

ASTHETICS IN REMI RAJI'S POETRY

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Introduction

Remi Raji, with five volumes of poetry, has become one of the prolific poets of the emerging generation of writers in Nigerian literature in English. The poet Raji is primarily preoccupied with the fate of his society largely imagined as a nation – his nation; he regards versification as an engagement in the socio-political discourse of his land, aimed at forging an equitable society. Raji believes that a poet should pursue “the possibilities of connecting poetry and pure nationalism” (*Sou'wester*, 10). He sees himself as a singer for the masses, vigorously set to “remember and make others remember the havoc of yesterday's flood, the twitches in the twilight of lives, the madness in moonlit intrigues and the blindness in the illumination of day” (*Webs of Remembrance*, 9). Raji thus locates his artistic concern in the grand theme of modern written Nigerian literature namely a commitment to the ideals of democracy and humanism (Amuta 77). The concern of this essay however is not with the thematic engagement of Raji's poetry; it is with the aesthetic design he erects to realise his poetic vision. The basic assumption here is that poetry, indeed any genre of literature, no matter the claim it lays to a grand

theme, is primarily, inevitably a primal realisation of craft. Aesthetics here is used in its loose sense to enfold those artistic ingredients, as it were, such as linguistic, literary and oral devices, and other such tools that the poet/writer deploys to realise as well as locate his imagination. Issues of aesthetics are normative, and inhere on the quality of the imaginative work to appeal.

Although the question of aesthetics, in the sense we exploit it here, is elastic in that it varies mainly in degrees from age to age, from movement to movement, even from race to race, it does remain central to (at least) the recognition of poetry as craft, as an unorthodox expression of passion and emotion, as a unique medium for a socially conditioned discourse; that is, aesthetics, in Peter Lamarque's words, "must capture something distinctive about literature as an art form" (25). It is poetry as a medium for a socially conditioned discourse that perhaps better describes the poetic tradition in which Raji writes. Like his contemporaries such as Esiaba Irobi, Chiedu Ezeanah, Maik Nwosu, and Toyin Adewale, Raji emerges on the Nigerian literary scene with a narrative, from the personal to the public, steeped in angst, frustration, and lamentation because of its prevailing background. This is evident in his poetry volumes: *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs: America – a Poetic Guided Tour* (2003), *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005), and *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* (2009). These

volumes reflect, confront and construct the recent history of military oppression in Nigeria covering the decades between the 1980s and the 1990s. What we have attempted to do here is to survey his deployment and appropriation of linguistic, literary and oral traditional figures to craft his socially engaged poetry. This survey will show that the aesthetic values of recent poetry-in-English in Nigeria are still orature-dependent, audience-patronising, and patently driven by the socialist inclination of the poet.

Aesthetics and Commitment: The Location of Raji's Poetry

The question of aesthetics, most often in the disguise of the question of language, is a recurrent one in modern African literatures, especially literatures written in European languages. Whether from the extreme position of Obi Wali or from the idealist position of Ngugi wa Thiong'o or from the middle ground occupied by Chinua Achebe and others, the issue of language has largely implied the quest for an authentic African literary aesthetics.¹ The resolve of many African writers, pragmatic as it is, to use the European languages in which they are educated, with which they can communicate across ethnicities, with which, in their estimation, they can relate meaningfully with the entire world, has come to be mainly predicated on the choice, perhaps first made by Achebe, to subject the European languages to the cultural peculiarities of Africa and the individual visions of the writers.

This is done through what Bill Ashcroft refers to as “engagement and rearticulation” (112). Instead of rejecting the language imposed by colonialism, most African writers today either create or take advantage of what is now famously known as the metonymic gap to insert and project their artistic identities and authenticities.

