Thesis By

SULE E. EGYA

UUNIVERSITY OF ABUJA, NIGERIA

POLITICAL POETRY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN LITERATURE: THE EXAMPLE OF REMI RAJI'S POETRY

MARCH, 2009

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(05521014)

BEING A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE POST-GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.) IN LITERATURE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & LITERARY STUDIES, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA, NIGERIA

MARCH, 2009

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been written by me and that it is a record of my own research work. It has not been presented in my previous application for a higher degree. All quotations are indicated and the sources of information are specifically acknowledged by means of references.

Sule E. EGYA

Sign: _____

Date: _____

Certification

This thesis, *Political Poetry in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: the Example of Remi Raji's Poetry*, submitted by Sule E. Egya, meets the regulations governing the award of doctoral degree (PhD) in Literature, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Abuja, Abuja, and is approved for its contribution to knowledge and literary presentation.

1. _____ _____

Dr. Gboyega Kolawole, Date
(Supervisor)

2. _____ _____

Dr. Gboyega Kolawole, Date
(Head, Dept. of English & Literary Studies)

3. _____ _____

Dr. Effiok B. Uwatt
(Dean, Faculty of Arts) Date

4. _____ _____

Prof. Kanchana Ugbabe Date
(External Examiner)

5. _____ _____

Prof. Ngozi Isu
(Dean, Post-Graduate School) Date

DEDICATION

For

Anyalewa

and

Oyigwu

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some senior scholars are inspiring, open-minded, progressive, philosophically fatherly and interested in the growth of the junior ones. My supervisor, Dr. Gboyega Kolawole, is one of them. For the rest of my life, I remain grateful to him for reading my work in the shortest possible time, making critical and profound comments and, above all, for believing that my work is good. My profound gratitude to Prof. Sophia Ogwude who picked interest in my work and "fired me up" to bring out the best in me which I didn't know existed. She is a mother and a thorough scholar. I also thank the entire staff, both academic and non-academic, of the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Abuja, for their support at one time or the other.

In the course of this research, I have interacted with scholars of literature both in Nigeria and abroad. Worthy of mention are Dr. Aderemi Raji-Oyelade (of University of Ibadan), Dr. GMT Emezue (of Ebonyi State University), Dr. Terhemba Shija (of Nasarawa State University), Dr. K. B. C. Ashipu (of Nasarawa

State University), Mr. Ismail Bala Garba (of Bayero University), Mr. Austin Amanze Akpuda (of Abia State University) and Ms Elizabeth Onogwu (of Benue State University).

At a personal level, I wish to thank Dr. Umelo Ojinmah,; Professor Olayemi Akinwunmi, for thinking so high of me and offering friendly supports; and Dr. Ferdinand Asoo, for getting me to start the Ph.D. programme. I must not forget my dear uncle, Mr. Jacob Olotu, for taking care of me to the best of his ability. Two brothers also worthy of mention here are Ibrahim Adoka Agye and Matthias Patrick who love to know what next thing I have achieved. I will not forget Gabriel, whose second name is Computer, for his technical assistance each time I have a problem with my laptop.

And to Oshone, the eagle-woman, who knows how to keep the study-bound teacup warm and who understands why her man keeps the other side of the bed cold and empty because of the love of study. Pray, let's reach the height together.

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ABSTRACT

Remi Raji is one of the irrepressible poetic voices in the decades of military dictatorship in Nigeria, spanning the early 1980s to the late 1990s. With a social vision that is hinged on what he refers to as "connecting poetry to nationalism," his poetry captures the socio-political realities of the era. But, more importantly, Raji's poetry, given the political consciousness that underpins it, performs two functions: one, it attacks the "military emperor" and his acolytes who are responsible for the despoliation of Nigeria; two, it sympathises with the oppressed populace and offers them an optimism to enable them keep dreaming even in the face of tyranny. This research is an exploration of the political theme in Raji's poetry with emphasis on its social functions. Raji has published four volumes of poetry, namely, *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs: America – A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003) and *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005).

The methods of interpretation used in this work are Marxism and New Historicism. Raji's political poetry belongs to the domain of protest literature and it is appropriate that our

exegesis of it is done through the Marxist theory. New Historicism is deployed to account for the historical realities on which Raji's poetry is based.

The conclusion reached in this work is that Raji's poetry fits into the canon of committed literature in Nigeria because it succeeds in historicising, with a great deal of artistry, the decades of military oppression in Nigeria, and exemplifies the engagement of new Nigerian writers in political theme. It is hoped that this study will be a contribution to the critical interpretation of new Nigerian writing which has suffered a dearth of criticism.

Chapter One

1. 0. INTRODUCTION

This study is an investigation into political poetry in contemporary Nigerian literature with a specific focus on the poetry of Remi Raji. We may take political poetry as that species of poetry that declaims against failed leaders and their systems; that depicts the intentional plundering of the land by those who ought to build it, and captures the helpless masses suppressed and oppressed by those who are in leadership position and have siphoned public funds to their insatiable privacy. This kind of poetry, belonging to the domain of protest literature, shouts, barks, screams, cries, curses, swears and prays in dire resignation. Ingrained in, but not limited to, postcolonial literatures, political poetry is a manifestation of committed writing that comes with the realisation of the poet that his poetic vision must transcend the abstraction of artistic self-glorification. In transcending poetic subjectivity, the political poet objectifies his voice through what Remi Raji calls “the aesthetics of rage” (3). Expounding committed writing in the preface to his recent volume of poetry, *The Dreamer, His Vision*, Gabriel Okara submits that “[the] poet must exist to exercise the powers of the Word to

realise his visions and an existing society on which he focuses his visions" (capital his, 78). First, the poet has "powers" from his manipulation of words, his immersion in imagery; second, such powers, translating to vision, must be focused on the well being of a people. The political poet considers himself organically linked to his nation, eager to speak with a fearless voice, to pursue interrogations, to seek answers and to evaluate societal orthodoxies on behalf of the ordinary people. The American poet Robert Bly, in an essay on political poetry, rather sees the enterprise of the political poet as engagement with the "psyche" of the nation. He posits that "the life of the nation can be imagined...as a psyche larger than the psyche of anyone living, a larger sphere, floating above everyone. In order for the poet to write a true political poem, he has to be able to have such a grasp of his own concerns that he can leave them for a while, and then leap up into this other psyche" (*Talking All Morning*, 100). We may find Bly's demarcation between individual psyche and national psyche, requiring the poet to leap from one to the other, unrealistic in the African situation. As we intend to show in this study of Raji's poetry, there is really no demarcation between the concern of the individual and that of the nation because the individual is inextricably

tied to the nation; the poet considers his voice as originating from the society, belonging to the society, and dedicated to the promotion of a just nationhood in the society.

Contemporary Nigerian poetry as used in this work refers to the poetry of the young, maturing Nigerian writers writing today who may not have reached the peak of their writing careers. A historical finger would pin the emergence of this generation of writers, now known as the third generation of modern writers in Nigerian literary canon, to 1988.[1] An exploration of the poetry of this generation shows that the poets, like their predecessors (those who wrote before them and are still writing along with them), subscribe to the African philosophy of social commitment in art. Most of the poetry of this generation is, like the poetry of the previous generation, announced by the poetry of Odia Ofeimun and Niyi Osundare in the 1980s, preoccupied with political themes because of the poets' consciousness to take a stand against the socio-political inadequacies of his society. This duty the poet or writer ascribes to himself sets his artistic foot into the canon of socially committed literature which has been the mainstream of African literature, whether written or oral. Early in African literature, Chinua Achebe has pointed out that "an African

creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*, *78*). Nigerian writers, in spite of their disparate ideological persuasions, have had faith in this statement and seen their writings as a means to evaluate responses to critical social issues and make decisive statements. These poets have used their creative imagination to capture the despondencies of military dictatorships in Nigeria from the 1980s to the 1990s. The dictatorships of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and late General Sani Abacha that spanned the aforementioned decades brought untold hardship to Nigerians in such a way that poverty and hopelessness became lingering realities for Nigerians.[2] Up till today, Nigeria is yet to recover from the dispossession, suppression and oppression that came with those regimes. Poets, today, attempt to chronicle those years and expose the cruelty of those dictators. Apart from historicising the years of plundering, they also dwell philosophically on the current psychic collapse in the land, which is a natural consequence of the military despotism. Thus, "[the] 3rd generation of Nigerian writers has had to deal with disillusionment in

every aspect of the Nigerian state, especially political" (Azuah, "Interview with Nnorom Azuonye" 24).

The writer's social commitment, as Dan Izevbaye points out, "implies that literature should not merely exist in a vacuum, with ideas passing from writer to reader, but that the writer, like the reader, should become involved in a kind of ideological dialogue" ("The State of Criticism in African Literature", 9). The poet therefore engages his audience in a dialogue on the socio-political realities of his nation, taking a position, militant and combative, as we will see in the case of Raji. This is understood if we consider Terry Eagleton's argument that "[l]iterature has become a whole alternative ideology, and...a political force. Its task is to transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies" (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 20). The poet's ambition, then, is to liberate his society, using the "energies" of his art. He often recognises the inadequacy of his fellow country people, especially in the face of tyranny, and sets out to intervene as a socially conscious artist. That a poet can evolve a vision focused on a dreamt positive change in his society arises from the pragmatic discourse that exists between literature and the society.

M.S.C Okolo, in her book *African Literature as Political Philosophy*, describes this when she says,

> The imaginative writer, through his or her work, can offer critical appraisal of the existing political situation and in this way mould or redirect society's actions, beliefs, ideals, values and ideas. Ideas contained in literature can influence people's perception about politics and the best means of effecting political change. (27)

Indeed, the Nigerian poet considers it his duty to depict the social ills in Nigeria as Raji does, bringing to the fore ideas that will raise consciousness among Nigerians and re-orientate them towards individual and collective struggles for a better condition in life. The poet, transforming himself from a pessimist to an optimist, seeks a healthy vision for a people who desire a new nation.

A poet with a consummate political theme, Raji, one of the most eloquent political poets of his time, sees versification as an engagement in the socio-political discourse of his land, aimed at forging a just and equitable nation. He 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's mettle as a poet is more noticeable in his political poems through which he combats the oppressor and gives succour to the oppressed, and the interpretation of these poems is the concern of this research.

1. 1. Background to the Study

Many poets have appeared on the Nigerian literary scene since the early 1980s. Most of these poets saw the degeneration of their beloved country from the oil boom of the 1970s to the oil doom of the 1990s, catalysed by the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programme on the people. They have witnessed the militarisation of the Nigerian polity and have, themselves, been victims of dictatorial brutality. Their poetry captures this age because they are "voices that have refused to be intimidated by bayonets, voices that survived the near decimations and decapitation of creativity" (Shaba, *A Volcano of Voices* 5). Raji is one of such voices and this is the reason for centring this research on his creative effort. Using his poetry as an example, this researcher is interested in doing a thematic study to demonstrate the engagement of the poet in historicising the social realities of the

dictatorship that existed in Nigeria from 1984, when General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida took over the governance of Nigeria in a coup, to 1999, when the army authority finally released Nigeria from its grips. A basic assumption here is that the writings of these new writers, like those of their predecessors, belong to the domain of protest literature in Africa, which has arisen because of "Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism" (Nnolim, "African Literature in the 21st Century" 2). However, the preoccupation of the new Nigerian poets is centred on military oppression within the aforementioned period. In delineating the distinctive nature of the political poetry written within this time frame, we use Raji's poetry as an example to show the poet's love for his nation, his confrontational stance against the despoilers and his optimism that, in spite of the plunder, the nation will rise again.

1. 2. **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore the political theme in Raji's poetry. Since the poems are based on happenings during the period of military dictatorships in Nigeria, this study will be concerned with the themes of oppression, suppression, dispossession

and depression. Using Marxism and New Historicism as theoretical underpinnings, this research will bring out the strengths of Raji's poetry in capturing the oppressive years of the military in Nigeria and, beyond that, fashion a canon for Raji's political poetry in African literature and political thoughts.

1. 3. **Scope of the Study**

This study begins from a general assessment of the kind of political poetry being written in Nigeria today and narrows to a critical exegesis of Raji's political poetry. The intention is to delineate Raji's political thoughts (expressed in poetry) as an important contribution to socio-political discourse in Nigeria. The data for this study is therefore limited to Raji's four collections of poems: *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001) and *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005) and *Shuttlesongs: America – A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003). The researcher also deems fit that two theoretical approaches namely Marxism, to account for Raji's combative tone towards the military oppressor and his sympathy for the masses, and New Historicism, to account for the historical facts with which Raji's poetry interacts, will suffice for this work.

1. 4. **The Methodology**

Two methods of interpretation will be used in this study. They are Marxism and New Historicism. Social commitment has always been within the confines of Marxism and it is to this category that we put contemporary political poetry in Nigeria. Being a theoretical approach that leads an analyst to the investigation of class dichotomy in the society and the social effects of such dichotomy, Marxism stands as a formidable lens through which we can discern and delineate the social struggles that are replete in Raji's political poetry. The nomenclature "political poetry" encapsulates the aspirations of the poet to interrogate the socio-political maladies in his society and take a position against the status quo. We bring in New Historicism in order to take care of the historical facts that have influenced the production of Raji's political poetry. Since contemporary political poetry in Nigeria is bonded to history, overtly or covertly, especially because of our society-rooted arts, to wish away historical facts in the criticism of political poetry in Nigeria, in any Leavisite fashion, will be amounting to the glossing over of such poetry, in this researcher's view. With Marxism and New Historicism, this study hopes to bring

out fully the thematic preoccupation of Raji's political poetry and establish it as one of the important political artefacts of our time. It will be seen that Raji's eloquence in speaking to the downtrodden and his resilience in combating the oppressor are remarkable and deserve a major critical attention.

1. 5. **Justification of the Study**

There have been a lot of outputs in political poetry with the coming of Raji's generation of poets. Almost all poets have one thing or the other to say about socio-political happenings in Nigeria. Yet it is the poetry and, indeed, the writings of this generation that do not get enough critical attention. Raji, as a poet, is a new voice in Nigerian poetry and has not been accorded major critical scrutiny. This study is therefore necessary to evaluate political poetry in contemporary Nigeria with a view to showing the thematic and stylistic strengths of Raji's poetry.

1. 6. **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to show the political theme in the poetry of the young, maturing poets writing in Nigeria today. That is, to evaluate their positive contribution to the evolution of an open society Nigeria. Specifically, the research will present the unique poetic voice of a writer whose gospel – as a poet – is connecting poetry and society in a way that the former serves the latter. While this is not new in Nigerian literature, Raji's distinctive eloquence as a poet and distinct manner of approaching the ubiquitous themes of oppression and suppression is something worth investigating to add to the existing scholarship on Nigerian poetry. This study will therefore bring Raji into focus as a significant poet.

Notes

1. There has been a debate on whether it is right to refer to this generation of Nigerian writers as the third generation or not. A school headed by Harry Garuba thinks that, given the emphasis on modern Nigerian writers, this generation is the third generation. On the other hand, another school, led by Obiwu, thinks that for a proper historiography of Nigerian literature, this generation is not the third generation but the fifth. For a proper understanding of the arguments of the two schools, see Harry Garuba's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry." *English in Africa*. 32. 1. (2005): 51-72; and Obiwu's "The History of Nigerian Literature, 1772-2006." *Farafina*. 7. (2006). Our position here is that if "modern" and "in English" are used as a prefix and a suffix to "Nigerian literature" respectively, then this generation is the third.

2. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida ruled Nigeria as a military Head of State and later as a President from 1985-1993; and late General Sani Abacha ruled Nigeria as a military Head of State from 1993 to 1998. Their regimes are said to be the worst dictatorships that Nigeria has ever witnessed.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. **Introduction**

Our aim in this chapter is to discuss the existing scholarship surrounding the subject matter of this research. This will offer us a context on which the explication of Remi Raji's political poetry will be feasible. Because our scope encapsulates the state of political poetry in contemporary Nigerian literature, it is expedient to know the conception and production of this literature and locate Raji's poetry in it. We will also trace the development of Marxism and New Historicism, our theoretical framework, in relations to contemporary Nigerian poetry. Marxism has come to be a formidable approach to interpret Raji's poetry because of its depiction of the social struggles in his society and the position he, as a poet, takes in the ongoing discourse of nationhood. Also, with the copious references and allusions to specific historical events in the nation in Raji's political poetry, New

Historicism becomes a handy method by which this poetry can be investigated.

2.1. **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is made up of two theories namely Marxism and New Historicism. In this segment, we engage in detailed discussions of the theories, tracing their developments, the connection between them and their contributions to literary exegesis. In addition, the researcher takes his position as to what parts of the theories are useful to the explication of Raji's political poetry.

2.1.1. **Marxism**

The evolution of Marxist criticism is, in the view of the researcher, predicated on two very important statements made by Karl Marx (1818-1883), the German philosopher and theorist of modern socialism:

> [1] It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. [2] The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it. (393)

We infer from the first statement that “consciousness,” which arises from a people’s social well being, is important to Marxist literature. And from the second statement we infer that a Marxist literature is the type that is poised “to change” a given human condition. Marx begins from the argument, well put in his *The German Ideology* (1932), that the ultimate force that moves human existence and history is the economic base. In this base are contained what he calls “forces of productions,” that is, the methods of producing consumable materials in the society and the relationships that these methods keep with one another dialectically to generate a “superstructure” in the society. This superstructure, which to him is the society’s collective consciousness, is what he calls ideology. His notion of ideology, therefore, is the overall expressions and manifestations of a people’s codes of law, religion, philosophy, politics, and science. In this premise, literature, for Marx, is dependent on the ideology/superstructure generated by the “economic base” which changes as the base changes; and since the hegemonic class controls the economic base, literature belongs to its whims and caprices. For instance, the whole idea

of an art patron is for the feudal class to control the production of art and literature. One major thing about literature Marx is concerned with is: to what extent do the obsolete Greek tragedies continue to exert literary influences and give aesthetic pleasure to, as well as form the literary standards for, the people of his generation? For him, there is no satisfactory answer to that question other than that the imposition of Greek literature on the people amounts to continuing a received bourgeois ideology, which he stands against.

Marx, in spite of his worry about bourgeois literature, is not, and does not pose as, a literary theorist. Marxist literary theorisation and criticism begin with the Hungarian Georg Lukacs who is seen as the first major Marxist aesthetician. Pegging his theory on the socialist realism already inaugurated as the official Communist artistic method (as a result of Friedrich Engel's contributions), Lukacs' Marxist thoughts are Hegelian, assessing literary works on the basis of their strengths to truly reflect the societies in which they are produced. Rejecting the naturalism of the European novel (Emile Zola, Theodore Dreiser and others), Lukacs insists that a realist work

must reflect social struggles and contradictions in its society, not by simply portraying the natural things that happen. With his outstanding contributions, such as *The Historical Novel* (1937), *Studies in European Realism* (1950) and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957), Lukacs refines his theory and launches attack on modernism, seeing it as a tradition infected by a failure to see man in the context of historical realities as a result of the modernist writers' preoccupation with the formal properties of art. He links this phenomenon to a narrow individualism which is a symptom of the writers' capitalist environment. For Lukacs, "it is the view of the world, the ideology, or *weltznschauung* underlying a writer's work, that counts" (qtd in Richter 1128), and it is what constitutes the intention of the writer. Seen from this context, style and form, according to Lukacs, are reduced to content. Lukacs' success was perhaps in his ability to evolve a loud voice to checkmate the dominant modernist thoughts and practices of his time, forging a premise for a socialist realism that flourished in other parts of the world except the West where it was sneered at as a Communist manifesto. But all was not rosy for Lukacs' Marxist

domain when insiders such as Bertolt Brecht and Louis Adorno emerged with their own theories of Marxism.

Brecht came to the scene as a young, iconoclastic playwright, better seen as a maverick than as a politically minded person. After reading Marx he became politically committed, exiling himself in 1933 with the coming of the Nazi. It was after he returned to Germany (specifically East Germany) more than a decade later that he began to examine and deflect Lukacs' established socialist realism. Coming up with what he calls anti-Aristotelian realism, Brecht rejects Aristotle's idea of unity of action, time and space, and the empathy the audience gives to the hero in order to produce catharsis. For Brecht, the dramatist should deviate from any orthodox connection of plot to universalism. In his theory of realism, the dramatist must present things in a way that would shock the audience who is conversant with received tradition of socialist realism based on Greek literary tradition.

Socialist realism, whether as propounded by Lukacs or as modified by Brecht, gets rejected in the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt where a group of young Marxists (Marx

Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and others) insist that their kind of Marxist discourse goes beyond the confines of socialist realism to embrace Hegelian thoughts and Freudian elements. The foremost theorist of this school, Adorno, contests Lukacs' view of realism by arguing that a literary work, say a poem, does not have a direct link with social realities. A poem detaches itself from realities and it is by doing so that it can not just reflect a society but also act as an interrogator or irritant which creates its distinctive reality. "Art," for Adorno, "is the negative knowledge of the actual world" (quoted in Selden and Widdowson 83). Adorno, then, does not totally reject the modernist's concept of literature, as Lukacs does, because he thinks a "[l]iterary form is not simply a unified and compressed reflection of the form of society...but a special means of distancing reality and preventing the easy reabsorption of new insights into familiar and consumable packages" (quoted in Selden and Widdowson 83). Adorno is therefore not concerned with how critical a work of art is but about its form and the "method of distance" it uses to reach and interrogate the society.

Other Marxist theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Lucien Goldmann and Louis Althusser continue to interrogate the connection of literature to the society in the classical socialist realist sense laid down by the forerunner of Marxism. For instance, the French Marxist philosopher Althusser, influential among post-structuralist thinkers, disagrees with the view of art as simply a form of ideology. He thinks a great work of art does not merely express the ideology of a class; it rather makes us see, in a distant way, the ideology from which it is born. Althusser defines ideology as a "system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society" (quoted in Goldstein 23). In this premise, there is no simplistic connection between the base and the superstructure because the society is made up of intricate crises and contradictions and a work of literature does not only have to pass through this intricacy, but also makes us see it by standing as a mirror that synthesises the various social crises and contradictions in a society.

While this Frankfurtian re-interpretation of Marxism dominated critical canon in the United States of America through the influential journal *Telos*, Marxist thoughts in Britain was revived around 1968 (after a decline in the 1930s) with such publications as *New Left Review*. Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson became the major actors of the British Marxist discourse, each making his distinctive contribution to Marxist criticism. Hinging his mettle on cultural studies, Williams, with his *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), and later *Marxism and Literature* (1977), embarks on a wide-ranging re-examination of social meanings substantiating his claims with not only literary works, but also the significations of popular culture in what he calls "cultural materialism." Eagleton, with a number of insightful books, ranging from *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) to *The Ideology of Aesthetics* (1990), makes an entry with a re-definition of ideology. Beyond re-definition and interrogation, Eagleton formulates what he calls "categories for a materialist criticism" in which he presents six categories namely General Mode of Production, Literary Mode of Production, General Ideology,

Authorial Ideology, Aesthetic Ideology and Text. In Eagleton's view, a literary work is not only determined by the economic base as earlier Marxists have postulated, but also by the categories he has formulated. For instance, a work of art is determined by the mode in which it is transmitted which is done either orally, or through the written text as a manuscript (Literary Mode of Production); it can also be determined by the writer's particular interaction with the social conflicts and struggles of his time (Authorial Ideology). In his *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981), Eagleton takes a course which seeks to, in his own words, "dismantle the ruling concepts of 'literature', reinserting 'literary' texts into the whole field of practices," and "deconstruct the received hierarchies of 'literature'" (98), thereby proposing a criticism that will see literature as a social weapon for the emancipation of the oppressed.

It is this classical view of Marxism as latitude for a criticism which sees literature as a weapon of social struggles that is received in Africa largely because of the protest-dependent evolution of African literature. Modern African

literature emerges as a response to the colonial anti-African writings of the Europeans (Joseph Conrad, Joyce Carry, and others). It is thus a matter of exigency that Marxist criticism finds solace in African literature, providing a counter-discourse to the received euro-centric discourse of modernism. We will examine the thoughts of two eminent African Marxist thinkers namely Omafume F. Onoge and Ngugi wa Thiong'O and take our position on this "dialectics" of Marxist opinions regarding the criticism of new political poetry in Nigeria.

In his incisive but no less polemical essay, "Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature," Onoge begins by arguing for a context or sociology for a literature that comes to existence because of reactions to colonial anti-narrative. He points out that the emergence of African literature has a critical (and by all means combative) encounter with "colonial politics" and this should form a premise for any criticism of African literature. Then he goes on to attack, in a Chinweizuan fashion, those he calls "art for art's critics" or "African bourgeois critics." He singles out Dan S. Izevbaye, critiques the latter's "The State of Criticism in African Literature" (1975), and concludes:

> Izevbaye's art for art's sake advocacy is really for a depoliticised literary universe inhabited by abstract human beings with the abstract moral values of an abstract religious pietism. A literary universe which, our prosaic logic compels us to add, must be created by astral writers and equally astral critics! (466)

While Onoge's polemic may be symptomatic of the judicial and prescriptive attitudes of African Marxist critics (see, for instance, Dada 48), it forms a background for Onoge to inaugurate his own concept of African Marxism. Constantly referring to "sociology" – though without giving adequate delineation of the concept, Onoge presents a Marxist criticism that first recognises the existence of a society with men and women, "not just stage performers," who are also "fundamentally playwrights and actors" (472). It is from this sociology that an "ideological critique" of African writings should be done. History is, of course, embedded in this sociology. Onoge does not attempt to do any re-definition of "ideology" because he obviously comes from the background of Lukacs' classical model of Marxism: socialist realism.

It is also from that angle that Ngugi, the Kenya's foremost novelist, emerges as a Marxist thinker. In his "Writers in

Politics: the Power of Words and the Words of Power," Ngugi contextualises his concept in a sociology (the writer and critic must recognise) which is peopled by "actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing, struggling, organizing, [men and women and children] in history of which they are its products, its producers and its analysts" (477). The writer, according to Ngugi, must be imaginatively involved in his society: "its economic structure, its class formations, conflicts, contradictions, political and cultural struggles, and its structure of values – particularly the conflict and tensions arising from the antagonism between those which are dying and those which are pointing to the future" (477). Literature, here, is more than just a mere reflection of the society and the writer must take a stand in the class struggles. "What is important," Ngugi says, "is not only the writer's honesty and faithfulness in capturing and reflecting the struggles around him, but also his attitude to those big social and political issues" (478). The writer must therefore accept the "relevance of literature in our daily struggle for the right and security to bread, shelter, clothes and song, the right of the

people to the products of their sweat" (Ngugi 478). The Marxist critic in African literature is, therefore, expected to examine the strengths of a literary work in reflecting the social struggles in the society and its avowed position to be on the side of the masses.

2.1.2. **New Historicism**

New Historicism arose in the 1980s to counter the intra-textual excesses of New Criticism. There was the need to move away from the text-centred literary studies that spanned over three decades in Anglo-American literary scholarship. The tendency to treat works of literature in a historical vacuum, as though their authors were not products of specific societies, came to be seen as a major diversion not only to the functionality of literature, but also as a deliberate undermining of the relationship between literature and history and, by extension, the society.

It was the American Renaissance scholar, Stephen Greenblatt, in his seminal book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning:*

From More to Shakespeare (1980), who set off the new wave that later became popular in Anglo-American literary scholarship hitherto dominated by a concentration of thoughts on the internal properties of a literary work. Greenblatt consistently fashioned a premise for New Historicism, which, to some extent, was more a methodisation than a theoretical abstraction. David Richter writes that "Greenblatt correctly insists that new historicism is not a theory or a set of doctrines but a practice" (*Critical Tradition*, 1204). Greenblatt sees the crux of his project as "an intensified willingness to read *all* of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts" (Italics his, quoted in Barry 172-173). It is an approach to literary criticism that recognises that a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated creation of genius. Consequently, New Historicists are interested in understanding a creative work through its historical context and, on the other side, understanding cultural and intellectual history through literature.

New Historicism is seen as a child of the 19th century practice of literary historians who read works of literature from the context of social, cultural and political history. A product of Hegelian idealism and the evolutionary naturalism of Herbert Spencer, the practice was regarded as Historicism. Historicists like E. P. Kuhl and E. M. W. Tillyard read literary works against the background of history in a fashion that saw literature as a "foreground" of historical background. For instance, in 1943 Tillyard published *The Elizabethan World Picture* in which he read Shakespeare's works against the spirit of the Elizabethan age, its ideas of divine order, the chain of being and the relationship between earthly and heavenly beings.

Historicism collapsed under the weight of counter-theorisation and practices from the vibrant New Criticism of the 1940s and when it re-emerged in the 1980s, the concept of history had changed as a result of post-structuralist thoughts: first, history was seen in two senses, i.e., "the events of the past" and telling a story about "the events of the past." Post-structuralists believed that history was narrated and so the first sense was out of place; second, there was the denial of a single

history and the acceptance of “histories” because of the variety of world-views that existed; third, the post-structuralists thought that historians could not be objective in narrating the events of the past; and fourth, literature and history were considered, by the post-structuralists, as two equal texts in such a way that history should not claim to be more sublime. These post-structuralist thoughts influenced Greenblatt and others in deviating from the practice of the “old” historicists.

