, and this has caught on. Until Tuface, Keke Ogungbe and Don Jazzy emerged, the few people who wanted to sing were hardly convinced they could make any breakthrough (Amagiya).

2.3 Broken Education System

Some people mention a broken education system that is the outcome of universities not offering literature courses. According to the writer Ada Agbasimimalo, when it comes to literature, motivation is scarce. Literature would leave a writer poor rather than richer. People do not flock to it and would rather spend their time on things considered worthwhile. People in Nigeria have never been made to discover the benefits of reading, as reading is considered an awkward exercise. Their world is not formed around books due to the fact that they grow up hardly ever been compelled to read for leisure. Internet and the social media, Agbasimimalo says, have silently kept people away from books. At length, the advantages of the social media cannot be overlooked, though. Agbasimimalo recalls how the concept of reading one book a month was included in school schedules when she was in high school.

Syed Amanuddin supports what Agbasimalo says when he speaks about the spell of the media. He opines that there is jet-set flow of information and tastes acquired as a result of the lust after current trends. In that circumstance, people who enjoy more reverence are politicians and the ideas that flow from them, as success is counted in practical terms. Literature cannot count on big audiences. Whether writing or reading, literature requires a certain intellectual capacity, unlike the others where the audience do not need a special training. Reaction to literature may be based on absence of improved reception ability. There may also be a problem by the audience failing to identify with the means of transmission. Often, there is lack of effort to link up with the message.

This happens especially when there is absence of enlightenment. It does help, Amanuddin says, if in a community a group has evolved and raised its level of appreciation or taste to the level required to absorb the message. The problem may also lie with the writer's ability or lack of it. According to Amanuddin, the writer first recognizes he has an audience. The writer may have failed to accomplish a set goal if he does not establish a relationship by good story telling. The writer definitely wants to see his work being highly prized by the reader (Agbasimalo, Facebook message to writer, Aug 04, 2013 Amanuddin 15).

2.4 The Writer and His Work

Zell says that it must be clear to the writer that he must attend to his writing with a strong dedication so that the work will be treated as great art by readers, especially given what the circumstance and place can support. He holds the view that the writer can be effective by practicing his trade diligently. He quotes Ghiselin who points out that "the artist must labor to the limit of human development and then take a step beyond." Amanuddin states firmly that when the writer draws closer to a community, that writer's voice will echo more in that small place. Distance might minimize the writer's resonance, if the distance is extended, as readers are replaced by strangers. The attempt to excel causes the writer to indulge in unnecessary devices in order to be appreciated.

The Third World writer or African writer tries to assist his foreign readers to comprehend his work, something that might upset the entire work. It should be certain to the writer how other writers produce their stories. It is taken for granted, for instance, that the poet is more rigorous and searches for that process which will make his or her work appreciated. Amanuddin cites the case of the poet who has to find new ways of expression for common words, making the words sometimes occur in unpredictable forms. The poet cannot afford to waste a lifetime effort by not producing a good work. What is left after and when it is declared fit for public consumption is what we read, eventually. The danger of revised texts is exemplified in how William Wordsworth's poems lost their substance, as Wordsworth inadvertently got rid of the allure of the poems. For writing, Amanuddin says

that there is the type of writing that has something in it for local and foreign readers. This is done in return for acceptance from readers (16-27).

2.5 Pleasing the Foreign Reader

Reacting to this practice, Agbasimalo remarks that it does not inspire one to realize that one may have to work hard to please some foreign authorities. She and some of her fellow writers, she says, work within rational ideals. She goes on to say that “African writers should be bold enough to even load their works unapologetically with vernacular.” One notices the pain of writing as an African when one ponders Agbasimalo’s assertion that some bold African writers do it even at the risk of being shunned by Western readers. This is because, as an African writer, for instance, one pays attention to what might make sense to an American audience. This is why it is feared that literature has become a tool being used to appeal to the sensibilities of people alien to African cultures, especially with regard to issues like feminism (Agbasimalo, Facebook message to writer, Aug 04, 2013,).

