

Exploring Activist Poetics and the Nigerian Leadership in Ndubuisi Martin’s *Answers through the Bramble*

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Received: 15/11/2022

Accepted: 15/12/2022

Published: 15/01/2023

Abstract

Ndubuisi Martins, one of Nigeria’s young contemporary poets, reincarnates the vagaries of Nigeria’s neo-colonial desolation, which reflects a culture of mediocrity in Nigerian leadership and the continuous suffering of the masses. He lays bare in his poetry a strict disapprobation of dysfunctional and catatonic conditions that continue to widen the gap between the disadvantaged Nigerians and the political class that this study investigates. Thus, the significance of the study lies in the intervention of poetry as activism by Ndubuisi Martins to excoriate and negotiate better living conditions for the Nigerian masses. The study adopts Marxism literary theory which explores the consciousness of class struggle in the interpretation of five selected poems: “To a returning general”; “When you said...”; “silence is spirit”; “The Reports”, and “Naija is a badly behaved poem”. The selected poems were critically analyzed as reflections of Nigeria’s leadership complexities that impose hardship on the Nigerian masses. This is what Martin’s poetry fustigates in *answers through the bramble* as a literary activist and intellectual voice against the tyranny of the ruling class in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ndubuisi Martins, Nigerian leadership, activism, Marxism, Nigerian masses

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1. Introduction

Literature over the years offers itself as activism against social malady. Prominent African-American writers - Fredrick Douglas, Toni Morrison, Anna Cooper, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Malcom X Rosa Parks, Amiri Baraka and the like have deployed literature as social activism against the stultification of humanity. The afore-stated writers for instance are widely known for challenging the ills of racial injustice and the subjugation of the black race.

Similarly, the consciousness of western incursion into the African space and the attendant imposition of colonial rule also sparked a greater deal, of activist literature from African writers. Imaginative writings like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Things Fall Apart* (Chinua Achebe), *Petals of Blood* (Ngugi wa Thiong'o), *House Boy* (Ferdinand Oyono), *The Will to Die* (Can Themba), arguably typify activist literature on African colonialism. Other writers especially in the genre of poetry resonate with activist poetics which interrogates the cannibalistic nature of slavery in Europe and America. This is evident in T. S Elliot's "The Wasteland", James Grainger's "The Sugar Cane", Percy Shelley's "Ozymandius", Christina Rosseti's "My Dream", Gabriel Okara's "You laughed and laughed", Raza Ali Hassan's "On Imperialism".

Besides monolithic activist literature on themes of slavery and colonialism, African writers in recent times focus mainly on the staggering contemporary realities such as apparent hardship and dystopia characterized by social injustice and poor governance. Sule E. Egya's *Poetics of Rage: A Reading of Remi Raji's Poetry* undoubtedly represents and explores activist poetry exemplified in Raji's art. Also, Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Joe Ushie, Ifowodo Ogaga, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Remi Raji share common activist poetics one gets in their forbearers like Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo as poets cum writers whose literature justifiably portrays the truculent leadership that subject Nigerian masses to further privations.

Remarkably too, young Nigerian poets do not pretend to be onlookers in condemning the maladministration of the Nigerian state. They also deploy their art as activist writers to excoriate bad leadership while negotiating better welfare of the citizenry. Thus, young Nigerian poets like Ndubuisi Martins, Aduragbemi Ojo, Romeo Oriogun, Barth Akpah, Razak Malik, Stephen Khekehege, Utibe Hanson, Ifesinachi Nwadike. Funmi Gaji, Charles Akinsete among others, utilize their art in the documentation and condemnation of the pervasive insensitivity of Nigerian leaders against the Nigerian masses. The growing numbers of literary imaginations in the genre of poetry have shown that Nigerian poets unmistakably represent the voices and yearnings of the underrepresented and marginalized Nigerian citizens. This study sets,

therefore, to explore Martins' poetry as activism and advocacy for the masses' enhanced welfare in the face of the staggering insensitivity of the ruling class. Hence, the study is an addition to the growing poetics of young Nigerian poets in the national consciousness of leadership failure and a strong force and protest for good governance.