But this anxiety about whether or not the European languages should be domesticated, it seems, has become a thing of the past for the new generation of Nigerian writers in English. Pius Adesanmi's polemical essay “Europhonism, Universities, and Other Stories: How not to Speak for the Future of African Literatures”, a powerful response to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 2000 essay, seems to be a well argued obituary for Ngugi's idealism, at least from the point of view of recent Nigerian writers in English.² Adesanmi, on behalf of the so-called third generation of Nigerian writers in English to which Raji belongs, states that my generation writes predominantly in English, Nigerian English, and shall continue to do so in the foreseeable future. That does not in any way make us Europhiliacs or agents of imperialism. The Igbo genius is unmistakable in Oguibe's poetry as is the Yoruba geniuses in the poetry of [Toyin] Adewale and [Remi] Raji. (126)

Appropriating the traditional “geniuses” is however not merely to metonymically inscribe one's identity vis-à-vis the domestication of European languages for purposes of cross-cultural communication, as Adesanmi argues

throughout his essay. Beyond that, it is a process of aesthetic formation for Nigerian, nay African, poets dating back to the first generation of modern African poetry in English. The poetry of Gabriel Okara, Kofi Awoonor and Okot p'Bitek, among others, powerfully resonates with their orature, instituting an orature-dependent African literary aesthetics that crystallises in the poetry of the post-independence era, an era marked by socio-political disillusionment, and a crucial reconsideration of the aesthetic mould of African poetry in European languages. Poets of the post-independence era such as Jack Mapanje, Tijan Sallah, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide became very conscious of the large treasure of orature in their society and of the need to exploit its poetic figures for their individual craft. They took to an artistic framework that desired to reduce poetry to a level appreciated by a wider audience.

This change of direction in aesthetics in the 1970s from the modernist aesthetic values hitherto dominating the African literary scene, although not without harsh criticisms from certain critics (see in particular Chinweizu et al 163-183), was not without a political impetus. In a sense, the issues of aesthetics in modern African literatures are arguably secondary to, in fact elicited by, the socio-political concerns of the writer because, as Chidi Amuta points out, "African literature is a historically determined and complex admixture of art forms marked by a *reactive* stance towards major

historical experiences (or misfortunes) such as slavery, colonialism, cultural emasculation, political corruption, apartheid, class antagonism and imperialism” (81). It is this sensitivity to the often heinous phenomena that affect life on the continent that in the first place spur the writer into writing; hence the conclusion, philosophically agreeable to most, if not all, African writers and critics that “the art of expression [in the domain of aesthetics]... [is] a handmaid to [the writer's] vision” (Irele 5).

The socio-political realities of the post-independence era in Africa triggered the poets' social consciousness that ultimately underscored their artistic visions. In Nigeria this is most vivid with the socialist aesthetics, technically encapsulated in oral traditional poetics, taking a centre stage with the poetry of, especially, Niyi Osundare, acknowledged to be its most focal exemplum (see, for instance, Jeyifo 609-616; Brown 97-113; Nwanchukwu-Agbada 73-86). The Nigerian scholar Funso Aiyejina, himself a poet of the new order, coins the apt phrase “Alter-Native Tradition” to capture the stylistic and thematic direction of the poetry of this era in contradistinction with the poetry of the pre-independence era (112-128). Thematically this poetry is marked by a heightened concern with the plight of the underprivileged, of the rural folks, in short of the voiceless masses in Nigeria; stylistically it is marked by a conscious and conscientious return to imagery derived from traditional concepts, ideas and objects,

to traditional proverbs and wisdom, and to native rhythms, among others. These poets, with oral traditional tropes, evolve a strong ideological aesthetics that, as most critics argue, befits their materialist discourse (see Ngara 3-8; Bodunde 1-5)

It is in this literary tradition, intensely sociological and socialist, that Raji's poetry, like the poetry of most of his contemporaries, locates itself. In a way, the poetry of Raji's generation emerged in the late eighties as a cultural struggle against the prolonged militarisation of the Nigerian state. This climaxed in the dictatorships of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and the late General Sani Abacha, characterised by wanton killings of both real and imagined detractors, activists, writers, journalists, and students.³ Raji and his contemporaries, themselves victims of the military oppression, took to writing poetry that historicises as well as produces an aggressive discourse against the atrocious establishment. Their poetry like that of their immediate precursors – Osundare, Ofeimun, Ojaide – is markedly political, socialist, and arguably Marxist, distinguished by what Ode S. Ogede terms as “Outrage...passionate, angry tones” (63). Perhaps more intense in the new poetry, as is clear in Raji's poetry, is the tone of lamentation as the poet literarily wail for their raped nation. “Lamentation”, as Gloria Monica Emezue puts it, “becomes a precious outlet for the gnawing spirit” (17). Raji's poetry, although with a sense of optimism, exemplifies this condition of lamentation (Egya 111-126).

