



## A Pragmatic Analysis of Some Selected Poems in Osundare's *Random Blues*

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**ABSTRACT:-** This paper attempts a pragmatic analysis of Niyi Osundare's poems in *Random Blues*. The poems x-ray the political process in Nigeria that is characterised by manipulation, intimidation, hooliganism and a myriad of malfeasance. Three of the poems have been purposely selected for Speech Act analysis because of their assertive, penetrating and incisive messages. Specifically, the data for the analysis are taken from *Random Blues* (*Ballot Blues Part 1*, *Ballot Blues Part 2* and *Ballot Blue Part 3*). The author uses the Speech Act theory which consists of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to analyse the poems. In addition to this, mutual context beliefs, implicature and presupposition are relevant analytic tools that are employed. For ease of analysis, the paper is specifically divided into two folds: pragmatic features and linguistic features. The paper concludes that for the needed change to be experienced in the political configuration of a country like Nigeria, a free, fair and credible election is pivotal to good leadership and governance.

**Keywords:-** Speech Act Theory, Pragmatics, MCBs, Poetry

### I. INTRODUCTION

Man deploys language in everyday situation and affair. The notion that language is employed to do things and that the meaning of forms used to achieve such task is largely premised on the socio-cultural context has made it worthy of discussion and interpretation. It is the reflection and manifestation of man's socio-cultural beliefs and thoughts. It is impossible to divest man of his thoughts, beliefs and the milieu in which he lives or finds himself. All of these factors have a telling effect on what man is and what he eventually becomes.

It is inevitable at this point to stress that poetry cannot be divorced from language, knowing full well that when discussion is made of literature, language is always present. This submission is a veiled way and manner of affirming that poetry is an appendage of literature and literature is a "subset" of language. Literature is non-existent in the absence of a language and it is also significant to the growth of language due to the strategic role it plays in the society at large.

To Ayeleru (2012:126), "poetry is a work of literature which is characterised by the presence of imagination, emotion, truth, sense of expression and concrete language expressed rhythmically." She stresses that it is a tool that is employed by man to express feelings and thoughts, divided into stanzas, lines or verses, concretises ideas, using figurative language, among others.

On the face value, poetry as a genre of literature might be viewed to be insignificant and does not appear to lend itself to a discourse-based approach (Carter, 1989). Poets have different things to say and they use language skillfully, artistically and aesthetically to convey their messages. The form of language used by poets has often repelled the interest and attitude of some people, among them teachers, pupils and scholars (Bala, 2011 pp. 82-83).

Poetry is not a form of entertainment and in a certain sense not even a form of art but our anthropological, genetic goal, our evolutionary linguistic beacon. We seem to sense that as children ... we absorb and remember verses in order to master language. As adults we abandon the pursuit, convinced that we know enough about it. But what we've mastered is an idiom, good enough to outfox an enemy, sell a product, get laid, or earn promotion, but not enough to cure anguish or cause joy.

From this submission, it could be inferred that just as language could be complex so also it is with poetry. Poetry goes beyond mere expression and passive reading but the ability of the reader to decipher the mind and intent of the poet. In fact, so complex and fearful is poetry to some people especially learners of

language. This prompts the viewpoint of Dasyva and Jegede (1997) that “poetry, to many, is a scary mystic, it is so regarded as something inaccessible and a puzzle.”

On account of the foregoing, it will be an aberration to view poetry as a genre of literature that is inconsequential in the scheme of things, particularly language and communication. Language users, especially poets, deploy and manipulate language with a view to conveying their information, messages directly or indirectly and to specific readers as well as the general populace. Poetry, therefore, is a vista to understanding the complexity and the dynamism that are associated with language use.

## II. PRAGMATICS

Various scholars and linguists have examined pragmatics as a concept. A basic problem that is associated with description, definition or explanation in term of acceptance is the absence of universality (Levinson, 2009). Pragmatics as a concept is not a difference. Alluding to some insights of what pragmatics means and what it reflects is a vista to its scope.

Gadzar (1979, p. 2) is of the view that “pragmatics has as its topic those aspects of the meaning of utterances which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to the truth conditions of the sentence uttered.” The point being stressed here is that it is not in all situation (communicative) that language users express themselves directly and that utterances and written expression could have hidden/deep meanings which the listener(s) or reader(s) is expected to decipher.

