



ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY AND POLITICAL WITNESSING IN J. P. CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S 'THE CASUALTIES'

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Abstract

This article positions J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's 'The Casualties' as a signal text within the poetics of affective minimalism, an aesthetic mode where emotional restraint functions not as political withdrawal but as a strategy for reconfiguring ethical perception. Through analysis of the poem's accumulative syntax, controlled diction, strategic pronominal shifts, and restrained imagery, the article argues that Clark-Bekederemo constructs a 'pedagogy of implication' that trains readers to recognize their embeddedness within networks of political responsibility. The poem's repudiation of conventional elegiac gratification, its flattening of affective peaks, and its expansion of 'casualty' beyond physical harm reshape the witnessing of suffering and the distribution of guilt. Drawing on affect theory and political philosophy, the study concludes that affective minimalism functions as a technology of ethical attention, cultivating civic consciousness by transforming readers from consumers of suffering into participants in a shared moral and political community.

Key words

Affective minimalism; J.P. Clark-Bekederemo; Nigerian poetry; political responsibility; affect theory; ethical spectatorship; war poetry; collective guilt

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Civil War (1969-1970) remains one of the most traumatic and extensively

documented events in postcolonial African history, a conflict estimated to have caused between one and three million deaths, primarily through famine and disease produced by the blockade of Biafra (Stremlau, 1977; Heerten et al. 2014). The catastrophe generated an enduring body of literary response, among whose most anthologized poetic interventions is J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's 'The Casualties'. The poem is typically situated within Nigerian war poetry alongside the prophetic density of Christopher Okigbo and the satiric moralism of Wole Soyinka (Obafemi 1992). Critical scholarship has largely approached the poem as a lament for national fragmentation, meditation on collective guilt, or concise articulation of the moral burdens of internecine violence (Elimimian 1989; Daniel 2008; Sharp 2010; Ighile and Nwodo 2013). Such readings have emphasized its historical embeddedness and ethical insistence that no citizen emerges untouched by civil conflict. Yet, despite sustained attention to these thematic concerns, relatively little scholarship has treated the poem's tonal discipline and rhetorical restraint as constitutive of its political force. Historical urgency has often privileged referential content over formal analysis, obscuring how the poem's ethical claims are mediated through a carefully regulated economy of affect.

We argue that 'The Casualties' derives its ethical and political force through affective minimalism: a deliberate curtailment of expressive excess functioning as a strategy of indictment and ethical exposure. Rather than staging grief through lyric intensity or soliciting outrage through graphic spectacle, Clark-Bekederemo deploys measured cadence, sparse imagery, and syntactic clarity that refuse both the consolations of pathos and the spectacle of individualized suffering. The poem offers no harrowing battlefield scenes or sentimentalized portraits of victims. Instead, it proceeds through cumulative repetition ('The casualties are not only those who [...]'), a syntactic pattern that steadily expands the category of casualty while withholding emotional satisfactions such expansion might conventionally produce. This austerity is not absence of feeling but regulation of feeling. It redirects attention from isolated tragedy to systemic implication, distributing responsibility across the social field by implicating bystanders, opportunists, diasporic actors, and the morally complicit alongside those who suffer direct harm.

The concept of affective minimalism draws on affect studies and political philosophy to illuminate how restrained emotional cues generate durable ethical reflection. Sara Ahmed's relational account of affect (2004), in which emotions circulate socially to align subjects with communities and structure the visibility of suffering, clarifies how the poem intervenes in affective economy. By withholding emotive markers that locate suffering in discrete pitiable others, the poem forecloses easy sympathetic identification. It instead cultivates what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms 'ugly feelings': low-intensity affects such as unease, implication, and reflective discomfort that resist catharsis. The poem's restraint therefore redirects affect from consumable spectacle toward ethical implication. Affect circulates not as emotional excess but as a mechanism for situating readers within the moral economy the poem constructs.

This framework illuminates dimensions obscured by thematic readings. The poem's diction reflects striking semantic plainness with political weight. Even the title, 'The Casualties', appropriates a term from military communiqués and bureaucratic reporting, a vocabulary compressing lives into administrative abstraction (Orwell 1946; Bauman, 1989). By

reworking this impersonal lexicon, Clark-Bekederemo performs a decisive rhetorical maneuver: abstraction remains, but its scope expands beyond battlefield deaths to encompass moral compromise, silence, opportunism, and complicity. The poem exposes the inadequacy of administrative categories while deploying their austerity to articulate critique beyond partisan division. Its minimalism thus mirrors the detachment of official discourse while undermining its distancing effect.

