THE ENVISIONED DIALECTIC OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND NATION BUILDING
IN A HETEROGENEOUS SETTING: A STYLISTIC CRITICISM OF REMI RAJI’S
LOVESONG FOR MY WASTELAND

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Abstract

This article examines Remi Raji’s alternative model of consensus building in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria that is continually threatened by forces of disintegration. The article considers the ‘Prologue’ to Remi Raji’s anthology, Lovesong for My Wasteland, which is presented in the form of a dramatic poem/poetic drama as an allegory of the challenges inherent in the task of national integration and the prospect of fruitful inter-group relations in Nigeria. It underlines the expediency of dialectic in the characters’ engagement of grave national issues, focusing on the argumentation thrust of the discourse as a template for productive national dialogue. Aside the logic of dialectic, the paper examines the stylistic markers that typify the discourse of consensus building, highlighting the characters’ discursive practices as prototype verbal signifiers that the heterogeneous entities within the Nigerian political space could deploy for renewed patriotic spirit.

Key Words: Dialectic, inter-group relations, nation building, national integration, Nigeria

Introduction

The crisis of nationhood besetting Nigeria as a country has been a dominant issue expressed in the works produced by not only literary writers but also by artistes of different climes and times. With particular reference to fixing the problem of ethnic nationalism and national integration required for national rebirth, I consider Remi Raji’s anthology titled Lovesong for My Wasteland a literary response that dramatises this knotty issue in a most critical manner that deserves attention. Remi Raji belongs to the third generation of Nigerian poets whose works have been markedly political in nature given their disillusionment with the palpable setbacks being suffered by Nigeria despite her enormous potential. This thematic preoccupation derives from a ‘nationalist imagination’ which (Egya 2007: 112) explains as ‘the use of creative writing, a product of imagination, to make important political statements and redirect people’s thinking towards positive change [...]’.

What particularly strikes me in Remi Raji’s treatment of political theme in this anthology as embodied in the ‘Prologue’ is the artistry with which he handles the motifs of dialogue and consensus building as ingredients for realistic inter-group relations that have eluded a pluralistic country like Nigeria for so long. Having closely read the text, I am particularly interested in the point of conflict among the characters in the dramatic poem/poetic drama, their archetypal roles, the peculiar setting they inhabit but perceive differently, the sequence and patterns of argumentation they put up in addressing the pressing national issues that form the basis for their dialoguing, and finally the unification of hitherto dissenting voices in playing active roles in the task of building the country.

Thus, my major concern in this paper is to explore a prototype discourse of national integration and nation building as proposed by Remi Raji, examining the dialectical processes that the symbolic characters in the ‘Prologue’ undergo before they could reach a consensus that favours national cohesion, reconciliation and renewed sense of patriotism to one’s country. In order to show the rhetorical dynamics that find expression in the dialectical processes of the characters’ dialogue, I attempt to stylistically analyse the defining schemes and tropes of the prototype result-oriented dialogue that is most desirable in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria.

Dilemma of National Integration in Nigeria

According to (Congressional Research Service 2008) ‘Summary’ on current issues in Nigeria, Nigeria faces serious social and economic challenges which have made its human development indicators among the world’s lowest, as the majority of the population suffer from extreme poverty. (Fageyinbo 2011) observes that Nigeria is faced with many social problems like fraud, embezzlement of public funds, ethnicity and nepotism, and serious crimes such as bribery, smuggling and bunkering. While these problems in themselves would not prove too intractable to fix, the composition of the entity known as Nigeria and the consequent attitude and commitment of ‘Nigerians’ to addressing
national issues are suspect.

(Metumara 2010: 92) rightly hints at the hub of Nigeria’s development challenges, saying: ‘Nigeria is an amalgam of rival ethnic groups pitched against each other [sic] in a contest for power and resources that have reflected in the political processes, sometimes threatening the corporate existence of the country’. Writing on the aftermath of such a political arrangement, (Omotoso 2010: 146) argues:

Instead of being patriotic by supporting and respecting the state, they see it as an abstract object, a European formation and therefore an evil arrangement that denied the people of their freedom. Because of this enduring notion of the Nigerian state by the people, they have had recourse to their various indigenous societies which to them are capable of protecting and guaranteeing their individual rights, privileges and advancement in the Nigerian state.