A number of theorists and philosophers have also influenced the formation of the new historicist approach to literary analysis. The chief influence is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his publications ranging from *Madness and Civilisation: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) to *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault consistently postulates that discourses are always rooted in social institutions. For instance, the discourses of madness, criminality and sexual abnormalities are always formulated against the concept of sanity, justice and sexual normalcy. This “discursive practice,” Foucault points out, is in the hands of those who have political and social powers, which

they often use to their advantage. It is from this concept that New Historicists (as well as cultural materialists) develop the political edge entrenched in their practice.

The entrenchment of cultural studies in New Historicism is derived from the works of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz who, in his studies of primitive societies, concludes that except by proper immersion in a culture, an analyst cannot do a cogent study or what he calls the “thick description” of a culture. New Historicists are therefore interested in doing an in-depth study of a culture if it forms a parallel with a literary text under study. Another influence on New Historicist thoughts is Hyden White, the philosopher of history who postulates that figural relationships such as tropes and figures of speech can be representations of a history or a culture. Through a figure of speech that is dominant in an age, the historical analyst can establish a particularity about that age. The French sociologists Pier Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau also influenced the New Historicists with their studies of intellectual social power in the sense that “a structure of a learned profession can alter the way

knowledge and the power associated with it are originated and distributed" (Richter 1206).

From these influences and other post-structuralist exertions, it is valid to agree with Greenblatt that New Historicism is not a theory or a body of theories, propounded by those referred to as New Historicists, but a practice which is at best eclectic. The American critic Louis Montrose sees New Historicism as the combined interest of what he calls the "textuality of history, [and] the historicity of texts" (quoted in Barry 172). Peter Barry gives an elaboration of Montrose's witty expression thus:

> New historicism is... a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. That is to say, new historicism refuses (at least ostensibly) to 'privilege' the literary text: instead of a literary 'foreground' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. (*Beginning Theory*, 172)

A distinct characteristic of New Historicism, then, is the equality accorded literary and non-literary texts. It encourages a juxtapositional and inter-textual study of both literary and non-literary texts "so that a new entity is formed. In this sense the

objection that the documents selected may not really be relevant to the [literary text] is disarmed, for the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by resituating it" (Barry 175).

It follows that to historicise is not really to have a historical sense, but to acknowledge the histories (not a history) as subjectificatory realities that have formed the texture of a specific literary work. In this intertwining relationship between literature and history, which is, itself, dialectic, text, according to Myers, "is interpreted as both product and producers, end and source, of history" ("The New Historicism in Literary Study" 31).

New Historicism has a political edge, which, in fact, arouses this researcher's interest in it. The New Historicist desires to know "the culture formation [what Foucault calls the 'episteme'], in which the workings of power and knowledge and their interrelationships can be defined" (Richter 1206). Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson elaborate further:

> American New Historicists tend to see power structures as permitting only identification and

> counter-identification. British exponents belong to a politically more radical tradition, and they are much more interested in the possibility of subjects not only refusing offered subject positions but actually producing new ones. (166)

The "radical tradition" of the British practitioners has come to be known as cultural materialism with which New Historicism shares a number of similarities. In fact, cultural materialism is often seen as the British version of New Historicism and the former is considered a more appropriate name for their pursuit because Greenblatt christened his practice "new historicism" too hastily and "has tried ever since to rename what he does 'cultural poetics,' in order to avoid the connotation of historical inevitability implicit in the word 'historicism'" (Richter 1204). A common purpose to these two methods of "the political interpretation of literature" (Myers 28) is the pursuance of the kind of exegesis that locates a literary work in a time, on circumstances and in a society peopled by human beings who are instinctively and materially polarised by the issues of power. This is why Selden and Widdowson go on to say:

> Foucault and New Historicism initiate a new kind of intertextual historical theory which is inevitably an interventionist one since it assists in remaking the past. In cultural materialism a commitment to

> transgressive and oppositional voices becomes more explicit. As usual, while it draws upon post-structuralism, it questions the claims of some versions of it to tolerate an innocent free play of meanings. (168-169)

Apart from drawing influence from post-structuralism, New Historicism also draws something from postmodernism in its tendency to see society as consisting of texts relating to other texts, with no static literary values beyond the way specific societies read them in specific situations.

The contentions of New Historicism are, thus, that literature feeds from and feeds specific historical events or issues, thereby freeing literature from the bondage of individualism and self-contained formalism. Also, literature considers history as its other-side of the coin and it can bring out its humanising meaning(s) only when it is historicised. It goes, without saying, that an interpretation of a poem, a novel or a drama recognises as valid and inevitable the historical and socio-political situations that have influenced the production of such a literary work. This is why Greenblatt and his fellow practitioners study a literary text side by side with a non-

literary, historical text to establish the strengths of the literary text through its symbiotic interaction with the non-literary text.

2.2. **Marxism, New Historicism and Raji's Poetry**

We have given the tag "political" to Raji's poetry because it is identifiable to a time, place and circumstances. Raji writes about people he sees, interacts with, sympathises (even empathises) with, and does not mince words on where he stands in the social and political contradictions and struggles in his society. Raji falls into the category of writers whose "attitude to those big social and political issues" (Ngugi 478) is unmistakably sympathetic towards the anguished people. Raji's poetry does not only mirror the Nigerian society, it feels the society's pains and anguish, it moves in the contours and crevices of the society, attempting not only to see the suffering of the people but also to unveil the modus operandi of those who use powers to cause the suffering. This is why we will deploy the doctrine of African Marxism expounded by Onoge and Ngugi to interpret Raji's poetry. Raji the poet situates himself in a real society (Nigeria, Africa). We will find Eagleton's Authorial Ideology useful in establishing the

circumstances that make not only Raji, but almost all poets writing in Raji's time to historicise the terrible years of military oppression in Nigeria. The hostile economy and politics of their time, which directly affects them, are parts of those things that make up their authorial ideologies. Their ideologies do not only find spaces in their individual works, but metamorphose into ideals of combativeness, in the classical Marxist perception of changing a society, thereby establishing them as political poets interested in bringing a change to their society.

Because of its tendency to interrogate power and unsettle its socio-historical institutions in the Foucaultian way, New Historicism is seen as a theoretical product of Marxism (Marxist critics such as Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton have variously emphasised the historicism of the text). However, New Historicism moves beyond the classical confinement of Marxism to ideology and power, to the economic base and superstructure, and views power as not exclusively class-related but extending across the society. Chris Baldick suggests, therefore, that "New Historicism is perhaps best understood as a position intermediate between Marxism

and pos-structuralism, combining the idea of historical determination...with that of textuality" (187).

With a deep interest in the cultural and political contexts of literary works, the New Historicist does not only situate the author but also himself in a socio-cultural and political circumstance that may have given rise to the author's work. It is in this sense that this researcher can claim to be an eye witness to some of the political and social issues Raji has historicised in his poetry. Also, using the New Historicist approach to study Raji's poetry demands that we have a non-literary text, which captures the age in which Raji writes or from which he draws his themes. Constant reference to this non-literary text will bring out the historicism of the poet Raji in capturing the oppression of the particular age under study. The book chosen for this concern is Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen* (2000). Maier is a British journalist who came to Nigeria, investigated the state of anomie in Nigeria, had a firsthand experience of some of the things going on Nigeria and then wrote a frank book about military oppression in Nigeria. Maier's non-literary text chronicles the years of despondency spanning the over two

decades that Nigerian military officers had political powers in their hands, reined a system of ruse in the disguise of rule and left the nation terribly plundered by the time the current democratic dispensation came on board in 1999. in Maier's words, "the very name Nigeria conjures up images of chaos and confusion, military coups, repression, drug trafficking, and business fraud" (xviii). As we have pointed out before, this is the historical reality that interacts with Raji's poetry.

2. 3. **The Emergence of the Third Generation of Modern Nigerian Poets**

In Nigerian literature, writers are, as a result of convenient compartmentalisation, grouped into three generations, namely the first, the second and the third generations of modern writers in English. In terms of historical eras, these generations are also known as the pre-independence era, the post-independence era and what we may call "the militarisation era." This general, often loose, periodisation implies the thematic and stylistic preoccupation of a group of people who write within particular time and circumstances.

The first generation of writers was concerned with culture contact that arose as a result of the colonial incursion of the white people into Nigeria. The writers – Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, T. M. Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, and many others – were interested in romanticising their culture through their writings probably to, according to Achebe, teach the white men that before they came the African cultures had existed with their own distinctions (*Morning Yet On Creation Day*, 45). Oladele Taiwo, in his insightful study of the novel of this generation, *Culture and the Nigerian Novel*, points out that "[w]hat certainly provided the motivation and subsequently the tool for writing is the colonial experience" (1). Because the colonial experience was harsh, the literature emerged with protest. Since their thematic concerns were on the elevation of their culture to the same level with that of the white man imposed on the land, their style (especially the novelists among them) drew largely from the traditional folklore of their land. Even in the works of the poets, such as Okigbo, Clark and Soyinka, who are accused of being negatively Eurocentric (see,

for example, Chinweizu, et al 172), there are vernacular words, and invocation and evocation drawn from orature.

The second generation of Nigerian writers distinguished themselves by coming to the scene with a loud proclamation about the social function of literature. The publication of Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* marks the beginning of the vibrant literature produced in this age. Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Tess Owueme, and many others, came on the scene with what Funso Aiyejina, himself a writer of that order, calls "Alter-Native tradition" ("Recent Nigerian Poetry", 112). Consciously, and in order to deviate from the path of their predecessors, these poets evolved a poetics which was the combination of semantically simple expressions and a more engaging dependence on orature. In explaining this poetic tradition, Ojaide says that "[t]he language of [the second generation of] African poetry taking a cue from traditional poetry aims at clarity of expression...the poets use simple language to match their concern for the common people" (*Poetic Imagination*, 84). Most of the writers of the second generation easily pass as

Marxist writers because they believe that “literature can change society... Art has the power to touch. Art affects. And anything that affects, changes people, changes communities” (Osundare quoted in Akpuda 7). This belief forms the focal point of their individual and collective vision as writers. In consonance with this vision, they emphasise a demystification of the poetic craft and a total return to the native tradition as implied in Aiyejina’s coinage, “Alter-Native Tradition”.[1]

The generation after them contains the writers who are writing today, most of them yet to attain full maturity. Ibadan, precisely the University of Ibadan campus, may be said to be the place of birth for the third generation of Nigerian poets.[2] Not that all contemporary poets in Nigeria today emanate from there. It was, however, the hub of poetic activities – christened The Poetry Club – that produced some of the major actors of this generation of poets. The Ibadan Poetry Club had the momentum to do so because it was literarily fathered by such great literary minds as Niyi Osundare, unarguably the finest poet from Nigeria today; Femi Osofisan, an established playwright who also wrote poems under the pseudonym Okinba

Launko; and Harry Garuba, respected literary critic and poet who had zeal for organising writers. Suffice it to say that the same University of Ibadan campus had been the birthplace of the first generation of Nigerian writers (Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark and others) and a significant symbol for the rise of Nigerian literature.

The generation was being born in Ibadan (and in other places, such as Nsukka, Benin, Jos, Zaria and Maiduguri) with reading, interactive criticism, chapbook and students' magazine publications when Harry Garuba, with a remarkable foresight, midwifed a seminal anthology entitled *Voices from the Fringe: an ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry* in 1988. This is the definitive anthology of one hundred new Nigerian poets, from all parts of the country, which formally ushered in the third generation of Nigerian poetry to the Nigerian literary scene. This is why 1988 is often seen as the year this generation of poetry formally announced its existence.

The Ibadan axis of this generation has produced such notable poets as Remi Raji, Afam Akeh, Chiedu Ezeanah, Onookome Okome, Emevwo Biakolo, Chuks Ata, Pius

Adesamni and many others. From the Nsukka-Benin axis there are important poets like Uche Nduka, Emman Usman Shehu, Ifowodo Ogaga, Maik Nwosu, Unoma Nguemo Azuah, and many more others. From the Jos-Maiduguri axis there are poets like Abubakar Othman, Idris Amali, Helon Habila, Toni Kan, Mmassa Massai, E. E. Sule, Nesther Alu, Isaac Attah Ogezi and many others. Also worthy of note in this generation are poets like Promise Okekwe, Maria Ajima, Moses Tsenongu, Ismail B. Garba, Alkasim Abdulkadir, Abdullahi Ismaila, Baba M. Dzukogi, Ahmed Maiwada, Muazu Maiwada and many more.

Most of these poets did not enjoy patronage from big publishing houses such as Heinemann Educational books, owner of the popular African Writers Series; Longman, whose literary series is called Drumbeat; University Press, Spectrum and Malthouse. These publishers were active in publishing writers of the first and second generations and contributed immensely to the flourishing of African literature. At the turn of the third generation, the publishers suffered serious distress, like the writers, occasioned by general apathy towards readership as a result of the activities of the viperous military

juntas.[3] It was an era in which the "publishing sector sneered at Nigerian creative literature rejecting it as unprofitable" (Adewale, *25 New Nigerian Poets* iii).

Poets and writers, thus, resorted to self-publishing so that literature might live in Nigeria. For, as Dul Johnson puts it in an interview with this researcher, "[if] we don't publish, our culture, our lives, perish" (27). Self-publishing, with its editorial inadequacy, brought certain discontent between the third generation of writers and the previous generations, pronounced during the first presentation of Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Prize for Nigerian Literature, Nigeria's biggest literary prize, in 2004. The judges of the prize could not produce a winner because of typographical and grammatical errors and this sparked off arguments that ultimately caused a re-evaluation of the potency of self-publishing in reviving Nigerian literature from the doldrums.[4]

Yet poetry thrives in this generation. Other anthologies emerged: *Poets in Their Youths* (1989) edited by Uche Nduka and Osita Ike; *A Volcano of Voices* (1999) edited by Steve Shaba; *25 New Nigerian Poets* (2000) edited by Toyin

Adewale; *Let the Dawn Come: Voices from North-East Nigeria* (2000) edited by Idris O. O. Amali; a very ambitious one known as *Five Hundred Nigerian Poets* (Volume 1, 2005) edited by Jerry Agada; *Crossroads: an Anthology of Poetry in Honour of Christopher Okigbo* (2008) edited by Patrick Oguejiefor and Uduma Kalu; and *Pyramids: an Anthology of Poems from Northern Nigeria* (2008) edited by Ismail Bala Garba and Abdullahi Ismaila. These anthologies indicate that there are more poets in this generation than any other generation. Nothing captures this phenomenon more aptly than Ben Obumselu's conclusion, in a recent interview in *ANA Review*, that "Nigeria is a bird-nest of singing poets" (14). Niyi Osundare also posits that "this generation has produced, and keeps producing, an exciting body of literature, remarkable both for the gravity of its content and the diversity of its styles...."[5] Another possible reason for Nigeria's sudden harvest of poets, according to Wumi Raji, is that "[in] the eighties when members of this new generation were still in school, most universities had creative writers groups and most members of this group (sic) specialized mainly in the art of poetry" (73).

It has been said by Achebe that "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 78). Bearing this in mind Nigerian poets, across the generations, have seen their poetry as a means through which they can contribute to the socio-political discourse in their society. The poets of this generation attempt to chronicle the dehumanising activities of the military regimes and chart a new rhetoric of nationhood. It is in this light that most of the poetry of this generation, like that of the previous generation, is deeply nationalistic and political. Consequently, there exists an organic link between poetry and nationalism, supporting the proposition that Nigerian writers, whatever is their persuasion, have felt a need never to turn their back on the socio-political crisis of their nation. This is why Ojaide concludes that "[m]odern African poets criticize the political corruption in their respective societies. It appears to me that African poets dwell on public experiences than private and have been more successful with the former" (27). No doubt, this is true, as this study will show.

The poet's participation in a discourse of nationalism is a result his desire to orientate his craft towards the emancipation of his society. He is thus the spokesman of the oppressed clan he belongs to – with a strident voice against what Amanda Grants calls "a general communal retardation" ("Memory, Transition and Dialogue," 11). The contemporary Nigerian poet chooses, either consciously or unconsciously, "to represent [his people] ... on the contemporary scene" (Mezu, "Poetry and Revolution", 96) in waging a war against the miscreants who find themselves in khaki uniforms, seize powers and subsequently unleash untold terror on the land. Nesther Alu puts it in a better way when she says, "[t]he poet's duty is further broadened by his honest desire to detach himself and his speechless brothers from the viperous hands of the African dictators and the tightening grip of neo-colonialism" ("Echoes of Commitment", 198). In chronicling the evils of the failed political leaders depicted in their poems and taking side with the common people, political poets feel they are speaking on behalf of their society and at the same time speaking to their people because, as Donatus Nwoga points out, "the wish to

communicate with 'the masses' has had a salutary effect on modern African poetry" ("Modern African Poetry," 37).

For Uche Nduka, a poet different from most poets in Nigeria because of his individualism and formalistic enthusiasm, accused by critics of neglecting socio-political issues in his land, a poet must engage his art in the happenings of his society. "A poet does not write out of nothingness. If he does, his lines will be lame and will evaporate out of his reader's consciousness in no time like foul air" (Nduka 10). But Nduka gives a proviso:

> When only socio-political issues are steadily highlighted over and above other issues and experiences, a cramping atmosphere manifests itself. The poet cowardly seeking acceptance in the present situations finds himself gravitating to tailored and already made thematic concerns. (10)

Nduka thinks a poet should not set out to pursue a particular theme, or, more specifically, the political theme that has become quite popular with contemporary Nigerian poets, without diversifying into other spheres of life. His thesis is that,

> I subscribe to a poetry of experience which objectifies itself freely, stylistically and thematically on the page. This is the type of poetry where actions, feelings, philosophies, dreams, visions and ideology

> are healthily and fitfully married, for a real poem is born from life. (10)

Indeed Nduka calls for eclecticism, which can be found in the poetry of some contemporary Nigerian poets notably Maik Nwosu and Ogaga Ifowodo, although in their poetry political theme manifests profusely.

However eclectic a poet is expected to be – and it is noteworthy that poets find themselves being eclectic in this generation, a great deal of attention is being paid to the political theme. The poets become more committed because they have not only witnessed the oil boom of the 1970s turning to the oil doom in their time, some of them have been victims of military brutality and the harsh condition of living that has come with the military era. There is a sense in which we can qualify the entire Nigerian poetry as political. Indeed, the militarisation of Nigeria is a continuation of the corrupt leadership that threw the nation into postcolonial disillusionment in the early 1960s. From the first generation, "the simple, direct declamations against colonial impositions and cultural assertions of the negritude" (Okonkwo, "The Missing Link in African Literature" 86) became so exerting that, despite their inclinations for

individualism, Soyinka and Okigbo "produced a poetry of individual search mingled with political or public statements" (Nwoga 37).

However, the second generation, which the generation under consideration is a direct product of, gathers more storms in the question of commitment in literature. Writers and critics of that generation – Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso, Biodun Jeyifo, Adebayo Williams – are self-professed Marxists. In their poetry, drama and fiction, they deal "with contemporary social problems in Nigeria with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present decadence..." (Obafemi, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* 168). Indeed that generation has a fierce determination in reducing literature to an ideological weapon with which writers can make positive (and provocative) statements about government decisions and policies that turn out to be noxious to the society. As Stewart Brown says, "it has been in the post-independence era that the idea of the poet as agitator and social commentator – indeed of poetry-in-English as an alternative

forum for political debate – has really taken root" ("Another Music", 46).

The possible reason for the third generation of Nigerian poets taking more after the second generation than the first generation is that their experiences in social and political issues are similar. They both faced and are still facing "the contradiction of African independence [which is that] Africans free themselves from white imperialism only to be faced with black imperialism, which constitutes oppression, thraldom and hatred that are in the main home-spun" (Egudu, *Modern African Poetry*, 103). They are jolted into the political reality that those who took powers from the imperialists turned out to be oppressive. In Nigeria, the writers witness the retrogression of Nigeria from wealth to poverty and from poverty to unbearable military oppression. For this reason, both the second and the third generations of writers write against the same tide. Given the thematic and stylistic distinctiveness of protest or political literature both generations practise, the influence of the second generation of Nigerian writers over the third one becomes obvious and pronounced. The influence is so

strong that critics accuse poets of the latter generation of being unable to wean themselves from the tutelage of their mentors.[6] An instance here is the Osundare-Raji arguments, which will be discussed presently.

Apart from the charge made against the new writers for not being able to evolve their own voices, they are also accused of not giving due attention to the aesthetics of arts. Many critics and writers have decried the poor artistry in contemporary Nigerian poetry even though a few of them have given it a serious critical attention. Notable writers and critics of the previous generations, such as Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan and Charles Nnolim, have made their thinking known about this. In an essay titled "Soyinka and the Generation After" Osundare expresses his worry over what he sees as the poor quality of literary language among contemporary poets who have had the tendency to globalise their diction to the detriment of literary language flavoured with local orature which his own poetry and that of his generation are well known for. To him, the present generation of Nigerian writers is so fascinated by the idea of the shrunken world as a global village that they give

themselves up to what he calls the "CNN syndrome" of looking outside their land instead of inside for creative craft. He thus declares that:

> there is a hip hop hysteria in the present atmosphere: an exogeneist mentality that urges one to take leave of one's very self and assume the borrowed, clinched mask of the foreign other. Many, many members of the new generation are doing to our literature what Islamic and Christian fundamentalists have done to our indigenous religion and cultural integrity. (22)

Niyi Osundare's essay is a provocative one and indicts most important writers of today for abandoning the aesthetics of African poetry, which, according to Tanure Ojaide, should "involve the distinctive styles and rhythms that convey the African experience" (*Poetic Imagination, 17*). For Ossie Enekwe, the emerging writers in Nigerian literature do not take their time to learn the craft of writing. In his words, "[the] new breed writers have not perceived the need to serve an apprenticeship. I think there is a lot of haste, a lot of impatience.... I think there is a lot of overwriting in modern Nigerian writing; where one image will do, they use ten" (*Winging Words*, 165).

Similarly, this researcher, elsewhere, considers this generation, in terms of literary language, as one that "wallows in watery diction" (67 "Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: Between Commitment and Aesthetics"). This arises, he says, as a result of the poets' urge to patronise the audience and the excessive dependence of poetry on theme. Again, in this matter, this generation is influenced by the previous generation. The idea of the writer reaching his audience conveniently, in a style the audience can understand, has been an issue strongly raised and well argued by the writers of the previous generation. Niyi Osundare, who now frowns at the diction of modern poets, in his metapoem, "Poetry Is", presents a poetic manifesto about the accessibility of poetry to the common man, which he diligently pursues. Femi Osofisan's prescription that "[y]ou've got to break things down to recognizable symbols. You've got to use language that is immediately accessible"(quoted in Obafemi 170) is part of the stylistic tenets that ruled the literature of his era. While commenting on the writings of the second generation of Nigerian writers, in an interview with Ezenw-Ohaeto, the eminent Nigerian critic Dan Izevbaye thinks that their writings,

compared with those of the previous generation are wanting in craft. He puts it this way:

> I must say that from what I have read from many writers [of the post-Soyinka era] there is a marked drop of technical excellence in the level of technical achievements, mastery of language and form which one has a right to expect of the successors to the literary tradition developed by Achebe, Soyinka, Clark and others. I think there is too much impatience, too little respect for form and especially for language. (*Winging Words*, 136)

While it is true that "a marked drop" is discernible in the writings of the second generation and those of the generation after it, a proviso for this has been constantly expressed, which is that, as political writers with themes that transcend the "privatist chant" of the pioneer writers, they regard their arts as the expressions of their disaffection with misrule and, subsequently, as the ideological energies with which to rise in defence of the plundered land. Writing is, for them, a dialogic discourse that offers them an opportunity not only to engage the despots in dialectics but also to reach the oppressed masses with sympathy and hope.

This social vision informs and affects their theorisation of aesthetics in literature. Aesthetics, for the third generation of

Nigerian writers, as with the second generation, becomes the softening and familiarising of symbols and images that enable an audience to dialogue easily with the poet. In this regards, Dul Johnson concludes that the poets

> reduce poetry into simple questions (sometimes without the question mark), put in relatively simple language – in fact, into language of song – drawing upon familiar symbols and images with the intent to drive home the message without the tedium that attended the poetry of the older generation. ("Arts of National Unity", 196)

A pertinent point here is what Johnson calls "language of song." Poetry is naturally enslaved to music in terms of rhythms. But beyond that, the contemporary Nigerian poets, who, despite Niyi Osundare's accusation, have not yet allowed urbanity to erase their affinity for their orature, draw musical inspirations from their folkways. Raji, Shehu, Tsenongu, Othman and Akeem Lasisi are few of the poets who have used such inspirations effectively. For instance, Shehu begins his politically engaging poem, "Bubble of Bitterness", with this derivation from Hausa orature:

> *Gatanan gatanan...ta zo mu ji ta.*
> *Gatanan gatanan...ta zo mu ji ta.*
> *Kai, gatanan gatanan...ta zo mu ji ta.*
> *Ke, gatanan gatanan...ta zo mu ji ta.*

> *Jema'a gatanan gatanan...ta zo mu ji ta.*
> (Italics his, *Open Sesame 1-5*)

This rendition is what a Hausa raconteur begins his story with. It translates as "Here I bring you story...say it let us hear" (my translation).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, who has done much research in the connection between orature and modern poetry, offers a reason for the poets' continuing interests in their orature:

> The desires of the poets to eliminate textual impediments, unclog poetic syntax and infuse the poems with the oral flavour of the rich and variegated Nigerian culture, hinged (sic) on this conscious reaction to make more people enjoy poetry, despite their occupations, in spite of their preconceived ideas of the poetic craft, and not withstanding their levels of intellectual sophistication. (*Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*, 11)

The implication here is that a musical poem is more enjoyable to the audience, especially in Nigeria, than a poem that is not musical since the poetics of African orature is rooted in musicality. While some poets such as Raji, Nduka, Shehu, Lasisi and a few others achieve this musicality and blend, it is this researcher's contention that many poets writing in this generation have not been able to do so.

In their attempt to be audience patronising, some poets drift to the level of cliché and write poems whose language can hardly affect the emotions of the readers. They lift wise statements from their grandparent's lips and dress them as poems. A critical reader will seek originality from such poems without finding it. But critics such as Harry Garuba think of this trend in a positive way thereby theorising that:

> The poetic style favours the simple rhyme, or even the cliché that matches the movement that clinches the pattern of the dance steps. This is because the poem is not conceived as just words on paper ... the words strive to imitate the musicality of the song-lyric and the rhythm of dance-movement. (*xi*)

While Garuba and Johnson have a descriptive attitude towards the infusion of clichés into modern poetry, others like Charles Nnolim, Niyi Osundare, Obakanse Lakanse and Titi Adepitan take a prescriptive stand towards it, picking on it as one of the gross shortcomings of the writings of this generation. To Adepitan, "[l]anguage is the greatest pitfall of [this] generation" (126). Lakanse laments that "[t]here is an uncreative temper and explicitness in the poems that are being rammed into our throats, leaving very little to chew on." (2). He is worried by the shallowness of the diction of contemporary Nigerian poetry.

Some poets are conscious of this use of clichés and do not see it as a deficiency in their language. It is rather a more effective way of reaching the audience as Ojaide (*Poetic Imagination*, 84) has opined. In defence of his second collection of poems, *Open Sesame*, which contains cliché-ridden poems, Shehu 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). Certainly, "wise sayings and clichés" have little to add to the aesthetics of poetry, which should be hinged on fresh expressions that invoke the right symbols and images on the minds of the readers. Indeed, Shehu's purported deliberate use of clichés is a mature attempt to extricate himself from being guilty of deadening the craft of poetry in this generation. Many poets are guilty of this. The anthology of five hundred Nigerian poets, which captures most of the poets writing today, presents poems that are marred by clichés and call for an interrogation of aesthetics in contemporary Nigerian poetry.

What is being driven at is that most of the poems in this era, though thematically strong, given the social visions of the poets, do not come through as aesthetic enough to be seen as accomplished poems. Poetry, which thrives in this generation more than in any generation, also suffers insufficient artistry from many of those who call themselves poets in Nigeria today. The bad poems are sparks of social commitment that are not well garbed in the artistic craft befitting them. This is not to say there are no good poems from Nigeria today. Remi Raji, Uche Nduka, Maik Nwosu, Afam Akeh, Akeem Lasisi, Abubakar Othman, and Ogaga Ifowodo are among the few poets that have kept poetry above the insipid line. The artistic maturity of these poets can be compared to those of fine poets anywhere in the world.

2. 4. **Remi Raji: The Poet and His Vision**

Raji is, no doubt, one of the foremost political poets of his time. I have observed elsewhere that “his second collection, *Webs of Remembrance*, is a poetry book whose enchanting images, controlled rhythms and profundity of diction, deftly

handled, are capable of cutting him out as the best political poet of the third generation of Nigerian poets" (Egya 68). Born in Ibadan in 1961, Raji attended his primary school, Nurul Islamiyya Primary School, in southeast Ibadan; finished in 1973 and proceeded to a secondary school, Holy Trinity Grammar School, the same year. After taking his Higher School Certificate at Olivet Baptist High School, Oyo, in 1979, he went to University of Ibadan to study English. He took his first degree in 1984, took his second degree in 1986 and bagged his PhD in 1992, all at Ibadan. After having a stint elsewhere as a teacher, he has been teaching in the Department of English, University of Ibadan. Raji has published four volumes of poetry, namely, *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs: America – a Poetic Guided Tour* (2003) and *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005). His poetry has won both local and international awards: *A Harvest of Laughters* was a joint winner of the Association of Nigerian Authors / Cadbury Poetry Prize in 1997; had a honourable mention in the Okigbo National Poetry Prize in the same year; and won Association of West African Young Writers' VOCA Award for Best First

Published Book of the Year in 1997. A well-travelled writer and scholar who has enjoyed several fellowships, Raji has read his poems to local audiences and audiences in Europe, the United States, South Africa and Ethiopia.

