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## CONTENT

### SECTION A: LANGUAGE

Pragmatic Analysis of Tones and Tonal Patterns in Igala Language <b>Abdul, Mohammed Adem</b>	<b>1</b>
Process Choice Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 Inauguration Speech <b>Mohammed Maikiyari, Ph.D and Ramatu Tijani Oziti</b>	<b>12</b>
Quantifiers in English and Izhia: A Minimalist Investigation <b>Maria-Helen Ekah, Ph.D and Chibueze Egbe Aleke</b>	<b>26</b>
A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Images of Banditry in <i>Daily Trust Newspaper</i> Cartoons <b>Umar Uba Abubakar, Ph.D., Benjamin Iorbee, Ph.D and Queen Nguhemem Jebe-Tume</b>	<b>42</b>
Critical Discourse Analysis of Persuasion in Donald Trump's 2024 Victory Speech <b>Hauwa Giwa-Ali, Ph.D</b>	<b>60</b>
Political Discourse Analysis of Selected Plenary Speeches of Nigeria's Senate President Godswill Akpabio <b>Ahmad Musa Saleh and Abdul'aziz Bako, Ph.D</b>	<b>73</b>
Rethinking Social Order: Racism within and After Covid-19 Pandemic <b>Abaya, Henry Demenongo</b>	<b>84</b>
Irregularities In The Grammar of the English Language: Blindspots for Pedagogical Attention in ESL Classrooms <b>Cecilia Folasade Ojetunde, Ph.D and Osipeju, Babasola Samuel</b>	<b>105</b>
An Analysis of Lexical Cohesive Devices in Governor Ahmadu Fintiri's Inauguration Speech <b>Muazu Hassan and Hauwa Giwa-Ali, Ph.D</b>	<b>121</b>
Non-observance of Grice's Maxims: A Study of Some Selected Dialogues in the Play – Harvest of Corruption <b>Abdulkadir Adamu and Usman Maigari Malala</b>	<b>140</b>
The Morphology of Personal Names in English and Ebira Languages <b>Amina Salisu Aliyu, Ph.D, Ahmadu Mohammed Dauda, Ph.D and James Jarafu Jawur</b>	<b>153</b>
Impact of Gamification on Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention among Private Secondary School English Learners In Lagos State, Nigeria <b>Adedokun, James Adekunle and Olabode, Adeyinka Ayoola, Ph.D</b>	<b>169</b>

The Expansionist Approach to the Teaching of the English Grammatical Categories: Examples with the Naming Category <b>Khabyr Fasasi</b>	<b>187</b>
Digital Media Learning and Postmodernist Classroom Innovations in Nigerian Universities <b>Maggai Tsokwa and Fatima Inuwa</b>	<b>201</b>
The Pronunciation of the New English Native Speakers in Nigeria <b>Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji</b>	<b>210</b>
Lexico-Semantic Analysis of ASUU-FGN Impasse In Nigerian Newspapers <b>Awoniyi Olalekan Ogundeji and Happiness Uduk, Ph.D</b>	<b>222</b>
A Critical Stylistic Analysis of a Channels Television Show, 'Politics Today' <b>Waliyah A. Akeju and Muhyideen Kolawole Ayuba</b>	<b>237</b>
An Investigation on Functionality and Usage of Language Laboratories for Teaching Oral English in Colleges of Education in Bauchi State <b>Bakoji Mohammed Fema, PhD, Alhaji Abubakar, PhD and Fatima Mohammed</b>	<b>249</b>
A Pragmatic Investigation of the Speech of Former President Muhammadu Buhari on Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 <b>Habu Yusuf</b>	<b>262</b>
Rhetoricity In Orality: An Analysis of Muhammadu Dan'Anace's "Shagon Mafara" <b>Garba Adamu, Ph.D and Ashiru Abdullahi</b>	<b>277</b>
A Semantic Analysis of Selected Mwaghavul Proverbs <b>Danji Sabo and Kyetu Mandyen Danlami</b>	<b>286</b>
Investigating Linguistic Features of North-East Nigerian Suicide Notes <b>Yunana Ahmed, Ph.D and Danladi, Daniel Boyi</b>	<b>300</b>
A Morphological Study of Derivational Patterns In Android Smartphone Terminologies <b>Ahmadu Mohammed Dauda, Ph.D and Abdulkarim Musa Yola</b>	<b>315</b>
Lexical choices and Ideology in Nigeria's Security and Development Discourse in the Nigeria's Media <b>Murjanatu Sulaiman-Shika</b>	<b>326</b>
Syntax and Semantics Interface <b>Mohammed Gambo, Ph.D</b>	<b>346</b>
Colonial Legacy in Tunde Kelani's <i>Saworoide</i> : Language, Power, and Resistance <b>Okunnuwa, Sunday J. Ph.D, Ibrahim, Wahab Adegbayi, and Sobande, Olukayode Olukemi</b>	<b>355</b>