(Metumara 2010: 97) then submits that ‘[t]he heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state and the problem it poses to nation-building is well recognised by its managers’. This has been an inherent problem in the Nigerian polity which dates back to the pre-independence era and has continued to threaten the corporate existence of the country even long after independence. To this end, (Salawu and Hasan 2011: 28) observe:

About five decades after Nigeria gained independence, the Nigerian diverse social structure in terms of her heterogeneity has not changed significantly. The diversity nature of the society has made identification with the ‘nation’ a difficult task. Today, identification is easier at both family and ethnic levels. A consequence of this is that many of the citizens may never develop a proper concept of nation. This kind of ethnic group relations signifies a negative dimension and which may mean much for the Nigerian political system.

(Ekanola 2006: 279) examines Nigeria’s socio-political and economic circumstances and concludes that many of its problems stem from its origin as an artificial colonial construct which lumped together a variety of separate peoples. Consequently, the relations between them have been that of mutual distrust which (Julius-Adeoye 2011: 2) captures thus: ‘The nation’s inability to effectively develop an integrated population even with its enormous wealth creates defensive groups along the ethno-religious lines, in effect creating a dichotomy of ‘we’ against the ‘others’.”

(Ifeanacho and Nwagwu 2009) are of the view that Nigeria’s efforts at achieving national integration have remained largely unrealised, considering issues of minority question, religious conflicts, ethnic politics, resource control and the call for a sovereign national conference. Consequently, the spirit of true nationalism needed to address the myriad problems confronting the country has been lacking, as ethnic nationalism in Nigeria continues to work against the integration of the different ethnic nationalities. Commenting on the nationalistic spirit required for executing the Nigerian project, (Ekanola 2006: 291-292) writes:

[...] the integration of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria requires a transformation of attitudes and values. This would entail a process of social mobilisation to teach and persuade members of different nationalities to see one another as people with whom they must rise and fall together, and bring them to a belief that their destinies are inextricably knit together in such a way that they either win together or lose together.

The Corpus

The study, as rightly pointed out earlier, focuses mainly on the ‘Prologue’ to the anthology which comprises forty-five poems in all. In fact, the forty-five poems encapsulate the poet’s sense of disillusionment occasioned by the Nigerian predicament and the ironic sense of patriotism that he demonstrates in spite of the near hopeless situation. In the figure of a physician who is able to diagnose the ills of society and would stop at nothing short of prescribing the antidotes for healing his society, Remi Raji artistically enacts a dramatic poem/poetic drama in the ‘Prologue’ to raise social consciousness about his concerns in the forty-five poems in the anthology and to sell his vision for turning around the fortune of the country whose major problem has been that of finding a common voice among the different ethnic groups whose sectional interests and sheer ethnic loyalty have vitiated their nationalistic spirit.
The four characters that are engaged in the dialogue are Gong, Takie, Gambia and Asabi. It is Gong who brings a message (a wake-up call) to the other three characters on stage. According to (Egya 2007: 115), ‘Gong sees himself [...] as a singer whose song carries the ups and downs of history and knows the consequences of yesterday’s failure’. But Takie, Gambia and Asabi do not share Gong’s views, as a result of which they challenge him. Instead of Gong’s abandoning his vision in the face of stiff opposition mounted by the other three characters, he exudes the spirit of tolerance, absorbing all manner of criticisms from the other characters and reasonably engaging them in a thought-provoking dialogue to the point of swaying them to share his dream, believe in his cause, and commit themselves to the project of nation building. So, the structure of the dramatic poem/poetic drama revolves around Gong’s having a dream and striving to sell it to an indifferent lot, engaging in a series of arguments and counter-arguments on the veracity of his claims and finally reaching a consensus that is born out of conviction and not belief.

