

The Projection of National (Di)vision through Animal Symbolism in Remi Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland* and *A Harvest of Laughters*

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Abstract

Modern African poets have shown a consistent commitment to the socio-political and economic trends of their various nations, becoming both the mouthpieces of the people and the watchdogs of leaders in all spheres of the society. This article examines animal symbolism as markers of Nigeria's socio-political history. To do this, it relies on the animals' behavioural traits as an interpretative paradigm. The article adopts semiotics, particularly symbolism, a meaning-expanding literary device, in interpreting Remi Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005) and *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997). The semiotic ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce undergird the basic framework for the explications. Moreover, the selected symbols are analysed within the context of socio-cultural beliefs and historical events in Nigeria. Hence, the study reveals that the poet's usage of cultural semiotic markers such as "the Elephant," "the Wolf," "the Dog," and "the Hyena" to indicate Nigeria's socio-political trajectory underscores his poetic elegance and social vision. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the poetry collections are symbionts and in dialogue with each another. Ultimately, the article captures dialogue as the poet's panacea for progressive coexistence in a heterogeneous nation like Nigeria.

Keywords: animal symbolism; Remi Raji; modern African poets; progressive coexistence; semiotic analysis; cultural semiotics

Introduction

A reading of Remi Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005) and *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997) reveals the preponderance of animal symbols that express an array of



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meanings. The poetry collections adopted for textual analysis were written at different periods. However, they share striking similarities in terms of themes, symbolism, and subject matters. Both collections are preoccupied with the postcolonial anomalies in Nigeria (especially from 1960 to date), as they bewail the culture of violence, impunity, corruption, betrayal, ethnic bigotry and all forms of anti-social behaviours that undermine common sense and decorum. Hence, the textual analysis is done based on these shared similarities.

To capture the underlying meanings in these collections, the poet's utilisation of symbolism is explored. Marcel Danesi (2004, 21) has rightly stated that because we are born into an already-fixed semiosphere, and although new signs are created by writers, we literally let our culture "do the understanding" for us. Consequently, the symbols used by Remi Raji are interpreted within the context of his culture, particularly the Yorùbá culture, and the African culture by extension. Against this background, semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems, submits itself as a viable tool for critical interpretation of symbolism in these poetry collections. The ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce undergird the basic framework for the description, classification, and application of semiotics. Danesi (2004, 23) states that "the primary task of semiotics is to identify, document and classify the main types of sign and how they are used in representational activities." Although Pierce identifies 66 types of signs, including icons, indexes and symbols, of interest to us in this study are symbols.

Symbolism as a Literary Device

According to Olaleye Kayode (2005, 1), one of the distinguishing factors between man and other animals is his ability to symbolise. In the words of Danesi (2014, 27), "a symbol is a sign that stands for its subject by convention or agreement in a specific context." In other words, symbols are understood only within the context of historical and socio-cultural conventions. Kayode (2005, 4) further defines a symbol as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. Implicit in this definition is that whereas a symbol is overt, its symbolism (figurative or extended meaning) is covert. Moreover, Luke Eyoh (2005, 42) submits that a symbol is an object used to represent other objects, concepts, conditions, places, behaviours and phenomena, but which bears no direct resemblance to what it represents.

From the foregoing scholarly views about symbols, it becomes clear that symbolism is a meaning-expanding literary device; it corresponds to connections that humans make between their lives, objects, characters, ideas, actions, values or cultures. Symbols in literature are weightier than their denotative or surface meanings: they carry an additional level of meaning which contributes to a deeper understanding of literary works. Ultimately, the use of symbols by creative writers calls the attention of the reader or critic to the nexus of aesthetics and subject matter in literature.

