Allusive truths in selected Mabel Osakwe's poetry

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Abstract

Nigeria's socio-political frustrations continue to find expression in the creative outputs of Nigerian female writers. By deploying allusion as a powerful literary tool, historical events of significance are reincarnated as sites of national contestation. The poetry of Mabel Osakwe, which has received few critical reviews, serves as the compass for this study. The study investigates the lingering angst in Africa's most populous nation. Using critical and inter-textual analytical methods to analyse the selected poems, the study focuses on the interplay of history and art as emblems of social consciousness and hidden truths in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. Using New Historicism, the study examines Osakwe's allusions to certain truths the strictures undermining economic viability and socio-political stability in oil-rich Nigeria. The study analyses four purposively selected poems: "The Land Chokes with Honourables"; "Dying Days… and a Cabal Nurses Ailing Nation"; "Eavesdropping on Observing Demo-demons"; and "Publish and Perish" published in her collection, *Desert Songs of Bloom*. Osakwe, in these poems, through a careful deployment of poetic devices, satirises the oppressive agencies of the political class and their awful impact on the social underdogs of Nigeria. Osakwe's artistic sensibility alludes to and condemns the vicious circle of leadership ineptitude in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian female writers, Mabel Osakwe, allusion, New Historicism, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Socio-political experiences of pre- and post-colonial African states largely stimulate African literature and its criticisms. African imaginative writers allude to a myriad of socio-political challenges in their creative works. Pioneers of African literature use their art to examine the impact of colonisation and racial discrimination against Africans during the colonial period. Similarly, African writers after colonial rule continue to address socio-political issues that impact the political and economic stability of many African nations in their creative works. In countries like Nigeria, Rwanda, Liberia, Burundi, and Somalia, African writers have depicted the horrors of war and the challenges faced in the aftermath through their art. Examples of this can be seen in *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (Achebe, 1973), *Casualties: Poems 1966-68* (Clark, 1970), and *A Shuttle in the Crept* (Soyinka, 1973). Nigerian writers portray fictionalised versions of the Biafran war experience (Kola, 2019). The depiction of Nigeria's troubling past in art aligns with the notion that Nigerian writers, particularly in the poetry genre, from the Ibadan literary block, allude to the tragic phase of Nigeria's political experiences (Okunoye, 1998). Patricia Wesley's *Before the Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa* (Wesley,1998) and "*When the Wanderers Come Home" (Wesley, 2016)* also alluded to the socio-political upheavals that impaired Liberia's economic and political stability.

The literary corpus of Sierra Leonean-born Sly Cheney-Coker also points to the trauma of war in Sierra Leon. Similarly, several works of South African literature make direct and indirect references to the mistreatment of black individuals during the notorious apartheid era in South Africa. This is exemplified in the creative instincts of Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mitswali, and Athol Fugard, among others. Fugard's "*Sizwe Bansi is Dead,"* for instance, is a spotlight on South African racial abuse of blacks during the apartheid regime. The play is a political allusion to the prejudices against many blacks described as "the

psychological persecution experienced by black workers" (*Jayathilake*, 2018). Dennis Brutus' poems are artistic statements and socio-political allusions to the politics of devaluation during South African apartheid rule. Brutus exemplifies this in "The Sun on this Rubble", which references the systemic stifling of apartheid policy and the ominousness of unpropitious violence against the majority of blacks. Brutus writes in the poem:

> This sun on this rubble after rain
> Bruised though we must be
> Some easement we require
> Unarguably, though we argue against desire.
> Under jackboots our bones and spirit crunch
> And and put commaremoveForced into sweat-tear-sodden slush
> -now glow-lipped by this sudden touch (*Moore & Beier,* 1963)

The imagery in "under jackboots, our bones and spirit crunch/forced into sweat-tear-sodden slush" is a political allusion depicting the violent killings, hard labour, and psychological torture experienced by blacks during the apartheid regime. His choice of the plural pronoun "we" alludes not only to many blacks but also to the poet, who himself experienced similar deplorable conditions. In recent times, however, there has been a growing number of imaginative works and critical essays alluding to the socio-political upheavals of xenophobic attacks, especially against migrants in South Africa. This is described as "political xenophobia", which refers to hatred, hostilities, and the deployment of government policy to discriminate against non-South Africans (Watts, 1996).

1.1 Reading between the lines: The art of allusion in literature

Allusion is one of the literary devices used by creative writers to bring back memories of the past in imaginative arts. Mainly, creative writers deploy allusions to add depth and understanding of past events, people, or historical contexts in literature. In its simplest definition, allusion is an indirect reference to places, events, people, or persons of note. The reference to any of the above must, however, have significant importance known to the average reader.

