

Poetic Protest and Testimony in *Endsars Rhythms*

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Abstract

Art participates in social movements and resistance to police brutality by virtue of poetic protest & testimony. Political corruption and police brutality is a vector for resistance and poetic testimony in African society. I conduct a textual analysis of a digital memorial to understand the ways Poetic Protest and Testimony in *Endsars Rhythms*. This study through the application of the concepts of protest and testimony observes that *EndSARS Rhythms* through poetic frame participates in preserving memory within the structure of art and documenting the exploitation and brutality of the youth by the Nigeria Police Force. It submits that *EndSARS Rhythms* is poetic protest and testimony to police brutality. This paper claims that *EndSARS Rhythm* is a literary testimony for victims of police brutality and survivals in Nigeria..

Keywords: History, Poetics of Witnessing, Memorial, EndSARS, Remediation

INTRODUCTION

The use of art as a medium of protest and testimony is a constant feature in African literature (Sene 2022). Art constantly participates in protest and testimony because man is art and what affects man also affects his art. Jayne I. Owan (2021) sees art as a medium of advocacy. Art testifies to pain and trauma in African literature. Shoshana Falman and Doris Laus (1992) in theorizing testimony submit that; “A “life-testimony” is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” (p. 2). Art testimony, appropriates memory as a literary vehicle in questioning police brutality. It reshapes such memories of abuse as evidence against the Nigeria police force. Owan (2019) is of the opinion that poets function in the capacity of an intercessor to protect...” (p. 982), as it is indicative of *EndSARS Rhythm*.

Implicating G. G Darah’s (2011) concept of Niger Delta literature of protest as testimony, he suggests that protest literature and testimony, reflecting the themes and idioms of the liberationist endeavour, are reflected in arts of objection. Chinua Achebe (1975) is foremost in using art as resistance and testimony to pain and trauma. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a subtle protest against colonialism and thereby inaugurating literary testimony to exploitation in Nigerian written literature. The foregoing is alluded to in Achebe’s *Morning Yet on Creation Day* when submitting that; “Art for art’s sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit” (1975, p. 21). Achebe (1975) affirms the functionality of art in the liberation of the people and he notes that an African creative writer cannot avoid social and political issues of contemporary Africa. This highlights the functionality of art as a medium of witnessing abuse and protesting against such abuse. The Niger Delta literature viciously protests and resists abuse and exploitation. Niger Delta Literature illustrates in clear terms the role of literature to testify against exploitation and

brutalization. Endsar protest is a throwback to this literary tradition. Chinyere Nwahunanya (2011) theorizing on protest literature in the Niger Delta notes that:

From those we refer to as the pioneers in patriarchs of Niger Delta Literature, we notice ab initio a dominant concern for the plight of man and the environment in the region. The literary responses were indeed aimed at highlighting the socio-economic, political, environmental and other problems that have affected the human population...(p. xiv).

Protest literature bears witness to the plight of the masses by appropriating the memories of the happenings in the society to confront the consciousness of the people and seek change. Nwahunanya (2011) further affirms Achebe's submission on the functionality of art and, by extension, protest literature; thus, "...literature must serve the society that produced it..." (p. xvii). This process of service in the case of EndSars protest is to highlight and question police brutality in Nigeria and by so doing erect a memorial through poetry for those victimized and killed by the Nigerian police. EndSARS poetry draws from a rich pool of Niger Delta protest literature and South African protest literature.

For instance, Dennis Brutus' *Letter to Martha* (1968) did a poetic witnessing to pain and trauma in South African South African prison illustrating that in the climate of uncertainties poetry is "weaponised" as a witness to pain. Brutus' *Letter to Martha* is the poetic narrative of the oppressed through an autobiographical presentation of his plight and suffering in the hands of Apartheid administration. Achebe in witnessing and resistance through poetic composition captures the pain and alienation during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. EndSARS poets in *EndSARS Rhythms* continue in this form of poetic witnessing and resistance in Nigeria. Falman et al (1992) is of the opinion that; "...contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission" (p. 5). The foregoing is clearly illustrated in *EndSARS Rhythms*. The Editor's Note in *EndSARS Rhythms* implicates Falman submission and also indicates the function of poetic testimony, thus; "Literature and arts owe society the duty not just to entertain and educate but also to document the history of the people as well as mirror and x-ray the society" (p. 5).

EndSARS Rhythms does three things: entertain the people within the site of their trauma and brutalisation, document in poetic form various causes of their brutalisation and through this, question about the moral vibe of the society. In the face of threat to life, Nigerians wrote poetry as a medium of protest to question police brutality in Nigeria. Nwahunanya (2011) affirming the power of art submits that; "The writers have through creative literature increased their pressure on sensitive minds in their call for a dispassionate reconsideration of the environmental and human rights issues which have repeatedly constituted their thematic focus" (p. xvi). The foregoing is the same poetic intention of EndSARS writers. Onyekachi Onuoha in writing about the function of the poetry of witnessing notes that; "The art of remembering...is a literary litigation against the power that be and those who have misused the said power at the detriment of others in the society" (p. 25). And this is what the writers of *EndSARS Rhythms* engage in an attempt to rescue the citizens from the oppression and decimation of the Nigerian police. Falman (1992) further notes that; "The essence of the testimony is historical, and that its function is to record events and to report the facts of a historical occurrence" (p. 16). *EndSARS Rhythms* records the events and historical occurrence of police brutality in Nigeria.

