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AFRICAN POETRY AS AN "INFORMAL EVENING FIRE-SIDE SCHOOL": MULTI-UTILITARIAN VALUES IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S *SNAPSONGS: HOMEGROANS AND FOREIGNFLARES*

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ABSTRACT

Poetry has developed in leaps and bounds right from its earliest, oral phase to the modern, written form and has been effectively utilised to serve different levels of needs in many societies and cultures for many centuries. However, what constitute the predominant leitmotifs or thematic thrusts of poetry vary from one society to another. While very many climes emphasise and project its formal/aesthetic qualities, content and value, African creative artists predominantly deploy poetry to serve multiple, community-oriented, utilitarian functions. This is the thrust of this paper which examines Niyi Osundare's *Snapsongs: Homegroans and Foreignflares* as a quintessence of African poetic art deployed chiefly to examine society with a view to attacking its imperfections and projecting or promoting its values. The research is a qualitative one, and adopts the interpretive design. The paper finds that Osundare's *Snapsongs: Homegroans and Foreignflares* chiefly derives its afflatus from the quotidian socio-economic and political realities of the African environment and reflects the complexity of the African experience. Through a lavish appropriation of copious oral artistic categories such as proverbs, aphorisms, metaphors, satires, and panegyrics, Osundare intensifies the didactic, communal, functional and other utilitarian values of the African poetic art.

Keywords: African poetry, utilitarian functions, values, aesthetics, community-oriented

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry is, perhaps, the oldest genre of literature, and has its roots traced to the oral tradition of very many societies and cultures across the world. The earliest surviving examples of poetry may be traced back to ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece around 4000-5000 years ago (https://www.blog.bookstellyouhycom; https://www.soacs.ac.uk). Poetry was often deployed in these ancient climes or cultures for story-telling, religious and spiritual expression, commemoration and celebration of communal events, and for expression of emotional and personal experiences. Some of the oldest surviving poetry include the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of the Ancient Mesopotamia written around 2100 BC, the *Pyramid Texts* of the Ancient Egypt written around 2400 BC, the *Iliad and Odyssey* of the Ancient Greece written around 800 BC, and the *Rigveda* of the Ancient India that may be traced back to around 1500 BC (cited in Micah Asukwo, 69). Poetry has undergone significant transformations over the centuries, reflecting changing societal values, cultural norms and artistic innovations. For example, while ancient poetry which covers the period 3000 BCE – 500 CE harped on oral traditions, mythological themes as well as religious influences, Classical Poetry which thrived between 500 BCE and 500 CE emphasised form, structure and reason. For Renaissance Poetry (1500-1700 CE), emphasis was placed on the revival of the classical forms, humanism and individualism, and was distinct from the leitmotifs of the Enlightenment and Romantic Poetry which placed premium on reason, nature, and emotions (David Jowitt, 109; Dasylva and Jegede, 56, Maduka and Eyoh, 76). Certainly, poetry has evolved over time; its root in ancient cultures and traditions makes it the oldest continuously practiced genre of literature.

Generally, the predominant leitmotifs of poetry may be described as being clime-specific. In other words, what constitutes the fundamental preoccupation of poets across the globe differ from one region to another. This variation may not be unconnected with a number of factors including the level of civilisation of the people, the driving zeitgeist of the clime, as well as socio-historical, economic and political experiences and/or realities of the society. African poetry is one of the world's unique subsets of poetry that began with the oral tradition. Oral poetry in Africa was a vital part of ancient African communities which served as a powerful medium for artistic expression, social commentary and cultural preservation. Ruth Finnegan notes that oral poetry in Africa was deployed to share stories,

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myths and legends, and to pass down cultural heritage and historical events even as African oral poets addressed social issues, critiqued injustices and promoted moral values in these communities. Oral poetry was also deployed to honour ancestors, celebrate leaders and their achievements (*Oral Literature in Africa*, 89-106). Following the advent of Western education occasioned by colonialism, oral poetry, though still being practiced in very many African rural communities, gave way for written poetry. This is not to say, however, that there was no written poetry in Africa prior to colonialism. After all, evidence abound about written poetry in ancient Egypt (around 2500 BCE), the Nubian Kingdom (around 2000 BCE), and in Ethiopia where the ancient Ge'ez scrip t was used to write religious and poetic texts (https://www.quora.com).

