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# The Poet as a Crusader for Social Justice: Stylistic Implications in Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues*

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**Abstract**

The role of the poet as a crusader for social justice has been well-acknowledged in literary circles and beyond. This stems from the nature of art as a humanistic endeavor genetically imbued with the spirit of standing with humanity and freeing it from the stranglehold of social malfeasance, reprehensible and tendencious inclinations. Poetry is, therefore, a unique artistic expression of solidarity with the people and an aspiration or vision towards a better human experience. Osundare's social involvement through literary practice has meant the engagement of issues with the intent of exposing the contradictions that impoverish society. The social involvement and foregrounding of the thematic issues have entailed the mobilization of linguistic resources as stylistic strategies for poignancy and effective communication. This paper interrogates the meeting point between Osundare's social concerns in his *Random Blues* and the linguistic strategies he employs to the service of poetic communication. To this end, the paper analyses New Historicism which underscores the invocation of socio-political times in the production and interpretation of literature; and insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics that stress the place of function and relevance in determining linguistic choice and meaning. The paper concludes that as a social critic, Osundare has used poetry to spearhead a rude awakening of the oppressed in the society against the contradictions and manipulations by the powerful few, calling the latter to action and championing the cause to bring about social transformation and liberation from the chokehold of tyranny and oppression.

**Keywords**: poet, crusader, social justice, society.

## INTRODUCTION

The triangular relationship between literature, the writer and society is such that the reflections of the writer are conditioned by the experiences that their socio-political situation avails them (Eyang 2004; Eyang & Okune 2004; Eyang 2016a). In this sense, the writer becomes a projection of the society, bearing fully the consciousness of the people, but a consciousness responded to in a creatively unique way. It is upon this social expressionist and liberationist view point that Nwahunanya (2012) avers: "Literature that must liberate the society is that which expresses the writer's sincere observations of the society's failings and points the way forward in



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the right direction" (p. 354). The direction the writer points to and the prognostications made about the society are an essential part of the vision for the society.

To this extent, literature is a veritable avenue not only for the capturing of the concerns of the generality of society but also a platform for the writer to express an alternative roadmap for the people. Society's expectations from literary activism presuppose a culture of group representation passively enshrined in communal interactions just like "in some traditions where poets [are] indeed licensed" to address issues, "air grievances or criticism of the rulers in praise-song or at communal gatherings where those being criticized [are] obliged to hear and to react" (Brown & Na'Allah 2003, p. 99). In other words, the socio-political environment necessarily conditions the temperament of the poet, qua writer, who takes up the challenge of championing a cause for the people as the realities of the time demand (Eyang 2016b; Okpiliya & Eyang 2013).

From the social role a writer adopts in the bid to foster change, the option to be on the side of the oppressed and marginalized as against identifying with predatory forces is crystal clear. Abdu (2003) has captured the dilemma of the writer's choice in terms of either to oppose the people on the side of the rulers, or to be with the people in their endless parley with those who are chosen or imposed as their leaders. This moral or social responsibility makes the poet an antagonist to either parties, hence his consideration as a contemptuous individual, sandwiched between two struggles of canvassing for the people or being for the rulers. In many developing societies, "the poet often functions against the antagonistic attitudes generated by the indifference of those in positions of authority" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 2003, p. 27). This, arguably, is the reason why Plato in *The Republic* ostracized the poets from his ideal republic as "their impulsive disposition to interrogate and expose the other side of 'the truth' puts them as the first political refugees" (Abdu 2003, p. xi). The refugee condition of the writer owes largely to the fact that whichever side they choose to support, they are still chastised by the other opposing faction. Abdu (2003) quips further that "between the two – the people and their, sometime freely elected, representative rulers – is a hiatus which the poet manipulates for the purpose of experimenting with, and proposing, fairer or equitable alternatives" (p. xii). Furthermore, apart from the political interest and its social dimensions, the poet also chooses what experiences they want to partake in, build consciousness from and situate their ideology on, which in the long run forms the major fibre of his art (Ojaide 2003). For Osundare, animism, ecocriticism, the ethno-religious thematic, political protest, social justice and social mobilization are the concerns around which he builds his art.