Similarly, an allusion is a reference to a well-known figure, place, or significant historical event, either direct or indirect. This literary device is utilised to contextualise a story by referencing well-known individuals, places, events, or other literary works (Gaiman, 2019). Furthermore, as a figure of speech, an allusion allows the poet to subtly reference something, someone, a place, or an event familiar to the reader. For instance, J. P. Clark's poem, "IBADAN", is a direct reference to the ancient city of Ibadan, the capital of the old Western Region of Nigeria:

> Ibadan
> running splash of rust
> and gold-flung and scattered
> among seven hills like broken
> China in the sun. (Clark, 1962)

The poem undoubtedly evokes memories of the ancient city of Ibadan, with its old rusty brown roofs and the absence of orderliness in the construction of mud houses scattered all around. Also, T. S. Eliot and Alexandra Pope artfully deploy allusion in *The Waste Land* and *The Rape of the Lock,* respectively.

Campbell (1994) agrees that "Allusions invite us to select from our mental library knowledge which is no t in the text itself and without which the writer's intention will not be fully communicated" (p.19). Campbell's position above implies that allusion, as a literary device, helps the writer and the reader associate meaning outside the text based on either a direct or indirect reference to the text. By associating the meaning inherent in the text, allusion helps the reader tap into the history associated with the inherent reference. Perhaps this explains why Irwin (2001) argued that "allusion is bound up with a vital and perennial topic in literary theory, the place of authorial intention in interpretation, and literature itself; allusion has become an increasingly pivotal device. How different would twentieth-century poetry be without ubiquitous allusion?" (p.1)

The foregoing is an attestation that, as a literary tool, allusion wields artistic influence in sustaining the author's intentions and readers' interpretations of poetry and other imaginative works. For instance, several Anglo-Saxon writers deploy allusions to accentuate meaning in their writings. This is evident in "Beowulf," believed to have been written sometime by an anonymous poet between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The subject matter and themes in "Beowulf" are anchored on Biblical allusions to Cain and Abel:

> Till the monster stirred that demon that fiend
> Grendel who haunted the moors, the wild
> marshes, and made his home in a hell. Not
> hell but hell on earth. He was spawned in that
> slim of Cain, murderous creatures banished
> by God, punished forever for the crime of
> Abel's death (Biblical Allusions in Beowulf, 2016)

From the above, meaning can be associated based on the Biblical allusion to Cain and Abel. In the epic poem, Grendel, a monster-like murderer, had his hand grimed with the innocent blood of Hrothgar's men. He is likened here to Cain, while Hrothgar's men suggest a direct reference to the Biblical Abel. One can also surmise that allusions are of different kinds. The explanation above refers to a Biblical allusion. Biblical allusion falls under the category of religious allusions. Other kinds of allusions include literary, classical, mythological, historical, cultural, and socio-political allusions. The interest of this writer, however, is mainly in socio-political allusions in the poetry of Mabel Osakwe.

2. Previous Studies

Scholarly engagements abound on how writers deploy allusion to foreground events of the historic past. For critics (Alstyne, 1993) and (Oraegbunam, 2022), allusion is an unvoiced text used to add depth to the understanding of literary works, especially poetry. This presupposes the literary weight allusion has in the place of meaning in imaginative works. History and politics play a critical role in every society. Literary critics and imaginative writers mask the thematic elements of their art through the use of allusion. They carefully allude to events of the past by bringing to mind some histories and politics that shape modern society. In most African American literature, writers reincarnate the history and politics of race and racial discrimination following the inglorious transatlantic slave trade with the use of allusion. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, for instance, explore the history and dynamics of racial subjugation. Similarly, the politics and history of colonisation are evident in texts such as *Things Fall Apart* (*Achebe,* 1958), *A Man for All Seasons* (*Bolt,* 1960), and *House Boy* (*Oyono*, 1956). This illustrates that literature is a reflection of the socio-political and historical contexts that influence human existence.

Poets and other creative writers utilise allusions to make their subject matter, characters, and events relatable to their audience. Allusion is employed to bring significant happenings of the past and assist the

audience in finding meaning in the text. In her essay "African Allusions in Eighteenth-Century Literature", (*Walker,* 2012), Walker argues that eighteenth-century African-American writers are known for historical allusions to Africa as a lost homeland, expressing a strong nostalgic desire to reconnect. According to her, writers like Langston Hughes, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Claude McKay, Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Lucy Terry, and Venture Smith all "capture the pulse of their homelands in their artistry" (2). She further suggests that they create an artistic "tapestry of the supernatural, matriarchy, and unique ways of knowing the world" (3). Her submission points out that the hyphenated African-American writers of the eighteenth century often alluded to the history of traditional African heritage, encompassing Africa's distinct culture and religion.