Written or modern African poetry encompasses the diverse and vibrant body of poetry produced by African poets from the mid-20th century to the present. It covers a wide range of styles, themes, and languages, and reflects the complexity and richness of the African experience. Very many outstanding African poets such as Wole Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Anyidoho, Leila Aboulela, Niyi Osundare, among others, have deployed their art to examine decolonisation and identity, oral traditions and performance, social justice and activism, and a host of other germane leitmotifs. But very importantly, a greater number of contemporary African poets have deployed their art to examine the multifarious "socio-cultural, political and economic issues which affect the poet's people" (Tanure Ojaide, 30). The essence is, perhaps, to proffer or attempt to proffer solutions to an avalanche of challenges that plague and keep plaguing the African environment. Commenting on African poetry as social art, Ojaide notes that the socio-cultural background of a people affects their aesthetic response and that poetry in Africa is predominantly a public art because "the thematic focus is on ideas which affect society and the human" (27). Thus, in Africa, individual artists deliberately tend to see themselves more as serving society rather than themselves, which underscores the communal didactic, and functional nature of the African aesthetic consideration, reinforcing in totality the utilitarian emphasis of the African poetic art.

In his "Defence of Poetry", an essay written a year before his death, Percy Bysshe Shelley addresses Thomas Love Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry" where the latter teases and jokes with the definition and value of poetry, specifically stating that poetry has become valueless and redundant

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in an age of science and technology, and that intelligent people should give up their literary pursuits and put their intelligence to good use. Shelley's essay serves as a rebuttal of Peacock's claim rather than a reply. In the essay, Shelley argues that civilisation advances and thrives with the help of poetry, and that poetry is essentially utilitarian as it brings "civilisation by awakening and enlarging the mind itself, by rendering it a receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Expatiating on the utilitarian value of poetry as accentuated by Shelley, Susan Bertolino opines that Shelley's idea suggests that poetry is "a presence of benevolence that aids us into making life the best it can be" (https://www.quora.com). The utilitarian value of poetry presupposes that poetry be deployed by its practitioners for the overall good of the generality of the people even as it should be used chiefly to attack societal imperfections and/or project its positive sides and values. This is what drives the thematic thrusts of a great majority of modern African poets, including Niyi Osundare.

One of the most prolific Nigerian-born African poets, Niyi Osundare is among the most widely read and critiqued poets of the 21st century Africa. Rich in imagery, symbolism and Yoruba mythology, Osundare's poetic oeuvre generally serves as a social commentary on the palpable human condition particularly in his home country, Nigeria. In other words, Osundare devotes a great deal of his thematic thrusts to issues of cultural, ethical and moral rejuvenation, corruption, political ineptitude, injustice and oppression, and indeed all shades of social inequality that pervade the Nigerian environment. Some of his collections that bemoan the state of things in the country include *Songs of the Market Place*, *Village Voices*, *A Nib in the Pond*, *Moonsongs*, *Songs of the Seasons*, among others.

