

Book Review

Gather My Blood Rivers of Song

Author: Remi Raji

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Remi Raji has established himself as one of the most significant poets of African origin. His poetry has relevance not only because of the compelling themes he deals with, but also because of his urbane appropriation of the Yoruba oral traditional singing mode into the written medium. Raji has this style that comes across as both simple and yet deep; with multiple layers of meaning, touching on various issues in contemporary Nigeria. In this collection, Remi Raji comes across as a fully matured poet who has mastered his craft. He is a trendy poet whose oeuvre relates to every category of readers in all levels of society, reminiscent of Niyi Osundare's *Song of the MarketPlace* (1983). Raji engages contemporary realities of the Nigerian nation with a tell-tale encounter with the self. This is a literary technique whereby personal concerns become a mirror of the larger concerns of the nation.

Gather My Blood Rivers of Song is divided into seven parts. Each of the seven parts captures the persona's lament and that of the nation on the brink. Parts three and four are selections from his previous poetry collections, *A Harvest of Laughter* and *Webs of Remembrance* respectively. Others are newly hatched poems from which the title of the collection is decided. Parts three and four of the collection are selections upon which the ordeals of the past are drawn onto the present. This inclusion suggests that the experiences of the past are reborn in the present. This therefore implies that the past is not totally gone; it keeps plaguing the persona's reality. Raji's success in weaving this relationship between the past and the present into one is manifested in the juxtaposition of related themes of the past contained in his earlier collections of poems with the present and these form the entire parts of this collection.

The poems "Out of the Deep" and "Do not go violent into the night", both culled his previous publications, resonate with "A Butterfly Song", a new poem in this collection; they all carry the burden of pain and sense of denial of the self and the nation. Raji captures the confusion the nation suddenly finds itself in. In the poem he ruminates over some disturbing memories, the memories of the "complex course" that the nation has undergone. The memory in which he himself has had to bear remembering. As the poem proceeds, one realises that this chain of memory is all moulded into the complex problem which has finally led us to our "simple end" (72). This end is further built into a gamut of symbols, when he tells us:

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

The “paddle” in this poem is symbolic of a Nigerian leader. It is he, upon whom the responsibility of steering the people in the right course is rested. His loss in this poem suggests he no longer knows the way forward. What Raji implies here is that our leader of the time when the poem was originally published as part of *A Harvest of Laughters* was lost; he is not sure of the direction he is to lead the people. The sunken “boat” is a metaphor for the nation losing its face in the gathering of the League of Nations. The leader must have led his people into this disaster since he himself is lost. It is a fact that a confused person cannot lead another person or people who do not know the right way to a right path. The “net” is a symbol for the labour force of the nation. And since it is torn, it means the labour force is weak and cannot come up with anything that will sustain the nation. The last of it is most serious: “the bait is gone”.

The “bait” represents the nation’s natural resources and because the leader is lost, he is not able to manage the resources very well and that results in the boat sinking and the bait going with the tide. As the poem continues, Raji remind us of the “coast of watery lies” told to us since this period of ‘lost’—the period when both the leader and the bait are lost. And then quickly ask the very disturbing question:

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

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

In “Do Not Go Violent into That Night” Raji evokes the lingering state of time. In this poem unlike the other he laments the outbreak of a dreaded disease that has eaten into the heart of the town and that one can only catch it when one goes violent into the night. It is possible to say that the words: violent, night, blood, and street are metaphors employed by the poet to stress his sublimated thought. A thought that is different from that which one gets from the superficial meaning of the poem. By adding the poem to this collection Raji seems to imply that this disease still scourges our society today. When he repeats the word “violent”, he means careless in the manner one go after sexual pleasure. In most lines of the poem, his admonitions seem directed at the male folks in society. One easily notices the reference to the phallus by his subliminal refrain of the phrase “do not go” in the poem:

Do not go
 violent into that night
 ...
 Do not go
 where alphabets of death wait
 ...

do not go violent like the fever
do not go violent into that night. (84-85)

The metaphor of “night” in the poem is interesting and rich. The “night” in the poem represents the interior of a woman. The imagery of “do not go” and the night project a new kind of sublime picture of thrusting. The repetitions of the phrase and the night together with that of violent all points towards thrusting. What Raji is saying invariably is that everyman should be careful; the act of going about thrusting could give room to contracting the dreaded disease. It is in “A Butterfly Song” that Raji harvests his sojourn in the web of these lines gathered in the poems published in his other collections and included into this new collection. In this poem, he summaries his pain, the ordeal of the nation and all he has had to bear from the past. The first line of this poem succinctly captures this idea:

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

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

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

The nation as the poet conceives it is caged by its leaders and is open to all sorts of ills. It is the proof of ignorance because as we see in “Out of the Deep” the leader is lost and a lost person cannot have a sense of direction where he treads; he ends up going in circles. At the last stanza, the poet finds consolation in placing his burden on the new generation of Nigerians, saying it has “returned, away from the breathless cologne of night”:

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

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

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

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

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

In spite of the tone of lamentation that runs through virtually every poem in this collection, the poems appear to affirm the poet's belief that literature matters in society. Here, it not only draws attention to the manifestation of the grim reality of life in Nigeria, but also pleads for virtues like love, justice and equity that will ultimately remould society and save humanity. Though Remi Raji's preoccupation is with socio-economic and political trajectory of the Nigerian society, we see copious use of love images lamenting the loss or denial of the self and this loss and denial are symbolic of the visible trajectory of the Nigerian people who equally suffer denial of equity and social justice in the hands of their rulers (leaders).