## SECTION B: LITERATURE

- An Appraisal of Cult Symbols In The Selected Songs of American POP Artists  
**Tanimu, Abubakar (Prof) and Adekunle, Joseph** 365
- Enlightenment for Empowerment: A Feminist Reading of Safiya Yero'S Najah  
**Manta G. Yadok and Ishaya: Bilyaminu Salman** 381
- Arab-Muslim Immigrants and the Limits of Cultural Citizenship in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*  
**Olamiposi Oyeleye, Ph.D., Oladiran Damilola Peju, Ph.D. and PatrickbCharles Alex, Ph.D.** 395
- The Artist and Leadership Failure In Africa: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O'S Wizard of The Crow  
**Dr. Manasseh Terwase Iortyer, Prof. Jeff Godwin Doki and Bizuum Godwill Yadok** 411
- Narratives of Conflict: A Literary Exploration of Boko Haram's Impact in Politics and Security in Nigeria's Northeast Since 2009  
**Markus Ishaku** 421
- Literary Creativity and the Condition of the Nigerian Writer in the Age of Globalization and Capitalist Economy  
**Adebayo, Abidemi Olufemi, PhD and Bukola, Olubunmi Iyabo, M.A** 431
- Amali's Faces of Shame as Reflection of Leadership at the Altar of Ethics and Decorum  
**Isah Ibrahim PhD** 442
- Of Mothers as Mistresses: Jocasta Complex and Transference in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's Season of Crimson Blossoms.  
**David Mikailu Ph.D.** 452
- Stylistic Explorations of Love: Conceptual Metaphor In Mariama Bâ'S So Long a Letter and Zaynab Alkali'S The Virtuous Woman  
**Anwar Danjuma, Maryam Mukhtar Abdullahi, Muntari Babangida and Sulaiman Harisu** 462
- The Influence of Nigerian Folktales on National Identity and Values  
**Jimoh, Olumide Yusuf, Ph.D. and Adedokun, James Adekunle** 474
- Discontents and the Quest for National Rebirth in Karen King-Aribisala's Kicking Tongues  
**Okache C. Odey** 487
- An Assessment of Performance of Bauchi State Senior Secondary School Students in Literature-In-English  
**Professor Asabe Sadiya Mohammed, Dr Alhaji Abubakar and Haruna Shuaibu Hardawa** 496



Betwixt And Between Colonial Hegemony and Contemporaneity: Examining The Voyage of Transmutation In African Drama

**Andrew Aondofa Nyikyaa** 508

Investigating the Educational Advisory Roles of Tera Proverbs

**Alheri Bulus** 527

## SECTION C: COMMUNICATION

The Media Influence on Economic Development Through Addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

**DANGO, Salamatu Eshi and ABDULLAHI, Hussaina Abaji** 535

Social Media Discourse and Peace Negotiations in Contemporary Nigeria

**Peter Ochefu Okpeh, Ph.D., Theodore Shey Nsairun and Okpeadua Sony Okpeadua, PhD** 546

When Robots take over Journalism: systemic Considerations for Artificial Intelligence and Practical Realities in Nigerian Television Newsroom

