

Young Adults' Problems in the Social Prose of
Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Doreen
Baingana: A Study of *I Do Not Come to You
by Chance* and *Tropical Fish:
Tales From Entebbe*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of young adults' problems in the social novels of Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Doreen Baingana. The specific texts under study are Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* (2009) and Baingana's *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe* (2005). The aforementioned texts are the first works of prose for both authors and indeed expose the problems of young adults in the society. The problems of young adults in these texts pose as challenges to Nationhood in the 21st century because young adults are the leaders of tomorrow. If they are not disposed to take this responsibility, then the future is bleak indeed for the nation(s). The Theoretical Framework for this paper is the Reader-response Criticism. The paper's emphasis is not only on the content of literary prose but also on the reader's interpretation and how it conditions his behavior to positive ends-a necessity for nation building in the 21st Century. Other key issues in the paper include identifying the "Young Adult" and the "Social Novel". Whatever the interpretation is in the context of the books listed above, it bothers on problems which need to be addressed in order to sustain the nation.

Introduction

Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani hails from Nigeria, in West Africa and Doreen Baingana is from Uganda, in East Africa. They are both female writers whose debut works of prose would attract a reader that easily picks interest in the problems of young adults in any social setting. Each of the authors captures the vivid pictures of her society. Their motifs represent their various societies and may also reflect any other environment where their subjects in the discourse are

significant. Nwaubani is the author of *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*, first published in 2009 while Baingana is that of *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*, which was published in 2005.

I Do Not Come To You By Chance is a novel that exposes the activities of the Nigerian internet scammers (419ers). They are represented by Boniface Mbamalu alias Cash Daddy; a school drop-out, who resulted from a fling between Kingsley's (the protagonist) maternal grandfather and a woman from the riverine area of southern Nigeria. Cash Daddy lives in affluence on ill-gotten and dirty money. Kingsley Ibe, the best Chemical Engineering graduate in his set from a Nigerian University leaves the gates of the Ivory Tower full of hope for the future. Contrary to his expectation, he only goes to face the harsh realities of graduate unemployment and poverty in Nigeria where much is expected of him as the *Opara* (first born son of the family), especially when his father later on dies. What intensifies the pain of this reality is Kingsley being jilted by his girlfriend who incidentally, is the joy of his life. Ola jilts Kingsley due to pressure from her mother. Ola's mother feels that Kingsley is not „arriving early enough“ to marry her daughter. Subsequently, the conditions of lack at home and the necessity for the sponsorship of his siblings in their various schools make him to resort to the option of joining his uncle in the 419 business until he also starts living the good life. He has a house, a Lexus and starts a new love life as evidence of his elevated status in the society. At the demise of his uncle, Cash Daddy, Kingsley takes a final decision between the unacceptable 419 business and a legitimate means of livelihood. His choice is the latter and this choice is demonstrated symbolically by his severe man-handling of his younger brother, Godfrey, who is tempted by the glamour of Kingsley's life to take to his ill tracks. All along, Kingsley's mother disapproves of his new life style with Cash Daddy but with this twist, mother and son reconcile and happiness and unity are restored again into the almost disintegrated family.

Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe is a collection of eight short stories by Doreen Baingana from Uganda. It centers on a middle class family of three sisters and their parents. The father, Taata, a senior government official, becomes an alcoholic and loses his job and life to alcohol. The girls are left in the care of their mother with her minimal earnings. Rosa, the eldest sister is promiscuous and dies of AIDS. Patti the middle sister becomes a born-again Christian while Christine, the youngest goes away from the shores of Africa for adventure in the United

States of America. She leaves in order to escape the crippling effect of the Idi Amin administration and the bad Ugandan economy of the 1970s. Baingana's short stories thrive on issues such as: love and passion, school life, Christianity, alienation, poverty, promiscuity, the HIV/AIDS scourge and family life. Along the line both authors from their various environments and dispositions expose successfully, the plight of young adults to their readers. The major characters fall within a given age range and have experiences that are best viewed as the problems that are characteristic of their age group.