In Dorothy Blairs's *Examining African Literature in French: A History of Creative Writing in French, from West and Equatorial Africa* (1976), the author contends that a Francophone West African poet employs allusions to "situate his tales" or "enhance the comic or satirical effects, particularly in animal fables" (47). Therefore, both Anglophone and Francophone African writers leverage the artistic significance of allusions to advance the thematic depth of their works. Thus, allusion has been an integral part of African literature.

In Yoruba traditional religion, especially the adherents of the Orunmila Ifa Oracle, it is observed that the Ifa priests often resort to historical allusions to the myth of creation, as well as recalling the life and times of Orunmila while on earth and carefully situating this in their incantations and divination. Liberian writers like Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, Vamba Sherrif, Wayetu Moore, Helene Cooper, and Shannon Gibney, among others, are relatively contemporary writers who integrate socio-political allusions to explicate the socio-political and historical life experiences of the Liberian nation. This is evident in Cooper's *The House on Sugar Beach* (2008), which alludes to the loss and pain of the protracted civil wars in Liberia.

A considerable number of Wesley's poems delve into Liberia's socio-political conflicts. Her poetry mainly alludes to the long-fought wars in her native land, Liberia. In the poem "War Children" for instance, Wesley alludes to the anxieties, conflicts, complexities, and socio-political alienation that plunged Liberia to the lowest ebb of economic and political instability. She writes:

> *Bury them-oh, we buried them.*
> *Bury them-yah! We buried them.*
>
> After years, we now dump those
> we used to carry on wheel barrows,
> legs and arms dangling, the air
> charged with gunfire (Wesley, 1998)

The tone of anguish in the poem brings back the memory of pain and the burden of agony that characterises the Liberian civil wars. The poet skillfully articulates the theme of death by referencing the mass killings during the war. The deliberate use of italics in the first two lines aims to highlight the humiliation and loss of loved ones in the war.

African writers, besides alluding to and recreating history in their creative oeuvre, have also continued to reflect the socio-political conflicts that plunge most post-independence African countries into their primaeval chaos. From Nigeria's Biafra war to the wars in Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia, Sudan, and the Arab Spring in North Africa, African creative writers consistently make direct and indirect references to the politics of power, tribalism, religious fanaticism, and neo-colonialism,

which in most cases lead to socio-political squabbles. For instance, in Achebe's *There Was a Country*, (*Achebe,* 2012), *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (Soyinka, 1985), and "Forty-eight Guns for the General" (Iroh, 1976) are imaginative writings that allude to the Nigeria-Biafra war. These works bring to light the politics of the civil war in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. Similarly, Mabel Osakwe, one of Nigeria's female poets, uses her art to allude to the socio-political disillusionment of post-independence and post-war Nigeria. Most of the poems published in *Desert Songs of Bloom* (2011) catalogue the socio-political underpinnings that mar development in Africa's oil-rich nation. Her poetry, no doubt, is a socio-political allusion to instances of Nigeria's underbelly.

3. New Historicism

New Historicism, as a literary theory, seeks to unravel the weight of socio-political and historical contexts in the making of a literary text. Every writer is shaped by society and the socio-cultural norms that influence it. The writer is also a product of society and its history. Reading a literary piece through the lens of New Historicism literary theory facilitates the understanding of the socio-cultural and political background that inspired the production of a literary text. This aids in the interpretation of such imaginative writing. Stephen Greenblatt and Michel Foucault are primarily credited as pioneering proponents of New Historicism. Greenblatt's perspective focuses on understanding the socio-cultural background behind a text. Thus, literary works are not closed cases of a single mind of the writer. Creative writers, therefore, write against the background of experiences in cultural, political, historical, and socio-economic contexts.

Typically, new historicists situate their analysis within the boundary of a "non-literary text" (Barry, 1995). The non-literary text here suggests the life experiences outside the text that the author (un)consciously brings to the fore in their writing. Barry (1995) posits further that in New Historicism, "literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other" (172). Hence, a text is appreciated within the context of revisiting society and historical perspectives, which in most cases exist in the space and time of relevance. This implies that there is a correspondence between imaginative works and their socio-historical contexts (Montenegro*,* 2018). This is seen in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (*Adichie*, 2007), which highlights the overlaps between the text (the novel) and the historic Nigerian-Biafran War experiences. This suggests that there is not much difference between literature and history (*Bonila*, 2018). This argument is also supported by Bressler (2011) that "in literature can be found history and in history, much literature" (184). This underscores that all expressive art exists in a network of intertextualities. This can be pigeonholed in the examination of the play "*A Man for All Seasons,"* which probes into the struggles between the state and the Church (*Bolt*, 1960). In the play, Bolt references the intrigues revolving around politics of power, religion, and freedom.