Worldwide, the practice of literature is pursued in two broad, opposing schools, namely, the formalist/structuralist school, and the sociological school. While scholars and critics of the formalist school such as Archibald MacLeish who believes that "A poem should not mean but be" (cited Luke Eyoh, 6) harp on auto-referentiality of literature which emphasises a work's manner over and above its matter, or an absolute disconnect or dichotomy between literature and the historical, cultural and social forces that produce it, those in the sociological school such as Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Leon Trotsky, Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, among others, believe in the inseparability of literature from the historical and

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cultural dynamics that produced it. The conviction of those in the latter school is that literature should be deployed in the service of the community and not just for its aesthetic appreciation or value. It is, perhaps, this consciousness that causes Niyi Osundare to devote his entire oeuvre to issues of societal relevance. Thus, rather than dwell on art for art's sake prioritised by the formalists, Osundare's works focus on concrete, realistic and community-oriented issues and experiences in the society, reinforcing the functional and communal nature of African poetry as "an informal evening fire-side school in which elders and parents teach the young ones ethics, morality, and the culture of the community" (Ojaide, 2). As a way of consolidating on his poise to deploy his art towards further serving multiple utilitarian values, Osundare published another epic collection, *Snapsongs: Homegroans and Foreignflares* in 2021, to re-emphasise his belief in the strategic role of the arts in the evolution of a liberated and an egalitarian society. This paper examines these utilitarian leitmotifs and concerns in this work which is a collection of eighty three aesthetically presented poems that are grouped into four sections, namely, 'Seeds in the Pods', 'Homegroans', 'Foreignflares', and 'Parables of Power'.

Multi-Utilitarian Values in *Snapsongs: Homegroans and Foreignflares*

African poetry is imbued with enormous oral aesthetic devices such as proverbs, aphorisms, parables, metaphors, paradoxes, among others, which underscore its didactic disposition and emphasis. Proverbs, for example, are a pivotal part of African oral and written art and are so prevalent that they constitute, in the words of Chinua Achebe, the "palm-oil with which words are eaten (*Things Fall Apart*, 6). They are very highly prized as far as African oratorical skill is concerned. Proverbs as well as other oral aesthetic devices aforementioned dominate the first section of Osundare's work titled 'Seeds in the Pods'. In "Seller of Words", the first poem in the subsection, the poet notes that for there to be peace and harmony in the society, people should be careful with the way they use their tongue even as unguarded tongue is capable of setting society aflame. The poet retorts:

Words have consequences
The proverb may provoke a *panga*
The journey of a thousand wars
Often starts with a small, incendiary word.
(*Snapsongs*, 3)

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In the same vein, the poet deploys proverbial and witty statements to emphasise the need for circumspection as far as the pursuit of worldly pleasure is concerned given its likely destructive end. The same level of caution is handed down in another poem titled "I Owe the Viper No Venom" where the poet warns unrepentant treasury looters against further indulging in the act even as he foresees death as the aftermath of their devious deeds:

Oh you thief with infernal greed
Steal less, see more
Take another look at an open coffin
Behold: the shroud has no pocket (6)

It is the poet's conviction that society thrives efficiently when its members avoid scandalous behaviours, practices and actions that are inimical to its growth and stick to desirable and socially elevating acts.

The poet's didactic bent is re-echoed in another poem titled "The River Sleeps in Its Bed". Here, the poet reiterates the need for people to be focused and endeavour to make best use of their nature-endowed talents, gifts or skills. Observing that people can sometimes be confused as to what they really want in life, the poem harps on the importance of decisive and purposeful living as a way of conquering attempts at having them derail from their goals. In "Superstition's Street", the poet frowns at ignorance, which, like darkness, can be very dangerous, and views science/technology as the harbinger of light. Though science appears surreal, magical and superstitious in many climes especially the Third-World, Osundare believes it holds the key to an enlightened and prosperous society. However, the negative deployment of scientific knowledge in developing weapons of mass destruction is, for the poet, unacceptable as far as life's continuity is concerned. The poet laments this negative tendency thus:

Diligent servant, deadly master
Wisdom so foolishly deployed
Monster which quells its thirst
With the blood of its maker (9)

It is indeed an irony that knowledge that would have been rationally utilised in improving the quality of human lives is ominously deployed in

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destroying same. The poet therefore harps on the need for scientific or technological knowledge to be applied only for the benefit of mankind and not for its destruction.

