



## Poetry: A mode of communication towards decrying shifting moral and social values in Ifeoma Odinye's *At Sunset*

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### Abstract

The varied social, political, cultural and economic misery in the Nigerian cultural milieu has brought into existence the emergence of poets who use their poetic literary skills to advocate for social change. *At Sunset* is Ifeoma Odinye's first collection of poems. In this collection, she explores possibilities open to the poetics of orality by performing the role of a social commentator. The poetics of *At Sunset* is composed to unearth social vices while commenting on painful human struggles. Odinye employs the use of African oral resources such as praise poetry, poetic outpouring of grief and satiric songs in criticizing the decline of moral and social values. Some oral literary devices such as simile, metaphor, symbols, repetition, idioms, communal voice, proverbial concepts, and wordcraft were used in analyzing the poems. In effect, her lamenting oral female voice is important in examining the poetics of orality and also contributes to the enrichment of contemporary Nigerian poetry. This study gives insight into the stylistic dimensions of Odinye's poetry with particular influence to the selected poems. Hence, it discusses the need for restoring social and moral values in order to salvage the fast disintegrating Nigerian cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** poetry, orality, communication

### 1. Introduction

Poetry is an emotional artistic form of self expression. It is a genre of literature that is "spoken or written which emphasizes rhythm, other intricate patterns of sound and imagery, and the many possible ways that words can suggest meanings" (Akinlabi *et al*, 108) <sup>[1]</sup>. All societies irrespective of their social and economic condition have peculiar poetic expressions. In the Nigerian cultural milieu, poetry forms an important part of human expression which manifests in the forms of songs, recitation or poetic expressions (Akporobaro, 396). Currently, a progression of change in modern Nigerian cum African poetry is geared towards an oriented exploration of different creative avenues. As a result, poets infuse their poems with rich oral poetic flavour to make poetry more pleasant to people. This development suggests that there is a sign of oral traditions in the poetry of Nigerian poets. Indeed, such creative use of orality is indeed narrowing the gaps between modern Nigerian poetry and the oral poetry. Such connection is not strange since both oral and modern written Nigerian poetry perform the social function of exposing social issues while enriching African creative activity (Nwoga 1979, 32). This new manifestation of African creative activity gives Nigerian poetry its unique artistic blend since it comes from all shades of people in society – both the literate and non-literate. This form of artistic blend of oral composition is basically what a contemporary Nigerian or African poet strives to achieve in written modern poetry (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, 11) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Furthermore, contrary to the Nigerian poetry of older poets like Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark, Michael Echeruo, Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo which could be termed

old-fashioned, craggy, obscure with difficult diction totally alienated from African oral poetic tradition; contemporary Nigerian poets have consciously explored poetry employing lyrical and cultural materials in written forms. Poets like Niyi Osundare, Obiora Udechukwu, Tanure Ojaide are famous for employing techniques and oral strategies of oral composition deeply rooted in their oral traditions. In view of the above, Isidore Okpewho observes that the 'exploration of oral tradition by modern African writers lies in understanding that times have changed. Therefore, they re-order some cultural legacies to depict a slight or radical departure from the tradition' (316).

Generally, the effort in adopting orality in written poetry is spurred by the need to rediscover how highbrow art could learn from the oral tradition to make poetry aesthetically pleasing while depicting the complexity of human struggles and experiences (Fraser, 314). This new blend reflects what is today referred to as written orality, a term infused into the mind by oral arts (Schipper, 67). In essence, this new form of written poetry is capable of sustaining the rich cultural tradition of African story-telling with all its perfection and imperfection. However, it is this artistic blend of social issues with the elements of orality that has inspired the exploration of Ifeoma Odinye's *At Sunset*. This concern reiterates Odinye's perception as a poet in the Nigerian cultural milieu – one who observes and interprets the norms, values and customs of a given society (Ngcobo, 150). In spite of the literary oral influences on her, it must be emphasized that the interest of this study is focused on the thematic preoccupation of Odinye's poetry and not mainly on the illustration of orality in her poems. The examination of Odinye's poetry is based on two aesthetic combinations – the use of oral verse form and a strong sense of realism which depicts human experiences to achieve poetic effects.

