
**COUNTER-LYRIC: ALMAJIRI CHILDHOOD AND AGENCY IN THE POETRY OF
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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the Almajiri counter-lyric in Abdul Rasheed Na'Allah's Almajiri African poetry. It explores how Na'Allah uses the aesthetic and affective power of poetry to restore voice and complexity to the Almajiri figure. The paper draws on Richard Bauman's Performance Theory with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonial Perspective as theoretical frameworks for its literary analysis. By intertwining Bauman's concepts of performativity with Ngũgĩ's decolonial aesthetics, this analysis reveals that Na'Allah transforms the experiences of an Almajiri into powerful public testimonies. The study discovers that Na'Allah underscores the political significance of the counter-lyric by resisting the erasure of the Almajiri by centring their voices within a lyrical space of protest.

Keywords: Almajiri, African Poetry, Nigerian Poetry, Na'allah, Poetry Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The figure of the Almajiri child in Northern Nigeria has become a poignant and tragic symbol in contemporary African discourse. Typically portrayed as a young boy in tattered clothing clutching a begging bowl, the Almajiri is frequently reduced to a simplistic representation of poverty, neglect, and potential radicalisation. This dominant narrative strips the Almajiri's childhood of its inherent innocence, agency, and potential, framing it instead as a social problem. Consequently, the lived experiences, inner worlds, and voices of these children are systematically erased, creating a void filled with external assumptions and biases. It is within this vacuum that Abdul Rasheed Na'Allah's Almajiri African poetry emerges as a powerful act of reclamation.

Abdul-Rasheed Na' Allah's *Almajiri: A New African Poetry* (published in 2001) is a poetry collection that gives voice to the experiences of Qur'anic school students in Northern Nigeria who often beg on the streets. His poetry empowers marginalised voices by transforming the Almajiri from voiceless victims into active agents of resistance through counter-lyric power. The 'counter-lyric' here refers to a poetry that challenges and subverts dominant narratives, often those of oppression and marginalisation. By incorporating indigenous rhythms and performative elements into his verse, Na'Allah reclaims the humanity of Almajiri pupils and challenges dominant representations. In doing so, his poetry fills a critical gap in literary scholarship, enlightening us about the power of African poetic forms to interrogate social injustice and articulate social criticisms.

This paper, therefore, examines Na'Allah's literary engagement with Almajiri in the poetry collection, *Almajiri: A New African Poetry*. It explores how he uses the aesthetic and affective power of poetry to restore voice and complexity to the Almajiri figure. It also demonstrates how poetry is a reflective and transformative medium in child welfare, education,

and social justice discourse. To illuminate this lyrical intervention, this paper utilises Richard Bauman's performance theory and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonial perspective as theoretical frameworks. The essay employs a qualitative textual analysis of selected poems and a sustained close reading of key poetic texts. By intertwining these frameworks, this analysis demonstrates how Na'Allah's counter-lyric ultimately transforms the elusive childhood of the Almajiri into a resonant space of protest and humanity. The paper argues that Na'Allah's Almajiri collection transcends merely representing the Almajiri, but it performs a lyrical intervention aimed at reclaiming the lost childhood of these children. Na'Allah achieves this through a strategic fusion of performance-oriented poetic techniques and a decolonial commitment to indigenous aesthetic forms. His work transcends mere representation as it stages the Almajiri experience as a public testimony, using the affective power of poetry to articulate their anguish, lament their systemic abandonment and critique the socio-political structures of their marginalisation.

2. THE ALMAJIRI

Almajiri Qur'anic pupils have constituted a serious social problem and remain a growing concern in Nigeria. What has exacerbated this concern is their ever-increasing population in northern Nigeria, where they are thrown to the streets to beg daily for food and money. According to a UNICEF report, Almajiri children constitute 81% of Nigeria's 10 million population of out-of-school children (<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/children-adjust-life-outside-Nigeria's-almajiri-system>). They are among the most neglected and marginalised groups in Nigeria, facing the harsh realities of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. This outlook contradicts the United Nations' encouragement to nations to create an environment where the rights of all children are protected, regardless of their background.

Derived from the Arabic word "Almuhajir" (emigrant), the term "Almajiri" is a Hausa adaptation referring to pupils or students. In Nigeria, however, it denotes explicitly children, ranging from primary school age to their early twenties, sent from their homes to study under Qur'anic teachers. Predominantly patronised by poor rural families, this Islamic learning system places responsibility on Islamic clerics (Mallams) to provide food, clothing, and shelter. At the same time, students learn to read and recite the Qur'an. Since these Quranic schools operate outside state oversight, they receive no government funding, forcing many proprietors to send their pupils onto the streets to beg for sustenance.