To Crystal (1987, p.120), “pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choices of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others.” From this standpoint, it is pertinent to note that pragmatics is not only concerned about what is actually said, but the factors (reasons) responsible for it and why the writer/speaker has chosen to use certain expressions/words at the expense of others.

It has also been averred by Lawal (2012) that pragmatics beams its searchlight (attention) on the manner and consequences of speaker/writer's utterance. He adds that speech act is an integral part of it. Speech act is part of sociolinguistic inquiry/investigation into the factors of linguistic performance. Humans employ language to do a lot of things such as making promise, issuing warnings, swearing, laying bets, among others.

### **Theoretical Perspectives/Underpinnings**

Language users employ language in diverse ways to achieve different objectives and goals. Poetry is an aspect of literature that creates the platform for the manipulation and domestication of language. It therefore follows that language is not always deployed in relation to the conventional form. The use of language is dynamic (Yule, 2002). It is the dynamism that is associated with language that affords poets to make the utmost use of poetic licence.

It is germane to stress that pragmatics cannot be discussed without recourse to context, since the former is the study of the way utterances are employed and how they are related to the context in which they are expressed. Therefore, context is quite significant in pragmatic study. Odeunmi (2006) is of the opinion that context is the spine (backbone) of meaning. Context is the environment in which communication takes place (Crystal, 1987) and is useful in accounting for inference, implicatures and presuppositions in an expression/utterance (Lawal, 1995). Some types of context of utterance have been identified by Lawal (1995). These contexts are linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological and cosmological. Linguistic context is the relationship that exists among words in an utterance. Situational context relates to the topic of the discourse and the factors of the physical event, including concrete objectives, persons and location. Psychological context refers to the background of the mood, attitudes and personal beliefs of the language user.

Furthermore, social context is said to be connected with interpersonal relations among interlocutors, while sociological context explains or describes the socio-cultural and historical settings/environments. The last context, which is cosmological, seems to be the broadest, because it refers to the language user's worldview, and the implicit references to the world or aspects of it, and to certain universally established facts (Ayodabo, 2012).

As it has been highlighted earlier, speech act is an essential pragmatic concept. Austin (1962) avows that language is deployed for diverse uses such as rebuking, warning, commanding, etc. He categorises speech act types into locution, illocution and perlocution. It is incontrovertible that speakers/writers of utterances/expressions mean more than what they say/write. Utterances/expressions are always elastic and ambivalent in meaning (Searle, 1969). It is also true that there is shared socio-cultural, linguistic and religious background knowledge in the form of mental structure of the participant known as “speech act schemata”. This is what has been tagged mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs).

The basic area/aspect which any pragmatic theory should explain revolves around speech act functions, along with presuppositions, implicatures, in addition to other mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs). It has been affirmed that the concepts of “implicatures” and “presuppositions” are strategic to the analysis of meaning in language use (Lawal, Ajayi & Raji, 1997). According to Austin (1962), our utterances perform different acts

such as warning, rebuking and commanding. It is on account of all these, that he groups speech acts into locution, illocution and perlocution.

The concepts of “implicatures” and “presuppositions” are significant in the study and analysis of the meaning of language use (Lawal, Ajayi & Raji, 1997). Implicature is the link between what is said and what is implied. Presupposition, on the other hand, is the explicit assumption about the real world which speakers make and in which the meaning of an utterance greatly depends (Ayodabo, 2012). Two types of presuppositions have been identified. These are semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition (Levinson, 2009).

The concept of MCBs, proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979) is quite relevant to the notions of implicature and presupposition. MCBs place premium on the speaker's intention and the listener's reference. A speech act is performed with the aim that the listener could be able to understand and identify the intention of the speaker. When this eventually occurs, the listener puts certain facts together that will assist him to recognise the speaker's intention. The fact or information as identified and recognised by the interlocutors is what MCBs signpost (Lawal, Ajayi & Raji, 1997).