Raji's poetry has come to deserve major critical attention because it carries a vision anchored in a past plundered and wasted, in a present burdened with frustration and anguish and in a future envisaged with surpassing optimism. His poetry is full of a cry of hope for a people. It is the kind of poetry that seeks to reach out to the masses, eager to, in M. S. C. Okolo's words, "prompt people to seek justice for and to criticise their political situation" (*African Literature as Political Philosophy*, 1).

Raji is consistent in his poetic vision and has always seen himself as a poet with a "nationalist imagination" (*Webs of Remembrance,* 9). He follows the steps of sociological writers in Africa (a path well forged by Achebe) who always establish an organic connection between their writing and their society. In some cases, the authors explain such connection, bearing in

mind their creative impulses and visions. And here is how Raji explains his indebtedness to his nation as a poet:

> There are levels of nationalism. I mean there are false nationalisms and there are critical nationalisms. The idea was to look back at my country and to do a critique of society because most people, poets, sometimes, try to run away from the possibilities of connecting poetry and pure nationalism. Even though I wrote these poems all at different times, I suddenly realized that most of the things I was talking about had to do with the country, all forms of oppressions, different kinds of silences. One major thing that connects all of them is that nationalist imagination. (*Sou'wester*, 10)

Most of Raji's collected poems are political poems that unveil the inexhaustible energies of a patriotic poet set about with a zealous fervour, again in his own words,

> to engage in intimate dialogues and interrogation of years and decades of despondency, to confront the outrage of tyranny, to plant hope where none is imagined, to explode the myth of silence and give voice to the speechless, to pluck laughter from the howling winds, ... and above all, to be the active child of Optimism in the midst of dire Pessimism. ("The Aesthetics of Rage" 3)

This is certainly a huge agenda for a poet. And it is this duty that African writers, committed to social vision, have pursued since the beginning of African literature, which Charles Nnolim, in his assessment of it, sees as "lachrymal" ("African Literature

in the 21st Century", 1) because of the history of slavery and colonialism behind it.

Raji's period of gestation and production as a poet – a period, from the 1980s, that covers what has now come to be known as the third generation of Nigerian writers – is a period that a poet, a writer cannot ignore drawing his thematic concerns from. Those were the years of hardship, oppression and plunder in Nigeria perpetrated by a cabal of successive leaderships manned by cruel military dictators. The terrible memories of those years have continued to fertilise creative writings today both among the third and other generations of Nigerian writers. They form the springboard for the harvest of political poetry in Nigeria today.

Raji, quite clear-headed with his vision from the beginning, crafting his political thoughts in the orature-dependent poetics popularised in the Ibadan Poetry Club, writes poetry that portrays "the havoc of yesterday's flood" (*Webs of Remembrance*, 9) and attempts to lift his audience out of this havoc by sowing a seed of optimism in them through a constant motif seen in his philosophical elevation of laughter.

He sees himself as a namesake of laughter. It is in this laughter that the seed of hope for the bright future is encapsulated. He says he has "never looked back at the dark side of life. [He looks] forward to the brighter moments. So the journey is certainly from the darkness to light" (*Sou'wester*, 12).

But Raji, even in these years of dearth of criticisms in Nigerian literature, has been in a critical dialogue with the evaluators of his poetry.[7] His poetry is fine and worth giving an ear, they do not doubt that. They, however, see him as imitating Niyi Osundare, probably the most important poet in Nigeria today who did mentor Raji at some time in his formative period. Raji does not claim that he is absolutely free of any influence from Niyi Osundare, after all Niyi Osundare did not only teach him Creative Writing, Niyi Osundare's poetry has been quite inspirational to most, if not all, younger poets writing in Nigeria today. During the 6th Lagos Book and Art Festival, in an open discussion in which the generation's issue was the focus, Raji responded to the question of Niyi Osundare's influence on him thus:

> In those days, Niyi Osundare used to tell me that
> I wrote too much like Wole Soyinka.... He and

> Okpewho kept nudging me to evolve my own writing. Looking back now, I believe these older writers and myself write from the same cultural pool. ("Daily Independent", E8)

In an age barren of textual, stylistic and thematic studies (before comparisons are made), Raji can do no more than offer such explanation to criticism-of-comparison that is either *uninstituted* (floating in internet listservs) or made by *uninstituted* critics.[8] Wallace Stevens once pointed out, with some sneer, that "there is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting what he reads for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people" (quoted in Polleta 14).

Suffice it to say that the generation of writers Raji belongs to has suffered some form of relegation from the older ones. We have seen how Osundare and others have decried the standard of literary language of Raji's generation. Even some writers and thinkers in this generation have been worried about the state of literature and criticism today. Indeed, this generation is seething with a handful of mediocrities in literature. While the genre of drama seems to remain a Cinderella, the genres of fiction and poetry (especially poetry) have become domains for

neophytes who are in a hurry to walk tall as their generation's Achebes, Soyinkas and Okigbos without knowing the rigours of writing. That not withstanding, it is untrue to conclude that there is no great writer in sight in the third generation of Nigerian writers. In any case, a critical study like this is needed to weigh the strengths of the writers of this generation.

We will not be in a hurry to depart from the issue of Osundare's influence on Raji without drawing out some comparisons. Similarities abound between Osundare's poetry and Raji's poetry. But similarities, from some contexts, also abound between other older poets' poetry and Raji's poetry. No one has, for instance, bothered to see that Raji's nurturing of a poetic vision, through a consistency of running imagery, is similar to Christopher Okigbo's. We can see Raji's poetry as one long poem because of the organic links of his continuous images as Darthone has made us see in Okigbo's poetry in his essay, "A Study of Two Poems: Okigbo Understood."[9] Does any one see the passion that Dennis Brutus has for his land phenomenalised in a love affair in Raji's poetry? Even the rage with which Raji hurls images at the bad leaders in his country is similar to the

rage with which Brutus attacks the Apartheid system. And yet we see Aime Cessaire in Raji in his deployment and tidying up of images; one image dissolves into another almost seamlessly. More over, do we not see the Diopian optimism for Africa (in David Diop's poetry) in Raji's glowing hope for Nigeria which is obvious in every one of Raji's poems? This may not be exhaustive if comparison must be made.

The major similarity between Osundare's poetry and Raji's poetry is that they are both imbued with the spirit of song and the poets themselves sometimes wrongly call them songs. For Osundare and Raji, who write from the same Yoruba cultural roots where song is a natural springboard for artistry (in fact, Raji started his artistic career as a Fuji singer), every poetic thought has to come in songful rhythms.[10] Another similarity is that Osundare and Raji, as well as most writers from Nigeria, share the same theoretical view which is that literature is an ideological weapon used for the struggle for survival, for the emancipation of the land from its suffocating socio-political problems. Consequently, it is Marxism (and its sister Feminism) as a theoretical perspective that thrives in

Nigerian literature today. The poetry of this philosophical complexion, which most Nigerian poets write, must embody social messages. Thus the diction of such poetry goes soft and audience-patronising. And, as Donatus Nwoga points out, the poet fulfils his "wish to communicate with the masses" (48).

But there are philosophical and even stylistic differences between the poetry of Osundare and that of Raji. Osundare's social vision is discursive and almost versatile; he does not, like Raji, create images that make the body of his poetry run through as a single poem. Raji's poetry seems to be straitjacketed into the nationalist imagination. Even when Raji writes love poems, we discern the nationalist imagination in them. While Osundare's satirical poems may spur laughter, Raji's satirical poems hardly do so. Raji, unpretentious with his images, has obvious rage that does not easily give way to humour. Osundare's "Sule chase", for example, succeeds as a satire because of its humour. While Raji comes out as an angry poet, quite combatant in his stand against the bad leaders, Osundare comes out as a chuckling poet. Osundare's poetry is generously flowered with Yoruba words; almost each poem has

words in Yoruba language. Raji's poems written in English (he also writes poems in Yoruba) do not easily contain Yoruba words. And Raji, unlike Osundare, is not given to writing long poems. In Raji's fourth volume of poetry, *Lovesong for my Wasteland*, a single poem in forty verses, we can still read the verses as short individual poems, unlike Osundare's *Waiting Laughters* (1990) and *Midlife* (1993).

This work undertakes a critical study of Raji's poetry principally to dwell on the thematic issues and explore its unique imagery. Raji's images, especially those that present sharp pictures of bad leadership, oppression and plunder in his land, his lover, are enchanting because they are accurate and incisive and have remained "the most potent tool for him to affect the emotions of his audience" (Udoeyop, *Three Nigerian Poets* 152). This presents Raji as an eloquent poet. The advantage this study has is that it makes an in-depth exploration of Raji's poetry, mostly from the standpoints of the personas. Tanure Ojaide, in his study of Soyinka's poetry, rightly points out, "the critic who focuses upon the poet's persona can provide a more comprehensive treatment of the

poems. The persona unites all the poems the poet writes" (*The Poetry of Wole Soyinka*, 3). Out of this unity emerges Raji's great vision powered by an engaging motif in the metaphor of laughter.

Notes

1. We may recall Niyi Osundare's metapoem that form a kind of manifesto for the poets of the Alter-Native order here. Titled "Poetry Is", it gives the African poem a new definition, seeing it as "What the soft wind / Music to the dancing leaf / What the sole tells the dusty path / What the bee hums to the allure nectar / [and] What rainfall croons to the lowering leaves" (*Songs of Marketplace* 2). With this gospel of bringing poetry to the level of the common man's understanding, the poetry earns another tag: "market place poetry".

2. Of course there were other university campuses, such as Nsukka, Jos, Maiduguri, Calabar and Zaria which also nurtured new Nigerian writers. *Okike: an African Journal of New Writing* based at Nsukka, was/is a medium quite instrumental to the dissemination of the works of these writers. Ibadan is given the credence here because even writers of other campuses, in those days, regarded Ibadan as a Mecca of poetry in the vibrant days of the Poetry Club.

3. It is a common knowledge that reading culture began to diminish badly from the 1990s when people were so terribly hit by hardship which was caused by a policy called Structural Adjustment Programme.

4. During the inaugural presentation of the NLNG prize for literature in 2004, the judges, unnamed, surprised the Nigerian literati when they announced that although three novels, namely, *Condolences* by Bina Nengi-Ilagha, *Fattening House* by Omo Uwaifo and *House of Symbols* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, did make it to the final list, none of them deserved the prize because of typographical and grammatical errors. This sparked some kind of hues and cry among writers and scholars of literature.

5. It is taken from Niyi Osundare's "Soyinka and the Generation After", published in "The Guardian", Friday, August 6, 2005.

6. Critics such as Ossie Enekwe, Titi Adepitan, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare and Charles Nnolim have not only seen the writings of the third generation of Nigerian writers as the footnote to the second generation of Nigerian writings, they have also sneered at the aesthetics of their writings. Obakanse Lakanse's polemic on this topic titled "The Failings of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry" is an interesting read.

7. Since the inception of the Internet in Nigeria, writers, mostly of this generation, have been making use of the Internet in a kind of group discussion circle known as Listserv. Today, we have krazitivity@yahoogroups.com, josana@yahoogroups.com and enderi@yahoogroups.com where writers share criticism, social and personal issues.

8. The article appeared in *African Literature Today*, Vol. 1-4, 1972.

9. In an interview I did with Raji (see appendix), he explained elaborately the influence of the Yoruba traditional songs on his poetry.

Chapter Three

THE POET'S SYMPATHY FOR HIS LAND

3. 0. **Introduction**

Our aim in this chapter is to show the connection between the poet and his society. Given the perspective of his vision, the poet is naturally imbued with love for his society because he tends to understand the problems that the society faces and he is, in any case, set to create his own kind of solution to the problems. This is the basis of the poet's social commitment, which arises from his sympathetic or empathetic feelings towards his land. The commitment is a self-given duty that the poet pursues with passion. In most cases, the poet, in prefaces to his volumes, explains this duty, often embedded in what we have now come to know as the poet's intention. Raji is a poet who has adopted this externalisation of intention and we intend to look at that as part of his consciousness as a political poet. The poet sees his duty as righteous and, even, solemn. Thus, when he rises against the unbearable antics of the military dictators that oppress the land, he does so with a righteous anger. After all, he is into a course that is expected to serve and

move humanity forward. This self-awareness helps to define the vision of the poet and that is what we attempt to show in this chapter.

3. 1. **The Poet's Self-Definition**

Like his contemporaries on the scene today, Raji is conscious of his role as a poet and in his poetry he often defines himself and his duty.[1] He knows of the peculiarities of the writer, especially as essentialised in his ideological stand. This definition is thus not only that of the self, but that of other writers too. In some poems where Raji dwells on the travails and triumphs of writers, such as "Duty" (in *Webs of Remembrance*), we see him belonging to that clan of writers whose sympathies for one another is easily a subject of poetry. In doing this, Raji is following the trend that has existed among poets and writers since the beginning of written literature in Africa. Great minds in African literature such as Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Dennis Brutus, Kofi Awoonor and Okot p'Bitek have had occasions to define themselves as artists and the trajectories of critical canons on

their works have tended to be influenced by such self-definition.[2]

Raji's self-definition is largely predicated on his social commitment as a poet. Since he believes that a poet, in connecting his art to nationalism, must rise beyond the self-glorification of artistry to embrace "social function" to which true art must lend itself (see Nnolim, "African Literature in the 21st Century..." 2), Raji crafts imagery and symbolism through which he defines himself. In *A Harvest of Laughters* and *Shuttlesongs: America*, he refers to himself as "a namesake of laughter." Indeed, Raji, in his oeuvre, sees laughter as a trope he uses to reach the common people who have sorrows and sadness etched on their faces as a result of the wrong doings of the oppressors. In *A Harvest,* we encounter Raji as a poet with the knowledge of "the therapeutic force of laughter" (Raji 9) as a handle with which to guard the masses through the harsh realities of the socio-political and economic problems of their land. As a poet who understands "the interplay of social forces, the plenum of forces in continuous tension within his socio-political reality and how he harnesses his talent to react to these

forces" (Nwankwo, "The Writer and the Politics of His Environment" 27), Raji's poetic vision seeks to offer succour to the less privileged ones in his society. A self-proclaimed singer for the masses, Raji's poems in this collection reveal the self-important stance of the poet against the ills of his society. Needless to say that in the era of political poetry Raji belongs to, poetry is reduced to intellectual songs and poets see themselves as singers, "in a way that a popular song writer does not do" (Ofeimun 22). The singer is ecstatic, bold and, like Soyinka, courageous in weaving words against the bad leadership of his land. He is one who has chosen to speak in the face of tyranny. The singing of the songs, itself, is therapeutic for the poet because the songs seem bottled up in him for quite some time and now burst out of him with natural rhythms.

"Introits" is the first poem in *A Harvest*, very short and heavy with the metaphor of laughter. It is worth quoting wholly here:

> I will spread my song
> in a sunlight of webs
> I'll seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter;
> No, not for me the twilight tales
> of sick knights
> not for me, the wilting metaphors

of pain-wrights. (1-7)

The singer insists on singing despite the “twilight tales” (4) from the “sick knights” (5) which are not only capable of removing his songs from his lips, but also laughter from his teeth. He is out to explore the therapy that laughter offers and he is doing this not only for himself, but for others too. He will ignore the “pain-wrights” (7) because his song through which he is sending forth the “lemon-smell of laughter” (3) will definitely confront the frowns of worries common in the land. Laughter is thus the first and recurrent metaphor with which he identifies; and, in doing so, he confers certain symbolic effect on what we ordinarily know as laughter. But there is a sense in which one may problematise Raji’s conception of laughter as a therapy. It is contestable to conclude that people who are suffering from oppression should learn to laugh in order to survive the hardship. One may not be hasty in interrogating Raji along this line because, as is clear in his poetry, the laughter he prescribes is not the one that comes from a passive people, but from a people actively engaged in their own emancipation.

As a poet, Raji is quite combatant in his tone.[3] The poet-persona reveals his strength and weapons of fight in “Gift”, a short poem written in run-on lines. He announces, perhaps proudly, that “The chameleon has given me the gift / of a thousand garbs” (1-2). What this means is that whatever way or side his enemy attempts to strike, he is ready to dodge. In fact, he will elude his opponents. He considers himself imbued with spider’s “contraptions” (5), equipped with the tortoise’s “wisdom” (8), filled with the songbird’s “beaded tales” (11) and fully, combatively emboldened to

> ...rise now
> hand in hand with Memory
> holding my frowns in fragments of laughter. (18-20)

The last, oxymoronic line summarises the therapy of laughter upon the sorrows and worries of life because frowns are symbolic of the unpleasantness of life that is directly antithetical to laughter. The mutation of his mien from frown to laughter paradoxically portrays his readiness to attack those who are responsible for creating worries in the land. But, more importantly, it exemplifies Tanure Ojaide’s postulation that “the poet is the sensitive part of his society and he articulates its joys

and sorrows" (*Poetic Imagination* 35). In this paradox we also see a balance between oppression and optimism which turns out to be a forte for Raji in his examination of the current state of anomie and his persistent recognition of a bright future ahead of this state.

Raji also defines himself in the first poem of *Webs of Remembrance*, "Salutation", where he comes alone, unannounced, "gently / Like the evening rain" (1-2) and "in silence / Like the dews of a virgin morn" (3-4). You will wonder what this gentle and silent fighter can do in the crises of misrule he is venturing into. Then "suddenly / Like thunder, like the rain at noon," (5-6), he springs up, battle ready. The poems that follow, in that collection, mostly concretised on the imagery of brutality against the innocent, point to the resilience, the courage, and the arrogance of the poet against the leaders that, rather than build the nation, have plundered it. The picture Raji presents to us is that of a poet who is battle ready and will not mince words in calling a spade a spade. Like most poets on the scene today, that is what Raji has chosen to be.[4]

In *Lovesong*, the poet-singer calls our attention to himself in "I WAS A VICTIM BEFORE I BECAME A CYNIC". It means he does not give in to the oppression of the moment. His cynical posture now is because he is patriotic about the fate of his land. His patriotism for which he now sings, ushers him into optimism in which

> The day [is] brighter where there was once darkness
> Love spelt in the colours of the rainbow
> where the hardness of hatred used to rule. (3-5)

Despite this standing optimism, the singer-persona is aware that all is not totally well with his nation, since people are still afraid of the "acid rain" (6). Then he goes ahead to reiterate the vicarious duty he has chosen for himself. The fear that has powered him to begin this song is "the father's [fear] for the future of his children" (9). He is concerned about the future; only those who look at the future with such concern are patriotic. While patriotism is part of every poet's sensibility, only few poets have artistically articulated their patriotism in what he sees as his "nationalist imagination".

The essence of Raji's self-definition is to identify himself, as a poet, with those who are suffering in the land. Beyond that,

however, he defines the kind of powers he has brought to the battleground with which he will effectively launch his attack on those he feels have incurred the wrath of the poet and, by extension, the wrath of the masses. With almost venomous images, Raji, in what he refers to as “the aesthetics of rage” sings a song that are meant to sting those who have caused social incoherence and political and economic retardation in his land.

4. 2. **The Poet’s Duty**

The poet’s righteous anger against the failings of his society expressed in his art is what Raji himself has couched “aesthetics of rage”. It is what powers the poetic vision behind his poetry and defines his duty as a poet. The poet, as Saleh Abdu points out, has to make a choice “between the Establishment and the People” (*Poet of the People’s Republic*, xiv) and it is to the plight of the people that he lends his voice. Raji does so with a certain artistic temper as we will see in the poems discussed here. The poet is moved, with passion and rage

to state the suffering of the masses and goes further to attack those responsible for their suffering.

In "I Rise Now" (*A Harvest*), the poet details his treatise in the business of seizing "upon the lemon-smell of laughter" ("introit" in *Webs of Remembrance*) to confront the inadequacy of his society. He starts by showing the unpleasant things happening around him which should normally evoke sorrow, not laughter. In surrounding countries, there is "the news of acid rain" (3). This rain is burning the masses. Then the poet goes on to point out that "our harvest tracks" (5) are useless because of "the blighted clouds of a locust train" (6). The "locust train" is a metaphor that captures the successive governments that impoverish the Nigerian State or the African continent. Hatred is instilled in the society and no one knows peace any more. And because there is no peace,

> Nobody
> no body seems to know
> how to smile again,
> not even a grin colours the face. (6-10)

Such is the hardship and cruelty that the ordinary people in the society face. The pleasurable things of life elude them. Everyone is busy in search of what to eat and so no time is given to

entertainment, to laughter, because that has become extravagant to Nigerians living in a plundered Nigeria. The imperatives of the society have occasioned “the rash of times / in the bellies of lovers and children” (18-9), meaning that the people in the society are engaged in the serious problems of looking for what to survive on, especially with the “acid rain” (3) which stands for the ethnic wars that spread in Africa during the middle-and-late-1990s such as the genocide in Rwanda, Somalia and Darfur. Raji situates the deplorable condition of Nigeria in a wider context to remind us of the history of continental violence Nigeria is part of. As if those who have come before the poet have watched the course of violence unchecked, the poet declares:

> I rise today
> to the sunrise sigh
> of beaded words. (25-30)

This is his duty. He is determined, repeatedly re-incarnated in the business of creating laughter. He vacuums his brain of “memories of slaving rites” (29) and advances “with long drums of laughter / to slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain” (37-35). The poet’s choice to laugh at such time is a phenomenal

step towards freeing himself from the grip of socio-political pains. The tone of the poem is triumphal because the persona seems to have discovered something that is not only more powerful than the problems of his society, but is also capable of making nonsense of the problems. And with it he is set about to launch his attack. This is bravery on the part of the poet. Whether or not this brave tone translates to a positive action is a different issue altogether. But what Raji projects in this tone, with these words, phenomenalises the social vision of most African poets.

"Bound to Remember" (*Webs of Remembrance*) is an enlightening step into the poet's enterprise. And the poet proves that he is bold in his self-given duty. The first two lines of the poem, repeated as a couplet in the poem, carry the destruction of the Nigerian polity by the oppressive leaders which requires his intervention as a poet:

> no water runs where the Niger flows
> no fish swims where the Benue berths. (1-2)

Rivers Niger and Benue suffice for the geographical mapping of Nigeria. They bestride the country and they are, here, symbolic of the immense natural resources the country is blessed with.

They are barren, the poet points out, because they do not have water and fish. What is the use of a river without water and fish? In this imagery of dried rivers, Raji captures the total collapse of system in Nigeria. Using a different image to show what Raji has presented here, Karl Maier says, "[d]esigned by alien occupiers and abused by army rule for three quarters of its brief life span, the Nigerian state is like a battered... elephant staggering toward abyss with the ground crumbling under its feet" (*This Houses Has Fallen*, xx). This will make every patriotic person grieve. Which is why the poet goes on to state his grief, which is "long like the rivers" (3). Such is the grief that pushes him to rise without fear because he has, unlike other people, chosen to use his poetic imagination for the course.

In a combative tone, he sees himself as a "thunder in the kidneys of liars" (6). The leaders are liars. They are people who make promises and fail, often intentionally, to keep the promises. This is in fact a mild metaphor conveying a less incisive image. The next one is not, however. The poet says he will remember

> the necklace of the albatross
> hanging in the *hearts of butchers*.

(italics mine, 9-10)

The picture of butchers, weighed down by "the necklace of the albatross," is certainly a strong one. The meaning is unmistakable; the butchers are killers and slayers. Indeed, a great deal of people lost their lives to the unspeakable cruelty of the military dictators. In the next stanza, the poet speaks of the oppressor's "bomb-game goon" (11), referring to the arbitrary eruptions of bomb blasts in the land; of "landmines of lies" (12), referring to the oppressor's despicable lies more destructive than a military weapon; and of "oasis of blood" (13), indicating the senseless waste of human blood in organised killings.[5] These have inflicted such a deep scar on the land that the poet maintains that he will not forget nor forgive as a result of which he will stand up for the duty.

The next image in the poem reduces the human status of the bad leaders. They are "rodents" (23). The rodents, we all know, are good at destroying while searching for food. Raji's metaphor here is quite apt because it captures the greed of our leaders. It shows that the leaders are so despicable in their desire to acquire wealth that they use all kinds of means. They

are shameless thieves like the rodents. They also destroy after stealing. What follows is the image of “reptiles in new skin” (24). Reptiles are noted for their poison. A dictator does not only carry poison in his mouth, like the reptiles, he also carries it in his actions. He therefore does not hesitate to hit anyone that questions his inhuman actions. Finally, the oppressor is one of the “bats flying above the flood” (25). The bat, by nature, is an ambiguous mammal. While it flies like other birds, it does not appear like other birds physically. No metaphor can better capture the military-civilian nature of self-made presidents that rule the country with orders. Even when civilians come, they are militaristic by nature.

Probably the poem that more strikingly captures the poet’s philosophy of struggle is entitled “Duty”, dedicated to Odia Ofeimun, one of Nigeria’s influential poets. Raji casts his mind on the responsibility of the poet, especially the African poet who versifies within the actuality of social commitment. In the first stanza, Raji prescribes that the poet’s first duty is “...to make love / To language, to land, and to liberty” (1-2). It is expected that the poet distinguish himself from other craftsmen

through the way he weaves words. His major strength is in the way he handles words. Being in love with language calls to mind Ofeimun's assertion, in an interview, that "language ought to move, and the poet...is in a better position to help it move, more than any other kind of performer in words" (*Prism*, 24). A poet also has to love his land, because he draws his thematic material from his land. His land is definitely peopled by men and women who need freedom; hence the poet should not only come to love liberty but should also lead the people towards freedom. That is ultimately the African poet's engagement; and, as Niyi Osundare, in an interview, has pointed out, "[it] is not possible for a conscientious writer not to be engaged" (Interview with Omowunmi Segun, 37). Raji is, here, redefining and reinforcing the forte of the socially engaged writer.

Raji becomes more definitive about the language of the poet in the second stanza. The kind of language the poet uses is metaphorical. His metaphors create wisdom to his people, to his generation, addressing all spheres of it ("armpits of Time" (4)). The poet should also be critical of people who hold power. He checks the consciences of those in power. The poet should,

as much as possible, depict the reality as it is. This is what Raji means by the poet evoking "the geography of bleeding images" (7). It is also the poet that can tend the minds of the people, especially the simpletons in the society, who just take things as they come. He has to endeavour to "make fires in bushels of ignorance..." (11). It is when the poet does all the aforementioned that he settles for living "beyond mortal wishes" (12). He has to remain an "eternal kernel of utterance" (13) so that no one, no circumstance can penetrate him easily. Raji believes that a poet is dutiful. "Poetry is about being a watchdog in a moment where there is a lot of chaos," so he says in an interview (*Sou'wester*, 13). He demonstrates that in this poem. In doing this, he is following the steps of other older poets in Africa, especially the poets of the Alter-Native Tradition whose social commitment almost surpasses what are regarded as formal poetics.[6]

In "The Critic's Dilemma", Raji moves from the responsibility of poetry to that of journalism or general writing in his treatise. This poem is more elaborate because it presents the general apathy the Nigerian society under the military

dictators had towards journalists and writers. More than that, there were cases of hostility on the part of the government towards the journalists. Many of them who were brave to live under the heinous regimes often wrote from undercover. This was because, no matter the violence directed against them, they considered it a selfless duty to write in order to take the society out of regression. At the beginning of the poem Raji sees the journalist, the writer, as “Ifa’s Acolyte” (1). Ifa is a cultural deity in Yoruba land who is often contacted to reveal the future. It also holds the gospel of truth. Raji’s point is that just as the deity safeguards the society by telling the truth that in most cases set the society free from trouble, so does the writer, “by the volume of his narrative “(2). This is the visionary essence of the poet, which parallels the poet and the seer in Orunmila, who is the legendary figure behind the Ifa corpus or chants.

But the writer has enemies in the society. They are probably those who are not concerned with the development of the land or those mindless of what they can do for the land. They are rather concerned about what they can take from the

land. Such people are materialistic in their thinking. They ask the writer:

> Tell us, talkative one
> How many fishes of late
> has your printed pop fetched from the waters of
> Lagos banks?
> How many cowries of oriki have blessed your sweat
> today (7-10)?