Contemporary African poets utilise socio-political allusions in their poetry. Corruption continues to be a major issue affecting growth and development in Africa. For example, Niyi Osundare, a prominent figure in Nigerian contemporary poetry, addresses issues of corruption in several of his works. In the poem "My Lord, Tell Me Where to Keep Your Bribe" (*Osundare*, 2016), the poet lampoons government officials, especially those who are expected to be the eyes and integrity of the nation's justice system. He writes satirically:

> My Lord
> please tell me where to keep your bribe?
> Do I drop it in your venerable chambers
> Or carry the heavy booty to your immaculate
> mansion.
> Shall I bury it in the capacious water tank
> In your well-laundered backyard (Osundare, 2016).

The betrayal of the Nigerian masses through corruption by government officials is a common theme in Nigerian literature. Political corruption, for example, is evident among the top echelons of the state. This has undoubtedly resulted in stagnation, inequitable wealth development, social injustice, and hindered economic growth in the nation (*Awuzie and Okiche*, 2017; Okonkwo & Ugwanyi, 2020; Okonkwo, 2024; 2025; Akpah, 2025).

New Historicism, however, does not view history as absolute truth; instead, it is seen as one of the perspectives for interpreting and writing about experiences in the world. New Historicism, also known as cultural poetics, interprets history and other discourses through a textual lens (Etim, 2020). This implies a convergence between socio-cultural foundations and the references to them in expressive art. In Mabel Osakwe's poetics, evidence abounds of intricate and inextricable connections between poetry and societal experiences. The writers, therefore, explore Osakwe's poetry to reveal the socio-political foundations to which the poet refers in her verses.

Mabel Osakwe's innate talent is visible in *Desert Songs of Bloom,* published in 2011. As a professor of English at Delta State University, where she was the pioneer head of the English department, and a University of Ibadan-trained poet, she brings to light the consciousness of her country, Nigeria, with deft allusions to history, politics, and socio-economic dictates of her native land. In her poetry, the reader is invited to explore the socio-political conditions that shape the thematic concerns of her work. Reading through most of the poems categorised under Parts II, III, and IV in the collection, an average follower of Nigeria's ongoing tales would recognise the socio-political allusions inherent in the poems.

4. Methodology

Using interpretative qualitative analysis (IQA) and inter-textual analytical method, the study engages four purposively selected poems of Mabel Osakwe: "The Land Chokes with 'Honourables"; "Dying Days… and a Cabal Nurses Ailing Nation"; "Eavesdropping on Observing Demo-demons"; and "Publish and Perish" published in her collection, *Desert Songs of Bloom (2011).* The selection was based on the overwhelming use of allusions to Nigeria's sore points. Nigeria, Mabel Osakwe's country, is the scope of the study, which examines the allusive truths of the country's open wounds.

5. Mabel Osakwe's poetry as a mirror to Nigeria's sociopPolitical landscape

Osakwe's *Desert Songs of Bloom* examines Nigeria's socio-political conditions. The poems categorised in Part II, under the heading: "Songs of Moral Decay, Drought and Rot" lament the moral decadence, strife, chaos, tyranny, and kleptomaniac tendencies exhibited by supposed Nigerian leaders. In the poem "The Land Chokes with 'Honourables'," she alludes to the greediness and insensitivity of members of the Nigerian parliament by satirically scrubbing their depravities with a tone of condemnation:

> Putrefaction assaults their breath up the city
> In the countryside, suffocating stench of decay
> Amidst distended containers of city honourable members
> Member representing Pocket-Project Budget for white
> elephant constituency
> Honourable chairman of Don't-Develop-Grass Roots
> Government (31).

The foregoing represents a poet whose poem drips with tears over the abandonment of the masses' projects to the whims and caprices of avaricious Nigerian lawmakers. True, Nigerian lawmakers have

been entrapped in corrupt practices at the expense of good governance and other dividends of democracy. Nigerian lawmakers, in most cases, indulge in all kinds of corruption scandals (Ojo, 2019). This is despite the hefty emoluments they earn. Yet accusations of "bribe for budget" (1) approval for various ministries still abound (Ojo, 2019). This explains why Osakwe, in the poem's title, gives the word "Honourables" a special meaning by her choice of enclosing the word in inverted commas to suggest a different meaning, suggesting its corruptness. Hence, the term "honourable" becomes questionable and points to legislators comprising men and women who, rather than being agents of change and development to the people of their constituencies, are instead, "Ladies and gentlemen, all men of timber calibrating on people's naivety" (lines 18-19). The land, according to Osakwe, stinks with rapacious lawmakers who had "become their dishonourables' dedicated account/Dedicated to all that destroys the land" (lines 16-17).