**Why Dialectics?**

According to (Hoffmann 2005), the notion of ‘dialectic is formed from the Greek verb *dialegesthai* whose first philosophical use has been ascribed to Zeno, a student of Parmenides. *Legein* means ‘to speak’, ‘to say’ and the prefix *dia-* can be translated as ‘through’. Accordingly, the everyday use of *dialegesthai* in Greek was ‘holding converse with’, ‘discussing a question with another’, or ‘arguing with one against something’. However, other philosophers from Plato, Immanuel Kant to Hegel have elaborated Zeno’s pioneering thought on the notion of dialectic. For Plato, dialectic is a method to organise, based on experience, our knowledge by structuring hierarchies within a world of ‘forms’, while Kant criticises as ‘dialectical’ all approaches that forget to ground ‘knowledge’ in concrete experience.

Both Plato and Kant, however, would agree that dialectic belongs to what we as human beings are doing when *reflecting* on the world around us, be it a world of experience or a world of pure forms. That is, for them, ‘dialectic’ is considered from the standpoint of *epistemology*; the context for both is a general theory of *knowledge* (*epistêmê* in Greek). Hegel’s concept of dialectic is different from the views held by the earlier proponents. According to (Hoffman 2005: 8), looking for ‘what alone can be the true method of philosophical science’, Hegel hints at ‘dialectic’ as something which belongs inherently to the respective *contents* of logic. Dialectic is not restricted to what we are doing in thinking and speaking, but it is the inner self-movement of the content of logic.

(Popper 2004) argues that dialectic in the modern sense, that is, especially in the sense in which Hegel used the term is a theory which maintains that something – more especially, human thought – develops in a way characterised by what is called the dialectic triad: *thesis, antithesis* and *synthesis*. First, there is some idea or theory or movement which may be called a ‘thesis’. Such a thesis will often produce opposition, because like most things in this world, it will probably be of limited value and will have its weak spots. The opposing idea or movement is called the ‘antithesis’ because it is directed against the thesis. The struggle between the thesis and the antithesis goes on until some solution is reached. This solution which is the third step is called the ‘synthesis’. Once attained, the synthesis in its turn may become the first step of a new dialectic triad. (Popper 2004: 4), however, stresses that in actuality the thesis does not ‘produce’ the antithesis but ‘it is only our critical attitude which produces the antithesis and where such an attitude is lacking – which often is the case – no antithesis will be produced’. Popper further stresses that we have to be careful not to think that it is the ‘struggle’ between a thesis and its antithesis which ‘produces’ a synthesis; for the struggle is one of minds and these minds must be productive of new ideas.

Thus, dialectical reasoning refers to critical thinking about problems and evaluating conflicting viewpoints. It is best applied in resolving controversial issues and assessing opposing positions. Dialectic is thus seen as an art of rational discussion in which a questioner and a respondent reason with each other by question and answer. It contains arguments and chains of connected steps of argumentation running through the sequence of dialogue. It is adversarial but also partly collaborative. In the present poetic discourse, therefore, I will explore the processes of dialectical reasoning in understanding the moving back and forth between contrary lines of reasoning in a prototype discourse of national integration in a heterogeneous setting.
Dialectical Processes and Style Markers in Consensus Building: Remi Raji’s Blueprint

From the outset, it is instructive to note that Remi Raji must have consciously designed and packaged the characters as prototypes of the opposing parties that see the challenges confronting Nigeria in different lights. While Gong is the visionary, the dreamer, the prophet, the great thinker (the philosopher), the conscience of society, and the messiah, as it were, the other three characters are rather lethargic, as they do not seem to be bothered by the challenges in the country. In fact, the naming pattern adopted by the poet is stylistic. The visionary is given the name Gong. What is the import of that name in the Yoruba cultural world from where the poet comes?

The gong in traditional Yoruba society is that communicative instrument that is used by the information aide of the traditional ruler to arouse the consciousness of the populace to social issues demanding the collective interest of all and sundry. It is sounded loud and clear to reverberate in every nook and cranny of the community such that no one would claim not to have heard the message of the gong in the hands of the information aide. As an instrument of social mobilisation and sensitisation, the gong seems to enjoy what I could call ‘communicative liberty’, as the Yoruba believe that the gong’s ‘voice’ is never silenced nor drowned (A kì i p’ohùn m’ágogo l’ěnu). It does not matter the constraints, the odds, the limitations, the gong would find expression for the vital message it has for the people.

