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**Funso Aiyejina.**

***I, The Supreme and Other Poems.***

**Ibadan, Nigeria: Kraft Books, 2004. 73pp.**

***By Jennifer Rahim***

Let me begin by risking blame for flirting too openly with superlatives.<sup>1</sup> We consider ourselves most blessed in having a person such as Funso Aiyejina moving to Trinidad and being here with us. Not only is he a creative writer, teacher, literary critic and cultural researcher of the highest calibre, but his very presence here and his willing embrace of this landscape makes tangible, with an ever new intensity, the enduring conversation the region continues to have with the African continent, that still troubled ancestral site of origins for the majority of Caribbean people. It is a dialogue that has been at the core of the region's long and often times agonized struggle to claim and validate itself, having endured a most difficult passage, a hard rite of becoming that necessarily involved a radical re-visioning of "Being."

All of Aiyejina's books to date demonstrate a concentrated interest with the historical, cultural and political life of Africa, particularly his native Nigeria. What is also evident is an emerging engagement with the continent's expanded diaspora. His writing, in other words, manifests a blossoming black diasporic poetics. His first collection of poems *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems* (1989), for instance, considers the historical plight, the shared experiences of suffering and the immense possibilities of Africa and her descendants, "separated into one / by the troubled waters of the Atlantic" (1). This collection is anchored in a trans-Atlantic love relationship that has produced two sons who intimately seal a connection between the Old and New Worlds, and thereby secure the promise of a "[g]olden harvest of interlocking histories" (27).

Aiyejina's award-winning *The Legend of the Rockhills and Other Stories* (1999) is a collection of Nigerian-based short stories, told in the entertaining and insightful ironic voice that is fast becoming his trademark. Many of the stories such as "The Governor's Tree," "His Excellency's Visit," "The Brand New Chair" and "The Tax Collectors" satirize corrupt governments, their power-maddened leaders and self-important public officials, while gleefully reveling in their unmasking by the perceptive gaze and anancy-like survivalist strategies of ordinary folk. These and others intersect with the tales of abused power that feature in his second poetry collection *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* (2004). This book demonstrates the maturing of Aiyejina's poetic style. The reader encounters the poet as spokesman for the community and the chronicler of its experiences. He is prophet, social critic and moral vigilante whose speech is couched in the community's collective wisdom and tradition, drawing on proverb, parable, and on a firm faith in the benevolent attendance of ancestors and their gods.

The text's richness lies in its intricate weaving of many thematic concerns. Its maturity is most evident in a confident control of voice that can be public and personal, satirical and reflective. The collection laments the betrayal of innocence and the failure of nationhood due to political corruption. It celebrates the resilience of the small and their stubborn will to survive and oppose injustice. It explores the capacity of the human person for unspeakable evil and redemptive good. The book condemns deceit and violence, and satirizes folly. It is about the pain of loss and the certitude of rejuvenation. *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* is also deeply concerned with African cultural survival and interconnections. Above all, these poems are about love of people, nations, and the earth that instructs and sustains us. The spiritual and philosophical orientation of this text speaks of an investment, against all odds, in the hope of a "future continuous" (56), for the people of Nigeria, the continent Africa and her diaspora, indeed for all the earth's peoples.

Of particular interest for Caribbean readers in *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* is the rooting of a transnational, intercultural sensibility, one that began in his first, *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems*. I choose to make much of this dimension of his work as opposed to Aiyejina's gently confessed resistance to an imaginative engagement with the Caribbean, primarily from the conviction that his creative formation and political concerns are elsewhere, that is, the Africa of his origins (in a personal interview with the Author, April 2005). This is true; most of the poems contained in the collection have this focus, particularly the opening sections, "Of Generals and Kings, Priests and Poets" and "Victorious Victims." Yet, I also believe that we are privileged to witness the evolution of what may well be a new trajectory in the literature of the African diaspora. I suspect that as he keeps on writing, as he continues to be entangled in the life of his current dwelling, a Caribbean focus will escape his censorship. Imagination, as I understand it, is the servant of love, which implies that imagination is its own government. Derek Walcott reminds us in *The Antilles* (1992) that "love is stasis and travel is motion" (20). So, as Aiyejina has chosen to stay with us, so too has he also chosen to love us, and perhaps will one day agree to write about us with the same passion with which he writes Africa.