The beauty of Mabel Osakwe's poetry lies in her ability to draw the average reader into her poetry through a careful deployment of literary devices used to enrich and project the themes of her art. The literary devices, besides amplifying the subject matters of her work, also help to evoke emotions, sustain memorability, and foster a deeper understanding of the inherent issues in her art. A remarkable literary device used in Osakwe's poetry is satire, as seen in the poem, "The Land Chokes with "Honourables" In this poem, Osakwe deploys satire and parody to highlight the absurdities of corrupt Nigerian lawmakers while evoking laughter. In the poem, it is paradoxical that the legislative members of the Nigerian state and national assemblies have become "Members representing Pocket-Project Budget for White Elephant Constituency" (3). Osakwe herein lampoons corrupt lawmakers as pocket-driven praetorian individuals whose mission in public governance is self-centred. The theme of corruption in Nigerian politics is highlighted with careful satirisation and parodying of the socio-political underbelly in the Nigerian state. Thus, Osakwe employs satire as a textual mechanism to stimulate the audience's laughter while condemning and parodying the imprudence of corrupt politicians. Osakwe's sense of humour, while challenging the inappropriate behaviours of public officers, testifies to Akpah (2018), who argues that in Nigerian literature, creative writers are "gifted with a sense of humour and wit while ridiculing follies" (134)

Similarly, the depth of meaning, emotional connection, and empathy with the Nigerian masses are aptly foregrounded through the poetic choice of personification as a textual strategy in Osakwe's poetry. Osakwe's choice of personification is signaled in "putrefaction assaults their breath up the city" (31), in which the poet personifies the state of putrescence or rottenness in Nigeria's legislative chambers in the poem, "The Land Chokes with "Honourables." Osakwe further deploys metaphor in the third line of the first stanza to describe the legislative chambers as "distended containers of city honourable members" (31). Comparing Nigerian temple of lawmaking chambers to "distended containers" is an indictment of the failing state of corrupt Nigerian political office-holders. Osakwe's deployment of metaphor further helps to foreground the social commentary and activism towards repositioning and challenging politicians to rethink and mend their ways to good governance for the interest of the Nigerian masses who elect them into office. Her deployment of metaphor, thus simplifying complex ideas, invites her audience to the uncovering of hidden truths in her poetry.

Osakwe's ire, evidenced in the mood of anger and tone of condemnation of the poem, brings the reader closer to one of the ills obstructing growth and development in Africa's most populated black nation. The themes of corruption and maladministration among African politicians attract critical attention from various African writers and critics. Literary works like *A Man of the People* (Achebe, 1966), *Midnight Hotel* (Osofisan, 1998), *Land of Tales* (*Akpah*, 2019), *Dance of Savage Kingdom* (Akinsete, 2020), *Answers*

through the Bramble (Martins, 2021) and others serve as reminders of how Nigerian writers reference the endless covetousness of African leaders.

The inter-textuality context, a significant aspect of allusion, indirectly refers to constraints that hinder societal development due to corrupt officials. In some cases, political, historical, religious, and literary allusions overlap since, in the words of *Pirnajmuddin* (2011), political allusions "…are related to a historical period" (854). This is apposite to Osakwe's "Dying Days… and a Cabal Nurses Ailing Nation." The poem revives the memory of a covert scheme by covetous leaders to cling to power. It reminds readers of the intrigues and power struggles during the tenure of the late Nigerian president, Umaru Musa Yar'adua, whose presidency witnessed a lot of in-house scheming by his kitchen cabinet, often referred to as the "cabals." The conflict revolved around the control of the political power machinery due to the void left by the absence of President Yar'adua in Aso Rock, where he was flown abroad for medical treatment. Osakwe writes in the third stanza that:

> Ailing president rules from anywhere in the world
> Global concerns mount, Nigeria goes comatose
> Power usurpers, intoxicated cabal, enthrones lawlessness
> No sharing formula: looted treasury; looted all over again
> Her matriarchy plunders state powers, state treasury
> Her usurpation a check to mate Jonathan's crime
> When does deputizing become a crime? Crime heinous? (Osakwe, 2011)

As shown above, Osakwe's poetry decries corruption and the thirst for power. She delves into this by appropriating the history of Nigeria's political space during the regime of the late Umaru Musa Yar'adua, who was Nigeria's president between 2007 and 2010. The deteriorating health of the ex-president in 2010 was shrouded in secrecy when flown abroad for medical attention. The gap created by the absence of the President in Aso Rock plunged the country into a "comatose" with "power usurpers" and "intoxicated cabals" scheming for power and control of the state machinery, including the nation's national purse. This did not go without the intemperate looting of the state treasury, abuse of power, and subsequent neglect and downplaying of the office of the Vice President, as if it were a crime to act as second in command. Hajiya Turai Yar'adua, the wife of the late President, was allegedly accused of playing an active part in the manoeuvrings. This is suggested in "Her matriarchy plunders state powers, state treasury/Her usurpation a check to mate Jonathan's crime" (p.47).