METHOD

This research used the research method of textual analysis of a digital memorial to understand the ways Poetic Protest and Testimony in Endsars Rhythms. This study through the application of the concepts of protest and testimony observes that *EndSARS Rhythms* through poetic frame participates in preserving memory within the structure of art and documenting the exploitation and brutality of the youth by the Nigeria Police Force.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Poetic Witnessing in *Endsars Rhythms*

EndSARS Rhythms is a community poetics by netizens who, through poetic composition, tell the plight of netizens in the hands of the Nigeria Police Force. This narrative of poetic storytelling mixes forms from poetry to poetic prose as seen in “Bermuda Triangle”. In this poetic prose the poet-persona states the process of imaging the plight of the masses as the witness stands of art. The poet persona state; “Here, it is not safe to wear tattoos, dreadlocks; to look posh, drive a Benza, or own a laptop, because they could pull the trigger that leaves you in a pool of blood-many things are not safe to do” (p. 7). The poet persona through imaging of brutality bears witness to levels of exploitation of the masses by the Nigerian Police Force. Through gradual presentation, we could see how wearing tattoo, dreadlocks, looking wealthy or driving an expensive car to predispose the masses to death in their immediate community due to the high-handedness of the Nigeria Police Force.

This form of death by the trigger is a result of the attempt of the Nigerian Police to define the citizens based on a restricted template of what is right and wrong, and that is why the poet persona says that; “...many things are not safe to do.” The poet persona did not keep his audience wondering who the culprits were in the brutalisation of the masses. The poet persona says; “It is not safe to sit outside my neighbourhood, you could be forced into a black van to a small bleak godforsaken latrine. Your trip could continue to Bermuda triangle where a bloody river is both a means of transportation and an untimely arrival of eternity- there is one in Akwuzu. The poet persona indicts the police and through witnessing chronicles their actions in that if one sits outside in his neighbourhood one could be forced into black van and taken to the police station where one would be dumped in prison, which the poet persona refers to as “small latrine”.

The poet persona likens the trip of the masses with police as a trip to the Bermuda triangle where things get lost upon arrival. The poet persona refers to that transportation in a police van as an untimely arrival of eternity, implicating police in extra-judicial killing of the masses. In testimony against police brutality the poet persona notes; “It is not safe to travel from Edo to Enugu, or ply the Kaduna-Abuja road. This means that the many boys like me who cannot afford the wings of anything that flies, rent our bodies as wages to the brutality of the police” (p. 7). The poet's persona points at places where their lives are threatened and how their bodies are physically battered in the hands of the Nigerian Police force. The poet persona even mentions date which indicates that the persona is bearing witness and making reference to historical occurrence thus; “Sometimes 2019, after searching even the most private parts of our lives, and there had to be at least one scapegoat, they asked our driver to continue, leaving this young man behind” (p. 7). The poet persona accounts for the plight of members of his generation who are always victims in the hands of the police and uses that single indices as referent to the plight of the masses in the hands of police officers. The poet's persona accounts for the reason why the young man is left behind; “They had found a pinch of paper in his wallet, they said he used it to smoke. How could such a tiny thing put a man in trouble that had my heart racing ahead of the bus? I peeped through the window hoping for the Acts of the Apostles but the quietness of that checkpoint blurred my heart, and the surrounding bushes seemed to house unspeakable secrets” (p. 7). The poet persona bears witness for victims of his generation, even the one that was convicted just because the police assumed he was a smoker.

The poet persona alludes to the quietness of the checkpoint and that it blurred the persona's heart as a result of the secrets which the bushes hold, a fact which might be connected to extrajudicial killing of Nigerians in the hands of the Nigerian Police. In bearing witness against the police, the poet persona indicts the police of corruption and exploitation of the masses. The poet persona notes that; “Elsewhere, there is an offering box on the highway, where those on pedals are forced off their steering to surrender their tokens to the force of firearms. For Jimoh Isaq among others, it was not safe to call for an

end to Police brutality. And though it is not safe to remember, we will never forget” (p. 7). The poet persona profiles the police and their corruption on Nigerian highways using the firearm which is supposed to be used for the protection of the masses but is used in the intimidation of the masses. In the poem “State Armed Robbers Squad (SARS) Frank Kaliati in the poet persona’s witnessing against police brutality submits that; “The law generously ejaculates lawlessness/ Down the virgin body of Mama Africa/ The law has raped Lady Peace and Fraternity” (p. 8).

