

ANALYSIS OF SENSUAL AND SENSUOUS IMAGERY AS VEHICLE FOR THE MESSAGES IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S NATURE POEMS IN *THE EYE OF THE EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of recent calls to address the parlous depletion of the ozone layer as well as other environmental concerns, Niyi Osundare's nature poems (especially the nature poems in the 1986 Commonwealth Prize winning collection *The Eye of the Earth*) have gained greater significance. Several international conferences on the state of the environment and climate change such as the Kyoto and the recent Copenhagen summits have all been aimed at formulating some workable agreement among first, second and third world countries to tackle the problem of environmental degradation and global warming, but all these attempts have, so far, not yielded the expected results. At the national level, numerous workshops and seminars have also been held with the aim of sensitizing people towards the imminent destruction of the earth through pollution by forces such as industrialization, but these have also yielded little result. In the nature poems of Osundare, one finds an exciting and effective means of bringing the state of nature to our awareness. This he does by representing nature in such a way that human beings are made to empathize with it, and subsequently, to be inspired by its indomitable spirit, and to seek solutions to the myriad of problems confronting it. Osundare's unique manner of presenting nature in this light proves to be successful in exposing the problems of nature to us.

Keywords: Sensuous, Sensual, Nature, Environmental Degradation, Image.

INTRODUCTION

The Eye of the Earth (1986) is a collection of poems that present various themes ranging from the threat to the earth by man's irresponsible actions, to the celebration of the earth as a repository of wealth and inspiration. The collection is divided into three sections: "Back to Earth", "Rainsongs" and "Homecall". Altogether, six poems have been selected for analysis. They are "The Rocks Rose To Meet Me", "Harvestcall", "Who Says That Drought Was Here", "What the Earth Said", "Ours To Plough, Not To Plunder" and "Our Earth Will Not Die." At least one poem was chosen to represent each section. Thus, two poems, "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" and "Harvestcall" were chosen from "Back to Earth"; one poem, "Who Says That Drought Was Here" was chosen from "Rainsongs"; and the last two, "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder" and "Our Earth Will Not Die" were chosen from the section, "Homecall."

THE CONTEXT OF OSUNDARE'S ACHIEVEMENT

In the wake of recent calls to address the parlous depletion of the ozone layer as well as other environmental concerns, Niyi Osundare's nature poems (especially the nature poems in the 1986 Commonwealth Prize winning collection *The Eye of the Earth*) have gained greater significance.

Several international conferences on the state of the environment and climate change such as the Kyoto and the recent Copenhagen summits have all been aimed at formulating some workable agreement among first, second and third world countries to tackle the problem of environmental degradation and global warming, but all these attempts have, so far, not yielded the expected results. At the national level, numerous workshops and seminars have also been held with the aim of sensitizing people towards the imminent destruction of the earth through pollution by forces such as industrialization, but these have also yielded little result.

In the nature poems of Osundare, one finds an exciting and effective means of bringing the state of nature to our awareness. This he does by representing nature in such a way that human beings are made to empathize with it, and subsequently, to be inspired by its indomitable spirit, and to seek solutions to the myriad of problems confronting it. Osundare's unique manner of presenting nature in this light proves to be successful in exposing the problems of nature to us.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS IN *THE EYE OF THE EARTH* "THE ROCKS ROSE TO MEET ME"

In "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me", the persona (who identifies himself as an "unwearying wayfarer" in line 17), becomes the privileged herald who understands and bears the coded messages of the rocks. He tells us:

I read the cipher tattooed
On the biceps of stone
Open like a book of oracles (lines 105-107)

In the poem, the persona, who is returning to his native locality after a very long time away, presents an image of two powerful kings, (symbolised by *Olusunta* and *Oroole*, two imposing rocks) rising from their thrones, welcoming him into their presence and admitting him into their confidence. The poem is in the tradition of the praise poem – the Yoruba *Oriki*. Thus, it makes extensive use of appellations. Subsequently, the persona adopts the role of a royal bard / linguist and tells the story of the rocks even as he tries to come to terms with the changes he is now witnessing.