The historical context intensifies this strategy's significance. The Nigerian Civil War left deep ethnic, economic, and psychological fissures within the postcolonial nation (John 1972). Public discourse oscillated between confronting and suppressing those fractures. The war, fought between the Nigerian state and the secessionist eastern region of Biafra, also placed Clark-Bekederemo in a contested position. A member of a minority group within the eastern region, he aligned with the Nigerian government. As Griffiths (2006:115) observes, this position distinguished him from Okigbo (a member of one of the major ethnic groups which is the group attempting to break away in the region), killed fighting for Biafra; Soyinka (a member of one of the major ethnic groups), imprisoned for anti-war intervention; and Achebe (from the same ethnic group as Okigbo), engaged internationally in Biafran advocacy. In this context, overt recrimination or graphic representation risked inflaming sectarian antagonism or offering merely cathartic release. Clark-Bekederemo's measured tone instead articulates critique without moral simplification, distributes accusation without consolidating factional identities, and sustains discomfort without resolution. Its calmness is not conciliatory but accusatory, insisting culpability is diffuse and no subject position (victim, perpetrator, observer, profiteer) remains untouched.

Affective minimalism manifests through several formal registers. Syntactically, the poem favors concise declarative statements that accumulate ethical pressure through repetition rather than rhetorical crescendo. Its rhythm is deliberate, almost processional, compelling confrontation with the unsettling proposition that casualty extends indefinitely. Lexically, it avoids elaborate metaphor, preferring spare precision that resists aestheticized suffering. Pronominally, the culminating shift to first-person implication ('We are all casualties'), transforms the reader from observer into participant within the ethical field the poem delineates. These formal strategies enact what may be called a pedagogy of attention: training readers to perceive structures of violence operating beneath spectacular visibility, recognize their implication within them, and sustain awareness without emotional reward.

This analysis proceeds through five movements. First, it examines the poem's opening claim that the dead are 'well out of it,' showing how this redirects attention from conventional elegy toward the ethical claims of the living. Second, it traces the expansion of 'casualty' beyond battlefield death through Karl Jaspers's distinctions among criminal, political, and moral guilt (2000) and Hannah Arendt's conception of collective responsibility (2000). Third, it examines how the poem maps responsibility across geographical and social distance, from diasporic actors in 'smoke-rooms' to opportunistic 'looters' and unsettled civilians. Fourth, it analyses the crucial pronominal shift that implicates the reader and makes them complicit in the war, acknowledging a cataloguing that involves all, albeit not absolving anyone. The last movement deconstructs the poem's restrained imagery, especially the clinical evocation of

kwashiorkor as ‘unforeseen camp-follower’, through which suffering becomes social critique without becoming spectacle.

Throughout, this study maintains that Clark-Bekederemo’s affective minimalism offers a model of political art that resists the economy of emotional consumption. In a media ecology where suffering circulates as consumable image, generating feeling that dissipates without demanding transformation, ‘The Casualties’ proposes another logic: a poetics that withholds gratification in order to demand recognition, refuses to make pain easily available for consumption in order to insist on harder ethical attention which ‘shows greater humane consideration’ (Okpewho 1985:136). Its political force lies precisely in this refusal. This is not a romanticization of austerity as inherently superior to expressive intensity, but an argument that in this poem restraint is purposeful and rhetorically productive. Where excessive pathos may invite cathartic release, minimalism sustains discomfort. The reader is left without redemptive arc or moral closure, only with awareness that war’s consequences permeate social relations long after combat ends. That unresolved awareness is itself the precondition for ethical response.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s ‘The Casualties’ has remained robust across Nigerian Civil War historiography, postcolonial trauma studies, and African war-poetry criticism. Yet one significant blind spot persists: the poem’s tonal and affective architecture has rarely been theorized as a site of political work in its own right. Existing scholarship overwhelmingly privileges thematic concerns (war, national fracture, collective suffering, moral complicity, and postwar memory), while leaving under-examined the poem’s regulated emotional texture, disciplined rhetorical pacing, and strategic withholding of overt lyric excess. A paradox thus emerges: ‘The Casualties’ is consistently read as a poem of anguish, but seldom as one whose formal management of anguish constitutes its most incisive political gesture.

Book-length criticism reinforces this thematic-historical emphasis. Isaac Elimimian’s *The Poetry of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo* remains foundational in establishing the poet as a voice of sociopolitical witness, violence, and national anxiety. Yet ‘The Casualties’ is largely subsumed under broader concerns of conflict and civic protest rather than examined through the micro-politics of tonal modulation.