Osundare's poetic style marks him out as a representative voice of "the group of Alter-Native Traditional poets" who are remarkable with their style of "liberating and demystifying the business of poetry for many readers" as against the esoteric style of poetry which is considered highly Eurocentric and verbose (Abdu 2003, p. 19), and tagged by Chinweizu *et al* (1980) as *Euromodernism*. The Alter-Native tradition of poetry owes from its novel style of poetry which is characterized by vivid and fresh depiction of the common and daily experiences of the Nigerian society (Abdu 2003). Abdu (2003) does a contrast between pre-war Nigerian poetry which he observes, following from Aiyejina (1988) and post-war poetry where he states that the former "is an "undue Eurocentrism, derivation, obscurantism, and private ostracism" unlike the latter which is socially relevant and down-to-earth" (p. 15). He groups the likes of Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark, Echeruo and other first generation poets as modernist and proposes a new group of post-war poets like Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Ojaide, Funsho Aiyejina, Chimalum Nwankwo, Ogundipe-Leslie, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, H. Garba and others as Alter-Native Traditional



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group. The Alter-Native Traditional group is leftist and their language and style is socialist in nature and radical in approach. On style, Abdu Abdu (2003) maintains that Osundare's poetry takes its content and form from Yoruba oral tradition which is an essential aspect of the writer's aesthetic-poetics. This is evident in his ingenuous borrowings from the complex semantics and phonology of Yoruba language and cultural material. Osundare gives African poems back to Africa, baking socio-political bread with a heavy synthesis of indigenous African ingredients (Na'Allah 2003, p. xxiii).

"Like an explorer, the poet's interest determines the choices of what to experience" (Ojaide 2003, p. 17). This births Osundare's thoughts in "Telling Gifts" where he philosophises that "You have given a pen to a poet/And thrown open the door to the house of songs" – and this house is a potpourri of experiences in songs and tales which the poet is obligated to share (Pages... 6). It is among the generation of poets that began publishing in the 1970s and 1980s (of which Osundare belongs) that the notion of the poet as being duty-bound to confront the political events of the times, or particularly, the antics of the country's rulers, has become axiomatic (Brown 98). Drawing inspiration from the first generation poets, Osundare's musicality and play on words is linked to J. P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo's style, which according to Tanure Ojaide (2003), is filled with chant-like rhythms and constant use of alliterative sounds as an influential characteristic. Along this line, Osundare's "The Eye of the Earth" and *Moon Song* are styled in Oriki rhythms. As Ojaide writes, the elusiveness of the poetry of Soyinka encouraged the budding poets like himself and Osundare to write more comprehensive poetry which could be easily accessed and interpreted (20). In his *Song of the Market Place*, Osundare attempts to locate poetry as where he communicates intelligibly and unambiguously as opposed to being "…the esoteric whisper/ of an excluding tongue" which is ambiguous and challenging to decipher (*Song of the Market Place* 4).

Ojaide (2003) posits that new emerging themes and literary concerns in the Nigerian literary space shaped Osundare's approach to poetry as Marxist and socialist concerns signpost the revolutionary impulse in his poetry. Immediate causes like the death of Kunle Adepoju, a student demonstrator in1971, the energy crisis of the 1970s and political corruption further radicalized Osundare and gave him and his contemporaries a revolutionary and proletarian ideal. In terms of transiting from the idyllic and narcissistic towards political engagement and partisanship, Osundare has a special stylistic fervour, "combining and juxtaposing the rustic and the rural, the profane and the urbane, the verbal and the non-verbal resources of language to produce an artistic paradigm" of modern-day Nigerian society and realities (Abdu 2003, p. ix). Osundarehas utilized the resources of poetry into the service of a revolutionary struggle, making a case for the emancipation of the downtrodden.

This research seeks to further validate the place of Niyi Osundare as a social and political commentator, nay activist in the Nigerian literary space in his attempt to confront the issues of social injustice and political instability. By voicing the concerns and challenges of the underprivileged, Osundare uses his poetry as a tool for social change and to make a bold statement thatpolitical office is an opportunity to improve the welfare of society and the generality of people as opposed to being an avenue for self-aggrandizement and denigration of the people as has become the sad case in Nigeria.



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**Theoretical Framework: New Historicism and Functional Grammar**