If Osakwe's exasperation in "The Land Chokes with "Honourables" amplifies the rot in the legislative arm of Nigeria's democracy, the executive arm comes under her scrutiny in the poem: "Dying Days… and a Cabal Nurses Ailing Nation" (p.47). The title of the poem is garbed with the garment of personification, which the poet uses to embody the theme of power abuse by Aso Rock cabals during the administration of the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua.

The poem's literariness, apart from personification in the title, is further enriched by metaphor, enjambment, and rhetorical questions that condemn power usurpers, mainly the president's kitchen cabinet. During the ailing moments of the late President Yar'adua, he was secretly flown abroad for medical care; his deputy, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, who by constitution deserved to take over the mantle of leadership in the absence of his principal, was, however, relegated to the background by the late president's camarilla. It is against this backdrop that Osakwe's use of rhetorical questions resonates in

the third stanza of the poem. She asks rhetorically, "When does deputising become a crime? Crime heinous?" (p.47). To Osakwe and many Nigerians, relegating Goodluck Jonathan and preventing him from assuming full responsibility as Acting President by Yar'adua's coterie is tantamount to usurpation of power. Osakwe's use of rhetorical questions in the poem, however, helps evoke empathy and emotional resonance for Goodluck Jonathan, whose unjust treatment by intoxicated, power-drunk cabals at the presidency during Yar'adua's illness is evoked. The use of rhetorical devices in the poem, apart from inviting readers to supply their answers to the unanswered questions, provokes critical introspection into the pervading power play among high-ranking politicians in Africa, especially between presidents and their deputies, as alluded to in Yar'adua and Jonathan's Nigerian experience. The rhetorical question in the poem is erotesis, as it is merely used to emphasise the unhealthy political manoeuvring among political gladiators in Nigeria.

As seen above, Osakwe's poetry is a socio-political allusion to the autochthonous corruption in Nigerian politics. Corruption has become so ubiquitous in nearly all facets of socio-political and economic life (Soyinka, 2015). Soyinka describes corruption in Nigeria as "Hydropus", which is a coinage he derived from the words "hydra" (multi-headed) and "octopus" to show how boundless corruption has become in Nigeria. Soyinka, the recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, poignantly expresses his moral repugnance towards corruption:

> How, for instance, does one begin to evoke, in just one word, the slimy yet abrasive, ubiquitous yet elusive, deadly but hypnotic, etc., characteristics of such national sui generis as corruption in all its manifestations, a phenomenon whose near-invisibility lashes out at will in all domains of social existence, and sucks the willing or the unwary, the complacent or the combative into its maw? (Soyinka, 2015)

Soyinka above ponders the sordid endangerment of corruption in the national space of the Nigerian people. This is also what Osakwe alludes to in her art, as the theme of corruption runs through *Desert Songs of Bloom.* This theme of corruption is further traversed in the poems: "Power" …"They Saw It Disappear," "Magic Painters Painting," "Maximum Rule," "Publish and Perish" *"M.V.* Nigeria," "Enough Is Enough" and such others.

Osakwe's exploration of Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 after years of military interruptions is a major concern in Part IV of the collection. Under the military dictatorship of retired generals Muhammad Buhari, Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, Sani Abacha, and Abdulsalam Abubakar, Nigerians were divided along religious and ethnic lines, especially between Southern and Northern Nigeria. This was exacerbated by the annulment of the 12th June presidential election allegedly won by the late MKO Abiola. The cut-throat "politricks" and the abortion of democracy by then Gen. Babangida gave birth to dissenting voices, which led to riots, security challenges, extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate arrests, ethnic and reprisal attacks, and the jailing of political activists. This further spurred the emergence and strengthening of ethnic militias like the Odu'a People's Congress (OPC) in the Southwest, Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta, and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and the like.

On 29th May, 1999, Nigeria returned to democracy with the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. This is the perspective upon which Osakwe's poem "Eavesdropping on Observing Demo-demons" is written. In the poem, Osakwe is pained that the expectations of the gains of democracy were dashed as politicians failed to usher in growth and development. The glitz that characterised the swearing-in of Chief

Obasanjo eventually gave way to avidity by the politicians. This is the socio-political context to which the poet alludes in the third stanza of the poem:

> Where weak ethno-religious tendon joins sinews
> Weak majority-minority divide joints
> And greed binds North to South, East to West
> Ghana-must-come-and go-politics
> Politricksters extra ordinary quantum!
> Ghana-must-come go missile; very deadly, most deadly
> Kills nine hundred and ninety-nine of every thousand (Osakwe, 2011).

