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The Artist and His Art: An Approach to Selected Poems of Niyi Osundare

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to access selected poems from the Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare. Osundare has been variously labelled by critics who have popularized his poems as either specially crafted to use nature-centred tropes to marshal home his thesis; or artistically framed to trigger propagandist responses from readers. With both critical standpoints in mind the present writers attempt the reading of notable poems of Osundare to reveal his creative attitudes vis a vis language use and his adaptation of cultural and natural tendencies. The essay concludes that Osundare sees poetry as a special art form that could be multi-facettedly deployed to preach the message that the other aspects of the literary art (drama and fiction) have not adequately captured.

Keywords: *Artist, Art form, Approach, Selected Poems, Osundare*

INTRODUCTION

The character of literary forms always evolves with the passage of times. Although African literature in its written form (as against the traditional oral form) has a relatively short pedigree, it has not failed to constantly renew itself by evolving, principally in its social functionality, either as an avenue to demonstrate a cultural point of view or a satirical vista. Consequently, this attribute is responsible for the peculiar aesthetics that particularizes the literature.

Given the peculiarity of African literature and other reasons critics in this part of the world have often been wary of the term 'aesthetic'. For instance, African critics have always frowned at such quasi negative critical registers like Larsonist, Euro-modernist, Neo-Tarzanist etc. that have adumbrated the canon of their literature especially as they tilt the form away from its original meaning. Basically because the front-liners in the practice of criticism in Africa are the creative writers themselves – the likes of Ngugi, Soyinka, Achebe Osofisan, Nkosi, Armah, etc – it is not surprising that such feelings of disdain against the variegated portrayal of what is African are obvious in the canon of creative genres in the continent. Importantly again, the socio-political dys functionalities of the post independence era yield identical thematic form to the genres of African literature and what has become prevalent in Africa's creative facets is the foregrounding of thematic variants from societies where ugly political and economic trends have remained un(re)solved after several decades of post-colonial self-rule. With these situations in mind, concerns about writer's commitment in African literature have become as pertinent as the works themselves.

THE AFRICAN WRITER AND HIS WORLD VIEW

According to Nagende (1963:137) the special situation engendered by a dystopian socio-political dynamics would not 'permit … the luxury of poets who are strangers to commitment who are locked up in their narcissism in their monologues.' Mphalele (1979: vii) corroborates this when he affirms that "every writer is committed to something beyond his art". Inexorably, this commitment to extrinsic forces influences the intrinsic form and conception of a work of literature.

However, no matter the level of a writer's political obligation, art must be presented 'artistically'. No matter the function into which art is employed, literature must be treated as a compound that contains self-nourishing syntagms and paradigms that provide subtle literary topography for the critic. Little wonder

Frye asserts, in Anatomy of Criticism that the postulate of criticism must emanate from literature itself. Also Henry James, the American novelist, once posited that how a story is told is part of the story; insisting "you cannot separate the story from the telling." Hence, albeit functional art has become the norm in Africa, the artistic aspect has not become irrelevant. Much as writers' interests have concentrated on, and very much directed to truly contemporary issues, the aesthetic part of their writing has been refocused to accommodate new inclinations.

Although the generation of Nigerian writers – Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe – are praised for initiating 'high art' in the nation's literature comparable with any in the world in terms of quality, and indeed aesthetics, they have also been criticized for producing works characterized by esotericism, individualism, pessimism, universalism and didacticism especially as indicated in the celebrated criticisms of Chinweizu (et al) referred to below by Ezenwa-Ohaeto.

> This period of economic recession coincided with the now famous statement by three Nigerian critics – Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubiuke – concerning modem African poetry. The three critics had argued particularly that the older Nigerian poets write with "old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic tradition, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism (1996:70)

The major shortcoming of this coterie, according to Osundare (2007) is their refusal to be concerned with the future of the society. What the group always presented

> is an overwhelming nostalgia about the past, a helpless jeremiad about the present, but hardly a suggestion as to the way out of the wilderness, hardly a vision of tomorrow. (25)

As Obafemi (1992) informs us, what this group lacks is a 'dialectical framework requisite for a radical and ethical alternative, a kind of 'serious' art that deals with the ghastly problems of society' (75). Drawing copiously from this, one can infer that these writers have always failed to proffer pragmatic panacea to minister to the prevalent decadent social structure. In a nutshell, the sledge hammer of Chiweizu and his friends, though hit the generality of Africa's literary practice, their cynicism for the African poets was more acute claiming that the primordial accolades given to the generation of the earliest African were instances of mere critical schizophrenia. The Bolekaja critics (as Chiweizu and his friends call themselves) berate these poets, noting vehemently:

> These poets compound the problem of meaning by insisting on importing imagery from alien environment and sometimes samefacedly apologising for doing so. Clark speaks of Lo (Greek mythology) in "Cry of Bith" and of Joan of Arc (Medieval France) in "Olumo" … (168)

According to Egva (2007), unlike these poets, 'the third generation of Nigerian poets has produced more political poetry than any species of poetry' (111). These poets are those that Osundare refers to as 'an angry generation' (27). Ben Obumselu recently captured the Nigerian poetic situation quite aptly when he concluded, 'Nigeria is a bird-nest of singing poets' (14). Osundare is one of the various 'singing poets' in the Nigerian bird-nest. This essay attempts an evaluation of Osundare's literary style as evident in a select few of his poems.

