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## Poetry of Political Impunity in Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues*

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### Abstract

*Poetry has always drawn inspiration from the political arena, recording, in most cases, the infractions and absurdities for societal correction and improvement. This essay examines Niyi Osundare's poetry of political impunity in order to contextualise the aspects of impunity prevalent in Nigeria. Most studies of political impunity have concentrated on causes and strategies of combating impunity, leaving the various forms by which it manifests in poetry. This critical gap leads to inadequate comprehension of the subject. Explored in this essay, therefore, is the categorisation of political impunity into its various forms for easy understanding. Inferences are drawn from the critical reading of Osundare's poetry, namely, *Random Blues* because of the deft handling of political impunity in the collection. This essay relies on New Historicism to tease out the various forms of political impunity, while using textual analytic method to interpret the poems. The analysis of the poems reveals that political impunity flourishes where the society revels in silence, deifies the political leaders and refuses to engage perpetrators of impunity in violent physical combat. The essay concludes that in Niyi Osundare's poetry, political impunity manifests in the form of electoral violence, public theft and abuse of power.*

**Keywords:** Political Impunity, Public theft, Electoral Violence, Abuse of Power, New Historicism and Poetry

### Introduction

The poems present a grim mirror of society especially the pain of the led and the wickedness of the leaders. Through satirical configurations of the poems, the poet ridicules the political ills in society and indirectly invites politicians and the elite to rise above such ills.

Equally true is that poetry of political impunity presupposes those poems written to address the manifestations of corrupt, abusive and deceitful conducts of political leaders whether on their way to the echelon of leadership or at the zenith of the political office. It matters less which, what is critical is that impunity flourishes in the land and it is the duty of poets to capture and reflect them in their poems.

This study is undergirded by the new historicist theory. Literacy criticism has considered the themes and meaning of literature as product of the

text alone. This situation ignores other possibilities, thus, limiting the interpretation of literature. The new historicist criticism reads the text as the product of the author's time and cultural situation. Hence, the new historicism evaluates the relationship between history and society. Also aligned with this is the concept of impunity which tries to demonstrate the behaviour of political leaders in government and how history has preserved their public conduct for posterity. New historicism, in Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's opinion, "may be defined as a recognition of the extent to which history is textual" (119). History and the text are inseparable. The text is built on the history of the society. Additionally, they argue that "literary texts are embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed" (119). Thus the prevailing activities and events in spheres of politics, religion and economy provide facts which the writers represent through their art. Therefore, to speak of the text as separate from historical reality is to miss the point. For literature is the extension of history.

The concept of impunity flows from the behaviour of leaders in society. Hence, Jesus-Maria Silva Sanchez provides a detailed historical perspective on the concept of impunity. According to Sanchez, "over the course of the last decade, particularly in recent years, two doctrines have emerged within the criminal law" (861). These two doctrines establish the meaning of impunity and give us guidelines to assessing cases of impunity and these are: "the doctrine of the fight against impunity 1 or "zero impunity" 2 and the doctrine of the victim's right for the perpetrator to be punished" (861). The first idea that strikes one is that impunity is an undesirable and unaccepted social behaviour. The second is that the perpetrator of impunity is often exempted from punishment. Thus the victim cannot bring the perpetrator to justice. In such a situation, impunity goes on unabated.

Jorge E. Vinuales identifies four types of impunity as a way of explaining its meaning:

Type (A) focuses on institutional/legal deficiencies making it difficult or impossible to provide some form of accountability for crimes committed by state or (state-endorsed) actors. In type (B), deficiencies are the result of inaction from state officials in general (127).

The above two types focus on deficiencies which tend to aid perpetrators to carry on with impunity. Thus their actions appear to be "state-endorsed" because of the reluctance of public officers to act or bring perpetrators to account for their actions. Vituales adds that:

In type (C) the state fails to make non-state actors accountable for their crimes because adequate accountability mechanisms are lacking. In type (D) situations, which all the necessary institutional mechanisms

are in place, for cultural or political reasons they are not implemented (127).

