Thematic Presentation of Osundare’s *Waiting Laughters*

B.A. OKORO
Senior Lecturer, Department of Arts of Humanities, Delta State Polytechnic, Ozoro, Nigeria
Okorobright2@gmail.com.

**ABSTRACT**

The paper examines the themes of *Waiting Laughters*, one of the best and popular Niyi Osundare’s poetry collections. The paper starts by looking at the role the Modern African writers have given to themselves— they see themselves as the voice of the people, so they have been using their writings to defend and champion the cause(s) of the African society which is quite different from the traditional oral literature of the African past; a general property of the people, involving several persons in its realization and performance. The paper notes that the earliest form of this modern African writings came in the wake of colonisation of the African continent either to condemn the erosion of the African culture and civilization by colonialism or by glorifying the Africa’s culture in the face of colonialism. But following the political independence of many African states, the high expectation of great development of the continent was dashed and the modern African writers have to redirect their energies toward the condemnation of the oppression, autocracy, greed etc that have come to characterized the rules of African leaders. Niyi Osundare is one of such writers and these are the themes he enunciated in *Waiting Laughters*. The paper justifies these themes in its analysis and fully affirms that Osundare truly uses his writing for social value in the interest of his people as against “writing for writing sake” and recommends the same to upcoming African writers.

**Keywords**: *Waiting Laughters*, colonialisaton, Niyi Osundare, oral poetry

**INTRODUCTION**

In the early stage of modern African poetry as distinct from the traditional /oral poetry, poetry or literature generally was used either to decry colonialism or to sing about the eroded the glory of African past which was greatly damaged and eroded by European colonization of Africa. The early 1960 witnessed a harvest of political independence of many African countries. The ‘new Africa’ was seen then as a continent in search of an identity, a personality. The poetry of this time tried to demonstrate that Africa had a culture, rich, vital and glorious. Typical of this kind of poetry are those written by Kofi Awoonor, J.P. Clark, S. Senghor, Wole Soyinka etc. Meanwhile South Africa poetry, which was personalized by Dennis Brutus, was being used to display the evils of the Apartheid System, which almost single–handly caused the expulsion of South Africa from the Common Wealth of Nations in 1963.

After sometime, the high expectation independence came with in the early 1960s was dashed and disappointment and disillusionment set in, as the new crop of Africa political leaders were very corrupt. And it did not take long time before the modern African poet came out in full force to condemn and criticize the corrupt leaders and defend the people. Since then, a new phase of protest has evolved, which has been a major dominant theme in African poetry. One of such voices is Niyi Osundare. In this respect, Osundare has written a number of poetry collections. They include *Songs of the Market Place* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moon Songs* (1986), *Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Songs of the of the Season* (1990), *Midlife* (1993) *Seize the Day* (1995). Some of these poetry collections have not only brought fame and admiration to Osundare but have also won him several prestigious awards. His *Waiting Laughter* won him the prestigious ‘Noma Prize’ in 1996, second only to the ‘Nobel Prize’ and he became the first African to win the Prize.
Osundare who belongs to the new generation of African poets, expresses the needs and feelings of his African people, particularly Nigeria’s people. Sometimes, he uses contrast and irony to create a sharp awareness of the disparity between the oppressor(s) and the oppressed. Or between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in their conditions of living. For example, “Koyi,” Vs “ajegunle” in Songs of the Market Place. And this is borne out of the desire to express his deep concerns for the plights and sufferings of the ordinary people in the society. It is as a result of this that made Ayiejina to describe him in the Nigerian Tribune of 15th March (1997:12) as “the fulfillment of the public poet in the town crier”. This opinion could be said to be an apt description of Osundare who uses poetry to mirror the common plights of a people relegated to the background in a fast degenerating society like Nigeria.

