

Against Silence: Confessional Poetry as a Form of Resistance in Postcolonial Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores Nigerian confessional poetry as a form of socio-political resistance. Drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and Michel Foucault's conception of power, discourse and counter-memory, this paper argues that the confessional mode transforms personal pain into a political act. Nigerian confessional poems foreground experiences of familial rupture, domestic violence, body vulnerability, and psychological trauma, exposing how patriarchal authority, colonial legacies, and socio-economic precarity converge to regulate silence and obedience. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of selected Nigerian confessional poems, combining close reading with theoretical interpretation. Poems are examined through a postcolonial and Foucauldian analytical framework to identify recurring thematic patterns, such as trauma, memory, silence, and resistance, and to interrogate how poetic language and imagery produce counter-discourses against dominant cultural and political structures. By articulating what is culturally repressed or socially taboo, Nigerian confessional poetry disrupts dominant narratives that privilege communal harmony over individual truth. The poetic 'I' functions not as narcissistic self-display but as a resistant subject who reclaims agency through testimony. The act of confession becomes an ethical intervention, creating a counter-archive that resists historical erasure and challenges the normative construction of masculinity and nationhood. The paper concludes that Nigerian confessional poetry emerges as a radical practice that reclaims voice, memory, and the body, asserting the personal as an indispensable site of political resistance in contemporary Nigerian society.

Keywords: Nigerian Confessional Poetry, Resistance, the Body, Trauma, Postcolonial Theory

Introduction

Nigerian poetry has historically served as a powerful medium of resistance, responding to colonial domination, political repression, military dictatorship, economic instability, and social injustice. From the early nationalist and modernist interventions of poets such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark to those of the alternative generation such as Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, Nigerian poetry has often addressed collective trauma through myth, symbolism, and communal voice. In more recent decades, however, Nigerian poets have increasingly adopted the confessional mode, foregrounding personal experience, memory, and vulnerability. Far from signalling a retreat into private subjectivity, Nigerian confessional poetry represents a strategic reorientation of resistance – one that locates political struggle within the intimate space of the body, family, and psyche.

Confessional poetry, as a literary mode, is commonly associated with mid-twentieth-century American poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. It is characterised by autobiographical candour, emotional intensity, and the articulation of experiences traditionally considered private or taboo, including mental illness, domestic conflict, sexuality, and violence. While critics have often accused confessional poetry of narcissism or excessive individualism, such critiques fail to account for how the mode functions in postcolonial contexts. In Nigeria, confession is not merely self-expression; it is an act of defiance against cultural, political, and historical structures that enforce silence.

Silence occupies a complex role within Nigerian society. It is frequently valorised as a marker of respect, communal harmony, and moral discipline, particularly within patriarchal family structures. Children, women and subordinate subjects are often socialised into silence as a form of obedience. Nigerian confessional poetry resists this logic by insisting on speech where silence is expected. As Michel Foucault argues, power operates through discourse by regulating what can be spoken, who may speak, and under what conditions (Foucault 53). From this perspective, confession becomes a counter-discursive practice – a means of exposing the hidden operations of power within everyday life.

Nigerian confessional poetry transforms the poetic 'I' into a resistant subject who speaks from within systems of domination rather than outside them. The self that emerges in the poems written by these young men and women is often wounded, fragmented, and traumatised, yet it refuses erasure. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson note that autobiographical and confessional modes function as acts of self-authorisation, particularly for subjects historically denied narrative agency (Smith and Watson 25). In Nigeria, confessional poetry and personal testimony become a form of historical evidence, challenging official narratives that prioritise national progress, masculinity or communal stability over individual suffering.

Postcolonial theory provides a crucial framework for understanding this resistance. Frantz Fanon's work on colonial violence demonstrates how domination extends beyond physical control to shape the psychological and emotional life (Fanon 141). Although Nigeria is formally postcolonial, the lingering effect of colonial governance – bureaucratic violence, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation – continues to structure everyday experience. Nigerian confessional poetry exposes how these macro-histories are lived at the micro-level, particularly within domestic

spaces. Abuse, fear, poverty, and emotional deprivation are revealed not as isolated personal failures but as symptoms of broader structural violence.