These two remaining conditions tend to suggest either complicity or weakness of character of those saddled with the responsibility of guaranteeing accountability whether mechanism for prosecution and punishment are available or not, the point is that the government often lacks the political will to do the right thing. Impunity in this regard is perpetrated in society where there is no intention to combat the menace.

Roland Ewubare provides the etymology of the: “The word “impunity” derives from the Latin word, *impunitas*. It means “without punishment: No sanction for bad behaviour. No punishment for misdeeds” (16)

The main thrust of this definition is that impunity is concerned with freedom from punishment particularly actions demanding it. Thus perpetrators go unsanctioned or unpunished. This is the cornerstone of impunity.

In Dayo Sobowale’s view, impunity emboldens offenders and gives the impression that the state is weak or soft on perpetrators of crime:

The resultant consequences of people acting without fear of being punished has made impunity a norm or culture which has produced such strange bed fellows as torture, arson, murder, embezzlement, assassination, corruption, greed, thuggery and so on (4).

Impunity invites anarchy and it can destroy the foundation of justice and fair play. Every society is preserved by its ability to ensure accountability of public officers and the rule of law. In societies where impunity is running wild, it is the foundation of societal collapse. Sobowale identifies corruption, thuggery, embezzlement, greed, and assassination as vital elements of impunity.

Bolaji Owasanoye, Olayinka Akonle and Olayemi Samuel posit as follows: “impunity also manifests in blatant acts of corruption, bad governance and human rights abuse by public officials” (5). For these scholars, corruption, bad governance and human rights abuse provide grounds for impunity to fester. There can be no development when society is run on the basis of impunity. Thus they add:

Impunity emanates from the failure of the legal framework of states, Discriminatory laws and policies, where rights of citizens are violated without proper system of redress has become the norm in most states”. (8),

It is obvious that where there is no law the people act in ways that seem right in their eyes. It also shows that there is no way offences can be redressed. This picture of impunity reminds one of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The poetry of Osundare has received positive reviews across the length and breadth of Nigeria. Some of these are worth reviewing here. Christopher Anyokwu examines the essentials of Osundare's poetry and posits that "Osundare deploys his people to champion and fight for the cause of society's dispossessed" (4). Writing for whatever purpose must at some point be identified with promoting a certain cause. Dickon Ogbonanwi Tambari focuses on patterns of deviation in Osundare's poetry and writes that his poetry evolved "a new poetic tradition" (1). The critic identifies deviation and its patterns as element of style. As for Isidore Diala, Osundare's poetry examines the burden of the visionary artist noting that the poems expose the "dialectic between politics and history" (406). Rafin Jimoh and Ibitayo O. Odetade conduct a socio-linguistic analysis of Osundare's poetry and remark that the poet satirises "the greedy attitude of Nigerian political elite" (51). Jimoh and Ibitayo's disposition emphasises the elements of Osundare's style which is underpinned by the invigorating power of combating socio-political aberrations with the view of freeing the people from slavery.

The foregoing review of essays on Osundare's poetry reveals that critics have ignored the subject of political impunity which is relevant to the study of the poems. This situation leaves a gap which this essay fills by focusing on the two aspects of political impunity namely: impunity in politics and impunity in governance. Therefore, this essay demonstrates that, in politics, political impunity manifests as political violence and that, in governance, it occurs as public theft and abuse of power.

## **I. Impunity in Politics**

Political impunity manifests in Osundare's poems as impunity in politics and contextualised as electoral violence. This has to do with all manner of violence perpetrated by sponsored thugs to derail the electoral process during elections and by so doing, perpetrate political leaders in government. In "Random Blues 6", Osundare presents the impunity of thugs as they carry out violent actions. This poem opens thus:

I say, here once again  
The *penkelemesi* years  
Rogue rulers are back on the prowl  
The streets quake with sundry fears (RB 19)

Historical allusion is employed effectively to describe the era of political dictatorship into which the country has descended. The word "*penkelemesi*" alludes to Wole Soyinka's autobiographical novel, *Ibadan: The years of penkelemesi* which captures the political opposition in the western region during the first republic. It was a very turbulent period in Nigerian political history. According to the speaker in the above stanza, the present

political situation can be likened to the one described by Soyinka in his book which marks the return of “Rogue rulers” to power and how their presence evokes fear and tension in the “streets”.

