

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Gauging The Masses' Mess: Suffering And Smiling: The Poetics Of Self- Annihilation Inthe Poetry Of Niyi Osundare**

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**Abstract**

African poetry is aimed at socio-political transformation. Most African poets use their poems to condemn tyranny, dictatorship and other social vices rampant in their countries. Niyi Osundare, a prolific Nigerian writer, is not an exception; his use of Yoruba poetics makes his poetry unique. On the other hand, the study explored the images used by the poet to condemn the indifference of some sections of the masses to the oppressors' perpetuation in power. Among the findings were: that Osundare employs images of deceit depicting the means used by the oppressors to perpetuate themselves in power and prolong the suffering of the masses. Therefore, it would be correct to conclude that Osundare deploys traditional but universal images in his poetry majorly to challenge the masses into ending the suffering inflicted on them by staging a revolutionary action against their oppressors.

**Keywords:** African poetry, Yoruba, images, poetics, revolutionary.

**Introduction**

Several efforts have been made by critics to classify African poets. African poets have been classified on the basis of period of writing as residual, the dominant and the emergent. Also, there categories of poets called the traditionalists and the euro modernists, classified based on their level of commitment to the deployment of oral traditions in their poetry. (Chinweizu, Jamie & Madubike 160) The truism remains that the so-called traditional and euro modernist African poets source their poetic material from the African oral traditions. The interpretation of this is that much as the influence of western literature on the poetry of the latter is massive, the poetry still reflects African oral aesthetics. Irele aptly opines that despite the influence of print culture on African writing, "...orality functions as the matrix of an African mode of discourse".(9) Suffice it to say that no matter the level of external influence on African poetry, oral traditions still persist. Kofi Awoonor confirms that "none of us, if we are good writers, are in any way diminished by being influenced. We have achieved what we have done, through the English writers, not with them.

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It should be emphasized that Chinweizu et al. were the first set of critics to have utterly and openly decried the poetry of euro modernist African poets like Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J. P. Their claim that “There is a failure of craft in the works of the euro modernist Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry” (Chinweizu et al. 165) has received a myriad of positive as well as negative responses from other critics. As expected, Soyinka labelled them “neo-Tarzanists” advocating for the “poetics of death and mummification not of life, renewal and continuity”. (Ezenwa-Ohaeto70) In his assessment of Soyinka’s reaction, Nwoga views it as “unfortunate in its violence but perhaps it was a valid over-reaction, to over-statement”. (Nwoga43) He goes on to conclude that “one acknowledges that the attempt to decree one type of African poetry is premature and inelastic and would do great harm to the growth of that activity”. (Nwoga43)

The point being made here is that Chinweizu et al. make a convincing, undeniable, but overstated observation. The fact in this line of reasoning consists in the objective scrutiny of the disjunction between the use of oral traditions by the traditionalists and the euro modernists. That the former poets mystify the oral traditional aesthetics used in their poems cannot be interpreted to mean non-inclusion of traditional elements in their poetry. For instance, in his unalloyed acknowledgement of Soyinka as “a poet of grand conceptions who employs myths as a poetic device” (Ngara 94), Ngara, like Chinweizu et al., condemns poverty of cultural consciousness in the use of African myths by Soyinka: “This might at first give the impression that Soyinka is a traditionalist. However, the embracing of Ogun as his central symbol in *Idanre and Other poems* does not signify an African nationalist consciousness on the part of the author...” (Ngara 95) Still, in all his argument, Ngara confirms that African poets engage largely in transference of oral traditional aesthetics to their written poems.

Of striking significance to our study is the charge of these euro modernist poets with insistence on “importing imagery from alien environments...” (Chinweizu et al. 168) Niyi Osundare has been described as a traditionalist who uses images sourced from the Yoruba oral traditions in his poetry. A prolific poet, Osundare belongs to the second generation of Nigerian poets whose concern is to address the socio-political problems of Nigeria (and Africa in general). Therefore, his poetic vision is to emancipate the suffering masses. He has always devoted his poetry to the service of the exploited African peasants. Jeyifo portrays Osundare as a poet of the people whose cause is the people’s cause; that is, to bring about a revolutionary change. He describes Osundare as: “...the most distinctive voice among our new poets; I suggest that this may be explained by the fact that in his verses we confront both poetry of revolution and revolutionary poetry...” (Jeyifo 320)

This poetic vision of Osundare revolves around his use of orality. As a poet of the masses, Osundare sources his poetic material from the oral traditions of his native Yoruba tribe in a bid to make his poems easily comprehensible to the ordinary people. Osundare employs

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traditional images which the ordinary people in society are familiar with and this accounts for the simplicity of his diction which “generally contrasts with the language practices of the first generation of Nigerian poets”. (Bamikunle128) Jeyifo also talks about Osundare’s “tireless sustained obsession with ‘playing’ with language, with words and metaphor, the “horses of poetry”.

