American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)
e-ISSN : 2378-703X
Volume-10, Issue-11, pp-53-66
www.ajhssr.com
Research Paper Open Access

THE CLASSICAL AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETICS IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S MOONSONGS AND THE WORD IS AN EGG

Micah Okon Asukwo , Dele Maxwell Ugwanyi
Department of English Akwa Ibom State University Obio Akpa Campus
Department of English and Literary Studies Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu

ABSTRACT : Existing studies on Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* dwell predominantly on the social relevance of the works in line with the poet's vision that writers should deploy their art in the service of society. Not much has been accomplished in subjecting the texts to a hermeneutic appraisal from the perspectives of the Classical as well as some 20th century poetics, particularly postmodernism. This is the thrust of this study which examines Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* from the Greco-Classical, Romantic, as well as some twentieth century poetics. The research is a qualitative one and adopts the interpretive design. The study adopts Stylistics as its analytical framework. The study finds that the poet's two collections align with the Aristotelian concepts of mimesis and rhetoric. The works conform to the Classical notion of sublimity which harps on the imperative of a socially elevating art. The works also align with the dictates of Romanticism which emphasises imagination and emotional spontaneity as the fulcrum of an impacting art. The study argues that Osundare's poetry demonstrates a creative synthesis of classical aesthetic principles and twentieth-century poetic experimentation, reflecting his commitment to artistic innovation, cultural identity, and social engagement. The study concludes that *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* reveal Osundare's distinctive poetic vision, through which inherited literary conventions are transformed into dynamic instruments of contemporary expression.

KEYWORDS: *Greco-Classical, Romanticism, Hermeneutics, Rhetoric, Mimesis*

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the oldest forms of literary expression, poetry has developed by leaps and bounds and has undergone significant transformations in its artistic principles, thematic preoccupations, and modes of representation across different historical periods. From the Classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome to the experimental movements of 20th century literature, poetry has remained a valuable artistic medium through which writers explore human experiences, cultural values, philosophical questions, and social realities. Classical poetics, particularly as articulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*, provides a framework for understanding literary composition, artistic imitation, structure, and the relationship between literature and human experience. Over time, however, changing historical circumstances and intellectual developments have expanded and changed the classical conceptions of the poetic form and function. The emergence of modernist and other 20th century literary movements/theories introduced new approaches to language, imagery, rhythm, symbolism, and poetic structure, thereby broadening the possibilities of literary expression. An examination of the relationship between Classical and 20th century poetics consequently offers an important framework for understanding the continuity and transformation of poetic traditions across historical periods.

Poetics refers to the principles of literary interpretation (Frye, 1970). Classical poetics is generally associated with the earliest established principles of literary interpretation, composition, aesthetic order, imitation, and the organization of artistic expression, as handed down by the ancient Greek and Roman scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, among others. Aristotle's conception of mimesis, imitation or representation, for example, remains particularly influential in discussions of how literature reflects, interprets, or reconstructs human experience. Although Aristotle's primary attention in *Poetics* is primarily directed towards tragedy and epic, his ideas have contributed significantly to wider debates about literary form, artistic unity, and the relationship between literary representation and reality. Classical literary thought also encourages consideration of the relationship between the poet, the subject of representation, and the audience. By contrast, 20th century poetics, typified in this study by postmodernism, encompasses diverse movements and theoretical approaches that question or revise inherited literary conventions. Thus, modernist experimentation, imagism,

symbolism, and other later developments such as structuralism and poststructuralism encouraged poets to reconsider conventional patterns of rhythm, diction, imagery, and structure. Rather than treating these traditions as entirely contrasting or different, a nuanced examination can sometimes enhance, promote or project the aesthetic appeal, comprehensibility, and appreciation of literary texts.

Fashina (2007) notes that within African literature, the encounter between inherited literary traditions and modern poetic experimentation has produced distinctive forms of artistic expression, and that African poets frequently negotiate the relationship between indigenous oral traditions, colonial literary inheritances, and contemporary aesthetic practices. Oral poetry, proverbs, chants, songs, folklore, as well as communal performances provide important resources for African poetic creativity, while 20th century literary movements offer additional possibilities for experimentation with language, imagery, symbolism, and structure. These intersecting traditions complicate any rigid distinction between Classical and modern poetics because African poetry often combines inherited aesthetic resources with innovative literary techniques. Niyi Osundare, a leading second-generation African poet, occupies a significant position with this literary development. His poetry is widely associated with the use of indigenous cultural resources, accessible language, musicality, and an engagement with the social realities of his society. Osundare's artistic practice demonstrates how poetry can function simultaneously as an aesthetic creation, a cultural expression, and an articulate medium of intellectual and social engagement.

Studying Osundare through the lens of classical, romantic, and some 20th century poetics therefore provides an opportunity to investigate the ways in which African poetic expression participates in broadening literary traditions while retaining its distinctive cultural identity. Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* offer valuable texts for examining the relationship between poetic inheritance and modern literary experimentation. The study investigates the relevance of Classical concepts such as mimesis or imitation and artistic organisation, alongside some 20th century concerns with experimentation, linguistic innovation, and the configuration of poetic form. Through critical analysis, the study seeks to establish how the two collections are capable of being subjected to any level of hermeneutic endeavour – whether classical or contemporary. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of Osunadre's poetic craftsmanship and demonstrates the value of examining African poetry within both its indigenous cultural contexts and the wider historical development of poetic thought.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

