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SOCIAL REALISM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF NIGERIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN OTHUKE UMUKORO'S "IF GOD WAS A NIGERIAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Othuke Umukoro's satirical poem "If God Was a Nigerian" as a contemporary instance of social realism in Nigerian poetry. Adopting social realism, buttressed by the sociological theory of literature and the tradition of committed African writing, the study reads the poem as an artistic mirror held up to the fractured realities of the Nigerian nation-state. Through a close textual analysis that quotes and interprets the poem line by line, the paper demonstrates how Umukoro converts the grand theological premise of his conditional title into a catalogue of concrete national afflictions: the collapse of the university system, cybercrime, human trafficking, political corruption, terrorism and communal killings, environmental devastation in the Niger Delta, irregular migration, state repression, child destitution, police brutality and the precarity of the artist. The analysis argues that the poem's hypothetical framing imagining even God as subject to Nigerian conditions is a rhetorical strategy that universalises national suffering and indicts the structures responsible for it. The study situates Umukoro within the lineage of socially committed Nigerian poets such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun, while noting the distinctly digital-age idiom of his imagery. It concludes that "If God Was a Nigerian" exemplifies the enduring capacity of poetry to function as social document, moral protest and call to civic consciousness, and it recommends greater critical attention to emergent Nigerian poets writing in this realist mode.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been understood as a reflection of the society that produces it, and nowhere is this understanding more deeply rooted than in modern African writing. Modern African literature is, by wide critical consensus, politically and socially committed, functioning as a distinctive reflection of lived realities and as a social commentary that points toward the direction in which the writer wishes his audience to move (Okwudishu, 2014). From Chinua Achebe's fiction of colonial rupture to Wole Soyinka's prison poetry, from Christopher Okigbo's premonitory lyricism to the ecological protest of Tanure Ojaide,

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Nigerian writers have consistently borne witness to the condition of their people. It is within this tradition of witness that the poetry of Othuke Umukoro must be located.

Othuke Umukoro is a Nigerian poet and playwright who has emerged as one of the most compelling voices of his generation. Born in the riverine town of Olomoro in Delta State, he studied playwriting at the University of Ibadan before going on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and he won the prestigious Brunel International African Poetry Prize in 2021 for a body of work praised by the judges for its fearless engagement with family, hope, depression and loss (Brunel University London, 2021). His debut collection, Fenestration, was selected by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Diane Seuss as winner of the 2024 X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize (University of Iowa, 2025). Umukoro's characteristic achievement is a poetry that balances lyric delicacy against the weight of the subjects it takes on sexuality, mortality, ecology and, as in the poem examined here, national politics.

"If God Was a Nigerian" is a satirical poem that, in the words of its original publisher, epitomises the current state of things in Nigeria's political clime (Kreative Diadem, 2020). Its conceit is deceptively simple: it asks what would befall God himself were he to be born a Nigerian, and it answers by cataloguing, in a single unbroken sweep, the calamities that ordinary Nigerians endure. The poem's power lies in the audacity of its hypothesis and the specificity of its imagery. By subjecting the omnipotent to the indignities of the Nigerian condition, Umukoro produces a devastating indictment of the failures of governance and the erosion of the social contract.

This paper undertakes a close critical reading of "If God Was a Nigerian" through the lens of social realism. It argues that the poem is a paradigmatic example of the realist and committed impulse in contemporary Nigerian poetry, translating the abstractions of political failure into recognisable human faces the striking lecturer, the trafficked girl, the potbellied politician, the Niger Delta child, the drowned migrant, the tortured dissident, the street beggar and the victim of police brutality. Through detailed textual analysis supported by direct quotation, the study demonstrates how Umukoro's imagery, tone, structure and allusions cohere into a unified vision of national crisis, and it assesses the poem's place within the broader tradition of socially engaged Nigerian verse.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Contemporary Nigerian poetry, particularly that circulated through digital literary platforms, has received comparatively little sustained scholarly attention relative to the canonical first- and second-generation poets. Emergent voices such as Umukoro, whose work often appears first online before collection in print, risk being read as ephemeral rather than as serious contributions to the realist tradition. There is therefore a need for rigorous critical engagement that reads such poems with the same interpretive seriousness accorded to established figures, and that demonstrates how they extend the social-realist project into the idiom and preoccupations of the twenty-first century. This paper responds to that need.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how Othuke Umukoro's "If God Was a Nigerian" deploys social realism to represent Nigeria's socio-political challenges. The specific objectives are: to identify the socio-political issues represented in the poem; to analyse the literary and rhetorical strategies through which these issues are rendered; and to situate the poem within the tradition of committed Nigerian poetry.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions. First, what socio-political challenges of contemporary Nigeria does the poem represent? Second, what literary and rhetorical devices does Umukoro employ to give these challenges artistic form? Third, in what ways does the poem continue and modify the social-realist tradition in Nigerian poetry?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the criticism of contemporary Nigerian poetry by offering one of the first sustained close readings of a poem that has enjoyed wide popular circulation but limited academic scrutiny. It affirms the continued relevance of social realism as an interpretive framework, and it models a method of textual analysis that respects both the artistic autonomy of the poem and its documentary force. For students and teachers of African literature, the paper provides a template for reading digital-age protest poetry within established critical traditions.

