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A Poetic Exploration of Commonality in Niyi Osundare's Selected Poems

***Adelowo, Abimbola Dapo; **Dr. O. A. Oyeleye; & **Prof. Stephen O. Solanke**

*Department of English, School of Languages, Oyo State College of Education. Lanlate. **Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo. Nigeria

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Abstract

Niyi Osundare is a second-generation poet whose works focus on socio-cultural and economic issues in his society. Previous studies have critically examined his works from stylistic, linguistic, and pragmatic perspectives, but have paid insufficient scholarly attention to the characters within his poetry, particularly the commoners. The aim of this study is to explore how Osundare uses his poetry to advocate for recognition and fair treatment of the commoners in society, by analysing selected poems from two of his anthologies. This analysis examines how these poems reflect his attitude towards the underdog, explores his thematic concerns, and considers how his work can contribute to societal improvement. The study is anchored on Marxism/Marxist critical approach. The poetic data were selected from Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices.* A careful appraisal and analysis of eight selected poems were carried out–In *Songs of The Marketplace* there are Excursions I, Excursions II, Excursions III, and Excursions IV while in *Village Voices* there are Eating with all the Fingers, Eating Tomorrow's Yam, The Land of Unease and A Villager's Protest. The findings revealed rural areas as the settings of his poetry, while the common man and common events caught his fancy. It was also discovered that Osundare uses a number of figures of speech and literary devices to solicit attention for these people in order to have a just, wholesome and egalitarian society. He went on tours in the company of other excursionists to survey, access and figure out the conditions of the sickly poor in the land, and could see for himself that these people in this situation need urgent attention from the people in government. These are things average human beings usually overlook daily. The conditions and welfare of the never-do-well of society were his priorities. In his bid to conscientise, raise awareness

and awaken the government functionaries from their inertia, the poet deliberately uses satire, lampoon and sarcasm. Furthermore, nativised lexical items, code-switching and indigenized words are employed to foreground the sorry conditions of the commoners. Having examined the selected poems of Osundare in the above-mentioned anthologies and having observed that his poetic thought-pattern can impact society positively the paper concludes that the poet aspires to have an impartial and classless society, thereby qualifying him as a poet of the commonality. The study also recommends that the government should be more aware of its responsibilities. Upcoming poets should also join hands with Osundare in campaigning against unfair treatment of the commoners and all should be more neighbourly in their social dealings.

Keywords: Commonality, *Songs of the Marketplace*, *Village Voices*, Plights of the Commoners, Marxism.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that Osundare is a keystone in the foundation and structure of Modern African Poetry. Therefore, there is no second-generation poetry in Nigeria without mentioning his name. He is a beacon of critical thought, an academic doyen and a social commentator. A study of his poetics, however cursory, shows that he has a soft spot for the poor. Most of his poetic writings border on and resonate with the challenges faced by struggling Nigerians. Whenever scholars discuss the second generation of Nigerian poetic works, they often pinpoint those printed in the 1980s. Notable among them are, *The Poet Lied* (1983) by Odia Ofeimun, *Songs of The Marketplace* (1983) and *Village Voices* (1984) by Niyi Osundare, *Petals Of Thought* (1984) *by* Femi Fatoba, *Shadow And Dreams* (1983) by Harry Garba, *Children Of Iroko* (1973) and *Labyrinths of The Delta* (1986) by Tanure Ojaide, *Letter To Lynda* (1988) by Funsho Aiyejina , *Naked Hearts* (1982) by Ada Ugha and *First Came The Deserts* a*nd then The Torturer* (1984) by Idi Bukar (Narasimhaiah and Emenyonu, 1988:70).

Osundare is a humanist who extraordinarily values human life and dignity. This could be the reason the themes of social justice, love, nature, freedom and human conditions are commonplace in his works. Although he writes in English, he infuses his native language, Yoruba, into almost all his works. He shows the ability to blend native lexical items into his poetry, thereby displaying a radical departure from the poetic sensibilities of the first-generation poets. His works and those of his literati (intellectual) colleagues could be described as mobilising upcoming writers to the business of decolonising the African consciousness.

Osundare stands tall and prominent in the world of poetry. He wrote most of his works during the era of socio-political tension in Nigeria and he has public subjects as the focus of his poetic works. He has authored about eighteen (18) books of poetry aside from his drama and prose works.