The writer lives in a society in which little respect is given to thinkers and philosophers. Once one is able to acquire riches (and it does not matter the way he does so), the he commands respect in the society. Hence the writer, who has taken the path of knowledge and thinking like "Plato, Boccacio, Burke to Bathes and Lentricchia" (12), has nothing to show materially. Here, we may recall Pythagoras' theory of the classes of human beings. The sixth century B.C. philosopher postulates that there are three classes of people in every society. The first class, to which the majority belongs, consists of people whose primary interest in the world is to acquire material wealth even if it is at the expense of other people around them. The second class is made up of people whose interest is to acquire fame. People here are, of course, not as many as those in the first class. The third class, which often has the least number of people, has

thinkers whose goal in life is to study the universe and suggest ways in which it can be made better. It is in this class that the poet chooses to be. From Raji's portrayal, and in consonance with Pythagoras' classification, the society is a moneyed one as we see in the image of the "trophy in the vault of the Central Bank" (14). But the writer is not hemmed in by the *minty* smell of the moneyed society. He sees dignity and high sense of duty in his craft:

> 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. (19-25)

Thus, the writer is not only dedicated to his job he is also envisioned. He bears a social vision for his society. Writers, right from the beginning of time, have always seen themselves within this purview. Raji is a poet, like most African writers, who stretches his consciousness of a writer's social vision early defined in "Duty". This often results to what Saleh Abdu sees as the disengagement of the poet from narcissism "towards

political engagement and partisanship" (*Poet of the People's Republic*, ix).

Raji returns to poetry in "The Spirit". Here it is not only the function of poetry, but also the nature of poetry that he focuses on. We have images running in defining poetry. Such images as "what rainfalls drum / into corn-ears of Earth" (13-4) and "what the sunbird sings" (15) bring out the musical nature of poetry. It is natural that this comes from a poet who believes poetic thoughts be rendered in strong musical qualities. There are also images such as "what riverbeds hide / from wandering eyes" (21-2) and "the monkey's path / in a platoon of twines / and trees" (24-6), depicting the wisdom of figurative language in poetry. The poet uses figures of speech to create images so that even the harshest truth he has to say is dressed euphemistically. For, as Nyong Udoeyop says, "[w]hen the poet's language creates an accurate image, the proper emotions will flow, hopefully, and the health of the society may be saved from deterioration" (*Three Nigerian Poets*, 148). In essence, the poet does not speak directly so that his "common lips" (32) can tell "the cruel crown" (32) whatever truth is there to tell. The

persona asks for more power to be able to stand as a poet in a cruel society. Poetry, then, becomes a weapon with which the poet can boldly confront the despoilers, and from what we infer from Raji's aesthetics of rage, the poet feels optimistic that his weapon positions him as a victor in this discourse of engagement.

"Riddle I" presents a riddling persona who has the tendency to persist, to move despite odds. Beyond the poet's combative stance, we see the usual Rajian optimism running through the images of "salty milk in succulent huts of coconuts "(2); of "evergreen roots, sap and kernel" (4): and of "fronds of flesh and wine / in an oasis of thirst and taste" (5-6). These images show consistency in nature. Stanza three even captures this optimism more:

> I am the riddle of desert rains
> river's course
> fire's foam
> earth's fragrance
> wind's breath. (7-11)

The images here present the energies of nature. Desert rains come like succour. A river moves endlessly. Fire's foam (a rather blurry metaphor) shows the indelible marks of fire on

anywhere it moves. Generation after generation will continue to feel the fragrance of the earth. They all seem to show immortality, though the poet's concern here is the resilience of a person to live, unruffled, through the hardship of the society. In these images is evoked the willpower of human beings to persist in spite of all odds in the form of oppression. The substances of "labouring lepers" (13) and "mocking hens" (15) as metaphors show that certain persons are responsible for the societal problems. The poet is sure that he will not fail in his endeavour against them.

"Riddle II" reinforces and reiterates the poet's duty. The persona who presents himself as a complex riddle becomes more definitive about the people or institutions he stands against. With the use of capital letters, "I AM..." (1), we see the I-am-certainly-greater-than-you nature of the persona which also means he can face whatever situation in the struggles. Like a pugilist, he has a

> ...clenched fist
> itching to break the brows
> of incontinent emperors. (2-4)

They are the military dictators with inordinate passion whose activities damage the nation. Already, there are “bloody tears / of bruised stones” (6-7) because of the cruelty of those emperors. The poet thus fights them and soothes the pains of their victims. This is one of the poet’s services to humanity. He positions himself between the oppressor and the oppressed, invokes destructive thunder on the oppressor and brings tenderness to the oppressed. In stanza three, we see the dictators as “gruesome weeds” (10) under the sharp, cutting blow of the persona who sees himself as capable of conquering them. The poet continues to use the images of bravery, although in the last stanza his stand becomes shaky. “I feel no ease in this riddle of balance” (18). Raji creates a character that sees himself as a lone fighter who will succeed against the evil of the societal emperors.

Raji’s long-breath poem, *Lovesong*, which contains forty-five stanzas, symbolic of the forty-five years of Nigeria as an independent State, begins with a prologue that is a dramatic poem (or a poetic drama since there are stage directions). The responsibility of the poet articulated in this drama. The

probable point is that a poet does not set out to sing for the sake of singing except induced by an issue that does not only disturb the peace of his land but also of the entire humanity. There are four characters on stage: Gong, Takie, Gambia and Asabi. Gong, whose voice will lengthen into the poet-persona's voice, speaks first and his speech from the outset reveals the thematic direction of the volume. The artist of the selfless duty we often see in Raji comes out clearly in the first stanza:

> People of the land, the living and the dead,
> those today whose lives count for nothing
> and those tomorrow who would live as if
> they have no future, hear me out,
> it is your story I have come to spin
> in the marketplace of thought. Hear me now,
> it is the smell of your history that chokes the
> singer out of silence...(1-8)

Gong sees himself as a singer whose song carries the ups and downs of history and knows fully well the consequences of yesterday's failure. Already, he suffers from the "lashes of History" (13) and he has to speak out, sing aloud "...so that our past shall not / overtake our future "(14-5). The nationalist feeling bursts out in those lines, charting a vision that is consistently centred on the plight of a people loved by the poet.

Takie, Gambia and Asabi, themselves inhabitants and, probably, victims of those lashes of history challenge him. Gong, to them, is like the self-important gospeller whose head is overblown with the idea of saving the nation from impending calamity. Gambia points out that they are "in a season fit only for business and leisure" (25) and that no one is interested in Gong's song. For Takie, Gong is "disturbing the moment" (20). Asabi sees Gong as a "hungry historian" (26). We are at once acquainted with the trio of Gambia, Takie and Asabi as pleasure-seeking people who care less or nothing about the direction their nation goes. In fact, they do not know that the land is on a shaky history and may collapse with them any moment. In Nigeria, where the military emperors forged a noxious history, there are many people who live in this history, unconcerned about its fatal consequence.[7] That in Raji's construction one good character stands in contrast with three bad ones indicates that the land is regrettably seething with people who can do little or nothing to liberate the land because the culture of plunder, waste and hedonism is instilled in them.

Gong begins to lambaste them subtly for their “absent imagination” (29) and they trace an argument with him. Gong is worried that such people do not care about their society. They mock him for taking up a fight that is not his alone or that cannot be possibly won. Gong reminds them that they cannot afford to dally with history because it “is the living thing, the *thingness* of all / our actions and inactions” (48-9). Gong cannot afford to ignore history and thus carries “the burden of generations in [his] chest” (52).

That he claims to be carrying the burden of generations makes Gambia want to listen to whatever story he has. But Takie remains sceptical and asks “why must a hungry man come and disturb the peace / with stories about History” (56-7)? To him Gong may be a deceiver since, he admits, the land is full of stories of fraudsters and thieves, people who tell lies to deceive other people. Gong seizes on this to let them know that the land is indeed full of deceitful stories and criminals, but that it is not the land itself that is bad; it is the people living in the land that are bad. Truth among the people is what is needed for

the land. The poet is set to kindle this truth for the sake of his society's survival.

The argument takes us to destiny, an idea that often phenomenalises the mediocrity and lack of direction of a people. Pinning this to the Nigerian situation, many Nigerians, even advanced thinkers, have relapsed into the idea that the destiny of Nigeria is to be what it is today and have thus made no attempt to move her forward. Many pleasure-seeking Nigerians who benefit from the largesse of the leaders at the expense of the masses reject any protest from artistes, writers and activists and preach this kind of destiny. In his aesthetics of rage, the poet rejects this status quo. Gong's questions here are vital:

> Ah I see, you believe in destiny!
> What kind of destiny do you believe in?
> The one which devours dream? The one which
> nurtures
> the imagination of the labourer? Or the one which
> glorifies the laziness of the ruler and the rich
> (78-82)?

While Gambia and others are still thinking of an answer that will definitely demean their sensibilities, Gong goes ahead to

tell them the kind of destiny they need to hold on to emancipate themselves from the lashes of history

> .... a people's destiny is the weapon in their hands,
> the zeal in their collective soul, the enthusiasm
> on the battle field
> and the power to tinker with their futures
> by engaging the past in deep dialogue. (84-8)

Gong disarms the trio with this postulation. Asabi wonders if "this one is real" (89) and Takie, still sceptical, thinks it is a waste of time listening to "familiar monologues" (95). Gong insists they have to listen to the song-story because they will definitely tell it to their children one day. Beyond listening, they have to participate in the song-story because, as Gong says,

> Together we shall grow, learning new ways to take
> after years of meandering through self-inflicted
> labyrinths
> of violence, ignorance, doubt, and despair,
> lethargy, deception, corruption, nepotism....(110-4)

The poet's duty, as is shown here, is to lead the people out of the crises of the State. It is at this point that the argument ends. The trio is now interested in knowing who Gong is. In revealing himself, Gong traces a history of plunder and waste in the land.

Raji captures first the year of "impossible flamboyance" (122) which reminds us of the years of General Yakubu Gowon's

regime during which it was theorised that the problem of Nigeria was not how to get money, but how to spend it. Each soldier, each civilian, came to know the joy and fulfilment of flamboyance. Those years gave way to the Nigerian civil war as Raji points out in these lines:

> when the smokescreen of a failed union gave birth
> to cries of war, and wars.
> Soon, and so suddenly
> music was made out of the skull of men.
> I was born in the year of blood. (125-9)

Then it was the year of "the Wolf" (130), a significant metaphor for the military. Raji has already become adept in equating sharp metaphors with the personalities of the military dictators. "In the year of the Wolf, all that was saved became food / for phantoms and bandits" (133-4). He refers to the soldiers as "warriors who never won a war" (136).

Then it is the year of the "Dog" (142). This year belongs to the mindless politicians whose primary aims for hopping into powers are to acquire ill-gotten wealth. The politicians all bark for change: "Change!! One Country!! Change!!! One destiny!!!" (145). The change is never achieved because the change is never really desired. What follows is that

Sweet dreams became the handle
of every man who knew the big man in the toilet of
power. (148-149)

Poverty hits the land and all except those who are in power become victims of the poverty the poet speaks of.

After the period of failed politicians (which one can conveniently suggest is the "Second Republic" in Nigeria), a set of supreme military officers, with loud noise of messianism, enters the scene. This is what Gong refers to as "the year of Hyena / which was also the year of Leprosy" (155-6). This period in Nigerian history witnessed the highest degree of mindless oppression unleashed on the common masses. The regimes of General Babangida and late General Abacha were the terrible realities of the period. Many people were frightened into exile because those dictators had fearful ways of dealing with both their real and imagined detractors and so

The land became colourful in silence,
heavy with the breathing only of the Hyena,
his henchmen, his concubines and their bastard
children... (165-7)

This is the kind of condition responsible for the waste in the land and Gong, as a singer, is determined to see that such condition does not pass, unmentioned.

Takie, Gambia and Asabi have softened to the logic of the singer. They now know him. In fact, they know of the years he has spoken of because they have lived through them. Gong concludes so metaphorically, "I can smell your blood in my blood" (174). Here is the thing that links the poet to his nation and pushes the poet to evolve his own discourse of nationalism. Gambia confesses his ignorance for not understanding what Gong does. The trio realise themselves and are won to Gong's side of the argument. Their duty, which has all along been the poet's duty, in the songs that follow, as Gong says, is that

> If we must re-build, we must talk about the plan,
> the foundation, before speaking about the colour
> of the lintel and the shape of the futuristic windows
> But above all, we must speak about the past
> and our romances with death and failure...
> The secrets of the future is locked in the past,
> and what we do now... (202-8)

This statement of mission is what sets Raji's pen on paper for the songs that follow. Indeed, Raji, as a poet, is worried, just like every clearheaded, patriotic Nigerian, that Nigeria, after spending forty-five years is yet to learn from its past and tidy its present and pick its way for a positive future. This worry calls for a poetic action.

Not only in the dramatic opening, but also in the twenty-fifth verse Raji raises a question about the usefulness of poem (and a poet) to a nation. The point is the potency of poetry as an instrument for social struggle. Raji, becoming more Marxist in this volume, cashes in on the posture that African literature has taken since its inception: literature of protest and social commitment. “WHAT IS POETRY THEN IF IT CANNOT RAISE A FLOOD” (capital his, 1)? Poetry must be strong enough, metaphorically harsh enough to break “criminal silence” (5). If metaphors are not strong enough to be “the madness of earthquakes” (7) (an image well understood if we picture how an earthquake destroys physical structures), then the poet does not need them. They become useless. What the poet needs is a useful poem with which to hit at the public looters. When Shehu says, “...every poem becomes dangerous / the moment I open my loud mouth” (*Open Sesame*, 68) he means it is through poems he confronts the Establishment. He also means every poet ought to have the artistic and social wherewithal to unsettle the received system of oppression at work in his society.

In “THERE CAN BE NO ARGUMENT ON WHERE I STAND”, the poet states the reason behind the duty he has chosen for himself. After enumerating the systematic havoc that is unleashed on the land by its leaders, he avers that it is the genuine love he has for his land that has made him loud-mouthed in articulating his duty. Referring to the people who inherited his country from colonial masters, whose inability to nurture it has plunged it into chaos, Raji, the land’s lover-poet, accuses thus:

> 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. (4-7)

The image created in the lines above presents a land sapped and abandoned to a younger generation that will certainly encounter difficulty in restoring the resources of the land. Oil, mineral resources and agriculture: the areas that the country can rely on and become rich are plundered by thieves who frolic about in the corridors of power. The singer-persona’s ironic statement that he does not know who are responsible for the plunder only points to the fact that the plunder is perpetrated by a powerful class of the society. In the land today, “What

remains are the ruins of laughable idiocies" (26). The persona, in the last part of this verse, likens his protestation to "subversion!" (31). This becomes a duty when he, "at the dawn of a new life" (29), remembers all the evils perpetrated against his land, his lover, and he rises to defend her.

3. 3. **Conclusion**

What we have attempted to do in this chapter is to explicate the duty of Raji as a poet imbued with social commitment with which he expresses his concern for his nation. Through the explication of some poems in which the poet captures his self-given and selfless duty, we are able to identify a poet whose boundless love for his land propels him to rise in her defence in what he calls his "nationalist imagination". It is the plight of the masses occasioned by those who plunder the land instead of building it that moves him to evolve the aesthetics of rage, an artistic idiom that is largely political in nature. In essence, we have succeeded in seeing Raji as a poet very conscious of his art and its commitment, as shown in his self-definition, towards the liberation of his society

from the grip of “emperors” bent on destroying the land economically and socially. Marxist in nature (because of his combative stance), the poet speaks in a revolutionary voice, eager to alter the condition of the masses in the land. Most contemporary Nigerian poets have this duty and they faithfully keep to it. And this accounts for the large output of political poetry on the scene today.

Notes

1. As characteristic of writers of every age, self-definitions and explanations of visions are expressed through either prefaces or creative works that are self-referential. Major poets of Raji's era, such as Ogaga Ifowodo, Emman Usman Shehu, Maria Ajima, have had to explain their visions in form of preface and define themselves even though what they write conspicuously show their visions as writers.

2. For instance, in a 1965 interview, Christopher Okibgo, one of the most difficult poets in Nigeria, declared, "I don't like writing that is committed" (Whitelaw, "Interview with Christopher Okigbo", 33) and went on to see himself as an esoteric voice for the oracle of his land. With such utterances from Okigbo, critics have tended to see his poetry as complex privatist chants.

3. In most cases, this combatant tone comes through in the poetry effortlessly and perhaps unconsciously because of what I may term overthematisation. Poets of the military rule generation – Ogaga Ifowodo, Emman Usman Shehu, Toyin Adewale, and many more – show this tone even without knowing it.

4. Really, like the poets of South Africa under the apartheid, Nigerian poets, during the intense militarisation of the Nigerian polity, took to writing poetry through which they released their pent up feelings in poems characterised by a combatant tone and utter invective.

5. In Nigeria, the military dictator, General Ibrahim B. Babangida has been accused of being the cause of the brutal death of Dele Giwa who got a parcel bomb. It was also common knowledge that during the Abacha regime, Nigerians witnessed bomb blasts at airports and other public places.

6. In their theorisation, the poets and writers of the Alter-Native tradition, notably Ofeimun, Osundare, Osofisan and Aiyejina, argue that poetry and literature generally should be removed from the sublime realm and brought to the pedestrian realm for

the sake of the masses that constitute their audience. In one of his interviews, Bode Sowande, a dramatist of that tradition, says, "[t]he urgency of the need for a functional theatre is so great that a heavily loaded philosophical stuff is a cheat on society" (quoted in Obafemi, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre*, 170).

7. What Raji is capturing here is certain self-complacency and lackadaisical attitude that existed during the terrible years of dictatorship in Nigeria whereby some intellectuals and professionals, feeding fat on the generosity of the military dictators could not talk about the evils of the day while some of them simply withdrew into silence. In her novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, Sefi Atta also points this out when she says, "[it] is amazing that privileged people in Nigeria believe that doing nothing is an option" (263).

Chapter Four

THE POET COMBATS THE OPPRESSOR

4. 0. **Introduction**

The poems studied in this chapter are thematically concerned with the relationship between the military leadership of Nigeria (which we have termed “oppressor”) and the citizenry of Nigeria. The relationship is that of oppression in which the military dictatorship (spanning the period from early 1980s to the late 1990s) subjected the ordinary people and writers/journalists to untold hardship and, at worst, threw the country into social chaos and misdirection. Taking a Marxist stance, the poet combats the oppressor by historicising the oppressor’s many evil deeds against the society in condemnatory tone and tenor. Since the poet’s sympathy is unmistakably with the people, his confrontation is intended to bring the gritty hardship before those who have perpetrated it. In addition, it offers optimism to the people whose hopes and dreams have been shattered by the unceasing cruelty being unleashed on them by those who have seized powers forcefully in the country. This critical analysis of Raji’s political poems

presents the poet as a people's poet, eager to bring change and hope to his society through a revolutionary poetic voice.

4.1. *A Harvest of Laughters*: Rising through the Mystery of Laughter

Raji's debut collection, *A Harvest of Laughters*, at once presents him as a poet of the people. Here, we mean a poet who understands and explores what Nourbese Philip calls "the bond between [the] poet and [his] place" ("Earth and Sound," 174), and a poet who, according to Tanure Ojaide, is "an oracle and a healer" (quoted in Anyidoho, "Prison as Exile/Exile as Prison," 6) for his people. Using laughter as a metaphor, which later transforms to a motif in his oeuvre, Raji's aim is to come between the oppressor and the oppressed in such a way that he uses laughter to combat the former and uses the same laughter to comfort the latter. He does this by exploring, in his own words, "the rather unacknowledged mystery of laughter [which] is its suprasegmental capability of knowing and expressing without much recourse to metaphors" (*A Harvest*, 10). Laughter is thus the idiom of the poet offered as a connective in

the tripartite engagement of the poet, the masses and the oppressor in a dialogue that is both humanising and dehumanising, leaving the poet at the centre of the aesthetic of rage. With diverse personas, the poet combatively explodes against the hardship and suffering in the land, specifically heaping curses and condemnations on those who have caused the hardship and suffering. The remarkable resilience in Raji's voice here is fully developed in his subsequent volumes of poetry.

In "Orphan Cry", the persona is an orphan in a hostile society. He laments and narrates his problem and those of other children in the society. Using provocative images evoked by "thorns" (2), "weals" (3) and "spears" (6), Raji depicts the violence that the society inflicts upon the child-orphan. He lacks, he wants, he is denied and violated. And these happen to him in his land which is imagised as "the crimson cage / of deaf emperors" (9-10). The "emperors" are the maximum dictator and his cohorts.

In the second part of the poem, there are even more tear-provoking images. Using plural personal pronoun, "our" (18),

the persona points out that he is among many children that are condemned to penury by circumstances. While he is alive, he can do nothing apart from lamenting the waste of his fellow children. The children are not only hungry, they are also, sometimes, consumed by death, as they are unprotected and thus vulnerable. He indicts the society for looking on while the cruelty against children goes on:

> I see the loud mirage
> of eunuch gods;
> I see the locust affection
> of tears at mourning time. (19-22)

Since the gods are impotent and cannot protect the children, societal hawks feed on them. Indeed Raji's message is that the Nigerian society, under those military dictators, did not consider children as worthy of living.[1] Since children symbolise the future, the society kills her future as it kills her children. Yet the persona, though a child-orphan, does not surrender himself to death. He intends to soldier ahead with hope, with that metaphorical laughter which contains his survival instincts:

> I'll walk with the herbalist sun...
> To the wake of roaring dreams,
> I'll seize upon the lemon smell of laughter. (26-8)

The lemon smell is the aroma of life that laughter carries. This optimism is stretched to the fourth part of the poem where the persona seems to mean that despite the empty promises of political leaders and shapers of society, he, as well as others, has "grown beyond the blue lullaby / of silence" (35-6). Here, "blue" seems to be used as a colour of insincerity. Similarly, "scalpel" (39), which in "Black laughter" is destructive to life, becomes constructive to life as the orphan hopes to survive and live on "the rattle-wisdom of scalpel songs" (39). These songs are certainly sharp and will penetrate the thickness of the societal ills.

"Old havocs," a poem Soyinkan in texture because of its density of imagery, gives us a Raji whose satirical swipe is not only targeted against those who use politics to suppress the people but also those who use religion. The first part of the poem reads like a political poem and, somewhat confusedly, as a religious poem. Raji's intentional obscurity seems to blur the line between politics and religion here. The persona, in an invocatory tone, addresses a being, urging the being to take actions that will expose the evils of "monster-priests" (9). You

would wonder whether the metaphor of "monster-priests" refers to religious leaders or not, especially as the image of drumming and dancing (characteristic of our modern churches) holds sway over this part of the poem. Earlier, one encounters conquerors, not of political minds but of religious minds, in the following lines:

> drum out the dreary livers of conquerors
> who preyed on the peace-meal of our flesh. (4-5)

But in the seventh stanza of the poem, the picture the poet paints appears more of the military dictators:

> So they stay
> in the frivolous fright and faith of men
> they build unending castles
> of their second coming. (17-20)

The second coming here may not be of the politicians as we see in the pet philosophies of our both civilian and military leaders, after all.[2] It may be the second coming of Jesus Christ, which the priests and pastors and prophets have used to create "frivolous fright" (16) on the mind of the common people.

The second part of the poem is not as ambiguous as the first. It is a direct, uncompromising swipe against religious leaders who feast on the ignorance of their congregation mostly

because they are interested in enriching themselves while impoverishing their congregation. The tone here is not invocatory any more. Raji assumes his idiosyncratic tone, which is elaborated in *Webs of Remembrance*; he accuses and attacks. These lines are typical of the message carried in that Rajian tone:

> OOSANLA! ALLAH! HOSANNA!
> hollow men with livid faiths
> with pleading venoms in golden teeth
> cannot smell their chaos in the piss of rain (34-7).

The poet is not against God or religion and by no way blasphemes. He is lambasting the "hollow men" (35) who have bastardised religion for their selfish ends. The second to the last stanza shows Raji's distaste for religious crises as he watches "fools walk stilts while the earth quakes" (47). Raji's indictment of religion in the time of bad leadership is appropriate because the time of intense oppression coincides with the proliferation of churches and hypocritical evangelism in Nigeria. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores this issue in an engaging way in her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, in which she creates oppression, caused by religious fanaticism, at a micro level,

which, in her views, leads to oppression at a macro level in the society.[3]

In the first four poems of the section captured "Songs of Experience", Raji idiomatises silence. It becomes prominent as an image of suppression. Or cowardice. In "Silence", the poem that opens this section, Raji, like Okey Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain*, picks the Soyinkan wisdom of the man being dead in him who keeps silent in the face of oppression.[4] But, unlike Soyinka, Raji does not hold acid contempt against the people for keeping silent. His sneering question here indicts those who keep silent:

> Silence,
> the blue-black lip-
> stick of fear
> or what (36-9)?

The import of Raji's image here is that fear is a lipstick that when the people paint their mouths with, they become objects of silence. They are silent because they are afraid. Fear is the conspicuous decoration of silence among the people especially during the dehumanising regimes of the military dictators in Nigeria. The ironic twist in Raji's philosophic thrust is that to be silent and inactive is a cheat in the society, for, as Kofi Anyidoho puts it, "through silence and inaction, a whole community

becomes implicated in the terrors of oppression" ("National Identity and the Language of Metaphor," 4).

Earlier, in a refrain, the poet claims that "I know the colour of your silence" (1) and goes on to point out what the colour symbolises. The poet discerns "dark" (2), "red" (13) and "yellow" (22) colours which when mixed may give "the blue-black" colour of fear. We encounter laughter in this poem, but not the kind of laughter that is therapeutic. It is "the beautiful laughters / of others at other people's pain" (34-5). Raji's contextualisation of laughter makes it elastic in a way that different facets of meaning surrounding laughter are explored, manoeuvred and idiomatised. Whether or not laughter by its texture, context, functionality and attendant symbolism is worth Raji's theorisation here is an issue that is debatable. What laughter means to Raji is not what it may mean to other people. Hence his philosophy of laughter as therapy, on one hand, and as an indicator of sadism, on the other hand, is privatist and challengeable.

The next poem "Silence II" is more successful with images. Here, Raji centres the oppressor's cruelty on singing – a

professional activity of the artist, the poet. It is the singer or poet who is blessed with the special skill and a highly powered conscience to ideologise his position against the bad leaders. The question, "who sings when the Beast prowls "(1), repeated in the last line of the poem, in capital letters for emphasis, bears the endemic fear instilled in not only the masses of the land, but also in the artists, the poets, the intellectuals and the philosophers. One of the major devices of the African dictators is to create a police state in order to arrest the people's consciences. The writer often finds himself the victim of this device. Narrating his experience in an essay titled "Containing Cockroaches", Jack Mapanje, the repeatedly incarcerated Malawian poet, points out that "[y]ou did not need to commit a crime to be arrested. Being in the limelight was sufficient. I was dangerously in the limelight" (47). This is because the dictator assumes the image of the beast that seeks those that it can devour:

> when Night thickens
> with dreams of blood
> when Sorrow's scent suffocates
> the remains of lean laughter (2-5).

"Night" and "Sorrow" are draped in capital letters. This draws our attention to their semantic meanings enlarged from what we know of them. Those two words are also semantically linked to "BEAST" (16) in a paradigm that is so obvious to us. The beast moves in the "Night" and when it does so it causes "Sorrow" to human beings. Raji's image of the dictator here is quite incisive. Lines that imagise military oppression stares at us as we read the poem:

> who sings
> when rhyme's winds
> run amok
> like amputated tongues
> when boots barrels
> and the gift of grenades
> chase the choir into silence (9-15).

The beast is the dictator, the godfather. And the "boots barrels" (13) are the soldiers that are at his disposal whom he uses to unleash brutalities on the masses. During the reign of the maximum military ruler, late General Sani Abacha, in Nigeria, real and imagined opposing voices (and artists' voices) were muffled. In his book, *The Last 100 Days of Abacha*, Olusegun Adeniyi reveals the brutality of that regime when he says,

> Security forces committed extra-judicial killings and used excessive force to quell anti-government protests as well as to combat crime, resulting in the death and injury of many individuals, including innocent civilians. Security forces tortured and beat suspects and detainees (57).

Such brutality is brought upon writers, artists and journalists as well as social activists who dare to raise their voices against the evils of the dictator. The poet laments that the land is barren and dry as a result of this cruelty, for it is the artist, the singer, the writer, who fertilises the land with his fresh, creative output. With a beast that silences the choir of singers, blessed voices of nature, the land is denied of its "remains of lean laughter" (5).

In "Anthem of Silence", Raji focuses on the dictator. There is an imperative command to be silent because "The old emperor is in court" (2) where he does not only feed on "curse-words" (3), words that he uses to oppress the common people, but also dishes then out:

> Waste the widows.
> Maim the maidens.
> Yoke the young
> with (the) muzzles

of labouring years.
Let the old lie
cold in the sunless
mist of the morning (5-12).

The dictator, the poet tries to show here, orders for the oppression and the killings of the people at will. He blesses when he is, in fact, cursing. He brings "locusts" (15) and "vultures" (20) to plunder the land. He does all these in his drunken state as a dictator because the people have done him nothing to deserve this wrath he unleashes on them. As in "Silence", the poet, in a sneering tone, points out that it is on a people "who have embraced silence" (35) that the dictator rains the "curse-words" (2). On the other hand, like Soyinka's "Chimes of Silence", in which the poet depicts his intense solitude and longing, Raji establishes the state of oppression victims undergo when they are confined to prison.

The poet speaks with the voice of the oppressed masses in the next poem, "On Behalf of Silence." The poem, though short, is written in two parts. The persona (in the voice of the masses) laments as well as asserts his allegiance to his fatherland. The masses are aware that they live in "tropics of hunger" (2) and thus their stomachs are "filled / with howling airs, ruled by

hurricanes of anger" (3-5). They are aware of "the history of shame" (7) their land has. They know their land is fully plundered and now filled with "echoes of empty lores" (10). Yet they love their land because it is all they have.