The poem employs a variety of sensuous details to develop the themes it espouses. Sensory details pertaining to sight, movement (kinaesthesia) and sound capture the mood and theme of the poem. For instance, the persona shows how looming the rock *Olusunta* appeared to be in his childhood years, by describing its peaks as "cradled in ageless mists" (line 4). This phrase paints the picture of a huge structure whose peak juts into the clouds – suggesting its high altitudes. This also creates the effect of power and majesty, two qualities the poet associates with the rocks. But apparently, those qualities he associated with the rocks have now disappeared. He recognises the rocks now as a resource of gold, not the divinity he had revered as a child.

The poet also describes *Olusunta* as the "lofty one whose eyes are / balls of the winking sun" (line 9, 10). This metaphoric description of the glint emanating from the surfaces of *Olusunta* as being "balls of the winking sun" is a clever way of depicting the rich gold deposit that the rock is

reputed to have as it depicts the characteristic of the rock whose glint is as bright as a sun that is winking.

The poet also talks about movement (kinaesthesia), and this indicates the relationship between royalty and subjects. For example, in “the rocks *rose* to meet me” (line 1), we are presented with a portrait of a royal personage who shows recognition for a subject by *rising* from the throne. In spite of this unpretentious show of recognition by the rocks, the persona is careful to ensure that the majesty and power of the rocks are not lost on us:

...their legs lithesome with lithic lore
At every step, the earth shook.
Like an ancient deck
Trees trembled from roof to root (Line 18-21).

Here, the grace and authority of the rocks are captured as they take easy, majestic and even frightening steps towards the persona. The subjects, including the earth and trees, respond appropriately to their power by shaking and trembling. This acknowledgement by the subject to the power of the rocks contrasts sharply with the response they had shown earlier when *Olusunta* had first smiled at the wayfarer: Then, “trees were swaying their leafy heads in the choreography of his moving lips” (line 24, 25), but now in anger and resentment, the rocks elicit a response of fear in the trees and earth as they now tremble and shake. The phrase “roof to root” is a deliberate choice to achieve alliteration and also to present the crown of the tree as a kind of shelter or covering.

Thus, Osundare makes a statement that even though nature (rocks) is threatened it still maintains its dignity and power in the face of man’s indiscriminate exploitation of its resources. Another imagery much used in the poem is that of sound. In the poem, nature speaks out, thus we have *Olosunta* who is described as “the eloquent one” (line 6), speaking first in a language that only the privileged persona understands. The message is that the rocks, which have now lost their divine attribute, would continue to yield gold, but the gold must be evenly distributed to society. It is to turn “paupers into people (not princes)” (line 44) and certainly, not to gild “the craniums / of hollow chieftains” (line 39, 40). Thus, the poet criticises rulers who selfishly use the resources of the community for their own benefit. The not-so-eloquent *Oroole*, on the other hand, has a voice that is “tremulous,” perhaps due to his age (as the rock has been there for a very long time), but they both speak out, nonetheless, in their silent language:

The rocks rose to meet me
Eloquent in their deafening silence (line 87, 88)

The poet’s presentation of the state of the rocks as eloquent in their silence is very effective in showing that the silent image of the rock speaks for itself.

Finally, through the use of repetition, the poet shows the importance of the rocks and sets the tone for the message they have, which is that their minerals can be exploited but only for the good of the community and not individuals. After each introduction of “*Olosunta* spoke first”, the persona, performing the role of a bard, reels off a series of appellations and epithets to

describe the rock. Repetition also helps to compliment the chanting mood of the poem, a mood which underlines the ritual of information transfer from deity to man.

The “Rocks Rose to Meet Me” presents the return of the persona to his native land from his sojourn abroad. His view of his native environment is sieved in a foreign land – an influence gained from his sojourn in a foreign land. Though much has changed and the rock has lost its divine nature, the rock retains its majesty.

Thus we see that by presenting himself as the chosen mouthpiece of the rocks, Niyi Osundare has successfully legitimised his position as a voice for nature. This recognition is a major achievement, and the poet’s poetic vision and his language combine effectively to present him as a most credible nature poet.

“WHO SAYS THAT DROUGHT WAS HERE?”

“Who Says That Drought Was Here” is a poem from the section of *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) titled, ‘Rainsongs.’ In this section (which includes other poems such as “Let Earth’s Pain Be Soothed”, “First Rain”, “Rain-Coming”, “Raindrum”, “Meet Me at Okeruku” and “But Sometimes When It Rains”), Osundare explores the importance of rain to human beings and the environment.