Osundare himself once unequivocally declares: “My poetry is strongly influenced by Yoruba poetics. Mine is the figured fancy. The question that then persists is: how universal are the images in his poetry, i.e. how well do such images (the Yoruba poetics) appeal to the wider audience/readership? In fact, this is one discreet question the answer to which can be sought in the analysis of his poetry through archetypal theory. Aside from the necessity of getting an answer to this question, poetry is generally perceived as the most difficult genre by most readers because of the problem associated with interpreting or deciphering the images employed in it. It is believed that the reader’s ability to decipher the images employed in a poem will aid his or her interpretation of the poem. However, this does not in any way suggest that only the reader’s ability to decipher the images in a poem is needed to interpret the poem. It only confirms that deciphering the images in a poem will serve as a clue to unraveling the mystery of the poet’s diction.

In a nutshell, descriptive elements employed to appeal to the reader’s senses in a poem constitute imagery. Decoding imagery in a poem poses more difficulty when a poet uses images other than visual (which are the common ones and the most conspicuous). The poet may also use auditory, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic and tactile images in a symbolic way. More so, the poet’s use of other figures of speech like onomatopoeia, simile, metaphor, personification may evoke certain images.

At this juncture, it is imperative to be more explicit on the concept of imagery. An image “need not be metaphorical” (Anthony69) as it is within the orbit of other poetic tropes. The exemplification of this is onomatopoeia which is an instance of auditory imagery. This signifies that it is not all images that can be subjected to symbolic import.

The generalization we can easily make from the above is that while not all images are symbolic, all symbols grow out of images. This point also gives credence to the fact that most images are metaphorical. In most cases, images are embodied in such figures of speech as simile, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, onomatopoeia. Often, poets refer to the particular repertoire of images in their disparate cultures to enrich the thematic content of their works. African poets are by no means an exception to this enterprise of borrowing from their oral traditions. In the light of the importance of imagery, Olafioye asserts that it is imperative for African poets to use traditional images in order to be original and to elicit the reader’s response to the theme.(Olafioye 145)An effective use of traditional imagery will surely connect the poet with his/her audience in that his/her message will be easily communicated. It is this task of bringing poetry to the common people through traditional Yoruba imagery that strengthens the relevance of Osundare in the literary scene of post-independence Nigeria. No wonder that in “Poetry Is”, the first poem

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in his poetry collection, *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), Osundare sets out to define poetry as “man/meaning/to/man” which altogether differs from “... the esoteric whisper/of an excluding tongue”. (Osundare 3-4).

**Theoretical Framework**

Notable scholars and critics, from Frazer, Jung, Bodkin to Frye, have proposed diverse principles for archetypal criticism of the literary text. (Ajiboye 30; Balogun 10) From Frazer's death-rebirth myth to Jung's the collective consciousness, certain distinct tenets have emerged on archetypal criticism. While the principles so derived in the works of both scholars are only applied to literary criticism without a definite pattern of approach, Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* clearly lays a strong foundation for a systematic archetypal criticism of the literary text. However, this does not in any way suggest that, upon its distinctive nature – and deviation too, Frye's archetypal tools/approach does not borrow certain concepts from his predecessors; rather, it tends to portray his approach to archetypal criticism as one that harmonizes the necessary archetypal tools for literary analysis.

According to Hardin, “...Frye's method is one of classifying rather than analyzing...” (Hardin53) Also describing Frye's approach, Daiches says that “Criticism becomes a technique of description by categorization and (...) reduction”. (Daiches 345) Here, our approach to archetypal criticism of the selected poems by Niyi Osundare largely involves using a compendium of some of Jung's and Frye's concepts. As a matter of fact, there are convergent points in their approaches. (Balogun 7) .

In the meantime, the relevance of Frye's approach consists in its elaboration on symbolic imagery. (Hardin 53) Frye's belief is that archetypal criticism of poetry revolves around these five structures of imagery. For a clearer explanation, the apocalyptic and the demonic are the two main forms of imagery in Frye's schema, with analytical imagery only mediating between the two. In Frye's schema, the apocalyptic and the demonic form “contrasting worlds...identified with essential heavens and hells of the religions contemporary with such literature” respectively. (Frye 139) This means that the heavens or desirable world of gods is a metaphor for apocalyptic imagery while the hells or undesirable world of demons is a metaphor for demonic imagery. Therefore, each of the five realms could symbolize a desirable world (the apocalyptic) or an undesirable world (the demonic).