According to Hurs and Ryder in https://www.wordpress.com :

> Osundare has always been a vehement champion of the right to free speech and is a strong believer in the power of words, saying, "to utter is to alter". Osundare is renowned for his commitment to socially relevant art and artistic activism and has written several open letters to the former president of Nigeria (Olusegun Obasanjo), whom Osundare has often publicly criticized. Osundare believes that there is no choice for an African poet but to be political. Under the rule of the dictator General Sanni Abacha (1993-98), Osundare regularly contributed poems to the tribune, a Nigerian national newspaper (now part of the collection Songs of the Season) that criticized the regime and commented upon the lives of people in Nigeria. As a result, he was frequently visited by the security agents and asked to explain his poems and to whom they referred.

From the foregoing, it is transparently clear that Osundare is a voice of the voiceless and a human rights activist who has devoted his artistry to making his world a better place to live, especially for the middle-class and those people at the lower rung of society. Osundare's style is unique, simple and modest, thereby clarifying and demystifying the business of poetic works in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Literature, no doubt, is a reflection of society. Since time immemorial, there has been a perceived lopsidedness, inequalities, social imbalance, avarice, greed and other reckless tendencies in human societies. Literary writers have also maximally shown all these and many other critical issues in their works. Odinye (2014), Anyokwu (2015), Afolayan and Ogunrotimi (2018), Bamigboye (2019), Okhuosi (2019), and Kehinde and Ibrahim (2021) have worked on the Poet's verses. Of all these, only those of Odinye (2014) and Anyokwu (2015) seem to be literary interrogations; others are mainly linguistic appraisals and critiques. Those that are literary, i.e. Odinye's, only dwell extensively on corruption and mismanagement in the polities of Nigeria, while that of Anyokwu generally sees Osundare's poems as suitable weapons in dealing with generic social problems of Nigeria. These works do not prioritise showcasing the unfair treatment of the commoners. They fail to foreground the malevolent and the lackadaisical attitudes of the elite class and government toward the poor, whose songs Osundare sings tirelessly in the selected poems utilised in this work. This is the gap (gap of being a 'solicitor' for the poor) that this study aspires to fill.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The work aims to examine how Osundare engages his poetic works to negotiate recognition and fair treatment for the commoners in the society. To achieve this aim, the study examines the following objectives:

1. To analyse selected poems of Osundare in his two selected anthologies - *Songs of The Marketplace* and *Village Voices,* as regards his concern for the treatment given to the commoners in the society;
2. to examine how the selected poems depict his attitude towards the underdog in his two selected anthologies; and
3. to explicate his thematic concerns and how these can help in bettering society.

Research Questions

i. How does Niyi Osundare explore themes of social justice and resistance in everyday life in *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices*?
ii. In what ways do Osundare's selected poems in the selected anthologies demonstrate a commitment to the struggles of the underprivileged in society?
iii. How do the thematic concerns and messages in Osundare's poetry help in proffering solutions to the problems that are ravaging the global community?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to eight (8) selected poems in two selected anthologies of Niyi Osundare. The anthologies are *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices*. The poems from *Songs of The Marketplace* are Excursions I, Excursions II, Excursions III and Excursions IV while those from *Village Voices* are Eating with all the Fingers, Eating Tomorrow's Yam, The Land of Unease and A Villager's Protest.

Methodology

The data for this work were collected from two Osundare's works under study. The poems were qualitatively examined

Theoretical Framework

The theory engaged for the work is Marxism. Marxism is a literary theory founded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Karl Marx lived between 1818 and 1883; He was a German philosopher, while his friend Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) was a German sociologist.

Marxism is an approach that focuses on the economic system that structures human societies. Going by this approach, society is made up of two divisions of people: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The proletariat consists of the people at the lower rung, who are commoners, the downtrodden of the society. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, are a class of wealthier citizens. They are otherwise known and called the capitalist class. This is why Barry

(1995:157) submits that 'the aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange…'

As we have already established, Marxism is a theory advanced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. It is purely a socio-economic and political proposition. Commenting on Marxism, Ormerod (2008:1573) quotes Isaiah Berlin (1948:1) who believed and wrote that 'No thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate and powerful influence upon mankind as Karl Marx'. Ormerod writes that Marx experienced a life of social upheavals and nationalistic sentiments. He argues further that Marx was a radical and a transformative person in nature who also always aspired to have a worker-friendly society. These nasty life experiences could inform Marx's critical attitude towards people's welfarism. The foregoing could be pinpointed as the interface between Niyi Osundare's poetic worldview and the theory employed. Marx is said to be a comrade of the workers, while Osundare, in his selected poems, displayed unalloyed love not only for workers but even the commoners who usually form the work-force in society. In light of the above, the Marxist theoretical approach is suitable for analyzing the selected poems of Niyi Osundare, as his poetry is thematically intertwined or linked with social justice, fair play and betterment of society. Kolley (2024:1) mirrors this when he submits maximally that:

> Marx believed that society's economic foundation regulates its social structure and the mentality of its people. Karl Marx insisted that enduring class conflicts would ultimately lead to a proletarian revolution, resulting in the foundation of a classless society. In his perspective, Karl Marx highlighted that when the productive forces of society come into conflict with the prevailing relations of production, a social revolution is activated.