In “Who Says That Drought Was Here,” the poet adopts a mocking, bantering tone to taunt drought and its related destructive and degenerative power. He celebrates the effect of the rainy season:

With these green guests around
Who says that drought was here? (Lines 7, 8)

Using the couplet that becomes a refrain after every stanza, the poet through his choice of words, also indirectly affirms the change in seasons as temporary, by referring to the newly, fresh, appealing lush vegetation as “green guests”. The choice of ‘guests’ implies that though welcome, the guests would most likely not stay for long.

It is the rain that initiates the action of redress and restoration and this is the quality the poet celebrates; for the rain “has robed the earth / in vests of verdure ... has robed an earth licked clean by the fiery tongue of drought” (line 3-6). The rain aims to redress the damage caused by the drought that has left the earth bare of vegetation, an earth “licked clean” by drought’s “fiery tongue.” The rain corrects this ‘anomaly’ by having the earth “robed”, in “vests of verdure.” The alliteration captures the jollity of the mood, but the poet’s choice again suggests the temporary presence of the green vegetation, for ‘robe’ again suggests a covering that may be taken off or changed. Indeed, he tells us that the earth has already gone through the dry season, the other stage in the seasonal cycle: “Palms have shed the shroud of brown...” (line 9).

Note the metaphor of clothing that the poet employs to describe the two kinds of seasons in Africa. For the rainy season, the poet uses “robe,” an appealing and attractive covering. For the dry season he employs ‘shroud,’ an unattractive, bleak covering which arouses the sense of

sight. Both choices portray vivid images of the different conditions of the earth during the rainy and dry seasons.

But the poet also observes that the condition of dryness that nature experiences, albeit temporary, is sometimes man-made:

Palms have shed the shroud of brown
Cast over forest tops
By the careless match of tinder days
When flares flooded the earth
And hovering hawks taloned the tale
To the ears of the deafening sky (line 9-14)

The poet describes the utter abandon with which bush fires are set in the earth through his use of alliteration in “flares flooded,” fluid sounds that capture the carefree nature with which people set fires to vegetation. Instead of water flooding the fields, it is rather “flares.” He also skilfully portrays the activity of the birds flying as though disturbed by the fires and smoke.

However, when the rains set in, there is a revival. The persona presents the atmosphere of liveliness and gaiety that characterizes the rainy season:

Aflame with herbal joy
Trees slap heaven’s face
With the compound pride
Of youthful leaves (Line 17-20).

From the poet’s description, we can see that the young, fresh, frisky trees are so high that they reach the sky and engage the trees in a playful banter. We note that the poet achieves this visual imagery in the expression “trees slap heaven’s face.” And the rain continues to clothe and decorate the vegetation, this time, “drapering twigs into groves”; healthy looking groves that had been “once skeletal spires.” Thus, the rain successfully counters the effect of the intense heat that literally dries up the freshness in earth’s flora, stripping it of flesh that is now skeletal looking due to the scorching sun whose intense concentration, according to the poet, is marked by an “unwinking face”.

The poet describes how the freshness of the season promotes nature’s liveliness and bustling. The fauna and the flora all interact with one another and engage in different kinds of relationships. For instance, the poet paints a vivid picture of insects and birds bustling with life:

Anthills throw open their million gates
And winged termites swarm the warm welcome
Of passionate twilights
And butterflyes court the fragrant 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 weaverbirds pick up the chorus in the leafening heights... (Lines 26-36)

Through alliteration, the poet highlights the activities of the termites: *winged termites swarm the warm welcome of compassionate twilights*; the butterflies: *butterflies court the fragrant company of fledgeling flowers*; and the moths: *milling moths paste wet lips on the translucent ears of listening windows*

Twilight marks the period when the sun prepares to settle for the day. The weather is not hot at this time and is rather agreeable for the milling termites. The poet chooses the word “compassionate” to describe this pleasant condition. Also, the poet skilfully indicates that the fragrant flowers attract butterflies: “and butterflies court the fragrant company / of fledgeling flowers.”

Similarly, the persona depicts the activity of moths, which are often seen fixed on windows. He describes this scene as if the moths were kissing the windows, “and milling moths paste wet lips / on the translucent ears of listening windows.” His choice of words, even though appearing fantastic, is actually an effective capture of the poet’s perception of nature. The effect of this choice is to highlight how natural and agreeable it is for the moths to be seen as they are.

