

PROTEST POETICS IN SÒRÒSÓKÈ: AN #ENDSARS ANTHOLOGY

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Abstract

Language use in literary works have consistently engaged with societal realities, including pressing concerns on security in contemporary Nigeria, resulting in civic debate and demonstrations such as the #EndSARS protests. Existing studies on literary pragmatics have focused largely on elements that emphasise meaning, such as linguistic choice, characterisation techniques, and meaning constructions in socio-cultural contexts. There has, however, been limited attention to how poetic language reflects resistance to extrajudicial violence, conflict, profiling, and delayed access to justice. This paper, therefore, examines selected poems in *Sòròsókè: An #EndSARS Anthology* (*Sòròsókè*), with a view to analysing how imagery, symbolism, irony, and allusion are foregrounded through pragmatic expressions represented in tense, punctuation, and pronouns, in determining how poetic language shapes public perception of security matters. This study adopts pragmatic concepts foregrounded by Mey (2001) which provides the framework for a reader-based interpretation of linguistic-literary signifiers. Findings reveal the use of alternating tense constructions to portray imagery, symbolism and ironical stance in highlighting past and current social realities related to the #EndSARS protests. Pragmatic expressions such as ellipsis and personal pronouns indicate representational references to poetic imagery and allusion, as contextualised in personalised and solidarity perspectives of extrajudicial brutality. With a deployment of literary pragmatics, especially as it relates to the sensory/imaginative and the semiotic/symbolic, this study explores linguistic strategy through literary lens in selected poems from *Sòròsókè*, to make a case for how understanding language use in literary contexts can foster national and, by extension, global security.

Keywords: #EndSARS, *Sòròsókè*, poetry, pragmatics, extrajudicial violence

Introduction

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has a rich history dating back to the 1800s, particularly 1861, with the establishment of a formal policing system in the nation (Ijalana & Ijalana 2025). However, Nigeria, in its over one-century history of policing, continues to tackle the challenge of extrajudicial activities linked to security operatives (Akinyetun & Adedini 2022). Matters appeared to reach an explosive point in October 2020, after reports filtered across social media platforms that a young man in Delta State, south-south region of Nigeria, had been killed by officers of the now-defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). A video of the man, who seemed to be lifeless, sparked outcry firstly on social media platforms, before the outrage morphed into physical protests on streets across Nigeria. However, the demonstrations didn't evolve out of a vacuum. Prior to the October incident, there had been complaints of extortion, harassment, and extra-judicial killings linked to security operatives.

As far back as 2009, a report by Amnesty International accused officers of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) of being “responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial executions, other unlawful killings and enforced disappearances”, with a significant percentage of the cases said to have been largely “uninvestigated and unpunished”. Eleven years later, protests over police brutality erupted under the #EndSARS movement (George 2020), culminating in a defining moment in the nation's history. Among the highlights of the #EndSARS protests included the disbanding of SARS, and the setting-up of #EndSARS panels across states to review old and recent allegations against security personnel.

As Nigeria continues to evolve, literary works have remained constant sources of reflections on the imperative of holding institutional authorities to account. From creative productions on corruption among security agencies to literary texts that engage reformation configurations, with the evolving nature of constantly-concerning perspectives on factors that link peace and development, the need to sustain the discourse on security is relevant. This stems from the perspective on the interconnecting sectors of a nation's polity, considering that security is tied to nearly all areas, including the economy, health, education and agriculture.

Adebisi (2015) underscores the significance of linguistic forms and strategies in African literature. Similarly, Akinsete (2016) states that, “literary texts are

relatively indebted to its linguistic structure or form”. On this note, an analysis of the language of protest, as captured in *Sọ̀rọ̀sókè: An #EndSARS Anthology* *Sọ̀rọ̀sókè*, edited by Verissimo and Yeku (2022), earns its essence from the significance of security on a nation's polity. For instance, the #EndSARS protest is said to have cost Nigeria an estimated N1.5 trillion, reportedly equivalent to 1.03 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as well as around eleven percent of the country's 2021 budget (Asu 2020). The preceding statistics constitute a very limited fraction of the influence of security on issues that cut across the polity, even in situations that one may consider largely unlikely in terms of consequences. The major impact of such losses on the country is significant.

