

Reflections of the Jos Crisis in Selected Short Stories of D. E. Kaze and Dul Johnson

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Abstract

Nigeria is struggling with the challenge of ethno religious-violence. This study is of the view that literary works can provide a safe forum for discourse that can create an opportunity for writers and critics to discuss the issue without apportioning blame but rather, show how the opposing camps can see that they are all victims of the violence and come together to move towards reconciliation. The study adopts the Literary Sociological approach to examine the text and context of selected short stories from D. E. Kaze's collection titled *Eyelash Magic* and Dul Johnson's collection titled *Why Women Won't Make it to Heaven*. These stories employ the autobiographical narrative style to reveal the despondency and frustration of characters that are victims of ethno-religious violence. It is hoped that out of the ruins arising from these hostilities shall spring further creativity and critical input that will stem such hostilities in the future. Literature, thus, becomes a preemptive remedy.

Introduction

Socio-political events in Nigeria are materials for writers to reflect on and use in telling human stories of what people feel and think at such moments. In writing and discussing Nigerian literature, one cannot overlook the issues that are peculiar to the states and regions of the country. In this sense, one can see that Niger-Delta Literature is a reflection of the crisis that occurred due to the discovery of oil and how it has devastated the communities whose inhabitants are considered minorities in the country. Another example is the Nigerian Civil War Literature which reflects the migration of the Igbos from the Northern and Western parts of the country and the harrowing experiences they faced in the location called Biafra. D. E. Kaze and Dul Johnson are contemporary Nigerian writers from Plateau State, the North Central also called the Middle Belt region. Jos is the capital city of the State with the slogan "Home of Peace and Tourism". Ironically, Jos has

been the focus of religious crisis with a rippling effect that resounds all over the country. The tragedy of the violence, like that of any crisis, is a profound source of reflection for displaying literary creativity. The city of Jos was acclaimed by Wole Soyinka while writing on one of the terrorist attacks by Boko

Haram as;

...the ecumenical heart of Nigerian humanity... there were no strangers in Jos... the city of open arms... the pre-eminent choice for extended school excursions and casual retreats, its lush hills, its temperate weather, shimmering plateau, but above all, its benign, neighborhood humanity drew all towards her like a mystic magnet. (n. page.)

The tragedy is that violent crisis and reprisal attacks have transformed Jos, in Soyinka's words, to "yet another national abattoir". Literary reflections of the crisis in Jos are not a recent development in Nigerian literature. Cyprian Ekwensi's novel, *Jagua Nana's Daughter*, published in 1986 shows the displacing impact of the Jos crisis on the lives of people as seen among his characters. It is the crux of events that set the stage for the development of the plot and sub-plots. Before the crisis, Jagua Nana has fond memories of the peaceful periods in Jos. She recalls these memories many years, upon her return to the city she had left earlier.

She remembers how often she and her friends had gone Girl-Guiding in the rocks, when the indigenes of Jos came down to the market from the Jantar rocks with their cooked groundnuts and acha and after selling would adorn themselves in cowrie-shell costumes and blow their flutes and dance. The rocks had not moved or grown bigger since those days.
(63)

After Jagua Nana's sexual escapades with Nick Papadopoulos, masterminded by Kate Nene leading to the secret conception and birth of Elizabeth, a circle of events is created about Jagua's regular visits to breast feed the child, Heidi's daily change of diapers and care for the baby and Kate's schemes and prostitution. The crisis that started interrupts these circle of events. The tragedy is captured in these words, "Even though Jos was a peaceful town, there were sometimes undercurrents of tribal strife and when they erupted, hundreds of people would lie dead and the violence and fear would continue for a long time" (99). It is ironic that the narrator describes Jos as a peaceful town, yet the undercurrents of

violence that occur often last a long period of time. This underscores the level of insecurity in the entire country. Violence has become a frequent occurrence and the atmosphere is charged with fear.

The crisis at that time also reveals the high degree of human depravity and loss of innocence which are portrayed before Jagua Nana's eye when she witnesses an instance where "a man was chased into a well and the lid shut over the well. He must have suffocated and drowned there. Groups of killers paraded the streets armed with cutlasses if they were Igbo, or with bows and arrows if they were Hausa" (99).

Jagua Nana and her parents leave Jos and Kate exploits the tragic happenings to her advantage by telling a lie that the child is dead.

The nature of the Jos crisis can be identified and discussed in Shedrack Gaya Best's *Conflict and Peace Building in Plateau State, Nigeria*; a historical and sociological text. In Best's opinion:

What was new when violence broke out in Jos in 1994, and again in 2001, was that Jos, which had before then prided itself as having been shielded from the conflicts that affected her neighbours to the north, had this record of peace shattered (3).

