

*'The World, the Text' and the Writer:  
A Reading of E.E Sule's Sterile Sky*

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A great writer of fiction creates a new unique individual world –through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitably, through commanding forms –and responds to a world, the world the writer shares with other people but that is unknown or mis-known by still more people confined in their worlds. Call that history, society, what you will. The writers who matter most to us are those who enlarge our conscience and our sympathies and our knowledge (Sontang 4).

**Abstract**

E. E Sule's autobiographical novel, *Sterile Sky*, fictionalizes the infamous Reinhard Bonnke religious crisis that rocked the city of Kano in October 1991. Its reconstruction of the intolerance, conflicts and violence that have become characteristic of multicultural settings in contemporary Northern Nigeria reaffirms the view that fiction responds to the reality of human experience. Against this backdrop, this article argues that fiction bears witness to social facts, thus, its a functioning part of the social structure of a nation just as the school, the family or the law. Based on the concept of *Worldliness*, as espoused by the postcolonial theorist Edward Said, the essay explores ways that fiction can be an important tool for the assessment of the social, economic and political forces in human societies. It concludes that fiction holds the potential, however unconsciously, to shape human perception, and to help build societies with strong cultural consciousness.

**Introduction**

The novel, particularly in Africa, consistently engages the continent's socio-political and economic realities. Consequently, literature occupies a significant space in the discourse of nationhood. *Sterile Sky*, E. E. Sule's award winning

novel, deals with contemporary problems in Nigerian multicultural settings where the struggle for space, power and dominance often lead to conflicts with devastating effects. The novel reveals growing polarization along ethnic and religious divides as yet another dimension to Nigeria's post-independence problems.

In *Sterile Sky*, Sule transfers facts in to fiction by incorporating an actual historical event – the 1991 'Reinhard Bonnke' crisis- in to a fictional story. Narrated through the experience and perception of the teenage Murtala, the novel partly indicts religion, bad governance and the structural inequalities between developed and developing nations for the poverty experienced by many Nigerians. However, at its core, Sule attempts to unravel the scourge of religious fanaticism and conflicts which often lead to death and destruction in contemporary Northern Nigeria.

In a review, Osha (2012), states that *Sterile Sky* portrays a prevailing phenomenon in northern Nigeria. He avers that the novel's depiction of the menace of religious fundamentalism and violence reveals that religion, rather than advance peace only serve to aggravate hatred in the region. In what follows, this article examines the way that the writer, the text and the society are inexorably bound in the process of discourse formation. It also examines how a writer's worldview is informed and nurtured by his society, and how the prevalent narrative of his time influences the story. To explore these issues, the paper deploys Edward Said's ideas on the text, its relatedness with other texts within a body of discourse, and with the occurrences of its time. What he calls *Worldliness* (Said 1975, 4).

### ***Theoretical Framework: Worldliness***

This concept is at the heart of Edward Said's discourse of postcolonial cultural theory and textuality. His seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), reveals his concern with textuality, in this instance, how Europe was able to produce, manage and control the Orient through a corpus of writing about it. His engagement with textuality is further reworked in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where he illustrates how European imperialism flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century significantly as a result of the justification of colonialism by writers of the time. Citing the

works of Josef Conrad, Jane Austen, Rudyard Kipling and other 18<sup>th</sup> Century writers, Said argues that the very idea of colonialism was made synonymous with the European civilizing mission. He shows how these writers crafted stories that did not only justify imperialism, but also established the claim that non-European people actually beseeched European domination (Said 1993).

However, Said's preoccupation with textuality was established before *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. His position on the text and its function in the world is expounded in the 1975 collection of essays, *The World the Text and the Critic*. In these essays, Said argues that texts are inexorably connected with the socio-political realities of the society from which they emanate. He contends that texts are always anchored on narratives of history and place, and the means through which readers and writers bring their own worldviews to bear on them. He refers to this phenomenon as the worldliness of the text, he argues:

Worldliness is concerned with the materiality of the text's origin, for in this material being is embedded the very materiality of matters of which it speaks; dispossession, injustice, marginality, subjugation... to treat literature as an inertly given thing, canonized in books, is to miss the important fact that it is an act located in the world (Said 1975,14).