Trauma theory further illuminates the aesthetic strategies of Nigerian confessional poetry. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma disrupts linear temporality, returning belatedly and insistently through memory and narrative (Caruth 18). This disruption, as will be shown presently, is evident in the fragmented imagery, abrupt shifts, and nonlinear recollections that characterise many Nigerian confessional poems.

Analysis of Poems

J.K. Anowe has emerged among his contemporaries as the most sustained and rigorous practitioner of confessional poetics in contemporary Nigerian literature. His poems draw deeply from lived experience – youthful precarity, desire, mental strain, and encounters with state power – transforming private pain into public testimony. Rather than confessionalism as mere self-exposure, Anowe’s practice functions as a mode of resistance, where the speaking self-confronts capitalism, religious authority, and postcolonial surveillance. In his poem, “Love in the Time of Arrests”, Anowe stages intimacy against the intrusive apparatus of state control, dramatising what postcolonial theory identifies as the afterlife of colonial discipline within the modern nation-state. He writes:

The orderlies come in their tens
I am just one man –

On poet

honed to one poem
that is the sentence of my life.

Or where it departs.

25 with no job prospects
I lie – palpable.

The speaker's age – "25 with no job prospects" – anchors the poem in postcolonial economic disenfranchisement. This line gestures toward the failures of post-independence governance, where neoliberal capitalism exacerbates youth unemployment and renders young bodies disposable. Scholars like Achille Mbembe argue that such conditions create necropolitical spaces where the state governs not by fostering life but by deciding who may be exposed to death, abandonment, or institutional violence (Mbembe 11-40). The poet's inertia "I lie palpable" suggests both physical vulnerability and political exposure, a body available for discipline.

At the poem's core is a criminalisation of being. The speaker is "Just one man/one poet honed to one poem that is the sentence of my life", collapsing the distinction between artistic expression and juridical punishment. The word 'sentence' functions doubly: as a grammatical unit and a legal penalty. This slippage foregrounds what Frantz Fanon describes as the colonial – and postcolonial – state's tendency to interpret expression from marginalised subjects as threat rather than creativity (Fanon 141). The poet's very existence becomes prosecutable, suggesting that to speak, love or imagine otherwise is already an offence. The next section of the poem goes thus:

On my mother's couch

The same one we've sat on to blame stuff
on the government

or rumpled our skins dry – humping on –
complaining of things we wish didn't exist
Like capitalism

Or God, or the hairline between.

& they come – the orderlies, in their tens
in pressed-out uniforms cassock white.

They come.

The lines above depict a domestic space – the mother's couch – that initially appears as refuge but quickly becomes precarious. The couch carries layers of postcolonial inheritance: it is a site of intergenerational frustration where blame is 'stuff[ed] on the government' and of forbidden

pleasure, where lovers ‘rump’ their skins in defiance of social and moral surveillance. The mother’s couch thus becomes a microcosm of the postcolonial nation: inherited, overburdened, intimate, yet never secure from intrusion.

The lover’s complaints – capitalism – or God. Or the “hairline between” – signals a critique of both global economic systems and metaphysical authority, implicating imported ideologies alongside local structures of belief. Capitalism here is not abstract but embodied in joblessness and arrested futures; God represents moral regulation often weaponised by the state to justify repression. The “hairline between” suggests the thin, often indistinguishable boundary between economic and spiritual domination in postcolonial societies.

The arrival of “the orderlies” marks the poem’s most significant engagement with state violence. Notably, they are not named as police but as orderlies, a term associated with hospitals and care. This euphemism exposes what Michel Foucault identifies as disciplinary power disguised as benevolence. (Foucault 66) The state presents coercion as treatment, arrest as care. Their “pressed-out uniforms cassock-white” merge religious imagery with institutional authority, recalling how colonial regimes fused church and state to legitimise domination. The whiteness of the cassock evokes both purity and historical colonial whiteness, reinforcing symbolic power even in a postcolonial setting.