One of the most prolific Nigerian-born poets, Niyi Osundare is among the most widely critiqued poets of the 21st century Africa. His realistic portrayal of issues of common interest in his artistry is perhaps one of the foremost reasons why his works enjoy a wide critical response, analysis and appraisals. The two collections of his poetic artistry used in this study - *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*, are not left out. We shall begin with *Moonsongs.* In his study of Osundare's poetry, Aderemi Bamikunle (1995), examines the evolution of the poet's themes and techniques across his early collections, including *Moonsongs*. His discussion provides a useful foundation for understanding the relationship between Osundare's poetic development, his engagement with nature, and his commitment to social criticism. Bamikunle's broader examination of Osundare's poetic career suggests that the poet's artistic development involves an interaction between socio-political concerns and natural imagery. This perspective is relevant to the present study because it establishes the importance of examining not only the thematic concerns of Osunadre's poetry but also the techniques through which those concerns are expressed. However, the present research extends this discussion by investigating how the poetic features of *Moonsongs* relate to classical aesthetic principles and 20th century poetic experimentation.

In "Communicating the Popular in Niyi Osundare's Soetry: *Moonsongs* Reconsidered", Katija Khan (2010) examines the relationship between poetry, song, myth, and performance in *Moonsongs*, describing the collection through the concept of "soetry", which combines the characteristics of song and poetry. Khan argues that Osundare creatively reworks Yoruba cultural traditions to produce a poetic form that communicates multiple dimensions of African experience. The study is particularly significant because it demonstrates how oral performance and indigenous cultural resources contribute to Osundare's poetic expression. Its emphasis on the relationship between written poetry and performed song provides a useful basis for investigating the interaction between inherited poetic practices and modern literary forms. Nevertheless, the relationship between these features and the specific principles of classical and twentieth-century poetics requires further or more extensive critical attention.

Christopher Anyaokwu's "Osundare's Poetry and Yoruba Worldview" (2011) provides further insight into Osundare's cultural and aesthetic orientation, though the critic's work examines Osundare's poetry more broadly rather than exclusively concentrating on *Moonsongs*. Anyokwu's article aptly investigates Osundare's use of Yoruba cultural concepts, oral poetic traditions, and mythology. The critic also considers the relationship between Yoruba cultural values and the poet's socially committed vision, highlighting the interaction between indigenous aesthetics and ideological expression. Anyokwu's scholarship is relevant to the present study because it provides a cultural foundation for examining Osundare's poetic choices and their relationship to

broader literary traditions. However, the present study seeks to go beyond a general discussion of Yoruba influences on Osundare's works and examine the Classical and some twentieth-century poetic features identifiable in *Moonsongs*. Our attention now shifts to the second text in this research – *The Word Is an Egg.*

In "Before the Beginning: Niyi Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg*" (2001), Wole Ogundele examines Osundare's understanding of words as creative and almost autonomous entities, arguing that the poet's artistic practice is deeply connected to the oral traditions and worldview of the Yoruba people. He draws attention to the collection's emphasis on the spoken word, chanting, repetition, and the sensory experience of poetic language. His analysis suggests that meaning in Osundare's poetry is generated not merely through the communication of ideas but also through the experience of words as sound, performance, and creative force. Ogundele's critical position is significant to the present study because it establishes language and poetic expression as central concerns in *The Word Is an Egg*. Nevertheless, the relationship between these features and classical theories of poetic representation, as well as twentieth-century experiments with poetic language and form, requires further critical evaluation.

Clara Agbara's "Implicit Communication in Niyi Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg"* (2018) is another valuable contribution among critical appraisals of Osundare's work under study. It examines how the poet communicates his creative ideas through effective deployment of figurative and idiomatic expressions. Drawing on pragmatic analysis and conceptual metaphor theory, the research examines how figurative/idiomatic language enables the poet to communicate meanings that extend beyond the literal interpretation of words even as it demonstrates the importance of linguistic creativity in the construction of meaning and highlights the relationship between poetic language and interpretation. Agbara's findings are relevant to the present study because they provide a basis for examining how stylistic devices contribute to Osundare's poetic craftsmanship. However, while Agbara focuses on implicit communication and figurative expression, the present study seeks to incorporate classical and some twentieth- century poetics in the analysis of *The Word Is an Egg*.

Josephine Alexander's "Oral Poetic Techniques as Decolonial Creative Strategies in Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg*" (2024), examines how Osundare deploys oral poetic techniques to challenge established conventions of Nigerian poetry in English. The critic argues that the poet creatively employs oral traditions to democratise poetic expression and challenge inherited Eurocentric conceptions of literary language and form. This critical position is especially relevant because it foregrounds the relationship between poetic structure, cultural identity, and decolonial artistic practice. In the same vein, Edem and Tsavmbu's "A Stylistico-Semantic Analysis of Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg*" (2024) examines Osundare's linguistic choices at the syntactic, semantic, morphological, phonological, and graphological levels, showing how these features contribute to the overall meaning of the work. Together, these studies demonstrate the significance of oral aesthetics, linguistic innovation, and poetic form in the collection. The present study, however, brings these concerns into a more elaborate analysis of the text by incorporating the classical and some twentieth-century poetics in its hermeneutic endeavour.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Stylistics. For Leech and Short (1981), style is the way "language is used in a literary text, with the aim of relating it to its artistic (aesthetic) functions" (14). In the same vein, M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham (2012) define style as the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse, that is, "how speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say" (384). The implication is that there is an inextricable relationship between what a literary text says and how what is being said is conveyed. Eyoh and Maduka (2005) believe that the style of a literary work contributes significantly to its overall message, and so an attempt at undermining one in favour of the other is certainly bound to be counter-productive. Stylistics is the scientific study of the style of literary texts. Peter Barry (1995) defines it as a critical approach which uses the methods and findings of "the science of linguistics in the analysis of literary texts" (203). By linguistics here, Barry means the scientific study of language and its structures "rather than the learning of individual languages" (203). Developed in the 20th century, stylistics aims at showing how the technical linguistic features of a literary work such as the grammatical structure of its sentences contributes to its overall meaning and effects.

