

## Symbolism in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare

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### Abstract

This paper examines NiyiOsundare’s use of symbols or symbolic images as significant and dominant formal devices by which the poet explores and amplifies his themes. It is observed that these symbolic images perform both aesthetic and social functions. The aesthetic function derives from their suggestiveness, their imaginative evocations of the human condition with which the poet is concerned; and the social function is manifest in the way the poet enlists our sympathy towards the oppressed and exploited masses on the one hand, and on the other hand directs our perception and attitude against the oppressive Establishment. As subtle connections between content and form, the symbols are studied as part of the technical machinery that gives Osundare’s poetry the qualification of art.

**Keywords:** Nigerian poetry, imagery, symbolism, socio-political reality.

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### I. INTRODUCTION.

In literature, symbolism is the presentation of images and metaphors as representations of things, ideas, or emotions different from the things or objects presented. The imagery so used for this representation becomes symbolic imagery, or symbols for the things, ideas or emotions so represented. Images and metaphors will cease to be mere analogues and comparisons and become symbols in their context; and in relation to other images and metaphors, they suggest or invoke a network of extrinsic ideas and associations. A symbol is therefore something that evokes reference—reference to something beyond the poem, reference to meaning and attitudes beyond what we see or hear. This reference inevitably takes its basis from something definite, concrete, or sensuous, and expands beyond itself into something indefinite, something abstract, invisible, or mysterious. Wellek and Warren write that a symbol is “an object which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation” (189). In other words, a symbol embodies both a presentation and a representation. The presentation is generally concrete and sensuous, while the thing signified or represented is often an abstraction, a concept, or an idea; the material representing the immaterial, the finite suggesting the infinite.

Commenting on the richness of meaning attributed to a symbol, Laurence Perrine says that a symbolic poem is open to as diverse interpretations as the experiences of its readers. He compares a symbol to an opal “that flashes out different colours when slowly turned in the light” (630). An image generally becomes a symbol when it has appeared so often in a work of art, or in the works of an author, that its appearance evokes a similar sensation, idea, or feeling in the reader. Thus to Wellek and Warren: “An image may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol” (189).

### II. SYMBOLISM IN THE POETRY OF NIYI OSUNDARE

The preeminent stature of NiyiOsundare as a poet is assured by the fact that his poetry boldly and consistently embodies the thematic and aesthetic aspirations and values of the second-generation of Nigerian poets. Against the modernist solipsism and angst-ridden temperament of their predecessors, this generation of poets, as FunsoAiyejina has argued, was “set to make poetry as relevant to the realities of their daily existence as possible” (31). Their poetry combined social relevance and political activism with a traditional oral poetics that exploited lucidity in language and simplicity of diction. Rather than “importing imagery from alien environments” (Chinweizu and Others, 168) the way the Euromodernist African poets had done, NiyiOsundare and his generation adopted vivid traditional imagery which encapsulate and convey their thematic concerns.

BiodunJeyifo has noted that Osundare enriches his poetry with metaphors, symbols, and correspondences drawn from the natural universe, arguing that this poet’s “observant, sensitive eye on nature yields the insight that the processes of the natural world correspond to the wishes and yearnings of the heart and, by extension, the will to change, the will to freedom” (319). Our aim in this paper is to examine the themes that

have most exercised Osundare's creative mind and how his imagination presents and encapsulates such themes in evocative images that assume symbolic significance.

### 2.1 Symbolism of Dryness, Drought, and Desert.

The poem "Siren" (*Songs of the Marketplace*) presents the political rulers as being more concerned with consolidating power and accumulating wealth, than catering to the needs of the people:

Siren Siren Siren  
no time for dry days  
and dark nights  
or food whose price  
costs a ton of gold  
no time for hospitals  
and schools and roads (*Marketplace*, 22)