The language of poetry, from an #EndSARS perspective, provides a discourse landscape for understanding how literature functions as a platform for exploring the impact of police brutality. The research's focus on highlighting stylistic choices, such as imagery, symbolism, irony and allusion, is used to depict socio-ideological responses to injustice. The study establishes an avenue for highlighting how poetry reconstructs real-life circumstances through artistic expression, yet retains the intense interpretive core of how the literary resists abuse of authority and engages policy discourse.

Language use in literature

Various definitions apply to how language is explored in literature, especially in relation to the underlying consensus that views pragmatics within the purview of meaning, language and context. For instance, Morris (1938: 6) defines pragmatics within the dimension of the study of “the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable”. Similarly, Thomas (1995: 22) examines pragmatics through the lens of meaning making as “a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance”. Rose & Kasper (2012: 2) define pragmatics as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context”; while Crystal (1997: 301) views pragmatics as involving “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication”.

Based on the foregoing, analysing poetry through the lens of pragmatics offers an interesting framework on how the humanities can contribute to workable policies aimed at improving security. Going further, a pragmatic investigation into the language structure of selected poems in *Sọ̀ròsókè*, examines issues relating to security and development. The poems selected for this study present differing perspectives on the #EndSARS protests, especially from the points of view of the different sectors of Nigeria's polity, inclusive of references linked to external concerns, also connected to security.

Exploring the place of pragmatics in literature is not new. Nofal (2011), in a study on the language of poetry, notes that the idea of poetic licence establishes the relatively non-restrictive nature of the literary world of poetry. As the study observes, the pragmatic nature of poetry is represented in language complexity, relative non-conformity with the rules of grammar, exploration of imagery, among other features (Nofal 2011). Within the scope of literary texts, Mey (2001) notes that literary pragmatics extends its coverage to include the effects of language, as seen in the influence of creative works on audiences. On another level, Mey (2001) provides the scope of literary linguistics, citing examples of prose and drama texts; this scope, which is portrayed as an extension of the range which literary pragmatics covers, also accounts for the semiotic/symbolic and the sensory/imaginative, when one considers the use of language. As the study observes, interpreting literary works through pragmatic eyes involves seeing the text as:

...author-originated and -guided, but at the same time reader-oriented and -activated process of wording. The reader is constrained by the limitations of the text; but also, the text provides the necessary degrees of freedom which the reader can collaborate with the author to construct the textual universe, one that is consonant with the broader contextual conditions that mark the world and times in which the reader lives. (Mey 2001: 237–238).

The analysis of the varying uses of language in literary texts has been the focus of several studies, especially from the context of pragmatics and discourse analysis. From novels to plays to poetry, pragmatics has offered a unique window for

understanding the backdrop that frames the use of certain diction, language and language elements, such as proverbs and punctuations in literary use. For instance, Odebunmi et al. (2009) examine this in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, with attention to how proverbs act as meaning signifiers, especially in African socio-cultural settings, noting that the use of proverbs establishes differing circumstances that foreground factors such as encouragement, providing assurance, and justifying actions, and so on. A study by Abushibab (2015) explores the short story format through the lens of pragmatics stylistics. As Abushibab observes, the coherence of a short story can be established from the concept that “it achieves a sequence of events within a framework of logical relations and the components of the text are mutually connected within configuration of the ideas” (Abushibab 2015: 115). That is, the understanding of a short story, based on the use of language, is a function of a combination of the author's intention in terms of the message being conveyed, as well as the reader's comprehension of the message passed by the author.