Language and Style in Raji's Poetry

As far as the issues of aesthetics are concerned, considering the contradistinction between poetry and other genres of literature, it is germane to our discussion of Raji's aesthetics to say that, in spite of whatever message a poet may embed in a poem, “the creation of beauty is the main object of poetry” (Egudu 8). Consequently, the poet, more than the novelist or the dramatist, pays closer attention to his choice of words, phraseology, and the tone that such words and phraseology evoke. This is why the critic Charles Nnolim avers in an interview with Amanze Akpuda that “the richer resources of language, deeper meanings, metaphorical expressions, adages, proverbs, etcetera find recourse in the services of poetry than prose” (86). Raji is quite conscious of this as a poet and a greater part of his poetic strength lies in the attention he pays to language and his adoption of a style that befits his message.⁴

Raji writes in Standard English and not in Pidgin Nigerian English, like some of his contemporaries, notably, Ezenwa-Ohaeto. In spite of the elliptical nature of the English phraseology in poetry, Raji endeavours to construct phrases that are not far-fetched. In his early poetry, in which he deploys the rich resources of language inconstructingintense imagery, a reader does not have to worry about interpreting the surface meaning of the lines.⁵ There is nothing lexically and semantically complex about such lines as “the blighted clouds

of a locust rain” (taken from “I rise now” in *A Harvest of Laughters*); “it was the dimple breath of dawn / growing deep on my palms like a new love” (taken from “Black laughter” in *A Harvest of Laughters*); “and i smell the odour in the air / which betrays the anus of the tribe / dressed but naked like prostitutes...” (taken from “Bound to Remember” in *Webs of Remembrance*); “From the seashore and sandsheets of dreams / your eyes show me centuries of journeys” (taken from “Interlude: dance” in *Webs of Remembrance*); and “will you bury the anger in the coffin of laughter?” (taken from “Questions and Prayers” in *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*). It is however pertinent to point out that each line above evokes an image and reading them without recourse to the deeper meanings they contain will amount to not understanding them at all. Raji, in evolving a style leaning on poetical eloquence, prefers to, in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's words, “eliminate lexical impediments, unclog poetic syntax” (11) so that the lines, beyond acquiring a phonic essence, engage the sensibility of the reader in a manner that is tasking but pleasant. To this extent, Raji's language and style cannot be said to be complex nor simple though he has been taken to task on the weakness of his imagery in *Shuttlesongs: America* (see *In Their Voices and Visions*, 74-91). It is in this light that the charge of writing in weak literary language levelled against most political poets in Nigerian literature today may not be brought against Raji. In his book, *Understanding African Poetry*, Ken Godwin calls

attention to the declining quality of literary language, especially in politically engaged poetry:

For a poet committed to poetry as a political instrument, literary quality may seem of little importance: an irrelevance or even a subversive hindrance. It is not surprising, then, that the politicisation of African poetry in English has been accompanied by a decline in literary quality. Godwin's assertion here is similar to an on-going debate on the condition of aesthetic values in recent Nigerian poetry. A number of critics and writers such as Tanure Ojaide (65), Moses Tsenongu (102-126), and Emman Usman Shehu (50) argue that the language of poetry has to be simple in order to embrace large audiences. For instance, Shehu, in defence of his cliché-ridden diction in his collection *Open Sesame*, explains that “I had decided quite early that I would explore means of making my poetry accessible [to the common readers]. In *Open Sesame*, the use of wise sayings and clichés is a deliberate approach” (50). On the other hand, critics and writers such as Titi Adepitan (125) and Maik Nwosu (24-47) have decried the declining nature of literary language especially among the poets who feel they are so much burdened with social messages that aesthetic embellishment is an unnecessary luxury for a poetry that must convey the pain and anguish of the people. Adepitan's contention is that “even social commentaries need some polish, some skills, and there can't be much to admire in it when it becomes an invitation to

all comers who think they have 'a message'" (125). Raji's position is made clear when he says, in an interview with Segun Ajayi, that "[as] much as I try to address the ordinary man in the street, I also try to couch my language in beautiful and elevated style without dancing towards obscurity. If there is what you can call a meeting point between the pedestrian and [the] highfalutin, I try to work in-between the two" (3). How Raji achieves this is by deploying metaphors that are not difficult to fathom but are not simplistic in their linguistic and sensuous construct. The following passage, taken from song XII of *Lovesong for My Wasteland*, demonstrates the accessibility and the tendency to appeal, which is common to imagery in Raji's poetry:

The ones who came before had sweeter
passions

They milked the mule of her mirth
And left us the hide and the rind
And a yawning question on patriotism
Just a little garlic on gaping sores...

