

Book review

Femi Abodunrin, **Black African Literature in English 1991-2001: Critical Appreciation and Reception**; Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, Dar es Salaam, 2007, 236 pp.
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The book represents an evaluation of the major works of scholarship carried out on African literature of English expression between 1991 and 2001. Since the former date, Femi Abodunrin has written the narrative bibliography of the intellectual output on New Literatures in English, African section, for the prestigious *The Year's Work in English Studies* published annually by the English Association based at the University of Leicester, UK. *Black African Literature in English* brings out in a single volume the author's first eleven contributions to the authoritative bibliography of the scholarly writings on the literatures of the English – speaking world. As he states in the preface to the book, Abodunrin's aim in doing this is to make a compendium of reviews of "scholarly writing on all aspects of African literature in English" available to students, teachers and researchers working in the field.

As a review then, even if extended, of a vast array of critical works pushed out in a particular year, Abodunrin's main challenge in each of what has now become the chapters of the book lies, perhaps, in working out a focus for his narrative. In tackling this, what the author does is to underline the preponderance of issues cutting across a fair average of the critical output on African literature of any year under consideration, using it to delineate a theme for his write-up. This is not always easy, of course, but Abodunrin, in the end, proves himself to be a close reader, and a great synthesiser and analyst of texts.

Taken together, Abodunrin's bibliography provides his readers with information on a range of about four hundred and fifty books, journal articles and chapters in books. Spread over eleven years covered by the compendium, this is an average of about forty publications per year. Abodunrin himself admits that this is not in any way comprehensive, that publications on African literature in any of the years covered by the book clearly exceed this. However, and because of the fact that the author often had to keep to set word limit, he

had no choice but to cut down on the number of materials that he works on, focusing instead on those he considers salient and critical for his purpose – which, by the way, is to demonstrate that African literature remains a field of intense intellectual activity and profound scholarly debate.

One thing that a reader will readily observe while going through Abodunrin's series of reviews, is that scholars of African literature do not often draw rigid distinctions between, on the one hand, the forms and techniques of the texts they analyse and the themes and contents of the same works on the other. Rather, the two aspects are often taken together, with critics themselves taking bold positions on the issues raised in the writings which they analyse. For example, chapter two of the book under review, originally Abodunrin's 1992 contribution to *The Year's Work in English Studies*, has "Orature in African Literature" as its title. Now the question of orality, orature and/or oral tradition is linked with form just as it is with the question of the historical context of African literature. It evokes the issue of colonial disruption and its aftermath, that of the writer's relationship to his/her roots and, as well, the language question in the literature which, incidentally, is foregrounded in the book's very first chapter, again Abodunrin's entry for the 1991 issue of *The Year's Work*. Abodunrin's review shows critics of African literary works taking unequivocal positions on the issue. He, for example, presents Eldred Jones as having stated in "Myth and Modernity: African Writers and their Roots," being the eminent critic's editorial to *African Literature Today Volume 18* that "African literature (...) derives its strength from tribal sources in spite of arbitrariness of colonial boundaries (...)" On the other hand, Daniel Kunene is said to have claimed in "African Language Literature: Tragedy and Hope" that, and to quote Abodunrin's words again, "anthropologists and missionaries have engaged in more rigorous scholarship in the area of African – language literatures than the modern African literature specialist." What such statements as the two cited above do is to provoke curiosity in the reader of Abodunrin's reviews, making them feel like seeking out the appropriate references in order to apprise themselves of the details of the argument. Other issues with which critics of African literature seem to pre-occupy themselves in the period covered by Abodunrin's compendium include those of women and representation, modern critical theories and their applicability or otherwise to the literatures, African language literatures in the postcolonial contexts, the question of "Euro-African intertextuality," biographies and autobiographies in African literature, developments in theatre and performance aesthetics and, as well, "New Voices in African Literature."

In general, narrative bibliographies are not very common and Abodunrin's work is probably the first to be devoted solely to African literature. However, and precisely because the chapters, originally, were each conceived as reviews of works of scholarship carried out on the literature in a particular year, they seem not to probe many of the issues generated too deeply while the presentational style itself appears, somewhat, to follow the same pattern. This is uncharacteristic of Abodunrin, to be sure, and I do not have a clear idea myself, on what the author could have done to prevent such a situation in this kind of book. A re-working of the chapters seems out of place since this would have led to a different kind of book. Probably then, and in place of the author's preface that he has now provided in the book, may be what Abodunrin should have written is a long, rigorous introduction which would have intervened boldly in some of the major issues which predominate in the criticism of African literature.

But this limitation notwithstanding, Abodunrin's book remains a unique source of reference in African literature. It represents a necessary complement to, and in certain respects an advancement on, Bernth Lindfors' (ed.) *Black African Literature in English*, hitherto the single authoritative source of information on intellectual discussions on African literature, first published in 1982 and updated every four years since then. Most importantly, postgraduate students and other researchers in African literature will find the information made available by the compendium extremely useful.

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