The two most substantial engagements remain those of Michael Sharp (‘Lament for the Casualties: The Nigerian War of 1967–70 and the Poetry of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo’ in *Narrating War and Peace in Africa*, 2010) and Robert M. Wren (*J. P. Clark*, 1984) whose readings of ‘The Casualties’ by J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, though differently inflected, converge on its ethical force within the context of the Nigerian Civil War. Sharp situates the poem within a transnational genealogy of war poetry, aligning its moral seriousness with that of Wilfred Owen and Edmund Blunden, and characterizes it as a ‘quiet assault’ (2010:271) on political violence, thereby foregrounding restraint as a salient rhetorical mode, even if he ultimately privileges comparative lineage and historical witnessing over a sustained theorization of emotional moderation as an autonomous affective strategy. Wren, by contrast, shifts attention from lineage to implication, construing the poem as a moral indictment of collective complicity

that expands the category of casualty beyond the dead to encompass all who are enmeshed in the structures and afterlives of war, collapsing distinctions between victim, observer, and participant, and mobilizing a deliberately restrained, unsentimental idiom to compel recognition of shared ethical entanglement. While the readings of Michael Sharp and Robert M. Wren remain anchored in comparative lineage and moral implication respectively, this article departs from both by advancing a fully theorized account of ‘The Casualties’ as a paradigmatic instance of affective minimalism, foregrounding the poem’s formal operations as constitutive of an autonomous affective strategy rather than ancillary expressive features, and thereby offering a more conceptually integrated framework that demonstrates how J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s aesthetic of restraint functions as a technology of ethical attention capable of reconfiguring readerly subjectivity beyond the descriptive and analogical horizons of earlier scholarship.

A similarly significant intervention is Iyabode Omolara Daniel’s (2008) reading of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo as ‘the weeping poet’, where his war poetry is **interpreted** through the lens of national mourning and moral admonition. In this account, ‘pain and anguish’ are elevated to the status of civic consciousness, and ‘The Casualties’ is positioned as an ethical appeal oriented toward postwar reconstruction. A comparable line of interpretation appears in Nnaji’s (2018) study, which construes the poem as the poet’s ‘instrument of preaching peace’ and a vehicle for ‘moral education’ (18).

More recent scholarship has widened the interpretive horizon. Ogunrotimi and Omotunde (2018), using M. A. K. Halliday’s systemic functional framework examines the graphological, syntactic, and lexico-semantic patterns that reinforce the poem’s concern with war and human suffering, though without foregrounding its subdued aesthetic logic. Fortress and Chimuaya (2022) introduce a spatio-temporal framework showing how the poem disperses casualty beyond immediate violence into social and psychological afterlife. Their intervention implicitly recognizes the poem’s expansionary logic, yet stops short of analyzing the affective mechanics through which its calm, almost forensic tone intensifies indictment. A philosophical extension appears in Kayode Afolayan’s (2023) work on death and existential reflection in Clark-Bekederemo. Though not exclusive to ‘The Casualties’, it offers a basis for reading restraint as philosophical poetics of survivorship, where refusal of sentimental overflow mirrors postwar ethical exhaustion.

Taken together, the critical corpus reveals two dominant formations: thematic-historical readings that treat the poem as memorial testimony or national allegory, and generic-comparative readings that situate it within protest poetry and global war verse. Both have been indispensable, but both share a limitation: they tend to treat affect as semantic residue, sadness, anguish, despair, rather than as a rhetorically produced structure of feeling.

The unresolved critical space, therefore, lies in theorizing affective minimalism as political praxis. Clark-Bekederemo’s controlled tone, deliberate repetitions, paced accumulations, and refusal of melodramatic climax do not merely describe devastation; they discipline readers into inhabiting the slow violence of historical fracture. Emotional restraint becomes not passive style but active ideological address. The poem’s tonal economy compels an ethics of listening precisely by withholding cathartic release.

What criticism has not sufficiently articulated is that ‘The Casualties’ performs politics

not only through what it says about war, but through how it calibrates feeling, distributes silence, and regulates the velocity of grief. By repositioning tone as strategy rather than atmosphere, this study intervenes in Clark-Bekederemo scholarship and African war-poetry criticism more broadly, where affect has too often remained descriptive rather than structurally theorized.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AFFECTIVE MINIMALISM AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

This study adopts a hybrid theoretical framework integrating affect theory with political philosophy, arguing that emotional restraint in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's 'The Casualties' functions not merely as aesthetic moderation but as a structured mode of ethical and political intervention. The framework rests on two interlocking premises: first, that affect is socially produced and circulatory rather than purely interior; second, that political responsibility exceeds legal culpability to encompass forms of collective implication. Together, these perspectives enable a reading of tonal discipline as a strategy that reorganizes ethical alignment within the postwar public sphere.

The concept of affective minimalism requires careful theoretical grounding if it is to function as more than a descriptive label. At its core, the term designates an aesthetic mode characterized by deliberate emotional restraint, the withholding of conventional affective cues, the refusal of cathartic resolution, the flattening of rhetorical intensity, that nevertheless generates ethical and political force. This is not, it must be emphasized, an absence of affect but a redirection of it; not emotional poverty but emotional discipline. The affective minimalist text does not invite less feeling than its more expressive counterparts; it invites differently distributed feeling, feeling that must be earned through interpretive labor rather than purchased through familiar triggers.

The affective dimension draws principally on Sara Ahmed's formulation of emotion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). For Ahmed, emotions are not private psychological states but 'cultural practices' (9) that align "subjects with collectives by attributing 'others' as the 'source' of our feelings" (1). Affect circulates between bodies, attaches to objects, and structures what can be perceived and valued. This circulation is political, organizing which suffering becomes visible and which remains obscured, which lives are grievable and which are not. As Ahmed writes, "emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (22), producing boundaries of belonging and exclusion.