## 2. Poetry as a mode of communication

Poetry has been identified as a dynamic mode of expressing emotions, feelings or ideas necessary for human relationships and nation building. It is an indispensable artistic creative tool employed by poets to trigger people's consciousness in order to restore the society socially, morally, politically and culturally. This suggests that poets often explore socio-political experiences of a given society in their literary pieces; whether oral or written. The above expression lays emphasis on the evolution of modern poetry which gradually changed from an oral traditional form to the written form. In F.B.O Akporobaro's view, "the written word is only an outcome of the oral forms which are man's earliest and original medium of self-expression and artistic creativity" (1). In essence, oral and written forms of poetry express the same human interest in the creativity innate in people in different cultural milieux. In line with the above, Akporobaro further observes that:

The artist who performs in the medium of the spoken word is engaged in the same creative process as the modern writer who creates through the written word. Thus, while engaged in the process of storytelling as in the folktale, or legend, or in the evocation of imagery when reciting poetry or creating rhythm and melody in his lyrical self expression, the oral artist shares with the modern writer the same element of creativity and language manipulation. (2)

The above quotation depicts poetry as an aspect of communication which "enhances potentials socially, mentally, economically and politically. Therefore, it is an effective medium for creating awareness, avoiding violence, ensuring integration, maintaining peace and security through an act of creativity" (Akinlabi *et al*, 102) <sup>[1]</sup>. This act of creativity is explored through different dimensions such as the "imaginative communication of experience, the communication of ideas of significant human value, and the heightened organization of the resources of language towards the achievement of aesthetic effects" (Akporobaro, 2).

Significantly, this study hinges on the theory of oral tradition, the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord which basically shows how poets employ formulas to express a given idea. In Parry's view, formula is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given idea" (80). In this study, Odinye's poems take into account a concept outlined by Parry and Lord in their oral-formulaic theory. Her poems are explored in the context of Nigerian oral traditional poetry as Parry-Lord's approach to south Slavic poetry. According to the oral-formulaic theory, different parts of oral traditional poetry have been composed orally in a more or less fixed form; while in modern written poetry, poets do not only represent their tradition, but also display their creative ingenuity because they have been decisive in the process of fixing the text. Abdulkadir explains that "the poet who composes a poem of any length exclusively through the medium of the spoken word must be able to fit his words to the fixed pattern of his verse. In contrast to the poet, as Parry observed, cannot think without hurry about his next word, nor change what he has made, before going on to read over what he has just written" (18). Literary poets just like the oral poets, learn a specialized poetic language whose mastery did not allow any form of mechanical composition as seen in ordinary speech (Lord, 36). This is to say that the poet is not a being who is possessed by a

tradition of handling down of oral poetic forms, but an independent person who expresses his individuality and creative views through his poetry. This best describes Odinye's poetry because her poems are replete with unique characteristic of time and oral composition.

On this note, it is important to note that the selected poems for this study are explored from the oral-formulaic point of view through the narrative frame and the poet's use of traditional oral forms such as rhythm, formulas and themes. Parry sees formula as a group of words used in the same metrical conditions to depict or buttress a given idea. Lord further defines 'formulas as the phrases, clauses and sentences of the poet's poetic grammar' (36). Although Lord did not explore or define other formulaic expressions in literary (non-oral) texts or genres, it has been pointed out that written cultures can also show oral-like features. Therefore, oral-formulaic model on written composed texts can also display oral-like poetic language, typical themes hypothesized in oral poetry. This poetic style is often called the song tradition. The emergence of this written oral poetic form is traced to the East African poet, Okot p' Bitek in the poems, *Songs of Lawino* and *Songs of Ocol*. Bitek's poetic style has great influence on many Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Koofi Awoonor, Tanure Ojaide, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and others. The poetic sub-genre and elements evident in the above mentioned poets' poetry are: praise poetry, proverbs, idioms, songs, dirges, lyrics, chants etc. Odinye's poems also exhibit some of these poetic sub-genres to project a unique poetic voice.

