

**ENDEMIC SLEAZE IN NIGERIAN JUDICIARY:
INTERPLAY OF HUMOUR AND
REFORMATIVE COMMITMENT IN NIYI
OSUNDARE'S "MY LORD TELL ME WHERE
TO KEEP YOUR BRIBE"**

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Abstract

It has been observed that poetic expressions in in general and in Nigeria in particular are inspired, primarily, by the desire for social redemption and change. This statement is true concerning the poetry of Niyi Osundare, one of Nigeria's most prolific frontline poets, especially in his recent poem, "My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe". Therefore, this paper examines Osundare's humorous reflection on the endemic corruption in the Nigerian judicial system in this poem. "My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe" which constitutes our primary data for this study is sourced from the Internet and subjected to a qualitative literary analysis, anchored on the mimetic ideas of the sociological theory of literature. To account for the poet's reflection on the social experiences within the domain of the judiciary, Raskin's Script-based Semantic theory (SSTH) of political humour is adopted as our theoretical framework. The study reveals that the judiciary, which is a sensitive public institution saddled with the responsibility of delivering justice, is neck-deep in corruption. It concludes that through concrete images in the poem, Osundare decries the rot in the judicial system to facilitate justice

and confidence in the judiciary which is seen as the last hope of the common man.

Keywords: Literature and law, Nigerian poetry, Niyi Osundare's poetry, Poetry and society

Introduction

Since the inception of his writings, Niyi Osundare has continued to demonstrate commitment to art and society. His artistic and social vision attests to the role of poetry in facilitating social and human improvement. For instance, in Osundare's quest to account for the utilitarianism of poetry, he declares in his collection, *Songs of the Marketplace* (1986) that "poetry...is man meaning to man". Modern African poetry is functional— it reflects and refracts the prevailing happenings in different African societies (Dasylva & Jegede, 2005; Kekeghe 2014; Maledo, 2021; Maledo & Emama, 2022). Poetry is constantly deployed to give an eloquent testimony to the social dysfunction in Africa.

The rot in society has often been a burning issue even in literary works because literature has some functions to fulfill. Literature, amongst its numerous functions, has the power to instruct morally and correct the ills in society. It reflects sociopolitical realities for the sole purpose of sanitizing the society; as such it, continues to expose leadership failings in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular. Africa's major problem is its lack of credible leaders and this has several attendant impacts on the generality of mankind and the economy. Greedy and power-hungry leaders often impose themselves on the people with the false claim that they want to serve the

people. When the masses resist such leaders outrightly, they employ several questionable means to acquire power including bribery, thuggery, falsification of personal data of candidates under oath, manipulation of election results by electoral officers, and several other acts of electoral malpractices. The electorate is denied the freedom of a free and fair electoral process as politicians impose themselves on the masses due to their greed and insatiable desire for power and wealth. This position is succinctly expressed by Oseghale (2012) who explores representations of corruption and political vendetta in literature and other cultural expressions. Oseghale argues that the various forms of corruption perpetuated by political leaders in Africa are engendered by their inordinate ambition to retain power and that this desire has become the political neurosis of the majority of African leaders.

The focus of this paper, therefore, is the overreaching and crippling power of bribery and corruption in the Nigeria judicial sector, as represented in Osundare's "My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe," showing how the poet deploys humour to demonstrate his commitment towards reforming the Nigerian judiciary. The judicial system is a very significant organ of government that requires urgent redemption. This, as depicted in the poem under study, needs to be reformed for the overall functioning and improvement of the Nigerian political space. Extant studies on Osundare's poetry have explored his political, cultural, ecological, and human health commitments. He intends to make a definite impact on his society.

