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Safia Elhillo, *The January Children*. Publisher: University of Nebraska Press. 2017, 90 pp. ISBN 97814962200099.

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I should begin by saying that we are, as it were, destined to end in order for the world after us to begin. A conversation such as this is probably one of the best ways to begin to do a review of this collection of poems which, like the works of the classical Arabic poet of note, Abul 'Alaa al-Ma'ari (d.1057 C.E), appears like a rubber. At a time conversations that center around the whole idea of African literature are still as engaging as they were at the end of the last century, and in the thick of arguments among literary writers and critics including Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (2016), in regard to, first, the existence of what might be described as the quintessential corpus of African literature, second, where such corpus might be located and third what purpose they serve in the overall assessment of African cultural production, Saifa Elhillo's collection of poems has emerged. This anthology, which contains fifty three poems, an acknowledgment, a glossary, a foreword written by Kwame Dawes and is titled *The January Children* (hereafter TJC) is an important addition to existing works in the field. The title TJC fires one's imagination and stirs up questions in the reader. Such questions include "Is this a Novel or a collection of Short Stories? If the title references *January Children*, what about, for example, the 'February Children'? In other words, what could this writer have meant by the "January children" and where could such be found? Thus by coming up with this title, Safia shows her awareness that good titles connect readers to texts; they are like the beautiful plates with which sumptuous meals are served.

But aside from connecting and attracting the reader to the text, of what meaning and importance is this title to Safia's poetics? This question appears to be germane to this review that must in and by itself not become another text. An immediate response, which benefits from the close reading of the poems in the collection, is to say that Safia's poetics is strengthened by her politics. In other words, when carefully contemplated, it is evident that the politics in the poetics of Safia, is both decidable and undecidable. In the first, Safia appears to have produced this collection of poems in memory of a generation of Sudanese children- "a generation born in Sudan under British occupation, where children were assigned birth years by height, all given the birth date January 1". Thus the critic could sense a postcolonial bent or agenda in her oeuvre. The reader is prepared in advance for a reinvention, in verse, not in prose, of the "empire writing back"; a new representation of the whole colonial enterprise in a way that exposes the hitherto unknown regions of its aberrant nature in the history of humankind.

But it must be acknowledged that TJC, like other similar texts, is indecidable. By that it is meant that while it is true that Safia might have set out to do a caricature of colonialism in her text and while this text furnishes new perspective in regard to what could have happened to the cultural

template of the Sudanese society under the jackboot of British domination, it is however evident that the grammar of her poetics goes beyond and reaches deeper than strict indulgence in postcolonial politics. This initial assessment is compelled by my reading of the poems in the collection in which hardly is there a poem dedicated to the actual representation of the British colonist in Sudan. Rather, the poems in the collection engage what the colonist left behind: the slippages and fissures in Sudan and in the Sudanese' sense of self consequent upon the experience of colonialism.

Put differently, entering the world of the text, the world of TJC, is like an entrance into a topoi or literary landscape where the past meshes into the present, where notions of time and space are decisively subverted in a project that probably is meant to prevent the past, in the postmodernist style, from being conclusive or teleological. But again that is just a perspective. The other relates to the structure of the poems in the collection. The elements, the imagination, the words, the emotion, the lyricism all of these are framed in such a way as to evoke in the reader both pathos and logos. Or how else might the reader escape the story told in free verse by "asmarani" (1) who begins by making prayer, full of 'vocabularies' (2) of home, 'for Sudan Today' (3). It is a prayer that can only become valid through "the use of water" (4); a 'prayer' ably 'led' by abdelhalim hafez. Here reference is to a "prayer" that is said in "abdelhalim hafez's concert" (6). The voice in TJC has "applied for the position of abdelhalim hafez's girl" (7, 17) and has been "interviewed" for same (13, 49). Other poems in the collection that I found very engaging include 'origin stories' (10), 'second date' (25), 'red moon night' (28), 'old wives tales' ((29), 'others'(30) and 'lovers quarrel with abdelhalim hafez' (53) among others. In the seeming lack of symmetry in structure and presentation of these poems, and behind this façade of tepidity and acute absence of symphony, lies deep emotion and yearning for meaning.

Thus right from the first poem titled 'asmarani makes prayer' the reader of this collection is thrown as it were into an ocean of riddles and puzzles where colour and race and the search for the self interpellate with feelings of nostalgia for the past, for the home. The poet's constant usage of the word *verily* invests the poet's search for the authentic self with an aura of the mystical, if not spiritual.

The search for the self that is evident in "asmarani makes prayers" is further evident in the poem titled 'to make use of water'. These and other similar poems in the collection call attention to the poet's strong awareness of her dislocation. Once outside the homeland, far away from Sudan, across the Atlantic, the poem pictures the experience of cultural dilution that leads to the loss of the poet's language. What results therefrom is a frenetic pursuit of that which is lost in a state of loneliness (5). The search for the authentic self, the pursuit of that which is lost invariably entails reconstruction of the self. This is evident in "self-portrait with the question of race" (25), self-portrait with yellow dress" (29), "portrait with asylum" (39) and "self-portrait with lake nasser" (44). The project of self-reconstruction and self-portraiture sometimes partake of the necessity for the reconstruction of the notion of the home, of the nation, of Sudan and indeed of America. To do this the poet engages in a dialogic encounter with the self-in-her-nation as is evident in poems number 9, 15, 32, 34, 35,, 36 and 47. In poem number 9, Safia flips the notion of the home upside-down and in not more than eight words, Maryland becomes the home while Sudan becomes the locale of exile.