In the second part of the poem, the persona concentrates on the oppressor and his praise singers and sycophants with whom he instils silence in the land. The emperor "is fooled by remnant-smiles / of sycophants ... and silence" (17-8). Men, women, and children are deprived of the basic things of their lives as well as their visions. Thus,

> Darkness dawns
> bones break
> madness maims (19-21).

Yet the dictator is continuously "fooled" (23) by his sycophants and praise singers because they themselves are, according to the poet, "spineless fools" (23). While these sycophants are not silent, shouting the praises of the emperor, they are, in fact, silenced, because they cannot open their mouths to utter a word against the oppression perpetrated which they themselves suffer from.[5] In juxtaposing the voices of the masses side by side with the enterprise of the fools, the poet shows that the dictator

has done nothing to be praised but to be condemned and it is mere cowardice that has made the praise singers glorify the killer; they are afraid of being killed.

It is pertinent to note that the persona in Raji's poems of silence has detached himself from the syndrome of silence. He is either against the masses for keeping silent or against the emperor for scaring the masses into silence. Raji philosophises on the siren and convoys that accompany the dictator wherever he goes in the trio of poems that follow. In "Siren Sense I" "Siren Sense II" and "Siren Sense III", the poet exposes, satirises, declaims and curses the phenomenon of official escorts to executive leaders. In the first of the three poems, it is one of the escorts who speaks of the cruelty of the siren motorcade. He dishes out a warning to a passer-by who is likely to have a "date / with the dead at heaven's gate" (24-5), or become "maimed / without a fee being named" (26-7). He has earlier warned:

> begone when you see us
> our naked light above
> koboko clubbing bayonet banning
> when you smell us meandering
> of a mutinous market (2-7).

Raji, in the above lines, tries to capture the senseless speed and violent nature of the convoys – which is indeed the sense of the siren. The gospel they carry is that anyone or anything on the way should be crushed because the oppressor is passing.

In the second poem, the persona is no longer one of the escorts, not concerned whether the person standing on the way is killed or not. The persona is an onlooker, drawing attention to the frightening stillness occasioned in public places (such as markets) by the motorcades of the escorts:

> The market stands naked
> to the emptiness of open roads...
> the highway is wide, wider
> than the astonishment
> in the public eye (2-6).

And despite the masses' tradition of standing and staring at the almighty road users, the poet calls his "brother man" (7) and tells him that he is a vulnerable victim of the madness of the convoy. To them he is a "fatal ant" (8) or a "lousy dog" (12) or a "carcass" (14) that they will not hesitate to crush on their way.

The third poem is the shortest and contains a virulent verbal attack on the leader travelling in the convoy. This poem has a thematic affinity with Wole Soyinka's "Malediction" in

which the poet also attacks the oppressor with poetic invectives. The persona, now an angry poet in the Rajian combative voice, bursts out with curses on the leader:

> may the wind carry a convoy of curses
> ...
> may the wind stab your tribe's trumpet
> may your glowworm scream lead to hell
> may the dumb ditch embrace your bones
> may new brooms descend
> on the dirty tempest
> of your ghastly waste (5-13)

As the last line shows, the poet wishes the leader a fatal accident. He invokes wind – an elemental force – to destroy the leader. Indeed, in the persona's tone and utterance we see his limitation. He cannot certainly raise a weapon against the leader and hence invokes nature to deal with the leader.

The first and second poems of the trio have given reason for the outburst in the third poem. Raji might have written these poems at the peak of military dictatorship in Nigeria during which siren escorts and convoys were so rampant that any senior military officer could send the air splitting with the blaring of sirens. Public office holders, traditional rulers and sycophants joined the queue and there resulted cases whereby

innocent people were maimed or killed by the convoys and escorts and no one dared to question the act.

In “A Dozen Monologue,” Raji presents the kind of dialectics that we see in Niyi Osundare’s “Olowo debates Talaka” (*Songs of the Season*, 38). It is the “we” against “them” argument in which “we” stands for the masses, the poor, or in a Marxist parlance, the proletariat, while “them” stands for the elite, the bourgeoisie. In a dozen couplets of contrasting meanings, Raji shows that while the poor do the toiling, the rich do the harvesting. Hence the theme of “monkey the work, baboon the chop” (as in Nigerian local parlance) becomes prominent. While the poor people “mine the coal” (1), the rich people “spend the gold” (2). Connecting this poem to Nigerian political development, Raji is probably thematising the quarrel that has, for some time, existed between the southerners and northerners in Nigeria during the successive military juntas and the current civilian dispensation. The southerners raise hue and cry that their land produces the oil and other things that bring riches to Nigeria, but it is the northerners (who do not have these natural resources) who are perpetually in government and

spend the riches. In a larger context, the haves and the have-nots in the society are on each side of a divide that Raji has depicted in the poem.

"A Mass Prayer" is the poet's invocation of God to save his people from the claws of "slippery / beasts" (30-1). Raji hinges man's current sins on the archetypal "Adam curse" (2) and "....Eve's / felony....." (17-8). The poet takes a supplicatory tone and does, in fact, intercede on behalf of his people so that they should be forgiven "the nightmare / of sinful inheritance" (23-3). The poem that comes after "A Mass Prayer" shows why there is the need for the poet to intercede. Having a title unique from the poems in this collection, "1995", it may have been written to capture one of the pro-democracy or anti-military demonstrations in South-western Nigeria during the reign of the military generals. The first four lines of the poem with the adjective, "another" indicates that the "wailing moments / measured in contralto" (7-8) described in the poem is a recurrent decimal. As usual, the "heckling tyrants" (12) are responsible for the upheavals. The poet continues to reveal

some of the major problems that befall the land under those tyrants. He depicts tribalism in the following lines:

> I have seen them all: nations dividing
> like malicious molecules
> a hexagon of hate
> in their ethnic paste (13-6).

Tribalism, to say the least, is one of the fundamental factors responsible for under-development in Nigeria. The hyperbole, "a hexagon of hate" (15), maximises the depth of hatred – and realities on the ground in Nigeria have shown this – that exists among ethnic groups especially when developmental issues are focused. Again, as in "To the brim, to the brim," Raji deploys the symbols of animals to depict man's animalistic attitudes towards fellow man. In doing this, a streak of satire is noticed. When the poet says that cockroaches are "dreaming a union dance / before the feathery fury / of pecking fowls" (18-20), he does not only mean that the fowls are always out to cruelly eat up the cockroaches, but he is also showing that it is stupid of the cockroaches to dream of a "union dance" against the fowls

4. 2. *Webs of Remembrance:* The Poet Remembers Oppression

Raji's second collection, *Webs of Remembrance*, promises a more solid base to institute himself as a political poet. Arguably, it contains his best political poems. Some of the poems are carried over from his first collection because they obviously fit into the poetic vision of this collection and should have been preserved for it. It is indeed a successful collection and part of the success stems from the strength of the imagery the individual poems embody.

Raji's images reveal a confrontational poet, although in his statement of vision prefacing the collection, Raji says that he is just remembering, not confronting: "I opt to remember and make others remember" (9). Beyond remembering, Raji does not only confront, but he also courageously hits at the military dictators hard with blows of severe images. With a venomous tone, considering the choice of his diction, the poet is apparently out for a total war against the military. Since the poems were written in the heyday of military dictatorship in Nigeria, Raji's poetisation would be seen as a "programme of

action" towards paying what Niyi Osundare calls the price of freedom. Osundare opines that "[t]he price of freedom is eternal vigilance. We [writers] must be part of that vigilance. We must expose all those things that dictators are always trying to hide" (Interview with Omowunmi, 39). Anyone who wrote under the maximum ruler's dictatorship was certainly paying the price of freedom.

"This land tickles me" presents a persona who is tickled not by playful pleasure or good things but by the evils he remembers. Tickle becomes ironic here. It is supposed to evoke laughter of pleasure but certainly not this one because the pleasure of this tickle is "grilled / in pints of pain" (2-3). The poet narrates the many woes of the land, taking us to the climax of military oppression. The land is "...full of tongues / ... without memories / Without herbs of a waking sense" (4-6). The military rulers and their men hardly learn from history. Mistakes are repeated senselessly.

The land is also full of "Naked gods..." (8) who parade themselves as messiahs "On rot and starched rust" (10). They are the kind of men Olusegun Adeniyi refers to as "old brigade"

(*The Last 100 Days of Abacha*, 28). The line describes soldiers who have rotten conscience, whose bravery, the poet says, is on their "tattered stripes" (11). Using the image of a wicked surgeon whose "hand that holds the scalpel is blind" (14), Raji presents, quite pointedly, the mercilessness of the bad leaders in oppressing the people of the land. He paints the criminal activities that seethe the land because new thieves emerge daily (since young men do not have jobs to engage them). The poet concludes that

> This land tickles me so soft, so hard and soft
> I cannot forget its vanity, its melody of stones
> This land tickles me without end ... (21-3).

A people who have nothing other than a "melody of stones" are doomed, denied a future. To taste of good life, there must be a rhythm of life available to the people to feed on. This is turned to a stone through the deliberate activities of soldiers who seize power in the land. This poem does not bear the Rajian optimism because the land obviously has enough capacity and drive to keep tickling the persona. There are no solutions in sight for the problems the poet has presented in the poem. The land's "melody of stones" (23) does not bear – and is not

capable of bearing – life for its people either now or in future. So, the poet is resigned to his fate.

"Cyclone I" to "Cyclone IV", are four poems that are sparks of the poet's feeling towards the plunder of the land. "Cyclone I" is worth quoting wholly here:

> Nightmare flickers
> In our twice-thrice-beaten
> Eyes, no more meaning
> In the gram, no gram
> In the grammar of lives
> My pain goes
> Like a stubborn present
> Tense.

The poet evokes nightmarish incidents that beat people's imagination during the military eras in Nigeria. Life becomes meaningless with those incidents. Raji's pun on "gram" and "grammar" attempts to capture the weight of the feeling exerted on the people by the nightmare. The poet speaks of the people's suffering and then narrows it to himself. His pain, "Like a stubborn present / Tense" (7-8), will not leave him. The poet, like his fellow country people, becomes a perpetual sufferer. Under this condition, he cannot create. Ola Rotimi states his experience of this police state when he says, "[an] enduring state of anomie engenders malaise and disenchantment. This

state is so unsettling in virtually every respect that it disorients and even frustrates the will to create or to produce" ("Conditions in the Third World," 126). Under this condition, there was an exodus of Nigerian writers and activists to the West in the 1990s.

"Cyclone II" talks of the relief that comes on the heels of the stubborn pain of the previous poem. "A slender relief / Touches Earth's brow" (3-4). Then those who belong to the clan of the oppressors go berserk. That they can become "restless" (12) and "Speechless..."(13) indicates that indeed people will have some respite from the activities of the evil ones. This did occur in the history of Nigeria when a new military leader took over power and offered temporary relief to the suffering people, only for him to plunge the nation into deeper sorrow.[6] Then, again, "Darkness springs" (1) returns in "Cyclone III". The dictator reclaims his evil hands. The people naturally, "reap the bounty / Of griefs newly grown". (3-4). In a couple of images Raji presents the battered land with its "harvest of poisons / Sewn in Earth's veins." (9-10). Raji uses sheep as a metaphor for the innocent people who become the "garnished game / Of

blood in the wind." (14-5). This represents the indiscriminate killings that are the result of inordinate passion on the part of the evil emperors.

"Cyclone IV", characteristic of Raji's poems of hope, consoles us that the wind carrying the game of blood in the previous poem contains evil and good. Rain serves as a metaphor for hope and harvest. The fire of the wind is not a negative fire because it "licks / The whirlwind" (6-7) that brings nightmare to the people. The poem is oxymoronic in feature and captures the confusion that the wind brings, although beyond the dreams and nightmare of the wind, rain will fall. These four poems are good because they do not, like some of Raji's political poems, over-thematise. They are short and loaded like Uche Nduka's poems.[7] Raji achieves connectivity among the poems, which is seen in the manner he contrasts them.

"The Predator's Prayer" presents the dictator as animalistic in his drive to throw the land into depression. A predator is either an animal that kills other animals or a person who exploits other persons economically. Raji uses the earlier

sense of the word in his creation of the image of the oppressor. The oppressor is thus animalistic, having “a canine promise” (11) that paradoxically soothes and destroys the people at the same time. The predator has an insatiable belly into which he pours all that he destroys, and he keeps destroying and pouring in. the poet reminds us, here, of the amazing greed of Nigerian dictators who kept siphoning public funds without any sense of modesty. In dealing with people, the predator has “learnt to perch on the wings of bloody wishes” (1). He says that his love for the people is “malarial” (3), meaning that it sickens and destroys the people. In the scope of this image, malaria should be seen as an illness that kills and is capable of wiping out a generation. The predator is murderous in nature considering his “bloody wishes” (1), his “crocodile jaw” (6) and his “canine promise” (11).

The most explicitly message-laden of Raji’s poems on military dictatorship in Nigeria is “Malediction for a Maximum Ruler.” In the early part of the poem, the poet celebrates his freedom because he is now free to sing. He will “feel no more nightmares” (6); and thus will sing his “harmless song” (9). The

freedom of the poet is no doubt a corollary of the extinction of dictatorship, since the poet cannot crow for freedom when the dictator is alive. The reason for his being free to sing his song, itself, is nightmarish. Hence:

> But I tried most in vain
> to kill this knifing nightmare
> ...
> Not to remember the emperor of scars
> who forgot his brains
> in a luncheon of prostitutes (13-8).

The dictator, the maximum ruler, is the "emperor of scars" because he is adept at inflicting sorrows and scars on his subjects. Lines 17 and 18 above reminds us of the maximum ruler General Abacha's misadventure during which he was said to have lost his life making love to a prostitute. Karl Maier captures this aspect of Nigerian history thus: "It began on June 8, 1998, when Abacha, on his customary nightly excursion into the pleasures of the flesh, expired while in the arms of a pair of Indian prostitutes. The official cause of death was a heart attack, although unsubstantiated rumours abounded concerning his demise" (4). Indeed the dictator in this poem, variously referred to as "the beast" (6), "the emperor of scars" (16) and "NEBUCHADNEZZAR" (44), is easily seen as late

General Abacha. It is this dictator that scared every person in Nigeria "with threats of self-succession" (24). He is trained "of Amin-Bokassa-Doe-Sese-Seko School" (29). This alliterative (and alphabetical) listing of the most feared dictators in Africa shows the gravity of the dictator's oppression. It also shows that the Nigerian history of woes is a part of a larger history: Africa has been wallowing in a trajectory that moves from slavery to colonialism and to neo-colonialism dramatised in the diverse post-colonial chaos on the continent. Militarisation of the state is one of the manifestations of that chaos.

The triumphal tone of the poet is realised in stanza four where he prays that all that is done in worship and apotheosis of the dictator should "be burnt" (40). That not withstanding,

> Let an epitaph of piss be written:
>
> HERE ROTS NEBUCHADNEZZAR FOREVER
> KING OF LOOTERS...(44-6).

The poet considers it indeed triumphal that the very dictator who does not allow him to sing his song now has his epitaph written in piss. An epitaph by the way is expected to say something good about someone dead. This poem is entirely a paradox in which the poet attempts to show – in lucid language

– the gravity of an oppressor's cruelty and the eventual collapse of his oppression. The poem summarises the life and death of a dictator whose actions are not only wicked to his subjects but also to himself because he is stupid enough to forget "his brain" (17) in a prostitute's laps.

4. 3. ***Lovesong for My Wasteland*: Consolidating the Nationalist Imagination**

Raji takes a significant step, higher, as a nationalist poet, in his most recent collection, *Lovesong for my Wasteland*. In this work, he moves beyond the engagement of abusive attacks on depraved leaders, lamentation for deprived and dehumanised masses, to a more holistically coherent nationalist voice that presents, to us, a poet, like Aime Cessaire, who "does not only sing Martinique, [but] is Martinique" (Moor, "The Negro Poet and His Landscape" 153). Raji is Nigeria in *Lovesong for my Wasteland*. Each sequence of the long-breath poem carries the spirit of Nigeria in a flow of images that pull to picture Nigeria's tattered past, confused present and an envisaged optimistic future. Raji surprisingly finds influence in

one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century European writing, T. S. Eliot. Raji's title, "Lovesong for my Wasteland" loudly echoes Eliot's two important, well-discussed poems: "Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock" and "Wasteland." He quotes lines from the former to open this volume of poetry:

> For I have known them all already, known them all-
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume? (quoted in Raji 1).

Raji, here, draws on the all-knowing image to stamp his understanding of the pains and joys of his land.

This volume is differentiated from other of Raji's volumes by the poet's patronage of agrarian imagery. The first sequence (which I will also call verse in this work), "IN THE BEGINNING OF A SEASON" (this capitals and subsequent ones are the poet's) asks an important question that preoccupies a farmer in the beginning of a season. A farmer should, ordinarily, think of "when to sleep, how to harvest or what to plant" (3). But this singer is a farmer with a different preoccupation. He is burdened with a seed for sorrow and trouble for the land. "*This is the seed which grows in my mind / A cancerous tuber*

nobody wants to eat" (this Italics and subsequent ones are his, 10-1). The import of this agricultural image is that the singer, this talebearer, has a story that has grown in his mind that nobody wants to listen to. But he tells the story all the same. People have to listen to it. He begins by saying, "THERE'S A LAND / where the river runs with thirst" (12-3). After pointing out the tension in the land occasioned by the intrigues, hatred, anger and imperfection, he parallels the earlier expression with "There's a land / where thirst runs through the river" (19-20). Raji's image of river here is as limpid as other images in the volume. It is not just the oxymoronic nature of conjoining river and thirst, but the depth of havoc discernible in the image. It shares a thematic direction with the image of the burning green tree that we earlier encountered in *Webs of Remembrance*. Thirst running through the river is an apt image depicting the poverty in the midst of plenty that has been characteristic of a military-ravaged Nigeria, the poet's wasteland. Indeed this syndrome of poverty in the midst of plenty runs throughout Africa, for, as Kofi Anyidoho reminds us, "[this] is the Africa of the intellectual and creative writer's hope and despair, the

Africa of the glory of vanished civilizations and of the pain of mass populations set adrift in a world falling apart and yet full of possibilities" ("Prison as Exile/Exile as Prison," 1). This is the Africa that Raji ponders on throughout his *Lovesong*.

In the second verse, the singer-poet indicts everyone of being guilty of whatever that has made the land a waste one. "NO ONE IS CLEAN" (1). More so, no one can claim he is free from the consequences of the destruction. This is why "everyone is talking about a cleansing" (6). The singer-poet points out, in the next verse, that people are only pretending; something is indeed wrong with the land. There is "BLEMISH OF HOLES / in that national dress" (1-2). People cover their hunger and anger beneath "fake laughter" (4). The singer-persona is aware of them all.

"FORTY FULL SEASONS GONE LIKE YESTERDAY" reveals the stupidity of a nation (indeed its leaders) which has refused to grow beyond its infant stage. The nation is thus like the "old manchild" (63), one of the pictures of oddities Aboliga the Frog showed his friends in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are not Yet Born*. The image is that of retardation and

dwarfism. According to the poet, even the elders of the land who are supposed to lead the nation forward have lost their legs, their focus. All is stagnant. Imagine the waste of "Two scores and ...seasons gone like yesterday" (8). Very apt about this is Karl Maier's projection that

> [s]ince winning independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed at least one million deaths in Africa's biggest civil war, the assassination of two government leaders, six successful coups and four failed ones, and thirty years of army rule. Yet somehow the country has stayed together, despite decades of government by a clique of military and civilian elite who have behaved like...pirates in power. (xxi)

The singer-persona hits the nail on the head by saying that it is the people of the land that are responsible for the stagnancy and maladies all around them. The people simply do not have a direction and hence cannot expect production. They are lazy and misuse their opportunities. They cannot exploit their resources for growth and development. So, they abandon their

iron ore, ignore the rain and “kill [their] suns with hurtful glee” (4). These are direct effects of military dictatorship. The singer goes on to say:

> The earth swoons in the farmer’s hand
> But all we do is rape the land
> All we know is maim the mind
> All we plant are epitaphs for the dead (5-8).

These lines are heavy with the images of destruction. The land is not only raped, deprived of its virgin natural resources, the best minds in the land are also maimed. The intellectuals in our midst fled into self-exile during the years of the locusts in Nigeria. And those who dared to remain were often unlucky to be murdered. History records these incidents to lash the singer into singing.

The second part of the volume, introduced by a quotation from Ai Qing’s “I love this land”, begins with the eleventh verse, “TEN MONARCHS, TEN SEASONS.” The word, “monarchs” stands for undemocratic governments, coming after one another, responsible for the bastardisation of the singer-persona’s land. He tells of the power that restricts human freedom and progress as a result of which “the crossroads are multiplying daily” (3). Silence is one of such. One is either silent

or he is silenced because “It is the season of gods. It is the season of dogs” (5). Raji’s bringing together of “dogs” and “gods” here speak volume of the dog-like greed of the nation’s leaders who enjoy being self-made gods. As their subjects, one would have to resort to silence or adopt the craft of telling lies. The poet goes on in verse thirteen to talk of aborted dreams. They melt “like shea-butter nut of nothingness in the sun “(2). The paradox of having thirst in the “land of rivers” (3) represents the suffocating poverty in which people live in the midst of plenty in the land. To add to that, the so-called heroes of the land, those people they have come to value and idolise are people whose thoughts are not even deep, whose philosophies cannot give integrity to the land. All these make the persona “borrow laughter from the wind of wonder” (5). And then he becomes a new personality whose “voice captures the loudness of thunder” (8), whose tongue “seeks the magnificence of tender metaphors” (9), and whose ultimate aim is to see to the “end of hardness and pain in the softness of things” (10). This is a duty that he is not just hopping into; it is a long thought out, self-given duty. Raji sees himself as a poet whose works “can set an

ideal standard for society and the state" (Okolo, *African Literature as Political Philosophy* 1).

The poet continues to expatiate on the problem of the land in verse seventeen. The inability of the people to use their minds, to engage in constructive thinking and have a deep sense of history has, as Raji has shown from the beginning of this volume, been the cause of the collapse of the land. The singer-persona laments that "We have long sought the shadow of the masquerader / And we puke in pride and laziness" (3-4). His people are given to pleasure and celebration of mediocrity because of the kind of leadership they have. He reveals the pitiable nature of the land for being so endowed with natural resources and yet begging "the world to feed [her] greed" (7). In such a situation, where is the strength and pride of the country, Nigeria, the so-called giant of Africa? The last stanza of this verse is provocative:

> For those who snore in the glory of self-contentment
> *The past is,*
> *the present is not,*
> *the future is nothing* (10-13).

The height of irresponsibility from the leaders of a country like Nigeria is the inordinate passion they have for indulging in

pleasure from ill acquired wealth. As they eat they do not think of the future. The future becomes undefined.

In the next verse, with a style that makes it different from other verses, the singer-persona reminds us that what was responsible for causing havoc in the past is still there. The metaphors here come out sharp and biting. Having referred to the failure of the past as “CLOUDS”, he goes on to liken them to “the scrotal / burden / of / convicted / rapists” (8-12). This image is significant because it brings to our minds the rapist nature of the destroyers who have reduced the land to nonentity. The image following it is also sharp: “the smell / in the air / is / the semen / of thieves” (14-9). Raji succeeds in creating an aura of thievery with those lines. This verse is one of the most successful verses in this volume because the imagery we encounter here is able to arouse our anger towards the plunderers in the way that people’s anger would be aroused towards a merciless rapist

Raji is not yet done with equating bad leaders with pain-inflicting wild animals as is shown in verse nineteen. He sees the oppressors, the destroyers as “SCORPION” (1), as “crabs”

(2) and as “alligators” (3). These animals manifested in the personalities of the oppressors, are “still in greed / for blood and brains of children....” (3-4). Children are the future of the land and once they are destroyed the land loses its future. The past leaders have left nothing useful behind for the people of today. The singer-persona’s lamentation here is deep-felt since the land is left with nothing that can be productive as the rivers, a source of eating and drinking, a source of wealth for the land, is already poisoned by no other persons than the owners of the land themselves.

Raji dwells on the violence that has become an integral part of the history of the land. The singer-persona considers himself and his generation as “CHILDREN OF THE GUN” (1). Gun metaphorically refers to the militarisation of the Nigerian polity by successive military dictators that held sway over the land for a long time, causing untold damage. They are also “Children of wrath / Ever abandoned to the odour of shame” (2-3). Bayonets and bombs that signify military might with their unique ways of causing deaths are clearly depicted.

Consequently, the singer-persona says, “We learn new ways of dying” (6).

The culture of violence in the land is also pictured in the people’s propensity to brew “wine... / of arsenic, ammonia and hemlock” (7-8) for themselves. They pollute the very air they breathe and are thus responsible for causing their own deaths. Violence, as the singer-persona shows in these lines, is inherent in the people because of their past:

> We who munch violence like water-yams
> What certainties now lie before us (11-2)?

It is still the lamentation about the reckless past that has failed to create a future. Foresight and wisdom elude a generation born into the philosophy of oppressive violence. The theme of violence is continued in the next verse. The singer-persona reveals that people have become cannibalistic and feed on the flesh of their fellow people. Using the pronoun “we” consistently because he knows the generation that has begotten him, he says, “We fed on our neighbours’ entrails” (2). A sore is created; it expands and becomes part of the life of the people. Raji’s portrayal of cannibalism here is identical to Christopher Okigbo’s depiction in “Path of Thunder”. It is still the same

society where life is a game of survival, with the instinct for violence surfacing:

> the elephant ravages the jungle
> the jungle is peopled by snakes
> the snake says to the squirrel
> I will swallow you
> the mongoose says to the snake
> I will mangle you
> the elephant says to the mongoose
> I will strangle you (Okigbo, “Elegy for Slit-drum”, 43-50)

It is the game of the powerful ones preying on the weak ones; it is far from being an egalitarian society.

Verse twenty-two is a strong one that echoes the biblical picture of the end of things and lives. The end time, it is said, is a hard time. It is the age of various criminal and inhuman activities. The end time is the age in which the sinner and the saint can hardly be differentiated from each other because the bad people who will multiply geometrically will take over the affairs of the land. It is the time “When the king is the chief of crooks / And the rapist is next of kin to the therapists” (4-5). It will indeed be the end of things when the thieves can use the law against the innocent people and the assassins will move gently, unknown, as priests in the society. Such time is the time

that the society loses its values and the people surrender their lives to God knowing fully that their situation has gone beyond human contrivance.

4. 4. **The Poet's Fight for the Writer / Journalist**

Part of the realities of dictatorship Raji aptly captures in his political poems is the oppression of the writer / journalist in Nigeria. Other poets and writers have captured the ugly situation in their works, too.[8] It is common knowledge that during the years of General Muhammadu Buhari (1984-1986), the notorious decree two was promulgated to take care of journalists whose confrontational writings, no matter how slight, were taken as seditions. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's junta (1986-1993) saw the unprecedented murder by parcel bomb of one of the finest journalists of his time, Dele Giwa of the *Newswatch* magazine. The dictatorship of late General Sani Abacha was responsible for the judicial execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a well-known writer, along with others, despite national and international outcries that the dictator

should spare the life of Saro-Wiwa. Karl Maier captures this history when he writes,

> [w]orld outrage against Nigeria reached its peak in November 1995, when the government executed Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists of the Ogoni people in the Niger delta who had campaigned for political autonomy and reparations from Shell for environmental damages caused by its oil operations. Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth of former British colonies. (18)

The killing of Saro-Wiwa, let it be pointed out, attracted loud declamation because he was a known figure. There were many unknown persons who were silently murdered while in prisons or killed during demonstrations by the dreaded military regimes.

In "My Soul is Stitched", written for Kunle Ajibade, the persona comes out fully with an identity.[9] He is a singer, a poet, who defies the pall of silence on the land and breaks "the emperor's / testicles in a nutshell / crash of screaming songs" (1-2). He is no doubt bold, courageous and confrontational. But

he pays for it because the emperor and his cohorts "have covered [his] head / with ash, hot as hell" (4-5). Social activists, journalists and writers suffered from the military misrule of the 1990s in Nigeria. Prominent among them was Gani Fawehinmi, who, by 1996, had been detained twenty-seven times (see, for instance, Akpuda 48). This poem treats this issue successfully. The persona laments that he is violently treated because he goes about his duty of checking social ills through his art. He does not only break the emperor's "testicles" (2) – a strong metaphor from Raji's repertoire – he also "rode in a paddle / of proverbs against the aching / currents of an envious sea" (6-8). More than that, he

> ... caught our drunken gods
> in a beastly pose
> and sold the canvas
> to sneering mortals (11-5).

This is what writers and journalists do no matter how hostile the dictator is. It is part of their chosen duty to expose the evils of the oppressor as Raji has done in his poetry. The "drunken gods" (11) move in "envious sea" (8) and unleash untold hardship on the people. The persona has a daring gut and, despite what he suffers, is optimistic that "they cannot kill the

truth" (19) of his songs and his writings. This fearless optimism reminds one of the Lagos print media that compelled General Babangida to *step aside* in 1994 and consistently deafened late General Abacha's ears till he died in 1998.