Remi Raji and an Overview of the Selected Collections

Remi Raji is a contemporary Nigerian poet. He is the author of *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs America: A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003), *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005), *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* (2009), and *Sea of My Mind* (2013). Just like other contemporary Nigerian poets, Raji decries the unfortunate economic and socio-political state of the African polity. A striking feature of Raji's poetry is its portrayal and condemnation of the downward syndrome of most African countries and his identification with the downtrodden masses. Raji often highlights the pitiable conditions of the poor in society, a condition occasioned by corrupt leaders and military dictators. His artistry is marked by his deployment of very familiar symbolism and imagery to denounce ethnic and sectional interest, military misrule, maladministration and corrupt practices, especially in Nigeria. Remi Raji has served as the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). He has been an Alexander von Humboldt Scholar to Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, and his works have been translated into French, German, Catalan, Swedish, Ukrainian and Latvian. Raji currently teaches literature in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Lovesong for My Wasteland (2005) is Remi Raji's fourth collection of poetry. It is a dramatic poem or a choreopoem in which Gong, Gambia, Takie and Asabi (characters in the collection) engage in a dialectical process of consensus building. What is clear in the analysis of Raji's poetic dramaturgy is the efficacy of dialogue among the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria in the realisation of the nation's national objectives. Raji has usually been concerned with how both human and natural resources in his nation have been wasted by military dictators and democratically elected political leaders. While some commentators and critics like Sule Egya (2007, 111) have averred that his poems are filled with optimism, it is also clear that pain, anguish, frustration and disillusionment characterise Raji's poetry, particularly *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (henceforth referred to as *Lovesong*). The title of the collection gives credence to this assertion.

In this choreopoetic collection, over 20 animal symbols, including elephant, wolf, dog, hyena, swine, snail, deer, bull, toad, vulture, woodpecker, viper, cobra and cock, are employed to foreground the poet's disillusionment, occasioned by corrupt practices, sectional interest and ethnic loyalty. Some of the vital issues in *Lovesong* include cohesion, patriotism, reconciliation, and national integration. By employing poetic dialogue, Raji projects his belief in nation-building through a cordial inter-ethnic relationship in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria. Moreover, the synthesis of Gong's thesis and the other characters' antithesis is interpreted as the poet's blueprint for the principle and process of a healthy dialectic for national integration, cohesion and transformation in Nigeria.

A Harvest of Laughters (1997) is largely recognised not only for its depiction of Remi Raji's satirical treatment of events in Nigeria's socio-political landscape and his tirade against the key perpetrators of such events but also for his belief in the therapeutic effect of poetry. Our careful study of this collection submits that laughter is a veritable therapy in an environment of countless socio-political anomalies. In this collection, Raji portrays and condemns class distinction. While the poor, ordinary people in his portrayed society invest their energy in developing and sustaining the nation's economy, they end up exploited and downtrodden by a select few elites by whose self-centredness the same economy is destroyed. It is in this connection that the poet condemns the excesses of the military regimes—regimes which are characterised by thievery, political patronage, brutality, corruption, extrajudicial killings, and so on. Although the poet treats very serious issues in the volume, he seems to portray the paradoxical relationship between laughter and disillusionment in a country like Nigeria. This relationship is key because rather than wallow in the mire of anguish, the poet proffers laughing at the ridiculous actions of the nation's leaders as a veritable pathway for preserving the psychological health of the onlooking and/or protesting masses. In *A Harvest of Laughters* (henceforth referred to as *Harvest*), some 18 animal symbols, including locust, chameleon, spider, tortoise, hawk, antelope, vulture, dog, hyena, wolf, elephant and cockerel, are used by the poet to project his poetic vision.

A Cultural Interpretation of Some Animal Symbols Used in the Collections

In this study, only four of these animal symbols used as semiotic markers of Nigeria's socio-political history are examined. The interpretations of the selected symbols in this analysis are derived from the Yorùbá epistemology. The following information about the symbolism of the elephant, wolf, and dog was obtained from Adesoji Gbelekale, a popular Yorùbá oral artiste.¹ It is also important to note that although the poet's cultural background is used as a launching pad for critical interpretation, many other African cultures share the same views and beliefs as the Yorùbá in relation to the selected animal symbolism. According to Gbelekale (personal interview with the oral artiste, 2014), the elephant is associated with notions of wealth, enormosity, might and abundance. While the wolf is considered a symbol of voracity and greed, the dog is seen as a symbol of promiscuity and instability.

