

Reminiscing the Blank Spaces of Sojourn: Sublimating Emotional Flights in Taban Lo Liyong's "*Words That Melt A Mountain*"

Niyi Akingbe *

Abstract

Taban Lo Liyong's profundity as a foremost writer from East Africa is often showcased by his wilful eccentricity and dogged iconoclasm, which exuberantly dot the lines of his poetry collections. For much of his writing career, Liyong has sustained a cultivated equanimity towards the paradox of being widely accepted by the budding African literary critics, and being deliberately neglected by the established critics. His maverick disposition to literary craftsmanship is stridently exhibited in the thematics of *Words That Melt A Mountain*: an unabashed treatment of controversial subject matters; intrusive and digressive narrative technique; confident assertive ego; an effervescent erudition in his writing and a disturbing frankness in the treatment of sex. This paper is preoccupied with the examination of how the Poetics of *Words That Melt A Mountain* are grounded in the boons and mementoes garnered from the experiences borne out of Liyong's sojourn in Japan. It will further look into how the reminiscence of Liyong's sojourn in Japan ferments an interplay of themes which oscillate between audacious narrative of erotic explorations and a penetrating introspection into the African mythopoesis.

Keywords: *Reminiscing, the blank spaces of sojourn, sublimating, emotional flight, Taban Lo Liyong.*

* Corresponding author: Niyi Akingbe, Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Humanities, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji. P.M.B 5006.233001, Ilesha, Osun State, Nigeria, E-mail: deniakingbe@yahoo.com

Introduction

Arguably East Africa's most pedantic and controversial writer, Taban Lo Liyong is perhaps South Sudan's most prodigious and colourful poet. Poetic of his *Words That Melt a Mountain* constitutes a landmark in African poetry. It is a poetry collection crowded with weird symbols and libidinous metaphors. Embedded in Liyong's poetry is a ringing tone of defiance and sustained air of non-conformism to the established norms of crafting poetry. Liyong's poetic is drugged on anarchic gusto, nuanced by shifts in time and place, and blurred by the intersection of fantasy and reality. His witty philosophy, overbearing pedagogical disposition and suffocating penchant for vulgarity, has earned him unparalleled enmity from the established critics of African literature. Adrian Roscoe, for instance, has described him as eccentric and curious the way he unconventionally used the lowercase letters, without punctuation in *Another Nigger Dead* (Roscoe, 1977:114). This has a subtle parallelism in the submission of Eldred Durosimi Jones, who considers the maverick poise of Liyong's poetry as "sometimes straight, sometimes ironic, serious, parallel, contrasting, are massed together to produce a prickly, jumpy effect" (Jones, 1973:176-77). But the most incongruous of the critical salvos ever fired at Liyong, was deleteriously delivered by Peter Nazareth, when he unabashedly blurted out that, Liyong is ideologically irrelevant as a spokesman for the Third World peoples and that he is an artistic failure (Nazareth, 1978:38). However, F. Odun Balogun has strongly underscored the artistic significance of Liyong, in the distinguished African literary hall of fame, when she relentlessly rallied a deserving support for his literary candidature in the African literary enterprise "Taban does not flatter the people of the Third World, just as he does not condone the weakness of the people of the developed nations. Rather, he uses his art to challenge the former to match the achievements of the latter. Taban believes in the unity of all men, 'in the final analysis', he says, 'society is also one', and he sees the differences in human beings as only a matter of 'difference in degree', for, as he points out, 'A reliable balance sheet of innate qualities of the Blacks and Whites and the Yellow has not yet been drawn up. For all practical purposes, there are no differences in them. This is why Taban

applies the same rule to all and believes the Third World has the capacity to catch up with the developed nations'' (F. Odun Balogun, 1998:260-261). While this paper does not intend to serve as a propagandistic platform to eulogize the stupendous proclivity of Taban Lo Liyong's literary provenance, the paper will however highlight how the avant-garde and the iconoclastic disposition of Taban Lo Liyong has shaped the poetics of *Words That Melt A Mountain* (1996), in capturing the emotional shifts, grounded in the staccato bursts of reminiscences of his stay in Japan.