Our ears are assaulted (and insulted) by the insistent sounds of blaring sirens as the self-aggrandizing rulers drive along the streets, paying no heed to the plight and predicament of the on-looking masses who have to contend with "dry days/ and dark nights" as well as with unaffordable prices of food and the lack of basic social amenities like hospitals, schools, and accessible roads. When the poet describes the days as "dry" and the nights as "dark", the epithets are at once literal and literary, they present the actual dryness of atmospheric conditions and the absence of light; but the "dry days" and "dark nights" are also symbolic evocations. Dryness here (or lack of rain) is a metaphor for the paucity, or even absence, of basic needs and vital social amenities like food, hospitals, schools, and roads. The dark nights, while standing for the lack of electricity, are also symbolic of blindness, the lack of vision among the establishment. The ineptitude and callousness of the ruling class results in physical, emotional and intellectual anguish among the masses.

In "Cloudwatch" (*Songs of the Marketplace*), the same idea of dry days is conveyed. The shepherds and the farmers are anxiously watching the sky for signs of rain:

Sand storms come and go  
But the sky declines to spit (74).

The impact of this dryness on the populace is obvious: the shepherd is "withered like his staff" and the sheep are lean. Similarly, "Dry Seasons" exploits the dryness of the seasons as a symbol of the dearth of social and material essences:

Earth awaits in  
Pain the embrace of  
Shafts of birth

For some time  
It's been dry suffering  
Maize leaves toughening  
Into sisal, the tendril  
Collapsing on stalks,  
Heads turning sunburnt  
And the earth hot like  
Molten steel

The cob this year  
Will rust grey-tasseled  
The tuber undersized (*Marketplace*).

"For some time," the poet tells us, "It's been dry suffering." This "dry suffering" manifests itself in the pale maize leaves, the withering tendrils, and the undersized yam tubers. This cluster of images are metaphors for disease, poverty, and neglect, all enlisted to serve as symbols of societal barrenness and desolation.

Certain poems in *Village Voices* also exploit this symbolic image of dryness and its extreme variant of drought. The poem "Unequal Fingers", for example, uses the image of the five fingers of the hand to convey the idea of social inequality among the citizens of the same country. The masses are said to "have known famished mouths/and years of unnatural famine", while in upper-class homes "chicken legs dance/at the bottom of simmering pots". The poet then uses the symbol of drought to describe the indigent and famished condition of the masses:

Soon  
we shall know  
how your farm stays so lush

in our season of drought (*Village Voices*, 61).

The masses' "season of drought" contrasts blatantly with the lushness of the farms owned by the bourgeoisie, the capitalists, and the political elite.

Another poem in *Village Voices* that uses the symbol of dryness is "The Stars Did It". Here the poet writes that :

The year we longed for big yams  
To fatten our famished hopes  
And put the lustre back  
In sunken sockets  
The sky went dry

The earth a cauldron of broiling hunger (63).

It is the common voice of the villagers, the communal voice, that is speaking: "we longed for big yams/To fatten our famished hopes". The people had hoped that the sky would pour rains on their farms and boost their harvest for this year. But the sky is stingy with its rain, the farmers' yearnings remain an illusion, their hopes remain "famished", the sunken eyes remain lustreless, and "broiling hunger" haunts the earth.

The sky and the earth are supposed to be in a harmonious relationship, the former providing for the well-being of the latter. But now that relationship is shown to be strained, even antagonistic; the sky which is custodian of the most-desired rain, deliberately withholds its bounties, and the earth is consequently famished. In this context, the sky is symbolic of an errant political system, just as the droughty earth symbolises the deprived masses.

The poem "Let Earth's Pain be Soothed" (*The Eye of the Earth*) belongs to that part of the collection titled "Rainsongs", which is an exhortation to political rulers to allow "rain" to fall and soothe the anguished earth.

Here the earth is envisioned as experiencing an unnatural kind of drought, unnatural because this is supposed to be the rainy season:

Our earth has never lingered so dry  
In the season of falling showers  
Clouds journey over trees and over hills  
Miserly with their liquid treasure  
The sky carries a boil of anguish  
Let it burst (27).