About the same time, the birds are also active. The persona notes the sounds made by birds over the lake. He recognises the sounds as composed songs:

And the swallow brailles a tune
On the copper face of the gathering lake
And weaverbirds pick up the chorus
In the leafening heights ... (Line 33-36)

The reader is informed about the prize that awaits those who take initiative at this time of liveliness: “soon, crispy mushrooms will break / the fast of venturing soles (line 37, 38). This means that people who venture into the forest would be able to harvest mushroom for food, specifically, breakfast, which the poet cleverly states as “break the fast of venturing soles.” At this point, as a result of what he has witnessed, the persona seems to be carried away; he is supremely confident in nature’s restorative powers. The final lines appropriately depict his bullish confidence:

With these green guests around
Who still says that drought was here? (Line 39, 40)

To Osundare, nature will always overcome her challenges. Even though she may experience difficult times, there will always come a time when she will be restored. She heals herself so completely that there would be very little indication of what she may have suffered. Nature remains indomitable.

“HARVESTCALL”

“Harvestcall”, a call to the celebration of a bountiful harvest, is a poem replete with a variety of images. The poet uses sensuous images to describe the scene he wishes to make real to us and sensual imagery to portray how attractive the crops that are being harvested are.

The persona introduces to us crops that are harvested in different localities. First he presents the yam crop on the farm:

This is Iyanfoworogi
Where, garnished in green
Pounded yam rested its feted arms
On the back of stooping stakes (Lines 1-4)

We observe how the poet depicts the presence of the foliage that complements the appearance of the yam. It is as if the yam is being decorated by the lush vegetation. The phrase “pounded yam rested its feted arms / on the back of stooping stakes” is a delightful one. It demonstrates the weight of the yam, for it is a heavy yield and therefore has “rested its feted arms / on the back of stooping stakes.” The stakes stoop due to the sheer weight of the yam. The poet deliberately plays on “back of stooping stakes” to pun upon the expression “break a back” which depicts an attempt to contain enormous pressure or go to extreme lengths.

From the farm, the yam is brought home and the poet captures the banter and frenetic activity that occurs in the preparation of the cooked yam for fufu:

This is Iyanfoworogi
Where yams, ripe and randy,
Waged a noisy war against the knife;
Here where, subdued by the fire,
Efuru provoked mouthful clamour
From the combat of hungry wood:
The pestle fights the mortar
The mortar fights the pestle
Dough of contention smooths down
The rugged anger of hunger (Line 8-17)

The poet’s description of combat, although unusual, in reality is a true capture of the preparation of yam for fufu. It is really a physical exercise and the poet is therefore correct in capturing the process as a battle that is fought by the pestle and mortar, but which only ends when the aggrieved party, hunger, consumes the food.

Still in the same locality, the persona turns his attention to the yam crop growing on the farm. He presents the yam as king of the root crops, with a retinue of attendants and followers:

Here, where yam wore the crown
In the reign of swollen shoots

Amid a retinue of vines and royal leaves (Line 17-19)

This presentation is a capture of the yam crop surrounded by vines and leaves. The persona presents the yam as though it were royalty. The effect of such a presentation is to raise the stature of the yam crop as looking very majestic, therefore, indicating to the reader the extent of the yield of the yam that is being referred to as a king who “wore the crown.”

Other elements of the sexual are largely portrayed by feminine attributes given to coy cobs who initiate sexual behaviour. This is because they voluntarily invite the attentions of males through their coquettish manner. An example of yam that is described as a temptress, and the response it gets, is given to illustrate this:

This is Iyanfoworogi
Where a *tempting yam sauntered* (**emphases mine**)
Out of the selling tray
And the marketplace became a mob
Of instant suitors (Line 25-29)

The poet, here, describes how attractive the yam is but likens it to a coy girl deliberately inviting the attentions of courtiers. The poet presents the crop in this way to heighten the effect of its appeal.

Similarly, the cobs express sexual interest by rubbing themselves against the hardness of the stalks: “coy cobs rocked lustily / in the loin of swaying stalks” (line 31, 32). Also, June’s persistence pays off as he has “*finally* grabbed the year / by her narrow waist” (Line 40, 41). Here we can only look forward to a harvest of offspring – corn. The corn cobs, in turn, confirm their own interest to engage in sexual activity by flashing “their milky teeth” in agreement, ending in the taking off of their clothes or the husks in “disrobing kitchens” (line 43).