In this regard, it is highly significant that what Aiyejina calls the book's "Pro/Epi/Logue" comprises a single poem entitled, "A Birthday Oriki for Iyalorisa Melvina Rodney," the poet's Trinidadian, Orisa spiritual mother. As a wordsmith conscious of the layered life of language, Aiyejina evokes the multiple streams of word and text. As "prologue," he ends the book where it logically begins or pre-starts; as epilogue he signals where the book ends, but transcends its natural closure. As "logue," the author intimates that the text is a compilation of experience, a history of sorts, public and personal, national and transnational—catalogue of a considered life. As logue, the collection is a discourse, that is, a conversation across space and time, across worlds: temporal and spiritual, there and here. The book is also a writer's logue, an artefact of memory, that catalyst of creativity, the transforming light of experience and agent of continuity. "Memory," he writes in the poem, "Dear Brother," "is the master of death: the beginning in the end ..." (36).

For me, and perhaps this is a matter of my own cultural positioning as a Caribbean reader of an African, now diasporic writer, I believe that an appropriate entrance to the collection is through its end, or back door, so to speak, which in the Caribbean is the door of everyday use through which the owners and extended members of the house cross in and out without formality, without hindrance. “A Birthday Oriki for Iyalorisa Melvina Rodney” is written in eight parts and opens with a lamentation for the histories of betrayals, old and new, that attempt to make Africa’s descendants into “blind strangers” robbed of their place in the world (68). It quickly moves to the resistance mode as self-pity and recrimination are rejected as dead-ends in favor of the life offered in the counter-discourse of transformative “tales,” those repositories of truths engineered by the wise that traverse time and place with their “vast masts.” The ship, Paul Gilroy points out in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), is the centric trope of traveling cultures, suggested here in Aiyejina’s image of those “vast masts” (68) that connect continents.

The establishment of this ancestral mooring, which is strengthened by the figure of Iya Rodney as a New World living ancestor, fuels the poem’s acceleration into praise. She is honored and celebrated as “Matriarch of the crossroads” (68) for Africa’s scattered tribes. Rodney manifests the indestructible line of continuity between spiritual and temporal worlds, across generations living and dead, and yet to come. In short, the Atlantic crossing of this contemporary traveler is no “amnesiac” surrender to irretrievable loss. Arguably, one’s historical positioning is what makes the difference between the first forced migration to the Caribbean as loss and later immigrations as reconnection. As a contemporary African traveler to the Caribbean, Aiyejina’s experiences of its cultural spaces and sensibilities cast no shadow of ambivalence about the African presence and its role as what Sylvia Wynter called, with reference to Jamaica, the “syncretic mixing force of the society” in her 1967 review of “Lady Nugent’s Journal” (34), a definition one can easily extend to this society—this Caribbean.

In Aiyejina, therefore, we witness the evolution of an imagination formed by journeys, one that necessarily moves from here to there to encompass the fullness of experience, and so forge links with geographic and socio-cultural territories, where collective and personal histories overlap to generate fresh metaphors of recognition and reconnection, such as the startling image of flamboyant trees of his adopted Trinidad landscape that “bloom / Into a procession of possessed *Sango* priests” in the poem “Memories of the future” (56). This transplanted African has literally found a second motherland in the New World, hybrid and changed, but not displaced or placeless; ravaged by a brutal history, but sprouting a new “style,” new tales spun with the “wondrous metaphors of rockhills & islands” (51). In fact, the opening lines of the title poem of his first collection, *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems* echoes as one reads *I, The Supreme*: “What is incalculably far from us / in point of distance can be near us. / Short distance is not itself nearness. / Nor is great distance remoteness ...” (1).

