

# Subverting Nationalism: Historicizing Horrors of the Past in Wole Soyinka's *Samarkand* and Femi Fatoba's *They Said I Abused the Government*

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## Abstract

This essay engages with Nigeria's turbulent past in Wole Soyinka's *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* and Femi Fatoba's *They said I Abused the Government*. Factionalism is adopted to poignantly map the pervasive tension which engulfed the Nigerian landscape during General Sanni Abacha's tortuous military regime between 1993 and 1998. The collections further reflect how satire intersect with protest to explore a sustained anger against the military. The increasing complexity of Nigeria's nationhood comes under close scrutiny as a patchwork of cultures encased in a tenuous geographical sphere, where people of differing nationalities and religions are stampeded into a nation by the obtrusive British colonial authority. These poetry collections articulate a great deal of connection in the thematics of satire and protest: poems in both collections are preoccupied with assertive criticism of Abacha's military subjugation. The paper's overarching concern is the delineation of brutality derived from the recent historical occurrences in Nigeria. Essentially, the poems significantly re-evaluate the potential of art to bear witness to the bizarre and depressing anomie which reverses Nigeria's sovereignty during this period. Where Soyinka's poetic hacks into the incongruity of Nigeria's nationhood, Fatoba's poetry generates vitriolic humour that verges on satiric tone.

**Key words:** subverting nationalism, historicizing horrors of the past, satire, protest.

## 1. Introduction

In almost all African nations that have witnessed the menace and scourge of military interjections, the attendant consequences are often encapsulated in: a looted economy, violation of human rights and perpetration of culture of impunity. Unabated, this chaos has often led to civil war in a few postcolonial African countries like Nigeria, Liberia and Uganda. The military as an aberration of governance in contemporary

Nigeria' is a by product of the subverted nationhood. It is curious to emphasise that Nigeria has often tottered toward disintegration and has been constantly rescued by the same politically inclined military from obvious collapse. This ambiguous role has become an oppressive, divisive tendency hedged around by the ambitious military gladiators to derail democratic governance since the first coup of 1966. Concrete evidence to support this assertion, eloquently reverberates in Wole Soyinka's *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002) and Femi Fatoba's *They said I Abused the Government* (2001). By driving concern to acknowledge the problematic of military incursion in the postcolonial Nigeria, Soyinka and Fatoba attempt an indexing of horrors which relentlessly accrued from the upsetting pain and brutality trajectory created by Abacha's military regime.

This comparative project first considers the well-known Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka. Soyinka, at the inception of Abacha's usurpation of power, embarked on a selfless campaign against the annulment of the June 12 presidential election. He was then forced to relocate from Nigeria when it became obvious that his life was in danger. Subsequently, he kept shuttling between the United Kingdom and United States of America in order to deflect Abacha's persistent persecution. On the other level, Femi Fatoba also suffered some degree of deprivation consistently unleashed on the pro-democracy activists based in the South-Western Nigeria where Chief M.K.O Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12<sup>th</sup> 2003 Nigerian presidential election hailed from. For Soyinka and Fatoba, 'faction' (combination of fact and fiction) is adopted as a stylistic of literary self-assertion in *Samarkand* and *They Said I Abused the Government*. Their adoption of faction takes the form of a delicate balancing act that oscillates between outright auto-biography and fiction. Invariably, Soyinka and Fatoba's re-telling of their experiences in the poetics rendered in faction serves as a convenient medium of response to the urgency of documenting events during the turbulent days of Abacha's regime. Incontrovertibly, the choice of faction affords the poets a needed platform to reiterate a pursuit of self-assertion which unsettles the gap between truth and fiction. In addition, the overlap between the actual historical occurrences of Abacha's brutality and the humiliating personal experiences suffered by the duo poets is exploited in intertwining of satire and pun within the context of protest, to reinforce the thematic link between affirmation and the denial of military subjugation.

Suffice to state that, the idea of nationalism has become an increasingly important leitmotif in the writings of contemporary African writers, for the interrogation of instability in some postcolonial African states. Nationalism is a recurrent reference point in the works of writers from Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and other belligerent African countries that are continually embroiled in perennial threats of disintegration often orchestrated by the disturbing ethnic differences and parochial military interventions.

I intend to argue in this paper that, the things that have held Nigerians back since the attainment of independence in 1960 include an ineffective pseudo-federalism, corruption and incessant military incursions. These factors have compromised their

ingenuity, talent and their ambition. But they also undoubtedly recognize that at the fundamental root of these interlinking problems, lies an unbalanced and inequitable structure which undermines Nigerian federalism. Essentially, Fatoba and Soyinka have through the medium of fiction appropriated pun and humour grounded in the intersection of satire and protest in *They said I Abused the Government* and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*. This intersection has been utilized to criticise the dehumanisation and devaluation that Nigerians experienced during the anomic years of Sanni Abacha's military regime. In the light of the above, significance of these collections lies in their attempt to engage with thriving Nigerian poetry that often vibrantly deploy protest against autocratic regimes. Soyinka and Fatoba have chosen to engage with nationalism as an important and topical issue which bothers on governance in post-colonial Africa in general. Through a deft appropriation of nationalism, the poets are able to catalogue the excesses of Nigeria's maximum ruler, General Sanni Abacha's despicable rule in particular. Consequently, the paper takes a close look at the nature of protest, its manifestation in satire, and the way in which the literary imagination transforms it to suit the artistic temper of Fatoba and Soyinka. The intersection of protest and satire in these collections remarkably retains its essence as a means of drawing attention to the intimidation, torture and killing visited on Nigerians by this repressive military regime.