Historically, the Almajiri system is a respected early childhood education model that predated British colonialism in northern Nigeria and has a significant cultural and educational value (Bolujoko, 2008). Although it did not include modern secular subjects, the system thrived with financial backing from wealthy patrons and traditional institutions. According to Bala (2014), during the pre-colonial days, the Almajiri schools were maintained by the state, communities, parents, zakat (alms/giving), wagf (endowment) and supplemented by the teachers and students through farming. However, since Western education was introduced under colonial rule, official support for Qur'anic schools has been withdrawn. Even after six decades of independence, the situation remains the same as state authorities in northern Nigeria continue to neglect the Almajiri system, neither providing resources to these schools nor integrating Western curricula into them. This decision is in stark contrast to state-supported public schools, where pupils receive meals and learning materials, privileges denied to Qur'anic students.

Consequently, the Mallams compel the children to beg for survival. In northern Nigeria today, it is common to see Almajiri children, clad in tattered clothes, roaming the streets pleading for alms and food. This vulnerability, born of hunger and neglect, exposes them to various abuses and exploitation. The Nigerian military has also warned that Almajiri

populations are "roaming threats" to the security situation in the country (Omeni, 2015). Compounding this crisis are the several years of severed family ties and exposure to street life, which have pushed many Almajiri toward criminal networks. According to Yau (2000, p.178), some seek refuge in hideouts of miscreants (Yandaba), where food and shelter are readily available.

Given the realities of banditry and Boko haram insurgency, the Almajiri system has developed into a moral, social, and political problem demanding urgent Nigerian government intervention. Moreover, the plight of Almajiri children contradicts core Islamic principles, which emphasise children's rights to health, safety, and nurturing environments. This infringement of children's rights is a critical issue that requires immediate action. It is also a violation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates equitable, quality education for all. Nigeria's failure to address this crisis risks deepening social fractures and perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence. Without decisive action, the Almajiri crisis will remain a "huge problem" in Nigeria with catastrophic consequences.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Performance explains the difference between narrow poetry reading and a reading characterised by the poet's immediate interaction as performer and audience. It also indicates that poetry is somehow acted through voice, dramatic styles and written text. Schechner elaborates on this point, urging readers to explore the various meanings of the verb "to perform" (2002, p. 22). According to him, the term "to perform" can also signify "to carry out," "to achieve," or "to execute" (Schechner, 2002, p. 22). Bauman (1977, p.59) describes performance as an enacted event where the speaker consciously takes on a role and engages the audience in a co-creative process. The poet is not bound to the written text, but a performer's success depends on audience engagement through a fusion of music, dance and mime. Bauman's concept of performance as a "mode of communicative display" invites audience accountability and reveals how Na'Allah's use of rhythm, repetition, and oral techniques transforms the poem into an act of public witnessing. Also, Ngũgĩ's framework on "decolonising the mind" contextualises this performance as a political act by centring African poetic sensibilities to challenge hegemonic narratives and reclaim the right to self-representation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o shares this outlook of performance as a collective exercise between the artist and the audience. He goes further in perceiving performance as a means of decolonisation. His strong support for literature rooted in indigenous languages, oral traditions, and communal expressions demonstrates his resistance to the alienation of African literary forms. By applying performance theory to this essay, we see how the poem extends beyond the written page by bridging oral and written traditions, making it accessible to broader audiences.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of Almajiri children in Nigeria has garnered substantial scholarly attention. While much of the existing research on Almajiri children is ethnographic and report-based, the literary dimensions of this Islamic learning system have been largely overlooked (Awofeso et al., 2003; Hansen, 2016; Hoechner, 2015; Kane, 2003; Loimeier, 1997; Reichmuth, 1989; Okonkwo, 2022; Sarkingobir et al., 2020). Nevertheless, these studies offer valuable insights into the Almajiri system's structure and evolution. For example, Hoechner's (2015) ethnographic study in Kano, northern Nigeria, reveals the social logic that supports the Almajiri system. The families often enrol these children in Qur'anic schools not out of disregard for modern education but due to economic constraints, cultural values and religious commitments. While the ethnographic study provides insights into the perspectives of parents, it does not fully

represent the voices, experiences, and inner lives of the Almajiri children. This gap underscores the importance of understanding the children's inner lives and highlights the need for a "literary dimension," such as analysing their songs, stories, or poems.

