

Roots and Routes: Home and Belonging in Embodied Performativity

Dr. Sangeetha Varma

Abstract: This paper aims at examining the expressive potential of poetry in the spoken word and the ‘performative turn’ in the world of poetry, which blurs the lines between a poem and its performance, thus expanding the field of poesis and poetics. It analyses “Homeward”, the performance poetry of Bassey Ikpi, a spoken word artist, who brings alive the picture of her childhood in her grandmother’s home in Nigeria fusing together both the narrative and the visual through the spoken word.

Keywords: Performance poetry, poesis, poetics, performing memory

Performance poetry is a type of verse specifically composed for oral delivery on a live platform, stage, or a community hall. Unconventional and open to improvisation, its live dynamics appeals to a large audience, and since its inception has in its affective ability helped to constitute a vibrant community. The *raison d’être* of this paper is to explore the expressive potential of poetry in the spoken word. This paper explores the ‘performative turn’ in the world of poetry, which blurs the lines between a poem and its performance thus expanding the field of poesis and poetics.

Roots

The change in nomenclature and stylistics of the oral poetry of the past to the spoken word poems of the present is of a relatively recent origin. Spoken word poem, as part of the larger structure of performance poetry, is only a few decades old, a toddler who has begun to take confident steps. In America it had its roots in the blues, hip-hop, jazz, and Beat culture of the 1960s and 70s.

Spoken word poems differ from the early oral literature in one significant way. If oral literatures acted as the archival memory of its culture before the discovery of writing,

spoken word poems are first written and then performed. Here writing precedes action/performance, but again for many artists the text is merely the script for performance. This elision of the morphic or the phonic, the word or the sound, in the oral and written traditions respectively is of paramount importance in the study of their different structures. Another significant difference is the spatial arena of performance. A mode of entertainment for the commons in large open spaces has given place to the contemporary stage or a raised platform within doors lending intimacy to the performance spectacle. This spatial change from open to enclosed areas has also led to changes in the nature of the audience. Earlier, the crowds in wayside performances would comprise largely of the peasant folk of the area who would gather to see the pageantry. The uninitiated loiterer, the *flaneur*, would also make it a point to assemble for the sake of enjoying the spectacle. But, when the performances were restricted to stages/platforms within community halls, the *flaneur* gave place to the connoisseur, the rebel, and the activist.

Routes

Today, many spoken word artists write poems in the confessional style, narrate anecdotes and personal memories, emphasise cultural markers, and deliberately use their mother tongue *in medias res* to address social issues such as gender inequality, race hate and immigration, assimilation and abrogation, loss of ethnic identity, and class struggle representative of the specific political enquiry and liberal ideals of performance without censorship. These performing artists use various nuances of language like tone, incantatory speech, repetition, staccato rhythm, and broken or fragmented phrases to simulate the dramatics of performance. This method of rendition of poetry reflects our age, where short-form communication is something people find easier to connect with. It is this selectivity of both content and form of performance poetry that is responsible for its mass popularity and its presence and following in the fabric of digital media like YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. The selection of subject and poetic style varies from artist to artist but the combinatory strategies of performing word-poem result in the exposition of a plethora of social injustices, human rights violation, genocide, and issues of corruption and environmental debilitation.

Performing Memory

This paper will analyse “Homeward”, the performance poetry of Bassey Ikpi, a spoken word artist who was a part of HBO’S DEF poetry for more than a decade in the United States. Her poem ‘Homeward’ brings alive the picture of her childhood in her

grandmother's home in Nigeria fusing together both the narrative and the visual through the spoken word. Emotions are intertwined with communication. Ikpi uses voice, meter, and rhyme to express emotions as varied as nostalgia, love, regret, loss, pain, and rootlessness, by introducing three generations of women in her family – her grandmother, her mother, and herself. She expresses her matrilineal roots, “She has my mother's face etched with time” (7). The poem is the spoken ‘text’ which she creates out of her experiences.

Growing up in Nigeria with her grandmother till the age of five, Ikpi was taken by her parents to Oklahoma, USA uprooting her from her family, her grandmother, and her country. She gives a very verbal and evocative description of her first visit home a few years later in the poem. Her use of rhetorical ploys through enunciation, rhythm, gestures, voice, and antics prove beyond doubt that both the imagination and the body are of central importance in evoking an emotional response for an aesthetic experience. A poem is crafted with emotional crests and troughs, and the audience engage with it completely, when poetry, like music, is heard.

The poet-performer's body is also highly political because of its historic, cultural and ethnic markers which are of course in the front or centre stage. In fact, the artist through her performativity does not conceal her genealogy, but choose to accentuate her ethnic identity, her colonised racial self. Ikpi expresses her anguish at the loss of language of her ancestors, after she has stayed in America for a few years. This loss of mother tongue created a schism in her psyche. Judith Butler ruminates, Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were by its prior power.

Ikpi found that she couldn't converse with her grandmother who knew only their native dialect. Her tongue had lost the ability to express the love she had for her grandmother in a language that she would understand. She laments,
It breaks my heart to realize that
I can only love her clearly in English
But tears do not replace the words
love will not make it easier

make it less heavy
desire will not help me remember (29-34)

The accompanying guilt was made worse with the realisation that by forgetting her language she had betrayed her country and her people, committed the greatest treachery of all. Remorse and regret at disconnection from home is an oft recurring theme in her platform literature which describes the cultural effects of colonialism on the black diaspora in the metropolis. This anguish of loss of identity is concomitant with loss of language.

How a person identifies herself is intricately connected to place and language which gives birth to a specific culture. Ikpi's valid sense of self and identity was fractured by her dislocation from her native Africa and by mnemonic loss of her mother tongue. Nigeria urges her to remember and reconnect with her people.

It's for my future
it is for my children
and it is for you, grandmother
that I must
always
always
remember (80-87)

"Homeward", as part of the tradition of performing art, is a site where memories coalesce to give a sense of being and belonging. Spoken Poetry is powerful. It can teach us about love, it can serve as a moral parable, and it can also mobilise a nation's people to protest. Thus postcolonial performativity may accomplish to reinvent and reinscribe ideas of home and belonging.

The liminality of the performer, the performance, and the stage allows for selection and combination of various social and personal issues stemming from race and ethnic differences to contest dominant colonial narratives. Informed by the personal, Ikpi delivers a performance which is highly political. The poet seeks to circumvent and counter the predominantly patriarchal institutions and canons of print publishing to deliver a poignant poem which performs memory.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

~ ~ ~. *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge, 1997.

Ikpi, Bassey. "Homeward." *YouTube*,

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTcOWR3uc0E>>Accessed 2 May 2019.