1.5 Scope and Methodology

The study is limited to a single poem, "If God Was a Nigerian," as published by Kreative Diadem in 2020. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, employing the techniques of practical criticism close reading, explication and contextual analysis supported by secondary literature on social realism and Nigerian poetry. The poem is quoted directly throughout, with lines analysed in the sequence in which they appear, so that the cumulative architecture of Umukoro's argument may be traced. All references follow a consistent scholarly citation style.

2. Review of Related Literature

The relationship between literature and society has been a central preoccupation of criticism at least since Plato, but it acquires special intensity in the African context, where the writer has rarely enjoyed the luxury of detachment from public affairs. Scholarship on the sociology of literature holds that the literary work is a social institution, using as its medium language, itself a social creation, and that its conventions, themes and audiences are all socially conditioned (Wellek & Warren, 1968). This foundational insight underwrites the whole tradition of reading African texts as reflections of, and interventions in, their societies.

Studies of Nigerian literature in particular have repeatedly affirmed its socio-political commitment. Okwudishu (2014), examining the fiction of Achebe, Iyayi and Habila, argues that modern African literature is politically and socially committed and serves as a social commentary that points the audience toward a desired direction, addressing recurrent themes of poverty, corruption, embezzlement, kidnapping and environmental degradation. This documentary and reformist impulse is not confined to prose. In poetry, the second generation of Nigerian poets emerging from the late 1970s and 1980s consciously reacted against what they saw as the private obscurity of the Okigbo generation, adopting instead an accessible, public and politically direct address to the people (Omoko, 2023).

Within this second generation, several figures anticipate Umukoro's concerns. Odia Ofeimun's poetry protests against the debasing conditions of the Nigerian populace and charges the people to confront their oppressors in pursuit of social justice (Omoko, 2023). Niyi Osundare has made the language of the common people and the injustices of class and power the very substance of his verse. Above all, Tanure Ojaide regarded as a socio-political and ecocentric poet who won the 2018 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature has

devoted much of his work to the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta and the injustices of petroleum extraction, incorporating Urhobo oral traditions into a distinctly regional poetics of protest (Mwangi & Kamau, 2025). The tradition also includes the prison poetry of Wole Soyinka, whose A Shuttle in the Crypt was composed during his political imprisonment and stands as a canonical instance of the poet as witness against state repression (Soyinka, 1972).

What the existing scholarship establishes, then, is a robust and continuous tradition of committed Nigerian poetry stretching from the civil-war generation to the present. What it has less adequately addressed is the newest cohort of poets those, like Umukoro, who first publish through online literary magazines and who write in an idiom shaped by digital culture. While these poets are increasingly recognised through international prizes, sustained close-critical engagement with their individual poems remains scarce. The present study contributes to filling this gap by subjecting one such poem to detailed analysis within the established framework of social realism, thereby demonstrating both the poem's literary seriousness and the continued explanatory power of the committed tradition.

3. Theoretical Framework: Social Realism and the Committed Text

Social realism is a literary orientation that aims to depict the everyday lives of ordinary people, focusing on social issues and the struggles of the marginalised, frequently with an implicit or explicit critique of the structures that produce inequality (Fiveable, 2026). Emerging in its modern form from nineteenth-century realism and later inflected by Marxist aesthetics, social realism insists that art should not retreat into private contemplation but should confront the material conditions of collective life. It privileges the concrete over the abstract, the typical over the exceptional, and the social over the merely individual, holding that the proper subject of literature is human beings in their determinate historical and economic circumstances.

In the African and specifically Nigerian context, social realism converges with the powerful tradition of committed literature. The sociological theory of literature, articulated by such thinkers as Vazquez in his essays on Marxist aesthetics and echoed in the classic formulation of Wellek and Warren that literature is a social institution, holds that the literary text is inseparable from the society that produces and consumes it (Okwudishu, 2014). African writers have embraced this view with particular conviction. As critics of the socially committed Nigerian tradition have observed, poets such as Odia Ofeimun protest against the debasing conditions that have become the lot of the Nigerian populace while charging the people to rise above petty sentiment and confront their oppressors in order to enthrone social justice (Omoko, 2023). Tanure Ojaide, regarded as a socio-political and ecocentric poet, has similarly made the degradation of the Niger Delta and the injustices of petroleum extraction central to his verse (Mwangi & Kamau, 2025).