Key Concepts in the Study

The key concepts in this study are: "Young Adult" and "The Social Novel".

According to the free encyclopedia from Wikipedia, "A young adult is generally a person in the age range of 20 to 39 (or 40) years.... The young adult stage in human development precedes the middle adulthood stage ages from 40 (or 41) to 64 years". This means that any person whose age is short of the senile age could still pass for a young adult or at most, an adult. Common problems associated with young adults include: the need to express themselves in understandable terms, the need to be independent adults, the need for acceptance and the need to succeed. From the *Encyclopedia Britannica* the social novel also known as the social problem (or social protest) novel, is a "work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem such as gender or race or class discrimination is dramatized through its effects on the characters of a novel." It adds that an outstanding quality of the social novel is its novelty or timelessness and that the preoccupation of the social novel is the exposure of a problem whose solution is arrived at by the characters. It is the characters therefore, that arrive at their solutions on individual basis rather than a universal application. Some of the issues that are commonly raised in the social novel include: identity, sexuality, depression, friendship, love, getting into trouble, the desire for adventure and any other social issue that may arise at a given moment.

The social novel emerged in Great Britain and the United States in the 19th Century with examples in *Ruth* (1853) by Elizabeth Gaskell which focused on prostitution and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) which was Stowe's anti-slavery novel. Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* (1839) gave vivid images of poverty, injustice and crime-the main recipients being young adults. In America, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) remains a timeless social novel on

Huckleberry's friendship, loyalty and difficult choices. In Africa, there are social novels that border on social problems and racial discrimination such as *Going Down River Road* (1976) by Meja Mwangi and *Mine Boy* (1946) by Peter Abrahams. In recent times, Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe* (2005) and Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* (2009) are additions to the list of works on the social novel from East and West Africa respectively.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Theoretical Framework for this study is the *Reader-response Criticism* which serves as the basis for the analysis of *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* and *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe* respectively. According to Charles E. Bressler, the Reader-response criticism dates as far back as the Greek classical times when Plato and Aristotle concerned themselves with their readers' or viewers' reactions to their works. The Reader-response criticism can be traced through the 1920s but gained prominence in literary analysis in the early 1970s and still influences much contemporary criticism. As an affective theory, it still gives credence to a reader's emotional response to a text thus, making the reader an active rather than a passive receiver of meaning. Bressler identifies scholars in this criticism to include: I. A Richards, Louis M. Rosenblatt, Gerard Prince, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Norman Holland. Bressler is of the opinion that

- A text should have an effect upon its reader(s) and
- That "the reading process is a transaction between the text and the reader...[who] transforms a text into a private world..., all interpretations are subjective" (60). Thus, M.H. Abrams summarizes about the Reader-response criticism that "...at least to some considerable degree, the meanings of a text are the „production“ or „creation“ of the individual reader, hence there is no one correct meaning for all readers either of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text. (330)

Young Adults in Baingana's *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*

The problems of young adults in Baingana's *Tropical Fish* are numerous. They include being naughty, insecure, poor, hungry, illiterate, alienated, and unemployed. Additional problems include sex and promiscuity, fear of the unknown, health challenges, life in the boarding school and stealing among others. Christine in *Tropical Fish* is thoroughly a naughty girl. She gets into her parents' bedroom unnoticed and puts on as many of her mother's jewelries as she can. At

the end of this act, she looks herself up in the mirror and says she could pass for a queen, a bishop, or a rich and loved wife. In this outlook, she even enacts scenes of being a white actress and squeaking her voice in a high, fake accent. Another instance is Christine's first kiss with a boy Nicholas, whom she attends the same primary school with (Lake Victoria Primary School). She sneaks from home to keep a date with Nicholas on Sunday by 2 pm but unfortunately for her, Nicholas fails to keep the date. It is embarrassing and annoying for Christine who goes through a lot of efforts like borrowing shoes and sneaking out of the house to keep the date that ends up in futility.