In consonance with the worldview and poetic ideology of Niyi Osundare, Marxists therefore believe that man's society is organized for the benefit of the haves (the rich and the ruling class) and the have-nots (the poor and the working class).

Rationale for engaging Marxism

We have already established the fact that Osundare's work among others things, believes in betterment of humanity and applauds fair interrelationship and frowns at and on unfair treatments of man to man and that is man generic.

The above inclinations are the basic tenets and principles of Marxism, hence its engagement. If closer attention is given to his works, especially the two collections in this paper, one would see for him/herself that the poet-scholar contends, confronts, and chastises evildoers and all annihilators of the entire human animals, their classes notwithstanding, without minding whose ox is gored. Osundare, like the Marxists, is bothered about humanity. He is therefore, concerned with exploiting literature to create awareness on the welfare of the citizens, both

the working class and the ruling class and even the betterment of the entire society so as to ensure its sustainability.

The Concept of Commonality

The commonality is the common people. These are a group or a class of persons in human society who do not possess socio, governmental or noble ranks. This set of people is usually uneducated. They are, more often than not, seen as riff-raff, the rag-tags, the unspoken of, the unreached, the neglected, the ejected, the lonely of society. Smith (2015), on the concept of commonality, states that according to history, it is the term usually used to describe the working and middle classes, and these are the people who are usually tied to manual labour or basic occupations. King (2016), also submits that commonality depicts the larger, always overlooked, part of the population that drives production and commerce.

Review of Related Works

Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace, Village Voices* and even any of his poems have been critically considered from diverse perspectives by quite several scholars; however, the works that examine the writer as being cut out to write/or 'fight' for the stampeded are scanty. For example, Alu (2008) considers the style and poetic revolution of Osundare's poetics. He sees Osundare as the pioneer of the crops of the Modern African poets who redefine "Alter-Native Tradition in African Poetry". The concepts of the cankerworm called corruption and poverty vis-à-vis Niyi Osundare's *Songs of The Marketplace* is the concern of Odinye (2014). The paper examines the mismanagement, nepotism, indiscipline and indifference to public welfare of the Nigerian leaders, the paper concludes by offering pieces of advice to stakeholders – political leaders, academics, and even the citizenry to aspire to make Nigeria work.

Anyokwu (2015) does what can be called general overview of the poetics of Osundare. The writer examines the importance and relevance of Niyi Osundare's poetry in addressing some social issues in the contemporary Nigeria. The writer concludes his essay by itemizing the characteristic features of Osundare's poetry, which, among others are: "limpidity of diction", "multivalence of form", and adroit deployment of stylistic tricks of print…" A critical observer would see Afolayan and Ogunrotimi (2018)'s work as assessing the craftsmanship of the person of Osundare. Afolayan and Ogunrotimi's work probes into Osundare's versatility, his awesome creative attitudes in relation to his language use and even his ability to adapt cultural and natural elements in poetry to drive home messages which drama and prose-fiction genres have not done.

Stylistic reading of a number of Osundare's poetic works is a matter of interest to Bamigboye (2019). His research concentrates on 'why and how' Osundare employed certain lexical items, sentences, metaphors and other literary terms, in certain ways in order to attain certain goals. His paper comes to conclusion by warning his audience and every other person that they have

got to be wary of mismanaging nature. Okhuosi, (2019)'s work bothers on the speech Act Analysis of Osundare's Early Birds III. Using J. R. Searle's Speech Acts Theory, the writer carries out a critical study of the poems and submits that Osundare employs, mainly, the assertive illocutionary acts, and that it is one of the instruments the poet utilizes to pass across the semantic content in the poetic works. He is of the opinion that Osundare's widespread use of the assertive illocutionary acts indicates that the poetic teacher is out to teach, train, admonish, mold, impact and inform younger generations.