The image of a people milking the best out of a mule is clear. The mule represents Nigeria. Similarly, the metaphorisation of "the hide and the rind" as well as "yawning" does not pose any obscurity for an average reader. In positioning his language and style in the middle ground between the complex and the simple, Raji attempts to achieve an eloquence that draws audiences to his poetry and nudges such audiences towards a mental activity required to fully appreciate the

condensed language of poetry.

Literary Devices in Raji's Poetry

The poet essentially conveys his message through imagery. Besides, it is through imagery that the poet invites his reader to effective dialogue. While the poet's enterprise entails constructing images for the effective conveyance of his message, the reader's enterprise entails deconstructing the poet's images for the proper understanding of what the poet says. The dialogue between the poet and his reader, because of the nature of imagery, is not hinged on a denotative interpretation of diction. Given this situation, the dialogue assumes a multiplicity of meanings with the reader seeking suggestions in a poem instead of definitive semantic interpretations. This accounts for James Reeves's assertion that words in poetry “are full of suggestion, of unrevealed meaning, a meaning which will grow out of them under the influence of thought and imagination” (34). The images a writer chooses, therefore, determine the dynamism of his dialogue with his audience. Ayi Kwei Armah, known for his use of imagery, says that “[i]magery is the craft of bringing abstractions (ideas, themes) together with particularities (persons, situations, objects) in order to create symbolic representations that contain and marry the two” (287). In creating an image, there must be a correlation between the abstract and the tangible, worked up in such a way that the latter expresses the former.

Since the theme often determines the image, and since Raji's themes are mostly social, the images are mostly unpleasant in the sense that they are conjured to evoke in the reader a level of sympathy for the masses and a level of hostility towards the oppressors. Raji attempts to present very clear pictures of oppression. A common feature in Raji's deployment of imagery is the use of animals to represent the oppressor-figure. In *Webs of Remembrance*, easily his most engaging poetry collection, you find such images staring at you: “i see rodents still / i see reptiles in new skins / i see bats flying above the flood” (23-25). Rodents and reptiles are known to human beings as destructive animals; bats are known for their deceptive nature – not completely birds and not completely four-footed animals. Raji's symbolism implies that a dictator, whether military or civilian, is as destructive as the rodent who only comes to steal and destroy; like the reptile whose bite is poisonous and can kill; and like bat that defies clear classification among animals. In “Silence II” (*Webs of Remembrance*), Raji begins by saying “Who sings when the Beast prowls” (1). The image of the restless beast refers to the oppressor having his stooges all around the nation, looking for both real and imagined detractors. In another poem, “An underground poem”, Raji also refers to the oppressor and his men as “chameleon and castrated dogs” (12). One of Raji's engaging images is found in “Love song” (*A Harvest of Laughters*) where he says:

When Love spoke
I became a rebel of the blood
in a convent of scorpions
without a sting to call my own. (13-16)

Scorpions represent the oppressor and his cohorts. The nation becomes their “convent” as soon as they take it through coup. The persona is impelled by his love for his people, his society, to become a rebel in this convent. While such representations of the oppressor in heinous animals run through Raji's corpus, it is not particular to his poetry alone because most of the poets who wrote under and about the military era in Nigeria deploy such animals to illuminate the nature of the oppressor. In her *Comparative Studies in African Dirge Poetry*, Gloria Monica Emezue points out that the new poets use such images because their poetry largely laments, that is, “[the] tendency to load enemy with all kinds of negative images has become a continuing tradition with most poetry of lamentation” (133).

Raji attempts to prune his images, to give his lines a sense of purity and clarity. This is why Niyi Osundare talks of the “limpidity” of his imagery (4). This requires skills in using words, which every serious poet must possess. Consider this example from “Endless wondering” (*A Harvest of Laughters*) where he refers to the beauty of a woman: “are you the bronze / among crooked woods / sculpted only by God's chisel hands” (9-11). Here a picture is presented of a beautiful woodwork created by the arch-creator. Referring to the greatness of the Library of Congress, Raji writes, (in *Shuttlesongs: America*,

62),

I sought my fancy in Romanesque parks
in the futuristic bowels of archives
and the boundless fountains
of the Library of Congress.

