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PANDEMIC AS ANTAGONIST: TRAGIC ABSURDISM IN OKINBA LAUNKO'S COVID-19 POEM, "SEASON OF THE UNNAMEABLE"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines "Season of the Unnameable," a Nigerian COVID-19 poem by Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan). It analyses how Launko portrays the pandemic as an active antagonist through the framework of tragic absurdism. Drawing on Albert Camus's theory of the tragic absurd, the essay highlights Launko's use of aesthetic strategies, such as structural fragmentation, dramatic devices, vivid imagery, euphemism, paradox and indigenous cultural references, to express the psychological and social disruptions wrought by COVID-19. Rather than simply recording suffering, Okinba Launko uses these techniques to dramatise the struggle between human meaning-making and an incomprehensible global crisis. The paper concludes that Launko's tragic absurdism recasts the pandemic as a dramatic force, against which African poetic expression demonstrates its resilience, rendering local experience into a universally resonant form of tragic art.

Keywords: COVID-19 poetry, Femi Osofisan, Okinba Launko, Pandemic poetry, Season of Unnameable.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to inspire scholarly inquiry and literary reflection, contributing to a vital archive of human responses to crisis. This paper analyses "Season of the Unnameable" by a Nigerian poet, Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan), with a focus on his depiction of the pandemic as an active antagonist. The central aim is to examine how Launko articulates the collective panic, loss and psychological trauma arising from the pandemic. The analysis highlights the poet's aesthetic strategies, showing how Okinba Launko structures his poem as a dramatic narrative in which the pandemic assumes the role of a tragic force, marked by profound loss of lives and existential anxiety.

In this poem, Okinba Launko casts the COVID-19 pandemic as a central antagonist, personifying it as an existential threat rather than merely a historical event. Unlike traditional tragedies that offer catharsis, Launko's poem withholds this relief, emphasising a confrontation with an indifferent, unnamed force. Drawing on Nigerian Yoruba performative traditions, Launko depicts COVID-19 as a "malevolent god," an invisible power responsible for global despair and uncertainty. Through the tension between this force and the resilient human spirit, Launko's poem becomes an allegory of both collective tragedy and enduring hope.

This study employs Albert Camus's concept of the tragic absurd as a theoretical framework for its critical reading and textual analysis of the poem. It examines how the poet weaves tragic and absurdist elements to illuminate the psychological and social effects of COVID-19 in "Season of the Unnameable." By applying Camus' theory, the study interprets the poem's depiction of meaningless suffering as an absurdist tragedy, addressing the tension

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between the search for meaning and the universe's indifference. The study contends that meaning emerges from persistent engagement with suffering rather than its resolution. Like Albert Camus' figure, Sisyphus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), Okinba Launko's act of bearing witness to unresolved grief becomes a form of resistance and a reaffirmation of shared humanity. By adopting the antagonist and tragic structure, this article advances a critical model that prioritises dramatic and philosophical inquiry over mere documentation. The following sections present the theoretical framework, review relevant scholarship and provide an analysis of the poem.

2. OKINBA LAUNKO

Okinba Launko is the pen name of Femi Osofisan, one of Nigeria's most prolific and influential creative writers. An emeritus professor at the University of Ibadan, Osofisan has made his mark as an essayist, poet, playwright, theatre director and novelist. He has nine poetry collections to his credit. The poem, "Season of the Unnameable", appears in his recent collection, The *Jeweller of Night* (2023) and is also anthologised in *Of Shadows and Rainbows: Musings in Times of Covid*, edited by Olu Agoi and Olu Obafemi.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of tragedy has transformed greatly from its classical origins to the present day. As cultural and philosophical landscapes shift, philosophers and dramatists continue to reinterpret tragedy from different perspectives. In *Poetics,* Aristotle described tragedy as an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, its purpose being to evoke pity and fear in the audience and ultimately lead to an emotional cleansing. This is a view that is generally regarded as the classical definition of tragedy. He also identified six core elements of tragedy, including plot, character, thought, language, music and spectacle. The tragic hero, a key component of Aristotle's model, stands between virtue and vice, exemplified by characters such as Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*.