The concept of New Historicism is built form the consideration that a work of art should be explored within the context of both the history of the author and that of the critic. As a critical departure from the position of New criticism that spells that a text is an autotelic artefact (self-referential in nature), "New Historicism" is characterized by a parallel reading of a text with its socio-cultural and historical condition which informs the co-text" (Emefiele, 2021, p. 36). Built from the critical position of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, the theory believes that the inspiration behind literature is the author's background (occasioned by his times and circumstances alongside the critic's understanding and response to the environment, positions and ideologies that birth a text. Therefore, New Historicism "underscores the impermanence of literary criticism... which is affected by and reveals the beliefs of our times in the same way that literature reflects and is reflected by its own historical contexts" (Sahu 2018, p. 54). Proponents of New Historicism relate the concerns of literature with society like Louis Althusser in his revisionist Marxist consciousness, Michel Foucault in his social power formation, Mikhail Bakhtin in his dialogic criticism, Stephen Greenbault in his social representation matrix and Clifford Geertz's in cultural anthropology. Regardless of the varying concerns of New Historicists, there is a meeting ground bordering on the ideal that literature does not dwell in a purely aesthetic realm devoid of economic, social and political conditions specific to a time or epoch. Instead, literature is realized in time which must correspond with the realities of such time. Nonetheless, there exists a clear distinction between literary and non-literary works. With this in mind, the literary product of history is fluid and relative, highly interpretative based on the perceived consciousness of the writer. Furthermore, the subjectivity of an author reflects in his interrogation of the social, cultural and political influences that mark his era. The author is not free and autonomous from such influences. In fact, he is tied to the social conditioning which informs his art. Thus, literature is not purely an imaginative work of art, but also an endeavor that is consciously aligned with, and richly inflected by, the socio-historical developments of the time.

On the divide of the linguistic appreciation of literature, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is adopted as a guiding theory. Systemic functional grammar stems from the concerns of language as a form of social behavior, examined on the position that language is "a network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meaning", hence the implication that language is systemic (Halliday 1994). Functional grammar is "the study of how meanings are built up through the use of words and other linguistic forms such as tone and emphasis" (Bloor & Meriel 1995, p. 1). Functional grammar differs from other grammar models in the way it treats language – as social activity – which always takes place in a context. It is this context that builds the meaning and interpretation of language usage as well as the relationship that exists between the elements of culture within which it is described. SFL believes that language is never used in a vacuum and this informs the basis for a context inspired critique of language usage. Harris refers to this as the integrational paradigm: one which sees language as "manifested in a network of human abilities and activities complexly integrated in social interaction" (p. 131). It is from this position that systemic functional linguists give prominence to the context of situation and generic subcategories of speech occasions. According to Halliday (1994), "systemic theory is a theory of meaning as choice by which a language or any other semiotic system is interpreted as networks of interlocking options: either this, or the other; either more like the one or more like the other, or so on" (p. xxv). These choices or options are fully dependent on the context or environment of



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usage. So the system of grammatical mood, for instance, involves a basic choice of imperative or indicative; the indicative involves a further choice of interrogative or declarative while the imperative involves a choice between inclusive and exclusive and interrogative involves the options between closed and open (Wales 2011, p. 413). The emphasis of SFL as it concerns this essay is on the functional exploration of language which to Halliday (1994) is built upon three distinct but closely related senses in the interpretation of (i) texts (ii) systems (iii) elements of linguistic structures. For texts, the language in a text is functional as its corpus is the basis for analysis. Everything that is said or written which is the sum total of the text unfolds in the context of usage giving essence to convention. Conventionality overrules arbitrariness as language gains relevance in the necessity of relating human experiences and activities. With regards to systems, all languages are wrapped around meaning relations portrayed in two main kinds of meanings; ideational (reflective) and the interpersonal (active). Ideational follows from a need to understand the environment while interpersonal involves relating with the others in the environment. This creates a third level of "textual", which gives form to the representations in both the ideational and interpersonal.

However, a meeting point between both theories situates literature in context, environment and social realities or experiences. New Historicism on its part considers the social conditions that necessitate the poet (in this case Osundare), to produce poetry which aligns with the imperative of social justice. His background and experiences in the Nigerian setting further expose the intentions behind his poetry. For functional grammar, the linguistic choices available to the poet as informed by a motley of factors result in the uniqueness of conveying the concerns and thereby characterizing his style. How the poet chooses to explore the resources of language to highlight his thematic concerns is an integral part of this enquiry. Thus, there is a link between the deployment of verbal resources, choice of experiences and the perspectives in which they are explored in projecting the writer as a restless crusader for justice and moral order.

**Social Justice in *Random Blues***

Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues* (2011), published twelve years after the eventual return of Nigeria to democracy, is a poetic panorama that bemoans the systemic problems inherent in the Nigerian polity from the dictatorial regime days to the contemporary civilian regime because the government and machinery of administrative public offices have not changed in ideology and practice. In this work, Osundare chronicles the Nigerian society in the spell of social injustice that has crippled progress and social development from independence till date. The thematic issues the collection explores range from the political to love/affection, morality, hope/despair, religious criticism, poverty, gender unrest and protest as well as imperialism and neo-colonialism (Akoda & Imbua 2005; Imbua 2015; Eba & Imbua 2017). Just like the blues, popular for its appealing rhythm and lyrics, Osundare uses words creatively to express pain and poignancy, sadness and joy, which involve and invite the readers as judges in the social processes that produce the unjust society being x-rayed. In politics, decay in governance and the highhandedness of public office holders are exposed in details as Osundare pitches his tent with the exploited populace to lament the issues of corruption, nepotism, inequality and social discrimination.