Here again there is tension in the sky-earth relationship. The seething earth is expectant of rain, but the clouds are "miserly" with this "liquid treasure". The rain-pregnant clouds symbolise the hoarded wealth of the nation. The resultant drought is therefore unnatural and man-orchestrated. As a result of this drought, dust abounds everywhere in the country:

Dust  
dust in brewing kitchens  
dust in eating halls  
dust in busy bedrooms  
dust in scheming boardrooms  
dust in retrenching factories  
dust in power brothels (27-28).

If drought symbolises the desolation that the selfish rulers have visited on the land, then dust symbolises the attendant moral and spiritual barrenness that prevails in "scheming boardrooms", in "retrenching factories", and in "power brothels". The poem ends with a plea that:

Let it rain today  
That parched throats may sing  
Let it rain  
That earth may heal the silence

...

Let it rain today  
That stomachs may shun the rumble of thunder  
Let it rain  
That children may bathe and brawl and brawl (28)

It is a petition for the hoarded national wealth to be equitably distributed, so that the hungry may eat and their children play. Emma Ngumoha has observed in "The Poet as Rain-Maker" that in *The Eye of the Earth* Osundare associates rain and rainfall with fertility and "the flow of celestial creative energy". He also points out the poet's symbolisation of the Earth as the feminine principle, representing the "regenerative power of female sexuality" (37). Ngumoha argues that Osundare "assumes the role of Shamanic rain-maker not only for the material good of his seed-planting and food-growing Ikere community, but also for the symbolic salubrious enrichment of the citizens of the universe whose ultimate well-being depends on the fertility of the earth" (39-40).

The poem "Human in Every Sense" (*Midlife*) is partly the poet's assessment of social and material deprivation, which once again is symbolised by sand and desert. It is partly also the vision of his role as poet-writer in a dehumanising socio-political order.

I am the forest of the desert

...

I look through the sand, I see a fountain

...

I say to the oasis: why don't you swell  
and swallow the desert?

I tell the desert: why don't you let the rain? (35)

The above lines attest to the poet's desire for luxuriance in an otherwise "desert" situation; his humanist vision conjures up a fountain and a forest in the middle of the desert; and he requests the oasis to swell up and swallow the desert. Later on in the poem the poet confesses that his own resilient mind has resisted the damaging effects of suffering and poverty as he grew up:

I have been through the desert  
but there are no sands in the ointment  
of my mind . . . (36)

His personal experience of growing up is seen in terms of the endless epochs of "dust" and "drought" that have characterised the Nigerian nation:

I have known the land, the land has known me  
I have reaped merciless dust in epochs  
of long droughts, sat down to hunger,  
and suffered endless nights on a mat . . . (43)

Social injustice and material deprivation are seen against the backdrop of an arid landscape which symbolises the barren morality, the depravity and greed of a self-serving Establishment.

The symbolism of desert, with its variant corollaries of drought and dust, is best demonstrated in "Olowo Debates Talaka" (*Songs of the Season*), where the famished land is the result of the rulers' greed. Here is the poor man Talaka questioning the rich man Olowo on the source of his opulence:

Our earth is dry  
The forests are scorched, and  
River beds lie like remnant spines  
Of ancient serpents;  
Our barns are lean,  
Our granaries ringing shells  
Of noisy hunger;  
A lingering death knocks  
The door of our hearts . . .  
But, man of money,  
Your farms stay so lush  
Like the loins of external rivers,  
Your barns brim with handsome yams.  
Tell us,  
What swells your river so  
In our season of drought? (38)

"Talaka" is the short form of "talakawa", the Hausa-Fulani expression for the masses. "Olowo" on the other hand stands for royalty among the Yorubas. Therefore, for Osundare, as spokesman for the masses, Talaka draws a contrast between their "season of drought" and the proliferative exuberance of the capitalist's farm. One side of the class divide is marked by dried-up rivers, empty barns, and general famine; while the other side is characterised by lush farms, full-flowing rivers and full barns.

