THE EXISTENTIAL VALUE OF ALBERT CAMUS' CONCEPT OF REBELLION TO SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY IN REFLECTION ON THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE (2020–2025)

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Abstract

It takes only an ingratiating and sycophantic individual to remain complacent in an unjust and dehumanizing system. In societies where injustice thrives, violence becomes the logic of survival, and political tyranny defines authority. For Albert Camus, only "the rebel" rises in negation to this quagmire. Through The Rebel, Camus depicts rebellion as the protest of human beings who refuse to accept an absurd world without meaning, insisting that only moderate rebellion, not unchecked revolution, can safeguard human dignity. This paper situates Camus' concept of rebellion within the Nigerian context, focusing on recent struggles such as the EndSARS movement, bad governance, and systemic corruption (2020–2025). It argues that rebellion, understood existentially, provides both a critique of Nigeria's cycles of failed uprisings and a roadmap for sustainable societal development. Adding that, rebellion, when true to its spirit, does not promise final victory or cosmic meaning but sustains a free, conscious, and compassionate society—one where humans affirm their shared existence amid absurdity and suffering. With an analytical approach, the paper contends that rebellion in Nigeria must move beyond violent outbursts to become a disciplined,

creative, and life-affirming force for justice, accountability, and human dignity. It concludes that society gains dignity and purpose in an absurd world by refusing to become tyrants or slaves, learning to live and to die, and, to be a man, to refuse to be a god.

Keywords: ***Rebellion, Existentialism, Moderacy, Value-Creation, Just-Society, EndSARS, Societal Development.***

Introduction

The idea of rebellion occupies a central place in Albert Camus' philosophy. He famously inverts Descartes with the declaration: "I rebel, therefore we exist." For him, rebellion is the act of saying NO to oppression while simultaneously affirming the dignity of life. It rejects injustice, tyranny, and exploitation, but it also resists the temptation of violence and nihilism. However, when an individual says "no" to intolerable conditions such as humiliation, servitude, or arbitrary suffering, this act is not purely solitary. It implicitly recognizes a shared boundary of what is unacceptable for all humans. The rebel identifies with others, surpassing individual isolation and creating a sense of metaphysical solidarity. Rebellion pulls the person from solitude and founds its first value on the whole human race; hence comes his declaration, "I rebel therefore we exist."

Camus insists that true rebellion must remain moderate, for when rebellion degenerates into absolute revolution, it breeds terror and destroys the very values it sought to protect (Camus, 1956, p. 281).

This paper, drawing on Camus' *The Rebel*, is organized into five thematic sections mirroring Camus' own framework: the nature of the rebel, metaphysical rebellion, historical rebellion, rebellion and art, and the principle of moderation at the meridian. Each section is examined analytically alongside the Nigerian experience between 2020 and 2025. The EndSARS protests of 2020, which began

as a peaceful youth-led resistance against police brutality, exposed the deep wounds of state violence, corruption, and misgovernance. The protests revealed a society where citizens long for justice and dignity but are often silenced by repression. At the same time, Nigeria's broader struggles with systemic corruption, economic inequality, and unaccountable leadership illustrate the danger of unmoderated power and the urgent need for a philosophy of rebellion that affirms human worth without succumbing to chaos.

While there has been extensive discussion of Nigeria's socio-political crises, little research has engaged Camus' philosophy of rebellion as a framework for understanding the existential value of protest in this context. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

Albert Camus' Concept of the Rebel

Camus' Rebel is a thesis of an outcry against an unjust existential system. Camus saw rebellion through the lens of expression through which people say "no," meaning that they have had enough and no more inequality would be tolerated. The rebel comes to consciousness here to question the situation and reject the master's trespass. As Moore and Brude (2002, p.54) observe, "this question arises when a person stops deceiving himself or herself and begins seeing the world without preconceived illusions."