Myth is an anonymous story with no categorical origin, yet a veritable instrument in the comprehension and apprehension of the universe. Myths play a pivotal role as far as humanity's effort at unravelling the mystery of the universe is concerned. Myths are clime-specific and deployed, essentially, to teach society about the origin of the universe, man, and a number of other seemingly inexplicable phenomena. In "My Myth Is Truer Than Yours", the poet considers all proclaimed religions as myth and notes that it is this "myth" that is deployed by many religious leaders to deceive their credulous members into believing that their God, belief, doctrine, and so on, is the superior one while those of others are incontestably inferior. These religious myth-bearers are so neck-deep in this conviction that they can kill and as well encourage others to do same in a bid to prove and/or protect the acclaimed sanctity and superiority of their religion.

My myth is truer than truer than yours
My God is godder than your own
In his holy and mighty name
I kill and maim as an act of faith (10)

A satire on religious hypocrisy which emphasises authenticity and/or superiority of one's religion over those of others, the poem likens the act of imbuing faith in religion to building castles in the air especially when such faith is not backed up by work.

'*Ora et labora*', the golden rule instructs
But we pray and forget the work
The ears of Heaven are sore from our shouts
Yet our faith is foul, our ways so impure. (10)

While condemning claims and counter-claims to religious supremacy or superiority, it is the poet's conviction that people can live peacefully with one another without recourse to over-professing of one religion or the other, a tendency, he believes, springs from ignorance. Questioning the reliability of religious myths, the poet, in another of his poem titled "If Eden Was So Benign", attempts a deconstruction of the biblical myth about

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the Garden of Eden by posing a number of probing questions about "the Serpent", "the Forbidden Fruit", and "the Original Sin". Some of the questions state thus:

If Eden was so benign
What was the Serpent doing on its tree?
From where did it derive its venom
Who was its teacher in the school of cunning? (11)

The poet appears highly sceptical about the authenticity of the story of the Fall of Man as he again poses some deconstructionist questions about the language/word-classes the Serpent may have used in conversing with Eve in the Garden:

In what strange language
Did the Serpent cajole its audience
What adjectives adorned its nouns
How dire, the adversity of its adverbs? (11)

While the poet reserves the right to pose these poststructuralist questions about the authenticity or reliability of the biblical myth about the Fall of Adam and Eve, it must, however, be stated that religion generally is a highly sensitive and personal issue – a faith-based conceptualist ideology which should not be overly argued about. Therefore, while the poet principally seeks a broadening of the epistemological horizon of his audience, a deconstructionist position such as he has taken may be seen as being strictly personal, and not worth being overly dwelled on.

Among influential members of the society the poet seems to be highly dissatisfied with are religious leaders. This displeasure stems from the fact that the Nigerian society, where the poet is from, is a deeply religious setting, which religion has caused more harm than good in the last few decades occasioned by the numerous experiences of incessant violence and killings across many parts of the country. In "There is a God in Every Man", the poet believes that religion is a huge deceit which is given impetus by the guts of their leaders and the naivety and gullibility of the followers. What is most disgusting to the poet is the chameleonic nature of these leaders who profess God in the daytime but worship idols in the dark. The poet expresses his disenchantment thus:

The Turban is not the teacher
The Collar must earn their calling

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Some black-robed *Asitani* of night
Are dazzling prophets in the blaze of noon (12)

Warning people to be wary of these wolves in sheep's clothing, the poet, however, appears agnostic about the existence of a certain God somewhere, who is a man, and a "bearded white-faced patriarch" (12). Rather, the poet believes there is a God in the heart of everyman, and that this can only be realised through conscious introspection.