Stylistics serves as the theoretical framework for this study because it provides, essentially, a systematic method for examining how linguistic choices produce meaning and aesthetic effects in literary texts. Thus, rather than treating poetry as a transparent expression of ideas, stylistics focuses on the relationship between form and interpretation by analyzing features such as diction, syntax, imagery, sound patterns, figurative use of language, rhythm, repetition, symbolism, and textual structure. This approach, Eyoh and Maduka (cited earlier) believe, is relevant to the study of poetry because poetic meaning is often created through the deliberate organization of language. Stylistics therefore enables the researchers to move beyond the general thematic interpretation of the text to demonstrating how specific linguistic and formal features of a work of art contribute to the construction of meaning in the primary texts. This framework is especially appropriate for analyzing Osundare's engagement with African cultural and oral traditions. His copious deployment of proverbs, chants, songs, indigenous expressions, communal voices, musicality, and accessible language can be examined as stylistic resources through which cultural identity and social experience are represented. Generally, stylistics provides a balanced framework for relating textual form to

cultural and thematic significance while demonstrating how Osundare develops a distinctive poetic vision through the creative manipulation of language.

The Classical Poetics

In the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye (1970) defines poetics as "a theory of criticism whose principles apply to the whole of literature and account for every valid type of critical procedure" (14). The history of poetics or the principles of literary interpretation has its roots in the Classical Greek poetics and rhetoric, and traces its trajectory to contemporary aesthetics and hermeneutic theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' literary scholars and critics. Although the roots of literary theory and criticism or poetics run as far back as the ancient Greece and Rome, it became a practice or profession that stood out succinctly in the twentieth century (Nwahunanya, 2007). The profession, Nwahunanya opines, comprises four basic arms, namely, analysis, explication/interpretation, evaluation, and prescription (15). As already noted, the history of poetics may be traced to the Classical Period, which spans 750 BC and 150 AD (Nwahunanya, 6). The most important literary theorists and critics were philosophers whose burning zeal and love for knowledge and wisdom resulted in their insistence on probing into virtually every sphere of human experience - philosophy, art, law, politics, science, and so on. They included the sophists of the mid fifth century, such as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, Gorgias, among others. Their philosophical thoughts, inspirational discoveries and time-tested postulations on poetry and indeed the literary art remain invaluable and indispensable to the development of the literary criticism.

In his *Republic*, Plato views poetry as mimesis, which means imitation or representation. For him, therefore, all art, poetry inclusive, is an imitation, a copy of objects in the physical world. It is Plato's conviction that poetry is merely "a copy of a copy, leading away from the truth rather than towards it" (Leitch, 33). This is why in Plato's ideal Republic, poets and their works should be banished if society must thrive soundly, morally, and peacefully (Leitch, 34). Like Plato, Aristotle views poetry as mimesis or imitation, but differs affirmatively in its moral effect on society and its utilitarian potential. In *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that poetry explores universal truths and what may happen according to probability or necessity rather than merely recording actual events, which is the preoccupation of history. He emphasizes plot, diction, rhythm and the organization of poetic elements as important considerations in evaluating literary works. His approach to literary criticism encourages the close examination of poetic form, language, imagery, and structure to establish how these features contribute to meaning and artistic effectiveness (Nwahunanya, 5-15). The hallmark of all this is that, Aristotle's *Poetics* provides a foundational framework for analyzing the relationship between poetic form and meaning, making it relevant to the study of classical and twentieth-century poetics in Niyi Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*.

Apart from Plato and Aristotle, Horace and Longinus are among scholars of antiquity whose intellectual contributions have also, highly invaluably, shaped literary criticism for decades. In his *Ars Poetica* (*Art of Poetry*), for instance, Horace notes that poetry should "both instruct and delight" (Leitch, 121). To Horace, poetry is not merely an inspired madness (as in Plato); it is an art and as such has rules and conventions that require both instruction and practice (122). Horace demonstrates that in literary creativity, natural ability must be supplemented by careful study and guided by discipline even as literary success depends on a combination of nature and art. Harping on its utilitarian value, Horace posits that poetry has the ability, tendency or likelihood to enhance human civilization (123). On his part, Longinus' *On Sublimity* harps on the need for literary writers to adopt an elevated and lofty style of writing that rises above the ordinary. From his author-centred perspective, writers and orators achieve greatness not just by rhetorical techniques but also by deep feelings, profound thoughts and natural genius (Leitch, 135). Thus, for him, "sublimity is the echo of a noble mind", capable of uplifting the spirit of the reader, filling them with "unexpected astonishment and pride, arousing noble thoughts, and suggesting more than words can convey" (Leitch, 135). This research uses the intellectual position of these Greco-Classical scholars, Romantic as well as some twentieth-century poetics in the analysis of Niyi Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*.