Sinha (2021: 29), in a study on how pragmatics provides a solid structure for the analysis of literary works, notes that while analytical approaches in pragmatics such as “speech act theory, conversational implicature, politeness theory, and relevance theory” are largely subsumed under conversational discourse, such theories can equally be applied to the analysis of literary texts. This is with a view to broadening the discourse on how context and meaning can be examined within the scope of literature. Sinha posits that in “a global pragmatic analysis of a literary work, one should take note of both what is specifically literary and what is not specifically literary but is, nevertheless, relevant to literature at the level of the character's communication or the level of communication between author and reader or speaker and hearer” (Sinha 2021: 38).

Crystal (2008: 379), in an analysis on what constitutes pragmatics, establishes that pragmatics is “the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication”. Crystal (2008: 379–380) goes further to define literary pragmatics as applying “pragmatic notions (especially to do with narrative) to the production and reception of literary texts”.

From the foregoing, the poems chosen for this study can be said to foreground the context of broader discussions around pragmatics and security, considering

that the poems present the particular issues tied to the #EndSARS protests. The use of language in the poems is significant, such that the representations of literary elements configured under elements such as imagery and symbolism provide a deeper insight into the security issues represented in the poems, even in cases where they are presented metaphorically.

#EndSARS and poetic constructions

The significance of the #EndSARS protests cannot be overemphasised, considering the concerns over police brutality and the quick-consuming nature of the demonstrations. Although the #EndSARS protests occurred years before the present study, the evolving nature of Nigeria's security space, which extends into governance discourse, makes this paper especially relevant. The poems selected for this study range from individual depictions to reflect the universal scale of issues involving security agents, showing that the concerns are not limited to Nigeria and matters of security and governance within Nigeria only, but extends to “anybody [who] can be somebody” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 82–83).

Thus, the exploration through literature, as represented in the anthology that forms the focus of this study, offers a necessary framework for understanding what drives and sustains such protests. This is aptly represented in the poetic elements explored in *Sọ̀ròsókè*, which is a collection of poems not just on the October 2020 protests, but extends generally to security-related activities in Nigeria. This can be linked to the position of Mey (2001: 255) who posits that, “The pragmatic act of reading implies an open-ended invitation to the reader to join the author in the co-creation of the story, by filling in the holes that the text leaves open”. Thus, an analytic invitation into *Sọ̀ròsókè* foregrounds the use of pragmatic signifiers, such as tense, punctuation and pronouns, to enrich the exploration of imagery, symbolism, irony and allusion as these literary elements reflect security-related peculiarities.

Tense markers as poetic visual evocation

In selected poems across the anthology, the use of tense and how this reflects imagery and symbolism as rich and provocative, gives necessary insights into the discourse around policing in Nigeria, with regard to feeling the pulse of the citizenry. Literary pragmatics accounts for the range of tense, and the effects of such grammatical constructions in audience-related perceptiveness. A study by Brinton (2001) observes that in medieval literary texts for instance:

...the “historic(al) present” – the use of the present tense in a past-tense narrative, often with rapid and seemingly inexplicable alternations between past and present – offers the most obvious phenomenon where a discourse analysis might provide a more satisfactory explanation than has thus far been given. It has traditionally been explained either as a metrical expedient or as an intensifying, vivifying, or emphatic device (142–143).

This context of tense is richly explored in Kola Tubosun's “Blood-Spangled Banner” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 30). The use of alternate present/past tense indicates a poetic narrative stance that depicts the imagery of a multi-verse situation, in which the poet gives a drone-view of various settings that bear the mark of police brutality. This is seen in the lines:

In the Ezu River of bones and blood...
In the white of a flag, the bleeding soul...
In Oke's twenty-year neck is a hole...
On the streets, the marauders mark the ground
With the casings of their killing rounds
Picked up hurriedly to mask the proof
That the promises are vain that the leaders make;
That the land is still a butcher's slab (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 30)