But, according to Akpabio Ekpa, this dominant trait of making society to operate on certain standards is dangerous. Ekpa quotes Catherine Acholonu who warns that the Western tradition cannot be a substitute for African traditional ways and cannot fulfil the needs of an African family. Therefore, conforming to what is strictly Western makes African writers to write in a way that is worrisome. In reality, there are firm attitudes among African women that happen in a way that negates the claims of the feminists. We have the opportunity to feel the self-consciousness of “Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah... Mariama Ba has come out assertive, individualistic, daring, and sometimes outright careless about how she achieves her goals” (Ekpa 27-30).

6.0 Meeting the Requirements for Getting Published

Weate uses his experience with African writing to state why this is undesirable. He wants to know if, among African writers, violence is a precondition for getting published. He notices how a particular work, like several works, is built around violence. When he is about reading a book, he is certain the writer will do the same thing. It makes him wonder why there is the high probability that a novel will focus on violence. It appears as if the writers had turned off the switch of hope. He argues that it will require an African publisher to minimize such occurrence. He warns of a handicap if every African work with a name has to go in and out of a Western publishing outfit.

Reference, he says, is always made of a book’s Western publisher. Even for one published by an indigenous publisher, approval is awaited from outside, and the story changes when the approval comes. If it suffers from being published locally or not to have won an award, lecturers may frown at it. They respond differently to the same book when

an edition is published outside. That is why Weate is of the view that with the presence of the Western press African writers can never elevate local publishing to an enviable status. He urges that the focus should be on an African work that is African in name and in content. He wants people to reflect on the blessings of a book coming from within. There is a price to pay when this is not the case. Publishing should be diverse enough to include the home actors. A local publisher can better assist a writer in constructing an African world that reveals very much of Africa (Situation).

Weate himself reminds us that capitalism is a Western product. It is not prepared to lose control of something it developed and has utilized for over 400 years. Global images are being disseminated from the West. Actually, there is a pool of publishing houses with huge assets that are woven like America's Hollywood. This is why value has been placed on anything that has its origin in the West (Situation). The new development, Agbasimalo says, is that African publishers now think about China and India the same way they take account of other goods and services those countries offer. How is it that the Africans have not developed a publishing tradition that will take literature to the desired height? she asks. There are still some publications that can be accepted as good works. What is happening is that African publishers have not really done their homework in managing their enterprises. If the publishers are interested in making their books free of errors they do not show it. Agbasimalo is worried that it has not been brought to the attention of African writers that American spellings should not be found in write ups with English spellings. She discovered, to her surprise, that American editors see use of British English as part of a string of faults (Agbasimalo, Facebook message to writer, Aug 04, 2013).

2.7 Government's Apathy to Publishing

Discussions on African literature, Philip Altbach says, have begun to look like a situation where nothing is consistent. People perpetually meet to discuss procedures for improvement, with government officials filling halls with promises that are unlikely to be kept. The government is yet to show that fairness expected of it and to understand why it is present at these conferences. In fact, various countries in Africa fail to realize the magnitude of the power they could wield if they collaborate with other African countries. Some French-speaking African countries, though, have acted appropriately and have agreed among them to jointly fund and advance the cause of literature. This is what ought to be built on, Altbach says. Government agencies are not reliable. They are extensions of governments that fail the people over and over. This is not surprising, since they are not conceived to operate outside the ministry of education (66).

It should have been good news that the multinationals have stopped maintaining any presence in Africa and turned over their assets and all activities to the indigenous people. Those multinationals had added to the problems besetting Africa. It should not be forgotten that they too were exposed to some distasteful practices in Africa. They had not only

despaired over the economic conditions in various African countries but were unimpressed by their inability to retrieve after sales cash. One of the common sins of the local agents was dishonesty. Licensing of local publishers failed due to a combination of lack of assurances from governments and the conduct of local publishers. Local publishers not having good intentions made many foreign partners to suspend or to withhold licensing. There is now a good development, with the World Bank replacing the government as a source of assistance. The World Bank however is not planned to deal with institutions beyond state structures. State-run organizations are not good examples of effectiveness, since a public enterprise does not stir the emotions and sympathies of its staff (Zell 72).