Evidence that the collection is occupied with charting a meeting point of worlds surfaces in the section “Memorials.” There, in the poem entitled “Elroy Quamina,” Aiyejina honours the memory of his father-in-law, whose prophetic prediction of the birth of Ararimeh is recorded in

his gift of a silver dollar for the “yet-to-be-conceived second child” (37). At the heart of this section, is the desire to immortalize in verse the significant persons who influenced the poet’s personal life, and who now form his ever-widening community of ancestors that close the chasm between the worlds. There are memorials, for instance, to close family members, writers and guides in poems such as “Mariatu,” “Asetu,” “Father never said much,” “Dear Brother” and so on.

The bridging of the Atlantic divide and the interdependence of the future, present and past which form the unifying logic of the collection is signalled most strongly in the section, “The Future Continuous.” Many of the poems focus on the birth and growth of his two sons, Abunameh and Ararimeh, the children of his enduring love for Lynda. This love builds a stable, renewing bridge across the Atlantic, the sea of time and distance, suffering and renewal that the poetic imagination grapples to reconcile. Several of the poems to his sons, written in the turbulent 1980s during the period of the murder of the journalist Dele Giwa and the reign of General Babangida, are carry-overs from the first collection, a choice that reinforces the sons’ role as signs of hope for a different future for Africa and its diaspora. Therefore, the paternal blessing he bestows on them is extended to all the “children of the wind” (58), fruits of the communion of Old and New Worlds and the promise of cultural, spiritual and generational continuity.

With this almost Lammingsesque “glance backward” in which one “rises full speed forward” (“Asetu” 34), the collection’s non-defeatist confrontation with the sorry state of African post-independence politics finds continuity, or perhaps identifies the origins of its philosophy. Narratives such as the title poem “I, The Supreme,” “The general on the swing,” “The power & the glory,” “Darkness may conceal” are potent critiques of the betrayals of military regimes and corrupt dictators. The evil of perverted leadership is most evident in the mercenary silencing of political detractors, captured in poems like “Re: Jack Mapanje - poet,” “The innocent spider,” “Gani Fawehinmi.” These figures and others are honoured as the courageous gatekeepers of truth, skillful “peddlers of parables” (21), visionaries who “dream,” the people’s future, artisans of the “the metaphors in our streams” (19).

In deference to Aiyejina’s loaded disclaimer: “No true character where none is intended / No true incident where none is created / No true location where none is identified,” I too choose to remain mum, in spite of my earlier slip, about the possible names of the long succession of dictators and the litany of crimes they oversee against the innocent. Rather, I surrender to walk the vanishing horizon the poet skillfully navigates between fact and fiction, actuality and invention. Specific knowledge and particular histories are not beyond one’s grasp, even as they are most times playfully shrouded in the folktale’s anonymity. Aiyejina proves he is most adept at playing the proverb’s best game of accusation without name-calling, and the choice of ironic double entendre signals a submission to satire’s highest service in offering correction to human error without ascending the throne of a reverse arrogance and violence. Indeed, these are localized tales of the dark conspiracies wrought by expert “spinnners of webs” (24), “butchers”

who “prepare knives” for the slaughter of sheep (25). They tell of “Generals,” immovable elephants, usurpers of the seat of justice that concoct schemes, sometimes “stranger than fiction,” that perhaps only fiction can best tell; but they are imbued with the representational currency to speak to all of humanity of the shared problem of misused power.

A strong didactic intent weaves through this collection, which appeals to a timeless belief in the ultimate triumph of truth and justice over lies and injustice. The text is a philosophy of survival that charts, even as it performs, a rite of passage into the future. At its core, *I, The Supreme* is a spiritual handbook about crossing over. It recognizes that the battle royal of human persons in the societies to which they belong involves the necessary confrontation with injustice, betrayal, disappointment—challenges of myriad sorts that test the mettle of the individual and collective spirit. This poet may be an idealist but he is no romantic. Social activism against injustice is therefore a collective responsibility, as it is the responsibility of art to speak out. His mediation on the matters of the living is an heroic surge to gather from the deep recesses of self, family, community and tradition, the spiritual weaponry with which mere mortals can stand firm against the tyrannous supremacy of the false “I”s that seek to deny life and imprison freedom. In essence, the book is about the inevitable, almost anancy-like overthrow of dictatorial, murderous, deceitful and indulgent selves by placing them in confrontation with the ordinary masses of people who are dispossessed of everything but the wisdom of the community, and faith in a Divine might, preserved in proverb, sanctified in ritual and lived in action, even if that is the act of waiting.