Kehinde and Ibrahim (2021), engaging deconstruct as a theoretical framework, carried out a deconstructive reading of Osundare's poem, called "Poetry is" and Abubakar Uthman's "Wordsworth Lied". Frowning on the concept of identity in poetry literary works, the paper upholds the fact that Niyi Osundare's "Poetry is" and Abubakar Uthman's "Wordsworth lied" are antithetical to the workings of language. It can be seen that all the studies above are mainly linguistic rather than literary, and so they are a far cry from the present endeavour that focuses on seeing Osundare as a poet of the commoners based on his preponderance of thematic concerns, the settings, and emotional attachments to the underdog. Nevertheless, the linguistic studies are pivotal to the study as they would be parts of literature review of this work. In view of the foregoing, the present study is out to fill the lacuna that these previous works did not.

Synopsis of *Songs of the Market Place*

The ninety-nine paged poetic work x-rays the deceit, unevenness and inequality in the Nigerian society. It is a work that raises eyebrows to social strata and their stratification. It also asks rhetorical questions about the connections and associations between the poor masses and the rich in the African world, and most especially in Nigeria.

Analysis of the selected poems

Excursions I

The theme of adventure and heartache is central in all the excursions, as we read:

> We meet eyes in sunken sockets teeth bereft of gum skins scaly like iguana's feet swollen like watermelon (Stanza 1, line 1 - 4)

The above opening stanza of this poem presents heart-rending, awe-inspiring, contemptible and objectionable fall-outs of the poet's journey (excursions) into the town in question. In a simple, accessible language, he says the people they met have "sunken sockets" and that their teeth and gums are already wounded. Their skins are covered with scales and their feet are already swollen. The narrator uses synecdoche (a literary device in which a part of something is substituted for the whole) to paint very ugly pictures of the poor. The poet chooses to behold, feel and document the conditions of this class of people in the society. These are scenes every other passer-by would see and look away from. As for Osundare, documenting the alienation

of the people who are supposed to be catered for is very crucial to him. He continues his awe-striking narration in the second stanza, thus:

> We meet babies with chronic hydrocephalus squeezing spongy breasts on mother's bony chests, shrivelled (Stanza 2, line 1-4)

The pictures of both the babies and their mothers painted are terrifying! The children appear very sick with serious chronic abnormal health conditions. The mothers too are malnutritioned, emaciated and wrinkled.

In the third stanza of the poem, the audience/readers are confronted with yet thought-provoking lines of poetry, as we read thus:

> We see village boys' kwashiorkor bellies hairless head impaled on pin necks and ribs baring the benevolence of the body politic (Stanza 3, line 1-4)

In this stanza, Osundare highlights the effect of poverty, malnutrition and neglect. The poet is not comfortable that children are maltreated like this, as they have become emaciated and sick. 'The body politic' (line 12) suggests that it is the failure of the government that causes it. The theme of voyage is evident in the poem. The poet and his team members go on an adventure and they discovered poverty, lack and disease walking nakedly in the Nigerian society. The first three stanzas are pointers to this theme. This poem is intentionally selected for analysis because it showcases the interest of the poet in the welfare of the poor.

Excursions II

The second part of excursions seems to be dedicated to the harrowing, horrible and frightening portrayal of the beggars and the underdogs of society. What Osundare seems to be doing is nothing but campaigning for a change in social order as he conscientizes his readers/audience with the poem:

> Beggars line our route. Running sores of broken humanity. They line our route. Crippling metaphors of our disabled conscience (Stanza 1, line 1-4)

Here, the poet highlights the avalanche of ugly social and moral problems that pervade Nigerian society.

> Some living casualties of our recent war the war we fought to make politicians rich and the country poor … (Stanza 2, line 1-4)

In this second stanza, Osundare comments on the shocking costs of leadership failure on the common man and woman in society. The poet insinuates that things are working together for the good of the members of the elite class, while other citizens are feeling pain continually.

Some crawl like crabs. Neither seeing nor hearing. Unsettling issues of malnourished pregnancies (Stanza 3, line 1-3)

In the above three-line stanza, the poet suggests that the self-esteem of human persons is no longer in existence in the land and that the people he describes are in dire need of help as they crawl like animals. As it is, in the first stanza, we are confronted with the sorry-case beggars who are already reduced to semi-human humans. Osundare wonders why the well-to-dos who see them every day on their routes behave as if they do not have a healthy conscience, "disabled conscience" (Stanza 1, line 4). In the second stanza, the poet reveals that these beggars are part of the citizens that voted-in the politicians who now conduct themselves as if beggars are not humans, apart from this, it is made known that some of the beggars are "casualties of our recent war, the war we fought to make politicians rich and the country poor", what the poet seems to be saying is that some beggars become casualties and victims of election-riots that put politicians in position, but today, the electorate rely on "sympathy pennies from passers-by"(Line 14-15)

The poet, in the third stanza, continues to open up different challenges confronting this category of people in the society that is supposed to be sympathetic and caring, he writes:

Some crawl like crabs neither seeing nor hearing unsettling issues of malnourished pregnancies… (Stanza 3, line 1-3)

Many have limbs and eyes and ears only beggared by increasing layoffs, handy jettisons of captains of industry (Stanza 4, line 1-3)

The poet in the lines above is pointing an accusing finger at those who turn some of these people into beggars, they are "captains of industry" (line 21), they are the ones who sacked and relieved them of their duties, hence their current joblessness status. In effect, the poet is saying that it is the failure of the government, attitudes of stakeholders in the society and unavailability of jobs that turn these people to beggars.

