

WAR METAPHORS IN NIGERIAN PANDEMIC POETRY

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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this study was carried out by Oni OSAGHAE (Miss) in the Department of English and Literature, faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

Dr. Clement Eloghosa Odi
Project Supervisor

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to God Almighty for guidance, protection and provision throughout the course of my study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

This essay examines war metaphors in Nigerian pandemic poetry in order to explore the representation of covid-19 pandemic in selected Nigerian poems. It also sets out to investigate the various military metaphors deployed to depict the phenomenon of covid-19. Lastly, the essay explores how war metaphors reveal the various combatants

1.2 Scope of Study

The essay covers the poems of six Nigerian poets selected from *World on the Brinks: an Anthology of covid-19 Pandemic*. The poets include Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chidiere Enyia, Law O. Mefor, Nnenna Vivien Chukwu, Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan and Maria Abiola Alege. The collection will henceforth be abbreviated WTB.

1.3 Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research because deductions are made on the basis of verbal interpretations rather than mathematical computations. Textual analysis is adopted in reading the various poems in order to identify the war metaphors deployed in the poems. Also, critical reading of the poems is conducted. The study is later classified into different ideas associated with the war metaphors as they help to organize the essay into different chapters. Secondly materials in the form of

essays in journals, books and several other sources are used to strengthen the argument.

1.4 Theoretical Background

This essay relies on formalistic theory to undergird the literary criticism of selected Nigerian pandemic poems. The stand point of eminent formalists such as Boris Eichenbaum, Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson is that the text is the object of study and not the author's biography nor the sociological context of the text. The theory is concerned about the way the reader understands and evaluate the text. According to Ann B. Dobie, "Formalism's sustained popularity among readers comes primarily from the fact that it provides them with a way to understand and enjoy a work for its own inherent value as a pure of literary art" (33)

What appears to be Dobie's view of formalism is the text's appealing quality which is internally constructed to draw attention to itself. The form is the rudimentary components of language use which continues to sustain readership. In other words, Dobie presents formalism as a text-centric theory:

Formalism puts the focus on the text as literature. It does not treat the text as an expression of social, religious or political ideas, neither does it reduce the text to being a promoting effect for some cause or belief. (33)

What Dobie means is that the text is a self-existing document when it comes to literary criticism. As such, social issues, religious dogmas, and political treatises do not have to influence the reader's sense of judgement. Rather, the focus is on the text as a literary self life. This is why the reading of the text is essential to enable the reader derive information based on the working of the textual material.

Tim Gillespie explains that formalism demands “a close, careful analysis often called close reading or text explication” (178). The purpose of this careful and close reading among others is to examine literature:

Looking to unlock its structure, looking for unifying patterns that shape the text and give its parts relevance to the whole and searching for uses of language and ambiguities, ironies and tensions that contribute to the whole effect (178).

The purpose of formalism is to explore the texture, the structure and the several patterns that combine to produce the text. The theory tries to account for the function of its component parts or form as they help tease out meaning.

Having explored the formalistic theory, it will be appropriate to explain and attempt to define metaphor which is the key element of form in this study.

Metaphor refers to one of the several tropes or figures of speech. Edward P.J. Corbett defines it as “an implied comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common” (479). That means metaphors often compare two “unlike” things with the hope of establishing their similarity. As for

M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, metaphor goes beyond the traditional similarity perspective. Metaphor, in their view, possesses pragmatic, and interactive, and cognitive perspectives. Highlighting the cognitive view defines it as “a deviation for special rhetorical and poetic purposes” (191). This means metaphors have deviational features that make them perform rhetorical and poetic functions in poetry and other literary contexts.

Brian Moon explains that metaphor involves the “merging of two elements or ideas, where one is used to modify the meaning of the other|” (62). This is why some metaphors operate as a kind of definition.

According to Sandra Rossi Andreas Maercker, and Eva Heim, “metaphors are expressions that describe a person or an object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics” (55). Rossi et al affirm the intrinsic quality in metaphor that makes it meaning to rest on another equally striking element in another entity, person or object. Thus, they perform descriptive function as they help to paint pictures of objects, things and persons.

Mohammed Abdul Khaliq, Rohan Joseph and Sunny Rai explain that “metaphors are creative cognitive constructs that are employed in everyday conversation to describe abstract concepts and feelings” (431). Metaphors help to construct description of abstract concepts and contextualize feelings in ways as to paint their pictures through diverse images.