As observed in Tubosun's use of language, the poetic voice moves from the present, as seen in “In Oke's twenty year neck is a hole”, to the past as reflected in “...killing rounds / picked up hurriedly”, and back to the present, as seen in “...the land is still a butcher's slab”. These highlight the imagery of a national outlook that takes on a realistic portrayal, as it relates to the pulse points of extrajudicial killings. These references revolve around the Ezu River in Anambra State, where corpses were alleged to have been dumped by SARS operatives as far back as 2013 (Oluwagbemi, 2017), while the “white flag” depicts the October 2020 shooting incident at the Lekki tollgate. There is also reference to other killings during the October 2020 protests, such as the murder of Oke Obi-Enadhuze, a young man who helped built a blood donation app

(Akinkuotu, 2020), as well as the aftermath of the protests.

This use of tense further explores the context of symbolic imagery, especially in the choice of words in “Blood-Spangled Banner” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 30). This is evident in words such as “marauders” and “ghosts”, which are used to refer to perpetrators as well as those caught in the crossfire of judicial killings but are yet to get justice. The description of Nigeria as “still a butcher's slab” is especially symbolically provocative, and this underscores the valuelessness of human life in relation to the factors that culminated in the protests.

The aligning representation of tense as a marker of imagery is also explored in Stephen Kekeghe's “We Chant our Pains” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 94), such that within the purview of the emphatic or intensifying in terms of the use of tense, the poet explores the present tense to depict what is a past occurrence, represented in lines such as:

We wake up with hurting hearts
our pains canting on the rhythms
of skits and Tiktoks
as SARS steals our humanity
in the altar of power and wreckage— (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 94).

The use of the present tense, as indicated in the lines above, portrays the intensifying nature of the factors linked to the protests. By this, the poet creates the imagery of a current event, bringing to the mind of the reader a vivid picture of the typical situation during the 2020 #EndSARS demonstrations. The use of the tense also foregrounds the urgency of the situation, provoking a renewed reality of a situation that may have hitherto been forgotten. The poet appears to be underscoring the need to keep the issues connected to the protests on the front burner of the nation's memory.

In “We Chant our Pains” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 94), the symbolic nature of the word choice is similarly explored in the use of literary language to drive home the poet-persona's stance. In expressions such as “Dawn meets us here”, “scowling chants”, “Dawn; drains our being”, “night kisses our remains”, the humanising of abstract elements reflects a deliberate attention to evoking the imagery of intense pain, as further represented in lines such as: “our pain chanting in the rhythms”.

The use of present tense as a reflection of imagery is extended in structural construction of Biodun Bello's “End Sirs!” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 90), which can be said to indicate the mood of the poet. The uneven nature of the lines can be interpreted to show the state of affairs that foreground the issues connected with protest. An instance is presented below:

Let your resilient calls
nourish
the silent streets
back to sobriety
that hails your bravery—
the bravery of fright-less legions
that skirt
the surrounded
cities
under
the watching afternoon skies... (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 90)

The imagery of concerns raised by #EndSARS protesters over security and governance are represented in the use of expressions such as “resilient calls”, “bravery”, “fright-less legions”, “brewing tides”, and furthermore, as expressed in “festering / fires / of force”, “tyrant vices”, “burning down”, “aged adumbration”, “justice”, “hollow / governance”, “equity, / but felonious”, “wastrels”, “paltry palliatives”, “blood and bullets”. The poem offers insight into how the language of revolution, within literary contexts around security issues, can continuously beam a searchlight on government policies.

Tense further takes on a literary significance, in the framework of irony, as a significant linguistic-literary device in *Sọ̀Qókè*. As Wilson & Sperber (1992: 68) posit: “[t]o communicate is, among other things, to claim someone's attention, and hence to demand some expenditure of effort. People will not pay attention unless they expect to obtain information that is rich enough in contextual effects to be relevant to them”. In light of this, one can say that the use of tense in “Hurray to Impunity” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 44–45) makes the attempt to ensure that security remains relevant in the range of topical issues affecting Nigeria's polity. An initial or cursory reading of the poem may provoke some sense of humour from the use of satirical language. However, on closer reading, the reader is drawn into the urgency that the poem demands.