A Poetic Analysis of Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*

In their separate positions on art and poetry to be specific, Plato and Aristotle uphold that art is mimesis - an imitation of nature. Thus, the arts of painting, poetry, music, dancing, and sculpture, are all imitations. But Plato would have us believe that art is an imitator of the world of appearance and not of Essence" (Abrams 8), implying that works of art have a lowly status in the order of existing things. This is why art, poetry in this case, should not, according to Plato, be encouraged given that all arts are "ultimately judged by the one criterion of their relation to the same Ideas" (8). Abrams sums the overall implication of the Platonic view of art thus:

> On these grounds, the poet is inescapably the competitor of the artisan, the lawmaker, and the moralist; indeed, any of these can be regarded as himself the truer poet, successfully achieving that imitation of the Ideas which the traditional poet attempts under conditions dooming him to failure. (Abrams, 9)

The Aristotelian conception of the term in his treatise, *Poetics*, holds that though mimesis or imitation means that a work of art is constructed according to prior models in the nature of things, "there is nothing invidious in that fact ... " (Abrams, 9). In other words, though art imitates, there is absolutely nothing harmful about it. Aristotle thus formally makes imitation a term specific to the arts, "distinguishing these from everything else in the universe, thereby freeing them from rivalry with other human activities" (9-10). For him, the genesis of art may be traced to the natural human instinct for imitating, and to the natural tendency to find pleasure in seeing imitations. Thus, for Aristotle, imitation in art is natural, and therefore, inevitable.

Osundrare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word is an Egg* are works of art that emanate from this concept of mimesis. In *Moonsongs*, for example, we find a work of art that reminds one of typical African traditional community of yesteryears whose members would gather under a bright moonlight to recite and chant some traditional folklore. The poem thus imitates artistic works by traditional bards and songsters who enlivened their community, mostly in the evenings, under a brightly shinning moonlight with all degrees of verbal entertainments. Osundare thus draws his inspiration from his Yoruba society, appropriating enormous artistic categories that are predominantly verbal, as Christopher Anyaokwu (2013), observes:

> Cognate to the deployment of the socio-cultural and ethical values of the oral past and the literary syntactic features of the Yoruba (African) oral poetry, in Niyi Osundare's verse, we also find a lavish or liberal appropriation of such oral artistic categories as the proverbs, the riddle, the curse, song, word games or punning, incantation, eulogy or panegyrics and satire. (3)

Among traditional poets and singers, there is a preponderance of the use of metaphors, onomatopoeia, heteronyms, idiophones, refrains, folksongs, alliteration, assonances and consonances in their oral pieces. This is what one finds in Osundare's *Moonsongs*, an indication that mimesis is rationally inevitable as far as the whole of the art is concerned. In the following lines, Osundare uses copious metaphors in admiring the moon, the way a traditional bard would:

> Oh moon, matron, master, eternal maiden
> The bounce of your bosom
> The miracle of your cheeks
> Your smiles which ripens the forests
> Your frown which wrinkles the dusk
> The youth of your age
> The age of your youth
> All, all wait
> The echoing thunder of my riddling chants (*Moonsongs*, 1)

In *The Word Is an Egg* (henceforth, *TWIE*), Osundare also imitates traditional Yoruba chants and invocations which often take the form of incantation. Here, we also find abundant use of refrains, idiophones, alliteration, assonances, consonances, and indeed other devices associated with the oral art. In "Invocations of the Word", for example, Osundare goes incantatory:

> Unwind the wind
> Give rapid legs to the crouching leaf;
> The horse of words has galloped through clouds, through thunder,
> through roaring waters...
> Throw open the door of your ears (*TWIE*, 10)

Like Aristotle would have us believe, poetry and indeed art is by nature mimetic. It is impossible to have an art that does not imitate, but how the audience or consumers of this product benefit is what matters after all.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle makes a case for poets to possess the power of persuasion in their artistry. This was necessary, in the words of Abrams, to keep one's audience in their seats until the end, and to induce cheers and applause. To achieve this, "the artist must conciliate, inform, and move the minds of his auditors" (Abrams, 16). The power of persuasion is a direct function of how vast the poet is. This is in line with the Latin maxim that one cannot give what they do not have (*Nemo dat quod non habet*). In this guise, Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* are works of art whose rhetorical power is monumental. In *Moonsongs*, for example, the poet makes use of copious imagery from various and varied dimensions, fields and professions. Thus, we find vocabularies from the arts, agriculture, science, architecture, medicine, law and sports inundating the poem, affirming the status of the poet as one that is tremendously vast. This is the same with *The Word Is an Egg* where the poet's rhetorical ingenuity is anything but rare. This is essentially the reason why Osundare's works remain must-reads for lovers of poetry.

Horace and Longinus are known mostly for their *Ars Poetica* and *On Sublimity*, respectively. In Horace's treatise, emphasis is placed on a number of issues paramount of which is morality and decorum. For him, the pleasures of imitation are best yoked with moral teaching even as he declares that the primary function of poetry is to combine "pleasure with usefulness" (Leitch, 8). On his part, Longinus, in his *On Sublimity*, believes that, for poetry to attain an acceptable standard, it must be sublime, by which he means that a poem should be written in an elevated and lofty style that rises above the ordinary (Leitch, 153). Studied from the

poetics of Horace and Longinus, one finds Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* as aligning with the spirit of the Classical writers who insisted on a work of art that is morally up-building and socially elevating. In *Moonsongs*, for instance, Osundare uses some of his songs not only to teach some lessons, but also to lament the ineptitude, greed, and self-centeredness on the part of Nigerian leaders which result in the endless suffering of the masses. He states:

Remember, oh moon, remember
Our house of hunger which savoured
Your sizzling pestle
Never tasted the busy silence of the afterstew (*Moonsongs*, 30)

The poet also warns of the aftermath of this wickedness, which comes certainly in the form of nemesis.

