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NNIMMO BASSEY'S POETRY AND HEALING THROUGH RESISTANCE THERAPY

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Abstract

Injustice can be compared to a disease that causes sickness. In other words, it could be projected as a sociopolitical phenomenon that triggers what many societies have come to regard as social malady. Nnimmo Bassey's poetry reflects the presence of this disease and the poet's response to it in his society. Through the psychoanalytic theoretical template, this essay critically examines Bassey's projection of resistance as therapy for healing the malady caused by injustice. It argues that applying this therapy involves exploring the collective memory of Nigerians, mobilizing all members of the Nigerian society, and promptly taking collective action against the disease. It is the conclusion of the essay that applying the collective resistance therapy as reflected in Bassey's poetry will transform and heal the society.

Keywords: injustice, psychoanalysis, resistance, therapy, collective memory

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Introduction

Art is not an act of submission, it is a victory.
The victory of what?
Of emotions and the means of expressing them.
Over what?
Over indifference, almost always; and for artists, over logic.
(Malraux 27)

Malraux's position suggests resistance as therapy, which is explored in this essay from the perspective of medical humanities and the psychoanalytic theory. The objective of medical humanities is a "cumulative interdisciplinary understanding of illness as a human need and clinical medicine as a human response to it" (Evans et. al 5). Poetry as a response to social situation operates under a similar objective as medical humanities. Medical humanities also share a very close link with the psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalytic theory, like the medical humanities, explores literature for its story telling therapeutic benefits. Rainer Emig observes: "Storytelling is the obvious link between literature and psychoanalysis" (175). He emphasizes this further and identifies other links which these two fields of study share when he notes that:

Psychoanalysis shares with literature the poiesis of images and expressions, the poetics of their arrangement, the grammar of narratives, but also a theory of interpretation. The latter frequently abandons the idea of an origin of symptoms (in empirical fact or transcendent metaphysics) and instead refers to other texts, previous traumas or archetypal images and stories that are closely related to myths. Modern literary theory calls this 'intertextuality'. Psychoanalytic theories also refer to their material in literary terms: the poetry of dreams, the drama of ur-scenes, and the narratives that emerge from them. Moreover they have inspired texts in all these genres: from the poetry of Sylvia Plath via Hitchcock's psycho-drama to fiction such as D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* and the works of Angela Carter. (175)

Poetry as a genre of literature shares in the story telling of literature. Each poem in a collection or selected collections, when properly arranged, tells a unique story. Poetry, to this paper, is a collection of pieces of a puzzle that needs to be arranged and re-arranged in order to understand the story told by the poet or poets. It is on account of the therapeutic value of poetry that Michael Ryan remarks: "The therapeutic cure occurs through an increase of knowledge and through the practice of discovering and communicating knowledge" (qtd. in Bracher 11). Ryan's perspective lays the foundation for the therapeutic essence of reading poetry. The key indicators pointed out by Ryan in achieving a therapeutic cure are inalienable to poetry. They also link poetry with psychoanalysis. It is because of this knowledge-based therapy that psychoanalysis is

often referred to as narrative medicine or the "talking cure" (29), a description first used by Josef Breuer's patient, Anna O. Ann Dobie identifies Freud's observation on this as follows: "Freud's sense of the artist, finally, was that he is an unstable personality who writes out of his own neurosis, with the result that his work provides therapeutic insights into the nature of life not only for himself but also for those who read" (56). As narrative medicine, language and narratives are fundamental to psychoanalysis the same way language and narratives are fundamental to literature.

Resistance as therapy does not only reflect the link between literature, psychoanalysis, and medical humanities; it also reflects the relation between literature, psychoanalysis, and radical politics. Psychoanalysis shares with literature what it shares with radical politics. According to Terry Eagleton, psychoanalysis "is a science committed to the emancipation of human beings from what frustrates their fulfilment and wellbeing. It is a theory at the service of a transformative practice, and to that extent has parallels with radical politics" (166). These ends of psychoanalysis and radical politics are also the ends of literature, especially the literature committed to the emancipation of the society like Bassey's poetry.

Nnimmo Bassey's poetry is an example of Nigerian poetry in English, especially in the post-colonial situation. Resistance is a prominent aspect of this national genre of literature. According to Rajeev S. Patke, this poetry is held together, amongst many things, by two ironies, and they are: resistance to colonial rule and grief at the failure of the nation to live up to its dream (111). The second irony has transformed into a different form of resistance. This new form of resistance operates with a therapeutic end in mind.