For the sceptics who believe that language or “poetry makes nothing happen,” Aiyejina unleashes the potency of the people’s poetry: those proverbial and parabolic, the “horses of speech” that can move “full-bodied elephants” (62), and “if reason goes astray / “retrieve & return it home to stay” (63). He too takes command of his culture’s gift of words by crafting his own arsenal of parables and proverbs, adding, like a dutiful elder, to the store of the community’s collective wisdom such as his innovations in “On becoming the wisest man in the world” (22). Language is not that unreliable post-modern chameleon, shape-shifting, escaping the intention to make words mean. It is rather the powerful vehicle of communication loaded with the firepower to unveil deception, to effect change by speaking unchanging truths to those with ears to hear and eyes to see the sad temporality of those who enthrone themselves on falsity of various kinds. For this postcolonial, diasporic African, at least, the veneration of a spineless, slippery language denuded of its potential to mean is not an option. Language, like “Sango’s thunderstones,” is the purposeful weapon of righteous anger, charged with the authority of experience and fortified with the confidence of an ancestral grounding that make words the able, fecund seeds of renewal and transformation.

Finally, the ironic vision of *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* is the light that provides the text’s counter-discourse with corruption. In contradistinction to the false “I” of egotistical kings, prophets and gods whose time on the deceptive “swing” of glory is but a temporary night, there is the true sovereignty of the wise, whose perceptive I/eye, like the dawn, will dethrone tyrants.

Many of the folk tales and narratives in this collection such as “The goat & the head butcher,” “On becoming the wisest man in the world,” “The power & the glory,” and “Termites dwell underground” affirm the organic wisdom of the community on which the disempowered and victimized rely. This is a book about the timeless battle between history’s Goliaths and Davids that will ultimately prove laughable the tyrant leader’s litany of empty boasts with which the title poem “I, The Supreme” opens:

They labour in vain: termites aspiring to devour rocks!  
Futile are their lots to surprise the crab in a trance  
The back of the cat is not for the ground to embrace. (12)

The ready challenge that undermines the authority of the General’s blind arrogance comes from the battery of contesting responses in the poems that follow this pseudo “Prologue” to the story of the community. The subtle revolutionary power of the collective voice of people is best represented in the poem written for the judicially murdered poet, Ken Saro-Wiwa, “Termites dwell underground” (28). Revolution from the bottom up is therefore the strategy reinforced in the text. It is with this understanding that truth triumphs that Aiyejina writes the poem “Elegy for my land,” which is really a song of hope, a refusal to mourn, and the antithesis of the section entitled “Epilogue,” since the future has only just begun.

Diasporic literature, we know, has developed the worrying reputation as the literature of “homelessness.” In a real sense, the problem of home, cultural loss and hyphenated ambivalences are very visible aspects of the postcolonial saga of lamentation over the cultural “erasure” and “dissociation” wrought by Imperialism and its aftermath. Aiyejina’s gaze, however, offers a refreshing leap from that discourse of loss and anguished recuperation. Although his body of work so far represents an early stage of writing in between spaces of dwelling, he is not in doubt about his belonging, nor is Africa an imagined space that slips from reality.

As outsider/insider to the Caribbean landscape and culture, he is awed by the miracle of African cultural survival and transformation. Aiyejina’s cultural experience and vision as a second wave, this time willing, immigrant to the Caribbean, updates and remedies, in a certain sense, the discursive strains that attempt to institutionalise displacement as typical markers of the postcolonial condition, or celebrate the “pleasures” of in-betweenity that may indicate the uncommitted, “stateless” globality of the nomad, that depoliticised transculturality of Fanon’s forewarned “rootless,” “race of angels” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). He stands on firm ground, imaginatively moving between worlds that are as real to him as the love that calls him to craft them whole.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This essay was written for the launching of Funso Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* which was held in the Audio Visual Room of the Main Library, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, on Wednesday 27th April, 2005.