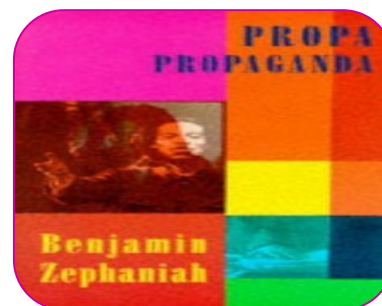




## BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH'S *PROPA PROPAGANDA*: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PROTEST IN PERFORMANCE POETRY

Niranjana Marian George

Guest Lecturer, Department of English, BCM College,  
Kottayam, Kerala, India.



### ABSTRACT

Protest literature that began with questioning and criticising the existing socio-political conditions experienced by the ordinary working class strata of the society was later on adopted by writers as a strategic medium for expressing their discontent with the social order. With the development of the Black British performance writing the element of protest took a new and different meaning, as Black British literature mostly dealt with disillusioned life of non-White British citizens, their unequal treatment and social and political oppression. Performance added new colour to the diction of such literature. This work is an endeavour to prove the inevitability of performance in protest and significance of protest in performance by thematically analysing the collection *Propa Propaganda* by the British performance poet Benjamin Zephaniah.

**KEYWORDS:** : Performance Poetry, Protest Literature.

### INTRODUCTION

Protest literature as a genre refers to the literature that aims at revealing society's ills and literature that opposes the existing socio-political situations to bring about a transformation within individuals as well as within society. Protest literature that gives voice to the pent-up emotions of generation's sufferings can lead to a permanent reformation in the society when the protest mirrors the gruesome reality of people, and initiate a deeper understanding of truth and justice. The specific subgenre of performance poetry best exemplifies the expression of protest in literature. The most notable feature of performance poetry that is the poet's strong and close link with the audience narrows down the distance between the two, making possible the interaction of poetry with its audience. 'Focussing on performance poetry as protest literature, poetry can perform the demands of appealing to an audience and inciting change it allows for textures of call and responses, humour and parody' (Williams: 28). This sense of call and response evokes constant syncopation and transition, as a result of which the aim of protest literature finds meaning' (Williams: 105). By attempting a thematic study of the Jamaican poet Benjamin Zephaniah's collection *Propa Propaganda*, this work tries to examine how performance poetry has an added significance when it expresses protest and vice versa. Zephaniah's poems function as a social satire, and the performance element in these poems make them more effective in using social satire as protest because of the directness established with the audience.

### BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH AS A PERFORMANCE PROTEST POET

Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah, an established performance poet among the British writers is widely appreciated for making his poems lively and musical with the accompaniment of guitar, jazz, and by incorporating elements of reggae music and the rhythm of Rastafarianism into it. Zephaniah has been classified as a 'dub poet' in the 'Cambridge Guide to Literature in English', owing to the inevitable element of

musicality in his poems. Dub poetry 'is a popular form of Caribbean oral poetry that originated in Jamaica and Britain in the 1970s. Dub has been viewed as political poetry voicing the concerns of underprivileged black youth.' (Head: 326). Though Zephaniah is also known to the world for his written work, they provide only a hint of the oral and dramatic qualities of his poems. Many of his poems are better known as albums and songs than as a poetic piece.

Zephaniah adopts performance poetry as a medium to demonstrate his strong criticism of the western society by attacking institutionalised racism in all spheres including police force, injustice in the legal system, and effects of capitalism and consumerism. Some of the poems capture the voice of an angry poet who questions the long established social norms that supports the unequal treatment of Blacks and their political confinement, restriction of individual rights and freedom as in his 'The Angry Black Poet' from *Propa Propaganda*. His poetry gives expression and shape to cross-cultural and geographic experiences of the Black people who struggle between the twin realities of their existence. In the preface to his collection *Too Black, Too Strong* published in 2001 Zephaniah states that, "when I say 'Black' it means more than skin colour, I include Romany, Iraqi, Indians, Kurds, Palestinians, all those that are treated black by the 'United whites States'. I can hear cries of "What?" already, but I have to say the suffering I have witnessed means that my conscience allows me to include the battered white women, the tree dwellers of the Irish. I still remember the notice that said, 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs'. My Black is profound" (Broom: 26).