Aristotle's emphasis on the elicitation of pity and fear suggests that tragedy aims not simply to entertain but to serve a psychological and moral purpose for its audience through catharsis. The emphasis on plot and character as central components implies that tragedy is defined by the decisions and morality of its protagonists, whose flaws and virtues are closely bound to their fate. Although Aristotle’s tragic model remains a lasting influence on how tragedy is understood, later thinkers such as Bertolt Brecht, Albert Camus, George Hegel, Arthur Miller, Friedrich Nietzsche and Raymond Williams, among others have provided fresh insights on the concept. Few of them that are significantly projected in the discourse are mapped out.

Fo example, Georg Hegel shifted the focus of tragedy from individual heroes to conflicts between ethical forces (*Aesthetics*, 1820, 1978). He saw tragedy as arising from systemic clashes, not just personal flaws. This outlook marked a significant shift from the Aristotle's model, which centred on a solitary noble figure. Hegel instead emphasised the representation of tragic conflict between opposing values. This perspective implies that tragedy reflects broader societal and moral dilemmas, rather than simply the downfall of an individual. By focusing on the collision of legitimate ethical principles, Hegel's theory suggests that tragedy can illuminate the complexities and contradictions inherent in human society. This approach calls on the audiences to consider the ramifications of conflicting duties or values and to recognise that tragic outcomes can emerge even when all parties are justified in their actions. As a result, Hegel's model enriches the understanding of tragedy by connecting personal suffering with universal themes and societal tensions.

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Building on Hegel's view, Friedrich Nietzsche argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that true tragedy accepts chaos and dissolves the self (1872, p.11). Nietzsche's redefinition of tragic value focuses on the direct experience of suffering, shifting from seeking resolution to accepting and appreciating life's complexities. By affirming life amid suffering, his view of tragedy encourages deliberate engagement with existence, rejecting escapism and embracing the fullness of human experience.

The evolution of tragedy continued with Shakespeare, who added psychological depth and explored themes of revenge and existential conflict. Expanding upon this groundwork, in the twentieth century, Arthur Miller further democratised the tragic form, arguing that ordinary people, not just nobility, could face tragedy through their struggle for dignity. According to Miller, the "common man" is as fit for tragedy as a king, because the tragic feeling is the "indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity" (1958, p.32). Consequently, Miller criticised classical theory for failing to recognise that a salesperson could also be a tragic figure, since the struggle for dignity is universal.

Albert Camus centres his theory of tragedy on absurd. According to him, society as living belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate humanity's conduct (1955, p.12). He regards tragedy as emerging from the clash between humanity's search for meaning and the universe's indifference, arising in the realisation of life's inherent meaninglessness. For Camus, the essence of tragedy lies not in fate or character flaws, but in the "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1955, p.28). Within this framework, the tragic hero recognises life's absurdity and consciously chooses to rebel and persist. Far from an act of despair, this rebellion represents a deliberate decision to live authentically despite meaninglessness. For example, Camus' tragic hero, exemplified by a figure like Sisyphus, demonstrates that nobility and meaning lie in the struggle itself rather than in any resolution or reward. Thus, the act of revolt acquires value; refusing to succumb to despair becomes an act of nobility. Instead of seeking catharsis, the hero secures dignity through honest endurance and defiance, making absurdist tragedy a perpetual experience. In this view, tragedy is not a closed narrative but a continual confrontation with the absurd, where the hero's resistance gives rise to a unique existential greatness (Albert Camus, 1955, p.). In this absurdist tradition, Okinba Launko's poem "Season of the Unnameable" engages these existential themes, embodying Camus' notion of confronting the absurd and responding with defiant solidarity in the face of catastrophe.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 has attracted a wide range of scholarship across disciplines. In English studies, there are existing studies in linguistic research that examined how language shapes public perceptions of the pandemic with some scholars focusing on speech acts in health messages (Al-azzawi & Hussein, 2020; Zakariyah, 2020; Anyanwu & Abana, 2020), grammatical constructions (Yuniawan et al., 2023) and digital genres like social media memes (Ambrose & Idegbekwe, 2020; Ernest-Samuel 2021), among others.

Some of the existing studies in the area of poetry include Acim (2021) that examines poetry as a form of public therapy, Giovanelli (2023) and Patnaik (2022) that analyse poetry as witness and intervention. Tembo (2022) connects psychological distress to ecological discourse in Malawian and South African poetry, while Sacks (2023) interprets South African digital performance poetry as an artistic survival strategy. Afolayan and Abayomi (2024) examine Remi Raji's 'Coronavirus Cantos and Monologues,' emphasising the poet's focus on survival and shared humanity. These studies are highly relevant to this paper because they provide a foundation for understanding how poetry can be useful as a therapy. Nevertheless,

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they do not generally elucidate how poetic strategies transform personal experience into collective testimony.

