

Representations of Pasts and Memories: Critical Analysis of Selected Poems of Taiye Ojo

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Abstract

Pasts and memories bear a large significance in the growing Nigerian poetry. This paper critically analyzes the representations and interrelations of pasts and memories in selected poems in Taiye Ojo's *all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings* and how the pasts and memories add to (re)defining the poet's understanding of his environment and experiences. The exemplifications of past lives, violence, elegies, deaths, loss, traumas, memories in fragments that can be personal and national are the concepts examined in this paper as used by the poet in underlining the interrelations and divergences of his observations and experiences regarding the pasts and memories.

Keywords: African literature, Nigerian literature, Nigerian Poetry, Poetry, history, memories, pasts

Introduction

all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings is Taiye Ojo's first chapbook. The collection demonstrates and reinterprets meanings accorded to pasts and memories, and offers its own versions of those pasts and memories by way of imageries and signs and symbols which inscribe the different points of interactions and divergences between them. It also gives understanding to the concepts (pasts and memories) as possibilities for new values. This paper is majorly framed by what Joy Harjo in her book *She Had Some Horses* refers to as "the particular meaning of indigenous realities" of a people who have learned to survive but to "forget nothing" (qtd in Hanna, 1). Certain Nigerian realities are portrayed by Taiye Ojo, in his poems, because there is a need not to forget them. In an act of documentation, Ojo strives for a literary tenet that performs a kind of bureau that maintains pasts and memories in the present to enable a better future and

for peace to be achieved. The poet, in his collection, made known Nigerian realities by involving a wide spectrum of its pasts and memories (of which some are still current) that saw countless forms of deprivation and atrocities namely: killings, violence, denials, disrespect of human rights, deaths, loss and trauma.

Pasts and Memories In *all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings*

Taiye Ojo's collection is personal and intimate. It reflects and reveals the conditions of life in Nigeria, and tries to make sense of its immediate past and memories. Memory is an active instrument in Ojo's collection, and as well an avenue that gathers his experiences which build on his national identity. The past is the precedent events in society; for this reason, it is usually said among historians that he who does not know his past is bound to repeat it. Ojo's involvement of Nigeria's pasts is very significant. And this is why they played important roles, especially the drive for the pasts not to be forgotten, in the collection by which the poet referred to certain events that took place in Nigeria.

all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings harbours what Philip Bagu calls "the historical truth and the artistic truth" (49). Both truths are creatively used by Taiye Ojo in examining his pasts and memories. The results of the union of historical truth (facts of history) and the artistic truth (art of imagination) are sadness, past lives, violence, elegies, destruction, deaths, loss, traumas, resilience and hope, memory in fragments which can be personal and national (by Nigeria)— these make up the poetry collection.

There is a source for every literary work; the source often shapes and defines a literary output. In this line, Lucien Goldman asserts that: "periods of crises are particularly favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature, because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to men and of the widening of affective and intellectual horizons that they provoke" (50). Goldman's assertion elaborates the societal problems and instabilities, which can vary in their disposition, and also be a source for literature. This is what guided Ojo in his collection. In "Elegiac: Unfinished Draft of Hauwa Liman's Humanitarian Work", the poet brings from the immediate past, the humanitarian aid worker —Hauwa Liman — who was abducted in March 2018 from Rann, Borno in northeast Nigeria by Boko Haram and killed. Boko Haram is a jihadist terrorist sect based in northeastern Nigeria. The poem shares in the sadness of the situation by mentioning the deaths, losses and lack of safety caused by the sect:

for days now, I stand in Rann— a small town
painted with blood & constant fear. there is
enough fractured in this land without pretending
that home is open prison. No words can beauty
this: I mean to say there are words you write

when you score a name with a blade. eulogy of a
body in prayer: what god turns his cheeks to see his
sweetest lambs slaughtered before they can
grow up into sheep? a boy is dying. a girl is dying.
a hundred students & a hundred healthcare
workers are dying. what can I give to be that
season, that sacred space contained in every
child's voice asking where then is safe? (5-17)