On the one hand, in apocalyptic imagery, the divine realm is represented by the loving deity; the human world is full of fulfillment, community-centeredness and other traits typical of In this apocalyptic imagery, all the five realms are desirable. On the other hand, Frye uses demonic imagery to represent opposition of human desire, perversion and disillusionment.

Finally, it need be reiterated that only the primordial images in the selected poems by Osundare depicting the strategies used by the oppressors to perpetuate themselves in power are

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analysed. These primordial images are “the building blocks of our mythologies, rituals, folklores, which in turn, are related to our language” (Soile 7); therefore, they represent archetypes (universal elements) found in all human species throughout the world. our approach to archetypal criticism will lay emphasis on Frye’s demonic imagery. This is because the thrust of this study can be better captured through Frye’s demonic imagery.

**Imagery of Deceit and Religiosity**

Osundare identifies deceit as one of the means deployed by the oppressors to perpetuate the suffering of the masses. In other words, their use of deceit to perpetuate themselves in power is a means of prolonging the suffering of the masses. In “Feigning Rebel”, a poem in *Village Voices* (1984), Osundare uses visual images to clearly present deceit as a tool in the hands of the tyrants to perpetuate themselves in power:

In the poem, Osundare presents a politician as a rotten being who only regurgitates lies in his mouth. His use of simile in “the politician’s mouth has two edges/like Esimuda’s swords” (VV, 57) is an affirmation of the politician’s tricky tendency. The narrator wants the masses to be wary of the politician’s tricky moves, for “Is it not the politician/who sees a snake/and hail an earthworm?” (VV, 57) In the animal realm of Frye’s schema, a snake is predatory while an earthworm is docile. It is thus ironic that the politician who claims to be passionate about the suffering of the masses would deceive them by calling a snake an earthworm. The narrator vehemently affirms that “whoever believes what the politician says,/his ear is blocked by the carcass of truth”. (VV, 57) This is an obvious attack of the majority of the masses who still irrationally believe politicians can offer them a good standard of living.

In his recent poetry collection, *Random Blues*, Osundare’s extensive usage of images of deceit is a carryover from *Village Voices*. In “Random Blues 3”, Osundare uses “hooded horsemen”, instead of “masked rebels” used in “Feigning Rebels”, as a metaphor for deceptive politicians. Through this, he creates an image of deception:

Hooded horsemen  
and a hateful Herod  
cannibal laws drench the land in red  
this anxious season of steel and rod. (RB, 15)

The politicians are hooded horsemen who ride on the masses. Osundare’s allusion to the Bible’s tyrant, Herod, excites an image of bloodshed, the same way the metaphor of “season of steel and rod” carries an image of degradation engineered by the contemporary “Herods”. In the meantime, “the streets” (a synecdoche for the poor masses) regret the consequence of being deceived: “the streets look back on their rude regrets”. (RB, 15) This line suggests that the

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masses only succeed in realizing and continually regretting their mistakes, they fail to correct them.

In “Random Blues 8 (Once again, the Penkelemesi Era, Part 3)”, Osundare works out an answer to the rhetorical question posed in “Feigning Rebels”: “Are you real revolutionaries/or reigning rebels/waiting for crowns?” (VV, 20) In this poem, there is power usurpation; the tyrant wears the crown, an icon of authority, to further deceive the masses:

His head swells and swells  
In his stolen crown  
The vulture who parades like an eagle  
Bribe-soaked cop once, now a shameless clown. (RB, 23)

They force themselves on the masses and they desecrate the land under the pretence of wanting to salvage it. In spite of their past bad reputation, they still cling to power tenaciously – and shamelessly too.

The clergymen hoodwink their followers into believing that leadership (religious or political) is a heavy burden. So, the perverse clergy encourage their gullible congregation to endure hardship of the polity. The laity, much the same as the clergy, accepts the lie wholeheartedly. Both the clergy and the laity form a section of the masses that aids the oppressors’ perpetuation in power. Osundare uses a Biblical allusion to portray the extent of this rampant religious deceit:

Maneuverings in the manger Candle-lit whispers in Bethlehem  
Blind bombs scare the flustered flock  
The land trembles from unending mayhem. (RB, 16)

The lines above recount the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger in Bethlehem. However, the ‘manger’, here, has been altogether desecrated by the so-called religious ones. This Biblical allusion, as used by Osundare, captures what Frye calls “an undesirable world” or “hells”. (139) The manger portends a hell. The narrator, contrary to the clergy’s position, maintains that “Prince of Peace” (i.e. Jesus) is “Never at peace with ruling rogues” (RB, 16) for taking pleasure in blaspheming.