Adesola Olátéjú (2005, 368) notes that the knowledge of the Yorùbá about the characteristic traits of animals is reflected in their poetic genres of Oriki (Yorùbá praise poetry), Ijálá (Yorùbá hunters' poetry), and Ese-ifá (Yorùbá ifá divination poetry). Raji uses four animal symbols as signifiers of Nigeria's socio-political "seasons." "Seasons,"

¹ This interview was carried out on 16 November 2014 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan. Adesoji Gbelekale is a popular oral artiste and, at the time, a postgraduate student at the Department of English, University of Ibadan.

as used here and in *Harvest*, imply political eras in Nigerian history. These animals are “the Elephant,” “the Wolf,” “the Dog,” and “the Hyena.” The first season conforms to the period between 1960 and 1966 in Nigeria; the second season corresponds to the years of military rule in Nigeria, and the third season signifies Nigeria’s period of democratic rule (1999 to date). The symbolism of such animals as “the Elephant,” “the Wolf,” “the Dog,” and “the Hyena” provide an insightful perception of Remi Raji’s *Lovesong* and *Harvest*.

Critical Analysis of Animal Symbolism in the Poetry Collections

Season of the Elephant

And the elephant / tetrarch and mighty / trample truth / with a blind foot (*Harvest*, 65)

The selected poetry collections are symbionts and in dialogue with each other in the sense that the socio-political events and features of the “seasons” (of the Elephant, Wolf, and Dog/Hyena) captured in *Harvest* are properly explicated and dramatised in *Lovesong* through the use of animal symbols. The first season captured in *Harvest* is the season of the Elephant. The elephant symbolises strength, might, wealth and abundance. In *Lovesong*, Gong, one of the characters, presents the season of the Elephant as the first in the nation’s socio-political history—the period of Nigeria’s political independence (1960–1966). It was a time when the prospects of the nation were the envy of the world. In fact, the wealth, potentials (economic and human) and strength of the nation as at independence had prompted the description of Nigeria as “the giant of Africa,” in line with the symbolic meaning of the elephant. However, the poet describes the season of the Elephant as a season “When the land quaked with myths of impossible flamboyance / When the homestead brimmed with promises / And guises and intrigues” (*Lovesongs*, 8).

Although the elephant’s physical traits suggest that its symbolism should be associated with complimentary ideas, as we pay attention to the context of the writer we see that its symbolism is uncomplimentary and satirical. Due to corruption and the inability of the leadership of the nation to manage the challenges of the newly independent heterogeneous state, “the smokescreen of a failed union gave birth / to cries of war and wars” (*Lovesong*, 8). Furthermore, because of the political ineptitude displayed by early civilian leaders and the numerous political skirmishes that followed, the military staged the first coup in the history of the nation in 1966. Shortly after the 1966 coup, Nigeria was plunged into a civil war, a gruesome period when “music was made out of the skulls of men” (*Lovesong*, 8). One of the reasons given by the 1966 coup plotters was the massive corruption in the government. The poet thus laments that corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the society so much that “no one is free now: / The deep smear / in a season of syphilis / On whose forehead have I not seen it?” (*Lovesong*, 16). Here, the poet portrays corruption as syphilis—a chronic, contagious and venereal disease. The idea here is that apart from the overtly corrupt individuals, as other citizens with

higher moral values began to relate with the political elites they too contracted the virus of corruption.

Corruption in the season of the Elephant was so ubiquitous that virtually everyone is indicted for it. The wealth of the nation was stashed away into private accounts by corrupt people in power. Resources meant for the common good were stolen by corrupt cabals. Raji laments such a season of thievery in the following (*Lovesong*, 28) rhetorical lines:

Who stole the secrets of oil from the rack of Forcados?

...

Who at night decimated the harvest of Kano pyramids?

...