Proverb as Praxis in Osundare's Poetry

The structured divide of every society invites the individual to choose where he belongs. For some the choice is voluntary. For others it is not. The generation of new writers sought identification with the oppressed class, which has inevitably made their work 'less' artistic, but simple, (albeit not simplistic), and this trait makes their creations invariable literatures of praxis which appear more direct, practical and imagistic. In a nutshell, the poets in this category believe that their works need to be accessible. In their opinion, if one is on the side of the masses, one cannot write in the elitist esoteric diction of the bourgeoisie.

As Jeyifo articulately explains in the introduction to "Songs of a Market Place", Osundare ranks among the poets who 'have taken the language of poetry, the diction of figurative expression to the market place' (ix). This means that the language that Osundare deploys in his poems is practically simple and eloquently interpretable for the members of the anti-bourgeois class. More importantly, Osundare's poetic creations draw extensively

from the Yoruba oral tradition. This is adequately corroborated by Shook (2007) when he states:

> Osundare's numerous travels have influenced him, but it is Nigeria, with its linguistic and cultural diversity, that has most shaped his writing. In his poetry, Osundare draws from the oral tradition of Yoruba, one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria (29).

The poet himself confirms this reliance on the Yoruba cosmological artefacts of oral lore.

> Without any doubt, Yoruba/African oral tradition has a strong influence on my works. It is for me both a source and an inspiration. I was not really "introduced" to Yoruba culture; I was born into it, and I grew up in it…. The Yoruba also have a deep fascination--no, fascination is a weak word--an abiding respect for and interest in the word (ohun/ oro). Words are not just the building blocks of language; they are its core, essence, and enabler. Without words, no language; without language no society. This is why the Yoruba consider words as delicate/fragile/sacred. A popular Yoruba saying, "Eyin loun or eyin loro," provided the title, The Word Is an Egg, for my volume of poetry published in 2000. (Cited in David Shook, 2007: 29)

In the following lines from "Advice", this is confirmed appreciably:

> To yourself
> Friend, be true
> You farm a thousand yams
> And tell us it is two hundred
> Alright
> After eating a hundred yams
> You will eat a hundred lies
>
> "Advice" (19)

These lines serve as indelible moral rectitude. The lines have been composed from the prominent apothegm designed to make people desist from telling lies. As the Yoruba maxim goes:

> *Agbe to ko'ogorun ebe l'oko*
> *T'o pe'gba lohun ko*
> *Ni'gba t'o ba j'esu ogorun ebe tan*
> *Ko ni sai j'ogorun iro*
>
> (A farmer who has made only a hundred hips
> Who claimed he had made two hundred hips
> After he has finished eating the yams contained in the hundred hips
> He must inevitably eat the hundred lies)

The maxim therein contained in the Yoruba moral saying no doubt provided very rich raw material for Osundare in this poem. It is the orality that Osundare's poetry illustrates that Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993) identifies when he says 'proverbs, tongue-twisters, riddles, communal traditions, even folktales in snippety forms are built into poetic lines, certainly with the intention of Africanizing poetic mediation' (85)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1996) also clarifies the obvious oral cadence characteristic of Osundare's poetry when he asserts "he also uses certain proverbs with regularity." For instance, as Ezenwa-Ohaeto posits, there is a proverb that appears twice in Waiting Laughters. The poem "The Feet I See Are Waiting for Shoes" in which the poet criticizes the injustice of social deprivation of stomachs "waiting for coming harvests," water pots waiting in famished homesteads, and the eyes "waiting for rallying visions," ends with the following proverb:

> Time it may take
> The stammerer will one day call his
> Fa - Fa - fa - ther - ther's na - na - na - me! (74)

These lines are indubitably invocative of the popular Yoruba proverb woven around the stammerer.

> B'o pe titi (It may take a long time)
> Ak'ololo a pe baba (The stammerer will eventually pronounce father)

Osundare reinstates the same proverb in "Waiting like the Crusty verb of a borrowed Tongue" in which he states:

> History's stammerer
> When will your memory master
> The vowels of your father's name?
> Time ambles in diverse paces -- (41).