In *Random Blues* (2011), the atmosphere of terror is relayed though the malevolent chieftainwho is a revered lord but an illiterate who wields influence through fear and intimidation. Arming thugs with weapons and unrestrained power and impunity, the chieftain



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preys on and molests his people. Osundare delineates a morally reprehensible (Nigerian) society cursed with politicians who systematicallyplunder the economy into ruins and impose poverty on the people. He shows us how the will of the people is subverted by the draconian tendencies of the ruler who 'calls the shots'. The streets are said to be quaking with fear as the rogue ruler goes on a rampage to cause tension. Since his policies are not favorable, his methods must be unnerving in order to quell insurrections of any kind. To ensure he crushes all rebellions, he employs the services of 'thugs and cut-throats/veteran arsonists and hired killers' whose job is to 'dump the dead and steal their coats' (Osundare 2011, p. 19). We experiencefirst-hand descriptions of political situations that bear a striking resemblance with past developments in Nigeria where autocratic leaders hired assassins to eliminate political opponents. Letter bombs and extrajudicial killings are lexicons that are not alien to our political history as names like Dele Giwa and Funsho Williams resonate with such lexicons. The picture of the chieftain fits that of the politician in the Nigerian setting who feeds fat on the proceeds of the state while depleting the treasury.

Described in scatological terms as a 'fat maggot in rotting pots' the chieftain is that ruler who wallows in the decay he has occasioned. Just like a maggot that lives in rot and scavenges off decomposing matter, the Nigerian politician wallows in the putrid mess of his own creation. 'His backyard is loud with skulls' revealing the long history of nefarious activities to silence protest while his 'bloodshed thrives his sickening joy', gladdened by the woes and lamentations of his people. The 'rampaging gang' who are used to wreak havoc boasts of their supremacy as they declare 'arrest us if you can' since their orders are from the ruling clique. Their weapons of evil are provided them by the clique – machetes and mallets/clubs and cudgels' and the irony of the situation lies in the regrettable realities that these weapons are not retrieved after the evil assignment. They are owned by the gang and further used to terrorize the people.

Osundare reveals to us that within the elite group, there is still bad blood existing between the rank and crown. In *Random Blues* (2011), we are exposed to the politics within the sovereign class as the Ruling King, the Rabble Chieftain, the Abuja Emperor and the lawless lawmaker clash on the altar of divided interests. This is symptomatic of the broken promises and prolonged animosity that grip the contemporary political space of Nigeria. Expectedly, we witness betrayals as 'covenants broken' and 'sponsored cries' become the offensive fruits of the premature political marriages. *Clientelism* and *god fatherism* are what they sound like at first before the progeny becomes a renegade and an enemy of the progenitor. The Abuja Emperor is said to have hatched a plan to transfer the King to somewhere violently chaotic. Using the lawless lawmakers, the plot is hatched and the King loses his crown to the whole process of governance, mocking the conscribed notion of due process. The land is thrown into messy chaos and the citizens suffer; lending credence to the axiom that when two elephants fight, the grass suffers.

The result of the displacement of a usurper is conveyed in *Random Blues* (2011), as the poet reveals that on the empty head of the usurper, rests a stolen crown. Admiring his new status, the figure head of a ruler 'stands before the mirror/every morning', careless about the disorderly state of the nation. The ramification of this anomaly is the depletion of public funds in order to address the insatiable greed of the political benefactor who installed him in the position. He pays homage and total reverence to his godfather, while the people he supposedly represents writhe in pains, abject lack and despair. The rest of the treasury is 'for him and his thieving fold' as his allies grow fat on the stolen proceeds. He is praised as his sycophants accord him the highest



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accolades. The religious leaders are complicit as well in this show of shame as 'the bishop said/he was chosen of God'. Osundare describes this clergy as 'corrupt collar' and their schemes as 'stained surplice'. The imam is said to also bless 'his stolen mandate' as he is declared Allah's choice. The sycophants have rolled out the drums as 'singers burst their throats'. The masses are forced to join the jubilation so they can be given peanuts by the 'scoundrels of the state who purloined their votes'.