Who burnt the trees of wealth: rubber, cocoa, kola and palm

Which sprawled the land and crossed many rivers?

...

Who bled the bellies of Jos, Enugu, Igbeti and other mines?

The Elephant becomes a paradoxical signifier of poverty in plenty, weakness in strength, and smallness in enormousness.

The Season of the Wolf

... the whimpering wolf / wonders why / the land is soaked in blood / the limb of the lost lamb / in its weeping mouth. (*Harvest*, 65)

The season of the Wolf immediately succeeds the season of the Elephant. The wolf is a greedy and voracious animal, a carnivore that preys on weak animals. The season of the Wolf symbolises the military era in Nigeria (July 1966–1979, December 1983–August 1993, and November 1993–May 1999). At this time, “the farmer” who bore the responsibility of building a strong and cohesive nation had been cleared from the scene and the “scarecrow” became “the landlord / of helpless birds and crops” (*Lovesong*, 8). This indicates the transition from a civilian government to a military regime, when power-drunk military officers were no more than “scarecrows” administering “helpless birds” (the civilian population). The poet captures the kleptomaniac tendency and profligacy of the military regime in the following lines: “In the year of the Wolf, all that was saved became food / for phantoms and bandits / All that was golden became the plaything / of warriors who never won a war” (*Lovesong*, 8).

In the 1970s, Nigeria had begun to focus squarely on petroleum resources as the major export commodity, leaving other sectors like agriculture comatose. The nation, from this point, began to import many commodities that could have been produced in the land if other sectors of the economy were not treated as second fiddle, or neglected in most cases. It is against this backdrop of an economic downturn that the poet sings thus: “We have ore but invent nothing / We have rain but hate to plant / We have the heat and the glory of the rainbow / But we kill our own suns with hurtful glee” (*Lovesong*, 19).

Nelson Fashina (2000) discusses many of the corrupt practices associated with the military regimes of Major-General Muhammadu Buhari (1983–1985), General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985–1993), General Sani Abacha (1993–1998) and General Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999). Buhari’s regime, although noted for its draconian anti-crime decrees, saw the rising tide of money laundering and drug trafficking. Fashina (2000, 6) states:

In spite of the seemingly stern nature and military super-power posture that the Babangida government constructed for itself through its human rights policies, the incidents of corruption, illegal drug trafficking, illegal importation, money laundering, obtaining of money by false pretence, illegal banking and financing institutions, armed robbery, kick-sacks, inflation of contracts, coupled with a regime of the entrenchment of mediocrity in exchange for excellence, all became the order of the day in the Nigeria of the Babangida years.

Fashina observes that the eight years of Babangida’s administration were the most notorious period in the history of Nigeria’s corruption. Given these harsh realities, in the poem “I Rise Now,” Raji laments that “nobody seems to know / how to smile again, / not even a grin colours the face” (*Harvest*, 15). The high-handedness of the military as well as lack of freedom and human rights during the military regime—the season of the Wolf—is a key preoccupation of *Harvest*. According to Fashina (2000, 10), Abacha’s fortitude was misdirected and negatively utilised for the pursuit of horrendous crimes and blood-chilling wars against his critics and all those who disinclined to accept the legitimacy of his aberrant military government. In “Silence II,” Raji calls attention to the lack of freedom to criticise the activities of the military. Thus, “Who sings when the Beast prowls / ... when the boots barrels / and the gift of grenades / chase the choir into silence” (*Harvest*, 52).

The above poem is an allusion to the killing of activists and citizens in the mould of Nigerian journalist, Dele Giwa, and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSSOP), Ken Saro-Wiwa, who challenged the unrestrained power of military leaders. In the poem “Anthem of Silence,” the military dictator is depicted as a cold-blooded “old emperor” who prefers to “... bless the land / with a liquid spray of locust / ... bless the fields / with a fertile roar of vultures / ... descend upon your homesteads / with gifts of bones and grenades” (*Harvest*, 53). There is a fine blend of irony and animal symbolism in these lines. While the locust is considered a devourer and an agent

of destruction, the vulture is an ominous bird that signals death and decay. Ironically, the poet-persona considers these as blessings and gifts to the citizens of the nation. Since the wolf is known for preying on weak animals, the above lines represent a subtle way of deriding the extrajudicial destruction of communities, human rights abuses, and other inhumane acts meted out to the helpless populace by the military regimes.