Whoever told you that God was a man?...
Is the figment of some wild, tendentious imagination
...My mother once told her listening child
Your character is your God
Your heart is your temple. (12)

The poet appears sorely pained about the deceitful nature of religion, especially the weird and cunning disposition of its leaders. In "Sane for One Moon", the poets "wonders" through elegantly constructed mosques and churches in search of morality or rectitude, but finds none. Instead, what he finds is a whole lot of irresponsibility and callousness perpetrated by the leaders of these religions who "build castles of fraud with the bones of fickle faithfuls" (sic) (22). Utterly disillusioned by these findings, the poet prays for nemesis to catch up with these religious rogues as a recompense for their evil deeds.

Let the collar choke the Pastor
Who shallows the laity's tithes
Let the turban twist the neck
Of that mimic Mullah
Whose sermons redden the streets
With fear and deadly orgies. (22)

It is the poet's conviction that society thrives in peace and harmony if people can acknowledge God in their hearts rather than think or believe they can only have access to Him in physically set up buildings or structures.

Another highly didactic poem in the first section of the collection under study is titled "The Lieful Truth". It is a blend of pieces of advice,

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satire, lament and wise/proverbial statements. As a piece of advice, the poem offers a reminder about the cause-and-effect relationship in human experience and that things do not just happen without a categorical cause. As a satire on the political class, the poem berates politicians who are always in a hurry to make promises but hardly fulfil any. It is these unfulfilled promises that result in hundreds of thousands remaining jobless, culminating in vulnerability to criminalities especially on the part of the youths. What government, however, prioritises is the construction of remand homes and prisons where these people are mindlessly thrown into.

Between street and prison
A perilously short distance
The new plantation in the Land of the Free
Is decorated with razor fence and armoured guards. (23)

As a lament on the condition of Nigerian workers, the poem bemoans the appalling condition of workers who toil like elephants but eat or get paid like ants. The poet is highly disconcerted to find that while "The labourer roasts in the midday sun, the Manager swings in a shaded hammock" (23) – a direct confrontation against the ever-widening socio-economic gap between the different classes of people that make up the society.

In "Seeming, Not Beign", the poet goes philosophical in his attempt to appraise existentialist realities in the society with a view to offering pieces of advice on some fundamental truth about life. The poem states categorically that there is a marked difference between reality and illusion, and that what one loves very dearly can sometimes pose a serious threat to their existence/happiness. The poem is unequivocal about the fact that life is characterised by ambivalences and that the earlier one braces up for these existential probabilities and realities the better (24). In the same vein, "Rumour's Lipless Mouth" harps on the need for courage as a key ingredient to a successful life even as it tasks people on the need to make adequate use of their time. Another fundamental basis for a happy life, as far as the poet is concerned, is laughter, which is believed to be highly therapeutic especially to a depressed soul.

Laughing branches redeem
The sadness of the tree
The roots hear the jokes
In the dormitory of their depth (25)

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"Time Talk" and "Dialogue with the Sun", the last two poems in this subsection dwell on the need for people to grow above the claws of procrastination while emphasising the need for them to take the bull by the horns if genuine progress in life must be attained. The poems posit that no one can influence or stop the hand of time irrespective of how genuine one's case or excuses might be. The admonition is intensified in the following lines:

> Do not allow the day
> To slip out of your hands
> Grab a moment:
> Stretch it into a million miles. (27)

The whole of the first section of Osundare's collection under study is preoccupied with enormous oral poetic devices such as proverbs, aphorisms, wise sayings/counsels as well as metaphors copiously deployed to intensify the didactic disposition of the African poetic art. The preoccupation of the second section is entirely different as will be seen presently.

In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe states explicitly and unequivocally that leadership deficit remains the greatest albatross as far as Nigeria's quest or effort at development is concerned even as he absolves every other factor, myth, cause or basis for the impoverished condition or fate of the country.

> The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (1).

