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New Poetics in the Poetry of Contemporary East African Poets

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Abstract:

East African poetry has over the years enjoyed considerable growth and development. This commendable development has attracted critical appraisals, with critics explicating the trend through which the evolution of this literary tradition has taken. However, adequate attention has not been paid to the new poetics of the contemporary East African poets. This study, therefore, examined the new poetics the new generation of East African poetry.

The study adopted post colonialism as a critical tool, for the critical appraisal of the poetry of two Anglophone East African poets. It selected Hurling Words at Consciousness and Give me Room to move my Feet by Mukoma Wa Ngugi and Mildred Kiconco Barya. The methods selected for analysis are literary and critical interpretations of the texts.

The possible blend of cultural differences; rejection of conventionalised language models, investigation of social-rigidity in pre-colonial culture, are prominent thematic concerns discussed in the works of the poets. The collections are testaments of the creative deployment of ideological hybridity in the poetry of the contemporary phase of East African poetry.

The thematic preoccupations explicated in the collections, depicts the ontological relevance of the contemporary poetry of East African literary tradition.

Keywords: Post colonialism, hybridity, new poetics, contemporary east African poetry

1. Profiling the Development of Poetic Imaginations in East African Literary Tradition

Poetry in East Africa like what is manifest in other regions of Africa is informed by the realities that spring from the cultural, political and economic realities of the region. Literary compositions like Okot p' Bitek's 'Song of Lawino' and 'Song of Ocol' which served the dual functions of; ameliorating Taban Lo Liyong's lament on the literary barrenness of the region, and as a veritable source of creative renaissance for poets who published after the publication of these jinx breaking poems Ezenwa (2013:166).

Roscoe (1977), Wellek and Warren (2010) and Kehinde (2007) suggest that, African literary and creative endeavours and the society are inextricably linked. Thus, in order to remain relevant and equally conform to the norm guiding literary productions in Africa, East African creative writers utilise poetry as a medium through which seminal social concerns are brought to the front burner.

The development of East African poetry has been evolutionary in recent years and this was mainly made possible by the doggedness of poets, who through the productions of seminal creative outputs aided the monumental development of East African poetry (147).

In order to map out the processes involved in the development of the literary tradition. Egudu (1978), traced the beginning of modern Anglophone poetry to late 20th century (38). However, Rubadiri in Heywood (1971) identified the reason for the need to address periodisation of East African poetry with some flexibility and open-mindedness. He submits that, the relative silence in the production of poetry in the region in the earlier stages was due to high-handedness of the colonial administrators (43). He favours a classificatory paradigm which pays cognisance to the era of Swahili versification. As such, it would be a disservice to aver that poetic imagination in the East African sub-continent was negligible before the advances made in English medium.

1.1. New Poetics in Modern East African poetry

Partington (2010), recounts that Mukoma wa Ngugi like poets such as; Stephen Derwent Partington, Njeri Wangari, Al-kags, Keguro Macharia, and Shailja Patel, publish poetry which he describes as one which could be read as synthesistic, or hybrid (3). He captures this succinctly when he submits that 'If culture is (in anyway) dynamic, there can be no single synthesis, but always eddies and whirls of syntheses, and-look-there's another twisting dust-devil forming in the sky, and another, and another, and those there are merging while those are splitting... cleave is a fascinating word (which can be used to describe to describe the configuration of the new generation poets) for it means both its opposite: things cleave apart, and things cleave together (31).

Phyllis Muthoni, after a critical investigation of poetry of the new generation, using Stephen Derwent's Partington as a benchmark, posits that the poetry of the new generation is often provocative, subversive, yet compassionate. It examines the present, but also creates discontent with the status quo.

2. Reconfiguration and Reappraisal of Postcolonial Realities in *Hurling Words at Consciousness*

Scholars have argued that East African literary tradition, like other traditions in the continent, is a functional and ontological literary tradition. It incorporates social realism in the crucibles of its imaginations and productions. (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 19). However, the current temper which is undoubtedly dominant in the discourse of modern East African poetry and to some extent, other subcontinents of Africa, is the reconsideration of the hitherto postcolonial notion and ideals of coloniser-colonised relationship.

Consequently, this breed of East African poets, through their poetry, do not focus majorly on the subservient nature of colonial imperialism on the pristine culture and tradition of East Africa. *Hurling words at consciousness* is a poetry collection of forty-four poems. The poems in the collection, thematically revolves around the thesis the new generation aptly capture and express in their poetic imaginations.