One other strategy the poet deploys into this widening geography of “psychogeography” (42) – reminiscences about how the past interlaces with the present in the politics of identity reconstruction - is self-impredation. Here the poet does what appears to be negative representation of the self as a strategy for the equally negative construction of the other. The Other in Safia’s poetics could be the whole Sudanese heritage. It could equally refer to the female gender – the “slave generation” of the Sudanese women. In ‘origin stories’ the poet, in part, says:

I hear prayers called by a voice thick with something hurting
like a croak but I do not mean that it is ugly

By saying “...but I do not mean that it is ugly”, the poet actually succeeded in calling attention to that which she purports here to deny- that the call to prayer in her new reality now hurts the hearer; it does exactly the opposite of what it is meant to achieve which is that of granting relief, that is spiritually, to the faithful. Unlike before when the same voice sounds beautiful to her, a subject negotiating new identities would most likely find no pleasures in old tastes.

In “watching arab idol with abdelhalim hafez” we have more insights into the poet’s self-caricature, which becomes, unlike the above, a strategy for the criticism of the global order where racial prejudice holds sway. A voice in the poem says:

when ragheb alama says...sudanese women
are the ugliest in the world...I am afraid
that I believe...

Taken together as a corpus, it is evident that Safia displays a predilection to engage in counter-discourse; to do satire of the home while in exile and to lust after the very object of her satire all at the same time. In other words, in a moment she may decide to patronize exile, the new home, while in the same breath deprecate the latter as the locale of, in “portrait with asylum” “gang violence, mugging, hate crime, islamophobia, xenophobia...and murder. The voice in the poem says further that “...this would never have happened if we’d never come to this godless country...”; America would never have become an asylum if all immigrants including the poet had not migrated. Thus the search for the authentic self in the season when loss of the self has become the normative, and at a time when all postures in favor of nostalgia for the past, for tradition becomes interlaced with amnesia for that same category makes for an experience, in TJC, of a redoubtable creative enterprise. In this collection, nothing, in the postmodernist sense, is permanent; it is the allure of the impermanent that makes the representation of ‘and’ as ‘&’ a categorical imperative.

One other theme is evident in the collection, namely surrealism. In “alternate ending” (31), the poet says:

the dead boy is poured back into his body
I try to leave home but the ocean bares its teeth
& where I am from is where I am from & not
Where I was put...

Here we read of an attempt to reunite the conscious with the unconscious streams of experience together such that reality is divested of its elements as it meshes with illusion. In the poem before this titled “others”(30), she says in part thus:

the dead root me to strange cities & I wish you
would come visit I shift the ghosts to one side
to make room for you in bed...I climb over over
your sleeping body & make ablution in the dark

In fact, the poet appears to have foregrounded the surreal in this collection in the very first poem titled “asmarani makes prayer”. In line seven of the poem she says:

...verily the ghosts will
not leave her alone verily when asked how
she got her name if telling the truth she
will say ...(a woman died...&everything
wants a home

These excerpts gesture towards the over-all project of identity reconstruction I proposed above. The lines derives from the poet’s strong awareness of the slippages in human consciousness of its reality; they speak to how the ‘ghost’ of the dead, the homeland, has had to be “shifted” to “one side” in order for the new home to have a space in the poet’s reality. This, once again, is partly instructive in the very first line in the poem titled “other”. It reads: “we begin because the worlds before ours ended”.

As I begin to wind down this review, I should not neglect to mention the strong Influence of Arab-Islamic culture on Safia’s creativity. Equally evident as possible fountain for TJC are the Sudanese traditional customs and perhaps the greatest of them all, Safia’s strong attraction for the late Egyptian musician Abdulhalim Hafez (1929-77). In fact it is possible to say that she could very well have titled her collection ‘romance with abdulhalim hafez’. This is because twenty three (23) of the fifty three (53) poems in the collection derives inspiration from or are invested with invocation of abdulhalim as a myth, a site for transaction in the nationalistic agenda or even as a decoy behind which nests an uncanny interface between, as I hinted at above, nostalgia and amnesia for what the poet yearns for in Sudan and America and for what she detests in them respectfully. Thus if reference to abdelhalim hafez in the collection appears to become mechanical such could be forgiven for a girl who desires to be hafez’s bride (arus)!

This collection of poems which is probably the first of such texts to emerge from an American-Sudanese, or should I rather say Sudanese-American writer is an important addition to African Book Series. For critics who are familiar with works written by other acclaimed writers of Sudanese origin including Tayyeb Salih and Muhammad Miftah al-Fayturi, this collection is complex in its framing, in its lyrical style, in its use of metaphor, and in the variety of materials and subjects it patronizes. I hold that TJC is like an early morning illumination from the horizon. The full effulgence of the illumination, in the mid-day’, is imminent.

Reference

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa, Cantalupo, Charles : "African Literature ... Says Who?" *Transition*, No. 120, (2016).

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