The universe sows its minutes, reap its hours...
Ashes are the echo of five
The nose is the memory of the face
The drum is an open hint of a hide...
The universe sows its minutes, reaps its hours (18)

In *The Word Is an Egg*, the poem's sublimity may be attested to by the quality of its language which is not only lucidly elevated but also “above the ordinary". The poet deploys copious imagery, idioms, aphorisms, idiophones, metaphors, alliterations, and folkloric stanzas amidst succinct thematic issues to project and announce its sublime status. In "Lovers’ quarrel", the poet harps on the limitless power of the “word" in finding solutions to problems.

I have heard leaves argue
In the parliament of the wind...
I have seen wine and water
Locking horns in an agitated glass...
But no matter how much the Word may be
We do not cut if with a knife (*TWIE*, 78)

The Romantic school of criticism was characterized essentially by the spirit of enquiry, quest, investigation and the urge to challenge established assumptions. Romanticism was a period of revolution which encouraged the free expression of the revolutionary will even as it endorsed the spirit of rebellion against established authority. It is opposed to self-complacency and passive acceptance of one's fate or destiny. Moreover, the Romantic writers interpreted nature as a pantheistic phenomenon, believing that it was only through nature that one could communicate with the infinite (God), and that the onlv human faculty capable of perceiving the infinite is imagination (Dasylva and Jegede, 38-39).

Osundare's *Moonsongs* is a piece of Romantic art which challenges the status quo through such devices as satire, sarcasm or pun. Some of the songs in the collection lament the inequality in our society occasioned by irresponsible leadership. In the following lines, corruption eats deep into the fabric of the society's life with its attendant consequences.

The rain fell in June
and December licked it brown
with its feline tongue:
they who marvel the sinews of our dust
let them ask what happened to the offsprings
of yester-showers (*Moonsongs*, 34)

The poet reminds the people that the rain (opportunity, petrodollar, sudden wealth) has a time-frame, hence, the need to make good use of it.

The rain is going going going
like a long-besotted bride (34)

In *The Word Is an Egg*, the poet insists on "making every verb sting like a bee and every noun like a full moon" (44), not minding whose ox may be gored. This effectively announces the revolutionary disposition of the poem. In "The Emperors Largesse", the poet lambastes the thoughtlessness of Nigeria’s political leaders who refuse to be bothered about the plight of their subjects, in spite of the seriousness of their situation.

And shout the people
Behold we hunger
And we thirst
Our babies die in the cradle
The old age into penury (*TWIE*, 67)

Rather than find solutions to their plights, the uncaring and emotionally detached leader only bombards them with unfulfillable promises:

And, touched and absolutely caring,
The emperor sends
100 bags of nouns
and 1000 bushels of adjectives (*TWIE*, 67)

Thus, Osundare's two collections contain bold statements of disgust for the status quo – a Romantic spirit indeed.

Mathew Arnold, one of the greatest critics and essayists of the Victorian period had, in his "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" opined that the poet should apply his ideas to life, and that poetry "should give answer to the question: How to live" (Abrams, 137). He believes that the creative power of poetry requires ideas and materials to provide it with inspiration and achieve success. These ideas nourish the creative power. Arnold also defends criticism against the opinion that believes it serves no purpose, and that those who criticize cannot write something themselves. Thus, for Arnold, "The business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world" (Abrams, 137). A poet, William Wordsworth (a prominent Romanticist) would say, differs from other men because he is "endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness....a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit that is in him" (Abrams, 102). Wordsworth's description of who a poet is aptly identifies Osundare, whose "lively sensibility", "enthusiasm" and "passion" for his art, has stood him out as an Iroko in the literary forest of shrubs and undergrowths. Osundare's creative power as seen in the two of his collections under study may be attributed to the vastness of his ideas, his wealth of experience, as well as the rounded knowledge of his society and the art. This is why his poetry has not only enjoyed a wide readership but has also won very many distinguished awards. Indeed, Osundare's poetry has, in the words of Arnold, given answer to the question: "How to live". For example, in *Moonsongs*, Osundare's contrastive juxtaposition of the different kinds of moons in Ikoyi and Ajegunle is a clarion call on the consciousness of the elite class and indeed our leaders that Ajegunle dwellers are part of our earth, and so deserve a good life just like those in Ikoyi. The poet describes the moon in Ikoyi thus:

The moon here is a laundered lawn...
Weighted down by chandeliers
of pampered stars (*Moonsongs*, 4)

But is there any significant difference between the moon in Ikoyi and the one in Ajegunle? To this question, Osundare answers in the affirmative:

Here the moon
is a jungle
sad like a forgotten beard (4)

An egalitarian poet, Osundare insists on a meaningful life for all including the hoi polloi because, for him, "they too are the earth".

In his famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T.S. Eliot believes that the individual talent of a given poet or artist of any kind must always be measured by its relationship to a larger tradition of poets and artist. Says Eliot: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Leitch, 1094). It is Eliot's position that every society is endowed with resources which a poet or an artist draws from. He asserts that "Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitative of its critical habits than those of its creative genius" (1095). It is Eliot's conviction that a poet desires adequate knowledge of his tradition which comprises not only the past but also the present. This is where Osundare's qualification as a poet reaches its zenith given his rounded knowledge of the Yoruba cosmology, from where he draws the bulk of his inspiration. Thus, one finds a lavish and liberal appropriation of such Yoruba oral artistic categories as the proverb, the riddle, the curse, songs, word games or punning, incantation, eulogy or panegyrics as well as satire in his work. There is also a preponderance of the use of sound symbols and images in his composition including refrains, idiophone, alliteration, heteronyms, onomatopoeia, assonances and consonances, which also feature fervently in the oral performances of Yoruba traditional poets and raconteurs. In all of his collections including *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*, Osundare heavily relies on and as well utilizes the stylistic elements and rhetorical features of the Yoruba oral poetry (Anyaokwu, 4). In the following lines, the poet-critic imitates the traditional Yoruba bard who renders a folktale in a bid to teach and delight:

Once upon a silence
In a town beyond Memory
A girl there was named Omoleti
Supple, fresh luminous like polished bronze,
Her black face pronounced the whiteness
Of her teeth set right and rhymed
Like asede's accomplished wonder *(TWIE*, 88)

Sometimes, the poet goes incantatory, stepping into the role of a traditional priest whose aim is to cure society of one malady or the other.

