

**Dissent and Orality as Praxis for Social Reformation in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare and  
Odia Ofeimun**

by

**Peter Emuejevoke Omoko, PhD.**

Department of English and Literary Studies,  
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria  
Email: [omoko.peter@dou.edu.ng](mailto:omoko.peter@dou.edu.ng) Tel: +2347034711220

and

**Emmanuel Oritshema IKOMI, PhD**

Department of English and Literary Studies,  
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria  
Email: [emmanuel.ikomi@dou.edu.ng](mailto:emmanuel.ikomi@dou.edu.ng) Tel: +2347036753439

**Abstract**

This paper examines Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* and Odia Ofeimun's *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* from a reformatory perspective. It underscores the fact that the poets' thematic concerns reveal a pathetic disparity between the haves and the have-nots, the oppressors and the oppressed, poor leadership, corruption, political insensitivity, military dictatorship, war and ecological consciousness in the Nigerian society and how poetry is deployed to the service of the downtrodden. In the selected poetry collections under study, we examine how the poets put on the garb of the town crier and artistically engage the political oppressors with biting metaphors and images drawn from the oral resources of the people. The aim is to analytically evaluate the poets' use of the motifs of dissent and orality in their attempt to confront social inequality in the society. This technique enables us to bring to light the salient indices of the writers' reformatory quest for a society bubbling with hope and optimism. The study shows that various metaphors and anecdotal references in the collections: Osundare's *Village Voices* and Ofeimun's *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* not only connect individuals and groups to Nigerian bartered history, but unfurls the fact that committed poets, like Osundare and Ofeimun tell the truth artistically to power, dying for reformation. The paper concludes that the two poets, being the flagbearers of the Nigerian 'alter-native' literary tradition, are committed to the reclamation of Nigeria's lost glory

**Keywords:** Dissent, Orality, Praxis, Poetry, and Social Reformation

## **Introduction**

The artistic nuances of dissent and the dynamics of orality have always provided interesting materials for literary discourse. Dissent, for instance, constitute the main thrust of modern African poetry since its emergence as a literary tradition. This is given the fact that the socio-political experience that informed the African writers' imagination remains excruciating and disheartening. From the colonial to post-Independence periods, the Nigerian masses have experienced different socio-political upheavals which have impacted negatively on their collective psyche. As a result, there is an urgent need to find solutions to this sordid situation. Dissent, through literature, thus became the vision of the poets, a vehicle which they deploy as a viable instrument for social redemption.

'Dissent literature', in the context of this essay, adumbrates a work of art that engages socio-political issues that affect the ordinary people as well as expresses resistance against their sources. It is synonymous to protest literature. One of the distinguishing features of dissent literature, therefore, is that it foregrounds the indices of oppression and dispossession with significant effect on the emotional and psychological consciousness of its audience. It sets out to protest against identified situations and vices that are inimical to the general wellbeing of the people and, indeed, society, even in the face of intense socio-political and cultural repression.

The tradition of dissent in modern African literature can be traced to the negritude movement in francophone Africa, whose basic tenets is the preservation of the African cultural identity against Western politics of dislocation and dispossession. In the United States of America, protest literature serves as a form of social reformation based on sundry political and racial issues that affect the ordinary people. Literary works like those of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, attack American social and political institutions - slavery and racism - especially as they affect people of African descent. These works contain emotions and sentiments that are revolutionary, framed in a manner that makes sense to the reader. It is against this background that Harris (2009), observes with regard to the African-American social and political quarmire, that dissent literature refers to a literature "of bringing redress to the secondary status of black people, of attempting to achieve the acceptance of black people into the larger American body polity, of encouraging practitioners of democracy truly to live up to what democratic ideals on American soil means." (p.1). According to her, the intention of dissent literature then "was – and remains – to show inequalities in America ..." (p.1). Similarly, the early African writers used their works to engage the colonial distortion of the African identity and religious belief systems.

By orality, we mean the deployment of oral literary and folkloric motifs inherent in the culture area of the writer in the embellishment of their works. The African writer, in order to domesticate his/her artistic vision, often borrows, adapt and employs oral resources which are woven into their work as motifs. This, therefore, adumbrates the hybridity of modern African literature; a combination of indigenous and Western tropes. It is against this backdrop that Ojaide

(2001) submits that: “the creative writer is never an airplant, but someone who is grounded in some specific place. It is difficult to talk of many writers without their identification with place” (p.1). In other words, since African oral literature, in its functional state, serves and encourages integrity, honesty, industry, humility and heroism, its aesthetic framework becomes a source of inspiration to the modern African writer. Ekundayo and Iyayi (2013) support this view when they aver that the package of modern African literature may be western, the language and the formal patterns may be foreign, but the contents and quintessence are African. Whether purely Oral African Literature or Modern Written Africa Literature of foreign structuring, the two types have become fused and they individual and/or collectively perform the same developmental functions (p.87).