What stands out from the foregoing perspectives is that metaphors are tools for describing abstract concepts, people, objects and things. They can compare and act as substitutes.

1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

Several essays have been written to present diverse perspectives on the covid-19 pandemic. A review of related scholarship on the use of war metaphors is necessary. Michael Hanne examines the use of war metaphor and how it helps in providing escape from contracting the covid-19. In this regard, the researcher explains that: “During the first months of the covid-19 pandemic, the “war” metaphor, standing for our relationship to covid-19, established itself, like the virus itself almost universally.” (88)

Hanne’s position on the covid-19 is valid as it draws connection between humanity and the coronavirus. For Hanne, the war metaphor represents the bond that binds us to covid-19 and that they have universal appeal. As profound as Hanne’s argument may seem, it does not demonstrate the various compositions that represent the combatants to which these war metaphors stand for. It does not account for how the war metaphors help to contextualize the efforts put into the supposed war being represented by the metaphors.

Andreas Musolff concentrates on the ironical, sarcastic and satirical use of war and competition metaphors in the context of covid-19 pandemic. In this connection, Musolff writes that:

The covid-19 pandemic tempted some governments to promise to wage “war” against it and implement “world-beating” control mechanisms. In view of their limited success, such claims soon came in for massive criticism, which turned their hyperbolic implicatives and figurative framing against them. (76)

Musolff explains that the covid-19 pandemic inspired governments across the world to find ways of tackling the virus and in the process, end up declaring war against it. As things have turned, their attempts were severally censured. Although Musolff may have examined the use of war metaphors, it does not show how the metaphors are used to frame the combatants which the war metaphors represent in Nigerian pandemic poems.

Margherita Benzi and Marco Novarese focus on the use of metaphors to convey our war against covid-19. These two scholars “consider martial metaphors to be dangerous because of their possible consequences for society” (10). This position is necessitated by the way governments across the globe re-imagined the covid-19 pandemic as an enemy seeking to vanquish humanity and the way the leaders have purportedly arranged their arsenals to destroy the virus. There was this possibility that the war might not be won. Therein lies the danger. Equally true is that, according to Benzi and Novarese, this perspective “gave prominence to the risk of individuals passively complying with restrictions on individual liberty” (10). This is the real danger as the war metaphors tend to collectivize the

public and conscientize them to willingly give up their rights in order to win the “war”. However, this view is correct but it does not dwell on how the poets use them to frame the covid-19 and present the combatants.

Francisca Brencio focuses on language and war metaphors in the covid-19 pandemic. The scholar canvasses the need for universal collaboration in order to defeat the pandemic. “To overcome the global pandemic and its devastating effects, we need solidarity, a value opposite to war terminology” (62). Brencio frowns at the use of war metaphors and terminology as efforts are being galvanized to finding cure to the pandemic. The scholar seems to assume that war metaphors create a siege mindset, inspire fear and drives people into some kind of depression. The solution which Brencio suggests is that of “solidarity”, something different from the war terminology. Solidarity will enhance unity of purpose, togetherness and build humanity. Brencio’s essay is thus different from the one espoused in this essay which is focused on identifying those at combat and how the war metaphor helps to represent the various moods, present humanity and health workers and our perception of the virus.

As for Martin Doring and Brigitte Nerlich, who examine the use of metaphors, images and symbols in framing the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, write that:

The “war” of governments, people, and whole societies against the coronavirus is still ongoing and is wages with public health

“weapons” such as distancing, isolation, or the wearing of medical masks. (3)

Doring and Nerlich construct the idea of war round certain metaphors, images and symbols. For example, the coronavirus and the entire human race are perceived to be in a war. The public health strategies are conceived to be the weapons. The images of “distancing”, “isolation” and “medical masks” are weapons contrived to win the war. Nevertheless, both Doring and Nerlich are contented with deploring various metaphors, images and symbols to frame the coronavirus, they do not reveal the identities of the combatants in the said pandemic war.