The use of the metaphors “bowels” and “fountains” to create the image of depth, vastness and greatness is part of the skills the poet has in choosing the appropriate words to paint a picture for the reader. Consider these images of (sexual) intercourse, de-vulgarised, rather innocuous, but penetrative:

i want to do to you what needles of rain do
to the parched earth
i want to do to you what the morning sun does
to butter nuggets
what the honey does to the pollen in the shrub
i want to hide in you, and hide you in me.

(*Gather My Blood*, 132)

The metaphors are those of intercourse that result in reproduction. When the rain meets the parched earth, fertility takes place. Sunshine beatifies butter nuggets; and the relationship between honey and pollen is obvious to us.

When we deconstruct Raji's imagery, we find literary devices profusely embedded in his language. Raji's craft partly lies in his use of sharp and gripping metaphors. One encounters in his poetry such metaphors as “They rape you and raid your children” (“Farewell to Myth I” in *Webs of Remembrance*), with “rape” representing plunder; “But we kill our own suns with hurtful glee” (Song V, *Lovesong for My Wasteland*), with “suns” representing the cream of the society;

“where a padlock / in every mouth / solves a mystery / of rude ravings” (“Silence” in *A Harvest of Laughters*), with “padlock’ representing the denial of people’s right to freedom of speech; and “New York New Amsterdam / Nobody bites the Big Apple / and remains the same” (*Shuttlesongs: America*, 40), with “Big Apple” standing for the opportunities that exist for everybody to live a good life in New York. Such metaphors are commonly found in Raji’s poetry; they give the impression of a poet who is in control of words and knows what to do with them to achieve his aims.

Raji does not deploy simile in the same frequency he uses metaphors. Simile, which when over-used may betray a loose connective between the tenor and the vehicle, is found sparsely in Raji’s poetry.⁶ In “Toast’ (*Webs of Remembrance*), we find a simile in the first two lines: “my love for you is like the moon’s / in its fullest smile above.” The simile here explains itself for any adult reader of poetry who must have seen the moon shining fully. Some lines down in the same poem, we find another interesting simile when Raji writes, “...I shall come / possessed like the glorious knight / quivering songs against your secret fears.” Knights, in the Middle Ages in the history of Britain, were socially respected people who did not only fight to protect their lands, but also are given special honours by the king or the queen for their achievements. For the lover comparing himself to a knight means that as socially placed as he is, he will confess his love

to her through songs. In Song XXIV, *Lovesong for My Wasteland*, Raji gives us another engaging simile: “These words, I fear, go like a tamed river / No blood, no rage but the civil anger of philosophy.” The poet-persona, in a righteous lament for his nation, angry with the people who have plundered the land, compares his words of truth and therapy to a “tamed river”, which is, itself, a metaphorical expression. When a river is tamed, it means certain forces have stopped it from flowing, by all means a sign of abnormality because rivers exist to flow.

Personification abounds in Raji's poetry. On page 41 of *Shuttlesongs: America*, Raji, describing the scenery of New York, says, “The Road will break / The boulevard will bow / There is no pain of panting / Through the million throng”. Quite visible in these lines dominated by personification is the action of “bow” that “boulevard” performs. When in the prologue of *Lovesong for My Wasteland*, Raji says, “but I cannot run away from the lashes of History,” the personification is not only clearly put, but it also explains itself. When people fail to learn from their history, they get “lashed” by the history. In “The mutineer's song” (*Webs of Remembrance*), Raji begins by saying, “Let the skies cry in crimson rage I shall not flee”. Since the skies are not living things, it is only metaphorical that they can cry. And in “Orphan cry”, the poet, in the beginning of the poem, writes, “a generation of thorns tickles my skin”, and goes on to say, “a

generation of spears peels my flesh”. These are figurative expressions meant to reinforce the incisiveness of the persona's feeling towards external oppression.

