

# Poet, Playwright Lemn Sissay in rief

BY HOMA MULISA

“Everyday, I try to think of an original way to describe the world...”

Lemn Sissay is an Ethiopian descent brought up by white parents in the North West of England. He is the author of the poetry collections: *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist* (1988), *Rebel Without Applause* (1992); *Morning Breaks in the Elevator* (1999), *The Emperor's Watchmaker* (2000), *Listener* (2008), and his new work *Gold from the Stone* (2016). He also authored a number of plays both published and streamed on BBC Radio.

I had a brief discussion with Lemn Sissay, as he showed up in Addis for a fleeting Christmas vacation. Here is the glimpse of our discussion.

**Lemn's inspiration to write comes from his unique vision**

“I think everybody has a unique perspective of life, so what inspires me to write is that sense of unique vision that all people have. We all have a peculiar vision. We all see things in a way our own experiences lead us to. I am no greater person than the person who is giving out towels in a hotel. She has a unique perspective on the world and so do I.”

Themes find him more than he chooses themes. I write all kinds of things. Themeswise, I write everything from the search for my family, to the battle of Adwa, to racism in England. Every morning I wake up and write a morning tweet. The scent for that is nature, spirit and the world that I am in at the moment. Everyday, I try to think of an original way to describe the world and that has never been done before. People follow my tweets all over the world. So in general, I write about Racism in England, the search for my family since it has been a big thing in my life. I write about anything that comes to my mind. I think themes find me.”

**He took one step at a time to face challenges and stand on the world stage**

“I take one step at a time. My journey has been about single steps not great leaps. That's the only way that I can live my life. So I don't think about my achievements, I just take it one day at a time. I don't know how better to explain it. If you do good, good comes to you. I try to do the right thing. I try to do what I do as good as I can, and I could not have imagined my life would have been this way but I didn't plan it. I did what I believe was right. I found my family, I wrote poetry. I just cut my own half one step at a time.”

**Following the truth has shaped his life**

“The idea that I follow my truth, follow what I believe to be true is the one thing that has seen me through the darkness and difficult times. I know that I have to follow a particular path, one step at a time, when nobody was with me saying 'this is the right way to go'. In fact everybody was saying this is the wrong way to go. I didn't know any Ethiopian or where I was from.”

In fact when I found out I was Ethiopian, I say I have to go in this direction. Nobody heard me but I have to just keep going because I knew and I still know I was going in the right direction. And I was following the truth. When there was nobody there, I had to close my eyes and keep going. We all have been through that kind of experience, in so many different ways. The decisions we make are the key points in our life. They shape us. When I was in a small town as a teenager, and I left the children's home and I had nobody, I know I have to go to the city on my own, with no family to look back on or to go to. I came to the city and it was full of Caribbean people. They talk of Ethiopia. I saw that they like Ethiopians and I have to search my family.”

When I left the children's home, I know I am from Ethiopia, because they gave me my birth certificate. Then I found my family. I am a singular artist within my family and that's who I am.”

**Lemn knows plenty of Ethiopian Literature**

“I have read Bewketu Seyoum and some English translations of Ephrem Seyoum. I have read Tsegaye Gebremedhin's English poems. I know that I have a lot to learn. There is a contemporary literature and there is also a deep history of literature in Ethiopia even further than Shakespeare. There is rhyming in the Ethiopian literature and that's what I also do in my poems. Therefore I have a lot to learn from Ethiopian literature and English literature as well. The more you know the more you want to know. I want to learn Amharic to be able to speak, write and read.”

**Adoption was unfortunate for him**

“I was stolen from my mother so I wasn't adopted. It was not a legal adoption in my case and it was not good for me. That was rather fundamentally unfortunate considering the fact that my brothers and sisters went to international schools in Paris and Belgium. They were very well educated. My mother works at the UN. It was bad because I was stolen from her. I had my name changed. Now, I have received my files because they keep files in England and the files show what they did. So for me people look at me and say he has done well. But I have no family. You know what that's like. You know how crazy that is like no mother, father, sisters, brothers, uncles, cousins, grandparents.”

**Poetry is like Sanctuary to Lemn**

“When I write, it's like home. My poems have been with me longer than my family and my poems help me click with myself which means I have memory of me and my poems than I do with any family member. Family is just a collection of memories between a group of people disputed over a life time. And poems are like memory of me in the past and present.”

**Public art: It's been 20 years since Lemn's poems started appearing on city's streets**

“There are poems of me installed as public art in England and in Addis Ababa as well. I got a webpage about those public arts on lemnsissaylandmarks.com and these are the only places I want them to be anyway. It just came out of the blue. In the early 1990s a poem

appears on a side of a building in Manchester. Now my poems are everywhere and I am proud of that.”

**Explaining what he meant in his poems**

‘Before We Get Into This’:  
‘Before we get to know each other  
And sing for tomorrow  
And unearh yesterday  
So that we can prepare our joint grave  
You should know that I have no family,  
Neither disowned nor distanced - none.  
No birthdays nor Christmas,  
No telephone calls. It's been that way  
Since birth for what it's worth  
No next of skin.  
I am the guilty secret of an innocent woman

And a dead man - tell your parents, they'll want to know.’

“For my mom, I am her first experience and that's what it means by an innocent woman, my father died on the Ethiopian New Year day, September 11<sup>th</sup>. As soon as something is hidden there must be some guilt in that.”

**His Advice for Young Writers: Follow your passion**

“Follow your passion and write about whatever you are passionate about. Weather it is the imagination or science fiction, follow that passion in your writing. You can be a lawyer and a writer; you can be a teacher and a writer. There are a lot of journalists, politicians, chemists, doctors who are also poets and novelists. And Read as well... Read ... Read... Read...Read... Read.

With this internet world, it's quite easy to put your stuff online but that's very tricky. Sometimes your work needs to grow before you expose it to the readers. It is nice to let it grow before letting people read it but at the same time don't hold on to it so much so that no body ever sees it. Your work needs to breathe but it also needs to be incubated.

They are like opposite, incubate them and let them breathe, then bring them back



to incubate them. Though most importantly follow your passion. Be inspired, don't be cynical, and be emotional.

**Lemn chooses to be addressed as poet**  
People address him as a standup comedian, musician, playwright and mostly poet. However Lemn said, “When I am with my poems I am with my friends. So I chose to be addressed as a poet. I am a poet, poets must cross between boundaries.”

**He's Impressed by Ethiopia**  
“I have been to Shashamane, Simien Mountains but I need to go to Hawassa, Jimma, Harar, Bahir Dar and do a residency somewhere to write about the place. There is something happening around the world with Ethiopian writers right now. There's Dinaw Mengistu and Mesza Mengiste, they are publishing poetry books now. The generation that left the country in the 1970s are doing great, like the Nigerian writers in the 1960s.”

**What we can expect from him next**

Lemn Sissay is working on his Autobiography to be written and published in 2017. The book will be a collection of his life stories. “I love the way books are sold in the streets of Addis Ababa.” Said Lemn and told me that he's speaking to Book World to see through ways to bring the paperbacks of his works so that readers in Ethiopia could be able to have his books.

I asked Lemn about his private life. He told me that He was in a relationship with a beautiful writer from Eritrea brought up in England but separated two years ago. Then he said: Now I am wondering like, What the Hell?