Social realism as applied to poetry does not require the abandonment of aesthetic craft; on the contrary, its finest practitioners fuse documentary fidelity with formal power. What distinguishes the social-realist poem is its referential commitment: its images point outward to verifiable social facts an oil spill, a bombing, a strike, a shooting rather than inward to a self-enclosed symbolic order. The reader is invited not merely to contemplate the poem but, through it, to see and to judge the world. This framework is especially suited to "If God Was a Nigerian," whose every image is anchored in a recognisable episode of recent Nigerian public life. The analysis that follows reads the poem as a social-realist text in this precise sense: as an artistic reflection that is simultaneously a moral and political intervention.

4. The Poet and the National Context

An adequate reading of "If God Was a Nigerian" requires attention both to its author and to the historical moment it addresses. Umukoro belongs to a generation of Nigerian poets who came of age amid economic austerity, recurrent insecurity and a pervasive sense of national disillusionment. His own account of his artistic vocation frames poetry as "the safe house I run to in times of great sadness," a refuge to which he turned in the heat of the coronavirus lockdown as he became more aware of what he called the vault of individual terrors and burdens (Brunel University London, 2021). This conception of poetry as a shelter that nonetheless faces outward toward collective suffering is fundamental to the poem under study.

The Nigeria that the poem addresses is a nation of stark contradictions: immense oil wealth alongside mass poverty; a large, ambitious youth population confronting chronic unemployment and a decaying education system; a security apparatus that too often preys upon the citizens it is meant to protect. The poem's images are drawn directly from the headlines of the late 2010s and early 2020s the recurrent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities, the rise of internet fraud and human trafficking, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, the farmer-herder killings in the Middle Belt, the environmental catastrophe of the Niger Delta, the Mediterranean migration crisis, and the police brutality that culminated in the nationwide protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. To read the poem is thus to read a compressed chronicle of a decade of Nigerian public life.

It is worth noting the geographical and biographical resonance of the poem's Niger Delta imagery. Umukoro was born in Olomoro, a small town surrounded by rivers, and recalls a childhood spent fishing and learning to read from his mother (Brunel University London, 2021). This riverine origin situates him within the same ecological and cultural world that has produced Nigeria's most eloquent poetry of environmental protest, most notably that of Tanure Ojaide, who is likewise of Urhobo Delta extraction. The Delta, which supplies the bulk of the national wealth through its oil, has borne a disproportionate share of the nation's ecological and human costs, and its poets have made this contradiction the central subject of a distinct regional literature. Umukoro's poem, though national in scope, betrays this local grounding in the sustained attention it devotes to the Delta's afflictions, and the reader senses that the poet writes of that region not as a distant observer but as a native son.

The poem's mode is satire, and it is important to be precise about the kind of satire Umukoro practises. His is not the gentle, corrective Horatian satire that laughs affectionately at human folly, but something closer to the savage, indignant Juvenalian mode that expresses moral outrage at systemic injustice. Yet Umukoro tempers this indignation with a self-aware, ironic humour that is characteristically contemporary the deadpan aside, the internet-inflected wisecrack, the final self-deprecating punchline. The result is a hybrid satirical voice that is at once furious and funny, capable of provoking both anger and laughter within the same breath, and it is this tonal complexity that lifts the poem above the level of mere protest verse into the realm of accomplished art.

5. The Title as Argument: The Conditional and the Blasphemous Sublime

Before a single line of the body is read, the title performs decisive interpretive work. "If God Was a Nigerian" is a conditional clause grammatically a hypothesis and its use of the subjunctive-flavoured "was" rather than "were" lends it a colloquial, almost conversational directness. The premise is theologically audacious: it imagines the omnipotent, omniscient and impassible God of monotheism reduced to the status of a Nigerian citizen, subject to the same vulnerabilities as the poorest of the poor. In a country as intensely religious as Nigeria,

where appeals to divine providence saturate public discourse, the conceit is quietly subversive. It implies that the conditions of Nigerian life are so severe that not even God would be exempt from them that the nation's dysfunctions have a power that rivals the divine.

The title thus establishes the poem's governing rhetorical strategy: reductio ad absurdum by incarnation. By the logic of the title, if the very source of protection and justice would be helpless within the Nigerian state, then the ordinary citizen's helplessness is total. The satire cuts in two directions at once, indicting both the failed structures of the state and, obliquely, the culture of religious fatalism that substitutes prayer for civic action a critique the poem will make explicit in its later reference to those who complain online "but will never come out to vote out oppression." The remainder of the poem is, in effect, an extended proof of the title's proposition.