2. Literature Review

Nigerian Poetry and Literary Activism

The intellectual voices of contemporary Nigerian poets reverberate the dysfunctional conditions of the suffering masses. This is evident in the neocolonial oppression of disadvantaged Nigerians. Awhefeada (2017) expostulates that post-independence Nigerian literature reflects the drubbing of Nigeria's harsh conditions. The poetry of the 1980s and 1990s birthed activist poetry on themes of "military dictatorship and the many ills it bequeathed the nation". Among the many ills of military dictatorship are human rights violations, breach of the constitution, inflation, and poor governance. Nigerian poets of the military and post-military eras are on the same lane with the deprived and subjugated poor citizens as their advocates. This is exemplified in the poetry of Niyi Osundare, Joe Ushie, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Harry Garuba, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Ada Ugah and others. Ada Uga's second collection, *Song of Talakawa* (1985) is made up of poems which represent the dispossessed and suffering masses. Her poetry without scruples demonstrates a poet who identifies with the *talakawas* (the poor).

Also, activism in Nigerian poetry dwells on themes and sub-themes like the despoliation of the environment and clamour for a safer environment. For example, Ojaide's volume *Delta Blues* (2002) typifies the resistance and activism against the ecological imperialism of the oil-rich Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The frustration and dehumanization of the people of Niger-Delta region, due to long years of environmental pollution, have invariably stirred eco-activist poetics in Ojaide's poetry. Nwagbara (2010) validates this when he writes succinctly that Ojaide's poetry echoes the coercive exploitation of the rich mineral resources in the Niger-Delta without recourse to the safety of the environment and the residents. The author writes further that Ojaide's poetry:

Highlights the system of exploitative environmental policies that place the multinational corporations represented by Shell, AGIP, Texaco, Chevron, and Mobil as well as the political elites above the people (the subaltern), thereby destroying the Nigerian environment. (p. 22)

Nwagbara's opinion above on Ojaide's poetry echoes intellectual activism via literary production against oil spillage and contamination of water, air, land, and the negative implications which affect the means of livelihoods of the residents.

Besides, activist poetics on the protection of the environment and the challenges of pollutions which negatively impact the flora and fauna of the ecological zones of the Niger-Delta, Niyi Osundare's "Deep Green" also represents eco-activist poetry on anthropocentrism. His poetry speaks against poor consideration for environmental balance. Chigurupati (2020) attests that Osundare expresses pain over the brutish and selfish human disposition to the environment. According to Chigurupati's words, Osundare "earnestly laments over the degradation, deforestation, and death of the ecology and human destiny thereafter" Osundare's "Deep Green (Once Upon a Forest)" justifies further:

Deep green, my testament, as I forage
through this forest of vanished glories,
my memory one shell of naked echoes

Roots have shriveled in
earth's heat-harrassed crypt
blighted leaves float in the wind
like flakes of careless scars

Long-limbed lumberman have
Laid low the loins of the land;
the Yes-I birds have left
with their rainbow songs

The desert marches towards the sea,
a haughty, implacable army...

Once (not too long ago)
I talked to trees in this forest
and trees talked back to me.

Deep green (Osundare, 2017, p.1)

Osundare's oeuvre strongly condemns the doom and gloom of deforestation that has become a threat to climate stability in Nigeria. One can conclude that Osundare's spiritual disconnection with the forest, because of the intruding activities of lumbermen is portrayed in "Deep Green". Thus, the ecological dimension of the poem is a testament to the poet's activist advocacy for the protection of the forest that has gradually become "forest of vanished glories".