*A Nib in the Pond* again exploits the aridity and barrenness of dust, drought, and desert as symbols of the general human condition—the deprivation and desolation, the poverty and misery to which the masses are subjected. The worker-persona in "The Oasis" reflects on the fact that the workers' efforts at cultivating the land are frustrated by those who have the power to withhold the rains from the workers' farms. The rulers are said to channel the rains to their own private estates, to "plant private oases/ in the fringes of our desert", thus ensuring that the workers live perpetually in "sands of want". Thus writes the poet:

They abort our clouds  
Seeding our labouring land with sands of want  
These monstrous farmers who fear  
The bloom of our dream

And so they plant private oases  
In the fringes of our desert  
Culture barbed hedges round  
Their stolen estates  
and date their hidden mansions  
withbroomless palms (52).

The oases-desert contrast is symbolic of the opulence-poverty, or hunger-surfeit contrast in contemporary Nigerian society. The picture is of the drought-stricken masses enviously watching a few people splashing themselves in “private oases”. “And while by waterless wells/we chew shrivelled roots”, the poem continues:

They soak their oily bellies  
in puddled dreams  
squander precious water on pampered lawns (53)

The “oases” are the stolen wealth of the nation, carted away by the “thieves of state” to private homes and foreign banks, leaving the nation in a situation of “drought”. “There are other oases/ in faraway lands”, observes the persona ruefully.

## 2.2. Symbolism of Darkness.

Another obsessive image in the poetic imagination of Niyi Osundare is that of darkness and its variant forms such as the cloud, night, and the colour black. The recurrence of this image in the context of socio-political depravity raises it above the merely literal or descriptive to the realm of symbol. Where the sun betokens illumination, vitality, moral and intellectual vision, the absence or negation of the sun symbolises a benighted society, morally depraved, materially deprived, and lacking in vision or focus.

We see the clouds being used as a symbol of oppression in “Excursion” (*Marketplace*), a socially realistic poem that details the filth and dereliction that constitute the masses’ lot, in contrast to the glamour and opulence of the Establishment. The poem’s last passage expresses hope that “oppression’s cloud” will soon be lifted from the people’s horizon:

But soon  
the people will shout  
when murmurs break through muzzles  
and will powers into action  
then oppression’s cloud will clear  
the sun eastering hence  
a life full and free (15).

The passage anticipates a political revolution by which the people will “break through the muzzles” of oppression and dispel the “cloud” that befuddles their existence.

A similar revolutionary fervour pervades “Namibia Talks”, which is an indictment against the repressive Apartheid government that has conspired to turn the country to a land of “the setting sun”. Thus the poet writes:

We shall turn our eyes  
From the setting sun  
Whose dying flickers  
entombs our vision  
with our own hands  
we shall take our life  
from the coffin of death merchants (51)

The images of “dying flickers” and entombed vision suggest a benighted society that is bereft of life and liberty. Osundare sees the oppressors all over the African continent as people with a professed aversion to light and truth, and thus are fosterers and perpetuators of night, darkness, and its attendant falsehood. In “Prisoners of Conscience” he describes them as “gagsmiths with steel muzzles/ on the mouth of conscience”, and writes further of them:

Truth dazzles their eyes  
Like sunrays of tropical midday  
Burns their throats  
Like a witch’s iron  
Scared of dawn’s return  
They seek to clog the throat  
That foresings the day song (160).

In “Scared of dawn’s return”, the oppressors incarcerate any of the luminaries of the society who condemns the darkness and “foresings the day song”. According to the poet, what these oppressors fail to know is that every sun that sets eventually rises again to dispel the darkness and expose the truth:

But the day must break  
So the people can see  
For seeing is knowing  
Knowing is telling  
Sawdust from garri

...

So the sun harried west  
By habitual plunderers  
Shall emerge from the east

...

Then blinkers shall fall  
So the people can see  
They shall see the truth  
Tearing through the clouds (60-61)

The "sun harried west" re-emerges, "tearing through the clouds" of falsehood and oppression. Osundare's symbolism here contraposes sun, light, truth, knowledge, and conscience with cloud, darkness, oppression and falsehood.

