

# COVID-19 Discourse and the Nigerian Experience: A Critical Literacy Approach

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## Abstract

The study aims to analyse and interpret the discourse on COVID-19 and the Nigerian experience. The data analysed in the work are news reports from the Internet in various modes, verbal forms of prose, poetry and drama sketches, memes and advertisements. The sources of the data are online news in English from newspapers and televisions and social media platforms such as You Tube, WhatsApp and Telegram between April and August 2020. The texts are analysed and interpreted using Lewison, Flint and Sluys' framework of critical literacy. The findings reveal a disruption of the commonplace from the lockdown and its consequences of economic downturn and workers' welfare, immigration of citizens from host countries boost in virtual communication via internet resources and interrogation of multiple viewpoints. A discussion of the findings centre on social and political issues on governance, national priorities for development, taking up action and promotion of social justice. The conclusion states that COVID-19 has gone beyond a medical problem into psychosocial and political ones that require global attention and cooperation to tackle. The pandemic requires multi-human, multi-tasking and multi-sectoral resources for its mitigation and critical literacy offers a perspective of appreciating many of the contending issues.

**Key words:** COVID-19, critical literacy, disruption of commonplace, multiple viewpoints, socio-political issues, social media platforms.

## 1. Introduction

Before COVID-19, a number of pandemics had occurred in the world in the past two centuries. These include:

- Small pox, a highly contagious disease in the 20<sup>th</sup> C., recorded 300-500m deaths Cholera of 1899-1923 recorded 800,000 deaths.

- Spanish flu of 1918-1920 infected 500m and recorded 50m deaths HIV/AIDS of 1976 infected 31-35m and recorded 36m deaths.
- Swine flu of 2009 and still seasonal recorded 575, 400 deaths.

COVID-19 is a very contagious disease that damages the lungs, blocks the throat and causes difficulty in breathing for victims. Ghebreyesus & Urpilainen (2020) say "This novel coronavirus has spread with alarming speed, shaking the foundations of health systems, economies and societies around the world". It broke out on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 from the city of Wuhan in the People's Republic of China and became a pandemic ravaging the world with 2.5 million cases, 292,000 deaths and 1.6 million recoveries as at 12 May 2020 (Covid Visualiser, 2020). In Nigeria the statistics shows 172, 263 confirmed cases, 164,896 discharged cases and 2,139 deaths as at July 2021 (NCDC, 2021). A rare disaster, it has resulted in a tragically large number of human lives being lost since the Great Depression.

There is no disputing the fact that the Corona Virus Disease (coronavirus), shortened to COVID-19 (WHO, 2020b), is the most current and prominent phenomenon in the news today. Medically, the name of the strain that causes it is 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2). It is talk of the town all over the world and it affects all human beings in all environment, at home, workplace, market place, schools, sports, entertainment. It has implications for all areas of national, continental and world development: governance, politics, society living, health, economics, education, agriculture, security among many others. Fallouts of COVID-19 are newsworthy and researchable in various fields, medicine, science, technology, and humanities. Researching the topic in English studies from the perspective of critical literacy will not only reveal the nature, occurrences and human encounter with the disease from diverse perspectives, it will broaden applied linguistics in English with implications for language, education and medical sociology.

## 2. Statement of Research Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon, but a lot of research and discussions already exist on the subject from the academic and non-academic perspectives. Some publications in the medical line discuss clinical trials for the treatment of the disease (cf. WHO, 2020a and b;

Khaliq, 2020; Read by QxMD, 2020) and methodologies for the research on COVID-19 (BMC Medical Research Methodology, 2020). In Nigeria, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC, 2020) gives update reports on health statistics, prevention and treatment of the disease.

Within applied linguistics, unique discourses have emerged from various perspectives to examine and interrogate ideologies, construct identities and frame events and ideas (Park et al., 2021; Carvajal-Miranda, Manas-Viniegra and Liang, 2020). A special issue of *Research in Pragmatics*, a journal of the Pragmatics Association of Nigeria, contains papers that address the topic of COVID-19 from the perspectives of pragmatics, multimodal discourse analysis and discourse metaphors. In the introduction of that publication, Ibileye, Faleke and Bamgbose (2020) suggest many more perspectives and possibilities on the subject matter for the understanding of researchers and scholars of discourse analysis, pragmatics and applied linguistics.

### **The Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to analyse and interpret the discourse on COVID-19 with relation to the Nigeria nation from a critical literacy perspective. The objectives are to:

- (a) analyse and interpret the textual data (media reports) as a disruption of the commonplace in the society;
- (b) interrogate the multiple viewpoints expressed in the reports; and
- (c) examine some of the socio-political issues raised in the reports and advocate a course of action and social justice for the COVID-19.

Apart from extending knowledge of the subject matter, a critical literacy perspective of analysis and interpretation seeks to create an awareness in readers of the discursive writings and practices in human encounters with COVID-19 and sensitise them to decoding the covert messages expressed. It will also to reveal the production of creative linguistic and non-linguistic activities during the lockdown and advocate actively a new social order to remedy the problems identified with the current situation.