Furthermore, hunger is a problem the young adult in the boarding secondary school. For instance, Patti Mugisha, one of the Mugisha sisters is a student at Gayaza Secondary School, Kampala, in Uganda, and goes through the throes of real hunger. She prays for God to „fill her cup to overflowing“ but this prayer is not answered. Not even the prayers on her behalf, by the girls at the chapel, are answered. The direct opposite of Patti's sad situation is Lynette who does not even eat the bad quality food from the dining room „...because back at the dorm, she can slowly munch down a whole packet of biscuits or a loaf of bread. Her father is Minister of Agriculture.“ (29). Patti's experience here would be understood better by the reader if he or she had ever experienced hunger in the boarding house, especially those which belong to the Government.

Another dimension of life in the boarding house is the attitude of Rosa who at a young age, exhibits traits of lust and promiscuity in the Girls' High School in Kampala. Tutored by Nassuna her corrupt mentor, she engages in an experiment on the myth of safety pins. Nassuna explains to the girls that

...men have this problem of wanting women too much, and they can't control it, so we have this power over them.... You secretly, *secretly*, mind you, rub a safety pin while looking directly at the man you like, and you'll get him excited. Just like that. Then he will do anything for you.” (58)

Rosa actually tries this out in the Literature-in-English class to see what effect this would have on Mr. Mukwaya who coincidentally scratches himself “right there!” (69) while asking the class a question and looking at Rosa at the same instance. It is lustful thinking and acts such as this that corrupt Rosa's mind to flirt with an expatriate, Peter, who exports Tropical Fish which he buys from all over Uganda to resell outside the country. She goes wild in her sexual adventures with Peter, gets pregnant, aborts the pregnancy and eventually loses her life to the Acquired

Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) from David. She realizes that she would die eventually and leaves the message below for David and young adults who may also wish to become adventurous

What went wrong, David? Do you ask yourself this all the time like I do? Who brought it to us?... Do you think about these things, David, as you lie in bed, too weak to sit up and sick of sleeping? Do you ask yourself over and over again why Nassuna slept with Kizza when she knew he had slept with Mary whose former boyfriend, Yonah, once had a sugar Mummy, one of those fat yellow Dubai women, and we know what business they did in Dubai...? (80)

Similarly, in an attempt to go to greener pastures and experience freedom from becoming discouraged by the heartless administration of the former Ugandan president, Idi Amin Dada, Christine leaves the shores of Uganda by winning an Immigration Lottery to Los Angeles in the United States of America. As she finds herself in Los Angeles, arrives at her freedom but gets caught in the midst of alienation, she exclaims that

I am here, but I am not. Flying on a plane from Uganda to New York to Los Angeles doesn't really take you there. The United States of America. The desert of Los Angeles, cut across by long wide strips of grey asphalt that are too smooth to be real.... Los Angeles. I'm trying to put my feet firmly on the ground. I'm trying to be here. (103)

Life in America is not all the glamour that is imagined by young adults. For instance, Christine's cousin, Kema who had come to America in her teens and had spent almost all her adult life there welcomes Christine to her apartment. She drives her on a familiarization outing warning her that, "see the Banyankore of here?... She didn't really think someone like me could end up with a dirty cardboard box for a house; end up a heap of rubbish lying in the street, did she?" (104). While in America, Christine has nothing more meaningful to do with the money she earns than to engage it on a spending spree so, "I buy and buy and buy. A car to be paid for over six years (that's painless); a new bed with a shiny gold bedstead.... "(106). Other items which she buys include: Matching bedside tables, mirror, chest of drawers, dining room set, office clothes, party clothes, barbecue clothes, disco clothes and all sorts of things that are not significant enough for her to have left Uganda for the US (106). She discovers that material possessions do not satisfy her. She therefore suffers physical and psychological alienation. In her

flat and in her bed alone, she has nostalgic feelings of dirty Kitoro in Uganda and concludes that she is lost.