Ahmed further argues that "the 'injustice' of war... depend(s) upon the exclusion of others from the emotional response of grief" (192), asking whether grieving the ungrieved might convert injustice into justice. Affect is, in this sense, according to Morrison 'closely connected to the way in which bodies responsively configure their spatial surround' (2020:147), while 'the truths of this world are dependent on emotions' and 'on how they move subjects, and stick them together' (Ahmed 2004:170). Her concept of 'sticky signs' explains 'how language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others' (195). As Abdel-Fadil (2023:367) observes, the politics of affect attends to 'which emotions are in motion, their

directionality, intensity and, for whom effect is formed’.

Ahmed's foundational work in affect theory provides crucial resources for understanding this dynamic. For her, emotions are not reducible to private psychological interiors; rather, they function as cultural practices through which subjects are constituted relationally, binding individuals to collectivities and articulating bodily space with social space through the intensities of affective attachment. Emotions, in this formulation, operate as social forces that circulate, orient, and align bodies within communal and discursive formations. Affect, in this account, is fundamentally relational and circulatory: it moves between bodies, attaches to objects, and structures the field of what can be perceived and valued. The crucial point for our purposes is that this circulation is not neutral. Affective economies organize attention, determining which suffering becomes visible and which remains obscured, which lives are grievable and which are not (Butler 2004). As Ahmed (2004) writes, “emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed 1), producing boundaries between those who matter and those who do not.

Applied to Clark-Bekederemo's poem, this shifts analysis from identifying represented emotions to examining how emotional restraint organizes readerly attachment. Overt lament typically localises sympathy in identifiable victims; Clark-Bekederemo's refusal of melodrama resists confining grief to a single constituency. Emotional understatement redistributes affect across the social field. By resisting the easy ‘stickiness’ of grief for some bodies over others, the poem refuses to reproduce affective hierarchies that render certain losses ungrievable. Grief circulates without predetermined attachment, making restrained form itself a political act of world-making.

This account is deepened by Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), which establishes the diagnostic political value of low-intensity, ambiguous affects emerging from obstructed agency. Ngai challenges traditions privileging heightened passions, arguing instead that ‘the feelings I examine here are explicitly amoral and noncathartic [...] nor any therapeutic or purifying release’ (6). Her “bestiary of affects” is ‘filled with rats and possums rather than lions’ (7), because ‘minor and generally unprestigious feelings’ (6) (irritation, anxiety, paranoia), register systemic contradiction where dramatic emotion may foreclose reflection. Such moods possess “a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the ‘suddenness’” (6) of classical catharsis, making them ‘diagnostically concerned with states of inaction’ (6). They function as ‘affective ideologemes’ rendering visible ‘how sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas [...] produce formal or representational ones’ (3), while their ambivalence resists both resentment and therapeutic resolution.

Clark-Bekederemo's tonal austerity can be productively situated within this Ngaiian framework. The poem's measured cadence, semantic plainness, and refusal of crescendo generate diagnostic discomfort, a subdued but persistent unease that resists cathartic discharge. As Ngai (2005) notes, aesthetics may deploy ‘the anticathartic device of dilating the time in which any particular incident takes place’ (6), mirroring ‘obstructed agency’. This is an instance of ‘the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together’ becoming ‘a prime occasion for ugly feelings’ (3). Restraint, then, does not evacuate feeling; it makes low-intensity affect the condition of critical efficacy.

Yet affect theory alone cannot fully account for the poem's political stakes. For this, the framework turns to Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt. In *The Question of German Guilt* (2000), Jaspers distinguishes criminal guilt from political guilt arising from acquiescence in a regime's actions, where 'The only common denominator may be [...] nationality which makes all jointly guilty [...]' (98). He adds, 'there are some who admit guilt [...] and many who hold themselves guiltless but pronounce others guilty' (21), while further insisting that:

Every human being is fated to be enmeshed in the power relations he lives by. This is the inevitable guilt of all, the guilt of human existence. It is counteracted by supporting the power that achieves what is right, the rights of man. Failure to collaborate in organizing power relations, in the struggle for power for the sake of serving the right, creates basic political guilt and moral guilt at the same time. Political guilt turns into moral guilt where power serves to destroy the meaning of power-the achievement of what is right, the ethos and purity of one's own nation. (2000:28)

These distinctions illuminate 'The Casualties', where the category of casualty extends beyond the wounded to include beneficiaries, bystanders, and silent observers.