Waiting Laughters

In Waiting Laughters, Osundare enunciates graphically the gloomy situation in Africa. It is made up of poems that focus on the agonizing suffering and frustration in modern African society. This sad state is wreaked on the people by their frigid and despotic political rulers. In focusing on this theme, the poet breaks into several sub-themes to reinforce and further highlight the state of frustration and hopelessness in the land, which are quite despicable of their political rules. But the essential emphasis in the book is that ‘Laughter’ (Victory) will surely come to the people someday. In other words, there shall be a revolution, which will sweep the corrupt and the oppressive regimes away. In a nutshell, Waiting Laughters is a kind of HOPE-RAISING for the African people, and a warning to their political rulers in their excesses, in a pervasive situation of gloom and hopelessness.

This central theme in Waiting Laughters, can further be broken into the following sub-themes
i) Oppression and Autocracy.
ii) Corruption and Covetousness
iii) Perseverance and Revolution.

Oppression and Autocracy

The dominant features of most modern African states are that of political oppression, suppression and autocracy, either in the form of military junta (albeit the military era has faded away) or one-party state. Osundare reflects on the African political experience in Waiting Laughters. These characteristics feature prominently in the collection. For example on pages 49 – 50 he evokes the images of military dictatorship that for a long time bestrode the continent:

Waiting
Still waiting
Like the strident summon of hasty edicts
Bellowed by the smoking lips of vulgar guns,
Signed in blood, unleashed in the crimson spine of trembling streets.

And the winds return,
Laden with adamantine thou-shalt-nots
Of green gods;
A jointless fear goosesteps the compound of our minds
With epaulettes manacle our days
And trees swaps their fruits for stony orders (49)

In the above two stanzas, Osundare evokes imagery of military scenario and oppressive dictatorship, which lexical items/phrases like ‘hasty edicts’, ‘vulgar guns’ ‘blood’ ‘trembling streets’, ‘adamantine thou-shalt-nots’ ‘green gods’ ‘manacle’ and ‘strong orders’, all of which are suggestive of military brutality, which were the characteristic of the military juntas that took over the reigns of government in many African states, from the late 1960 to mid 1990s. During this era, repression and incarceration of opposition groups were common place. Journalists and other civil society members who criticized the military juntas were brutalised and violently suppressed. Typical of such military regimes were Idi Amin of Uganda, Jerry Railings of Ghana and . Sani Abacha in Nigeria etc.
In stanza one of the above poem, there are unusual collocations, for example, in line two we have ....“smoking lips of vulgar guns”. Here guns cannot be vulgar, but because, it is wrongly used by military juntas to crush opposition groups or defenseless innocent citizens, and because the poets do not want to be direct in his critical attack, he replaces the doer with his repressive instrument. It is on account of this, ‘guns’ become personified. In the case of “trembling streets”, the poet uses this phrase to refer to the ordinary people in the country who are usually frightened by this military brutality against the civil society. In stanza two of the poem, there are also some examples of unusual collocations. There is the use of metaphor in ‘green gods’ to indicate the minds of soldiers in military regime who see themselves as gods, answerable to no one. They do whatever they like without caring about the feelings of the people. Oftentimes, military junta suspends all normal and happy life in the society and infringes on the liberty and rights of the people, and subject the people totally to the despotic whims of the regime. This is the image Osundare encapsulates in the above poem, using extended metaphors. For example, “And trees swaps their fruits for stony orders”

The poet sustains the dictatorial image of military junta from pages 49-87 by reinforcement, using parallelism and repetition of autocracy to give prominence and intensification to the oppressive (military) tendency.

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the snail} \\
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the shell} \\
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the frog} \\
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the tadpole} \\
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the sea} \\
I & \text{ proscribe} \quad \text{the sky}
\end{align*}
\]

The repetition makes the emphasis to suggest that military regime(s) do not spare anything in their repression. It must be noted that the poet published Waiting Laughters 1989/90 when most African countries were still under sit-tight military/civilian rulers. In order to make it more dramatic and vivid at times, Osundare resorts to the use of oral performance in his criticism of the dictatorial tendency of African political rulers. In doing so, sometimes, he draws on his Yoruba’s oral poetry. For example, Osundare uses the following dialogue between the ‘snake’ and the ‘toad’, to capture the ruthlessness of the African political rulers, in their determination to exploit, oppress and crush the ruled for their selfish interest.