Okunloye (2007) recognizes Osundare's commitment and attributes his remarkable shift from the early private self or individualistic and universal concerns of the previous generation of artists to the public and socially relevant to the present poets. Okunloye thus describes him as the mouthpiece of his generation. In the poem, "Songs of the Seasons", Okunloye interrogates Osundare's concerns for the poor and the marginalized. The poem, according to him, reveals that the dreams and the desires of the poor, powerless, and disadvantaged enjoy rare privileges. The study applies the Yoruba popular poetic tradition of the town-crier mode of the song of abuse (known as "efe" or "ajagbo" or "opelu" in different Yoruba communities) to the explication of Osundare's "Songs of the Season" and claims that it allows for his powerful indictment and ridicule of the gross misconducts among Nigerian political leaders.

Anyokwu (2015) also acknowledges Osundare as a leading light or champion of a new kind of poetry that is thematically and formally different from preceding artists. He asserts that Osundare frees poetry from the prison house of obscurity which the generation of Soyinka puts it and refers to him as the people's poet as he uses his poetry to address everyday people and issues as proper subjects of verse-making. Anyokwu focuses on Osundare's change in strategy and thematic thrust to fight for collective self-empowerment and the course of society's dispossessed. His major themes include economic survival, struggle against poverty, oppression, dispossession, and social inequality. Anyokwu refers to Osundare's assertion that "the world I see is bent. I am mode and medium for its straightening." He thus

emphasizes Osundare's social obligation to revolutionize his society and bring fundamental change for the economic emancipation of the poor masses. Anyokwu strengthens his argument by interrogating several of Osundare's poetry collections including *Songs of the Market Place* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), and *Midlife* (1993).

In the same vein, Ebim (2016) investigates Osundare's deployment of linguistic choices to achieve satirical effects in his bid to expose certain national issues in Nigeria to reform society. Ebim explores the manipulation of language in the poem, "Blues for the New State King" in passing valuable information on Nigeria's political and social life. Through structural repetition and metaphoric names, Osundare foregrounds the constant change of identity of political actors in Nigeria's political space. Like the chameleon, politicians change their identities, "PDP in the morning; Labour at noon, APC at night." Osundare no doubt, has attracted so much unprecedented attention due to his fearless social commitment and the defence of justice for the masses through the medium of poetry.

Osundare's poetic statement on the Nigerian judicial system has not received adequate attention. Interestingly, this literary effort falls within the domain of Literature and Law, an evolving subspecialty of literary discourse. Thus, this research effort has contributed to the field of Literature and law as it explores the interface between poetic composition and the judiciary. The poem under study reveals Osundare's view of the judiciary as an important organ of Nigerian life that is plagued with a debilitating illness of corruption. He feels there will be a

better nation with a judiciary that is less corrupt. The poem, “My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe” which is currently in circulation in social media spaces has inspired this research through the poet’s use of concrete images to satirize the judiciary to revitalize the judicial system and the nation as a whole.

Corruption and the Nigerian Judiciary

Generally, corruption is seen as dishonest or fraudulent conduct by the people in power and it involves bribery. It is regarded as a punishable crime as it involves abuse of power and illicit acquisition of benefit for personal gain. In addition, judicial corruption is the engagement of those in the judiciary in corrupt practices such as accepting bribes and other tantalizing offers for the perversion of justice. This is detrimental to the nation’s existence as it shakes the very foundation of democracy, distorts electoral processes, and perverts the rule of law.

Oladipo, (2016) points out that judicial corruption results from its dependence on the executive financially and dictatorially in political issues. The judiciary, therefore, has become a mere tool in the hands of politicians and political leaders and institutional practices have been politicized. The judiciary has constant interaction with politics. The executive, according to Oladipo, pays the piper and therefore, dictates the tune. He further alleges that the news surrounding the activities within the institution of justice has been marred by allegations and counter-allegations of corruption. The Pedigree of the Nigerian judiciary according to Oladipo has been eroded as a result of her involvement in corruption. Her propensity for corruption at the highest

level of the profession is extremely high and there is no one with moral justification to call any member of this body to order. He also observes that in the past, the judiciary was regarded as the hope of the common man and was viewed as sacred. However, recent occurrences about the Nigerian judiciary have proven this view wrong and placed the integrity of the judiciary under serious doubt. There is acclaimed distrust of Nigerians in the judiciary owing to several instances of perverted justices hinging on allegations of bribery and corruption.