**Maggai Tsokwa and Tebrimam Useni Andefatso** 560

Mitigating Fake News Through Media Literacy Education: The Perception and Experience of Masaka Market Traders in Karu

**Ben Ita Odeba, Ayuba Ummah Ibrahim and Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD.** 574

An Assessment of Adherence to Journalism Code of Conduct among Journalists in Plateau State

**Dorcas Agabison, Prof. Greg H. Ezeah, Maggai Tsokwa and Orya Theophilus Tertsea** 597

An Assessment of the Two-Way Communication Model of Public Relations Used During the University of Jos School Fees Increase in 2023

**James E. Amad, Evaristus J. Ugboma and Chidimma Precious Okechukwu** 616

An Assessment of the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Business Communication in Lafia, Nasarawa state and Makurdi, Benue state, Central Nigeria

**EIMOGA Audu** 632

## SECTION D: CREATIVE WORKS/BOOK REVIEW

Poems for Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies

**Ismail Bala** 647

The Loss-Land

**Fatima Inuwa** 652



Dustbins and Dreams <b>Abdulkadir Mubarak</b>	<b>657</b>
The Desperate: Desire of a Feminine Soul <b>Faith Nkeri Aliyu</b>	<b>664</b>
Gumakan Zamani: A Book Review <b>Mohammad Abubakar M.</b>	<b>667</b>



## Discontents and the Quest for National Rebirth in Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues*

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### Abstracts

*The paper examines how socio-economic and political issues have made many Nigerians discontented with the country. The issues stagnating the development of Nigeria are captured in several stories recounted by a group of people during a bus trip from Lagos to Abuja. The stories thus serve as a means by which the travellers identify Nigeria's socio-economic and political challenges. Through the stories told by characters in Karen King-Aribisala's Kicking Tongues, this paper aims to demonstrate that by promoting dialogue, Nigerians can come together to identify and seek solutions to the myriad of challenges facing the country despite differences in gender, social status, religion, and ethnicity. The paper draws from Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory, which is based on the notion that all aspects of a given society should function together to foster unity and progress. This theory is relevant for this study as it examines how different individuals can work together to make Nigeria a better country for everyone. The qualitative content analysis method is also adopted for this study to understand social interactions in society better. The paper concludes that literature can be deployed not only to identify societal issues but also to explore ways of solving those issues.*

**Keywords:** Nigerian Society, Discontent, Quest for Change, National rebirth, Functionalist theory.

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### Introduction

Hope often appears to dwindle in a society where the people are confronted with dire socio-economic and political issues. When people experience a high cost of living coupled with other societal issues they tend to be gripped with anxiety about the direction of their country. A huge number of Nigerians have been stripped of societal hope due to the present socio-economic and political realities of the country. There is huge discontentment among the people as they struggle to meet their basic needs and to also make sense of the depressing situation in Nigeria. Discontentment with issues in society

often propels individuals into seeking solutions to their collective challenges.

In Nigeria, just like in many other countries, writers often, cannot extricate themselves from the prevailing reality of their society and this affirms Ngugi Wa Thiongo's assertion that "literature does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored" (xvi). The creative impulse of the writer is inextricably linked to the society where he or she draws inspiration. Kwawisi Tekpetey argues that "artists should be deeply



rooted in the socio-political reality of his people which must be reflected in his work" (32). He further states that the writer's intervention must lead to constructive action. The writer can intervene by deploying the power of word and imagination to make the people come to terms with the socio-economic and political issues in their society. To Wole Soyinka "The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision of his own time" (21). Aside from functioning as the voice of vision, writers according to Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo also operate as the drivers of change in society by exploring "their vision of society to both educate and instruct their readers" (10). To Akachi Ezeigbo, writers should be committed to the positive transformation of society. The writer can achieve this by fostering a sense of solidarity among the different groups in the society.

Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues* expresses socio-economic and political lament among a group of Nigerians on a trip from Lagos to Abuja. The novel treats issues that matter to Nigerians irrespective of gender, social status, religion, and ethnicity. The paper examines the socio-economic and political discontents that fuel the soul-searching trip by drawing on Emile Durkheim's study of social interaction.

In Emile Durkheim's study of social interactions, he conceives society as the human body parts working as one. To Durkheim, society is a system with dissimilar parts that must work together to unify the disparate parts. The failure of the different parts of the society to work

together will according to him, inhibit progress in the society. Durkheim asserts that the "first condition for an entity to become coherent is for the parts that form it not to clash discordantly" (94). As an entity, the discordance of the different parts of the Nigerian state may account for her stagnant growth.

This paper seeks to explore the issues that fuel discontent in Nigeria and what happens when individuals play their part in the collective effort towards making the country a better place for all in King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues*.

### **Discontented Voices and the Quest for Change**

Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues* revolves around forty individuals who embark on a bus trip from Lagos to the new capital of Nigeria, Abuja. King-Aribisala's novel is modelled on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* set in medieval England. Just like Chaucer's tale, King-Aribisala's novel is about a group of individuals who come together "in spite of difference in sex, in class, in tribe, in spite of grievance" (6) to seek a kind of national rebirth in their country's new capital.

The organizer of the trip refers to herself as The Black Lady who puts on black attire irrespective of the occasion whether at weddings, funerals or her place of work as a symbol of the gloomy situation in Nigeria. The criteria for her selection of the travellers illustrates the underlying reason for the trip which is a call for all who "really cared about what was happening to our country" and "They had to be individualistic but they also



had to have a sense of unity, however dormant. And they had to have something to say with their tongues or their lives which is, of course, a kind of tongue" (20). The selected 'forty journeyers' (9) are quite an assorted mix of people from monarchs to a cook but who are all disillusioned with the prevailing socio-economic and political realities of their country. Christopher Anyokwu notes that the group is made of "both the respectable members of society and social detritus who join hands to salvage the country's battered image" (313). To Daria Tunca, the group embodies "the cultural and social variety characteristic of the Nigerian state as a whole" (5). The novelist's position is that the push for a better Nigeria requires the effort of all irrespective of gender, class, religious persuasion, or ethnic group.

Emile Durkheim argues that what brings about cohesion among different individuals in a society is what he termed 'collective consciousness' which he explains as an "object of shared sentiments" (99). In *Kicking Tongues*, the desire for a better Nigeria is the 'shared sentiment' among the forty Abuja-bound travellers. At the heart of King-Aribisala's artistic consciousness in *Kicking Tongues* are the socio-economic and political issues impeding the growth of Nigeria. In this sense, King-Aribisala affirms Charles Nnolim's position that the artist "must possess at all times the highest measure of social consciousness" (225) necessary to drive social and political change in society. For the writer to push for social change Akachi Ezeigbo believes he or she must possess the "power of the imagination and the illusion of reality to create and re-create

experiences that hold up a mirror to their society to view their actions and understand the need to achieve positive transformation of the society" (12). *Kicking Tongues* is the mirror King-Aribisala holds up to reveal the socio-economic and political deficiencies of the Nigerian state. In the prologue the characters acutely bemoan the disconcerting situation in Nigeria:

We do not speak of hope  
Our stars are bloodied-dim  
The light is out.  
Our gods  
such as they are  
Have  
Left  
Us. (3)

The Abuja-bound trip is a soul-searching one "to citizens concerned/to those/want wishing hope" (8) for a more functioning society. The different stories of the travellers serve to highlight the level of discontentment of the citizens in the country. The Black Lady The, the convener of the trip narrates many of the stories which foreground the societal ailments that have consigned the Nigerian state to an intensive care unit. The characters are largely disillusioned with the postcolonial reality of their country and the trip serves as an avenue for them to identify the problems stifling development in Nigeria and to also come up with solutions. *Kicking Tongues* is a strong rebuke of the political class in Nigeria. The Black Lady The laments how politicians feed the electorates with promises that are:



"Pockmarked with holes  
Of flatter  
From which  
Rises  
Deceit  
Cursing  
This land  
Nigeria..." (4).