The rebel stands against this disorder, convinced of his truncated rights and those of others: Thus, "the movement of rebellion is founded simultaneously on the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which, in the rebel's mind, is more precisely the impression that he has the right to..." (Camus, 1956, p.13). When he does this, Craig (1998) believes that he is initiating revolution by transformation: "by demanding an end to oppression, rebellion seeks to transform by revolution, if necessary, the condition that gave rise to it." Rebellion reveals "the part of man

which must always be defended" and is profoundly positive, even though it appears negative at first: it defends a core of human value against degradation. In societal terms, this means rebellion counters atomization and conformity, building community through collective awareness of injustice rather than through imposed unity or state power.

Camus (1956, p. 14) states: “the rebel, in an etymological sense, does a complete turnabout. He acts under the lash of his master’s whip. Suddenly, he turns and faces him. He opposes what is preferable to what is not.” Every rebellion evokes value, but every value cannot entail rebellion. Not until the rebel wades through rebellion does his voice escape being swallowed in injustice and his rights hijacked. That very moment, the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master; he simultaneously rejects his slavish condition.

This rebel’s attitude demonstrates the existentialist facticity whereby one aspect of human existence is the ability to transcend a given situation by taking a stand on one’s own life (Craig, 1998, p. 493). As Ndubuisi (2006, p. 55) argues, “it is freedom that posits value. It is only to the active freedom that value can be revealed, which means that my freedom is the ultimate foundation of my value.” Under dictatorship, tyranny, and injustice, the rebel’s freedom is precisely what is demeaned. Camus (1956) distinguishes between different kinds of rebellion, each examined in turn below within the context of the Nigerian polity.

Metaphysical Rebellion and the Nigerian Experience

Albert Camus’ notion of metaphysical rebellion lies at the very foundation of his philosophy of resistance. Unlike political or historical rebellion, metaphysical rebellion begins with a confrontation with the absurd: the realization that life has no ultimate, preordained meaning, yet the human spirit still thirsts for order, justice, and dignity. Unah and Osegenwunne (2010) rightly write that the “knowledge of the human predicament is the only thing that can

fortify man and imbue him with the courage to confront the oddities of life" (p.135). The metaphysical rebel refuses both suicide and resignation; instead, he declares "no" to injustice while simultaneously affirming "yes" to life and the possibility of value (Camus, 1956, p. 23).

The rebel slave affirms that there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe. In both cases, "we find a value judgment in the name of which the rebel refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself" (Camus, 1956, p. 23). The elementary form of rebellion is an aspiration for a recognizable value, one that every human being carries. It "subjects to our power of refusal to bend it to the unbending part of human nature, forcibly integrate it into an existence that we render absurd, and finally drag it from its refuge outside time and involves it in history" (Camus, 1956, p. 24).

Camus maintains that we should not confuse metaphysical rebellion with atheism. The rebel talks to God as an equal. He wants to dethrone God and, from that vantage point, create the justice, order, and unity he sought in vain within his own condition. As Unah and Osegenwune (2010, p. 135) note, Camus "holds that there is no purpose, no teleology, no order in the universe, and since life is meaningless and absurd, the only thing ultimately worth knowing is the human situation."

This philosophical position is profoundly relevant to Nigeria. Nigeria embodies the paradox of an absurd universe: a land blessed with abundant natural resources, a youthful population, and cultural richness, yet continually mired in poverty, unemployment, corruption, and insecurity. Citizens are told that Nigeria is the "giant of Africa," yet basic services, such as electricity, education, and healthcare, remain inadequate. The absurdity lies in the gap between the nation's potential and the lived realities of its people.

Metaphysical rebellion surfaced dramatically during the EndSARS protests of 2020, when young Nigerians publicly declared that the brutality of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and the silence of the government were intolerable. This was more than a political protest; it was existential in nature. This shift in consciousness reflects a move from seeing suffering as an isolated incident to recognizing it as a shared human condition. As Obaila and Aghamelu (2022) argue, "the knowledge of the absurd that ought to be accepted as a universal problem has been accepted by the individual as a relative problem". By identifying the struggle against brutality as a universal moral experience rather than a private grievance, the rebellion gains the collective strength necessary to challenge systemic injustice. By saying “enough is enough,” the protesters rejected not only police violence but also the underlying absurdity of a system that denies citizens their dignity. Placards read, “We are human beings, not criminals” and “Stop killing us” (Wada, 2021, p. 9). These statements reveal the essence of rebellion: a demand that life must hold meaning and dignity. Just as Camus insists that rebellion is both a negation and an affirmation, the Nigerian youths’ refusal of systemic violence was simultaneously an affirmation of the right to live fully and freely.