The state of the nation is described in details in *Random Blues* (2011) as the social infrastructure is unreliable and in abject ruins. The public funds which are meant for social development vanish into private pockets as 'hunger overtakes the marketplace'. The populace suffers, with 'holes on [their] roofs' and 'ragged roads unravel [their] soles'. The usurper plunges the land in ruins just like the Nigerian situation where the dearth in social infrastructure is proof of the degenerate state of the nation (Effiom *et al*., 2019; Felix *et al*., 2020). Affordable healthcare is a mirage as hospitals are non-operational and dilapidated. Electricity is a luxury commodity as only the rich can afford to produce electric power through fuel-run generators. The available roads are pothole-ridden while some are death traps for motorists. In the end, justice is served and the usurper loses his throne and the masses heave a sigh of relief which is probably short-lived since the Emperor King is still in authority and would just replace the defunct usurper with another.

Continuing his description of the ruling vandal, Osundare unravels the actions of the governor, whom he calls 'Gangster Govnor' in *Random Blues* (2011), *10* (27) and *11* (29). We are told that the Gangster Govnor 'is now on the run' and 'his nasty noise is now a whisper' – a fugitive to his own people and an outcast to the entire system. Typical of the Nigerian system where the governor moves around with a retinue of escorts in convoys of deafening sirens, the displaced governor's sirens have been silenced and 'the waving crowd' that come out to applaud in awe at the splendour and animalism 'have turned into jeering mobs' ready to lynch him. He is likened to a vicious thief who 'sneaks through town and country' and is ashamed to have his face seen in public. He is compared to a rodent rummaging through dirt and garbage; the governor now 'lives in his footprint'. The conduct of the governor is exposed in *Random Blues 11* (29) and the poet reminisces that the clergies flatter him as the 'Lord's anointed' and 'favourite of the almighty', but he ends up becoming a scoundrel. The poet recounts how at a point in time death is wished on anyone who opposes the governor. His 'phantom projects' trumped up by 'packaged lies' like those of our present-day politicians are the only relics of his administration still standing. Roads are commissioned only on paper and bridges built on computer generated pages.

The outlandish and ostentatious lifestyle of 'His Excellency' is the concern of *Random Blues 15* (37), a lifestyle of affluencethat extends to his allies who occupy privileged positions. They ride in fleet of 'trendy jeeps' at the expense of the people. The wealth that circulates within the family and among the kith and kin of His Excellency exposes the rot in the system. His mistresses and concubines who are objects of his sexual pleasures are appendages who live in unearned luxury.His Excellency boasts of his achievements as he asks immodestly 'who built your university?'forgetting that the universities are grossly underfunded and terribly mismanaged. Ironically, he studied abroad in Ivy-league schools while the underfunded ones he built are offensively and scandalously dysfunctional. We also witness the deputy and the boss embarrassingly disagreeing as a result of conflict of interest in their cuts/share of their ill-gotten bounty.



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The world of the impoverished masses is revealed to us as the poet persona in *Random Blues 13* (33) voices their pains and sorrows. Like an epistolary, the poet addresses the people, talking to them in the second person. The poet persona retorts, 'show me your pain... show it raw'. He enjoins them not to be quietened by any fire or the lion's roar as they have the right to air their grievances. To the poet persona, their challenges can only be overcome when they choose not to cower in the gimmicks of the ruling class; their challenges can only be overcome when they are assertive in making their demands. The past and present sorrows ought to be motivation for them as rendered thus;

> We look up ourselves
> In history's mirror
> Yes, we look up ourselves
> In history's mirror
> We behold fragments and moving shadows
> Dazzling phantoms greet our gaping horror (p. 33).

The persona maintains that it is only through collective bargaining and mutual agreement that the addressed populace can achieve social advancement. The addressed populace in this case is likened to a rainbow that in its different beautiful colours still needs every bit of its rays to give off its allure. The metaphor aligns with the cultural and social situation of Africa in its diversity and heterogeneous nature. The persona enjoins his audience, the pluralist society of Africa, to embrace its heterogeneity as strength and celebrate its beauty in diversity just like the rainbow.

This mood is sustained in *Random Blues 17* (41) where the poet persona questions the motive behind the manipulated results of the population census conducted by the government. The irregularities in the census figures are in themselves a stern rebuke of the process, as the poet accuses cows of being counted which unarguably led to the inflated figures in some regions to give them a political edge over the others. As a witness to the political corruption in his home country Nigeria, Osundare recalls how census results have sparked controversies in some quarters; about which he retorts'the numbers stay put in some parts', while it is the reverse in other parts.All this, coupled with unbridled tribalism and nepotism in the polity perpetuated by the privileged few create an oppressive atmosphere where accountability and moral responsibility are seriously undermined.

