Ahmed Koroma
Of Flour and Tears
Baltimore, Publish America, 2012

A Ray of Hope in the Tunnel of Pain: A Review of Ahmed Koroma’s Of Flour and Tears

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Some of the world’s best literature has been triggered by cataclysmic events. War and Exile are two human experiences that are known to have produced excellent literature. Ahmed’s work is an example of excellent literature triggered by a cataclysmic event. In his case, it is excellent poetry triggered by the horrendous decade-long war in his country of Sierra Leone.

Ahmed Koroma’s debut collection of poems, Of Flour and Tears, can be referred to as a poetic biography of a nation in pain. The collection is sombre but hopeful; reflective and inspirational. It walks the reader through an array of emotional, psychological and cognitive alleys of pain, sadness, hopelessness, reflection, relief, forgiveness, and then hope.

Ahmed divides his collection into three major parts: Prelude (the smoke), The Act (the inferno), and Aftermath (after the firestorm). This structural framework allows the poet the opportunity to present the collection as an argument; ensuring unity in the composition, and at some level, a logical progression of thought. This, by no means, interferes with the poetic dexterity and autonomy of individual poems.

It is Ahmed Koroma’s effective use of “Language” that recommends him as one of Sierra Leone’s most promising poets. An admirable quality of a poet is the ability to use accessible language to convey complex messages; to marry profundity with simplicity. Ahmed resists the temptation to use consciously poetic language that often stands between meaning and reader. He effectively employs literary techniques such as allusion, metaphor, symbolism, antithesis, metonymy, and the like, to convey his message. It is interesting and instructive how Ahmed effectively weaves in what I call “eponymic metaphors” from Yoruba cosmology and onomastics into his message of hope and peace in “Aftermath.”

In “The Prelude (the smoke),” the poet presents the “Here” from which we got to “There.” The parenthetical addition, “the smoke,” suggests that something is “burning” or at least “smothering.” The Prelude consists of 13 poems, ranging from “Rain” to “Owl.” In “Rain,” the poet or speaker reflects on the past:

he mud-splashing and the drizzle of today
left me pondering about my yesterdays.
Something must have triggered the return to “yesterdays.” It is in “The Red Sun” that we clearly see the nature of the “prelude,” the “Here” that got us “There:”

its redness penetrates the grayish clouds with westerly wind racing toward the rocky hills

a hungry stomach, a duodenal bacterium, waiting out a breakfast meal, a maggot feast the rays will bring.

Here, we witness the use of subversive poetry. Ahmed uses antithesis to subvert the reader’s conventional knowledge about the Sun. The Sun is supposed to be a source of energy, of life. The plant kingdom upon which Man depends, needs the Sun’s light to flourish. But what we see here is antithetical to what we know or should know about the Sun. This is a different kind of Sun; it is a “Red Sun” that is transgressive, oppressive, and life-denying:

but the warning sign, we dare not look at him lest the redness follows the eyes that never sleep

the sun blinds those that dare to dream those with zest and fervor, those unafraid to speak.

The above is an example of Ahmed’s ability to use simple but not simplistic language to make profound statements. The “Red Sun” he is talking about here is the All Peoples Congress Party whose symbol is the Red Sun; a party that led Sierra Leone for most of that country’s life since independence. Ahmed poignantly paints the picture of the oppression that led to the explosion in later years. ‘The sun blinds those that dare to dream,” is a profound statement about the killing of the concept of future; the killing of human aspiration, determination, and hope by the life-denying “Red Sun.” In the absence of a chance to dream, Man’s fate rests on the syllables of Prayer, which in the poet’s case seems ineffectual”

the saturated mixture of flour and tears the expectation from all these years

did my people pray their lives away while Satan’s maniacal laugh echoes outside the minaret walls…

Ahmed constantly keeps us reflecting, thinking, questioning, and ruminating. Here, we are asked to think about the effectiveness of Prayer in solving Man’s problems on earth. The poem is certainly not anti-religion, but questions religiosity. Should Man outsource solutions to his problems to Prayer?

It is the absence of hope, the absence of a chance to dream, the “hungry stomach” that can only hope for a meal of “maggots,” that form the background to the inferno.
In “The Act (the inferno),” the poet explores themes of violence, pain and loss. In “Solitude,” the poet employs the technique of allusion to talk about the courageous and brave Sierra Leoneans who stayed, fought, and died for their country, paying the ultimate price any citizen can pay for love of country.