Best, extensively analyses the internal and external factors responsible for the crisis and suggests ways on how peace can be restored. Literary writings can however go beyond the cerebral examinations of what actually happened. Literature awakens the feelings and shows the human stories, imagining and showing what the people feel and how they creatively use language to express their thoughts and feelings. It may be unreasonable to be hasty in apportioning blame because the role of the writer in conflict situations is not to make provocative points but to seek for reconciliation and try to contribute towards strengthening the fragile peace. And this is what both D. E. Kaze and Dul Johnson have sought to achieve with their experiences by presenting them in short stories. It is very important that time may have to elapse before more works are written to objectively discuss the crisis as Emenyonu observes in writing about conflicts:

In the present circumstance, the Nigerian writers on the war must allow a reasonable period of time to lapse before they can objectively write about the war, no longer as active combatants in the conflicts, but as writers who bring their imaginative vision to bear on the important events in the history of their people. (485)

However, as Achebe has admonished, “it is also true and very important that we do not forget but grasp the meaning of our tragedy. We must not fail to remind ourselves of the things that happened and how we felt when they were happening” (xiii).

The Jos Crisis in D. E. Kaze’s “Christmas is Coming” and “Dawn After the Fires”

Kaze’s collection of short stories entitled, *Eye Lash Magic*, clearly demonstrates how the human heart responds to tragedy, horror and loss. Kaze is less concerned with the sociological dimensions of the crisis. In two short stories, he uses the autobiographical method of narration to reveal the thoughts and feelings of young adults who struggle with the outcome of killings and destruction of property.

The first story is titled “Christmas is Coming” and the second is “Dawn After the Fires”. In Christmas is coming, news of the 2001 September 7th crisis comes to a family in America through an e-mail by Sarah, a member of the family that is left behind in Jos. The mail reads thus:

The killings and burning of houses and cars are still going on. I don’t know how to say this, but our house too has been burnt down. Everything now is ashes. We couldn’t save anything because we were trying to run for our lives. You people have to come and take me oh. I’m tired of waiting and all these things are happening. Right now Kaka, Atukop and I are at the church, where many other displaced people are. Come for me oh. The pastor kept saying we must forgive, I don’t know how this would happen. (177)

Coincidentally, the letter arrives while the family is grappling with the shock of the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in America. Kaze uses the epistolary method to show the high level of insecurity in Jos and in the United States. He reflects a universal human struggle and the ubiquitous nature of insecurity in the face of terrorism caused by religious and ethnic bigotry. A deep sense of fear is expressed but the mother is convinced that through forgiveness as advocated by the pastor in Jos, hope can be found. As fear intensifies, a father-son feud continues to degenerate the harmony in the family.

The narrator seeks solace in reflecting on happy moments in the past on how Christmas was celebrated in Jos before the crisis. At such moments, she remembers, among many other things:

the all night touring of various church members' houses with songs, drumming and dance in the cold. The gifts of money we got from adults when we said „Happy Christmas“. The white rice with red stew and drops of dark brown pieces of meat exchanged by families. The new clothes children wore and compared with one another's. And the exploding sounds of bangers all over the neighbourhood. I remembered Christmas in Jos. (181-182)

After the crisis, the situation becomes different and a sense of loss is expressed.

It wasn't as bubbly as Christmas used to be before we left for America. There was less exchange of food between families, though there was still display of garish clothes among the younger children. The Christmas Eve all-night outing couldn't hold because they said Jos wasn't what it used to be. (186)

The Christmas season, all over the world, is meant to be a period of love and peace. These virtues are to be demonstrated by all of humanity. Unfortunately the city of Jos is engulfed in crisis and the people are hostile to one another. To the young female narrator, who appreciates love and care, Christmas has lost much of its essence. Giving the fact that it is also a period for feasting, she is yet to accept that in the Christian worldview, there is more to the celebrations. She may, however, come of age in the Christian Faith.

The aftermath of the crisis is a devastated community. Families are displaced, many are either dead or missing. There are also the biased and exaggerated reports of the crisis by certain international media houses who, according to Uncle Thomas, should be held accountable for bias reportage. Returning to Jos worsens the disillusionment already experienced by the family in the United States. The relationship between father and son worsens, father blames mother for Samuel's misbehaviour and beats her for reporting him to Uncle Thomas. The crisis has taken away the fun of Christmas, and has also contributed to the breakdown of harmony in the family.