Clement Eloghosa Odia and Peter O. Aisherba focus on pandemic poems as contemplative discourse in recent Nigerian poetry. They argue that “pandemic poems written by recent Nigerian poets demonstrate the nature of contemplative discourse as they dwell on themes which extol human virtues” (3). Beyond the need to show the resilience of humanity in the face of pandemic threat, these scholars believe that pandemic poems offer the poets the opportunity to engage in contemplative commitment. They add:

There is a link between the pandemic narratives, which paint the vivid pictures of the pandemic, and the processes involved in writing the poems. Since the poems are products of contemplation, the poems read like contemplative texts (14)

Odia and Aihevba argue that the poems which treat the subject of pandemic and the contemplative process have some affinity. This is noted in the way the poets engage with the themes of mortality, human frailties and resilience as they confront the covid-19 pandemic. Odia and Aihevba's essay is not related to the use of war metaphors.

Clement Eloghosa Odia examines pathography of pandemic poetry focusing on the representation of disease and death in recent Nigerian poems. Odia writes that:

Morbidity and mortality are two important issues treated and concludes that in representing disease, the poets employ both human and non-human images while recognizing that death functions as king and leveler in the poems and at the same time, describing the disease as a revenge seeker, a seductress, an august visitor, a curse, a beast and endangerment. (32)

Odia's essay treats the subject of disease and death and the various images used to convey how they help contextualize covid-19 pandemic in recent Nigerian poetry. As presented in Odia's essay, the poets use both human and non-human images to depict coronavirus. Thus covid-19 as represented functions as "king" and "leveler" while at the same time operating as "a revenge seeker", "seductress", "august visitor", "a curse" "a beast" and "endangerment" respectively. All these show that the covid-19 pandemic represent serious threat to humanity.

1.6 Thesis Statement

This essay demonstrates that Nigerian pandemic poets use war metaphors to frame health workers, humanity and coronavirus as combatants in the envisaged pandemic war.

CHAPTER 2

HEALTH WORKERS AS COMBATANTS

The primary concern of this chapter is to examine ways in which Nigerian poets such as Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Chidiere Enyia use war metaphors to frame health workers as war combatants in their fight against coronavirus. Adimora-Ezeigbo, in “Brave Frontliner”, a poem dedicated to nurses and other health workers fighting covid-19 begins thus:

Your resolve to stick it out amazes everyone
 Except, of course, your loving family,
 For they know how determined you can be
 To follow through a cause or mission (WTB,19)

The image of a resolute fighter rings through the above stanza. The health workers’ determination to see to the end of the coronavirus invasion amazes the speaker. It appears the writer is laying a solid foundation for the argument. The unflinching commitment of these health officers although comes a surprise to the people, their “loving family” know of their ruggedness to fight for a just cause. Thus, these health workers are presented as trained military officers who will not abandon the war.

Undeterred by the tidal wave of death
 you throw punches of care to stem its surge.
 That carries away the weak and the strong,

you wouldn't retreat though covid-19 storm rages.

Equally underscored in the above stanza is the pervasive image of the tidal wave which is employed to present the large number of death wreaked by the coronavirus. Despite the overwhelming scale of death, the health workers are “undeterred” by putting up a big fight. They are said to “throw punches”, but in the context of the poem, they are punches of “care to stem the surge” of death. This is an excellent metaphor. Still deploying war metaphors, the speaker describes these brave fighters (health workers) as soldiers who will never “retreat” in the face of the raging “covid-19 storm”. Thus far, the poet has employed three adjectives to celebrate the courage of health workers. These include: “resolve”, “determined” and “undeterred”. These work together to affirm the speaker's envisioning of relentless and courageous fighters who will never glory in retreating from a battle:

You dare the plague's vicious and lethal attack
 Rampage that throttles humanity to near extinction.
 You insist on providing the best service possible
 Under the most harrowing circumstances. (19)

Still presenting health workers as veritable soldiers, the speaker maps their resilience as daring the “vicious and lethal attack” of the coronavirus. Military metaphors abound in the above stanza. The metaphorical expression of the relationship between the health workers and the coronavirus is amplified by the

image of assault weapons. The virus is the weapon which unleashes deadly attacks on humanity. The purpose of this rampaging virus as can be seen from the above stanza is to wipe out the human race. This idea is forcefully presented through the image of racing car as evidenced in the image of “throttles”. Thus the virus is envisioned as an armoured vehicle mowing down humanity into “extinction”. Despite the menacing speed to eliminate the human world, the health workers fight on by never giving up, “providing the best service possible” in the middle of such “harrowing circumstances”. Thus these health workers are the heroes of the covid-19 war:

Every day, in all weathers, there you go, sister,

kitted n your survival robes O Brave heart!