Sarkingobir et al. (2020) adopt a more critical approach that highlights the worsening situation of the Almajiri learning system and its harmful effects on child welfare, including health risks and psychological abuse. Although this study performs a crucial function by applying a child rights lens, it overlooks the voices of the Almajiri children, their agency, resilience, and the coping strategies they develop to survive their circumstances. Building on this critique, Kane (2015) and Loimeier (1997) further emphasise how the growing activities of reformist Islamic movements have delegitimised the Almajiri system. They argue that critics increasingly associate it with culturally specific Hausa practices like begging, viewing these traditions as incompatible with core Islamic teachings. This perspective brings up the internal theological and ideological debates within Islam.

Furthermore, Obisesan (2021) addresses a very real and pressing concern for the Nigerian state by linking the Almajiri issue to national stability. It examines the level of security threat that the Almajiri pose to the Nigerian state and what implications their mobility has for Nigeria's internal security. It rightly highlights how the children's mobility and marginalisation make them vulnerable to recruitment by criminal and extremist groups. By framing Almajiri primarily as a "threat," the study shifts the focus from their welfare to the state's safety.

The foregoing existing studies explore the Almajiri from the sociological, political and security perspectives and reveal tensions between its historical roots and contemporary reformist critiques. Nevertheless, the most significant gap unifying all these studies is the neglect of the literary and narrative dimensions. This scholarly approach would provide a crucial missing link to the understanding of a deeply misunderstood population.

Abdul Rasheed Na' Allah's collection, *Almajiri: New African Poetry*, has received very little scholarly attention. Although the Almajiri collection has enjoyed a handful of reviews, it has yet to have a comprehensive critical engagement, leaving a significant gap in understanding how literary art contributes to the discourse on Almajiri. Toyin Falola, in a brief comment on the poem, observes that by writing about the Almajiri, Na'Allah "became the voice of the masses and spoke to authorities on their behalf to create awareness where necessary and effect solutions to generational problems". Na'Allah's Almajiri poetry combines African indigenous oral traditions and modern socio-political criticism to give voice to children with elusive childhoods. In order to better appreciate the literary dimensions of Almajiri-themed poetry, it is crucial to contextualise it within modern African poetry. The African poetic tradition is deeply rooted in oral and performative practices that challenge conventional notions of literature. While the Western literary tradition prioritises the written word, African poetry emerges from oral cultures where performance is central to meaning and transmission. Its dynamic nature, contextual dependency, and strong communal engagement necessitate new modes of critical inquiry that respect its unique aesthetics.

Building on this perspective, many scholars have explored how modern African poetry integrates indigenous performance aesthetics with contemporary literary forms. Notable contributors such as Adeeko (2012), Bodunde (2001), Brown (2000), Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1991), Garuba (2005), Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993), Ogundele (2011), Ogundipe (2013) and Ojaide (2009) have highlighted orality's role as both a stylistic and political device. Their works underscore how poets use oral traditions to navigate identity and address pressing social issues. Weaving oral devices and performance traditions into the fabric of modern African poetry extends beyond simple recitation. It involves vocal modulation, bodily movement, audience

interaction, music, and setting, which are crucial to understanding the meaning and function of African poetry.

5. ABDUL-RASHEED NA'ALLAH

Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah is a distinguished Nigerian academic, author, poet, literary critic and Professor of Comparative Literature. He earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Ilorin, Nigeria and his PhD in 2019 from the University of Alberta, Edmonton. He was the Chair of the African American Studies Department at Western Illinois University in the United States of America before devoting a significant aspect of his career to university administration in Nigeria as Vice-chancellors of two universities — Kwara State University, Malete and the University of Abuja. His scholarly work often focuses on African oral traditions, performance, and Islam, which provides essential context for his poetry.

Na'Allah has published extensively on different genres of African literature. He stands on a long tradition of African poets who learned the power of culture in a people's literary tradition from their elders. He acknowledges his debt to these earlier poets who made African poetry more accessible by writing in the lively idiom of simple English. As a creative writer, Na'Allah understands that Africans must not be left behind in promoting knowledge of their figurative heritage. He has written elsewhere that African writers should project Africanity to remain identifiable by preparing to use foreign and indigenous languages in their writings (Na'Allah, 2016). His poetry collection includes *Almajiri: A New African Poetry* (2001), *Ilorin Praise Poetry* (2021), *Ilorin o* (2018) and *Ilorin Fa* (2022).