In feminist struggle, activism in Nigerian imaginative art reflects the flowering of female voices whose creative works confront unequivocally hegemonic stances against women. Hence, Nigerian female writers challenge various patriarchal dominance and negative stereotypical underpinnings which limit the visibility of womanhood or relegate women to marginal space. Literary activism of Nigerian women writers gravitates toward resistance to oppressive male dominance and limitation to women's freedom of expression and right to existence (Akpah, 2018). Hence, activist literature of women's writings pushes women to live out of the circle of cultural exigencies which limit their aspirations. High-ranking Nigerian feminist writers include Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Sefi Atta, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Buchi Emecheta, Unomah Azuah, Chinelo Okparanta, Lola Shoneyin, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the like. Lola Shoneyin while responding to an interview with D'Clark (2020) is of the view that society should move beyond "the ecology of gender binaries". Shoneyin's literary activism and feminist advocacy manifest in her poetry collection: *So All the Time I Was Sitting on an Egg* (1998). Shoneyin's unapologetic body poetics deconstruct gender roles. She negotiates unhindered freedom for women's existence, choices, and aspirations for a better life. Shoneyin's radical feminist streak appears to be on the same terrain as Azuah's unrelenting feminist stance which counters poor imaging and limitation of women.

Literature undoubtedly is a potent activist force and instrument for the conscientization of every society. This means the masses need a viable literary production for activism and social change in Nigeria where leaders have failed the citizens whom Ojogan (2010) describes as "those who bear the yoke of oppression" and have no choice but to speak up in revolt.

3. The Marxist Orientation in Twenty-first-Century Young Nigerian Poets

Fyfe's (2020) essay "Marxism and African Literary Studies today" downplays the relevance of post-colonial Marxist evaluation of African imaginative art. Fyfe (2020) believes that there is the decline in socialism and Marxist struggles in Africa today unlike the days of political figures like Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, or Thomas Sankara in the 1970s and 1980s. While this may be true to some extent, a cursory look at the "Sorosoke" #End SARS

movement in Nigeria attests to the collective struggles and protests by the largely Nigerian youths against the brutality and excesses of the country's military and paramilitary agencies. The struggle primarily was a confrontation and call for the disbandment of the infamous Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), whose excesses have been criticized heavily. The #EndSARS movement expanded further to protest the ineptitude of the Nigerian political class. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria reawakens the demand for social justice, financial accountability, and good governance. Adisa (2020) argues that #EndSARS protest was the Nigerian masses' struggle to "end capitalist oppression and exploitation". This presupposes that #EndSARS protests exemplify one of the core values of Marxism. For decades, the precarious state of the Nigerian entity which reflects in her ailing democracy warrants the masses' protests in major Nigerian cities of southern Nigeria.

Olaopa (2020) posits that in Marxist analysis, protests become inevitable and at the center of discourse because the capitalist society allocates power to the superstructure (the rich) leaving the poor to the margins and struggling for survival. Olaopa's position aligns with the avalanche of literary production associated with the #EndSARS protest. For instance, *SOROSKE: AN #ENDSARS ANTHOLOGY* edited by Verissimo and Yeku (2021) embodies the tales of the torturing, debauching and systematic dehumanization of Nigerians by the government's quasi-military agencies. The Marxist confrontation against the brutality of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad breathes in the poem "Bubu" by Yeku:

The streets are heaving with anxiety,
as screens and smartphones pour tales of grief
into your chest; you wonder what gestures
to end czars will unloose the tongue of bubu.

But alas, Bubu speaks, but of clouds without rain,
Dreaming hurricanes as he gaslights a nation
without fuel, in a paradise drained of life and lustre;

those who die are as the cattle of Daura, invisible. (p.34)

From the foregoing, one sees that the poet sits on the side of the #EndSARS protesters. Martins decries the battering of the land and the painful insensitivity of the Nigerian leader who is sarcastically referred to as Bubu which is a sarcastic reference for the Nigerian president, Buhari. The president's negligence in the heat of the protest unfortunately has made the land lose its "life and lustre". The Marxist inclination of the poem is exemplified again in Ndubuisi Martin's "Asking for Sunrise and Getting Silence" in the same anthology. In the poem, the

brutality of the state deployed to squelch the #ENDSARS mass protest reincarnates in the second stanza of the poem:

Asking for sunlight meant
We want too much desert after
A dinner of rhetoric, and all we get
Is the garrison sprinkle of blood,
The silence that yawns long after
D.J Switch let the digit eyes see
The way an answer comes in the regalia of blood
At Lekki gate. (p.28)

Ndubuisi's "silence" in the poem's title is a metaphor for oppression. Nigerian government led by retired general Muhammadu Buhari rather than tackle the concerns of the youths preferred bloodbath with the "sprinkle of blood" during the #EndSARS protest led by one of the leading protesters, "D. J Switch". Switch's camera captured the brutal killings of the protesters at the popular Lekki Toll Gate where the protesters had assembled for the protest.

Marxist interpretation of literary texts primarily explores the consciousness of class struggle, the oppressed and the oppressor, and the silenced and the silencer. It is a deliberate effort at investigating opposing forces – the struggles of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in which the latter aims at attaining positive transformation and improved status. Mambol (2016) argues that positive transformation occurs because of opposing forces between the two struggles. The product of such struggles often yields positive transformation. Straight from the shoulder, it is the quest for social transformation and improved welfare of the hoi polloi that stimulates literary activism of the Marxist orientation. Art thus becomes a tool for social transformation.

Marxism generally credited to Karl Marx aims at dialectical materialism which negotiates the overall progress of society. Mambol (2016) states further that dialectical materialism for Marxists as an effective tool exposes the secrets behind the social processes and their future course of development. Also, the common goal of Karl Marx, Luckas Bertolt Brecht and Louis Althusser who are the core proponents of Marxism is summarized in attaining fairness in the distribution of resources between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie for the overall interest of social change and liberation. Therefore, the liberationist aesthetics which characterize contemporary and young Nigerian poets validate the continuous struggle for social change in their imaginative art.

4. Exploring Ndubuisi Martin's Activist Poetics in *answers through the bramble*

Ndubuisi Martins' jaunt into the Nigerian literary space began in 2017 with the birthing of his first volume of poetry, *One Call Many Answers*. Several of the poems in the collection navigate the Nigerian state with a strong mission to call out ineffectual leaders for the miserableness and alienation of the Nigerian masses. The symbolic hangover which lies in Ndubuisi's title seems the government has become helpless and lacks credible answers (solutions) to the agitations of the downtrodden as portrayed in Martin's *One Call Many Answers*.

In Martin's second collection, *answers through the bramble*, the poet's critical faculty and Marxist mission beyond a shadow of doubt come out boldly to condemn and challenge the pernicious marginalization of the poor by the Nigerian upper class and political leaders. The systematic marginalization over the years continues to deprive under-class Nigerian citizens.

Nigerian citizens have suffered years of military rule that were characterized by anguish, desultory misgovernance and the like. The incursion of the military into Nigeria's political space was a bad omen that negatively hampered the stability of Nigeria's democratic values. War, poverty, corruption, and ethnic and religious sentiments remain part of the fall-out of military irruption. Against this background, Martins rues the re-entry of a former army general (Buhari) into Nigeria's democracy as a civilian president. The poet adumbrates this in the poem: "To a returning general":

Let the mat spread through this path as we hail
the general who returns, four times denied,
now emerges with the heads of his four enemies
under his armpit, for the Aso carnival scrub,
the flavour of a repeated song on civil lips
(*answers through the bramble*, p. 12).

A discerning reader can easily interpret the satirical notion in the first stanza of the poem. True, due to the perceived failure of Goodluck Jonathan administration, which was characterized by corruption, especially in key government agencies, many celebrated the second coming of Buhari as timely even after he failed repeatedly the four times he contested. The artistic representation of the carnival-like atmosphere by Buhari's supporters is satirically depicted in the opening stanza of the poem as shown above. However, the mood of despair which suggests the tragedy of a nation justified by the vulturous disposition of the returning general pervades the last three stanzas of the poem:

We now step into the new baptism of change,
another maxim perennially renewed to woo us
we, whose sense of history is the very graveyard
of amnesia, we, who leave wound to fester flies until
our neighbours cope with the frequent fragrance
that defines our homeland.