Furthermore, based on what he refers to as a text's circumstantial reality in the world, he maintains that readers/critics must connect the text to socio-political, economic and cultural realities of its society. This means that we ought to consider how a text shapes our perception of the world. We must also consider, specifically, our political, cultural and historical relationship to the text, and how its themes and issues affect us. These, in Said's scheme, all come to bear in giving the text a location in the world, he explains:

texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society. In short, they are in the world, and hence worldly. Whether a text is preserved or put aside for a period, whether it is on a library shelf or not, whether it is considered dangerous or not: these matters have to do with a text's being in the world, which is a more complicated matter than the private process of reading, (Said a3, 12).

Following these, it becomes clear that *worldliness* challenges the Formalist's 'art for art's sake' thesis which emphasizes the idea that works of arts are sufficient in themselves and need not have any direct bearing on social factors. *Worldliness* focuses on 'extraneous' elements by asking questions such as: who speaks to us in a text? From what position of power does she speak? What are the ideologies that she promotes? Which ones does she deemphasize or mutes? Similarly, the concept undermines the Humanist's celebration of literature as transcending human experience, and of the author as an originator by arguing that a text is always being constructed out of many discourses within which writers themselves are either subjects or non-subjects. Thus, Said contends that critics should question the writer's positioning in the world (society), as well as the ideologies that converge in the making of the text and in giving it a location within the body of discourses that make up human history.

On this score, Said is particularly concerned that critics pay too much attention to the text's aesthetics, what he calls its 'formal operations', rather than to its 'materiality'. He therefore argues that critics should focus on the link between the text and its connections with the political realities of the society in which it occurs. This "enables the intellectual to speak truth to power" (Said 1975, 63). In his view, when the intellectual fails to see the link, it results in the text becoming "a self-consuming artefact idealized, essentialised, instead of remaining as the special kind of cultural object it is, with a causation, persistence, durability and social presence quite its own" (Said 1975, 148).

My interest in this model stems from the view that it can be safely deployed to examine how Nigerian writers have produced a narrative – mainly from the advent of colonialism-that shows the connection between fiction and the society. This affirms that writers are responding to the country's realities. The fundamental issue of bad leadership, with the attendant legacies of corruption, nepotism, injustice, mistrust, deprivation, among many other issues bedeviling the nation are amply being portrayed in fictional works.

### *The text and its world*

The novel genre in Africa has remained one of our principal mode of understanding the past and the present. Indeed, critics of African literature have

variously expressed the view that the African novel emerged as a response to colonialism and the depiction of Africa by Western writers. Simon Gakwandi (12), for instance, submits that African literature emerged as a counter-discourse to European colonialism. Abiola Irele (3) also posits that the mode and pattern of the African novel is inevitably tied to the continent's socio-historical experiences. Writing in the same vein, Ngugi wa Thiong O' maintains that "African literature responds to its historical context; and through its textuality, the historical context is selectively created and produced" (Ngugi 5). These submissions converge at the point that the novel arises out of the crucible of the people's experience and of the particular alternatives of its time. It then follows that African writers create works that give significant insights in to the historical and socio-political experiences of the continent.

With reference to Nigeria, novels like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1953) explicitly depict the encroachment of colonialism and its denigration of indigenous culture. In their sequel, *No Longer at Ease* (1962), Achebe deepens the concern with the culture clash and the hybrid condition which it created. After independence, the disenchantment with the failure of the leadership to actualize the ideals of independence became the writers' preoccupation. Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) details the anger of an emerging group of elites seeking relevance in an ennui-filled polity, just as Achebe's *A Man of The People* (1966) foregrounds the willful corruption of the newly installed political class and the imminent supplanting of this class by the military.