Ironically the persona bears witness how the law which is represented by the Nigerian police generates lawlessness and bears witness how the law raped lady Peace and Fraternity which a metaphoric reference to the peace and friendship of the masses. The poet persona highlights the suffering of the masses when the persona says; “we shiver that we shake as lost lambs” and that the might of the law is more brutal than the corona indicating how harmful police brutality is to the psyche of the masses. The poet persona’s choice of images is so glaring such that one cannot mistake who the poet persona is bearing witness against; “Heavy black boots polished in black blood/A deafening cry tears the very silent heavens/Another black soul so soon severed/ Widowing poverty impoverished mothers /Orphaning already malnourished babies/ The defenders betraying own sacred oath” (p. 8). The Nigerian Police which wears heavy black boots and polished in the blood of the innocent Nigerians kills the masses which awaken tears from heaven for their extrajudicial killings of the masses. In this their action, their subjects face pain and agony, making mothers who had already be impoverished by the state, widows while also making children who hardly survived in Nigeria when their fathers were even contributing to the house keep, orphans thereby complicating their existence and leaving them in constant sorrow as a result of the police “the defenders” of the law “betraying own sacred oath” of protecting the masses. In the Nigerian Police betraying their own sacred oath, they; “Spewing terror on the tight reins of the law/ A virus of our own design/ A failed experiment creating demons to haunt us/ Day in, day out robbing, raping and killing /Married to the very law, immune to prosecution” (p. 8). The extensiveness of Police brutality is illustrated by the poet persona’s choice of word such as the “spewing terror” and what pains the poet persona is that the law is used in perpetuating the oppression of the masses. This oppression is metaphorically referred to as a virus designed by our own people.

The poet persona sees the creation of SARS as a failed project that robs, rapes and kills the masses. This the poet persona indicates that the robbery, raping and killing are all carried out by the law that was supposed to protect them and the perpetrators of this crime are immune to the prosecution of the law. The poet persona calls the perpetrators of this crime against humanity: “The dark virus in human form/ The spirits of the old have abandoned us/ The birds no longer melody sweet mornings/Gun shots punctuated by beatings linger the airs/ The fierce legendary battle of evil over good/ The law embracing corruption and brutality/Armed with justice, we fight on” (p. 8). The dark virus that is symbolically to the Nigerian Police force now replaces the sounds of the birds with gunshots and punctuated by beating the masses. The hurt inflicted on the masses still lingers in the air and it is this memory of hurt and unlawful afflictions that stir the masses to a protest against police brutality. Though the law embraces corruption and brutality as a model of its oppression, the masses are armed with justice and a collective voice to fight their battle. This is ironic in the sense that those who are in charge of administering justice are no longer doing it but the masses are stepping into that space to demand for choice in the sense that those who are supposed to practice justice are spewing injustices and inflicting pains on those they are supposed to be protecting. Darah (2011) affirms the function of protest literature in Nigeria, noting that; “Nigeria is currently adrift in a similar sea, and it needs a compass of justice... to make the shore safely” (p. 11). Injustice is a constant indices of the Nigerian state and protest testimony is a vector toward the drive for justice. Onuoha in theorizing about the memory of protest submits that; “...the writer’s representation of exploitation and abuse in Nigeria as a poetic narrative pointing to the

continued subjection of the masses and the interpretation of what happens within the framework of the text” (p. 18). The afore-mentioned is the same temperament that is highlighted in *End SARS Rhythms*.

In the poem “EndSARS! LAWMAKERS, OR LAWBREAKERS” by Olude Peter Sunday highlights the actions of the police while bearing witnessing to the atrocities committed by the Nigerian police force thus: “I, am the tickling talks of the town,/ black bullets on the lips of gory guns-/ I maim without mercy- I sting the group I guide,/ and vaunt the voice of virtuous denizens/ into rotten reverberations” (p. 9). The hurt is reposed by the poet persona on behalf of the people, the persona says, “I am tickling talks of the town” narrating the actions of the people using collective memory to point at the site of the affliction of the masses. The action of the “black bullets” maim the masses without mercy and sting the group the police force is supposed to guide. The failure of the Nigerian Police Force who are sustained by the taxpayers’ money, the masses resist their oppressors, the “vaunt the voice of virtuous denizens” “into rotten reverberation” against the cause of their oppression. The poet persona affirms the resolve of the masses: “I, am the shield of the streets,/ The shepherd in fine suits, to secure- but/ *I fire without favour*- I gash bruises on the skins of my sheep,/ and like evening wolves, I tore the sons I screen/ and rinse their blood into the darkness of my dreams” (p. 9).