Okinba Launko's Covid-19 poem, "Season of the Unnameable," has received very little scholarly attention. Although there is a growing discourse on pandemic poetry in Nigeria, the poem is yet to receive a published critical engagement.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"Season of the Unnameable" is a lengthy poem written in ten movements, with each section exploring distinct themes and functioning like dramatic episodes or chapters. Okinba Launko describes the poem as a series of Covid-19 poems (2023, p. 71). The sections in the poem are 'Salute,' 'Song of the Cowed,' 'Landscape I,' 'Rain at Dawn,' 'Sunday Morning,' 'The Widow,' 'Convening Corpses,' 'A Change of Dialect,' 'The Heroes,' and 'The State Governor,' which reflect a multifaceted artistic response to the pandemic. The following discussion analyses excerpts from six of these sections in detail.

The title of the poem, "Season of the Unnameable", deepens the terrible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The word, "Season," evokes nature's cycles and refers to a distinct, finite period, each with unique qualities. Calling COVID-19 "the unnameable" paradoxically names what defies language or unspeakable. In the first movement titled "salute," Okinba Launko emphasises the indescribable nature of the pandemic right from the very beginning of the poem. As such, the poet directly addresses the subject in astonishingly placatory speech:

The Unnameable!
Tooto-o! Iba re! Mo juba!
I pay respect!
With this meek salute and a begging bowl of song, I say:
Tooto-o! Iba re! Mo juba!

The excerpt above gives a vivid display of homage directed towards COVID-19 that has assumed a numinous persona. The poem beginning with a "salute" establishes a tone of reverence and invocation. Paying respect or homage directed towards higher powers or specific individuals at the beginning of a performance is a necessary protocol in African oral performance. The poet makes a display of the homage in three syntactic layers. The first is "The Unnameable!", which is a vocative directed at Covid-19, with an exclamation mark lending urgency. The second is the Nigerian Yoruba invocation, "*Tooto-o! Iba re! Mo juba*!", which roots the poem in a specific cultural tradition. It appears that the poet wants the reader engage with the poem on its own terms by refusing to dilute its essence for a Western or universal audience. "*Tooto-o!*" is an emphatic interjection with its elongated vowel echoing Yoruba oral tradition and amplifying the poem's resonance. "*Iba re*!" means "homage to you!". The third layer is the English phrase "I pay respect!", which is a direct translation of "*Mo juba*!" that introduces humility and supplication. This frames the poem as both an art and an offering. Also, the fourth line "with this meek salute and a begging bowl of song" metaphorically extends the poet's posture as a humble supplicant. Thus, we see the poet making a plea for permission and inspiration to begin, setting the stage for a deeper spiritual exploration in the following lines:

They taught us this:
When a strange contagion whelps the nation, till even elder
Babalawo and trusty priests cast their nuts in limp despair—

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When a disease by all previous prescriptions cannot be tamed
And the known wisdoms of yesteryears fall against its awe—

Then, they said,
Sensible people quickly name it –*the Unnameable*

The excerpt above clearly illustrates Albert Camus' concept of absurdity, depicting a society unsettled by the unknown. Structurally, the line breaks in the excerpt do more than shape the form; they reflect the poem's themes of broken wisdom and the disruption of meaning caused by the Unnameable. The "Babalawo" and "trusty priests" represent traditional wisdom, yet they are powerless before a phenomenon that is largely beyond human comprehension. The pandemic's resistance to explanation or control, echoes Camus' view whether "it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; (1955, p.4).

"Babalawo and trusty priests cast their nuts in limp despair-"/ "when a disease by all previous prescriptions cannot be tamed" suggests that a community's ancestral traditions accept that some events are incomprehensible and demonstrates that African systems have long recognised and addressed such mysteries. The poet writes, "sensible people quickly name it the Unnameable!" This phrase portrays a Nigerian Yoruba custom of not directly naming a mysterious disease because it is thought to worsen its effects. So, euphemisms are used to prevent further harm. For instance, smallpox was named indirectly to appease its deity (Henderson and Preston 2009, p.32).