We snore and snort for we are here at this Rome
where our rear-guard, old vicar is now a repentant
democrat, ready to enthrone silence and give sword
to the air, promulgate decrees and claim the see
of spirit, ready to cure the darkness on the land
with the grief of fictive Egypt .(*answers through the bramble*, p.12)

From the foregoing, Martins enunciates the baptism of fire evidence in the mass disillusionment of the populace because of the Buhari led administration which has failed the Nigerian masses with the phoney mantra of "change". Martin's anger switches to the oppressed masses who constitute the bulk of the electorates for re-electing Buhari in 2019 despite their apparent dissatisfying first term in office as a civilian president. It is worth stating that the poet's decision to include himself as part of the masses who had lost their sense of history with short-lived memory justifies his affinity and inclusion as victim of poor governance. They sheepishly continue to re-elect iniquitous leaders into public office. Martin's creative maturity is evident in how he carefully deploys irony and humor to dilute the searing temperature of pain that Nigerians face under the regime of Muhammadu Buhari since his assumption of office as Nigeria's civilian president in 2015.

It is ironical that the “retired army general” deserves “fourteen gunshots” for promoting obliquely characterized appointments in critical sectors of the country despite claiming that he “belongs to nobody and for everybody”. The raw absurdity of the rudderless administration of Buhari’s civilian regime activates the lamenting voice in Martin’s poetics despite his attempt to mask that in pigeon laughter. Thus, rather than promote equity and national cohesion, the administration of Buhari paid wispy interest to the abstruse diversity of the Nigerian state by promoting ethnic and religious sentiments. The audacious activities of herdsmen attacks across Nigeria exemplify this. Martins amidst humor alludes to this in the last stanza of the poem “to a returning general”:

Fourteen gunshots for the old general who belongs
to nobody and for everybody, who must answer
the surname of herds. (*answers through the bramble*, p.12)

Martin’s activist poetics sits in between the condemnation of Buhari-led administration’s perceived tacit support to the herdsmen and their villainous activities across the country. The poet calls for sanity in the polity. The poet’s Marxist sensibility and disapprobation against the “returning general” and his deplorable leadership failure are rekindled in the poem “when you said....” In the poem, the poet chronicles what has become the theatrics of election campaign promises which are plagued with deceit. In most cases, unpatriotic and greedy politicians deceive Nigerian electorates with fake promises.

Martins deploys his creative instinct as a public intellectual to portray the unending rhetoric of deception among the ruling class. Before the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, salvaging Nigeria’s economy, and security, and tackling corruption were the major campaign promises of the then-presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari. After Buhari emerges as President, the outcome of his performance in tackling corruption, insecurity and the ailing economy was far below the expectation of the electorates and at variance with the campaign promises made to them prior to the election. It is this irony of what was said (promised) and the reality that Martins ingeminates in the poem “When you said...”:

I waited through still-birther answers
after you, slay man, called.
When you said lies will steer the strife
Of your predecessor, we, eager parliaments
Parroted your creed, coveted your rhetoric...
we kept our doors open for the guardian star,
but here we have the scars of multiple stabs,
yours now outnumber the vilest of them.
(*answers through the bramble*, p.13)

The poem above shows that the poet's persona is miffed at the disconnect between the garnished campaign promises made and the disconsolate failure that accompanies such promises. From the foregoing, the poet rues the lack of integrity and failure of major political actors to live up to their words when elected to public office. For instance, the change mantra which is associated with the ruling party (APC), was to represent a positive transformation of the economy, security, and reduction of corruption in Nigeria's major sectors and public governance. Obviously, the masses have been bumped off by the "slay man" which is a metaphor for the elected delusory leaders alluded to by Adisa (2020). The pain in the poet's voice resonates in:

...we, eager parliaments
parroted your creed, coveted your rhetoric...
we kept our doors open for the guardian star,
but here we have the scars of multiple stabs,
yours now outnumber the vilest of them. (*answers through the bramble*, p.13)