### **Data Base of Study**

The study is a survey text analytic and interpretation of the discourse on COVID-19. This requires qualitative information about the perception of the pandemic in all ramifications of its contact with people in different medical, socio-political and cultural settings. The data analysed are news reports in different modes such as verbal forms of prose, poetry and drama sketches, memes and advertisements. These derive from the Internet and the facets such as Online news from newspapers, televisions and social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram. The data reflect global opinions on COVID-19 as may be relevant to the discussion and are not necessarily restricted to Nigerian authors.

The restriction necessitated by the lockdown during the period data collection between April and August 2020 limited human physical interactions but encouraged virtual interactions on the computer media. While we recognise the limitations in presenting the real videos, films and music to illustrate our findings in the next section, we have cited the references online and on YouTube in appropriate places in the analysis. The verbal texts and still pictures are presented in written, transcribed and copied forms as may be appropriate.

### **3. Literature Review on COVID-19**

The topic of COVID-19 is very visible in current literature space in view of the uniqueness of the occurrences of the pandemic, its intractable nature and debilitating effects on humanity. The discussion of it in researches, reports, views and comments has been multifarious, multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral and multidimensional, spanning fields such as medicine, sociology, religion, psychology and linguistics. However, because of the danger of fake news and, sometimes, triviality of content, many reports, views and comments may serve as useful data base for investigation but may not provide reliable sources for a literature base. We present a review of some works that benefit this study below.

Carvajal-Miranda, Manas-Viniegra and Liang (2020) analyse online discourse in the context of COVID-19 on the mobile social media Weibo and the Internet search browser Baidu in a government controlled online media environment in China. Using content analysis, the findings show that there was an important presence of social and lifestyle topic categories dominating the discourse, which dramatically changed in correlation to the increasing spread of the disease. Additionally, there was a marked

absence of topics in relation to economic and political information, and there was a notable absence of an official government voice generating topics.

Yu, Lu and Hu (2021) employ a corpus-based critical discourse analysis to study news reports on the pandemic in China and the UK, using the *China Daily* and *The Guardian* respectively. By utilising the database analysis software AntConc 3.2.4w on self-built corpora, they analyse news reports of different stages on the discourse characteristics in the two media, together with the discussion on their possible relations to the pandemic controlling activities. The results show that the *China Daily* used more objective and neutral words in the description of the COVID-19 and expressed more active attitudes in the fight against the pandemic. In contrast, *The Guardian* used more negative words in describing the pandemic and words with weak restricting force when reporting policies concerning the control and prevention of the disease. Furthermore, the discourse before and after the lockdown demonstrated that the descriptions of the COVID-19 in the UK media transformed into a more objective and neutral one than before with an increased use of expressions of restriction and social conflicts.

Adebomi (2020) attempts a multimodal analysis of memetic representation of Nigeria government's response to COVID-19. The study reveals that the selected social media memes expose the perceived inadequacies and insincerity of the Nigerian government with respect to its responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. The memes also express Nigerians' belief that the federal government, to a reasonable extent, politicises the pandemic and uses it as a means of political and financial gains. The study reveals further that some Nigerians contemplate whether real cases of COVID-19 exist in the country or do not. The memes may have been deployed to express their distrust for and disapproval of the government's COVID-19 policies.

This study complements the studies above by providing a fresh perspective for describing the content of reports and views on events, practices and activities during the COVID-19 period and the responses of the government and the people to the pandemic. We shall now explain briefly the concept of critical literacy and the essential components.

#### 4. The Concept of Critical Literacy

To a new entrant to the field of literacy, the definition is by no means

simple. Yet, despite the complexity, the definition cannot be adequate. We thus prefer to start with the basic definition given in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2013) as “the ability to read and write”. If we take this as the root, we can then understand the consequent unending adornments of scholars of diverse interests in terms of medium, mode, channels, domains or functions, stages and perspectives (cf. Lawal, 2016; Egbe, 2019). For the purpose of this study, we identify broadly two types of literacy in terms of perspectives, viz. uncritical/autonomous/neutral and critical literacy. This corresponds to the distinction made by Street (1984) and Openjuru (2009) between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models. What comes next is to explain the word 'critical' in Critical Literacy. The word has ideological meaning in its occurrences in other similar concepts such as critical practice (Birch, 1989) critical linguistics (Fowler, 1996), critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Critical linguists believe that interpretation of texts goes beyond just understanding the meaning of what the authors says. The meaning of texts are, whether scientific or not, never neutral but contain some prejudices and biases based on the writers' points of view (Birch, 1989). Thus the interpretation must examine the underlying prejudices in terms of 'identity', 'ideology', 'power', 'hegemony' and 'dominance'.

Identity represents ideas about self, characteristics and image. It is a creation in terms of social roles played by human beings in different social domains or institutional settings and described in terms of social and demographic factors such as name, national, racial, cultural, ethnic, educational, religious, social class, gender and age. Ideology refers to established sets of beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions shared by members of a given social group (Bloor and Bloor, 2007). It is an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. Power is about relations of difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures (Wodak, 2001). Dominance refers to having power and influence over others; and hegemony refers to dominance of power and influence over others. (Tollefson, 1991). In critical linguistics, the analysis of language features in most studies utilises Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985; 2004), whether the approach focuses on micro-linguistic, macro-linguistic, textual, discursive or contextual features.