Therefore, by naming the disease "the Unnameable", the poet is not living in denial but is deliberately embracing a paradox. This decision preserves the threat's reality and the community's values. Thus, the "Unnameable" reveals the limits of human knowledge and ritual, symbolising an absurd, indifferent force. The Nigerian Yoruba ritual of euphemistic naming, as invoked by Okinba Launko, is inherently tragic. The community knows that naming a disease "the Unnameable" will not cure it, homage would not appease the enemy and the "begging bowl of song" will remain empty. Yet, these acts persist; not for their effectiveness but as rituals that maintain communal coherence amid affliction. This state of affairs represents an absurdist revolt being enacted through an indigenous African tradition.

Another interpretive layer emerges in the second part of the poem, titled "Song of the Cowed", where the poet expands the range of the euphemism "unnameable" to draw attention to the strangeness of the disease: The "cowed" here refers to the people of the world already clobbered to submission by the ferocity of a malevolent, "stranger god":

There are powers and poisons a name confers on strangers__
There are timed anonymity in an armour for the weak—
Oh, the Lion has a name—
And is everywhere hailed with candour and respect
The Elephant has a name----
No rival dares bar his way in the forest.
Even the ant has a name—
And crawls his sly way through walls to the grain store
And the forest ensures vocables
For all of its trees and numerous plants—
And listens when we ask for shelter and nourishment.

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This excerpt above addresses the power and risk of naming. Animals like the ant, elephant and lion gained status and defined relationships through names. The lion is "everywhere hailed with candour and respect." Thus, the practice of naming creates order and control. Calling COVID-19 the "Unnameable" breaks this pattern. Remaining "unseen, unheard and yet everywhere" suggests a resistance to understanding or management. Unlike the lion or elephant, naming cannot tame or diminish COVID-19 threat. The poem presents the Unnameable as a force beyond familiar strategies, highlighting an absurd reality:

But you, you are unnameable!
A Stranger god unseen, unheard, yet everywhere!
A guest uninvited, yet feeding death to your hosts.

The excerpt above presents a layered aesthetics, using the metaphor of a "stranger god" to cast COVID-19 as an alien force, suggesting it as an awe-inspiring and unfamiliar persona. This metaphor evokes the deep existential uncertainty that permeates daily life. Humans are strangers in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, writes Albert Camus (1955, p.20). He suggests that, once the comforting certainties and beliefs that once illuminated human existence are stripped away, people are left to confront the world as it truly is, without inherent meaning or guidance. This confrontation with the "absurd" compels individuals to search for purpose, grapple with existential uncertainty and ultimately create their own meaning even in a universe that seems indifferent to their longing for answers. The use of a "stranger god" in the excerpt positions the COVID-19 as an inscrutable entity, inspiring both fear and reverence. It also emphasises how the pandemic has fundamentally altered humans' perception of the world and their place within it.

Also, the phrase "feeding death" fuses nourishment with mortality, intensifying the pandemic's horror with a parasitic image. The paradox in "god unseen, unheard, yet everywhere" highlights a presence defined by absence. The antithesis, Unseen/Unheard vs Everywhere" and "Uninvited guest vs hosts", juxtaposes COVID-19's intangible nature with its pervasive impact, casting it as both nothing and everything, intruder and force of destruction. This elevates the pandemic to a supernatural level.

The third section of the poem, titled "Landscape", presents a world radically estranged from its ordinary rhythms and meanings. In this movement, Launko depicts how the natural element, like the rain, traditionally a source of comfort and fertility, has undergone a semantic inversion:

Even the rain has changed its song to clamour
On my roof, it exchanged its lulling drawl for shrill lament;
The soft paws that lured a suitor to passion's entrapment
Have turned to thundering hoofs and changed the old script
To sobbing tales in diverse songs and threnodies
The terror is real behind our masks, but
How many dirges should I count that have walked through my grief?
How many actors climbed the boards of my present pain?

The image in the first two lines of this excerpt presents an abnormal transformation of gentle rain. Its once a "lulling drawl," shifts into violent symbols and a "shrill lament." The rain's "soft paws" that "lured a suitor to passion's entrapment" now become "thundering hoofs." This is a clear example of pathetic fallacy, where the rain ceases to be neutral and becomes an active agent in the speaker's experience. This situation contributes to a mournful soundscape as the

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symbolic order collapses. In Albert Camus' terms, this situation dramatises the moment of absurd revelation, where the world suddenly refuses the meanings, we have imposed on it.

