

## Style, Language, and Symbolism in the Selected Poems and Drama of Niyi Osundare

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### Abstract

Poetry is a spoken literature while drama is performing arts. Both often emphasise cosmological realities of social order of human worlds. Their artistic values, improvisation, historical chronology, narrative techniques and performative styles are quintessential factors that give works of art a sense of socio-cultural and economic sensibilities that are deeply rooted in human endeavours. To many scholars, poetry and drama are traditional and modern mediums of expression that showcase social realities among the living and the dead in African society and, at the same time, serve as entertainment and performing art in contemporary age. However, poetry and drama have been deeply neglected on how modern-day authors use language as a resourceful tool of craftsmanship to showcase their socio-cultural backgrounds and their innate creativities. Therefore, this paper examines the use of style, language and symbolism in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, *Village Voice*, *The Word is an Egg*, and *The State Visit* (play). This is with a view to show that modern African writers are cultural ambassadors of their societies that promote their traditional cultural heritage through a resource of language techniques. Schechner's Performance, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyse the selected works in order to reveal the artistic rationale behind the author's creative sensibilities. The selected poems and drama are subjected to performance and literary analyses.

**Keywords:** Style, Symbolism, Language, Poetry, Drama.

### Introduction

Niyi Osundare is a renowned international poet, prolific dramatist, media columnist and social critic that gears his literary works towards social revolution and creative impulse. His African cultural life with traditional idioms, proverbs, and songs has enriched his creative output for over two decades. This is why Adekunle (2009:18) avers that Niyi Osundare found his subject and voice in a universal icon to exhibit his Yoruba indigenous cultural heritage. Dasylyva (2004:171) claims that the interlacing of English with local languages, dialect, or Pidgin English, is found in the poetry of Osundare. Some of his works largely emphasize on preservation of natural

elements, such as forest, agrio-life. Besides, he is seen as a voice of the underprivileged people. Irele (2001: xvii) avers that Osundare has established himself as one of the most significant poets today, with a singular sense of his mission as the voice of the underprivileged in his country, Nigeria, and as prophet of hope for the African continent.

Besides, he has written more than ten volumes of poetry, four plays, two books of selected poems, a book of essays, and several articles on languages, literature, culture and society. These literary collections are: *Songs from the Marketplace*, 1983; *Village Voices*, 1984; *The Eye of the Earth*, 1986; *A Nib in the Pond*, 1986; *Moon Song*, 1988; *Waiting Laughters*, 1990; *Selected Poems*, 1992; *Midlife*, 1993; *Songs of the Season*, 1999; *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture*, 2002; *The Word Is an Egg*, 2002; *The State Visit* (play), 2002; *Pages from the Book of the Sun: New and Selected Poems*, 2002; *Early Birds*, 2004; *Two Plays*, 2005; *The Emerging Perspective on Niyi Osundare*, 2003; *Not My Business*, 2005; *Tender Moments: Love Poems*, 2006; *City Without People: The Katrina Poems*, 2011; *Random Blues*, 2011 and *Others like Days*. But this paper examines the use of style, language and symbolism in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, *Village Voice*, *The Word is an Egg*, and *The State Visit* (play). This is with a view to show that modern African writers are cultural ambassadors of their societies that promote their traditional cultural heritage through a resource of language techniques.

On this note, style is an individual creative utilization of the resources of language that is periodic and dialectic (Lucas, 1955; Sebeok, 1960; Crystal and Davy, 1969; Enkvist et. al, 1971; Allan et. al, 1988; Okunoye and Odebunmi, 2003). Kehinde (2012: 45) opines that “style refers to the way a literary is written.” It deals with the way sentences are constructed, the use of figurative language, the way the language is used, and the choice of vocabulary (Oripeloye 2017:22). To Sandig and Selting (1997: 139-140), style is pragmatic, lexical, holistic in written and spoken forms. It is a deviation from a norm that is governed by the rules of language (Lawal 1997:28). According to Osundare (1982:7), a remarkable writer of style is the one who has been able to bend, if not break, the pre-set rules of language, the linguistic outlaw who has flouted its hallowed thou-shalt-nots. Every language has within its system a loophole. On the other hand, symbolism is a literary movement in which writers rearrange the world of appearances to reveal a more truthful version of reality (Oripeloye 2017:23). It represents the idea and thought of a work of art. It can be an object, person, situation, or action (Kehinde 2012: 45). Dasyvla (2004:13) states that “it is something other than what it states or shows.” This is why Iwuchukwu (2018: 21) affirms that it is an indirect expression that one can read between the lines and could reveal a hidden meaning.