Consequently, Christine finds no one to talk to, especially on Saturdays, takes lonely walks and ends up just joining a walking group advertised in a local paper or going to the club to listen to a live band but her African accent sells her out and prevents her from becoming totally integrated into her new environment. Christine finds out that everything in America is metal-doors and elevators but in the midst of this comfort and security of all sorts, "My mouth is sticky from not talking, my face sticky with silent tears... I have been torn from natural living chaos that wrapped itself strongly around our lives. I am alone and trapped in metal" (111). Lack of focus makes her to engage in casual sex with Robert (Raab). In her escapade with Robert, she discovers that "sex heals some wounds apparently" (121) but this healing is only momentarily as the reality still awaits her when she gets out of her ideal state. We see the futility of Christine's outing in the US again when on her return, her luggage include: three suitcases of clothes and shoes and "lots of decaffeinated coffee, apricot and peach, bubble bath, pink women's razors with aloe and vitamin E, and enough lubricated, ultra-sensitive, extra-strong, non-expiring latex condoms to last anywhere from two to six years" (131).

Nonetheless, the government also has a role to play in stabilizing young adults in all the areas which they need attention. For instance, the "brain drain" which the unpopular regime of President Idi Amin of Uganda created is corrected by President Munino. When he speaks to Ugandans in Washington DC, it is a clarion call for patriotism

He pleaded with the „brain drain“ Ugandans to go back home and help rebuild the country. They were the cream of the crop, he said; they were desperately needed.... Why live as second-class non-citizens, unwelcome aliens facing racial discrimination and snow? (134)

It is to such a call that Christine heeds and comes back home to be absorbed as the new Executive Assistant Director of the Ugandan Human Rights Commission but to her dismay, she sees the general negative attitude of civil servants towards public work. For example, by 9.00 am, her Boss, Mr. Musozi is yet to be in the office and on his official seat because he has to take his children to school and his wife to work before coming to the office (138) and every three months, he has to be away from the office for a couple of days either for the burial of an Aunt or a

brother-in-law. When in the office, he would use a good amount of official time to attend to visitors or make calls on the telephone. To Christine, this is the reverse back in the US and this could be the example that the leaders at whatever level of leadership, exemplify for young adults.

Based on the illustrations above in *Tropical Fish*, the Reader-response criticism becomes applicable here because the reader does not only read about these episodes for aesthetic value alone but most importantly, that they appeal to his emotions especially as an African reader who could be part of the same story.

Young Adults in Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*

In *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*, the protagonist, though from an educated background, demonstrates the problems of young adults through the indices of poverty, insecurity, lack of identity, unemployment and issues of sex and promiscuity until he also engages himself in the 419 scam, an easy but dangerous way out for most Nigerian youths who have recourse to this practice for survival. Kingsley's educational background right from his parents is a solid one. His father Paulinus Ibe, is a graduate of Engineering from the United Kingdom and his mother Augustina is a graduate of Clothing and Textile from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Both also have Masters Degrees in their disciplines respectively. Kingsley Ibe is also a university graduate of Chemical Engineering with good grades. The father's earnings as a civil servant had been sufficient for the family but years of rising inflation without any corresponding increase in wages gradually render the amount insignificant, and more so for the fact that he now becomes a pensioner. Similarly, the little income from his mother's tailoring shop does not really make so much of a difference to meet the demands of the family (17). In terms of feeding which is a basic necessity of life, the following description explains the situation of the Ibese better

I washed my hands and began to eat slowly. The soup should have been a thick concoction of *ukazi* leaves, chunks of dried fish and boiled meat, red palm oil, maggi cubes-all boiled together until they formed a juicy paste. But what I had in front of me were a midget-sized piece of meat, bits of vegetable, and random specks of *egusi*, floating around in a thin fluid that looked like a polluted stream. (17)