> Bring Seven Rains and Seven Winds
> Fresh-laid eggs, rams with vigilant horns
> Rainbow shawl of the Mermaid of the Sea
> A hoeful of dust, an acre of sunshine
> Three-lobed kola, syllable of the Tongue (*TWIE*, 90-91)

Osundare's reliance on his immediate (Yoruba) tradition for his artistic resources goes to confirm Eliot's proposition that no artist has his meaning alone. Moreover, Osundare owes his success as a great poet to early African poets who relied enormously on oral tradition for their artistic composition. Such early poets who could constitute models for Osundare as far as reliance on the oral resources is concerned include Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark-Bekeredemo, Wole Soyinka, Okot p' Bitek, among others.

Marxist inclinations in Osundare's poetry cannot be over emphasized. The erudite poet has used his art to decry the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in the society and articulately expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo. A self-confessed socialist-Marxist poet, Osundare is among the few poets and artists who have chosen to commit class suicide in a bid to identify with the down trodden and voiceless members of the society. In some of his essays including "The Writer as Righter", Osundare believes that it is the responsibility of the artist or writer to "utter" if he must “alter" (9). For him, a writer must always be on the side of the people, in spite of opinions to the contrary. He retorts:

> For a real writer has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression. Like the prophet of the Old Testament, he is the guilty conscience of the king, his words the nagging unremitting images in his mind, his words are ancient revolt, to disrupt the deathly equilibrium, the mendacious “peace and stability” of a truly violent system. The king knows and has always done everything to contain the writer's destructive power (*The Writer as Righter*, 7).

In virtually all his collections, Osundare's poise for an egalitarian social system is unmitigated. He lambastes greed, avarice and every cadre of irresponsibility associated with the country's leaders who stop at nothing in milking dry the coffers of the nation thereby plunging the masses into endless frustration, poverty and woes. In the fifteenth song of his *Moonsongs*, Osundare draws the attention of the leaders, who hold both the yam and the knife, to the starving class of the society whose ability to survive is shrouded in probability.

> Remember, oh moon, remember
> Our house of hunger which savoured
> Your sizzling pestle
> Never tasted the busy silence of the afterstew (*Moonsongs*, 30)

In *The Word Is an Egg*, Osundare harps on the need for the oppressed class to use the spoken word to break the chains of the oppressors. In “Ode to anger” the poet shouts:

> Do not take my anger away
> my stubborn noun, my adjective which,
> Like the scorpion, carries the burning tale (*TWIE*, 58)

While acknowledging the avalanche of problems that confront writers especially in developing societies such as ours, Osundare is of the opinion that writers must not be dissuaded by these challenges even as he encourages them to be courageous and undaunting in the face of challenges.

> However, in spite of these obstacle - or, indeed, because of them – the business of writing for social liberation must continue, the writer taking the present problems as a source of challenge and inspiration, rather than frustration and withdrawal. (*The Writer as Righter*, 38)

Rather than let the challenge frustrate them, the articulate poet insists that writers must allow them to deepen and broaden their commitment. Osundare is indeed a quintessence of a Marxist poet.

Postmodernist Poetics in Osundare *Moonsong’*s and *The Word Is an Egg*

Like so many other contemporary works, Osundare's artistry can also be studied from the postmodernist angle. Postmodernism is a terminology often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-1945). It is a movement in the arts that sought a break with the earlier traditions and conventions of literature (Abrams, 227). Postmodern poetry refers to poetry that exhibits the tenets, features or characteristic ethos of postmodernism, characterised by experimentation especially as it affects the use of language. Postmodernist writers use language as a tool to confuse rather than inform or educate. Thus, postmodern literature's message is reader-specific as one is at liberty to interpret a text their own way. In the following lines in “Missing tongue", Osundare throws his readers into a sea of thought:

History stammers
through its long tirade...
Murder tongues gave birth
to direlects with pidgin curses... (*TWIE*, 52)

In "Testament", the poet also uses words in a way that calls for deep thought and serious reflection on the part of the reader, as the following lines indicate:

I sew my words into a garland
And threw them round the neck
Of the slowest runner (*TWIE*, 24)

Postmodern poets make copious use of the device of experimentation in recognition of the topsy-turvy disposition of the postmodern world.

Linguistic eclecticism is a prominent feature in Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*. This is observed mostly in the form of code-mixing. Code-mixing involves the amalgam of two or more languages in a speech act. Here, at least two languages function side by side at the same time. In Osundare's works, it is English and Yoruba. However, the bulk of the Yoruba expressions observed in the two collections are idiophones. The following lines in *Moonsongs* provide an example:

Remember the lucky hand's ceaseless journey
To the market of the mouth
Remember the wounded thunder
Which strokes the blaze of empty hearths.
Osupa olomi rooro
To ba di role a besulori
Poro poroporoporo... (*Moonsongs*, 31)

The poet's technique is deliberate as it is aimed at reaching the masses of his people who constitute his (immediate) target audience.