Through resistance and appropriating the messianic prophecy, the poet persona says I, am the shield of the streets, and fire without favour indicating the nature of justice. The poet's persona indicates that by justice it will cure the bruises on the skins of the sheep in this persona dreams for a positive change for the plight of the masses. The foregoing implicates Celestine Oyom Bassey's (2011) concept of the tyranny of the minority over the hapless majority. And this motivates the poet persona as he passes judgment and states the reason why he is bearing witness against the Nigerian Police: “I, am the *ant-robbery* in want of *anti-robbing*./ armed forces to prune the arm of my pride;/ for like the goliath's fall: I have proven to be, and, to let the/ shadows of the innocent hurry home before their body” (p. 9). In clear terms the poet persona bears witness against the anti-robbery squad which robs the people and kills them at their wake. The poet persona makes biblical allusion to the fall of Goliath which symbolically represents the fall of the Anti-robbery squad. Their poetic protest points at how this police point unit brutalised the masses. The poet persona uses the poetry collection to represent the spirits of the masses to hurry home before their body which represents death. The poet persona resists being silent: “cut-me-off, end me in name, and scattered offices;/ I am still the coiling poison./ the toxic songs in the throats of my prey-/ for if my brutal bones be mixed with mercy,/ I will exploit thousand livers and lives alive,/ And even fly far hunt the peace of the souls I have slain” (p. 9). Even at the point of death and brutality, the persona is the coiling poison in scattered offices that attempt to suppress the truth.

The poet's persona's brutality becomes a representation of the brutality of his people and the toxic songs in the throats of the prey against the predators. The poet persona uses indirection to speak truth to power when the persona says; “for if my brutal bones be mixed with mercy/I will exploit thousand livers and lives alive,/and even fly far hunt the peace of the souls I have slain” (p. 9). This is illustrative of the fact that those who are alive will demand for the souls of those who have been slain by SARS. A. M. Sarawade (2021) affirms the functionality of a protest poet thus; “...a protest poet is expected to describe the protest in the form of outward behavior of the people” (p. 23). This is what the poet persona so far studied engages in.

Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto's “What I Want Us to be Strange to” corroborates the previous poem and chronically illustrates forms which police brutality takes when the poet persona says: “This day begins with bullets. /Another day for sons and daughters to breathe their last. /First, it starts with apprehending then baton-ring, then panicking,/ Then gunshots, then more panicking, then more gunshots,/ Then screens, then more more gunshots, the more screams, then deaths” (p. 10). The poet persona highlights the terror, which SARS represents in reality in the lives of the masses, and how they used the gun

bullets to kill, and maim the masses. They also use the gun to drive fear into the minds of the masses. While every day; “Another day for sons and daughters to breathe their last./ I want us to be strange to this violence./I want us to be strange to these brutalities./ Last week, a boy was apprehended down the street/And forced into a van and taken away./ No questioning. No warrant. No crime scene” (p. 10).

The activities of the SARS are a cause for concern in the sense that each day young boys and girls are killed without any reason. The poet persona provides a poetic lead to protest the excesses of the Nigerian police by saying “I want us to be strange to this violence” and to be strange means not to accept it as a normal and the poet persona bears witness to a boy who was taken away on his street by SARS unit without any questioning done by the public and passer-by. The poet persona also informs what causes the boy’s arrest which is zeroed just on negative assumptions by the people that: “He looks like a thief, that’s evidence, they said./ The boy’s arm has arrays of tattoos. It’s evidence, they said./With a hair cooked neatly as art. Evidence, they said./ His beards grown plenty I could hide inside. Evidence they said./ The boy has an iphone. Massive Evidence, they said.” (p. 10). Therefore, the boy was thrown into a dark room and tortured to his innocence: forced to confess what he didn’t do; forced to name guiltless people; “Forced to empty his bank accounts; forced to drink his urine./ Thereafter, the boy was shot dead after the he survived/ These torture, and then dumped into a river like he was dirt./ Yet, the country’s flag keep flying without it’s people” (p. 10). The “boy” represents those who have been killed extra-judicially by the police and forced to own up to crimes they never committed. The police went as far as stealing from them, humiliates them and after they survive police torture, the police kill them after they are forced by the police to implicate others. The police appropriate the looks of the “boy” and other boys of his generation to re-classify them as thieves because they use expensive gadgets.

Poet after poet bear witness to the forms of police corruption and brutality in Nigeria through poetic representation. In Nkiru Onyeyaforo’s “Talk True” she highlights police brutality through her autobiographical encounter with the police. “I thought “talk true” was a statement/ Until I tasted your baton on my head/And the butt of your rotten guns/ Reshaped the shape of my jaw/ Offence number one, speaking too much English/“Why would you ask, ‘what is my offence?’” (p. 11). The poet persona is brutalized because she attempts to know what she has done wrong and as such the police uses baton on her head and uses the butt of their gun to hit her on her jaw. Her offence is because she spoke too much English inquiring what her offence was. They brutalize her and took her to the police station. “Why this shiny handcuffs?/Come! Why are you towing me to the station?/ Hit! Crack!/ I tasted my own blood, tickling down my jaw line, down to the collar of my immaculate white shirt/ What a stare! A blend of blood! Tears! And sweat!/Offence number two!” (p. 11).