“Hurray to Impunity” draws inference from the dense reference on linguistic irony. In contextualising security-related issues, pragmatics offers the appropriate window for analysis, when one considers the position of Wilson & Sperber (1992) on how interpretation of grammatical representations is dependent on the relevance of the circumstances around such expressions. As such, pragmatics becomes a considerably significant tool for analysing revolutionary language in poetry. As presented in the repeated “Hurray to Impunity” in the stanzas of the poem, the poet offers an ironical view of the state of affairs, depicting a condition of praise for a state of disarray. The poem presents an array of voices that appear to take on the stances of various personalities across different sectors of the society. It becomes even more interesting that the context of irony in several stanzas also adopts a paradoxical nature in terms of contradicting voices.

Norrick (2001: 89) affirms the discourse significance of paradox in figurative language, noting that “while metaphors oppose a literal and a figurative frame of reference, contradictions and paradoxes oppose two frames of reference on the same literal level”. These frames of reference are evident in the poem. The lines of the poem provoke the imagery of a frustrating level of underdevelopment, while still ironically praising the context of impunity. The various sectors of the polity are depicted through the references such as “commonwealth”, “toiling poor”, “services”, “leadership lectern”, “protests”, “Land of Birth” and “genocidal acts”. And it is within these sectional references that the poem explores the paradoxical in terms of representations.

To cite an instance, the presentation of “I will wolf down the wealth of the commonwealth / Paean and perquisite in return will I get” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 44), shows future tense markers that indicate an ironic clash of action and reaction. On a surface level, it is more or less unthinkable that a public servant who is expected to manage the commonwealth appropriately, “wolves” down such resources, and yet gets adulation. In the second stanza, the future tense circumstance is presented in “I will pray and prey on the toiling poor / Accolades and garlands for my oppressive shoulders will I receive”, and this can be viewed from the telescope of religion and the context of taking advantage of the poor. However, as the ironical tone of the poem suggests, rather than punishment for such actions, the oppressor receives “accolades and garlands”. The mood resonates in the third stanza, where the poet depicts another situation in the

following words: “I will charge the people for services not rendered / Approbation and complicit silence will I obtain as reward”. This speaks to corruption that is relatively observed in Nigeria’s public sector, which ironically is not exclusive of the reality in security agencies (Robert & Wilson, 2024), as seen in services not rendered and substandard practices.

In stanza four of “Hurray to Impunity”, the poet pens in the future tense: “I will maim, rape, and kill / Feeble outrage and stage-managed court sessions will I provoke”. The paradoxical stance of the poet, which is ironical, points to the demands of the protesters during the 2020 demonstrations. This is portrayed in the demonstrators’ requests for “justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensations for their families”, and “setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reported police misconduct within a period of 10 days” (*The Cable* 2020: 1). However, in line with the future tense construction of the poem, the issues or the activities cited in the lines above are still commonplace three years after the protest (Ezeamalu 2023). Furthermore, in the reference to “Land of Birth”, which the poet persona describes as “The paragon of impunity”, this further signifies some level of ironical portrayal of events, since it is not expected that a state of impunity should be celebrated for excellence.

On punctuation: Ellipsis as literary illustration

The use of punctuation in *Sọ̀ròsókè* is also worthy of attention, as the varying nature of its use can be portrayed within the context of the literary, in terms of imagery and symbolism. According to Calhoun (2015: 28), “[a] critically responsible treatment of a poem’s punctuation recognizes that reading only with reference to contemporary punctuation results in a limited interpretive stance, and also constitutes a critical move based on presupposition”. In light of this, one of the most obvious references in the symbolic use of punctuation is in the use of ellipsis, which foregrounds a variety of definitive interpretations ranging from pauses for effect to signifying the frequency of occurrence.