There are many facets to critical literacy. According to

Lewison, Flint & Sluys (2002), a review of the past research and professional literature reveals a synthesis of four dimensions that a description of critical literacy should consider (Muse, 2003, p. 20). These are (a) a disruption of the common place, (b) an interrogation of multiple viewpoints, (c) a focus on socio-political issues, and (d) a taking up action and promotion of social justice. According to Muse (2003, p. 20), “a disruption of the commonplace encourages people to consider everyday practices that have become so commonsensical that we often do not realise why we do what we do”. In order to do so, there first must be an understanding of how language works in shaping identity, constructing discourses, and how it supports or disrupts the everyday, or normative practices (Lewison, et al. 2002). Lewison, et al. (2002) argue that relating this dimension to the elementary school teacher encourages a new view of teachers and students as co-constructors of the curriculum. The perception of children is no longer as empty vessels waiting to be filled up with the knowledge of adults. Muse (2003) examines the meaning of the dimension in terms of helping schoolchildren to become critically literate.

An interrogation of multiple viewpoints is essential to counter widely held beliefs that have persisted over time, some of which may be rooted in history and social cultural beliefs. The focus on socio-political issues is a consequence of the sociological categories in the analytical framework such as identity, ideology, power, hierarchy and dominance. Lastly, a requirement of the analysis is the presentation of an alternative political stance to the practices uncovered. According to Horkheimer (quoted by Wodak, 2001, p.1), to draw consequences for political action from critical theory is the aspiration of those who have serious intentions, and yet there is no general prescription unless it is the necessity for insight into one's own responsibility.

## 5. Analysis and Findings

### 5.1 Disruption of the Commonplace

Three main observations of disruption are made here on this subheading. The first is the lockdown or no lockdown response; second is the migration of people to their home countries; and third is the disruptions of testing for and treatment of COVID-19. We shall discuss them in turns. A major fallout of COVID-19 is that nations have to make a choice between lockdown and no lockdown. The choice of either has its restrictions on the people and is thus an uncommon experience to human beings. In Nigeria,

the federal government adopted the lockdown measure in three faces in 2020: pre-lockdown (28 February-March 29); total lockdown (30 March – 3 May) in three most affected areas, Lagos and Ogun States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja; and easing up of lockdown (5 May – 15 July).

*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'lockdown' as the confinement of prisoners to their cells for all or most of the day as a temporary security measure. In the current situation, the meaning is widened to 'a protocol by someone in a position of authority to prevent people, information or cargo from leaving an area'. Other expressions associated with it are 'shutdown', 'quarantine' 'isolate', 'stay at home and 'travel restriction'. Shut down is synonymous with lockdown. Quarantine is the separation of a person that has contracted a disease from infecting others in a special medical centre, while isolation is the separation of immigrants or persons with unsure status of contraction. Such persons are restricted to a centre for observation for a short period of about two weeks. 'Stay at home' is, as it sounds, not to go outside of home to anywhere, place, work, school, market, church, recreation centre, sports, etc.; and 'travel restriction' refers to prohibition of vehicular movement.

Wearing facemasks to cover the nose and mouth and avoiding touching the eyes, nose and of parts of the body is another bizarre way to safeguard oneself against contracting COVID-19. An opposing view claims that 'It is easier said than done', because much of touching parts of the body is reflex action (Stieg, 2020), and another view (Okoye, 2020) warns us in a video to beware of facemasks, or rather its misuse. However, the Federal Government of Nigeria through its various agencies enforced compliance with wearing of facemasks in addition to the ritual of hand washing with soap and constant use of hand sanitisers. The inconveniences that derive from listening to the warning are thus a cross to bear for the purpose of self-preservation. Akpatason (2020), a political leader, reflects the campaign in support of lockdown and safety protocols in the poster below (Example 1).

The poster in a creative way expresses the following message:



**Example 1:** Add the Banner. Spread the Message. Stop the Virus.



**Keywords:**

Hands	Elbow	Face	Space	Home
Nose	Mouth	Wash	Cough	Don't
Avoid	Stay	Cover	often	into
touch	crowd	inside	Safe	regularly

Apart from the lockdown or no lockdown and the ancillary responses, another major fallout is the migration of people from their places of abode (UN News, 2020; Knol & Bisong, 2020). Migrations induced by COVID-19, whether external (emigration) or internal are sudden and unexpected; they can be either voluntary or necessitated by the authorities in the severe conditions emerging from the pandemic. Migrants concentrated in urban economic cities in host countries face additional challenges in many sectors such as health and agriculture, which depend on the availability of migrant workers. Such are more vulnerable to infection by the coronavirus. Considering that, migrants' remittances tend to provide an economic lifeline to poor households in their home countries, a reduction in remittance flows could increase poverty and reduce households' access to much-needed health services. The economic and social tension could also exacerbate xenophobic and discriminatory treatment of migrants by natives of the host country. In Example 2 below, Adepegba (2020) reports

that over 2000 Nigerians in China, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, United Arab emirates, Turkey and others have indicated interests in returning home on account of the coronavirus pandemic.

**Example 2:**

COVID-19: Evacuation of 700 Nigerians in the US begins May 10. The Punch, May 4.

