



Existence as Shared Struggle: Nature, Humanity, and the Pursuit of Harmony in Osundare’s Poetic Vision

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Abstract

This study examines the interconnectedness of all forms of existence (human and non-human) as exemplified in one of Niyi Osundare’s poems: ‘They Too Are the Earth’. From the lens of Critical Ecocriticism, the study interrogates how Osundare paints the picture of existence as a shared struggle that binds nature and humanity in a collective journey toward harmony and peace. The poem serves as a powerful literary response to the global crisis of environmental degradation and social inequality, rooted in both ecological and social consciousness. The study applies a qualitative research methodology, with a focus on close textual analysis and thematic interpretation. Ecocriticism and Deep Ecology theory serve as the theoretical frame, providing tools to for the analysis. Findings reveal that the poet employed vivid imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to equate the struggles of the earth with the oppression confronting the marginalised human groups. The poem views the Earth not merely as a backdrop to human experience, but as an active player in the struggle for justice and dignity. It calls for the recognition of the intrinsic value of all life forms without dismantling the anthropocentric worldview Finally, Osundare’s poetic vision promotes an ethic of coexistence, ecological awareness, and social empathy. The study submits that ‘They Too Are the Earth’ is not just a poem. It is a clarion call to action, encouraging readers to have a holistic understanding of life as a place where peace can only be achieved with unity between nature and humanity.

Keywords: African Poetry, Deep Ecology, Ecocriticism, Interconnectedness, Shared Struggle

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Introduction

Literature has emerged, and till now, still stands as a vital medium for reimagining the human link with nature, and promoting planetary peace, especially in a period marked by ecological collapse, widening social inequality, and increasing human disconnection from the natural world. African poetry in particular, has historically accommodated a worldview that sees nature not as an inert backdrop to human activity but as an active, sacred force intrinsically connected to human existence. Niyi Osundare, one of Africa’s most acclaimed poets, is known for his consistent poetic

engagement with ecological and social justice themes. His poem ‘They Too Are the Earth’ encapsulates a deeply humanistic and eco-centric philosophy, depicting nature and marginalised human communities as co-victims in a shared struggle against exploitation, alienation, and violence.

Recent literary scholarship highlights the urgency of ecological awareness in contemporary poetry, particularly in postcolonial contexts where environmental and human exploitation are related (Okuyade, 2020; Ede, 2023). Osundare’s work resonates with this emerging discourse, offering poetic resistance

to the duo crises of ecological degradation and social injustice. In the word of Eze (2021), African poets, including Osundare, often adopt a "voice of the land," giving expression to silenced ecologies and oppressed peoples through metaphor, symbolism, and oral traditions. These creative expressions not only challenge extractive capitalist logics, but also provide frameworks for healing and coexistence. This work is out to interrogate Osundare's poetic vision in 'They Too Are the Earth', with a focus on the poem's portrayal of interconnected existence and its call for harmony of nature and humanity. The study is informed by the growing scholarly recognition that peacebuilding and ecological awareness are inextricably linked (Okuyade, 2020; Ede, 2023). In their argument, Nkrumah and Danso (2022) are of the opinion that "ecological peacebuilding" offers a promising model that integrates environmental sustainability with social cohesion, particularly in postcolonial societies. No doubt that earlier studies on Osundare have explored his environmental and political themes, only few have explicitly situated his work within the lens of interconnected struggle as a foundation for peace. By employing contemporary theories of ecological justice and deep ecology, this research offers a new light on African poetry's potential to shape global discourses on environmental ethics and social equity. This study aims to analyse how 'They Too Are the Earth' represents Osundare's vision of interconnected struggle between human and non-human entities, promoting peace via ecological and social awareness. The specific objectives of this study are: examine how nature and humanity are represented in 'They Too Are the Earth'; investigate how Osundare's poem presents existence as a shared struggle across species and social classes; examine how the poem exemplifies ecological and social consciousness and; assess the relevance of Osundare's poetic message to recent discussions on environmental and social justice.