“Dawn After the Fires” is narrated from the consciousness of a liberal young adult whose parents are from the two separate camps that are fighting in the crisis. The autobiographical narrator reflects on the aftermath of the crisis, “Life

became a hot bar of iron in my hand” (191). A deep sense of pain and loss weighs heavily on his mind. All that his father has ever worked for is razed down. His younger brother is nursed by his mother in the hospital after he gets shot in the leg, and his father is missing, probably dead. He has to stay with Umar, a friend in whose room are articles and gadgets looted from the crisis. Without any sense of humanity, they talk about the way they killed the catechist. Danlami, one of the boys says, “I love to remember how we tore their catechist into pieces, he says and guffaws. I can still remember the smell of shit from his intestines” (191). The disposition of the catechist at the point of death however hunts the narrator.

He reflects,

I remember the killing of the catechist too. But I remember more than that. I remember the silent confidence in his eyes and the look he gave me. Adamu Commando had ordered him to renounce his infidel faith and proclaim the greatness and oneness of God. He quietly said he would never do that. Threatened with death, he unflinchingly said he knew where he was going after death. (192)

The enthusiasm of the boys and the confidence of the Catechist are the outcome of their religious convictions. They all hope to gain some form of eternal reward for their effort and sacrifices. It is worth noting that any act of service or sacrifice following from a religious belief that blinds one to the realities of life and degrades the human body is against the law of nature. Such acts will destroy humanity and society.

Reminiscences of happy moments are common in war fiction, it is not about the horrors alone. Happy moments are mixed with the tragedy to relieve the reader and expose the futility of war and violence. A happy moment captured in the story is when the narrator finds himself reflecting: “On this street we played „monkey-post with rag-balls“. Samuel my cousin was always the star of the games able to shoot a goal from post to post or dribble everybody like a thread being woven cleverly around a fabric” (193). As he walks further, he moves away from the scene of nostalgia and continues to examine the degree of devastation on his father’s house. He tries to smoke but voices in his head continue to haunt, it is a feeling of loss, pain and a deep desire for vengeance.

The system that exploits young children through religious indoctrination for the purpose of perpetuating violence and havoc in the interest of a privileged elite class is depicted in the story. Haji MaiGoro typifies this class. He supplies

the weapons used for the destruction. He encourages the boys to fight for their faith and abolish western education which he wants them to see as diabolic. His hypocrisy is exposed when his children returned from London without prior notice. They come in looking “completely westernized”. A spark of revelation is revealed as he unwittingly scolds them in the presence of the other boys, “but I phoned you that this place is not safe for you, neither is it a place for your type. What would I do if I lose you people? Tell me what I would do if you died in this crisis” (196).

The will to fight leaves the other boys as they all realize that they are being used to wreak havoc on others and risk their lives while his children are expected to stay far away where it is safe and peaceful. The hypocrisy in Mai Goro’s actions and beliefs is exposed. This is a man who condemns western ethics, yet he sends his children to acquire western education in London. The narrator is surprised to hear Mai Goro speak to the children in English. It is a common phenomenon therefore to realize that ethno-religious violence is the handy work of elites who themselves are educated and are willing to educate their own children while the masses are impoverished in all ramifications. The masses are given the bare minimum of food to survive and when necessary they are given weapons to fight and kill each other. It becomes a moment of realization for the narrator, so he walks away hoping for a paradise outside the hell of the crisis.

The Jos Crisis in Dul Johnson’s “Laughing in Sadness”

In Dul Johnson’s collection of Short Stories, *Why Women Won’t make it to Heaven* he tells the story of the Jos Crisis in a story titled “Laughing in Sadness”. The story is a travelogue that reveals the state of mind of an educated elite and a father whose family is in the hotbed of the crisis. The narrator is away, concerned about his safety as the rippling effect of death and killings surrounds him.

“It was September 7th 2001, a beautiful Friday” (87). Unfortunately, it turns out to be a woeful day that is memorable to people in Jos as September 11th 2001 is memorable to people in the United States. It is a day out of the narrator’s routine with series of lectures. He travels to Abuja for a meeting. While in Abuja, he hears about the crisis, “Jos was on fire” (88). It was not completely a surprise as he muses:

Religious crisis! The threat had been in the air, almost suffocating. I’m sure that those with a strong sense of smell, would even have smelt it.

But I hoped under my breath that it would end there and on that Friday evening- that special God's day. (88)

It is an agonizing moment of fear and uncertainty reminiscent of Crusoe's discovery of footprints on his island and appreciating how "the fear of danger is ten times more terrifying than danger itself when apparent to the eye; and we find the burden of anxiety greater, by much, than the evil which we are anxious about..." (122). Being a typical intellectual, and not allowing the emotions to completely overrule his reason, he finds an escape in the meeting chaired by Professor Wole Soyinka. The fear, however returns after the meeting. He is worried about his family in Jos. His voice cracks, a drink tastes stale in his mouth and his friend's effort to encourage him that Abuja is safe so he should stay back does not make any sense to him. The calls he is able to make could only stir in his mind an image of houses of friends and relatives going up in flames.