The emphasis on ellipsis aligns with the position of Chen (2006) on the significance of ellipsis in pragmatics. Chen posits that “[n]o matter whether ellipsis occurs in daily oral English or in written form, such as couplets, poetry, artistic languages of novels, etc., they all occur in specific discourse, and ellipsis cannot exist without discourse” (Chen 2006: 2136). This observation by Chen

(2006) foregrounds the context of literary discourse in “Fevered Children” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 40), which falls within security issues connected to the #EndSARS demonstrations. This is seen for instance in:

These fevered children
Hot from nightmares and sick from sleeplessness,
Lost...wondering
what sources so great a stench,
that paints and makes
their emptied bowels wretch... (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 40).

The use of ellipsis in the third line of the excerpt above, provides the imagery of a sense of intensity of the experiences of the individuals referred to in the context of the poem. The “fevered children” are presented as sick, not just in body but in their psyche, represented in the “lost...wondering” nature. In line six above, the use of ellipsis can be said to intensify the imagery of disgust and pain, especially given the position of sick children with bowel movements. It becomes even more significant, since the “stench” referred to causes bowels that are already empty toretch. It is important to point out that the use of “wretch” within the context of what may actually be “retch” appears to be a deliberate signifier of the frustratingly pitiable state of the situation. Furthermore, the use of ellipsis for effect is observed in “You can only bury so much... / six feet is for one body or at most the two”, as well as in “This historical Nation... / that feeds on her inhabitants” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 40), that further intensifies the imagery of the state of affairs that depict symbolic carnage with respect to extrajudicial killings and corresponding cover-ups.

Further along the lines of the elliptic, Biodun Bello's, “End Sirs!” demonstrates a play on words that also signifies literary pragmatics. The poem reflects how security issues indicate the state of governance and, by extension, the effects on the economy. The use of ellipsis in the poem can also be seen designed to achieve a dramatic pause for effect, and to show that the issues presented in the poem are ongoing matters of concern. For instance:

End sir!
in the shady
verandas
of wastrels

bearing pumps
of paltry palliatives
and making offerings
of culture to the people... (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 88–90)

The lines above present the imagery of underdevelopment that is traced to the context of offering palliatives to the poor and vulnerable in the society. While the use of ellipsis can be said to signify that the palliative offerings constitute an ongoing practice, the ellipsis can also be considered within the purview of forcing the reader into rethinking the context of presentation. This is depicted with regards to the issues arising from palliatives that people alleged were locked up in stores, but later broken into during the 2020 protests (*Vanguard* 2020). The use of “pumps” is also significant in the context, as it provokes the imagery of the “sirs” who are “bearing pumps”. This can be re-imagined as guns loaded with “paltry palliatives” which are thrown at the people. The ellipsis, when considered under the context of semiotics, is a symbol of enduring hope, as signalled by an expression like “until the / dawn bears / the golden / morning / of freedom, / bringing succour to the land”; these lines underscore the quest for freedom that is expected to bring about a new wave of positivity that will last.

Additionally, the use of ellipsis at the mention of “Linda Igwetu...” in James Agada's “My Name is Jimoh” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 74) is significant, as it indicates that the list has an unspecified end that is not immediately apparent to the reader. The use of ellipsis is not just reflective of the elements of language, but also of literary strategy. In literature, ellipsis provides the reader/audience the opportunity to be a part of the creative process by providing them the liberty to add missing information.

A similar perspective is also offered in Tope Olabisi's “I Can't Breathe” (*Sọ̀Qókè*: 82–83), where the poet notes: “I laughed in the face of crumbling dreams, / chanted e go beta when all there was was... kata kata”. The ellipsis allows the reader not just to take a pause for effect, but to fill the gaps outside the “kata kata”. Similarly, the ellipsis after “Linda Igwetu” gives the reader the opportunity to add more names to the list. The poem also offers more insight into the circumstances that revolve around the mentioning of the name. This is depicted in lines such as “I have other names like most of y'all / But unlike you,

my voice is forever banished / sentenced to a life of silence". This is further evident in "But the bullet were stronger than my will / I fell too soon, way too soon... / And now, all I ask if for y'all to soro soke". From the foregoing, while the message underlining it is portrayed in a metaphorical sense, the focus from a denotative stance is relatively clear.