The poet persona kept asking question as blood drips down his jaw. The poet persona is abused and forced to sign a document that he was not even allowed to read the content. They kicked and slapped him more butting to the extent that he signed the paper that was given to him to sign. The officers beat him to the extent that redesigned his skin in torn and drums fallacious charges against him. ”Pair one! Offence... refusal to drop egunje!/ Pair two! Offence... annoying officers?/ Aha!/ Pair three! Offence... no broom in the vehicle/ Goodness!/ Pair four! Offence... asking an officer direction without dropping uhmm...egunje” (p. 12). This illustrates the supposed offence the poet persona committed that made the police to brutalize him. The excerpt indicates that the masses are abused because they fail to offer bribes to the police officer, and as such the police use guns and other weapons of the law to intimidate and extort money from the masses. The police officer stole from him under the pretence of the law: “I, aha! Offence... refusal to part with my phone./ Our monies? Gone! Accessories stolen! Body bloodied, spirit broken/By our uniform robbers, paid to keep us safe/Now kept unsafe in an unknown cell/ By people paid to keep us safe” (p. 12). The police practically stole from him using the weapon of the state and even imprisoned him for his failure to comply with their exploitation.

In “Guns End Dreams” by Olawumi Oluwasogo bears witness to the one killed by the police: “Guns end dreams/ How do I know?/ It ended the dreams of mic with a magical flow/ flow like a river cooling the heat in the heart/ but the Guns mad that flow blood and ended the dream/ just because he had a lock on his head which they dread” (p. 15). The poet persona bears witness on behalf of Mic who died as a result of police brutality. His only offence was that he wore a lock which the police dreaded. Through poetic refrain the poet persona says: “Guns end dreams/ How do I know?/ It ended eldorado in the heart of a soul/ Poised to be the head of the pack/ And Eldorado with our existence/ But the Guns killed the soul/ Oh! Now how will our existence find her gloomy groom Eldorado?” (p. 15). The poet's persona testifies against the police and on how the gun their yield ended the lives of people in the society. Through poetic refrain, the poet persona kept illustrating how the gun kept ending the lives and dreams of the masses. The poet persona through poetic witnessing indicates that the police is used by politicians to suppress the masses and the poet persona asks rhetorical questions: “I have a question for these guns/Whose side are you on?/Let me help you; the agbada with the green padlock?/Who rob you while you rob us why don't we both kill the robbery/ The agbada steal your life and humanity/ Hence, the bitter wine of brutality you spill on us/ While you let them set you on us like a Rottweiler on a hapless victims/ You call us your friends but I guess that's your lingua translation/ For the English word “Enemies” (p. 15).

The poet persona is of the view that failed leadership of the agbada kind of leaders are the ones causing police brutality in Nigeria. And the poet persona asks who is the police on their side, the corrupt politician or the masses. The persona seems to suggest that the police is a victim victimizing victims as a result of their inability to attack those in power. They turned their attention to the masses and inflicted pain on them. The poet persona notes that; “We don't hate you though/ neither are we your foe/ Take our outstretched hands/ And let us free you rottweilers from the masters who malnourished you” (p. 15). The persona notes that the masses do not hate the police or are their enemies and offer a hand of friendship to the police force. The poet's persona attempts to redirect brutality to those in power who had caused the malnourishment of the police force to the extent that they now exploit the masses. In “EndSARS” by David Jonathan Inyang, the poet persona chronicles the reaction of parents at the loss of their child at the hands of SARS; “indeed, the land is bleeding,/ Parents and youth are weeping,/ Due to the killings of their love ones,/ which their only crime was carrying expensive phones, oh! what a nation!” (p. 53). The Nigerian police and especially, the anti-robbery unit kills innocent citizens without trial just because they are using expensive phones. They kill them without investigation or any form of trial and in this “That is the more reason we all demand freedom,/ Yes, we are fighting for a true cause,/ for the government and security agencies have failed us” (p. 53). And the poet persona makes allusion to these various forms of oppression as factors necessitating their protest the call for ending SARS in Nigeria.

Affirmatively, the poet persona says “Over police brutality and assault, we will speak, we will speak louder,/ until we see a better Nigeria,/ we remain stronger/ my eyes grow week over the money they borrow/ indeed, our dauntless heroes left a stain” (p. 53). The poet persona says they would not keep quiet until they see a better Nigeria and they will remain stronger even in their oppression. Then the poet persona goes ahead to mourn those killed by the Nigerian police after collecting bribes from the family they borrowed to pay the police. The poet's persona hopes that those slain by the police, their death would not be in vain. The poet persona in erecting a poetic memorial submits that; “My heart bleeds as I write this threnody,/ Nevertheless, I believe it's a surge for a pleasant melody,/despite, the brutalities and agony,/ Nigeria is about to be reborn in peace and harmony,/ we shall live to see a “New Nigeria” (p. 53). Amidst this lamentation the poet persona expresses faith for a new Nigeria. In the poem “Homeland in Pain” Enyia Lilian Nkechinyere continues the tribute and the building of memorial for those massacred in cold blood at Lekki tollgate. “Tribute for victims of police brutalities/ let us remember/ Those souls terminated by bullets/ the souls of Lekki massacre./ Those youth holding

placards,/ With the inscription EndSARS/ whose body was riddled with bullets/” (p. 52). In tribute their poet memorial is erected in poetic lamentation about their killings and their memories are written in hurt on how they were abused as witnesses against Nigerian government and its institutions.