In *The Black Lady* The's account of the Oyinbo White Maclean Clean's tale, the reader gets to know how the political leaders undermine the "democratization process" and consequently reduced Nigeria to a "political mess" (83). In that same tale, the author beams her artistic lens on how tribalism, nepotism, and other isms have prevented Nigeria from experiencing "true development/true growth" (82). If Nigeria is to attain economic and political stability, King-Aribisala encourages Nigerians to discard all that tends to divide them because as Durkheim notes "society becomes more effective in moving in concert" (102). Again, in *The Postgraduate English Major's* poem, the author denounces politicians for possessing "tongues which garble and coat with sugar-coated lies" and for denying the people "the promise and the hope" (106-7) of a better society. To King-Aribisala, the people must not allow the politicians to silence them with their "sugar-coated lies" so that they can hold those in government accountable with their kicking tongues.

The story of *The Female Petrol Attendant* gives a bleak picture of the country's economic fortunes. The "oil boom bonanza" did not improve the economic condition of the majority of the people rather it spelled "economic disaster" (150) for the country. Just like the political space is in a mess, the

economy of the country has equally not fared better. The novel published over two decades ago, succinctly captures the present-day reality of Nigeria. The Dentist's tale further captures the economic woes of Nigeria. The story reveals how the past is very much reflected in the present. Just like the current reality of Nigeria, Nigerian doctors and dentists are migrating in large numbers to America and Saudi Arabia "In a bid/To escape worsening economic situation" (153) in the country. Nigerians are running away just like today to "America, Saudi Arabia/Or any other area/Far away from Nigeria mouth" (157) because "Times are hard in this Nigeria of ours" (161). Just like the present situation in the country, one of the tales shows the depreciating value of the Nigerian naira against the US dollar, "And out came the dollar of power/The naira sliding and low" (211). *Kicking Tongues* is a sad reminder of how Nigeria as a country has fared economically in nearly the three decades since the publication.

Again just like the present situation in Nigeria, human life seems to be of little value as "the killing comes again, again it comes" (4). The novel captures the incessant killings in Nigeria and this shows the failure of government over the years to turn things around. The stories become the mirror through which the travellers behold their flawed country. It affirms Chimalum Nwankwo's assertion that in African society the "story must remain as escort of the people" (7) and also, in their quest for social rejuvenation. Through the various stories, *The Black Lady* The paints an unsavoury picture of the state of the nation:





"The country was corrupt and we had become the laughingstock of the international community. The elderly, the traditional rulers, and just about everybody else were having a field day in the famed 419, which is to say every area of life, and every person could be bribed and made to sell their principles at a price." (193)

"Clearly you are all concerned with what has happened to our dear nation. You will have the opportunity, during the course of our journey from Lagos to Abuja, to tell us about your lives, and, hopefully, by each and every one of us placing ourselves in another's shoes, so to speak, we shall be able to enter, at least imaginatively into ... each other's lives ...." (12)

King-Aribisala's fervent appeal to the people over two decades ago to "get things right" went largely unheeded because the country's present situation is a reflection of the issues in *Kicking Tongues*. In apportioning blame for the economic and political mismanagement of the country, the author spares no one. She criticizes both the political class and also, the ordinary people who have equally contributed to the pathetic state of the country. The Black Lady The tells the gathering "I'm feeling indescribably sad and I pronounce, weighing my words, the fact is we're all to blame. But I think the company is to be applauded. At least we're identifying problems and I just know we'll get out of this." (152). The trip from Lagos to Abuja is not just a pleasure trip but to identify the problems inhibiting Nigeria's socio-economic and political development. The movement from Lagos to Abuja is therefore a solution-seeking quest for Nigeria's myriad of issues. The Black Lady The tells her co-travellers that:

King-Aribisala in *Kicking Tongues* functions as the reflector of the ills of her society. In that sense, she is akin to the bus conductor in Nigeria who when the mirror is broken "often acts as a mirror himself, reflecting and telling the moolue driver when cars were coming, when they might crash, and so on. Many a Lagosian owes his life to such moolue boys and this one was no different" (215). The bus serves as a metaphor for the country and the bus driver represents the political and economic leaders who have failed to drive the socio-economic and political fortunes of the country to the desired destination for all Nigerians. The writer as alluded to above functions as the bus assistant who is like the mirror warning against any mishap on the road to national growth. The passengers are the people and the author wants them to understand their power because "a bus stop where people have decided it is a stop" (165). This position is quite telling as it reinforces the notion that the ills of





society will only stop when the people collectively rise to put a stop to it.

Just like the drummer speaks through his drum to “awakening life birth” (204), King-Aribisala through her novel, attempts to awaken the people to demand for a new Nigeria. Thus, *The Black Lady* is the vessel through which the author tries to convey her vision for Nigerian society. Through the melancholy hostess’ tale, the author informs the society that there is a “lot of evil in the air and we have, as a people, to do our utmost to quench it” (214). It is the desire to eradicate the evil in the land that inspires *The Black Lady* to put out the call in the newspapers for the trip. King-Aribisala’s position in *Kicking Tongues* is that the people must speak with one voice in their quest for national rebirth as it is “harder to fight and defeat the enemy if there is no unity among the ranks” (225). The people collectively need to kick their tongues in motion and speak out against societal ills:

When  
Kicking Tongues  
Our leaders  
Ours  
Ours Tongues  
Can stem  
This tide  
Of disillusionment  
And make us  
Not  
Tongue-tied  
But  
Tongue Released

The writer is also the touch bearer who leads the people through the dark phase of socio-economic and political turbulence in society. Through

the different stories in the course of the trip, the author not only beams her artistic lens on the issues fueling discontent among the people but also proffers solutions to those issues.

### **The Society and the Writer’s Vision for Change**

King-Aribisala’s *Kicking Tongues* is a strong denunciation of the socio-economic and political issues confronting the Nigerian state but aside from focusing the literary lens on the issues, the writer also proffers ways in which the country can turn around for the better. Akachi Ezeigbo asserts that one way in which literature can be deployed to the service of society is when the writer offers a “possible vision of how the present can be improved” (17). King-Aribisala’s novel in several ways offers socio-economic and political solutions to the issues that trigger the discontent among the forty travellers.

Aside from functioning as the reflector of her societal ills, King-Aribisala also functions as one who provides solutions to those ills. After all, the essence of the trip is to identify the issues bedevilling the country and to equally come up with solutions. The author seems to suggest that in a time of socio-economic and political discontent in any society, it is imperative for the people not to keep quiet and this is why the forty journeyers’ trip from Lagos to Abuja is in “search of true tongues which speak and kick up truth” (76). The drive for a better society according to the author begins with the people speaking with one voice. Again, King-Aribisala’s position in the novel is that the people must work together to bring about the society of their dreams. For the people



to work as one, social barriers that negate cooperation among the different members of society must be dismantled. The novel's narrative structure mirrors the author's vision of a society in which everyone needs to work together to entrench good governance. The narrative style of *Kicking Tongues* blurs the lines between prose, poetry, and drama. The novel's blurring of the lines between the genres of literature is reflective of the author's artistic vision of dismantling societal barriers along ethno-religious and gender lines in the quest of "building a new nation and writing the wrongs" (60) that have impeded the growth of Nigeria.