6. Close Reading: The Anatomy of a National Nightmare

The poem unfolds as a single, breathless enumeration a litany of the fates that would befall the divine Nigerian. Its structure is cumulative and paratactic, each image layered upon the last without hierarchical subordination, so that the reader experiences the sheer density of national affliction as an accumulating weight. The analysis below follows the poem's own order, quoting and interpreting each movement in turn.

6.1 The Collapse of Education

The poem opens with an image drawn from the perennial crisis of Nigerian higher education:

ASUU would strike him

till his sorrow grows a beard.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has, over decades, embarked on repeated and prolonged strikes in protest at the underfunding of Nigeria's public universities, actions that have left students stranded for months and sometimes years. Umukoro's genius here is to invert the expected relation: God is not the striker but the victim of the strike, cast as the perpetually delayed student. The metaphor "till his sorrow grows a beard" is arresting in its concreteness grief is personified and given time to mature, to reach a kind of dishevelled adulthood, quantifying the length of the delay through the organic growth of hair. That a beard signifies the passage of years transforms an administrative dispute into an image of wasted youth and stolen time. The opening couplet thus establishes the poem's method: an institutional failure is rendered as intimate, embodied suffering.

6.2 The Economy of Desperation: Crime and Trafficking

From the ruined university, the poem moves to the illicit economies that absorb the young:

He would be a Yahoo boy or a pimp or a drug dealer

or an innocent girl in the cold & dark streets of

Italy tendering white men's amorous dreams

or all of the above.

Here the poem catalogues the survival strategies to which the educated-but-abandoned young are driven: the "Yahoo boy" (the internet fraudster whose name derives from early email

scams), the pimp, the drug dealer, and in the poem's first extended image of gendered suffering the trafficked girl forced into prostitution on "the cold & dark streets of Italy." The phrase "tendering white men's amorous dreams" is bitterly euphemistic; the commercial verb "tendering" reduces the girl's body to a contract bid, while "amorous dreams" ironises the transaction with a false romanticism. The adjective "innocent" insists on her victimhood against any moralising judgement. The closing phrase "or all of the above" the deadpan language of a multiple-choice examination sardonically suggests that these are not alternatives but a single continuum of desperation, and that the divine Nigerian might occupy every degraded position at once. The ampersand, recurring throughout the poem, signals the compressed, digital-age idiom in which Umukoro writes.

6.3 The Predatory State: Corruption and Its Absurd Icons

The poem next turns its satire upon the political class:

He would be a potbellied politician

that swallowed (y)our children's future,

or a snake that swallows dollars

or a rat that chases the big man

out of his office.

The "potbellied politician" is a stock figure of Nigerian satirical iconography, the distended belly a visible emblem of embezzled wealth. The verb "swallowed" initiates a controlling metaphor of predatory consumption that governs the whole passage: the politician swallows "(y)our children's future," the parenthetical "(y)" collapsing the distance between the reader's children and the poet's, implicating everyone in a shared dispossession. The following two images are pointed topical allusions. The "snake that swallows dollars" recalls the 2018 scandal in which an official claimed that a snake had swallowed millions of naira in examination-board funds, while the "rat that chases the big man out of his office" alludes to the widely mocked episode in which the presidency claimed that rodent damage prevented the head of state from using his office. By elevating these absurd official excuses to the level of poetic imagery, Umukoro exposes the contempt with which power treats the governed: corruption is not merely criminal but insulting, cloaked in explanations so ludicrous that they constitute a second injury.

6.4 Bloodshed: Terrorism and Communal Killing

The catalogue darkens into outright massacre:

They would have slaughtered him, like

Ramadan rams, in Benue or

bandaged him with bombs in Borno.

Two theatres of mass death are named. Benue, in the Middle Belt, evokes the farmer-herder conflict that has claimed thousands of lives, while Borno, in the North-East, is the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency. The simile "like Ramadan rams" is deliberately shocking: it compares human beings to sacrificial animals slaughtered at the Islamic festival, draining the killing of any ceremonial meaning and reducing it to routine butchery. The alliterative "bandaged him with bombs in Borno" is a masterstroke of grim irony the verb "bandaged,"

which should denote healing, is yoked to "bombs," so that the very language of care is weaponised. The heavy plosive alliteration on the letter b mimics the percussive violence of explosion. In three lines the poem compresses the geography of Nigerian insecurity into a map of graves.