6. DISCUSSION

Almajiri: A New African Poetry (2001) is a collection of forty-seven poems divided into five main sections, preceded by a lengthy introduction to street poetry that prepares the reader for the poems' layered metaphors and performative nature. The main sections are titled "issues," "celebration and communality and humanhood," "environmental and human exploitation," "Kizo, let us talk Hausa, Yoruba," and "Daybreak laughter, love", respectively. The collection documents Almajiri's struggles, hunger, abandonment, and societal scorn while emphasising their resilience as active individuals rather than mere victims. Na' Allah's portrayal reflects a consciousness of using poetry as an integral part of the social environment to speak to social injustice and childhood identity. He critiques the system that forces little children seeking knowledge to seek their livelihood and education through begging and other menial labour. According to Na'Allah, "the Almajiri is, in all instances, also a poet" (p.14). As he goes around houses and compounds begging for food, he sings to entertain his patrons and patronesses. He vocalises his frustration about society and questions the system that sentences him to eat leftovers and casts him into the gutter. He asks whether it is a crime to pursue knowledge and why a young person who wants to know more about God and his society becomes destitute among his people.

Bauman's concept of performance as a "mode of communicative display" is fundamental to this discussion. For Bauman, performance transcends the mere transmission of a message; it represents an act that "puts the act of speaking on display," which enhances awareness of linguistic form and encourages the audience to assess the performer's skill and effectiveness. In this collection, we see how poetry extends beyond the written page by bridging oral and written traditions, making it accessible to a broader audience. The African oral performance tradition strongly influences many poems in the collection. Na'Allah's poetry calls for an embodied delivery where the speaker animates the text through voice modulation to emphasise emotion and intensity. His intentional use of rhythm, repetition, code-switching,

and the invocation of oral poetic traditions transforms the poem from a simple descriptive text into a dynamic event. There is a direct engagement with the audience, where the performer invites the audience and recommends performance elements for some poems. For example, in the following poems, "Aramanda", "Dan Makarantar Bokoko the Nigerian School Goer", "Kuluso", and "Sing along; my song", the poet underscores their performative elements. He also makes the issue notably clearer in the poems, where he writes the following: "to the accompaniments of hand-clapping and or African talking drum" (p.42) and "to be performed with an accompaniment of music from the African talking drum, in the rhythms of the wordings of the refrain" (p.38).

Another significant element in the collection is its linguistic and cultural features. The collection features Hausa and Yoruba languages alongside English. Although the poetry collection is essentially written in English, it includes many references in Hausa and Yoruba languages, making it accessible to the audience to participate freely. In some poems, the refrains are either in Hausa or Yoruba. This outlook is evident in the poem "Sing Along My Song", where the refrain is in Yoruba (Ika owo kan ko le mu/ Ika owo kai ko le mu/ Reluwe duro oo). In another poem, "Tabarmar kunya -the Mat of Shame", the refrain is in Hausa "Sun shimfia tabarmar kunya/Duk duniya/Sun bar mu kwan bisa/Har dariyar mu suke/Yar duniyan". Na'Allah reinvigorates the poems through creative deployment of refrains. For the audience who may not understand English, using Nigerian languages as refrains assists them in actively participating in the performance. This multilingual approach empowers Na'Allah with multiple resources from which he has drawn. His blending of numerous linguistic and cultural codes produces a unique form of poetry that reflects the linguistic diversity of Nigeria and the poet's belief in using language as a tool of cultural assertion. More importantly, his linguistic hybridity challenges colonial linguistic hegemony, reinforcing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's conviction that African writers in European languages would benefit African communities more if they wrote in local African tongues.

Expanding this linguistic hybridity further, Na'Allah harnesses Pidgin English (language of the streets) to foster inclusivity and relatability. A striking example is in the poem, "Dan Makarantar Bokoko" (The Nigerian School Goer), where the poet adopts the street idiom that ridicules Western education in northern Nigeria. By channelling the voices of marginalised Almajiri youth, the poem juxtaposes academic pretension with calls for spiritual and ethical integrity. Here, Pidgin transcends mere vernacular; it becomes a subversive tool for social criticism, while celebrating the wisdom of the oppressed. Na'Allah's multilingualism, therefore, functions as a political act of decolonising language, amplifying marginalised voices, and redefining poetry as a space where linguistic borders dissolve in the service of cultural solidarity.