Historical Rebellion and Nigeria’s Political Struggles

Camus extends the concept of rebellion from the existential to the historical, examining the regicides and decisions of European revolutions to demonstrate how rebellion can betray itself. He argues that revolution is only the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion, but its aim, freedom, is so demanding that justice is often suspended to achieve it (Camus, 1956, p. 107). The French Revolution, which began with cries of liberty, equality, and fraternity, descended into the bloodshed of the guillotine. The Russian Revolution, initially a protest against tyranny, gave birth to Stalinist authoritarianism. As Camus

(1956, p. 107) writes: "in fact, if there had ever been one real revolution, there would be no more history. Unity would have been satiated."

Camus traces the violence of historical rebellion through the actions of figures such as Saint-Just, who, drawing on Rousseau's social contract and the principle of the general will, justified the death of Louis XVI. He accuses Hegel of having "rationalized to the point of being irrational" (Camus, 1956, pp. 1–33), constructing a dialectical history in which the risk of life and acceptance of death mark the ultimate realization of human value. The German and Russian revolutions that followed, argues Camus, elevated murder into a principle. As Stumpf (1993) notes, dehumanized Western man began to exhibit all the symptoms of his dehumanization; and Camus (1956, p. 185) observes that "seven million Jews assassinated, seven million Europeans deported or killed, ten million war victims" stand as evidence of nihilism taken to its extreme.

Nigeria's political history reflects the same dynamic. Anti-colonial struggles of the 1940s and 1950s promised freedom, justice, and prosperity; yet independence in 1960 quickly gave way to ethnic rivalry, corruption, and power struggles. Military coups, often staged under the banner of fighting corruption, soon became cycles of dictatorship. As Iroegbu and Izibili (2004, p. 10) observe, "possible causes of revolution include insolence and avarice as well as fear and contempt." Each rebellion against misrule produced new forms of repression, confirming Camus' warning that rebellion without moderation merely reproduces the injustices it sought to overcome.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) illustrates another dimension. The Biafran attempt to secede was initially framed as a rebellion for survival against marginalization, yet the conflict produced immense human suffering, famine, and death. In contemporary Nigeria, the democratic transition of 1999 was meant to herald a new era of accountability; yet widespread electoral malpractice, bad

governance, and corruption have subverted those noble ideals. The EndSARS protests of 2020 appeared as a new wave of historical rebellion, decentralized, digital, creative, and inclusive (Wikipedia Contributors, 2025b), but the brutal state response and its chaotic aftermath revealed the fragility of rebellion again when power refuses accountability. For Camus, this underscores the necessity of moderation. Historical rebellion protests specific injustices like tyranny, inequality, or systemic suffering, while metaphysical rebellion challenges the human condition itself. In both cases, rebellion injects value into a valueless world and refuses to treat humans as mere objects of history or power structures

Rebellion and Art in Nigerian Protest Culture

Camus maintains that the activity of art is inseparable from rebellion. Both arise from the refusal to accept absurdity, and both create meaning where there seems to be none. He asserts: "rebellion… is a fabricator of universe. This also defines art" (Camus, 1956, p. 255). For Camus, the artist rebels by shaping chaos into beauty, by giving form to what seems meaningless, a constructive act that resists despair by affirming life.