Another index of eclecticism in the poet's work is the blending of the techniques of poetry, drama and prose in his craft. The following lines in “Words which" assume the form of a dialogue even as it also takes the shape of an imperative expression:

Please leave your name and number
At the end of the beep
And I will get back to you
As soon as possible (*TWIE*, 28)

Generally, postmodern poetry tends to undermine the boundaries that exist between genres (Hamilton, 6). By dissolving the boundaries between genres, the postmodern poet recognises the reality of the contemporary world that is an admixture of diverse ideologies and practices. Pornography is another feature of postmodern poetry. In a postmodern work, pornography movesfrom the periphery of discourse to the centre (Snipp-Walmsey, 416). Pornography denotes any printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement. Observably, postmodern poetry does not believe in covering the reality of existence under any cloak. Thus, it does not only present it but does so as blunt as possible. In the following lines, Osundare presents a sexual scene between two lovers:

As I stalk my way through
The forbidden territory between your legs
The beckoning petals of your eyes
The succulent eternity of your warm, obliging lips...
Touching legs, tangle tails (*TWIE, 64)*

Postmodern poets tend to use this device to defy the cultural restrictions on sex and also expose the corruption and filthiness in the society.

In “Understanding Postmodern Poetry", Hamilton (2011) lists features of postmodern poetry to include, among others, formlessness, “iconoclasm and populism” (2). Certainly, very many of Osundare's poems in the collections under study succinctly yield to this feature. In "City Noon" (*Moonsongs*), the poem takes the form of a sprawling city on a typical noonday. The first lines of the poem appear thus:

at the height
of the noon
of a February day
sultry like every February day
and just as frenzied,
on the brow
of the head
of a sprawling city (*Moonsongs*, 54)

Another poem titled “Nightfall’ is presented as follows:

Night one
finally stroke
abolished of
the inky
day dark
with ness with
A lone in barracks
star beheld of fireflies
the edict and lanes

of truant thunders (*Moonsongs*, 58)

Similarly, the thirteen song (XIII) of the poem appears thus:

some say
you moon
are the
ash es
of the
sun bath
ing limpid
night in
the grey
ing of
your silence
pallid echo
of solar
thunder s
are you (23)

Postmodern poetry may be regarded as a prawling sea of fragments characterised by formlessness and shapelessness, emphasizing the shapeless nature of the postmodern world. As Hoover (1994) observes, postmodern poetry suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a "worldview that sets itself apart from the mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life to writing" (xxv). In this kind of poetry, "method and intuition replace intention" even as it “opposes the centrist values of unity significance and linearity" (xxv). It is the belief of postmodern poets that coherence is falsehood, hence, their insistence on fragments, which is believed to create variety.

Another feature of postmodern poetry is its tendency to "brood on the human condition disclosed by radical literary theories" (Brann, 29), One of the "radical literary theories” that explicitly discloses the human condition is the postcolonial theory in which citizens of formerly colonised societies narrate their often untoward experiences in the wake of colonial domination. Osundare's two collections under study effectively perform this function of "brooding" on the condition of the poet's people who live close to the river but use spittle in washing their hands. In *Moonsongs*, Osundare "broods” on the condition of the peasants in the society who are abandoned by the ruling class rather being encouraged and carried along in the scheme of things given their invaluable role in the development of the society.

Oh moon oh moon where is your hoe, where, your hatchet
Who farmed the yam in your silvery barns (*Moonsongs*, 59)

The poet also "broods" on the self-centred and greedy attitude of the leaders who insist on amassing all and leaving nothing for the masses. He pleads that they remember the hungry ones in their midst:

Remember, oh moon, remember
Our house of hunger which savoured
Your sizzling pestle
Never tasted the busy silence of the afterstew (30)

In *The Word Is an Egg*, the poet also "broods" on the attitude of religious leaders in our society, who, rather than toe the path of truth and honour, play always to the gallery for selfish reasons. They hide the truth from the leaders in a bid to remain perpetually relevant before them. In "Sermon", the poet states:

And the preacher's sermon
Drops like hailstones
“Fear the tyrant
Obey the rich!" (*TWIE*, 80)

This is indeed a compromised position given the sermoniser's disposition as the purveyor of truth, which truth the society desires for emancipation.

A Stylistic Reading of *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg*

That Osundare is versatile in his poetic style and technique is an understatement. This is epitomized by the way he masterfully weaves his verses to suit the settings, the underlined messages, and his overall artistic vision. In *Moonsongs*, he brilliantly weaves form and content together to bring out his message clearly. The first thing to note in this collection is the title, *Moonsongs*. By this title, Osundare psychologically transports the reader from the urban and sophisticated terrain to the rural setting of traditional life. To achieve his objective, the poetic voice is not often the writer's but the communal voice of the rural people. The writer allows the masses, through this technique, to sing about the prevalent condition in their own society. In these songs, we hear the voices of the rustics - their feelings, pains, plight, worries, and hopes. In one of the songs (XV), the moon is depicted as one who prepares a sumptuous meal, but chooses to eat alone in spite of the quantity of the food and the number of mouths that yearn for it.