Mukoma, weaves contemporary realities into his literary outputs. Contemporary realities in this context, is the manner at which he, in his bid to depart from the over-flogged ideology of the postcolonial colonise-colonised dichotomy. He, like his contemporaries amplifies and espouses other aspects of this relationship. As such, there is an emphasis on the positive effect of the cultural engagement. The poems of Mukoma are informed by the need to expose the subservient nature of the reductive view of colonial engagement with African societies and emphasise the need for a reconfiguration of imagination and poetic vision of the African society.

Although, Mukoma Wa Ngugi writes extensively in a technique which avails him the privilege of subverting conventions like; structural and rhythmical presentation of words, his poetry can best be regarded as a socio-political poetry. The social and political nature of his poetry is seen in his poetic visions which run through the anthology; *Hurling words at consciousness*.

Disease pandemic, war and the eternal burden it bears on causalities, exilic consciousness, import of communal relationships, and neo-colonial maladministration are some of Mukoma's concerns in his poetry. The African socio-political society has a degree of influence on the artistry of Mukoma wa Ngugi, however there are some influxes of metaphysical temper in his poems. Furthermore, Mukoma wa Ngugi's stance in his poetry is in concordance with the poetry of the likes of Clifton Gachagua and Stephen Derwent Partington. The emphasis in these poetry collections is on the socio-political development of African states.

This submission is lent impeccable credence in the poems that starts the collection. 'Letter to my Nephew' and 'Apoem for Arthur Nortje and other Disappeared African writers', are poems which identifies the vistas of neo-colonial operations. The poems emphasised the need for writers to up their ante in their creation of creative devices against the whims and caprices of the neo-colonial operations. The poet emphasises the aftermath of this neo-colonial operation as a retrogressive medium, which will only facilitate the disruption of the communal existence of Africans.

This departure from the norm of solely addressing the immediate society of poets is a remarkable feature of the breed of poets that this study focuses on. The Pan-African project is a cause that drives the passion of these poets. They view Africa as a sole entity which should not be geographically separated but must stand as one and form a unique force against the predatory forces that lie in wait for her. He makes a major claim for the commitment of communal efforts to acts and actions which will see to the end of the sinister aftermaths of the act of the 'machines' on the region's commonwealth.

The evolution advocated by the contemporary poets which this paper considers from Mukoma's poetic artistry and poetics calls for the reconfiguration of perspectives about the issue of cultural obeisance and celebration through poetry. The juxtaposition of a poetry that focuses on Shaka's assegai to one which considers the significance of adorning a martyr's cap. Hence, the poetics of the contemporary does not only emphasise cultural aesthetics but also calls for urgency in the treatment of evident societal realities.

Mukoma Wa Ngugi vilifies the charade created about the realistic nature of the socio-economic situation in the society. The poet considers the escapist perspective in which pertinent and salient issues hinging on societal growth and development in Africa, have been handled. He considers this attitude as one which would wreck unbearable disasters on the society. He thereby makes a passionate call to all and sundry, to take their communal responsibilities seriously in order to save the society from nose-diving into abyss. The poet conjures imaginative and prescriptive media to advocate for the psychological rejuvenation of the people. In order to adequately accentuate the stand of psychological renaissance, the poet employs a diction which essentially relies on the deconstructive skills of readers to recognise or discern the poetic vision of the poet in 'Thoughts as We Got Lost'.

Mukoma Wa Ngugi's presentation of the images of hopelessness- 'the silence of the radio', dark green clouds' are vituperative tools deployed by the poet to create the psychological awareness that the poet looks to create in the readers. Thus, the psychic presentation of the poet's ideologies and ideals is firmly encrypted in the mindset of readers. Also, the absence of minor and major pauses is suggestive of the poet's inability to assert control over his emotions in his vilification of the society. In addition, the poet's deployment of fragmented versification suggests the pain, anguish and scepticism the poet feels about his society, a society whose 'sun' only manifests at 'night'.

Moreover, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, through 'Recipe: How to become an Immigrant and an exile' reflects on the rationales and effect of history on the postmodern society of Africa. The poet, through this unique piece, which ardently captures the historical development of African society, presents the exilic condition that manifests in the postcolonial African society. In view of this, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, through a confessional medium presents the postcolonial condition of

cultural syncretism, as a situation to be appraised for the positives, rather than dwell extensively on the negative aspects of it.

The poet presents the experiences of the black people, especially those of African ancestry in the globe, fared during the periods of slavery; slave trade denunciation and the eventually, during the period of European conquest of African colonies. The poet disapproves of the civilization plan which the European conquest claims to be the rationale for the conquest of African colonies. He describes this as a grand ploy which he was not willing to subject himself to.