At each point in the emergence of a new administration in Nigeria, there are cases of corruption scandals from previous administrations. In most cases, such allegations are not investigated properly due to lack of commitment, political will, and sincerity. Where investigations of corruption are initiated, sometimes the buildings are engulfed with fire. The judiciary in Nigeria connives with corrupt politicians and finds respite for them as they pervert or twist judgments and corruption thus continues unabated. Obutte (2016) sees the judiciary as a weapon in the hands of corrupt politicians and political office holders which is employed to frustrate justice and perpetrate as well as condone illegitimacy of alarming proportion. The election tribunals and Supreme Court justices are opportunists who are blinded to the widespread rigging of elections and other forms of election malpractices as a result of mouth-watering bribes they have been offered by corrupt politicians.

The judiciary has a giant share of the blame for the issue of bad leadership in Nigeria. Her role in resolving election and electoral disputes in Nigeria leaves nothing to admire. For instance, the judiciary's role in the

annulment of the June 12, 1993 election plunged the nation into catastrophic chaos. It is for this reason that Obutte (2016) avers that the judiciary is an accomplice. He compares the Judiciary to a spider web that catches small flies and allows big ones to go. The common man is punished for minor offences by the law while corrupt politicians who drained national coffers walk Nigerian streets free. Obutte (2016) confirms the truthfulness of the Nigerian first female chief justice position before the senate during her screening, she refers to their early days when Nigerian judges lived above board and their integrity could not be questioned. She noted with regret allegations of corruption and bribery in exchange for grant bail which have become a common occurrence and stresses the need for reversal through sanctions of erring judges.

Political leaders employ every possible means to attain and retain power and one very potent means is the manipulation of the Nigeria Judiciary. To this end, corrupt politicians offer tantalizing gifts and huge amounts of money as bribes to upturn decisions and election results in Nigeria. Obutte (2016) thus asserts that the judiciary which ought to uphold good governance in Nigeria and promote a free and fair democratic process is now tainted with corruption with extremely negative impacts on the nation's development objectives. With the collaboration of the judiciary, legitimacy, good governance, rule of law, maintenance of sustainable democratic order, eradication of poverty, diseases, lingering hunger, and underdevelopment have become a mirage in Nigeria.

Nwabueze (2007) asserts that the judiciary's failings in its primary responsibility to uphold justice in

the nation's electoral matters, and the erosion of judicial uprightness are clear indications of rot in the society and the sole reason why dishonest politicians and looters of national treasury still parade themselves in the corridors of power. They evade judgment, and escape sanctions or punishment even when they have been indicted of corruption; they walk the street free and still hold key political positions. Oladipo (2016) laments this shameful situation which the Nigerian judiciary has fallen into. He claims that there is a high level of distrust in the judiciary as they have offered justice in Nigeria for sale to the highest bidders.

The place of the judiciary in any nation's electoral process is undeniably very crucial. It is one of the fundamental tripods responsible for upholding the democratic system of the nation. The rules and regulations guiding the electoral body are exercised under the watchful eyes of the judiciary. The judiciary ought to live above board being the machinery and procedural mechanism that is responsible for ushering in new political leaders and administrators. The judiciary occupies a very sensitive position in Nigeria. However, their involvement in politics of money and corruption has undermined this position of trust and it has a terrible impact on other institutions saddled with the responsibility of handling election proceedings, namely, the Independent National Electoral Commission. The court and the Independent National Electoral Commission have reneged in their obligation to install justice and fairness in Nigeria's democratic process but have connived to enthrone corruption and every form of vice in Nigeria's political space. The justice system is

compromised and often the expression “stolen mandate” is heard everywhere in Nigeria.