In addition, there is the problem of lack of identity for Kingsley due to the inefficiency of the government to take care of its citizens. We come to understand

that Kingsley's parents find it difficult to fund his education effectively and those of his siblings. The family finds it a difficult task to feed the family and maintain Daddy's health as a retired and diabetic patient. Poverty has its toll on Ibe. He loses the Queen (Ola) of his life to the riches of a semi –illiterate Igbo business man, while the demands of the family stare him right in the face. Later when he finally loses his father, the full weight of the family demands rests on his shoulders and he has nowhere to run to for provision. Finally, Kingsley becomes alarmed when all the job interviews he attended in the oil companies as the best graduate of his final year in the university yielded no fruit. In Nigeria, "engineers, lawyers and medical doctors wore hunger from head to sole" (241-42). Seeking peace and comfort in the word of God and the church are only an exercise in futility so Kingsley gets infuriated when a group of Christians offer him hand bills in an invitation to a church programme.

Subsequently, poverty and insecurity finally lead to kingsley's loss of identity. In this dire constraint, Kingsley has an identity only by name-*Kingsley Onyeaghalanwanneya Ibe*. He does not have the identity of an *Opara*, he does not have an identity before Ola, he does not have an identity before Ola's mother, before the oil companies where he attended job interviews and before Cash

Daddy's security man, who meets him for the first time. The hammer of graduate unemployment hits Kingsley so hard that he finally makes the decision to join his uncle (Cash Daddy) in the dubious business of 419 scamming. When Kingsley eventually becomes rich, he begins to use material icons and emblems to signify his new social status. Examples include: Prada slippers, 100mls of Issey Miyake perfume, Calvin Klein boxer shorts, Rolex and Morado watches (282). Codes like Mugu, 419, and 404 are understood not by their appearance but by what the writer and most importantly the reader makes of them. In this order too names like Cash Daddy and World Bank represent the social status of the owners. Similarly, Kingsley's dream in which his father lays two choices before him to make between reading to be a man of integrity and selling in the market is a metaphorical expression which places life's options before him and leaves the choice to him.

Kingsley lives in comfort but his conscience is plagued by his mother's non-acceptance of his new way of life, his father's memories and the fear of the unknown. Kingsley cannot explain the nature of his work to Andrew Onyeije, his former school mate who comes to attend his sister's wedding from the United

States. According to Andrew, he is into IT and IBM. He has a Masters degree in Cyber Informatics from Rutgers, a Masters in Tetrachoric correlations from Cornell, a Masters in Data Transmogrification in Yale and is about to start his PhD at Harvard (241-42). By the time Kingsley hears all these from Andrew; he tries to smile but cannot smile well. When Ola confronts him headlong at the airport about his involvement in the 419 scam for a living, he cannot defend himself in concrete terms.

Subsequently, the problem of illiteracy is also high-lighted by Cash Daddy who cannot speak Standard English, fill a gubernatorial aspirant's form or produce a General Certificate of Education (GCE) document as proof of being learned enough to contest for the post of the governor of Abia state. Cash Daddy, right from the onset exhibits traits of non-challant attitude to education and is tilted more to living a dishonest life hence he could have more than one girlfriend at a time in the primary school. All his letters to these girls are only but a copy which is drafted by someone else, written out by Kingsley and distributed to the girls by Cash Daddy.

Kingsley's coach, Cash Daddy, does not only get Kingsley corrupted but also initiates him into the world of sex and promiscuity. He encourages Kingsley to work on his „machete“ by consuming 404 (dog meat) to enhance his sexual performance and protect him from venereal diseases and from his enemies. In Kingsley's words, “I had tried to keep tract of their names. After Camille, there was Jackie. Then Imabong, then Chichi, Precious, Amaka...These days, I no longer bothered to ask. Today's girl was getting up to go to the bathroom when I noticed that her right foot had a big toe that was much, much smaller than all her other toes” (281). Thus, Camille becomes his entrance point to the erotic life. Kingsley therefore becomes a sex toy in the hands of his numerous girlfriends.