The poem goes on to question and metaphorize Borno as a house and an entity that isn't free of Boko Haram's abductions. The poet shows his sadness for the Boko Haram acts in Borno: ...I had been grieving your *abduction* forever (22). Despite the poem's accurate message and appeals to emotions, it lacks in calling out or mentioning the Nigerian government that kept a blind eye on the country's deteriorating situation. The poet distances himself from the scenes. Here is the poet's diffusion of the country's situation's precarious memory, losses and trauma as he calls for who will take care of the bereaved mothers and fathers and the newborn babies and children:

O Borno, what century fell at your door? I took to
my hands & knees when you climbed out from a
garlic clove & kissed the moon on its cheek. It was
only months when it felt like i had been grieving
your *abduction* forever. I keep meaning to stop. to
wait for you, night after night as my little sister
does when I'm gone—I mean to say I make a list
of things I know you'll come back for. I will say
come back, come back for the children you left &
the dog. come back, I will say to rock the newborn
babies to sleep & console their depressed teenage
mothers. come back for your brother & the nights

full of cold bowls of oat brewed with cardamom & clovers. (18-30)

Also in “all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings”, the poet points out another terrible Boko Haram doing. The terrorist sect kidnapped about one hundred and ten school girls, aged 11 to 19, from the Government Girls’ Science and Technical College Dapchi in Yobe State, Nigeria. Some of the kidnapped girls were released as their families paid the demanded ransoms. While some were abused, as noted by the poet: “today a boy told me that girls are just places to crawl through to get to somewhere else” (4-5). The poet, in this poem, narrates how sad such an act turned out and how a country couldn’t offer safety to the civilians. The sadness of the situation is felt out rightly at the beginning of the poem:

the morning gives us leftovers from a night fill with a
thousand *Dapchi* children melting into the fertile soil.
this calls my body crime— a light house on the lips
of bomb shelters. (1-4)

It is never easy confronting social and political issues. Oftentimes, one who does so is tagged a rebel or an enemy of a state or country. Notable individuals who have, in their various capacities, confronted the Nigerian government include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Fela Kuti, Chinua Achebe, Falz the bad guy etc. In this view, Ngugi wa Thiong’o agrees by saying, “what is important is not only the writer’s honesty and faithfulness...but also his attitude to these big social and political issues.... Politics is part and parcel of literary territory” (477-478). In “Memory as a Necessary Pain”, the poet recalls the memories he has of his country by showing how hurtful and dehumanizing they are: his family and people are denied the necessary life amenities. With the rise of corruption, hope is almost lost. The poem:

...as a child, my country was a
roof that’s always collapsing. How it spreads on my
mother’s face—a brief dazzle of pink light like a rapture
in a stranger’s eyes...what do you do when your body is a pistol or rifle
pulled apart? since most of us bloomed out of sorrow like
swans always bent on pond water. I am afraid of
attending a place now green with mold but still edible for
some. (3-13)

The poet's task of confronting an ugly past is usually overwhelming. But to seek right, normalcy and question the past and history for a stable and conducive operating system in a society, is a better risk to take in a country with a government that is unfriendly to criticisms. In "Self-Portrait as a Postscript in Civil War", which is about the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970), the poem starts by saying, "what kind of world should we leave for our/ children? history is a place in my skin. the sky/ bloodies with birds & I swallow my left hand until a country leaves me..." (1-3). This is the poet's understanding of the costs of the war. Though he never experienced the war firsthand, the task and attitude lie in the embrace of his history for a better perception of his society. In the aforementioned poem, the evidence of the war is portrayed by the mention of "blood, more blood" and graphic of losses:

blood, more blood & I will never know how

Carnage lunges inside a woman except the woman

is my mother scattering his sons like salt. what

the war costs, a son must pay out of his body & a

river lassoes my father's body into a forest

biblical with bones... how if you

look closely enough, ever war-child was once a

prayer waking an ache in my jaw. (8-16)

