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***The Eye of the Earth: Niyi Osundare as a Poet of Nature* (Pp. 66-77)**

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Abstract

It can be said with considerable justification that Niyi Osundare is one of the most fecund poets writing in Africa today. A Nigerian of Yoruba extraction, his poetry is richly coloured by common expressions of traditional life (like proverbs and songs) which reflects the world view of his people. Besides, his poetry is accessible because in it he assumes the voice of the unlettered peasants and villagers ‘who speak plain without feigning sophistication’ (Ohaeto 7). His themes are many and varied. They range from a preoccupation with the poor and down-trodden in society to an engagement with Africa’s socio-political problems and a revolutionary vision that will bring about a new Africa. In all these Osundare is not blind to his physical environment. In fact most of Osundare’s poetry dwells on the impoverishment and decay of the rural communities. His fourth collection of poetry The Eye of the Earth is entirely devoted to mother-earth and other forms of physical nature. It is the object of this piece to ascertain the extent to which Osundare qualifies as a poet of nature in this collection.

Introduction

The Poetry of Nature

The term nature has many meanings. During the classical period, it was used to mean something preconceived, abstract, philosophical and static. Thus, in

the classical tradition, even art was considered as an attempt on the part of man to complete or fulfil nature.

During the neo-classical period, the classical theory of art as an imitation of nature working according to rules and principles in a rationally ordered universe and supported by reason deepened. Thus, in 'An Essay on Criticism' Alexander Pope could write:

First follow nature, and your judgement frame.
By her just standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature! Still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, and end and test of art .
(Pope qtd. in Bate 174).

To the neo-classicists, nature was supreme and was made up of unalterable regulations. In other words, nature was mechanical.

In the late eighteenth century, the Romanticists used the term to mean psychological nature and even the concrete nature of geographical exploration. Thus, in Romantic poetry, nature is still the watchword but it is used in a very different, altogether and more organic, way.

All the Romantic poets, with the exception of Blake, have always been celebrated for their love of nature. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron writes that

I live not in myself, but I became
Portion of that around me; and to me
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture: I can see
A link reluctant in a fleshy chain,
Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle and not in vain. (Byron qtd.
in Kermonde and Hollander 421).

Wordsworth could also describe nature with great enthusiasm because he found

In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul

Of all my moral being .
(Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey qtd. in Gill 83).

This ample celebration of nature does not in anyway suggest that the Romantic poets were the first to delight in nature. The Classical poets especially Theocritus, Vigil and Horace and even Medieval poets like Geoffrey Chaucer gave much attention to nature.

But it was James Thomson's poem, *The Seasons* (1730), which is considered as the first major poem sequence in modern times to concentrate principally upon nature. Much of the poem's sublimity comes from the apprehension of the created world as evidence for the existence of God and His benevolence. From this time onwards poets have been concerned with the various aspects of physical nature like the Earth, the rocks, trees, night and stars. This concerns in not restricted to English literature.

The Theme of Nature in *the Eye of the Earth*

In the preface to his second collection of poetry *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare makes this confession:

Farmer-born, peasant bred, I encountered dawn in
the enchanted corridors of the forest, suckled on
the delicate aroma of healing herbs, and the pearly
drops of generous moons. Living in those early
days was rugged, but barns brimmed with yams
fattened by merciful rains and the tempering fire
of the upland sun ('Preface' xi).

Implicit in this confession is the fact that Osundare is concerned both with reality and the connection between the individual and his environment. It is therefore not surprising that the entire volume is devoted to poems about man interacting with the physical aspects of nature.

The opening poem 'Forest Echoes' is actually a harbinger of what is to come. In the poem, the poet saunters into the forest of *Ubo Abusoro* from where he allows his sea of memory to flow unhindered. The first thing that strikes the poet as he enters the forest is the destruction of the land and the trees by timber merchants referred to in the poem as *agbegilodo*. From this position, the poet laments the fact that these economic trees have been reduced to mere stumps as a result of exploitation. At this point the poet relies on his senses

to describe the forest. There is the palm-wine tree which is described as conqueror of rainless seasons/mother of nuts and kernels/bearer of wine and life. There is a bevy of birds/a barrack of beasts and a school of truant antelopes.