Here, the poet is acting as a voice for the commoners, calling the attention of government's awake to its responsibilities. There is the theme of total neglect and abandonment in this poem, as beggars and cripples are a common sight daily. This is obvious in the first stanza of the poem, and it runs through.

Excursions III

This is a six-stanza poem that showcases the ugly experience of the poet-persona's touring of the entire land. The first stanza is a testament to his adventure. He writes:

I have been through the push and pull of shopping doors… (Stanza 1, line 1-3)

In this poem, Osundare is talking about the frustration and dehumanisation that appear in every facet of life in the land. Osundare is further bothered about the alienation of the land. In stanza two, Osundare continues to exhibit his frustration when he writes that:

> I have been through the jam and jab of motor parks *molue, danfo, dagbere** … (line 1-4)
> as pick-purses brawl over the loot across the street (stanza two, line 11-13)

In stanza two, the poet foregrounds the chaos and upheavals that exist in modern-day Nigeria, despite the presence of elected leaders in position. He talks of 'jam and jab' (stanza two, line 2) of crowded motor parks, he also talks of the hustle and bustle of porters, traders and touts. Osundare seems to be disillusioned and disappointed in the leadership of the nation, who failed in ensuring a better life for all and sundry. Despite the advancement here and there, there is poverty, hardship and difficulties facing everybody in the land.

Even in stanza four, Osundare is surprised that the government workers and even the civil servants are not civil at all. There is heart-aching bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption. The officials are unhelpful and discourteous, thereby negating the expected standard in this government's parastatal. The issue of files being 'lost and found, found and lost' (stanza 4, line 6 & 7) means inefficiency and disorderliness. He writes:

> I have been through the secretariat where civil servants are all but civil here files are lost and found found and lost… (Stanza 4, line 1-7)

Excursions IV

In 'Excursions IV', Osundare discovers that people in the larger society are disappointed in the leaders who find it difficult to proffer solutions to the socio-economic challenges that have become commonplace in the land, as he writes that:

> In the streets people whisper their rage about a million million naira of our blood … (Stanza 1, line 1-4)

He is also taken aback that people in the ivory tower have been corrupted by the ugly practices that have pervaded the nation; they are no longer innovative, lacking originality and creativity, recycling worn traditions' (stanza 2, line 4) as we read thus:

> In the university students talk about threadbare gurus recycling worn traditions dreading change like despots yes, they talk about dons pawning wives for chairs then slouching into glamorized mediocrity breeding flat minds… (Stanza 2, lines 1-9)

He is, further, surprised that the kings have also been corrupted by the idiocy and lunacy in the land. They, have also thrown caution to the wind and partake in the evils of the time. Osundare writes that:

> In the cities people whisper about fortressed kings ruling by boot and butt,… (Stanza 4, line 1-4)

The poet, however, concludes by assuring his audience and readers that truth will triumph in the final analysis:

> But soon the people will shout when murmurs break through muzzles and will powers into action then oppression's cloud will clear …(Stanza 6, line 1-5)

Via the instrumentality of the four poems titled 'Excursions' I–IV, Osundare comments loudly on the upheavals, struggles and difficulties that obtain in Nigeria despite her abundant natural blessings, revealing the lack of foresight of the leaders. These poems 'Excursions' I – IV are pointers to the fact that Osundare is interested in the predicaments of the commoners, hence the decision to analyse them in this work.

Synopsis of *Village Voices*

The seventy-one-page collection was written in the year 1984 and it houses thirty-seven (37) poems. It is Osundare's second poetic work, and the bulk of the collection examines, reveals and addresses the agonies and predicaments of the ordinary men and women, and even the children in Africa and other developing worlds.