Pronouns as descriptive connotations

Beyond capitalisation is the depiction of pronouns, in particular personal pronouns as literary markers, as seen in *Sọ̀Qòkè*. Ortega (2006: 397) makes a case for how personal pronouns can extend beyond "minimal descriptive value", such that they are "neither mere deictic indicators of their referents, nor linguistic elements that support just grammatical categories such as gender, person or number", but also a signifier of "politeness, respect, intimacy, solidarity". In light of this, Agada's "My Name is Jimoh" (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 74) can be seen as depicting how literary works can present security-related issues, through the echoes of imagery and allusion.

Although the poem mentions the name 'Jimoh', the use of personal pronouns also contextualises the imagery of different activities that took place during the 2020 protests. This is represented in the use of expressions such as "throw stones", "burn the fences / Of the detention center", which can be linked to the reports of stoning and jailbreaks that also characterised the protests (Akanbi et al. 2020; Olufemi 2020). The account in the poem points to the real-life experience of Jimoh Isiaq, a bystander who was killed after being hit by a stray bullet during the #EndSARS protests in Oyo State, southwestern Nigeria (Oyero 2020). This is represented in the concluding lines of the poem, where the poet-persona says:

Father,
You can see in my eyes
Staring at the sun
As I lie in the street with a bullet in my back.
I did not disgrace you.
I only told them my name is Jimoh
The son of Ishaq (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 74)

"My Name is Jimoh" indeed explores the temper of the different persons involved in the protest, whether as direct participants or indirect observers.

From the events presented in "My Name is Jimoh", personalising the occurrences point to the need for urgent reforms in the country's security sector. This is in order to rewrite the negative factors that fueled the protests, such as detention centres "where legs are broken / And hair's shaven for the price of a phone", and extending to situations in which persons get killed just for being observers. The poet-persona identified as the "I" in "I am halfway dead, yet halfway living" and "My" in "My Name is Jimoh Isiaq" indicates the obvious level of personalisation. From a solidarity perspective, the poet also presents the imagery of other real-life victims of extrajudicial killings, such as "Chika Ibeku", "Anita Akapson", "Precious Odua, Onovo Matthew, Linda Igwetu...". The names cited by the poet are listed as victims of police brutality during the #EndSARS demonstrations that took place across several states in October 2020 in Nigeria (Kabir 2020).

The context of personal pronouns in pragmatics discourse, from the position above, is also represented in the title of Olabisi's "I Can't Breathe" (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 82–83). The poem aligns thematically with "My Name is Jimoh" (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 74), which is discussed in the earlier section of this study. As Olabisi's poem depicts, the personalisation of the experience holds some sense of individuality as well as solidarity, couched within the realm of extrajudicial killings, which formed the crux of the 2020 protests.

Correspondingly, in Oladimeji Ogunoye's "Fevered Children" (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 40), the perspective is given of a citizen who laments over "state-sponsored deaths buried in the open". Within the context of language use, the poet's use of personal pronouns is significant in the sense that it points to a sense of belonging by victims of extrajudicial killings and the need to look into the past in order to understand the present and prepare for the future, as represented in the lines:

Until we come back to shovel these bodies...
Until we question the lead that fell each rotting flesh
No matter how far we run...
our children will always wake up fevered by this nightmare
In fear of boots, clubs and guns
Of a future defined by a gory past (*Sọ̀Qòkè*: 40)

"Fevered Children" explores the imagery of physical and psychological distress experienced in an environment that depicts the horror of witnessing public

deaths. This is portrayed in the use of expressions such as “hot from nightmares”, “sick from sleeplessness”, “emptied bowels wretch”, “fevered stench”, “towering carcasses”, “rotting flesh”, and “gory past”. The intensity of the horror is depicted in the number of the dead that have to be buried; so many that the graves dug were hardly enough to contain the corpses, as seen in: “You can only bury so much... / six feet is for one body or at most the two / But when you bury millions, / The graves meant to hide them / Becomes a foundation for the mountain their heap makes” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 40).

