SONG OF THE WOMEN OF MY LAND

Background of the poet:
Oumar Farouk Sesay is a notable Sierra Leonean poet who is a graduate of the Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

He is a playwright, a short-story writer as well as a novelist. His poems have also been translated into Spanish and German.

Some of his works includes Published Anthologies such as: Kalashnikov in the Sun, Lice in the Lion’s Mane, Songs that Pour the Heart. Some of his published poetry collections are: Edge of a Cry, Broken Metaphor, Salute to the Remains of a Peasant.

Background of the poem:
For ages, women have been treated as inferior to men, and they have as well been victims of hard labour, exploitation and oppression.

This is the same situation peasant women in the rural areas are subjected to daily; labouring in the fields, under the sun, to contribute to the sustenance of their countries and their families but they’re not celebrated, appreciated or acknowledged.

Only few members of the communities remember these peasant women after their death; and when they happen to be remembered occasionally, a mournful song {dirge} is performed in their remembrance.

Such remembrance is what the poet does in this poem of his.

Setting of the poem:
The poem’s setting is most probably in Masingbi, Tokonlili district where the poet is from in Sierra Leone.
In this rural area, the main occupation of the women is farming; and through their farming activities they support their families and contribute to the national wealth of the country.

The time setting of the poem is since time immemorial \{distant past\} which the poem describes as “vast void of time” \{Line 8\}, “in those days” \{Line 9\}, “an epoch lost in antiquity” \{Line 18\} etc.

Nevertheless, it can be said that there’s a link between the past and the present generally, as only little has changed in the unfortunate situation of these women.

**Subject-matter of the poem:**

The poem which consists of 8 unequal stanzas and 46 lines talks about the condition of African women especially the peasant women in the African society.

The poetic persona speaks on how African women most likely during the slave trade were subjected to hard labour and oppression on large farmlands/plantation. He also in a clear tone of regret speaks on how the women consoled themselves in their miserable condition by singing. These songs they sang are songs that tells the story of their lives and unfortunately these songs are hardly remembered today; rather the tunes of these women’s song is the only available fragment or part left for the poetic persona to write to his readers about these women and their experiences.

**Themes in the poem:**

The following themes are examined in the poem.

- **The Oppression of Women:**

  The poem mostly talks on the way women were treated in the past especially as farm labourers, it also examines the condition of most peasant women in rural and urban African presently. These women are poorly paid for their labour after being made to work in fields or plantation owned by big individuals or companies. Some are forced to work as slaves of course without any pay.
Derailing in their responsibilities might earn them death from their slave-masters, thus they sing in the course of duty to psychologically ease their burden, forget their sorrows and entertain themselves. Thus through this songs of theirs, they tell their stories and celebrate their achievements.

• The Power of Time:

Here, time negatively affects the memory and brings about forgetfulness as seen in Line 2-3 of the poem. And in Line 4 “it leaves a fading tune” and “a dying song” instead in Line 20. Obviously, these are negative things attributed to time.

On the advantageous part of time, the poem shows that the women are fortunately able to cheat time through singing.

Endurance:

The persisting ability of these women in the face of suffering is clearly underestimated in the poem. In their hopeless and miserable condition, African women continue to endure, taking consolation through singing and celebrating their achievements.

Despite being faced with difficult/challenging tasks and risk of death, they still carry on like all is well and sing to “cheat the tyranny of time” Line 16.

The importance of Song:

Song is depicted in the poem as very important for several reasons:

• it’s used by the women to tell the stories of their lives.

• It serves as therapy to them because with their songs they were able to withstand and endure the torture and collective pain they suffered.

• It serves as a purpose of entertainment as the women used it as a means to celebrate their achievements. Thus time is considered a valuable element in the poem.
STYLES IN THE POEM

The following style of writing is used by the poet in the poem:

**Alliteration**: This refers to the repetition or recurring of same consonant letters closely placed together in the lines of a poem.

Examples of alliteration in the poem includes: *forlorn fields; lyrics lost; tuning the tenor of my verse; a song to sing the story of their lives; tyranny of time; soil and soul.*

All these also contributes to the quality of the poem’s rhythm.

**Personification**: This refers to giving of human attributes/qualities to inanimate objects.

Example: Line 37 “*stuttering lips of my pen*” and Line 38 “*screeching voice of my rib*” shows personification.

Other indications of personification are as follows: “*Time*”, in line 1-2. Time is likened to a sculptor who uses chisels to construct his artwork.

Also “*servitude*” in line 10 is given the attribute of a policeman who uses cuffs to prevent a criminal from running away. With the idea of cuffing the ankles of the women’s souls, it shows the extent the exploiters of these women are ready to go.

**Simile**: This is the indirect comparison between two things using “as or like”.

Examples are: *Lines 1-2* “like a sculptor chipping away at bits of wood, Time chisels away bits of their memory.” The comparison here illustrates how time slowly and steadily takes away the human memory about the women of my land. Also in *lines 22-23*, the simile here is used to compare the “death of the women’s song” to that of “the woman who died long ago.” Other examples of simile are in *lines 24-25*, and *lines 41-42*. 
**Repetition:** A few words and phrases are repeated in the poem which includes: forlorn fields, song, ploughed, lyrics, time, etc.

“Forlorn fields” emphasizes hopeless in the condition of these rural women. “Plough” emphasizes the physical exhaustion and torture these women experience. Thus, each of the examples of repetition adds to the quality of rhythm of the poem.

Other styles used by the poet in the poem are: imagery, paradox, metaphor, diction.