In the same vein, language is societal based (Adekunle, 2017; 2020). It is a representative of a society (Greenberg, 1971; Babajide, 1999; 2000; Adekunle, 2014). To Butler (2003: 4), language is first and foremost a means of human communication in sociocultural and psychological contexts. According to Fowler (1986: 19), language is an instrument of socialization by which is a person is moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into

which s/he happens to be born. This is why Lamidi (2000: 110) says: “a language is a useful tool in the hands of human beings and because of its versatility, it lends to many different functions in the society. One of these is its facility for interpersonal and interactional purposes.” Adeyanju (2011: vii) avers that no meaningful task could be accomplished without the instrumentality of language in all fields of human endeavour. This means that language is a thread that brings members of a speech community together.

In a nutshell, style and symbolism are resourceful components of language in human interaction. Language is a vehicle in which style and symbolism form their aesthetics. These facts are pragmatically seen the poetry and drama of Niyi Osundare analysed below:

## Data Analysis

### Aesthetics and Ecological Narrative Techniques in Niyi Osundar’s *The Eye of the Earth*

Osundare’s style, language, and symbolism in literary works reveal a deeper sensibility behind the sociological factors and aesthetic nature of his works. The artistic dexterity is used to create socio-economic consciousness and it largely serves as a social criticism besides its cultural values. The artistic consciousness forms the thematic preoccupations of his works. In his poetic collection, *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare employs a linguistic style that graphically showcases the ecological footprint of humans in connection to their social well-being. In one of the collection named “Forest Echoes,” he stylistically reveals the structural composition of the earth in a linguistic manner. He linguistically portrays the agro nature of the earth. Besides, the zigzag form of the earth of valleys and mountains is equally portrayed.

A green desire, performed memories,  
a leafy longing lure my wanderer feet  
to this forest of a thousand wonders.  
A green desire for this petalled umbrella  
of simple stars and compound suns.  
Suddenly, so soberly suddenly,  
thesky is tree-high  
and the horizon dips into an inky grove  
like a masquerade scribbling loric fear  
in the lines of festival street.

The rains have kept their time this year  
(Earth has (finally) won the love of the sky)  
Trees bob with barkward sap  
and leaves grab a deepening green  
from the scanty sun.

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  
I tread the compost carpet of darkling forests  
where terror grows on trembling leaves  
natured by lore  
nurtured by fairy truths  
(Page 3).

In the above, the nominal phrases such as “a green desire” and “performed memories” and entire stanzas are celebration of nature and agri-cultural life. “A green desire” and “performed memories” are used as nostalgic evocation of the past. He uses these nominal markers to show the naturalness and aesthetics of nature. “To this forest of a thousand wonders”, “in the lines of festival streets”, “trees bob with bark ward”, “and leaves grab a deepening green” are forms of exaggeration that revealed the serenity of the forest life.

Also, “On a canvass of leaves wounded” and “by the fists of time” are linguistic styles that are used to connote “harvest time”, that is, “the seasons of harvest” in African society. These two prepositional phrases are vivid capture of cyclical life that revolves round “life” and “death” or “birth” and “death” as a stylistic representation of time of planting and harvesting.