To show the centrality of the gong to the poet’s nationalist imagination and vision in a society in dire need of renaissance, one would not only consider it as a cultural semiotic that the poet has stylistically invoked in this anthology to relay his message to the people but also as a persona that serves as the poet’s voice. We have to note that in a society where things have gone awry, it takes the gong to raise people’s awareness and sensitise them on how to arrest the situation. So, in a like manner, it takes a Gong (the persona and singer) in a beleaguered society like Nigeria to sound a red alert to those who are still sleeping while the house is on fire. In this sense, the literary writer, be it a poet, a novelist or a dramatist or the artiste who cuts the figure of the conscience of the country in the midst of palpable moral and social degeneration is that coveted Gong needed to sound the wake-up call for transformation.

In fact, the lesson for realistic nation building that must be learnt from the interaction between Takie, Gambia and Asabi, on the one hand, and Gong, on the other hand, is that of the semiotic of number. It does not take a multitude to diagnose the ills of society and come up with the necessary antidote. Just an individual is enough to see the fault-line in the structure of the entity called a country. Just an individual is enough to raise the social consciousness of others. Just an individual is enough to raise the social consciousness of others. Just an individual is enough to tactfully and reasonably make others see what is possibly not open to all. But the question is: How easy would it be for that singular individual to match the dissenting voices of the multitude that would possibly see issues differently? So, in the task of nation building, the dichotomy of number or number differential – one social crusader with the dream and vision confronted with a multitude of lethargic disposition – is a factor but not enough a reason for the crusader to get defeated. All that is required is for that individual to have the resilience of the gong for realistic national dialogue.

Therefore, within the situational context of the dramatic poem/poetic drama enacted in the ‘Prologue’ to Lovesong for My Wasteland, a miniature of the Nigerian society with her myriad socio-political and economic problems calling for attention, Gong cries out to the people:

People of the land, the living and the dead,
those today whose lives count for nothing
and those tomorrow who will live as if
they have no future, hear me out,
it is your history 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 ...
(LOVESONG FOR MY WASTELAND, p. 3)

It is noteworthy that Gong does not see himself as a lone ranger, as he seeks to share what bothers his mind with fellow compatriots. Such a disposition is necessary for viable nation building. Reaching out to others either to sensitise or mobilise them for action is in the collective interest of
nation building, as we find out here that Gong does not target people of like minds. It is people who do not see what he sees, people who do not experience what he experiences or people who share the same experience but are indifferent that he calls on.

The choice of Gong’s audience, therefore, becomes a signifier in itself for that seemingly uninformed or laissez-faire audience waiting to be sensitised for the task of nation building. In this sense, the choice of the nominal element ‘people of the land [...]’ as opposed to ‘fellow comrades’ is stylistic; for it downplays sectional or class interest. In order to reawaken the people’s consciousness to the challenges inherent in the system, Gong uses the temporal deictic elements ‘today’, ‘tomorrow’/ ‘future’ to emphasise that time factor must not be wished away in matters of national life. The poet is agitated with the unfavourable turn of events in the present and possible further degeneration in the future for which he seeks to sensitise the people and consequently mobilise them for a change of attitude needed for national rebirth. This is the thesis of Gong’s message for the people. This social commitment thrust on the part of the poet is what (Egya 2007: 111) refers to as ‘Raji’s political theme [...] to raise his society’s consciousness to the collapse of national psyche and to redirect their attention toward a better tomorrow for which they have to work’.

In a tactical manner that is the hallmark of the dreamer who wishes to sell his or her dream to those who cannot possibly see beyond the present time, Gong uses the persuasive imperative structure: ‘hear me out’ to get the attention of his audience. It is by hearing and not by shunning him that they will get to know what the problems of the land are and then understand the visionary’s perception of how to get round those problems. ‘Hearing’ as a verb of inert perception and cognition then becomes a requisite signifier for holding and sustaining national discourse among opposing parties.

