

EMPATHY AND PURPOSE IN SELECTED POEMS OF REMI RAJI

By

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Abstract

This essay examines how Remi Raji, through his poetry, projects empathy and purpose in *Webs of Remembrance* and *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*. It focuses on selected poems from both collections. Thus, the paper argues that Raji uses his poetry to engage social issues, and to proffer solution(s) to societal problems. It is also observed that Raji's poetry of engagement expresses a fidelity to art that has easily become a commitment to the nation-space. It is for this reason that each persona, in each poem, is shown to be engaging in a dialogue with the reader in particular and the society in general.

Keywords: Empathy, Poetry, Nigeria, Remi Raji

Introduction

Remi Raji's poetry collections include *A Harvest of Laughter* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs America: A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003), *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005), *Gather My Blood River of Song* (2009), and *Sea of My Mind* (2013). His first collection won both the Association of Nigerian Authors/Cadbury Poetry Prize and the Association of West African Young Writers' VOCA Award in 1997. He has served at various times as the General Secretary of the Nigerian Centre of PEN International, as the President of the Association of Nigerian Authors, and as the Dean of Arts at the University of Ibadan amongst others. He is a widely travelled poet and literary scholar.

For the convenience of periodizing Nigerian literature, Raji is often described as a member of the Third Generation. Sule E. Egya says that the poetry of this "group of poets...might have first appeared in 1988, under the very suggestive title *Voices from the Fringe: An ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*, edited by the poet and scholar Harry Garuba, and simultaneously in what are widely known as the Update collections" (13). Egya further says that

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the "context in which this poetry is new is one that is not clear-cut in matters of theme and style or obvious paradigmatic shift; it is not that the new poets stylistically or thematically deviate from, or challenge, the existing matrix of the social moorings of Nigerian poetry" (13). It will appear then that this group of poets, who have become accomplished over time, are defined mainly by the timeline of their emergence and artistic engagement.

It was the sprouting of a crop of poets across Nigeria; a crop of poets who were younger than Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, and Niyi Osundare (to name but a few). The likes of Ojaide, Ofeimun, and Osundare had emerged earlier as the poets of the Second Generation and/or the Alter-Native Tradition. Osundare himself sees his own generation and Raji's as the "Singers of a New Dawn" but he also observes that the later poets have their peculiar slant: a generation of men and women who were "born around Nigeria's independence" in 1960 who, in spite of their "deep-seated anxieties," can be "aptly described as the poets' generation. Close to three quarters of [their] publications belong to the poetic genre" (73-74). Raji is indeed a highly productive member of the generation.

Although literary scholarship has gradually been paying attention to Raji's poetry, the full range of his art has understandably been open to new critical discoveries and discussions. Some critics have identified the social problems which form the focus of Raji's poetry. For example, Solomon Olaniyan observes that Raji (as a contemporary Nigerian poet) is committed to writing about the ills in his polity, to reflecting the anguish and incongruities in the nation (110). Sunny Awhefeada recognizes that Raji recreates impressions of grief, gloom, anomy, inaction and intended vengeance; and he also castigates the parasitic political elites (237). Philip Aghoghovwia, on his part, observes that Raji's poetry "engages contemporary realities of the Nigerian nation with a tell-tale encounter with the self" (1). The weight of those realities has positioned Raji as a poet of empathy.

There are various definitions of empathy. Adam Smith identifies two types of empathy namely: cognitive and emotional empathies. He discusses empathy as sensitivity to an understanding of the mental states of others (3). Joshua D. Wondra and Phoebe Ellsworth appraise empathy as one of the vicarious emotions that has a name. They describe empathy as "when we feel an emotion because something happens to someone else and it is the same emotion that they feel" (411). Ross Murfin and Supriya Ray define empathy as "the involuntary projection of ourselves into an object (be it a person, physical state, emotions, etc.) to such an extent that we feel what that object feels or

undergoes" (103). One thought runs through the different definitions and that is: empathy is the ability to connect with others or to share the situations that others are experiencing. Poetry and/or poetic persona can become a vehicle of empathy when it is deployed by a poet to address social issues. This kind of poetry helps the poet to raise awareness and to empathize with disadvantaged people in a shared polity. The poetry of empathy seeks to create empathy where social apathy is both an effect and a weapon of power.

Empathy Meets Purpose in Remi Raji's Poetry

Remi Raji explores the need to be empathetic in "Dreamtalk" (*Gather*). The persona in the poem expresses his wish to be fully empathetic towards the apostrophic reader in the following lines: "I will like to turn you inside out and step into your skin / To be, that sober shadow in the mirror of indifference" (89). The persona also defines, in the process, what it means to have empathy, and that is to metaphorically step into the skin of the person that requires empathy. He presents, to the reader, the two sides of empathy. The first side is that the empathetic persona is able to step into the skin of the suffering one. The second side is expressed in the next two lines: "Look at me, slowly, behold the irises wherein you hide/ Wherein lies the ultrasound of hidden bleeding images" (*Gather* 89). This implies that the one who is suffering should be able to see his/her pains in the eyes of the one who is empathizing.