Review of Literature

Ecocriticism and African Literary Ecology

Ecocriticism, as a field of study, has developed beyond traditional Western environmental concerns to incorporate

diverse worldviews, particularly those established in postcolonial and indigenous epistemologies. In tandem with the aforementioned, Chakrabarty (2018) and Heise (2019) have emphasised the need for literary responses to the Anthropocene that address, not only environmental degradation but also, global inequities. These studies argue for a decolonial turn in ecocriticism, opening space for African voices that present alternative cosmologies grounded in relationality. In the same vein, Okuyade (2020) articulates the emergence of "eco-humanism," a strand of African ecological view that refuses to separate environmental and social issues. In essence, this study posits that African eco-poetry frequently situates the Earth as both a material and spiritual entity, intrinsically connected to communal well-being. In what looks like a challenge to capitalist environmental logic, this opinion is also resonated in Eze (2021), where it is observed that African poetry often takes nature as kin, not commodity.

Osundare's Place in African Eco-poetics

For a long time now, Niyi Osundare has been described as a foundational figure in African eco-poetry. His work combines ecological insight with political critique, portraying nature as both a site of beauty and struggle. Stressing further in his study, Ndibe (2019) submits that Osundare's poetry "dramatises the tensions between a threatened Earth and exploitative human systems." It also imagines alternatives rooted in mutual respect and harmony. In another focused study, Adesokan (2022) interrogates how Osundare gives voice to marginalised beings such as peasants, animals, or rivers, presenting them as equally dignified participants in existence. Osundare equally merges his concern for human dignity with an ecological ethic in 'They Too Are the Earth'. According to Ogunyemi (2020), the poem interpreted as a symbolic map of shared struggle, the Earth bears witness to, and participates in, human suffering. He posits that the poem functions forcefully as a call for solidarity among humans, and between humans and nature.

Poetry as Activism and Ecological Resistance

In the discourse about climate and justice movement, contemporary scholarship affirms poetry's power as a tool of resistance. Studies including Finch & Sanni (2021) avert that African eco-poets often deploy metaphor and imagery to expose environmental racism and corporate exploitation. To this end, Osundare's poetic vision can be described as a kind of activism that elevates the Earth to the status of an oppressed subject. In Kariuki (2018), African ecopoetry is connected with indigenous environmental ethics, emphasising that traditional African cosmologies do not divide the sacred and the ecological. She submits that poetry like Osundare's reflects these values, offering healing pathways in the face of ecological trauma. Kariuki's idea's submission is extended in Mpofu (2023). The study examines how African poets use oral aesthetics and performative language to evoke environmental empathy and communal responsibility.

Interconnectedness and the Theme of Shared Struggle

One theme that has become central in contemporary ecological thought is that of the theme of interconnectedness. Barasa and Nkrumah (2021) present "ecological entanglement" as a motif in postcolonial African literature, where human suffering is viewed in environmental degradation. They argue that this motif highlights the shared vulnerability of all life forms controlled by neo-colonial capitalist systems. In analyzing Osundare's broader collection, Ibrahim (2022) observes that the poet consistently collapses the dichotomy between the human and the non-human, employing shared suffering as a narrative device. In a related study, Afolayan (2019) asserts that Osundare's diction and tone showcase a deep mourning for the loss of harmony, arguing that peace cannot be attained without restoring ecological balance.

Deep Ecology and the African Context

The theory of Deep Ecology was first articulated by Arne Naess and later found resonance in African literary thought for its emphasis on biocentric equality. Tayo and Owusu (2020) examine the compatibility between Deep Ecology and African oral traditions, with both

treating phenomena such as rivers, animals, and forests as animate and moral agents. Their study affirms that poets like Osundare rely on the use African cosmological frameworks to express deep ecological principles in culturally rooted ways. Ndebele (2021) lends his credence when it is pointed out that this eco-philosophical lens is not only theoretical but profoundly political in African contexts: a society where extractivism and environmental injustice often reflect colonial-era exploitation. In another work, Danso (2023) studies ecological justice in African literature, he does not fully address how poetry can frame shared suffering as a connecting and healing force.

