

## The Poet as a "Lover": Probing Love Impulse in Niyi Osundare's Tender Moments

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### Abstract

*Niyi Osundare is popularly viewed as a political poet with a Marxist and socialist vision. Perhaps very few literary critics know him as a poet-lover. This paper, therefore, beams a novel and unpopular search-light on the Nigerian bard. Employing Freudian psychoanalytic postulations, the research aims at investigating love impulse in Niyi Osundare's Tender Moments as reflected in the poet's tripartite psyche and also attempts to delineate love impulse as reflected in metaphors and symbols and finally evaluates Osundare's style in his love poetry. The paper submits affirmatively that Osundare, the poet, is indeed, human in every sense: a lover of life without regret. The study concludes that more researches be embarked upon the poet's oeuvre, which will confirm him a passionate humanist and not merely a combative Marxist thereby bridging the existing gap between the well known dimension and the new dimension of Osundare in his poetic creation.*

### Introduction

Niyi Osundare has enjoyed some favourable critical reception, going by the flurry of interest researchers and literary enthusiasts have had in his works. To the majority, Osundare is a revolutionary poet with a Marxist vision. Among the list of critics who share this belief is Biodun Jeyifo who submits that "Osundare occupies an increasingly looming place within this tradition. His poetry constitutes a distinct revolution within the new poetic revolution" (Introduction. *Songs of the Market Place*, vii).

On the other hand, Osundare is seen as a socially relevant artist by most literary scholars. In his review on Osundare, Koko Kalango views him as "a firm believer that writers have a duty to be social commentators" (77). To Kalango. Osundare's social vision is seen in his being vocal in putting forward his opinion about the ugly state of economic, political and social affairs in Nigeria-"a commitment that has not always made him popular with the authorities." In another dimension of his social vision, Luke Eyoh sees him as a human right activist. In his paper *on Human Rights Advocacy and National Integration in Niyi Osundare's Poetry: A Study in Human Rights Law*, Eyoh adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Osundare's poetry. He writes that Osundare has "used his verse to advocate human rights and national integration in all ramifications" (139).

Yet, few know of Osundare as a "lover". Samson Dare, in his paper "Sexual Discourse in Niyi Osundare's Poetry: A Sociolinguistic Reading", submits that Osundare reads about sexual issues which invariably employ some lexical items socially regarded as repugnant (89). Osundare's contemporary, Tanure Ojaide, in a study entitled "Niyi Osundare and His Poetic Choices" may have concluded too early or wrongly when he identified Osundare as a Marxist with a socialist vision and "proletarian ideas" and accused him of "his Marxist infatuation":

Osundare's poetry does not appear to be personal. It is rare for him to write about a personal experience or for him to be confessional. There are no poems about his relationships no love poems, for instance. He distances himself from the personal... Love poetry could often times show much of the sensibility, passion, and humanity of a poet... Osundare disengages from the personal, which coalesces into pop art, and shows much of one's humanity (23).

He concludes:

His choices are informed by ideological and political considerations, as he wants to be seen as ranging on the side of the people as down-to-earth (23).

Love is about the most influential and complex of all human emotions. It is most desired and expressed. The inevitability of love as central to human existence is by the truth that it is regardless of culture, age, gender and social class; penetrating the very existence of the young and the aged, the weak and the strong, the literate and the illiterate. Indeed, as the core of human psychology and personality, love is about who we are. It is, therefore, slightly or not surprising at all, that despite his monumental achievements and intellectuality as a writer, Osundare is caught loving in his *Tender Moments*; his emotions and feelings are greatly troubled by sensual love. This, of course, is in cognizance of the fact that literature, and poetry in particular, is a reflection of (socio-psychological) realities. This feeds deeply into William Wordsworth's explication of poetry as "...the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility" (cited in Maduka and Eyo 13).