The poet points an accusing finger to the imperial colonialists whose disingenuousness in the demographics in a coupled Nigeria sowed a seed of discord manifesting in the malfeasance being encountered in the polity today. The gain at the end of the day is not even for the people whose population numbers have been exaggerated; rather it is for their representatives who feed fat from the over blotted allocations accorded them as a result of their number and landmass.

Osundare takes a swipe at the Western nations and their unhealthy desire for economic domination entrenched in their strategic stirring of chaos in third world countries for their own gains. Acting as puppets to Europe and America, third world leaders in Africa and the Middle East are used to inflict pain on their people and get dumped in the end. In *Random Blues 18* (43), *19* (45) and *20* (47), Saddam Hussein, the dictatorial ruler of Iraq is the subject of consideration. *Random Blues 18* (43) recounts the incident of his execution by hanging, ostensibly as a consequence of his many crimes against humanity. The extent of his vilification and demonization is underscored in his being described as the 'Butcher of Baghdad', a luckless tyrant ends up in the gallows. In describing the gory execution of Saddam Hussein, the poet persona comments: 'the noose descended/the dangling body .../death came in a rapid flick'. The



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reaction of the Western world to the death of Saddam is that of elation as *Random Blues 19* (45) describes the atmosphere in London and Washington. Osundare writes that 'the death news provoked a happy nod' from the imperial powers who have succeeded in taking out an opposition to their imperialist agenda. We are told that his kin are the ones that carried out the execution, armed by the authorities of the imperial powers as 'Native surrogate knotted the noose' while 'the distant masters imposed the options of death'. In *Random Blues 20* (47), the poet persona reveals that when Saddam 'ran the errands' he was an ally as he was their executioner and praised tyrant. But when he decided to confront the West, they promptly used his own people – native surrogates – to eliminate him. Osundare gives us a perfect picture of the imperialist logic in which their puppet tyrants are accorded all possible protection by the West while being used as its agent until the moment of reversal of fortunes occasioned by a collision course and the resultant confrontation. The puppet is then brandished a tyrant and his people are turned against him. In the third world nations, a good leader is one who attends and answers to the demands of the imposing first world nations. Breaking this allegiance by the leader is tantamount to political suicide, hence he is tagged an enemy of the state. We are given a snippet of who Saddam was as an emperor, 'one whose tongue was sword' while his word was law. He, a crook, is said to be undone by stronger crooks and 'dispatched by a bigger gun'. The imperialist Western world leaders are described as the 'liberators who lied their way to his land', since the promises they had made to him before granting him power have only fetched him damnation to the gallows.

Osundare addresses corrupt leaders in *Random Blues 22* (51). As an advocate of justice, he queries and interrogates the elite. He demands accountability from them as he reiterates his devotion to hold them accountable for the wrongs. He writes;

> You try to run the country down
> And I'll paint your name in red
> Shameless thief, political goat
> I'll sing a hammer to your venal head (p. 51).

Like a social advocate, Osundare takes the bull by the horn by directly charging the politician to turn a new leaf if he wants to be loved. The declaration that the ruler should 'wade in there/And trouble the water' shows what the ideal politician should be – stand up for his people and confront head on the rot in the system. He enjoins the politician to join forces with him (the poet persona) and build the society, as he retorts, 'let history talk about the house we built'.

In *Random Blues 23* (35), *24* (37) and *25* (39), Osundare criticises the electioneering process which he describes as built on rigging and misconducts. Another season of voting is a season of calumny where 'the sad story of the ballot' happens yet again and there is 'stealing and swapping in every ward'. We are told that imaginary votes are counted and recorded, detailing the ripe misconduct evident in the electioneering process in Nigeria. Mercenaries are employed to 'thumb-print' and 'toe-print'. 'Long, long before the polling date' the results are already known as revealed by the poet persona. We are told that all the stakeholders are partakers in this infamy as ballot boxes are seen everywhere even at the Oba's palace and the thug's bedroom. In *Random Blues24* (p. 35), the electionday is here and hell is let loose. All kinds of malpractices come into play. The life of the voter is threatened and 'your life or your ballot' is the command on the lips of the perpetuators of terror. The security outfit of the state is exploited as money becomes the only authority the operatives answer to. Osundare tells us that election in this clime is 'do or die/All or nothing' and to the politician the 'human life is not worth a farthing'. Indeed,



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this narration depicts in the real sense the condition of elections in Nigeria where the will of the people is trampled upon by the ruling class in solidarity with the election body.

With *Random Blues* (2011), Osundare has reflected the Nigerian society in the light of the social injustices meted on the people by those who, by their positions of responsibility should be leaders and not rulers; defenders and not violators of human rights; liberators and not oppressors. Osundare's social involvement in this collection further strengthens the interconnectedness between literature and society; and literature as a reflection of a milieu. Through the leitmotif of moral decadence and social injustice, the poet has given a dystopic reflection of the conflicted and dysfunctional Nigerian nation figuratively heading towards the Hobbesian state.