Wearing a mask that perhaps hides the terror

In your eyes when you remember your family. (19)

Nurses are evoked as covid-19 war combatants whose undaunted spirit see them wake up on daily basis to go back to the hospitals conceptualized as the battlefield where they battle non-stop the coronavirus. These soldier-nurses dress for the battle. They are armed “kitted” with “survival robes” and “a mask” to defeat the contagion mapped as the enemy. Thus, these women are described as “Brave heart”. The beauty of this apostrophe cannot be ignored as it conjures the presence of the nurses and conveys the speaker’s tone of admiration for them. Also implied in the above stanza is that these nurses are inspired to fight on each time they

remember the vulnerability of their loved ones back home to the coronavirus. Thus the mask functions as a shield against the virus and a means with which the nurses hide their fear. But in the eyes the world, they are fearless.

Also in Enyia's poem, "Who are the Heroes?" the poet uses war metaphors to frame health workers as war combatants. The poem parodies J.P. Clark's "The Casualties", which catalogues the casualties of the Nigerian civil war. Enyia has used this method to examine the various classes of people who combat the coronavirus, especially the health practitioners. The opening stanza is instructive:

The heroes are not those
 Who donated millions and billions
 To fight covid-19
 The heroes are those
 Who are locked down in their houses
 Under the scourge of hunger. (WTB, 83)

The entire stanza is predicated on the metaphorical and ironic exuberance to construct the war scenario. The speaker recognizes key actors in the effort to eliminate the covid-19 pandemic. Two groups of people are identified: the financial donors and the ordinary citizens who complied with covid-19 safety guidelines and suffer untold hardship. These two are metaphorically compared to "heroes". The donation of donors are supposedly meant to support effort of

government. In the context of this stanza, the speaker using metaphor sees it as being geared to “fight covid-19”. Thus the covid-19 pandemic is perceived as a kind of war. Hence, the image of war combat is used and sustained.

Despite the “millions” and “billions” provided by financial donors to aid governments, the speaker refuses to consider them as covid-19 heroes. This is ironic for several reasons. The speaker considers the act of giving money to save lives as also saving the lives of the donors. Hence, it does not make them heroes because true heroes are selfless, and not selfish. Leaving the donors, the speaker considers the ordinary people as the true heroes of the covid-19 pandemic. They are “locked down” in their houses and left to suffer under the “scourge of hunger”. For enduring the misery, pain of alienation and food crisis, the speaker pays tributes to the resilience of the people.

The heroes are not covid-19 task force

The heroes are the doctors and nurses

Battling to save victims. (83)

The above stanza is remarkable for the use of contrast. The speaker proceeds to recognise the work of covid-19 task force who help to keep people safe and ensure compliance to covid-19 protocol. For the speaker, “the doctors and nurses” are the authentic heroes who battle covid-19 to save lives. Again, the image of war plays a key role in this stanza. The doctors and nurses are unequivocally compared to soldiers in the covid-10 army who battle to save

victims of the deadly virus. In the battle for survival, the doctors and nurses are indispensable. Thus by contrasting covid-19 task force with doctors and nurses, the speaker draws attention to the importance of the latter group in ensuring that lives are saved, and the covid-19 defeated.

CHAPTER 3

HUMANITY AS COMBATANTS

The major preoccupation of this chapter centres round the use of war metaphors to depict humanity as war combatants fighting covid-19 invasion in the world. The chapter focuses attention on the poems of three Nigerian poets namely; Law O. Mefor and Nnenna Vivien Chukwu. They present the efforts and strategies contrived by humanity, other than health workers, conceived in this essay, as non-health workers, to stop the coronavirus from destroying the human race.

Mefor in the poem “love in the time of covid-19” uses war metaphors to present humanity as fighting a kind of war as they combat covid-19. The poet suggests that solidarity is the weapon humanity needs to vanquish the covid-19 pandemic:

This is the time to share like none other time
 Giving all we have and all will never have
 Showing off our shared humanity and strengthening
 the tendrils with our infirm shoulders
 Daring to live and die together in comradeship
 While confronting the inglorious bastard eyeball to eyeball (BTW,
 159).