It is often said that every song, every poem, every novel, every painting ever created is, in some way, "about" love (Popova 1). What this suggests is that love is the driver of all great stories and the central theme in human's creative works, the Holy Bible inclusive. In line with this assertion, *Tender Moments* is not an exception. In this sensuous, daring, evocative, inviting and lyrical collection, Osundare embarks on a strange excursion (typical of his previous poems): an excursion on love, but here altogether atypical in content and concern. In it, he expresses his other self, his innermost self, and by so doing complements his personality as "Human in every sense/Lover of life without regret. (Midlife 37).

In his famous essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, TS Eliot posits that the poet must be aware of the obvious fact that "art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same" (Nwulu 49). Thus, Osundare, in his first post-Katrina collection (of love poems) does not attempt to improve upon art on love; rather, he uniquely and consciously adds his voice to the past and present outstanding poetic voices on love poetics, such as the biblical Solomon, the classicist Cupid, the Elizabethan William Shakespeare, the metaphysical John Donne, the modernist E. E. Cummings and of course, Osundare's greatest influence, Pablo Neruda.

### **Love Impulse**

Traceable to Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis focuses on the psychology or the mind of an author or a character in literary discourse. Thus, it seeks to analyse and explain the psychic interconnections between the mind (of the author or his characters in a work of art), and the art; how his conscious wishes and desires manifest in the language (Ann Dobie 64). Such a study is in itself an interdisciplinary approach, connecting literature with psychology.

Lave impulse, in this context, includes the manifestations of instinctive, romantic, libidinal and sexual drives, wishes, desires and gratification, made visible and concrete in lines of verse. Sigmund Freud places love at the centre of his theoretical formulations. In his *Theory of the Libido*, Freud explains that human beings are products of both conscious and unconscious wishes and desires and that all human behaviours originate from our sexual drives and desires (Terry Engleton 155). In other words, the human mind is responsible for both conscious and unconscious decisions based on libidinal drives and forces. The unconscious desires motivate people to act accordingly. The "id", the "ego" and the "super ego" are the three aspects of the mind, which, Freud believes, make up and influence an individual's personality. Therefore, for the artist (the poet in particular), he is able to repress his guilty desires and turn them into a socially acceptable source of entertainment and pleasure, made possible through language. This, of course, corroborates Jacques Lacan's assertion that "The unconscious is structured like language (Dobie 64).

On love impulse and passion, Helen Fisher explains that humans and other mammals have evolved three emotion systems in love relations; the "sex drive", "attraction" and "attachment". The sex drive is characterised by the craving for sexual gratification; attraction by increased desire and focused attention on potential mates; whereas attachment allows for protection and nurturing behaviours for the couple (29).

### **Symbols and Metaphors**

Freud, according to Dobie, recognizes how the consciously expresses fantasy, illusion and wishes through symbols and metaphors and that "to write a story or a poem is to reveal the unconscious, to give a neurosis socially acceptable expression." Such a view makes the writer a conflicted individual working out his/her problems (57). The poem or story therefore becomes a reflection of repressed reality.

The focus on love impulse and human experiences is the concern of psychoanalysis. Relevant to this work are Freud's psychoanalytic principles on human's "tripartite psyche", "symbols" and "metaphors". Thus, in an effort to describe the conscious and the unconscious mind, Freud divides the human psyche into three parts: the "id", the "ego" and the "superego". The "id" is the repository of the "libido", the source of our psychic energy and psychosexual desires, giving us our vitality. Freud writes: "the id strives to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle" (Ann Dobie, 53). On the other hand, the "ego" strives to regulate the "id", mediate between our inner selves and the outer world, operating under the reality principle". The third part, the "superego", provides additional balance to the "id". It is similar to one's conscience and operates according to "morality principle" (53).