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Certainly, leadership is the fulcrum upon which the fate of every society hangs. It is the pivot around which the fortunes of the people revolve even as it determines the rate at which society either experiences an astronomical growth with its attendant benefits or the extent to which it plummets economically, socially and otherwise. Indubitably, the Nigerian society, where the poet comes from, finds itself in the latter experience or category. Rather than the fortune of the masses improving in terms of access to sources/means of livelihood, a great majority of the people live in absolute economic servitude, agony, pain, and misery. This is the concern of Osundare who devotes the entire second section of the collection titled, 'Homegroans', to these abysmal experiences Nigerians go through in the hands of their inept, greedy, corrupt, and unconscionable leaders.

In "Wonderland", the poet sees Nigeria as a place of uncommon, negative, and reprehensible wonders. It is indeed a wonderful tale when one learns of a situation where a snake would be accused of swallowing millions of naira from the coffers of government by civil or public servants in Nigeria.

> Wonderland, Wonderland...
> A hundred million naira vanished from government coffers
> They say a snake swallowed it with its evening meal (31)

The mind-boggling level of corruption among political office holders in the country is so pervasive that there is hardly any arm of government, from the executive to the judiciary, that is left out. While the governor "wails" in falsehood about his security vote being stolen "by bandits of unknown origin", the senator claims he loses his constituency's development allowance between "Abuja and his penury-ravished constituency" (31). Rather unfortunate is the fact that these bizarre tales of deceits and lies are not restricted to political office holders alone; leaders of religious organisations also revere in them, as the poet sarcastically observes:

> In this land of miracles
> Our cars are fuelled by gallons of prayers
> Our Pastor's car once drove a hundred miles
> On an empty but *faith-ful* tank (31)

It is indeed disheartening to find that the Nigerian masses are not only at the mercy of their fraudulent politicians who steal away their present and

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future, but also a vulnerable lot in the hands of religious jobbers, charlatans and conmen.

In "To Whom Do We Owe Our Darkness?", the poet wonders why electricity that is taken for granted in other climes does not work in Nigeria. He makes a conceit between NEPA – an agency responsible for provision of electricity in Nigeria and leprosy, and frowns at a situation where solution cannot be found to the perennial darkness the nations has found itself the same way leprosy hardly has its cure.

To whom do we owe
The darkness that rules our lives?
Which rulers made sure that NEPA
Never got a cure as the nation's Leper? (33)

Apart from electricity, the poet also bemoans other teething issues of social concern such as lack of portable water, an avalanche of poor and dilapidated road networks, poor and abandoned educational and health institutions, and a host of others, and wonders, through repeated rhetorical questions, whose responsibility it is to have these things fixed. In the same vein, in "A Nation Under Water", the poet frowns at the negligent attitude of leaders who dwell in complacency and pay deaf ears to virtually every serious issue of public interest. This slipshod attitude is the basis for ignoring warnings by the meteorological agency of government about an impending flood and related disasters, and therefore, the need for proactive measures to avoid or mitigate losses. Such warnings would however fall on ears as the flood takes over almost the entire nation.

Flood, flood, flood everywhere
In choicest parts of town
In tin-shack districts
Where the sky broods like a leaking roof (35)

The poet places the blame for the destruction of bridges, NEPA offices, Water Corporation and other public buildings by the ravaging flood at the doorsteps of the different agencies/organs of government which pay absolutely no heed to the warnings by weather forecasters on the need for proactive action. Government is also held liable for poor drainage maintenance culture occasioned by a deliberate refusal to have gutters

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desilted, poor town planning service and little or no oversight functions by the legislature (35).

In saner and more advanced democratic climes, political party affiliation is driven by ideology. In other words, politicians are persuaded by the kind of prevailing ideas and principles that drive the specific policy goals of a political party as the basis for joining them. It is also observed that in these democratically advanced climes, politicians remain faithful to their party and whatever remains their fate per time. The reverse is, however, the case in Nigeria where politicians who get to power on a certain political party platform would dump same in no time for some selfish reasons. Here, political party affiliation is not necessarily based on any categorical ideology or principle but on pecuniary or related, self-aggrandising interest of politicians. This irresponsibility on the part of the country's politicians is what the poet frowns at in "Prostitutes in Power" Parts 1, 2, and 3. Thus, like prostitutes, Nigerian politicians defect from one party to another at any point in time without recourse to their electioneering promises prior to being elected. They view the nation as "a fallen elephant", and so, armed with knives, they are ready to move to any party that would grant them a better opportunity to partake in the spoils.

