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Niyi Osundare: The 'Eco Elegist' Echoes through his Elegies

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A poet dons many roles to ring in a change, to bring in a transformation, blows a clarion to call caution, envisages a dream and battles for a better world. Niyi Osundare, the Nigerian poet, activist fits into this bill perfectly. His heart heaves heavy as he whines over the imbalance in the ecology imbued by the brutish and selfish humans. He grieves over the loss of the green cover, wails over the woods being cleared, moans over the mountain ranges being razed to the ground and sheds tears on seeing the 'tear' in the sky. Osundare wears the mantle of the typical 'eco elegist', who earnestly laments over the degradation, deforestation and death of the ecology and human destiny thereafter.

Following the lines of traditional elegies, Nyi Osundare begins his poems on a highly pessimistic note over how, man pounds and plunders the earth for his selfish motives. He imbues his lines with melancholic mood as he moans on seeing the morose, unsightly sights around him.

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I. Introduction

"The biggest enemy we face is anthropocentricism. This is that common attitude that everything on this earth was put here for (human) use."

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A poet dons many roles to ring in a change, to bring in a transformation, blows a clarion to call caution, envisages a dream and battles for a better world. Niyi Osundare, the Nigerian poet, activist fits into this bill perfectly. His heart heaves heavy as he whines over the imbalance in the ecology imbued by the brutish and selfish humans. He grieves over the loss of the green cover, wails over the woods being cleared, moans over the mountain ranges being razed to the ground and sheds tears on seeing the 'tear' in the sky. Osundare wears the mantle of the typical 'eco elegist', who earnestly laments over the degradation, deforestation and death of the ecology and human destiny thereafter.

Following the lines of traditional elegies, Nyi Osundare begins his poems on a highly pessimistic note over how, man pounds and plunders the earth for his selfish motives. He imbues his lines with melancholic mood as he moans on seeing the morose, unsightly sights around him. He turns on the dreary tone and tenor as he witnesses the timeless treasures of nature being tarnished and tainted. He treats the themes of apathy, callousness, insensitivity and greed of man towards environment that's shaking the ground, destructing and disrupting the ecology thereby leading the human race into jeopardy.

Osundare, though begins his poems on a note of disappointment; he, like the other traditional elegists journeys through the highs and lows of life experiences and finally reaches a positive point to seek solace and sustenance drawn from hope, expectation and anticipation; thereby drawing lines of prosperity and prospects.

The poems of Osundare selected for study are: 'Our's to Plough, Not to Plunder'; 'Our Earth Will not Die'; 'Deep Green (Once Upon a Forest)' and 'Hole in the Sky'.

Osundare employs vibrant and vivid imagery as he paints the pictures of bountiful and beautiful nature during its glorious days of yore, when it was still unravished by the enterprising nature of humans. Parallel to the effervescent and lively images, run the dreadful and frightful pictures of the ravaged earth wailing and whining as it helplessly lies crumbled and ruined in the ruthless hands of the hard- hearted humans, who greedily ransack and pillage the environment to fill in their personal pockets.

The poet rues over being a mute witness to the assault and abuse of the forests. He testifies himself as a helpless spectator who walks through the naked forest which is stripped off its dignity and glory by the beastly humans who have exploited it for their personal gains. The poet uses the words like, 'naked', 'scars', 'shrivel' only to expose the unsightly signatures left by the humans in the name of development, progress and advancement. Ironically, unmindful of the bleak future they are going to hoist for the generations to come by. The following lines from the poem, 'Deep Green' testify his agony.

'Deep green, my testament, as I forage

through this forest of vanished glories,

my memory one shell of naked echoes'(1-4)

Osundare, in this poem is referring to the lumbermen, who like the cold-hearted army ruthlessly tore down the trees in the forest for their material gains there by transforming the once lush green forest into a dreary, dry desert. As a result, the homeless birds deserted the forest in search of new homes.

'Long-limbed lumbermen have

laid low the loins of the land;

the Yes-I birds have left

with their rainbow songs'(8-11)

The once glorious forest now lies naked, stripped off its trees, its flora, birds and animals. The forest which echoed and reverberated with the songs of the rainbow birds, not too long ago, is now standing bare only to expose its dry stubs and deep scars after the carnage unleashed by the humans.

'Once (not too long ago)

I talked to trees in this forest

and trees talked back to me'(14-17)

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The poet feels lonely and agonised as the strong spiritual connection and the deep emotional bond between him and the forest has now been prematurely slashed down by the insatiable hunger of the man.