Arendt similarly insists that collective responsibility differs from collective guilt. In her reflections on responsibility under the Third Reich, she writes:

It is, rather, to consider how to conduct ourselves and how to bear the trial of confronting a people among whom the boundaries dividing criminals from normal persons, the guilty from the innocent, have been so completely effaced that nobody will be able to tell in Germany, in any case he is dealing with a secret hero or with a former mass murderer. In this situation we will not be aided either by a definition of those responsible or by the punishment of "war criminals." Such definitions by their very nature can apply only to those who not only took responsibility upon themselves, but also produced this whole inferno - and yet strangely enough are still not to be found on the lists of war criminals. The number of those who are responsible and guilty will be relatively small. There are many who share responsibility without any visible proof of guilt. There are many more who have become guilty without being in the least responsible. Among the responsible in a broader sense must be included all those who continued to be sympathetic to Hitler as long as it was possible, who aided his rise to power, and who applauded him in Germany and in other European countries. (2000:149-150)

This is crucial for reading a poem where implication exceeds perpetration. Responsibility attaches not only to direct actors but to those embedded within the polity that sustains injustice.

Integrating affect theory with political philosophy clarifies how Clark-Bekederemo's minimalism performs ideological framing. If emotion circulates socially, as Ahmed argues, and responsibility extends beyond direct action, as Jaspers and Arendt maintain, then affective restraint becomes a mechanism for expanding accountability. Emotional excess might isolate

suffering within victims, allowing others the comfort of sympathetic spectatorship. By contrast, restraint destabilizes this division. The poem's refusal to dramatize agony prevents readers from settling into pity, confronting them instead with a broadened category of casualty that includes those who survive materially yet remain ethically compromised.

This framework also speaks to postwar Nigeria's political context without reducing the poem to historical documentation. A rhetorically incendiary poem might reinforce factional antagonism; an overtly sentimental one might foster selective sympathy. The controlled tone avoids both extremes. Through affective discipline, the poem articulates critique while maintaining a composure that broadens address. Political philosophy clarifies why this matters: the nation emerges not as a division between innocent sufferers and villains but as a shared moral space of diffuse responsibility.

Methodologically, the framework entails close textual analysis attentive to diction, repetition, syntax, and pronoun shifts, read through affective circulation and collective responsibility. Lexical abstractions such as "casualties" function not merely semantically but as affective nodes around which political meaning clusters. Tonal steadiness forestalls catharsis; form structures ethical alignment.

By balancing affect theory with political philosophy, this framework avoids reducing the poem either to historical lament or to autonomous formalism. Emotional restraint in 'The Casualties' is neither incidental nor merely stylistic. It is a calibrated mechanism that redistributes grief, implicates the collective, and sustains ethical unease. Through the fusion of affective modulation and distributed responsibility, the poem demonstrates how tonal discipline itself functions as political address: quiet, measured, and uncompromising.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY AND POLITICAL WITNESSING IN J. P. CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S 'THE CASUALTIES'

I. The Opening Gambit: Death as Ethical Horizon

The poem's opening lines demand careful attention, for they establish the fundamental orientation from which everything else follows:

The casualties are not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it.
The casualties are not only those who are wounded,
Though they await burial by instalment. (lines 1-4)

The understatement of the second line, 'They are well out of it', is striking, even shocking, in its casual dismissal of the dead. Where elegiac convention would demand reverence, lamentation, acknowledgment of loss, Clark-Bekederemo offers something closer to dismissal. The dead, he suggests, have exited the field of moral concern; their suffering, however terrible, is complete. This is not, we argue, a callous refusal to mourn but a strategic reorientation of attention. By removing the dead from consideration, the poem clears space for a different kind of ethical inquiry: one focused on the living, on those who remain within the field of moral action and

responsibility.

This move resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of ethical obligation (1979), which locates the foundational ethical relation in the face-to-face encounter with the living other. For Levinas, the face in its vulnerability issues an infinite injunction that forbids violence which precedes reciprocity or desert. Because this obligation arises from the immediacy of the face, Levinas privileges the encounter with the living other over relations mediated only by memory or absence. Clark-Bekederemo's apparent dismissal of the dead might thus be read as a Levinasian move: a clearing of ground for the ethical claim of the living, whose faces still demand response.

Yet the poem does not simply replace dead casualties with living ones; it transforms the very category of casualty. The wounded 'await burial by instalment' (line 4), a metaphor that suggests a death stretched across time, a dying that never quite achieves the finality of the grave. This is the first of many expansions: the casualty includes not only those who will die but those who are dying, those for whom death has become a process rather than an event. The clinical precision of 'by instalment' refuses the consolations of tragic finality; it insists on the mundane, protracted nature of suffering that does not achieve the dignity of a clean end.

This opening establishes what we might call the poem's ethical horizon: a field of concern that includes all those who remain within the reach of harm, all those whose suffering continues, all those whose death, when it comes, will not resolve but merely extend the catastrophe. The dead are 'well out of it', out of the war, out of the ethical field, out of the space of responsibility. The poem's attention, from this point forward, will be directed elsewhere: to those who remain, who suffer, who are implicated. This orientation fundamentally transforms what it means to read about war. We are not invited to mourn the dead, whose fate is sealed, but to recognize our relation to the living, whose fate remains open.