\[
\text{And the snake says to the toad;}
\quad \text{I have not had a meal}
\quad \text{For a good one week,}
\quad \text{And my stomach yearns}
\quad \text{For your juicy meats”}
\quad \text{“suppose I turn into a mountain?”}
\quad \text{Asks the toad,}
\quad \text{“I will level you in the valley}
\quad \text{Of my belly”}
\quad \text{“Suppose I turn into a river?”}
\quad \text{“You will flow easily through}
\quad \text{The channels of my mouth”}
\quad \text{“Suppose I become one}
\quad \text{Of your favourable children?”}
\quad \text{“I will eat you}
\quad \text{With all the motherly love}
\quad \text{In the world”}
\quad \text{The toad then turns into a rock}
\quad \text{And the snake swallows it}
\quad \text{With delicious dispatch}
\]

Ah! Aramonda
Here, the poet dramatizes the dialogue in such a manner as to bring out its humour. The text shows that the political dictator could be so desperate in exploiting or suppressing the ruled to the extent that he can endanger his own life. In some other times, he uses anecdotes or parables to reinforce his criticism of their oppression and their set-tight disposition. For instance, on pages 60 and 61 of the collection, he presents an anecdote, which he uses to warn the African despotic rulers of the danger of their overindulgence by overstaying in their political rulership to the detriment of their people:

Adufe had a dip

And every shrub became
A kitchen of soap,
Every tree stretched out
A basket of sponge
The noonday sun was ready towel
The wind waited in the wing
Like a loquacious robe.

And the foamy touch of soap
On her brow became the laughter
Of the clouds,
The sky globules on her cheek
Was a quarry of delicious diamond
The pebbles broke into song,
Provoked by the velvety warmth
Of her guiles soles
Shadows peeped behind the mountains;
The sun stood still in its wondering sky

Adufe's dialogue with the river
Was a saga of careful whispers;
First, her leg
Then, the eloquent vale which loomed
Between her upright breasts

She swayed she swam
She patted the checks of the laughing stream
Wild with joy, clean like a mint,
She climbed back to the bank,
Back to her waiting clothes;
And just then she saw
The memorable gift of the wonderful river;

Her lower side now a tail
Of silvery scales

In this text, the poet admonishes the African political rulers. Adufe who saw a stream full of enjoyment and recreation, became overindulgent. As a result, her ‘lower side’ turned out to be ‘a tail’ at the end. The poet uses the anecdote to admonish African political rulers of the danger of overstaying in power. In
otherwords, they should not be carried away with the lures of political power, because it might lead them into trouble. In this regard, Osundare employs the skill of oral performance to arrest attention. The use of commas, deixis, isocolon and andiplosis are quite effective. The indentation of the last two lines is used to highlight or give prominence to the effect of over indulgence. At the end, the poet has more pungent words of advice for Africa dictators. He warns them of the hopelessness of using coercion to crush their ruled especially those who speak against their unjust rulership. He believes that no matter how repressive a ruler might be, one day the people will put up resistance against his oppressive regime. This is said against the backdrop of many African political rulers who delude themselves with the idea of using ruthlessness and violent intimidation to silence the strident voices of opposition in the society. Sometimes, he resorts to the use of proverbs in his warning. A good example of such lines is found in page 74.

*The stammerer wil one day call his fa-fa-father sna-na-na-me!*

In these two lines, Osundare tries to capture the mannerism of a stammerer’s natural utterance. In doing so, he uses the graphic form to capture the actual phonic realization of the stammerer’s natural idiosyncracy. In this way, he deviates from the expected poetic form, by the lexical truncation of the second and line and by joining the truncated and unusually spaced words together in the line to achieve the natural difficult and jerky effort of a stammerer to utter words while the word ‘wil’ is deliberately misspelt ‘will’, a deviation to depict a revolt by the stammerer. In this context, the stammer is used as a metaphor for the people; as a sort of warning to the corrupt and despotic rulers of Africa’s societies, that they should not take their ruled for granted, if not, one day they will revolt.