Retrieved from <https://www.punchng.com/covid19-evacuate...>

Returnees to Nigeria were undaunted even when the Federal Government said that they would pay for their flight and be put in compulsory quarantine on arrival in Nigeria.

On internal migration, lockdowns, loss of employment and social distancing have prompted a chaotic and painful process of movement or relocation of internal migrants in India and many countries in Latin America. In Nigeria, the mass movement of 'almajiri' (socially deprived itinerant children) and Fulani herdsmen (nomads) from the Northwest to different places in the South for subsistence has been a subject of the press. In Example 3 below, *The Guardian* (2 May 2020) writes a headline thus:

**Example 3:** COVID-19: 'Deportation' of Almajiris re-opens citizenship rights debate.

The 'almajiris' are out of school children who are perceived to be vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their destitution. For temporary restitution, some governors of northern states, where the children originate from, have been relocating the children back to their various home states, but some of the children still prefer to look for destinations on their own. The disruptions of testing for and treatment of COVID-19 pertains to the obstacles encountered in the testing process, the rather intractable search for vaccines and drugs for treatment at the initial stages and the controversies about types of vaccines, the genetic considerations for vaccines and getting vaccinated or not at the later stage. An extract from an implementation guidelines document by the Presidential Committee on COVID-19 (2021) expresses fears of the government about the treatment of the disease as follows:

... While the country's vaccine roll out has begun, there is a

shortage in global supplies affected by the current situation in India. This translates to a delay in vaccinating a large proportion of the population, and therefore a risk of a large outbreak especially in the context of poor adherence to the recommended public health and social measures ...

Although the National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC, 2021) has approved a type of vaccination for Nigerians, many Nigerians are still hesitant to get the vaccine for many reasons, especially pertaining to perceived lack of transparency in the government's handling of the entire issue of the pandemic. Example 4 below is the headline of an online newspaper that gives one of the reasons for this hesitancy about vaccination.

**Example 4:** Covid 19: Nigerians hesitant to get vaccinated.

Despite these assurances, however, doubts persist which may further threaten the vaccination exercise... "in Nigeria, I guess nonchalant attitude is one thing and lack of trust is another, people feel what the government is giving as vaccines may not be the same thing others are receiving ..."  
(*Africa News* [www.africanews.com](http://www.africanews.com) Retrieved 31 July 2021)

## 5.2 Interrogation of Multiple Viewpoints

The liberalisation of communication through the social media encourages multiple viewpoints on almost all issues raised pertaining to the COVID-19, being a new phenomenon. The multiple and sometimes conflicting opinions most often make it difficult to reach a consensus on several suggestions aimed to ameliorate the effects of the pandemic on the source, cause and types of the pandemic, pro-lockdown and anti-lockdown controversy, use of face masks, isolation and physical distancing, testing for and treatment of the disease (see Section 5.1). For better representation, it is apt to discuss this section with clear examples from our database.

The multiple viewpoints are discernible in four voices. The first voice is that of the World Health Organisation (WHO) medical personnel. The WHO is the official voice on COVID-19 for the critical literacy analyst and it is the authentic parameter for fact checking news reports on the Internet. The WHO's voice can be identified with the purposes of describing the causes and sources of the disease, authenticating facts, disclaiming rumours and rebutting false news in order to dispel

unnecessary fears among the people. Examples 5 and 6 illustrate the first of the voices on the social media, coming respectively from the WHO and the Director General.

**Example 5:** Coronavirus (World Health Organisation, 2020b)

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without...

**Example 6:** Source: <https://www.who.int>...> Speeches>Detail>



In Example 6, the Director General of WHO, Ghebreyesus (2020a), has reaffirmed the mandate of the organisation in Ex. 6 to rely on facts, reason, solidarity, not on the fear, rumours and stigma circulated on the media, in combating the coronavirus.

The second voice is those of the governments of different countries, represented by committees on COVID-19, pro-government politicians and allied news media reports. In Nigeria, for example, the government central voice on disease control is the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), which has the mandate to prevent, detect and respond to threats of infectious diseases. All information on COVID-19 is posted on the website of the NCDC ([ncdc.gov.ng](http://ncdc.gov.ng)). However, because of the special nature of the disease, a Presidential Task Force (PTF) has been set up which reports to the President regularly. The task force has the Secretary to the Federal Government as Chairman, and other members

include, among others, government officials from relevant ministries, the Director General of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and a representative of the WHO. The body has the responsibility to combat the threats of the coronavirus in line with WHO guidelines by giving advice, warning and reporting their activities towards containment to the nation (See Ex. 5, 6 and 7).

**Example 7:** COVID-19 SITUATION REPORT 177, Sunday, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020 ...

DATA AS REPORTED AND ACCURATE BY NCDC AS AT MIDNIGHT 23<sup>RD</sup> AUGUST 2020 (COVID-19.ncdc.gov.ng)

**Example 8:** COVID-19: Buhari approves medical research, facilities' funding by TETFUND

President Muhamadu Buhari has approved the funding of six medical simulation, research and training facilities in six colleges of medicine through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)... (*The Guardian Nigeria News*, 2020)

Ex. 7 is an extract of a daily report of COVID-19 contacts from the website of the NCDC in Nigeria. The co-text of the extract further contains data on State of the Nation, Situation Updates, General Fact Sheet showing data as at 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020 on States, Confirmed Cases, Discharged Cases and Total Active Cases and Selected Charts. Example 8 reports the actions of the Nigerian President in regulating activities via authorisation and approvals.