In Nigeria, art has always been central to resistance. From Fela Kuti's Afrobeat in the 1970s, which condemned military dictatorship and corruption, to contemporary Nollywood films and literature that critique modern society, Nigerian art has served as a living archive of rebellion. The EndSARS movement continued this tradition. Artists used murals to memorialize victims of police brutality, transforming public spaces into sites of collective memory. Social media artists designed posters and hashtags that spread across Twitter (X) and Instagram, ensuring that the voices of protesters could not be silenced. Falz's "This Is Nigeria" became a cultural mirror exposing systemic decay; Burna Boy's 20:10:20 turned the Lekki Toll Gate massacre into an enduring testimony of

injustice; spoken word poets like Dike Chukwumerije amplified the pain and resilience of young Nigerians (Wikipedia Contributors, 2025c).

This artistic rebellion was crucial in preventing despair. In the face of brutality, art gave Nigerians a language of hope and solidarity. Where political leaders sought to suppress truth, art preserved memory. The global spread of EndSARS imagery, music, and hashtags demonstrated how art universalizes rebellion, inviting solidarity from the diaspora and the international community. In Camus' terms, this represents rebellion at its most constructive dimension: an affirmation of human dignity across borders.

Thought at the Meridian: Moderation and the Nigerian Future

In the midst of contradictions and aberrations, Camus exposes what true rebellion is and what is not. He states: "in assigning oppression a limit within which begins the dignity common to all men, rebellion defines a primary value… Logically, one should reply that murder and rebellion are contradictory," (Camus, 1956, p. 281). He affirms that the rebel, in opposition to the oppressor, pleads for life and undertakes to struggle against servitude, falsehood, and terror. Emphasizing the need for moderation, Camus writes, "We now know, at the end of this long inquiry into rebellion and nihilism, that rebellion with no other limits but historical expediency signifies unlimited slavery" (Camus, 1956, p. 294). Moderation against excess is what saves unlimited rebellion from unlimited slavery.

This principle is urgently relevant to Nigeria. The EndSARS protest revealed both the promise and peril of rebellion. Its promise lay in its creativity, unity, and peaceful resistance. Its peril emerged in the aftermath, where violence and chaos gave the government justification for repression and state brutality. Camus' insistence on moderation invites Nigerians to channel outrage into constructive avenues: sustained civic movements, non-violent protests, strategic

litigation, grassroots education, and transparent democratic participation. The value of Camus' brand of rebellion to society is dependent on respect for limits. Put differently, authentic rebellion is limited in scope; an incoherent but vital pronouncement of refusal that seeks unity without totality. It fights injustice while refusing to commit new injustices, serving justice without becoming unjust itself. Camus' brand of rebellion cautions all types of avant-garde and atavistic approaches to social change.

More importantly, moderation in rebellion means resisting the temptations of resorting to unlimited violence, terror, and new tyrannies, which often characterize the pursuit of the interests of ethnic nationalities, religious sectarianism, and political opportunism. True rebellion must be inclusive, life-affirming, and guided by shared human values. It refuses to reduce humans to objects; it refuses to kill or die for what we are not, instead living to create what we are. Matthew Sharpe et al. (2020) rightly capture that when rebellion loses sight of where it comes from, its dual commitment to valuing human life and respecting limits, it can turn against its own purpose and create a new form of oppression. In their view, what makes rebellion valuable to society is exactly this sense of restraint. It offers a way of thinking that promotes balanced action, holding together freedom and equality, resistance and affirmation, for them, understanding the necessity of limits is essential to rebellion, because revolt itself is an expression of setting and defending those limits Hyde, 2025).

For Nigeria, this means that the struggle against police brutality, corruption, and bad governance must not simply seek to dismantle institutions but to reform and rebuild them in ways that uphold human dignity. Nigeria's youth, armed with digital tools, creativity, and solidarity, have already demonstrated that such moderated rebellion is possible.

The practical value of rebellion to societal development is immeasurable: it drives progress against oppression without surrendering to nihilism or passive resignation. Rebellion insists on living fully and creating meaning through action, art, and lucid confrontation. It promotes a "day-to-day revolt" that "gives life its value" and serves as "evidence of man's sole dignity. The challenge for the Nigerian youth is to sustain this spirit beyond moments of crisis, transforming rebellion into long-term civic engagement.