Book donations, with their unpredictable natures, have been sources of replenishment. And in many countries in Africa today, the state of libraries raise the question of utility in the modern world, as information on library collections cannot be obtained online. That is why some foreign organisations make arrangements for African libraries in this regard (Zell 65-69). There exists, for instance, the Sub-Saharan Africa Journal Distribution Program, sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, with vast distribution network. As the name suggests, it included African countries as part of its recipients. The Australian Centre for Publications Acquired for Development (ACPAD), the library association of Australia, is truly acting in a supporting role and willing to do more if only the contact will be initiated by African libraries. Response will depend on how the request is presented. A good arrangement is one whereby donors will deliver books identified by the recipients. Some international lending agencies are now also funding some royalty payments. With regard to a small time publisher, his meagre capital and earning cannot make him a donor (Zell 70).

2.8 Lack of Preference of African Works

Zell suggests that preference should be for African books, so that books from a certain country could form part of what is read in other African countries. It is not helpful when other African countries are not within the area of coverage or readership of books written in a particular West African country. Zell has a supporter in Jeremy Weate who says that such a practice will result in exchange of books and ideas. The people concerned really need to make books from other African countries to be desired in other communities. By so doing, African readers and people will exhibit oneness. If possible, this will be an opportunity to check European interference. It should be done in such a way that services by Western agencies will not be missed. There are foreign institutions and individuals who have discovered and are keen on African books like any other.

With the number now impressive, the potential exists for impressive and healthy outcomes for local African publishers. Anyone whose concern it is to see an improvement in sales of African books worldwide will be satisfied with the success so far recorded by some publishers and marketers. The promotions of these publishers, though, if at all, have

not been anything that suggests they have broken into foreign markets. A good example is the agency African Books Collective which has been cited as one of the outfits that adapt methods that might bring a change. African Books Collective becomes useful in that it has a facility as well as a pattern that suits both the African publisher and the marketer in the West (Zell 65-74).

It is lamented that some universities, contrary to laid down rules, assemble mostly people without PhDs as lecturers. The state itself does not want to discontinue the practice of spending 25% of its annual budget on a few not very productive legislators comprising two national chambers. The same government boasts that education now gets 7% of the annual budget, much more than it got in the past. The government is still satisfied with the wonderful idea of lowering the admission scores of students from some regions to zero, while raising that of students from less favored states to 375. Ironically, the country's leaders will be produced from the group with the lowest scores. Therefore, the government spoils students' appetite for scholarship.

2.9 Security, Writing and Publishing

As Nigeria is diverse, so have been the various types of crimes in the country. Each people exhibit in a peculiar way some elements of their discontent with the state. It has all developed to put the country in a state of war. All is quiet now in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where activities by some militants had paralyzed the oil industry and affected oil prices worldwide. Security agents have recorded success in tackling crime in Lagos and the Western part of Nigeria. Therefore, this region has been spared some violence. Most parts of Nigeria do not have such luxury. Kidnappers, taking a cue from the so-called Niger Delta militants, now rule in some climes in the south east of Nigeria. They seize people with ease. A little up north, the Plateau State area has acquired a new image as a place where Christians and Moslems as well as settlers and indigenous groups advance various causes. The people have grown to hate each other for more reasons for their faith than citizenship of the country.

As a by-product of the conflicts, population transfers became inevitable in the place as different people conversely moved out of hostile and into more friendly neighbourhoods. In the towns, traditional names disappeared and were replaced by ideological names like 'New Jerusalem, 'Jesus Zone' and 'Promised Land,' for the Christians. The Moslem settlers took names from Islamic countries and their religion. There are now 'Sharia Line,' 'Anguwan Musulumi,' 'Afghanistan,' 'Jihad Zone,' 'Saudi Arabia, and 'Seat of (bin) Laden.' What is expected of communities that adopt such names in that circumstance is the raising of local armies. Expectedly, the place has tasted blood in disturbing proportions ([Medicine](#) for [uncertain futures](#): a [Nigerian city](#) in the [wake](#) of a [crisis](#) / Ulrika Andersson Trovalla).