### III. METHODOLOGY

The data for this work were sourced from Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues*, a collection of poems that was birthed through the inspiration which the poet drew from a group of his enthusiastic students at the University of New Orleans. *Random Blues* is a poetry comprising fifty five poems (Random Blues 1-55) with some of them bordering on various aspects and themes. Specifically, three poems; namely, *Random Blues 23*, *Random Blues 24* and *Random Blues 25 with the sub-titles: Ballot Blue Part 1, Ballot Blues Part 2 and Ballot Blues Part 3*, respectively are chosen for study due to their uniformity of purpose, message and thematic prism.

#### Pragmatic Features

The poems are inciting and penetrating as Niyi Osundare deplores the electoral process and system that characterised the Nigerian polity. Using locution, illocutionary and perlocution as variants of speech acts alongside implicature and presupposition and MCBs, the poet captures vividly the ugly political scenario that typifies election system and process in Nigeria.

Implicature is a tool employed by the poet to depict the voting system. *Random Blues 23* (Ballot Blues 1) opens with a sad reminder of the ugly past of electoral malfeasance in the country. As a springboard and insight into the poems, the poet affirms that those who participate in the voting system are non-existent (dead) and the under-aged. This is the veiled reference but not incomprehensible message of alluding to the under-aged as “Babies in the cradle” and the deceased as “The long, long dead”.

The poet shows the mutual knowledge of election as an event that takes place periodically. Through the MCBs, the reader is able to infer that “voting season” is a period when the electorate in a given domain “choose” those that will represent them in various positions. The reference to “ward”, “ballot boxes” is an indication of the electoral process. In addition to this, MCBs is also established through the poet's use of “Green-white-green”, a reference to the Nigerian flag. This also depicts the social context of the poems, because of the relationship between the target listeners and the politicians who are “seeking” the votes of the electorate.

On a very large scale, the poet employs judicious use of direct illocutionary act through the act of asserting and stating. As an eyewitness, though not a participant, in the fraudulent, electoral acts, he affirms that elections in Nigeria is not free and fair. The indecorous acts of stealing of ballot boxes, stuffing of ballot boxes with already thump-printed (toe-printed) ballot papers are indicators that electoral process that ushered in politicians into office is fraught with irregularities.

By making allusion to places like “in the Oba's palace”, “in the thug's bedroom” and “in the Chieftain's house”, the poet avows that rigging is ubiquitous. Implicature as employed in this regards, reveals that electoral malpractice is the business of both the lowly and highly placed personalities. It is an act that cuts across all the strata of the Nigerian society. The poet equally applies indirect illocutionary act. It is the intended illocutionary force that is verdictive in assessing, evaluating or judging the outcome of electoral process. He is of the opinion that election is just an issue or matter of formality or the popular slogan of due process because it has already been concluded even before it commences. “Long, long before the polling day, their victory assured, without a fight” lends credence to the judgemental stance.

*Random Blues 23* (*Ballot Blues 1*) is brought to a climax through the “verdictive” act of satirising the politician and his “contraband” guest. As it is affirmed by the poet, the chieftain (politician) and contraband guest (his accomplice in the distortion of the electoral process) are not prosecuted by authorities that are expected to deal with all manners of atrocities and their offenders/operators. In *Random Blues 24* (*Ballot Blues Part 2*), the poet presents the ugly developments that typify the polling day. Contrary to what obtains in saner climes, the political and electoral atmosphere is tense and charged as politicians and their allies (battalion of thugs) reign supreme.

The poet uses illocutionary act to depict the acts and utterances of the politicians (office seekers) and their supporters (thugs). By moving about with “power-ful guns”, the poet implies that they (thugs) have

backing. This claim is even more substantiated judging by “their weedy breaths (that) pervade the air”. Contrary to what would be expected from politician as a plea or peaceful means of begging for the votes of the electorate, it is an issue of threat and command. This borders on indirect illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of threatening and commanding.

From another perspective, the poet uses presupposition to entrench the view that the electorates/voters are not stakeholders on the polling days as they are under the beck and call of the politicians and their marauders. The thugs are the real voters while the electorates are the spectators (onlookers). Any attempt to challenge the course of the election could result in loss of lives.