**Stylistic Strategies in *Random Blues***

Metaphors, symbolism, neologism and rhetorical devices are creatively deployed by Osundare as linguistic resources and as style to give poignant expression to the urgent and vexed issues of postcolonial destruction, tribalism and irresponsible leadership of many a developing country.Rhetorical devices function as persuasive devices which are used as techniques to convey the author's meaning with the goal of convincing through emotive invocation to project empathy. Osundare employs rhetorical devices to help balance the tempo of his message with the depth and urgency of the same. Repetition and refrains, rhetorical questions and inverted commas/quotation markers are outstanding elements of rhetoric employed in *Random Blues*.

As though rendered with the words of the mouth or sung as blues, Osundare uses refrains and sustained repetitions for these purposes. The first is to introduce a rhythm or musicality into his poetry, considering the genre and title of the collection. Named 'Random Blues',Osundare intends that the lyrical nature of the blues be reflected in the collection. This can be adjudged to be the reason for his adoption of the repetitive pattern. In some instances, lines are repeated in calculated progression while in others, some words are recast. For example, in *Random Blues* 3 (15), 'the sky is with egret' is repeated in line three and five of the first stanza. This pattern follows through the poems in the collection, as the first and second line of each stanza is refrained in the third and fourth lines of the same stanza. This stylistic pattern is consistent, creating a rhythmic structure throughout the collection. Osundare also maintains a consistent seven (7) paragraph structure in all the poems in the collection, with each paragraph being a sestet. Only *Random Blues 10* (27) has an exception which has the regular pattern for stanzas one to five while the other six stanzas are couplets of rhyming patterns.

The second purpose for the employment of refrains and repetitions is for emphatic purposes, that is, to re-establish and accentuate an already mentioned item or issue. This strategy is necessary as it helps to rehash the message or expression intended by the poet. However, Osundare uses words that resound rhetorical essence as though talking to his readers. Expressions like 'I say', 'Yes', 'Yeah", 'Oh Yeah', 'Say' are inserted in the third and fourth lines of every stanza throughout the collection before the repetitions of the earlier rendered lines. The poet also sustains this style throughout the fifty-five poems in this collection, and all the poems have at least one of the expressions.

He also uses rhetorical questions to actualize the strategy of rhetoric as four of the poems in this collection – *Random Blues 14* (35), *Random Blues 15* (37), *Random Blues 17* (41), and *Random Blues 21* (49) – contain rhetorical questions. In *Random Blues 14* (35), the poet begins with a rhetorical question running from the first and second lines and then repeated in the third



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and fourth lines. This strategy is used to project the second person interactive point of view as the poet persona asks, 'who will save us/from the madness of our rulers'. The poet persona uses the inclusive plural pronoun 'us' to create a link with the addressee whom he speaks for. In *Random Blues 15* (37), the same interactive atmosphere is sustained but the interaction is between the corrupt politician and the people. The politician in his desperation to clear his name and project himself as people-oriented queries; 'And whose money built your university?'. The rapport in *Random Blues 17* (41) is between the poet and the people when he sarcastically interrogates, 'How many [people] we are?' the question is meant to remind them of the government's scheme to conduct a census to number them for the purpose of embezzling the little resources they have. The rhetorical question in *Random Blues 21* (49) is simply asked the reader for the purpose of sustaining interaction and attention. In summary, Osundare's employment of rhetorical question is to serve the purpose of improving the interaction between the poet and his audience as well as highlight the topical issues about poor leadership and injustice.

Another strategy employed by Osundare is the use of coinages and borrowings from local languages to add some unique flavour to his work. He borrows from Yoruba, his native language to draw up some cultural relevance in his use of words like 'penkelemesi' (19), 'jegundejerawonbilikiwonbia' {interpreted as 'Gluttons, shameless scoundrels} (39). He employs interjections as ideophones from the conversational speech patterns of the Yorubas like 'Eewo' (53), 'fem' (55) and introduces songs in verse form in 'Random Blues 31' where the last stanza is rendered in Yoruba with interpretation provided thus.

> Kogbokogbo bi orogbo (Ripe, ripe, like *orogbo*)
> Adunniingbeyinewuro (Sweetness succeeds the bitter-leaf)
> Beeni, Kogbokogbo bi orogbo (Yes, ripe, ripe, like *orogbo*)
> Adunniingbeyinewuro (Sweetness succeeds the bitter-leaf)
> Eyinkuleekunl'erinwa (Laughter lives in sorrow's backyard)
> A koniiba won pe "Oni soro (May we never say "What a terrible day") (p. 70).