The poet’s selection of verbs reinforces the idea of invitation of the suitors by their coy partners through their actions. For instance, “Efuru *provoked* mouthful clamour”, “tempting yam *sauntered*”, “coy cobs *rocked* lustily”, “corn cobs *flashed* their milky teeth”, “aroso, geregede, otili, pakala ... *beckoned* lustily.”

The suitors, in turn, respond lovingly to the invitation of their coy partners. The sun acquiesces to the call of the cotton pods by exhibiting a touch of love: “cotton pods, lips duly *parted* / by December’s sun”, while pumpkins, also employing the imagery of touch, “*caressed* earthbreast”. As demonstrated earlier, the poet largely uses imagery pertaining to the sense of sight. He captures the beauty, lushness and bounty of the harvest. For instance, in “garnished in green / pounded yam rested its feted arms / on the back of stooping stakes” (line 2-4), we encounter lushness in the colour green, and also beauty through the use of the adjective “garnished.” Also, the idea of the heaviness of the yield is implied in the simple description of how the stakes are stooping to the weight of the yam that has “rested its feted arms” on it. The image of royal pomp and pageantry is captured in the description of the yam plant: “...yam wore the crown / in the reign of swollen roots / amid a retinue of vines and royal leaves” (line 18-20). Here, yam shows an awareness of its royal roots by keeping a retinue of followers.

Furthermore, the picture of lushness is captured in section II of the poem where the poet describes the month of May:

Once here in May
A tasselled joy robed the field
Like hemless green.
Once here in May
The sky was a riot of pollen grains
And ivory mills waited (im) patiently
For the browning of grey tassels (Line 33-39).

The idea of clothing and decorating the field is created by the tassels that have beautified and “robed the field” (line 33-35). The poet also successfully paints a picture of the pervading environment through the word “riot” to describe pollen grains running amok everywhere, reaching even the sky. This frisky, carefree attitude of the pollen grains underlines the mood of joy that is ready to greet the upcoming harvest.

The imagery of movement is also used in the poem mainly to reinforce the sexuality of the yam tuber and corn cobs, two of the crops that are portrayed as feminine. For instance, the coquettish gait of the yam is seen in “a tempting yam *sauntered* out of the selling tray” (line 26, 27). Here, the choice of the verb “sauntered” shows how supercilious the yam is as it shows off its beauty, expecting a raucous, appreciative response from suitors.

The poet shows a change in the mood of the poem by indicating that the music accompanying the poem becomes solemn. The persona here becomes sentimental and reminisces on the past. He bemoans the loss of certain crops and plants:

But where are they?
Where are they gone?
aroso, gereddede, otiili, pakala
Which beckoned lustily to the reaping basket?
Where are they
The yam pyramids which challenged the sun
In busy barns
Where are they
The pumpkins which caressed earthbreast
Like mammary burdens
Where are they
The pods which sweetened harvest air
With the clatter of dispersing seeds
Where are they? Where are they gone? (Line 56-69).

The persona’s choice of “beckoned lustily” projects the image of invitation which is the poet’s way of showing that the harvest of beans was so attractive that the harvesters had to quickly collect them in baskets. The yield of yams appeared so great that, piled, they grew as high as “pyramids which challenged the sun.” Even pumpkins which used to lie attractively had

disappeared. The phrase “caressed earthbreast” captures how the pumpkin looked as it lay on the ridge. The persona also captures the sound made by the seeds from pods, describing them by the onomatopoeic “clatter” they make as they drop unto the ground. As well, he presents the appealing smell of the pods which to him, “sweetened harvest air.”

But the poet also makes suggestions by employing sexual metaphors of seed to state that “seeds...sleeping in the womb of the earth” only need committed labour, that is, “the quickening tap / of our waking finger” to give life to these dormant seeds.

“Harvestcall” therefore, is successful because of the manner in which the poet presents the produce from the different localities. By use of sensuous and sensual imagery, the poet successfully portrays the manner in which the crops, having an awareness of their value and beauty, tend to show off and bask in the glow of appreciation by the ‘suitors’. This technique encourages us to view nature in a new light, appreciating its appeal and beauty.