From the above, one feels the pains of the poet persona, on the face of it regrets supporting, campaigning, and voting unavailing leader as a rock-ribbed follower before the election. Martins stirs the contestations of campaign propaganda in Nigeria's wobbling democracy and leadership failure by those Adeniyi (2021) describes as people whose greed is driven by "unending speculation in Nigeria's oil wealth" (p. 399). Okolie, Enyiazu and Nnamani (2021) are right in concluding that campaign propaganda enabled by the media is creatively orchestrated by politicians to promote popular sentiment that could easily wheedle the electorates to cast their votes for them.

In most cases, campaign propaganda is stirred on ethno-religious sensitivities by the political class to achieve their economic and political aspirations. Thus, the change they seek to offer is mere rhetoric for ascendancy to power and subsequent repositioning of their cronies. This, consequently, hampers good governance, security, and socio-economic development of the country. This is what Martins quetches in stanzas two, three and four of the poem, “when you said...,”:

When you said, it was time for change,
you meant it. We see it in your foggy
seasons, full throttle,
after all, one region breathes
in the nerves of all like the foul air
all noses must breathe in.

when you said our night will be day, you left
the hurricane in the morning of your vow
from dark alleys. We pick cobwebs
in the house once loud with your noise.

When you said you belong to everybody
And you belong to nobody, you made everybody
Your kinsmen alone, the true taxonomy
Of the change saddle, the pillar of integrity
And unmitigable empire of forex
Stumping scaffold for your blood brothers...
(*answers through the bramble*, p. 13)

Undeniably, the poet is appalled by the failed promises of the nation's leader. He deploys the image of fog on "foggy seasons" which is synonymous with poor vision to express the pain of the mass's inability to see the promised change for better living. Also, the pain associated with an unstable electricity supply that has caused hardship for the Nigerian masses is decried in stanza four of the poem. This is conveyed with the image of "cobwebs" which are metaphors for inactivity or dormancy. At another layer of meaning, the cobwebs suggest the web of lies, darkness or evil which characterized the political leaders, and their strong alignment with deceit and insincerity. All this combined to scotch the rehabilitation of the energy sector and effective distribution of electricity to Nigerians.

It has become unavoidable for Martins to gloss over the perceived ethnic and religious sentiments which smell badly in the regime of President Buhari. Martins alludes to the inherent deception in Buhari's "I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody" famous speech when he (Buhari) was sworn in 2015. The speech was widely acclaimed by political analysts who believed that with that speech, equity and fairness are guaranteed to all Nigerians regardless of their faith, ethnicity and party affiliation. Painfully, Buhari's words hang on hoodwinking and chicanery. Martins poetry, therefore, exposes the dishonesty in Buhari's speech in "you made everybody your kinsmen alone". According to the poet, only Buhari's kinsmen are defined with the indefinite pronoun "everybody". The poet humorously refers to Buhari as "...the pillar of integrity" to satirize the facade of a personality sold to Nigerians as "Mr. Integrity". Martins' poetry, therefore, bemoans favoritism in Nigerian politics. The poet also deconstructs the APC "Change" mantra associated with the ruling party. Rather than signifying a new dawn of good governance, the political class becomes insensitive to diversity and inclusiveness, Olaopa (2020). A major cause of disaffection among Nigerians of diverse tribes and religions is attributed to bad governance and lopsidedness in the appointment of key political officeholders under Buhari administration. This is what the poet objurgates in the stanza below:

...you made everybody,
your kinsmen alone, the true taxonomy
of change saddle ... (p.13).

In “Naija is a badly behaved poem”. the poet echoes the pervading spirit of fear, tragedy and general insecurity that have befallen the land (Nigeria). The vagaries of a land which has been shattered come with a sombre mood in the first stanza:

We wake not by cockcrows here anymore,
bullet sounds and shrills topple nature.
reports rifle through our beings,
the tamarind bust-shrills ends till.
Beginnings for twilight are a day longer.
(*answers through the bramble*, 57)

The rage in the poet’s voice reflects the absurdity of political leaders who have failed ingloriously to proffer solutions to the splurge of insecurity across Nigeria. The poet reminisces about the barrage of mass killings and kidnappings across Nigeria by the activities of killer herdsmen, bandits, *boko-haram* insurgents, and unknown gunmen. The activities of these ill-famed groups are widely reported in both social media and traditional media outlets.