Matter of fact, Nigeria is a nation in transition where tribal allegiances are privileged over equitable compromise that gives each of its federating units its proper due. As a result of this inherent inequity, each ethnic group tries to assert itself over others. A situation which has often developed into a mutual distrust as it has constantly bred unbridled rivalry that has led to anarchy. Further, it will be illustrated that, these poetry collections revolve around a series of social and political reminiscences that impinged on Nigeria's turbulent nationhood. This perceived political upheaval has in turn emphasised a reverse of the gap between historicism and reality. Suffice to state that, the climax of recent threat to Nigeria's sovereignty is roundly entrenched in the poetics of beating, incarceration and humongous assault. These are satirically and humorously grounded in the pages of these anthologies to protest the subjugation of Nigerians by the military during the apocalyptic days of General Sanni Abacha's horrendous regime<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, Fatoba in *They said I Abused the Government* weaves a diverse poetic techniques of metaphor, irony, sarcasm and Yoruba proverbial to build a platform in which anecdotal evidences of the violation of individuals' human rights and the illusory messianic image of the military are counterpointed. Similarly, Soyinka in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* articulates the nauseating obduracy and searing megalomania of the military as grotesquely exhibited in the form of liquidation of its perceived political opponents. But most importantly, Soyinka and Fatoba poignantly express all these atrocious occurrences in humour, metaphor, irony and pun in the two poetry collections.

Writing on the impact of military incursion into the governance in Nigeria has become a poetic tradition which Oyeniyi Okunoye has essentially emphasised in his delineation of the anti-military poetry tradition in the Nigerian Literature:

Even though writing against dictatorship may immediately suggest writing solely preoccupied with criticising dictators, the tradition has grown, impacting in the process on the form and media of poetic expression. There have been three main phases in the development of anti-military poetry in Nigeria. The first coincides with the work of Odi Ofeimun... The second was a development in the eighties which saw many poets building on the foundation that had been laid, while the third, in part an extension of the second, largely chronicles the losses and social dislocations... (Okunoye 66-67).

It is remarkable to note from the foregoing, that anti-military Nigerian poetry draws on the trajectory of brutality coordinated by the military who expended violence with attendant gambit of dehumanization on the hapless civilian populace in the past three decades. It will not be out of place, to also affirm that since the first coup of 1966, the Nigerian military in its rampaging adventurism has ran the country as fiefdom, promoted ethnic divisions and maintained a ruthless grip on power. This was eventually to have profound consequences for the Nigerian nationhood during the Abacha era. Invariably, the long stay of military in power thrives in dispensation of brutality and terror that was not borne out of rationality but a sheer engagement in impunity. As became evident during the regime of Abacha, the Nigerian military's forage into politics was not to strengthen democratic principles but to stay as an army of occupation. It bears remarking that since independence, Nigeria has suffered from its weakened political structure which has encouraged significant conflict between political elites and has rendered the country vulnerable to usurpation of power by a succession of military interlopers. Subsequently, Abacha symbolises this, and his obtrusiveness into the political sphere ostensibly documents the slippery Nigerian political terrain.

However, if the past military regimes in Nigeria have been criticized to be repressive by the contemporary Nigerian literary writers, the decisive ruthlessness with which the military administration of General Sanni Abacha dealt with the opposition leaves a lot to be desired. An egregious suppression of the dissent voices who criticised his wanton dissolution of the democratic process, has ostensibly burgeoned into an exuberant literary productions. The frightening magnitude of Abacha's brutality has been indexed and made accessible to the reading public in: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) and *Homeland and Other Poems* (2008), Ademola Dasylva's *Song of Odamolugbe* (2006) and Joe Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* (2004). These writers focus on the fragmented Nigeria's past to elicit a feedback on the stranglehold of anomie created by the military from these works. Similarly, the horror of death is deconstructed in these works within the critical consensus forged by the deluge of political violence and destruction wrecked on postcolonial Nigeria by the successive military regimes. However, the full extent of military brutality becomes apparent, when violence is employed in these titles individually, to inscribe a scathing criticism of the Abacha's high-handedness and to elucidate its attendant horrific bestiality.

## 2. Harnessing the Intersection of Protest and satire in *Samarkand* and *They Said I Abused the Government*

Significantly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has noted that "satire takes for its province a whole society, and for its purpose, criticism". He stresses further that, "the satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's failings. He corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter" (Ngugi 55). Hence, considering satire's prodigious engagement with criticism, its often highly elliptical nature has made it the favoured tool with which literary artists over the ages have employed it as a weapon of protest against the shortcomings of oppressive rulers and gotten away with it. When taken as such, Satire in poetry is explicitly designed in form and in content to state opposition to social conduct that is deemed reprehensible. It is often appropriated as a tool for repudiating societal ills in order to facilitate a restoration of societal ethos to its rightful place. To this extent, satire provides in Soyinka's *Samarkand and other market I have Known* and Fatoba's *They Said I abused the Government*, the elliptical literary sites for the deconstruction of the imagery and symbols which repudiate Abacha's incarnation of despicable rule.

But just as satire explicates the elliptical imagery and symbols in poetry, on the other hand, the etymology of the word 'Protest' demonstrates that it has from the very beginning, been associated with notions of self-assertion at the individual or group level within a context that is simultaneously adversarial and social. The Latin *protestari*, with its implication of a public declaration, is invariably associated with argument and contending views, and it is not surprising that about four centuries later, it took on the much more specific and sharper connotation of a statement of disapproval. This latter meaning carries implications of right and wrong, and places greater emphasis on the need for the one making the protest to assert his opposition to whatever it is that he disapproves of. In other words, he was in a significant way, at odds with certain other members of his society. Given the trajectory it had traced, it is not surprising that protest next appeared within the profoundly contentious context of the American Civil Rights movement some two centuries later. It is easy to see how an assertion of disapproval could be transformed into a demand for equality under the law; after all, a person who censures or condemns an ongoing situation in society is very likely to also be a person who seeks to change that which he disapproves of, and this was precisely what Civil Rights activists wanted.