The essence of this technique is to preserve the oral tradition of the African people as well as use its aesthetic nuances to reform society.

Since the attainment of political independence in the early 1960s, many African states have had the misfortune of being plagued by insensitive political leaders. This has affected, significantly, the social and political progress of the continent. Thus, either explicitly or implicitly, the African writer uses his work to engage these socio-political and cultural misfortunes in their society as well as to record them in a manner that the audience would want to react to, either positively or negatively. This is why Awhefeada (2007), asserts that “... the writer should be seen as actively involved in the unfolding experiences of his society, not only as a recorder but also as a participant trying to shape events” (p.12). This, therefore, is the social vision of the African poet. The apparent burden that confronts the African writer, nay the poet, is the urgent need to right the wrongs in the existing social order. Arguing in this vein, Darah (2010), declares that “...all classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environments where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity” (p.100).

Although contemporary African poets derive their resources from the socio-political issues highlighted above, they have also expanded the frontiers of the African ideology and individualised their aesthetics by borrowing motifs from the indigenous oral tradition, thus assuming the role of the tribunes of the masses. They have become dissidents, opposing socio-political structures that work against the good of society. To this crop of African writers, the worth of the work of art should be measured by its ability to criticise any established order that goes against the tenets of fair play, even in the face of intense censorship and political persecution. These writers’ works are aimed at offering practical solutions by way of specific measures either for consensual reform or powerful revolution against the existing socio-political order. They, therefore, set their works against the backdrop of failure of leadership, political instability, corruption, insensitivity of sit-tight political office holders’ pauperisation of the masses and the regimes of military dictatorship across the African continent as well as environmental degradation. Most of these writers not explore the dialectics of Marxism as a backdrop but deploys

oral literary motifs in a bid to reconstruct the African concept of integrity, fairness and dignity of labour. It is in line with this view that Maduka (2004) asserts that:

Literature enhances man's awareness of the interlocking relationship between human freedom, self-determination of people and progress in society and the necessity of creating systems that sustain the life of social institutions. Each national literature encodes values which guide the people towards the development of effective mechanisms of response to the challenges of civilisation in the modern world... Our national life is in chaos because there is no poetry in the heads of our leaders (cited in Ekundayo and Iyayi, 2013).

Writing in the same vein in his assessment of modern Nigerian poetry, Awhefeada (2007), opines that the Nigerian poets of the 1980s whom Aiyejina (1988), describes as belonging to an "Alter-Native Tradition" (p.12), use their works to vivify "... history and made it a tool of angst against the rulers" (p.17). Continuing, he explains;

...the poets were prodded by the pressures of history. In response, they became ideological combatants, putting their poetry as a tool for social and political reordering. They adopted the Marxian praxis as the means to put an end to the oppression of the masses as a result of the depravity of a corrupt bourgeoisie. The poetry created new and revolutionary visions in a tone of angst and protest (p19).

This essay, however, focuses on the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun as a prism through which we can examine the indices of dissent and orality in contemporary African poetry. The choice of the two poets is appropriate because their poetry collections, *Village Voices* and *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* best exemplify the fecundity of dissent and orality which constitute the core of this paper. Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun bear the flag of the 'alter-native' tradition of Nigerian poetry who deploy their works to address the tension between the African political-cum-capitalist elite and the masses. Their dissenting stance against established socio-political structures in the Nigerian state is unparalleled. In much of their poetic outputs, there is always one form of protest or the other, demystification of the difficulty associated with poetry through the infusion of oral aesthetic tools, giving birth to a poetic tradition which can variously be termed dissent or protest poetry. A poetry which according to Anyokwu (2015), "...is inherently and fundamentally different, both in thematic concerns and in style, from that of the preceding generation" (p.12). They understand that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. To them, "... we must strive for a form of social organisation that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so that we can build a new country, and sing a new song." (Ngugi 1981, p.50).