II. The Accumulative Syntax: Expanding the Circle of Casualty

The poem's most striking formal feature is its accumulative syntax, the repeated phrase 'The casualties are not only those who [...]' that structures the first two-thirds of the text. This repetition is not merely decorative; it performs the very work of expansion that constitutes the poem's ethical argument. Each iteration adds a new category of casualty, extending the circle outward from the immediately obvious to the systematically obscured:

The casualties are not only those who have lost
Persons or property, hard as it is
To grope for a touch that some
May not know is not there. (lines 5-8)

Here the poem moves from material to psychological loss, from the fact of bereavement to its lived experience. The 'grobe for a touch' figures grief as bodily habit, a reaching toward an absence that the mind has not yet registered. This is subtle, interior suffering, the kind that leaves no visible wound, that generates no headlines, that persists long after cameras have departed. By including it within the category of casualty, Clark-Bekederemo insists that war's

devastation cannot be measured by bodies alone; it extends into the intimate textures of everyday life, into the habits and gestures that violence disrupts.

The next iteration extends further:

The casualties are not only those led away by night;
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven,
Nowhere as absolute as the grave. (lines 9-11)

Here the poem enters the space of detention, the 'cruel place' that is yet 'sometimes a haven', a formulation that refuses the simple binary of victim and perpetrator. For some, the cell offers protection from worse fates; this acknowledgment complicates any easy condemnation of the detention system without, however, endorsing it. The moral complexity introduced here, the recognition that spaces of confinement may be, paradoxically, spaces of safety, prepares for later complications of guilt and responsibility. The crucial point, however, is that detainees too are casualties, their suffering no less real for being ambiguous in its meaning.

The next stanza extends the circle in a different direction:

The casualties are not only those who started
A fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands
Are burning that had no say in the matter. (lines 12-14)

This is a crucial move, for it includes within the casualties those who initiated violence, those who 'started a fire', while immediately redirecting attention to those who burn without having chosen the fire. The perpetrators are casualties too, caught in consequences they cannot control; but their inclusion does not diminish the claims of those who suffer without agency. The poem holds both categories together, insisting that moral complexity does not require choosing between them.

The political theorist Karl Jaspers's (2000) distinction between different forms of guilt illuminates this move. In his post-World War II lectures, Jaspers distinguished among criminal guilt (for acts in violation of law), political guilt (for the actions of the state to which one belongs), moral guilt (for one's own ethical failures), and metaphysical guilt (for failing to prevent wrongs one might have prevented). Clark-Bekederemo's expanded category of casualty cuts across these distinctions: the 'thousands burning' include those with criminal guilt and those with none, those who bear political responsibility and those who bear only its effects. By refusing to sort casualties by their degree of desert, the poem insists on a fundamental human equality in suffering, an equality that does not erase differences of responsibility but refuses to make those differences a precondition for recognition.

This refusal resonates with Hannah Arendt's (2000) account of collective responsibility. For Arendt, political responsibility is distinguished from guilt precisely by its non-transferability: 'Where all are guilty, nobody is' (88). Guilt requires individual action; responsibility may attach to membership in a political community regardless of individual acts. Clark-Bekederemo's expanded category of casualty might be read as a poetic rendering of this

distinction. Those who ‘started a fire’ bear a different relation to the catastrophe than those who burn without agency; yet both are casualties, both caught in the fire’s consequences. The poem’s accumulative syntax refuses the moral clarity that would separate victims from perpetrators into clean categories. Instead, it insists on the messy reality of implication, the way war entangles everyone, distributing suffering and responsibility in patterns that resist simple sorting.

III. Spatial and Social Dimensions: The Geography of Implication

One of the poem’s most striking contributions is its attention to the spatial dimensions of casualty — the way suffering and responsibility are distributed across geographical distance. Lines 20-26 introduce figures far from the immediate scene of violence:

They are the emissaries of rift,
So smug in smoke-rooms they haunt abroad,
They do not see the funeral piles
At home eating up the forests.
They are the wandering minstrels who, beating on
The drums of the human heart, draw the world
Into a dance with rites it does not know.

These lines target diasporic actors, those who have left the conflict zone but continue to shape its course through their influence, their rhetoric, their mobilization of international sympathy. The ‘smoke-rooms’ suggest spaces of power and privilege, the lounges where decisions are made far from the consequences of those decisions. The ‘funeral piles / At home eating up the forests’ provide a stark contrast: the material reality of mass death, consuming not only bodies but the very landscape, rendered invisible to those who have removed themselves from its vicinity.