Providing details about the era, Osundare states:

I say, yet another era  
Of thugs and cut-throats  
Veteran arsonists and hired killers  
Who dump the dead and steal their coats (19)

This stanza best captures impunity at its highest order. One gets the picture of everyone behaving in a despicable manner. “Thugs” are said to unleash mayhem on the society. That they are “veteran arsonists” and “hired killers” underscores the many years of their evil operation that the national security agents are unable to bring them to book. By referring to them as “thugs”, the poet affiliates them to politics. The absurdity of their operation is brought out more when the poet perceives them as unrepentant killers who engage in “cut-throat” political activities leading to mindless killings. Those who die have their bodies dumped along the road as they “steal” from the dead “their coats” and other belongings. This is politics of impunity or political impunity where human lives are taken with impunity and their killers are never brought to book. These acts of thuggery pose serious threat to human dignity and human security.

Osundare then turns to the man at whose behest the killing takes place:

Yes, an ill-literate chieftain  
Call the shots  
Practised mob-monger, triumphantly crude  
Fat maggot in rotting spot (19)

The neologism, “ill-literate” underscores the political chieftain who is being satirised. Incidentally Adegoke Adelabu, who is credited with forming “penkelemesi”, a Yoruba corruption of the English phrase, “peculiar mess”, was known to be a tough politician. He was said to employ extreme violent measures to deal with his political opponents. Also his “ill-literate” description is meant to further categorise his penchant for bombastic English words like his leader and mentor Nnamdi Azikiwe. For this reason, he often descends in infamy and public opprobrium. Thus he cuts the image of a brutal killer and the chief patron of political thugs. Osundare calls him “mob-monger” because of his patronage of these vile men. He was known to operate with impunity, reigning in violence. Hence, he is “triumphantly crude”.

Medieval his method

Parlous his ploy  
Oh, medieval his method  
Parlous his ploy  
His backyard is loud with skulls  
In bloodshed thrives his sickening joy (19)

The politician is said to employ “parlous” methods to achieve victory. His “backyard” is said to be “loud with skulls”. The fact that these skulls scream “loud” underscores the sense of injustice and the large number of citizens killed. He is a bloody politician who “thrives” in the pain of his victims or derives joy from the death of his opponents.

Politics in Nigeria is often controlled by men like Adelabu who are:  
Commander-in-chief  
Of numberless thugs  
Yes, commander-in-chief  
Of countless thugs  
Who rush for the kill at his swift behest  
Doles and crumbs their fastest drugs (2)

Many politicians have large number of thugs on their pay-roll. They equip and maintain them for violence against their opponents. For this reason, they can do anything they are told to do. The said thugs are given pittance to do the dirty job.

The boldness of the thugs grow on daily basis because their actions are sanctioned by powers that be:

Yes, arrest if you can  
Boast the Rampaging Gang  
Our orders come from the ruling clique  
Who never hit without a bang (20).

This stanza expresses the impunity with which the thugs and their sponsors operate. They see themselves as law unto themselves. They dare law enforcement agents to arrest them. They know they have become untouchable. Since they work for political leaders, once arrested, their principal will set them free. Impunity emboldens the vile among us. According to the thugs, their “orders” come from the ruling clique”. The impression one gets here is that violence and politics are inseparably. The image of Adelabu is meant to usher in the political discourse that certain elements have hijacked the political system and employ violence as weapon of winning elections. Nigerian politics has become synonymous with violence and impunity, thus culminating in destroying human dignity and security.

In another poem, Osundare captures the reactions following the botched tenure elongation impunity in "Random blues 7". The inordinate ambition of politicians when unrealised often leads to untoward violence, unrest and breakdown of law and order:

Roadside birds said the Abuja Emperor  
was no stranger to the plot  
I say, roadside birds said the Abuja Emperor  
who no stranger to the plot  
For never backing his plan for lifelong rule  
The Emperor wanted the king somewhere hot (21)