The poet persona continues; “To men and women/hacked to death for/ greasing their palms with crispy notes./ To writers imprisoned/ for speaking truth to power./ to patriots wallowing in urine and faeces / infested prison and cells./ to all freedom fighters and activists whose back bears the/ mark of poisonous whips/” (p. 52). Through metaphoric piling the memorial of those slain and those held in forceful detention are erected as witnesses against the state. The poet persona continues in building of the poetic tomb as reminder of those slain by the state; “Let your blood become our ink/ Let the ink write your name/ on marbles of gold/ let poetry preserve your story/ in the sands of time” (p. 52). The poet persona uses the blood of the slain ones as ink in writing their name with poetic marbles and task poetry to preserve their story of death and unlawful incineration.

Physical Protest and Testimony Against State Brutality

Poets after poets in *End SARS Rhythms* chronicles the reason for their protest and bears witness against the state for the extra judicial killing of many in Nigeria. Obiwuru Chidera Rex in the poem “The Tollgate of death”, informs the society that the only arm the protesting masses carried was melodies. They “armed with melodies of hope we chant:/ One nation bound in freedom, peace and unity”(48). This freedom that has been elusive is what they seek to get but met their death. The poet's persona informs that it was out of hope they marched, but “our fellow compatriots in uniform pointed at us and killed us” (p. 48). This is a testimony against the state. In lamentation the poet persona erects a memorial for the slain ones, “ On the walls of the strange world we wrote/ we wrote weak, cold hands: Brothers killed brothers at a tollgate, the tollgate of death” (p. 48).

In the poem “how our lights were put off”, the poet personas’ voices were not heard they marches out to confront the government and the police institution and to draw attention to their plights. In the poem “How Our Lights were Put off” by Nwokeabia, Ifeanyi John, the poet persona accounts for what led to end SARS protest in Nigeria thereby emphasizing the history of the masses' abuse in Nigeria. “When our dispersed voices failed to beckon ears,/ We hopefully gathered them like a bunch of broom/ At the cross of tollgate, our new found abode./ We supplicated day and night for untreated wounds” (p. 11). This illustrate the plights of the masses and when the authorities failed to hear the voices of the masses and take action, the masses decided to protest their brutalization in the hands of police. They gathered as “bunch of brooms” at the tollgate in Lagos and supplicated the day and night for their untreated wounds which were caused by police brutality and the complicity of the Nigerian government. Their actions were caused as threat by government because: “The symphony created by crescendo of rising voices,/ Voices seeking justice for voiceless victims/ Quaked the hills of our merciless messiahs/ Who slithered silently like snakes in a mission,/ And struck the unarmed bodies at Lekki with darkness,” (11). The government which represents the hills and who were supposed to be the messiahs of the people in reverse were merciless as they saw the people’s cries for justice as an affront to them and a threat to their government. The government did not look at the people’s plight instead they send the soldiers after them and murder many of them in cold blood. The poet persona preserves the memories of those who were killed at the Lekki tollgate and gives an eye witness report of what happened on that day thereby illustrating that preserves history amidst its form. Thus: “Wails, revving the already distraught air,/ Booms of gun-fires sent bodies sprawling,/ A sea of red is spluttered and scattered everywhere,/ Sending splashes of red on standing clothes” (p. 11).

The Nigerian government used its institution to inflict pain and death on the masses and flowed the bloods of its citizens on its soil. The poet persona notes that: “Green, white, green, red, green./Our anthem of patriotism became a dirge./ For many holding flags, sang to their darkness./ That’s how our lights were put off “ (11). The poet

persona and the masses thought that holding the flag of the country would protect them from the invading armies whom the state instructed to disperse them by all means including death. And those who attempted to express faith in the symbol of Nigeria's independence were killed as they sang into darkness and “that’s how our lights were put off” in the words of the poet. The poet persona erects a memorial for those who were slain by the Nigerian government and the military. The poet persona notes that; “Though, the bodies might have been laid to rest,/ The burning fires of the minds are forever ignited./ Darkness never ends life” (p. 11). The burning fires of the mind to seek for justice are forever ignited by the actions of the Nigerian government and its institution and poetry becomes a medium to bear witness against the action of those killed and to actively keep the memory of those slain alive through the medium of art which comes alive at the encounter of it. Like “How Our Lights were Put off” by Nwokeabia, Ifeanyi, “Spare us! Spare us! By Adaji Elizabeth Mercy also chronicles what led the masses out in the end SARS protest in Nigeria. Through the autobiographical memory, the poet becomes a participant in chronicling the plight of his people. “Here’s an escape from the dark dank cave of silence/ We, with our tails between our teeth /Liked bridled ass, yielding headlong to master’s whip/ Shackles on our necks like dangling jewels /We were made denizens of shut cages /Only peeping through bars to see what tomorrow brings” (p. 13).