This spatial critique anticipates contemporary discussions of what Thomas Lacqueur (1989:204) deconstructs as ‘extension of compassion to others’ (the geography of compassion), the way moral concern is distributed along axes of proximity and distance. The diasporic ‘emissaries of rift’ are casualties too, the poem insists, though their suffering takes a different form: they are casualties of their own detachment, their own inability to see what their actions have wrought. The ‘drums of the human heart’ they beat draw the world into a dance with ‘rites it does not know’, a figure for the manipulation of international sympathy, the mobilization of feeling without understanding, the reduction of complex conflict to digestible narratives.

The poem’s treatment of these figures is notably restrained. There is no outrage here, no denunciation, no rhetorical attack. The tone remains measured, almost clinical: ‘they do not see’, ‘they are the wandering minstrels’. This restraint is itself a political strategy. By refusing the satisfactions of condemnation, the poem forces readers to consider their own relation to these figures. Are we not also distant observers? Do we not also consume simplified narratives? Do we not also beat drums whose consequences we do not fully grasp? The poem’s restraint implicates the reader in the very condition it describes.

This spatial analysis extends to those who remain ‘at home’ but equally fail to see

clearly:

the stay-at-home unsettled
By taxes and rumours, the looters for office
And wares, fearful everyday the owners may return. (lines 37-39)

Here the poem includes within the casualties those who profit from (the) war, the 'looters' who seize property and position in the chaos, living in constant fear of the return of the owners of those properties and positions. They are casualties too, though their suffering takes the form of anxiety rather than direct harm. The 'stay-at-home unsettled / By taxes and rumours' represents the general population, those who neither fight nor flee but are nonetheless 'unsettled', a word that carries both emotional and material weight, suggesting both psychological disturbance and physical displacement.

This comprehensive mapping of the civil war's effects, its reach into diasporic smoke-rooms and domestic anxieties, its transformation of looters into anxious occupiers and ordinary citizens into unsettled spectators, constitutes a kind of social anatomy of conflict. Clark-Bekederemo shows that war is not a bounded event occurring in a discrete location but a force that radiates outward, reshaping social relations, emotional economies, and moral perception across vast distances. The poem's restrained catalogue of these effects, its refusal to privilege some forms of suffering over others, enacts a democratic attention that insists on the relevance of all those caught in the war's web, regardless of their geographical location or moral desert.

IV. The Pronominal Turn: From Spectator to Participant

The poem's most dramatic moment occurs in lines 28-33, where the accumulative syntax gives way to a new grammatical subject:

Caught in the clash of counter claims and charges
When not in the niche others have left,
We fall,
All casualties of the war,
Because we cannot hear each other speak,
Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd.

The shift to first-person plural transforms everything. Throughout the poem's first two-thirds, the reader has occupied the position of observer, following the poem's catalogue of casualties from a comfortable distance. Now, suddenly, that distance collapses. 'We fall' includes the reader in the category of casualty, implicating us in the condition we have been observing. The 'we' is not specified, not restricted to Nigerians or Biafrans or any particular group; it is, the poem insists, all of us.

The reasons given for this universal casualty are striking: 'because we cannot hear each other speak, / Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd' (line 32-33). The problem is not violence directly but the failure of recognition that makes violence possible. To 'cease to see the face from the crowd' is to lose the capacity for what Levinas calls the ethical

relation (1979), the encounter with the other that makes a claim upon us. Without that capacity, we are all casualties, all caught in the clash of claims and counter-claims that substitutes for genuine dialogue.

This pronominal turn enacts what Judith Butler calls ‘precarious life’ (2004), the recognition that our vulnerability to each other is constitutive of our existence. For Butler, grief reveals the fundamental sociality of human life: we are, from the start, given over to others in ways we cannot control. Clark-Bekederemo’s ‘we fall’ works similarly, insisting that our implication in each other’s fates is not a matter of choice but of condition. We are casualties because we are social, because our lives are bound up with lives we cannot fully know, because the failure to hear and see is not a private failing but a collective catastrophe.

The poem’s affective minimalism is crucial to the force of this turn. Because the preceding catalogue has been so restrained, so measured, so free of rhetorical manipulation, the shift to ‘we’ lands with particular weight. The reader has not been prepared for an emotional climax; there has been no crescendo of feeling to anticipate this moment. Instead, the ‘we’ arrives quietly, almost casually, and in that casualness lies its power. It is not an accusation but a recognition, something we might have seen all along if we had been paying attention.

This recognition transforms the ethical demands the poem makes. Throughout the catalogue, we have been asked to acknowledge others as casualties; now we must acknowledge ourselves as casualties too. This is not, however, a levelling that erases differences. The looters’ anxiety is not the same as the detainees’ suffering; the ‘stay-at-home unsettled’ are not casualties in the same way as those ‘burning’ in the fire. But all are implicated, all caught, all required to answer. The ‘we’ does not dissolve distinctions but insists that distinctions do not release us from relation.