Through the different stories, the reasons for the broad socio-economic and political discontentment of the people are identified and the trippers begin to seek solutions. There is a kind of collective agreement among the travellers that the nation cannot continue on the path of retrogression and to turn things around, they note "That the only way out/Was a national turnabout" (141) which requires collective effort. The way out of the discontent that the people find themselves is imbedded in the stories of the different individuals from the Palm-wine Tapster's tale to that of the Female Boutique Owner. The Tapster's tale and the one by the Boutique's owner reveal that Nigerians and by extension Africans, must come up with home-grown solutions to African problems and also, reduce their desire for foreign things. For there to be development just like the tapster says, Africans must learn to appreciate and embrace "her natural resourcing" (60) and equally as deduced from the story of the Female Boutique owner:

"That they should try to forge  
And forget  
The privilege  
For a time  
Of importing  
Selling certain  
Foreign goods  
For their own  
National good." (142)

The craving for foreign goods and other societal ills have gone on for a long time as noted by the travellers but like the corrupt female officer in The Female Police Superintendent's story, King-Aribisala argues that Nigeria just like the corrupt female police, "could begin again" (121) but the people must always be watchful and know when to "turn on the heat" (122) on the people in leadership positions when they begin to derail from the path of good governance. The recurring idea in many of the stories is that the drive for social change requires that the people continually hold those in power to account.

Aside from offering practical solutions to Nigeria's perennial problems, King-Aribisala also proffers in *Kicking Tongues* a divine way out of the national mess, an idea that Anyokwu considers "a Judeo-Christian solution to the Nigerian question" (318) and which though is understandable due to the deep religious temperament of many Nigerians is a far-fetched means of effecting change. Though Durkheim argues that the most vital element required for a better society is the notion of divinity (227), that option is a kind of simplistic approach to solving societal issues. Aside The Black Lady The, King-Aribisala also uses the



prophet Isaiah just like in Biblical times to re-direct Nigerians to God.

“Nigeria is in profound danger if you continue the way you’re going. Your people are from a great continent; a great nation is Nigeria. But it is stained with murder, armed robbery, corruption bribery, and all kinds of immorality. Your trust in foreign alliances thinking that the IMF, the World Bank, will bail you out. God is a Nigerian. He wants to help you. Put your faith in Him. You are in Babylon; those who oppose God are in Babylon.” (235)

The solution to the people’s discontentment according to the author is for Nigerians to seek the face of God and it is only then as in Biblical time will God replenishes their land. The Black Lady The tells the gathering that:

“Spiritual hope and therefore everything will be all right with Nigeria once we’re right with God. But you know, the creation of a new heart, one which is suitable for making the Kingdom of Heaven while living here on earth, isn’t that easy.... Time to leave now. I think we can safely say we all learned a lot

about life, people, and God during the course of this journey. One can only pray that ‘my people will not perish for lack of vision.’ I had a vision when I got these people together for the trip; it was that our love for Nigeria should be ‘set in order;’ and I think this dream has been realized....” (239-240)

In *Kicking Tongues*, King-Aribisala’s artistic vision is one couched in practical and ethereal solutions to the socio-economic and political issues that keep fuelling discontentment among Nigerians. While she pushes for moral rebirth as a panacea for social rejuvenation, she also calls on the people to turn to God in their quest for a better Nigeria.

## Conclusion

The paper explored the social, economic, and political issues in Nigeria that make a group of discontented Nigerians embark on a solution-seeking trip from Lagos to Abuja. The Lagos to Abuja trip can be interpreted as the concerted desire of the people to move from their old ways of life that have left the country stagnant to one that will usher in a new Nigeria. Karen King-Aribisala’s *Kicking Tongues* depicts not just the issues strangulating Nigeria’s socioeconomic and political growth but also the solutions on how the country can get things right. The call to turn things around for a better and brighter future as depicted in the novel demands a



genuine change of attitude by both the leaders and the people.

The writer's solutions to Nigeria's myriad of problems are both practical and spiritual as examined in this paper. King-Aribisala articulates a vision for national rebirth that if Nigerians embrace will turn around the country's stagnant growth.

This paper established as depicted in the novel that Nigeria as well as other African countries can change for the better if people choose to do their part and also, work together irrespective of differences in gender, social status, religion, and ethnicity.

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