As the title of *Midlife* suggests, the poems in this collection are mainly about the poet's self-assessment at midlife, but in re-creating his personal experiences he also explores and evaluates the historical, social and political experiences of his country and other African nations after several decades of political independence. For both poet and nation, midlife that was supposed to be the "noon" of being is, instead, fraught with symbols of darkness, gloom, and despair:

First,

An Noon spoke

In visions of measured torrent

The forest's inky depth  
Footfalls of galloping mountains

The equator's dark accent  
Stitch of broken sun (5)

The "noon" of the society is engulfed in darkness: "inky darkness". "The equator's dark accent" expresses an irony of situation in that the equator that is generally associated with a bright overhead sun is here linked instead with "broken suns" which betoken the bleakness of African nations.

Against the historical background of recurrent dictatorships, the African continent at her political midlife is still a crawling child, as "Diary of the Sun" witnesses:

Midlife

then in a continent repressed into dire childhood  
like Sologon's child, crawling at eighty  
still struggling to count her fingers

...

Nights swap garments with days,  
the sun staggers into the  
parlour of an overripe morning,  
having slept too long in the chambers  
of clever clouds (*Midlife*, 92-93).

In the African continent, it is morning yet at midday, "an overripe morning", caused by "clever clouds" that have since prevented the sun from breaking forth upon the land. Age and youth, as well as night and days, are confounded in the continent.

In ensuing passages of "Diary of the Sun" (*Midlife*), the symbolism of night and darkness is further developed, with the African continent portrayed as "starless regions" overwhelmed by a night that is both cold and frightful:

The night is cold with fright

white with the simpering laughter

of deracinated teeth

a crow describes shrill stunts in the magnitude  
of the sky

one with night, one with the wordless clatter  
of starless regions.

Which firefly will sow a little twinkle

in the infinite furrows of a loamy darkness,  
which gallant noon will define itself  
by the black plenitude beyond  
asnoreless slumber?  
The night is chill,  
a sepia sun gathers strength behind  
the clouds (96-97).

The imagery that describes the night underscores its bleakness: it is “cold with fright”, its silence is punctuated only by the shrill notes of a crow (itself an inauspicious presence), and it is “loamy”, suggesting its murkiness. The bleakness of the human condition moves the poet to desiderate some streak of light, at least some firefly to “sow a little twinkle” in the infinite darkness.

In the next passage the poet describes the African continent as “Here where towering conspiracies usurp the sun” (97), and proceeds to lament that:

Grinning boughs have swallowed the sun:  
forests grope their days in hurricanes  
of alien lanterns (97).

African rulers are symbolised as the overspreading boughs of a large tree that have contrived to keep the sun to themselves, while the undergrowth withers for lack of the sun’s warmth and vitality. In a subsequent passage, the poem further dwells on this situation of a swallowed sun, thus:

Grinning boughs have swallowed the sun  
for how long will the forest grope its days  
in hurricanes of alien lanterns? (98)

Several poems in *Horses of Memory* also exploit this symbol of an eclipsed sun to convey the gloom associated with military despotism and the miscarriage of political institutions. “Stilldancers” uses a network of imagery and symbols to portray the hazardous effects of military dictatorships on the society:

The rain has beaten us a million times  
Now the cloud has eaten up the sun  
The sky is carnival of bleeding shafts (38)

The cloud that has eaten up the sun refers to the military rulers, and the “sun” that they have eaten refers to the human and social essence.

The aspirations and ideals that the people had entertained at the threshold of political independence are said to have been dashed by the selfishness of military despots and the political class. In “Memory Chips” the poet is doubtful that those ideals can still be remembered and recovered after our long history of “night”:

With a night so  
long  
shall we still  
remember  
our dream  
at the threshold of dawn? (61)

This rhetorical question is supposed to prick the conscience of oppressors, and at the same time it solicits a call for action.

### III. Conclusion

Osundare’s symbolic references give his art the appearance of a tapestry, enriching it with several layers of meanings and interpretations. This paper identifies such recurrent images in NiyiOsundare’s works, and studies them as demonstrative of his poetics that combines direct statement with suggestion, evocation, and association.

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