6.5 The Wounded Land: Environmental Catastrophe in the Niger Delta

The poem's longest and most sustained movement addresses the ecological devastation of the poet's own region:

His children's life expectancy in the

Niger Delta would be around

9 or 10 (that's a conservative statistic)

all they would ever have are: a bowl

of oil spills for breakfast, a plate of

greenhouse emissions for dinner

& grief sandwiched between.

This passage is the ethical heart of the poem, and it is no accident that Umukoro, a son of the riverine Delta, dwells here at greatest length. The claim that a child's life expectancy would be "around 9 or 10" is a deliberate hyperbole, but the parenthetical aside "(that's a conservative statistic)" adopts the deadpan register of official reportage to insist that the reality is, if anything, worse than the poem states. The device recalls Ojaide's long poetic campaign against the ecological ruin of the Delta, where oil extraction has poisoned water, air and soil (Mwangi & Kamau, 2025). The central metaphor structures deprivation as a grotesque meal: "a bowl of oil spills for breakfast, a plate of greenhouse emissions for dinner, & grief sandwiched between." The domestic vocabulary of nourishment bowl, plate, breakfast, dinner, sandwiched is systematically perverted, so that the very sustenance of life becomes the instrument of death. "Grief sandwiched between" turns emotion into food, making sorrow the staple of the Delta diet. The image indicts an economy that extracts wealth from the region while leaving its inhabitants to consume the toxic residue the classic subject of environmental social realism.

The choice of the meal as organising figure is worth dwelling upon, for it exemplifies the social-realist technique of rooting large political abstractions in the textures of everyday domestic life. Climate change and oil pollution are, in the abstract, statistical and distant; by serving them at a family table, Umukoro renders them viscerally intimate, forcing the reader to imagine ingesting them. The breakfast-and-dinner structure also implies dailiness and inescapability: this is not a single catastrophe but the ordinary rhythm of Delta existence, repeated meal after meal, day after day. In this the passage aligns with the ecocritical dimension of contemporary Nigerian protest poetry, which insists on the interdependence of human and environmental welfare and on literature's role in mediating the conflict between extractive power and local communities (Mwangi & Kamau, 2025). The Delta child, denied even the years of a normal childhood, becomes the poem's most poignant emblem of a generation consumed by the very wealth that should have sustained it.

6.6 The Perils of Escape: Migration and Modern Slavery

6.7 Digital Outrage and Civic Paralysis

The poem now turns, in a moment of self-implicating critique, to the failure of the citizenry itself:

He would yelp & complain on the mad streets of twitter

but will never come out to vote out oppression.

Here Umukoro widens his satire to include the governed. The metaphor "the mad streets of twitter" transforms the social-media platform into a chaotic public square, a place of noise without consequence. The verb "yelp," suggesting an animal's reflexive cry of pain, diminishes online outrage to impotent reflex. The devastating turn comes in the second line: the citizen "will never come out to vote out oppression." This is the poem's sharpest indictment of civic paralysis the substitution of digital performance for political action, the preference for complaint over the ballot. It also fulfils the implicit critique of the title's religious fatalism: just as the pious defer to divine intervention, the digitally outraged defer to the catharsis of the timeline, and in both cases the structures of oppression are left undisturbed. The line reflects the perception, documented in studies of Nigerian youth and social media, that online expression frequently fails to translate into offline mobilisation.

6.8 The Silencing of Dissent: State Repression

Those who do resist meet a terrible fate:

The sun would die in his mouth in Kirikiri

or other eyeless places where those who try to

sing new songs are stripped, chained & tortured.

Kirikiri, Nigeria's most notorious maximum-security prison, becomes the setting for the silencing of dissent. The surreal image "the sun would die in his mouth" is among the poem's most haunting: the sun, source of light, life and speech, is extinguished at the very organ of utterance, figuring the total suppression of voice. The phrase "eyeless places" evokes both the blindness of unseeing authority and the invisibility of those it disappears, perhaps echoing the classical topos of blinded prisoners. Most pointedly, "those who try to sing new songs" are the artists, reformers and visionaries those who imagine a different order and their punishment, to be "stripped, chained & tortured," places the poet's own vocation directly in the line of state violence. This passage aligns Umukoro with the tradition of Nigerian prison writing exemplified by Soyinka's A Shuttle in the Crypt, composed during the poet's own political imprisonment (Drummond, cited in the criticism of protest poetry).

6.9 The Abandoned Child

The poem returns to the fate of the young, now as street destitute:

He would not be in school but on the sidewalk, holding a

blue plastic bowl for your damn pity or under the leprous

stare of the sun cleaning your windshield at a red light.