## 3. At Sunset: creating a revolutionary consciousness through the rhetoric of orality

The image encapsulated in Odinye's title *At Sunset* depicts the poetics of orality. To epitomize the shifting moral and social values in African cultural milieux, the poet constructs the title to depict a daily disappearance of human value and relationships in society. Odinye's construction of the title is equated with the time of sunset – the moment when the upper limb of the Sun disappears below the horizon. In Odinye's interpretation, the time of sunset is closely associated with a certain measure of truth concerning the reality of human existence and experiences. The truth equated with the concept of sunset paints the sordid pictures of corruption, hardship, oppression, discrimination, class struggle, poverty, tribalism, xenophobia, killings, war and disillusionment which have engulfed the Nigerian cum African society. In essence, the title suggests that the Nigerian society is at the darkest moment when morality no longer illuminates the people. Figuratively, it signals the final period of Nigeria's moral values and unity. Thus, the depicted image of Nigeria at sunset creates an atmospheric image of orange and red colours of the Sun attributively nearing a termination period of good old days.

Again, the deliberate use of the rhetoric of orality is also discernable in the different poems that explicate the themes of suffering, disillusionment, war, oppression and death. The poems in the collection possess thematically intrinsic revolutionary structures in their various interpretations of human experiences. The major concern in this study is to examine how Odinye's *At Sunset* criticizes a decline in social and moral values, which reflects the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie who neglect a poverty stricken society and thus cause untold hardship. In this collection, the contemporary Nigerian society has been

represented as a society where values like dedication, truthfulness, selflessness, and decency have been replaced by violence, hatred and wickedness.

Significantly, the collection captures and addresses bourgeoisie impunities that denigrate Nigerian social and moral values. *At Sunset* (2018) <sup>[10]</sup> is replete with thematic concerns found in the six sections: “Woes of my Land”; “Songs of Childhood Memories”; “Songs of Reflection”; “Woes of Man”; “Songs of Liberation” and “Songs of Hope”. These sections are further explicated to see how Odinye deploys various poetic forms such as satiric songs or poetic outpouring of grief.

#### 4. Satirizing social ills through satirical songs

In the two sections of the collection entitled “Woes of my Land” and “Woes of Man”, the poet focuses on social thematic factors to comment on global problem of importance. This is seen in poems like “Before Sunset”, “The Sunken”, “Zion’s Zest”, “The Second Coming”, “Afra my Afra” and “Scars of the Mind”. These poems are replete with satiric jabs that are aimed at ridiculing and exposing social ills. In the first section of poems labelled “Woes of my Land”, the poet explores and exposes a perceptible image of hopelessness and poverty stricken society through the use of wordcraft, allusion, idioms or proverbial concepts which have different figurative meanings than the literal meanings of each word or phrase. The poem “The Sunken” illustrates one of such crafty or clever use of words which is the key concept in Odinye’s fundamental recognition of the importance of words in depicting a feeling of disappointment expressed by the suffering citizens of Nigeria. What Odinye does in this poem is to interrogate a system of leadership that has brought so much hardship on citizens to the extent that they are akin to depression arising from the realization that all hope is lost. The third stanza of the poem depicts the idea of that figurative expression associated with disillusionment:

We are the sunken  
Echoing together Thomas Hardy’s Natures Questioning  
Questioning the moonlight that once sprayed happiness on  
eager faces  
Sun that brightened the face after a mid-night’s sorrowful  
pangs. (3)