The Nigeria-Biafra War, hence, becomes a tool used by the poet in his collection and this is what Chikwenye Ogunyemi projects as "...the sheer urge to record as truthfully as possible an excruciating, indelible, visceral experience which the author has been physically and/or emotionally involved in" (41). The "emotional involvement" of the poet propels him to "record as truthfully as possible" his past. The poet confronts the magnitude of the bloodbath caused by the war, "my old country gives me a hammer when I ask for/a home & I imagine the bloodbath as a sunset in a/razed village... my birth rhymes with pogrom... (17-19). The poet, on showing more of the horrifying events of the war, points out how fathers are not allowed to raise their girl-children and the sons given guns to fight in the war, and mothers harassed with panga cuts:

my grandfather says girlhood was the child he

was never allowed to raise & sew a fork into my

hand. I wear my blood as bracelets & my brothers

suckle on the udders of guns. listen: I boil a broth

of stars until the sun wounds the sky— my uncle

has no son to carry his blood home. distance is
another way to measure my mother's body
homing in my head like panga cuts. I remind
myself to water the battle ground until every sea
bulging to the shore with our blood is the edge of
a knife I teach the depth of my pain. (25-35)

The poet confronts the memory of his personified mother in "Poem". The personified mother fights cancer. The child persona in the poem watches the mother who suffers from it and later dies. And as a child, bearing such a memory is something heavy. This poem is both a call on the government's neglect of its medical sector. In the poem, the child persona wakes up and realizes that,

what gives us life
was taking it back but in small drops of falling leaves &
muted days...I was five
when mother had cancer, cervical cancer, a body
soft with birdlike bones rotting like a roadkill. I imagine
the cancer preening her from her bones like a vulture:
the body burning into itself. Little me standing in my
mother's hut, heartbroken & crying in silence. the doctor
said there is nothing we can do... (1-10)

Throughout this collection, the poet confronts his past and memories by showing how he is affected and, as well as, the society he lives in. His sadness and the trauma are felt. And towards the end of the collection, especially in "It Is the Season of Falling & All I Can Remember Is the Taste of My Mother's Laughter", the poet hints on overcoming his traumas and the burdens of his pasts and memories. This is exactly what James Berger meant when he said, "only if traumas are remembered can they lose, gradually but never entirely, their traumatic effects" (415). In the poem, the poet agrees that he is "...sick of drawing a country of memories with thick red lines" (4). And by doing so, he seeks joy and balance between his present and his past and memories. This is evident here: "my life is a list of perfect water songs. today, a man told/me to breathe, to become something so light like joy—/the only thing holier than a moth's wing" (1-3).

Hope is a delicate thing, yet peculiar and intimate. J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada sees hope as a stabilizer in a writer's life: "Creative writing serves as an outlet for an individual's pent-up feelings, for his passion and for the expression of his hopes or disappointments; writing could serve a stabilizing role in its writer's psychological make-up" (7-8). In "It Is the Season of Falling & All I Can Remember Is the Taste of My Mother's Laughter", the poet hopes for a better future by agreeing that his life and experiences are both sweet and bitter:

I don't think I've ever written the word *hope*, but
nothing else fits here. I've seen whole orchids blooming
from ash—which is to say, I have stopped looking for
myself in movies. (22-25)

To conclude, Taiye Ojo defines pasts and memories in his collection *all of us are birds & some of us have broken wings* by making the concepts the essentials in his poetic process which integrate and synthesize feelings and past experiences into grand stanzas. It is crucial that human beings form connections between themselves and their past lives. This is where memories play an important role. Without memory, there could be no understanding and harmony between people and nature and life; and there could be no solace for people to find. Therefore, just as Taiye Ojo explores in his collection via delving into his feelings and understanding his pasts and memories, he finds a way of coping with the situations of his environment by hoping for better a country.

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