The contrast "not be in school but on the sidewalk" recalls and completes the poem's opening concern with education, tracing the arc from the delayed university student to the child who never enters school at all. The "blue plastic bowl" is a precise, unsentimental detail the ubiquitous begging bowl of the Nigerian street child and the intrusion of the second person in "your damn pity" confronts the reader directly, refusing the comfort of detached observation and exposing the inadequacy of pity as a response to structural neglect. The personification "the leprous stare of the sun" is remarkable: the sun, diseased and disfiguring, becomes complicit in the child's suffering, its light a wasting affliction rather than a blessing. The final image of the child "cleaning your windshield at a red light" captures the everyday spectacle of urban child labour, the traffic stop as a site where the comfortable motorist and the destitute child meet across an unbridgeable inequality.

6.10 Police Brutality and Systemic Collapse

The catalogue reaches its climax in an image that fuses two forms of state failure:

SARS would shoot him & the government hospital

they will rush him to will not have electricity.

SARS the Special Anti-Robbery Squad whose abuses provoked the mass #EndSARS protests embodies the perversion of the security apparatus into a threat to the citizens it should protect. The couplet stages a bitter sequence of compounding failures: the state first shoots the citizen and then, in the same breath, proves unable to save him, for "the government hospital … will not have electricity." The juxtaposition of the two clauses by the simple conjunction "&" enacts the seamlessness of systemic collapse violence and neglect are not separate failures but a single continuous betrayal. The absence of electricity in the hospital, a mundane and universally recognised Nigerian reality, grounds the poem's climactic horror in the ordinary, insisting that catastrophe here is not exceptional but routine.

6.11 The Poet's Self-Inscription

The poem closes by folding the poet himself into the catalogue of the afflicted:

He would be a broke ass poet like me.

After the crescendo of state violence, the final line executes a sudden tonal shift from horror to rueful, self-deprecating humour. The colloquial "broke ass poet" punctures the accumulated gravity with a wry admission of the artist's own precarity. Yet the levity is only apparent. By ending on "like me," Umukoro dissolves the hypothetical distance the poem has maintained throughout: the divine Nigerian is, finally, the poet himself, and the entire catalogue of suffering is revealed as autobiography as much as social commentary. The self-inscription performs a crucial rhetorical function it authenticates the poem's witness, for the speaker does not observe the national tragedy from a position of safety but writes from within it. The poet's poverty is itself one more item in the indictment: a society that impoverishes its artists is a society that has abandoned its conscience. The line's readers, tellingly, reported that it made them "laugh out loud" even amid the poem's grief (Kreative Diadem, 2020) evidence of the satirist's capacity to fuse pain and comedy into a single, unforgettable effect.

6.12 The Cumulative Vision

Read in sequence, the eleven movements of the poem trace a deliberate arc. The catalogue begins with the frustration of aspiration the delayed student and proceeds through economic desperation, political predation, physical slaughter, environmental slow-death, the

foreclosure of escape, civic paralysis, the silencing of dissent, childhood destitution and, at last, the fusion of state violence with institutional collapse, before closing on the poet's own precarity. There is a discernible movement from the individual to the systemic and back again to the individual: the poem opens with a single striking student, widens to encompass the entire apparatus of the failed state, and narrows finally to the lone poet who bears witness to it all. This structural design ensures that the reader never loses sight of the human faces behind the statistics, even as the scale of the indictment grows to national proportions.

The cumulative effect is a portrait of a society in which every institution meant to protect and elevate the citizen the university, the government, the security forces, the health system, the very land has been turned into an instrument of harm. This totalising vision is precisely what the title's audacious conceit promises: if even God could not escape these conditions, then the failure is not partial but complete, not incidental but structural. In refusing to offer any consoling exception, the poem achieves the moral seriousness that distinguishes committed social realism from mere complaint. It does not merely describe suffering; it assigns responsibility, and it demands, in its final turn, that the reader recognise the poet and by extension every citizen as implicated in, and answerable to, the national condition.

7. Style, Structure and Rhetorical Technique

The social-realist force of "If God Was a Nigerian" is inseparable from its formal design. Several techniques merit particular attention.

Cataloguing and parataxis: The poem is built as a single accumulating list, its clauses joined by the repeated "or" and the ampersand rather than by subordinating conjunctions. This paratactic structure refuses to rank the nation's afflictions, presenting them instead as an undifferentiated flood. The effect is one of overwhelming abundance the reader is denied any resting point, mimicking the relentlessness of the conditions described.

The controlling conditional: The anaphoric repetition of "He would" throughout the poem sustains the governing hypothesis of the title, binding the disparate images into a single sustained argument. Each recurrence tightens the logical grip of the conceit, insisting that all these fates follow inevitably from the one premise of Nigerian citizenship.

