

Breaking fear in the body: A delve into the selected poems of Logan February's *In the Nude*

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Abstract

*Over time, aesthetic shifts and changes. By the aforementioned, in all ramifications, it has been the core of creativity for the bettering and understanding and assimilation of human relationships. The goal of this study is to identify conceptualizations and lack of importance accorded to the contexts of fear and body in poetry. This paper is majorly framed and guided by the propositions by Paul Dumouchel and Barbara H. Rosenwein. With history and experiences and the state of violence and political upheavals reoccurring every day, why do poems about fear and body matter? What are the exact factors that constitute this kind of poems? Specifically, this study pays attention to how Logan February has applied various forms and techniques in the selected poems of his poetry collection *In The Nude* to examine the contexts of fear and body, and as well as avenues for breaking, overcoming and suppressing fear.*

Keywords: Fear, literature, poetry, body, fear

Introduction

The concepts of body and fear are of great significance to contemporary poetry and as well relevant to the global community. The body is the corporeal makeup of a being or an animal. It is capable of numerous emotions. By this paper, the particular emotion concerned is fear. Fear is regarded as an

unpleasant emotion often triggered by danger, harm or threat. With the reoccurring events in their various dispositions happening around the world, there is a relationship existing between the representation of the human body and the expression of fear. This paper however follows heavily the propositions by Paul Dumouchel and Barbara H. Rosenwein. Paul Dumouchel in his bid to explain the history of emotion in connection with reoccurring events or the environment and the body proposes, “the body and its representations, being a largely social construction, are therefore among those signs and are thus one of the possible languages of emotions”(qtd in Dumouchel, 84). Barbara H. Rosenwein, in agreement with Dumouchel, argues that “Historical knowledge of emotions is always mediated by signs, in which the elusive nature of feelings are culturally shaped and linguistically translated” (1). Within the aforementioned propositions, the reoccurring events in their various dispositions happening around the world imply that human beings are always affronted with the realities of their bodies in connection with their emotions (fear) and contexts. Hinging on this notion, it is therefore certain that this paper shows how literary depictions of the body can be evaluated as a source for feelings (fear), and as a mosaic of situation where by historical moments coated by emotions are experienced.

Fear and the body in *In the Nude*

Poetry is the one of the avenues for literary expressions and consciousness. Sometimes, if not most times, poems are taken to be conscious of word economy and discrete messages. The diffusion and dispersion of subject matters, in this genre, are done with the use of good imageries and metaphors. It is unarguable to state that poetry has a great bond with emotions. This is evident

in the representation of the body and fear in *In the Nude* and corresponds largely with the different life phases of its poet. As this is the case, the poet also simultaneously explores the ways in which the body and fear are embedded in specific historical, social and political contexts.

Logan February's *In the Nude*, his first full poetry collection, is filled with courage, fear, body, love, sacredness, anxiety, longing, sexual and physicality. One of the poems in the collection titled, "Samsara", the poet recounted with uncertainty and uneasiness his own contrasting fear which is familiar,

Sometimes I find myself dangerously close
to the meaning of life, before it slips away again.
I understand this crisis too well. My song is
loudest at my ribs, with no one close enough
to hear it. Mine is the predicament of hiding...
(Lines 1-5)

The meaning of life, to the poet, comes as something vague. The need to grasp meaning and purpose becomes handy. And because life is what we see every day and coated with uncertainties, the poet proposes his assertion— his awareness of not knowing what comes in the next moment of his life in association with his body and the bid to make a meaning out of it. This seems to be the singular fear every human carries in the body. To Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body has its own mind which he calls "a corporeity of consciousness," an intentionality of the body to explore and live in its surrounding (237).

The poet in his knowledge of uncertainty in "Samara" says in line 21 that "I want to be naked. I want to wander". This is obviously a courageous decision, to beat and overcome fear resident in the body by wanting to be naked and free of bad

forces— be it attacks, anxiety or grief or anything bad. In the poem the poet exhibits the will and resolve by packaging and pushing aside his disquietude and worries about life and fears engineered towards his body to be free and happy and wander.