'New Animism' unravels the spiritual trauma that the poet is undergoing over the deadly deforestation deals taken up by the spiritually numb lumbermen. Animists believe in the philosophy that all the living and non-living creatures including human beings, mountains, valleys, forests and animals are endowed with a spirit. They believe that there is an enigmatic and mystical connection between nature and the humans. The connection is supremely spiritual and deeply emotional. It allows dialogue between the animal world and the human world. Birds and animals share a wonderful, animated and euphonious conversation and create a harmonious symphony in the surroundings. The trees sway back and forth and caress the humans as they meander through the forest maze. Nature bursts into a rapturous frenzy as it melts to the musical medley. That was the beautiful world when man had shared space and co existed with all the creatures of the earth.

But, in the present globalised world, there is no space for any other being except for the human being. As the growing greed is getting better off the human beings, they started convincing and considering themselves to be the most superior beings in terms of physical power, intelligence, critical thinking and creativity over the other beings on the earth. In order to meet their personal and selfish motives, the humans started exploiting, mutilating, molesting and abusing nature in the most ruthless and callous manner. According to the Brazilian Ecologist, Michael Fox, man had become anthropocentric. 'Anthropocentrism, regarding human kind as the very centre and pinnacle of existence, is a disease of arrested development.' Fox reiterates that 'Man is the most dangerous, destructive, selfish, and unethical animal on earth'.

In the above poem, 'Deep Green, (Once a Forest),' Nyui Osundare becomes the spokesperson of 'ecocentrism', as he takes over the mantle of an ecocentric to blow the bugle, summoning the humans to buckle up and rally against the anthropocentric approach .

In the poem, 'The Earth is Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder', Osundare holds the hoe and picks the plough, wears the cloak of a farmer to sow the seeds of ecocentricism in the barren brains of the people, who take the earth for granted as they dig deep dibbles into the bowels to plunder gold and other metal.

He personifies the earth as a woman, as he says,

'The earth is ours to plough and plant

The hoe is her barber

The dibble her dimple.' (1-3)

Osundare, like a true spirited farmer wants the earth to be ploughed only for agricultural purposes and not to ravage her in the name of excavation, mining and digging for the precious treasures that she conserves in her womb.

'Let wheat fields raise their bread some hands

To the ripening sun

Let legumes clothe the naked bosom'(8-10)

He, on seeing how deforestation is exposing her naked bosom; he implores that she may be swathed and covered by the ripe wheat fields and legumes.
In the lines:

'Let the pawpaw swell and swing its headward breast' (11)

He prays that the pawpaw fruit may mature and ripen under the sun and swing and sway its breasts. The poet is personifying the fruit with a woman's breasts. The reason behind he, drawing parallels between a woman and nature is only to restate his ecocentric approach, where nature is considered to have been endowed with human qualities and spirit.

The western philosophy claims man to be at the centre and all the other natural resources and creatures as inferior beings. There exists only a materialistic relationship between the so-called civilized westerners and the earth. Whereas the indigenous cultures believed that there is an uncanny, spiritual and emotional relationship between human world and nature. The Europeans dominated nature as it is 'inferior' and is meant for their 'consumption' (according to their understanding). Within this framework of domination and exploitation, they have included non-Europeans and women. During the colonial enterprise, the Europeans have leveled the status of land with the status of woman. The land is for exploitation, for consumption and so is the state of a woman.

'This earth is

Ours to work not to waste

Ours to man and not to maim' (23-25)

The above lines reinforce the poet's anti anthropocentric philosophy. As he feels that the earth is meant for all of us to work and not to exploit its natural resources. The earth is the giver and provider of life. He states emphatically that the earth should not be destroyed, damaged and maimed for satiating the ever growing monstrous hunger of the humans for their material pleasures.

In the postcolonial context, driven by enterprise and desire, man has pulled off his ethical and moral cloak only to pounce like a predator onto the earth; to tear, to slit, to slash, to rip, to destroy and damage the natural resources in the name of productivity and

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progress. It is imperative to study the quote of Joseph .W. Meeker the author of *Comedy of Survival:*

"The human race has the capacity to render itself extinct unless alternatives are found to the patterns of intraspecific warfare that have dominated civilized history. Ours has long been a predatory species."