Theoretical Approach

This study is anchored on the mimetic theory of art and Raskin’s (1985) Script-based Semantic theory (SSTH). The mimetic derives from the opinions of great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and others who regard art as the imitation of life. The mimetic theory is in affinity with the sociological investigation of creative writings and it involves understanding literature in its larger social context. The 20th century literary and critical theorist, Kenneth Burke, introduced the sociological criticism of the works of art as a means by which the reader can understand the text’s relationship with happenings in the society since literature is a reflection of the society. Raskin’s (1985) Script-based Semantic theory (SSTH) deals with the essence of humour; components of humour, basic concepts and terms employed in humour research, and in categorizing humour and the theories of humour. Raskin is the first to delineate his approach to humour as linguistic. The SSTH is based on the postulation that there is a text that is compatible either fully or in part with two different scripts and these two scripts are in opposition and at the same time overlap either fully or in part. Raskin further identifies three kinds of aggressive humour which are sexual, ethnic, and political. This study relies on political humour which he also termed political jokes. Accordingly, he recognizes that there are texts concerned with the denigration of political figures (showing such as stupid or indecent). Others he asserts are political jokes concerned with the exposure of political repression

(involving terror, arrest, lack of freedom and civil liberties and freedom of speech) and exposure of political situations and the peculiarities of specific political regimes. The humour explored in the poem under investigation falls within the premise of Raskin's Script-based Semantic theory of political humour that exposes specific (political/democratic) situations in Nigeria through satire.

Critical Analysis and Discussion of the Poem

Niyi Osundare is a poet who has engaged poetry to lampoon and ridicule political and public officeholders in Nigeria because of their high and unpardonable involvement in heinous crimes, especially bribery and corruption. He demonstrates the crucial role of literature in nation-building through his poetry. Niyi Osundare deviates from the traditional norm of complexities and obscurantism that characterize the poetry of Wole Soyinka and a few others and employs simple language in all of his poems. With simplicity of language and great commitment, the daring poet unveils the pestilential stench of corruption, bribery, and other serious vices in Nigeria. His primary concern is that of social transformation, thus, his works address issues affecting his people including the relationship between the poor masses and the corrupt leaders.

Niyi Osundare's poem, "My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe" indicts Nigerian judges for their lamentable role in dragging Nigeria further into an irredeemable state of hopelessness. Through humour and satire, Osundare lays bare the judiciary's greed and unrestrained and insatiable desire for wealth. They are

guilty of plutomania; their obsession with wealth has undermined their sense of honesty, dignity, and decorum. The poem further shows that the judges have betrayed the trust imposed on them. In any case, it is not the common man's hope anymore. Osundare opens the poem with a rhetorical question which serves as a tag to the poem's title and it continues as a refrain that runs through the twenty-four (24) stanzas of the poem:

Do I drop it in your venerable chambers?
Or carry the booty to your immaculate mansion?
Shall I bury it in the capacious water tank
In your well-laundered backyard?
Or will it breathe better in the septic tank?

The first five lines of the poem are presented rhetorically not to initiate a response but to ridicule and expose the shameful act that the judges are indulging in. It also reveals that the act of bribery taking place among the judges has not escaped public notice. This poem is a satirical response to the allegation of Nigerian judges' involvement in corruption in the October 2016 general election. This revelation was greeted by reactions from the print and electronic media. The poet succinctly lampoons the judiciary's involvement in corruption, subversion of justice, and the resultant biased judgment.

A critical examination of the lines above reveals the use of words such as "venerable" "immaculate" and "well laundered". Ordinarily, they carry a sense of decency, reverence, flawlessness, unblemished, and respectfulness. But the words are humorously deployed to contrast the shame and loss of honour associated with

vices such as bribery and corruption. In reality, the profession deserves a great deal of respect but it is lost as the judges have thrown caution to the wind and brazenly indulged in various acts of bribery and corruption. In essence, the words are used ironically to ridicule and make mockery of the corruption evident among the judges who ought to be exemplary in preserving the virtues and values of traditional society. Nwabueze (2007) refers to this shortfall as the failings of the judiciary in its primary function and the sole reason for the crumbling of the masses' trust in the judiciary.