This fear as presented by February is relevant by the manifestations of the inward and outward forces adversely affecting the body and lives. Because the poet is aware of the tenuous factors towards the human nature, the title of the collection “in the nude” suggests freedom. Perhaps, as evident, it is a freedom from the shackles of fear. The poet walks in the nude, free of forces geared towards the body where the ever present worrisome forces against the beings are created. February gives startling lines about the scars (fears) on his own body in “Envy” after exposing the marks as a tradition by his people for remembrances. The poet tries to make meaning out of his scars, to find a stand in understanding his worries and fears:

My people used to scar themselves
 As a sign for their ancestors,
 To honour their forebears.
 My scars are wide enough for a whole
 generation to share.
 I don't know where I begin or belong.
 I suspect my grandmother would see my skin and say,
 Child, you are not one of our own
 And she'd click her tongue.
 I just want my scars to mean something.
 My body is another homeland... (Lines 1-11)

The body is not only a singular entity as a sheet covering the bones, but a complex, multifaceted matter situated in the socio-economic and psycho-sexual society. This ideal draws attention

to the overcoming of certain factors, including: attacks, lynching, abuses, molestations, negligence, that the society puts towards the body. Overcoming these factors is, in other words, exulting and expressing pride in the body. When a person doesn't understand the usefulness of a possession, he/she takes less interest in it, and with time comes its withering. February understands this notion and treasures it absolutely well. In "Pride", he begins with awareness,

It's official: taxidermy is not such a cruel thing.

I understand that now. Show me a dead thing
that doesn't seek resurrection...

A perfect circle was drawn with the salt to keep the
evil out.

All that was kinetic went quiet... (Lines 1-12)

This awareness in the above expression is drawn towards the body. In it, taxidermy is evident, and by the poet's proclamation "show me a thing that doesn't seek resurrection" is a revolt. The phenomena as observed in the piece that can pull up or trigger a revolt are freedom and pride. The poet goes to mention a personae "Lilith" who he presented as strong willed and free and gleaming with pride for the body:

Lilith knew she was naked

and she loved it. Her dark breasts high in the sun,
her 'fro frothy like sea foam.

But she never told Adam how they were. (Lines 3-5)

The body has become a construct to most writers, especially to poets, who include Warsan Shire, Taiye Ojo, Terrance Hayes, Jane Hirshfield, Leila Chatti, Ilya Kaminsky, Theresa Lola, Romeo Oriogun, Nome Patrick Emeka and the rest. This construct is the awareness for values and respect. And a means of

expressions of thoughts which are personal, and are finally released to the world. T.S Eliot states that modern poetry should be inspired by the corporeal experience of the modern individual and derives its language from “the cerebral cortex, the nervous system and the digestive tract” (Eliot 30). Eliot’s statement suggests that corporeality is the rhetorical idiom of modernism. He posits that the body is at the center of modernist literature (qtd. in Alblaimi, 2).

The body and the fear can be examined through the aspect of psychology. With Logan, the poet has shown that the body not only absorbs the cultural fears or anxieties that society invokes, but also uses the body as a tool to wield will and power great enough to crush down fear. This means that the body has its own mind and ability to agree and disagree. This notion is evident in “I Do Not Love Anything That Can’t Fit in my Hands”, as the poet declares his fearless desires in his hands, which are parts of his body, to love a lot of things:

I do not love anything
that can’t fit in my hands,
But then again, I have big hands.
I go for little things
so I can love a lot of things... (Lines 1-5)

It is also evident that the body plays a vital role in the poet’s choice of metaphor. This is for conceptualization of certain notions: he repetitively relates the body to entities such as love, fear, urbanity, personality, physicality, sexuality, longing or the sacred. Regarding the latter, sacred is often represented as body, a shift which enables him to depict his physicality as a political entity with a distinct history of conflict. By conflict, it is the evil force against body; the evil force against the gay body and the

infliction of fear on the gay. This is the case of right where a country, Nigeria, is unfriendly with the gay. In “Various Pulses”, the poet exemplifies fear as an attack and disrespect towards the forty faceless men rounded up at a party and no one hears of them. In this poem the speaker narrates the lives of gay people who are frightened and made afraid because they live in Nigeria. This experience is recorded because of its importance for everyone to understand how all lives matter, and the need to exterminate fear. This everyday experience in Nigeria is terrible as the poet expresses: My people who run like the Nile/ what is time, but a gasping, shifting thing... (10-11). Moreover, Eliot’s view on the body is the need to document the modern experience, which Minsoo Kang defines as “the simultaneous sense of exhilaration and anxiety about the now and what it might hold in store. Each modern expression is characterized by this inherently ambivalent attitude toward the present” (Kang 18). And it is apparently exposed in “Various Pulses” where daisies (the queer bodies) are killed for their sexuality and Nigeria is compared with America that is gay welcoming:

Every time one of our bodies hits
 The ground, the earth quakes.
 There is not enough earth to go around.
 Nigeria, the aromatic garden,
 Where daisies are yanked and clipped at the neck.
 At a party, forty faceless men are rounded up
 & that is the last we hear of them.
 I think things must be better in America
 But look at little Gabriel, angel baby...
 I tell myself the daisies are bobbing in the wind.
 That the past keeps them safe in the earth’s wrist.
 (Lines 1-15)