A third voice in the coronavirus literature expresses alternative or opposing opinions to the WHO or government authorities. The authorities describe the voice of dissent as 'conspiracy view' or 'conspiratory theories' of powerful groups, including medical experts and politicians formulated in order to get attention or for political reasons (Byford, 2011). Conspiracy theories come up when a group perceives concealment, delay or insincerity in intention, political propaganda and other inadequacies of the world health leader and political authorities. Two reports on the media during the lockdown that have great impact on readers around the world, including Nigeria, are presented in Examples 9 and 10 below.

**Example 9:** A Bioweapon or Effects of 5G? 7 Conspiracy theories around

Coronavirus that will Shock You. (ET Online, 2020)

... Ever since the news about the coronavirus was picked up by the global media, speculations about the communist government of China trying to 'cover-up' the outbreak and hide the official figures were rife. They call the stuff 'Wuhan-400' because it was developed at their RDNA labs outside of the city of Wuhan and it was the four-hundreth viable strain of man-made microorganism created at that research center... 'Wuhan-400' is a perfect weapon. It afflicts only human beings ...

**Example 10:** FBI Arrests Bill Gates for Biological Terrorism after Tip Off from Melbourne (Reddit-betootaadocate, 2020).

Ex. 9 refers to reports of an alternative cause of COVID-19 to the WHO's. The reports claim that COVID-19 is not a virus but 'a biological weapon' or 'effects of 5G', a fallout of an experiment in a laboratory. Example 10 is a prominent report of the third voice woven around the allegation that Bill Gates plans to implant the global population with vaccine microchips to fight the COVID-19 disease. The report of arrest is a frame up to stigmatise him and link him with the bioweapon and 5G agenda. Apart from Bill Gates himself denying the conspiracy theories that he created the coronavirus outbreak (Gates, 2020), the post has been regarded as fake news online (Africa Check, 2020). Such posts as the above have implications on people all over the world, including Nigerians; and they can slow down progress made on vaccine trials and whip off human rights sentiments of resistance against successful vaccine treatment over fears of biological contamination or control. Lastly, the fourth of the multiple voices on COVID-19 issues is the voice of individual persons. Individuals express opinions based on personal research or observations (Ex. 20 – 22), beliefs expressed in religious sermons or prophecies (Ex. 23-24) or criticism (Ex. 25). Some of them may lack evidence or be outright falsehood, sometimes called 'fake news'. The social media provides many opportunities for individuals to express themselves on various issues during the lockdown. A few examples are presented below:

**Example 11.** COVID-19: When a governor believes it's a hoax and ordinary flu (Offiong, 2020)

Governor Yahaya Bello, an accountant by training, stated in a video

posted on his Facebook ... “Ninety per cent of the noise about COVID-19 is for political, economic, financial or material gain. The other 10% relates to ordinary flu, like common colds Nigerians generally suffer...

**Example 12:** COVID-19: Man expresses his frustration on NCDC' lack of transparency, shares solution (Ezekiel, 2020).

Ex. 11 should surprise the critical reader because the speaker, a governor, is part of the government of Nigeria whom he criticises. The dissension shows the lack of synergy in the implementation of COVID-19 programmes between state governors whom he represents and the federal government whom he criticises. The expectation is that state governors must be carried along to implement the measures put in place by the NCDC in their respective states instead of the national committee superintending the states. The tendency to conceal information is also the cause of the complaint in Ex. 12 by a leader of indigenous ethnic groups in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja.

**Example 13:** 5 Books and movies that basically predicted the coronavirus? (Whalen, 2020)

Who is Psychic Sylvia Browne and Just How Right has She Been? In around 2020 a severe pneumonia-like illness will spread throughout the globe, attacking the lungs and the bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments...

**Example 14:** Madagascar coronavirus cure: African kontris wey don receive covid-organics tonic (BBC News Pidgin, 2020)

Even though say World Health Organization never give green light to di 'miracle herbal drink' wey Madagascar President say dey work against coronavirus, some African kontris don begin receive the drug.

**Example 15:** Is the Coronavirus in Bible Prophecy? Facing Uncertain times (Jeremiah, 2020)

The preacher attributes the belief in prophesy (a) the vulnerability of everyone, (b) the uncertainty and swiftness of life, (c) the credibility of the Bible, (d) the scarcity of hope-tilt towards the negative and (e)

the sufficiency of Jesus.

Examples 13 and 15 present speakers' attempts through research and sermon to relate the cause of coronavirus to different sources of prediction such as previous creative works and the Bible. Many readers may be carried away by the reports, but a critical reader is interested only in facts and not conjectures. The fact remains that COVID-19 is a virus (Ex. 1 and 5) and none of the attempts negate that fact. The use of Pidgin in Ex. 14 is an attempt to identify the drug with the low class who constitute majority of the population. This class feels more comfortable with more in herbal drugs than with orthodox medicine and are hopeful of herbal solutions as the African contribution to the treatment of the pandemic.