“OURS TO PLOUGH, NOT TO PLUNDER”

“Ours to Plough, Not to plunder,” is a poem about the need to preserve the earth and not to destroy it. The poet enjoins mankind to nurture and cultivate the earth for that is what would keep the earth attractive:

The earth is ours to plough and plant
The hoe is her barber
The dibble her dimple (Line 1-3)

The poet puns on the kind of labour that would be required from those working the earth, and the earth itself:

Out with mattocks and matchets
Bring calabash trays and rocking baskets
Let the sweat which swells earthroot
Relieve heaps of their tuberous burdens (Line 4-7).

Here, the poet skilfully portrays the sweat that would be required to work the earth, for it is only that which “swells earthroot.” But he also refers to the earth going into labour and the farmer would have to “relieve heaps of their tuberous burdens.” We note that the poet presents the earth that is to be ploughed as female. He bestows attributes of sexuality on the earth in order to highlight the earth’s beauty, and its fertility by which the earth is capable of bearing bounteous produce. For instance, the beauty of the earth is described in several ways. The poet states that “the hoe is her barber / the dibble her dimple” (L. 1, 2). The first line is a reiteration of the Yuroba cosmological worldview of the earth as a goddess, a view acknowledged by the poet in the first poem of *The Eye of The Earth* (1986), “Earth” in which we encounter a traditional epithet used to describe the earth: ‘Ogeereamokoyeri’, which means the one that shaves his head with a hoe. The idea of using a barber suggests the care that the earth needs in order to look good. It also serves as a metaphor to represent human beings, her custodians who are required to attend to her. The second line of the poem “the dibble her dimple” is an alliterative play that describes the holes that are made into the earth by the dibble to plant seeds and seedlings.

Nature herself seems to be aware of her beauty and sometimes shows off this quality to the world. In “let the pawpaw swell and swing its headward breasts” (13), the poet enjoins human beings to nurture the crops so that they can fully mature, become attractive and freely show off their beauty. Indeed, the poet believes that it is crucial that human beings contribute towards the preservation and development of the environment. He stipulates that it is within the powers of mankind to ensure this through his emphatic use of the imperative verb, ‘Let’. For example:

Let the sweat which swells earthroot / relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous burdens
Let wheatfields raise their breadsome hands / to the ripening sun
Let legumes clothe the naked bosom / of shivering mounds
Let the pawpaw swell and swing / its headward breasts
Let water spring / from earth’s unfathomed fountain
Let gold rush / from her deep unseeable mines
Let’s put a sun in every night (lines 6-19).

In seven statements he makes concerning the produce and resources that the earth is capable of generating, he begins each time with ‘let’; thus asking man to permit nature to fully explore and attain its potential in terms of growth, productivity and wealth. Osundare acknowledges that it will require hard work in order to locate and extract the wealth from the earth: “Our earth is an unopened grainhouse, / a bustling barn in some far, uncharred jungle / a distant gem in a rough unhappy dust.” He only admonishes that in the quest to tap the earth for her resources we should ensure that the earth is not devastated or laid waste:

This earth is
Ours to work not to waste
Ours to man not to maim
This earth is ours to plough not to plunder (Lines 23 – 26).

Osundare also recognises the traditional attribute of motherhood associated with the earth. In the poem he stresses the earth’s ability to procreate and care for her offspring. In the lines “let the sweat which swells earthroot / relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous burdens” (Line 6, 7), we encounter a description of a harvest: yam tubers being dug out of the earth. But it is Osundare’s poetic choices that paint the image of a child-bearing process. For instance, his deliberate choice of the words “sweat”, “swell”, “relieve” and “tuberous burdens” help to paint a vivid picture of the birthing process. Furthermore, the poet demonstrates the earth’s resources by his use of birthing imagery – thereby, emphasising the earth’s regenerative powers.

The poet also shows how nature cares for her dependents; again, stressing the earth’s motherly qualities. He does this through the use of visual imagery. For example, in “bring calabash trays and rocking baskets” (line 5), the poet deliberately chooses the phrase “rocking baskets” because, not only is it used to carry the produce, but it also ties in smoothly with the phrase “tuberous burdens” as in, “relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous burdens” (line 7). The effect of these choices is the highlighting of the maternal qualities of the earth observed in how it evokes the image of a baby that has been newly delivered and is being rocked in order to make it more comfortable or get it to sleep.