Words That Melt Mountain fervently coalesces Liyong's cultural incursion into the Japanese society and the attendant social disequilibrium he experienced, during his sojourn in that country. Liyong's position as an outsider affords him a rare privilege of probing perceptively into the socio-cultural fabric of the Japanese society. Unlike Aime Cesaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, whose fauna, landscape and images are depressingly emphasized rather than the individuals who occupied the landscape, Liyong's *Words That Melt Mountain* mediates individuals' exhibition of cultural nuances. Liyong's often obtrusive voice, reverberates consistently in the poems. None of the poems in this collection has a title, they are rhetorical, loosely structured, and each poignantly narrates the poet persona's exuberant, hilarious and convivial experiences. They are rendered in verbal erudition, which betrays compelling emotional shifts. The structural-linguistic significance of these emotional shifts in the *Words That Melt Mountain* strikingly reflects Sunday Anozie's submission on linguistic criticism of literary works. He observed that there are two underlined assumptions in the structural-linguistic method of literary crafting:

The first is the realization that a poetic work contains a system of ordered variants which can be isolated and represented vertically in the form of superimposed levels, such as phonology, phonetic, syntactic, prosodic and semantic. The second is that modern structuralism-especially in the form of its offshoot, generative grammar- provides an adequate theory and method for accounting for such levels and in dealing with the internal coherence of the given work of art (Anozie, 1984:106).

Liyong has adopted this stylized approach of stringing together scraps of experiences rendered in poetry because it is the most convenient way of rendering life lived in fits. While the European and Western literatures copiously advocated a reduction of the author's presence within the work, to reiterate James Joyce's injunction that "the artist like the God of creation", ought to "remain within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Joyce, 1984: 194), but Liyong takes upon himself, the role of obtrusive commentator most often in *Words That Melt Mountain*, to offer explanations and illustrations when necessary.

Facilitating Dialogue between the Writer and the Reader in Literary Production

The collection starts with the invitation of the readers by the Poet persona, to a literary dialogic. The writer has most often constitutes the cynosure and bastion of literary creativity, but Liyong reverses this omnibus role of the writer by emphasizing the collaboration and synergy between the writer and the reader, towards attaining the aesthetic fructification of a literary work. He argues further, that the success of any literary production only thrives on dialogue, rather than on the selfish-prone monologue which only justifies the writer's gratification, thereby alienating the readers:

Dear Reader,

Writing is an invitation to a dialogue.

First the writer chooses the theme and expounds on it.

The reader is provoked to respond; silently or loudly,

Prosaically or poetically.

The debate that ensues amplifies the theme...

The mind's empire is enlarged, and the heart

Can understand what it would never have condoned before.

Toleration is the answer

To a multicultural uni world. (i)

Liyong has unambiguously demonstrated in this introductory poem, that writing should not be the exclusive preserve of the author, but rather, it should be an exchange of ideas between the writer and the reader. It is only logical for the writer to sustain this link between him

and the reader, because the reader axiomatically constitutes, the vibrant audience of any literary production. Such exchange is deemed beneficial to literary enterprise because, when ‘the writer chooses the theme and expounds on it/the reader is provoked to respond; silently or loudly, and the dividend of such exchange strikingly ‘amplifies the theme’.