The speaker in the poem “Last Breath” tells of how one holds so many secrets. These secrets are the brutalities and attacks experienced by a gay body in a society that deems itself unfriendly. Towards the poem’s ending, the speaker exemplifies superiority by comparing the body to the blooms and beauty of a flower amidst fears:

As a man, you must do things with your chest.
 A man must keep many secrets.
 You must keep your secrets
 close to your chest.
 When death came for me,
 I looked him in his green eye...
 The moment a flower blooms
 is not when it is most beautiful,
 but when it opens gracefully...
 The flower showed its face. (Lines 1-12)

The critic E. Grosz pays particular attention to widening the understanding subjectivity of the body. She sees the body not as a ‘natural’ or an embodiment that precedes cultural inscription, but as something which is produced in and through certain cultural contexts. She writes: “The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, production or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural product” (qtd in Viljoen, 2). It is in this line that *In the Nude* can also be viewed. The poet understands the body as a site of social, cultural, political and geographical inscriptions, that in “Boy Lolita”, the aforementioned are explored by stating the life circumstances of the Boy Lolita in Nigeria. In the poem, Boy Lolita is fully aware of how unsafe he is by walking “half ixora”

and “half succubus”. And the “red in him” which can be seen as his life or blood isn’t fully his because he exists in place that is gay unfriendly. In spite of these ugly experiences, Boy Lolita hides his fear well because he is trying to survive and live because Nigeria wants to burn taboo (gay) out of his body. The poem:

Boy Lolita walks like half ixora, half succubus. The red in him isn’t all his own. He’s not even that young, just beautiful in a nectarine way. Childlike, on the inside. Boy Lolita read a poem by Plath—now he eats men like air, unless they’re paying his food. He wants rose and Chinese rice. Tonight, in a dark room, someone else’s father is undoing him like a knot. Boy Lolita knows how to hide fear well. This country will make him eat glass, to burn the taboo out of him. (Lines 1-7)

In all circumstances, there is need for hope. With hope comes freedom and extermination of fear and anxieties. This is what the poet has done in some of his poems especially in “Beloved”. Here he stands on the attitude of being prideful and appreciated. By this, he makes it known that everyone is beloved: you are a mystery, shadowed/and so beloved... (2-3). An individual having this in mind has the ammunition and capability of defeating fears already. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that the body in the modern metropolis appears as “an attitude towards certain existing or possible tasks”

and its spatiality is not “a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation” (100).

The body and its cognates draw on the imports of heritage and pride and at the same time celebrate a synergetic multi-cultural existence. This is only achieved by standing over the forces targeted towards it. And at the end the body is the mirror into all one has gone through and experienced. Mikhail M. Bakhtin agrees in this notion by stating in *Rabelais and His World*, “In the act of eating, as we have said, the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world’s expense.” In this line, February projects and celebrates the body at the world’s expense in his poem “Claw, Hoof, Paw, Hand”. The poem narrates the ordeals and challenges of a gay body existence and its breaking free:

In the end, this is all I ever wanted
 To be- a cannibal,
 To eat of my own bestiary...
 You animal whisperer, you.
 Here are my wings. Pluck them clean.
 Press my face to my piss- this too,
 I remember. My mouth, a quiver full
 Of arrows. Reach into my throat,
 Call my name and hear it echo
 In this cavernous heaven. Yes, I climbed,
 Stubborn as a mountain goat...
 I’ve shaved my skin, naked for the first time.
 Look at me, small burning reptile:
 A dragon who first ruins itself. (Lines 1-21)

Conclusion

The understanding and familiarity with a problem bring solution, freedom and significance. *In the Nude* is filled with sadness, courage, fear, body, love, sacredness, grief, anxiety, longing, sexual and physicality. The mentioned entities are existent in the body. The poet, in his collection, expresses how these entities affect the body and how the body reacts towards them. The entity - fear - is shown in this paper how the poet exemplifies the avenues it is broken and overcame and suppressed in the body. It is without argument that there is always the expectancy of fear, in any way it comes, in the human beings' lives. It is understood that human beings are in the constant experience of it (fear) and in the bid to overcome and make meaning out of it to better life. In "Learning to Float", one of the last poems in the collection, the poet assumes control and command over the things (fears) geared towards the body. He says, "beneath the shimmer/there is a testament to a folklore... (3-4). Also, in the line of assuming control and command, Merleau-Ponty sees a body without fear as "that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world, and through which we can consequently 'be at home in' that world, 'understand' it and find significance in it" (237).

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