The resolve of the poet to communicate the deliberate use of a rhetoric of orality is discernable in the poems that boarder on social issues in order to communicate, sensitize, refine attitudes and heighten social vision. The poet makes reference to Thomas Hardy’s “Nature’s Questioning” to probe just like Hardy, the questions of human relationships and purpose in society. This particular reference to Hardy’s poem challenges contemporary Nigerian thinking and modes of living which encourage social vices. “The sunken” are perceived as the deprived people who are victims of greed, injustice, corruption, discrimination, exploitation and bad government. The rhetorical question – “Tell me why weathered faces stare with visionless vision...(4)” as an idiomatic or figurative concept portrays the voiceless humanity, the ignored and despised found in the Nigerian society. Imagery is used in the above line to signify only description of visible subjects which is vivid and particularized, as in “weathered faces”. The imagery is used to signify figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphors. The above quotation has symbolic implications

since poverty or disillusionment is the unmistakable identity of such people. The orality of the poem is emphasized through the implied communal voice which stresses that “we are the sunken/ we are the stuffed children/ Leaning on an empty column/ Paralyzed legs infested with poliomyelitis” (3). This communal voice is part of an oral tradition in which the voice of the poet echoes the opinions and concern of her cultural milieu. The above expression highlights the profound articulation of social change in Nigeria in order to restore hope to the suffering citizens. Significantly, the use of the communal voice in Odinye’s poetry simply depicts that many people, including the poet herself represent the voiceless downtrodden. This is why she makes copious use of the plural pronoun “we” to show a public significance of the poem. This is also evident in her comment on communal interest when she laments – “we are the sunken/ Once, leaning on a fence with nice big slats/ And space around, so free and roomy/ Legs well guarded, fixed firmly on the surface/ Waiting for a falling star!” (3). The use of the communal “we” also depicts the declamatory tone on behalf of a society whose citizens have been denied the basic human rights and necessary facilities for growth and development. This emphasizes the orality of traditional poetry that Odinye has incorporated as part of her poetics of orality.

Furthermore, in the section titled “Woes of Man”, the use of the communal voice is also employed in the poem, “Scars of the Mind” to depict various shades of social and moral decay, encompassing— rape, intimidation and oppression of the vulnerable members of the Nigerian society. The poet’s concern is on the humiliating experiences of the female gender – women, girls and babies who are raped or sexually exploited in society without any attempt to punish the perpetrators of these inhuman acts. The persona comments: “A child –a girl in her zero year/So brief her presence on earth/ Is consumed in an unwholesome flame/ Which the middle-aged maidens dread” (33). Again, “Young lass in her prime/ Consumed within the infernos of home and streets/ Crying each minute in a broken monody” (33). “A woman clutched tightly around the neck/ As flames’ waves distil her body/ Sinking recklessly in the guarded flames” (33). In the above lines, the poet criticizes the decline of moral values which ostensibly reflects in how rampant the cases of rape or sexual abuse have become in contemporary Nigerian society. The enormity of rape or sexual abuse is rendered in the representation of the imagery of the female gender as vulnerable victims who cry for justice. Thus, the act of rape has been represented in the image of “flame” which consumes the female victims leaving them physically hurt, psychologically broken and disoriented. The use of the word, “flame” in the poem underscores the weakness and victimhood of these vulnerable people in the face of horror. Consequently, considering the magnitude destructive nature of “flame”, the poet employs the image to depict the damages it causes to the survival of the female gender. To decry a wasteland in which morality has been bastardized, the poet employs a communal voice to reflect a thematic preoccupation entrenched in revolutionary action for social change: “We will fight!/Once again, I say/We will fight/When they least expected it!/ The scars of rape/Over our minds and bodies/Like red-hot arrows on the chest/Have finished us” (32). The above lines reiterate Odinye’s convictions about the female gender’s concern on sexual abuse. This remarkably raises awareness to its negative



social and psychological consequences on society.