In the next line of the poem, the poet humorously remarks that “money can deodorize the smelliest crime”. This shows his abhorrence of bribery the same way one abhors the smell that oozes out of a septic tank. However, the lines indicate how corrupt individuals, politicians, and judges alike construct underground saves to hide their loot. Osundare thus, alludes to this in the first line of the second stanza of the poem. While septic tanks are meant to absolve excrement or human wastes, it is ironically dug to harbour stolen money from the nation's coffer. As Raskin has correctly observed concerning the postulation on which the SSTH is based, Osundare's choice of diction suggests two levels of meanings derived from the original texts. These meanings are in opposition as illustrated in the lines already quoted. The expressions “venerable”, “immaculate”, “well laundered” and many others employed in the poem, suggest chasteness, uprightness, and that which is good, but in the context of the poem, they are used ironically to generate humour. Consequently, the words denote indecency, disrepute, contamination, and shame.

The poet continues with the same tone of sarcasm to expose other places where corrupt individuals hide their ill-gotten wealth:

Shall I haul it up the attic?
Between the ceiling and your lofty roof
Or shall I conjure the walls to open up
And swallow this sudden bounty from your honest labour.

The lines above show that judges are neck-deep in bribery and corruption with levity based on the fact that they are collaborating with well-meaning political officeholders. So they flagrantly indulge in bribery and corruption with impunity. For judges as well as politicians, the attic is purposely designed to harbour their ill-gotten money. For the fact that these high office holders evade punishment for their involvement in corruption, Osundare ironically uses the expression “bounty from your honest labour” which is conspicuously humorous considering the source of the wealth.

The subsequent lines of the poem are concerned with the pile of money received as a bribe by the judges and the daunting task of counting and keeping it. Through a series of rhetoric, the poet in bewilderment asks the receiver how he intends to manage the contemptible bribe he has been offered:

Shall I give a billion to each of your paramours
The black, the light, the fanta-yellow?
They will surely know how to keep the loot
In places too remote for the sniffing dog

Or shall I put the particulars
Of your anonymous maidservants and manservants
With their names on overflowing bank accounts?

These lines reveal the judges' sickening spirit of plutomania as they continue to accept bribes above what they can keep or manage, hence the need to find alternative places where they can conceal it. The shameful practice of corrupt public office holders as shown here is to stack such money in the accounts of girlfriends ridiculously referred to here as "the black, the light, the fanta-yellow" or even in the house-helps accounts. Their greed knows no bounds as they continue like gluttons to accept bribes even when they no longer have accurate records of their numerous accounts or the total sum of their wealth. According to Osundare, it takes the bank's "fastest machine" several "days to count the booty" and even the bank bosses "help themselves to a fraction of the loot".

The poet laments the harmful effects of these dastardly acts of the judges on the infrastructure and development of Nigeria. The far-reaching effect on the poor masses is also bemoaned by the poet with such expressions as:

where potholes swallow up the highest jeep
and penury leaves a scar on every house.
The last hope of common man
Has become the last bastion of criminally rich

He laments further "A terrible plague bestrides the land" (Nigeria). He indicts the judges and the lawyers as

partners in crime who are responsible for the “rot and riot whose stench is choking” Nigeria, and refers to them as “rigmaroles”. The poet declares that their crime is not hidden, “corruption stands, naked, in its insolent impunity”. The poet outrightly identifies the judges’ accomplices who take advantage of their insatiable thirst for wealth to drain Nigeria of her wealth as the politicians. He refers to the politicians as the “highest bidder”, “criminals” and “scoundrel vote-riggers”.

These corrupt politicians are addressed as “opulent criminals who shop for judges who are complacent to employ inter-locutory or perpetual injunctions in election petitions to frustrate their less privileged opponents who might have won elections. The judges, on the other hand, are portrayed as “buyable Bench” and “Conniving Bar” who accept currencies of different shades, “dollars”, “euros” or even “naira” and keep them in their closet in the parlour or under the kitchen sink. The poem mocks the judges further as they spend all night counting their loot and admiring their various “gifts” but doze off in their courtrooms. “The chief of justice looks on with tired eyes”.