Critical Evaluation

The profundity with which Camus has, through his rebel movement, exposed the sordid and solitary state of man and suggested how this might be mediated through moderate rebellion is commendable, though his argument does not stand immune from observable flaws.

First, if the rebel has condemned everything including God who created an unjust world, and placed the salvation of the human condition in the hands of man, yet simultaneously chronicles how tyrannical, violent, and murderous that same man is as evidenced in the European and Russian revolutions, how certain can we beat that man, sharing the same universal genealogy, can carry out the enterprise of justice? From the perspective of eugenics, if offspring are replicas of their parents and God is responsible for existence including man, then man is God replicated. Dethroning God and enthroning man makes no fundamental difference, since man is a prototype of whatever injustice Camus and the rebel develop aversion toward.

Second, a major limitation in Camus' thought is his near-silence on the concrete mechanisms through which rebellion should be expressed. In the Nigerian context, where governments often suppress dissent, it is not enough to affirm rebellion in principle. Citizens need practical avenues like dialogue, civic movements, grassroots mobilization, and legal frameworks through which

rebellion can translate into institutional reform. Without such mechanisms, rebellion risks remaining a noble cry that is either repressed or co-opted by forces of disorder.

Third, Camus' rejection of transcendence and his insistence on human self-salvation raise a serious tension. If humanity is capable of creating just values apart from God, why does history including Nigeria's own show repeated failures of human-led systems marked by corruption, greed, and oppression? This raises the question: can rebellion truly secure justice without moral foundations that transcend human frailty? This contradiction is especially significant for African societies where religion continues to play a strong role in political and social life.

Despite these tensions, it is right to fight against injustice and condemn murder, unreasonable insurrection, and all life-devaluing principles. This is where Camus receives sincere commendation, for it is here that he upholds human dignity. Camus is insightful and firm in his quest to establish justice common to all through the rebel movement. What eluded him was to outline concretely the medium through which the rebel should make his voice heard. Without such a medium, rebellion remains articulated but unrooted.

Conclusion

Albert Camus' concept of rebellion provides a profound philosophical lens for understanding Nigeria's struggles with injustice, corruption, and failed governance. Rebellion, in Camus' thought, begins as a metaphysical NO to absurdity and oppression but also affirms the possibility of dignity, justice, and life-affirming values. Applied to Nigeria, rebellion becomes more than a political act; it is an existential necessity for a people whose lived realities are riddled with contradictions. Grounding values in the act of protest itself, it creates ethical rules without needing external absolutes.

Camus is worth commending for laying down, through his essay, how a human-valuable society should be built: through moderate rebellion immune from selfishness, injustice, violence, and murder; and through this, a prodigious edifice for human dignity is constructed one useful at every epoch for peaceful co-existence. The rebel remains a powerful critique of both passive acceptance of injustice and fanatical ideologies. From independence to the present, Nigeria has embodied Camus' warning that revolutions often betray themselves. Military coups promised rescue from corruption but led to deeper authoritarianism. Democratic transitions have been marred by violence, manipulation, and disillusionment. These cycles reveal the dangers of unmoderated rebellion.

Yet, Nigeria's history also demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit. The EndSARS protests of 2020 marked a decisive moment of metaphysical and historical rebellion. Young Nigerians, disillusioned by decades of broken promises, refused to accept a system that dehumanizes life. Their cry "Stop killing us" was a rejection of absurdity and an affirmation of human dignity. Through art, music, poetry, and digital activism, Nigerians fabricated a universe of meaning that resisted despair and galvanized solidarity across ethnic, religious, and class divides.

If Nigeria can channel the energy of rebellion into constructive transformation guided by Camus' principle of moderation, then rebellion can become the foundation for a society where dignity is not an exception but the norm, and where justice is not postponed but realized in daily governance. Such a rebellion. Life-affirming and moderated can indeed serve as the pathway to Nigeria's long-awaited societal development.

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