Other linguistic stylization’s devices employed by the poet above are figures of speech. “A leafy longing lure my wanderer feet”, personification and hyperbole; “this forest of a thousand wonders” and “compound sun”, hyperbole; “suddenly, so soberly suddenly”, “trees bob with barkward sap”, alliteration; “the sky is tree-high”, hyperbole; “like a masquerade scribbling loric fear” and “like wristwrestlers straining muscularly”, simile; “the rains have kept their time this year”, “trees bob with barkward sap”, and leaving grab a deepening green”, personification.

Besides, the stanzas of the poems graphologically portrayed the topographic levels of earth. The topography of the earth where nature resides is sometimes in “zigzag form” as portrayed by the shape of the poem above. The shape is revealed as mountain shape, valley shape and flat shape. This philosophical ideology also revealed in another poem, “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me”, in the collection shown below:

The rocks rose to meet me  
Like passionate lovers on a long-awaited tryst.  
The rocks rose to meet me  
their peaks cradled in ageless mists.

Olosunta spoke first  
Eloquent one  
whose mouth is the talking house of ivory  
Olosunta spoke first  
thelofty one whose eyes are  
balls of the winking sun  
Olosunta spoke first  
the riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground  
for god and gold

“You have been long, very long, and far’

said he, his tongue one flaming flash  
of unburnable gnomes  
“Unwearying wayfarer,  
your feet wear the mud of distant waters  
your hems gather the bur  
offartherest forests;  
I can see the westmost sun  
In the mirror of your wandering eyes.”  
(Page 13)

In the poetic rendition above, Osundare eulogies his hometown historical rock called “Olosunta.” Olosunta is a very high rock that could see from every nook and cranny of the town even seen by foreigners from the neighbouring towns. This is why he says: “You have been long, very long, and far”, “Unwearying wayfarer”, and “peaks cradled in ageless mists”. The rock is a centre of attraction and excellence because of the peculiarity of the rock. It is a traditional centre of worship of the gods and habitation of gold. The rock is “the riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground for god and gold”. Here, Osundare also sees the “rock” (god) as the “Eloquent one” and “whose mouth is the talking house of ivory”. He sees this poetic platform as a way of globalizing his African natural and cultural heritage as a centre of global tourism.

The poet also employs a stylistic power of literary devices of personification, alliteration and hyperbole. “The lofty one whose eyes are”, “balls of the winking sun”, “the riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground”, “tongue one flaming flash”, “the rocks rose to meet me there,” “your feet wear the mud of distant waters” and “in the mirror of your wandering eyes” are personification and hyperbole used to qualify the rock. “For god and gold” is a prepositional phrase used as alliteration. “The rocks rose to meet me” is also a repetition found in line one and three of the first stanza. Aside this, the poet also shows the aesthetic nature of the rock by saying: “your feet wear the mud of distant waters of fartherest forests”. This revealed that rock is surrounded by water in the fartherest forests.

### Linguistic Dexterity in Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* and *The Word is an Egg*

In another poetic performance, *Village Voices*, Osundare in his creative sensibility evaluates societal challenges through the use of myth, fable and dirge as revealed below:

Who does the chicken think  
it is deceiving?  
It eats pebbles  
And swallows sands  
yet complains of toothlessness  
the goat which has teeth  
the dog which fortifies its mouth  
with the strongest of ivory  
dare they eat pebbles in the morning  
and still walk about at noon?

(Page 6)

In above, he uses an interrogative gesture to lampoon the top government functionaries and political leaders who often cajole the nation's citizenry with their vain promises. They are the chickens that eat pebbles, that is, the nation's commonwealth. "Sands" and "pebbles" are metaphoric words used to represent the country's natural resources. The powerful leaders (the chickens) complain of lack of funds to finance the nation's capital projects but live in affluence at the expense of their citizenry "It eats pebbles, and swallows sands, yet complains of toothlessness". Besides, "the goat" and "the dog" are nominal entities used as metaphors to portray the nation's workforce (downtrodden mass) who works for the money embezzled by the bourgeoisie. They have been working all day but have nothing to show for it "they eat pebbles in the morning and still walk about at noon?" This means that after serving the nation meritoriously for several years, they are denied of their pensions or gratuities at their old age. This is why Osundare sympathetically says: "still walk about at noon?"