The poet employs direct illocutionary act through the direct assertive act of stating that incumbent office holders, who are seeking re-election “work” in concert with electoral officials/polling agents as well as security agencies to perpetrate illicit electoral acts. The “soldiers” and “police” support electoral manipulation because they have been compromised (bribed). Their interest is not a patriotic one but the type that is self-centred.

The terminal part of the poem affirms that it is anathema and abomination for office seekers, especially those who are seeking re-election to lose. As a result of this, they would do anything unlawful to cling on to power, not minding the interest and welfare of their subjects (followers/citizenry). The idea of being a former occupant of an office is irritating and is not what should be conjectured, let alone experienced. *Random Blues 25 (Ballot Blues Part 3)* is a personal and self-evaluation of the poet on elections in Nigeria. Using presupposition, he avers that election is a do-or-die affair and that with respect to this, the human life lacks premium.

The effect of the locutionary and illocutionary acts in *Random Blues 23* and *Random Blues 24* is what eventually climaxed in perlocutionary act. The resultant effect of electoral irregularity (rigging) and subjugation of the people’s will do not go unchallenged. Protests by the electorate on the outcome (result) of the election will spell doom: loss of lives and property. The poet, using implicature, affirms that for those who have been robbed of victory and by extension the electorate whose rights have been infringed upon, have no hope of getting justice. This scenario is vividly explained as in “Justice staggers with a broken scale ...”

At the summit of *Random Blues 25*, the poet submits that office-holders commit a lot of atrocities to get power and with the “blood of peace” that stained their hands, the land (Nigeria) will continue to experience unease and palpable tension.

### **Linguistic Features**

The linguistic features of the poems are characterised by repetition, metaphor, personification, alliteration, irony, consonance, homophone, among others. This will be explained one after another.

#### **Repetition**

The poet employs a great deal of repetition to give the poems rhythmic and musical value. Virtually all the stanzas of the poems are interlaced with repetition. As a linguistic/literary device, repetition is the recurrence of words to achieve emphatic effect. Examples are found in *Random Blues 23, 24* and *25* respectively:

Another voting season  
And the sad story of the ballot  
Say, another voting season  
And the sad story of the ballot.

Polling day  
And Hell is here  
Ah, polling day  
And Hell is here

It’s do-or-die  
All or nothing  
Yes, do-or-die  
All or nothing

#### **Alliteration**

A prominent device deployed by the poet is alliteration. It is the recurrence of all the consonant sounds (plosives, sibilants or fricatives) at the initial position of word groups close to one another on the same line (Salman, 2013). The alliterative use as evident in the poems include: “sad story”, “stolen, swapped”, “swarving ... shifting shrouds”, “...deaf and daft”, “promptings of the purse”, “bloody box”, “leave ...lingering loss”, “shooting sport”, “...bow and bend”, etc.

### **Consonance**

It is a linguistic device that reveals the use of similar consonant sound in the middle or terminal part of word group close to one another on the same line. Manifestations of consonance in the poems include “hapless harlot”, “...cast...vote”, “...past the last, last post”, “untouchable the Chieftain”, “...contraband guest”, “...stock...nest”, “...police salute”, “glittering ...pockets”, “...deaf and daft”, “...must...ruse”.

### **Simile**

Simile is used by the poet to depict the disdain which the “political class” has for the electoral process. It is the comparison of two dissimilar things with the same quality, using as and like. Ballot boxes are being “stolen” and “swapped” by the politicians and their allies without a modicum of conscience. This unhealthy practice informs the use of the simile “Like a hapless harlot” to describe the contempt which politicians have for the ballot box, a device for the implementation of positive change in governance.

### **Oxymoron**

It is a linguistic device that connects two contrastive words together. The expression “To the foul delight of the ballot paper” reveals the poet’s displeasure with the politicians who desecrate and abuse what should be held sacrosanct. The “delight” which the perpetrators of electoral fraud seem to enjoy and relish is to the poet a foul and repulsive one. It is “delight” that is not acceptable to any right-thinking person and the norms of the land.

### **Personification**

It is a linguistic device that assigns human qualities, functions, attributes to living and non-living things. A situation whereby those who are already dead and perhaps, forgotten are being called to cast their votes typifies personification. This is exemplified in “The long, long dead / Are re-called to cast a vote”. In addition, “Justice” is also personified in one of the poems as the poet admits that “Justice staggers with a broken scale up in the sky a thundercloud”. The function of a human being “stagger” has been assigned to “Justice” an abstract noun.