Protest was an escape from the dark dank cave of silence and the fear that is associated with silence as they struggle under the master’s whip. The people were imprisoned by the masters and when they could not take the brutality any longer from their oppressors they; “In retrospect, we decided to gird our loins/ Yea, we the the roaches of yesternight/ Took the arm of “one voice”/ To stage a revolt against injustice/ In winter or summer, our united arms will suffice” (p. 13). The underdogs of the society in one voice decided to revolt and to demand for justice from their oppressors and bearing only the arms of justice and one voice against their oppressors. Even at the point of seeking for their freedom they were dispersed and battered by the Nigerian state. “Didn’t we get independence to revivify us?/ Yet we’re battered with inhumanity/ Empty rhetoric of political slogan/ Falsified mandates in eloquence/ This, clustered with brutality/ We’d not wear the insignia of fright anymore” (p. 13). Even in that brutality by the Nigerian state people who they elected and since the politicians decided to cluster with brutality instead of freeing the people from their oppressors they joined in oppressing the masses. The poet persona says that the masses no longer wear the emblem of fear anymore as they were used to. In collective resolve the poet persona says: “Our Petitions aren’t Insipid/ Yet, it’s hidden behind the air of insouciance/ Our lives at the mercy of stray bullets/ We would give in only in death/Look how the grave cries, “spare us, spare us” (p. 13).

The poet persona insisted that their petitions for freedom are not lifeless. However, it is hidden in the air of indifference because the masses’ lives are at the mercy of stray bullets and the poet persona insists that they will give their lives only in death. The poet persona points at the grave of those fallen down by police brutality and Nigerian government complaisance. In the poem “In Lekki, Heroes Prevailed...” by Merife, Chisom Victor, the poet persona calls forth to the oppressors: “Now hear us, you inhabitants of the world!/ Never again shall we remain silent,/ For our posterity is in threat of slavery/ Never again will we fear death,/ For we are not better than our painfully departed comrades;/ For even in life, the occupants of Hades pitied our sorrows” (p. 16). In an authoritative tone the poet persona calls the attention of the oppressors and inform them that the age of silence has passed and they the oppressed would never again remain silent. The poet persona and the masses resolved to speak out against oppression because by doing so they would save posterity from slavery. The poet, seeing the fate of those who were killed at Lekki for protesting police brutality, says those who are alive are not better than the painfully departed comrades. The poet persona makes biblical allusion to the situation of those living in Nigeria under oppressive rule of the government and its institutions that those in Hades pitied our sorrows in Nigeria. The poet persona recounts the subjugation of the people by Nigerian politicians even before they were born: “In our mother’s wombs,

we learned the mystery of hunger,/ Yet, we have endured./ In peace, we begged to listened to;/ However, they ripped our veins open in response./ In agony, we queried why?/ But in their pride, they murdered us in our prime!” (p. 16).

The masses, even in their mother's wombs, are starved of the necessities of life like their mothers, and they learn from the womb to cope without the basics. Furthermore, at birth, the government through its institutions ripped the vein of the masses and in their response in agony, the masses questioned them at Lekki and in the government's pride they murdered the youth for agitating for freedom and a better society. The poet persona affirms that goats, cows, Gold and Silver have more value in Nigeria than human lives. The motherland weeps for the slain ones of Nigeria killed by the government and its institution. The poet persona concludes: “Our sorrow knows no bounds/ Our comrades were prematurely shown the portal of eternity./ Yet, they faced death confident: shoot us, they dared./ Of a truth, heroes, they were./ We shall always immortalize your courage./Your sacrifices shall never be in vain/ To all fallen heroes of the Lekki massacre, we forever bow in reverence!” (16). The poet's persona bears witness to those killed by the gun. The persona bears witnesses who were harmlessly killed by the Nigerian army. The poet persona informs that they will immortalize the courage of those slain by the state. The poet persona highlights the sacrifices made by those who lay down their lives in protest against police brutality in the country. In “To our heroes up” by Adefeyintola Adesegun, the poet persona notes that: “It was just a peaceful protest/ A clamour for change and freedom,/ In high spirits and dope looks/ Their voices rang in unison/ A new country they stood for/ But the men in Black made game/They dimmed light and dashed hopes” (p. 17).The poet persona bears witnesses to those who engaged in the Lekki protest and informed the society that it was a peaceful protest seeking for freedom and a better country. However, the police and other security structures of the state made them a game to be hunted and killed. The poet persona erects a memorial for those killed by the state thus: “And made them a red sea of flesh/ But this is our truth and cry/ Bloods of martyrs, our heroes/ shall never spill in vain/ To their memories ever alive/ Shall our pledge be made” (p. 17).