In Okinba Launko's view, the landscape has become a site of traumatic repetition. He expresses the speaker's pain through a series of theatrical and artistic metaphors. The "old script" of courtship and fertility is replaced by "sobbing tales" in various "songs and threnodies." Elements that once symbolised renewal now evoke only grief and death. This situation traps the speaker in a narrative beyond their control. Also, the transformation is total as the rain no longer merely echoes human sorrow but enacts it. The "thundering hoofs" beat out a dirge that the community must sing. For Camus, the absurd arises from this gulf between the search for meaning and the world's silent indifference (1955, p.113). He argues that humans possess an innate desire to find order and significance in their lives, yet the universe offers no clear answers or reassuring truths. This tension produces a sense of estrangement and disorientation, confronting people with the uncomfortable reality that meaning is not given, but must be created (Camus, 1955, p.4). According to Camus, acknowledging the absurd is not an act of despair, but a call to live authentically and courageously despite uncertainty (1955, p.98).

Furthermore, one of the poem's central aesthetics is the accumulation of unanswered, unanswerable questions:

How many dirges should I count that have walked through my grief?
How many actors climbed the boards of my present pain?
How many poems can fall from the eye of one single teardrop?

This rhetorical technique reveals the speaker's confusion and frustration, emphasising the futility of finding meaning in suffering. The speaker's persistent questioning echoes Camus' notion of lucid interrogation. As Camus notes in "*The Myth of Sisyphus*," "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it" (1955, p.44). The repeated questioning is not a request for answers but a refusal to accept the Unnameable. In a situation where meaning is denied, the insistence on questioning affirms human dignity and consciousness. By multiplying questions and tallying dirges and actors, the persona resists surrendering to the absurd. The landscape shifts from a site of trauma to one of profound alienation. The situation continues in the fourth movement titled, "Rain at dawn," where it becomes complicit in this estrangement:

At dawn, the rain came down,
Startling the coffins and ambulances,
But would not wash the day clean for us

Oh rain, we had prayed for you
To sweep the pestilence down the drains
And make the streets safe again for
Cosy encounters. All in vain.

In the above verse, the poet invokes rain's archetypal symbolism as a cleanser, only to subvert it. Rain is tainted by death and fear amid the pandemic and is powerless to "wash the day clean for us." This failure suspends expectations of renewal and evokes deep disappointment. The apostrophe "Oh rain" emphasises nature's indifference and the denial of normalcy, as the speaker's hope for comfort of "cosy encounters" remains elusive. The cultural promises of purification remains unfulfilled, as prayers are met with silence. The poet heightens this sense of alienation by juxtaposing rain with images of death. Instead of nourishing flowers and roofs, he portrays the Rain falling on "coffins and ambulances." This stark imagery captures the

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atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic, when death and emergency pervaded daily life. The following stanza marks a crucial shift in the speaker's relationship to the catastrophe:

I watch the procession of coffins
On the television screen
And with this mask over my face
I send my desperate prayer—

The detail in the above excerpt is both precise and devastating. The speaker witnesses "the procession of coffins" not firsthand, but through the mediated lens of television. The experience of collective trauma is filtered through the very technologies (screens and masks) that simultaneously connect and isolate. The ever-present pandemic mask becomes a symbol of distance, separating the witness from the event. Yet, amid this double mediation, the speaker still "sends" his prayer. The verb "send" is deliberate as the prayer is not directed to any deity or the rain, but cast into the void, like a message without hope of reply. This is a quintessential absurdist gesture; an act of address without assurance of being heard. The speaker does not know if the rain will hear, or if there is anyone on the other side at all. Nevertheless, he sends his appeal:

Rain,
Come again soon
With your ancient power of cleansing.

"Come again soon" embodies the fleeting nature of absurd hope. The speaker recalls the blessings associated with rain as the "ancient power of cleansing."

In the fifth movement, "Sunday Morning," the poet reveals how pandemic lockdowns have disrupted religious practices:

Silent are the pianos and organs, the church bells,
Choirs and choristers
Gone, the dancing worshippers
Gone, the burning candles and incense.