The poet remembers the partridge with its 'skyful guffaw' which is a triumphant mockery of a missing shot. The weaver bird and the squirrel all join in the chorus while the chameleon is dazzling the forest with its garment of a 'million mirrors'. There goes the praying mantis wringing its green hands before an absent god in prayer. Almost all of nature is present in this orgy of joy. The termites, snakes and monkeys. But all these are just memories as we get to the end of the poem and just like he stated in the preface looking back also means looking forward especially for the visionary artist because he is not just a rememberer, he is also a reminder.

In 'Forest Echoes' therefore, Osundare depicts man, the land, animals, plants (in fact all of nature) interacting and celebrating in one festive mood at this time of universal productivity. It is set in the past but it is meant to enhance our understanding of the present.

The second poem in the collection 'The Rocks Rose To Meet Me' is an encounter with the rocks – another aspect of physical nature. Before the rock of *Olosunta*, the poet is standing and waiting like Christopher Okigbo at Heavens gate. And the Olosunta rock began to address the poet in the following words:

“You have been long, very long, and far
Unwearying wayfarer,
Your feet wear the mud of distant waters
Your hems gather the bur
Of farthest forests;
I can see the westmost sun
in the mirror of your wandering eyes”
(Osundare *The Eye of The Earth*, 13).

In these lines, Osundare is doing some kind of homecoming. He is a renegade and is now trying to establish vital links with the past. As he put it:

'The Rocks Rose to Meet Me' is a homecoming of a kind, a journey back (and forth) into a receding past

which still has a right to live. The rocks celebrated in this section... occupy a central place in the cosmic consciousness of *Ikere* people; they are worshipped and frequently appeased with rare gifts, thunderous drumming and dancing (Osundare *The Eye of The Earth* 'Preface' xiii).

The truth is that Osundare celebrates the rocks of *Olosunta* because they are both an aspect of physical nature and they have a mystic dimension in *Ikere* cosmology. *Ikere* is actually Osundare's home place. By celebrating the rocks of his native home, Osundare is emphasizing the permanent and solid forms of nature which are lasting monuments of time and place.

At another level, the *Olosunta* rocks in *Ikere* mean more than physical nature they also have some economic value. Somewhere in the poem, it is stated that the belly of the *Olosunta* rock is a battle ground of god and gold. The deeper meaning is that the *Olosunta* rock is reputed to be a repository of gold. This explains why at the end of the poem the poet ask the rock to

Yield your gold, lofty one,
But how dig the gold
Without breaking the rock?
(Osundare *The Eye of The Earth*, 14).

Returning back to his old theme of an egalitarian society and economic exploitation, Osundare states that when the gold is dug it should be used for the betterment of society and not to enrich a few kings and princes. It should be used to turn hovels into havens/paupers/into people (not princes)/so the world may sprout a hand/of equal fingers.

Osundare's concern with physical nature is varied. Apart from showing the importance of earth (nature) it is also used to show that the earth (nature) signifies wealth and all the life-giving forces. It is mother-earth and natural laws demand that the wealth accruing from nature should be used for the advancement of society.

In 'Harvest Call', Osundare is still revolving around the cosmology of *Ikere* people. In *Ikere* worldview the rocks which rose to meet the poet in the previous poem are also considered to be guardians of the harvest spirit. Thus,

all the poems in this section of the collection talk of crops, harvest and bounty. The implication is that the earth is a source of increase and production. It is fertile and generous. It is capable of producing food and wealth for the benefit of man. In fact, earth signifies plenty and abundance. This particular stanza is a celebration of yam the king of crops.

This is *Iyanfoworogi*
where yams, ripe and randy,
waged a noisy war against the knife.
here where, subdued by fire
Efuru provoked mouthful clamour
from the combat of hungry wood.
the pestle fights the mortar
the mortar fights the pestle
a dough of contention smoothes down
the rugged anger of hunger (*Osundare The Eye of The Earth 18*).