Concerning symbols and metaphors, Freud recognises the complex workings of human sexuality as being expressed through "yonic" (female) and "phallic" (male) symbols. Similarly, through the processes of artistic creation, the repressed desires are sometimes made manifest in metaphors and euphemisms. Moreover, psychoanalysis studies the impulsive and conflicting workings of the human mind or psychology. Affirming this, Gordon, in his *Psychoanalytic Reflections on Love and Sexuality*, avers: "Psychoanalysis concerns itself with the mysteries of the heart, mind and soul..." (85). Furthermore, Abrams and Harpham define psychoanalytic criticism as a study which

deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in an indirect and fictional form, of the state of mind and the structure of personality of the individual author (289)

In line with this, *Tender Moments* fits into the mould of such literature and since "love" is its thematic preoccupation, it can best be approached psychoanalytically.

### **Tender Moments: An Overview**

The text a 102-page publication which has seventy-seven (77) love poems, classified under three main headings- In the Mood. Songs of Absence and Metaphor. The first section contains thirty verses, the second, twenty-six, while the third section features twenty-one poems. "In The Mood" opens with a thrilling poem entitled "In The Mood for Love" and ends with "The Longest Love Poem in the World", whose only line surprisingly contains only a word, "Yes Songs of Absence" opens with "Songs of Absence (1)" and concludes with "Elephant Across the Path"; whereas "Metaphor" begins with "Questions for a Poet's Wife" and caps it all with "Metaphor". The poems are dedicated to the celebration of love. Hence, they are characteristically sensual, appealing and lyrical.

### **Love Impulse in Selected Poems**

Adamaradan, come close to me  
So you can behold the honour of my presence...

What is the lover's duty if not the pouring of honey into the ears of the beloved...  
("Adumaradan" 19).

This poem sets the tone of the poet as a lover. Here, he openly defines his mission which is to pour honey into the ears of the beloved. In other words, he invites his lover into his presence, ready to sing her praise and play with her. This tender passion for his object of love is expressed in the love impulse which flows in all the verses as analysed below.

The moon is playing hide-and-seek  
Behind the clouds, A mellow smile  
Lingers on the lips of the sky....

*Sun mo bi, Ologuro*  
I am in the mood for love tonight...

Stir little fires in the furrow between my ridges  
Plant me, a song, in your loamy acres  
Palm my memory, mold my mask

Let rasping leaves caress the fruit  
At the branch's edge. Quench this quest  
With the magic of murmuring moments...(3-4).

The above 10-stanza poem, "In the Mood for Love", spiced with the refrain "Sun mo bi Ologuro" I am in the mood for love tonight", passionately sets the stage for the thrilling odyssey of romantic poetry in *Tender Moments*. The poem is crafted against the backdrop of the "moon" (symbol of love), thus stressing some link with *Moonsongs*, an earlier collection

of this nature-oriented bard. Again, the refrain interpreted "Move closer, sweetheart reminds us of John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Like Donne, Osundare or his poet-persona is engaged in erotic love play. Clearly, the lines: "Stir little fires in the furrow between my ridges... /Let rasping leaves caress the fruit At the branch's edge. Quench this quest With the magic of murmuring moments...." suggest the idea of foreplay before the actual love-making—they connote the poet's endearment and burning desire to be caressed, fondled and be aroused for love-making since we already suggested by the title of the poem "In the Mood for Love", the poet is "in the mood for love tonight". These lines show the embodiment of the poet's id being swung into action. Here, we notice the pull of the id to disregard the traditional restrictions (against public discussion or engagement in sexuality) and to indulge in acts normally forbidden in the poet's society. Such metaphors or euphemistic expressions as "furrow between my ridges... fruit at the branch's edge" connote sexual organs. Also, to this quest with the magic of murmuring moments" suggests sexual act, by means of which the poet's libidinal and impulsive drives and desires are assuaged.

The poem "Love Can" also reflects the poet's unconscious psyche. The seventh and eighth stanzas read:

...Love can swim like a fire-tailed sperm  
Through the dark caves of desire  
Whisper wet wonders in the ears  
Of eternal cycles.

Love can make you  
Moan like a mantra  
Start little fires  
In the valley of sleeping valleys...(6-7).

Again, we notice the poet's id, seeking to gratify its unlawful desires without any concern for law, customs and taboos. The poet persona paints concrete pictures of sexual act with such diction and apt metaphors as "fire-tailed sperm", "dark caves of desires", "moan like a mantra", "little fires in the valley...".