Also, in *The Word is an Egg*, another anthology, Osundare linguistically lustrates the perlocutionary effects of words. *The Word is an Egg* is a metaphoric expression that shows words as a powerful tool that can destroy or build persons or nations. This fact is revealed in two poems, "Words Which" and "Can-do" below:

Words which go to war to find peace  
Words go to peace to find war

Words which mew like a cat  
Words which roar like a lion

Words which pounce their young with masurpial care  
Word with go to bed each night with a proverb  
Under their pillow

Words which die every dusk into the sea  
rising every dawn a golden eagle  
Words which burrow into the sun at noon prospecting  
for hidden silver  
High words. Low words  
Words which frame the sky, a canvas of luminal colours  
Words which sculp the proverb into paragons of waiting  
Wisdoms  
Words which pluck the chord in the rhymer's throat  
Words which rouse the drum, the drum, the drum, the...  
Words mould. Words make.  
Which which shine like a cat's eye through the conspiracy  
of night  
Words dull and drawn like a funeral robe

Words which dance on the roof  
Words which creep around the foot of the street  
(Page26)

In the poetic performance above, Osundare shows aesthetic power of words through some literary devices. The entire stanzas of the poem are written in anaphora. An anaphora is a repetition of the same word(s) at the beginning of two or more lines of a poem as shown above "Words which...". There is use of binary oppositions in stanza one as chiasmus "war to find peace", "peace to find war" and "high words and Low words". The whole poem is full of personification and metaphor. In line three, four, twenty and twenty-one of the poem there is preponderance use of simile. There is also use of alliteration in line eight, seventeen and twenty-two.

Can-do  
I have seen rain-clouds gather  
At the instance of a word

I have seen rivers walk up-hill  
On the order of a proverb

I have seen a sentence hand out  
Penalties stiff as a rod

I have seen lovers sigh pale  
On the humour of a sonnet

I have seen mountains move  
To the promptings of a dithyramb

I have seen stones stammer  
On their first vowel

I have heard melodies which re-  
Turn the sword to its scabbard

I have seen well-aimed songs  
Uncrown the emperor

Arabaponmbeponmbeponmbeponmbe

Only those who live  
In certain regions of the moon

Know the mortal danger of little nouns  
The unspoken thunder of needling ballads  
(Page 16)

The stanzaic style of the poem, “Can-do”, is written in form of a couplet. All the stanzas are personification and hyperbole except line ten and line eleven. There is also use of alliteration in stanza six line one. There is a preponderance use of propositional phrases for emphasize in the second lines of stanza one, two, four, five, six, and ten. All the stanzas of the poem show of words on Osundare’s subject matters. Words are to gather clouds of rains in stanza one; used as a proverb to walk river up-hill in stanza two; used as a rod of punishment in stanza three; used as a song of lovers in stanza four; used as instrument of peace against war in stanza seven; used as a lamponer against societal anomalies in line eight; used to uncrown emperors in stanza nine; and used as an unspoken thunder of needling ballads in line eleventh. Nouns means words, that is, the effectual use of words to qualify the subject matters being described.

### **Dramatic Symbolism and Lexical Graphology in Niyi Osundare’s *The State Visit***

In the same vein, Osundare used his drama, *The State Visit*, for social criticism against socio-economic decadence, poor governance, political corruption and moral atrophy of the elite of his country. He employed the drama to lampoon the cabal who looted the nation’s treasury for their own interest and leaving the downtrodden masses in abject poverty in the midst of plenty. The maladministration has led into total doom of economic sabotage and recession.

Narrator:

As I was saying, this land is rich in everything. But the wealth is in the hands of a few kings and queens. The only possession the people have in abundance is p-o-v-e-r-t-y is a seven-letter word, a sacred number that no God-fearing nation can ever afford to miss. So the wealthy fester in opulence, the poor squirm in their poverty. The flashiest of foreign cars find their destination in the Land of Rivers: the Cadillac hurries through the



assembly line aboard to join the queue in its cities, the Jaguar finds a resting place in its private garages; the Mercedes glides in, a glossy wonder. The last brand has been so long with us that it even has a stanza in the poetry of opulence (Page 10).