The articulation of social change in Nigeria has also been captured in the section “Woes of the Land”. The poem “Before Sunset” confirms that perception of the inhabitants of Nigeria as people who wear the badge of poverty – struggling against all odds to eke out a living. It is ironical that in a country blessed with many human and natural resources, “...people embark on a pacing chase/ A game of luck, a game of chance/ ...humbled by hunger, thirst and want...(2)”. The poet comments about the condition of the poor citizens with passion because they have been “wrinkled by life’s unsteady visions” (2). No doubt, Odinye uses her poem as a literary vehicle for the depiction of social change in Nigeria which is evident in the rhetorical question in the poem, “The Sunken” – “Tell me why frail men turned gods over night/ Unleashing fire and brimstone on earth’s sojourners”(4)? The picture depicted in the above lines is that of bad government, injustice and massive exploitation of the masses. To the poet, “earth sojourners” represent the poor citizens of Nigeria who are ignored and despised in autocratic regimes, under democratic as in authoritarian leadership. Another poem “The Second Coming” explores the Igbo dirge tradition of outpouring grief: “I listened to the wild cry/ My heart bled once again/ O how dreams quenched,/ And unity broken by divided hearts” (7). The poem explicates the death of a hero who was killed in the Nigerian civil war. The poet comments that “a hero came the first time/ and was silenced/ and sabotaged by his kinsmen/ who accepted the pythons as friends” (Ibid). The civil war between the Eastern and Northern part of Nigeria resulted to emotional empathy; because, “thousands were killed on the hero’s soil/ perhaps millions under avarice, hatred and wickedness” (7). This poem is a poetic outpouring of grief because the persona expresses grief over the loss of lives during the Biafra war.

Interestingly, “Zion’s Zest” evaluates the dreadful theme of tyranny that is sublimated by the institutionalization of terror in Nigeria’s landscape. The poem reflects a harvest of pains, fear, suffering, injustice, death and evil. This is indeed a conceptualization of sensibility relevant to the poet’s vision in the use of image or metaphor. The poet persona shares “...the open secret of life misery/the lurking secrets of my generation/ Sprayed and scented on the blue airy surface/ The wagging tales of pains and gains/ The twisted tales of clans and wars/ Tales of cows and colony/ Tales of lies and deceit”(5). Considering the magnitude of impunity at the disposal of dictators, the poet has decided to voice this social discontent. To reflect the thematic preoccupation entrenched in social change, the poet comments on the current unending clashes between the local farmers and the Fulani cow rearers from different ethnic and tribal lines which have resulted to scores of death without government intervention. The poet’s powerful use of imagery is vivid as citizens “bowed in painful ecstasy ready for the unguarded hour / hour of fear and pain/ hour of dreaded evil and death/... leaving the falcons and falconers without a guide” (5). Here, the falcons and falconers refer to the leaders who are incapable of performing patriotic acts. Relevant to the poet’s vision is the use of images or metaphors of falcon and falconer, the bird of prey and a person who breeds or trains birds of prey. The association of the falcons and falconers with Nigerian leaders is made to arouse a repugnant attitude in the readers. This gives an impression that government’s inability to tackle the problem

of insecurity depicts the abnormalities which the images symbolize. This impression reinforces the idea that reflects the irresponsibility of the leaders. Therefore, “things fall apart, the earth cannot conceal/ the falcon’s tale of untold pains/tales laden with death tolls unnamed and untamed/ tales of lost vegetation/ tales of sights and sounds”(6).

Again, the poem “Martyrs” further stresses the thematic concern of leaders’ insensitivity to insecurity in Nigerian society because martyrs are “... hatched untimely by the lopsided gaits of untamed hooligans” (9). Odinye invigorates this poem through the lyrical refrain to expose the negative consequences of leaders’ irresponsibility on the society. The lyricism in the poem is derived from the influence of orality as she portrays in the poem, “Martyrs old and weary as the earth wounded surface.../pained by life’s thoughtless rhythms/ Rhythms of the lost/ Rhythms of the weak/Rhythms of sight” (9). The constant use of the word, “rhythm” gives the impression that pain, fear, death have become a common song in citizen’s lips. This lyricism is also replete in the poem, “The Second Coming” which voices out social dissatisfaction on the way and manner citizens are molested and killed; hence, “chants of sorrow here!/ chants of sorrow there!/ ...chants of sorrow everywhere”(8).