These lines picturesquely capture the heightened moment of sexual act, when, with the wildest excitement, ejaculation takes place; and the "fire-tailed sperm swim/ through the dark caves of desire" (female sexual organ) in uncontrollable emotions in form of "whisper[ing] wet wonders in the ears" or "moan[ing] like a mantra." A "mantra" is a sacred Hindu chant or music believed by the practitioner to have psychological and spiritual powers (see Jan Gonda, 244-97). Therefore, like a Hindu who desires to derive psychological effect from his mantra chanting, we see the poet's id charged with sexual emotions for endless cycles of sexual act. The "valley of sleeping valleys" suggests the female sexual organ.

However, to prevent the chaos or breaking of taboos that would result if the id were to go untamed, the "ego" and the "super ego", the other parts of human psyche, as Freud posits (Ann Dobic, 53) must balance its passion. Thus, we discover such a balance in the poem "Forbidden Song", where the third and the last stanzas read:

There is a secret flower  
Between your legs behind  
a thicket of thorns

and a thousand touch-me-nots.  
Beloved  
You are my forbidden song  
I dwell the eternal portals  
of your sophisticated silence...(10)

Here, the "ego and the "superego" combine to divert the attention of the id into socially acceptable actions, thus providing the sense of moral and ethical wrong doing. Notably, the "secret flower" and "thicket of them" connote the female sexual organ and pubic hair respectively. The pubic hair symbolically shields the organ from unlawful touch by the id. Hence for Osundare, the unconscious passion of the id to "touch" the "secret flower" is being restricted by the combined actions of the ego and superego symbolized by "a thousand touch-me-nots" and by "You are my forbidden song".

Furthermore, in the poem, "Laughter Without Forgetting", we notice similar restrictions imposed on the id by the actions of the ego and superego. The third stanza reads:

And when blue pledges  
Blossom into desperate whisperings  
With forbidden man-goes so ripe  
In the laughter of distant valleys (35).

In the above lines, the libidinal desires of the id grow wild at the sight of the "ripe man-goes," (female sexual organ); hence, it becomes "desperate" with longing. Contextually, the expression. "man-goes so ripe" is imagistic and symbolic of the natural impulse of "man" to "go" after the "ripe" feminine organ. Incidentally, the intervention of the ego and the superego reminds the id that the "ripe man-goes" are "forbidden" and therefore should not be touched.

### **Metaphors and Symbols**

Away from love impulse as reflected in Osundare's tripartite psyche, we now move to similar impulses being captured in metaphors and symbols. An examination of the poems reveal some love impulse as captured by "yonic" and "phallic" symbols as well as love (sexual) metaphors. In "Love Can", for instance, whereas the phallic symbol is represented by "fire-tailed sperm", the yonic symbols are typified by "dark caves of desires" and "the valley of sleeping valleys":

Love can swim like a fire-tailed sperm  
through the dark caves of desire...  
Start little fires  
In the valley of sleeping valleys... ("Love Can" 6-7).

Similarly, in "The Evening of Your Smile", whereas "roosters", "pestle" and "fingers" are phallic symbols, representing the male sexual organ, the yonic symbols, representing female sexual organ are portrayed in "hens", "frayed skirt", "mortar", "onion" and "golden gong":

... Your magic detains my gaze  
Even as roosters chase their hens  
Around the frayed skirt of the forest...

The constant quarrel of pestle and mortar  
Onion fingers of pampered desires  
And you no golden gang, my eternal poem: Lovecrior... The Evening of  
Your Smile 9

Furthermore, in "Your Are", the 'Earth is both a metaphor and symbol of femininity, likewise "Shepherdess".

You are my Earth  
my root, my roost...  
Shepherdess of my nomadic fancies... ("You Are", 15).