Stained surplice, corrupted collar  
The Rocks of Truth will smash th  
eir gourd!  
The Imam blessed  
His stolen mandate  
Prayer torrents jammed the J  
umat  
And homage which carried a sinful weight. (RB, 24)

These religious leaders, whose aim is to share from the embezzled public funds, are not less corrupt than the tyrants. Places of worship (particularly mosques and churches) are turned into a political rendezvous where the people’s oppressors are beatified by already bribed



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religious leaders. Those who are in the best position to preach good governance merely acquiesce in the unprecedented corruption of the land.

It is this same tyrannical human world that Osundare creates in “Random Blues 10”. The politician is symbolic of the devil bent on humiliating the masses in the name of God. God, in this sense, being worshipped by the politicians, is the divine head of destroyers. The understanding of this stance can be traced to the politician’s insistence that “...his seizure of power was an act of God”. (RB, 28) The politician thus indulges in atrocities on the pretence of having a divine backing: “In God’s name/He lied/He killed. (RB, 28) Osundare affirms the falsity of the tyrants’ claimed piety in “Random Blues 16” when he says they are “False to their land/...shout righteousness.../But smash all the virtues with a heavy rod”. (RB, 40).

**Imagery of Sycophancy and Stoicism**

In both *Village Voices* and *Random Blues*, Osundare condemns the activities of praise-singers who curry favour from the tyrants. These praise-singers are a section of the masses that Osundare perceives encourage oppression. A compendium of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic images is employed to describe the sycophancy of these praise-singers.

The singer’s drum is personified: it is silent in the marketplace where the masses are and only talks loudly in the palace of gold where the tyrants are. The metaphors, “marketplace” and “palace of gold”, represent a ghetto and paradise-on-earth respectively. These praise-singers only drum to extol the destroyers of the world with utter disregard for the suffering masses.

Therefore, the praise-singers constitute a tool for the masses’ suffering in the hands of the oppressors. They not only sing praises of their oppressors to survive, they also become messengers to them. The poet-persona derisively censures them for wasting away their lives in the palace of their oppressors:

You were in the palace, running endless errands  
Like a shuttle in the loom  
Your eunuch drum a dumb tool  
For harem buttocks. (RB, 7)

The sycophants’ drum is called “a dumb tool” because it does not sound to change the condition of the suffering masses; therefore, it is unproductive. This “eunuch drum” then remains a demonic image. In “Random Blues 8”, drumming for the oppressors of the masses continues. Paradoxically, the masses themselves fervently extol and barefacedly entertain their oppressors as they (the masses) are left with no option but to shamelessly beg for alms to survive. Though these sycophants are aware of their being in an “undesirable world”, they believe their livelihood depends on begging:

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He then realizes that most of these sycophants praise the oppressors in spite of themselves. To him, these sycophants only pretend to be glad whereas they are deeply in pain:

The masses danced for the tyrant  
 The masses danced for the master  
 There is a careless sadness in the people's laughter,  
 The masses pray  
 For their prayers. (RB, 25-26)

The paradox, "There is a careless sadness in the people's laughter", evokes an organic image of pent-up sadness that we find in the irony, "The masses pray/For their prayers". The masses seem too cowed to stage a revolution against their oppressions; hence, they unwillingly resign to fate.

The long-suffering and stoical attitude of the masses also forms the locus of Osundare's poetry. Ideologically, the ambivalent disposition of the masses towards putting an end to their suffering is referred to as 'therapeutic paradox'. In Osundare's viewpoint, silence is two-way implied. The masses' silence on the oppressors' perpetuation in power can either be a tool for prolonging their suffering or a strategy designed to destroy their oppressors.

Soyinka's position that the man dies in him who keeps silence in the face of tyranny attests to Osundare's stance here. To voice out one's grievances to the oppressors is a step to revolution. Noise, in Osundare's view, is a prick that will sting the oppressors into consciousness. That the masses' silence in the face of suffering is destructive further manifests in "Random Blues 54".

In his poetry majorly to challenge the masses into ending the suffering inflicted on them by staging a revolutionary action against their oppressors.

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