**BOOK REVIEW**

***Contemporary African Literature: New Approaches***

Tanure Ojaide

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*Readership:* Postgraduate students and scholars with an interest in African literature and literature in general.

Tanure Ojaide is a Nigerian poet and literary writer in addition to having critical essays on topics like imperialism, ecology, and religion. His poetic style and vision won him the 2018 *Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa* through his poetry collection, *Songs of Myself: A Quartet* (2017).

The book focuses on literary productions from Africa and begins with a critical discussion on the matter of the canonization of African literary works, runs through related topics that impact the public reception of literary productions from Africa such as migration, globalization, care of the environment, human rights, conflict management, Pidgin English, gender issues, poetry, critical scholarship and ends with discussions on African literary aesthetics and prospects of continuity and change. These make up the central themes explored in critical discussions throughout the book.

The work emerged from an interest to explore African literature using a socio-historical approach and draws from a wide range of perspectives. The qualitative methodology adopted was designed to underscore an underlying thesis that literature is domiciled in Africa as much as it is in the West and even as the West postures to possess final authority over it. Another underlying thesis is that literature exists in an interactive ambience with other disciplines and this functions to empower the role of literature in society especially in these modern times. Furthermore, it argues that African literature must be recognized as having its own peculiar characteristics and these should be accepted on the international stage rather than used for the continued subjugation of African literature to codes established for Western literature in a Euro-Western environment. In this lies the identity of African literature and a denial of this will only undermine the prospects of African literature.

Another interesting perspective in this work is that literature is a cultural production and it plays dynamic social roles or serves specific objectives in the African societies where they are produced while at the same time relevant to the world. The literary writer is conceived not as a passive agent in social dynamics but as an active agent who should by that reason be willing to devote creativity and other required resources to the task of generating and promoting proper ideals in society. This duty will be carried out both at local levels and at international levels. The literary writer is also envisioned to contribute to public discussions and the framing of policies with respect to creating an environment conducive for social interactions and developmental initiatives in a multicultural world.

The author exhibits a clear intention to link up the visions of African literature with the global call for fairness, justice and peace in the midst of multiple levels of differences between individuals, families, groups, cultures, nations, and races. What is also visible is the expectation that an African writer must be committed to the struggle for human rights taking cognizance of differences that might exist in the society based on gender, political inclination, economic status, population size, physical/health conditions, and other social interests. In addition, the writer is also expected to contribute to action for a safe environment and ecological wellbeing going by the understanding that the survival of the human race and developmental progress also depend on the care of both the environment and the climate.

The author advocates for what he calls “the scholar-poet perspective” and this refers to the view that a writer has meaning not only as a creative writer who produces works of poetry, prose, or drama but also as a critical historian tasked with identifying, exploring and promoting traditional and modern African literary works and putting them on a footing enabling them to compete favourably with literary productions from the West and other parts of the world.

The book affirms the immense efforts already being made by a significant number of critical scholars and literary writers from different parts of Africa whose works are indicators of the quality of scholarly and literary productions from Africa. It is also important to note that the book draws immensely from the vast range of experiences of the author which he garnered over the years both as a creative writer and as a literary scholar. Using these resources, he interrogates the dependent condition of Africa on the West and argues for decolonization quite persuasively. Previous research he did on different topics that derive from this core concern while discussing the achievements and potentials of African literature provided most of the material used in this book. These were ideas he explored and presented for public discussions as a keynote speaker, a lead paper presenter at conferences and at other fora for intellectual discussions held in Africa and elsewhere.

The author encourages more interest in modern African creative writings and scholarly productions especially poetry. He underscores the view that a writer with some background in creative writing and scholarly research has a great advantage because of the intellectual resources that will be at the person’s disposal. He also believes that his role in this book is to raise questions rather than to provide answers even though insights uncovered in the book can provide solutions. He also raises the question whether African readers, writers, scholars, and students truly feel inclined to identify with what their fellow Africans produce or look up to foreign versions.

Furthermore, while the author raises questions about how Africans should respond to works written by fellow Africans, he presents a convincing argument that if the existence of a Western literary canon is affirmed for Western literature, an African literary canon should also be affirmed for African literary productions given that all these are cultural productions from different parts of the world. Indeed, literary productions that have nothing to contribute to the society that produced them incline towards absurdity. He also presents a strong argument that concerns about the canonization and aesthetics of African literature complement each other to provide a fuller and enriching layout of literary creativity on the continent. He finds oral poetic performances such as the *udje* and *ijala* and other artistic forms as instances of how modern African literature is birthed from traditional African literature.

The author goes on to argue that while the old and the new can interact to produce meaningful hybrid forms, the purposes of literature are served more when the traditional is explored in newer forms. It is against this background of African literary tradition and modernity that an African writer can find both his or her individuality and locus.

This book is commendable for its achievements in the area of projecting the independent merits of African literary works as cultural productions that have canonical status and aesthetic merits. The language used is clear while the style of argumentation is straightforward. Indeed, the work makes some very significant contributions to the ongoing discussion about African literary creativity and its prospects in a globalized world. The resources used in achieving this objective were primary and secondary sources which were well explored and systematically presented. The author’s ample use of examples drawn from his personal creative and scholarly history as a “scholar-poet” brings ideas to life and foregrounds the perspectives he argues for. This is an evidence of god scholarship and it showcases the descriptive and analytical powers he also brought to bear on his materials.

However, the book does not do enough to explore the origins of what it generally categorises as traditional forms of African literature. One would expect that a work presenting serious arguments about the merits of African literature in a globalized world would devote sufficient pages to discussions concerning the origins of African literature. This is a big gap in the work. In addition, the book does not offer sufficient exploration of areas of divergence and convergence between African literary productions and Western literary productions. Furthermore, the book does not do enough to present strong indicators establishing that African literary works will continue to compete favourably with literary forms from other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, the book’s panoramic approach is very interesting and very informative. On this basis, we recommend it for reading.

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