The word "Protest" as embedded in *Roget's Super Thesaurus* has synonyms of varying accuracy, all of which attempt to convey roughly the same meaning of the concrete demonstration of opposition or support for a social trend, government policy, or momentous situation. They include "objection, remonstrance, complaint, grievance, march, demonstration, strike, riot, boycott, rally, sit-in, stink, fuss, picketing, challenge" (Mc Cutcheon 454). Many scholars of protest prefer to speak of protest in terms of a "protest movement," that is, protest as a mass rather than an individual phenomenon aimed at significant social, political and economic change. In this paper, the preferred

term is "social protest" because it appears to properly contextualise protest as a fundamentally social activity, motivated by social needs and aimed at specifically societal ends. Essentially, protest could be any verbal or non-verbal means by which an individual or a group expresses disagreement with or support for an existing or proposed state of affairs in all or part of a given society, and/or seeks to alter or maintain it, either by ending the said state of affairs by replacing it with something else, or by maintaining it (Akingbe 12). Protest is not just a means of ventilating grievances, but is also an arena for the clash of opposing views because it compels those on all sides of a given issue to consciously articulate and propagate the ideas that form the basis of the issues they are protesting for or against. Many definitions of protest situate it within the context of conflicting aims of different sections in society, where it is mainly utilised as a means through which interest groups simultaneously justify their claims, seek a more advantageous situation and reject disadvantageous ones. Poloma's description of protest accords with this view: "Protest is a process that may be instrumental in the formation, unification and maintenance of a social structure; protest has been used as a weapon for agitation by groups seeking power, by groups holding power and by groups in the process of losing power." (Poloma 67) Anifowoshe has also observed that: "In virtually all parts of the world, protest has been pursued in the defence of order by the privileged, in the name of justice by the oppressed and in the fear of displacement by the threatened." (Anifowoshe 25)

In terms of broad eclectic applications, it must be emphasized that the many definitions of protest are complicated by its all-encompassing nature, and protest cannot be limited by notions of whether it is "political," or overtly aggressive, or aimed at achieving radical social change. In accordance with its characteristic of simultaneously reflecting and shaping society, poetry reflects protest and influences it. One of the ways in which this is done can be seen in the manner in which *They Said I Abused the Government* and *Sarmakand and the Other Markets I have Known* focus on the actual nature of protest itself, rather than just portraying it when they adopt the appurtenances of satire: pun and humour as the most effective ways of responding to the dire situation in which Nigeria during Abacha's rule finds itself. The implication of this is that, in these collections, Fatoba and Soyinka use protest to define themselves as individuals in opposition to the dictates of a repressive military regime, to obtain access to rights hitherto denied them, and to indicate the possibilities of change and social progress.

In contextualizing the interaction between satire and protest in the paper, it should be acknowledged that the relationship between satire and protest poetry is more complex than at first seems apparent in *Samarkand and other Markets I have Known* and *They Said I Abused the Government*. This relationship cannot therefore be restricted to the art-propaganda dichotomy. Due to their propensity to harness satire, protest and poetry are implicated in each other, and any attempt to properly understand the way in which they do this simply cannot be done within the confines of this long-standing division between aesthetics and relevance. What this implies is that satire is a fundamental aspect of protest, and to the extent that poetry is in many ways a reflection of society, satire is also a reflection of protest, and therefore cannot be alien

to it. Satiric poetry is unambiguous protest, since it seeks “to ridicule folly or vice in a society, an institution or in an individual” (Ouinn 291). African literary history is replete with poets who defied danger and coercion by expressing their opposition to perceived injustice in their work. They include Dennis Brutus, Arthur Nortje, Wole Soyinka and Jack Mapanje.

Remarkably, the paper establishes that poetics of Femi Fatoba’s *They said I Abused the Government* and Wole Soyinka’s *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* are sufficiently grounded in the intersection of protest and satire in their capabilities to raise the awareness of incarceration, torture, maiming and killing, during the Sanni Abacha’s reign of terror. By declaiming these absurdities, Fatoba and Soyinka have demonstrated their artistic commitments to the transformation of Nigerian society, by showing in their poetry, how those atrocities can be lessened or reversed to the benefit of all. In focusing on the notion of protest in their poetry during the Abacha’s regime, the poets attempt to raise questions regarding how contending social forces arise as a result of military brutality, and they further seek to articulate how satire has been harnessed for the depiction of this brutality within the context of other forms of literary techniques at their disposal.

### 3. Interrogating A Dislocation in Nigeria’s Nationhood

If we consider the national anthem of a country as its most assertive totem of cohesion and indivisibility, the Nigeria’s national anthem stands as a sad euphemism for recalling the arbitrary yoking together of people of disparaging nationalities by the British colonial administration. As representatively exemplified in Fatoba and Soyinka’s poetry, therefore, the nebulosity in Nigeria’s nationhood is remarkably caused by the irreconcilable cultural differences among its federating units, which the military institution has always manipulated to stage incessant military coups. Nigeria in the words of Obafemi Awolowo, “is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression...” (58). This amorphousness in Nigeria’s nationhood has also been reiterated in the succinct observation of Nigeria’s first prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, “since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds...and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite...” (Meredith 8). Curiously, the arbitrariness in Nigeria’s nation-state as delineated by the yoking together of varied nationalities with incongruous ethnographic features which epitomizes her inherent falsehood as aptly illustrated in Benedict Anderson’s seminal definition of the nation as “imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 15). Anderson further declaims that, unlike individuals, nations have no specific, identifiable source or referencing. Therefore, Nigeria incongruously derived from differing multi-nationalities is a nation daily re-imagined by its trapped inhabitants and such re-imagination verges on a “narrative of identity, and a crafted story that imbues it with a sense of continuity” (Anderson 205). Anderson’s striking submission on the imagery of a nation further refracts in the political diagnosis of the ineffable complexity of Nigeria’s nationhood, which has been clinically elucidated in Chinua Achebe’s *There Was A Country*, “the social malaise in Nigerian society was political corruption” (Achebe 51). The structure of the country was such that there

was an inbuilt power struggle, among the ethnic groups, and of course those who were in power wanted to stay in power. The easiest and simplest way to retain it, even in a limited area, was to appeal to tribal sentiments, “so they were egregiously exploited in the 1950s and 1960s” (Achebe 51). It needs to be stated unequivocally, that the discernible arbitrariness in Nigeria’s nationhood has been tellingly complicated by the actions of her opportunistic sectional leaders, who constantly fan the embers of ethnic tension. This has often orchestrates a backlash, that requires military intervention in the governance of postcolonial Nigeria.