The excerpt reveals a significant sense of abandonment and the paradox of silence. The musical instruments, “the pianos and organs, the church bells” that are ordinarily defined by their sound have now lost their appeal. The silence described here reflects Albert Camus’ perspective of the universe as having a "gentle indifference" or "unreasonable silence" to human suffering and desire for purpose (1955, p.66). The repetition of "Gone" at the beginning of the last two lines creates an anaphora, given that the pandemic systematically erased movement “dancing worshippers”, light and ritual “burning candles and incense”, associated with religious worship.

The sixth movement titled, "The Widow," deepens the poem's exploration of the pandemic's toll. The section focuses on a widow in her garden and the agony of her daily grief:

Death 's in the air, and today
My neighbour is in her garden

The husband in his grave, does he
Think sometimes of her loneliness
In this garden of rhododendrons
That he has left her to wander in

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Accompanied by memories alone?

Her hands touch the flowers tenderly,
Like she used to touch his skin
Her ears stretched out to listen, as if
Hearing again, from fat, far away
The laughter of the children
All departed now, all of them,
To the faraway gardens of their own lives.

In the above excerpt, the phrase "Death's in the air" captures how death saturates daily life during the pandemic, while "and today" highlights the persistence of routine in ordinary life. The widow continues to garden, tend her ‘rhododendrons,’ and listen, suggesting that her ordinary activities endure but their meaning have diminished. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of these routines, which once sheltered the widow from existential emptiness.

The widow's loneliness cannot be solved, only acknowledged. Her daily routines offer no restoration or relief from her solitude. Her experiences echo Albert Camus's tragic survivor. The absurd hero does not die spectacularly but endures, repeating gestures that once gave life meaning. Just like Albert Camus’ figure, Sisyphus, who returns endlessly to his rock, finding not happiness but clarity and defiance. The widow’s experience embodies this perseverance through the activities of tending her garden and listening for absent voices. Her decision suggests that the living must carry on in a world shaped by loss. Thus, her garden becomes a metaphor for survival. The ‘rhododendrons’ are both real flowers and symbols of endurance, their tenderness evokes the persistence of ritual in a situation of emptiness:

Her hands touch the flowers tenderly,
Like she used to touch his skin

The simile above expresses both continuity and rupture. The widow's hands that now touch ‘rhododendrons’ once touched her husband's skin. The same tenderness persists, but its object has changed. The flowers cannot replace her. The widow redirects her tenderness, even though the flowers cannot replace her husband. This is the absurd at its most personal and it reflects what Albert Camus refers to as the "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" (1955, p. 40). The division plays out in the tangible reality of the widow's hands. Her urge to touch and care endures, though its recipient is no longer the world that inspired it. Still, she continues her gestures. This is not hope or resignation, nor simply nostalgia. It is the persistence of habit in the absence of its original meaning.

Furthermore, the seventh movement of the poem titled "Convening corpses," intensifies the sense of tragedy as the poet presents memory as a morbid, involuntary ritual;

And my mind is summoning them.
One by one to me, to this rendezvous
All the lost faces of yesterday
The friends who fell along the way
Too fast to leave a farewell

Summoning not only persons
But the dreams that with them departed
The songs forlorn and rigid

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Like the coffins lined up
In front of the congested graveyard
With no space to bury them

In the excerpt above, we see the poet-persona recalls “all the lost faces of yesterday and friends” with sorrow and pain. The recollection moves from specific "friends" to abstract "dreams" and "songs," suggesting grief extends beyond people to lost potentials and other intangible losses. The simile “songs forlorn and rigid /like the coffins lined up” makes grief feel real and crowded, like a packed graveyard. This image helps us understand how overwhelming and suffocating emotions can be, turning abstract feelings into something physical and easy to picture. The "congested graveyard / With no space to bury them" is paradoxical. It suggests that the speaker’s mind is filled with unprocessed loss that even the symbolic ground for laying the dead to rest is exhausted. This paradox intensifies the poem’s atmosphere of unresolved grief.

The eighth part of the poem titled “A Change of Dialect," chronicles the changes people are forced to witness in every aspect of life. It frames the pandemic’s social rules as a new, alien grammar. Touch, once fluent, has become untranslatable or forbidden.