The poet asserts that the judges are catapulted to the billionaire’s club overnight due to their involvement in sharp practices namely, bribery and corruption. This, the poet mockingly refers to as a handsome reward for proclaiming the guilty or loser winner and the winner looser. He says: “won-gb’ ebi f’ alare / won gb’ are f’ elebi”. He laces the poem with the local flavour of his traditional Yoruba language showing the far-reaching effect of corruption. The expression simply reveals the swapping of justice where the guilty is free and the

innocent is punished. This pervasion of justice results in the betrayal of trust and the prevalence of crime in society as affirmed by the poet. He charges further:

Crime pays in this country
Corruption has its handsome rewards
Just one judgment sold to the richest bidder
Will catapult judge and lawyer to the billionaires'
club

But he also points out the sad outcome as he quickly adds that the conscience is murdered and:

They kill our trust in common good

The hypocrisy of the judges is also exposed in the poem. Even though they troop to the church on Sunday or “pious mosques” on Friday, their god is revealed to be the “monster of mammon”, the god of riches which is an allusion to powerful biblical imagery. This reveals the control that money can exert on the mind of the individual. Lack of fear for the true God is the sole reason they indulge in corruption and pervert justice all week long. They pardon so many irregularities in the land (Nigeria) as asserted by the poet:

Where impunity walks the streets
Like large ‘invincible demon...
And dig us deeper into hellish hole
Nigeria is a huge corpse.
With milling maggots on its wretched hulk.

The judges in Nigeria have led Nigeria into a hopeless and pitiable condition as revealed in the images of an “invincible demon”, “huge corpse” and “milling maggots”. It is indeed an irredeemable and helpless situation. In the last stanza of the poem the poet repeats his tone of satire by calling the judges, “my most honourable Lord.” There is no doubt that the judge is not honourable considering all that has been revealed about his involvement in bribery and corruption. It is on this note that Niyi Osundare concludes by offering the English translation of his earlier Yoruba expression:

They declare the innocent guilty
They pronounce the guilty innocent

Osundare employs several literary devices to achieve humorous effect in this poem and these include personification. With personification, he animates objects and concepts such as potholes (“swallow up the hugest jeep”), penury (“leaves a scar”), corruption (“stand naked”), and more, to emphasize the agonizing effect of corruption on the masses. He also employs hyperbole and metaphor, thus, creating a vivid mental image that the reader can recall with ease. He mentions “antiquated wig”, “slavish glove”, and “penguin gown” as rots “whose stench is choking the land.” He mockingly presents the judges as dozing off in the courtroom after spending the entire night counting money and other gifts, the proceeds of corruption. The tone of mockery runs through the poem from the beginning to the end through the poet’s application of various literary devices.

Conclusion

This study investigates the involvement of the Nigerian judiciary in bribery and corruption in Nyi Osundare's "My Lord, Tell Me Where To Keep Your Bribe". As noted various writers, including Niyi Osundare, have demonstrated serious commitment to the cause of reforming Nigeria and by extension Africa in exposing the rot in the society in their creative works. The study shows how the poet uses the poem to expose and lash out at corrupt judicial officers through humour and powerful images which reveal that the Nigerian judiciary is in a precarious situation. It can be seen that judges and politicians are highly culpable in running aground the Nigerian economy, thus, plunging the masses into hunger and deprivation at an unimaginable degree. The master satirist, Niyi Osundare, uses this poem to fearlessly expose layers of decay including greed, lust for power, looting, kleptomania, embezzlement, bribery, and many more perpetrated by political office holders and the judges as a result of their inordinate thirst for wealth and power. Niyi Osundare's simplicity and straightforwardness of diction and technique make this poem apt and remarkable. His use of repetition such as "my Lord" throughout the poem highlights the prevalence of corruption in the judiciary as well as sets the tone for sarcasm. He is no doubt a revolutionist in both subject matter and technique, an artist of excellence.

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