Hence, the consequence of subordinating Nigeria nation-state to tribal lines by its political elite, has exemplified her localization, thereby caricaturing its sovereignty as tenuous. This weakness in the Nigeria’s nationhood is aptly reflected in the words of Homi Bhabha, when he described a nation as a “curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance” (Bhabha 2). Bhabha’s remark inscribes Nigeria’s nationhood within a dialectical logic where ethnic/tribal interest is privileged over and above national interest. Consequently, the crisis of ethnic nationalism in postcolonial Nigeria indicates clearly that however the national interest and ethnic[tribal]affiliations are mixed they will never coalesce. The recognition of this disturbing fact elicits a perception of Nigeria in *They Said I Abused the Government and Samarkand and Other markets I have known*, as a pseudo-nation struggling against military brigandage, corruption and constant threat of disintegration from its federating units. A reverberation of postcolonial disillusionment in Nigeria’s nationhood has equally been argued by Sanya Osha when he posits that, “the African political disaster has meant disaster in all other spheres of African life...” (Osha 177). In Africa, as in other places, politics and economics are coterminous. Hence, inefficient political programmes have resulted in an intolerable level of economic stagnation and the sieges launched upon “the peoples of Africa by different regimes have effectively broken down barriers and roles; thus all forms of societal schizophrenia prevail” (Osha 178).

If Nigeria’s nebulous nation-state is situated within the discourse of ethnic chauvinism, its economic prebendalism and the overarching political anxieties also continue to threaten its sovereignty on the present continuous terms. Then Nigeria as a nation-state could be seen in the light of a “contested referent” (Esonwane 1993), a “shifting referent” (Cobhan 1991), and an “imagined construct” (Pardes 1994). These complicated descriptions of the nature of Nigeria’s nationhood ostensibly betrays Fatoba and Soyinka’s portrayal of the artificiality of the Nigeria nation-state: as a nation which constantly needs to be held together by its self-seeking military. In a veiled way, this artificiality in Nigeria nation-state has been obliquely satirised by Fatoba in ‘Like Weaverbird or Crow? :

They say I sing our anthem  
With a heavy lump in my throat  
Twisting and spitting the words  
As if they were parts of a curse:

But what is there  
 To remove the harshness of my tone  
 What yet to re-arrange  
 The collocation of my lyrics?  
 Is it the foaming saliva of hunger  
 Which constipates my bowels...  
 Or the eternal hawks of prey  
 At every stretch and corner of our lives? (*They Said I Abused* 3)

By drawing on the leitmotif of dissonance in nationalism, the poem interrogates incongruity of patriotism amidst hunger and deprivation: “they say I sing our anthem/with a heavy lump in my throat/twisting and splitting the words/as if they were parts of a curse”. This interrogation recalls Rhonda Cobhan’s (1991) fitting imagery of a nation in African political discourse, she has described a nation as “having a shifting and unstable significance within African political discourse” (Cobhan 84). Imbued with Cobhan’s political discourse, the poet persona protests the basis for recitation of Nigeria’s anthem when he is hungry. The refusal of the persona in the poem to recite national anthem with enthusiasm constitutes a deep-seated protest against Nigeria’s lacklustred welfare packages. It is a refusal which has pitted him against power elite that insists he must be patriotic despite his social deprivation. The persona’s obstinate resolve to sing the national anthem grudgingly amidst a debilitating hunger, provides a literary site for the examination of the relationship that demonstrates competing display of nationalism between Nigerian power elite and its impoverished citizens. Refusal to sing Nigerian anthem with affectation clearly has the effect of freeing the persona from obsequious and exhibitionist patriotism. Through a depiction of disempowerment of the masses in the poem, Fatoba deftly contrasts the marooning of the masses in throes of hunger with the perpetration of social inequality by ‘the soldiers’ of fortune who have pauperised the masses in their looting of the treasury. At the same time, the poem evokes a satire which problematizes the military’s swashbuckling that have left the streets awash and crowded with the ‘felling men’ who are dying of hunger.

The poem untangles a complex web of poverty and misery the poor have been subjected to by the Abacha’s military in Nigeria through Fatoba’s use of a linguistic gambit of implied meaning. Harry Garuba has described this as “the mark of mime” (1986). Garuba has further explicated impact of the biting elan of satire in Fatoba’s poetry when he enthuses that, “Instead of the ‘grand’, explicit linguistic gesture he uses the ‘dwarfed’ one, precise and laden with a seething series of implied meanings” (Garuba 21). Consequently, the signification of protest is realised in the poem, through the interlocking of satire and humour imbued by the implied meanings: “They say I sing our anthem/With a heavy lump in my throat/But what is there/To remove the harshness of my tone/The collocation of my lyrics?/Is it the foaming saliva of hunger/Which constipates my bowels”. The full extent of the persona’s denunciation of Nigeria nation-state becomes ostensibly apparent in the depth of humour grounded in the poem. The persona’s despair and disillusionment is sufficiently invested in humour

that is subtly accomplished in the poem through the use of irony to delineate the contrast between opulence of the soldiers “of fortune” and poverty of the masses. Hunger as a debilitating factor inhibits a demonstration of nationalism which provides the perfect counterpoint to the patriotic recitation of national anthem in the poem. This counterpoint further underscores the contrasting cynicism and enthusiasm for nationalism that is inherently embedded in the Nigeria nation-state. The poem has a ringing parallelism in “Prayer for the National Team”, where a wobbling national football team is employed as a metaphor to articulate the tragedy of Nigeria’s nationhood:

Lord, you gave us this geographical spread  
 From which we select our team  
 We did not us the way we are;  
 The team never plays well, and  
 We cannot prevent us from relegation.  
 Our goalkeeper achieves his goal  
 Just by being between the posts  
 Strutting to the cheers of his tribe.  
 The centre-forward positions himself.