Once, innumerable currents of affection
Were shared in just a single touch—

But now
The dialect has changed:
The virus that compels distance
Compels estrangement from trust:
What love can break sincere
Through the barrier of a safety mask?
If, to keep death away, we must
First, kill the tokens that keep us humane?

This verse extends to how love is expressed in an era of social distancing. Now, the dialect of connection has changed. In order to survive, the love that sustains life must be curtailed by masks, isolation and distance. The safety mask, designed for protection, also muffles words of affection and prevents gestures like kisses. Beyond physical loss, the pandemic claims love and friendship as casualties, eroding the bonds that unite humans. Yet in the ninth section titled "The Heroes," the poet honours health workers who risk their lives on the front lines:

And of course,
We must talk of the new heroes
Of our age of pain—
The medical gladiators-—doctors, nurses
And other personnel—
Who defy danger and opt to fight
With no weapon, other than
A humane compassion, just the Will of defiance.

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In the excerpt above, the poet celebrates the true heroes of the COVID-19 battle. He praises both the living and the dead: "We must talk of the new heroes / Of our age of pain." These are individuals, who "defy danger and opt to fight with no weapon, other than a humane compassion." Their bravery affirms human dignity amid senseless destruction. In contrast, COVID-19 is cast as the antagonist, a villain in humanity's struggle for survival. The poet's tone is admiring and eulogistic toward the healers, sharply distinguishing them from the menacing presence of the "unnameable." The poem ends on a hopeful note, as the medical personnel persevere while the threat recedes:

All will be well.
All manner of things will be well.

The above excerpt alludes to a popular phrase of hope from the 15th century, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" (Julian of Norwich). It also echoes Camus' conclusion in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, "all is well" (1955, p.98). This reflects Camus' opinion that no matter the circumstance, one will always find one's burden again.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has examined how Okinba Launko portrays COVID-19 in 'Season of Unnameable' as an active antagonist through the framework of tragic absurdism. It reveals how Okinba Launko foregrounds the absurdity and resilience at the heart of the pandemic experience. The characters in this narrative poem endure, finding meaning in the repetition of acts despite loss and disconnection. The poet uses several key literary devices to achieve its depth and impact. The most prominent is the personification of the COVID-19 pandemic as the "Unnameable," depicted as a "Stranger god unseen, unheard, yet everywhere" and a "guest uninvited, yet feeding death to your hosts."

The poet also personifies the rain in "Rain at Dawn," treating it as a powerful force. He draws on Yoruba traditions, where natural elements have agency and can be addressed through ritual by helping people connect to a changing world. This interplay of personification and Further emphasising this complexity, Okinba Launko mixes Yoruba and English, using ritual honorifics like "Tooto-o! Iba re! Mo juba!" to assert Yoruba tradition and create a layered, hybrid language.

In addition to language and paradox, extended metaphors shape the poem's meditation on the pandemic. The forest and rain represent both disruption and transformation, with the rain acting as both failed purification and continuity with ancestral memory. The widow's garden stands for survival and care after a huge loss. Closely related is the poet's fusion of tenderness and loss through similes, as when the widow's hands touch flowers "like she used to touch his skin" or her ears listen "as if hearing distant children." These demonstrate gestures that persist after their original meaning is gone. Vivid imagery also plays a crucial role by transforming abstraction into a lived experience. The poem displays multiple sensory imagery. The sound of rain, the feel of flowers, the sight of coffins and even the scent of the garden versus "Death's in the air." These images are reinforced by recurrent symbols of rain, mask, garden and coffin that gain meaning through repetition.

Furthermore, Okinba Launko employs many rhetorical questions, each one deepening the speaker's sense of uncertainty and reinforcing the universe's silence. The deployment of repetition further binds the poem, especially through the honorific phrase "*Tooto-o! Iba re! Mo juba*!" This refrain creates unity and ritual across the poem. Allusion is also central, as the poet alludes to Christian mystics, Yoruba ritual poetry and Greek tragedy, especially in the widow's figure, echoing survivors in Attic drama. All these devices culminate in the poem's tragic

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inversions; rain as lament, guest as predator, mask as isolation, garden as memory, which show the collapse of old meanings and the lived experience of the absurd. In all, Okinba Launko enacts the absurd in this poem, like Camus's philosophy, by affirming the dignity of survival and the lucidity of confronting suffering. Although the poet offers no escape, he recognises the courage and resilience required to persist in the midst of overwhelming experience.

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