

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



At the height of the Internet revolution, it was predicted that books disparaged as ink splattered on dead trees would go the way of the gramophone.

However, the sales and library turnovers of books continue to increase globally and they sustain their profound impact on society and individuals.

Next week, the Association of Nigeria Author (ANA) will hold its annual conference and prize-giving ceremony in Port Harcourt. On the same occasion, the Women Writers Association of Nigeria (WRITA) will award its first National Endowed Prize (courtesy of the National Theatre), the Zulu Sofola Prize For Literature (all genres) by a woman writer.

The ANA conference is a defining event in the literary culture of Nigeria, and I shall discuss it in a later column.

The award of literary prizes is very topical. The Nobel Prize for Literature for 2001 has just been awarded to Sir Vidia Naipaul and the U.K Bookers Prize to Peter Carey for his novel—“The True History of Ned” which stimulated intense discourse.

Naipaul was born 70 years ago to Indian migrant worker parents in Trinidad. Although his adult life has been in the U.K, Naipaul sees himself as stateless and as the interpreter of the post-colonial third world. In his journalism, travel books and novels, Naipaul presents a bitter jaundiced and seemingly racist picture of the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbeans, Latin American and Africa. He criticizes not only the politics, cultures and religions but also the writers of those countries.

In *A Bend in the Rivers* set in Africa, he attacked the obvious shortcoming of African governments but also mocked African novelists. Recently Naipaul criticized the work reputation of some famous writers, including Wole Soyinka.

So, Naipaul is not a writers' writer and has been engaged in battle with other writers (notably Theroux). To add to his controversiality, Naipaul is a fierce critic of the Islamic revival for lacking any intellectual or cultural depth. Naipaul's non-fiction books, *Among the Believers and Beyond Belief*, examined Islam in Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan and concluded that Islam in non-Arabic countries is a kind of cultural colonialism that has damaged indigenous cultures. This argument is very familiar in African historiography's analysis of the impact of Islamic and Christianity in Africa. Naipaul concluded that only Arabic can embrace Islam in a way that does not destroy their sense of who they are. These views do not make Naipaul popular in the Islamic world.

Nor has he been popular in his ancestral home, India, or his birth country, Trinidad, both of which he has satirized and criticized. However, in Naipaul's acceptance of the Nobel prize, he expressed gratitude to India. This is interpreted by critics as meaning he has made his peace with the land of

his forefathers.

This issue of the ties of relocated/dislocated writers to their homeland is of increasing relevance to Nigerian writers, more and more of whom are resident in or growing up in the Nigerian Diaspora.

The U.K Booker prize has been won by non-British/expatriate, relocated authors many times. This year, it was won by an Australian novelist, Peter Carey who is resident in the U.S.

The True History of Ned Kelly is about an Irish/Australian author (armed

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robber) who has been glorified in Australian history (as did his British to Robin Hood) for his fight against the British colonial authorities, represented by the police and the banks. The titles are ironic because it is based on historical data, but it brilliantly captures the spirit of the times and the poverty-stricken victimized rural workers.

In 19th century Australia, Another foreign Booker Prize winner, Nigerian Ben Okri, seems to feel that the prize has elevated him to the status of unofficial U.K poet laureate. He has written poems about events such as the foot and mouth disease in the U.K and now on the current crisis, *The Taliban*, a stanza of which was quoted in the London Evening Standard of October 17;

The Taliban;

When they shot down the stone Buddha

it crumbled into rubble.

And sent round the world a deep shudder.

That would get them into trouble.

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Power of the Book

tures, who was a Soviet spy. He died in 1983. The surviving executor of Blunt estate gave the typewritten manuscript to the British Library which placed it in a sealed container in the safe in a vault in the basement. There is a thirty-year embargo on the memoir which means it will not be seen (and then published) until 2013. The executor is the only person alive to have read the memoir (and he is 72). There is no other copy.

Why the great secrecy? The memoir could embarrass many important people in the U.K, including the Queen. Blunt, a member of M15 throughout the Second World War, was the so-called fourth man in the Cambridge spy ring of Philby, Burgess and Maclean. The government discovered Blunt was a spy in 1964 when he defected to Russia

A confession was obtained from Blunt in return for a promise of immunity from prosecution. Buckingham Palace was informed about Blunt's treachery, but he remained an employee of the Queen until 1972. Blunt was stripped of his Knighthood in 1979.

To better comprehend the potentially-explosive power of that memoir, imagine, if you will, that Awolowo had written a secret memoir in which he revealed the facts about what happened to the Action

Group in 1962 and entrusted that memoir to one unknown confidante with instruction to release it thirty years after his death. A good subject for future columns.

The power of books to make and unmake reputation and historical legacies is again demonstrated by two recent publications, biographies of the wives of T.S Eliot and the artist, Gauguin.

All the many books about T.S Eliot and Paul Gauguin have presented wives of these great men as unhelpful, bitter, aggrieved women who handicapped their husbands. The accepted view of Vivienne Eliot popularized in the film, *Tom and Viv*, is that she was a madwoman whose demanded behaviours and protected affairs with the philosopher, Bertrand Russell – came close to wrecking Eliot's sanity.

In fact, as Carole Seymour Jones documents in her biography, she was an artistic and gifted woman who helped inspire his greatest poems in a unique literary partnership— whose love for the man who rejected her never died (Daily Mail, London October 20).

Gauguin's Dutch wife, Matte, was also talented and enterprising. She brought up their five children entirely on her own while her husband dallied and married 13 -years-old girls in Tahiti. She remained the only woman Gauguin truly loved until his death (from syphilis).

These books will revise the accepted opinion not only of the wives but also of the great men themselves. In a future column, I shall discuss a book by the wife of a well-known Nigerian.