### 5.3 Examination of the Socio-political Issues

The findings reveal dominant reports on the disruption of commonplace assumptions in human daily lives, as they challenge the status quo ante. Six socio-political issues are observed in this section thus (cf. Digital Phabet.com): i. United States vs China 'cold war', ii. Re-thinking power structure of nations, iii. Interrogating the social hierarchy among human beings, iv. Family life, health, eco, social and economic welfare, v. Governance and national priorities for development, and vi. Boost in virtual communication through Internet resources.

#### 5.3.1 United States vs China 'Cold war'

Many conversations in the social media imply that a 'cold war' is going on between the United States and China and this has implications for developing nations of Africa. The social media report a power game between both countries in form of accusations and counter accusations, allegations and defences. Chee's (2018) video recording, pre-COVID-19, readily foreshadows this power contest thus:

**Example 16:** From Beijing to Berlin, from Washington to Wellington, workers, traders, investors and consumers are wondering if a trade war is looming between China and the US dragging the whole world into darkness. I don't know, but I know it takes enemies to fight a war. Are China and America enemies now...

The overriding political and economic power of the USA has witnessed perceived threats by China in recent times and this seems to have created



tension between the countries, including political sanctions and countersanctions (Breuninger & Macias, 2020; Lin, 2020; Westcott & Faidell, 2020). The USA has utilised the current pandemic to get back at China via accusations of insincerity with information and calls for sanctions against China by the World Health Organisation (Hernandez, 2020). Critics say that the WHO was too trusting of China and did not push it on its early missteps. However, the agency replies by warning people not to politicise the crisis. “No need to to use COVID to score political points. You have many other ways to prove yourself ... If you don't want many more body bags, then you refrain from politicizing it” (Ghebreyesus 2020).

### 5.3.2 Re-thinking Power Structure among Nations

Three major observations become relevant under this subheading. First is the undermining of political superiority of developed nations of the world, especially the West, represented by the USA and the East, represented by China. COVID-19 reveals the weaknesses of all nations, including the superpowers, in their helplessness towards finding a solution to the pandemic. Apart from the higher infection statistics of developed countries such as the USA, Italy, Spain and the UK, the high death rates defying solutions challenge the economies and health services of nations, to the extent that citizens emigrate from the so-called 'greener pastures' back to their home countries (see 5.1). The unpreparedness of nations for the pandemic together with barriers of transportation and physical distancing during the lockdown forces every nation to cater for itself relying less on others, or otherwise, without support from others; even, sometimes, offers of assistance are viewed sceptically. Consider Example 17 below:

**Example 17:** With the worst of the coronavirus behind it now, China has been ramping up its international assistance to other countries so they can contain the virus ... There is a desperate need for the medical protective equipment and gear to support public health workers in Africa and China's donations fill a part of that need at a time when not many other people have been stepping up to help ... (Asiedu 2020).

The second observation is the recollection and re-examination of colonial

history of, especially, African nations and diplomatic relations between them and The USA, Europe and China. In Example 18, Olaiya (2020) praises the President of an African nation for challenging the status quo of domination.

**Example 18:** ... In readiness for the takeover, the Chinese are snapping up African seaports and airports. Their “modus operandi” is to grant African countries some toxic loans to build their much needed infrastructure and get African leaders to sign a shrouded contract, written in Mandarin that will permanently transfer the ownership of these ports to the Chinese nation. Kudos to the eagle eyed President John Magufuli of Tanzania who tore a contract signed by his predecessor and told the Chinese to go home ... (Olaiya, 2020)

In Example 19, the poem by Thando Sipuye (2019) on the YouTube re-enacts in anger the horrible experience of slavery in Africa by European and America:

### Example 19: CHILDREN OF AFRICA

I speak to you  
The white boy is not our friend  
Never was and never will be  
He chained our ancestors like dogs and cattle  
Caged our fathers and mothers  
Rodents, mice, reptiles, lice raped, sodomised, then mutilated  
Black men, black women, black children, their European slave ships  
reduced to the lowest animals ever ...

Lastly, in Example 20, the picture re-presents heroes, iconic leaders of black people, freedom fighters and Pan Africanists. It is to serve as an inspiration to Black leaders and citizens.

### Example 20:



A popular quote of one of the leaders, Patrice Lumumba (2019) goes thus:

The tragedy with Africa is that those with ideas are not in power, while those in power have no ideas. When the people have a chance, they still vote for those with no ideas.

### 5.3.3 Interrogating Social Hierarchy among Human Beings

In Nigeria and many other nations of Africa, the perception is that the coronavirus affected the rich negatively more than did the poor. The restricted movement during the lockdown kept popular sports persons, social celebrities and entertainers at home. The closure of religious centres to prevent contagious spread reduced the contact of religious leaders with their congregations and the enormous power the leaders wield over the latter. The failure of the leaders to utilise the instrument of prayer and spiritual power they claim to possess to contain the coronavirus demystified their personality on the public space. In the end, all society rested their hopes on the medical personnel to contain the disease at the risk of infection and possible death (Abu-bashal, 2020). Nwaubani (2020) reflects on the different attitudes of the rich and poor towards the COVID-19 thus:

**Example 21:** Coronavirus: Why Some Nigerians are Gloating about COVID-19

Many Nigerians gloat that COVID-19 is mainly targeting the country's elite, particularly politicians, despite warnings that life-threatening respiratory illness could hit the poor as well. The Nigeria Centre for Disease control has recorded more than 600 cases since the end of February – most of them people who had been abroad, and those they had interacted with after their return to Africa's most-populous state... So far, Nigeria's list of people who got or have died from COVID-19 includes President Muhammadu Buhari's Chief of Staff, politicians, heads of government agencies, former ambassadors and their aides or relatives. These are the kind of people who normally jet off to the UK, Germany, or the US at the slightest headache because Nigeria's state hospitals are poorly funded, run-down, and lack adequate equipment.