The repetition of what the roadside birds have said concerning the tenure elongation plot underscores the absurdity of the impunity and the readiness of the president ("Emperor") to manipulate the constitution to suit his whims and caprices. The poem is preoccupied with exposing the violence and breakdown of law and order. The president's anger is directed at those who refuse to back his "plan for lifelong rule" and summarily "wanted" them thrown "somewhere hot". This presents him as vindictive, manipulative and treacherous. He is determined to go any length to vent his frustration and anger in order to get even. This picture of one above the law infuriates the poet:

Yes, lawless lawmakers went to work  
And a gigantic malaise was born  
The king lost his crown to a sponsored clique  
Justice bowed under a heavy scorn (21)

Impunity thrives when lawlessness is condoned particularly among lawmakers who ought to know better. The situation produced by lawlessness foists on the country the ambience of hate, desperation and acrimony. This is what the speaker describes as "a gigantic malaise". The fact that the president fought against governors (The kings) who refuse to back his bid for third term and even "sponsored clique" to displace the governors provide sufficient evidence of impunity. Thus "Justice" is said to bow or surrender "under a heavy scorn". What Osundare appears to be saying is that perpetrators of impunity make scorn of the law of the land. They break the law at will and the institutions are so weak as to allow the situation to fester. It is also mindboggling to note that law breakers go scot-free as the victims endlessly cry for the elusive justice.

Indeed, he strutted all around  
As if he owned the world  
Crows shat on his motorcade  
His tongue stumbled on the word (22)



The emergent leader behaves as if he were the owner of the world. This reveals the paradox of impunity. He is untouchable and unvanquishable. The image of a proud and self-important personality is employed to depict the impunity with which the leader carries himself. By repeating the lines, Osundare draws attention to the arrogance of power holders and the derision with which they hold the rest of the society. Political impunity continues to exist because the society refuses to fight the system and this paradox runs through the entire collection. Osundare seems to be making the point that no one can subjugate another without that person's permission, whether directly or indirectly, and knowingly or unknowingly. This appears to be the norm in our society where those in power behave as though they were above the law.

The poem entitled "Random blues 23" is Osundare's exposure of political violence as perpetrated with impunity by politicians and their thugs. The poem reveals the unwholesome electoral practices which tend to engender strife and violence:

Say, another voting season  
And the sad story of the ballot  
Stolen, swapped in every ward  
Like a hapless harlot (53)

Osundare presents the reality of the electoral system which is characterized by violence. In the election, thugs are employed to steal ballot boxes and in some cases to swap the boxes which they have already stuffed. The poet compares the way this is done to a hapless harlot. This simile is effective because it shows the ease with which the swapping of ballot is carried out which parallels the way harlots are replaced. Thus the highest bidder controls the game.

Say, ballot boxes here  
Ballot boxes there  
In the Oba's palace, in the thug's bedroom  
Green-white-green, fair and square (54)

To emphasise the point, the speaker paints the picture of impunity in which ballot boxes litter the places except the polling stations. The irony is that the Oba's palace has become a polling station where votes can be manipulated with ease. Also thugs with the aid of guns secure their bedroom and convert same to a polling station where they carry out nefarious activities.

Say, unforgettable the chieftain  
And his contraband guest  
His power comes from those above  
Who send him guns and stock his nest (54)

The bizarreness of the above situation is that those who ought to uphold truth, justice and the law are presented as providing cover for those who perpetrate

electoral violence. The said party “chieftain” is the chief sponsor of thugs who also empower them with “guns” and “stock” them with ammunition to cause trouble. The chieftains receive fresh supply of weapons from power from above. This is the tragedy of election in Nigeria. There seems to be impunity everywhere.

Similarly, in “Random blues 24” Osundare presents the pervasiveness of electoral violence:

Ah, polling day  
And Hell is here  
A battalion of thugs with powerful guns  
Their weedy breaths pervade the air (55)

The Election Day is compared to “Hell” because of the unimaginable proportion of violence. A “battalion of thugs” wielding sophisticated guns bought by politicians and elected officers to truncate the electoral process and in some tilt it in their favour. The thugs have their sense of reasoning numbed by weed. As they prowl the polling centres their breaths reel of weed. They cut the figures of fear and panic as they threaten the people:

Say, “your life or your ballot”,  
They scream at the crowd  
“Do as we say, and stuff the box,  
Or end up in a dirty shroud” (55)

Intimidation and manipulation are used to win election. The ones in power preserve their seats and position by threatening voters. This is impunity at its worst state. The election is not a true reflection of the people’s will and wishes. The powerful intimidate the voters and make them to do their will. This is why the best do not win. The purpose of the direct speech is to establish the imposition of the will of the political class as against the expression of will of the people. It is the researcher’s firm belief that where political impunity reigns human dignity and security are denied.