The lines above show that the only thing that binds politicians from both religious and ethnic divides is corruption, rather than improving citizens' social welfare and physical infrastructural development. The "Ghana-must-come-and-go politics" is a metaphor for corruption, which has become a pang in the annals of Nigeria's socio-political space. The poet in the first stanza refers to these politicians as a "threat to our kingdom here on the globe" (line 7). The poet's play on words with the deconstruction of democracy as "Demo-demons" in the poem's title suggests that the politicians are compared to demons whose purpose is to milk the blood of the nation dry by their demonic dispositions to governance. Osakwe in the poem blames both members of the upper and lower chambers of state and national assemblies as accomplices in the bastardisation of good governance. Hear her in the last stanza of the poem:

> From lower Abu-chamber come
> Upper chamber-come-legislative nothing
> Thirsty-sick Assemblies come join the chorus
> Dance crazy in tune with demo-demons
> Sniff this air-borne abortion pill
> Abort democracy in Nigeria.
> Divide, despoil, destroy democracy (Osakwe, 2011).

The wit and artistic vibe in Osakwe's poetry are evident in the sullenness and sarcasm that pervade the last stanza of the poem. The line "Thirty-sick Assemblies come to join this chorus" apparently suggests each of the thirty-six houses of assemblies representing each of the thirty-six states in Nigeria. The poet is disturbed by the collusion of these state assemblies with the executive arm to steal and destroy the people's patrimony through a macabre dance. The poet likens the spread of corruption between the executive and legislative arms of the Nigerian government to an "airborne abortion pill" that she fears would "Abort democracy in Nigeria". The pervasive corruption among government officials serves as the backdrop of Osakwe's poems. This exemplifies the new historicist dimension of her poetry.

One of the remarkable beauties in Mabel Osakwe's poetry is the consistency in her use of poetic license. This is evident in the poems: "Eavesdropping on Observing Demo-demons" and "Publish and Perish." The poetic license confers on the writer the artistic freedom to bend the rules of syntax to achieve certain stylistic effects. In exploring the subject matter of corruption among Nigerian politicians and the rot in Nigeria's ivory tower concerning publishing, academic ranking and promotion, Osakwe stimulates her readers with her choice of poetic license. For instance, the poet describes Nigerian politicians as bound in the common interest of siphoning public funds regardless of their ethnic and religious colourations. To bring the spotlight on the ills of corruption among Nigerian politicians, the poet subverts the normalcy of

word formation to create the word "politricksters" as a metaphoric reference to venal officials in Nigeria's democracy. Describing Nigerian unprincipled politicians as "Politricksters extraordinary quantum" in the third stanza of the poem "Eavesdropping on Observing Demo-demons (29'05'99)" (p.54) suggests Osakwe's recreation and unique voice as social commentary on the treachery that pervades civic leadership in Nigeria's statutory administration. Similarly, Osakwe's technical maturity resonates in how she carefully uses linguistic neologisms of poetic liberty to enhance the literariness of her poetry. In the last stanza of the same poem, referencing the thirty-six states' houses of assemblies in Nigeria as "thirsty-sick Assemblies." is not only a manipulation of the morphology of the phrase "thirty-six" but also the poet's sonic and semantic creativity aimed at chastising the malfeasance of lawmakers in Nigeria and the business of ensuring sanity in the state's legislative houses.

The squalid catalogue of issues affecting Nigeria is revisited in the poem "Publish and Perish." In this poem, Osakwe focuses on her constituency, the academia, in what seems to be a self-reflection on her career as academic staff in the ivory tower. Here, the poet deprecates the claptrap surrounding the "publish or perish" slogan in university promotions for academic staff. To her, the value of hard work appears to have diminished as promotions are no longer grounded in academic rigour, resulting in what she describes as the "rotten inbreeding of scholarship" (line 2). The poet bemoans the uncouth practices of "bootlicking, praise singing" and other uncultured dispositions by some academics to gain undue favour to reach "apex status" (professorial cadre) in career advancement. According to the poet, favouritism has become commonplace in attaining the professorial cadre of academic institutions, as long as aspiring candidates engage in bootlicking and "worship" of the stakeholders responsible for appointments and promotions in the university system. This sentiment is succinctly expressed in the following lines:

> Be ready for the green card as you perfect your game.
> You perfect your games of bootlicking, praise singing
> You have easy virtue and vices: double-tongued,
> double speaking
> If you kneel and crawl, announce loyalty, paying
> regular homage
> You defend evil practices of principal umpire fiercely, add
> Other corrupt practices labelled: smooth, easy
> flowing, agreeable
> Then, publish less, promoted fast (Osakwe, 2011).