### **Dissent and Orality as Praxis for Social Reformation**

This section is concerned with the analyses of the use of dissent in the poetry of Osundare's *Village Voices* and Ofeimun's *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* by highlighting the motifs of orality which the poets deploy in a bid to reform society. The investigation covers the basic ideas, thematic goals as well as the formal elements of his poetry, which endear them to readers. There are certain literary motifs which are combined with oral praxis by the poets to produce poems that are revolutionary in both content and form. The various literary devices utilised by the two poets in the examined collections are also analysed in this segment. As poets, Osundare and Ofeimun use poetry as a vehicle for social reformation. While some of their poems foreground private themes, it is public experiences that are predominantly recreated in their poetry. In other words, their poems serve as a social commentary on the Nigerian state and the global community. The thematic concerns of the two collections, for instance, reveal the pathetic disparity between the haves and the have-nots, the oppressors and the oppressed, poor leadership, corruption, political insensitivity, military dictatorship, war and a keen ecological consciousness. Thus, in the two collections: Osundare's *Village Voices* and Ofeimun's *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* which constitute the critical discourse of this essay, one comes across the writers protest against socio-political injustices aimed at redeeming the Nigerian people from oppressive manifestations

Osundare, for instance, believes that the poet must not only just write but must make concerted effort to salvage the Nigerian society from the hands of the local oppressors. In the words of Irele (2003), Osundare's poetry is adumbrates "his commitment to social issues of his country, his continent, and his world". According to him, "Osundare's concept of morality is steeped in the push for a balanced world, and equalised earth, and an uncensored goodness towards humanity" (p.xxv). This reformatory mission is done through a remarkable appropriation of indigenous motifs and images which are targeted as conscientization and social reformation. Jeyifo (1987), affirms that "only in the poetry of Agostinho Neto and David Diop will you find the same depth and passion and lyricism in solidarity with the oppressed, the downtrodden, the dispossessed, and a corresponding faith in their aspiration and will to revolutionary change as we confront in Osundare's poetry". According to Jeyifo, the "dispossession of the majority of our people, and more specifically of the rural producers, may in fact be said to be the grand theme of Osundare's poetry" (p.xi).

In *Village Voices*, for instance, we come across Osundare's social reformatory vision as a poet of common man who uses his poetry to convey the various socio-political injustices meted on the common people - the have-nots and the majority of the masses. The aptness of the title 'village voices', attests to Osundare's commitment towards demystifying obscure poetic language with the aim of communicating to the less literate class of the society - the poor peasants, including the hawkers, in fact the downtrodden in the fringes of society, that is village. The poet perceives that the pauperised majority are the people who need his message, not the elite oppressors. Thus, in order to convey the social disparity that constitutes the main fabrics of the Nigerian socio-political

domain, Osundare employs essential images of deprivation and affluence, which he uses to foreground the repressive manifestations of the ruling class (the haves) on the ruled (the have-nots). In other words, the poet takes his message to the oppressed peasants, who are found in villages and rural hamlets. Through the adroit exploitation of language oral rhetorics and themes, Osundare ontologises the motif of dissent in a manner that the oppressed masses are constantly incited to act and resist their oppressors.

In many of the poems in *Village Voices*, the dichotomy between the bourgeois and the proletariat is copiously represented. The Marxist thesis and antithesis expressed in many of the poems in the collection highlights the imperative of struggle, which is the only alternative left for the masses to reclaim their share of the resources in the land. In the collection, Osundare seems to inflame the oppressed in order to combat every instrument of the oppressor as perpetrated by the heartless capitalists and the political rulers, who are poachers that persistently conspire to torment them. The foregoing idea resonates in the poem “*The Land of Unease*”:

The yam of this world  
is enough for all mouths  
which pay daily homage  
to the god of the throat  
...  
But alas,  
men forge unequal knives  
a few slashing the yam  
with machetes greedier  
than Esimuda’s sword

(*Voices*, p.46)