In another poem entitled "Return," the importance of empathy is also expressed. The speaker seeks to help people go through the healing process. Thus, the persona acknowledges the weight of the people's burden:

I have heard so much I could be deaf
Seen so much I could be blind...
Yet my mouth is sealed in cobwebs,

I said nothing until the wind
Lifted my tongue, out of the deep
out, silence is sin, I am the patient spider
of sinister days, only the dream never died
though it has paled to a faint period...
I return, to labour, and to love. (91)

The persona in the poem posits that being empathetic is more than just listening and seeing the pains of the people. It involves breaking the silence and speaking about the people's predicament. Empathy is undermined when the

lips are sealed by cobwebs. It requires the wind to lift the tongue out of silence so as to enable a person of empathy to speak about the condition of the people. Utterance becomes a primary function, and a spider (metaphor) moves out of patience or inaction to become an agency of action when it is unrestrained by its own cobwebs (signifies individual concerns and/or limitations). Empathy is thus extended to give hope to the people; to be active is to induce communal action. When the persona returns to the duty of love, action becomes a shift of engagement and social reality.

In Raji's poem entitled "Duty" (*Webs*), poetic utterance is depicted as a duty. The subject is in sync with that of "Return," and the persona defines his/her place as a personage of purpose. There is no doubt about the persona's intent which is to express a poetic duty as social engagement.

A poet's first duty is to make love
To language, to land, and to liberty

A poet's second duty is to sew philosophies
Into armpits of time, to stammer by corn-ears of metaphors

To conjure, confound and arrest Power
To cause the conscience to cry. (68)

Although the persona describes two duties, the duties are related. It is the use of language to address community and foster liberty through noble thoughts (philosophies) and social crusades in a world where power is often retrogressive and corrupt. The persona does not conceive of poetry as a sterile, or cold, or non-engaging exercise. It is a business of empathy and commitment. It is empathy with the land and its people that causes the persona to deploy language and ideas in a chosen manner. Poetic duty requires that the poem should function in a manner that can show empathy and cause readers to have empathy towards those that are suffering in the society. From the last of the above-quoted lines, the poet's duty (to cause the conscience to cry) is to get the reader to be empathetic.

The persona in Raji's "Duty" identifies a third duty that follows naturally from the first two. It is "to evoke a geography of bleeding images / And in an economy of space, speak of epics and mock-epics yet to be" (68). Why do the images have to bleed? Is it because they are to depict a bleeding people in a difficult social space? Is it because it should rouse people to points of engagement that will result in bleeding? Is that the point of catharsis, a point of

purgation, a point of change? Certainly, the images that bleed are also to speak to epics and mock-epics (both high actions and their imitations); they are to speak forth situations that will make poetry achieve its fourth and fifth duties:

A poet's fourth duty is to mine the mind
And make fires in bushels of ignorance...

The poet's last duty is to live beyond mortal wishes
An eternal kernel of utterance...heaving, sowing... (*Webs*, p.68)

Obviously, a poet like this one cannot ignore "the mind" because he/she has assigned his/her art the role of a cleansing fire. A poet's duty is to create works that will help the reader have empathy, and eventually, achieve the catharsis that will lead them to take the action needed to achieve change or transformation. A task like that is considered vital to the tenor of art and to a poet-persona's self-appointed office of a social and/or public critic. Thus, in Raji's "The Critic's Dilemma" (*Webs*), the persona further amplifies his/her duty to society.

In spite of the dilemma(s) of social responsibility, as echoed in the title of "The Critics Dilemma," there is a forthright buoyancy that anchors the persona's gravitas. There is a clear sense of mission:

I am the unstoppable alphabet
which worries the wind
the scathing smooth sentence
which arrests your conscience
My word startles...
my word stabs the robber's dreams
and irrigates the lover's heart. (69)

The poem points out the positive psychological effects of poetry in the society. The persona notes that poetry impacts both the good and the bad: it "worries the wind," "arrests [the] conscience," "stabs the robber's dreams," and "irrigates" love. The wind is a metaphor for a prevailing circumstance in a polity or community. It is definitely a negative wind that requires the kind of art that can worry it; it is the kind of wind that allows untoward conscience to thrive; it is a haven for robbers against which poetry must be present as a knife that wounds. But it does not stop there: it also has something for the positive values of love which need irrigation in a universe of vices. The "unstoppable alphabet" refers to the unstoppable power and influence of poetry. It lays emphasis on the

ability of poetry to cause the reader to have empathy and to cause him/her to get to the point of catharsis.