(*They Said I Abused*5)

Fatoba’s abiding interest in Nigeria’s tortuous nationhood is further complicated in the poem. The poem cryptically delineates the abiding dislocation of excellence in Nigeria nation-state as captured in the jettisoning of the technical merits of selection. Curiously, the poem emphasises a mediocre representation of the federating units in the national football team’s selection. The poem indicts the successive military regimes for inaugurating this nebulous contraption in the football team’s selection and further berates the Abacha’s regime for sustaining the practice. Hence, the poem employs the overarching metaphor of ethnic based-football team selection, to evaluate and paints the grim picture of the extent to which Nigeria’s nationalism has sunk. Nigeria is presented as a spectacle of mishmash in which ethnic nationalism and overriding patriotism are counterpointed. This clear-cut tragedy in Nigeria’s nation-state has been surmised in Femi Osofisan’s flagellating rhetoric, “...Our identity crisis in Africa, and specifically Nigeria (emphasis mine) is of a different order entirely”; relating to two urgent problems—first, the dilemma of creating a national identity out of our disparate ethnic communities; and secondly, that of creating committed, responsible, patriotic and “compassionate individuals out of our civil populations” (Osofisan 6). In writing of the balance between patriotism and sectionalism in the poem whose personae indubitably typify the collective Nigerian citizenry, Fatoba works out a pattern of attitudinal disposition, locating affinity between zealotry and debasement, resolution and wishy-washy: ‘lord, you gave us this geographical spread/from which we select our team/we did not make us the way we are/the team never plays well, and/ we cannot prevent us from relegation’ (*They Said I Abused* 6).

Through this compromised trajectory in the contemporary Nigeria, her citizens of differing ethnicities have often displayed cynicism toward its nationhood, and have made for themselves a variety of excuses that could make them circumvent the circuitous

long trudge to nowhere. This circumvention often manifests in social vices such as: corruption, armed robbery, embezzlement of public funds and prostitution. Cynicism is remarkably deplored in the poem, to satirise the reduction of the rigorous selection of the national football team to the ridiculous, debased and pedestal of ethnic consideration. Fatoba condemns vehemently, the abysmal situation whereby important political appointments in Nigeria are ostensibly premised on the ethnic endorsement for its legitimization. This condemnation reverberates George Padmore's (348) submission that tribalism remains a major constraint to the development of African postcolonial societies, because it "can be, and is exploited by unscrupulous politicians to spread disunity and separation" among the more politically backward sections of the people, and undermine "the forces working for national integration" (Padmore 349). The perceived tribal rivalry in postcolonial Nigeria is often demonstrated in the sustained adversarial competition between its southern and Northern ethnic groupings, especially the four major ethnic groupings: Hausa and Fulani (predominant Muslim), from the north versus Yoruba and Igbo, (predominant Christians) from the south. Since independence, political domination has often been skewed in favour of the barely- educated political elites of the agrarian north to the detriment of the well-educated and industrialised south. Rivalry between the two divide reached its apogee in 1993 when General Babangida, a northerner annulled a presidential election allegedly won by Chief M.K.O Abiola, a southern Nigerian politician. In the light of Padmore's analysis, it will not be out of place to state that the perceived violence and wrangling ravaging contemporary Nigeria nation-state have been imbedded in the ethnic narratives of its federating units. Fatoba's oblique, but satirical protestation against the perceived subverted nationalism exhibited in the football-team's selection depends for its scathing remark, on the politicization along the ethnic line in the management of the nation's vast human resources. This overarching perceived artificiality in Nigeria's nationhood is also tenaciously evaluated in Wole Soyinka's "Elegy for a Nation":

Ah, Chinua, are you grapevine wired?  
It sings: our nation is not dead, not clinically  
Yet. Now this may come as a surprise to you,  
It was to me. I thought the form I spied  
Beneath the frosted glass of a fifty-carat catafalque  
Was the face of our own dear land- 'own', 'dear'  
Voluntary patriotese, you'll note—we try to please.

An anthem's sentiment upholds the myth. (*Samarkand* 68)

Though inspired by deep-seated cynicism, Soyinka seems to contend in the poem that what holds the postcolonial Nigeria together is basically the British foisted unity, tenuously weakened by the recurrent, egregious intrusion of its military into governance, which has essentially driven a wedge among varied ethnic groupings that constitute its federating units. This notion is rendered in: /our nation is not dead, not clinically/...our own dear land-"own" "dear"/voluntary patriotese, you'll note-we try to please/. Soyinka in the poem sets out to generate hostile reactions from the inherent artificiality in Nigeria nation-state which further transposes political tension

into antagonism between Nigerian populace and Northern Nigeria military-political elite who unabashedly could annul elections at will to frustrate southern Nigeria's aspiration. The dilemma and frustration experienced in the obtrusive yoking together of adversarial ethnic groupings in the colonial Africa, detracted from the mask of anger identified in Basil Davidson's book, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-state* (1992). Davidson enthuses in the book that "[T]he old states in Africa were swallowed entirely into new states as though these old states had never existed save as quaint survivals from the 'savage backwoods' of a deplorable past" (Davidson 188). The central problematic that Nigeria and other African nations that are yoked together against their wills are confronted with has also been summarised by Arjun Apparadurai (1996) when he argues that, "the incapacity of many de-territorialised groups to think their way out of the imaginary of the nation-state is itself the cause of much global violence" (165) because many movements of emancipation and identity are forced, in their struggles against existing nation-states to become anti-national or anti-state and thus to inspire the very state power "that forces them to respond in the language of counter nationalism" (Apparadurai 166). Taking a cue from Apparadurai's theory of counter-nationalism, protest against the arbitrary creation of Nigeria manifests in the repudiation of the identified British colonial meddlesomeness. This condemnation reflects in the aftermath postcolonial, political mismanagement by the military institution which has often led to a sustained discontent that abound in the two poems.