The spatial deictic element which serves as the centre stage or the forum for resolving national issues: ‘in the marketplace of thought’ is noteworthy. The imagery of the market in the traditional society is being invoked by the poet to make a statement about the kind of atmosphere needed for realistic national dialogue. At the market place, both the seller and buyer may have different positions on the value of the products, goods or services and how much should be spent on them. However, in the process of haggling, they shift grounds and eventually arrive at a compromise that may favourable to both parties. The marketplace imagery thus becomes a semiotic for that unconstrained level playing ground for stakeholders in a national project to operate for realistic solutions to national problems. It suggests that desirable setting, not a war front nor a battle field that stakeholders sometimes resort to in order to settle their differences. In fact, the use of the post-modifier ‘of thought’ to qualify the setting is compelling, as ‘thought’ is suggestive of a rational means of resolving issues as opposed to whipping up primordial sentiments or taking rash actions or decisions that would not help matters. Furthermore, the poet’s use of the temporal deictic element ‘now’ in ‘Hear me now [...]’ shows the sense of urgency with which the issues should be raised and discussed, as delay may be dangerous.

In the spirit of a social crusader, the poet, using Gong as his mouthpiece, lays bare the burden of his heart on the predicament of the land:

I cannot deny my promise not to tell,
but I cannot run away from the lashes of history.
It bids me speak now so that our past shall not
overtake our future.
(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 3)

History becomes a constant signifier in the discourse of nation building that can be ignored only at a country's own peril. Hence, the poet's use of the visual imagery of the 'lashites of history' from which he cannot run away conjures up before the reader the historical antecedents in the country's annals which have inflicted open wounds not necessarily on the poet’s body but particularly on his heart. When someone suffers lashes on the body, he/she feels the pains from the bruises suffered. In a like manner, the poet's suffering from the 'lashites of history' suggests that the history of the country causes the poet anguish and must have probably bruised his heart, as a result of which he needs healing for himself, his compatriots and the land at large through national reconstruction.

Although it is often said that humans never or very rarely learn from history, the poet does not wish that this would be his lot and that of his fellow compatriots. Hence, in the paradoxical statement: 'It bids me speak now so that our past shall not / overtake our future', the poet once again invokes the
temporal deictic elements ‘past’ and ‘future’, exploring the symbiosis of the two frames in such a logical sense that implies that what was done in the past (although confined to the dustbin of history) has the propensity of tampering with the future. For the repugnant reminiscences of history embodied in the olfactory imagery of ‘smell’ expressed in the nominal structure ‘the smell of your history’ and the visual imagery of ‘lashes’ expressed in the nominal structure ‘the lashes of history’ have a way of telling on the near or distant imagined future. So, the poet’s exhortation here sounds like an aphorism that reminds humans of the timelessness of their actions and inactions. For a Nigerian literary writer, Tayo Olafioye, even paradoxically titles his chronicle of the African/Nigerian experience in a piece entitled *Tomorrow Left Us Yesterday* (Olafioye 2004).

As is characteristic of dialectic, Gong has an opposing party that is composed of Takie, Asabi and Gambia who doubt the sincerity of his claims so far and then put him to test, coming up with their own respective antithesis. And they take turns to charge at him as follows:

Takie:     Hey who goes there? Who goes on disturbing the moment?
Gambia:   [...] Who begs of you your hungry smelling biography
         in a season fit only for business and leisure?
Asabi:    What do you have to tell us, [...]?
         Has your roof started leaking all over [...]?
         Not in this dry season?
         (*Lovesong for My Wasteland*, p. 4)

It is pertinent to note that instead of sharing Gong’s views right away, the other characters question the rationale behind his action and claims. The series of interrogative sentences they deploy in the process suggests their inability to comprehend even in their wildest imaginations why an individual would attempt to intercept what is popularly known in the Nigerian parlance as ‘business as usual’. This is a cliché that Nigerians have creatively coined to trivialise the social hiccups that are symptomatic of the failings in the Nigerian system.

In the present discourse, therefore, Takie, Gambia and Asabi seem to have resigned to fate, giving up on the Nigerian project and taking the socio-political realities as being normal and, therefore, not calling for any redress. Therefore, the use of the nominal elements ‘the moment’, ‘...a season fit only for business and leisure’ and ‘the peace’ serves to capture the people’s perception of the state of the country, which to them does not warrant any cause for alarm. Simply put, these temporal markers are metaphors for that delusive ‘comfort zone’ the people seem to have settled for or the state of passive acceptance of the Nigerian condition. Would the poet as the conscience of society go to sleep in such a strange world or close his eyes to the raging peace that the people stoically seem to bear? It is then left to Gong to make them see reason by engaging them in rational dialoguing.