Zephaniah challenges the discriminatory attitude towards Blacks and advocates the cause of ordinary Blacks in Britain by supporting their rights and freedom movements. The themes in most of his poems are related to the public and political spheres of Black existence in a White world and their difficulties of combating prejudice and bigotry. Closely analysing protest elements in the *Propa Propaganda* should help in an understanding of Zephaniah's use of performance poetry as a vehicle of his political and social cause for Black rights.

### **PROPA PROPAGANDA: ELEMENTS OF PROTEST IN PERFORMANCE PEOTRY**

The poems in Benjamin Zephaniah's collection *Propa Propaganda* are a reiteration of the themes of anger, agitation, rebellion, self assertion, and hope. Directness of expression, simplicity of language, humour, address to human emotions and experiences mark these poems as different from traditional poems on the printed page. These poems articulate the suffering of Blacks in the White society, the intolerance, and oppression they suffer, the brutality of their day-to-day experiences and their helplessness to question this. Zephaniah's expression is varied: at times the poems capture the Black voice in British community or just unveil their life before the audience, leaving them open to ponder over the issue, sometimes question the existence of such biased norms in a society, furiously thrashing them, and at other times take an optimistic view and aspire the best for his people. Through these poems, 'Zephaniah helps people to awaken their conscience and raise awareness of the rigors and inequalities of lives lived under oppression and improve their condition.' (Scott: Vol. 5:197).

Anger and revolt are important themes in the 'Belly of de Beast', 'Walking Black Home', and 'Terrible World'. The poem 'Belly of de Beast' expresses Zephaniah's resentment at the unequal treatment of Blacks in Britain. The poem begins with 'Don't want go jail, Don't want go jail Cause every time we gu dea dem never give me bail'. These lines throw light on the Black experience of living a difficult life in Britain. Blacks are denied justice and face trial and punishment by virtue of their racial descent. The use of language also adds to the purpose of writing. By the occasional use of non-standard English dialect and broken grammar, Zephaniah captures the everyday bitterness of black suffering. By the domestication of language, he tries to shatter the myth of the need of using Standard English in writing and performing. He tries to create a new Black culture by incorporating aspects of the Black life and language into a western genre (Scott: Vol. 5:198). Zephaniah says "In hell places like dat Yu find no justice for de Blacks", Blacks are treated indifferently and their life is not easy as that of Whites. There are few to raise voice for them, and to support their fight for justice, which makes the world terrible to them. Innocent Blacks sent to jail for no reason and punished savagely and black women who bear the brunt of white male arrogance are no exaggeration. 'One time they

beat me almost kill me'- is reality spat out furiously. Discrimination finds no limits, it extends from their socio-political stature to everyday phenomena like jogging, where they have to make themselves invisible or experience the consequences of their undesirable existence. Zephaniah questions this irrational and unjustifiable attitude towards the citizens of the same country who differ just by the pigmentation of their skin. He accuses the political leaders, government and the law enforcing bodies for his people's suffering.

'Walking Black Home' precisely captures everyday bitterness of Black suffering by describing the exhausted poet who finds it difficult to get a taxi because of his skin tone. Black's struggle in finding a rented house and taxi is no new theme. The poem does not revolt but very casually espouses the poet's indignation and protest at this cruel discrimination. 'Terrible World' and "The Angry Black Poet" also reflect the poet's exasperation caused by the social evils such as the unofficial genocide and strategic sexual violence against women. The murderers become heroes and the rapists live luxuriously, but the poor, innocent Blacks suffer. These poems depict a hurt poet who is rebellious and fuming, and rants for freedom angrily.