In "An Underground Poem," dedicated to Jack Mapanje, probably written in the early 1990s when Mapanje suffered incarceration from his nation's authorities, we encounter the brave persona again. He claims that he cannot be killed even though he has dared to "speak against gods" (14) in his enterprise of social activism. Already he says "My body is a temple / of angry music" (1-2) which of course must be sung no matter whose ox is gored. Being the only survivor where "melodies are made / on platters of skull" (7-8), he sees himself as capable of laughing at the dictator who is only big by the size of his evil and can do nothing to help the land despite his messianic message. Fearlessly, he dares to go on speaking

> Against gods whose flesh refuse
> to melt or dance
> to fires of simple songs
> all of me is a household of canine bravery (27-30).

Raji carries his optimism in the stubborn, resilient voice of his persona, symbolic of his belief that only the people, when

hardened and resistant, can save themselves from the claws of bad leadership.

"Sesan Ajayi, 1959-1994", written for the writer late Sesan Ajayi is a different kind of elegy. The persona of the poem is seen as someone who understands that death is inevitable, although one ought to accomplish something before one dies. The first couplet presents the poet that should be accomplished before he dies. If the poet does not accomplish his enterprise of singing and laughing before his death, then he should be stirred out of the depth of "Nothing" (13) that death will take him to. There, his skill will be useless. This poem regrets that late Ajayi did not live to sing his song to the end. But he did sing a song when he was alive. He was one of those poets, under the tutelage of the Ibadan-based Poetry Club, who wrote exuding a lot of anger against the military dictator of the day.

"Deadlines" is written for Dele Giwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mamman Vatsa and others whose lives were crushed under military oppression. These were people who lost their lives to the cruelty of the dictators during the military era in Nigeria of the 1980s and the 1990s, the period well historicised in Raji's

corpus and the entire writings of his generation. The poet addresses the oppressor in the poem, reminding him of how he has caused “a mascara of mourning in the land” (2); of how he has fed his “beast / with the flesh of suckling birds” (3-4); of how he has filled his “tongue / with darts of denials and lies” (5-6); and of how he has “killed laughter / like a cruel coward” (6-7). The metaphor, “suckling birds”, stands for the great talents that are embedded in the young writers. Killing them means destroying the future as far as creative writing and journalism are concerned. That is how the poet and others see the cruel extermination of Dele Giwa and Ken Saro-Wiwa by military dictators in Nigeria. In the second part of the poem, the persona now becomes the land that owns the murdered talents. The same killers have turned to console her. But she points out that it is meaningless because “how do you console a mother / bereaved by the talons of a tiger?” (16-7). This calls to mind some of the programmes that subsequent governments have put up to console the relations of those killed undeservedly.[10] The poet’s opinion is that such consolation is useless.

Raji continues his exposure of the bad leaders and their destructive misrule and oppression against writers in "Notes of an Exiled Poet." He speaks from the view of an exile, although, earlier on, we see a poet-persona resisting the tempting – and often legitimate – idea of going on exile. Raji uses anthem, the Nigerian national anthem, a song of unity and progress, as a metaphor of rot. In stanza one the anthem is empty, only filled with fools who cannot certainly repair the land. In the second stanza, there is the image of a "suicide hole" (7) on the anthem indicating self-destruction. It is Nigerians that are engaged in plundering Nigeria. No one can salvage the country. This is what the poet means when he says:

> no surgeon can see
> no healer can stitch when Death reaps
> and the roads become desolate
> under her scythe of darkness (9-12).

Raji's image of "the scythe of darkness" is among his very sharp and incisive images that reveal his deep sense of appropriate imagery. The darkness eclipses people to death. The anthem has "requiem" (13) and "only Truth can heal" (14). The land is barren of truth, a national truth, needed for the development of the nation and humanity. Because this truth is non-existent,

"heroes [are] hounded like villains / and thieving necks / now wear garlands of gold" (16-8). Such is the tragedy of the land. The poet refers to the melody of the anthem as "terrible" (19). Thus owls feast on the melody; and the poet sees "A dead slow march of laughters" (24). This is pessimistic indeed. But the last stanza brings up the optimism. Thus the persona says:

> I shall come to chorus when I see the end
> of my land's strangled sighs and no more
> the piercing cries behind the bars (29-31).

The cries will surely end. And the anthem shall be purified anew where oppressors shall have no opportunity to hijack it from the lips of the people for whom the anthem is sung.

Another successful poem with this theme is "And the Poet Foresees a Death" which carries a strong image of "the green tree" (1) burning while every creature "holds their breath in ruins of smoke" (2). Green trees are not meant to burn but flourish. It is a sign of immeasurable havoc that a green tree is burning. Tantamount to the sun setting at noon, Raji's insight into the destruction caused by the past military rulers is quite deep. When the military rulers came, drumming their messianic intents of saving the country from her myriad of problems, one

thought they were serious about that. But they turned out to be the worst leaders and set the green tree, a symbol of a flourishing nation, at its robust stage, burning to the extent that:

> Restless hills, bleeding woods
> Wounded valleys without echoes of flowers
> Ceremonies in the wind; all else
> Hold their breath in streams of smoke (10-3).

The weaverbirds and the river-birds, metaphors for singers and poets, are disturbed. They become unproductive. Then the "dove absconds / With her secret of peace" (8-9), giving way to violence. Green trees symbolise the natural resources, the formidable cream of the society, the thinkers and philosophers who are supposed to move the nation forward but cannot because the military ruler plunders and kills and sends them away. In her introduction to *25 New Nigerian Poets,* Toyin Adewale states the effect of this military terrorism on Nigerian literature entirely when she says,

> [s]ome young Nigerian writers...chose to go into voluntary exile. Literary groups... petered out. The publishing sector sneered at Nigerian creative literature rejecting it as unprofitable and chose

> instead to publish...self-serving biographies of retired and serving army generals. (iii)

This shows the sturdiness of Nigerian writers, journalists and activists in pursuing their goals of seeing the country free of military oppression. We see more of this in "A Country Writes Her Own Epitaph", dedicated to Ogaga Ifowodo and Akin Adesokan, two important poets who are Raji's contemporaries. The two poets suffered incarceration during the heinous regime of late General Sani Abacha. The persona of this poem is the Nigerian nation (paradoxically writing her own epitaph). As a plundered, raped mother, she recounts the many woes that have befallen her. The totality of her woes is captured in the first stanza:

> From the beginning of night
> To the end of day
> Vigils for death become the new
> dance-craze of my people. (1-4)

The ultimate is death and it holds sway over the land. Raji's hyperbole is understood here to mean the incessant killings that filled the military juntas that humbled the Nigerian State. As a result the country laments that "My children flee to other lands / Seeking the kindness of strangers" (17-8). The poet points out

in the following stanza that the children have to run away because they are “Afraid of the noose and the acid” (26), an image that reminds us of how the writer and environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was killed during the height of General Abacha’s dictatorship.[11] There is a deep sense of pessimism and loss as the country, a mother, continues her cry because “no one, not even the dead / Is safe / From these vigils / Of a new destruction” (37-40) brought on the land by the oppressor. Raji abandons his optimism here in a bid to bring before us the gritty realities of violence against the populace and the writers during the military despotism that ruined Nigeria. Raji’s historicism is vivid and engages our memories with pictures of suppression of journalists and writers in an age in which the land is barren of democracy.

4. 5. **Conclusion**

What we have attempted to do in this chapter is the exploration of Raji’s political poems to delineate the poet’s hatred for the military dictators, captured in various metaphors such as “emperor”, “beast”, “Goddam gods”, “Nebuchadnezzar,”

and so on, vis-à-vis his concern for the masses who undergo severe depression as a result of the ethical and moral failures of the dictators. Concentrating on Raji's engaging imagery, we have seen his poetic manifesto couched in "the nationalist imagination" at work in the poems analysed here. The oppressor does not only impoverish and cause the deaths of innocent people in the society, but he also cracks down on writers. Raji successfully captures the years of economic and socio-political depression in Nigeria as well as the cruel murders of writers such as Dele Giwa and Ken Saro Wiwa in Nigeria. Through Raji's poems treated here, we see the conditions of people in Nigeria that became so bad that some people found their ways out of the nation in order to seek survival in other lands. Till today, Nigeria has not recovered from the havoc perpetrated by military oppressors in Nigeria. This phenomenon has become a major thematic source for poets and writers in Nigeria today among whom we have singled Raji for study in this work.

Notes

1. Here, we refer to the most terrible dictators in Nigerian history, namely, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985-1993) and late General Sani Abacha (1993-1998).

2. One of the overwhelming ambitions of the Nigerian dictators, General Babangida and General Abacha, was to transform themselves from military rulers into civilian leaders. It was widely known as the second coming.

3. See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Farafina, 2004.

4. See Wole Soyinka. *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 1985.

5. The phenomenon of praise singing is entrenched in Nigeria's history of dictatorship. Olusegun Adeniyi brings this to our knowledge when he says, "[f]rom Gowon to Obasanjo, Buhari to Babangida and now Abacha, Nigeria has always been awash with time servers who become willing tools under the military rulers with the idea of self succession" (*The Last 100 Days of Abacha*, 39).

6. A good example is the case of General Babangida. When he took over power in 1985, Nigerians were tired of the oppressive blows of General Mohammadu Buhari one of which was the notorious Decree Two that hounded journalists and sent them into prison without trials. When General Babangida came, he struck it out and endeared himself to Nigerians. But, alas, it was during his regime that journalism received the harshest blow: the killing by parcel bomb of Dele Giwa, one of the finest journalists in Nigeria then.

7. See, for instance, Uche Nduka. *If Only the Night*. Amsterdam: Sojourner Press, 2002.

8. See, for example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, and Sefi Atta's first novel, *Everything Good Will Come*.

9. Kunle Ajibade was one of the journalists who suffered severe incarceration during the intense dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. He produced a prison memoir titled *Jailed for Life*.

10. In most cases, the government decided to train the children of the slain talents or offer their wives jobs as a form of compensation for the death of their breadwinner.

11. It was common knowledge that when Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged in 1995, acid was poured on his body in order to be sure that it was totally destroyed. The dictator had a special interest in ensuring that nobody had access to the body of the slain writer.

10

Chapter Five

THE POET'S OPTIMISM

5. 0. **Introduction**

In this chapter, we will consider a very important aspect of Raji's political poetry which is the optimism he offers the suffering masses. In almost all his political poems, we sense this optimism, which is usually a glimpse of hope ahead of the terrible situations of the moment. Beyond his combatant nature seen in his choice of imagery, there is the tender and hopeful Raji although the hope is given to the oppressed not the oppressor. The poet's optimism, as it were, is invested in the running motif he has chosen for himself: the motif of laughter. In his own words, "Laughter is the happy harvest in a savannah of tears" (*A Harvest of Laughters*, 10). Thus, the laughter envisaged for the suffering people is predicated on the law of nature which is that those who are inflicting pains and sorrows on the people will naturally be consumed by their own wickedness as a result of which the masses shall rejoice in their liberation. Aside from offering sanguinity to the people, the poet also advises them on how to be the captains of their own

country by making sure that they do not surrender their precious land to the wolves any more. This phenomenon is a consistent theme in Raji's poetry.

5.1. **Laughter as Therapy for the Suffering Masses**

The title of Raji's first collection announces laughter as a remarkable motif in Raji's poetry. He achieves a striking paradox with his conception of laughter. In a collection of mostly political poems, which attempt to capture situations that can evoke tears, laughter may seem to have no place. Indeed, where there are tears, laughter may loss its function and would merely assume a hypocritical or cosmetic stance. It is therefore paradoxical that the poet finds bravery in laughter despite the flow of tears in the land. In fact, it is with laughter that he emerges to tackle the gross inadequacies of the authorities. Which is why laughter translates into a remarkable idiom in Raji's poetic vision. Since "art," according to Chinua Achebe, "is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him" (quoted in Okolo 14), the poet Raji, in evolving his art, presents an alternative function of laughter as a balm to the rising temperature of his

society with the intention of altering the situation not only for himself, but also for the ordinary people in the society.

In “Introits”, the singer insists on singing because he is out to perform a dual function: exposing the ills of the bad leaders in the society and, at the same time, giving hope to the brutalised masses. He is thus like Santrofi Anoma, the parabolic bird of Akan mythology. Explaining the metaphor of Santrofi Anoma, Kofi Anyidoho writes:

> Endowed with mysterious treasures of the mind and voice, Santrofi is both a blessing and a curse. Santrofi is a blessing for the clarity of its vision and for the transforming beauty and power of its gift of song. But Santrofi is also a curse for its irritating and irrepressible urge to expose the unsavoury side of the society.... Society is blind without Santrofi's visionary guidance... (“Prison as Exile/Exile as Prison,” 5)

There is a real sense in which every poet and writer is a Santrofi to his society. Raji's exploration of the Santrofi philosophy is such that after cursing the bad leaders, he turns round to offer hope and show the direction towards a better humanism for the society.

Thus, in “Introits”, he is not bothered by the “twilight tales” (4) from the “sick knights” (5), even if they are capable of

rendering him artistically lame. For a poet-persona with such confidence, as Raji depicts, there is no fear that any forces can take away his singing tongue from him. He will reach out to the people with a laughter that has a "lemon-smell" (3), which may be understood as the therapeutic appeal that it gives to humanity. In Raji's philosophy, laughter can heal a wound; it can end a fight. He will ignore the "pain-wrights" (7) because his song through which he is sending forth the "lemon-smell of laughter" (3) will definitely heal the people of the burden and sorrow they have been living with.

"Black Laughter" reveals more of the poet-persona's resistance against the tyrants of his land. Laughter as an engaging metaphor drapes his strength and provides him an almost harmless weapon with which to live his life in the face of hardship. No matter "the morning mist of harmattan" (2) and no matter "the talcum dust of the day" (11), the persona vows to open his mouth wide and laugh "beyond the thrills and threats / of conditioning yoke" (7-8). There are hideously thrilling realities in his land that threaten his life and he is yoked to strictures and restrictions. The poet's laughter, which he needs

to survive, is the one that comes out of the pen because he says, "I need just a pen / for my black laughter" (19-20). The adjective, black, seems to indicate that the poet's laughter carries bravery and endurance associated with the struggles of the black people. Black laughter is the writer's social commitment with which he faces those who have made life oppressive to him and his fellow human beings in the land.

The second part of the poem contains three questions in three stanzas. The poet wonders what amount of energy of the black laughter can "drawn the merry tantrums / of mirthful tyrant" (25-6). In other words, how much of his laughter can withstand the irresponsible anger (responsible for the indiscriminate maiming and killings) by the military dictators of his land. Part three of the poem answers that question. What the poet needs for survival is "a stubborn cyclone of laughter" (30). This is, in fact, his saviour

> from the teasing scalpels of robbing angels
> from tendon-tears of boneless pain...(32-3)

Scalpels are sharp blades used for tearing human flesh. It represents the various inhuman policies of the dictators used in inflicting avoidable but damaging pains on the common people.

The poet's laughter against such wicked people must carry obduracy and fearlessness, two important qualities of the social activists that were able to stand against dictatorship during the heinous regimes of General Babangida and late General Abacha in Nigeria. The poet yearns for "blue wind" (40), a phrase that occurs twice, signifying the dreamt freedom that will also come as "the dimple breath of dawn" (42). In any case, the poet is not too optimistic about this change and hence whether it is "dusk or dawn" (49), he calls on his black laughter to sustain him during such a terrible time.

In "The Last Laugh" Raji comes out once again as a brave poet, courageous enough to show his people the therapy of laughter in the face of tyranny. The poem is in two parts. In the first part, the poet accuses a "you" (1), which stands for the oppressor, of being wicked towards him. The oppressor "laughed and laughed" (1) – not the kind of laughter the poet knows – at the poet and by doing so expects the poet to fall to his "teasing tongue, red with thorns" (5). It is the laughter that consumes the innocent. The poet boasts that he survives that laughter and this surprises the oppressor's "clan of conspirators

/ who loved to lick [his] bones / to the music of mockery" (7-9). The poet does not only survive, but is poised to counter the oppressor with his own kind of laughter. Thus the second part of the poem, bold in sanguinity, presents the poet as a possessor of laughter that heals the people:

> The poet in me mocks you too
> But I will rather heal your septic sins
> with a deodorant smell of the last laugh
> I'll rather heal your clan
> with the long lacerating blade of divine love.
> (19-23)

This is Raji's vision as a poet. He sees the poet as someone, like other poets such as J. P. Clark-Bedekeremo, Osundare and Ofeimun have seen, who should be out to speak the "lacerating" (23) truth to save humanity. Raji dwells on laughter as a cushion for his vision and demonstrates that even in the absence of sanity, of love, of hospitality, and of comfort; in the presence of deafening chants from the dictators and their acolytes, it is the poet's kind of laughter that the people need to learn to be able to go through the hard times.

"Turn", a short and epigrammatic poem, bears the Rajian sanguinity invested in the motif of laughter. The poet invokes the power of a supernatural being, probably God, to turn

darkness to light. His death will thus become “butter-fly melodies of love” (6). His tears will turn to “golden rosary of laughter” (9). The image Raji has created here, hinged on Catholicism – we know of the power that is said to reside in the Rosary – is expected to have a kind of liberating effect on humanity. Just as the rosary saves, so also the laughter that bears what the poet has captured in the metaphor, “rosary”, is expected to save the poet and his people. This poem is also well positioned because the optimistic view of the poet through the preceding elegies is summarily presented in a strong tone. As in some of his poems, the supernatural being addressed is seen as capable of intervening for the poet and his nation.

The last part of *A Harvest* contains only one long poem titled “Harvest I-VI.” The poem summarises the vision the poet sets out to pursue in the collection. Raji succeeds in elevating laughter to a metaphor that is capable of surmounting the poverty and wants that are responsible for the pitiably low standards of living in the land. Since the military dictator is responsible for causing that in Raji’s poetry, laughter, here, is

used as a poetic strategy of combat against the dictator. Hence, the poet Raji, as M.S.C. Okolo puts it, approaches his

> task as [a] social act that entails evaluating the mode of production in society; the nature of the relationship between the various classes; and how to bring about a revolutionary end to the oppression and exploitation by one class of another. (*African Literature as Political Philosophy*, 100)

The poet's dream, demonstrated in his poems here, is to bring an end to the lingering social crisis between the rich and the poor; because of this, he deploys various poetic strategies, institutes idioms and evolves a resilient voice. Raji's rhetoric of laughter is within this actuality of social art.

In "Harvest I-VI", the poet concludes his running theme that "Laughter can heal" (22). It is divided into six parts. In part one, the poet reveals the uncomfortable condition in which people live in the country:

> a blind moon bleeds across the streets
> a dominion of silken dust sickens this wind. (6-7)

It is indeed terrible for the moon, itself a light for humanity, to be blind, talk less of bleeding. That it bleeds shows that some people (the oppressor and his men) have inflicted violence on it. And that it bleeds in the streets shows that all the people are

affected by – and thus suffer from – the wound of the moon. The second line carries “silken dust” as a strong metaphor. The dust, despite its silken beauty, moves in the wind and does damage to people’s eyes. This is violence on the people.

The poet reiterates the bad situation in the second part of the poem. The land is yet filled with “so many stitches so much pain “(8). The poet-persona harks back to the evils perpetrated by the oppressor and his cohorts in the past. He refers to them as “boa-conspirators” (10) because of the terrible way they conspire to oppress the masses. He also refers to them as “pagan pilgrims” (11) all bearing “ribbons of snakes” (12), lustily set to act on the “virgin plague” (13). These metaphors evoke sharp images that depict the wickedness of those who cause others to suffer.

Part three of the poem introduces what the people need to live through the gloomy situation – laughter. The poet tells his people in a clear term that “if only [they] know the crescent magic of Laughter” (16). Laughter is written with capital “L” to show its supra-abstract nature. It is seen as a concrete reality, a formidable substance, capable of healing the people of their

poor and harsh conditions. When we know the magic of laughter, then

> we will ride the flood of predicted pains
> we'll toast to a tomorrow full of love
> without stitches or stains
> without brimstones of plagues
> without milestones of snakes. (17-21)

Raji's metaphor of pain and suffering and oppression in the stanza above attests to his deep understanding of the crises-ridden Nigeria he writes about. Ultimately, "snakes" bite and their poison kills. It is to that extent that the destroyers intend to kill the land. Laughter, the poet says in the next lines, can heal the bites of the snakes.

In spite of the capacity of laughter to heal, the poet is not oblivious to the fact that laughter may, sometimes, disappear from man. In part four of the poem, he dwells on the interregnum between *one* laughter and the other during which it is possible that "dark clouds cripple the cheeks / as dimples vanish into bleak oblivion" (24-5). The image of crippling cheeks, i.e. contorted face, reveals the absence of laughter and the presence of pain. This image demonstrates that Raji has a close understanding of the philosophy of laughter, of the

contours of the face when laughter comes upon it. And the crisis of emotion that is capable of chasing laughter away from the human face.

The poet turns to the oppressor in part five. He does not pour invective on the oppressor as we see in other poems, but offers a curse that sounds like a prayer. He prays that the oppressor should know the difference "between the bloodbath and the birthcry" (36). As simple as this difference seems, it appears the oppressor has forgotten about it and that is why he pursues his cruel acts relentlessly. It is also important for the oppressor to know the difference "between the ash and tinders of joy" (40) and "between the cruel scar [inflicted by him] and tattoos of love" (42). And in this knowledge, laughter's fingers will lift the veil of oppression the oppressor has hidden himself in. When the veil is lifted, the oppressor becomes equal with the people he oppresses. At this level, nemesis is wont to catch up with the oppressor.

The last part of the poem presents to us different complexions of laughter, attaching each of them to its functional posture. The first is "a callous laughter / ... / of a

blistering sun" (45-7). This may be the oppressor's laughter because of how inhuman it sounds. The next one is "a lean laughter" (48) which is found in "swaying stem" (49), a metaphor whose import is the unsettled man in the discomfort created by the oppressor. The bees' "pollen laughter" (51) is the laughter of production, of sweet and pleasurable moments ahead. The "gentle laughter" (54) is also that of good life. In the stanzas that follow, the poet concentrates on the healing effect of laughter and ultimately points out that, no matter the situation, "Laughter lives / on the verdant breath of Nature's wings" (67-8).

Raji's duty as a poet is to go into the "breath of Nature's wings" and pluck laughter for humanity and he performs the duty quite well. It is also a duty he re-defines and performs in his fourth volume of poetry, *Lovesong for my Wasteland*. More than anything, Raji establishes himself in this collection as a poet with a deep love for humanity, for people around him, and for his land. He does not claim to carry the gospel of the therapy of laughter to the entire world. He is a poet more sensitive to his immediate environment. His later output may prove this wrong,

though.[1] In A *Harvest of Laughters*, Raji builds a sustainable theme of survival, even in stark situation of penury and oppression, for himself and, above all, for the people of his country ravaged by successive military juntas.

5.2. **The Poet's Advice to the Nation**

Raji is aware that the optimism he offers will be useless if the people do not change their habit and attitude towards the oppressors and towards the rehabilitation of their land. Consequently, in some of his political poems, he dishes out pieces of advice to the people in this respect. His contention is that unless the masses realise their folly, especially in dancing like cowards to the tune of those who seize power to suppress and oppress them, they can never successfully extricate themselves from the grip of military despotism. Such contention is hinged on the functional role of literature in Africa which enables the writer to engage in a useful dialogue with his audience. In his book, *Reading Poetry as Dialogue*, Kimani Njogu posits that

> [the] artist creates from a socio-historical milieu of which he or she is a product and, similarly, the

> addressee is a social product also informed by the socio-historical events with which he or she is in contact. The literary piece, in turn, reshapes the history of the place and time in which it is received. (10)

Such is the phenomenological basis for the dialogue that goes on between the writer and his audience, whether targeted or not.

In *Lovesong*, after tracing the painful history of plunder, the poet consistently urge the people to drop their old habit of being lackadaisical about the affairs of their land and take full interest in their land since it is the only land they have. He, in the fourteenth verse, calls on those who will join him in the enterprise of emancipating the land to desist from the idea of trivialising the duty. He instructs, "LET THOSE WHO WOULD FOLLOW / Forget the sense of an ending, we have not started" (1-2). It is also pertinent that they should not entertain any fear of falling down, because they have started and all they need is to be on a sound footing. He accuses the people of not being aware of current realities since they live "Ten decades behind the present" (6). They must come to know the present before they can be fully engaged in the duty of shaping a suitable future.

Which is why in verse fifteen, he admonishes his country people:

> STEP INTO YOUR NEW SELVES WITH NEW HEARTS
> Embrace the ground beneath like a virgin bride (1-2)

The duty calls for people who have understood themselves and have possessed new hearts. This sounds like the biblical baptism that renews and empowers a person to face greater spiritual challenges. The humility and submissiveness of the virgin bride is also needed for successful pursuance of this self-given goal.

The singer-persona continues his admonition to his country people in verse sixteen. The encouragement this time is for the people to "FORGET THE SLOW FACE OF SLOTH AND SORROW" (1). The past should be left behind and whatever pains emanating from the destruction of the past should not stand as a wedge to the progress of this song that also has the phenomenal duty of shaping the future. "*Prime tomorrow with the colour of work*" (2), he admonishes. Without hard work needed to rebuild the destroyed nation, the future may not take shape. Raji's image of destruction in this verse is seen in

"*bazaar of bastard*" (3), capturing the kind of unrestricted greed and glee with which the past leaders feasted on the resources of the nation, almost appropriating them to their personal uses. The singer-persona's advice to this generation is that people "*...must grow new hearts of steel / And maybe a new definition of love...*" (6-7). Love, now a motif that replaces the Rajian laughter in this volume, is what this generation needs to advance the rebuilding of a terribly destroyed land. In this shift of idiom, Raji stands out as a poet who is "the sensitive part of his society and he articulates its joys and sorrows" (Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination* 35).

"BUT I HAVE LEARNT THE REWARD OF PATIENCE" (1), a line beginning verse thirty-one, replaces the memories of havoc with that Raji's belief in a tomorrow. "My refuge is in songs / laced with the laughter of blades" (2-3). The image created here brings out the confrontational nature of the poet; yet he does not subscribe to making "*melodies with bullets*" (4), which means the demonstrations and upheavals that will amount to insurrections. In other words, he calls for a non-violent action; or, rather, the Gandhian dialectical resistance

based on self-respect and self-discipline (see, for instance, Okolo 50-53). It is the patience that allows the human spirit to gather against injustice and move for peaceful cleansing that he needs. He is concerned about the kind of resistance that builds within a man and creates reasonable logic and conviction in the man as to his standing against the evil in the society. Raji's gospel here is that fighting for freedom from the clenches of the dictator should be philosophical enough so as not to evoke senseless fighting and destruction.

In this verse, Raji reverses Soyinka's lamentation that his generation is a wasted one when he points out that "No more the wasted generation / We must seize the day and wring the neck of night" (8-9). Only the inhabitants of the land can redefine and redirect their future. It is only by themselves they can craft "the story of new loves, new lives, and a new World" (12), which are certainly essential for the progress of the nation.

The singer-poet again concentrates on the oppressor in verse thirty-two. Here, the dictator speaks of the kind of destructive love he has for the land and his modus operandi in plundering the land. He is not given to patience. Haste and

greed are in fact what make him a dictator who oppresses people. His love for the land is “malarial” (3) and he thrives on the people’s blood. He possesses a “crocodile pouch” (6), a symbol of destructive consumption, and he makes sure that it is always filled with what he can wangle from the people, be it their flesh or their blood. He goes on:

> I asked the gods to take my sight and sharpen my teeth
> That I may descend and rob the earth in my canine softness (7-8)

In all his endeavours, he is out to make sure that the land surrenders to his expansive wickedness. Raji writes of the dictator’s tactics as those of “the colonial angel” (10) capturing the wit and the clever exploits of the colonial leaders in colonising Africa. It is with that kind of passion that the dictator wants to possess the land. Needless to say, the militarisation of the system is a continuation of colonisation the difference being that the former has home-based actors.

The singer-persona goes on, in verse thirty-three, to present himself as a figure of optimism. “But it’s about myself in you that I speak / Black, Male, Female, Child, preferably African” (3-5). Already, he is an incurable optimist and he

desires that he be seen in his fellow African people. He resists what he terms “the leisure of lazy interpretation” (8) which, at worst, elicits dismal predictions on the land. Despite the past havoc and today’s difficulties, the singer-persona’s desire is that his “generation shall begin a new correspondence with itself” (13). He calls for a concerted effort to revive the land in its African mirthful essence and recreate the warmth of brotherhood. When this is done, those who think there is no tomorrow for the land will be disappointed.

In the last verse in this section, the singer-persona is set to move ahead from the havoc of yesterday and the reality of the movement as “the ready feet of Dawn” (6) calls him for a new and constructive future. He calls on his people, the inhabitants of the land, to come and create “the bedrock of waking in this river of thirst” (8). Out of the river that runs with thirst they must step so as to find their feet in the forward march to a new future. Raji’s songful motif surfaces here. The people have to forget the past, put destruction behind them and move ahead as they “*Invoke the humour of the wise...*” (12). This is Raji’s

gospel of a new Nigeria. It is his way of offering a new metaphor for his nation's self-definition and self-renewal.