In “At the Wall (kaibara city, Animal suffer!),” we witness a happy marriage of Language and Theme. The theme of violence, pain, and brutality is matched by the poet’s diction:

she is butchered and maimed
clipper-fingers forced between
ripping her innocence apart
for the first time…

The words “butchered,” “maimed,” “forced,” and “ripping,” paint a picture of unbridled horror. The poet compares the introduction of mayhem in Sierra Leone to rape. Like a raped virgin, Sierra Leone lost her innocence through the horrendous rebel war that ripped the nation apart. The poet chooses the language of violence and destruction to match the theme:

the brutal act is unbearable
so she hollers in a vacuum
cries unheard
as the riotous crowd chants:

depth to democracy
we killed peace at last
lest it brings more peace
and democracy…

The above captures the violent overthrow of security, sanity, and peace. The rebel war becomes The Act that is “the inferno.” It nurtures “anarchy and chaos;” it “slaughters Love,” and converts Sierra Leone into a “land of entropy.”

The Act kills hope and the future. Ahmed uses rhetorical questions to dramatize the loss of future in “When Hopes Die:”

joyless rides in countryside/a kidnapped lad who’s drugged and high
missing his tomorrow/will he ever come.

In “The Song,” a ray of hope peeps through the lips and hips of singers:

we clap our hands and sing sad songs/clad in frayded piece of woven cloth
battered but strong we will not fall/with worn-out zest we will stand tall
we lost our homes but not our soul…
our lives in tattered dangling ropes
but distant ray of hope I see
across the wasteland to the sea
a cherished sight beyond the hills
inflame my heart and comfort me…

All is not lost; there is hope in the bowl of human resilience. Here, Ahmed Koroma pays tribute to the human spirit, especially the strength of character and indomitable will of the Sierra Leonean people who are able to see a ray of hope in their tunnel of pain.

In “Aftermath (after the storm),” Ahmed Koroma turns to reconstruction. The language of the poems in this section is one of peace, of “weaving” not of “ripping;” it is one of sowing, not of cutting; one of fecundity, not of aridity.

Physical places play an important role in Ahmed Koroma’s poetry. Tower Hill, the Wall of kaibara city, and Sackville Street are some of the places that serve as physical springboards for the poet’s artistic creations. In “Nostalgia,” Sackville Street serves as the backdrop against which the poet reflects on the condition of his country. Here again, Ahmed Koroma exhibits his skill to achieve profundity in simplicity. Witness the following lines:

the kid in the gutter
his mind once glowing with colors
(of the rainbow)
is now an expert
on Kalashnikov and alphajets
what replacement toy
for yesteryear’s alphabet.

Sierra Leone’s young who are supposed to be introduced to the alphabet were instead introduced to guns. Instead of becoming educated professionals, they became fighters and killers. This is how Sierra Leone’s bright future was murdered by the war.

as Ogun springs from the body of Yemeja
so is mercy that shower on Salioko
(along the stream where we bathe all night)

we wash our faces with tears of joy
the tears that roll after the mighty storm
the celebration, after the thunderous war…

Ahmed Koroma’s poetry is about pain but it is not all gloom. It rescues the reader from the pages of pain and gloom to a future that promises peace and hope. The poetry sings of rebirth. In the verse, “as Ogun springs from the body of Yemeja,” the poet uses the Yoruba Creation Myth (The Pantheon of Orishas) to talk about the rebirth that should take place or is taking place in Sierra Leone after the war. Ogun, the classical warrior, a primordial Orisha or emissary of Olodumare, came from the womb of Yemeja, the Mother of All. The poet sees forgiveness as a new force, a life-affirming force that should be born to chart a new direction that may lead to Nirvana.

The idea of the coming of a new day is continued in the poem, “His Return:”
as darkness spreads over the quiet town
we hear the distant sound of trumpet blaring
across the land/and the late wind whispers goodbye
to sorrow

... but Salioko is reborn

... ah! the image of Salioko
the smell of daylight
the smell of joy
Kayode is home
again.

In the above verses, Ahmed Koroma inspires hope and a return to stability and joy. The poet uses what I refer to as eponymic metaphor to drive home the message. “Kayode,” in the onomastic traditions of the Yoruba, is a male name which means, “He brought joy.” Here, Ahmed Koroma uses the name to symbolize the happiness, joy, and hope that visits Sierra Leonean homes after the terrible storm.

Ahmed Koroma’s poetry inspires, educates, and elevates. His language is simple, accessible, but effective. His figurative language is original and rooted in African traditions, making the imagery that rides on the waves of his metaphors and similes, refreshing.