The issue of social disparity and class discrimination, which manifests in the Nigerian socio-economic domain, is depicted in the poetic lines above. The distinction along class lines in Nigeria, gives rise to exploitation of varying forms. Osundare incites the oppressed to react to the disturbing experience of injustice, where resources meant to satisfy the needs of all are abrogated by few individuals, who perpetuate and seek to entrench themselves in power. The sociological allusion to Esimuda’s sword metaphorically depicts the greedy nature of the Nigerian politician, who embezzles all the fortunes of the nation, with little or nothing left for the majority. Esimuda, according to the poet’s personal note, is a “legendary Ikere warrior with a sword extraordinarily large and sharp” (Osundare, 1984, p. 46). Being an indigenous oral motif, the character of Esimuda in the poem, is symbolic of the legendary greed of the Nigerian political class, who manifest a keen self-centredness. That the poet borrows this image from his indigenous oral culture in his home town, Ikere, in Ekiti State, Nigeria, reflects his consciousness of his native environment and the

commitment to redeem it from the hands of poachers. While the image of Esimuda depicts the greediness and insensitivity of the political class and the capitalists, Omodindinrin (the smallest finger), in contrast, represents the pauperisation of the masses and the labourers, who are left with nothing of significance by the highly placed. Again, Osundare illustrates:

why have few chosen to be thumbs  
and the many others *omodindinrin*  
clinging precariously  
to the periphery of the palm?  
(*Voices*, p.46)

Osundare's use of images to capture the idea of class disparity appeals to our senses. For instance, the recourse to playing with the indigenous metaphor of the human fingers to convey the concept of class distinction and alienation, is socially convincing — it reflects the overbearing effects of political and capitalist greed on the masses and the labourers. The line "...few chosen to be thumbs", captures the opportunists few — political rulers and capitalists, who arrogate all the wealth to themselves, leaving little or nothing for the starving majority. The affluent class is represented by the fattest finger, the thumb, but the poor majority are depicted by the smallest finger, known as *omodindinrin* in the indigenous Yoruba language. The oral and metaphoric appropriation of the human fingers, to reflect social disparity, could be exemplified further: the separation of the fat thumb finger, from the other fingers in the human palm, signifies the class structure that exists between the rich and the poor in the society. The tone of protest in this poem is aimed at realising social parity and equality, which is the essence of social reformation in human society.

Again, in "*The Padlock and Key*", the poet protests the constant disdain with which the masses are held in their own country by a few who have the opportunity to rule over them. Here, Osundare highlights the inhuman manifestations of autocratic regimes in Nigeria, where the masses are persistently brutalised so that they will not be bold enough to demand better conditions of life. In other words, the people are threatened by the power play to remain docile in the midst of stern political trepidations. The dissenting pulse that runs through the poem is meant to spur the masses into taking radical decisions that would redeem them from the oppressors. The poet tells us in the first two stanzas:

We ask the tyrant:  
when will you end your torture  
he asks us  
when will snake stand on its own legs  
when will the rat wed the mouse's offspring  
we shiver with shrieks from death chambers  
he says they are laughs of men at play

We ask the tyrant:  
when will you destroy your chains  
he says  
when there are fires in the land  
hot enough to melt their links  
(*Voices*, p.65)

In this poem, “padlock” and “key” represent the bondage of the Nigerian people, who are subjugated by military dictators and civilians. The suffocating atmosphere that is generated by autocratic tension and the repressive manifestations of political highhandedness are exposed in the excerpt above. As is the case with military regimes, the people are treated with so much disregard are subjected to dehumanising treatment, hence they “shiver with shrieks from death chambers” (p.65). Furthermore, in the dialogue above, one experiences the richness of indigenous indices of orality inherent in the Yoruba culture. It also foregrounds the enthralling rhythm and mood of the traditional oral poetic tradition *ijala* of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Ironically, as in the oral tradition, the agony of the dehumanised majority serves as an amusement to the tyrants: “He says they are laughs of men at play”. In this kind of situation, the poet believes that every oppressed person must come out to protest against maladministration, bad leadership and every form of oppressive manifestations perpetrated by the ruling oligarchs. This dissenting motif is well anthologised in many of Osundare’s poems. In other words, in the struggle to redeem the land from the shackles of oppression, nobody should be left out— even the intellectuals in the ivory towers must be fully committed to the quest to liberate the people. The poet reprimands in “*Listen, Book Wizards*” thus:

Listen, you book wizards  
your pens are spears  
in the eye of this land  
your ink the stench  
coursing through gutters  
and government offices  
carrying debris of rot  
from the stagnant pond  
of legislative houses

The laws of your books  
bow a million heads  
hunching backs once straight  
like young rubber tree



they turn the world upside down  
for you to lick the spill

(*Voices*, p.58)

In this poem, everyone is involved in the struggle to redeem the land from the hands of the few heartless poachers, whose sole mission is to keep the people in perpetual subjugation. In other words, no matter your status in the society, all hands must be on deck to take the country out of the woods.