Her soup is the sea
With a teeming tribe of simmering fishes
Her spice is the loyal shrub
Which tickles the nose of lofty hills

Remember, oh moon, remember
Our house of longer which savoured
Your sizzling pestle
Never tasted to busy silence of the afterstew (30)

Osundare's poetry uses a form of language imbued with proverbs, local expressions and coinages. These are worked into the poem to enhance the message of the poem and to intensify the African background. The poem “Nightfire" uses proverbs in the form of rhetorical question:

Ah! the Night has gone on fire. Is anyone still asking
what became of the beard of the hill? (62)

Osundare's *Moonsongs* is also inundated with copious stylistic features of orature which include repetitions, lexical matching, structural parallelism, rhetorical questions, and sobriquets. In song XXI, for example, the poet uses repetitions to drive home his point:

The moon is a mask dancing

She needs no spectacles to see our roofs
rust-tongued, fear-furrowed, squeaking now...

The moon is a mask dancing (40)

Osundare also uses satire to paint the picture of inequality that prevails in the society. In XXII, the poet ridicules the kind of moon (socio-economic condition) that glows in Ajegunle as opposed to the one in Ikoyi.

Ikoyi
The moon here
is a laundered lawn
its grass the softness of infant fluff,
Ajegunle
here the moon
is a jungle,
sad like a forgotten beard... (42)

Generally, poems in *Moonsongs*, have no definite rhyme scheme, no set meter nor any particular structure. It is a free verse haphazardly arranged thereby foregrounding its status as a postmodern art.

Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg* accentuates the creative powers of the spoken word. Derived from a Yoruba proverb, Enyin l'Oro, the work encapsulates the productive and destructive powers of the spoken word. Accordingly, there is the need for a continuous and positive use of words in any communication situation. In "The Word is an Egg", the eponymous title of the collection, the poem states thus:

The Word, the Word
Is an egg:
If it falls on the outcrop
Of a stumbling tongue
It breaks
Ungatherably (14)

To avoid this, the poet believes that there is need for restraint and carefulness whenever we use words. In "Divining words", the poet emphasizes the need for people to choose appropriate words at appropriate contexts:

I long for words
So careful about the company they keep
Words which cut a path
On the divination tray (15)

Like others of his works, Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg* borrows extensively from traditional Yoruba oratory. Thus, we find a lavish appropriation of such oral artistic categories as the proverb, song, incantation, riddle, eulogy, satire, panegyrics, and so on. The poem is also richly endowed with literary tropes and figures of thought, speech and sound such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, idiophone, irony and litotes. In "Can-do", the poet uses hyperbole to emphasise the limitless power in the spoken word.

I have seen rain--clouds gather
At the instance of a word
I have seen mountains move
To the promptings of a dithyramb (16)

The poem also deploys proverbs effectively in passing his message across. In "Falling off the tree of words", the first lines remind people, proverbially though, about the imperative of choosing the right words at the right time, and, of course, the consequences thereof:

He who falls from a tree in the open forest
May still work on his mended legs
But there is no doctor
For him who falls off the tree of words (21)

Playing the role of a traditional bard, the poet also uses folktale not only to entertain, educate and inform, but also to remind. This, according to Osundare, is one of the cardinal roles of the poet. In "Omoleti", the poet effects a reminder:

Once upon a silence
In a town beyond Memory
A girl there was whose name was Omoleti
Supple, fresh, luminous like polish bronze,
Her black face pronounced the whiteness
Of her teeth set right and rhymed
Like asede's accomplished wonder (88)

Intensifying his status as a traditional poet, and as one who does not feel like detaching himself from his roots, Osundare also goes incantatory:

Bring seven rain and Seven Winds
Fresh laid eggs, rams with vigilant horns
Rainbow shawl of the mermaid of the Sea
A hoeful of dust, an acre of sunshine (91)

Osundare is also fun of blending or yoking words together for effects. Thus, we find such joined words as *compostbed*, *hooffall* (10); *mountainheads*, *footsounds* (11); r*ainanddust*, *blackandwhite*, *lifeanddeath, and harvestsongs* (12). Essentially, apart from using this technique in promoting the aesthetic effect of the poem, the poet also leaves invaluable message of constant probability and inevitability of certain phenomena in human experience. For example, no matter how long an oppressor lives, he shall surely die (*lifeanddeath*); no matter how long the rain lasts, it shall cease and give way to harmattan and dust (*rainanddust*); there can be no harvest without songs (*harvestsongs*), and so on. Thus, one finds the inextricable nexus between a poem's content and its form.

III. CONCLUSION

Niyi Osundare's *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* succinctly demonstrate the dynamic interaction between classical and twentieth-century poetics, establishing poetry as an artistic medium through which inherited literary conventions can be interrogated, re-examined, and reconstructed. Drawing on the classical principles articulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*, particularly the concepts of mimesis, artistic representation, aesthetic organization, and the relationship between poetry and human experience, Osundare sustains the traditional understanding of poetry as a meaningful reconstruction of reality. His poetic vision, however, goes beyond classical prescriptions through his engagement with twentieth-century poetic developments, including postmodernist experimentation, linguistic innovation, fragmentation, and the reconfiguration of poetic form and expression. The two collections reveal that poetry is neither restricted by inherited conventions nor entirely detached from established literary traditions. Rather, Osundare's poetic vision demonstrates the fact that classical principles can be reinterpreted and revitalized through modern artistic innovations. This study establishes that *Moonsongs* and *The Word Is an Egg* represent significant expressions of the continuing

interaction between tradition and modernity in African poetry, and affirms Osundare's distinctive contribution to the development of Nigerian and indeed African contemporary poetic traditions. The study reaffirms Osundare's position as a significant voice in contemporary African poetry and demonstrates the continuing relevance of classical and contemporary poetics to the interpretation and appreciation of African poetry.

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