While Fatoba assembles and sifts through memories and histories in "Prayer for the National Team" to lampoon ethnic chauvinism as the undermining factor diminishing the Nigeria nation-state, Soyinka irrevocably condemns Nigeria's fraudulent claims to a nation in "Elegy For A Nation". However, the premonitory disintegration of Nigeria undermines the value placed on its illusory cohesion in Fatoba's "Workingman's Time":

'workingman's Time'  
We have not got the peace of mind  
Now  
To paint landscapes of flowers  
Our vegetation is a whirlwind  
And clouds are running red  
On our hot pavements.  
What is the use of flowerbeds  
On which only war tanks will buzz? (*They Said I Abused* 4)

In pursuit of unshakable premonition, a picture of imminent disintegration of Nigeria is satirically painted in the poem: "we have not got the peace of mind/now/to paint landscapes of flowers/and clouds are running red"... "what is the use of flowerbeds/on which only war tanks will buzz". Fatoba's sacerdotal nudge about Nigeria's imminent balkanisation makes a connection between her colonial artificial fixture and the dilemma of her postcolonial fragility held together by the military might. The poem is reminiscent of Christopher Okigbo's laudatory "Come Thunder": *Labyrinths* (1971), in which he prophesied the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970:

NOW THAT the triumphant march has entered the last street  
corners,  
Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds...  
Now that laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous between  
the teeth,  
Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth...  
The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the  
afternoon.  
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of  
Power...

(*Labyrinths* 66)

In the most disturbing sequence in the turbulent trajectory of Nigeria's nationhood, Okigbo's premonitory hunch in the poem did come to pass: as the Nigeria's burgeoning ethnic differences eventually snowballed into a full-scale civil war with attendant heavy casualties on both sides. Although the Nigerian civil war was brought to an end in 1970, but it has nevertheless, left in its wakes the final death of its nationhood. What is been hedged around by the successive rulers, is nothing, but a counterfeited nationalism that is sustained at all cost through the military might.

Ostensibly nurtured on propaganda, thirty-one years after the Nigerian government's dubious proclamation of 'No victor, no vanquished' to signal the end of the civil war, Fatoba has in contrast, presciently poeticizes Nigeria's disintegration in *They said I Abused the Government* when he rhetorically asked "what is the use of flowerbeds/on which only war tanks will buzz?" (*They Said I Abused* 4). The implication of this is that ethnicity has poignantly remains the albatross of cohesion in the postcolonial Nigeria and it is a sad indictment of the colonial authority's insensitivity in the yoking together of differing ethnic groups who do not share the variables of nationhood: common ancestry, language, culture and other anthropological nuances of nation-state. What is most worrying about this division is its exploitation by the Nigerian ambitious military to promote sectional interest, which has often pitched one ethnic group against the other. Underpinning this sectionalism in postcolonial Nigeria has been an exemplary annulment of the 1993 Presidential election<sup>3</sup>. The annulment is a deflationary action embarked upon by the northern Nigerian soldiers, with an intention to degrade the southern Nigerian political elite. In an uncharitable promotion of northern Nigeria's interest, the election was annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida and upheld by General Abacha, both who are from the northern Nigeria.

#### 4. Criticizing the Militarization of Nigeria's Political Sphere

African poetry is most often concerned with the prevailing national issues like poverty, military rule, war and famine. The reason for this overt concern has been explained by Tanure Ojaide (1995) that "there are indications that despite the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, the flowering of multi-party politics in Africa, and the gradual dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, African poetry will continue to be radical..." (Ojaide 17). Poets will continue to portray the bleak socio-economic landscape "with negative and ugly images and dream of light at the end of the tunnel" (Ojaide

17). While successive military junta in postcolonial Nigeria has denied Nigerians the laxity of inalienable human rights, contemporary Nigerian poetry's rhetoric and form have entrenched protest tradition which aims at revealing the disturbing reality of brutality associated with military rule. In this pursuit, it also entrenches the shaming of the military's decades of pillaging Nigeria's vast economic resources. Again, the audacious indexing of debilitating effect of poverty unleashed by the successive military regimes on the Nigerian masses, stands poetry out from other genres of literature. More over, the overt engagement of protest in Fatoba's *They said I Abused The Government* and Soyinka's *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* have significantly amplified outrage against perceived pernicious brutality during the Abacha's regime. Ostensibly, Fatoba's employment of sarcasm to criticise the military's infringement of the human rights in Nigeria, is embedded in a poem titled "They said I Abused the Government":

The police came to break my door  
To drag me, away from home,  
From wife, children and relatives  
To lock me up at the mercy of government...

Did I say the government is deaf  
And does not hear the cries of her people!  
Did I say the government is lame  
And never lifts an arm in the service of her people!  
Did I say the government is blind  
And does not see where she is going!  
Did I say the government is a cannibal  
Killing and eating her own children!  
Did I ever say anything  
Bigger than the small mouth

With which I ask simple questions?... (*They Said I Abused* 7)

Through an oblique appropriation of humour in the poem, Fatoba is able to make a concerted effort in demystifying the excessive display of terror and violence by the military when he retorts to the sarcastic cataloguing of the grandiose brutality, torture, intimidation and pauperization of the masses by the repressive General Sanni Abacha's government. Further, the persona rhetorically asks "How did I abuse the government/ Did I say the government is deaf/And does not hear the cries of her people!/Did I say the government is lame/And never lifts an arm in the service of her people!/Did I say the government is blind/And does not see where she is going!/Did I say the government is a cannibal/Killing and eating her own children!" (*They Said I Abused* 8). The repetition of a rhetorical proof "Did I" underscores the signification of humour in the poem and must be read as a polemic against the trauma orchestrated by the Abacha's military's high-handedness against Nigerians. It is interesting to note that in attaining a satirical gratification as exemplified in the use of humour, Fatoba undercuts military intimidation in "They Said I Abused the Government".