Analysis of the Selected Poems in *Village Voices*

Eating with all the Fingers

The theme of this poem is greed and its possible consequences. In this poem, the poet-persona utilises simple diction to call attention to the young and budding generation of leaders who are not only corrupt but gluttonous and unnecessarily ambitious. These are people who are shamelessly eating with their "ten fingers". The poet wonders and asks these sets of people if, that is how the elderly eat with all their fingers, will they meet or wake up to see any "single morsel"? He sees them as greenhorns who don't know what the business of life calls for, instead of watching and following the footsteps of the elders, they are gluttonous and muscularly???? ambitious for nothing, busy doing nothing! He accuses:

> You jerk up from sleep and find us eating you immediately want a scoop
> just wait if we started this way would you wake up on a single morsel?
> (Stanza 1, line 1-7)

Using a humorous approach, Osundare is creatively and sarcastically scolding the younger generations to be patient and considerate of other people in whatever they do. He also admonishes them to learn from the elders who are older than they.

The affairs of this life are like people eating some dip ten fingers and clog
their throats their greed chokes the land (Stanza 2, line 1-5)

Osundare also engages metaphor here to comment on the negative and gluttonous posture of the youths, who tend to be extravagant. He thinks that the youngsters lack self-control and if they are not checkmated, will injure themselves 'clog their throats' (line 11), at the end of the day.

The last four lines reveal the preparedness of the poet and other human rights activists like him to cry woe and wage war against "wobia" in society. He expresses his readiness thus:

We will raise our voices and tell the world we will not be watchers of
others eating (Stanza 3, line 1-4)

As evident from the above, another theme in the poem is standing up and fighting for one's rights.

The young politicians and other leaders are the ones eating while the poor masses are watching. The poet is saying that they would publicise the corruption and other reckless tendencies of this crop of young but too temerarious leaders. It is noteworthy that the poem is a reflection of the atrocities of the political class. They have more than they need, yet they are not satisfied. They are usually accused of nepotism as their family members, wives and children are the only beneficiaries of their loots and other political gains. The poem analysed above is a rebuke to the elite class, hence the decision to consider it in this work.

Eating Tomorrow's yams

The theme of this poem is the lack of foresight or myopia. That this poem follows "Eating with all the fingers" in the collection must be intentional. The very word that comes first in the titles of these two poems is 'EATING'. The questions that may crop up in the minds of the readers may likely be: who are those people "eating with all the fingers" and who are those prodigal individuals "eating tomorrow's yam"?

Furthermore, it may also be asked what the metaphor "yam" stands for and why the poet-persona is bold enough to challenge these rascals and prodigals? It is transparently clear that the "eaters" are the thoughtless, care-free leaders who, upon stumbling on the nation's wealth, begin to voraciously and gluttonously eat up the wealth without a thought for tomorrow. The poet, representing the elders, knows the consequences of such misdemeanour. He writes in Stanza 1:

When cutting a tree in the forest it is the wise who watch where it will fall;
(Stanza 1, line 1-3)

The poet continues to expose the condition of the "village" and even of the "village barn", in fact, the mood and tone used call for caution. Nevertheless, the prodigal insists on carrying out his thoughtless act of eating up tomorrow's yam'.

We read in Stanza two:

> There is only one yam left in the village barn the prodigal calls for a knife
> "what shall we eat tomorrow?" the people ask if we finish all the yam
> today (Stanza 2, line 1-6)

In the above stanza, the poet reveals that "the people" (this may mean the populace, the well-meaning citizens of the society) try to interject the prodigal to stop his reckless tendencies, asking him, "what shall we eat tomorrow?"

The poet also makes us see the senselessness of the "prodigal" when he opens his vocal cords in stanza 3, thus:

> And says the prodigal: 'tomorrow will take care of itself, how can we
> know the next day if we die of hunger today?' (Stanza 3, line 1- 4)

Furthermore, we are made to understand that "the people" are wiser than the prodigal by putting to him a question that should put him back on course:

> The people reply: 'how can we see tomorrow if we eat its yam today?'
> (Stanza 4, line 1-3)

The poet, via this poem, desires that both the national leaders and politicians would take precautions concerning the wealth of the nation, Nigeria, lest posterity rain curses on them ceaselessly.

The Land of Unease

The poetic piece titled 'The Land of Unease' not only reveals the vicissitudes of life being faced by the commoners of the society but also the inequalities therein. On one of the pages where the poem is written, the poet drew a human palm that shows unequal five (5) fingers. Apart from the lack of equality that obtains on the palm, two human beings appear boldly. One looks well-fed, bedecked in 'agbada' with a Yoruba cap to match, while the other man appears pauperish, thin, haggard, nasty, unpleasant and unwholesome. The title, once again, is self-explanatory as it talks about chaos, disarray, confusion and difficulties being experienced in the land which is supposed to be lively and conducive for all to live. This could be the reason why Alu (2008: 69) comments about Osundare's work thus:

> In his poetry, we are confronted with many forces of oppression in the
> varying operative arena. Most importantly, the feature of his poetry is his
> defence of the speechless and oppressed citizens of the land.