The poet indirectly reawakes the consciousness of dissonant cries across the land and the apparent impuissance of leaders on the issues at stake. The absence of peaceful co-existence due to the unprovoked destruction of lives and peoples’ means of livelihood is aptly captured in:

We wake not by cockcrows here anymore,
bullet sounds and shrills topple nature
(*answers through the bramble*, p. 57).

From the foregoing, one cannot argue that the poet alludes to the anguish of “... news of new pogrom and herdsmen orgies” (p. 57) extrapolated by the poet in the third stanza.

The eerie silence in the face of baleful disasters which confront the land and her inhabitants particularly the poor is what the poet satirizes in the poem, “silence is spirit”:

On this clan, silence is spirit:
modern supernatural, abiding in hills and valleys.
Signatures through cranky, grey mosses and
streams, blue or cluttered,
at the busy jaws of streets, in the troubled tranquillity
of “sacred” groves, this spirit struts... (*answers through the bramble*, p. 16)

The silence here is a metaphor for both oppression and insensitivity. Martins in this poem certifies his Marxist disposition by excoriating the spirit of silence by once Nigerian virile activists and social crusaders even in the face of the languorous performance of political leaders. For the poet, the salvation of the land and the masses warrants spiritual reawakening in seeking answers – good governance, social justice, security, and equitable distribution of resources even if doing so comes with multiple challenges. Therefore, the poet deserves credit for crafting the title of the collection – *answers through the bramble*. The poet is aware that no true change comes without the brambles. That is why in the last stanza, Martins writes:

Silence lives, dies, lives:
the broad scapula of a tyrant boosts its tenure,
fidgeting pen of the fourth estate, loam of its life,
brassy rebels, carcinogenic traps for death, poetry
its graveyard, most too, silt for its life.
If you can kill silence, kill it.
It soon dies through your first stutter
And lives through your run of words. (*answers through the bramble*, p. 16)

Inherent in the stanza above is a poet who is aware that the continued silence of the masses and political activists are tantamount to approving uncouth political leaders' continuous subjugation of the poor. Hence, the poet calls out journalists (the fourth estate) to boldly expose the ills of society rather than being faint-hearted in their reportage as suggested in "fidgeting pen." The poet understands the danger of silence; it is the easiest way for the masses' unconsciously submit to the dictates of oppression by their torturers. This is further albeit painfully encouraged by the unflappable press.

This pain of generic silence by the populace to the overwhelming failure of their leaders in the poem, "silence is spirit", is again visited, this time with a more sulfurous sarcastic tone in the poem, "Naija is a badly behaved poem". Ordinarily, a badly behaved poem is a poem that throws its meaning off its readers. In other words, it is badly written and less appealing to its audience. Metaphorically, Martins sees naija (Nigeria) as less appealing to the average Nigerian citizen. It has become a homeland for kleptocrats as suggested in the first stanza of the poem:

Homeland, green for kleptocrats, is red in my verse-
a poem written as an epic-becoming unfitting,
oversized sheets of noisy lullaby of countryside.
(*answers through the bramble*, p. 55)

The poet above justifies why *Naija* is a badly behaved poem. One of the conventions of an epic poem is that it dwells on a personality, a hero who represents national, socio-cultural, religious, and political ideals. Unfortunately, the extraordinary deeds of the hero which you find in typical epic poetry, which appeal to the common people, are lacking in Nigerian leaders. They are therefore very “unfitting” to occupy public offices. Truly, leadership failure has been the scourge of socioeconomic growth and development in Nigeria. Martins puts it perfectly by describing greedy politicians in Nigeria as “oversized sheets” who go about with cacophonous rhetoric in the countryside. These corrupt politicians barefacedly show off their ill-gotten wealth to the suffering masses in the countryside.