Furthermore, Osundare laments the insensitivity of the Nigerian rulers, who have no vision for the Nigerian state. He declares that the only thing Nigerian rulers are good at doing is the embezzlement of funds — they do not show any iota of commitment to advance the socio-economic condition of the country, except mere exhibition of Eurocentric or imperialist tendencies (Ajakah 2017, p.2). In the “*Eunuch Child*”, Osundare protests the Eurocentricism that is displayed by the political class through their privileging of imported goods from Euro-America over domestic products. The poet illustrates with yam, a local source of carbohydrate, which is grown in Nigeria. He parodies the politicians’ failure to encourage its commercialisation to become a major source of income in Nigeria. He condemns the reliance of the Nigerian economy on importation:

Oh! if only yam would grow in Europe  
we would send a thousand ships today  
and stop worrying about wayward weeds  
about droughts which crack the land  
like a harmattan lip  
about floods which carry pregnant heaps  
down the busy hill  
into the wolfish jaws  
of the tricky Atlantic

Oh! if only yam would grow in Europe  
we would buy a million barns  
with our oil billions  
and import white princesses  
to pound for our kings

But since yam never grows in Europe  
we will bring Europe here  
to grow for us:

(*Voices*, pp. 53-54)

From the above, it is evident that the poet protests the misplacement of values by the Nigerian political class and elites, who privilege European culture and products as elitist. In this poem, Osundare unearths an enigmatic nugget of wisdom when he says: “Oh! if only yam would grow in Europe/we would buy a million barns/with our oil billions”. This oral artist trope is used to lampoon the over-reliance of the Nigerian government on foreign goods at the detriment of the indigenous resources. To the poet, acts like these not only increase the colonial stronghold on the country but impoverished the people. For Osundare, therefore, the solution to Nigerian economic advancement lies mainly on the promotion of indigenous or domestic products. This inward-looking approach is the only means for the sustainable development of the Nigerian nation. As Osundare suggests, the commercialisation of domestic products is the most tenable measure to redeem the poor peasants from abject penury. Osundare’s suggestion is necessary in a time like this, when Nigeria is drifting rudderless. As Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2003) affirms, “the words of the poet must not be ignored because they are words that have been carefully selected and used to present useful ideas” (p.31).

As a social crusader, Osundare uses his poetry to champion the cause of the oppressed masses in order to redeem them from oppressive rules (Anyokwu 2015, p.9). In Osundare’s poems, one constantly encounters the images of protest against the recurrent debasement and dehumanisation of the downtrodden because he desires a world where the rich and the poor would have equal access to the social and political amenities in the country. His resort to dissent motif in his poetry is therefore a call for social justice and parity. As he intones in “*A Dialogue of the Drum*”, “When I raise my voice/The world will be my chorus” (... *Voices*, p.6). Here, the poet implies that he has the capacity to incite the world to protest against all forms of inequality in the land. He therefore warns the oppressors that their time will soon be over because the people are tired of their continuous subjugation. In the same poem, he sounds a warning to the tyrants thus:

Your drum is sounding too loud  
It may soon reach the tearing point  
You have reached the neck of the palm  
You may soon find the earth  
Cradling your broken head  
(... *Voices*, p. 7).

The metaphor of the drum demonstrates the indigenous means of mobilizing for war against the enemy. In other words, the tyrants should be careful when they hear the sound of the collective drum of the people. In the course of arguing for freedom for the masses from the shackles of oppression and dispossession, the poet manifests a revolutionary spirit which projects him as the people’s patriot. Thus, when the poet announces “I Wake up this Morning”, he appeals to the

audience as the poetic persona, whose vision is to chastise arrogant and heartless tyrants. He declares:

I wear courage like a shield  
telling kings their fart  
chokes the village nose  
I wear courage like a shield  
and shout mountains of distance  
into plains of touch  
rid of daunting echoes  
of the hillocks men build into forbidding peaks  
submerging valleys

*(Voices, pp. 1-2).*

As we experience in the lines above, Osundare is exposed to us as the people's poet, who uses poetry as a potent instrument for social redemption. Osundare constantly echoes the wastefulness, which corruption and inequality continually bequeath on the Nigerian state. In many of his poems, he graphically paints the picture of the disparity that exists between the rich and the poor. In "*Eating with all the Fingers*", for instance, he protests the affairs of men, where a few will arrogate all the food meant for the entire community to themselves. He tells us:

The affairs of this life  
are like people eating  
some dip ten fingers  
and clog their throats  
their greed chokes the land  
with sprawling dirt

*(Voices, p.15).*

He, therefore, engages the people in a conspiracy against their tormentor. According to him, in order to defeat oppression, the people must add their voices together and fight in one accord. The motive behind this call is to realise a society where equality for all men and women will be projected:

We will raise our voices  
and tell the world  
we will not be watchers  
of others eating

*(Voices, p.15).*

Like Osundare, Ofeimun's poetry resonates with images and metaphors of dissent aimed at sensitising the masses to their power to redeem the land from the hands of the tyrant poachers. He openly expresses his disdain on the socio-political malaise in the country and the pauperisation of the masses. Ofeimun, like other African committed writers, Omoko (2023) aver, "confront issues that have bearing on the people. This is because he imbues in his works, images and metaphor that deny the enemy of the masses sleep. Ofeimun's poetry is one that pitted the state against the downtrodden who looked to them for direction" (p.147). As a radical poet, his view is that as the politicians are insensitive to the plight of the ordinary citizens and thus cannot be trusted, the people must fashion a collective and a dissenting means to fight for their rights. It is in this regard that Awhefeada (2006), opines that Ofeimun and the poets of his generation, unlike their predecessors:

...became ideological combatants, putting their poetry in the service of humanity. Conceiving poetry as a tool for social and political reordering, they adopted the Marxian praxis as the means to put an end to the oppression of the masses as a result of the depravity of a corrupt bourgeoisie. The poetry created new and revolutionary visions on a tone of angst and protest (p.379).

Ofeimun's *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* in line with the above artistic sentiments, conjures an overtly political consciousness side-by-side an aesthetic inquisition into the labyrinths of the peoples' predicaments in the face of plenty. In the title poem, "*A Handle for the Flutist*", for instance, the poet differs with those who believe that poetry does not have the force to confront the socio-political inanities in the society nor can it reform. Rather, he sees poetry as means to disintegrate the gathering of the oppressors and enthrone social justice in the society. The use of the oral motif of the 'flutist' in the collection carries the metaphoric and wordsmithery adumbrates the vast inanities that retard the peoples' progress. The first two stanzas of the poem, for instance, foreground the artistic mission of the poet by locating poetry in the domain of social consciousness:

You have heard it said before  
that poetry makes no water jump  
blows not the wind it divines  
builds no pyramids nor does it  
repair bridges or start anything afresh

Yet in the common tongue of those  
who love to feel the terror of survival  
the survival of mouth as mouth alone

the worshipped word is enough  
to expiate crimes and to lay honour  
upon who the pleaded grace of song has fallen  
(*A Handle for the Flutist...*, p.7)

As a social reformer, the poet uses the functionality of poetry to explore the alternative potential of poetry in sanitising society. Although his artistic goal is to discredit the position of some classical critics such as Plato who believe that poets, because of their reflective and refractive use of materials derive from society, are unfit to reform society, the poem foregrounds the role of the poet as the conscience of the society. Of course, if poetry “builds no pyramids nor does it/repair bridges or start anything afresh”, it is capable of bringing people together as well as fight against crimes. The allusion to ancient Egyptian pyramids and bridges only adumbrates the rhetorics of oppression and force labour. It foregrounds the idea of tyranny which the masses are subjected to by the callous rulers. To the poets, pyramids and bridges are built with the sweat of the masses who are in turn prevented from enjoying the luxuries they provide. Poetry on the other hand, produces love by bringing people together. For those who love poetry, “the worshipped word is enough/to expiate crimes and to lay honour/upon who the pleaded grace of song has fallen” (p.7).

The poet’s position is clear. The masses must understand the fact that the aim of their oppressors is to annihilate them. In other words, the dehumanisation of the Nigerian majority by the few tyrant rulers is a means to make them useless not only to themselves but to society where they would survive at the instance of the oppressive political elites. Ofeimun illustrates this position further in the poem, “Beyond Fear” where he charges the poor Nigerian masses look to themselves as the source of their freedom. The poet charges the people to take their destinies into their hands in order to identify the road to salvation; even at the risk of facing combat:

The fact that we survive it compels us  
to do something about it: the hungerbash  
hidden by the syrupy communiques  
of the idols of warfare, trade, and ‘tricknology’  
The fact that we survive  
the beleaguered slumscapes  
the sweltering, tattered villages,  
dragoons of biocide  
afester with rancid commerce,  
the fact that we survive it  
compels us to do something about it,  
to scoff and wag our loaded fingers  
at the zanny cowboys on heat

heaping salted invectives and trash-talks  
at the daring ones who go at dusk

...