In most cases, the poet uses apostrophe to address the oppressor or the oppressed that is not physically in existence. Some poems, like “Farewell to myth I” (*Webs of Remembrance*), run all through as an apostrophe. In “Farewell to myth I”, Raji addresses the god, Olokun, railing against it for its unconcerned attitude towards those who are suffering in its land. The poem opens thus:

Where are you, o Olokun
They rape you and raid your children
They march on your fertile brows
And rid gods of crude pain in your veins

Also in “Farewell to myth II” (*Webs of Remembrance*), the poet, with an enraged tone, says, “Go up in flames, dear goddess”. The same technique is deployed in “For dead gods” (*Webs of Remembrance*). We find another example of personification in “Rain song” (*A Harvest of Laughters*), where Raji, with a sense of romanticism, says,

There's a blue eagerness in the loin of clouds
The wind is pregnant
With seductive memories
Of burning flesh, of pollen laughters.

Clouds and wind are given human attributes to foreground their usefulness to life, given the fertility of the soil that comes with the rainy season.

Other literary devices that a keen reader can detect in Raji's poetic embellishment include irony, sarcasm, paradox, oxymoron, antithesis, hyperbole, synecdoche, metonymy and literary allusion. For instance, on page 41 of *Shuttlesongs: America*, Raji makes allusion to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where he writes, "Sometimes too / You're invisible like Ellison's man / Nobody cares if you're white, black / or both or neither". T. S. Eliot echoes loudly in Raji's fourth volume of poetry: *Lovesong for My Wasteland*. It calls to mind Eliot's "Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock" and "Wasteland." Asked why Raji chooses to allude so profusely to Eliot's work, especially given the Chinweizuan charge against poetry in Nigeria for being Euro-modernist, Raji says, "I think there's no better canonical way to symbolize the imagination of my land in the metaphors already internationalised by Eliot" (*The Ker Review*, 74).

In *Shuttlesongs: America*, page 26, we find the use of metonymy where Raji says, "In that synagogue of sounds / the road to fame is paved / With rum, dope, rage and death". The listed objects: rum, dope, rage and death, represent the musician-criminals in the U.S. who indulge in drinking, smoking ganja, fighting and killing. We have more of metonymy where Raji, in "Siren sense I" (*A Harvest of Laughters*), begins by saying, "Brother man, be warned or / begone when you see us / our naked lights above / koboko clubbing bayonet banning". Here, "naked lights" stand for the

cars with siren bulbs fixed at their tops, and “koboko' and “bayonet” represent the soldiers and mobile policemen who are the official escorts of the oppressor in a convoy. In “A dozen monologue” (*A Harvest of Laughters*), a poem that is a whole lot of paradox, Raji uses the technique of metonymy to depict the dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed in the society. The first stanza says, “we mine the coal / they spend the gold”. In the subsequent lines, the use of 'coins', “notes”, “bridge”, “dam”, etc points to the terrible social divide in the society.

Raji pays close attention to sound effects in his versification. Raji's poetry, in terms of musicality, evidences Walter Pater's declaration that poetry “constantly aspires to the condition of music” (quoted in Egudu53). Alliteration is primal to Raji's sense of musicality. In *Webs of Remembrance*, we encounter such alliteratively designed lines as “I belong to no bacchanal / babel of Goddam gods” (“An underground poem”, 24); or this conscious alliterative listing: “Burutu-Bori-Babe-Beniboye-Benisaide” (“Farewell to myth I”, *Webs of Remembrance*), which are the names of towns that are environmentally degraded in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. A reader will encounter repetition in almost all of Raji's poems. The repetition of “which” in the extract below brings out the kind of cadence one often sees in Raji's poetry:

My song is half the wit
Which bakes the bread
Which breaks the fast

Which feeds the barren land

(Song XXIV, *Lovesong*).

Apart from repetition, Raji deploys parallelism to achieve musicality as the example below shows:

What will earth say to the toxin?

What will the deer say to the hunter?

What will the elephant say to the poacher?

What will the woodpecker say to the sawmiller?

In these parallelistic questions are irony and paradox, which depict the extent of system failure in a society. As the instances above show, there are other sound effects such as assonance and consonance.