**Corruption and covetousness**

Corruption and covetousness is another sub-theme in *Waiting Laughters*. The entire collection bemoans the deficiency of governance in Africa Osundare pays great attention to the corruption and covetousness of political rulers in Africa. The poet sees Africa rulers as people who seek political power to empty and convert public treasury into their private pockets. While the political rulers squander public funds, the ruled live in squalor and want. Examples of this state of affairs abound in the collection. For instance, the following stanzas of a poem minutely contrast the ironic situation of life between the rulers and the ruled:

*A king there is In this purple epoch of my unhappy land; His proud father is Death Which guards the bones at every door.*

*And the vultures are fat’ crows call a feast at every dusk; Markets wear their stalls like creaking ribs The squares are sour with the absence of friendly feet.*

*And fat cows swallow lean cows And yet corpulent town criers Clog the ears of listless lanes; Praise-singers borrow the larynx Of eunuch thunders (45 – 46)*

In the above stanzas, Osundare succinctly depicts a typical African state. Here, he uses metaphor and symbolism as his tools. The poet plays on the full name of a king, a metaphor for starvation and death. In otherwords, “the King”, is a symbol of an average African dictator. He has nothing for the people other than hunger and death.

In the second stanza, the “vultures”, which symbolize those in government who feed fat on others, organize feast or party at frequent intervals at the expense of the people. Osundare continues the use of symbolism, by drawing a sharp contrast with the life of the people. “Markets” and “the squares” which
symbolize the people, are gaunt-looking and unhappy. The line in stanza three is an allusion from the Bible. It is based on king Pharoah’s dream of famine. It captures the situation very vividly – while those in government are steeped in opulence and affluence, the ruled starve to death, yet the mass media which are usually government agencies and other government sycophants, who are eating fat too, sing praises to the government and “deafen” the entire country with it – they do not in the least, see the suffering condition of the masse. The above portrayal is reinforced in the following poem.

And the multitudes waiting,
all ways waiting,
in the corridors of hungry shadows.

Stretched skeletally out
in rice queues, bread queues
salt queues, water queues.

Long like a scarlet tear
from the short-tempered scourge
of the winkless sun.

To the sprawling terror
of twilight’s of chilly hearths
and emptiness balloons the stomach,

lethal likes a blinding plague,

How many fishes will quell the rage
of this political hunger,
how many loaves?

The messiahs peep at
The tattered hordes from the paradise
Of mercedesced distance.

Their fences are high
Their gates wild with
Howls of Alaskan soldiery (56)

The pain to eke out a living among the masses is vividly captured in the poem. Basic items that should be taken for granted in a normal society are so scare that the masses have to queue up for every of such items for hours under the unceased burning sun in an empty stomach of biting hunger. It appears as if there is a punishment for every basic item of life for the people. It becomes more preposterous when one notes that life generally has become synonymous with hunger, making the people to look gaunt and skeletal in figure as shown in lines 3 and 4. This is a true recapture of the African society that has been characterized by starvation and scarcity of basic necessities of life, which have remained the lot of the people always, hence Osundare plays on the word always as “all ways” to show that hunger and starvation is all ways in the society and it is being felt at every nook and cranny of the society. That is why the poet asks rhetorically.

How many fishes will quell the rage
of this political hunger,
how many loaves.

‘Political hunger’ in the sense that, it is artificially inflicted by the naked greed of those in power, hence the opulence of those in corridor of power, who are well secured from the people, draws a sharp contrast from the want and squalid conditions of the masses.
All these are to show how African political rulers in their sadistic regimes degrade and dehumanize their people, in order to brigand the economy for their personal enrichment. Osundare reinforces this idea of political enrichment with the continuous dropping of the name of “Croesus”, a man famous for being the richest man in the whole of Asia continent in the 3BC in relevant texts in the collection. While people who were/are reputed to have suffered a great deal or died in the hands of oppressive and autocratic regimes as “Mandela”, “Steve”, Walter” (South Africa), ‘Sankara’ (Burkina Faso) and ‘Soweto’, a town in South African that is reputed to have witnessed the massacre of teenage students in the oppressive hand of Apartheid South Africa are dropped in relevant texts across the collection to reinforce the peoples’ suffering.