*(A Handle for the Flutist..., p.15)*

In other words, the power to restructure society lies significantly within the masses. Everybody must look inward and be strengthened by his/her will power to make the desired change that everyone craves for.

In the poem, “A Serious Matter”, Ofeimun charges the masses not to take the promises of their insensitive politicians serious because they are laden in lies. Here as a social crusader, Ofeimun does not spare the masses who by their actions and inactions compromised the process of electing new leaders in the country. To the poet, the people cannot be fully separated from their social, political and economic predicaments. This is because, they are too canal and fail to see beyond the immediate:

We have no need for  
the common salt of want and hunger  
said the spokespersons of the people  
as they rode kites of ballot paper  
to the truth of an ancient wish

But we must stop these  
air-conditioned arguments –  
do something – said the Peoples’ lawyers  
as they stood up and were  
carried shoulder high  
*(A Handle for the Flutist..., p.23)*

The lines above foreground the social and political context upon which Nigerian elections are held. The people, through their representatives are coaxed into supporting orthodox means of election rigging by financial inducements. The people are gullible, hence they believed that after collecting election inducement money: “We have no need for/the common salt of want and hunger/said the spokespersons of the people”. In other words, the people must be weary of those who they send to represent and speak on their behalf. This is because even from among the them, there are betrayals who speak from both sides of the mouth. Thus, having been bribed, the politicians are able to have their way in manipulating the election process: “as they rode kites of ballot paper/to the truth of ancient wish”. The poet uses this poem to caution the people that for every election that is compromised, there is a consequence. This is well ontologised in the last two stanzas of the poem thus:

...when my mother came back  
from the rally of rallies  
the kitchenware welcomed her  
with blank stares

The spokespersons of the people  
did not tell her  
where to find the next morsel  
for her children  
(*A Handle for the Flutist...*, p.23)

What the poet has done in the above lines is to accuse the people of being culpable in their socio-political woes. The people ought to know that the politicians are not to be trusted. Hence with their collective power, they should use the ballot to change wrong leaders. Furthermore, being the poet of the common man, Ofeimun takes the posture of the ignorant masses in the poem, "Ballast" and asks:

How could we know  
being calves on green grass  
we had so much promise in our horns  
to make the oaks panic  
at vague rumours of our hoofs

How were we to know  
that our dreamy eyes could give  
so much to the many-layered sky  
to make the earth envious  
of our footfalls  
(*A Handle for the Flutist...*, p.28)

The lines above adumbrate the ignorance of the people about their collective power to fight against all forms of oppression and dispossession that are meted on them by the insensitive politicians. Here, the image of the calves 'horns', 'hoof' and 'footfalls' become a convincing metaphor of strength inherent in the masses who are represented as calves to confront their political oppressors. In the poem, the metaphor of the 'oaks' which transcends into 'many-layered sky' foregrounds the elitism that characterises the upper class, which includes the political class and the bourgeois capitalists. This group must be confronted with the truth to enable them understand the meaning of social justice. This conscious sensitisation of the poor will certainly lead them into re-examining

their predicament. Significantly, the oppressed poor will one day rise in fury against their oppressors; and when that time comes, the people will understand the social power they wield over their oppressors. In other words, when the people finally summon the courage to take their rights, the tyrants will be overthrown and will become worthless in the scheme of things. Here, Ofeimun seems to corroborate Rotimi's assertion that "to sit down and do nothing is to be crippled fast" (*The Gods*, p.7). This is why he charges the people to rally themselves together to speak truth against power with one voice. The invitation is open to all. This is well presented in the poem, "Come to our Rally":

Come to our rally  
I said to the rain  
in every sun  
that found a blade of grass  
renew the sap  
from root to budding wish  
dare to sing  
of life as terminus  
a splash of truth  
with greenness as home  
in the spurting wilderness of forest flowers  
(*A Handle for the Flutist...*, p.40)

In this poem, the enemy of the people are the heartless, insensitive politicians and tyrant kings who take pleasure in pauperising the people. Here, the poet becomes a social activist who takes upon himself to rally the people together to confront their oppressors squarely. Furthermore, as the voice of the voiceless, Ofeimun takes the side of the downtrodden and becomes their drummer who awakes them to consciousness anytime they become docile to their predicaments. In the poem "The Drummer" for instance, the drummer is used as a motif of reformation commissioned to recreate the despoiled socio-political landscape of the society. This is the drummer:

...came to tie knots  
to create new riddles  
out of  
the too-simple truths  
of festivating crowds

From by-ways to thoroughfares  
disdaining the fists  
lifted in facile worship  
of rude power



he sought the deft idiom  
beyond the kobo-wise  
haggle  
of praise-singers  
(*A Handle for the Flutist...*, p.32)

The poetic import of the above lines becomes redolent when one considers how successive governments in Nigeria have succeeded in trading away national assets for personal gains and aggrandisement. Like the flutist in the oral setting who represents the conscience of the society, Ofeimun impressively collects social, political and economic materials in the society which undermine the progress of the country and reconstructs them as in the traditional setting in a manner that it transforms into a call for change and reformation. This is why Omoko (2014), argues that the oral poet in traditional society, “must be abreast of the goings-on in the society. He is always alive to both the old and current trends of the sociopolitical environment. Thus, he collects materials from the society and weaves them into songs” (p.159). In other words, in order to re-right this public anguish, the poet, through his poetry becomes the catalyst to the reformation which society seeks.

### **Conclusion**

Poetry, no doubt, serves as a tool for social and political reformation. However, it is artistic use of certain motifs such as dissent and oral cadences that enhance the extent to which such reformation goals may be achieved. The examination of the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun in this essay has shown that the poets are not only intellectuals but radical reformers who use various aesthetic tropes including dissent and oral resources to proffer solutions to the sundry socio-political distortions in the Nigerian society. Thus, through the use of dissent and orality as poetic tools, the poets have been able re-evaluate the plight of the downtrodden and voiceless masses of the society who daily bear the violence, dispossession and dislocation of the insensitivity of various hegemonic structures in the Nigerian state and redefines and recreates ‘dissent’ as an important tool in confronting the various oppressive structures of society.

### **References**

- Aiyejina, F. (1988). “Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition”. Yemi Ogunbiyi. Ed. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*. Vol. One. Lagos: Guardian Books. pp. 112-128.

- Ajakah, J. C. (2017). "No Hiding Place for Politicians in Niyi Osundare's Poetry". *Vanguard* October 16, 2017.
- Anyokwu, C. (2015). "The Essentials of Niyi Osundare's Poetry". *Transnational Literature*. Vol. 8, No. 1. 1-11.
- Awhefeada, S. (2006). "Poetry and National Evolution: The Nigerian Experience". *Abraka Studies in African Arts I: African Arts and National Development*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Awhefeada, S. (2007). *The Burden of History in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide*. A Thesis in the Department of English, Submitted to the Faculty of Arts in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Ibadan.
- Darah, G. G. (2010). "Revolution Pressures in Niger Delta Literatures." *Nigerian Literature Today: A Journal of Contemporary Nigerian writing*. No 1. 99-122. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Ekundayo, S.B. and Iyayi, F. (2023). "The Place of Literature in Individual and National Development" *Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria (JLSN)*. Issue 5, p. 83-93.
- Ezenwa, O. (2003). "Niyi Osundare and the Poetic Statement of a Generation". Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. Ed. *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press. 97-113.
- Irele, A. (2003). "Preface: Niyi Osundare Between Self and Commitment" *People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*. Abdul-Rasheed Na' Allah (ed.) Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.
- Jeyifo, B. (1987). "Introduction" *Songs of the Marketplace*. Ibadan: New Horn Press
- Ngugi wa, T. (1981). *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann Publishers.
- Ofeimun, O. (1980). *The Poet Lied*. London: Longman.
- Ojaide, T. (2001). "Poetry, Performance and Art: Udje Dance Songs of Nigeria's Urhobo People" *RALS* 32.2, p.44-75.
- Omoko, P.E. (2014). "Socio-Biographical Study of two Urhobo Musical Maestros: Sir Juju Debala and Udjabor Okololo" *Nigerian Journal of Oral Literatures*. No. 2, p. 147-173
- Omoko, P.E. (2023). "Socio-Political Activism and Nationhood in the Poetry of Odia Ofeimun"

*Postcolonial Interventions*. Vol viii, Issue 2, p. 143-174

Osundare, N. (1984). *Village Voices*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers.

Rotimi, O. (1971). *The Gods are not to Blame*. London: Oxford University Press.

Harris, T. (2009). *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.