The speaker appears to canvass the idea that if there is any potent weapon needed to defeat the virus it is the generous spirit, of “shared humanity” and “comradeship”. All these epitomize solidarity. Just as soldiers shoot bullets, rockets and missiles to defeat their enemies, humanity is presented as a kind of army who requiring solidarity as their own weapon to overcome the coronavirus. Thus running through this poem is the war image. In the stanza above, the speaker recommends “giving all we have” to support those who do not have during the pandemic. This way, the effect of the virus on the world will be minimized. The next is sharing with those who do not have what we have. This is the spirit of generosity. Next is that both acts of giving and sharing affirm our shared humanity as well as strengthens our sense of humanity. We are encouraged to dare “to live and die together in comradeship”. This is a military metaphor that promotes the sense of camaraderie which emphasises the feeling of friendliness, goodwill, and familiarity among the people. Implied in this word is generosity, compassion, kindness, benevolence, brotherhood and charity. These ideals are the weapons needed to defeat the covid-19 pandemic.

In the subsequent stanza, the speaker shifts attention from humanity in general to the family in particular revealing the need for togetherness and understanding:

This is the time for the family like none other time.

Time to live or perish together

Making the scarce resources so abundant
 To rekindle the love that made us say “I do”
 and push from the obscurity to security. (WTB, 159)

This stanza contextualises the previous one. It invites the family, especially couples, to “live or perish together”. Implied in this stanza is that the pandemic is a war in which families are either ready to live as one or die as such. One way they are do this is by “making the scarce resources so abundant” By making much out of the little they have. This is not the time to quarrel or fight over resources but rather to manage and maximise them. They are also advised to “rekindle” the love they once had in order to make the lovers feel more secure. This way, they can defeat covid-19.

The idea that appears to run through this poem is that love is a powerful force that conquers all:

This is the time like none other time
 When all time past is lost for good
 And a new page opens in the new language
 Which only love can teach
 And the loving will learn and bequeath
 A lovely earth to lovelorn inheritors. (160)

The peculiarity of the pandemic time is repeated throughout this poem to explain and remind the reader that it is a different time they are living in which requires a different approach. The coronavirus invasion has necessitated a different approach.

This becomes the new weapon for winning the pandemic war. This metaphor summons the reader to new level of appreciation and understanding. Here the speaker encourages everyone to show and practice love so that “the loving” among humanity can “learn” to be more loving and eventually “bequeath” it to others in order to create a “lovely earth” taking the place of the “lovelorn inheritors”, a metaphor of people denied love.

In another poem, this time by Chukwu, entitled, “Wedging War on Humanity”, the poet depicts humanity as war combatants.

The image of war resonates in this poem:

In the year 2020

The world awakes conscripted

Slow-motion first characterized its pace

And suddenly the journey turns a rat race. (WTB, 180)

Running through the above stanza is the metaphor of war as represented by the word, “conscripted”. This word implies a forceful enlisting of people into the army. Similarly, the advent of covid-19 in 2020 forcefully “conscripted” the world into the covid-19 army in fighting to survive the deadly pandemic. The rate at which the conscription began is metaphorically captured by the poet. The

forceful recruitment of people into the combat started gradually, later it became “a rat race”. This metaphor reiterates the threat the plague posed to humanity.

The image of humanity as combatants is further conveyed in the following lines:

The galloping journey hides in its flipping jeer

Panic and pain served in anxiety and bitterness

Loss, wailing and mourning

Limping between spiritual and physical hunger

Covid-19 is a journey of war on humanity. (180)

The image of war combat is extended to capture the expression of grief which is associated with the pandemic. Just as wars cause panic, pain, loss, wailing and mourning, so is the pandemic metaphorically conveyed as the harbinger of panic, pain, loss, wailing and mourning. As the speaker has stated, “covid-19 is a journey of war” which has been waged on humanity. This goes to substantiate the earlier position that the pandemic is a combat. In winning the combat therefore, the people struggle between “spiritual” and “physical hunger”. This refers to several attempts to engage spiritual power to ward off the plague. It also refers to physical efforts initiated to end the pandemic. Still conveying the sense of humanity as combatants, the speaker employs war metaphor to depict the covid-19 pandemic:

Humanity puts on its armour and girdles
With quarantine,
Social distancing,
Face mask,
Hand gloves,
Running water rinsing her souls,
And other Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs)
That shield man from the world outside him. (180)

The metaphor of war is instructive in the above stanza. As it is in wars, the soldiers or fighters wear “armour” and “girdles” as protective garments. Similarly, the speaker argues that the pandemic war also requires some protective gears. This time, they come in the form of “quarantine”, “social distancing”, “face mask”, “hand gloves” and “running water “. They are the items which when utilized, can protect humanity from being wiped out of existence. For humanity to combat coronavirus, they must wear the armour of “quarantine” to keep the entire human race safe. Another armour is that of “social distancing” to prevent the spread of covid-19. The aim is to break the contact. Next is the weapon of “face mask” with which they can keep health workers safe and the rest of the human population alive. They are to wear “hand gloves” so that contact with others will be safe. Every home and offices where human beings live and work are expected to have at their disposal the armour of “Running water” with which to rinse their

hands after washing them. The last armour is the Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). The use of the above safety measures are meant to convey the sense of war and humanity here is functioning as war combatants who by deploying the above weapons are bound to win the covid war.

CHAPTER 4

CORONAVIRUS AS COMBATANTS

The two previous chapters have examined health workers and humanity as combatants. This chapter proposes to explore coronavirus as combatants. It shall focus on the poems of Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan, and Maria Abiola Allege.

Olaosebikan in the Poem, “This Too Shall Pass” presents covid-19 as a dreaded reaper in the world at war with humanity:

Behold! It’s the Reaper

The Grim reaper is here!

See the sons of men scampering for safety

every man for his life

The raging waves and stormy seas prostrate

in silence

All welcome the fearsome general,

The Grand commander of the covid-19 forces (WTB, 47)

The poem begins with a biblical allusion to the ubiquitous power of the reaper sent by God to set things right especially to clear the earth of humanity. Covid-19 is that messenger sent down with a dreadful appearance. Its coming has driven fear into the hearts of men who scamper for safety. To amplify the power of covid-19, the poet employs images of waves and seas which are “raging” and “stormy” respectively. Despite their ferocity, they are said to “prostrate in

silence” to the great covid-19. This explains why the speaker calls coronavirus “the fearsome general” and “The Grand commander of the covid-19 forces”. This view presupposes that covid-19 is a military commander coordinating the pandemic war on humanity and that it is the head of “the covid-19 forces”, in fact, it is “The Grand commander”.

What a force! Irresistible!

Behold our man-made defences turned lifeless guns
against viruses, oh no!

Shall we ever defeat this invisible warrior of
the century?

A priceless question on mortal minds

As we watch defeatedly while she recklessly
wreak havoc,

Souls vanishing daily

Yeah, she feeds the insatiable belly of mother earth
endless graves defying norms. (WTB, 47)

The speaker’s sense of shock and fear is expressed through the opening apostrophe in which the virus is described as an irresistible force waging an unseen war on the world. The “guns” are said to be “lifeless” when used “against viruses”. Also instructive is that covid-19 is an “invisible warrior” recording a huge success. Through the rhetorical question, the poet asserts that human beings cannot defeat

the force of covid-19. Everywhere, the virus “recklessly wreaks havoc” on the world, while humanity watches “defeatedly”. Consequently, “souls” are said to be “vanishing daily”. In the end, “mother earth is said to feed the “insatiable belly of the earth” as “endless graves” defy “the norms”. The beauty of the above lines cannot be ignored. The use of personification is explicit, as it emphasises the rate at which the virus is killing people. Thus, it has recorded more casualties than any military offensive ever conceived by humanity.