Here is a total recall of a time past before colonization when Africans had lived their quiet, organized lives. During this period Africa had its own identity. There was peace. There was food in abundance and people could eat their fill and drink in joy and love. Although, it should be stressed that in referring back to the days preceding colonization, Osundare does not do so out of nostalgia. Rather, Osundare presents Africa's beautiful past in order to create a defence against today's alienation. Other poems in this section expand this very theme by celebrating other crops like cobs, cotton, beans etc.

Then, again, harking back to his familiar theme, the section ends with a poser in which the poet demands to know why we are still hungry in the midst of plenty.

With our earth so warm
How can our hearth be so cold?
(*Osundare The Eye of The Earth, 21*).

The poser is a subtle indictment of the ruling class and their foreign collaborators who plunder the earth which is the home of man. It is important to note also that in his treatment of earth, as one of the most important aspect of our physical nature, Osundare has a passionate and committed concern for earth. This concern borders on veneration. In other words, in Osundare's poetry earth acquires both respect and a quasi-mystical status. This is all in

the belief that earth is man's true home. It is the source of man's wealth and increase. Even the very title of the collection (*The Eye of The Earth*) epitomizes this concern. Man (and in this case the farmer) tills the soil and from this relationship there is an interaction between man and the earth. Both complement the other. Man and his environment are considered in this collection to have a symbiotic relationship. Earth is for man the same way man is for earth. The two, in times past, were working together in harmony. Again, the remark will not be completely misplaced that the title of this collection is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* in which Fanon is concerned with the issue of race and colonial domination. This view is quite tenable in the sense that Fanon and Osundare share some specific ideological similarities.

In 'Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed', Osundare evokes a world after the capitalist plunder and despoliation of the earth, its resources and its ecological balance. Nature is angry with man for this despoliation. As a result the skies have refused to send down its liquid treasure (rain). Consequently, there is drought, hunger and famine.

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst

Dust
dust in brewing kitchens
dust in busy bedrooms
dust in retrenching factories
dust in power brothels

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst

The roofs have been silent too long
the seeds noiseless in the dormitory of the soil
the earth has been lying too long, and songless.
(Osundare *The Eye of The Earth* 28).

As a result of the activities of the predators the sky is angry. There is dust everywhere in the bedroom, factories and kitchen. The seeds planted in the earth cannot germinate. The underlying meaning is that there is anger and

disorder in nature. The underlying moral is that the danger posed by man to society through greed and exploitation is also carried out on a grander scale in the despoliation of the earth. In the profoundest sense, man is endangered as much as nature itself is threatened.

In the collection 'The Eye of the Earth' Osundare has the capacity to evoke a mood of romantic nostalgia and introspection. This very method affords the poet the opportunity to experiment with contrasting situations. Thus, whereas in the previous poem, the poet talks about drought, despoliation and famine, in the next poem he talks about bliss, peace and tranquility. Through these contrasts also, we are presented with good on one hand and evil on the other. The good and beauty in nature is seen through nature's responses to the environment. Thus, when it rains there is joy and peace because the earth will send forth its fruits. When there is evil (consequent upon certain material forces in society) there is drought, pain and suffering. This contrast is amply, depicted in the poem 'First Rain' through stark lines like these:

a tingling tang awakes the nose
when the first rain has just clipped
the wing of the haughty dust
a cooling warmth embraces
our searching soles
as the land vapour rises
like a bootless
infantry
and
through her liberated poles
our earth breathes again.
(Osundare *The Eye of the Earth* 29).

The first rains brings hope and joy and with its arrival 'our earth breathes again.' The evil that is enacted in society by the despoilers has the capacity to affect mother-earth directly. But with the arrival of the rains a cooling warmth embraces/our searching soles. The power of the rain as both bringer of peace and relief is also the major theme of the next poem that follows.

'Raincoming' metaphorically refers to the time before the predatory capitalist plunder when earth was a friend to man and man earth's friend. It is, therefore, a period of calm and bliss. With the arrival of the rains there is a

greenish verdure in the land. There is happiness because the barns are brimming and there is plenty.