Another instance is the line, “let legumes clothe the naked bosom / of shivering mounds” (line 10, 11). Apart from the literal meaning of legumes that have spread themselves over mounds on the farm, the poet makes it appear as though the legume plant does so deliberately. The image presented here is of a mother putting a cover cloth over a child shivering from cold in order to provide it with warmth. The quality that the poet highlights here is the earth’s self-preservation and protective abilities.

Thus, we find in his nature poems that Niyi Osundare explores the sensuality of nature in order to portray nature’s feminine attributes such as beauty, procreation and motherhood, which are all aspects of nature. His purpose in doing this, while hailing the earth’s indomitable spirit, is also to induce human beings to be more sensitive in their awareness of nature, be sympathetic to her plight and be committed to preserving, maintaining and restoring nature to its optimum state of efficiency.

“OUR EARTH WILL NOT DIE”

“Our Earth Will Not Die” is one of Osundare’s signal poems that illustrate the indomitable spirit and resilience of the earth. It is thematically connected to “Who Says the Drought Was Here” and “What the Earth Said”, in how it speaks the message of hope that in spite of the abusive exploitation that earth has been subjected to by human beings, the quintessence of the earth will not die. He does this by stating that the earth has what it takes to defy the odds and survive man’s brutal and selfish misuse of her resources.

The poem “Our Earth Will Not Die” is in two movements. In the first part, the mood of the poem is solemn. This is because the portrait that he paints is of a dying earth so abused that our response can only be subdued to such a sorrowful extent. But the sadness of the poet is tinged with anger and hope as he is certain that earth will survive these attacks. We see this in the opening lines of the poem:

Lynched
The lakes
Slaughtered
The seas
Mauled
The mountains
But our earth will not die (Lines 1-7).

The poet, perhaps, exaggerates the reach and extent of the selfish exploitation of earth by suggesting that the abuse can be found wherever one looks: “here / there / everywhere / a lake is killed by the arsenic urine from the bladder of profit factories”. This outburst, as well as the poet’s choice of strong active verbs “lynched”, “slaughtered” and “mauled”, betrays poet’s passion as a naturalist.

The poem is successful because of the poet’s skilful use of language borne out of his careful study of the environment and knowledge of the industrial world. Osundare employs the use of both visual and auditory imagery to paint vivid images of the abuse the environment suffers

through human activities. This therefore affects the poem's mood and tone which are mournful in the first part. He succeeds in capturing a portrait of degeneration through his careful choice of verbs and adjectives. For example, the use of the active verbs 'lynched', 'slaughtered', 'mauled', 'killed', 'staggered', 'coughing', 'wailing', 'chilling', 'reducing', and 'amputated', and adjectives such as 'arsenic', 'poisoned', 'sickly' and 'balding', which are all present in the first part of the poem, are negative visual and auditory images that illustrate the deep state of gloom that the environment is presently in. This contrasts with the positive use of active verbs and adjectives in the second part of the poem whose mood the poet suggests is to be festive. Here, in the context of the poem, verbs that show excitement and hope such as 'rise', 'twittering', 'dancing', 'rock', 'drink' and 'tumbles' indicate visual, auditory imagery are suggestive of regeneration and ties in smoothly with the poet's defiant cry of the refrain, "Our Earth Will Not Die."

Apart from the poet's choice of verbs and adjectives to describe the earth, the poet also visualises the gloomy state of the earth through the use of personification and pathetic fallacy. He does this by painting and presenting aspects of the earth as victims who have suffered horrible abuse at the hands of industrial profiteers.

Through personification, we picture the 'lakes', 'seas' and 'mountains' as human beings who have been 'lynched', 'slaughtered' and 'mauled'. He also humanises the stream to show a stark and dramatic image of one struggling to keep alive in spite of the improbability of survival: "a poisoned stream staggers down the hills." To Osundare, it is important that we become aware that the problem is not only the death through poisoning of water bodies, but the fact that their death will affect (all) other living entities as one little stream that has been poisoned ends up "coughing chaos in the sickly sea."