Mythologizing African Cultural Consciousness in the World Literary Order

The exploration and adoption of mythology in the works of contemporary African writers, is no doubt designed to re-write African cultural consciousness in the world’s new literary order. It will not be out of place to acknowledge the fact that contemporary African writers, even though they write in non-African languages like English, French and Portuguese, but have their inspiration sacrosanctly rooted in the African culture, cosmology, the landscapes and the social patterns obtainable in their respective cultural milieu. Suffice to say that “Modern African literature right from the beginning has drawn upon two major traditions and their respective thought and imaginative systems: the Western literary tradition and the African oral tradition. One insists on the epistemological difference between history and fiction, the other on the pragmatic identicalness of both. For the majority of African writers, the two traditions exist to be of mutual assistance in the evolution of the new literature in Africa, and the distinction between history and fiction is accepted as valid” (Ogundele,1992:9). In a poem whose first line begins with ‘When i hit my right foot against a stone’, the poet creates an interrelationship between man, inanimate objects and the supernatural elements in African cosmology, and Africans maintain a corresponding anthropomorphic attitude to stones, water, forest and animals. This is significantly underscored in the words of Mazisi Kunene “Each society is concerned with its destiny within the cosmic arena. Without this perspective, the society can only be stampeded into directions it does not fully comprehend or does not feel ready to follow...myth can take many forms. It can reorganize the historical content in terms of modern perspectives. It can create an attractive vision defining in familiar cosmic terms the future possibilities of society. Myth can be used to celebrate the

achievements of society, making them fall into an acceptable social order (Kunene, 1980:190). The poem is deftly anchored on the stylistic influence of African mythopoeic tropes employed in the poem to reiterate African cosmological exegesis:

When I hit my right foot against a stone
 It portends bad news ahead.
 So it happened as I walked to work.
 A letter from Kampala, a fax message from Khartoum,
 lunch at the canteen; all went well.
 But you were not at your desk...
 your friend later told me you had a cold.
 The secret of your heart is out
 mother earth already knows. (3)

Liyong's almost obsessive, but avowed fidelity to the African mythology is effusively demonstrated in the poem:

When I hit my right foot against a stone/It portends bad news
 ahead

Despite the poet been away from Africa, his mind flits between Japan and Africa, consequently, myth serves as a conduit for bridging the distance. The poem is grounded in the anthropomorphic signage derived from the African mythology which the poet has telepathically harnessed, to probe accusatorily into a supposed friend's whereabouts. But the friend's gender is not disclosed in the poem. However, no sooner did the persona started the pursuit of a line of thought on mythopoeia than the poem got intruded into by another non-mythological discourse which was not conclusively pursued: "But you were not at your desk.../ your friend later told me you had a cold/ The secret of your heart is out/mother earth already knows". This veering off the discourse of African mythology in the poem, remarkably denotes the eccentric characteristic which usually ricochets off the poetry of Taban Lo Liyong. Nevertheless, the signification of African mythology in the poem has a striking parallelism in another untitled poem in *Words That Melt A Mountain*:

The shrines to the ancestors we also have.
 My mother long ago cleared with my father long dead
 If in the East he had friends and kindred spirits who would look after me.

My dear ancestors said man goes by plane
 But they, the spirits, are all in the air or underground
 Linked and interlinked all the time.
 They already hobnobbed with eastern spirits.
 So I went and had a good time.
 So I came again. (69)

Here the aesthetics of African culture is explicated from the levels and depths of mythopoeia. The poem essentially reiterates the African belief system, whose signification would be incomplete without its accrued appurtenances that admit the inextricable communion between the persona and his ancestors, there is an invocation of sufficient divination of mysteries of the future concerning the persona as recalled in Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* 'The past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same Masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. Its dialogue is liturgy, its music takes form from man's uncomprehending immersion in this area of existence, buried wholly from rational recognition'' (Soyinka,1976:148). Juxtaposed against the Japanese religious belief system, which is also replete with the concept of ancestral veneration, the ubiquity of the ancestors is remarkably emphasized:

But they, the spirits, are all in the air or underground
 Linked and interlinked all the time.

The African mythopoetic perspective of the divine assistance of the ancestors, as Soyinka enthuses, incorporates the protective and filial duties of the ancestors to their wards which is not limited to the shores of African continent, but has further been suggested by Liyong to cover other areas of the universe. This ontological relationship between the ancestors and the persona in the poem is accomplished by the conviction of the persona, that the African ancestors can naturally interlink with the Japanese ancestors, to ensure his safety and well being. Even though the poet persona lives in Japan, he is confident that the ancestors' aura is

always with him, because the ancestors are 'linked and interlinked all the time' and since 'They already hobnobbed with eastern spirits', his sojourn in Japan will be hitch-free, because they will constantly attend to his spiritual queries. The paraphernalia of African cultural consciousness in the poem: 'The shrines', 'ancestors' and 'the spirits' fittingly sublimate the Linguistic and cultural enigmas that revolve round the African Anthropology.