Slowly

but

Surely

like liquid fingers

on the aluminium drum

of echoing roofs

the rain unites the farmer's tongue,

bursting farming yawns

into barns of lilted yams

plums and pumpkins

dense with drink and daring

roll juicily from furrow to furrow (Osundare *The Eye of the Earth* 30).

In this very poem, we see the power of rain. It is not just there to enable plants and the trees to bloom and flower. It is also has the capacity to bring about a union between man and nature. The pumpkins, plums and grasses all partake of this festive mood. But in spite the glee in nature and the apparent correspondences between man and his environment, Osundare laments the fact that in his land there is no rain. This lament, coming at the end of the poem, is meant to stress the fact that something is still rotten in society.

Slowly

but

Surely

the early rains ring the bell

but oh my land!

so deep and dry still

in the unnatural desert

of barn-burners (Osundare *The Eye of the Earth*, 31).

The last stanza of the poem is obviously a comprehensive commentary on the despoliation of the earth by predators. This despoliation is equal to the destruction of the individual by material forces in society. There is an obvious parallel here with Wordsworth's theory: love of nature leads to love of man and an awareness of God.

This power of nature as provider and protector is taken up again in the poem 'Who Says the Drought was Here'. The obvious metaphor used here is that of the green guest. Green guest means rain. The green guest has the power to decorate the earth with the verdure of green which signifies progress, increase and reproduction. The poem is one of Osundare's most clearest celebration of earth as provider, giver and protector.

The rain has robbed the earth
in vests of verdure
the rain has robbed an earth
licked clean by the fiery tongue of drought...

with these green guests around
who says that drought was here?

And anthills throw open their million gates
and winged termites swarm the warm welcome
of compassionate twilights
and butterflies court the flagrant company
of fledgeling flowers
and milling moths paste wet lips
on the translucent ears of listening windows
and the swallow brailles a tune
on the copper face of the gathering lake
and weaver birds pick up the chorus
in the leavening heights... (Osundare *The Eye of The Earth*, 35).

These lines, reminiscent of 'Forest Echoes' are just a celebration of the giver and sustainer of life. The deeper meaning here is that the rain is the agent of the difference between plenty and famine, life and death. In other words, Osundare confers a god-like status on rain. It is a regulator of joy and pain, lack and plenty, life and death.

This same idea of rain as a divinity which could confer joy and pain on man receives adequate treatment in the poem 'But Sometimes When it Rains'. Here are a few memorable lines from the poem:

But sometimes when it rains
and an angry thunder raps earth's ears
with its hand of fire

sometimes when it rains
and a heartless storm beheads
the poor man's house
like some long-convicted felon
 sometimes when it rains
 you wonder who sent the skies weeping
(Osundare *The Eye of the Earth*, 36).

The power of rain as an aspect of nature alternates between good and evil, life and death. In other words, rain (an aspect of nature) has a double-edge sword. This very idea of an inherent evil existing in nature is grandly celebrated in Alfred Tennyson's poem 'In memoriam A.H.H.' For Osundare, rain is a divinity worthy of veneration because of its dual nature.

The desecration of earth by powerful forces in society is the theme of the poem. 'They Too are the Earth'. The poem is worth mentioning here because of its dual thematic preoccupation. Apart from celebrating earth, our home, the poem also talks about suffering humanity. The main message in the poem is that the hordes of beggars on the streets, the hewers and carriers of wood, the suffering women who die unknown in the villages are all children of the earth. The poem is relevant because it redirects attention to earth, the home of man. In doing this the poem raises fundamental questions about the predators and despoilers.

Are they of this earth
who fritter the forest and harry the hills
Are they of this earth
who live that earth may die
Are they? (Osundare, *The Eye of The Earth*, 33).

Finally, in Osundare's nature poetry earth and the rain have great relevance and significance. Earth is considered to be the source of life and wealth. But between earth and man, there is the rain serving as an agent or regulator. Through careful introspection and nostalgia, Osundare examines and celebrates these two aspects of nature in his poetry. In his celebration of the theme of nature also Osundare makes the suggestion that the despoliation of the land by certain forces in society is capable and can actually endanger the full existence of man as a human being.

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