Again, the picture he creates by his description of the effect of acid-rain on vegetation is one of abnormality:

And the rain
The rain falls, acid on balding forests
Their branches amputated by the septic daggers
Of tainted clouds (Lines 22-25)

Here, it is not normal rain that falls on the forests but acid which is so sharp that it has shorn the trees of their leaves leaving them bald, as well as cutting off the branches of the trees through the "septic daggers of tainted clouds" that is, the feel of the rain is as sharp as the edge of a dagger. The poet also employs a skilful blend of pathetic fallacy and *punctum* to show how nature responds to abuse. In "weeping willows drip mercury tears" the plant's weeping is as a result of the vegetation being so exposed to industrial pollution that instead of water, it is mercury, a toxic industrial by-product, which the plant secretes. Such gruesome presentation of nature provokes in us a feeling of concern, revulsion and ultimately an outcry for justice.

Thus Osundare betrays his obvious Marxist leanings by deliberately presenting to us the heartless treatment that the earth suffers at the hands of a selfish inhumane capitalist economic system. As a main feature in all his poems, Osundare's preoccupation with the production of sound can be seen in his use of alliteration, repetition and auditory details. Alliterative words such as lynched the lakes, slaughtered the seas, mauled the mountains, stream staggered, coughing

chaos, sickly sea, wailing whale, weeping willows, trees twittering are all used to produce musicality as does the use of repetition seen in the refrain “but our earth will not die”. The repetition of ‘fishes’, ‘birds’ and ‘rabbits’ in the poem (line 31-33) is to indicate that these represent animals that dwell on the earth, the waters and the skies. But the poet remains confident that, in spite of the earth being polluted at every level, the earth will not die. Therefore, the poet states defiantly that the earth is, perhaps, only injured but will definitely not die.

The final part of the poem makes use of images that are indicative of celebration and renewal. Like a natural cycle, the earth will overcome her current problems and rise again just as the “westering sun will rise again / resplendent like a new coin.” The poet promises that the wind “will play its tune” to which the environment will dance to. We will find “trees twittering, grasses dancing” and the hillsides rocking in the joy of a rejuvenated earth.

CONCLUSION

The predominant setting of the poems in *The Eye of the Earth* is the forest. Nature in this collection constitutes the flora and fauna and events/phenomena such as rainfall and mountains. The poems analysed were “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me”, “Harvestcall”, “Who Says That Drought Was Here”, “Ours to Plough, Not to plunder” and “Our Earth Will Not Die”. The persona’s tone is mainly passionate – in his celebration of nature and in his protestation of the earth’s exploitation.

Altogether, in his evocation of nature, the poet demonstrates a struggle to come to terms with impulses about his conception of the reality he encounters. For instance, in “Harvestcall” and “Who Says That Drought Was Here,” the persona celebrates harvest and the lush vegetation, insects and birds that thrive in the wake of rains after a long period of drought. Conversely, the persona in “Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder” and “Our Earth Will Not Die,” strongly voices his resentment at the irresponsible manner in which the flora, fauna and phenomena such as the rocks and rivers are treated. Nevertheless, the poet remains hopeful that the earth will survive.

But the persona is ambivalent in “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me.” One reason for this attitude is that his perception of nature has been shaped by his native background and foreign education. Another factor is the fact that the poet is forced to come to terms with change. For instance, in the “Rocks Rose to Meet Me,” while the persona decries the loss of the divinity of the rocks due to human activity, he accepts that the rocks ought to be exploited to improve the livelihood of the people in the community. Much of the presentation of the environment is done by using sensuous and sensual imagery. Through this device, the experience of this aspect of nature is made real. For instance, through the sense of touch, the persona demonstrates that a tree grows as high as the sky by stating that the trees “slap heaven’s face” (“Who Says That Drought Was Here”). The poet also employs sensual imagery to humanize nature and make the image he presents clear. For instance, by stating in ‘Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder’ that the hoe is the earth’s barber, the dibble her dimple, the poet reiterates the Yoruba cosmological worldview of the earth as a goddess, and also literally demonstrates the beautification of the earth by giving it a haircut and a dimple.

Some critics note that the birth of *The Eye of the Earth* was an opportunistic ambushing of the international outcry against the destruction of the environment and global warming. But beside the suspicion that this Commonwealth Prize winning collection appeared to have been too conveniently written at just about the right time, the subject matter and themes in *The Eye of the Earth* remain relevant, even more now than in the past, as the earth's condition gets worse.

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