Beyond language, the collection also addresses oppression, resilience, societal neglect and the struggle for dignity in Nigerian society. The first poem in the collection, "After the Drought," laments the relentless suffering that has characterised Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999. It questions systems that offer no respite to citizens suffering after crises, placing marginalised individuals as central figures of enduring hope. Using the drought as a metaphor for prolonged suffering under military rule and rain as a metaphor for potential renewal under succeeding democratic rule, the poet condemns the hypocrisy of greedy political elites who deliberately hoard resources that are meant for all citizens in Nigeria. Thus, the poet makes a powerful rallying call for unity against exploitation. Similarly, in "Pomo," the poet adopts a philosophical tone as he draws on African proverbs and animal imagery to assert that truth is constant, even if its appearance shifts. In the poem "Squirrel", Na'Allah makes use of non-

human imagery as he reflects on missed opportunities, unreturned communication, and the transitory nature of influence. The squirrel becomes a metaphor for something elusive.

Shifting the focus to religious identity, the poem "Al-Ikhlās" explores the intricate web of African Muslims' identity and religious hypocrisy. Na'Allah critiques extremist tendencies and cultural supremacy within Islam. The title alludes to the Qur'an's Surah Al-Ikhlās (declaration of God's oneness)—ironically underscoring the poem's theme of sincerity. Another poem with a non-English title, "Godiya" (meaning "gratitude"), interrogates the relationship between ideology and art. The poet thanks the Almighty for providing the "ammunition" of his ink, framing his writing as both a divine command and a prophetic call to justice.

Food and memory take centre stage in "African Biscuit," where the poet nostalgically evokes *kuli kulfi*, a traditional peanut snack. Through sensory imagery and personification, Na'Allah captures the communal joy tied to this food, especially for diasporic Africans longing for home. Finally, in "The Hen has Learnt about its Game," the poet delivers a sharp allegory about power and complicity. The hen symbolises oppressed individuals who recognise their exploitation but remain trapped within the system. Far from celebrating awareness, the poem warns of "education without liberation", a critique of enlightenment that fails to dismantle oppression.

6.1 Analysis Of Almajiri Poem

Na'Allah's poem, "Almajiri", articulates the silent cries of the street children in Nigerian society. The poet employs vivid metaphors and socio-political critique to explore themes of marginalisation, resilience, and systemic oppression that the Almajiri children face. Describing them as unacknowledged poets and chroniclers of their own stories, Na'Allah portrays the disparities between the haves and the have-nots and challenges systems that perpetuate the suffering of neglected children while centring on the marginalised as agents of enduring hope. The poem serves as a rallying cry for solidarity in the face of exploitation and encourages awareness of this pressing social issue. Na'Allah reveals some of these paradoxes of beauty and pain in this manner:

Ants walk the village paths innocently,
searching for larva and lore,
sniffing, touching, looking to see
How the sun rises and sets.
Almajiri, the ants cry for a chance to grow;
But meet death from the bullet feet of city bullies.
Ants eat leftovers and smile at the chance to feed,
But bullies condemn ants as worms of chance.
Alas, ants fall on their faces, kneel, prostrate
to have leftovers to eat,
yet smile
At the chance to feed.

The poem begins with the striking comparison of Almajiri to ants. This metaphor that extends across multiple lines in the poem meticulously explores the shared attributes between the Almajiri and these tiny creatures. Ants, as social insects, are among the smallest creatures. They connote vast numbers, alluding to the overwhelming population of Almajiri children in Nigeria. Despite their size, ants captivate humans with their cleverness, diligence, and hard work. However, they remain vulnerable, much like the Almajiri.

Further deepening the metaphor, ants are also highly active foragers and adventurous risk-takers, embodying boldness, teamwork, selflessness, and organisation. Through these lenses, the poet's comparison underscores how the Almajiri, though small and numerous, are rendered invisible and reduced to a faceless mass of street children in the public eye. This imagery is reinforced when the poet describes Almajiri as ants "walking village paths," searching for "larva and lore." Here, the practices of "walking" symbolise hard work; the Almajiri's relentless daily struggles, while "larva and lore" represent their basic needs: food and knowledge. The mention of feeding on larvae" suggests a subsistence-level existence. In many rural Nigerian communities, insects and caterpillars are the only sustainable protein source for those who cannot afford meat. Thus, an Almajiri's life epitomises social and material deprivation.

Beyond mere survival, the ant metaphor also highlights the Almajiri's powerlessness, persistence, and industriousness. Remarkably, ants accomplish extraordinary feats despite their physiological limitations, and this trait is echoed in religious texts. Both the Bible and the Quran urge humanity to learn from their wisdom. The Quran (27:17-20) recounts Prophet Sulayman's encounter at the Valley of the Ants, while the Bible praises ants in Proverbs 30: 25 as "a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer." Similarly, Proverbs 6:6-8 admonishes humans to learn from ants, stating: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise." These admonitions and Na' Allah's comparison of Almajiri to ants encourage readers to discern the Almajiri's resilience and untapped potential. Their "sniffing," "touching," and "looking" reflect innocence and curiosity, starkly contrasting with the brutal reality of their existence. Likewise, the phrase "how the sun rises and sets" underscores Almajiri's passage of time and ceaseless struggle for survival. By positioning the Almajiri with ants, the poet humanises them and issues a powerful call to action. This appeal becomes explicit in the lines:

Almajiri, the ants cry for a chance to grow
but meet death from the bullet feet of city bullies.