It is disheartening that pervasive corruption has infiltrated the sanctity of academic institutions, which are meant to serve as the moral compass for society. The "green card" is a metaphor for approval of a lecturer's promotion as long as you can "perfect your game" which means aligning to the whims and caprices of the supposedly senior academics. " If not in the poem, delete; if there, please explain for non-Nigerian audience.

There have been negative attitudes and politicisation in the appointments and promotions of academic staff in Nigeria (Fatunde, 2019). While this may not be true in all cases, this is what Osakwe, however, condemns in "Publish and Perish." At times, principled academics, irrespective of their qualifications and publication records, are denied promotions for refusing to engage in bootlicking or praise towards those tasked with deciding the fate of academic staff during the promotion process. Osakwe paints this aptly in these lines:

> Be ready for the red car if –

You are principled and upright, if –
You're truly God-fearing and truth-speaking
If you are fearless and diligent, worst still if-
If you are not corrupt or incorruptible
Then publish and perish! (Osakwe, 2011)

The global practice in academia is that promotion is based on teaching, research (publications), and community service. In Nigeria, however, it appears that academic publications take a lion's share in determining lecturers' promotion to the next rank after two or three years. This accounts for why many lecturers prioritise publication to flourish. However, in addition to hard work and paper publication, there is an unvoiced rule that one must be in the good books of those who dictate where one's fate lies during the promotion exercise. The "red card" metaphorically suggests rejection for promotion regardless of whether one meets the criteria for promotion or not. Hence, academic staff who refuse to "play ball" by capitulating to the dictates of ego-driven superiors wait endlessly before reaching the apogee of their careers as university teachers. The diligent scholars are painfully subjected to psychological and emotional deprivations as they wait. The poet makes this clear below:

Some die waiting, some retire waiting
Their sin? They publish too genuinely
Too scholarly, no veneer of loyalty
Therefore publish and perish (Osakwe, 2011).

Osakwe's poetry, when situated within the context of Nigeria's ivory tower, reincarnates the harsh realities faced by some blunt, honest, hard-working academics who are unwilling to bow to the line of "veneer of 'loyalty'" (45). This is what the poet alludes to and satirises in "Publish and Perish." In the poem, Osakwe's empathy towards genuinely hardworking university teachers is projected through the technical use of literary devices. The abundance of literary devices in the poem bears testimony to the poet's conscious effort to magnify the thematic thrust of her poetry through the richness of figurative language. For example, Osakwe's use of parallelism in the first line of the seventh stanza when she writes: "Some die waiting, some retire waiting," as a means of emphasising and contrasting the uncertainty of hardworking university lecturers whose moral sanctity, rather than becoming a rewarding virtue for their uprightness, has become a setback to earning promotion. They instead suffer endless delays or are denied promotions because they refuse to perfect the game of bootlicking and praise-singing ego-stuck superiors. The use of irony is evident in "…retire waiting" after all, retirement from active service suggests rest and a break from waiting. It is therefore ironic that rather than the university lecturers earning their promotion while in active service, some had to wait until retirement before being rewarded. It is this unhealthy practice that Osakwe decries in the poem. The choice of irony is therefore deployed to amplify and condemn the state of limbo and endless waiting to be promoted for years, even when it is certain that the sedulous lecturers deserve their promotions. Also, Osakwe uses rhetorical questions in the sixth stanza to expose the delay tactics used in Nigerian ivory towers by disgruntled, egoistic colleagues to create a time lag and emotionally suppress fellow university teachers into endless waiting.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the socio-political allusions to a myriad of corrupt practices experienced in Nigeria's economic, educational, and socio-cultural spaces. Through the imaginative writings of Mabel

Osakwe, the audience is exposed to the insensitivity of Nigerian leadership. Within the theoretical provisions of New Historicism, the poet's stylistic imagination depicts how the poet reincarnates the pervading history of "hydropus" and the ills of Nigeria's socio-political life. Osakwe uses her art to unveil the stagnancy of growth and development because of failed leadership and corrupt officials in government. The allusion to systemic corruption in Nigeria's socio-cultural existence manifests in various sectors such as politics, education, and the national treasury.

Also, the study explored the creative prowess of Mabel Osakwe in the use of figurative expressions. The literariness of her poetry is demonstrated through a careful deployment of poetic devices such as poetic license, metaphor, allusion, rhetorical questions, irony, paradox, parallelism, symbolism, imagery, and among others, used to amplify the different themes in her poetry. Thus, Nigeria's socio-political undersides, to which the poet alludes, are sustained through evocative strategies and literary aesthetics.

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