Poems that depict intense emotion can be cathartic and help the reader to purge his/her emotions. The catharsis realized with poetry is like the catharsis realized with tragic drama. The reader plays the role of the audience, and the persona is comparable to the tragic hero or narrator. The persona is a representation of humanity, even when the persona is a common man/woman. As Arthur Miller argues, a common man (character/dramatis persona) in modern drama is in a similar emotional situation as the royal heroes /heroines of the past. Miller states further:

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. (1021)

Such personages/personae are seen in the poems of Raji. The speakers in the poems are willing to lay down their lives, if need be, to secure personal dignity and the dignity of those they represent.

Raji's "Farewell to Myth II" (*Webs*) reflects the catharsis and healing that the persona wants to achieve. The voice of the persona in this poem is the voice of someone who has been able to purge his/her negative emotions and is ready to get out of mourning (a situation of pain). The cure he/she has achieved is reflected in his/her ability to distance himself/herself from the other—whether it is a strong supernatural force or a person in power. The persona speaks directly to this force/person in the first stanza of a single line, the eighth stanza, and other stanzas that follow thus:

Go up in flames, dear goddess

...

No, we said, we've reached the end
of that watery myth, you must bend

...

Or drown in the fires of our valiant songs
farewell to the silence of your ancient tongues

Go up in flames, dear gorgon

Go down, in the flare of your own conspiracies

let friendly vultures stoke your ashful memories
And when thunder rears these beds of stench

it is farewell to vanity fair
it is farewell to innocence and fear! (38)

"A Farewell to Myth II" is an engagement with reality: a replacement of water with fire, silence with words. It is a season of fire and thunder that holds the points of this purgation. The erasure of vanities and fear is the same as the erosion of innocence. But innocence is not mourned because the persona presents it as a figuration of the myth that must give way to reality. The appropriation of Greek mythology as allusion serves as the dissolution of the old, so as to allow the new. There is also the imagery of "friendly vultures" and "thunder [that] rears...beds of stench:" both images portray agencies that are cast in unusual functions. But they serve the persona's purpose which is to usher in a new order of meaning and action. The poem certainly excites contemplation and/or interrogation. It is a mode that is often repeated in Raji's corpus.

In Raji's "Questions and Prayers" (*Gather*), emotion and truth are shaped as both contemplation and interrogation. The persona asks rhetorical questions that will engender reflection, awareness, and catharsis in the reader:

when the locusts come, will you greet them
with tears and blood, in the aftermath of fractured years?

when the termites come with fangs of iron
can you be the grit stubbornness of rocks?

when your throat is filled with fire
why do you watch in silence?

where will you give birth to the red hunger
of truth, who will welcome the sailing tongue?

where will you hide amid these impatient clouds
will you go where the smoke is perfumed light

when your throat is filled with fire?
will you bury the anger in the coffin of laughter? (128)

The questions asked in the above stanzas are meant to test if the reader or the people will rise to confront their challenges. It is a poem in search of responses to difficult situations. Its pungent images query the diverse possibilities of engagement. Tears or blood? Resistance or surrender?

Fiery utterance or silence? Truth or pretence? What does it mean to bury "anger in a coffin of laughter"? It is capitulation, one of the worst of things in a world of anomie. It is possible to capitulate in the presence of evil. Thus, this poem raises awareness through a series of questions, and it also indicates a number of proper actions:

still do not sleep, dream but scream at slumber.
will you forget those forgotten in the teeth of dogs

those to whom agony is both foretaste and dessert
whose faces are painted in gloom, who bleed still
and dance in hope?

Salute them all, who never said farewell to our tale.
Salute them, who always return, flowers in the diseased heart.

To all the seeds, all the fruits, and all the plants
and all the trees without names, offer a prayer of rains.

To the locusts and termites, spoilers of rivers
and plunderers of farms, let the tongue become the fire,

let the fire borrow the shine of a thousand-edged sword,
let the sword burn and soothe the land. (*Gather*, 128-129)

Some set actions are defined. Beyond rhetorical questions, the poem moves to indicate what precisely should be done. It says: do not slumber in the face of oppression; build and sustain solidarity with those who nurse hope and confront the gloom even when they bleed; do not break ranks with those who keep the narratives of the oppressed alive; resist evil as represented by the metaphors of locusts and termites. To resist is to raise a tongue of fire; it is also to bear a sword that is capable of burning up evil and bringing succour to the land.

Conclusion

Raji's poetry reveals the minds of the personae and the social context they inhabit. The circumstances in the poems require a clear understanding. A

society in crisis must first know its ills before it can create possible solutions. The agency of the people is repeatedly depicted. Sufferers must have the courage to resist oppression; and the conscience of oppressors must be challenged through confrontation.

Through the poet's *métier* in *Webs of Remembrance* and *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*, there is an enunciation of empathy and a call for action. It is a fidelity to both art and community that has made it possible for the poet to deploy tropes that hit set targets. When the role of the poet meets the role of the poem, beauty certainly matches purpose.

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