The Influence of Yoruba Orature in Raji's Poetry

In his insightful study of the influence of orality on Nigerian poets of the Alter-Native tradition, Ezenwa-Ohaeto avers that “when a society comes out of an oral tradition into a written form, continuity is not lost and the changes are often gradual. Thus, there is a manifestation of a co-existence and mingling of both the oral and written phenomena in Nigerian poetry” (11). This assertion is not only true about poets and writers in Nigerian literature in English today, but a critical assessment of the poetry shows that some poets are conscious of their orature and make attempts to constantly return to the orature to seek inspirations in their craft.⁷ Beyond the close affinity between the oral form and the written form they wish to maintain, and beyond their desire to show themselves as

town criers of the roots, contemporary Nigerian poets have become more aware of the audience factor in their craft. The taste of their arts is therefore conditioned by the audience they speak to. After the so-called Eurocentric poets – Okibgo, Soyinka and Clark – received a critical bashing for writing poetry that was not distinctly African, new poets since then have attempted to seek the distinct taste of Africa in their versification by encouraging what Ojaide calls “a symbiotic relationship between the oral and the written” (33). They evolve an identity that concerns “the distinct styles and rhythms that convey the African experience” (Ojaide 17).

Raji who began his art with singing in the Yoruba language is one of the poets writing in Nigeria today whose craft is organically connected to Yoruba orature. Because of his exploration of the Yoruba rhythm, proverbs, tales and religion, his poetry has been likened to that of Niyi Osudare whose appropriation of the Yoruba oral aesthetics is perhaps unparalleled in Nigerian literature in English. The concept for Raji's first collection of poetry, *A Harvest of Laughters*, which has an inter-textual dialogue with Osundare's *Waiting Laughters*, is taken from Yoruba's wisdom surrounding the phenomenon of laughter. Raji explains this in his introduction to the collection:

From my life and others, I'd want to affirm the potable necessity and the therapeutic force of laughter. As the Yoruba say, “Erin ko yato, titi to fi de `lu oyinbo” (Laughter is

uniform, from here to the whiteman's land). It strikes an impressionist universal current, like instrumental music, between cultures, races and the sexes. (10)

All through the collection, Raji who sees laughter as “the rainbow paste on weeping scars,” thematises the force laughter has of lifting one from the suffering that one encounters daily as a result of leadership failure in the society. He thus offers the masses hope through laughter. Similarly, in *Shuttlesongs: America*, a sequence of poems written about his first trip to the United States, Raji delves into the slavery and oppression in the past of Africa, and takes a concept from the Yoruba traditional religion in the design of the cover of the book. In an interview with this researcher, he explains thus: you look at the image of the Statue of Liberty that you think is on the cover. But it is not. It is the image of an African woman, carrying the insignia of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. And then you see the impression of the Middle Passage, of boats, ships, conveying people across the ocean. Behind that you find the pocket of huts representing the different West African kingdoms, where people were taken to the New World. And that spreads over to the back of the book. But the first thing that an unsuspecting reader will see that will invite him, or distract him, or infuriate him is the American colour, which is not! (*In Their Voices and Visions*, (74-91)

It is only a poet who is conscious of his roots that will domesticate such imagination as Raji has done. In versifying

about his lonely birthday in the U.S., Raji, in *the same volume*, uses the popular Abiku spirit in Yorubaland to imagine the eternity of his origin and history. He begins by saying, “Spirit unto spirit, I waited on my / mother's song / Even if I lived forty years more, these / scars will never fade”. Here, he likens the scars in his history, i.e. the experience of slavery and oppression to the scars made on *abiku* child to identify it from normal children. The import of this is that anywhere a black African goes his history of slavery serves to unite him with other black Africans.

In most cases, speech wisdom in Yorubaland, nay in Africa, is found running through Raji's poetry. When in “Salutation” (*Webs of Remembrance*) Raji writes,

I salute the song I salute the singer
I salute the patience of quick proverbs
I salute the craft in immortal songs
I salute the pebbles I salute the pearls...

we see not just the musical rhythm of Yoruba orature but also the speech wisdom of the Yoruba people. In “Elegy for towncriers” (*Webs of Remembrance*), Raji uses the onomatopoeic “Yee pa ri pa!” (1), which is an occult greeting among the Ogoni confraternity of Yorubaland. In “The Agidigbo speaks volume” (*Webs of Remembrance*), Raji idiomatizes “agidigbo”, a Yoruba drum noted for its speech quality. It is the drum of the elderly ones who, at the height of their wisdom, only speak in proverbs; it is, in fact, a kind of philosopher's drum that radiates wisdom which only the wise do understand. As universalised as the vision of *Lovesong for My Wasteland* is, the craft of the volume is rooted in Yoruba tradition. The running imagery of farmer,

farming and harvest; the reference to Yoruba items such as *olukondo* (an epithet for a small sharp knife used by the guild of circumcisers in Yorubaland); and such proverbial statements as “When the hour of hunger descends on the homestead / Then the farmers talk of rains long imagined”, all attest to Raji's sense of artistic domestication.