All these devices are quite effective in painting the gloomy picture of greed versus suffering in the African society.

**Perseverance and Revolution**

Perseverance and revolution is one of central themes in *Waiting Laughters*. As a matter of fact, the central theme of the collection is to reassure the suffering African people that their perseverance shall not be in vain - Something good is in the offing. The poetic book is therefore written as a response to the gloom and pessimism hanging pervasively on the entire Africa continent. It is on account of this optimism that the title of the collection is derived – *Waiting Laughters*. The idea runs through the entire collection. One analogy that Osundare uses to pursue this idea, is the idea of sowing and reaping. In other words, a farmer must be patient to wait for the harvest season, in order to reap what he has sown long ago. There are many images associated with farming and planting generally in *Waiting Laughters*, to further intensify this idea of sowing and reaping. Osundare, perhaps, uses these images, by way of identifying with his peasant and rural background. For instance, the following texts clearly depict the planting or farming activities:

**Text One:**

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My song is the even rib
In the feather of the souring bird
The pungent salt and smell of earth
Where seeds rot for roots to rise (26)
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**Text Two:**

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When a long-awaited shower
Has softened the pilgrimage of the dibbler
corn-grains sing their way to germinal roots

Bent now
The farmer’s back;
The hoe’s edict chills the spine.

Of sowing seasons,
And the sweat
Which rivers down the mountain of the brow,
Finds fathering basin at the root
Of coming harvests   (88 – 89)
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In the stanza of text one, Osundare likens the society to a seedling that must rot before germination takes place. The same idea is reinforced in stanza one of text two, where a farmer plants his corn-grains immediately after the first rain-drops of the year, which result in immediate germination. In the last two stanzas, Osundare recaptures the laborious work of the traditional African farmer during planting. In such work, the farmer’s body is shaken to his spine. The poet uses a highly exaggerated metaphor of the continual streaming down of sweat to his brow, as a result of the much energy expends in such laborious work. But at harvest time, the farmer has his reward.

The extended metaphor of planting is used by the poet to encourage African people that perseverance has its own reward. And in this line of thinking, the poet strongly believes that the revolutionary change will definitely come to pass. He therefore encourages the people to be hopeful, hence the idea of waiting for
this much cherished time is comparable to different and diverse situations of waiting in the collection. This is to highlight the idea of being patient for the great expectation. Such examples abound in Waiting Laughters.

Waiting  
For the heifer which bides its horns
In the womb of the calf (10)

Waiting  
Like the uncircumcised penis of Okro
Peeping out of the prepuce of dawn (14)

Just waiting  
For the tadpole’s flowering into frog (17)

At the end, Osundare assures the people that the revolution is sure to come.  
This, he says with all authority and conviction.  
Laughter will surely come back  
To the paradise of our lips (87)

CONCLUSION
From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the essence of Osundare’s Waiting Laughters is to assuage the minds of the African people that have been so battered and made so hopeless by the political and economic strangulation policies of their mindless political rulers since Independence. Waiting Laughters is also a warning to the political rulers, to have a change of heart, if not, nemesis in form of a revolution will soon catch up with them.

It is in the light of this, that Osundare is considered the people’s poet. That is, he uses his poetry as a critical instrument of championing the cause of the people; hence his poetry is for social value.

RECOMMENDATION
Based on the fact that Africa countries are faced with myriad of socio-political challenges, it is strongly recommended that modern Africa writers should continue to use his gift of writing as social utility in the promotion of Africa development as Osundare has clearly demonstrated in Waiting Laughters as against “writing for writing sake” to display mere artistry or craft of the individuals in writing.

REFERENCES