In “Afra my Afra”, the poet reflects the poetic, philosophical, political and social vision of the Igbo people. The title of the poem is a fictional setting that has significant connotation in the poet’s cultural tradition. “Afra” in this poem means—“Biafra land”, the utopia nation of Igbo tribe of Nigeria. This poem is part of the tradition deciphering past and future events. Odinye employs a public voice to comment on the 1967 Nigerian civil war that “ravaged the land” (11). The public voice subsumed under a personal voice that contributes to the projection of Igbo communal interests in agitating for a new nation free from tribalism, discrimination, injustice, and killings. Like a minstrel, the poet personifies and eulogizes “Afra” – “Afra of proud warriors in green land fields/ Afra of which my grandfather chants/ on the soil of distant lands” (11). The poet-singer actively engages in the utilization of the oral resources in the creation of the poem. This is done to further comment on the tragic events of the Nigerian civil war which nearly ruined the Eastern part of the country. The use of oral resources in the form of praise singing is clearly seen in the rhetorical question – “Is the oppressor’s hand stronger than your Amadioha iron-hand?/ ...this hand which threw Amalinze the cat on the ground in swift bravery/This hand which fed hungry thousands in war ravaged lands”. ‘Amadioha’ is a god or deity that is worshipped and served by the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria. In Igbo cultural milieu, ‘Amadioha’ also represents the collective will of the Igbo people to challenge any form of oppression or injustice that would destroy their unity. The poem magnifies the need for Igbo people to be realistic in pursuing their utopia dream of reclaiming their pride as great warriors of old. This is the essential part of Igbo rhetoric in which images are employed to emphasize ideas. Equally significant in the poem is the name, “Amalinze” which is part of the tradition of employing Igbo names to urge the readers into awareness. “Amalinze” is a word that invokes direct similarity with the word “cat”. Achebe’s interpretation in his novel makes an implied comparison that projects ‘Amalinze as a brave wrestler whose back never touches the ground like the cat. The depiction of this physical prowess is part of the verbal

exchange adopted from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in order to eulogize and depict the Igbo people as undefeated wrestlers. The allusion to the figure of 'Amalinze', a character in Achebe's novel redirects the mind of the people to illustrate the orality of realistic statements with sentiments. The realistic statements – "...the spirit pure and brave/ though hushed, is courageous and untamed/ like the air which cannot be caged in a container/ This is the spirit of Afra" (11-12) codify Odinye's view that all hope is not lost in fighting the oppressors. Significantly, the onomastic implication of words and names are prominent in the Igbo language. Thus, the poem makes use of oral rhetorical questions to provide linguistic platform that would inspire the people of Afra.

### 5. Regaining societal values through praise poetry or poetic songs

Poetry is a platform for social transformation and development. Odinye in the Sections – "Songs of Hope" and "Songs of Liberation" have employed African oral poetic mode of expression and images to urge for social transformation. In fact, the communal voice in the selected poems to some extent becomes the mouthpiece of Odinye's satirical purposes to comment on the mentality of Nigerian bourgeoisie – the holders of power and political leaders of Nigeria. The poetic revolutionary song is captured in the section—"Songs of Liberation". In the poem entitled "The Dance" each stanza commences with a refrain – "This is not the season to dance" to tackle the Nigerian leadership problems" (57). The transformation of the above refrain into incremental repetition shows the poet's consciousness to incorporate effective element of orality to suit her poetic objectives. The poet proceeds beyond the stage of using refrains and comments: "This is not the season to dance/ For we are in the hands of traitors/ who are a swarm of mysterious bees/ haunting daily the threatened/ in dry secluded atmosphere" (Ibid). The complex use of this refrain— "This is not the season to dance" sustains the satiric thrust of the poem and communicates the seriousness of issues raised by the poet – "For war looms on the surface/ and our leaders have grown wings/ to flee our land if war afflicts" (57). The above idiomatic expression projects the image of abnormality in the leadership system of Nigeria through the imagery of insensitive greed and savagery. This reminder that— "This is not the season to dance/ and roll your waist like the Calabar woman" (ibid) suggests social, economic, cultural and political destabilizations, because according to the poet – "this dance is a new one/ An alien steps of secret drums/Hidden in the unseen path of gods" (57). This poem is lyrical. It is a song rendered to the accompaniment of musical instruments where a single speaker addresses another person or a group of people. The dramatic device in the above lines heightens the orality of this poem. It also serves as an innovative poetic composition which envisages reactions from the audience. The ambiguity in the poet's rejection of the dance of merriment which is symbolic of the 'Calabar woman' in Nigeria raises great concern for the doom of the society. The imagery of 'secret drums', 'unseen path of gods' and 'Calabar woman' is thus symbolic of the poet's effort to infuse traditional musical resources into her poems. These traditional instruments compliment the poet's reflection of the poetics of orality. The criticism and condemnation of corruption and injustice