However, in keeping with the Marxist or revolutionary ideals that characterise the poetry of most modern African poets, the poem “My Soul Is Stitched” describes the defiance and dauntlessness of the poet-persona, a representation of the temper of political activists during the military regime. The poet-persona defies all odds to challenge the excesses of the “emperor” / The Wolf—a signifier of greed, unwarranted voracity, and unrestrained profligacy.

The Season of the Dog and the Hyena

The humble hyena / frowns at the silent cult / of flesh-eaters / and vows to die / a carnivorous vegetarian. (*Harvest*, 65)

Although in *Harvest* there seems to be a distinction between the season of the Dog and the season of the Hyena, this study shows that the seasons of the two signifiers are the same. The season of the Hyena is merely an extension and a continuation of the anomie that characterised that of the Dog. This third season symbolises the period of democratic rule in Nigeria, beginning with the Second Republic (Shehu Shagari’s, October 1979–December 1983) to the Fourth Republic (1999 to date).² This argument is elucidated by the following lines: “The year of the Wolf went with a boundless waste / And the year that followed was ruled / by the *domestic hound of the carnivorous rump*” (*Lovesong*, 9; emphasis added).

The dog, especially the bitch, is a symbol of promiscuity and instability. In the context of the poem, the notion of instability is suggestive of moral bankruptcy and lack of integrity. That is why the poet describes the democratically elected leaders as “the new party of bandits” (*Lovesong*, 9). The season of the Dog marks a period of political patronage, when “Everybody barked in the civil strife of selective prosperity” (*Lovesong*, 9). Corruption, tribalism, and ethnicity replaced merit and diligence, so that “sweet dreams became the handle / of every man who knew the big man in the toilet of power,” and in such a setting it was unavoidable that “poverty became very promiscuous” (*Lovesong*, 9). Those who were dutiful and pledged to serve the nation in honesty were victimised and eliminated. This anomaly is the spotlight of the poet in “Letter to a Rare Policeman.” Because the police officer “dangled the skeletons” of his

² Shehu Shagari’s civilian government was overthrown by the military regime of General Muhammadu Buhari. However, General Abdulsalami Abubakar handed over political power to a democratically elected president in 1999.

superiors “in the market place” and “stroked the nakedness / of looters and cheats in black uniforms,” he ended up marking himself out for death (*Harvest*, 74). The police officer is a representative of those who still uphold the tenets of integrity and patriotism. In this relation, we may recall the Nigerian flaming journalist, Dele Giwa, who was killed by a mail bomb—an act publicly alleged to have been perpetrated by the military government of General Babangida.

In response to the year of the Dog that came with a deceptive bang of “false unison” and “Change”—notions that are not different from the “myths of impossible flamboyance” which the nation had experienced—the poet in “Orphan Cry” states that he is “accustomed to the bronze fiction / of promises of politics” (*Harvest*, 24). In “Here They Lie,” Raji vividly captures the regrettable image of the typical politician who has become synonymous with trickery and subterfuge. The politician makes impracticable promises just to garner votes. Besides, the orchestra of deceptive politicians is cheered on by mendacious sycophants. The activities of these political sycophants are aptly depicted through the image of “the rally rats.” The poet-persona says (*Harvest*, 59) of political sycophants:

Pollen to pollen
they will lick the nectar
in your nest and cry to the hills
“he’s our man, he’s our law
perhaps, he’s our God...”
Oh worthy one, leader, lion
ruler of a rudderless people
they will love you with lips
shaped by the smell of minted money.