From the excerpt above, the personification of ants evokes deep empathy for the Almajiri's plight, granting them a collective voice. Far from being passive victims, these children exhibit agency and resilience, even as systemic forces crush them. The irony in the word "chance" is gut-wrenching. While ants grow naturally through their life cycle, the Almajiri are robbed of childhood and forced into premature adulthood the moment they enter Quranic schools. Their growth is stifled and treated as a privilege rather than a right. The poem's closing lines deliver a devastating critique. The "chance to grow" is not just denied. It is violently trampled by a society that views them as expendable. Their cry is both a plea for survival and an indictment of a world that silences them.

However, Almajiri pupils are children without any childhood. They become adult the moment they enrol for Quranic education. Being an Almajiri offers limited opportunity for change and individuality, as they must beg for opportunities to exist and develop. The line, therefore, critiques Almajiri's access to fundamental rights. Access to education, food and shelter is presented as a charitable "chance" rather than an entitlement. The 'chance to grow' is not just denied; it is mocked by a world that crushes them underfoot. The Almajiri's "cry" voices their instinctual existence and human suffering, foregrounding the injustice of their plight. As the poem continues in the successive lines, one can sense the hostility of the social environment against the subject in the lines below:

But meet death from the bullet feet of city bullies.

The preceding line, "but meet death from the bullet feet of city bullies", does more than depict violence; it lays bare the systemic brutality inflicted upon Almajiri children. This imagery starkly underscores the perpetual danger the vulnerable face at the hands of the powerful. Much like ants, which play indispensable roles in ecosystems yet are mindlessly crushed by humans, the Almajiri are neglected despite being the nation's future. Instead of nurturing their potential, the "city bullies" (urban elites) collaborate to exploit them as beggars, thugs, protesters and cheerleaders, only to abandon them afterwards. The phrase "bullet feet" in the excerpt is particularly unsettling, evoking not just violence but total erasure of the vulnerable as easily as a boot crushes ants. However, amid this oppression, the poet reveals a haunting resilience of the Almajiri in the excerpt below:

Ants eat leftovers and smile at the chance to feed,
but bullies condemn ants as worms of chance.
Alas, ants fall on their faces, kneel, prostrate
to have leftovers to eat,
yet smile
at the chance to feed.

The phrase "Ants smile" carries profound irony. The ants and the Almajiri "keep smiling" despite being forced to "kneel" and "prostrate", suggesting their unbearable humility and perseverance. It also evokes a life of gratitude, contrasting with the burdens of some privileged people. While some wealthy people agonise over material concerns, such worries hold no weight for the Almajiri. Their smile, however, is not a passive resignation but a mark of defiance. This resilience is rooted in a steadfast belief in divine justice. The Almajiri could also smile because they reckoned that there was a Day of Judgment. Even as Nigeria's political and economic systems fail them, their faith in God's provision remains steadfast. Therefore, the poet frames their suffering as a sacrifice endured in pursuit of sacred knowledge. This mindset aligns Almajiri with those who claim to act not for material gain but solely for the divine. To them, contentment lies in accepting God's will, whatever form it takes. The metaphor's true brilliance lies in its duality. Ants embody resilience yet are treated as disposable, while the Almajiri persist only to be preyed upon. By likening them to harmless, hardworking ants crushed by unseen forces, Na'Allah does not merely invite pity; he demands a moral reckoning. This call to empathy, however, is complicated by the Almajiri's acceptance of destiny, a tension captured in the following lines:

Palm patterns come in different shapes,
and tread different directions on the palm:
Palm-patterns know that many roads lead to the market.
City bullies block their own ears,
whenever their palms want to talk to them.

The above excerpt, "Palm-patterns come in different shapes, / and tread different directions on the palm", does far more than describe uniqueness. It is a declaration of an incontestable truth that every life follows a singular path. Each individual is unique with distinct traits. The metaphor of the "palm-patterns" becomes a mark of intimate and irreducible identity, asserting that no two journeys, like no two palms, can ever truly align. Across cultures, palm lines prophesy fate, while in forensic terms, they evoke fingerprints as a universal proof of individuality. This highlights the poem's theme that no two lives are identical, yet societal structures impose a demand for conformity, as suggested by the phrase "wear our garments."