Verse thirty-five centres on those who ought to lead the society out of chaos but fail to dream dreams for the land. "AND THE FATHERS OF SECRETS CAST A SPELL / Into future's eyes. All they see is Deceit, sister of Lies" (1-2). They do not have a vision because they have missed the mission they ought to have pursued. The remaining lines of this verse point out the laziness and apparent sense of loss that the people have. It is when they feel hungry that they "talk of rains long imagined" (4). And "the king's men" (7), acolytes of the oppressor, are always there to "...mumble an abundance of promise / When famished children howl through empty nights" (7-8). Yet the singer-persona pursues his optimism. Their lack of belief in tomorrow only amuses him. He takes his position, which is different from theirs, because he sees himself as the oracle of the society.

And in the next verse, he reiterates his determination to pursue his goal alone:

> ALL
> all alone

I make my journeys
in tune with a multitude of winds (1-4)

No doubt he has seen and known of the "indelible marks of rogues" (5), an image that shows the extent to which his land is plundered. He knows quite well how the land is dispossessed. He is, however, determined to face the business of rebuilding it alone. It is a task that he has chosen for himself.

To those who are too lazy to follow the noble course he has chosen, he tells the truth in the verse that follows. They are living in "the forge of tears" (2), not ready to come out and emancipate the land. He puts forward a significant proverb for them whose import is that except they build, they do not have a place to live in, and they cannot reap what they have not sown:

The child who gathers imaginary steaks and snails
Will have his supper in a dream of suspended meat
(3-4)

Raji's anger and frustration, as a poet, is not only directed towards those who dispossess the land, but also against those who are suffering from the consequences of the dispossession and do not have the courage and will-power to rebuild the land.

His anger towards the impotent ones comes out clearer in the next verse:

> *In the middle of a season*
> *what should the farmer [do] in the absence of rain:*
> *burn the wilting seed,*
> *irrigate the mind of Earth or*
> *snore away in the compost of despair*
> (Italics his, 12-6)?

Raji's rhetorical question here is aimed at calling and challenging his fellow countrymen into the actions of rebuilding the land. In the previous lines, the singer-persona laments "the smell of bandits" (9) that rules the air. The people of the land should, however, not lapse into despondency, but rise and take their future in their own hands.

The last verse in this section, quite elaborate, is a build-up on the previous verse. The singer-persona still indicts his fellow inhabitants of the land for worsening their situation instead of remedying it. Obviously, Raji attempts to capture the disillusionment of the post-military era during which – and it lingers till today – major ethnic groups in Nigeria, instead of building the nation out of the havoc of the military era, become embittered and form associations and groups with the aim of seeking for redress as each of them is convinced that it is marginalised. The deliberate and, often, senseless dirges about

marginalisation have not finished yet. Today the government is saddled with the movement for the creation of Biafra. Raji's position is that Nigerians must learn to live beyond this collapse of national psyche. The singer-persona vehemently takes the stand that "I won't, I can't dance in this arena of slit souls / Where they whisper war into empty bowls" (9-10). Even if the dusk is dying, even if the sun (symbol of vivacity) is sinking, the singer-persona and his children, those he has sold his gospel to successfully, will "embrace the land like a new love" (19). Here is a poet whose nationalist imagination is hinged on what Tanure Ojaide calls the "love of one's country [which] gives rise to ... political poems" (*Winging Words*, 97).

It is with a quotation from Pablo Neruda's "Here I Love You" that Raji opens the last section of *Lovesong*. In a way, Raji's explicit romance with his land essentialised in his political poems here is comparable to Neruda's love poems written for his land instead of a woman. The tones of Raji's verses here are triumphal. The singer-persona has a sense of fulfilment for having given back to his land the hope it has lost, for reviving for the land the future it has almost killed. The

verse that opens this section is one of the finest verses in the volume. Raji continues to deploy agrarian images; the images here are quite blended and engaging. The singer-persona is essentially a farmer who believes in the natural law of sowing and reaping. So far, he has been preparing his land, his soil, with the song of remembrance and hope, trying to build a future out of the wreckage of yesterday. In fact, the entire project of versifying the pains and joys of the land, re-contextualising them in a lucid imagistic realm, designing a programme of action for a new nationalism, amount to toiling in the farm. Now, with a sigh of relief, he says:

> I HAVE BUILT MY TENT
> with straws of supple thoughts
> I have watered my farm
> with sweats of longer days...(1-4)

When a farmer, a husbandman, is so prepared, the season will not take him by surprise. His actions will have a direction and rewards will follow them. He positively foresees the fruits of his labour. Having prepared his home and his soil, he waits “like the groom” (5). His sense of expectation, being likened to that of a bridegroom here, shows that he has fully accomplished his own job of singing the song of hope and survival for his land.

Consequently, he foresees “the fullness of a generation in the loin of [his] song” (6). A greater sense of expectation is seen in these metaphors of name: he is “the breakfast glee” (7), the “millet memory” (8), and the “Sorghum son” (8), sown to the land, awaiting the coming of the rain. Here, we see the limitation of the singer-persona. While he can prepare his land and himself in expectation of the rain, he has no power to make the rain. He is human like us, but a patriotic one.

Verse forty-one focuses on the land as a prepared bride. “AND SUDDENLY MY LAND BECOMES A BRIDE AGAIN” (1). Is the singer-poet, as a groom, meeting this bride? He romanticises the land “Dressed like the garden of Arcadia” (5). He invokes the mountain and the valleys to the name of the land. He goes on, calling on the fullness of nature:

> Let the evening sun rise in gold, in your name
> Walk in beauty like the deer among hogs
> The forests proclaim your antimony of flesh...
> (8-10)

The lines above do not only show the beauty of the land, but also the fertility as well as the natural resources the land is endowed with. The singer-persona refers to the land as a “woman, wife, mother, [and] lover...” (11). It is pertinent to

mention here that Raji in his recent love poems, both the ones encountered here, and those that have appeared in his poetry column, "Songscape", in a national daily, gives his land a feminine image.[2] The kind of closeness he feels to a woman is what he feels to his land. Thus he is perpetually in love with the land. The reason for this love is seen here:

> For Love is the only language I know
> In a season of parched promises and shrunken memories
> Love is the caprice of remembrance, the remedy of forgetting (16- 8)

This kind of love heals. Raji considers himself a patriotic poet whose energies are channelled to healing the land of the wounds inflicted on it by the past military dictators. He will not, like many people in the land, dismiss Nigeria and choose to forget her as a nation.

Raji's incurable desire to see his land survive and grow against all odds is seen in verse forty-two. He has

> A MOUNTAIN OF DESIRES
> to grow where the rain fails
> to live where death thrives.
> Valleys of valiant longings
> To rise with the beauty of dawn
> To strike Spring where they worship Drought (1-5)

Nobody can be more sanguine about the survival of his land than the singer-persona here. Even if nature fails him, he still has a hope in the land. The natural phenomena that fail to come today will certainly come tomorrow. This dream of tomorrow, "like a meadow" (8), is inherent in Raji's theme all the time.

The next verse is directed to the inhabitants of the land who may not understand the singer-persona. It appears they have not fully come to team up with him. Hence, he asks

> DO I SPEAK IN SWEAT, SO FURIOUSLY, YOU
> DON'T UNDERSTAND
> Or I speak in song where nobody cares for simple
> symphonies?" (1-2)

He keeps (from the beginning of the volume) wondering why they do not understand his course. He laments that "Men have lost all; no flare in their eyes / No eyes in their heads..." (3-4). But he, as a singer, has his eyes, his senses and his voice. Even when people are dying, he thinks and sings of renewal. His testament as a singer of hope is seen in these loaded lines:

> To be counted with the living
> To live in hope and laughter of coming rains
> To take the path of fire and forget despair
> To become finder of footprints and new loves
> I make the pledge and think in colours of rebirth
> *Nothing's worse than self-inflicted nightmare*

(10-15)

That is why he dreams. He wishes that other men should resurrect from their spiritual deaths and join him in this enterprise of moving the land from the terrible stage of self-inflicted nightmare.

In the next verse, he continues to tell us why he sings and cries and sounds "*like the ancient cock*" (10). He says, "*It is because I know all the truth and all the lie*" (12). He understands the land, his lover, more than anyone. And it is also the reason he has to discern a dream "*Between darkness and daylight*" (4); and to have to survive and flourish "*between the lovely night and nightmare*" (6). His dream of tomorrow seems to be a potent one.

The last verse of *Lovesong* carries natural images that are seasonally there, awakening a man's sense to the continuity of life. The singer-persona sees himself thus:

> I WILL BE WATER
> I will be fire
> I will be one with Earth
> Where the rainbow breaks
> there you will find me
> Where the sun strikes there I will be...
> When the moon beckons the sea to a duel
> Of love, work and play I will be there (1-8)

He will therefore continue to live. At this time, his voice becomes the voice of the land that is now a new bride. And we see the avowal of the land to exist despite all the problems it has gone through. Nigeria is clearly depicted here. Despite the pre- and post-June 12 elections that suffocated the nation with so many wayward, inflammable words and actions, Nigeria continues to exist as one nation even to the chagrin of Nigerians themselves.[3] Lesser problems have torn other countries apart. But Nigeria is resilient in its resolution to be a nation.

Raji admires the oneness of Nigeria. And his major thematic concern is to let Nigerians know that the land still has its value; it is still fertile and a fruitful tomorrow is ahead despite the problems Nigeria has gone through. His advice to Nigerians which is seen in the running motif in this volume is this:

> *Forget the slow faces of sloth and sorrow*
> *Do the work and wait for the laughter of tomorrow*
> (12-3)

It must be a collective effort. Everyone has to begin to work, and not to laze about, lamenting the plunder of yesterday or the difficulty of today. It is not certain whether the people have

taken this advice or not. Raji should have ended the volume the way it begins, bringing in the voices of Takie, Gambia and Asabi (the voices of the people) to react to the songs of the survival and hope sung by the singer-persona. The singer-persona is, in anyway, triumphal in his songs. That he sees himself as a groom and the land as a bride signifies that the land has the hope to survive beyond yesterday and today.

5.3. **Conclusion**

What we have done in this chapter is an exploration of an important theme in Raji's political poetry, which is the optimism that runs through his poetry. Concentrating on *A Harvest of Laughters,* his first collection, we have seen Raji's idiom of what we commonly know as laughter through which he conveys his theme of optimism to the people who are seemingly thrown into gloom and doom by the successive military juntas that held sway in Nigeria within the decades from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. In his *Lovesong for My Wasteland*, we encounter Raji's admonition of his people who should, as a matter of urgency, abandon their slothful habit and become

serious about building their nation. He points out that the nation belongs to all of them and except all hands are on deck, as it were, the nation may not be salvaged from the dictatorship of the military. So, it can be generally summed up that there is transcendence from mere depiction of the evils of the military to the offer of hope for the people in Raji's political poetry. In Raji's heart is the overwhelming love for his nation and it is this love for his nation that makes him an impassioned political poet.

Notes

1.Indeed, from being sensitive to his immediate environment, Raji has taken his imagination to a transnational level. This transnational imagination is what he explores in his volume, *Shuttlesongs: America – A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003). For a critique of this transnational imagination, see Sule E. Egya "Transnational Imagination: Remi Raji's Poetic Travelogue". *Nasarawa Journal of Humanity* 1.3. (2007).

2. Remi Raji, at the time this work is being done, writes a poetry column in *The Sun* newspaper. Entitled "Songscape", most of the poems that appear in it are, like Pablo Neruda's poems, love poems for the poet's country.

3. On June 12, 1993, Nigerians went out en masse to vote late Chief Moshood Abiola as a president. It was said to be the freest and fairest general elections Nigeria had then, but the then military dictator, General Babangida annulled the elections to the shock of Nigerians. Thereafter, Nigeria was thrown into chaos as a result of protests and demonstrations.

Chapter Six

AESTHETICS IN RAJI'S POETRY

6.0. **Introduction**

Although this research work explores Raji's social commitment as a political poet, it is pertinent to discuss Raji's aesthetics as a poet because poetry – distinguished from other writings – is a phenomenon of beauty, requiring the writer to be sensitive to the language, style and literary devices he uses to express his thoughts. Part of the impetus for this work is the recognition of Raji's remarkable poetics that marks him out as an outstanding political poet of the new generation of Nigerian poets. He is not only conscious of his style, the accessibility of his language and the literary devices at his disposal as a poet, he is also conscious of the oral rhetoric of the Yoruba language, his mother tongue, which he infuses into his poetry to achieve poetical eloquence. Following the tradition of bringing African oral literature and the Western written literature into synthetic fusion already laid down by great African poets and writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphalele, Kofi Awoonor, Niyi Osundare and many others, Raji writes poetry

that is stylistically linked to his Yoruba roots. In this chapter, therefore, an attempt is made to examine, with textual examples, Raji's deployment of literary devices, musical effects, and his sourcing of material from the Yoruba orature.

6.1. **Form and Structure of Raji's Poetry**

It is needless to say that, like most African poets, Raji writes in blank verse. But as Dasylva and Jegede have pointed out in their *Studies in Poetry*, "[f]ree verse does not suggest metric liberty, it simply means that the control of the verse is informed by the poet's own emotion or stream of consciousness and not by an external order or rule" (21). Raji's poems do not exhibit any evidences of external prescription in the form of metrical feats or rhyming schemes, but the internal rhythms are discernible by any keen reader of poetry. In the first poem in his first collection, *A Harvest of Laughters*, we notice the internal rhythm; a good ear can hear the falling and rising, and the assonated syllables when these lines are read aloud:

> No, not for me the twilight tales
> of sick knights
> not for me, the wilting metaphors
> of pain-wrights

This shows that Raji is conscious of the arrangement of his words in expressing his thoughts. This rhythm, when deployed skilfully as Raji does in some cases, results in musicality although this cannot happen without the use of other sound effects.

As is demonstrated in his oeuvre, Raji's poems are mostly lyrical, short, either written in stanzas or in run-on lines.[1] They easily come through as songs because of the beats and controlled rhythms. Given the individualistic nature of the lyrical poetry, the personas in the poems often sound like Raji the poet venting his anger on the militarisation of his society. "Cyclone I" in *Webs of Remembrance* is a good example of the witticism and musicality embedded in Raji's lyrical poems:

> Nightmare flickers
> In our twice-thrice-beaten
> Eyes, no more meaning
> In the gram, no gram
> In the grammar of lives
> My pain goes
> Like a stubborn present
> Tense.

Like most of his poems cast in such lyricism, it is not punctuated at the end of the line, thus enabling the lines to flow into one another.

A great deal of lyricism is achieved in Raji's third and fourth collections of poems, which are, as their titles suggest, seen as songs by the poet: *Shuttlesongs: America – a Poetic Guided Tour* and *Lovesong for My Wasteland*. The rhythms and beats are not just heightened, the diction of these collections become softer, fitting into what we may call the 'linguisticality' of song.[2] Quite musical is this example from *Shuttlesongs*:

And that Sunday summer noon
When Katherine suddenly
became a mermaid
Ridin' and rollin' down down the river
Showing us how not to drown
Ridin' and rollin' down down the river
How not to become new legends
In Kalamazoo's native tales...
If the river is not too deep
It is long in breath and brown with age.
Tom was with me, Tom was with her
Two canoes... (18)

The grammatical contractions, the repetitions, the parallelisms, the alliterations, assonances and consonances, and the

limpidity of the imagery all move the poem towards the rhythms and beats of a song. Conscious that he is writing lyrical poems that best sound as songs, Raji, in his author's note to *Shuttlesongs*, says that "I have seen historic places therefore I memorize these into movement of songs..." (vii). The transformation of lyrical poems into songs is not peculiar to Raji's poetry alone. In fact, it has become a trend for Nigerian poets, since the advent of the Alter-Native tradition, to see poems as songs. The rhythms and diction of poetry thus become patterned in the manner of songs. This tendency to conceive of poems as songs by the poets themselves may not, as the low standard of artistry in contemporary poetry indicates, be of any positive effects on the literary scene because it implies (sometimes erroneously) that the language of poetry has become watery to be appreciated.

Structurally, Raji's poems do not obey any technical rule. In a poem, some lines may be short; others may be long. While some poems, such as "The Agidigbo speaks volume" in *Webs of Remembrance*, are fairly long, Raji's poems are generally short. Perhaps what we may call Raji's longest poem is the prologue to

Lovesong for My Wasteland, which is written in over two hundred lines, and is cast in a dramatic mode. The persona-characters, Gong, Takie, Gambia and Asabi, speak out directly like characters on stage. Raji's poems have internal structures and give the impression of a poet with a good grasp of his trade. By internal structure, we mean the "arrangement of the material or the various elements from which the text is put together and integrated for the purpose of providing a unified vision that underlies the text" (Dasylva and Jegede, *Studies in Poetry*, 21). Through accessible images, Raji presents his ideas selectively, and from one stage to another, especially in his fairly long poems that treat issues at a length. In "Orphan Cry" (in *A Harvest*), for instance, he divides the poem into four parts, each part making a distinct point that is linked with the other parts. The persona is an orphan who, apart from projecting his suffering, presents the anguish of every orphan in Nigeria's streets. In the first part of the poem, the orphan-persona tells of his long suffering under "a generation of spears", referring to the harshness of the society towards those who are not lucky to have parents. In the second part of the

poem, the orphan-persona shifts from his own suffering to that of other orphans like him who are roaming in the streets because the culture of violence in the land denies them parents and the violent "hawks" will not even spare them. In the third part, the orphan-persona calls on other orphans to come together and forge a common ground through which they can turn their woes into fortunes by "[seizing] upon the lemon smell of laughter". And in the final part, Raji, as characteristic of his poetry, presents an orphan-persona, along with his fellow-sufferers, full of optimism for themselves in spite of the terrible realities. In this structure, Raji builds his ideas from hopelessness to hopefulness, a phenomenon that is inherent in his poetry.

6.2. **Language and Style in Raji's Poetry**

As far as the issues of aesthetics are concerned, considering the contradistinction that exists between poetry and other genres of literature, it is germane to our discussion of Raji's aesthetics to say that "the creation of beauty is the main object of poetry" (Egudu, *The Study of Poetry*, 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" (*Reconstructing the Canon*, 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 makes his poems eloquent songs in the ears of the reader.[3]

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 his language is more mature in imagery, a reader does not have to worry about interpreting the surface meaning of the lines.[4] 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*); "it was the dimple breath of dawn / growing deep on my palms like a new love" (taken from "Black laughter" in *A Harvest*); "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*); and "From the seashore and sandsheets of dreams / your eyes show me centuries of journeys" (taken from "Interlude: dance" in *Webs of Remembrance*). 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" (*Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*, 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 this researcher has had to take him to task on the drift in tautened imagery in *Shuttlesongs* (see appendix). It is in this light that the charge of writing in watery literary

language levelled against most political poets in Nigerian literature cannot be brought against Raji. In his book, *Understanding African Poetry*, Ken Godwin calls attention to the declining quality of literary language when he says:

> 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. (xiii)

Godwin's assertion here is part of an on-going debate on the quality of literary language not only in Nigerian poetry, but also in poetry written elsewhere in the world. A number of critics and writers such as Ojaide, Tsenongu, Terhemba Shija, Onoome Okome and Shehu argue that the language of poetry has to be simple in order to embrace large audiences. On the other hands, critics and writers such as Niyi Osundare, Titi Adepitan, Obakanse S. Lakanse and Maik Nwosu 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 pains and anguish of the people in the

society. 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 "[a]s 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 constructs. The following passage, taken from song XII of *Lovesong*, demonstrates the accessibility and the tendency to appeal, which is common to the construction of images 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 just too clear. 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 within the middle ground between complexity and simplicity, Raji achieves an eloquence that draws audiences to his poetry and nudges such audiences towards a mental activity required in fully appreciating the condensed language of poetry.

6.3. **Literary Devices in Raji’s Poetry**

The poet essentially conveys his messages through images. 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 messages, 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 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" (*Understanding Poetry*, 34). The images a writer chooses, therefore, determine the dynamism of his dialogue with his audience. Ayi Kwei Armah, known for his skilful use of imagery, says that "Imagery 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" (*The Eloquence of the Scribes*, 287). In the formation of 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 foregrounds the image, and since Raji's themes are mostly political, presenting the plight of the masses and the cruelty of those who cause the suffering, the images are mostly unpleasant in the sense that they are conjured to evoke in the reader sympathy for the masses and

hostility towards the oppressors. Raji, through his imagery, attempts to present very clear pictures of oppression. A very common feature in Raji's deployment of imagery is the use of animals to represent the oppressor-figure. In *Webs of Remembrance*, easily his best 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 physiology – not completely birds and not completely four-footed animals. Raji's symbolism means 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". 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", written for Jack Mapanje, 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" (in *A Harvest*) 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. While such representations of the oppressor in heinous animals run through Raji's oeuvre, let it be pointed out that 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 encapsulate the nature of the oppressor. In her *Comparative Studies in African Dirge Poetry*, GMT Emezue points out that the new poets use such images because their poetry largely laments, meaning that "[the] tendency to load enemy with all kinds of negative images has become a continuing tradition with most poetry of lamentation" (133).

Raji screens and prunes his images, giving a sense of purity and clarity. This is why Niyi Osundare talks of the "limpidity" of his imagery ("Soyinka and the New Generation"

4). This requires skills in using words, which Raji possesses, judging from his poetic output. Consider this example from "Endless wondering" (in *A Harvest*) 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, unstained, is presented of a beautiful woodwork created by the arch-creator. Referring to the greatness of the Library of Congress, Raji writes, (in *Shuttlesongs*, 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 special skills the poet has in choosing the appropriate words to paint a picture for the reader.

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 Remberance*), with "rape' representing plunder; "But we kill our own suns with

hurtful glee" (Song V, *Lovesong*), with "suns" representing the cream of the society; "where a padlock / in every mouth / solves a mystery / of rude ravings" ("Silence" in *A Harvest*), with "padlock' representing the silencing of people's speech and consciences; and "New York New Amsterdam / Nobody bites the Big Apple / and remains the same" (*Shuttlesongs*, 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, thus substantiating Gabriel Okara's assertion that "It is the Word [the poet] uses as tool to bring about the transformation and regeneration of the present to meet the demands of his society" (*The Dreamer*, 82).

Raji does not deploy simile in the same frequency he uses metaphors. Simile, which when over-used may betray immaturity in poetic language, is found sparsely in Raji's poetry.[5] 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 honour by the king or the queen for their achievement. 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, *Lovesongs*, 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 – which are 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*, 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*, 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 apostrophes. 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*), Raji, 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*), where Raji, in a rare 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*, 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 latest 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 internationalized by Eliot" (See appendix).

In *Shuttlesongs*, 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*), 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*), 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.

As a poet with a distinct sense of musicality, 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 Egudu, *The Study of Poetry*, 53); or Paul Valery's description of the Symbolist Movement that its chief task was "to take back from music what poets had lost to it"

(Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism*, 9). 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 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.

6.4. **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" (*Contemporary Nigerian Poetry*, 11). This assertion is not only true about poets and writers in Nigerian literature today, but a critical assessment of the poetry being written today shows that some poets are conscious of their orature and make attempts to constantly return to the orature to seek inspirations in their craft.[6] It is, as it were, a way of domesticating the craft. 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 Tanure Ojaide calls "a symbiotic relationship between the oral and the written" (*Poetic Imagination*, 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 cannot be far removed from the 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 poeticisation of the Yoruba orature and bucolic society is yet unparalleled in Nigerian literature. 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*, a sequence of poems written about his first trip to the United States, Raji, aligning his themes with the slavery and oppression in the past of Africa, 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's 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! (See appendix)

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 US, Raji, in *Shuttlesongs*, uses the popular Abiku spiritism in Yoruba land to imagise 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. There is therefore a sense in which a common adversity can unite a people.

In most cases, speech wisdom in Yoruba land, 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 songful 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 Ogboni confraternity of Yoruba land. In “The Agidigbo speaks volume”(*Webs of Remembrance*), Raji idiomatises “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* 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 Yoruba land); 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. Furthermore, they reinforce the need for the poet to discover his roots, as Christopher Okigbo has done in his poetry, before he is able to rise against the social maladies of his nation.

6.5. **Conclusion**

Our purpose in this chapter has been to prove the artistic maturity of Raji as a poet. Given his tutelage at the Poetry Club at University of Ibadan, and given his ardent pursuit of the art of poetry culminating in four significant volumes of poetry, the maturity of Raji's craft as a poet is unchallenged, as we have thus far shown. Though his poems take diverse forms and structures, they are intensely crafted with the conscious use of literary devices on the part of the poet and his sense of artistic domestication. As a poet, Raji feeds from the orature of the Yoruba where he hails from and speaks to the world in a voice that is distinctly Yoruba and, ipso facto, African. Following the tradition of reaching the common people entrenched in Nigerian poetry by the Osundare-Ofeimun generation, Raji, who can easily be seen as a poetic child of that generation, opts

for soft imagery and a tender, musical language for versification. The result is that he evolves a lyricism through which he takes a swipe at the activities of the oppressors in the society and offers optimism to the victims of oppression in his society.

Notes

1. It is pertinent to point out that the poem is becoming short and shorter in Nigerian literature today. Structurally, it is a safe assumption to say that the narrative poem is dying, though poets like Ogaga Ifowodo (see *Mandiba*) and Maik Nwosu (see *Suns of Kush*) have a penchant for writing long, arguably narrative poems.

2. There is evidently a difference, in matters of diction, between the language of a poem and that of a song. For an insightful explication of this difference, see Odia Ofeimun's interview titled "Truth and the Language of Poetry" published in *Prism*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001.

3. Raji, himself, says, "[a] poem is measured speech. Measured, advanced, laced with rhythm, with a lot of passion" (see appendix). What this entails is that the poet must choose his words carefully, having beauty as the primary purpose of the craft.

4. 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) and *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2006). There is, I have argued now and then, 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. See appendix.

5. 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.

6. As the African literature written in English grows, writers and poets, in spite of postcolonial 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” (“Earth and Sound: The Place of Poetry”, 173-4).

Chapter Seven

7.0. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research work has been to locate and canonise Remi Raji's poetry within the mainstream of literature of social commitment in Nigeria. A dominant tradition that is seen through this literature is the writer's utmost desire to commit his art to the welfare of the state. In doing so, he positions his art between the people and the Establishment, rising against the latter on behalf of the former. This we have seen in the first generation of modern Nigerian literature and in the second generation.

This tradition becomes even more dominant in Raji's generation as Unoma Azuah, in an interview, has pointed out that "The 3rd generation of Nigerian writers have had to deal with disillusionment in every aspect of the Nigerian state, especially political" (24). The political theme of this generation often captures the years of despondency occasioned by the almost thirty years of military rule in Nigeria. Because of the impact of this military despotism on the generality of Nigeria, and because of the poet's urge to readily respond to the iniquity

of the society, political poetry becomes prominent in this generation. Raji, as a third generation poet, has distinguished himself in this enterprise and that is what this work has attempted to project.

Having produced four volumes of poetry, with the nationalist imagination powering his vision, which rests on a good understanding of his nation's past and an optimistic insight into the destiny of his nation, Raji has become a formidable voice in recent Nigerian poetry. He pursues his vision with significant ardour in imagery. The first thing that will interest a reader of Raji' poetry is the eloquence Raji brings into harnessing words to create sharp and incisive images either in attacking the bad leaders or in sympathising with those who are oppressed. The poet is both concerned with the plight of the ordinary citizenry and the writers/journalists, that species of the society's elite who cannot keep silent in the face of oppression.

The interpretative approaches we have used in this work are Marxism and New Historicism. Raji's aesthetics of resistance – and, indeed, that of other poets writing in Nigeria

today – can effectively be understood through the application of the tenets of Marxism. To begin with, the poet himself stands out as a person whose consciousness has been widened to the extent that he no longer wants to stomach the incurable ineptitude of the military despotism. Out of this consciousness and an abiding zeal to fight the status quo, the poet sings his songs, as it were, which are full of criticism and satire against the oppressor. The poet's intention is to let his audience know of the evils that are responsible for the country's stagnation and, thereafter, present a hope through which the people can glimpse the bright future ahead. For Raji, "the journey is certainly from the darkness to light" (*Sou'wester*, 12). This Marxist literary enterprise cannot be devoid of New Historicism, which may be seen as the historicising aspect of Marxism. Through this method, we are able to delineate the effect of historical facts on Raji's poetry and vice versa. Raji's large claim is that he writes poetry for the sake of his nation and he minces no word about what he sees as "the possibilities of connecting poetry and pure nationalism" (*Sou'wester*, 10). This is why his poetry carries a large chunk of Nigerian history of

subjugation by protracted military dictatorship. In *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, Karl Maier, a journalist who, like Raji, takes an interest in Nigerian history, dwells on the failure of Nigeria to be a true nation as a result of military oppression. Raji's political poetry attempts to historicise this moral and political collapse in Nigeria and our contention here is that he has done it so well that his poetry has come to deserve this critical attention.