Evidently, this poem being a confessional poem like some poems in this collection, traces the nuances of cultural syncretism from the gory experiences in the 'middle passage' during the transatlantic slave trade to the 'Harlem' melting pot. He decries the dismemberment of the psyche and havoc wrought by these experiences. The poet amplifies his contempt and disdain for these experiences and calls for the same nostalgic disposition in the collective consciousness of Africans.

The poet confers the onus on the black race to reflect and refract on these historical events by paying cognisance to the whims and caprices of the engagement, in order to discover the vices that characterised these experiences. Mukoma Wa Ngugi appeals to the consciousness of conservative mindsets on African poetry. He confutes the conservative claim that poetry must revolve around a monothematic inclination which exclusively considers the coloniser-colonised dichotomy. Owing to this, Mukoma regards the persistent dwelling on the effect of the coloniser-colonised engagement, as a venture into creative and literary futility. This recycling syndrome is what Mukoma Wa Ngugi equally refers as a means of facilitating literary death.

However, the poet is not encouraging the perception that the new poetics is a means of endorsing nonsensical poetry. This is seen in the impeccable deployment of metonyms and synecdoche. He emphasises the import of the aesthetics of the cultural and traditional beliefs system in the formulation of any form of meaningful poetry.

Suggesting a new paradigm which should inform the poetics of churning out poetry, the poet prescribes a poetry which would not only be in concordance with contemporary trends in the global poetic tradition; but one which would equally capture the intricacies and exigencies of the postcolonial and postmodern society of Africa.

Discountenancing the preponderant emphasis by poets on the ills of European colonisation of African countries, which according to him beclouds a positive disposition towards growth and development in the African society; he advocates and endorses this new literary configuration through which the new generation churn out poetry. He recognises the fact that the constant deliberation on the colonial mentality in the appraisal of socio-historical realities, would only water-down the effect of creative imaginations in contemporary times.

Buttressing this new trajectory which the new generation of East African poetry have assumed in their poetry, 'African revolution' is testament of a poem which seeks new direction by constructively vilifying the socio-political structure of African rebellion. The poet lampoons the self-gratifying interest, and the manifestation political undertones that inadvertently undermine the effect of revolutions in Africa. The poet decries how revolutionary acts have not been borne out of ideological procedures or processes. The poet presents a psychological awareness which inadvertently contributes next to nothing, to the development of the continent. Little wonder, the poet assumes a suggestive and prescriptive posture in the ideas he presents in 'The center is always moving and other things'. With a peculiar decision to aid the facilitation of a psychological renaissance, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, through this poem, lends credence to the new literary indoctrination adopted in the composition of the poetry of the new generation of East African poetry.

Mukoma Wa Ngugi like his contemporaries, see it as a point of duty to their enabling society, to present the dynamism and grandeur of the 'fucking' beautiful life. One of the facets of this life is the historical eventualities of the African polity. Reflecting the eventualities and realities of history, Mukoma Wa Ngugi presents the living conditions of children, who as a result of the internal aggressions and strives in their society, become subjected to the precariousness of existence. The poet through the deployment of metaphors of despondency which inadvertently contributes to the development of the tone of war presents the abject nature of existence.

However, the reaction of the children beats the imagination of the poet, suggests a polity which refuses to drown itself in the precarious situation.

In the same vein; 'Once they lived together' captures the intricacies of the Rwandan genocide. The poet through a peculiar narrative mode articulates the arrays of occurrences that characterise the ignominious civil unrest of 1994. He portrays the disregard for the organic and communal co-existence that reared its ugly head during the war. The poet deploys metaphors like 'hack', 'ax', 'blood' to mention a few which portends horror and also portray the atmosphere that characterised the genocide.

Hurling words at consciousness is not an anthology that favours a monothematic discussion. As earlier mentioned, the anthology captures variegated degree of realities, which the poet through his confessional imaginations, reflections and refractions, hopes to vividly depict by succinctly portraying the pervading eventualities that conditions the contemporary African society. Thus, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, like his contemporaries, explicate the vistas of sociological eventualities that characterise the modern African society. The new poetics of East Africa poetry, using Mukoma Wa Ngugi as a benchmark, appropriates the principles of the reality of cultural syncretism. Cultural syncretism according to (Kenneth W. Warren 2010:704), manifests as a result of the diffusion and interaction among cultures

2.1. Forging a Hybrid Space for a Child of Two Worlds through *Give Me Room to Move My Feet*

Mildred Kiconco Barya's *Give me room to move my feet*, goes a long way in the discourse of the apt employment and deployment of postcolonial hybridity. Barya's collection of poetry, establishes an ambivalent manifestation of poetic ingenuity and awareness of the postcolonial condition of the East African society, and African society by extension. Owing

to this, the conscientious dedication of Barya to the exposition and re-visioning of the sociological ordering of the East African society is affirmed in the collection of poetry. In a bid to prosecute this unique social responsibility, Barya deploys an in-depth satirical criticism of hegemonic structure of poetic imaging of the East African society.