“This land is rich in everything. But the wealth is the hands of a few kings and queens” is symbolic expression that connotatively revealed how the rich resources of the nation are mismanaged by an oligarchy. The kings and the queens are the oligarch suffering the downtrodden mass in abject poverty. According to Osundare, the kings and queens are the country’s president, Head, Minister of Finance, Minister of External Affairs, Minister of Public Morality of Agriculture, professor, journalist and Colonel Anapa. These are the elites that used their positions wrongly to siphon the nation’s wealth. They are expected to use their elitist positions for the development and growth of their nation, but reverse is the case.

Besides, the way “p-o-v-e-r-t-y” is spelt graphically signified how poverty has been a long stay in Nigeria and African as a whole. The hyphenated letters of p-o-v-e-r-t-y are a linguistic style used to showcase the level of poverty of the nation and, at the same, ridicule the so-called elites. Also, the nominal phrase, “a sacred number” is ironically used. “Sacred” means “sanctified”. It connotes that sacred is a word used to qualify holy people or things, but, here used to illustrate nefarious activities of the greedy leaders.

In addition, Osundare linguistically portrayed how extravagant and wasteful the nation’s leaders are “the flashiest of foreign cars find their destination in the Land of Rivers.” They go about in exotic cars such as “Mercedes”. They used the country’s money to import foreign goods and services to the neglect of their own country’s goods and services. This step taken by the oligarchy has drastically brought economy recession to the country. “Land of Rivers” is a nominal element used as a metaphor to represent Nigeria.

Governments award emergency contracts for bridges which collapse under the first bicycle. You and I may complain about a broken bridge; as for the kings-and queens – no problem: no broken hinders their helicopter in the sky...well, unless it is the one between here and Switzerland. The doctor takes egg bribes from kwashiorkor patients, his stethoscope placed on the pulse of his bank account: the magistrate counts justice in notes and coins; the guilty buy innocence from the courts as tender for public office. (Pages 10 &11).

Government functionaries and political leaders are seen as an epitome of corruption. They award emergency contracts without due process, as a means of looting the nation’s treasury. Osundare says: “Governments award emergency contracts for bridges which collapse under the first bicycle.” Bridges are built with fake materials which may eventually lead to loss of life. Those bridges easily collapse without remedies. The political leaders’ banks accounts are fat in “Switzerland”. Apart from all these, civil servants such as doctors and judges are unscrupulous in carrying out their duties. Doctors take bribes from patients whole judges dole out justice on the platter of money, that is, in “notes” and “coins”. The guilty buy innocence from the courts.

Injustice flows as a scream of water. All these elites pay lip service to their works. They are nonchalant attitude to the growth and development of the nation.

The journalist turns a mere minion for looting-oh did I say “looting”?-I mean ruling powers. He dips his pen in the slime of falsehood and his vision trips on the plane of History. His throat cleared by constant inducement, he bombards the public’s ear with official lies. And the middlemen of business who stand between us and progress: buying cheap, selling dear, smuggling, hoarding, extorting, crushing under the weight of profit: forwarders and backwarders, manufacturers’ representatives’, habitual slavers who haggle away our freedom just like their fathers’ fathers, their fathers’ fathers’ fathers.( Page11).

Also, journalists who are supposed to be epitome of truth are seen as sycophants who run after money. They are controlled by the ruling powers that use them to publish their nefarious activities in a positive way. They dip their pens in “the slime of falsehood” on “the plane of history”. They are called “official lies” by Osundare. The middlemen of business “buy” and “sell cheap” goods. They smuggle and hoard, extort for the purpose of making high profits. Manufacturers are slave masters who overused their workers for hard labour without pay or under paid. Workers fundamental human rights are denied. There is no freedom of speech or freedom of association. The rule powers see the country’s labour union as a mere association that can only bark but cannot bite. Here, “just like their fathers’ fathers, their fathers’ fathers’ fathers” refers to African slaveholders during slave trade in Africa. The activities of the contemporary slaver drivers, that is, the ruling powers are compared to these African slaveholders.