Intoxicated by new schemings
Fired up by insatiable appetites:
The nation, to them, was a fallen elephant
And they came with an arsenal of knives (37)

Described as "Corpulent Birds of Prey", these politicians are not ashamed of being seen with a particular party's symbol in the morning and another party's symbol in the afternoon and with yet another at night, reinforcing their morally capricious and integrity-bereft disposition.

Umbrella in the morning
Broom at noon
Hammer-and-sickle at night
All these and more the following day (38)

It is, perhaps, this highly disenchanting, freakish and fickle predisposition of the politicians that causes the poet to describe them indignantly as "strangers to honour", "perverters of principle" and "venal vagabonds" who trade loyalty before the "highest or lowest bidder" (38). Full of betrayal,

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"mindless" and "rapacious", these "incurably self-absorbed politicians", the poet believes, are the promoters of the roguish system the country has found itself and therefore the brains behind the high level of poverty amongst the people who voted them into those exalted offices. It is therefore the poet's conviction that not much should be expected from a political system that is besieged by a crop of unreliable, protean, defective and sloppy citizens such as these.

From the foregoing, it would be appropriate to define modern African poetry in the words of Frank Mowah as "a product of conflict, social and political schisms and experiences which have characterised the African world since the coming of the Europeans in the nineteenth century" (cited in Solomon Olaniyi, 2). Certainly, modern African poetry has consistently borne the burdens the postcolonial African environment has been encumbered with. But beyond Afro-centric leitmotifs, realities and concerns, Osundare's poetic lenses in the collection under study, have also, very succinctly, focussed on some pressing issues of global dimension. In the third section of the collection titled 'Foreignflares', the poet extends his artistic searchlights to examine these issues of global concerns with a view to handing down his own position or opinion on them.

The rationale behind wars of global scale is what constitutes the primary concern of the poet. The poet is highly bothered about the reason why nations, especially the technologically advanced ones, cannot afford to live in peace with one another to exemplify their claims as a truly civilised people. In "World War III, Here We Come" (Part 1), the persona brags about his atomic prowess and his ability to launch missiles of mass destruction on enemy countries irrespective of the location or distance.

I have just dropped the Mother of All Bombs
On some distant lands of hills and caves
Gave the talkative Press a fiery fray
To divert their hunt from their Russian ruse (79)

However, the poet-persona is not totally at peace with his conscience when he learns of the aftermath of his action on his victims, especially children, who have no hands in what constitutes the basis of these conflicts. He confesses frankly:

My heart broke into pieces when I saw those kids
Twisting and jerking from an overdose of gas

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I wept and wept till I filled a bucket
Though I decreed a ban which excluded their kind (79)

In the second part of the poem with the same title, the poet expresses deep fear about the possibility of a Third World War given the irrational approaches some world leaders deploy in handling some very sensitive issues that bother on global peace and security. The poet is particularly worried about the fate of the world in the midst of an avalanche of weapons of mass destruction which very many nations develop or try to develop. What appears more confounding to the poet is the way the super-power nations brag about these negative, fear-inspiring and life-terminating prowess.

'You have no place in our Nuclear Club',
The bigger Boy tells the younger one
'Destroy your toys and invite my gang
To come to your house and inspect your forge' (81)

The poet describes wars and related activities as senseless especially the painstaking effort at developing weapons of mass destruction by technologically advanced nations. The poems harp on the need for humanity especially the world's superpowers to learn from the histories of the two previous wars and earnestly reappraise their aftermaths before contemplating another war of global dimension.

