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The Bottle and the Bushman: Poems of the Prodigal Son by Mohamud S. Togane

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poem, "Graduation Notes..." leaves us with these lines as she speaks to the future generation, the collective. "Know you as young heroes soon to be decorated with years. Hope no wars dwarf you. Know your dreams wild and sweet will sail from your waists to surround the non-lovers. Dreamers. And you will rise up like newborn armies refashioning lives. Louder than the sea you come from."

When this poet speaks, she rouses our thinking and feelings and urges us to seize the time, to deal with reality, to dare to be, to think, to feel and continue to struggle to be ourselves.

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Togane, Mohamud S. **The Bottle and the Bushman: Poems of the Prodigal Son**, The Muses' Co., A St-Etienne, Ste-Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, Canada, H9x 1E8. \$6.00 (Canadian)

"Does Civilization Mean Speaking the Language of an Alien Tribe", this poem by another Somali poet, is the question broached in the introduction by Mohamud S. Togane to his first book of poetry. I am not sure if the question is answered in this book, but I think his poetry shows us how well the bushman has mastered the tongue of this alien tribe. Togane is a poet of both daring and courage. This is reflected in both the content and form of his poetry. There are poets whose form is daring, avant-garde, but their content remains humdrum; and poets whose content challenges, yet their form is mundane. In Togane there is the perfect blend, content that shakes your complacency, and form that is bold.

In form, Togane has a totally eclectic, post-modern approach to poetic style. He uses alliterations without shame, and creates new words at will. The poetry is even wild looking on the page. His neat little stanzas are suddenly interrupted by long lists of rhyming, rhythmic single words on a line or a thick heavy stanza of words all run together. In almost all

cases his unusual ordering of the lines is very effective. The most glaring exception is the poem "Shakespeare, The Bible and Bushman On Wine" a poem that is arbitrarily shaped into a whiskey bottle. It is too obvious and contrived in comparison to the rest of the work in this book.

His creation of new words is exciting. Usually we can understand the meaning from context or the way several words are slapped together. Now western poets who consider themselves "avant garde" are creating new words in their work, but Somali poets, due to their very strict alliteration rules, have been creating new words at will for a very long time. The influence of the oral nature of Somali poetry is clear in all his work. Each poem begs to be read aloud, the delicious sounds rolling off our tongues, the rhythm of our heads moving as we voice the words.

Togane creates great energy in his work. He can rhythmically build up to a wonderful climax or create intense horror. He also uses repetition adding a chant-like quality to his work, "White Man No Fool":

Meantime.

took away the best land

built hisself a white house on a hill cannot be hid

only stone house

only indoor plumbing

only electric lights

only warm place to shit

wipes his dainty blessed ass....p.20

The sound repetition of "only" creates the image of the white man grasping pieces of Africa and holding tight. Visual flowing African images are juxtaposed against "proper English poetics" and American street language. He weaves an interesting pattern interspersing each form when necessary in a poem. A perfect example is the poem "To Your Enemy, Give Sweet Milk", freely translated from the Somali (p.39).

Togane is in his glory when he writes satire: political and social. No subject is taboo to Togane. Love, racism, Islam, Christianity, African Leaders, Western Leaders, alcoholism, female circumcision are all subjects of his poetry. He uses the sharp scalpel of truth to dissect his themes. He is hard on everyone, but especially himself. Togane is weaker in his direct political poems and his love poetry, they lack the sharp clever bite of his satirical work.

"A Short Lesson in Comparative Language" is one of his best satirical works. Who can forget the humor in the following stanzas:

'n a seal is the stamp between Juliet's quivering thighs.
 Bushman prefer fat women ' cause they all seal.
 Bushman shed laughing tears
 when Miss Gehman, the missionary teacher, declared
 "In the British parliament
 a bill does not become law
 unless and until
 Her Majesty, The Queen, puts her seal on it." (p.5)

It is important to note that Togane uses the Somali words for certain parts of the human anatomy without italics and with double meaning in the rest of the poetry in the collection.

"Arfaye" is one of the most touching poems in the collection. The poem starts with a Somali proverb, "A man without a nickname is like a goat without horns." Arfaye, the fattest man in Mogadishu, is a traffic cop. Togane paints a surreal picture of the hot noon time traffic in that city and Arfaye, "the sweet-smelling one".

Out of this medley sometimes a relief would appear
 quivering ripe breast of a careless bushwoman
 or some undulating steatopygous behind
 then Arfaye would pause, tilt his head in worshipful wonder,
 flash a smile, and throw darts of desire. (p.35)

"Zara" is his longest and most ambitious poem. "Zara" is Togane's beautiful tirade against female circumcision. Zara, the Somali woman, is constantly compared to the earth, mother nature. And the act of circumcision is a crime against earth. In both the first and sixth stanza is the reoccurring chant:

She has neither Kintir
 nor labia majora
 nor mountains
 nor valleys
 nor screams of delight. (p.46)

Stanza two starts with very standard English poetics then builds rhythmically, rhyming pubescent with his new word yummiscent. We laugh at the new word; it so describes a

young woman. Then we are then bombarded with images of the mutilation done to her:

hacking out the holy hooded clitoris
 the kintir that melts sweet delight and hurts no on
 to insure her virginity, her chastity, her humility
 to insure our family honor and dignity
 against horny honkies
 and the blows of Nigroid pestles. (p.47)

The third stanza starts with "after the lull" and with short sharp sound repetitions makes one feel the physical destruction of Zara:

building our idol
 IMPENETRABLE
 an artificial hymenal (virginity) wall
 to sell
 from Nairobi to Nebiyork
 to the highest bidder
 planting thorns
 on the mossy banks (p.47)

In the above stanza, Zara's body is nature again-the disfigurement of the geography.

We break an ostrich egg
 Over our messy malmalled myrrhed
 fumigated Pharaonic masterpiece
 HATCHING

After these four lines comes a tight, thick grouping of words describing the diseases caused by female circumcision. Listed as a litany, rhythmically frightening, climaxing with the following line:

Mongoloids monsters billbiling monkey business (p.48)

It is rare to find a male poet that deals with a subject directly affecting women with the sensitivity and understanding that Togane has. Even more surprising is his lack of condescension--there is nothing paternalistic about this poem. Instead he laments the crime of female circumcision against nature, against women. He offers no excuses and spares no one. He mourns for the loss of the "scal

of pleasure" of the Somali woman. We see the proud Zara, and the destruction against her body--no false sentiment, no excuses. Every muscular line of Togane's poems rings true. We find ourselves ducking his punches and pleading for mercy, when suddenly there is a satirical line or a cluster of beautiful images. We are refreshed and ready to continue battle.

Togane's contribution to English literature is obvious. Even though he writes in an "alien tongue", his writing is among the best post-modern poetry I have seen. His style is very different, as is his content, from the Nobel prize winning poet, Wole Soyinka. But both African poets are able to mould and manipulate the English language as though it were clay from their childhood village.

This collection of poetry, with its satire and touches of cynicism, is very positive. Togane is a poet that attacks the evils inside himself and in the world with such passion and energy. He is a poet committed to change. Amid the nihilistic dronings of much of western poetry, Togane is a refreshing difference.

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