The policeman who flogs bribes out of mere suspects; the port worker who makes cargo disappear through the talisman of tricks: the clergy who breaks into holy sweat after swallowing all the widow’s mite; the university don who pawns his wife for a chair. (Page11).

In the same vein, Osundare sees the police as instruments of oppression “the policeman who flogs bribes out of mere suspects”. They extort money from innocent citizens and, sometimes, brutalized them. They lack professional ethics and always run after self-profit. Aside this, the port workers are also revealed as unscrupulous workers who feed on tricky activities “the port worker who makes cargo disappear through the talisman of tricks”. People’s goods disappear at every port of the nation. if the goods are to be eventually released the people have to pay exorbitant amount. This shows that all sectors of the nation are totally corrupt.

The religious leaders are portrayed as extorters. They exploit money from their followers through religious gullibility and sanctimonious hypocrisy “the clergy who breaks into holy sweat after swallowing all the widow’s mite”. They supposed to be seen as God’s ambassadors or spokesmen through their ways of life. Some of them now speak for their stomachs instead of God’s mission. This is why DasyIva (2004:159) says; “the spiritual leaders have also capitalized on the religious bigotry of their members. The worshipper’s gullibility is in turn, motivated not

by any holy desire to be truly close to God but out of sheer desperation to satisfy selfish desires, the ultimate goal of which is the get-rich-quick syndrome.”

The university dons are portrayed as mirages of hope. They are armed chair observers “the university don who pawns his wife for a chair”. They are only good in theories. But in actual application of the theories, they are nowhere to be found. Osundare sees them as scholars who unproductive and always waiting to accumulate wealth for themselves at the expense of their learners and the nation at large. There is no more selfless service. They ought to be brains behind the nation’s growth and development but reverse is the case.

OBI: The happened?

SULE& ETIM: Heeey, have patience!

ABEKE: The man stood up and came close to me. He was breathing hard like one being pursued. ‘Ah, she is so beautiful’, he said, coming closer still, “how did this one manage to be blind? Ok, wash her up and bring her back to me” (pause). So those brutes stripped me naked and, pretending to bathe me, took liberties with every part of my body then took me upstairs to their master.(Page 34).

In the same sense, Osundare presents how the bourgeoisie used their positions to oppress the downtrodden masses. They are the underprivileged people and the outcast of the society. The people are exploited psychologically, sexually and physically. Abeke, a beautiful blind lady, was sexually assaulted by so-called power brokers “ah, she is so beautiful”, he said, coming closer still, “how did this one manage to be blind?”. She was kidnapped raped, molested, and dehumanized “so those brutes stripped me naked and, pretending to bathe me, took liberties with every part of my body then took me upstairs to their master”. This is a very cruel behaviour and man’s inhumanity to man.

## Conclusion

In the above poetic renditions, Niyi Osundare stylistically used the resources of language and literature to portray his societal realities. The graphological shapes of poems, whether in zigzag forms or free verses, are emblematic representations of chaos that pervade his society. The use of literary techniques, such anaphora, simile, repetition, simile, especially in “Words Which” and “Can-do,” is an aesthetic creation that displays the potentiality of words. In “Can-do,” the poet uses first person narrative technique as an experiential observation in sociological realities around him. “Forest Echoes and “The Rock Rose to Meet Me” are nostalgic feelings of rural engagement of the poet. The poet celebrates nature as a romantic poet. In general, there is copious use of adjectives in all the poems. In a nutshell, this means that Niyi Osunare is a stylistician whose idiolect gives a unique aesthetic to his poetic renditions through resources of language and literature. Also, in his dramatic text, he symbolically reveals man’s inhumanity to man display by the ruling class against the downtrodden masses through stylistic power of

linguistic expressions. This suggests that Osundare is a linguistic fashion designer who knows no cultural bounds.

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