Perhaps the poem’s most haunting moment is the lovers’ preparation for self-harm. The persona writes:

Because there’s nowhere to go.

We ready our razors, unhinge ourselves

Forearm to wrist –

The way wind chimes must open

to catch wind

our pains’ lash threshold

inviting them to enter.

The lovers’ act in the above lines can be read not simply as despair but as a radical reclaiming of agency. In a context where the state claims total access to the body, self-wounding becomes a

tragic form of resistance – a refusal to let the state be the sole author of pain. Mbembe’s necropolitics is again relevant here; when life is already governed by death, the subject’s relationship to self-destruction changes politically (Mbembe 11-40). The simile – “the way wind chimes must open to catch wind” introduces a paradoxical beauty to this violence. It suggests that suffering is rendered meaningful only by exposure, that the body must open – be cut, be broken – to be heard. This metaphor aligns with postcolonial aesthetics that turn wounded bodies into sites of testimony, insisting that pain itself speaks when speech is policed.

Finally, the poem’s title “Love in the Time of Arrests” echoes Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “Love in the Time of Cholera”, replacing disease with detention. Arrests become the defining condition of the era, a social epidemic that structures intimacy. Love here is not escapist but insurgent: it exists within repression, not beyond it. The poem suggests that loving under such conditions is itself a political act, an insistence on humanity where the state recognises a threat.

Another poet whose poetry operates powerfully within the confessional mode is Romeo Oriogun. This poet uses personal disclosure both as an aesthetic strategy and as resistance, particularly from a queer subject position in a very hostile socio-cultural landscape. His work foregrounds intimate experiences of desire, shame, faith, family and bodily vulnerability, transforming the private life of a queer Nigerian subject into a site of public speaking. In poems such as those in “Sacrament of Bodies”, Oriogun confesses not to seek absolution but to expose the violences – religious, familial, and state-sanctioned – that structure queer existence in Nigeria. In one of his poems, “Coming Out”, he writes:

The woman on the bar stool knows your body
Is a journey into songs,
The door into a moth flirting with fire
Which means there’s a pretty boy
Living under your skin.
I do not wish to come to you
But I can’t help it
You look drunk like a man
Seeking a way out of himself
Or a way into the beginning of his voice.

The title of the poem “Coming Out” is already ironic within the Nigerian context. Unlike Western liberal narratives, where coming out implies self-actualisation, here it signals exposure to violence. The lines above stage confession as something that happens involuntarily – “I do not wish to come to you/but I can’t help it” – suggesting that desire exceeds repression even when the cost is death. As Leigh Gilmore argues, confessional speech often occurs under conditions of threat, where telling the truth risks punishment rather than liberation (Gilmore 75). This is especially apt in Nigeria, where queerness is criminalised and publicly vilified. Confession here is not about claiming identity but about bearing witness to danger.

The body in the poem is figured as music, journey, song. This metaphor does crucial political work. In Nigerian society, queer bodies are frequently reduced to ‘acts’ or ‘sins’. By contrast, Oriogun insists on the body as expressive, creative, and sacred. The line “your body knows how to beat a path/through hell and back” reframes queer existence as endurance rather than deviance. Judith Butler’s notion of precarious life helps illuminate this: some bodies are more exposed to violence because they are denied social recognisability (Butler 18). The poem makes the queer body visible while simultaneously acknowledging that visibility is unsafe. Confession thus becomes a double bind – necessary for selfhood, dangerous for survival. The poet writes:

The city knows how to kill a man like you
and on the face of some men
I can see you burning.
Tonight, you take your first step into music
Saying your body knows how to beat a path
through hell and back,
saying angels do not die in song.
You are daring like a throat accepting the fire
of tequila. Across you in a dark booth,
I want to scream silently.
Do not dance
do not give in to the wild beat
flowing through your heart.