Not too long ago, an attempt to tackle an unknown group in nearby Nassarawa State led to the deaths of over seventy policemen and other security forces. Further south, in Benue State, the wiping out of villagers by Fulani herdsmen has become too familiar. Across southern Nigeria, communities are being subjected to arson, murder and rape at the hands of the same herdsmen. The country is struggling to hold back the Islamic group Boko Haram in the far north. Boko Haram is a group that has chosen the path of Islamization of Nigeria. Surprisingly, the writers are not rattled yet. Their reaction is to prepare for further reading sessions. The conflict can shape the literature but the reader in the plot has to be somebody who loves books as he does his mobile phone.

3.0 Summary and Conclusion

This security situation has not lessened the ambitions of Nigerian writers. Reading sessions have readily been revived. The writers have surely found themselves in an economy that makes this ... possible. However, it is obvious that what the writers gather to do is not capable of reversing the trend in writing in the country. These writers are not producing books for which the writers could be given some credit. When we talk about literature, the view is held that writers are not making literatures that can motivate people. It cannot be said that the books in the market are being written by the best hands in the land, either. It does not work that writing should secure fortunes for the writers.

The assertion by Weate that anything happening in Nigeria does not resemble that of a country on the list of suppliers of oil to the US and other countries is not tenable, even though what Weate says about a well oiled tax evasion system in which the oil majors rip off the country is true. (Situation Is Critical! Bringing African Writing Back Home) Thinking of the various bonanzas the citizens have fallen in love with, one can understand why writers get less than other artists. If quest for money is the rule in the country, the people in charge in the literary world have failed to make writing a rewarding venture. Prize money for often criticized reality show Big Brother Africa is \$500,000. Though Project Fame and Gulder Ultimate Search attract less fortune, they are well publicized events with a lot of followership.

Definitely, if people are made to make millions in book-related bonanzas, more people will be interested in literary works. The government should do what Agbasimalo suggests, which is that the government should encourage encounters between writers and students. The purpose will be to build affection in the minds of students for writers and writing. Writing, according to Weate, should be regarded as something that requires the involvement of government. The government unfortunately often forgets its promises. It has left libraries to go to ruin. It does not help that the African writer is still wary of who may constitute his or her readership. He or she knows that it is the Western reader who keeps him or her in business (Agbasimalo, Facebook message to writer, Aug 04, 2013).

The various arguments are based on the premise that we should not expect a foreign language to perform this task satisfactorily. African writers have given up any claim of a wholly written African work. With regard to publishing, Agbasimalo informs us that African publishers have enough reasons to turn to the countries in Asia. Publishers, writers and editors do much of their business not paying attention to grammatical rules. The publishers do not operate by the same commercial standards that are found elsewhere. They should be made to respect license terms and to resist the urge to withhold money from sales. Local publishers must understand the state of urgency in their business.

They ought to take into account the fact that writers are entitled to their dues. It is also said that it is difficult to endure the prevalence of book piracy. Rather than disappear, piracy thrives. Hans Zell writes that in Africa the people have settled for the unpredictable culture of book donations. Considered from the point of view of helpless African writers, there has been a shift to self-publishing. Self-publishing is akin to self-preservation. After all, these African writers are taking note of how one Louise Voss and Mark Edwards have turned self-publishing into a success story. The sales Voss and Edwards make from their publications bring into focus the bluff of major publishers (Liam). Can writers in Nigeria deliver the goods when it is hard to explain how various groups are now disposed to killing security officials and the reluctance of the state to assert itself? In a situation whereby people are seized by kidnapers with ease, improvement in security should dominate the minds of people. In this debate, the bitter pill to swallow is to de-emphasize the competition for control of power which actually fuels conflicts on the African continent.

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