As an extension of the season of the Dog, the season of the Hyena is synonymous with the season of Leprosy, which portrays the commoner as leprous, hence isolated from the camp of the healthy and wealthy. Denotatively, leprosy is an infectious disease that causes severe disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage in the legs and arms. Raji uses leprosy as a metaphor for the masses who are quarantined in the mire of poverty and penury and who consequently suffer social stigma. This idea is portrayed in the poem “Siren Sense I,” where the common people become victims of whipping and police brutality if they do not make way for the convoy of politicians. However, the use of

leprosy as a metaphor has a double-edged meaning. Apart from the poor individual whom the oppressive politicians view as leprous, the politicians themselves could also be regarded as lepers. In describing the politician's craze for obstructing the use of public roads with his sirens and convoys in "Siren Sense II", the poet (*Harvest*, 61) says:

The market stands naked
to the emptiness of the open roads...
the highway is wide, wider
than the astonishment
in the public eye.

Just as the healthy would clear the way to avoid contact with an approaching leper, so do the common people stay off the politician's path. In this way, the politicians/bourgeois in Raji's imaginative world become akin to the biblical Naaman in 2 Kings chapter 5. Although Naaman was a leper, he ironically commanded the army of the king of Aram. However, until Naaman heeded the advice of his Israelite slave girl, he could not be cured of his disease. In this relation, leprosy signifies moral bankruptcy on the part of the nation's leaders. The season of Leprosy, therefore, marks a season when the prevailing moral, social, and political malaise "claimed all our limbs" (*Lovesong*, 9). Greed and graft became the creed of public service holders, while those who should confront corrupt leaders with their wrongs "sealed their lips in the pleasant agony of self-defeat" (*Lovesongs*, 9). In the light of this, Raji opines that until the leaders, like Naaman, are humble enough to listen to the advice and yearnings of the people, their moral deficiency will remain with them.

Apart from signifying a season of shady political deals, the season of the Hyena also marks a period when we witnessed some laughable infighting amongst members of Nigeria's leading political parties. Nigeria's political stage witnessed many wranglings in the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and in the opposition parties between 2013 and 2015. Although these political squabbles are not the concern here, they find relevance in the symbolism of the Hyena. One of the characteristics of the hyena is its eerie and high-pitched laughter. Hyenas engage in fights while feasting. We can, therefore, associate the political uproars in Nigeria's corridors of power, during her democratic dispensation, to the trait of the hyena. The noisy infightings for economic gains and for the attainment of political fame among Nigeria's politicians are akin to the squeaky cackle of the hyena. The Nigerian soil is surfeited with "grains" of laughter, hence Raji's proclamation of "a harvest of laughters." Raji has successfully employed the Dog as a cultural signifier of moral instability and deception, while the hyena stands for greed and deception.

The Rajian Panacea of Progressive Coexistence in a Heterogeneous Nation

Raji, just like many contemporary African poets, uses his poetry as a veritable tool for speaking against socio-political, moral and religious ills. Through his poetry, he laments the failures of all generations of Nigerian leaders—civilian and military—portraying leadership as the bane of the nation and the cause of its backwardness. However, Raji does not only reel out the failures of his nation but also proffers solutions to those failures.

Solomon Olaniyan (2014) and Adeyemi Adegaju (2013) consider Raji as a physician. In the words of Adegaju (2013, 2), Raji is 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.” This idea is similar to Olaniyan’s assertion that Raji rises above other writers who narrate the woes and abnormalities in contemporary times without creating hope (Olaniyan 2014). According to Olaniyan (2014, 111), Raji offers “laughter as therapy” to relieve people of their untold anguish. Raji is a patriot who does not believe that his nation cannot get out of the mire in which it finds itself. In his study of *Lovesong*, Sule Egeya (2007) affirms that Raji admires Nigeria’s ability to still exist as an entity, despite its recurrent history of inter-ethnic rivalries. And his major thematic concern in *Lovesong*, according to Egeya, “is to let Nigerians know that the land still has its values; it is still fertile and a fruitful tomorrow is ahead,” despite its current problems (Egeya 2007, 125). Adegaju (2013, 1) identifies *Lovesong* as Raji’s way of artistically using the motifs of dialogue and consensus building as essential factors for realistic inter-group relations that have eluded a pluralistic country like Nigeria for so long. Of importance to the critic in Raji’s dramatic poem is the manner in which the argumentations of the dissenting characters unify to foster nation-building.