The horrific nature of the situation is even more significant in the symbolic use of “mountain” to represent awaited justice, as in the number of victims of extrajudicial killings described as “a mountain of bodies so high / No matter how far we run into the future, / we will always see its tower behind us”. The recyclical nature of such deaths is presented in the imagery of bodies carrying bodies, which will still carry other bodies as presented in “the dead you buried, / the legs are outside... / Please know those legs carry other bodies / whose legs carry other bodies...” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 40).

The use of personal pronouns can also be viewed through the lens of foregrounding solidarity (Ortega 2006) that extends into universality, when the context of literary allusion is considered. The expression, “I Can't Breathe”, as expressed in Olabisi's “I Can't Breathe” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 82–83), is globally recognised from a background of police-related events, as it relates to the infamous incident involving George Floyd in Minneapolis, United States. In May, 2020 Floyd was killed in an incident involving police officers, during which one of the officers held Floyd down by pinning him by the neck to the ground. During the incident, which was caught on camera, Floyd had repeatedly said “I can't breathe”, while the police officer held him down, and the expression became the rallying call for the Black Lives Matter protests that reverberated within and outside the US afterwards (Hill et al. 2020).

From the foregoing, the poem is captured as moving from national representation to a global one. The conversation provokes a discourse that encourages introspection on policies dealing with developmental challenges. As presented in the poem:

Until your voices are strong enough
to dissolve systemic corruption

Until you are no longer
“a bunch of young ones who can be silenced with negligence”
Until every life is treated like all living depends on it.
Until every wrong can be accounted
for and anybody can be somebody
Until transparency becomes a culture
and integrity more than a word but a watchword
Please
Do not
Stop! (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 83)

In “Fevered Children” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 40), the use of personal pronoun within the scope of allusion is also a pointer to the particular nature of the nation under question, which when one considers the subject matter of the poem, as seen in “Joining the towering carcasses of our dear Nation's exploits”. Furthermore, the lines, “From the General turned Pastor, / to the reincarnated agbádá-wearing one”, portray comparative analyses on understanding Nigeria's security landscape, with allusion to the country's transition from military to civil administration. This is indicated in the reference to former President Olusegun Obasanjo's reported activities as a pastor during the military administration (Premium Times 2017).

The use of pronouns to reflect solidarity is also seen in the deployment of allusion, as presented in “My Name is Jimoh” (*Sọ̀ròsókè*: 74). The lines, “I was just an Aaron / Holding up Moses hand / That Joshua may prevail” recall the biblical story where Aaron is more or less a bystander that held up the hand of Moses while Joshua battled against the Amalekites (ESV Bible, Exodus 17:12). Like Aaron, the poem identifies Jimoh as a bystander who does nothing but observes, while the protests continue a distance away, but he eventually joins the list of victims swallowed by the fallout of the demonstrations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the elements of language use in literary contexts from pragmatics perspective, and how such elements foreground the ever-present discourse on Nigeria's security challenges and polity in general. The analysis contributes to the understanding of the past, the present and, possibly the

future, especially on ways to improve relations between the police, and all security outfits in general, and the 'policed'. The paper shows how tense, ellipsis and personal pronouns foreground the pragmatic deployment of symbolism, imagery, irony and allusion in the selected #EndSARS poems. These figurative expressions are analysed alongside linguistic markers. Through the analysis, the conversation around security, especially as it relates to the burning issue of relations between security officials and citizens, is demonstrated as highly consequential. In essence, through literature, especially the deployment of pragmatic tools from a literary framework, the paper offers insight to better understand the dynamics that fuel protests against injustice associated with security operatives, and fostering improved policy frameworks and, by extension, a better world.

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