

***Green: Sigh of our Ailing Planet* by Niyi Osundare : A Review**

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In 2021 Niyi Osundare added to his remarkable poetry oeuvre with the publication of two collections: *Snapshots: Homegroans and Foreignflares*, and *Green: Sighs of our Ailing Planet*. This latest offering under review is best described as a collection - to borrow the sense of Sule Emmanuel Egya in differentiating it from a volume, one which comes as critical of man's relationship with ecology; in it we hear of the environment concerns around the world by the people's poet, baring out his travelled experiences. Contained therein is his perception and craftily put into words those concerns he has observed from the Amazon to the very deserts of North Africa, not oblivious of his home land Nigeria. Osundare comes forth here as spokesman of nature, pleading and imploring in a mix of chaos and beauty. Call it the richness of ruin, reshaped from a wounded environment but most importantly Osundare gives voice to nature's urgent, approachable cry. Before us is a book relevant and optimistic for people to pause and rethink endangering of the beauty of all of nature.

Containing 132 pages, if judging the paperback first published by Commonwealth Books alongside Black Widow Press on February 21, 2022, the pieces therein - according to the poet himself - have "something deeply spiritual, almost religious, about the mission and the message of the poems, and the many ways they have turned out to be denizens of that vital interface 267

-Ohaeto Resource Centre, Awka, Nigeria between the ecological and the cosmic.” The collection betrays itself into the genre of ecocentrism. It peaks Osundare’s environmental concerns that were first crystallised in *The Eyes of the Earth*. To appreciate the work, the first point of call is the cover art - a boisterous tree, greenish and full of life. The content is structured in nine sections of differing length, thematised and each section having a quote to give a glimpse of what to expect. The Ekiti born griot serves as a gadfly to our active minds, resenting images of our dying planet; without mincing words he thinks man the culprits himself, in most as seen in activities of industrialisation, negligence and the likes.

The first section comprises a lone long poem titled ‘Green’ and rendered in couplet form. It reads like an invocation (or a call and response lyric) and as a litany of juxtaposition of lushness and loss. On one hand, “green” calls to mind life, growth, and renewal—“Green germinations / Green efflorescence / Green rainbows”—these are interwoven with symbols of destruction and decay—“Green ashes / Green estrangements / Green sadnesses” (3). Juxtaposing festivities and grief reflect a deep emotional dissonance: a desire and anguish for an environment that is still present, yet deformed unchangeably. The poem, from which the volume gains its basic title, decries the decline of the habitat of man. Osundare’s litany of green is also an elegy, it seems; it presumes that the vitality of the earth, its quality of life is less of a present thing but memory.

We find another long lone poem as the constituent of section two but it is unique in the sense that it is partitioned into nine parts, as if to echo the entire volume. Titled “Hole in the Sky,” it talks

of “blazing, blinding hole / In the garment of the sky” (10), as metaphor to mourn the depletion of the ozone layer. This image of torn fabric best conveying the visual breach is powerful in telling of the effect of gases, fumes, pollution and other human manufactured (dis)activities that have punctured a huge hole in the placid sky above. Through the poet we sense that damage brought about by industrial modernity, represented in the lines “factories and automobiles.”

Section three brings us to four poems still amplifying the ecological discourse with focus on trees. It begins with the unique piece titled “Igi Da,” rendered in Yoruba, albeit translated in a piece that follows as “The Tree Has Fallen.” The piece bemoans the felling of trees which often leads to extinction of certain species and the loss of biodiversity. It's imperative to query the perpetrators of this self-sabotaging act, the Yoruba rendition gives it the weight: “Nibo le lo?/ Nibo leyin wà?/ E ba mi b'àwon fò 'gbó-fo'jù/ A-gé-t'oni-má-ro-tola” (Where have you gone?/Just where are you?/ Let us ask the blind plunderers of the forest/ who cut and cut as if tomorrow will never come). What is the result? The poet answers in a subsequent stanza: “Alas the tree has fallen/ the birds have flown away” (15). In “Amazon Burning,” the poet ponders the puzzle of human ignorance cum negligence in the face of visible impending doom, especially that of reckless burning of trees. It features a couplet that kept recurring throughout the Act I of the four Acts poem: “the Amazon is burning/ the lungs of our planet are seared by smokes” (17) and then another refrain

(personifying the trees) in the Act III which reminds a forgetful race: “I am the vital lobe in the lungs of the

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planet” (21). The last Act echoes the preceding poem when it affirms that a tree never falls alone, it takes with it the future with every crashing leaves. In “Deep Green,” the activism for ecological consciousness is insisted upon.

The fourth section is the most populated; Osundare dedicates sixteen poems to drill the message concerning ‘Our Dying Planet,’ being the title of the section. As if to describe what they are meant to communicate, a nostalgic couplet serves as opening quote - it reads: “Time long gone when/ The earth was green and the seas were sane” (27). In this section, poems address varying issues that signal ebbing of life from this blue planet, as a piece says: “The Sky Ain’t Blue”; this should tell us of what we are fast decaying into. There is hardly a consistent outplay of anything that concerns nature and the environment. If any section of the volume should make us worry, it is this one. In “Climate of Fear,” Osundare shocks the reader with a brutal fact, though it seems improbable yet it is a reality undeniable: “the earth we used to know/ is once-upon-a-time...” (30). Other elements of our planet that bespeak this imminent and rapid mortality include: the mountain (Osundare puts it in astounding an couplet: “the mountain is dying/ they say it’s just malingering” (31), reiterated at six junctures of the prosaic piece - by way of repetitive effect); the lake is dying, the desert is encroaching fast at us, the water bodies are not any friendly or lively (Fela say water no get enemy, but the reality seems different

now). Not to forget in the list the refugee camps - eyesores and death camps, the destructive dumpsites which loads the problem of waste disposal, amongst others.