## **II. Impunity in Governance**

This section focuses on impunity perpetrated by political leaders as they steer the ship of state. This kind of impunity manifests in two ways: public theft and abuse of power.

“Random blues 8” looks at the impunity of public theft. According to the speaker:

Oh, public funds  
Were his pot of gold  
A hefty sum to his patron father

The rest for him and his thieving fold (23)

Apparently, public servants see public funds as personal property. They dole it out to those who do them political favours. The entire financial system is wired to suit them and accountability does not appear to be in their dictionary. For the thieving political office holder, the first responsibility is to satisfy the “patron father”. For this reason, a “hefty sum” of money is given to the patron while a sizeable amount is shared among senior party leaders and the rest the office holder keeps for personal use.

The poet provides the reason for political subterfuge which has to do with financial gain the elected officer hopes to make:

His head swells and swells  
In his stolen crown  
I say, his head swells and swells  
In his stolen crown  
The vulture who parades like an eagle  
Bribe-soaked cop once, now a shameless clown (23)

The arrogance of the political leader is as a result of the impunity with which he steals the mandate of the people. The image of the vulture is employed to show the leader as deceptive and pretending. He is said to parade himself about like an eagle when he is a vulture. The fact that this leader was once a cop who was “Bribe-soaked” has ended up becoming the political leader who is now a “shameless clown”. As a cop, he was corrupt, now a top government officer, he has become a “clown”.

Yes, drums thundered  
Singers burst their throats  
Swindled masses and their mindless dances  
For scoundrels of state who purloined their votes. (24)

They use their ill-gotten money to sustain a horde of praise-singers. These sycophants do not care even when they are the victims of public theft. The lexical choices employed emphasised the sense of public theft. For example, words like “swindled”, “scoundrels” and “purloined” point to the fact that the leaders steal government money without conscience. The leaders are said to swindle or obtain public funds through dishonest means. The leaders are described as “scoundrels” because in their action, they are rogues. Apart from stealing funds from public vaults, they also purloin the masses of their “votes”. Thus the leaders in government steal public funds with impunity. Still lamenting the public theft by leaders in government, Osundare in “Random blues 9” presents the matter thus:

I say, public funds vanished

Into private pockets  
Poly-trick-tians fester in wanton loot  
Anoterh fiesta of seamless rackets (25)

The poet paints public theft with so much hilarity employing the word “vanished” to emphasises the gracelessness of the stealing. The neologism “poly-trick-tians” combines two major ideas which describe their behaviour. The prefix “poly” means many. The second word “trick” refers to deception and dishonesty. The last suffix, “tian” is coined from the word politician. This word, poly-trick-tian is a deviation from the norm, politician. Osundare suggests through this coinage that the political class in Nigeria are a combination of tricks, roguery and dishonesty. It goes to underscore the culture of impunity which the politicians have entrenched in their “Wanton loot”. There seems to be an organised and smooth stealing of government money in Nigeria (“seamless rackets”).

In the second stanza, the poet recounts the consequences of public stealing on the entire nation:

Alas, holes in our roofs  
Ragged roads unravel our soles  
Hunger has taken over the market place  
Our rulers are beasts in need of souls (25)

The unequivocal portraiture of the roofs and roads as having “Holes” and “Ragged” respectively paint a picture of ruin, dysfunctionality and ineffective government. This is so because money meant for developing key infrastructure has been stolen by the political class. Also the masses suffer severe hunger. The image of the marketplace overwhelmed by hunger is meant to establish the effect of public stealing. Thus the “rulers are beasts in need of souls”. The image of bestiality is meant to emphasise their inhuman treatment of the masses.