Another metric of determining a badly behaved poem is the poem’s poor structure and lack of punctilious deployment of literary devices, poor placement of words in their proper order, and unsatisfactory attention to the metrical units of a poem. All these make the meaning of such a poem very bad, drifting, and directionless. Martins, therefore, indirectly in “*Naija is a badly behaved poem*”, refers to Nigeria as an aimlessly drifting country with leaders who lack the substance of great deeds to drive the seat of governance.

Similarly, the poor structuring of the country which makes power reside and rotate among the cabals, and the lopsidedness in the appointment of key government officials, at a greater disadvantage of the downtrodden validates why “*Naija is a badly behaved poem*”. One is therefore safe to conclude that the poet lends his voice in support of many Nigerians who believe that the country needs restructuring. As Babalola and Onapajo (2019) argue, the calls for restructuring aim at “a review of the existing federal arrangement to allow for more representation and equity in the system”. The authors’ position is further heightened in Obaze (2022) that clamor for restructuring is to help the Nigerian entity and its constituent parts “more efficient, productive, acceptable, functional and equitable”. Thus, Martins’ symbolic examination of a poorly structured Nigeria is a literary activist’s reawakening and repositioning of Nigeria for a better and more profitable nation. After all, one of the core values of Marxism

is equity and fairness in the distribution of common heritage; it shows in the words of Morawski (1974), "concerns about alienation."

Martin's emotional distress and distaste over Nigeria's political and economic imbalance, another sign of Naija as a badly behaved poem, is further accentuated in the closing stanzas of the poem:

A bad poem is:

A country of tribes 1914,
lugardian convenience,
that fiefdom where silence
befriends oppression and
masses learn to live to
adjust in circles of ever-
unfolding penury. (*answers through the bramble*, p. 55)

Martin comes out perspicuously above to lucubrate and justify why he thinks "Naija is a badly behaved poem". The poet faults the historical antecedent of Nigeria as a country built on the marriage of convenience. Alluding to the amalgamation of southern and northern Nigeria in 1914, he blames Lord Lugard, the former Governor-General who was instrumental to the fusion of both southern and northern protectorates for the imbalance in the merger. The imbalance arises from the poor structure of the Nigerian federal system. As if this was not enough, the poet sees Nigeria (Naija) as a domain controlled by feudal lords. This is an indication of oppression, enslavement, and lack of freedom. Indeed, Nigeria has become a "fiefdom" of esurient politicians and the upper class whose motive is the continuous impoverishment of Nigerians. The poet, however, repines that the masses who bear the chain of oppression choose to suffer in silence despite the weight of oppression thrown at them. This is where the poet's Marxist streak breathes. The poet expects the masses to come out of their shell rather than die in silence. For him, silence, therefore, becomes an instrument of defeat and complicity with their oppressors as they "learn to live" and "adjust in circles of ever-unfolding penury" (lines 14-15).

The six-stanza structure of the poem represents the six geo-political components of Nigeria. Also, one can lay claim that Martin's poetry exhibits activist poetics as he protests the evil machinations which retard growth and development in Nigeria. Hence, the poet rails bitterly against the silence of the suffering masses who to the poet, "learn to live; to adjust in circles" of poverty. The Nigerian masses according to the poet bow calmly to the deceptive analogies and oppressive regimes of Nigerian leaders.

4 . Conclusion

Over the years, social activism via literature manifests in several Marxist literary productions in Africa and beyond. Creative writers deploy their art to protest the distempers orchestrated by poor leadership of the political class. Literature thus becomes a tool against social malady in literate societies. Martin's, *answers through the bramble*, stands as a poet's activist response to the pernicious devaluation of the Nigerian lower-class citizens by their ineffectual leaders. The poet thus reawakens the consciousness of the masses to stand tall against all forms of social injustices which have denied them democratic values and uplift their socio-economic well-being.

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