V. Minimalist Imagery and Clinical Critique

Even when Clark-Bekederemo introduces imagery that might, in another context, generate powerful emotional response, he calibrates it to preserve tonal restraint. The poem’s final section contains its most striking image:

We are all casualties,
All sagging as are
The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor,
The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war. (lines 40-43)

Kwashiorkor, a severe protein deficiency disease that became iconic of the Biafran famine (Heerten 2017), its images circulating globally as evidence of the war’s horror, here receives remarkably restrained treatment. The ‘cases celebrated for kwashiorkor’ are the photographs that became international symbols, the starving children whose images mobilized aid and outrage (See the July 1968 cover story in *Life* magazine). Yet Clark-Bekederemo’s phrasing is almost clinical: ‘sagging’ describes the physical symptom without melodrama; ‘celebrated’ ironizes the global attention without dismissing its reality.

The comparison is between ‘all of us’ and these celebrated cases: we are all sagging, all

depleted, all suffering from a kind of malnutrition. The metaphor extends kwashiorkor from physical condition to spiritual and social condition: the war depletes everyone, leaves everyone sagging under its weight. The disease becomes what the poem calls it, an ‘unforeseen camp-follower’, that accompanies war whether we invited it or not.

This restrained treatment of kwashiorkor is politically significant. The global circulation of famine images during the Nigerian Civil War created what we might call, following Sontag (2003), a spectacle of suffering, images that generated sympathy without demanding understanding, that produced donations without requiring political reckoning. Clark-Bekederemo's clinical diction refuses this economy. By refusing to reproduce the emotional charge of those images, by treating kwashiorkor as metaphor rather than spectacle, he insists that the real issue is not the visibility of suffering but its structural production. The disease is a ‘camp-follower’, not an accident but a consequence, not a tragedy but a predictable outcome of the war's conduct.

This move exemplifies what we have been calling affective minimalism's political strategy. By withholding the emotional gratification that famine images conventionally provide, Clark-Bekederemo redirects attention from the spectacle of suffering to its causes, from the victims who solicit our sympathy to the systems that produce victims. The comparison between ‘all of us’ and the kwashiorkor cases insists that we are not simply observers of others' suffering but participants in a condition that produces such suffering. The disease is ‘not just our war’, it belongs to war as such, to the structure of conflict, to the systems of violence that produce malnutrition as reliably as they produce death.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis has shown that J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's ‘The Casualties’ exemplifies affective minimalism as a deliberate political strategy operating through structural and semantic restraint to reconfigure the ethical relation between text and reader. Through accumulative syntax, controlled diction, pronominal shifts, and restrained imagery, the poem refuses the conventional apparatus of war poetry, lyrical amplification, spectacular suffering, and cathartic resolution in favour of tonal discipline that redistributes affective attention and intensifies ethical exposure. The iterative phrase ‘The casualties are not only...’ functions as a methodological device, progressively expanding casualty beyond the dead and wounded to include bystanders, diasporic actors, opportunists, and the morally complicit, thereby distributing ethical weight across the social field without recourse to emotional discharge.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed, this study has argued that the poem intervenes in conventional affective circulation by withholding emotive cues that would localize suffering in pitiable others. Rather than soliciting sympathy, it cultivates what Sianne Ngai calls ‘ugly feelings’: low-intensity, non-cathartic affects such as unease, implication, and reflective discomfort. The understated imagery — the cell ‘sometimes a haven’, the ‘fortress of falling walls’, and kwashiorkor as ‘unforeseen camp-follower’ — generates unsettling recognition that resists resolution. Affect circulates not as spectacle to be consumed but as a mechanism implicating readers in the moral economy the poem constructs.

Political philosophy further clarifies this ethical expansion. Karl Jaspers's distinctions

among criminal, political, and moral guilt illuminate how the poem distributes responsibility across differentiated social positions, while Hannah Arendt's concept of collective responsibility clarifies the force of the culminating declaration, 'We are all casualties'. This assertion does not erase distinctions; rather, it insists that distinctions do not absolve relation. The reader is consequently transformed from spectator into participant in an ethical field where responsibility exceeds individual action and extends into shared civic life.

The hybrid application of affect theory and political philosophy thus demonstrates the originality of Clark-Bekederemo's strategy. Emotional restraint is neither aesthetic deficiency nor neutral formalism but a rhetorical posture that intensifies ethical scrutiny, deepens political witnessing, and broadens civic consciousness. The poem's force derives precisely from what it withholds: cathartic release, emotional climax, and the satisfactions of resolved feeling. By refusing emotional excess, it encourages readers to confront violence through sustained ethical reflection rather than momentary emotional identification.

Ultimately, 'The Casualties' shows that affective minimalism is inseparable from political critique. Its enduring significance lies in demonstrating that war poetry may achieve profound ethical and political force not through the spectacle of suffering but through measured expression that redirects feeling toward sustained recognition and collective answerability. In doing so, the poem offers an enduring reflection on the responsibilities of political witnessing and the cultivation of civic consciousness, reminding readers that citizenship is sustained not only by legal or institutional belonging, but also by an ethical willingness to acknowledge shared vulnerability and responsibility in the face of collective violence.

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