Concrete, topical imagery: In keeping with the referential commitment of social realism, the poem's images are drawn from specific, datable public events the ASUU strikes, the snake and rat scandals, the Benue and Borno killings, the Libyan slave markets, the #EndSARS shootings. This topicality is the source of the poem's documentary authority; it functions almost as a versified news digest of a decade.

Ironic reversal and dark metaphor: Umukoro repeatedly perverts the vocabulary of care and nourishment "bandaged him with bombs," "a bowl of oil spills for breakfast," the "leprous stare of the sun" so that the language of life is made to serve death. This systematic irony is the poem's signature rhetorical gesture, and it generates the bitter comedy that distinguishes satire from mere lament.

The digital idiom: The lowercase "twitter," the ampersands, the multiple-choice "all of the above," and the colloquial "broke ass" locate the poem firmly in the linguistic register of the social-media generation. Umukoro thus updates the social-realist tradition for the digital age, drawing his diction from the very platforms whose civic inadequacy he critiques.

Tonal modulation: The poem moves through a carefully managed emotional range from wry satire through mounting horror to the deflating humour of the final line. This modulation

prevents the catalogue from collapsing into monotonous protest and secures the reader's engagement to the end. The closing pivot to comedy is the mark of the accomplished satirist, who knows that laughter can wound more deeply than solemnity.

8. Umukoro and the Tradition of Committed Nigerian Poetry

"If God Was a Nigerian" takes its place within a rich lineage of socially engaged Nigerian verse. The second-generation poets Osundare, Ojaide, Ofeimun and their contemporaries established a poetics of public witness that rejected the perceived obscurity of the Okigbo generation in favour of accessible, politically direct address to the people (Omoko, 2023). Ojaide's environmental protest against the ruin of the Niger Delta is a particularly close antecedent to Umukoro's own Delta imagery, and both poets share a rootedness in the Urhobo world of the riverine South-South (Mwangi & Kamau, 2025). Ofeimun's insistence that the poet must charge the people to confront their oppressors finds a clear echo in Umukoro's rebuke of those who "yelp & complain" but "never come out to vote."

Yet Umukoro also modifies the inherited tradition in significant ways. Where the second generation often adopted an oratorical, hortatory mode the poet as prophet addressing the assembled nation Umukoro writes in a more intimate, self-implicating and ironic register, folding himself into the suffering he describes rather than standing above it as a guide. His idiom is that of the internet age, his allusions those of the viral news cycle, and his humour is a distinctly contemporary blend of the tragic and the comic. In this he represents a third or fourth generation of Nigerian poets who inherit the committed tradition but recast it for a readership that first encounters poetry on a screen. The recognition of Umukoro's talent by international bodies the Brunel Prize, the X. J. Kennedy Prize confirms that this recasting has produced work of durable literary value, not merely topical protest (Brunel University London, 2021; University of Iowa, 2025).

A further point of continuity and departure concerns the poem's mode of circulation. The canonical protest poems of the second generation reached their audiences primarily through print collections issued by university and commercial presses, taught in classrooms and reviewed in literary journals. "If God Was a Nigerian," by contrast, first appeared on an online literary platform and was read, shared and commented upon in the same digital spaces whose civic limitations the poem itself critiques. The comment thread beneath the poem, in which readers alternately praised its craft and lamented the truths it exposed, is itself a small archive of the poem's immediate social reception (Kreative Diadem, 2020). This mode of circulation collapses the distance between poet and public that characterised the print era, allowing a protest poem to enter public discourse with an immediacy the earlier tradition could not achieve. It also, however, exposes such poetry to the very ephemerality against which this study argues hence the importance of preserving and analysing these works with scholarly seriousness before they are lost to the churn of the timeline.

9. Discussion of Findings

The close reading yields several clear findings in answer to the study's research questions. In answer to the first question, the poem represents an extensive range of Nigeria's socio-political challenges: the collapse of public education, cybercrime and human trafficking, political corruption, terrorism and communal killing, Niger Delta environmental devastation, the migration crisis, civic apathy, state repression of dissent, child destitution, police brutality and the precarity of the artist. Few poems of comparable brevity encompass so comprehensive an inventory of national failure.

In answer to the second question, the study finds that Umukoro renders these challenges through a coherent set of literary strategies the governing conditional conceit, cataloguing parataxis, concrete topical imagery, systematic ironic reversal, a digital-age idiom and carefully managed tonal modulation. These devices work together to convert social fact into artistic form without sacrificing either documentary accuracy or aesthetic power, precisely the fusion that social realism at its best achieves.

In answer to the third question, the study finds that the poem both continues and transforms the committed Nigerian tradition. It continues that tradition in its referential commitment, its moral urgency and its solidarity with the oppressed; it transforms it through its intimate self-implication, its ironic and comic tonality, and its thoroughgoing adoption of the language and reference points of the digital generation. Umukoro thus demonstrates that social realism remains a living and adaptable mode, capable of speaking to and for a new century of Nigerian readers.