### **Metonymy**

It is the use of object or instrument to represent a person or entity. It is a mutual knowledge that green, white and green are the colours on the Nigerian flag. By using these colours, the poet is making a veiled reference and allusion to Nigeria as the setting of the bizarre events and oddities.

### **Synecdoche**

This linguistic device employs a part to represent a whole or a whole to represent a part. The poet employs “Broken heads” to portray the victims of injustice that characterised the electoral process due to their bid to resist it. “Corpses in the street” refers to the people who have been killed with regards to the uprising that accompanied the electoral malfeasance.

### **Irony**

The act of saying the opposite of what one has in mind is irony. The poet in a hidden manner describes the ugly developments before and during election as anything but good. The poet writes that “with a convoy of boxes fully loaded (illegally stuffed) his polling style is neater and trendier”. The question that is worth asking is, what could have been cleaner and fair in a rigged election? He goes further in his ironic tirade, “Rig-to-rule is our sacred custom”. Rigging is antithetical to a free, fair and credible election. Rather than accepting rigging as an eyesore, it has become a way of life.

### **Metaphor**

Metaphor refers to a comparison in which an idea, object or person is described as if it were a thing whose attribute it shares (Okesipe & Okolo, 2013). It is an implicit or indirect comparison in a discourse. The poet uses some metaphors to typify the electoral irregularity that has become endemic and pandemic. He says rigging to rule is a “game”, a “sport”, an “ailment”, a “symptom”. All these are metaphors used by the poet to capture and describe the untoward electoral activity.

### **Idiomatic Expression**

Idioms are combination of words which could express meaning markedly different from or independent of the literal meanings of its individual words (Yusuf, 2004). The poet employs idiom to make an incisive and penetrating appeal to the reader(s). Hear him: “Ballot boxes here Ballot boxes there ... In the Oba’s palace In



the thug's bedroom Green-white-green, fair and square". Fair and square is the idiom that shows that the electoral manipulation is done directly and in the open without challenge or confrontation.

### **Lexical Borrowing**

The idea of lexical borrowing is irresistible in a second language situation, especially when cognisance is taken of English in relation to Nigerian languages. For instance, the poet employs *Eewo*\*! (abomination) and *Oba* (King) as expressions that can be found in Yoruba language.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Speakers and writers, including poets have diverse ways of relaying and communicating their messages. The role of poets in the re-construction of the individuals and societies cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, poets, as life and image changers, are the watchdog of the society and also ensure that good governance is entrenched through their campaigns.

Niyi Osundare, a prolific poet, dramatist and literary critic in *Random Blues 23, 24 and 25* castigates the perpetrators of political and electoral malfeasance. He has always been a vehement champion of the right to free speech and is a strong believer in the power of words, saying, to "utter is to alter". (Wikipedia, free encyclopedia).

Osundare, a literary and academic giant is renowned for being the mouthpiece of the oppressed and downtrodden. He is ever ready to align with the masses, regardless of the situation and the price involved. It is said of him that the African poet cannot afford to be a political:

You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in, in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator with a gun in his hand; and, on the international level, when you live in a world in which your continent is consigned to the margin, a world in which the colour of your skin is a constant disadvantage, everywhere you go – then there is no other way than to write about this, in an attempt to change the situation for the better. (Wikipedia, free encyclopedia)

This submission conclusion is quite lucid concerning the selected three poems in *Random Blues*. Using pragmatics as a launch pad, Osundare in veiled and clear expressions mirrors the decadence in the political and electoral process in Nigeria. This patriotic act of satirising, warning, rebuking and condemning the actors and other accomplices is with the intention to cease the electoral haemorrhage.

The poems are of relevance, knowing full well that words have the propensity of transformation. Any poet that is individual-minded and society – sensitive cannot afford to be silent in the face of oppression, intimidation, raw and brutal display of power as well as suppression and repression of people's will and rights.