These evidences of 'written orality' which have exhibited Osundare's aim at reproducing proverbial oral speeches in his poems lend credence to the poet's conscious exploitation of orality. Consequently, the dialogic relevance in

the poems is manifest in the patterning of the language as occasioned by the various drawings from the Yoruba verbal acrobatics. This is purely why the communicative vigour, maintained in the plain earthy diction is reinforced by the use of local imageries and symbols which however are not originally Osundare's. Interestingly though, as identical as the exemplified lines are to the original proverbs which can be taken as the hypotexts, Osundare's linguistic ingenuity is not beclouded. Instead we see diverse instances of proverbs re-worked and transmuted to the histrionic essence that we find in the various lines. Hence,

> Osundare's use of Yoruba proverbial lore has undergone changes as he refines and weaves the associated ideas into the poem rather than leaving them bare …. This use of proverbs is much more interestingly presented through a chain of proverbs in …(his) poem(s) (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1996: 72)

Rather than see in the poet a plagiarist, we observe the additional sonority and aesthetic colouration which his defamiliarizing translations of popular proverbial maxims have imposed on the poet's literary idioms. Apart from this function, the various proverbs perform the prosodic functions, or meta-functions, of rhetoricalizing Osunndare's poetic constructs.

As rhetorical devices the proverbs enhance the messages or contents of the poems and, apart from giving local colours, they accentuate their structural forms. For instance, the adaptation of the popular Yoruba proverb Omo go, eni o ma ku. Ki lo n p' mo bi o s'ago? is glaring in the following lines drawn from "Sleeping at Five and Twenty"

> We say a child is foolish
> His mother says 'As long as he doesn't die'
> What death kills a child faster
> Than arrant folly
> "Sleeping at Five and Twenty" (72)

Similarly, another instance of this adaptation of proverb is obvious in the following where Osundare had in mind the popular Yoruba aphorism, B'omode ba n ge 'gi n'igbo, awon agba a maa wo bi a wo si (when a child is felling a tree in the bush, the elder observes with caution the direction in which it would fall). This is what the poet re-casts in the following lines,

> When cutting a tree in the forest
> It is the wise who watch
> Where it will fall
> "Eating Tomorrow's Yam" (16)

The short and witty structures of the proverbs fit appositely into the form of the poems. With these poetic devices familiar imageries are created to further deepen the theme and the message.

As Osundare has explicated, the general purpose set for his generation of literary artists are the simplicity in language use and the utilisation of local expression (images and proverbs) which are to assist the artists to reach out to more readers, especially the masses he is simultaneously speaking to and speaking for. Osundare identifies 'that we are left with semantic approximations and syntactic gymnastics' because 'useful as the technology of writing is, it cannot capture the oral performance in its full-bodied essence'. This no doubt leads us to the secret of his unique stylistic poetics which screws the parole of English into the langue of the traditional Yoruba construct.

Politics and Nature as Motifs in Osundare's Poems

The accessibility of the language of Osundare's poetry does not in any way take away the seriousness of his art. More than anything else, he unceasingly addresses the socio-political problems of the society by taking on the tyrants, politicians, vagrants, rebels, in-laws, indeed everybody who subscribes to the debasement of the country's socio-political aspirations.

His most caustic satire, however, is for the political leaders, whom he obviously has no love for. He reserves his vituperative diction to describe the political class in "The Politician's Two Mouths":

> The politician's mouth has two edges
> Like Esimuda's sword
> It is murder both ways
> Is it not the politician
> Who sees a snake
> And hails an earthworm
> He prostrates for a vote
> But his mind squats like a hungry dog

In this poem, Osundare satirises the typical characteristics for which the politicians have become notorious: fickleness, greed,

embezzlement, promiscuity, lethargy, and a general insouciance towards national issues. Nigerian politicians are often publicly criticized for their demagogic intrigues especially as they trick people with their sugar- coated mouths. To accentuate his theme in this poem, Osundare likens the politicians' duplicity to the double-edged sword of Esimuda. For example he reveals that after canvassing for votes with 'inflated promises' and 'countless prostrations', the politician eventually wins the election and:

The mouth is now too honourable
to greet, the belly too obese to bend
Our man becomes a locust bean seen but once
in several seasons
his Mercedes thunders through the street
our dust-laden mats announce the departure
of the man of power.

"A Villager's Protest" (48)

This is a revolutionary voice in Nigerian poetry. It challenges the political situation, which certainly has the position of the grandmaster of all the country's problems, by addressing it and taking head-on the attendant problems. The move from militocracy to democracy is supposed to give the citizenry a new life of benevolence and development. The contradiction yields frustration, and indeed more.

