

The Town Crier Metaphor in Niyi Osundare's *The Village Voices*

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Abstract

Niyi Osundare's poems, composed under the broad title, The Village Voices, will be examined in this paper in keeping with the role that he and other writers and poets have assigned to themselves as the conscience and barometer of the society. The poems are divided into parts depending on the central theme that each part espouses. Some of the poems excoriate political leadership for its cluelessness and insularity to the yearnings of the people they lead while other poems flagellate the ordinary man on the street for his indiscretion and improvidence. The poems are examined using the sociological literary theoretical criticism. This theoretical framework problematizes the ills in society and dredges up solutions to the identified malfeasances from the same society from which the identified imperfections have grown, in the first place. The paper ends with a prognostication of the diagnosis earlier carried out in society. The overall objective of this is to shore up the potency of literature, particularly of the poetic genre, as a healing balm and corrective compass for society because of its therapeutic properties.

Introduction

From timeless prehistory, poetry has been in the forefront amongst mediums through which humans express themselves, especially on very special occasions. Of the three aspects of the traditional taxonomy that defines Literature in general, poetry aligns more properly with society because of its banality. It does not occupy the same position as drama which must involve a cast of *dramatis personae* before being relevant to society. Nor does it involve the pedantry and sentential phraseologies of fiction whose prosaic features stand it out as a rather hard nut to crack. Poetry lends itself to society as a friendly and commonplace medium of expression that nonetheless carries weight. Amongst the Yoruba, the ethnic stock of which Osundare is part, poetry is employed on historical and epochal occasions such the coronation of an *Oba*, the installation of a Chief, the birth of a neonate or the transition of a personage. This is why importance is attached to poetry not only as a popular medium of traditional and modern expression but also to the message that it carries.

Background of Osundare, the poet activist

Niyi Osundare was sired by peasant farmers in Ikere Ekiti in present day Ekiti State in 1946. He has his early education, primary and secondary, in his native land before enrolling for a degree in English at the University of Ibadan. He gained an MA from Leeds University in the United Kingdom and a PhD from York University in Canada. He was awarded a full Professorship at the University of Ibadan in 1989 and was appointed Head of the Department of English between 1993 and 1997. He relocated from Nigeria to New Orleans in the United States as a Professor of English and Literature in 1997. He has published many volumes of Poetry, Plays and scholarly papers in renowned Journals throughout the world. Osundare who has garnered more than fifteen awards as a scholar and nationalist is a believer in free speech.

He is often reported as saying ‘to utter is to alter’, a possible aggregation of the strong belief amongst his people, the Yoruba, that muteness or dumbness is a precursor to bad luck.

Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical scaffolding considered appropriate to explicate Osundare’s thoughts in *The Village Voices* is the sociological theoretical literary framework. This is a literary approach to critical evaluation of literary work in the context and perspective of the society in which the work is produced. Its proponents believe that art is produced and consumed in the society that produces it. One of its known theorists, Kenneth Burke, in an essay titled, *Literature as Equipment for Living* argues that literature makes meaning only when it is intended to teach society to learn from its inadequacies and toe the line of rectitude. Burke counsels that sociological criticism should avoid affective response and authorial intentions (in the study and analysis of literary texts) but it should consider pieces of art and literature as systematic reflections of society and societal behaviour. The sociological criticism, on which Burke’s views are predicated, contrasts with New Historicism, another critical perspective which believes that a text, especially poetry, should be read after which meaning is decoded from it instead of relating its contents to what happens in society.

Contributing to the sociological school of thought as a critical literary perspective, Austin Harrington in his book, *Art and Social Theory*, deposes that sociological approaches generally possess a stronger sense of the material preconditions, historical flux and cultural diversity of discourse, practices and institutions of art. Going further, Harrington adds that ‘the sociological element is essential because art is inevitably full of references and commentaries on the present day society’ p 31. It is to this view that Osundare aligns himself. Deploying erudition, perspicuity and the instrumentality of the written and spoken word (oral poetry), he buffets both society and its (mis)leaders in one poem after another. For him, literature should serve a utilitarian purpose: that of rousing the masses of the people from their deep slumber to demand fairness, justice and equity from their leaders. The social relevance of art is an issue that has been elaborately canvassed by authors and writers as early as the 1960s. Writers are concentric that art serves no useful end if it does not squarely address the medley of problems that daily confront society and humanity. Wole Soyinka, in a 1967 Address presented to listeners and stakeholders at the African-Scandinavian Writers’ Conference notes that ‘when the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognise that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler or post-mortem surgeon’. p 20. In the same vein, Chinua Achebe adds his voice to the debate on the need for writers to be socially relevant in their respective societies. In 1968, at a Conference of African writers in Makerere University, Uganda, he spoke on *The African Writer and the Biafran Cause*. He remarks that ‘it is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big and small political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant- like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames’ p 78. These positions, amongst those of many other writers, underscore the utilitarianism of art. In a poem titled, ‘The Land of Unease’, he rails against manifest injustice and the inhumanity of man to man. These vices are inherent in society because leadership wants it so. The triadic opening of the poem is full of acerbity, premonitions and foreboding that all will go awry if injustice is left without redress. Osundare says:

The land never knows peace
Where a few have too much
And many none at all p 46

Peace will remain an elusive commodity in any society where a few have the wherewithal to enjoy life to the fullest and the vast majority of the people have nothing as livelihood because of the rampaging greed, graft and selfishness of leaders. He explains that if there is careful

planning, inclusive administration and equitable sharing of the commonwealth, the needs of every citizen, weak or strong, will be met. Hear him again:

The yam of this world
Is enough for all mouths
Which pay daily homage
To the god of the throat
Enough for the aged
Awaiting day's dusk
And the young peeping
At tomorrow

From mother's backs p 46

These musings are self-explanatory. "The yams of the world" are no longer sufficient to feed the old and the young because "the big knives//push bellies bloated by excess//the small die hungry deaths//in village streets". How terrible can man be to man? What belongs to all has been mindlessly appropriated by a powerful few whose bellies have become bloated because they have more than enough to eat but maintain an uncanny insularity to the excruciating pains of the masses who die hungry deaths in village streets. P 46.

The poet adorns himself in the garb of the village town crier to deliver important messages and weighty instructions, usually from the sage or the ruler of the people. The town crier, in pre-modern times, is the oral or spoken medium through which messages are passed to the people simultaneously. It eminently fills the space of modern day mass media. In another poem, "The Villager's Protest", Osundare reprobates the political class for their utter selfishness and serial deception of the electorate. Voters are besought most importunately at the approach of elections but are soon condemned to hunger and despondency once the polls are conducted and victory is accorded them. The scenario is better depicted if the poet is taken at his words as follows:

They come more times
Than the eye bats its lid
When they need your vote
At cockcrow
At noon
At sundown
When red rays
Are bidding farewell
To the western sky p 47

The voters are pestered and heckled into doing the bidding of spineless politicians. Sometimes, they are intimidated by coercive powers of state to make them act contrary to their convictions. Nothing, short of empty promises, is returned to the people as dividends of democracy. And the cycle, once in four years, is re-enacted. The poet ridicules the politicians by pointing out their shamelessness at making empty and boastful promises which they know would never be fulfilled. He recalls the fake promises in the following lines:

We'll build schools
We'll build hospitals
.....
Will come seeking shelter

We'll bring water
To every backyard
And turn all night into day
In huts long neglected. p 48

In yet another poem, ‘The Farmer’s Bank’, the poet condemns government’s penchant to dress deception in the borrowed robes of truth. As the crusader and advocate for a saner society that he is, Osundare warns the local population of farmers against the Greek and his gift. The Bank loan, a juicy and mouth-watering promise that will miraculously transport the farmer’s misery into a life in Eldorado, is simply fantastic and nebulous. The collaterals that the Banks demand are conditions that the farmers will find quite difficult, if not altogether impossible, to meet once the paper work is complete and the loan is granted. The instructive lines of the poems are as follows:

The government has just opened
A farmer’s bank
At last a way to grow yams
With currency notes

Here money is yours
Just for the asking
(and if too lazy to ask
The government can ask for you)
Just pawn five houses
Surrender your ancestral land
Thumbprint your livelihood away
And carry home
Your bags of government kindness. P50.

Osundare knows that this is not government kindness but a deft plot to inveigle the unsuspecting farmers into slavery and impoverishment. When a farmer, agreeing to the terms of collateral, ‘pawns five houses, surrenders his ancestral land and thumbprints his livelihood away’, on what will he survive? The poet says these conditions are ‘*kolatera*’, which he explains in a footnote as pun on ‘collateral’: *kola* (from *kolanut*), being a euphemism in Nigeria for bribe and kickback. p 50. The local populace, composed mainly of peasant farmers of cocoa and yams who listen to the strident, persistent and importunate monotone of the town crier are saved this evitable noon day tragedy of borrowing money that would be impossible to repay no matter how hard the farmers work to meet the terms of repayment.