Forcing someone to alter their "pattern," literally or metaphorically, violates fundamental rights. Hands are also tools for work. Calloused palms tell stories of survival. The poem suggests that systemic forces exploit these hands while denying their humanity. Moreover, the line "Many roads lead to the market" echoes Yoruba proverbial wisdom to shatter the myth of a single "right" path. For the Almajiri, it rebukes Nigeria's obsession with Western education as the sole gateway to knowledge, exposing how authoritarian logic resists alternative ways of being. Sometimes, the instrument of coercion is used, hence the ultimatum:

Almajiri must wear our garments
or wear no garments,
or face the courts!

The preceding excerpt does not merely suggest coercion but embodies authoritarian violence. The poet's deployment of imperative tone mimicked the bark of a hegemon, commanding a forced submission. The so-called available "choices" are laughable: assimilate (shed your identity), starve ("wear no garments"), or face criminalisation. In this framework, clothing becomes a metaphor for garments, representing cultural genocide, and "no garments" representing engineered poverty. Simultaneously, the state's cruelty is laid bare as it systematically withholds resources only to punish the deprived for their deprivation. Thus, the excerpt frames marginalisation as a moral failing rather than a systemic outcome. Even nakedness holds power despite this, as choosing "no garments" means refusing the oppressor's script.

Building on this symbolism, garments could also represent cultural or religious identity. To forcibly remove them is to erase the Almajiri's way of life, coercing assimilation into dominant norms. The oppressors frame conformity as the only "civilised" path. However, the alternative, "no garments," is not freedom but annihilation of self. Moreover, nakedness signifies vulnerability, mirroring how marginalised groups like the Almajiri are stripped of state protection and left exposed to societal brutality. This resistance recalls colonisers' cultural imperialism, which demanded Africans abandon their traditions for Western "civilisation." Similarly, in modern Nigeria, elites deride the Almajiri's tattered clothing as proof of backwardness, a circular logic that blames victims for the poverty the state itself engineered. The poem lays bare the hypocrisy in a society that denies resources to the marginalised and then criminalises their deprivation. Despite this systemic cruelty, the Almajiri persist in defiant pride, their smiles a quiet rebellion. The poem concludes on a note of radical hope. If the powerful open their eyes and ears, they might finally recognise the value of the Almajiri's "songs-meal". Their culture, resilience, and humanity yearn to join this unbroken chorus.

The phrase "face the courts" in the verse under consideration drips with bitter irony, laying bare how judicial systems deploy the law against people with low incomes. Historically, post-1999 Nigeria wielded this phrase to taunt victims of electoral fraud; now, it is repurposed to threaten the Almajiri. The ultimatum remains unchanged: assimilate or vanish. Nevertheless, the poem's closing strikes a defiant chord. The bullies may ignore their "palms" (their inner truth), but the Almajiri will not change their garments. Their suffering, once ignored, now demands witness. Ultimately, the palm-pattern image emerges as the poet's ultimate instrument of resistance; an unalterable signature of self. The poem leaves us with a searing question. That reality in Na 'Allah's poetry is what remains when every layer is stripped away? Only the irreducible, the "palm pattern", that no power can erase.

From the foregoing, Na' Allah's poem, "Almajiri", is structured like a protest song, with its repetitions, metaphors, and shifts in tone. The poem functions as a verbal performance

(Bauman) and an act of decolonised resistance (Ngũgĩ). It aligns with these theorists' ideas in several ways. Bauman (1977) emphasises how speech acts become performances when marked by special codes, audience awareness, and heightened expressiveness. Also, Ngũgĩ argues that language and performance are resistance tools against colonial and neocolonial oppression. The poem's performative strength lies in its embodiment of resistance in content and delivery. The poet's deployment of repetition reinforces key themes of resilience and the unchanging suffering of the Almajiri. For example, the opening imagery, "Ants Walk the village paths," is repeated in different forms, "Almajiri, the ants cry..." and later "Almajiri must wear our garments..." which ties the theme of marginalisation to the metaphor of ants. Also, "smile at the chance to feed" is repeated twice, emphasising resilience despite oppression.

