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Book Review



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Book Review: *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*

by Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu



About the Author

Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu is a Nigerian poet, literary critic and writer. He holds an MA and a BA in English/Literature from Nigeria. His research interests are Postcolonial literatures, Protest studies, African/Black Diaspora literatures, Environmental Humanities and the intersection between Fine Arts and literature. His latest project on Hafsat Abdullahi's Spoken Word Poetry and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's drama are forthcoming in *Critical Perspectives on Oral African Literature*, *The Journal of African Youth Literature* (Issue 10) and *The Nigerian Review*. His creative works have appeared in *African Literature Today*, *Nigerian Journal of Poems and Short Stories*, *ANA Review*, *The Criterion*, and elsewhere.

Book Review

Raphael Chukwumeka Onyejizu

Osundare, Niyi. 2021. *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*. Boston: Black Widow Press.

Niyi Osundare's exceptional poetry repertoire expanded in 2021 with the publishing of *Green: Sighs of our Ailing Planet*. This collection could be read as a poetic rethinking of the environmental challenges facing the present-day world. The poems visit various landscapes, from the clover-laden Amazon Forest to the desert landscapes of North Africa and the poet's native Nigeria, thus capturing intimate relationship between human and natural environments. Nature repeatedly appears as a "living thing," as a voice to be heard through illustrations of beauty, fragility, and deterioration throughout the volume. The collection emphasizes the contradiction of a natural world that remains visually appealing despite ecological decline and environmental disaster. The poems communicate both the beauty of nature and the necessity to preserve it in a delightfully poetic manner, addressing environmental problems. The book is accessible but powerful, giving readers a chance to stop and consider their obligations to a delicate and vulnerable planet and perhaps even a new sense of hope for the environment.

The collection, its aim, and its message are imbued with spirituality—indeed, religiosity—not only for the poet but for all of us, since it occupies a singularly crucial area between the ecological and the cosmic. The whole collection is immediately identifiable as belonging to the genre of "ecocentrism." Osundare's environmental themes that first got introduced in *The Eyes of the Earth* (1986) are stretched to great heights again. The first thing that impresses you is the title, which is quite urban—along with greenish pages of color, it helps to provide the cover with some life. Nine sections of varying length with a quote at the start of each section to give an insight into it. The Ekiti born Griot is an accelerator of our active brain, which not only paints pictures of our dying planet, but also clears a path for our future in it! An honest man believes that man is the guilty one, which are most evident in his activities such as industrialization, negligence, etc.

The first section comprises a lone poem titled "Green," rendered in couplet form. It reads like an invocation (or a call and response lyric) and has a litany of juxtapositions

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, it reflects 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 main 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 and more a memory.

We find another long 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 a “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 which is 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 a 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 that often leads to the 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’awon fó ‘gbó-fo’jù / A-gé-t’oni-má-ro-tola” (15) [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 the reckless burning of trees. It features a couplet that keeps recurring throughout Act I of the four Acts of the poem: “the Amazon is burning / the lungs of our planet are seared by smokes” (17) and then another refrain (personifying the trees) in Act III that reminds a forgetful race: “I am the vital lobe in the lungs of the 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 leaf. In “Deep Green,” the activism for ecological consciousness is insisted upon.

The fourth section is the most populated; Osundare dedicates sixteen poems to drill home the message concerning “Our Dying Planet,” this 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 the ebbing of life from this

blue planet. As one piece says: “The Sky Ain’t Blue” (38); this should tell us of what we are fast decaying into. 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 a couplet reiterated at six junctures of the prosaic piece creating a repetitive effect: “the mountain is dying / they say it’s just malingering” (31). The lake is dying, the desert is encroaching fast at us, the water bodies are not any more friendly or lively. Not to forget in the list, the refugee camps—eyesores and death camps, the destructive dumpsites which make loud the problem of waste disposal, amongst others.

Easily, because we often resort to blaming others or trivializing our guilt, we turn and spiritualize what is essentially a human problem; Osundare warns us not to dare pinning our inhumane actions (those of commission and omission) as God’s acts. In the poem addressing the issue, he rebukes such thoughts, 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 the 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 kill. 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 stood in line as forebears of the activists who intervene 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 has turned to mere whimsies today. Ecoactivists like Saro Wiwa, Greta Thunberg, and Liz Ikiriko, amongst others, are herein made subjects of the panegyric. Without a 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.

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 the 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 section, being seventh, the poet celebrates seasons, from West Africa’s dry season to the 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 from personifying them, he makes times and seasons colorful: green, yellow, as if to tell of life, of attractiveness.

Beneath the title “Wind, Water and Punctual Petals” in the opening inscription to section eight, the thirteen poems here explore the aquatic world and punctual petals “so proudly green in all their aspects.” 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 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 pain[s]” (112), the 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 mind “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). Best suited to this part of the sentence would be the positive verb resolve, complimenting the basic, reality connotating the word green. 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 desiring to experience the beauty of nature in the little things of life and of a homecoming. 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* (1975), 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 says anything about Osundare, then it confirms what Henry Akubuiro (2022) observes: "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."

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