We have pointed out that Raji begins his enterprise by defining himself and understanding the vision before him. To this extent, he sees himself as the bearer of the therapeutic laughter that has come to become a vital metaphor in the summation of his poetic vision. Laughter is a metaphorical weapon not only for the poet, but also for those who suffer along with him, with which they can go through the socio-political harshness of their society. His social vision is to see himself and his people, the common masses, enduring with the kind of laughter that disarms the oppressors' stings and shows them a direction ahead of the dictators' oppression. We therefore dwell a great deal in Raji's idiom of laughter which he

uses as a handle for ploughing from pessimism to optimism through the rough terrain of dictatorships in his society. Raji's poetic attack on the past military leaders, as seen in *A Harvest of Laughters* and *Webs of Remembrance*, cuts him out as the openly bitterest poet. In the two collections, Raji's tone is, first, that of anger and combat and, second, that of a belief in tomorrow that will certainly come at the end of the bleak period. This is the vision of transcendence in Raji's political poetry.

His most recent volume, *Lovesong for my Wasteland*, presents a Raji more invigorated to pull his society out of its stagnancy with stronger poetry of optimism. The thematic thrust is that the havoc of yesterday perpetrated by the leaders who are inept and mindless in their governance does not – and should not – bring down the nation into the kind of collapse that it shall not be able to move ahead. Raji, like Cesaire and Brutus, considers himself as a poet imbued with patriotism whose land is his lover and he stands to protect her jealously.

This work presents Raji in totality as a political poet. Running themes and motifs in his collected poems show that he

is a poet conscious of his vision in seeing the suffering ones in his society given succour. A basic point of conclusion is that Raji is a poet who cannot be ignored in our canon of contemporary Nigerian poetry. In fact, he stands out prominent as a political poet because of his highly developed poetics, his social vision and considerable output. This research work has tried to bring this out as a contribution to the study of political poetry in Nigerian literature, African literature and the world literature at large.

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Interview with Remi Raji

Sule: I'd like you to talk about your life generally. How you started and got into poetry.

The Poet: I was born in 1961, in Ibadan. I went to primary school at a place that's just a few meters away from my home, in southeast Ibadan. I finished elementary school in 1973 and entered secondary school the same year. I finished secondary school in 1979. My primary school is an Islamic mission school, Nurul Islamiyya Primary School. My secondary school is called Holy Trinity Grammar school, sponsored by the Anglican mission. I moved on to Olivet Baptist High School, Oyo for the Higher School Certificate. I entered the University of Ibadan in 1981 to study English, with secondary emphasis on Theatre Arts and Communication Arts. After finishing in 1984, I had the mandatory National youth service year in Lagos State, before returning to Ibadan for my Master's degree between 1985 and 1986. I had a two months' stint at the Rivers State College of Education in 1987. I returned to Western Nigeria to take up my first full job as a teacher at the old St. Andrews' College, Oyo. From St. Andrews, I moved to Ogun State University and to the Obafemi Awolowo

University, Ife, before I was practically encouraged to take up a teaching job at the University of Ibadan in 1995.

Sule: Within those periods, when did you start writing?

The Poet: To put a thumb on the date, I'll say precisely the very week I completed my West African School Certificate examination, I think May or June of 1978. Before then I'd been involved in musical compositions, first as part of a cultural routine and later as a semi-formal activity, becoming the leader of a youth musical group specially formed for Ramadan festivals.

Sule: Are you a Muslim?

The Poet: I was born into a Muslim family but I grew up in a religiously diverse society which favoured understanding and true tolerance the sort of which is lacking in many parts of the world now. But I will also say that my temperament or creed is now larger than any religion.

Sule: Certainly, you're not an atheist, are you?

The Poet: Atheism is certainly not the only option left if one chooses not to be either Muslim or Christian. There are other religions with codes and mantras which I know emphasize the belief in the Supreme

Being, God. By the way, I emerge from a culture where there is in fact no option to be an atheist.

Sule: Let's go back to poetry, where you began.

The Poet: Oh yes. Between 1978 and 1979, I stayed at home because my result was not that superlative. I didn't want to go the way of my colleagues then, by going to the job market first before returning to school. So, I receded into myself. Mother was surprised that I could stay at home and read my books all over again. But I chose a different course. I registered originally for Science subjects. When I returned to school, I opted for the Arts subjects apart from the compulsory papers in Math and Biology. That was when I took greater interest in "Literature in English" as a subject. So you could say that in reading on my own, I discovered that I had greater latitude to imagine things, interpret ideas and compose without much hope that I must arrive at one single result or equation of things.

Sule: You were at University of Ibadan during the heydays of the famous Poetry Club, led by Niyi Osundare, Harry Garuba and Femi Osofisan. To what extent did the Club influence your being a poet?

The Poet: The Poetry Club was my first entry into a commune of writers who took the industry as play and work. It was the late Sesan

Ajayi who introduced the Club to me in early 1983. I was fully involved in the association that I served as coordinator in my last year at the university. The Club was a foundry where the budding writer was given the opportunity to develop, under very open criticism and correction; it was also an avenue to try the voice on others who were willing to listen. The Poetry Club was a cult for the creative talent in those days, and even those who were mere enthusiasts declared their membership of the club as a matter of pride. It was there that I developed more confidence in what I could do with words, apart from the more formal setting of Creative Writing workshops tutored by both Isidore Okpewho and Niyi Osundare in the Department of English.

Sule: I am aware that the Poetry Club is now dead or, if it exists, what we have of it is the parody of what it used to be during your days as a student. As a lecturer in the same university, what do you think was responsible for the Club's collapse? Don't you think we need such a Club in our institutions of higher learning where English Studies exist?

The Poet: There is no doubt that things have changed but I will not say that the Poetry Club is dead as such. I think its decline is part of

the evidence of the shifting culture of creativity and discourse within the university system. Now, the version of the Club organized by students with little contribution by the staff cannot be as effective and influential as before not only because the real interest in writing, tutelage, and excellence is rare nowadays. What you call the parody is here now because the enabling environment for such extracurricular activity no longer exists on campus. I have reflected deeply on the point where and when the descent in the influence of the Poetry Club occurred, and I have come to the conclusion that the factors responsible for the decline are about logistics, both organizational and social. It will take a new collective of enthusiastic students preferably in their first or second year of study, with full administrative encouragement from the host department, the department of English, to achieve a real revival of the Club.

Sule: When you wrote for the first time, did you have any liberating effect? Like the kind of experience Richard Wright narrated in *Black Boy*.

The Poet: It was liberating. Before then, I'd been reading other people. And I didn't have any privilege of my teachers reading me. So it was precisely very liberating. It's like a woman giving birth to her

first child. I wrote very personal poems. At a very tender age, in secondary school, I started reading Keats and Wordsworth. I didn't know how those books got into my hands because we weren't required to read them. It was when I got to my HSC programme that I started reading them with a purpose because we had to study for Cambridge. That was when I started appreciating the Romantics, the Victorians, and the Augustan writers. My NYSC teacher at Olivet, Mr. Ogbowei, introduced me to those writers.

Sule: As a poet, how do you write? Do you have any rituals?

The Poet: I don't have any rituals per se, apart from the fact that I must have undergone some period of immersion, learning an experience as I meet people, as I play with words. But I certainly have at the back of my mind a vision for writing. I don't just want to express myself for the mere sake of expression! I want to communicate. No, I don't have a particular ritual, and if I may infer from the words of Wordsworth here, I must have undergone some kind of experience, I must have witnessed some kind of phenomenon, then I gather the thoughts and synthesize them in ways that I wish the reader feel the experience with deep emotions, depending on the subject that I'm dealing with.

Sule: Is there any special time you write?

The Poet: I thrive in the night; I'm a nocturnal person. I rarely sleep, and if I do, I probably will be the last in the household. So, when I don't sleep, I take time to write as much as I can before the day breaks. I do not hate the dawn but night is the best time. I also thrive when I'm alone, sometimes in the bathroom.

Sule: It is not new that people write in odd places, is it?

The Poet: Of course it is not. When I became very aware that I was a writer, that's in 1981, I read not just poets and their poems, I also read their biographies and I almost practically imitated them. I imagined that the Romantics writers went into the bush, into the shrubs, and sit on trees. I used to wander into the college pond and my friends would come looking for me.

Sule: I'm not aware that you've published any work in the genres of Fiction and Drama. Have you tried your hand on them before; are you likely to diversify into them?

The Poet: I probably might diversify! Go into writing fiction and stop day dreaming with words! But sure, I wrote short stories of the thriller sort during my school writing workshop days in Okpewho's class. I actually won a Longman Pacesetter award to write a longer

short story, but I didn't. Till date, I have only one of my stories published in a book dedicated to the late Bola Ige. As for drama, I completed two full length plays, but never got around to publishing them. One of the scripts was to be produced for the NTV Ibadan in the mid 1980s but was apparently misplaced by a friend's sister who worked for the television state. I still feel the loss, as I felt losing six of my juvenile poetry.

Sule: Let's talk about reworking poems. For how long do you rework a poem?

The Poet: It depends on the life of each poem. A poem could be ten lines and it would take a week. A poem could be three lines and it would take a year. It depends on the possibilities that the poem provides for you to retouch and to reformulate it. There's no particular time limit for the formation of a poem. What I know is that a poem becomes when it undergoes transformation.

Sule: So, it's not possible for you to write a poem at once and it comes out?

The Poet: I used to believe in that kind of automatic writing. You can get flashes of poetic statements in every day speech as I'm talking to you now. But you can't compose a poem that way. A poem is

measured speech. Measured, advanced, laced with rhythm, with a lot of passion. I don't imagine that I'll just open my mouth and begin to recite immaculate poetry! I'm not close to the talent of Prophet Mohammed, or any of the prophets.

Sule: That brings us to an important point: inspiration. Some poets say there are things that trigger them. Your poems are highly political. What could have inspired them?

The Poet: I don't consider my poems to be mostly political. There are exceptions. There are poems that are political, though. I didn't start as a political poet. If I'm now read as a political poet, maybe the situation in the country or the world has given some kind of label to my poetry. Some part of my imagination is essentially political. Correct. Actually, most of the poems that you find in *Webs of Remembrance* are political. And as I said in the introduction, the inspiration is powered by nationalist imagination.

Sule: Some of your poems in *Webs of Remembrance*, like "Bound to Remember" and "This Land Tickles Me," carry a lot of images of bad leadership and the oppressed masses. I consider these poems and similar others more successful than your non-political poems.

The Poet: Have you been reading my love poems sequence of late?

Sule: In “The Sun” newspaper?

The Poet: Either in “The Sun” or in the collection you’ve mentioned.

Sule: Yes. And I told you I didn’t think your newspaper poems are quite sound.

The Poet: Have you read the one I dedicated to Niyi Osundare and the one to one Helen?

Sule: Oh yes. They can be touching, but they are not, I insist, as strong as the political ones. I think I’m enchanted by the apt images infused in your political poems.

The Poet: Well then, you’re the critic. I admit that. But I want to be seen more like a poet who combines both political and personal themes. Real human themes. Maybe, I’m trying to do the same thing that I’d done for my political poems in my love poems now. I just discover that these poems keep coming. They’re love poems. But this does not mean that I’d abandoned my passion for political themes. It just means that times just provide themselves for particular types of poetry.

Sule: I notice that your collections are all prefaced. And you try to explain the visions you pursue. To what extent do you understand

your own poetry and then to what extent do you think they achieve a particular goal for you?

The Poet: Writing is deliberate. The writer certainly has the option of saying little or more about his writing. I try as much as possible not to say so much about my writing. Maybe one or two sentences about the poems and probably give a hint of the creative process through which some of the poems were launched. I don't expect the critics to believe all that I've said about the poem, but I expect the critics to go beyond that and to even misread the poems. It's possible that the writer's intention may just be inferior to the critic's reading and vice versa.

Sule: I've been quite enthralled by what you call the nationalist imagination. In explaining it, in one of your interviews, you said, "There are levels of nationalism. I mean there are false nationalisms and there are critical nationalisms. The idea was to look back at my country and to do a critique of society because most people, poets, sometimes, try to run away from the possibilities of connecting poetry and pure nationalism." Now I ask, must poetry, a pure product of art be connected to nationalism? In other words, must a poet be concerned about the political issues of his land?

The Poet: I say to you that all great and influential poets connect their imagination to the land, real or imagined, in most cases real and chosen. Whitman, Frost, Milosz, Soyinka, Okigbo, Qing, Tagore, de Souza, Baraka... all of them respond or react to what the land offers or denies. If poetry is a pure product of art, the imagination which enlivens it belongs to a man, a citizen, or subject who must return now and then to the same concerns of temporal and spatial existence. As a writer, I am grounded in the politics of a country which I call my land; ignoring the constant urge to respond to that politics makes me vulnerable as the river without a source. The poet, as the economist, or the physician, must not refrain from dealing with political issues of the land, for that is what qualifies him or her better as a role model for others...

Sule: It appears something has happened to your writing in the gap between *Webs of Remembrance* and *Shuttlesongs.*

The Poet: Well, I can't put a thumb on what has really happened. But it should be shameful if my writing is static. What I know is that I've expanded my horizon. I've seen beyond my immediate environment. I've borrowed from some influences. I learnt from other established, unknown but wonderful writers in Europe, in America, in

Asia. So, do I really know what happened? But I know that there is no clear-cut interregnum between *A Harvest of Laughters* and *Webs of Remembrance*. I wrote the poems of *A Harvest* during the harmattan period of 1996. It took me so much time to finish it. But between 1995 and 1997 I had been collecting materials for my second collections. The poems I wrote in 1995 which didn't get into *A Harvest* found their ways into *Webs of Remembrance*. I completed it in 1999 and did not publish until 2001, the same year *Shuttlesongs* was published. Incidentally, *Shuttlesongs* is a compact exposition of what I experienced indelibly as a traveler through the American landscape in 1999.

Sule: That collection is supposed to celebrate your first landing in the US.

The Poet: If you call that a landing. "Celebrate" will be a flamboyant word. It wasn't a celebration. I was only reacting to an experience and to people who dotted my imagination. It was the first time I would come across cities where you find one museum or the other in a corner of the other street; the first time I would encounter practical details of the history of the transformation of the Africans in the US.

The history that I've read and I've also imparted to my students. I was coming to terms physically with that history.

Sule: And I notice a tone of anti-racism in the poems.

The Poet: What does that mean? Of racism or anti-racism?

Sule: Of anti-racism; you're standing against America's racism.

The Poet: Oh sure. You have to be anti-racist. I can't go to America and begin to look at just one section of the community. I see America as one spiralling land of various multicultural experiences. As I met African Americans, I also met Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans. So I was responding to the whole experience. But I had to feel and speak as an African writer.

Sule: I'd like you to pin down the aim of *Shuttlesongs*.

The Poet: One of the aims is to be the eye or the ear of any other African who wants to visit the very places that I visited. I wanted to make it a pocket gift for those who want to go to somewhere in Cleveland, Ohio or to Niagara Falls or Seneca Falls. You want to come in contact with virtually the same things I experienced and you want to relate that to your own experience. You want to see if there's correlation with what I experienced. The other thing is to point at, in very innocuous, silent, euphemistic manner the contradictions that

bedevil the American landscape. The land of opportunities but where some other people still want. The land that claims to be the land of liberty where some people still walk in chains everywhere.

Sule: It means your perception of America before going changed.

The Poet: It didn't change; it got modified.

Sule: So, will I be right if I say it is for these purposes that the language of *Shuttlesongs* becomes prosaic and the images simplistic?

The Poet: Well, if you say simplistic, then you'll be wrong. The images are simple. I also had a different audience in mind when I was writing it. I wanted people to read it without having metaphors as a wedge between reading and understanding. The metaphors there are however not watery. They are subterranean. How metaphoric will I talk about the problem of misinterpretation of personality in the history of Jamestown or in the history of the African American in contemporary Philadelphia? I tried as much as possible to write it in a free-flowing manner. And don't forget that it's also meant for the American audience. Ironically, against my original intention, it has been received more in America than in Africa. The contemporary American readership of poetry is essentially impatient for meaning if a poem must really mean. They don't want you to go round and round

before you get to the point. Poetry has some kind of urgency about it. It has its own sound bytes.

Sule: What's the concept of the cover page?

The Poet: The concept has a strange and interesting twist to it. I collaborated with the publisher in designing the cover. I wanted to domesticate, or Africanize, the American national colours. You see the book for the first time and you think it is covered with American flag. It's not. Anyway, the main colours of the American flag were appropriated from the traditional and ceremonial colours of one particular group of the original inhabitants, that is, the Native Americans. That was how it was interpreted anyway. I didn't know that until after the book was published! A year ago, I autographed a copy of the book for John Crowe, Professor of English and American literature in California, Irvine. He took a look at the cover and asked me if I had seen the traditional Native American colours before. I said no. Then he showed me the picture in one of his books. There it was, almost very close to the kind of impression that I had suggested to the publisher and the illustrator of the book. It's just mere coincidence. But beyond that, you look at the image of the Statue of Liberty that you think is on the cover. But it's 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!

Sule: In your first collection of poems, *A Harvest of Laughters*, you idiomatise laughter in a rare way. In fact, laughter becomes a running motif in your poetry. What meanings have you associated with laughter?

The Poet: Laughter is perhaps the other activity, apart from speech, which connects the whole of humanity, or which gives us the sense that we are alive to things. The Yoruba suggests that laughter is universal but that reveals only half the fact. There are of course different kinds of laughter for different purposes and intentions. The meanings attached to laughter therefore are varied from poem to poem. But the aspect I am interested in is the idea of the ironic

whereby laughter becomes both a shield and spear in responding to issues.

Sule: You have intended, as explained in your preface, that *Webs of Remembrance* will make the reader remember the terrible years of despondency during military dictatorships in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the people in leadership positions in Nigeria, and, indeed, the generality of Nigerians don't read. In view of this, do you think poetry can attempt to change the status quo in the society?

The Poet: I think that poetry of a particular frame has the potential of causing change even if the change comes slowly. Poetry in the service of other art forms in our contemporary world can. Don't forget that those corrective songs and critical chants which forced tyrants to abdicate and which pushed traitors to commit suicide in the past, are corporate parts of poetry. But at present, it takes a greater zeal to force change through the ritual of words.

Sule: You become quite experimental in your latest volume of poetry, *Lovesong for My Wasteland*. Did you feel a need to deviate from the mainstream?

The Poet: My choice to experiment is obviously a deliberate one. I wanted to introduce the dramatic voice into the poetic imagination.

Choreopoetry is actually not a new thing in Nigerian literary tradition. Odia Ofeimun tried it with success in *Under the African Skies*. Incidentally, I was one of those who "acted" in its production in March 2000, in both Ibadan and Lagos. So *Lovesong* is not much of a deviation as choreographic poetry, but it is a happy departure from the general trend in contemporary Nigerian poetry. For at least two reasons: it is the first poetic text that I know to deal with the subject of national history in a dramatic way; I needed a broad breath to space out the dialectic narrative, and into the episodic verses, I weave the fate of a collective of cultures bound within an African border invented as Nigeria. I make little effort to disguise it. Also, I imagined the text as one string of songs and declarations, a Poem to be read practically at one grip.

Sule: The characters that open the choreopoetry of *Lovesong* are symbolic of the ethnic diversity and multiple opinions existing in Nigeria. Could you explain this?

The Poet: Yes, I think those names reflect the cultural diversity of the land. That's exactly what is meant. I needed different voices to embody the same or similar feeling towards the "historian" or History.

Sule: I do feel that the characters, Gong, Takie, Gambia and Asabi, should have appeared at the end of the volume with a unity of purpose and a determination to rebuild the land. I mean the volume should have ended with their voices as it started with their voices.

The Poet: Well, the structure didn't occur to me that way. Perhaps I wanted to dissolve the voices of the four characters into one indissoluble lyric as a way of achieving the universe of diversity which many patriots dream about for the country. But I can only guess for this work. Its ending might have been structured otherwise, for similar effect.

Sule: T. S. Eliot echoes loudly in your title, "Lovesong for My Wasteland". I'm surprised that you're not afraid of a Chinweizu.

The Poet: No, a Chinweizu or the version of the combative anti-Enlightenment critic of African poetry does not worry me. I think we make so much out of the echoes of Eliot in the title, for beyond that, you will rarely find the usual Anglo-American opaqueness of style which a Chinweizu will kick against in the text itself. But that's not even the deal in my aesthetic transformation. Yet, I think there's no better canonical way to symbolize the imagination of my land in the metaphors already internationalized by Eliot. If I deploy the tropes of

"love" and "wasteland" for a distinctive constructive purpose, if I domesticate them and the reader is touched differently by the power of the metaphors and the message, why worry then?

Sule: I want you to talk about criticism and literature in Nigeria today. Recent events have cropped up a lot of issues that need attention. Everyone cries that there is a dearth of criticisms. What do you think are responsible for this conspicuous silence from the angle of criticism?

The Poet: I think it boils down to the standard of education in the country. What do we teach, especially at the university level? Do we have a sense of history? Do we go to the past and pick things that will give us good ideas of what literary criticism is? Do we know the functions or nature of literary criticism? Do we choose the right and appropriate texts for students to read? When we don't live up to the expectation of teachers and we don't have this sense of history of criticism and literature at the back of our minds, then it becomes difficult for us to develop the tradition of good criticism. And as one of my professors once said, good writing and good criticism are two sides of the same coin. So, if you don't have good critics, you'll not have a good crop of writers, because both groups will have to thrive

on each other. The problem is that many of our writers that are critics have had to find their ways out of the country. So, when they left, there was a sudden vacuum and people who are probably not well trained had the immediacy of confronting the situation and the problems became daunting. And these writers who went out became appropriated, especially the successful ones among them.

Sule: What do you mean by becoming appropriated?

The Poet: I mean we have a situation whereby a successful writer living abroad gets renamed. For instance, there is the designation, "Nigerian-born British writer" or "British writer of Nigerian parentage." You wonder at which point the transnationalism is merely another way of enlarging the lapse or diminishing the character of the Nigerian literary tradition. Unfortunately, the institutional agencies which are supposed to redress the drain are not really bothered; there are very rare opportunities available to Nigerian writers at home, to excel, and to work in very comfortable or inspiring way.

Sule: Tade Ipadeola once said that most of these Nigerian writers and critics go abroad and become unproductive. He particularly pointed out that none of them could be as productive as Odia

Ofeimun both in quality and quantity. Maybe, they're producing things we can't see here. Take the critics, for example, is it not possible for them to be there and still make vital statements about our literature?

The Poet: Don't forget that different societies create different demands on the writer. When you're in the country, you have the writing audience but the channels may not be available to you. Abroad, the possibility is that the channels are available to you, but you may not have the audience. The audience may want anti-political writing from you; they want you to talk about when raffia palm was your main dress; when raw, uncooked food was your staple food. They give you the impression that when you cannot create an aura of the magical African environment, you become irrelevant. But don't forget also that writers thrive depending on their ability, or their luck, or what providence provides for them. There are writers who find themselves at the right place at the right time. There are also writers who go abroad and find themselves in the most unproductive environment whereby they'll be dealing with issues of survival, just as many of us here. I have considered myself lucky. I have not been too especial, I have not been too brilliant than the others. I have set my

hands on the plough, as they say, and I don't think I'm going to look back. I take on each opportunity to prove that I can be better than previous work or appearance. I have chosen to meet all the challenges of writing in both productive and unproductive spaces. Even when it was not fashionable to call yourself a writer – I mean during the Abacha regime – some of us still trudged on. A writer must always be at alert, both as a political animal and as an aesthetic animal.

Sule: The literature of the first generation and the second generation survived mostly on the healthy polemics between the writers and the critics. I recall Chinweizu versus Soyinka. We don't have such things these days and it appears our writers – even the readers – are too negatively sensitive to criticisms. The few voices that can be heard are often denigrated. The line of thought now is that except you're a creative writer, you're just talking nonsense by criticising.

The Poet: The struggle between the writer who considers himself as an angel and the critic considered as the devil has been a long battle. It didn't just start in our generation. There was also Soyinka versus the Ife-Ibadan Marxists. It has always been so. It's just that we have very few critics around in the Nigerian literary tradition now. A critic must always be alert, even if he makes mere hypothetical statements.

There is one critic to about five writers who want to scream at him. So, a good critic must not just be a niggling faultfinder, but also someone who had done his homework so that he stands his ground against the emotional self-righteousness of the writer.

Sule: I also see that writers of today are against theories. They think these theories are Western lots meant to misdirect our literature.

The Poet: Any writer who goes against theories is, himself, suffering from *anti-theoreticism* which is theory on its own. Those who say that are either ignorant or deficient. I don't really see any problem with learning to drive a car and then engaging in the activity of driving it. You can't say that you don't need to study how to drive a car. Literary theory and creative writing should be complementary. But it's also up to the writer who feels he doesn't need the support of the theory.

Sule: And now we turn to self-publishing. Errors in self-publishing.

The Poet: Self-publishing is not an evil in itself. It's a whirlwind that comes with the good and the bad. It depends on how the energy of self-publishing is harnessed. It is not limited to developing nations. There is self-publishing in the UK, in China and in the US. But what do we put into those books? It is not just the covers; it is not the publishers who will put those things there for you. And so if you pick

about four or five collections of poetry or novels from the same region and you find errors that are so simple and unforgivable...

Sule: Do you then blame the authors. The authors claim that they've put in their imaginative stuff. And it's the duty of the editor to edit. They've exonerated themselves.

The Poet: How many authors take into consideration the work of the editor? We're talking about self-publishing. What most of them do is to package their works, give them to publishers, pay the percentage of a certain amount and the works are published in two or three weeks because they want to meet up to some kind of deadline. The editor is killed, dead. The writer is alone; he does his role. Have you seen any one in this country who says his main job is editing, except in journalism?

Sule: You're indicting the authors, then.

The Poet: I'm not just indicting the authors; I'm saying that all of us should take the subject and the activity of writing as serious as possible. Just the same way I'll advise a medical doctor to take the idea of extricating a malignant tumor out of somebody's brain serious as possible because it is a dangerous but possibly rewarding service.

Sule: Given the brouhaha about the NLNG Nigeria Prize for literature, and the consequent denigration of the writings of our generation by Osundare, Charles Nnolim and Tanure Ojaide, do you think the Nigerian literature today is as poor as people see it?

The Poet: I have had occasions to look critically at some of the statements by the older writers. And I'm beginning to see that there is a lot of self-examination that we need to do as writers of the new generation. You can't come up and say that you've written 2000 poems in two weeks. And you want to publish them and then you accuse those past generations that they've not been assisting you. Nobody reads for the other person except at the very personal level. We've had situation where authors in other places in the past rub off on each other, like Pound and Eliot, Keats and Shelly; Coleridge and Wordsworth. I've had to relate with some of my senior colleagues. I have an idea of what I want to write, give it to them and they make comments. I've read some of Osundare's poems and made comments; and he has read mine and made comments, too, apart from being a teacher who encouraged the production of my early works. You don't have that kind of relationship now. People are more interested in controversies.

Sule: Ojaide has made a piercing claim that most recent Nigerian poets copy the poets of his generation. Well, to me, there does not exist a clear distinction between his generation of writers and your generation because of the sociopolitical and economic problems peculiar to both generations of writers. His generation grappled with the issues of failed leadership, which is still what this generation is grappling with. Do you see or envisage any difference between your generation and Ojaide's.

The Poet: You see, the problem lies in the inability of a proper critical fixation on the bulk of writings coming out. So clearly this is even evident in the statement of Tanure Ojaide who is probably not sure of the identity of the writer he compares with Niyi Osundare. And to refer to writers of the new generation as copycats is the unkindest and uncritical thing I have ever read on the pages of our newspapers in recent time. I really don't see that kind of criticism as piercing at all. I leave the subject of the difference and continuity, influence and departures to the critic of the literature but I will only add that such is the contentious nature of canon formation in any literary tradition. It will take time for the difference to form, depending on how discerning the scholar is at his or her work. There

may be clear-cut departures from one generation to another as in the case of the post-Achebe-Soyinka-Okigbo writers of the 1970s, and of course there are subterraneous transitional movements, as you will see in the post-oil boom, post-Marxist writings of the new generation. This is what many commentators of Nigerian literature fail to deal with...

Sule: In a recent essay titled "Issues in Recent African Writing", Titi Adepitan concludes, "Language is the greatest pitfall of the upcoming generation." How do you react to this as a frontline member of this generation?

The Poet: Adepitan might be dead correct if he qualified that statement precisely. How is language the pitfall of a whole generation of writers, we have not been told. He probably had a number of writers in mind when he chose to push that argument. It will serve the readership well to flesh the suggestion out with the textual fact of the pitfalls. I myself am tempted to buy the argument considering the unstable quality of our writing, some of which dance towards real uninspiring mediocrity. Again, I function here as writer, so I better leave the critic the gauntlet to take the field.

Sule: What advice do you have for upcoming writers?

The Poet: The new writers should put their hands on the plough and shouldn't look back. When they look back, it's probably that they want to take advice from their fellow writers. And when they look to their front, it means that they're looking up to those who have had some considerable achievements. A person can't go beyond his level of imagination, but for you to attain that level, the thing that you should always guard against is the danger of the devil of errors in putting finishing touches to the work. No two writers can write the same and not all of us can win the Nobel Prize; not all of us can win the Noma Award, not all of us can become a Rushdie or a Coetzee in this lifetime. Each writer has his own trademark. But I don't think any writer will want to announce errors or uninspiring mediocrity as his trademark. I will hope that those who choose the option to write will also learn to read and experience great writings in order to be able to write well.