And finally, as the bottom line, Osundare says:

'The earth is ours to plough, not to plunder' (26)

Osundare issues a pounding word of warning to the pillagers, plunderers, looters who, with their short sighted vision are wreaking havoc on the planet earth considering only its resources to fill in their booty. He accentuates and echoes through his verses that 'The earth is ours to plough, not to plunder'. Osundare seems to be echoing the idea of Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, as she states: " The abuse of the Earth is the ecological crisis." Greta Gaard in her famous text, *Ecofeminism, Women, Animals and Nature* says that:

"Humans should not attempt to "manage" or control nonhuman nature, but should work with the land. The use of agricultural land should be guided by an ethic of reciprocity. Humans should intrude upon the remaining natural ecosystems and processes only where necessary to preserve natural diversity". (58) And Osundare is clearly reflecting the vision of Greta Gaard through his verses.

The 'Our Earth Will Not Die', may sound like the swan song sung by Osundare as one reads the first few lines. Yet, the poet holds on to the cords of optimism and hope as he travels through the lacklustre lakes, slaughtered seas, maimed mountains and convinces himself that some time in the distant future the damage would be repaired, the carnage would be taken care of, and the curtains would be drawn to conclude the high octane drama rolled over by humans as they participate in the play, 'Mega Massacre of the Mother Earth.' He discusses global warming, climate change, deforestation, oil spills and disrupted marine eco system through the gross and graphic images that reflect the gravity of the macabre episodes.

"Lynched
the Lakes
Slaughtered
The seas
Mauled
The Mountains
But our earth will not die" (1-7)

The vision of the poet that this serious destruction shall not defeat the spirit of the earth instils hope in the readers that this is not the end of the game and that the future is not bleak and dreary but bright and better.

'A lake is killed by the arsenic urine
from the bladder of profit factories
a poisoned stream staggers down the hills
coughing chaos in the sickly sea
the wailing whale, belly up like a frying fish,
crests the chilling swansong of parting waters.
But our earth will not die (11-17).

In the above lines, he laments over how the factories urinate arsenic into the lakes and in turn fatten themselves by way of profits. His eyes well up as he sees the seas coughing, as poison from the factories and industries are excreted into the seas. He wriggles and writhes in pain as he witnesses the wailing whales and burning fish in the sizzling hot, sticky oil spills. He mourns as the marine ecosystem is thoroughly imbalanced by the release of liquid petrol into the seas.

The images of the sick sea, wailing whale and arsenic urine that the poet has employed are drawn from the profit oriented postcolonial enterprises. The commercial bent of mind of the humans is stealing away the primordial principle of ecocentric approach towards life. Though some gruesome and ghastly images flood the poem and imbue melancholic mood, the poet refrains from being morose, as the refrain that 'Our earth will not die' reframes the vision of the poet, that the earth shall overcome the reparation, prepares itself to rebound and regain its splendour and glory.

"And the rain
the rain falls, acid, on balding forests
their branches amputated by the septic daggers
of tainted clouds
Weeping willows drip mercury tears
in the eye of sobbing terrains
a nuclear sun rises like a funeral ball
reducing man and meadow to dust and dirt.
But our earth will not die "(21-28)

The above lines are sharp darts aimed at the global warming and climate change that the earth is now reeling under. The images of the acid rains pouring over the plain stubs and stumps in the once green forest areas; the dreadful acid that slashes the dry branches; the weeping willow trees shedding arsenic tears; the nuclear sun rising as if at the funeral of the earth; the man and the meadows being reduced to specks of dust, losing out on their identity and space – all speak volumes about the destruction, devastation on a massive scale that the earth is facing now. The next phase that the earth enters into is obliteration and then the 'Period.'

At this point, a closer look at what Stephen Hawking, Physicist & Author had said about climate

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change and global warming is worth mentioning: "One can see from space how the human race has changed the Earth. Nearly all of the available land has been cleared of forest and is now used for agriculture or urban development. The polar icecaps are shrinking and the desert areas are increasing. At night, the Earth *is* no longer dark, but large areas are lit up. All of this is *evidence that human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit*. But human demands and expectations are ever-increasing. We cannot continue to pollute the atmosphere, poison the ocean and exhaust the land. There isn't any more available."

In the last lines of the poem, Osundare reverts from the point of doom, takes a 'U' turn only to bloom on a fresh note of hope. He says, in the last line, "But our earth will not die". He continues his vision by singing:

"Our earth will see again

eyes washed by a new rain

the westering sun will rise again resplendent like a new coin.

The wind unwound, will play its tune

trees twittering, grasses dancing;

hillsides will rock with blooming harvests

the plains batting their eyes of grass and grace.

The sea will drink its heart's content

when a jubilant thunder flings open the skygate and a new rain

tumbles down

in drums of joy.