The public generally did not mourn or regret the deaths of political leaders from COVID-19. Instead, they blame them for the poor infrastructure and the parlous state of the economy. They expressed their disappointment at the unbridled level of corruption, greed and abuse of power exhibited by the deceased in their lifetime. The elite destroyed the public school system and sent their children to high fee- paying schools at home or abroad. They neglected health care and the hospitals and would fly abroad for treatment at the slightest instance of a headache. The power sector was moribund and epileptic. The transportation system was down. Insecurity was at the highest level and employment rate was very high. Thus, while the poor suffered, the political elite lived in affluence and flaunted their wealth all over the place.

### 5.3.4 Family Life, Health, Environment, Eco system, Social and Economic Welfare

There are positive and negative effects of COVID-19 on Family Life, Health, Eco and Social and Economic Welfare during the lockdown period. In the example below, Kumar (2020) reports on the positive aspect in the excerpt below:

**Example 22:** Families have been forced to spend endless time together and people have begun to realise the value of the same. Spousal relations have been rekindled; parental bonds have been rejuvenated, albeit with exceptions of course! Board games have

been resurrected from the dead. There is a coming together akin to what we grownups have experienced in the '80s. For the millennials, this has been a first. The value of domestic labour has been redefined. Household chores are equally shared amongst family members and there is a camaraderie that develops when people act together.

There are positive developments in thinking about relationships with people outside the immediate family. Aided by technology there has been an exponential growth in virtual gatherings. Friends, colleagues and extended family members have found ways of connecting and maintaining relationships via groups on social media. Regardless of the benefits above, COVID-19 also has negative impacts on the society. Across much of the world, schools are closed for many months and families are largely restricted to their homes. The associated uncertainty and anxiety is a real concern, with disruptions to children's education as well as to their time with friends, for exploration and play, social life and physical and mental health. According to Ramchandani (2020),

These disruptions won't be fairly shared out. Children from more prosperous homes will have more space, greater access to toys and learning opportunities, greater support from their schools and better access to resources on the internet. We must ensure that those who have the least in society don't end up being more adversely affected.

The very youngest children, including those yet to be born, are potentially the most vulnerable to family stress and anxiety. Effects on them may not be immediately apparent, but there is a large body of research showing that depression and anxiety in either parent is linked to a greater risk of mental health problems in children; so intervention and support now, such as psychological therapies for parents, would be transformative for many families.

Confinement to home seems to lead to a rise in domestic violence. Physical assault on wives, increasing cases of rape and children abuse at home leave victims with a much higher risk of psychological difficulties in their lives. The government at various levels has to rise up to the occasion by maintaining social order, supporting vulnerable children and families

and ensuring security of lives and properties during the pandemic.

Most prominent in terms of families' social and future health and opportunities is the impact of an economic downturn. Policies enacted to tackle the recession sometimes create the burden of economic pain on, especially, families from the poorest communities, with children living in poverty and a large and sustained increase in the number of families relying on food banks. Across much of the world, schools are closed and families are largely restricted to their homes. The associated uncertainty and anxiety is a real concern, with disruptions to children's education as well as to their time with friends, for exploration and play. The strain on weak families is aggravated by folding of companies and small businesses, reduction in salaries, job losses. Example 23 below shows how home schooling can sometimes exhaust parents during the lockdown as children innocently soak cartons of noodles in bathtub during play (Onuu 2020). In Example 24 three expressions in the *Sunday Independent* (Badejo and Nkasiobi, 2020) show the impact of COVID-19 on the Nigerian economy: (a) Landlords Groan as Rent Default by Tenants Soars and (b) Aviation Unions, NAHCO Bicker over 50% Cut on Workers' Salaries.

### Example 23





## Example 24



COVID-19 has had both positive and negative impact on both the environment and eco-system, though Cheval, et al. (2020) observe that most facets of the impact have not resulted directly from the virus itself but from abrupt limiting or closing of economic sectors. Large cities or megacities may provide a certain degree of comfort and protection for citizens but they increase the exposure to specific threats more than the rural areas. In a recent research report, Cheval, et al. (2020) identify the

following as impacts on the environment: air quality and local climate quality, aquatic systems and water resources, and the soil environment.

The impact on air quality and local climate air becomes visible as a reduction in air pollution. The disease suppression policies have caused severe impacts to the energy and resources, high-tech and communications, retail, manufacturing and transportation sectors, thus limiting anthropogenic emissions. Aquatic systems and water resources are affected by disposal of sanitary consumables, which create concern about the contamination of water bodies. However, there is some balance in water consumption, because while the demand rises due to washing of hands and watering of gardens, there is a reduction in industrial water consumption and little demand from fewer commuters and low tourist activities. The soil environment provides essential ecosystem services for human society, ranging from agricultural production to carbon sequestration, but there are increasing risks of food insecurity and disruption of the food supply chain apart from the risk of the soil hosting and transmission of the SARS-CoV-2.