“The city knows how to kill a man like you” is one of the poem’s most explicit political lines. Violence is not accidental or individual; it is systemic and urban, embedded in social space. This point aligns with Ato Quayson’s reading of postcolonial cities as sites where modernity amplifies vulnerability rather than alleviating it (Quayson 17). The speaker’s repeated warnings – “Do not dance”, “Come into the dark” are not acts of shame but strategies of care. Silence and darkness, often critiqued as repression, are reimagined as protective tactics. bell hooks reminds us that silence can function as survival rather than submission under hostile conditions (hooks 57). Here, withholding confession is itself a form of resistance. The speaker continues:

But you are dancing like a boy drowning inside
his blood and all my body
can do is pray your soul’s into a bird’s wings
and hope the wind call you home
Do you know the first thing about fire?
Have you seen a mouth calling God
Only to find a body rising in smoke?
The city does not want
to hear your song flowing through a bird,
they don’t want you dancing in the light.

Religious imagery saturates the poem – angels, God, worship, sacrament. But religion is not a refuge; it is a language hijacked by danger. The image of ‘a mouth calling God/only to find a body rising in smoke’ indicts Nigerian religiosity that condemns queer bodies while claiming moral righteousness. Chukwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s critique of moral absolution is relevant here: she notes how religious ideology often overrides compassion in favour of social conformity (Ogunyemi 56). Oriogun reclaims worship as embodied love “– let me sing/the night through your body/ like a man learning how to worship God / in a strange land.” This is a confession turned into counter-theology. Oriogun’s poem exemplifies self-confessional poetry as a form of resistance under duress. It refuses the fantasy that truth is always liberating. Instead, it reveals confession as a dangerous, tender, and necessary act in a society structured to punish difference. By transforming queer desire into song, prayer, and warning, Oriogun’s poem insists that speaking – even softly, even from the dark – is itself an act of defiance.

Another poet whose poetry exemplifies confessional writing as both an intimate mode of self-exposure and a radical queer intervention within Nigerian and diasporic literary spaces is Logan February. February is a non-binary poet who has published three poetry chapbooks and a full-length volume of poetry, “In the Nude” (2019). Drawing unapologetically on personal experiences of desire, trauma, faith, exile, and psychic fracture, February turns the lyric ‘I’ into a site where private pain intersects with structured violence – homophobia, religious orthodoxy, and the afterlives of colonial codes. Their confessional voice is marked by emotional nakedness and stylistic urgency, often collapsing the boundaries between prayer, love poem, and lament, so that queerness is articulated not abstraction but as lived, wounded, and desiring flesh. In their poem, ‘Bright Cataclysm’, February deepens – and sharpens – the project already underway in Oriogun’s “Coming Out”, using self-confessional poetics not simply to narrate psychic distress but to contest the conditions that produce and deny it, especially within a Nigerian social order that treats fear, queerness, medication, and vulnerability as moral aberrations rather than lived realities.

From its opening – “my shirt is dancing around my body/ so I think maybe today is the day” – the poem foregrounds the body as a sensitive barometer of crisis. Confession here is incremental, almost hesitant, refusing the dramatic arc often expected of “trauma narratives”. The poet writes:

My shirt is dancing around my body
so I think maybe today is the day
if I could count the degrees, I would
but let’s just say it’s been a really hot week.
a hibiscus wilted & a truck
flipped over & a humming bird died.
It was so small, its endless colors pooling
around its feathers. I was too scared
to run my pale thumb across its beak.
I think it’s the violence, mostly but also my
Pills aren’t working.

At first glance, the poem appears intimate and diaristic: a body overheated, a mind unravelling, a voice confessing fear. Yet read through a postcolonial lens, the poem reveals how private breakdown is shaped by structural violence. The opening line quoted earlier links bodily discomfort to existential dread. Heat here is not merely meteorological; it evokes infrastructural