These characters’ assessment of the spatial and temporal settings they inhabit with Gong but which they perceive differently underlines the essence of dialectic, as the ensuing discourse is largely adversarial. If Gong claims that it is the ‘smell of your history that chokes the singer / out of silence [...]’ and yet Takie, Asabi and Gambia instead of being ‘choked’ feel comfortable in the illusory ‘season of business and leisure’ and ‘peace’, then the inherent contradictions in that society that are played out in the antonymous linguistic elements need to thrashed out. The scenario echoes the proverbial account that what the dog sees and barks at ferociously is that which the sheep in turn sees and gazes at stupidly.

To compound the task of the social crusader, the opposing characters do not consider the plight a communal one, as they keep on using the second person singular pronominal forms ‘you’ and ‘your’ to downplay the collective interest in Gong’s crusade. It is in fact noteworthy that Asabi thinks that all that could call for Gong’s reaching out to others is on the condition that ‘your roof has started leaking all over [...]’, with the possessive adjective ‘your’ suggesting that it must be a personal experience that compels Gong’s perceived disturbance of public ‘peace’. Thus, the imagery of the leaking rooftop not even during the rains but in an awkward ‘dry season’ suggests the weird condition which must have made Gong’s account a personal experience that may not necessarily be shared by the outsider.

However, the social crusader seeks to provide answers to the questions posed by the opposing characters to underline the question-answer sequence of dialectic discourse. In order to convince them, he resorts to educating them, making them realise that what they perceive as a personal
experience is indeed a communal one. There is then the transmutation of the distancing person deixis element ‘your’ to an affective person deixis element ‘your’ that is rhetorically merged with ‘my’ to give a sense of the resultant collective ‘our’; for ‘your’ + ‘my’ in a moment of shared perception become ‘our’. Therefore, Gong comes up with a rebuttal:

No, not by any stretch of your absent imagination!
What has leaked is far more than my rooftop,
and your rooftops […]
Your history, my history, the past which stinks
and threatens the present.
It is your lack of worry that worries me.
The future […]
(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 4)

Although the same possessives ‘my’ and ‘your’ are still used above as to the sense of history the persona emphasises, the personal has given way to the collective. So, there is a shared sense of collectivity that finds expression in the common history that all the characters have. But the question that arises is: How cognizant of this situation are the other three characters? As would be expected in a discourse situation with divergent opinions and perceptions, the one who claims to see or know what others have not seen or known is usually treated contemptuously. Therefore, the propaganda strategy of name-calling is evoked in the discourse, as the other characters call Gong all manner of names ranging from ‘Mr Philosopher’, ‘hungry historian’, ‘Prophet’, to ‘Professor’. These social semiotic resources are the usual verbal stereotypes deployed to ridicule the sense of grandeur or nobility that almost always characterises the visionary’s vision and goals. All of the nominal elements give the impression that the visionary seeks to know more than the ordinary people, consequent upon which he/she does not deserve to be engaged in any meaningful dialogue.

As if that is not enough, Asabi takes Gong’s personality assessment to the level of psychiatry:

Asabi: Are you sure this one is real? The other day I met someone
who looked very much like him, he was busy arguing
with a statue about the palava of state creation,
the pain of inflation […]
I have said it before. I don’t trust the man.
(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 6)

The imagery of any man or woman that is busy arguing with a statue reminds one of the figure of a mentally deranged individual. Should such a fellow then be welcome not to talk of being engaged in a dialogue? With the picture of a demented being created of Gong, there appears to be no prospect of his engaging the attention of Takie, Asabi and Gambia. Hence, in a final showdown, Takie declares:

There’s no need wasting the night
Listening to familiar monologues.
I will have none of this!
(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 7)

How would Gong thwart this campaign of calumny in a bid to achieve his goal of sensitising the people to transform society? Or should he be discouraged, having been negatively labelled? As his name symbolically suggests, he must be resilient and muster enough courage to get the attention of the opposing characters and make them share his vision. So, he insists:

You will. You will. And you will.
Don’t forget it is your history and you will have to tell it
To yourselves and your children in a language […]
(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 7)

Gong’s sense of insistence in the above lines is hinged on the use and repetition of the modal auxiliary verb ‘will’ that is combined with the subject pronominal element ‘you’. The repetition is emphatic and reinforced in the third and last structure with the conjunction ‘and’ in ‘And you will’, showing the climax of Gong’s recommendation to which he sees no other alternative. Also, the repetition of the second person pronominal ‘you’, the possessive ‘your’ and the reflexive form
‘yourselves’ is a rhetorical stroke to stir the characters’ sense of belonging and to forewarn them about the possible repercussions of their actions and inactions.

At this point, the voice of the opposition, not out of forceful coercion or intimidation but out of sheer logical reasoning, begins to sway, as Asabi wonders:

I don’t understand again. The other time you said
You have come to show us our history:
now you want us to do what?
What’s your problem?

Asabi’s charge paves way for Gong to make his blueprint for the nation building project known to the other players in a manner that they would know the kind of attitude and ingredients required for national reconstruction. Gong then assumes the role of a teacher in nation building especially in a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria, advocating:

Yes, you are right. Is it possible to clap with a single hand?
What would limbs do when the brain dies a willing death?
We must sing the songs of songs together.
When the masquerade of thought comes abroad, […]
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, […]
*(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 7)*

In the first two lines of the above extract, Gong deploys rhetorical question to underline the sense of collectivity that is required for national transformation agenda. Using the semiosis of body chemistry where he considers the networking of the right hand with the left for efficiency and the supply that the limbs get from the brain to function well, Gong evokes the physiology of the human system as a prototype of the kind of synergy needed among the different entities that make up the Nigerian polity for realistic nation building. Harping on the question of collectivity now as opposed to individualism, there is pronominal shift from the hitherto ‘you’ ‘your’, ‘I’ and ‘my’ to ‘we’. The deployment of the first person plural pronominal element ‘we’ as an inclusive device underlines the sense of solidarity knitting that is coveted for true national rebirth.

Besides, the use of the modal auxiliary verb ‘must’ that goes along with the subject ‘we’ to suggest obligation and subtle compulsion gives force to the action required to be taken and the kind of disposition the people need to have to succeed in the process. In fact, the use of the adverb of manner ‘together’ to modify how the action should be carried out is stylistically significant. Furthermore, to intensify the place of the adverb in achieving the set goals, the adverb is repeated and stylistically thematised in the line ‘Together we shall grow […]’ as opposed to ‘We shall grow together […]’ whereby the attention of the audience is drawn to the focused element ‘together’ in the former structure.

Consequent upon Gong’s engagement of Takie, Asabi and Gambia in a spree of argumentation that is based on logical reasoning, the other characters unconsciously drop their guards, as Gambia probes: ‘Now, we need to know, who are you?'; Asabi queries: ‘Where do you come from?’ and Takie enquires: ‘Who are you?’ Although these characters still employ interrogative clauses, they ironically grant Gong audience at last as opposed to their initial posture of outright rejection of him and his crusade and labelling him in all manner of despicable figures.

At the climax of the dramatic poem/poetic drama when Gong could identify the unanimity of purpose between him and the other characters, he attempts to sell his blueprint for building Nigeria all over again:

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.
*(Lovesong for My Wasteland, p. 7)*

The architecture imagery invoked and intensified by Gong is stylistically compelling; it x-rays
in totality the nation building process and the steps to be taken to achieve an enduring and worthwhile effort. So, Gong uses the adverbial clause of condition ‘if we must re-build’ to sound a note of caution that it is not the effort of building that matters but that there are necessary and sufficient conditions to be satisfied for the structure to stand the test of time. Hence, Gong uses the modal auxiliary verb ‘must’ to insist on the due process for nation building and the repetition of the modal auxiliary element twice in the poetic line emphasises the kind of attitude needed for true nation building.