Despite the wealth of commentary on 'They Too Are the Earth', its deeper philosophical implications, particularly the dignity of non-human life, have not been broadly studied. This research interrogates how poetic language can challenge dominant hierarchies, restore balance, and promote a vision of peace grounded in coexistence. A kind of direct response to calls for more integrative literary analysis linking concerns about environment and humanity in African contexts (Adekoya, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism means the interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment, exposing how texts reflect, critique, or reimagine human connections with the natural world. Evolving in the 1990s, it has since been developed to incorporate postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous perspectives, presenting a more comprehensive lens for analysing environmental and social injustice in literature (Heise, 2019). In the context of Africa, ecocriticism often intersects with themes of land dispossession, colonial exploitation, and ecological resilience. In Okuyade (2020), African ecopoetry frequently portrays nature as a spiritual and communal entity rather than a resource for human extraction. Applying this lens to 'They Too Are the Earth', the study interprets Osundare's depiction of Earth as a sentient force solidarising with oppressed human communities. The analysis of Osundare's language use: deployment of symbolism and metaphor, exposing

environmental degradation and social suffering as mutually reinforcing conditions is also supported by ecocriticism. This framework enhances the illumination of how the poem appeals for ecological justice and the restoration of harmony between all forms of life.

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, it challenges anthropocentrism by asserting the intrinsic value of all living beings, not minding their utility to human life. The main concern of Deep Ecology is the principle of biospheric egalitarianism, which highlights interconnectedness, diversity, and ecological self-realisation (Naess, 1973; Tayo & Owusu, 2020). This theory complements Osundare's vision in 'They Too Are the Earth', where humans, animals, and the land are portrayed not in hierarchy but in coexistence. Deep Ecology presents a moral and philosophical lens for interpreting the poem's emphasis on shared suffering and dignity among all beings. It helps frame the poem not merely as environmental lament but as a unique critique of dominance and exploitation, both of people and of nature. Deep Ecology therefore focuses on community and self-in-society, resonating with African communal philosophies, making it a culturally congruent lens for analysing Osundare's work. With this framework, this study bridges literary aesthetics with ethical and ecological considerations, and thereby offers a robust interpretation of poetic resistance and unity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design, it utilises textual analysis to investigate Niyi Osundare's 'They Too Are the Earth'. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study since it is exploratory and interpretive in nature, with the aim of analysing how Osundare conveys themes of interconnected struggle, ecological justice, and peace. The data for analysis is the purposively selected Osundare's poem 'They Too Are the Earth'. It is selected for its rich thematic portrayal of nature, human dignity, and shared suffering. The poem is subjected to close reading, focusing on thematic development,

symbolism and imagery, linguistic choices and tone, representation of nature and humanity, and intersections of ecological and social critique. Each identified theme is interpreted based on the lenses of Ecocriticism and Deep Ecology. Through this, the recurrent motifs were identified, metaphorical and symbolic elements interpreted and connected to broader ecological and philosophical discourse in relation with how the poem articulates interconnected existence. The analysis was carried out in respect to the intellectual property of the poet and scholarly authors.

Analysis and Findings

The poem 'They Too Are the Earth' represents a philosophical poetic meditation on the interrelationship of all beings in a world, defined by shared struggle and mutual dignity. By deploying rich imagery, oral rhythms, and a tone of reverence and advocacy, the poet develops a poetic universe where ecological awareness and social justice are inseparable.

The representation of nature and humanity in 'They Too Are the Earth'.

The poem starts with an invocation of those who are often invisible or forgotten in the larger narratives of progress and modernity. For instance:

*They too are the earth:
The swarthy drivers of the earth's uprooted
wealth...*

Osundare, here, immediately presents marginalised human beings, mainly labourers, as deeply embedded in the Earth. The line *they too are the earth* destroys every artificial binary between humans and nature. Also, the Earth is depicted as a living, labouring force, directly linked with the struggles of the working class. In the line: *The tillers of hunger's fields...*, the connection between agricultural labour and sustenance is evoked, also the hardship inherent in human survival. The Earth and its tillers suffer are both victims, not resonating a hierarchical, exploitative relationship but one of camaraderie and resilience. According to Heise (2019); Okuyade (2020), this underscores Ecocriticism's concern with the representation of nature as a living

presence and a witness to human activity, particularly within postcolonial contexts.