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Easily, because we often resort to blaming other or trivialising our guilt, we turn to spiritualise what is essentially a human problem; Osundare warns us not to dare pin our inhumane actions (those of commission and omission) as God's act, the point; in the the poem addressing the issue he rebukes such thought, saying there's nothing about ecological deprecation that is the act of God. He doesn't fail to give voice to a world already on its deathbed, "Cancer Alley" is that poem that confronts us with what our world has turned to, a sickbay; but what is more, the planet itself is sick. The logic is simply that our actions make it sick while its reactions make us sick - both liable to death. If our planet is dying, it implies only one thing: we too are dying.

In section five, Niyi Osundare does pay tribute to some important artists and ideologues who long before now stand in line as forebears of activist who intervened in the exploitation of the environment; with beautiful verses, the griot serenades us with tributes recalling how beautiful their world/our world was but which have turned to mere whimsies today. Ecoactivists like Saro Wiwa, Greta Thunberg, Ikiriko, Clark, amongst others are herein made subjects of the panegyric. Without doubt, he and every subsequent activist in the ecological realm have a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before him/them in the struggle and continue(s) in this ever needful part. It's interesting and symbolic

that Osundare titles the section “Redemption Army,” and further added “Green Shield, Rainbow Warriors,” as if to tell the liberating character of their mission and achievements, protectors and fighters that they are.

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Osundare serenades fruits and food we eat, garden and harvest. The poems, eight in number, address world food day, the uniqueness of pineapple, the phenomenon that is watermelon, the beauty of string bean, the wonder of farming and harvest. This is what the poems of the sixth section attend to. This section talks of bounty (from green grass to brown bread); it celebrates the very substances that nourish human life on earth. There’s no gainsaying how vital food is. Osundare brings his farming experience to bear in this praise work.

In the next, being seventh, the poet celebrates seasons, from West Africa’s dry season to Western World’s autumn. With thirteen beautiful poems of varied length and temperaments, he makes the moon interesting and extraordinary, adding to the mysticism of the seasons and their routine, and making the harmattan come alive. In reading it, the reader is transported to these seasons, and those who have experienced them feel the beauty or nostalgia that comes with them. Uniquely, aside personifying them, he makes times and seasons colourful: green, yellow, as if to tell of life, of attractiveness.

Section eight is another group of thirteen poems addressing the aquatic world as well as the world of punctual petals; those

worlds ever “so proudly green in all their aspects,” as the opening inscription describes the section being titled ‘Wind Water’ and ‘Punctual Petals.’ The poems therein suggest a tribute to the natural order of life on the planet, especially rhythm. It celebrates the harmony, timing, and renewal found in ecosystems, particularly within the watery and flowery domains. Osundare is pointing to a world that is vibrant, responsive, and dependable—

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“ever so green”—until it is disturbed by human negligence or exploitation. The poem “Water” should speak this clearly and forcefully to us: “Water has its own language/ Its Robin-Hood morality/ Its shifting fortunes/ Its partial largesse/Between waste and want/ Plenty and penury/ And the thirsty threat/ Of looming sands/ Fish learn, often too late,/ The mortal ambiguity of water” (96).

He concludes his volume with eight songs of life beyond the geography of pains as preoccupation of the ninth section. It is a section for nostalgia but more importantly of hope. Though it bears poems essentially on wishes, it also has at the back of its minds “all things green and beautiful,” as if to tell of a stubborn optimism (echoing one of the poems in the section: “Stubborn Hope”), that yields not to the greyness of decay because “a stubborn hope sustains our being” (107). This hope is expressed in “Embers,” thus: “Beneath these ashes/ A choir of sighing embers/ Hope/ thin-bodied/ Is bent/ not broken” (108). What more could best describe the section than the strongly positive verb resolve attached to the basic reality of “green,” hence we have “Green Resolve”? The hope is not naive, it knows it cannot always

have its way as we see in “Wishes.” It is a humble hope, knowing that everything is connected as far as ecology is concerned. Whatsoever we do to the least of the elements of nature we do it to all; it is both spiritual and human. As such Osundare ensures we never forget by offering a powerful reminder in the poem “Remember,” it is ever important to have our ecological history at hand. Because of this hope one can talk of a “dare-do,” desiring to experience the beauty of nature in the

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little things of life and of a home coming. Until then, like Osundare and with him, we end our sigh with the resolve: “Still we sing/ of life beyond the geography of pain/ far from the quaky temper of violated mountains.../ Still we sing/ of a Planet sane and sound/ of all things green - and beautiful” (112).

In T. S Eliot’s *The Social Functions of Poetry*, we learn of three things that define the poetic art. These three things, in no particular order, are the communication of pleasure, experiences, and the expression of feelings and emotions. This calls to mind the classical Wordsworthian definition of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of emotions recollected in tranquility. If these were standards to judge poetry (and they are) then Niyi Osundare’s work herein has achieved the mark. If this collection say anything on Osundare, then it is the confirmation of Henry Akubuiro’s words that “for Osundare, the universe is the local and the local is the universe. Salvaging one is a stepping stone to salvaging every creation and rewriting the forlorn story.”(n.p.).

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