

REMI RAJI'S LAMENTATIONS FOR A NATION

By

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Remi Raji has established himself as one of the most significant poets of African origin today. His poetry has relevance not only because of the compelling themes he deals with but also because of his urbane appropriation of oral and traditional singing mode into the written medium. He has this style that comes across as both simple and yet deep, with multiple layers of meaning, touching on various issues in contemporary Nigeria.

In this collection, Remi Raji comes across as a fully matured poet who has not only mastered his craft, but as a trendy poet whose oeuvre relates to every category of reader in all levels of society, reminiscent of Niyi Osundare's *Song of the Marketplace* (1983). Raji engages the contemporary realities of the nation with a telltale encounter with the self. This is a literary technique whereby personal concerns become a microcosm of the larger concerns of the entire nation. This device is common among the "third generation" of African writers.

In the eponymous poem, "Gather my blood Rivers of Song", Raji seems to employ poetry as a form to express his individual response to issues of national significance through poetry/literature, and laments the seeming ineffectiveness of literature in conscientising society, nay the ruling class;

Sometimes a man gets tired of going to sea as now
When the voices I hear speak nothing but shame, and silence.

There is wickedness beneath the tranquil sea
And the heaviness above craves the lightness of love

So I return to the red sea that flows in the vein (130).

Here, he laments the ordeals of the nation through the expression of pains and self-pity. *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*, is a collection of poems divided into seven parts; a

regurgitation of a trail of prolonged pain and worry about the nation and the self. Each of the seven parts contained in the collection captures this ordeal of the self and that of the nation in different and unique styles. While part three and four are selections from his previous collections of poems, *A Harvest of Laughters* and *Webs of Remembrance* respectively, others are newly created poems from which the title of the collection is decided. Parts three and four of the collection are selection upon which the ordeals of the past are drawn onto the present. What the inclusion of these poems that are part of the old collections of poems entails is that the experience of the past is reborn in the present. This therefore, implies that the past is not totally gone; it is a recurring decimal, or what the New Historicist will see as a recycling of history. Raji's success in weaving this relationship between the past and the present into one is manifested in the juxtaposition of related themes of the past contained in his early collections of poems with the present that form the other parts of the collection, *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*.

While among the selected poems in part three "Out of the Deep", the eighth poem in the part, with another in part four "Do not go violent into the night", all gotten from his past publications, are synonymous with the ordeal represented in another part from where the title of the collection is taken, "A Butterfly Song". In "Out of the Deep", Raji captures the confusion in which the nation is plunged immediately after independence. In the poem he drives us around a wealth of so many memories, the memories of the "complex course" that the nation has undergone. The memory in which he himself has had to bear remembering. As the poem proceeds, we realize that this chain of memory is all molded into the problem which has finally led us to our "simple end" (72). This end is further built into a gamut of symbols, when he tells us:

the paddle is lost
the boat is sunk
the net is torn
the bait is gone (72)

The "paddle" in this poem represents the leader. It is He, upon whom the responsibility of taking the people on a right course is rested. His loss in this poem means he no longer knows the way forward. What Raji implies here is that our leader of the time when the poem was originally published as part of *A Harvest of Laughters* was lost and was not sure of the direction he is to lead the people. The "boat" that sunk is a metaphor for the nation losing its face in the gathering of the League of Nations. The leader must have led his people into this

disaster since he himself is lost. It is a fact that a confused person can not lead another person or people who do not know the right way to a right path. The “net” is a symbol for the labour force of the nation. And since it is torn, it means the labour force is weak and can not come up with anything that will sustain the nation. The last of it is most serious: “the bait is gone”. The “bait” represents the nation’s natural resources and because the leader is lost, he is not able to manage the resources very well and that resulted in the boat sinking and the bait going with the tide.

As the poem continues, Raji remind us of the “coast of watery lies” told to us since this period of ‘lost’—the period when both the leader and the bait are lost. And then quickly ask the very disturbing question:

Tell me oh wondrous waves
where is the mermaid you promised me?
tell me oh callous cliff
where is the fairyland you promised me? (72)

The poet tells us further that he has been deceived into risking his “drowning duet”. The metaphor of the duet is inherent in the comparison between line 19 of the poem with subsequent lines: “beachboys mock me/ divers mock me/ shrimps & frogs mock me/ all mock me”.