Neologism is enhanced by his recreation of lexical items from already existing ones and attaching semiotic significance to them. Below are examples of this strategy.

- 'Ill-literate' (*Random Blues 6* p. 19) is coined from illiterate, with 'ill' suggesting an absence of mental wellness and literate sustained in this instance as the politicians may be schooled but their ill mental disposition makes them appear psychologically disabled.
- 'poly-trick-tians' (*Random Blues 9* p. 25), coined from the homonymous 'politician' but in this instance the 'trick' stands out to connote the gimmicks they play on their citizens and the populace. They are given to deceiving and tricking the populace during elections and after being voted in, they play games with those that voted them into power. The coinage which is both satirical and sarcastic in the context of use connotes that politicians are good in many tricks which they use to hypnotize and mislead with the willful intent to exploit and plunder.
- 'You Mar-thew me' (*Random Blues 15* p. 38) points to a biblical allusion where Matthew, the tax collector, is alluded to, which is indicative of the politician who extorts tax from even the poorest regardless of their living conditions. Here the words 'mar' (to damage) and 'thew'(muscular strength) are carved out of the name 'Mathew' to form a verb with its object being 'me'. The signification of "You Mar-thew me" therefore is that 'You forcefully collect from me'.



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- '[T]oe-print' (*Random Blues 23* p. 53) is opposed to thumb-print, suggesting the extent of absurdity of electoral irregularities whereby the perpetuators would exhaust their fingers in thumb-printing, having blistered them, and resort to the use of their toes.

Osundare also experiments with metaphors through which extended meanings are connoted and links are drawn which the readers can relate with. In *Random Blues 4* (17), the crocodile in the first line of the poem that reads, 'so the big crocodile is gone' alludes to a fallen patriot whom the poet is writing a tribute to. P.W.B. is the alias used here and is referred to as the 'Big Crocodile'. In *Random Blues 7* (21), 'Justice' is said to have 'bowed under a heavy scorn' as justice in this scenario is a direct reference to the legal system that cannot not reverse the impeachment of the ruling king by the lawmakers. In *Random Blues 25* (58), the same meaning is withheld as 'justice staggers with a broken scale', implying that there is a total overhauling of the legal system by the corrupt politicians as justice now is for the highest bidders. In *Random Blues 8* (23), 'stolen crown' signifies the stolen mandate since the crown is a symbol of authority. Osundare has ensured that the references in these metaphors are not far-fetched as they are simple everyday expressions, giving credence to his artistic principle that poetry should not be esoteric and inaccessible.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of human nature is to make that valuable contribution to the good of the universe and project selfless service for the good of the people and the society at large (Bryce 127). This philosophy can be said to be the guiding principle of Osundare's poetry and indeed the collection, *Random Blues*, as he lends his voice to address the problem of social injustice bedevilling Nigeria and Africa as a whole. As a social advocate, Osundare believes that his poetry should reflect the concerns of his people and point towards the direction of an ennobled humanity. From this prism, he draws from his environment and its experiences to produce literature, as his response to a query about his greatest inspiration as a poet clearly shows:

> I find it extremely difficult to locate a single source. I would rather talk of a network of inspirations. First, my cultural and historical background: that is the source to which I always return. Second is the chaotic but terribly attractive country called Nigeria, its stunning heterogeneity and the history and present circumstances of Africa and all of African descent…" (Enenwa-Oheato, 2003b 73).

The social realities of his time and circumstances influence his creativity where his role as social crusader is birthed. From the poems analysed in this paper, not only has Osundare demonstrated that literature should be the tool for social engineering, he has also laid bare the mishap, contretemps, challenges, misfortunes, dereliction and malfeasance that have turned the political and economic landscape of the nation into a wasteland. As the voice of the abused and downtrodden populace who have been robbed of their commonwealth by the over-privileged elite class, Osundare takes on a Marxist criticism of the profligate system that empowers the oppressors against the proletariat.

Through his artistic use of language, topical issues bordering on politics, religion, sociology and governance have been reflected in *Random Blues*. The challenges confronting the masses as regards the systemic inefficiencies have been explored in this paper. Therefore, it can be concluded that Osundare's poetry, much as it invites the reader into understanding the obvious contradictions that plague the postcolonial state of Nigeria and indeed Africa, expresses



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a vision of a rude awakening to the supreme necessity of enlightenment and action to bring about good governance and free the people from the chokehold of tyranny and oppression.

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