In what seems like a prophetic vision, the poet reveals the end of public theft with impunity in the next stanza:

Yes, for many, many months  
The usurper held the throne  
Till justice woke up one day  
And parted the dog and its stolen bone (25)

As a result of the delayed introduction of the poem’s central symbol, the last two lines have a prophetic mystery and power. They present justice as a personality that will eventually confront the dogs in power holding on to the bone of their commonwealth. Justice is imagined to wake up one day and descend on the proverbial dog in power and part it and its stolen bone. Until

this happens, public theft will continue. It appears that the poet is convinced that the people are to blame for the impunity of public stealing because it operates in a permissive milieu.

This prophetic vision of change is further presented in another stanza thus:

Yes, the usurper fled  
His foul dream in disarray  
Justice woke up one morning  
And put an end to the vicious play (26)

Still predicting revolutionary dislodging of corrupt leaders from power, the speaker presents the thieves in power fleeing. The usurper's "foul dream" of enslaving the masses is then thrown "in disarray". Justice, the poetic personification of the revolution, is the instrument through which change will be released to usher freedom to the people.

The poet reminds the people that as long as public stealing is in place, there can be no hope of freedom. This explains why there is emphasis on depicting what happens after freedom comes:

Oh how the usurper fled  
His wake a heap of sordid deeds  
The land lies prone from choking stench  
Our voices croak like broken reeds (26)

The end of an era exposes the sad and dirty dealings. The metaphor, "a heap of sordid deeds" emphasises the magnitude of the rot and their shameless actions. The sense of a fleeing usurper underscores the fact that every usurper cannot rule for ever. This shows the vanity of power and a sad reminder of those who thrive in tyranny to learn that nothing exists for ever neither does power lives for eternity. The fled leader exposes the citizens to the "choking stench" of their corrupt ways. The vision of political leaders is one in which they are seen as above the law. This goes to demonstrate that the only power that they fear is resistance. The moment the masses rise up in unison, the usurper will flee.

Public theft is the keynote of the poem entitled "Random blues 15". The poem conveys the recklessness with which public theft is carried out:

Trendy jeeps for mistresses  
Countless scoops for sundry bribes  
Say, trendy jeeps for mistresses  
Countless scoops for sundry bribes  
The accountant general lost count  
Of doles and doles to teeming tribes (37)

The rulers are perceived as frivolous and wasteful as they steal public funds to live a high life. They buy expensive cars “Trendy jeeps” which they donate to their numerous “mistresses”. According to the persona, the money they spend for buying these cars come from “sundry bribes” they receive from contractors and other individuals who depend on them for public service. Also they dole out cash gifts to tribal leaders just to get their political support.

The poet then presents the leader as financially corrupt:

I say, “whose money built your university?”

“Whose money established your own?”

That question surely rings a bell

Ask it in a soft and gentle tone (37)

The stanza presents accusation and counter accusation over the source of money each used in building their university. These questions carry the weight of social criticism. Certain issues are evoked through these questions. Firstly, it is shocking that public officers can raise funds to build private universities even as they hold public offices. This smacks of public theft because all such funds are illegally acquired. Secondly, the emphasis on source of the money for establishing the university underscores the corrupt nature of public officers. This is the question that Nigerians frequently ask as public universities are gradually being denied funds to improve and develop.

The persona then turns his attention to how they spend stolen funds:

Yes, those secret manipulations

That won us the last election

Those hit squads and ruthless riggers

And the millions spent to hush their missions (37).

The government spends ill-gotten money to finance their elections which Osundare calls “secret manipulations”, are responsible for winning elections. Also much cash is spent on maintaining election riggers and thugs to threaten and carry out political killings. The millions spent on keeping their “missions” quiet are also harped at. The pivot of this argument is that impunity grows when perpetrators of public stealing are not prosecuted neither are they called to account for their misdeeds.

This section has established the fact that public theft is one of the cases of impunity in Nigeria which receives Osundare’s poetic attention. Having explored impunity in governance from the perspective of public theft, this subsection shall examine abuse of power. It shall focus on how politicians in government wield power with impunity and the consequences of their actions. “Random blues 10” addresses political impunity from the angle of abuse of power:

The Gangster governor

Is now on the run  
Yees o, the Gangster Governor  
Is now on the run  
His nasty noise is now a whisper  
Fear has replaced his wanton fun (27).

