Where Are the 287 Poets Contesting the 2022 NLNG Prize for Literature?

Salawu Olajide
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Let us start with a confession — mine, at least: I don't know where the poets are. Or I don't read them because I hardly hear their names and haven't seen their books, because no one is reviewing them in magazines or talking about them, not even at a gathering of writers drinking beer. Or perhaps I am too lazy in my work as a critic to find them or I am within the wrong circle, or in the wrong city, or maybe like me, you too, know only the poets who are your friends and the poets who are within the microcosm of the macrocosm of your friends who are also poets. Or because of your access to them online, you know only the new school poets, in their growing number, who daily post news about their publications in foreign journals.

On April 21, the NLNG Nigeria Prize for Literature received a total of 287 poetry collections for this year's prize for poetry, announced on their Twitter and Facebook pages. On seeing the number 287, I was alarmed. As someone who thinks he knows more-than-average about the literary terrain, at least, to know that Nigeria is currently one of the poetry capitals of the world, with a currently increasing rate of — mostly the newer voices — published poems in the world's no. 1 poetry magazine *Poetry Foundation*, the number of NLNG entries surprised me, not because it is an impossible number, but because who are these poets? Or, where are they?

This is obviously not a question. The country is greatly filled with literary talents, poets inclusive, if

not a bludgeoning number of them. And since the NLNG prize accepts works published within the last four years of any current category, 287 is not a high number. However, it is as if this amount of poetry collections has risen from oblivion into our consciousness. For anyone who's paid any attention to the poetry landscape in the last four years, would have innocently goofed if he was certain the number of collections out there isn't this much.

Now this is the problem: save for a few popular collections—and almost an all-male list at that—our current literary terrain suffers an accessibility and visibility plague for published works. It is worse for poetry (more on this later). As a result, writers or poets and their works battle below the stage, no matter how acclaimed some of these works are, waiting for the grace of awards, prize nominations, or lady luck, to be known to a larger audience. (Only recently, Emmanuel Iduma, one of Nigeria's best prose stylists, was considered "obscure" because of the lack of visibility within the community.)

But even waiting in purgatory, to be finally known or heard of — and we won't know many of these collections; only 9 will make the NLNG longlist — is the question of the work our poetry performs in the larger imagination of our literary society. This much poetry works means varying representations, motifs, mapping of ideas, artistic and philosophical statements, politics, and landscapes painted by these writers, forming a grand mosaic of our place as a people today. This is why it is important we know our poets. These 287 poets. Recently, I enjoyed reading Ismail Bala's review of a poet I'd never heard of, Abdullahi Ismaila (his 2021 published *Songs of Silence*), where Bala's criticism is very enriching in understanding the locus of the poet; even more, bringing the country into context through the poet's work.

This is the gift of art. It is the gift of poetry, too. In enabling us to see. But we suffer accessibility to this gift — it is why we cry: who are these poets? When I shared a post online (Facebook) about this, Nigerian linguist and poet Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún showed his surprise too; his comment: 'I'm equally surprised that that many collections have been published in the last four years. A question of accessibility is a crucial one that needs to be asked year after year. If this much is coming out and no one knows about them, there's a problem somewhere.'

What is the problem? Did my answers in the beginning of this essay give a hint? Our almost-disarrayed publishing industry adds to this problem, too. In the last decade, a vacuum has replaced the enthusiasm of publishers, promoters, and even reviewers, due to a lack-of-reward loop or even recognition in the whole idea and business of the written word. The bustle has dwindled, the disappearance of the writing world gradually taking place.

So some of these poets and their books we don't know of are mostly from small presses, vanity publishing and self-published works — and I daresay, even from roadside printing presses. The few copies published or printed remain with family and friends or perish in purgatory. They make up a good number of the NLNG entries.

But why have major Nigerian publishers refused to publish poetry, which I think is also part of the problem of visibility? They all seem to incorporate this preemptive in their submission guidelines: 'Please, we do not accept unsolicited poetry manuscripts.' Are the submissions always awful? Or is poetry so bad for business that they do this? I mean, how do we celebrate our poetry when the publishers who'll give it any traction at all don't want it? Or perhaps they don't understand their role in championing names?

I reached out to two major publishers concerning their disinterest in poetry manuscripts. The reply from one of the publishers is that they 'believe the audience for poetry isn't as large as the one for fiction. Its marketability, limited.' Bibi Ukonu of *Griots Lounge* who has been courageous in

publishing poetry, however, has this to say:

‘Griots Lounge was founded by two poets, Bibi Ukonu and Jide Aluka, while we were comparing our verses, back in the days. It was poetry that brought us together. And although we haven’t made “a lot of money” from the genre, the passion is what matters to us. We’re also hopeful that the titles we publish will one day gain major recognition. It’s understandable that other publishers avoid the genre. In most cases, it’s like throwing funds into the ocean, even here in Canada. But I feel publishers should each reserve a slot each year for the genre. Other genres have their roots in poetry, and the African style of poetry is unique and worshiped internationally. If they have 5 titles in their budget for each year, they should keep one for poetry.’

Whether they like it or not, our major publishing houses play a great role in the visibility of our poetry, which they have to stop ignoring. They’re at the center and their names matter. A lot more can go on for our poetry if they let it in. They may complain about sales, but a good number of Nigerian readers possess Ocean Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds,* published by Copper Canyon in 2016. Or do we generally prefer to buy foreign titles? (The problem might be the quality of poetry manuscripts, too, which in the case of the NLNG, many have gone ahead to self-publish or print to enter for the prize.) But our big publishers, because of their position, can always use good intel to source for quality manuscripts.

One last factor contributing to the lack of visibility is our dwindling culture of engagement and absence of mainstream criticism — or as now whispered in many corners, the death of Nigerian literature, which is a result of lack of engagement, after all. We can’t know our poets if no one is talking about them. Perhaps, this year’s NLNG prize for poetry will spark interest once more dismantling our atrophy.

Carl Terver writes from Makurdi. His forthcoming poetry collection is *The Memory of Now.*