Olaosebikan in another poem, “The Levelling General” presents coronavirus as a combatant in boastful tone. The virus speaks throughout the poem thus:

I clear whom I will
 I defy colours, wealth, stature nor age
 I am the sudden guests in viral frames,
 Infecting every aspect of moral world
 Making geniuses fools
 And their expertise futile. (WTB, 49)

The exultant voice of the coronavirus is highly instructive. It demonstrates the triumphant nature with which the virus has wreaked great havoc on the world. Deploying the first persona voice, the virus declares that he has the sole power to kill any victim. The speaker employs euphemism to describe the killing power. The words “clear” and “defy” convey the sense of killing. What the speaker

means when he says that “I clear whom I will” is that he can kill very large number of people at the same time. To “clear” is wipe out of existence. The word, “defy” shows that no one has the capacity to resist the power of coronavirus. Hence, the virus kills people of different races, economic class and age. Also, the poet employs equative metaphor to present the virus. This time, the virus is compared to “guests” who operate in the shape and power of viruses. These viruses are said to be “infecting every aspect of mortal world”. Their operations have confounded “geniuses” thus making them “fools” and rendering their “expertise futile” the coronavirus pandemic has assumed the status of global health emergency.

Still rendering his audacious account during the year of covid, the coronavirus declares thus:

I have sent your warriors into self-imprisonment

They call it isolation

Alas! Behold as hunger beckons your men to

Shelter in her tent

No house to rent

Nor food for the living man! (WTB, 50)

The virus has presented itself as a combatant who has sent human “warriors into self-imprisonment which we gladly refers to as “isolation”. According to the virus, “isolation” is a kind of “imprisonment”, this time, prisoners of viral war. The use

of personification is heartwarming because the poet presents the pervasive nature of “hunger” which is seen beckoning on the rest of the world to take “shelter in her tent” Beyond that, the poet treats the subject of economic privation as it occurs during the war. There is no house to rent neither is there “food for the living men” to eat.

In a rather unsparing tone, the speaker declares thus:

Level them I say! Level them all!

For it is I, in charge-yes, I,

The Great general of the corona battalion

The keeper of the viral realm and mother of all diseases

And I have come to collect all that is due for me (50)

The opening line of the above stanza sums up the mission of the coronavirus. It is to “level” the human population. The word “level”, like “clear” and “defy” is a euphemism for to wipe out of existence. It is an order given by “The Great General” to the “Corona battalion”. Here the coronavirus is ordering his battalion to level or completely destroy the human world. The virus explains further that he is in charge of the corona battalion. The poet employs three war metaphors to describe the coronavirus.

Firstly, the virus is “The Great General of the corona battalion”. There is an indirect comparison of the virus to a General of a military battalion. In this context, this battalion is that of corona virus. Hence, covid-19 is a kind of soldier

in combat with humanity. Secondly, covid-19 is the “keeper of the viral realm”. This is a metaphor and it expresses the authority and power of one in charge of a realm. In this poem, covid-19 is the keeper, but of the viral realm. Thirdly, covid-19 is compared to “mother of all diseases”. The point being made is that, it has the power to control all diseases. Hence, its power is irresistible and uncontrollable. Hence, the viral speaker declares that he has “come to collect all that is due for me”. Again, this is a euphemism for kill and destroy. This presents covid-19 as a combatant who has come to kill and destroy the world.

Revelling in war metaphor, Alege in “warring the space” depicts the hazardous nature of covid-19 pandemic:

It’s war we’re fighting, “isn’t it so?

But they brought their wars on us,

As if it’s our war, yet we know not whence

This war in our space, waw-waw no be small. (WTB, 165).

Notice how the poet makes a comparison between covid-19 and war. The opening line draws attention to the sense of fighting a war. The human race is perceived to be engaged in a kind of war. The speaker remarks that this “war” is their war, which they have brought on us. This implies that the covid-19 disease did not originate in Africa and that it has been brought on Africans and the world in general. Apparently, no one knows from where it has sprung. This speaker concludes this stanza with the Nigerian pidgin phrase “*waw-waw*” which means

ugly. According to the speaker, this covid-19 “war” or pandemic is ugly as it exposes the unpleasant experiences people had to go through to survive it.