It is a period when mobile phones are not common. Educated elites cannot afford one and when he is given one to make a call, he admits his ignorance on how to operate it. It is therefore, difficult to know what is happening and how his family is faring. He calls a friend and they talk about the crisis but they can do nothing except scream, wince, sigh and hiss. He cannot sleep and when it eventually comes it was a snatch, jerky and nightmarish sleep. David Rubadiri's sublime opening line "Such a time of it they had" (139), finds an echo in reading the tortuous experience of uncertainty and anxiety faced by the narrator during the Jos crisis.

Finally, he arrives Jos and discovers the state of things in the city. He states:

I never imagined the degree of carnage or bestiality that greeted me as we got to the outskirts of Jos. First, I saw a fresh corpse lying a little distance away from a burnt bus. Though people moved around, no one seemed to give a hoot about the corpse...I had counted up to six corpses, the victims having been burnt, either alive or after they had been killed.
(92)

The helpless state of the security officers is pathetic. They stand by and helplessly watch the angry people carry clubs, cudgels, and dane guns. They paint their faces in red or black and are willing to kill, maim and destroy. These are people

who, in the past, had lived in peace with each other. They had been friends, neighbours, brothers and sisters.

The crisis creates its own way of labelling that is common in a crisis situation. According to Alubo Ogoh:

In modern Nigeria, citizenship involves, above all, a labeling process in relation to material benefits and the power to make the labels stick. This is brought home by the avalanche of labels such as foreigners, settlers, colonizers who are perceived as taking food and other opportunities away from the indigenes and “sons of the soil”. (72)

During the Jos crisis, the labelling system is “Namu ne” and “Nasu ne”, translated as “our own” and “their own” and the purpose is to determine who should be killed or spared. The narrator arrives Jos and finds himself in what he describes as a “friendly territory”, “Our own people”, he considers. He is then able to see something frightening and funny about their appearance and the weapons they carry. It is a traumatic experience for the narrator as he confesses, “what had governed my life since then, I believe, my life and many others, were fear and insecurity” (93).

The snap shots of the short story examine the social implication of the crisis. The narrator reveals the fear, insecurity and suspicion that are the aftermath of the crisis. It is an agonizing experience of fear travelling to Katsina, a place he now considers an “unfriendly territory” A phone call he receives gets him to start thinking thus:

How safe was Katsina, especially in light of what had just happened in Jos? My mind swept across Jos again for the umpteenth time. The sounds and pictures of the destruction of the war. Most vivid were the events of Wednesday the 12th. The sound of machine guns and tanks that ruled the air from about eight in the morning till about seven in the evening before giving way to sporadic shots. (94)

The travel to Katsina, despite the fears, provides him an opportunity to witness and reflect on the causes and rippling aftermath of the crisis. At a critical moment in a bus boarded by Muslims except him, he muses, “of course, the Muslims did not quarrel with just any non-Muslim. Their target was the Christians, and I was one” (96)

As he nurses this fear, he confesses a realization that:

The problem in Jos was not only between Muslims and Christians. Maybe it wore that colour at the beginning. But it soon took on different colours, and Yoruba, Idoma and Igbo Muslims? All faced the wrath of the- should I say, purer Muslims? Was this really a Muslim versus Christian fight? How many Muslims were part of this...? (96-97)

The answers to his rhetorical questions are implied in what he describes as “Purer Muslim” from whose wrath many have suffered. These are people like Haji MaiGoro in Kaze’s story whose children are too precious to die, and people who have exploited religious doctrines to pursue their selfish agenda. Again, the narrator makes references to how the people have demonstrated bestiality during the crisis to stress the point that evil is an inherent factor in humans. The devil, who is the symbol of evil, has been turned loose through the people’s exercise of their free will. He therefore works through Muslims, Christians, non-Muslims and Non-Christians to unleash carnage on humanity.

Conclusion

Literary writings are preemptive measures for writers to enlighten their audience on human tendencies for all forms of evil, so the audience can guard against gullibility and irrationality. The experience of the Jos Crisis as narrated by Kaze and Johnson are aimed at exposing the pain and folly of violence on individuals and communities. Whatever justification those who encourage violence seek to advance, there is no better way for humanity to live meaningfully in a society other than the way of love and peace. In this sense, their stories are propaganda for beneficial purpose.

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