The charm of Zephaniah's poetic vision lies in the fact that his poems radiate positivity/optimism about human life amidst the anguish and misery. Self assertion is a reverberating motif in 'Save Our Sons', 'Reggae Head', 'Dancing the Tradition' and 'Independence'. 'Save Our Sons' makes a conscious exploration of the Black identity, their weakness and then tries to raise their confidence. The poet reminds his people that it is not enough to be just proud of their culture and then suffer silently but assert themselves and their rights in public. The power is within the people to save their sons, to help the future generation to overcome this injustice and lead a peaceful life. Zephaniah invites his people to stand together as one and fight. The kind of political awakening that the poem offers is a definite feature of protest literature. In 'Reggae Head' the poet emphasises his origin and culture. The poet says nobody can get the Reggae out of his head. Reggae music is an integral part of the Jamaican life and experience. The poem is a celebration of the Jamaican culture where the poet refuses to give away his cultural traits despite all the difficulties he has to face because of it. 'Dancing the Tradition' encourages the people to stand up for their rights. Zephaniah uses the name of Jesus to invoke his people to think that there is hope for and to inspire them to have self-faith and confidence. He warns his people not to be fools to think of defeat and death when there is a lot of hope and chance. Zephaniah firmly establishes the Black's right over the land in 'Independence'. The poem makes the claim that the Blacks have equal right over the land as any other British or American citizen, for they have spent their entire life there. The poem also questions the policy of distancing Blacks from the land in the name of race as noted in the lines 'the little piece of Sun is ours , we borrow clouds from neighbours, we got air,...this land is ours'.

Zephaniah looks forward to a better future for his community in the poems 'I have a Scheme' and 'De Rong Song'. He dreams of a time when his people will gain power, equality and peaceful life. 'I Have a Scheme' gives the people the hope that there is a future for the Blacks, there will be a time when Blacks and Whites will live together and talk together, and people will no longer care about race and colour before appointing employees. Zephaniah is optimistic that one day people will become sensible to realise that this discrimination on the basis of colour is meaningless. He even foresees a time when the United States of America will have a Black President. 'Though it may take time, it is not impossible' is the belief of the poet. Throughout the poem, the poet gives hope to the people about a better future where there will be equality in all fields.

The protest elements in these poems gain better reach and response owing to its performance quality. Through the performance, the poet's attitude, anger and fury are best conveyed to the audience who thereby make more sense of the poem and assimilate the surface as well as the inner meanings of the poem better and analyse the cause and reason that called for the dissent. The expressed protest then becomes easier to be related to by the audience; therefore, it invokes the audience to respond and react to it. Zephaniah's poetry that incorporates elements of Black music such as reggae and jazz poetics, exalt and celebrate the Black culture. This aesthetic fusion of different artistic expressions helps in the purpose of stating protest through music by a counter cultural interaction. Thus, it serves as a link between the black oral tradition and white literary tradition.

The thematic analysis of the collection *Propa Propaganda* proves that this text is an example of performance protest literature and the performance element gives the poems an added advantage due to the direct link between the poet and the audience. For example in 'Independence', the assertion that 'dis land is ours' becomes more powerful when the poet shout it out to the audience. The themes of protest in these poems thus reach out better to the audience because of the performance element and as performance poetry they have an unchallengeable significance because of the creative protest it features.

### CONCLUSION

By incorporating elements of protest into performance, *Propa Propaganda* effectively espouses the hard reality of being a black among the whites. This close link between performance and protest is well appropriated in the collection thereby finding a new meaning to the literary struggle against generations of white dominance. Performance quality maintains the spirit, tone and attitude of protest in the poems.

### REFERENCES

1. Day, Gary and Brian Docherty. (1997). *British Potery from the 1950's to the 1990's*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
2. Head, Dominic. (2006). *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
3. Scott, David. *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of British literature, Volume 5*. New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Williams, Nerys. (2011). *Contemporary Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
5. Zephaniah, Benjamin. (1996). *Propa Propaganda*. New Castle: Bloodaxe Books.



**Niranjana Marian George**

Guest Lecturer, Department of English, BCM College, Kottayam, Kerala, India.