In “Do Not Go Violent into That Night”, Raji evokes the lingering state of time. In this poem unlike the other he laments the out break of a dreaded disease that has eaten into the heart of the town and that one can only catch it when one goes violent into the night. It is possible to say that the words: violent, night, blood, and street are metaphors employed by the poet to stress his sublimated thought. A thought that is different from that that is gotten from the superficial meaning of the poem. By bring the poem further into this collection Raji implies that this disease is still selling in our society today. When he repeats the word “violent”, he means careless in the manner one go after sexual pleasure. In most lines of the poem, his advice tends toward males. One easily notices the gender of the person he refers to through his frequent reference to the phrase “do not go” in the poem:

Do not go
violent into that night
...
Do not go

where alphabets of death wait
...
do not go violent like the fever
do not go violent into that night. (84-85)

The metaphor of “night” in the poem is interesting and rich. The “night” in the poem represents the interior of a woman. The imagery of “do not go” and the night project a new kind of sublime picture of thrusting. The repetitions of the phrase and the night together with that of violent all points towards thrusting. What Raji is saying invariably is that everyman should be careful; the act of going about thrusting could give room to contrasting the dreaded disease.

It is in “A Butterfly Song” that Raji harvests his sojourn in the web of these lines gathered in the poems published in his other collections and included into this new collection. In this poem, he summaries his pain, the ordeal of the nation and all he has had to bear from the past. The first line of his poem clearly captures it in a nutshell:

I who have seen this far,
Blinded by the friendliness of the cosmetic sun
But stretched back into darkness
Battered by the bloodless teeth of the rain
Still thirsty through the pool of flooded days (92)

In this poem the “I” does not point specifically to the poet rather through the use of the self he laments the anguish of the nation and its people. The poet confirms the pains and suffering of the past as contained in the selected poems and goes further to posit that these suffers, these pains, and these diseases have not left us, instead of leaving us, they have besieged us with force. The poet wails that a nation as ours who had seen hard times and had experienced suffering ought not to be clasped in a trap of so much confusion as it is in the present. And talking further about the pain the country finds itself, the poet howled:

I am the cage. I am the world.
I am the world, the open cage.
I am proof of the ignorance. I am the pain, and the sore.
But I am also the healing, the unspoken history of scars. (92)

The nation as the poet conceives it is caged by its leaders and is open to all sorts of ills. It is the proof of ignorance because as we see in “Out of the Deep” the leader is lost and a lost

person can not claim knowledge of direction upon which he treads or else he will end up deceiving himself.

Towards the end of the poem or better still at the last stanza, the poet finds consolation in placing his burden on the new generation of Nigerians, saying it has “returned, away from the breathless cologne of night”—

Dirty, traduced by the ugliness of the ape story
I am the butterfly in the open field of thorns
I am the cold anger in the friendly handshake
I have returned,
tears tainted with the glory of a new tomorrow (92)

The poet throws his heap of lamentation on this set of new Nigerians and leaves it there, resigned:

I returned, wondering into your presence
Wondering if you know how far I have seen.
I, Tiresias, the fool in a wise world. (92)

His comparison of the nation with the blind seer Tiresias who is popular in Greek myth and who is also employed by Sophocles in his play, *Oedipus Rex*, Raji makes mockery of the nation and his past escapades.

In summary, *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* moves from personal and local concerns to public, national, global, and human issues to show that Remi Raji is grounded in socio-historical memory. The language, though dignified and urbane, is simple and evocative of the poet’s oeuvre. With this book of poetry he has certainly stamped himself as a major poetic voice to be reckoned with in this “third generation” of African writers/poets addressing postcolonial concerns through poems indebted to “the way we sing in Africa”, rhetorics that interrogate the abuse of power in government, the politics prevalent in Nigerian ivory towers, issues of brain-drain, debilitating effects of globalisation and the hip hop culture on the youth, migration and moments of dislocation at one point or the other as captured in section five titled “Gather My Blood”.

In spite of the tone of lamentation that runs through virtually every poem in this collection, the poems appear to affirm the poet’s belief that literature matters in society, and here it not

only draws attention to the negative manifestation of the grim reality of life in Nigeria, but also pleads for virtues like love, justice and equity that will save society and humanity.

Though Remi Raji's preoccupation is with socio-economic and political realities of our society, we see copious use of love images lamenting the loss or denial of the self and this loss and denial has ramified implications for the people of Nigeria who equally suffer denial of equity and justice in the hands of their rulers (leaders).