More of the female symbols are isolated in "Metaphor", which include: "palm oil", "earth", "moon", "dark growing secret" and "pistil of the flower". Contrastively, the male symbols are captured in "sky", "knife", and "rain

Your are the palm oil, honour of the soup ("Adumaradan  
(English)"19)

This thin membrane between earth and sky... glow on the brow of the moon, soft  
orange knife in the flesh of the night... dark growing secret in the pistil of the flower  
waiting for the warm provocation of the lenient rain... ("Metaphor" 98).

Perhaps it is necessary to recall William Blake's "To Spring", where similar male and female symbols of the sky (Spring) and the Earth (British Isle) unite in love to bring about the sprouting of plants, fruits and new life in the season of Spring Still in "Metaphor", the fishes: "dolphins and "eel" are both symbolic of the male organ, whereas "womb", "egging salmon", and "silent depths" typify the female organ:

Mating minnows, dolphins of desire  
The eel's phallic distance, capacious womb Of egging salmon. Thronged tantrums  
Silent depths... Beautiful Beatrice

In the case of love metaphors, the poet is careful in shielding his verses from charge of writing salacious literature; hence, the use of apt metaphors to depict love and sexuality. The symbols in these verses are at the same time metaphorical. Thus, in addition to addressing his lover as "my golden gong, my eternal poem; lovercrier" (9), my Earth/ my root, my roost.../ Shepherdess of my nomadic fancies" (15); "the palm oil, honour of the soup" (19), "the key to the/ door of my day/..., the eternal flower the garden/ of my smile" (82); and "my forbidden song", (10) which passionately and picturesquely capture the beauty, worth and essence of his lover, the poet invents the already discussed symbols as metaphors to conceal their erotic connotations. The effect is that the technique does not only embellish the poems, but also justifies Osundare as indeed a master poet-lover.

A discussion on Osundare's poetry would be incomplete without assessing his stylistic wordplay. In this collection, he chooses a style that aesthetically conveys his love message, Three of his artistic features are here considered. First, the verses are, in the main, lyrical. They exhibit the essential ingredients of African poetry, which is largely panegyric, dramatic and The poems, especially "Bless", could be sung to the accompaniment of drums, gongs, flutes, etc., as indicated in the poem.

(Drums)

Bless those eyes which perch like eagles  
On either side of your nose

Bless the ocean in their sockets on which Memory's boat glides from  
coast to coast...

Bless, bless, bless (75).

Besides, the poems are imagistic and picturesque. Vivid imagery, mostly drawn from the poet's home environment, is employed. The images appeal to ocular, olfactory, aural, dactyl, kinetic, etc., senses; thereby conveying more vividly the romantic acts of love affairs. Illustrative of these are the poems, "Mountains", "These Many Moons" and "Tender Momentress", respectively.

Wherever you go  
Something follows:  
A pair of happy mountains  
Difficult not to see Impossible not to love ("Mountains" 84).

...Did you feel a tingle between your legs  
As you passed through our hunted spots...

Did you? ("These Many Moons" 43).

...your moonskin aglow  
with tears and dusken sighs ("Tender Tormentress" 23).

In sum, the language employed in the volume is largely limpid, racy and sensual. The verses are replete with concepts and image that would have been adjudged vulgar were it not for the poet's masterly creative use of language as in "Love can swim like a fire-tailed sperm/ Through the dark caves of desire ("Love Can" 6). The style and art employed by the poet is effective, in that it helps extensively to convey the love impulse and message as intended by the poet. The style carries the rhythm, passion and lyrics of love, thus supporting the anthology's beautiful content and form.

### **Conclusion**

An attempt has been made in *TenderMoments* to examine Osundare as a poet-lover. The work authenticates the poet as a lover of life without regret, basing its argument on the love impulse as reflected in the poet's tripartite psyche, love symbols, metaphors and style. The verses, indeed, confirm the psychoanalytic assertion that the artist (poet) has an introverted disposition, longs to love women and have his impulsive, libidinal desires assuaged. But lacking the means of achieving these gratifications, he turns away from reality and transfers them into a socially acceptable means of entertainment (poetry), Love, therefore, is the basis of human existence.



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