The resistance nature of Nigerian poetry is informed by disturbing historical events that the nation has witnessed. Steve Ogude's observation on African literature in English as: "the story of slavery, colonization and further colonization, otherwise referred to as neo-colonialism" (1), outlines these historical events. These events identified by Ogude form experiences, phases, and instances of injustice in Nigerian life that Nigerian poetry has resisted and is still resisting. For example, during the era of colonization, Nigerian poetry resisted the injustice of the invasion of the fatherland by strangers. This resistance manifested in protests, through poetry and other genres of literature, calling the colonial overlords to vacate the country and leave the management of its local resources to its indigenes. After independence, Nigerian poetry and other genres of the nation's literature became committed to resisting the injustice of bad leadership, dictatorship and tyranny; characteristics of neocolonial stooges who took over the leadership of the country. This neo-colonization which has become a major part of Nigeria's poetic story has stretched from the first republic through the coups and counter-coups that resulted in the crisis which led to the civil war, and from the war to the Second and Third Republics and their interruptions by coups and military dictatorships. These sad experiences have affected the nature of Nigerian poetry. They have made Nigerian poetry develop a peculiar nature which is better understood in line with an observation made by Patke on how art should respond to violence and injustice. He observes:

Extreme forms of oppression and injustice raise the question: How should art respond to violence? The question masks an anxiety based on a form of binary thinking. To accept the binary is to believe that (a) poets create artefacts that transcend or transmute their circumstances in order to provide lasting aesthetic pleasure and insight, or (b) when faced by oppression and injustice, poets set aside the aim of creating objects of aesthetic contemplation in order to resist injustice and foster change. The binary mode assumes that the two aims are incompatible, requiring poets to choose between the allegedly timeless disinterestedness of art and the urgently local commitment of politics. (122)

A careful assessment of the poetry of Bassey and those of other Nigerian poets appears to show works that reflect the above statement: “the urgently local commitment of politics.” Nigerian poets have been concerned with resisting injustice and helping the Nigerian reader make sense of the complex Nigerian situation, and their response to injustice has become a defining aspect of the nature of Nigerian poetry. This nature and position of Nigerian poetry exemplifies the argument by Himes (2001) that, “if history and literature have taught us anything, it is that in the midst of trauma, violence and death, it is the poets who help us make sense of the senselessness” (qtd. in Lee 100). Bassey, as a Nigerian poet, has not lost focus in ensuring that the people fully understand their situation in the face of colonial or neocolonial injustice, as he projects a possible means of reprieve.

Bassey is mostly critiqued as an eco-critical poet, as exemplified in critical works by Chibuzo Asomugha (2008), who adjudges Bassey as a poet involved in intense campaign against the spoliation of the earth; Philip Aghoghovwia (2014), who locates both Bassey’s poetic and political practices of petro-environmentalism within the category of social and environmental justice crusaders; and Olawale Taju Ajayi (2015), who points out how Bassey catalogues the woes of the coastal communities or the Delta and instigates the people to rise up in arms, if possible, against the authorities or injustice. However, this paper, from the medical and psychoanalytic perspectives, reads and assesses the therapeutic nature of the form of resistance identifiable in Bassey’s poems.

Resistance as Therapy in Bassey’s Poetry

Revolution and renewal motivate the poetry of Bassey. His work suggests that resistance by the people is one of the ways out of their current predicament. With his poetry adopting the resistance mode, it becomes a performative act. The poetry of Bassey is mostly performative because it uses as a tool of achieving its therapeutic ends, words that enact deeds.

The eponymous poem, “I will not Dance to your Beat,” using the strong personal pronoun “I,” clearly reflects resistance for therapeutic ends. The title of the poem implies resistance to an unacceptable condition and threatens to confront upholders of injustice in order to stop further acts of injustice:

I will not dance to your beat

If you call plantations forests
 I will not sing with you
 If you privatize my water
 I will confront you with my fists
 If climate change means death to me but business to you
 I will expose your evil greed
 If you don't leave crude oil in the soil
 Coal in the hole and tar sands in the land
 I will confront and denounce you
 If you insists on carbon offsetting and other do-nothing false
 Solutions (11)

One of the conditions resisted in the poem is lying or the projection of falsehood. The poem also resists leaders taking economic decisions and making policies that are inimical to the public good. The poem also interrogates leaders and opportunists who usurp their position of advantage to encourage a condition that is dangerous to the public good because it will enrich them. This poem reflects the presence of injustice propagated by bad leaders. These leaders are also adjudged by the persona as projecting false solutions. The persona in the poem actively shows that resistance is the therapy needed against such false solutions and situations of injustice. In resistance, he threatens to act in a revolutionary manner if there is no change in the behavior of men who have the opportunity to make things right:

I will make you see red
 If you keep talking of REDD and push forest communities
 away from their land
 I will drag you to the Climate Tribunal
 If you pile up ecological debt
 and refuse to pay your climate debt
 I will make you drink your own medicine
 If you endorse genetically modified crops
 And throw dust into the skies to mask the sun
 I will not dance to your beat
 Unless we walk the sustainable path
 And accept real solutions and respect Mother Earth
 Unless you do
 I will not and
 We will not dance to your beat (11)

The persona in the poem is grieved because of some human activities that are not good for the environment and the general welfare of the people. These activities are reflections of injustice towards the environment and others who dwell within its space. Some of the inimical activities being resisted are: the encouraging of the talk on REDD

and pushing the forest communities away from their land, the piling up of ecological debt, the endorsing of genetically modified crops and throwing dust into the skies to mask the sun. The threats he issues in the poem are meant to prevent those in authority from enforcing non-therapeutic solutions. These threats are elements of resistance that serve as preventive medicine against unhealthy and dangerous acts. The persona strongly vows to resist evil and expose greed until there is a change.

In the poem, "They Charged through the Mounted Troops" (Beat), Bassey projects resistance as the medicine the people need to come out of the situation of general injustice which they face and which leaves them in malady by citing examples of those who have used the resistance therapy before. The poem projects that to gain collective healing, the people need to take collective action in resistance, and that is, they must be united in their action against injustice. This poem can be assessed as a tale of healing, taking note of what the sick or affected did in the poem to come out of an undesirable condition. Based on this story of success, like a psychotherapist, the persona in the poem calls on the people to act like the victors did in the tale recollected in the poem as quoted below:

They charged through the mounted troops
 Sniffing vinegar beneath their scarves
 Till the mounted guns dropped and the exalted ones scrambled
 They built synergy and spread energy
 It was time to connect the tyrants, dots on the maps
 Bridge them and abridge their grasps

Time to dust our cardboard armours and tin can caps
 Bounce back their plastic bullets, spit in their grumpy faces
 We've reached the crucial phase when clanging pots and pans
 And flying shoes to boot
 Must stand for what we know they should
 Time to detach their bloodied fangs from off our bleeding veins

Awoken from our nightmares it's time to dream and to act we
 Break the teeth of the blood-sucking vermin to shake off
 collective amnesia
 Today we see the reasonable thing is demand the
 unreasonable
 Recover our memory of proud fighters as we must
 Salute the victors
 And the living and the fallen in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya
 And... (12)

The first four lines tell the reader how a group of people acted in resistance to oppression. The perspective presented by the persona is that they acted together and did not relent until their foe was forced to retreat. The essence of this is to urge the people to "charge through the mounted troops" of injustice, moral decadence, and other vices that

result in the loss of social ideals. The remaining lines of the stanza are directed at the reader and the people, telling them it is time to strategize and act in resistance to tyranny and not relent until the battle for justice is won. In the second stanza, the persona declares that they have come out of their nightmare. Nonetheless, to be liberated they need to act by isolating and disarming their enemies and shaking off their own "collective forgetfulness."

Bassey emphasizes his suggestion on healing through collective response and resistance in another of his poems in the same collection of poetry. This suggestion is particularly visible in the poem "Yasuni" (Beats). In the second stanza of the poem, the poet teaches the reader that the defenders of nature and society are the members of the society and not necessarily a supernatural force or being:

Yasuni
 Sacred land
 Your defenders
 Link hands across generation gaps
 Kids, ancestors, butterflies merge confronting the rage of crude
 addicts
 Impotent capital halted by guardians of your treasured space
 Still you stand still
 Your calm visage shocks me
 Your verdant mane, rivers of life
 Mother Earth's best patch besieged. (64)

The persona in the above stanza hints at a link between one generation and another in the struggle to overcome the enemies who are after their commonwealth. "Yasuni" is presented here as a supernatural being. In Bassey's poetry, such forces are portrayed in a manner that shows that they have no concern for the suffering of the poor and the affairs of the people. The essence of this presentation is to dissuade the people from putting their trust in supernatural or external forces to fight their cause. The persona suggests that such forces do not have concern for the people's suffering. The deity in the poem remains mute even when the existence of her territories is threatened:

Yasuni.
 Sacred land
 Children of the earth bandaging the earth's many bleeding spots
 Your blood drained to run the lusts of men
 Chains broken, fears dumped, gags burst, your children
 Demand the bloodletting has run its day
 Despots have made their kill
 Humanity captured by plastics and sundry garbage drawn from
 your veins

Yasuni

Sacred land
 Today your children follow the bloody fangs of the panting
 vampires
 From Ogoni to Lofoten to Maracaibo to the Karoo and to First
 Nation lands of the North we shout
 Silence the rigs, hang the monster shovels, block the pipes,
 Give *Pachamama* a break
Sumak kawsay is the way
Ubuntu that which ties us together
Eti uwem the good living
Buen vivir is the way
 Good living, excellent in any tongue
 We refuse to fuel the engines of wrath and pains

Yasuni
 Sacred land. (64-65)

The persona addresses the land in this poem. Using apostrophe, he consoles the land and assures her of the protection of her children. This is so presented because it is the living that must protect the physical world not the dead or an unseen force. He uses what is close to reverse psychology to achieve his goal of making the people come to a realization of their responsibility to act in resistance and protect their land from the dangerous activities of those who are bent on despoiling her for their selfish gain. The poet-persona's emphasis is on the sacred nature of the land, hence the poem begins and ends with the address "Yasuni/Sacred land." The persona also identifies the tools needed to achieve successful resistance as "collective action" and "active collective memory." This deduction is evident in the last but one stanza.

Bassey wants the people to know the importance of seizing the moment before them to act positively towards securing healing from the malady that plagues the society as reflected in the poem, "New Moments" (Beats):

Each new moment a
 Chance for new movement
 Each new minute another
 Opportunity
 To undo impunity
 Seconds give second chance

To undo obscenities
 Of the stinking rich
 Swimming in the sweat of toiling pawns

Each new moment a
 Chance for new movement

To undo historic wrongs
 To build future memories
 In futurescapes
 Founded on villagecapes of
 Justice, dignity, peace

To undo obscenities
 Of the stinking rich
 Swimming in the sweat of toiling pawns

Each new moment a
 Chance for new movement
 In the cold shadows of simmering towers
 To march, heads on the ground
 And build by each thoughtful bounce
 Living ways
 Right way up (49)

The poet explores repetition, especially parallelism, to emphasize the importance of the principle of acting promptly to overcome a cantankerous condition in which the people are "toiling pawns" sweating for "the stinking rich" who swim in the "sweat" of the people. The parallelism visible in the poem is close to what is called inverted parallelism, as the structure of the first stanza is similar to that of the third stanza instead of that of the second. The second stanza is repeated exactly in the fourth stanza. The poem is arranged in such a way that the thought in the first stanza is needed to achieve the goal in the second. This poem is built on the principle of "carpe diem" or "seize the moment." In the first stanza, the persona wants the reader to seize the moment to "undo impunity." The second and fourth stanzas emphasize the need to "undo obscenities." The third stanza urges the reader to seize the moment to "undo historic wrongs." The whole essence of undoing impunity, obscenities, and historic wrongs, which are reflections of the sick state of the society, is to build "future memories."

Bassey's "Mobilize...Resist...Change" (Beat) identifies and sums up the process of healing through resistance, as the title of the poem suggests. The first step identified is that of mobilization. The second step to be taken is to resist, while the last step is the end that is expected if the first two steps are successful and that is to achieve change. The three steps are active and not passive, hence, the use of active verbs. These three steps are re-emphasised with the use of repetition in the form of a refrain slightly changed, with the addition of a new element or a little readjustment of the structure reflected as: "mobilise/resist/transform" in the second stanza, "we mobilise/we resist/ we'll transform" in fourth stanza, and "together we mobilise/ together we resist/ together we transform" in the last stanza of the poem. The third form of the repeated structure with the addition of the phrase "together we" confirms the efficacy of the resistance therapy when collectively applied.

Conclusion

Nnimmo Bassey through his poetry acknowledges that the society suffers different forms of injustice which have become the cause of pervading neuroses. His poetry projects resistance therapy as a means of attaining healing from the neuroses. It identifies the elements of resistance therapy to include: collective remembering or accessing collective memory, the issuing of threats, mobilization, seizing the moment, and collective action. Bassey's poetry strongly prescribes collective resistance therapy and projects that the people and all they hold sacred need to explore their collective memory, mobilise themselves, issue threats against unjust leaders, promptly take collective action and not rely on supernatural forces in order to transform the society from a neurotic state to a healthy one. In other words, taking the collective resistance therapy will heal the society. This is also the stand of this paper.

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