In the same vein, the poet also satirises great and powerful nations who appear bereft of ideas on how to live in peace with their neighbours other than building walls of intimidating heights and magnitude. In "Give Me, This Day, My Daily Wall", the poet ridicules some great nations which believe that building a wall is the only panacea for internal peace, and wonders how high a country's wall could be to succinctly guarantee a lasting peace, security, harmony and tranquillity.

My wall, my wall, my lovely wall
Make it long and make it tall
Let it rise from the trembling earth
And humble the world with its concrete girth (75)

Quite disconcerting to the poet is the fact that these walls are built against the wish of the masses who do not believe these intimidatingly high

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structures hold the key to a lasting peace and security, but the obstinate and self-conceited leaders would only do what they have made up their minds to do and not what constitutes the yearning of the masses.

‘We don’t need a wall’, the people say
‘So burst your beast’, they plead and plead
But the emperor insist in un(truth) and deed
That they know not what they truly need (76)

Perhaps, the conviction of the masses who are opposed to the building of these highly intimidating walls is predicated on the fact that the greatest wall is the one in people’s mind: walls against love, peace and harmonious co-existence, and not necessarily the physically erected ones.

In “Reflections on Exile”, Edward Said conceptualises exile as an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and the true home, and characterised by solitude, insecurity and hostility (cited in Micah Asukwo, 194). This exilic experience especially among the black or coloured population in the Western climes is what Osundare recreates in “Walking While Black” (87) and “Black and Blue” (88). Here, the poet decries the worthlessness that characterises the treatment of Non-Western races which sometimes results in mindless brutality and maiming of these ones whose only offence is their skin colour. The poet frowns at a situation where black people live as exiles in these societies in which their forebears had contributed a great deal through their sweat and blood, and describes as “painful” a situation where they live a “visibly unseen” life even as they try to speak, but their voices would “not be heard” (88).

The language of the poems is lucid, seasoned, and nuanced with indigenous Yoruba expressions, tropes and other oral devices which lend themselves to elastic interpretive possibilities. There is a lavish appropriation of oral artistic categories such as proverbs, metaphors, satires, and panegyrics. From the pithy, epigrammatic and gnomic ‘Snapsongs’ to the tartly satirical ‘Homegroans’ and ‘Foreignflares’, one is confronted with poems which grip the readers’ attention with their lyricism, visionary thrust and humanist engagement – poems poised and/or energised by a reflective temper and socio-political urgency.

For Jean-Paul Saetre, the writer has a fundamental role to play for the evolution of an egalitarian, free, sane, and progressive society, and so the function of the writer is to act in such a way that “nobody can be

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ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about" (cited in Micah Asukwo, 82). This position is maintained by Romanus Egudu who posits that the writer is "a god-sent gadfly" to his society with a categorical mission to awaken it from its social, political, and intellectual slumber (cited in Julie Agbasiere, 71). In his *The Writer as Righter*, Niyi Osundare corroborates these positions, but further emphasises the need for literary writers to deploy their art towards righting the multifarious wrongs of society. Thus, from all that has been examined in Osundare's *Snapsongs*, it is safe to observe that the work is a quintessence of a typical African poetic art with a didactic intent and a testament to the fact that literature, poetry in this case, captures both the milieu and the moment with a view to recreating concrete societal experiences and realities.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the multi-utilitarian functions or values inherent in the poetry of Niyi Osundare contained in his *Snapsongs: Homegroans and Foreignflares*. The paper found that Osundare has successfully subjected his art to serving multiple utilitarian functions. The poems in the collection have been effectively deployed to teach, inculcate and/or impart societal values even as they offer wisdom and life lessons. The poems have been copiously utilised to challenge social irresponsibility, actions and injustices whether at the local or international domain. There is an air of social commitment that pervade the entire collection of Osundare's poetry in the belief that literature, African literature to be specific, cannot afford to be passive or nonchalant in the face of multifaceted challenges that plague and keep plaguing the African environment.

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