Albeit admixture of satire and protest, the poem made a veiled reference to the debasing atrocities of the military in which the devious dark side of intimidation is conceived in terms of symbols: “the police came to break my door/to drag me, away from home, /from wife, children and relatives/to lock me up at the mercy of government/” (*They Said I Abused* 7). Protest is eloquently grounded in the poem to satirize the regime of terror unleashed on the dissent voices, in their criticism of the repressive policies of the military. The entrenchment of humour in the poem undercuts the severity of dehumanisation meted out to the persona by the military. The intensity of the military’s subjugation in the poem is trivialized by the employment of the Yoruba proverbial, which is deleteriously rendered in rhetorical questions: “did I say the government is deaf/did I say the government is lame/ Did I say the government is a cannibal! /did I ever say anything/bigger than the small mouth/with which I ask simple questions?” (*They Said I Abused* 8). Clearly, the Yoruba proverbial affords Fatoba the innocuous platform for attacking satirically the military’s sure-footed trajectory of repression. Following in a similar course, Soyinka deplores pun to satirize the death of Nigeria’s maximum ruler, General Sanni Abacha in ‘Exit Left, Monster, Victim in Pursuit’:

Long, long before he slipped  
Viagra  
Down his throat, and washed it down  
    With 3-Barrel rotgut,  
    His favourite gargle from Iganmu,  
    Libelled home-made brandy as in  
    Home-made democracy, the Gunner  
Was a goner.  
    The world said he’d outgunned  
The finest and the best  
Of a hundred million but  
The Gunner was long gone. (*Samarkand* 21)

In reiterating the gratuitous debauchery embedded in the poem, Soyinka juxtaposes Abacha’s transient pleasure of sex with his morbid fascination with death. This is done through the graphic illustration of his Viagra-induced insatiable appetite for sex. Viagra is an aphrodisiac he had taken an overdose of which eventually hastened his death atop an Indian prostitute. The farcical mockery of Abacha’s death in the poem is robustly offset by his legitimization of violence, whose inscriptions are viscerally outlined in the Nigeria’s political landscape in the forms of anarchy, sorrow and death that are harvested in scores. The first stanza presents the graphic depiction of the destructive effect of display of macho bravado and the self-destructive libidinous indulgence embarked upon by the tyrant. This depiction is delayed thus: “long, long before he slipped/Viagra/down his throat, and washed it down/with 3-barrel rotgut,/his favourite gargle from Iganmu” (*Samarkand* 21). But the second stanza celebrates the more deserving death of the tyrant referred to in the first stanza: “the world said he’d outgunned/the finest and the best/of a hundred million but/the Gunner was long gone” (*Samarkand* 21).

In addition to the farcical foregrounding of the ignoble death of Sanni Abacha in the poem, Soyinka deftly extends this mockery by employing the pun of Gunner/goner as a polemical gambit in the stanzas to balance the political and personal. The Gunner/goner pun is utilised effectively in the poem to redeem the gloomy, apocalyptic image of Nigeria that Abacha had hitherto created. The rhythm of African tradition of communal mourning in the poem is essentially restricted to a rancorous polemical and didactic probity of the past. The sombre and seedy chiaroscuro evoked in the depiction of Abacha’s ignoble demise in “Exit Left, Monster, Victim in Pursuit” is juxtaposed against the enduring lamentation of the death of pro-democracy heroine, Kudirat Abiola. Kudirat is the wife of Nigeria’s president-elect, Chief M.K.O Abiola, she was murdered by the Abacha’s foot-soldiers on the streets of Lagos. Soyinka fittingly exemplifies this juxtaposition in ‘Some Deaths are Worlds Apart’:

No bed of flowers bloomed for Kudirat  
She was not royal, white or glamorous  
Not one carnation marked the spot of death.  
Though undecreed, a ban on mourning spoke  
Louder than cold-eyed guns that spat  
    Their message of contempt against the world.  
Death touches all, both kin and strangers.  
The death of one, we know, is one death  
One too many. Grief unites, but grief’s  
Manipulation thrusts our worlds apart  
In more than measurable distances-there are  
Tears of cultured pearls, while others drop  
As silent stones. Their core of embers  
Melts brass casings on the street of death. (*Samarkand* 19)

Although recent bid by the few Nigerian political elite to fix Nigeria’s political system may prove fruitful at long run. Especially, if one considers that such determination entails a huge political move that could cut to size the morbid, inordinate ambition of the military and prevent them from seizing political power at will. Nevertheless, Soyinka’s agony over Kudirat’s death in the poem, further privileges a determination by the pro-democracy activists to restore sanity to the troubled Nigeria’s political sphere once and for all. The overt engagement of “Some Deaths Are Worlds Apart” with Nigeria’s political complexities, compliments the interrogation of the dimensions of human depredation in Abacha’s military gulag. By contextualizing the intersection of poetry and politics (*protest*), Soyinka succeeded in establishing a vocabulary of resentment against the military’s matrix of terror in the poem. This convenient intersection of poetry and politics has been explained in the words of Reed Way Dasenbrock (2003) in his essay: *Poetry and Politics*:

Today most critics and theorists hold that the connection between poetry and politics is not limited just to situations in which poets become politically involved in an explicit way, but instead, all cultural expression is related to the social and political context-whether implicitly or explicitly-in which it is produced....All poetry is political in one way or another,



since even the choice to eschew explicit political involvement or reference constitutes a form of political action (or perhaps more precisely inaction) (Dasenbrock 51).

Soyinka's foregrounding of discursive context of political assassination in the poem is complicated by the range of Abacha's brutality evidenced by the liquidation of Kudirat. However, this discernible intersection provides a vibrant platform for articulating the odious tragedy of subjugation during the Abacha's regime. The protestation in the poem is designed to further sensitize and mobilize Nigerians against future occurrence of another military incursion. Beyond the imaginative retelling of the dark chapter in Nigeria's nationhood, the intersection further enamoured a discursive paradigm which inaugurates a poetic mode of expression that unobtrusively articulates the frustrations borne by the victims of the Abacha's junta in their quest for reparation.