failure, climate precarity, and urban exhaustion common in postcolonial spaces where the state is unstable – or unwilling – to provide stable conditions of life. Confessional poetry in this context does not celebrate inferiority; it documents exposure. Leigh Gilmore notes that confessional speech in trauma contexts often functions as survival language, marking the limits of what the self can endure (Gilmore 43). The speaker's uncertainty "If I could count the degrees, I would" signals not confusion but a refusal of the rational metrics through which suffering is often minimised. The poem's catalogue – a hibiscus wilted & a truck flipped over & a humming died" – collapses scales of disaster. Domestic, infrastructural, and ecological breakdown co-exist without hierarchy. This flattening is a hallmark of postcolonial reality, where catastrophe is not exceptional but ambient. The truck accident evokes failed road infrastructure; the wilted hibiscus suggests environmental stress; the dead humming bird introduces fragility into a landscape of excess heat and violence. This is not a metaphorical stress; it mirrors Nigerian lived experience, where violence, insecurity, police brutality, climate stress, road deaths, and state neglect coexist on the same psychic field. Ato Quayson's notion of postcolonial nervous conditions is useful here; the subject's anxiety is not private pathology but a rational response to systemic precarity (Quayson 65). The speaker's fear – "I think it's the violence, mostly" – is precise, not vague. Confession becomes a way to name causality in a society that prefers to spiritualise or individualise distress. The speaker continues:

Any good doctor would see me & ask
If I've heard of euthanasia.
I imagine I'd run out of his office, naked,
With my hair troubled. I'm afraid, too, of dying
The world is ending itself anyway. If I could
count the time, I'm not sure I would. Just
look up, watch for the steady strike of lightning.
It's pretty scary, isn't it? But also, its pretty
I'm thinking awful things again – rattlesnakes
coiled around the crackling power lines.
Hold me, Doctor. Show me mercy.

The line "my pills/aren't working" exposes a fraught relationship with psychiatric care. In Nigeria, mental health infrastructure is limited, stigmatised, and often treated as an important Western

framework unsuited to “African realities”. Yet the poem refuses romantic alternatives. Instead, it indicts the failure of care, not the desire for it. The imagined doctor who might suggest euthanasia dramatises an ethical abyss. The persona’s wish is not a literal wish for death but a critique of medical systems that manage suffering rather than alleviate its causes. Michel Foucault’s argument that modern institutions regulate life by deciding whose pain is tolerable resonates here (Foucault 66). The speaker’s fantasy of fleeing the doctor’s office naked underscores a refusal to submit fully to institutional authority – even when seeking help.

Fear saturates the poem. The repetition of fear without apology resists Nigerian cultural scripts that equate fearlessness with moral strength, masculinity or faith. The poem’s ending – “hold me, Doctor. Show me your mercy” is not submission but a demand. Mercy is trained as relational, not divine or disciplinary. In a society where mercy is often outsourced to religion or postponed to the afterlife, the speaker insists on immediate human care. Ultimately, February’s “Bright Cataclysm” exemplifies self-confessional poetry as a mode of resistance against Nigeria’s society’s regimes of silence, endurance and moralisation. By articulating fear, medication failure, and suicidal ideation without narrative resolution, the poem refuses the social demand that suffering must either be cured, hidden or made inspirational.

The last poet to be studied in this essay is Saddiq Dzukogi, whose poetry also operates within a confessional mode but shaped by Islamic spirituality, ethical introspection, and the pressures of contemporary Nigerian life, especially that of the north. His poetry, as seen particularly in his celebrated work, “Your Crib, My Qibla” (2021), foregrounds the vulnerable self – one that doubts, prays, falters and hopes – using confession not as self-indulgence but as a moral and spiritual reckoning. Drawing on Islamic imagery, ritual, language, and the rhythms of supplication, Dzukogi situates personal experience within a larger metaphysical framework where faith is continually tested by loss, political violence, poverty, and grief. The lyric ‘I’ in his poems becomes a site of accountability, speaking honestly about fear and inadequacy while seeking divine presence and mercy. “A House that Does Bad Things to Me” is a ferocious example of Dzukogi using the confessional mode as a form of resistance. He writes:

The universe grinds my body into a white horse,
Mushrooms down my throat, hands
heavy on the door, through which
same world came to me. I am inside

the fire, big as floodwater,
clinging to every part of my bones,
memories set my hair ablaze,
it's Eid, let's sacrifice
this girl's neck, the ram
loses blood to a thirsty government.