Cultivating Affection and Delineating Emotion

The notion of 'love,' as with all notions that delineate human beings from the animals, is based on a fundamental contradiction, which linearises human emotion, rationalizes individual's erotic gratification, to the particularity of the bestiality of sex which accompanies the coital performance. Among other things, love initiates a wave of affection, blurs racial differences, reinvigorates the universality of humanity and recuperates warmth between lovers. This is ambitiously pursued and sustained on the pages of *Words That Melt a Mountain*. In an untitled poem, Liyong demonstrates the import of a seamless blissful link between man and woman, which needs to be jealously guarded:

How does it feel to be in love?
It feels liberated: nothing matters any more...
Not even the whip on the back.
It makes one feel warm, and breath quicker;
It makes the impossible to look possible.
After a while, you cannot see anymore with your outer eyes.
You only know the warmth that envelopes you
And the pull towards the beloved.
For me I start talking-anything that comes to mind.
For you I notice the glands make your mouth water. (61)

Although love is complicated by the passion it generates between two individuals, but neither the tenderness of its cultivation nor the fervency of its consummation is strong enough to obliterate its appeal to humanity. But blissful as love connotes, its capability to generate the problematic of been bogged down in petty bickering and mutual distrust, which interrogates in principle the possibility of infidelity in a relationship is raised in another untitled poem:

Friendship or love involves opening up.
 Baring the heart of one to let in the fire of the other.
 It is self-obliteration in favour of the other.
 Where there is a seed of suspicion there is distrust.
 Where both are rock-bottom weak and harmless,
 There will grow a joint strength to protect the duo.
 Since even I distrust myself at times, most times
 A friendship that gives one some other soul
 Who is as foolish as one is just too good to miss. (66)

Selflessness in the pursuit of love game is succinctly advocated, and treated in the poem with great mystique. Love between a man and a woman is situated between two fundamental trajectories: outright sincerity and wilful deception. Between the two are embedded altruism, sacrifice and dedication that are juxtaposed against selfishness, deceit and suspicion. Liyong didactically pontificates on the challenges against pure and seamless love, which he rhetorically enunciated in the poem: “Friendship or love involves opening up/Where there is a seed of suspicion there is trust”.

These challenges are transposed into words rendered in simple language, and mediated by the poet’s magisterial tone. Liyong in advocating a commitment on the part of the two lovers in the poem, however, points out a commendable balance of judgement:

Baring the heart of one to let in the fire of the other.
 It is self-obliteration in favour of the other.

By deciding to be lovers as to savour the passion accrued from a love feast, Liyong suggests that the two individuals engaged in a relationship need to remind each other, that love is naturally demanding, tasking and unconditional.

Place of sex/love in search of Global Harmony

In most African societies, individuals often choose not to discuss sex openly and whenever it occurs, it is usually expressed through snatches of overheard conversation or in subdued tones. To openly broach sex in traditional African setting represents a daring act which somewhat attracts a prescribed level of sanction. But Liyong believes that every

society must seek out its space and create a convenient platform where sex could be discussed with brutal honesty, for the overall benefit of the society. Sex is a topic which paradoxically generates passion and revulsion in Liyong's *Words That Melt A Mountain*:

This is a town where traditions are broken silently.
There is a tacit understanding that you understand
the hunger within and permit the other,
Nay, cooperate with the other,
In slacking her thirst from the forbidden well.