The poet persona highlights the number of persons killed by the Nigeria police and the poet persona call it our truth and cry and that the blood of the martyrs for a better society will not be forgotten. The poet persona informs that those who were killed at Lekki will not die in vain that their memories will ever remain alive and thus, the poet persona pledges. Consequently, poetic witnessing becomes a means of establishing the slain masses in the hearts of society by virtue of art, so that on encountering the lines on which their tombs are built they come alive again in the consciousness of the society. The poet persona pledges to keep the memories of the slain one's ever alive because their memories perform the function of: “...our candles be raised/ to the new Nigeria reign/ will their status be built/ we weep for your depart/ with a broken heart,/ a parting that never heals” (p. 17). The poet persona hopes that the sacrifices made by these slain one will usher in a new Nigeria and in this their status will be built. Chidiebere Enyia in “Requiem for victims of Lekki Massacre ” informs the society that it was too a peaceful protest. The poet persona uses autobiographical memory to account for how he feels thus: “Terror tears my heart/ When chaos breaks out/ At the Lekki tollgate /The death rise in high rate/ As the uniform thugs in their hate/ Opened fire on the mammoth crowd” (18). The poet persona implicates the uniform men for firing shots at harmless protesters at Lekki tollgate who were seeking for police reforms and the need to end SARS brutality in Nigeria. “They were Nigerians/ they were youths/ from different tribes and ethnic background,/holding their nation's flag, /singing their nation's anthem,/marching peacefully with their placards, / billboards and cardboards bearing the inscription “EndSARS,” /“End police brutality,”/ “Reform Police”/ “End Corruption”/ “We want a better country...” (p. 18). Those at Lekki tollgate gate were killed just because they protested and asked for right to exist in Nigeria. They were boys and girls from all parts of the country and across all tribe lines and backgrounds to the extent that it illustrates the collective drive of young Nigerians to exist peacefully in their own country. However, they were killed in cold blood even when they

were holding the flag of their country.

The poet persona bears witness to their traumatic memories: "They were mowed down/ After the cameras were/ Switched off from the eyes/ Of the world. Bullets pierced /The bodies of armless protesters" (p. 18). They were killed as soon as the camera went off, that means at Lekki, the killing of defenceless and armless masses were premeditated, whose only crime was that they demanded for justice. The poet persona notes: "Whose voice were chanting freedom./ The national flag stained /With blood of citizens./ The ground soaked with blood/ Tears flowed freely to mourn/ The departed heroes" (p. 18). Through metaphoric piling, the poet persona builds a memorial for the dead killed by the Nigerian government. Shola Balogun in "The night when doves cried" joins in the witnessing and states that the poem is "A poem in honour and memory of those who lost their lives during End SARS protests," the foregoing indicates how to build a memorial for the dead and protesting against the injustice of the state. The poet persona calls the day the boys and girls were killed at Lekki tollgate as black October and refers to the killing as nightmare their spirit witnessed. In their knees armed with the nation flag gunfire broke the skies all over the masses and rippling flags and the masses. They continued to sing even on their knees bettered bullets that flowed their bloods amidst their tears (19). The poet persona in building a memorial for those killed at Lekki notes: "You are the living fire interpretations/Of my heart brokenness, the river/In the space of my emptiness,/The flower-frame of a thousand bullets,/ Shaking your thunder rain failing tears/ All over me now" (19). Those killed at Lekki tollgate represent the brokenness of the masses and the nation. The poet's persona accounts for those killed by thousand bullets shaking thunder rain. The poet persona bears witness for the slain ones and uses poetry to build a memorial for their remembrance. In Blessing Chinenye David's "Inquest for freedom!" accounts for what led to Lekki protest. 'At the beak of the morn/lies the inquest for freedom/ where heroes decided to proclaim their fates/ And protest against their patriotism" (p. 50). They protested against incessant killing. They march "through corrugated roads/ into field of destiny,/ with their fists clenched for a fight,/ their heart turned against home/ as they headed for a known-unknown destination" (p. 50).

This is a witnessing against the state that those who marched were armless but were sent to their early graves in that "their peaceful hands and humble voices/ that was beautifully arranged according to the pains/ Buried in their voices to sing out,/ a proclamation of their rights" (p. 50). That they came out according to their pains but what the state did was to send them to their graves. The poet persona notes; "Began to visit the mother earth/ untimely and unexpectedly;/ they were drenched by the rains of bullets/ yes the wicked attacking bullets" (p. 50). The Nigerian state murders the protesters and the poet persona concludes; "In the cool eve of history/ some fell and died;/ while some still raised their voices/ High, higher and higher/ to scream with their red eyes,/ and heads filled with agony/... these bullets are supposed to protect us/ why then are they coming against us?" (p. 50).

At the end of the martyrs, the poet persona erects a memorial for those through poetic inking. In "Journey to Hope" by Agada Patience Anthony the poet persona in building a memorial notes that; "there has never been a darker night/ like on the day of Lekki massacre/ where brutality trampled on human right/ and tyranny left a terrible scar/ it was a harvest of souls/ many men were martyred/ our eyes left their sockets/ while our heart were scattered/" (p. 46). The poet persona bears witness for the defenceless killed by the state.

CONCLUSION

EndSARS Rhythm is a protest against exploitation and brutality in Nigerian Society. Through poetic chronicling of the EndSARS protest in *EndSARS Rhythm* Nigeria appropriate art as a medium of protest. Their poetic narrative acts as Nigeria witness to police brutality in Nigeria. The poetic narratives indict the Nigerian government and the police as agents of exploitation and subjugation of the Nigerian youths. Poets after poets

in *End SARS Rhythms* chronicles the reason for their protest and bears witness against the state for the extra-judicial killing of many Nigerians.

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