Beyond these direct answers, the analysis suggests a broader critical claim. The persistence of social realism in a poet as internationally decorated and formally sophisticated as Umukoro challenges any assumption that committed, referential poetry is aesthetically inferior to more introspective or experimental modes. "If God Was a Nigerian" is at once a piece of political testimony and a work of considerable technical accomplishment its metaphors are fresh, its structure is deliberate, its tonal control is masterly. The poem therefore rebuts the false opposition, sometimes drawn in critical debate, between art and commitment: it is committed precisely because it is artful, and artful precisely in the service of its commitment. This fusion is the enduring achievement of the social-realist tradition at its best, and Umukoro's poem is a worthy contemporary exemplar of it.

A limitation of the present study should be acknowledged. Because it confines itself to a single poem, its conclusions about Umukoro's poetics and about the state of contemporary Nigerian protest poetry are necessarily provisional. A fuller assessment would require analysis of the poet's collection Fenestration and comparison with the work of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, the intensive close reading undertaken here has the compensating virtue of demonstrating, in fine detail, how a single poem can compress an entire national predicament into thirty-four lines a demonstration that a broader but shallower survey could not provide.

10. Conclusion

Othuke Umukoro's "If God Was a Nigerian" is a compact but formidable achievement of contemporary social-realist poetry. Through the audacious conceit of subjecting God himself to the conditions of Nigerian citizenship, the poem holds up an unflinching mirror to a nation in crisis, cataloguing with satirical precision the afflictions that its people endure. The analysis has shown that the poem's power derives from the marriage of documentary fidelity to formal craft: every image is anchored in a verifiable social reality, yet every image is also transformed by metaphor, irony and tonal control into enduring art. From the striking lecturer to the trafficked girl, from the potbellied politician to the Niger Delta child, from the tortured dissident to the poet himself, the poem assembles a gallery of national suffering that indicts the structures responsible and challenges the reader to move from pity, and from the empty catharsis of online complaint, toward genuine civic engagement.

The study has argued that the poem exemplifies the enduring vitality of the committed tradition in Nigerian poetry while extending that tradition into the idiom and preoccupations of the digital age. Umukoro's self-implicating irony, his fusion of grief and comedy, and his drawing of imagery from the viral news cycle mark him as a distinctive voice who inherits

the mantle of Osundare, Ojaide and Ofeimun even as he refashions it. "If God Was a Nigerian" confirms that poetry retains its ancient office as the conscience of the community as social document, as moral protest and as a summons to a more just order. In an age of distraction, its insistence that the nation see itself clearly, and act upon what it sees, could hardly be more necessary.

10.1 Recommendations

The study recommends that greater critical attention be devoted to emergent Nigerian poets who publish through digital platforms, so that the significant body of contemporary social-realist verse is not lost to scholarship. It further recommends that such poems be incorporated into secondary and tertiary literature curricula as accessible and engaging entry points into the study of protest poetry and the sociology of literature. Finally, it recommends comparative studies that read poets such as Umukoro alongside their second-generation forebears, in order to map the continuities and mutations of the committed tradition across generations, and that further research examine the reception of digitally circulated poetry among young Nigerian readers.

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Appendix: The Full Text of the Poem
If God Was a Nigerian

by Othuke Umukoro

ASUU would strike him
till his sorrow grows a beard.
He would be a Yahoo boy or a pimp or a drug dealer
or an innocent girl in the cold & dark streets of
Italy tendering white men's amorous dreams
or all of the above.
He would be a potbellied politician
that swallowed (y)our children's future,
or a snake that swallows dollars
or a rat that chases the big man
out of his office.
They would have slaughtered him, like
Ramadan rams, in Benue or
bandaged him with bombs in Borno.
His children's life expectancy in the
Niger Delta would be around
9 or 10 (that's a conservative statistic)
all they would ever have are: a bowl
of oil spills for breakfast, a plate of
greenhouse emissions for dinner
& grief sandwiched between.
He would drown crossing the
Mediterranean or sold for peanuts in Libya.
He would yelp & complain on the mad streets of twitter
but will never come out to vote out oppression.
The sun would die in his mouth in Kirikiri
or other eyeless places where those who try to
sing new songs are stripped, chained & tortured.
He would not be in school but on the sidewalk, holding a
blue plastic bowl for your damn pity or under the leprous
stare of the sun cleaning your windshield at a red light.
SARS would shoot him & the government hospital
they will rush him to will not have electricity.
He would be a broke ass poet like me.

Source: Umukoro, O. (2020), Kreative Diadem.