'Existential Cycle' and 'Escape' highlight the significance of subjecting socio-cultural ideals of the postcolonial African society to critical evaluation. The poems serve as bases for the thematic preoccupation that informs the anthology as a whole. These poems accentuate the new poetry style that characterises the poetry of contemporary east African poets. This new poetics is presented as one which avails poets the wherewithal of considering other perspectives from which the postcolonial condition can be adequately appraised. The poems highlight the sinister consequences of the postcolonial theorising of culture.

These poems, like most of Barya's verses, corroborate her unapologetic discontent with the subjective perspective on the postcolonial condition. Thus, *Give me room to move my feet* is a collection which reels out arrays of imaginative freedom which explores and exploits to herald a re-conception of the postcolonial condition which transcends cultural theorising.

Consequently, Barya deploys satirical, comical and metaphorical aesthetics in 'Scarred', to foreground her reservations and buttress her recommendations. Through a persona which vividly represents the psychological frame of Africans who have refused to avail themselves with the positives and beneficial aspects of the precarious colonial experience. These Africans, who the persona serves as a microcosm of, persistently drown themselves in the negativity that mars the cultural, social and political engagements.

The poetic vision which is succinctly harnessed in this poem, and which the poet in turn hopes to entrench in the psychological consciousness of Africans, is the inextricable and inevitable reality of hybridity in the African society. The reason for this submission according to the poet, is as a result of the interaction that ensues among traditional and cultural values of the African and western societies.

The poet mocks the vagueness in the constant explication of the pristine precolonial standards so as to vilify the infiltration of the west. The poet due to her hybrid consciousness perceives this as an exercise in futility. Owing to this, the poet is assertive in her criticisms of the 'negritudinal' perspective on the postcolonial condition of the African society. This perspective according to Barya, is an escapist medium of jettisoning pertinent and germane issues that captures the postcolonial condition of cultural admixture and syncretism in full glare.

Moreover, Barya acknowledges the difficult and unpalatable reality which a relatively conservative critique of the African society could generate. This she accentuates in her satirical lampoon of the gestures of the poem's persona. Proffering plausible way out of the retrogressive perspective and disposition of the persona; Mildred Kiconco Barya, advocates for duality. This according to her is a medium which essentially captures the realistic essences of the postcolonial African society. Through 'Things that melt us', the vistas of issues that underpins the symbiotic relationship between African and western societies are considerably brought to limelight. However, the poet is not oblivious of the factors that mars the hybridisation of culture. These factors Mildred Kiconco Barya, emphatically relays in 'The last Ring' and 'The Element we Become'.

Hybridity is acknowledged by Barya as a medium of representing the postcolonial east African condition. 'Things that melt us' is a poem which buttresses the need to take note of the situation of cultural and traditional duality.

The poet takes readers on an intellectual journey which entails the amazement and delight that the poetic persona feels due to the interaction with the strange and alien voice of relief and calm. The poet resorts to seek the 'miracle inside' as a possible means of conditioning relief to the reservations she once nurtured in her heart about the strange or new force. The poet concludes by noting that the process of reconnection with the process she advocates for through her poetic notions could be psychologically demanding and unpopular. However, she is of the opinion that the advances she has made due to her own ability to reappraise status quo is quite inevitable in the new world created by cultural syncretism.

Furthermore, hybridity is also employed in Barya's deployment of the reversal of traditional roles allotted to the female gender. Evidently, Barya's poetry unlike Micae Gutho's and Susan Kiguli's poetry, is not emphatically assertive in the discourse of feminist agitations; however, 'Grandma and I' and 'The Perfect Match' underscores Barya's mild contribution to feminist agitation. Thus, through succinct and impeccable deployment of metaphors and allusions, Barya conjures traditional imageries of women, in order to elaborate the significance of the feminine gender in the African society and the western society.