Cutting the figure of a perceptive dreamer and master architect, Gong systematically outlines the building process, proceeding from the substratum of drawing out ‘the plan’ and laying ‘the foundation’ in the first instance. The initial performance of these tasks is reinforced with the stylistic use the adjunct element ‘before’ in the structure ‘before speaking about [...]’. All of the nominal groups that serve as the object of the preposition ‘about’, that is, ‘the colour of the lintel’ and ‘the shape of the futuristic windows’ are co-hyponyms of the superordinate terms mentioned earlier. As subsidiary steps, it would be out of place to attempt having them carried out before the basic steps. In this regard, Gong, serving as the mouthpiece of the poet, Remi Raji, cuts the figure of a teacher on national strategic planning.

At this stage of the discourse when Gong’s thesis has been thoroughly subjected to questioning and testing (antithesis), Takie, Asabi and Gambia accept Gong’s views (synthesis) as Gambia and Asabi chorus in unison: ‘I agree with you [...]’ before Takie emphatically lends his own voice: ‘Oh yes... Yes, I agree with you. But it is my story’. The fact that all the characters no longer use interrogative or negative structures but declarative and affirmative sentences suggests that their doubt has been cleared. In fact, the use of the declarative sentence ‘I agree with you’/ Oh yes [...] Yes I agree with you [...]’ is not just a performance of an assertive act but also a commissive, showing the sense of commitment that they have towards the cause. As if Takie’s identification with the dream project, that is, the Nigerian cause in his declaration ‘But it is my story’ is an invitation to healthy rivalry, Asabi snaps ‘No, it is my story’, while Gambia enthusiastically declares: ‘No, yes, I mean, it is the story of my life [...]’.

The sense of patriotism and commitment exhibited by the characters to the cause of the Nigerian project is stylistically reinforced with the use of the individualistic possessive adjective ‘my’ as opposed to the generalising possessive adjective ‘our’. If the characters had opted for the plural possessive, individuals that make up the group could claim that the fate of the country could be left in the hands of others for safe keep without any genuine commitment. But with the use of ‘my’, the sense of belonging and commitment to the cause of nation building is further emphasised and intensified. In fact, the healthy rivalry among Takie, Asabi and Gambia in playing their respective roles in the task of nation building is brought to the fore in their jostling for the part to play, with no one ready to concede his/her own under any guise. The competitive thrust of the discourse is stylistically conveyed with the rebuttal ‘no’ in ‘No, it is my story’, ‘No, [...] it is the story of my life’. Metaphorically speaking, ‘the story’ that each of these stakeholders refers to encapsulates the crisis of development in Nigeria, the attitude the players in the reconstruction bid have to imbibe and the steps to be taken to turn around the squalid story of the country for good.

Conclusion

The invocation of the principles and processes of dialectic and the characteristic style markers in the poetic discourse analysed thus far throws up a number of issues. The use of rhetorical strokes: constant pronominal shift with very penetrating and fluid pragmatic effects to gauge the dialectical processes, temporal and spatial deictic markers, turn-taking strategy with marked question and answer sequence and minimal overlaps or interruptions is significant. Furthermore, the preponderance of interrogative clauses in the utterances of the opposing characters is interesting.

It is noteworthy that from the beginning of the dramatic poem/poetic drama where the characters are engaged in a conflict of values as to the lot of their country up to the point at which the climax is reached, it is only on the basis of argument (whether logical or illogical) on the part of the opposing characters and superior (counter) argument on the part of Gong that the discourse has been sustained. At no point do we have any suggestion of any attempted scuffle accompanied by the brandishing of dangerous weapons such as guns, machetes or fetish objects that are commonly deployed in the Nigerian environment for settling political scores or even the invasion of the forum or venue of the dialogue by restive youths or political thugs. Simply put, all that the characters have engaged in is ‘jaw-jaw’ instead of ‘war-war’. The poet, Remi-Raji, thus seems to reiterate the potency
of dialoguing as a communicative semiotic tool required for practical national integration.

In terms of the dramaturgy deployed by the poet, the characterisation of the literary piece is intriguing. The characters are representative of the diverse ethnic groups within the Nigerian political space that need to engage one another in a useful dialogue for national integration. As archetypes, they occupy the symbolic setting of a heterogeneous society like that of Nigeria where the inhabitants would have diverse interests to protect, out of which only national interests should prevail.

References


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