The image of gansterism as used in the above stanza portrays the Governor as lawless. The speaker recalls vividly the activities of the ousted Governor, especially the impunity with which the leader behaves in government. Relying on auditory imagery, the poet envisions the chaotic manner the Governor oppressed the people. The vision of “noise” epitomizes the visionlessness and brutal deployment of power. Thus one comes to terms with the picture of the Governor as one who takes delight in the oppression of the victims.

The Governor’s sadistic inclinations is subtly underscored to show the leader’s terrible use of power. Thus the poet appears to be offering a serious warning to all those political leaders who are in power to learn from this poetic Governor because no matter how long they oppress the people, one day they too will leave power and be confronted by the people they derisively abused.

The sirens are silent now  
Dispatch riders have jammed their wheel  
Yes, the sirens are silent now  
Dispatch-riders have jammed their wheel  
Waving crowds have turned into jeering mobs  
The gangster has a wound that time cannot heal (27)

The siren image defines the recklessness and the absurdity of the abuse of power. There was in the reign of the Governor, the liberty and impunity taken by dispatch-riders to show the hypocrisy and shambolic emptiness of the leaders. The said leader used to enjoy the attention and applause of waving crowds. Time has changed. Through the effective use of time sequence to understand the government of the dictator, we see clearly the kind of evil reign that the leader entrenches. He mistook the great number of the crowd that turned out to receive him as a true test of acceptance and approval. Now that all that has changed, the proof of his rejection is buttressed by the action of the crowd. The waving “crowds” have turned into “jeering mobs”. This is the reality of power abuse in Nigeria.

The reversal of his inglorious fortune is further presented thus:

He sneaks through town and country  
Like the vicious thief he is  
Yes, he sneaks through town and country  
Like the vicious thief he is  
Rodents live in his footprints

Thornbushes welcome him with a hiss (27)

The Governor is said to sneak through town and country because he abused power when he was in government. He is not just a thief but a “vicious” one. This explains why he hides from public view. Had he used power to enhance and promote public good, he would not need to sneak through town and country he once governed. This shows the man abused power. Also everywhere he goes he is welcomed with a hiss. This reveals the disregard and disrespect with which he is perceived. The irony of power abuses is that after one has finished one’s tenure, one is confronted with those one has oppressed. It seems this is the fate of Governors who do not think about how ephemeral power is.

During the reign of the political leader, he claimed “his seizure of power/was on act of God”. Thus he “lies/in God’s name”. Also in God’s name. he stole”, “killed” “rigged the ballot” and “lamed the law” (28). The Governor exhibited all the trappings of power abuse. There was massive pillage of the treasury. Evidence of mindless brutality is found in the poem. This is strengthened by the killing spree that agents of state security displayed. Thuggery was dignified as they rigged the ballot to power. The will of the people did not count. The law is broken at will thus they “lamed the law”. This poem is, for the most part, focused on power abuse, which pointed directly to the deeper pressures and malaise which the sequence as a whole projects and contends with. Its concluding stanza, however, shifts tone and orientation completely and gets to the heart of the matter, a psychotic state which paralyses all potentiality for sustained and improvement of society.

Osundare depicts the impunity of political office holders who abuse power through dialogue. This is the major preoccupation of “Random blues 11”.

And said the Bishop:  
“Oh welcome the Lord’s Anointed”  
And said the Imam:  
“All hail the favourite of the Almighty”  
“Whoever opposes him  
Is on a one-way ticket  
To the hottest part of hell  
Whoever queries his order  
Will disappear behind the clouds” (29)

The verbal statements of both the Bishop and the Imam expose the hypocrisy of the clergy and denounce the recipient of power who has been led to believe that he has divine backing. Inspired by this, the Governor unleashes a reign of tyranny on the people. This political leader has zero tolerance for opposition:



Phantom projects  
Invisible poultries  
I say, phantom projects  
Invisible poultries  
Packaged lies, expensively posted  
No end to the felon's confounding rogueries (29)

One manifestation of abuse of power is diversion of public funds. Money earmarked for projects are embezzled and "phantom projects" which exist only on paper but not on ground describe the government. The government thrives on lies and propaganda. According to the speaker, there is no "end to the felon's confounding rogueries". Those in power abuse their oath of office as they descend in morality and commit crime against the state. Their activities are confounding to the discernible. In fact, they are rogues.