Investigating how the poem illustrates the interconnected struggle of all beings.

The repetitive use of *They too are the earth* by the poet serves as both refrain and revelation. It creates a liturgical rhythm, affirming the shared existence of those often ignored. Lines:

*They too are the earth:
The spinners of rust and sweat...*

connect labour, suffering, and elemental matter such as rust, sweat, and dust. Osundare connects the materiality of human struggle with the elements of the Earth itself. These *spinners* do not merely work the land; rather, they become it. Their essence and efforts are taken as part of the Earth's pulse. Similarly, the poet doesn't limit this connection to human being alone. There is an implied solidarity between humans and the broader ecosystem. The language of dust, sweat, and soil reflects an organic unity that transcends species. E.g.: *The earth is a granary of broken backs...*, the Earth is further portrayed not as a distant backdrop but a co-sufferer, carrying the memories and wounds of both human toil and ecological depletion. This aligns with Deep Ecology which holds that all beings have a common spiritual and existential ground (Naess, 1973; Tayo & Owusu, 2020).

Examining how Osundare's poetic vision contributes to ecological and social awareness.

Osundare's poetry is inherently critiquing. He deploys this poem confront the reader with both ethical and ecological truths. For instance in:

*They too are the earth:
The village nude who clutches a
shriveled hunger
And seeks a return to roots...*

The idea of *a return to roots* conveys both literal and symbolic implications. In short, it evokes ecological restoration, a re-rooting in tradition, nature, and communal values. The term *roots* make a reference to the organic connection to land, ancestry, and sustenance. This directly speaks volume about Osundare's

ecological philosophy that modern alienation from land, each other, and from spiritual balance constitutes both environmental and social crises. Thus, readers are encouraged to reexamine what is visible and valuable. Osundare resonates with ecological humility and human solidarity as kinds of knowledge and power. That Earth, a shared inheritance, already damaged by human greed, can still heal with collective recognition and respect.

Assessing how poetry can serve as a tool for promoting harmony and peace

In Osundare's vision, poetry is a unifying voice that affirms the worth of every being. Thus, the refrain: *They too are the earth...* functions as an incantation for peace. It exemplifies equality across all boundaries. A repetitive structure that draws from oral traditions and collective memory, encouraging listeners to internalise the message of unity. Towards the end:

*They too are the earth:
The faceless legions of dawn...*

The phrase *Faceless legions* elevates those unseen by power structures, that peace is impossible without justice and visibility for all. Humanising the marginalised and associating them with the Earth itself, Osundare conceptualises peace not as a distant ideal but a product of mutual recognition and shared existence.

Conclusion

So far, an attempt has explored the thematic depth and philosophical undercurrents of Niyi Osundare's "*They Too Are the Earth*", revealing how the poem envisions existence as a shared struggle between human and non-human entities. With Ecocriticism and Deep Ecology as theoretical lenses, the analysis has demonstrated that Osundare's poetic language not only critiques environmental and social injustices but also offers a framework for reimagining harmony rooted in interconnectedness and mutual respect. In line with contemporary discourses on ecological justice and peace building, this research reaffirms the significance of African poetry as a tool of resistance, healing, and environmental advocacy. Osundare's work stands as both literary art and ethical guidepost, urging a return to

ecological consciousness, spiritual rootedness, and communal solidarity. While this study has focused on a single poem, its implications reach beyond the text. Future research could expand to Osundare's broader body of work

Recommendation

This study therefore recommends that concrete effort should be made to recognise the intrinsic value of all living beings not minding their utility to human life. That humans, animals, and the land should be portrayed not in hierarchy but in coexistence. More so, in line with Adekoya (2025), there is the need for more integrative literary analysis linking concerns about environment and humanity in Africa.

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