From its opening line – “The universe grinds my body into a white horse” – the poem establishes the body as a site of cosmic and political violence. The body is not metaphorically wounded; it is ground down, processed by forces larger than the individual. In postcolonial terms, this grinding evokes the historical machinery of empire and its afterlives – extractive, indifferent, relentless. The body becomes terrain, much like the colonised land itself. Frantz famously describes the colonised body as the first site upon which domination is enacted and naturalised (Fanon 43). The poem extends that logic into the postcolonial present, showing that violence has not ended – it has only changed language.

As a confessional act, the lines above refuse the privacy of pain. The speaker does not say ‘I suffer’, he says ‘the universe does this to me’. confession thus externalises causality, rejecting the moral framework that would individualise or psychologise his suffering.

One of the poem's most searing moments occurs in its use of Islamic sacrificial imagery:

Its Eid, let's sacrifice
this girl's neck, the ram
that loses blood to a thirsty government

Above, religious ritual is exposed as a symbolic cover for state violence. The girl's body replaces the ram, revealing how sacrifice in postcolonial societies often falls on those with the least power – women, the poor, the marginalised. This again recalls Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, referenced earlier in this essay: that modern states tend to assert sovereignty by deciding who may live and who must die, often cloaking this decision in moral and sacred language (Mbembe 11-40). As a confession, the lines above are profoundly heretical. The speaker does not confess sin to religion; he confesses religion's role in sin. In the Nigerian context – where religious authority frequently shields political violence from critique – this is an act of immense resistance. The poem

breaks a powerful silence by naming faith not as a refuge but as a mechanism. The speaker continues:

The world does bad things to me, a girl –
my body, a bloody terrorist, ravaged
by gun-heads and godheads
I feel the unending opinions of a ghost, I am
going to write about my mouth,
the great sorrow it speaks
in the name of prayers all over, my blood
is a homage to Allah, the soldiers
who broke the door, dumped pieces of themselves
inside a womb, hospital submerged
in the water of negligence
what do you want to remember?
What about the house where you stripped
me of dignity, a world
that does bad things to me.

As earlier stated, there is a radical reversal of sacrificial logic in the poem. The girl is both offering and victim; religion becomes a vocabulary through which state violence launders itself. In Nigerian society, particularly in contexts where Islam and Christianity are mobilised as moral authorities, questioning religious ritual is taboo. The persona's confessional speech violates the taboo. Michel Foucault's analysis of confession as a technology of power is inverted; instead of confessing sins to be absolved, the persona confesses what power has done to her (Foucault 51). Her blood becomes "a homage to Allah" – not as devotion, but as a bitter irony. One of the poem's most harmonising passages reads:

The soldiers

who broke the door, dumped pieces of themselves
inside a womb.

The line above collapses rape, invasion and occupation into a single act. The house, the body, and the nation are indistinguishable. Nigerian feminist critics have long noted how women's bodies

become collateral terrain in moments of political terrain. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi argues that African women's suffering is often narrated as incidental to the national struggle rather than central to it (Ogunyemi 226). Dzukogi's poem refuses that marginalisation. The poet adopts the persona of a girl in the poem to make it function as counter-history. The womb remembers what the nation refuses to archive. By placing the female body at the centre of religious ritual, military aggression, and national neglect, Dzukogi exposes how power survives by consuming vulnerable lives.

Conclusion

To sum up, Nigerian confessional poetry reimagines resistance not through grand revolutionary proclamations but through the persistent courage to tell the truth within social conditions that often punish honesty. These poets suggest that the articulation of personal pain—particularly when such pain is shaped by queerness, religious tension, gendered vulnerability, or economic marginalisation—constitutes a deeply political gesture. By reclaiming confession from its historical associations with punishment, religious discipline, and colonial authority, contemporary Nigerian poets transform it into a subversive literary strategy that bears witness, exposes injustice, and insists on survival. In this way, Nigerian confessional poetry emerges as a powerful aesthetic practice that restores voice to silenced experiences, preserves memory, and foregrounds the body as a critical site through which personal testimony becomes an enduring form of political resistance in contemporary Nigerian society.

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