Additionally, the persona sheds light on the use of falsehood as state weapon of governance:

Roads tarred with sputum  
Mansions framed with falsehood  
Oh, roads, tarred with sputum  
Mansions framed with falsehood  
Public coffers emptied by bulky ploys  
The state fire burned on plastic wood. (29)

Clearly the government in power has no infrastructure to show to justify the billions of naira budgeted to fix the country. Hence, the people mourn for lack of motorable roads. The only weapon with which they govern the people is erected with falsehood. Also they empty "public coffers" at will through foul means. The metaphorical brilliance of the stanza is strengthened by the blend of sense and imagery. They contribute to presenting the leaders as abusing power entrusted to them.

Arson squads by day  
Murder gangs by night  
Yes, arson squads by day  
Murder gangs by night  
His rain of terror rattled every roof  
Freedom died, succeeded by fright (30)

The fact that "arson squads" and "murder gangs" are used by leaders to send "rain of terror" to their political enemies demonstrates abuse of power. It is important to consider the metaphorical import of the phrase. "rain of terror" which "rattled every roof" demonstrates on the one hand, the pervasive nature of terror unleashed by those in power. On the other hand, it shows the extent the people have been traumatised by power. The consequence of this is that

“freedom died” and replaced by “fright”. Freedom is personified thus presenting it as a personality which has real existence but has now “died” or ceased to live. The picture presented here is one of complete and full blown dictatorship characterized by abuse of power.

The poet is also appalled at the why government money is shared among politicians:

Pity lavish share-outs  
Base and mindless junkets  
Their private welfare, our public hellfare  
Rulers who empty the people’s pockets. (30)

The unrestraint appetite for sharing money to bribe and patronise certain political figures constitute the greatest abuse of power. Thus the country’s money is shared-out just like that. The leader’s “private welfare” becomes a burden on the people and ends up becoming “public hellfare”. The word, “hellfare” is a coinage which comes from “hell” and “fare”. Osundare draws attention to the hell aspect of the word. It exposes the irony in the stanza because the welfare of the leaders is the hell or suffering of the people. As the leaders loot the treasury, it is the people who must go through hell to survive. The actions of the rulers further drain (“empty”) the “people’s pockets”, thus they pauperise the people. When government becomes a burden on the people, abuse of power is already taking place. The sequence sacrifices artistry for thematic relevance. The poet is here concerned with exposing impunity in government and indirectly calling for accountability as a way of ending cases of impunity.

Osundare in “Random blues 14” reveals power abuse by employing a persona who satirises the political leaders:

Who will save us  
From the madness of our rulers?  
I ask, who will save us  
From the madness of our rulers?  
They trample our dreams without a mind  
Coffin-makers and dead-end dealers (35)

The rhetorical question which opens this poem exposes the sense of helplessness which the people feel. The “rulers” are said to embrace “madness”. Their said madness is posing serious threat to the people’s welfare and safety. Tyranny is subtly underscored here. The leaders “trample” the dreams and everything of worth. Their brazen penchant for lawlessness encourages “coffin-makers” which presupposes that death of citizens escalate in the land. Their killer squad visits death on the populace. The quality of the rhetorical question is commendable as it enhances the suspense and express

the psychological trauma of the people. it enables the persona to communicate a collective woe as well as articulate the theme of abuse of power.

### Conclusion

This essay has examined impunity in government in Osundare's poetic sequence. Three aspects of impunity receive the poet's attention and exemplified in this study. The focus has been the demonstration of the stylistic devices employed by the poet to present instances of impunity. This essay has shown that impunity manifests when the culture of political violence is entrenched by government, especially through their collaboration and sponsorship of thugs. Also it establishes the fact that public theft manifests in government when public officials indulge in mindless stealing of government money without being prosecuted. The essay also shows that impunity in government occurs when rulers abuse power and operate like gangsters breaking laws without any iota of remorse.

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