Although the harsh reality of the Abacha's brutality which manifested in the killing of Kudirat is rendered inconsequential by the deification of her valour and bravery. This deification resonates in 'one death/one too many/grief unites, but grief's/manipulation thrusts our worlds apart/in more than measurable distances apart/in more than measurable distances-there are/tears of cultured pearls, while others drop/as silent stones/ and 'their core of embers/melts brass casings on the street of death'(Samarkand 19). While Soyinka broke into paroxysm of lamentation to mourn the death of Kudirat, he paradoxically trivialises the death of Abacha in a gale of mockery, derision and humour.

The valorisation of Kudirat as an epitome of the heroic struggle against a rapacious army of occupation in the postcolonial Nigeria is set against the villainy, rape and devaluation of democratic ethos by the intrusive Abacha's military junta. Soyinka's inversion of pun in the juxtaposition of the reception of Kudirat's death against that of Abacha's introduces a bias beneath the general signification of death, and stimulates a counter-current of emotion which amplifies witticism in the poetic of 'Some Deaths Are Worlds Apart' against the poetic of 'Exit Left, Monster, Victim In Pursuit'. Kudirat's death at the hands of Abacha, strikingly recalls the killing of Dele Giwa by the General Ibrahim Babangida's odious military regime. Giwa, a quintessential Nigerian journalist was brazenly murdered at his breakfast table through a letter bomb which was hurriedly dispatched by the army's intelligence unit. This heinous killing is explicated in Fatoba's "For Dele Giwa":

Let us be satisfied  
That he is dead  
Let us rejoice  
That he will no more  
Stick his pen in our conscience  
Let us sit back in hope  
That we  
Having killed a tongue of truth  
Shall never die. (*They Said I Abused* 26)

Giwa in his pursuit of investigative journalism, unearthed a high profile dealing in narcotics that indicted General Ibrahim Babangida personally and some members of his military junta, which he threatened to make known to the public. But this discovery

of the damaging facts against the military led to his untimely death. Beneath his curiosity and stridency to report misdemeanour of Nigerian political elite to the public, Giwa has been fingered to be involved in an underhand financial dealing with the former Nigerian military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida not to publish the inflammatory treatise. But, he later reneged on the deal albeit blackmail, and published the story. This irked Babangida, who sent soldiers to seize all the printed copies of the *Newswatch* journal and had Giwa murdered subsequently through a letter bomb for betrayal of agreement. Nevertheless, Fatoba sees Giwa's brutal assassination by the military as symptomatic of the killing of "a tongue of truth". Fatoba's appropriation of the narrative voice in the poem poignantly mocks the temporary triumph of the military, who in their naivety assumed that the killing of Giwa will guarantee their continuity with unrestrained trafficking of illicit drugs and unabashed looting of the treasury. This mockery is eloquently emphasized in: /let us be satisfied/ let us rejoice/ that he will no more.../ (*They Said I Abused* 26). However, little did they realise that their shameless deeds will be exposed to the world through the literary production exemplified in Fatoba's *They Said I Abused the Government*.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has acknowledged that in re-telling their experiences of physical assault and deprivation, Soyinka and Fatoba have to adopt fiction in order to bridge the delicate gap between outright auto-biography and fiction. In examining the devastating effect of the military rule in the postcolonial Nigeria, the paper has sought to explicate the employment of intersection of satire and protest in the poetry of Femi Fatoba and Wole Soyinka to confront the monstrosity of the shenanigans of Sanni Abacha's repressive military regime. The paper further illustrates the differences among the federating units of the postcolonial Nigeria, which indubitably has compromised its nationhood and continually raised fear of its disintegration. Nigeria nation-state has been frequently wracked by continuous bouts of internal dissension emanating from tribal antagonism exhibited by its differing ethnic groupings. Hence, the military has often cited this threat to Nigeria's sovereignty as the necessary impetus for intervening in its political process. It is this intervention that historically gave birth to the atrocious Abacha's regime that brutally recorded casualties of maiming and killing of the opposition with cannibalistic gusto between 1994 and 1998. The two poetry collections not only explicate the viciousness of Abacha's military junta, but also act as touchstones to show the extent of the killing of notable Nigerians during its preposterous incursion into the Nigeria's political system.

Nevertheless, Femi Fatoba's *They said I Abused The Government* and Wole Soyinka's *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* have through their poetics protested against their humiliation as well as the detention, torture and killing of other dissent voices who criticised Abacha's usurpation of political power. In the same vein, the paper has affirmed the appropriation of fiction by Fatoba and Soyinka's poetry; to harness the appurtenances of satire: humour, witticism and pun. All these devices are utilized to evaluate the devastating effect of military brutality on the Nigeria's socio-political landscape. While Fatoba's protest against the military is nuanced by the humour and Yoruba proverbial, Soyinka's protest against the military is dexterously rooted in pun and witticism. These poetic devices have been utilised in the anthologies:

to criticise the subordination of overriding patriotism to ethnic nationalism by the successive military rulers in the postcolonial Nigeria. A pursuit of northern Nigeria's unbridled political interest led to the annulment of the June 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election adjudged to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a southern Nigeria's politician. Aftermath of this annulment also led to the brutal assassination of dissent voices, like Kudirat and Alfred Rewane by the reprehensible Abacha's regime. The paper concluded that, breaches that had occurred in the Nigeria's nationhood has remarkably necessitated the regular incursions of the military into the centre stage of her political arena, which has subsequently facilitated emergence of the monstrous Abacha's regime.

#### Notes

1. Although Nigeria attained independence in 1960 from Britain, but her nationhood has been continuously threatened by the ethnic differences among its federating units. This threat to the Nigeria's nationhood has often serves as an excuse for an ambitious soldier to stage a military coup that has constantly disrupted democratic process in the postcolonial Nigeria.
2. General Sanni Abacha ruled Nigeria between 1994 and 1998. His regime is often associated with gratuitous brutality in which scores of dissent voices were maimed, detained and killed.
3. Chief M.K.O Abiola is the presumed winner of 1993 presidential election in Nigeria. But mid-way into the announcement of the final results of the election, it was annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida.

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