Osundare believes that poverty is the cankerworm that is instrumental to societal upheavals. He writes in the first stanza that:

That land never knows peace where a few have too much and many none at all. (Stanza 1, line 1-3).

As far as the poet is concerned, the above scenario is a serious matter. Osundare appears to be a lone voice, crying woe in the wilderness of the society in question, which is lopsided and has no economic, social and educational welfare of the populace at heart. The poet believes that if well planned, the manifestation of divine care and blessings is enough for all and sundry. He writes in the second stanza that:

The yam of this world is enough for all mouths which pay daily homage to the god of the throat (Stanza 2, line 1-4)

The themes of 'The Land of Unease' are turbulence, difficulty and inequality between the common man and the rich in society. Osundare seems to be warning the ruling class that lawlessness and unrest may break out if the situation continues unabated.

A Villager's Protest

Here, the poet chronicles the number of times politicians visit and pester the electorate to solicit and covet their votes, which, according to him, are even countless; he adumbrates the visits thus:

They come more times than the eye bats its lid when they need your vote (Stanza 1, line 1-3)

He says further that the politicians' mouths are sugar-coated and their words are a bunch of sweet nonsense, bribing, prostrating/to the populace so as to secure their approval. The poet writes:

They come armed with sweet words inflated promises and a chest that bribes with countless prostrations like the agama on the rock (Stanza 2, line 1-6)

According to him, their promises include:

We'll build schools. We'll build hospitals. We'll bring water. To every backyard (Stanza 3, line 1-4)

The poet reminds his audience about the empty promises of the political class, which they make to the citizens in all towns and villages of Africa, which they usually refuse to fulfil. It is indeed an indignation poem, showing the fury and anger of the masses ably led by the poet himself, castigating the politicians on their ugly lifestyle. The poet ridicules further that:

They come. They talk. They promise. Now in, and promises forgotten (Stanza 4, line 1-5)

Osundare makes use of "Esuru" which, according to him, is a kind of yam, soft, loose, tasty, but impossible to pound **(**Page 48), to throw aspersion and sarcasm on the politicians who usually keep away from the masses who vote them in after they might have assumed office. These honourables, as far as Osundare is concerned, are not honourable. Why? Because:

> Esuru grows swollen-headed and outgrows the prestigious belly of the mortar (Stanza 5, line 1-3)

The poet believes that these politicians are not wise, as they are unaware that power is transient and that the position they occupy today belongs to another person tomorrow. He writes that:

> Men of deep unwisdom knowing not that power is the bird of the forest. (Stanza 6, line 1-3)

The poet rounded off the poem with words of consolation both to himself and the masses he is contesting on behalf of, thus:

> Another rain will fall (its clouds already gathering) (Stanza 7, line 1-2)

The theme of sheer disillusionment and ingratitude runs through the poem. The poet believes that when these ingrate politicians call on the electorate to canvas their vote, they should expect protest. This forms the title of this poem, "A Villager's Protest".
The reason why the poems are chosen and analysed above from the *Village Voices* in this paper is that it is a wake-up call to all stakeholders to be awake to their duties.

Findings

In the course of this research, it was discovered that the focus and the settings of the works are mainly rural areas and even about ordinary and common events which the average man and woman always overlook. Osundare must have noted, probably as a result of his rural upbringing himself, that a rural area is the best laboratory to study the psychology of human beings. The conditions and the welfare of the people, especially the commoners, are mainly his concern. Among others, literary/poetic devices engaged are simple words presented in an awe-inspiring manner; similes, metaphors, to foreground the bad conditions of the poor, for example, the poet uses a simile, which is the comparison between two things that is made explicit by the use of 'as' or 'like'. Osundare makes use of this figure of speech to describe the depressing and heartbreaking situation of the poor, probably, to solicit public sympathy. We read in "Excursion I" thus:

> …Skin scaly like Iguana's feet
> Swollen like watermelon (*Songs of the Marketplace* Page 7, line 3-4)

In 'A Villager's Protest' too, we read in the second stanza, line 6, thus:

> …Like the agama on the rock (*Village Voices* Page 47, line 15)

Furthermore, in the same 'A Villager's Protest', Osundare employs metaphor to cast aspersion on the politician who avoids contact with the electorate after winning the election, as we read:

> …Our man becomes a locust seen but once (page 48, stanza 5, line 10)

He is also dexterous in bringing Yoruba words into his poems to foreground the poor condition of the underprivileged in society. For example, he uses *tanwiji* (mosquito larvae) to indicate how bad the water consumed by the commoners is. He similarly uses *molue, danfo, dagbere etc.* to show belittling means of transportation of these same people. His tone in the poems is sometimes humorous and sarcastic so as to display his disapproval of political leaders and even the selfish or excessive aspirations of leaders who often desire to have more than they need.