‘A Farmer on seeing Cocoa House, Ibadan’, is a poem that seeks to ‘open the eyes’ of farmers in remote parts of the Western Region of the days of yore to the possibility of the wonders that could be achieved from cocoa farming if the cash from the sale of the commodity abroad is properly and judiciously utilised. The poet shows the antithesis in the true ownership of Cocoa House. If the stunning 25 storey building truly belongs to the farmers whose sweat was said to have produced it, it should have been erected in the old Ondo state, the epicentre of cocoa farming. The relevant lines of the poem bear reproduction here.

And so this neck-twisting tower
Is Cocoa House, our house,
Its walls are made of crushed cocoa pods
The beams of cocoa branches
Its blinding glass
Of the farmer’s glistening back
.....
Grown in the country
Reaped in the city
Cocoa, tree of money,
Spewing gold from every pore
For those who plant trees

In confidential files p52

This poem, which appears to stir a protest amongst the cocoa farmers up country seems to have yielded the desired fruits in that the then government of the Western region of Nigeria had to establish marketing boards which enlisted the interests of the farmers in how their product was taken overseas for sale. This is an important objective of literature of protest. The poet rankles the powers that be when he vaguely refers to them as individuals who make good money from cocoa whose trees are planted in confidential files.

Osundare deploys the potency of the poem titled, ‘‘The Politician’s Two Mouths’’ to further denigrate the political class for their chicanery and buccaneering shenanigans. When this volume of poetry was published in 1984, the poet was both clairvoyant and prophetic. Its contents remain potent, forceful and veracious. While mirthlessly buffeting the duplicitous politicians, the poet says:

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
Alas, a thin membrane covers the belly
We cannot see inside of a lying wolf. P 57

The imageries of a hungry dog, a lying wolf and a shifty double mouthed person are sufficiently damaging to whatever reputation a politician claims to have. The poet is irked that the teeming population of voters is hoodwinked by them each voting season. He suggests that there is an urgent need for self-introspection so that when none is a fool, society becomes a better place for us all.

In ‘‘Unequal Fingers’’, the poet depicts how two distinct worlds are created for people who should live together harmoniously in the midst of plenty. In the separate divides, the rich and well fed inhabit a portion just as the lean, underfed and impoverished occupy another section. Whilst there is raucous laughter of satisfaction and contentment amongst the haves, there is a baneful and agonizing lamentation in the midst of the haves-not .Osundare finds this scenario both resentful and repugnant. In a gripping juxtaposition of the two cases, he writes:

We have known famished months
And years of unnatural famine
.....
And yam was gold from distant farms
Cocoa buyers withheld our pay
And money monopolized the pocket
Of a few
.....
While
Somewhere, not more than
A hungry shout away
Chicken legs dance
At the bottom of simmering pots
Blazing the torturesome smell
Of festive kitchen
Senior service children
Pamper corpulent cats
With corned beef
Laughing heartily at our yawning ribs. P 60

The picturesque depiction of opulence on the one hand and the deprivation on the other is truly lamentable. A reader/listener is moved to a state of revulsion by the needless starvation of some people who are hapless and helpless through no fault of theirs and the suffocating contentment of another group which has more than enough to feed their ‘‘corpulent cats with corned beef’’. What an outrage! To make matters worse, the fattened children of the affluent, like cows of Bashan (Amos 4:1) ‘‘laugh heartily at the yawning ribs’’ of the deprived who suffer acute malnutrition by underfeeding. The poet, upset by these glaring yet unabated inequalities, blots out hotly and defiantly when he tells the oppressors:

Let no one tell us again
That fingers are not equal
.....
We are not bats
Blind to the glaring happenings
Of a tricky day
.....
Soon
We shall know
How your farm stays so lush
In our season of drought
.....
When the time is ripe
The stick will tell all ears
The silent secret of the drum. P 61

Having seen these copious quotes from the poem, it is safe to say, *res ipsa loquitur* because the issues raised here speak explicitly for themselves. A reaction of the poor leading gradually but steadily to a protest is seen in the concluding lines of the poem. The down trodden appear to have become resolute about holding their destinies firmly in their own hands.

Conclusion

In concluding this essay, it can be said that it has achieved all the objectives that it set for itself. The sociological critical approach has been found to be adequate and relevant in the treatment of the poems selected for elucidation in the paper. Further, Niyi Osundare and the protestant poets like him who see literature in general and poetry in particular as a tool to ensure the manumission of the *hoi-polloi* from the manacles of their slave masters have done justice, commendably, to the tasks set for themselves. The paper ends by noting that it is only a people who are bent on freeing themselves from the ignorance, squalor and disease that their task masters foist on them who can truly breathe the air of liberty and ravish in the bounties of freedom.

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