In the preceding two stanzas, Alege makes a historical allusion to the previous two world wars and hints at their destructiveness. The next stanza shifts attention to the covid-19 war:

This time, con[vid]sion of mixed reagents
 Rocket in Wuhan spacecraft
 To cough in sneeze the unseen fiend
 Across lands, seas and clime
 In blind fury that confound
 Even those supposedly know
 Their ways aaround evils ‘n good (WTB, 166)

The technical beauty of the above stanza among others is in the apt use of coinage or graphological deviation. The opening line of the above stanza contains “con[vid]sion” which is a deviation from the norm “confusion”. It suggests the confusion that has come upon the world as a result of covid-19 which is a product of a chemical and a laboratory process in the city of Wuhan. Sliding back to war metaphor, the covid-19 virus is metaphorically compared to a “Rocket” fired from a Wuhan “spacecraft”. Thus, the covid-19 virus is a rocket and the Wuhan institute laboratory is a metaphor for spacecraft. Invariably, the war metaphors employed above help to create the picture of a devastating pandemic. To further

amplify the power of the virus, the speaker suggests that it has made people to “cough” and “sneeze” this “unseen fiend”. In wars, the enemy is seen but in this context, the covid-19 is an “unseen fiend”. It carries out its vindictive destruction with “blind fury” which has confounded everyone.

In the concluding stanza, the speaker explains thus:

No jet bombers, no artillery hails,
 No ballistic missiles, no nuke,
 No amphibious rumpus, no blood spills
 Yet coffins deluge the lands
 Until cadavers hurry into their homes
 With no rites, just to stay safe. (166)

The poetic exquisiteness with which the metaphors of war is employed to convey subtle ideas about covid-19 pandemic is commendable. Also noted is the instructive power of the parallelism: the sustained negation of strong weaponry for war. This shocking scenario smacks of covid-19 ubiquitous power. It does not possess jet bombers with which to kill people. It has no artillery to shell its victims like the drop of hails from the sky. This is a great metaphorical construction to evoke the pervasive power of the covid-19 which functions exactly like the artichery. By stating that the covid-19 has no weapons, the poet is indirectly speaking to its capacity, power and strength. Each weapon mentioned underscores exactly the power of the virus. Hence, they are metaphoric in nature.

Firstly, the virus functions like a jet bomber bombing the world with a deadly virus. Just as the fighter jet drops bombs on the battle fields, people drop covid-19 virus on human bodies thus causing widespread infections. Secondly, the virus operates like ballistic missiles which can travel far and wide. In like manner, the covid-19 virus spreads across lands and seas, wreaking havoc on the world. Next, the virus is like the nuclear weapon. It does not spill blood but we see the “deluge” of coffins across the land. This is the power of the virus.

This chapter has explored the covid-19 pandemic in the poems of selected Nigerian poets who have used images of war combat to express the poet’s vision of the pandemic era. Through the various images of war combat we are able to appreciate the poetic artistry and metaphoric ingenuity on display as the poems show the various sites of death and destruction.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this essay has been to examine war metaphors in Nigerian pandemic poetry in order to establish how covid-19 pandemic is represented in selected Nigerian poems. It goes further to explain how military metaphors are used to frame the various war combatants in the poems. Looking at the various perspectives from which the selected poets have engaged the virus portrayal, it is evident that the study identifies three main combatants.

The first combatants which the poets present through the use of war metaphors are the health workers. They come in the form of nurses and doctors who battle in the frontline to resist the spread of the disease. The poets present these health workers as resolute fighters or combatants. Through care for the patients these health workers help them to fight through to survive the pandemic attack. These health warriors refuse to retreat in the face of serious threat to their own lives. The hospitals are framed as the battlefield where the war takes place. This is where the nurses fight the battle. Thus the image of fighters dominate the poems.

Next to be framed through the use of war metaphors are human beings in general. The poets believe that humanity is fighting an invisible enemy. To defeat this viral enemy, human beings are encouraged to adhere strictly to non-pharmaceutical safety guidelines which range from staying at home to avoiding

crowded spaces. They are to wash their hands regularly and wear face masks or protective shields. They are encouraged to be themselves isolated and keep a safe distance from other human beings. Of critical relevance is the need to show love to others who may be in need. The spirit of comradeship is believed to be a fundamental weapon in the fight against covid-19 pandemic.

The last combatant is the coronavirus. This virus is presented as engaging in a war to wipe out human species. This viral war machine has no intention of slowing down any time soon. Several epithets are conjured to describe this virus. They include “General”, “Grand commander”, “the levelling General” and several others. These sobriquets are meant to present several aspects of their nature and intention in combating the rest of human beings to a standstill. Some of the poems exalt the coronavirus by focusing on how it has killed thousands closed schools, offices and ruined economic activities. The point being made in this essay is that covid-19 studies have depended on the use of war metaphors as a framing device in the representation of the pandemic.

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