Our earth will see again

this earth, OUR EARTH" (37-45)

As the poet was nourished and nurtured physically, emotionally and spiritually by nature, he is able to reflect upon his vision that the mother earth shall never decay and die. He dreams of a promising future when the rains shall bring pristine clear drops of water and cleanse the earth and replenish its scorched terrains. He dreams that the trees shall regenerate and become home to chirping birds. He dreams that the gates in the sky would roar open to pour down the rain on rolling mountains and hills. He envisions the sun shining resplendently over the verdure valleys and dales. He dreams that the creatures on the earth would sing and dance to the reverberating beats of the drum and soulful songs. He envisages a new lease of life as the earth opens to renewed avenues. Osundare's vision is reinforced through the words of the environmentalist, Rachel Carson, the author of the seminal book, *Silent Spring:*

"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."

The last poem for analysis is 'Hole in the Sky'. It is a choreo poem composed to sing along with musical instruments. The earth implores the poet to narrate its story of woe and wretchedness. It asks him not to edit and censor the story. It tells him not present a wrong picture of poise and beauty of the planet. It advises him not to eulogise it by eloquently evading the truth; It tells him not to paint the planet with pretty words. Instead, it asks him to be frank and stark by not covering its scars in sugar coated songs, and wax away lyrically with varnished verses. It asks him to tell the world its piercing pain and treacherous trauma caused by the merciless men.

"Tell my story,"

Said the Earth to me,

"Oh, tell my story the way it is.

Don't sugarcoat its bile

Don't varnish its rust

Don't cover its scars with pretty words

Tell my pain the way it is" (1-7)

In the above mentioned poems, the poet has discussed at length different issues like climate change, global warming and deforestation. In this poem, he makes the victim i.e., the earth to speak for itself as none of the humans is ready to take up its cause, none of them to stand for it and by it, none of them to protect it from molestation and destruction. In the following lines, he advocates against the over use of pesticides on the crop.

The dialogue between the fruits and leaves over who was affected most by the pesticide dose is heart-wrenching. This dialogue opens up a huge argument on the excessive use of pesticides that harm the bio diversity and the toxic effects it has on the environment.

"Ever heard fruits arguing between the leaves
Over which got the deepest dose
Of the pesticidal plague?

The poison killed the pest
And later buried the people" (24-28)

"The desert marches towards the sea
The desert marches towards the sea (35-36)

The issue of deforestation and soil erosion is discussed in this poem. In the poem, 'Deep Green' the line that the desert marches towards the sea is again hoisted by the poet. There seems to be an overlap of

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lines and ideas and issues troubling the poet, which culminate in the poem, 'Hole in the Sky'

"A hole

A hole

A blazing hole

In the garment of the sky" (68-71)

The poet now brings in the issue of ozone depletion; the gases, fumes, pollution and other human manufactured (dis) activities that have punctured a huge hole in the placid sky above. The poet uses the metaphor of 'garment' to describe the vast expanse of the blue sky.

Oven-hot summers
Winters blind with ice

The Arctic melts like butter
As rising oceans consume the land (72-75)

The depletion of ozone layer, or the 'tear' in the garment of the sky or the 'hole in the heavens' is causing inferno -like summers and melting the ancient Arctic like soft butter and aiding the oceans to rise and erode and eat into the lands.

Yet, Osundare has not lost his hope. He is the champion for the cause of painting the planet green. He is the foot soldier who carries the pennants to plunge into action. He is the bugle blower who instills hope and optimism and warmth into the waning hearts of the people. He is the medicine man, who heals the wounded souls and spirits of the people.

Trumpet sounds in the horizon
Green intimations unfurl the wind
Healing needle to the hole in the sky
Earth's Redemption Army
Is gathering strength beyond the clouds.
Trumpet sounds behind the mountains" (86-90)

He listens to the trumpets blaring across the horizon; he sees a needle sewing the hole in the sky, he sees the signs of green leaves fluttering in the wind. With this fantastic vision unfurling, Osundare concludes his poem on a positive note that the future is definitely going to be brilliant and glorious with the army of green poets working relentlessly on their verses only to repair and redeem the earth from destruction and bring in solace and succor to the spirits of the humans, animals, birds, forests and mountains thereby reinforcing his philosophy of ecocentric approach to life. Truly, the eco-elegist echoes ecocentricism through his elegies.

On a concluding note, it's important to appreciate the philosophy of Rachel Carson:

"We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less travelled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth."

— Rachel Carson, Silent Spring

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