It is not only the hypocrisy of the politicians but the whole gamut of Africa's democratic system and the thin line that separates military tyranny and democratic excesses that come under the ferule of his criticism. Virtually every vice perpetuated by the military regimes is replicated by the democratic leadership and this as captured the representational fancy of Osundare's aesthetics. Taking his cue, as it were, from this consistent and unending and vicious cycle of leadership irresponsibility, the poet too is tireless and persistent in his denunciations as evident in the corollaries below.

Let no one tell us again
that fingers are not equal
for we know
how the thumb grew faster
than all the others
the funds for our community centre
built your palace
the funds for our rugged roads
bought your car
the funds for our water scheme
irrigate your banks in Europe

"Unequal Fingers" (161)

Let this war be fought by
Presidents' children
Governor's children
Senators' children
Bankers' children
Bishops' children
and others who cut up the country
like an unending cake

"Dying Another's Death" (55)

We know who harvested a contract for steel
but built wooden bridges collapsing
under the first feet
the policeman who murdered an only child
to win your country's honours
the naira king who hoarded rice
so we can all owe our lives to him

"Listen, Book Wizards" (58)

With these lines, Osundare slams the power mongers with the knowledge of what they have always chosen not to acknowledge but which ineluctably is the basic truth adding;

men of deep unwisdom
knowing not that
power is the bird of the forest
which nests on one tree today
and tomorrow pitches its tent
on another.

"A Villager's Protest" (48)

It is therefore understandable why Osundare berates the 'power mongers' in his poem especially as he tells us

> …there is no running water… no food on the table, You cannot keep quiet about the situation… in Africa. When you no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator with a gun in his hand… then there is no other way than to write about this, in an attempt to change the situation for the better

Also of coordinate importance is Osundare's resolve to initiate a change in the existing political arrangement, his purposeful

doggedness to incite a combative attitude in the masses to throw down the gauntlet to the politicians. And in this he is very much willing to join; by including himself in the 'we' of his lines shows his preparedness not only to count himself with the oppressed but also part of those ready to confront the political leadership.

In most of his poems that do not tongue-lash the African despicable leadership, Osundare brings his humble background as a 'farmer born' to fore by celebrating the African natural immaculateness. It is not surprisingly, therefore that his focus as a poet transcends politics. In The Eye of the Earth, each of the eighteen poems in the collection is either eulogising the friendly greenliness of the earth, the therapeutic freshness of the forest and village lanes, or lamenting human destructive adventures in the forests and his systematic squandering of earth's resources.

He begins by praising the forest's lush and its abundance of verdant boughs, budding herbs and ripening roots;

> Bouncing boughs interlock overhead
> like wristwrestlers straining muscularly
> on a canvas of leaves wounded
> by the fists of time
> I tread, soft-soled, the compost carpet
> of darkling jungles
> my nose one charmed universe
> of budding herbs and ripening roots (3)

He singles out trees of particular economic relevance, trees that have over the centuries been used, not only to make furniture pieces or building materials, but also as integral necessities of human culinary ingredients and general home use:

> Let iroko wear the crown of the roof
> let ayunre play the clown of the fireplace
> but let no tree challenge the palm
> mother of nuts and kernels
> tree proud and precious like the sculptor's wood
> bearer of wine and life … (7)

CONCLUSION

Niyi Osundare is one of the fecund poets that have written in Africa today. In fact, he is a Nigerian of Yoruba extraction, from Ikere Ekiti, whose poetry is richly coloured by common expressions of traditional life (like proverb and songs) which reflects the worldview of his people. Besides, his poetry is always accessible because in it he assumes the voice of the unlettered peasants and villagers who speak plain without feigning sophistication. His themes are many and varied especially as they range from a preoccupation with the poor and downtrodden in the society to an engagement with African's socio-political problems and a revolutionary vision that will bring about a new Africa. In all these, Osundare's is not blind to his physical environment. In fact, most of his poems dwell on the impoverishment and decay of the rural communities.

Osundare was quoted as saying 'I survived all those dictators by hiding behind my words. I used animal images, the hyena representing the dictator, for instance, and the antelope the people'. This is also an indication that the aesthetic elements of his poems are things around him. Of special interest is his reliance on his natural environments. Just like many of his contemporary professors who hailed from Ekiti, Osundare exhibits a tenacious love for his culture, dialect and ethos. It thus seems that this love was rewarded as he miraculously escaped death in 2005, the year he was caught in Hurricane Katrina in which he and his wife were stuck in their attic for 26 hours, at which time their neighbour, who at the time was floating by in his boat, heard their shouts for help. That Osundare was rescued from the turbulence of Hurricane Katrina confirms the efficacy of his family name – O-S-U-N-D-R-E – which literally means Osun (a popular river in Yoruba land) has vindicated its own. Since Osun has vindicated Niyi, it is apt to reason with the logic that an ordinary hurricane-powered flood could not have silenced his poetic voice which for long will remain strident in the canon of African poetry.

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