In the bus a girl came and placed her front against my knee.
The bus jerked and swerved, she gasped and sniffed.
I looked and saw the appeal and let things be. (15)

Comparative evaluation of the African and Japanese reactions to the issue of sex constitutes the locale of this unnamed poem. Liyong creates a counterpoint in African and Japanese approaches to sex. He obliquely condemns the African girl's reticent and coyish approach to sex, but he unobtrusively does a clinical riff on the psychological disposition of a Japanese society's brash approach to sex: 'this is a town where traditions are broken silently/there is a tacit understanding that you understand'. The complementarity between milieu and the Japanese girl is strikingly demonstrated in the poem. Concomitant with the suggestion of Hallie Burnett that the "writer must give thought to each word and weigh each one spoken or written for its true sense, its effectiveness, and color, because each word a writer uses must have meaning, weight, feeling, and particularity" (Burnett, 1983:46). To get this point across, the poet chose some erotogenous metaphors and images like: 'the hunger within', 'In slacking her thirst from the forbidden well', 'a girl came and placed her front against my knee', 'The bus jerked and swerved, she gasped and sniffed' and 'I looked and saw the appeal and let things be'. Liyong has abundantly demonstrated through these metaphors and images how 'discourse [...] is in fact one of the places where sexuality [...] exercise[s] in a privileged way some of [its] most formidable powers' (Foucault, 1981: 52). He exploits and manipulates these metaphors and images to heighten the Japanese anecdotal evidence of libidinous disposition.

Liyong's maverick treatment of sex is further reiterated in another untitled poem:

Sex is tedious.
 Ask a mating dog, mated bitch.
 Saint Paul was right; do it for perpetuation of the species for goodness' sake.
 Holding hands, stirring up the heartbeat,
 Loving by the eye, lying side by side hearing the tom-tom of hearts, kissing
 caressingly,
 Kissing succulently, kissing vacuumly and letting time pass;
 Feeling the little hairs, the nape, nipple, beckoning the guard.
 The result is exhalation. (6-7)

There is no doubt that Liyong is a controversial poet whose audacity most often unsettles the contemporary African literary orthodoxy, but it has to be recognized that his unambiguous treatment of sex calls to mind its paradoxical functions of pleasure and stress: 'sex is tedious/kissing caressingly' and 'kissing succulently/the result is exhalation'. Liyong's broaching subject on sex, reflects Julia Kristeva's opinion on the process of creating a text, when she suggests that the writer needs to lose his or her worldliness, as it were, in the process of writing so as to ensure that : 'The subject of narration (s)is drawn in, and therefore reduced to a code, to a nonperson, to an *anonymity* (as writer, subject of enunciation) mediated by a third person, the *he/she* [here I] character, the subject of utterance' (Kristeva, 1980:74). Even though the ambience of the poem is pervaded with an aura of eroticism, but sex in the poem is synonymous with fun and suffering, and contests the notion of it been an avenue of unlimited hedonism. This paradoxical function of sex is further pursued in another untitled poem:

For love of making love
 Is wearing out, is wearing down.
 It is the tiring of the body,
 It is the exercising of the body
 It is driving of the muscles to the rigor mortis of ejaculation.
 And then the bathing in sweat
 And the re-forming of the iron files
 Into a future usable instrument. (45-46)

As in the other untitled poem, the paradoxical theme of pleasure and exhaustion is tenaciously pursued in this poem. It is imperative for the

reader to pay an unbiased attention to the layers of meaning inherent in the poem, and comes to terms with the fact that, sexual activities take place in all lands and climes. Liyong unequivocally reiterates in the poem, that although every human being is desirous of sex with the opposite sex once in a while, but this human action is nonetheless energy sapping and undoubtedly tiring afterwards. However, sex is believed to be the prelude to the much needed love between man and woman towards building a harmonious world. Liyong's narrative of sex as an antidote to global hatred and acrimony in the poetry collection, reads like a romantic manifesto for harnessing global peace. This is effervescently inscribed in another untitled poem:

When man-and-woman come together
 In the communion of the spirit,
 And the entanglement of limbs and flesh,
 There shall have been re-enacted
 That divine fellowship
 Of the union of kindred spirits
 To which humanity owes itself;
 And which *alone*
 Will keep the world rotating
 And give humanity an existence guaranteed. (104)

Liyong basically foregrounds the theme of global harmonious relationship among people of the world on two fundamental motifs in the poem. The first focuses on the bond between man and woman. The second emphasizes the exchange of love between man and woman, which he sees as the harbinger of an enduring affection. Liyong perceives love in sum total, as the definitive elixir, ostensibly needed for the transformation of the turbulent world, and sex serves as the much needed tonic that could kick-starts the transformation.