is seen in the poet's call for unity: "This is not the season to dance/ but a season to seek refuge/ in the bosom of unity/ which gathers more legs/ in the lyrical eloquence of the gong" (58). Significantly, Odinye deliberately weaves in metaphoric images, ideas and sound instruments (drum, gong) adopted from her cultural milieu to enhance her poetic revolutionary song. The interplay of ideas flavoured with figurative expressions bear affinities with oral poetry. Hence, the poet suggests that collective revolution is the key to freedom from social vices. The poet further stresses her poetic vision and maintains that – "This is not the season to dance/ but a season to invoke an eagle/ possessed by the gods/ to wrestle power from generals' hands/ and disrobe them like mad men/ in the middle of the road/...we must dance/ till we speak freely of freedom" (58). The above lines stress the thematic concern of sensitivity buttressed by the poet.

In the poem entitled "Exultation" under the section "Songs of Hope" the issue of contemporary dilemma and future liberation are prominent. The poet uses praise poem to urge the Nigerian citizens into revolutionary action. The rapturous delight in the poet's comment: "with shouts of exultation/ I applaud you all children of light/ ...I applaud your determination/ to stand so thick and strong" (79) creates metaphoric devices of orality. The use of appellation and attributive epithet – "children of light" in the praise of good citizens of Nigeria reflects the quality of praise poetry, *Oriki* Yoruba poetry (Barber, 503). Thus, the implicated use of *Oriki* in this poem is geared towards urging the citizens to fight against social and economic corruption that could generate civil unrest and wars. Again, in the comment: "with the sound of drums/ I raise the song of harvest/ to separate the wheat and tares/ to cast the tares into the fire/ to salvage our fields" (79) the deployment of elements of orality is symbolic. The poet's adoption of sound instruments to render her poetic revolutionary song transforms her poems into a good work of literature which reflects human conditions for the purpose of correction. In the "Vows", the poet employs poetic songs imbedded in lyrical refrains to raise the hope of the citizens. The orality of the first stanza of the poem reflects the rhythm of hope that is expressed thus: Sing, o people / Our vows are yielding hope/ Our prayers are yielding answers / ...Sing, o people/ ...Our prayers are not in vain" (76). The rhythm in the repetition of 'Sing, o people' adds to the lyricism of the song which is consciously captured in the poem. In the poem, Ifeoma Odinye consciously makes an oral employment of song poetry to comment on socio-political reality. The effective employment of such verbal rhythm stresses the transfer of power from the oppressors to the oppressed. Thus, the poet's fulfilment of this mandatory role is grounded in the lines: "Sing aloud/ I say, sing aloud/ and press onward with better hope/ For life's duty has just begun/ To win this race more bravely" (77). Again, the poetic celebration of the triumph of good over evil is explored in the poem "Exultation". The poet concludes aptly with the chants of poetic revolution protesting over injustice. She captures her exhortatory poetry this way:

With claps of exultation  
I urge you to raise a song of hope  
To remain faithful to that final harvest-hour  
Ripening with great dreams! (80)

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the decay of moral and social values in *At Sunset*. Through the exposition, Odinye has harnessed various elements of poetry submerged in a poetics of orality to raise concern about the changing cultural, social, economic and political circumstances in Nigeria. The poet also appropriates the art of Igbo song or Yoruba *Oriki* (praise song) for emphasis which is culturally significant. In this collection, Odinye has criticized the exploiters in positions of power by advocating for social justice as a platform for restoring social and moral values.

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