Examples of satire

The poet uses several satirical statements to point out the flaws of greedy leaders, he also does this to provoke a change or make people think right, e.g.:

> …men forge unequal knives
> a few slashing the yam
> with machetes greedier
> than Esimuda's sword
> leaving mere peelings
> for the many others (*Village Voices* Page 46, line 14-19)

Examples of sarcasm

> And when we ask why. They say fingers are not equal. We ask again . Why have a few chosen to be thumbs. and the many others *omodindinrin** clinging precariously to the periphery of the palm? (*Village Voices* page 46, lines 24-30)

The Social Impact of Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices*

Niyi Osundare's selected poems in *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices* can transform the social and political landscape in Nigeria if her leaders and political office holders would heed his timeless and timely warnings, counsels and precautions.

Advocacy for social justice and equal rights

In *Songs of The Marketplace* and *Village Voices*, Osundare exposes the entrenched moral rot and corruption in the Nigerian nation. He points at the disparities between the rich and the poor, demanding a revolution in the social system toward fairness and justice. His poems is a clarion call to readers and every right-thinking Nigerian to engage in social reconstruction with a view to initiating change.

Conclusion

This paper has critically carried out a study of Niyi Osundare's poetry, and these are *Songs of the Marketplace* and *Village Voices*. Previous studies of Osundare's works were carried out and the concept of commonality was dealt with. The study was upheld by Marxism. There was an in-depth reading, interpretations and explanations of the selected poems from the two anthologies under study. It was discovered that Osundare engaged several methods and literary devices, not only to cast aspersions on the ruling class but also to awaken the sleeping, selfish, gluttonous political leaders to their social responsibilities, this as far as Osundare is concerned, would forestall uproar and having 'A Villager's Protest' (A Villager's Protest Pg. 47). It was discovered that the poet demonstrated keen interest in the plights of the commoners, the uncelebrated, and the never-do-well of the society, these is displayed in virtually all analysed poems especially in 'Excursions' I - IV. Particular attentions were given to the literary devices of his poetry. It was noted that the poet desired and clamoured for a better Nigeria in no small measure. The works are dedicated to showcasing and interrogating the unfortunate predicament of the commoners in society. The study concluded that he is indeed a poet of the commonality.

In achieving his aim of speaking for the voiceless, among others, Osundare engages several poetic devices, among which are:

1. Figurative expressions: The poet mainly employed metaphors and similes, to foreground the pathetic situations of commoners, begging and sickly people of his poems. He does this to canvass or evoke sympathetic emotions for them.
2. Another instrument he employed is Symbolism and Imagery: Osundare deliberately makes use of some symbols and words to illustrate certain concepts or ideas in his works. For example, in 'The Land of Unease', He uses 'yam' to indicate wealth, riches, resources and treasures of Nigeria. He also uses 'mouths' to indicate or refer to all people of Nigeria Village' in '*Village Voices*' could also be said to mean Nigeria, while 'Marketplace' in *Songs of the Marketplace* could also mean or stand for Nigeria.
3. Tone and Intonation: Niyi Osundare's tone is absolutely sarcastic in most of his poems under study. For example, in *Village Voices* (Page 48 stanza 5) the poet writes thus:

    The mouth is now too honourable to greet, the belly too obese to bend our
    man becomes a locust seen but once in several seasons. (Line 39-42)

There are two sarcastic statements in the above lines, for example, 'the mouth is now too honourable to greet…', which indicates the pride and arrogance of the politicians, who find it difficult to greet the electorate as soon as they are voted in. Secondly, 'our man becomes a locust seen but once in several seasons' points to these same politicians who run away from the electorate after their success in elections.

Also, in Excursions I (Line 48, *Songs of the Marketplace* page 9) 'catatonic orgasms' is sarcastic because the singing here is nothing but a mere demonstration of enthusiasm, it is mechanical and it is not real. Likewise, 'Hymning and Psalming are the diet of the soul though

the body succumbs to the buffets of hunger' (line 49-51) is also sarcastic because the people in this poem are hungry, suffering and are in dire need of a physical diet that can nourish their body, not the one that nourishes their souls.

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