Though *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* and *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*, highlight a lot of the problems of young adults such as unemployment, poverty, lack of identity, alienation, promiscuity, family life, HIV/AIDS among other problems, the authors of these works have designed certain characters to stand out as control or upright elements in a scientific experiment. These characters have remained uncontaminated or cleansed after contamination. Their good conduct stand out as ideal for what young adults should emulate-that of credibility and integrity. In *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*, Engineer Paulinus

Ibe and Mrs Augustina Ibe would not have any compromise to the positive ideals that they have cultivated in their lifetimes, marriage and children. In the dream that Kingsley had about his father shortly before his father's expiration, his father had offered him the options of success or failure in life and left him like the biblical Joshua, to make a choice as he desires but to also be ready to take the consequence(s) of whatever choice that he made (130). Kingsley's mother's refusal to accept a new Television, her son's attempt at repainting and refurbishing the flat where the family lived and a new generating set to cushion the harsh effect of NEPA (188) are all signs to indicate that she does not approve of his new found job in Cash Daddy's office, in addition to an open reprimand. The more Kingsley becomes wealthy from ill-gotten money, the more sick and anxious does his mother become in disapproval. Next in this line is Merit, the lady that Kingsley hoped to engage in marriage. She is not poised to be bribed by materialism and this discovery waters down the relationship into an end with this exclamation: "I'm not that type of girl, OK? I'm not into guys like you. Just stay out of my life. Please" (316). Kingsley's final resolve to start living by legitimate means is the lesson at the end of the novel for any youth who would be intending to engage in living by illegitimate means due to societal pressures and expectations. The writer has done justice to the novel by exposing entirely the can of worms in the society and of the corrupt youth. The choice is entirely that of the reader but it is expected that he or she makes the right choice.

In *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*, Patti is a born-again Christian and upholds the true ideals of her faith. She is peaceful, modest, patient and charitable in opposition to Rosa's and Christine's weird lives and sexual adventures. Patti like Mama is always focused. Mama is not happy with Taata's drunken practices and her loose daughter's behaviour. Mama is a strong advocate of positive cultural practices. Hence she would not embrace Christine at the airport after her long absence from Uganda and a long stay in the USA. The reader, especially as a young adult, is expected to emulate the upright characters in these texts. The authors' deliberate design of upright characters in these works is to guide young adults in the right way so that they would emulate them and become worthy citizens of their countries. It is in such citizens that the future hope of nations is reposed.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the problems of young adults in the social novel and the role of the reader, guided by the Reader-response criticism which is significant to a reader's understanding of these works. The readers of the two texts would have learnt lessons from the plight of the principal characters in order to live better lives. Kingsley for instance, leaves the negative paths of life which he treads conditioned by the influence of his corrupt Uncle and switches over to a positive living by establishing Kings Ventures International-a computer based enterprise. Conversely, Cash Daddy loses his life in the most unfortunate circumstance when his political opponents devise means and poison him to death. In *Tropical Fish*, Rosa loses her life to HIV/AIDS because of living a promiscuous life. Based on the foregoing exposition of both texts, the paper recognizes the roles of parents and the government as quite significant considering the problems encountered by young adults in the society. For instance, it is the type of parents whom Kingsley had that guided him not to derail completely from the right track, and Christine in the same vein, makes up her mind with the visit of the President of Uganda to the US, to return home and serve her country. The contribution of this study to knowledge is that no literary work of art is bound to be appreciated and interpreted in a fixed or stereotypical manner. The reader of a work of art consumes the work not as an external activity but a personal interpretation, view or attitude to enhance his or her understanding of a text. It is this orientation that also guides the paper's interpretation of *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* and *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*. What matters here most importantly is the interpretation and response of young adults to the content of the texts for a better society. This is explicated through the channel of the social novel.

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