The poet's deployment of a string of metaphors testifies to a shared perception of the realities of things and their connectedness between the poet and the audience. Almajiri, like ants, are seen as insignificant but persist despite oppression. The imagery of ants' searching for larvae and lore, 'kneel, prostrate / to have leftovers to eat' (echoing both Islamic prayer posture and forced humility), and 'smile at the chance to feed' (dignity in survival) all underscore their resilience. The shift between third-person and direct address ('Almajiri must wear our garments') imitates authoritarian speech, making the poem almost theatrical as if the speaker is narrating and confronting the audience. This shift from narration to direct address also creates interactivity, a key feature of performance where the audience is implicated.

The poem's rhythmic repetitions ("Almajiri, the ants cry...") reflect Ngũgĩ's emphasis on African orature, using poetic speech to reclaim cultural autonomy. Unlike Ngũgĩ, the poet uses English but infuses it with African metaphors (ants, palm-patterns), suggesting a subversion of the colonial tongue. Also, the proverbial structure ("many roads lead to the market") mirrors traditional African wisdom, resisting Western linear narratives. ("Palm-patterns know that many roads lead to the market") adds a mythic quality, making the poem not just a statement but a communal storytelling act. The kneeling/prostration imagery ('ants fall on their faces, kneel, prostrate') evokes both Islamic prayer and forced submission, showing how the body performs oppression. Even then, the smile defies this, serving as a powerful symbol of embodied resistance. This defiance in the face of oppression can inspire the audience. The final reversal, "our songs-meal they will ask to eat", reaffirms hope that the oppressed hold cultural power, representing a significant decolonial tactic. It suggests that those who oppress and marginalise the Almajiri may one day need them. This twist is performative in its subversion of power dynamics, challenging the audience. This note of hope makes the poem a call for justice, leaving the audience optimistic.

The lines "If only bullies open their ears" directly challenge the listener, fulfilling Bauman's idea that performance is communication heightened by accountability. Bauman helps us see the Almajiri poem as a verbal act that demands interpretation. Ngũgĩ helps us see it as a decolonial act, using orature and metaphor to reclaim agency. Together, they show how the poem performs suffering and defiance, making the Almajiri's struggle visible and audible in a society that silences them. The poet's adoption of performance mode makes the poetry collection a living protest, not just a text. He also demands a response from the audience through this medium, whether pity, anger, or solidarity. This outlook aligns perfectly with Bauman's performance theory and Ngũgĩ's decolonial poetics. Moreover, using nature metaphors (ants, palms) contrasts with the harshness of urban "bullies." The structure has short lines of enjambment, creating a flowing yet fragmented feel that mirrors Almajiri's disjointed experiences. The poem's strength comes from the simplicity of language, lyricism, musicality,

and directness, making the poetry accessible and engaging for all readers. The poem critiques systemic injustice while celebrating the Almajiri's marginalised strength.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper has explored Na' Allah's Almajiri poetry as a counter-lyric that documents injustice and offers a collaborative platform for an art concerned with how children are valued and nurtured in modern society. Almajiri children deserve the best education and a safe and secure environment in which to thrive and become a part of society. By employing Richard Bauman's performance theory, this analysis has demonstrated how Na' Allah's work stages a dynamic confrontation with dominant narratives, turning poetry into a performative act of public witness. In this context, the poet is a writer and a performer whose success is intricately tied to the audience's engagement. The Almajiri's struggles, often silenced or distorted in official discourse, are reclaimed through performative language, rupturing rhythmic conventions, invoking oral traditions, and demanding an ethical response from the reader. As shown in the discussion, various performance elements reminiscent of the interactive nature of traditional African music, where poetry and song are inseparable, anchor the poetry in oral aesthetics. This approach, adopted by Na'Allah, ensures that his poetry is accessible to a diverse audience.

In addition, the application of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's vision of art as a tool of decolonial resistance further clarifies the political urgency of Na' Allah's counter-lyric. Poetry here is not merely a representation but a rehumanising instrument that refuses the marginalisation of the Almajiri and insists on their place in collective memory. The streets, as depicted in Na' Allah's verses, are not just sites of abandonment but arenas where lyricism becomes defiance, demanding immediate attention and action. Given Nigeria's current political and economic challenges, there is a slim chance for Almajiri, as street children, to escape multidimensional poverty. The assumption that their deprivation is a temporary sacrifice for knowledge's sake is delusional. In the long run, the best products of the Almajiri system that could be offered are petty income opportunities available as street vendors and handypersons. This study affirms that Na' Allah's counter-lyric is more than aesthetic innovation but radical solidarity with the oppressed. His poetry compels society to listen, not as detached observers but as implicated participants in the Almajiri's suffering and resilience. In amplifying their voices through performative and decolonial poetics, Na'Allah's counter-lyric protest song echoes long after the page is closed.

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