The impact on the ecological systems is related to the relationships between society and ecosphere. MERS-CoV, SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2 are all animal corona viruses that infected people and then succeeded to spread to indifferent communities at a large scale (Cheval et al. 2020). Forest landscape fragmentation also may facilitate more often human contact with wild animals, increasing the likelihood of transmission risk of animal-to-human viruses. Lastly, the pandemic has also had an impact on ecological research, field work and experiments. In many cases, this research activity, diminishing or halted, has had important consequences on conservation of species and habitats.

### 5.3.5 Boost in Virtual Communication via Internet Resources

A major consequence of the coronavirus lockdown is the boost in virtual communication via the Internet. The 'new media' resources on the internet almost become exclusively utilised to access materials and content of the 'old media' such radio, television, newspapers and others. Communication now takes place 24/7 on websites, personal blogs and platforms for social interactions, group chats, webinars and virtual conferencing. The ban on travel has limited the reach of the enterprises in the foreign market, which, in turn, has increased the adoption of video conferencing software. Companies are adopting an innovative recruitment process at such time by



engaging video conferences. The government, on the other hand, is using video conferencing software to connect with doctors and administrative people of their region and other countries (businesswire.com). Evans (2020) also writes thus:

With millions of people being forced to stay at home to help stop the spread of COVID-19, many have found creative ways to virtually stay social through happy hours, trivia nights and birthday parties. And Zoom, one of the dozens of video conferencing services, has risen to the top.

In terms of content, among others, the Internet is suffused with messages about the coronavirus in various forms for information, education, entertainment and relaxation: news online, musical videos, visuals and verbal expressions in prose, poetry and drama. Many examples have already been given on the various forms above, but we shall close this section with a viral creative example of acrostic poetry with a feminist touch. The content of the text in Example 25 reads: Avoid touching MEN to stop the spread of COVID-19. Follow women to prevent COVID-19. (India.com,2020).

#### Example 25:



#### 5.4 Advocacy for Action and Social Justice

Advocacy for action is a crucial aspect of critical literacy demand for COVID-19. We shall utilise this subheading to discuss the fifth socio-political issue mentioned in 5.3 above, viz. governance and national priorities for development post-COVID-19. The disease catches all nations napping, including scholars and professionals. Some nations were reported to have foreknowledge of it but had failed to take action. This is an evidence of the lack of perfection in humanity and a warning that all nations must be prepared for pandemics or social disasters at all times without overreliance on some nations.

Lockdown or no lockdown. Nations with enlightened citizenry, strong economies and infrastructure can withstand either. Most African countries, including Nigeria, cannot cope with either choice because of their weak economies and structures: no hospitals, portable water and literate citizenry. The lesson here is for nations to give priorities to issues of primary human needs such as food, health and education (United Nations Population Fund's (UNPF), 2015).

Governments should upgrade the health sector, empower and motivate the professionals to work. The need becomes obvious for citizens to embrace healthy dietary habits and avoid habits injurious to our health, such as smoking and hard drinks. Reports of COVID-19 deaths and recoveries show that old age and complicated health history make people more vulnerable, while immunity strengthens one's chances of recovery. African countries must utilise the COVID-19 experience to look inwards and tap from its natural environment and human talent to produce injections, drugs and herbs for health remedies.

There is need for synergy and transparency between government and the people to be able to solve national problems. Leaders of Africa must get closer to the people they govern and develop their environment instead of depleting the resources for personal aggrandisement. The charity of philanthropists, voluntary organisations and private establishments is commendable, in the face of the government's inability to provide welfare packages to needy persons during lockdown. A positive sign of social living is showing kindness towards one another.

Many countries of Africa are endowed with a good climate, abundant human and natural resources to counter any disease. The relatively young population can withstand pressure and adversity if well-tended and motivated. The population of Nigerian returnees goes a lot to

prove their belief that home provides the best shelter in times of trouble. Government must provide a conducive atmosphere for its citizens to thrive. There is no need to depend on any outside nation for its development.

Lastly, the lockdown has propelled the latent creative talent of Nigerians into light. The sheer volume of digital communication and creative activities and entertainment on social media and YouTube during the period bears testimony to this. This provides the opportunity for the government to provide the necessary infrastructure to enhance digital communication for use in critical sectors of the economy such as health, education, judiciary and security services.

## 6. Conclusion

The demand of critical literacy on COVID-19 is broad-based. Literacy is an all-embracing subject and the critical aspect of it is social, political, cultural and sceptical. The analysis of the pandemic must extend beyond the disciplines of health and medicine to cover all of these other aspects of living. Four dimensions of critical literacy have been utilised to unravel opinions, activities and events surrounding occurrences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the world. The results indicate disruption of the commonplace, interrogation of multiple viewpoints, examination of political issues and advocacy of action and social justice. Critical literacy enables us not to engage the containment of the pandemic passively. All of the non-verbal and verbal activities of engagement are to be interrogated and mediated in the context of good governance, social justice, social responsibility and political commitment.

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