Conclusion

The poet's major preoccupation is with the language, the form and the structure of his poem, his art. It is his major preoccupation because it distinguishes him from a journalist, an essayist or even a fiction writer. The primacy of language in poetry has never been in doubt, but its perfection has varied from place to place, tradition to tradition. Phil Roberts, in his book, *How Poetry Works*, points out that “[w]hat the poem articulates is, in the end, itself” (62). Poetry, then, has the tendency not to condescend, or patronise, or apologise; it is often the essence of *arrogant* craft. The reader comes to it with his senses alert, especially the auditory sense. A poem is like a piece of music, emphasising on what is *heard*, not what is *known*, following what Suzanne Langer calls “the morphology of feeling” (quoted in Roberts 62). If the poet, well schooled in his craft, deploys linguistic items the referentiality of the items, which has nothing to do with “the morphology of feeling”, is, strictly speaking, secondary to the manner in which he deploys the items. When, for instance, Raji writes, “To love is to gather my blood into a river of songs”, he invites us primarily to a dialogue, not with the

referentiality of the lexical items: love, gather, blood, river, songs, but to behold the beauty of collocating the items in a way that is outside the confines of everyday speech. A poet worth his craft is constantly struggling to dazzle us, to engage us, to stretch our sensibility, with such language play, often unmindful of meanings, knowing fully that it is by refiguring the language, taking advantage of its elasticity, that he can hold his audience.

The manipulation of language(s) is therefore integral to the poet's aesthetics. It is in this light that the idea of aesthetics for the African writer stretches beyond the confines of a particular medium of expression; that is, although the poets, such as Raji, write in English, they constantly return to their mother tongues for the purposes of aestheticisation. Poets like Raji who are politically conscious are committed to language in a way that the language is *made to* carry out extra function other than the aesthetic display of the linguistic items. Their idioms, in terms of content and form, are conditioned by the transformative powers of the words since the words are deliberately deployed to *alter* situations. For such poets, then, their preoccupation with language is, first, to have a proper sense of artistry with words and, second, to have the skills to engage the words in extra-artistic commitment. Raji, as we hope to have shown, is one of the few poets of his generation who have demonstrated such preoccupation with art and achieved some level of aesthetic appeal.

Notes

1. The views of this trio are not only popular in African literary discourse but are quite influential to the rather persistent debate of the language of African literature. These views are expressed in these famous discourses: Obi Wali's "The Dead End of African Literature?"; Chinua Achebe's "The African Writer and the English Language" (in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*); and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

2. The Ngugi essay Pius Adesanmi responds to is entitled "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship." It is published in *Research in African Literature*, 31.1. (2000): 1-11.

3. For informed and detailed discussions or accounts of these oppressive regimes see Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis* (2000); Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: a Reporter's Prison Note* (2003); and Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror* (2002).

4. Raji, himself, says, "[a] poem is measured speech. Measured, advanced, laced with rhythm, with a lot of passion" (*In Their Voices and Visions*, 81). What this entails is that the poet must choose his words carefully, having beauty as the primary purpose of the craft.

5. His early poetry refers to the poems collected in *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997) and *Webs of Remembrance* (2000); and his later poetry refers to the volumes: *Shuttlesongs: America—a Poetic Guided Tour* (2003), *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2006) and *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* (2009). There is, I have argued elsewhere, a technical lacuna between the early poetry and the later poetry. Raji admits this and he offers his sensitivity to his audience as the impulse for that.

6. To say "He is a lion" is obviously stronger than to say "He is

like a lion.” It is this logic that informs the conclusion that a metaphor is tauter than a simile.

7. As the African literature written in English grows, writers and poets, in spite of post-colonial migration, are becoming more and more aligned to their orature. The Nigerian poet is always enthusiastic about this development. More than the theme, the language stands the chance of linking the poet to his roots. The poet Nourbese Philip captures this vantage place of language thus: “Literature, and in particular poetry, only begins to belong to a place when the poet belongs; the poet belongs when the language belongs; the language belongs when it arises from and reflects the essence of all that combines to produce place. In this process, the bond between poet and place remains indispensable” (173-4).

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