Appraising Transcendental Wanderlust Through Divination

Liyong appropriates the subtlety and the traditional undercurrents which abound in the African oral tradition in the form of symbols, images, proverbs and divination, to essentially explicate some mysteries peculiar to the African cultural experiences. This practice has been fittingly corroborated by Charles Bodunde, that “the influence which the

various elements of oral traditions exert on modern African writing especially poetry, is indeed tremendous. In fact, major African literary texts indicate attachment to the African cosmic setting'' (Bodunde, 1992:25). Divination is a practice common to all African ethnic groupings and societies. As a cultural practice, its signification has attracted an overwhelming subscription from most people living in the continent. Like other African writers, Liyong utilize divination motif to shed light on his wanderlust trajectory in *Words That Melt a Mountain*. This motif underscores the influence of African oral tradition in foretelling the future of Liyong's wanderlust, in an untitled poem:

After my father had consulted his ancestors
And had been told that I would belong to the world...
I do not know how hurt he could have been,
But I think my elder brother had already gone out
Into the world and fought a war
With other Africans, and under the British,
Against Japan and Hitler's men in Europe.
And, my father had been donated to the colonial government
As a policeman in Kajokaji... (94)

Liyong has assiduously prepared to globe-trot right from the infancy, based on the hindsight gleaned from the poem. His sojourn in Japan as in other countries where he has sojourned earlier on, only confirms the plausibility of African divination and oracular which he has alluded to in the poem. His continuous sojourn in different countries of the world, is symptomatic of a transcendental wanderlust of his family tree, which he has in turn, taken an insufferable glib attitude towards:

And his own father had been a headman
In the royal household of Limi...
We left enclosures over a hundred years ago.
And, with all the movement of peoples
up and down, east and west all over Africa,
Who knows where we had come from?
The Berlin Conference pegged us in the Sudan,
But where would we have been by now
With our wanderlust?
perhaps in Japan! (95)

Liyong seems to be in his most impassioned moment in this poem, where his authorial use of language is ostensibly deplored to delineate his ambiguous identity. Appropriately, he ingeniously betrays an uncanny attitude to his genealogical migratory survey, which he gregariously hedges about, to reflect the continuous movement of his ancestors from 'the royal household of Limi', to been 'pegged in the Sudan' by the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 which conducted the scramble and partition of African countries among the European colonial powers. This partitioning metaphor is poignantly used to criticise the European colonial powers, for creating a modernist tragedy of the internal displacements in Africa, a social crisis suffered by bulk of the African ethnic groupings who were taken from their kith and kin in one country and yoked with different ethnic groupings in another country, who they do not share linguistic and cultural affinities with. Liyong essentially sees himself as a victim of this historical misdemeanour, because he has often been mistaken for a Ugandan or a Kenyan in most cases. But his identity is often complicated by virtue of coming from the fledgling republic of Southern Sudan, who had to fight a long war of independence with the Arab-Islamic government of Northern Sudan.

Conclusion

In examining Taban Lo Liyong's poetics in *The Words that melt a Mountain*, the reader easily comes across a pot-pourri of poetic fermentations, distilled as reminiscences of Liyong's sojourn in Japan. However, the paper has been able to analyse how Liyong reminisces on the African traditional values as they shape, the collective African attitudes to the issues of identity, culture, sex and religion. The fact that all the poems in this collection are untitled reflects the eccentric and iconoclastic approach of Liyong to literary production. This attitude has often pitched him against the contemporary African literary orthodoxy, who often denigrate him and his literary works for non-conformism. But what can not be taken away from Liyong is his erudition, penetrating imagination and his unabashed frankness at discussing sexual issues. Although, most of the poems in the collection are written like scraps, but they are nevertheless, essentially grounded in germane topical issues

which bother on the African cultural consciousness in relation to cultures from other lands.

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