Conscientiously, the poet elects not to dwell on cultural nationalism which has been the subjective mode of appraising the postcolonial condition. The poet refuses to pitch her tent with the ethos of cultural nationalism which inadvertently subverts the female gender in the society. As a result, the poet is able to document the pervading vices of gender subservience and trepidation, without being hampered by the blindfold of cultural nationalism. Highlighting the import of women in both Western and African societies, Barya considers the domestic relevance of women and the superiority they enjoy over the male gender. With this vilification of the conventionalised and traditional notions about women in the society; Barya accentuates her unique and hybrid vision of social reconstruction of the postcolonial African society.

However, it is instructive to note at this juncture that the deployment of hybridity as the poetics of poet is not aimed at maligning the importance of the traditional and cultural societies on Africa; nor does it applaud the excesses of the Western beliefs about gender roles. Thus, the rationale that informs Barya's deployment of hybridity in the discourse of gender roles is to assert the excesses common to the Western tradition and African tradition. Evidently, this makes the perception on superiority and inferiority of tradition and cultures very insignificant.

Consequently, Barya commits concerted critical efforts into the objective appraisal of the intricacies of the two traditions- the Western and the African. From the poet's conclusion and submission, pitching tent with the 'third space' becomes exigent, as it is a space in which syncretic values and virtues, inherent in the cultural engagement, can be adequately harnessed and developed.

Corroborating her view on the inevitability of the need to develop a 'third space' through hybridity, Barya's poetic vision, the poet advances the thesis which underpins and revolves around the objective understanding of the postcolonial condition which evidently needs for hybridity. Accentuating this, Barya deploys metaphors which elicits precariousness and doom; in order to lampoon the ill-digested opinions about the condition of cultural and traditional syncretism. The poet calls for the development of affirmative actions, which would put paid to the wranglings and overflogged deliberations on the sinisteress of the cultural and traditional marriage of the West and Africa.

The alliterated titling; 'Sun Sinks', portrays the significance of the need to seek new possibilities and ventures which would adequately represent the realistic essence of the postcolonial condition. Owing to this, Barya proffers hybridity, which she has lexically, thematically and ideologically deployed in *Give me Room to move my Feet*. She considers hybridity as a medium, which evidently cannot correct the ills wrought by the cultural and traditional admixture of cultures, on the psyche of the polity. Notwithstanding, hybridity in the poet's view can offer a template for the navigation of the postcolonial present and future of African societies.

Furthermore, Barya also presents the dangers of failing to adhere to her recommendation and poetic vision. She contends that disillusionment and hopelessness will be very considerable in the society. Barya traces the ignominious consequences of electing to continually dwell on the old order. As a result, she calls on Africans to develop new and innovative perspectives on the issue of the supposed distortion and disruption of Western lore and mores by Western cultural and traditional whims. The heart rendering reality and the vistas of eventualities occasioned by this inappropriate psychological architecture is portrayed through imageries of a psyche caught in the throb of internal and external cultural and traditional displacement.

Barya's poetry can be read for its impeccable employment and deployment of ideological and lexical hybridity. Her representation of the poetic vision of the East Africa society is one which elicits her disdain and contempt for the subjective perception about the eventuality of cultural syncretism. In Barya's view, the admixture of cultures should not only be considered for the sinister cloud that hovers around it. However, conscious efforts can be made to objectively apprehend this reality, by forging a 'third space'.

Overtly, in Barya's opinion, which evidently runs through this poetry collection, hybridity is not a medium of artistic experimentation, nor is an aesthetic element which adds to the allurements of literary imaginations. Hybridity as deployed in *Give me Room to move my feet*, is one which has ontological implications. Thus, hybridity is not really a thematic concern in this collection, but a medium through which the social and political visions of Mildred Kinonco Barya for her enabling milieu, Uganda and East African society in general, are exemplified.

Consequently, she pitches her tent with the newly emergent poetic as well as, creative voices which recognise the phenomenon of hybridity as a means through which the norms of cultural interactions or mingling can be subjected to critical extrapolation. This is in order to critically comprehend how interacting cultures contribute their ideological quotas to the formation of in-between ness or third space.

3. Conclusion

East African poetry in English has made and is still making waves in the corpus of African poetic tradition. Over the cause of its exponential development, poets have concerted poetic commitments to the social and political reconstruction of the East African society. Barya's and Mukoma's poetics staunchly advocate for the dissolution of the coloniser-colonised dichotomy that has been a guiding principle which informs postcolonial African poetry. It equally calls for reflective poetic documentation which bears in mind the contemporary reality of the East African society and the African society by extension.

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