Raji’s *Harvest* is a prototype discourse of patriotism, national integration, cohesion, reconciliation and nation-building. *Lovesong* resonates with the yearnings of many Nigerians for a national dialogue that will determine the nature of coexistence among the various ethnic groups that make up the nation. Proponents of a national dialogue believe that a heterogeneous nation like Nigeria can attain sustainable progressive coexistence and development through the viable option of a confab. Thus, Raji’s *Lovesong* captures what a national confab should be like. Given that Raji’s dramatic poem was written in 2005, the collection is a prophetic blueprint for the kind of national dialogue that would cure the depicted nation’s maladies, because a national conference was eventually organised by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration in 2014. Through Gong, one of the characters in the dramatic poem, Raji presents (*Lovesongs*, 11) his personal belief on the need for a national conference:

GONG

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 our past
and our romances with death and failure...
The secret of the future is locked in the past....

The poet expresses faith in history as a determinant of progressive coexistence and cooperation. For the poet, the past must not be swept away, for a poor sense of it will only plunge the nation into a cycle of negative reoccurrences. Although some aspects of the nation's history are dim and inglorious, the persona insists that they must be reawakened in the consciousness of the people. Every nation that has a space on the pinnacle of international fame is a nation whose people express a good sense of their history. History, therefore, becomes a metaphoric torchlight with which humanity gets a graphic view of the dim past in order to chart a meaningful course for the shadowy future.

The poet uses Gong to assemble all other stakeholders to "the marketplace of thought" (*Lovesong*, 3). Gong raises the consciousness of Asabi, Takie and Gambia, pulling them out of the dark corner of indifference and suspicion. Gong is a symbol of the people's conscience and their national history, the embodiment of a chequered national history that plagues the consciences of Nigerians, prompting them to find a way out of their current quagmire.

After a series of arguments and counter-arguments between Gong, on the one hand, and Asabi, Takie and Gambia, on the other hand, the characters come to a consensus. This is indicative of the healthy theses and antitheses that are expected to characterise a forum such as a national confab. But in the midst of these, Raji presents a synthesis of ideas on how to move the nation forward. The synthesis is captured by Takie's comments (*Lovesong*, 10) and Gong's response:

TAKIE

Do you mean we, you and I, were born
around the same year when optimism suffered
a terrible abortion?

Was that the period, what you call the year of the elephant?

GONG

I can smell your blood in my blood.

Both characters are victims of the same appalling national history. After a lengthy disputation, these characters come to the realisation that they all share the same ancestry. This is an expression of the single parentage of humanity. Moreover, though tribes and boundaries abound, humans are always reminded of their common origin when engaged in a meaningful and healthy dialogue. The shared suffering of these characters becomes a unifying force for them to forge a new path for their nation. Raji provides a blueprint for how delegates to the projected national conference should comport themselves. Like these fictional characters, the ability to mediate their theses and antitheses in order to arrive at a synthesis, without resorting to brutish and anti-social means that contravene the rule of law and the codes of human coexistence, is an important recommendation.

Conclusion

The study has examined Remi Raji's use of four animal symbols as signifiers of different eras in Nigeria's socio-political history. A semiotic study of Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland* and *A Harvest of Laughters* provides an insightful understanding of the collections of poetry: both collections enjoy a symbiotic relationship in the expression of the artistic and social vision of the poet. Raji's reliance on animal symbols whose interpretations derive from the Yorùbá culture marks him out as one who has drawn his artistic resources from the pool of oral tradition in order to assert and retain his African identity. Furthermore, the poet's utilisation of animal symbols underscores the fact that he has not betrayed art on the altar of socio-political concerns.

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