The pragmatics in Osundare's poems is all about aesthetics, research, education and information. Pragmatics gives the reader(s) the ability to see and think beyond the ordinary. Indeed, it could even make the reader to "outsmart" the writer (poet). Pragmatics is an inevitable aspect of language that is essential in unearthing and discerning the message of writers, particularly poets.

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## Appendix I

### **Random Blues 23 (for May 6, 2007) (Ballot Blues Part 1)**

Another voting season  
And the sad story of the ballot  
Say, another voting season  
And the sad story of the ballot  
Stolen, swapped in every ward  
Like a hapless harlot

The long, long dead  
Are re-called to cast a vote  
Yes, the long, long dead  
Are re-called to cast a vote  
Graveyards swarming with shifting shrouds  
Ghost long past the last, last post

Babies in the cradle  
Toe-print the ballot paper  
*Eewo\*!* Babies in the cradle  
Toe-print the ballot paper  
Crying and kicking, crying and kicking  
To the foul delight of the ballot paper

They thumb-print in the day  
They toe-print in the night  
Yes, they thumb-print in the day  
They toe-print in the night  
Long, long before the polling day  
Their victory assured, without a fight

Ballot boxes here  
Ballot boxes there  
Say, ballot boxes here  
Ballot boxes there  
In the Oba's palace, in the thug's bedroom  
Green-white-green, fair and square

They sit fair and square  
In the Chieftain's house  
Yes, they sit fair and square  
In the Chieftain's house  
Long, long before the voting day  
Home to the roach and the sniffing mouse

Untouchable the Chieftain  
And his contraband guest

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Say, unforgettable the Chieftain  
And his contraband guest  
His power comes from those above  
Who send him guns and stock his nest

**Appendix II**  
**Random Blues 24**  
**(for May 20, 2007)**  
**(Ballot Blues Part 2)**

Polling day  
And Hell is here  
Ah, polling day  
And Hell is here  
A battalion of thugs with powerful guns  
Their weedy breaths pervade the air

“Your life or your ballot”,  
They scream at the polling crowd  
Say, “your life or your ballot”  
They scream at the crowd  
“Do as we say, and stuff the box,  
Or end up in a dirty shroud”

And enter His Excellency,  
The Deputy Premier  
Behold His Excellency,  
The Deputy Premier  
With a convoy of boxes fully loaded  
His polling style is neater and trendier

Soldiers snap to attention  
The police salute  
*Fem!*, soldiers snap to attention  
The police salute  
Glittering medals, bulging pockets  
Eye on their share of the national loot

The people shout  
The people curse  
Oh, the people shout  
The people curse  
But deaf and daft, the party men  
Only heed the promptings of the purse

“Hello hell-o hell-o!”  
The Governor phones the Polling Boss  
“Hey, hello hell-o hell-o  
The Governor phones the Polling Boss  
Fill every space of the bloody box  
Leave no room for a lingering loss

We are the Ruling Party  
We must never lose  
Say, we are the Ruling Party  
We must never lose  
Never Ex-This or Ex-That  
Win we must by every ruse.



**Appendix III**  
**Random Blues 25**  
**(for May 27, 2007)**  
**(Ballot Blues Part 3)**

It's do-or-die  
All or nothing  
Yes, do-or-die  
All or nothing  
Voting is war by every means  
Human life is not worth a farthing

Rig-to-rule  
Is our sacred custom  
Yes, rig to rule  
Is our sacred custom  
Our national game, our shooting sport  
Our stubborn ailment with a lingering symptom

Forget the means  
Embrace the end  
Say, forget the means  
Embrace the end  
Grab the throne with a sword in hand  
Watch the people bow and bend

Broken heads  
Corpses in the street  
I say, broken heads  
Corpses in the street  
The road to power is littered with bones  
A worthy ruler must kill and cheat

But the land is hot  
The omens are rife  
Say, the land is hot  
The omens are rife  
Burning passions, homes aflame  
The stage is set for a bloody strife

The days are silent  
The nights are loud  
Say, the days are silent  
The nights are loud  
Justice staggers with a broken scale  
Up in the sky a thundercloud

The ruler's hands are stained  
With the blood of peace  
Alas, the rulers' hands are stained  
With the blood of peace  
Shameless murderers with stolen crowns  
Sworn to rule in a land of unease.