The incursion of the military in the political space is equally well documented within the canvas of the novel. The spate of military dictatorship-notably from the end of the 1960s to the end of 1990s- with its stigma of fear, insecurity, and the abuse of human dignity is fictionalized in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1981), Olu Obafemi's *Wheels* (1989) and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), among many others.

The restoration of civil rule in 1999 ushered in even higher levels of socio-political and economic complexities in the Nigerian polity. Agitations for political and economic control among the various ethnic and regional groups of the

country are threatening the polity. These are the times of MEND, Niger Delta Avengers, Boko Haram, IPOB, Fulani herdsmen, and many, various groups fighting for some sorts of control.

Writers are documenting this phase of the country's development. Tanure Ojaide's *The Activists*, Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* engage the Niger Delta predicament. Habila's *Measuring Time*, E.E Sule's *Sterile Sky*, Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossom*, El-Nathan John and Edify Yakusak's very recent novels, *Born on a Tuesday* and *After they Left*, all represent the political/ethno-religious palaver in Northern Nigeria. These texts do not only attest to the view that fiction responds to the reality of human experience, they also bring to focus the relevance of the text in the society-what Said calls the texts' 'circumstantial reality'.

It is against this backdrop that literature partakes in the formation of discourse and knowledge, and is thus a functioning part of the society. As such, fiction writers are not only story tellers, but are also historians, teachers and moral agents. Embedded in their stories are lessons in history, current affairs and morality. The novel informs and broadens the readers' knowledge about the past and the present. It evokes the readers' emotion and reason towards an understanding of what is good and bad and what is repulsive and admirable.

### ***The writer and the world***

The writer is connected to the society. The socio-political and cultural landscape nourishes the writer's imagination. Consequently, fiction reflects the society's experience in social, historical or psychological terms. Stressing this thesis, Achebe in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" (1975) reiterates that a writer has a role to play in the society. For him, the writer is, above all, a teacher whose main role is to re-educate his society about its past, in order to restore the dignity and self-esteem which they had lost in the process of colonization. For Achebe, writing against the backdrop of colonialism and its erasure of African culture and values, the major preoccupation of the African novel should be to tell:

That African people s did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and,

above all, they had dignity that many African peoples all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. (Achebe 157)

If we connect this point, the role of the writer, with Ngugi's assertion that literature responds to its historical context and through its textuality, the historical context is selectively created and produced, (Ngugi 5), we can safely argue that Sule's engagement with the themes of religious extremism, poverty, underdevelopment, disease and ignorance demonstrates the worldliness of a text and the function of literature in society.

### *Textual Analysis*

Set in Kano, the novel deals with the inhabitants of this city whose lives are intertwined in spite of their divergent religious beliefs, ethnicities and social class. The author utilizes characterization as a major device in order to comment on religious intolerance, violence, poverty, disease and bad governance. His characters are representatives of the classes of people in the society. The poor, rich, educated, ignorant, believers in religion and the agnostics. He uses them to show how religious, social and class status informs and influence peoples decisions and actions.

The story revolves around the poverty-stricken family of Baba Murtala. Plagued in his youthful years by woes of family rivalry and fear of witchcraft, Baba had fled his village and joined the police force. He served in it for 18 years without promotion until his unfortunate sacking from the force. He lives with his family of eight in a two-room rat infested and dilapidated tenement where nutrition, education and other basic amenities are luxuries beyond the reach of many. This neighborhood of the poor displays the highest degree of religious intolerance.

On the other part of town lives Ola, Murtala's wealthy class-mate and benefactor. A character the novelist uses to show the differences in the perception of religion between the rich and the poor. Ola's wealthy parents belong to the two

antagonistic faiths, the Mother a Muslim and the Father a Christian, yet are completely unaffected by the religious hostilities wrecking the poor. Baba Murtala, on one hand, criticizes the church through his cynical views on its doctrines, while his wife is an ardent believer in Christ, miracles and the power of prayer. Uncle Tony, a student of history at the Kano University, sees Christianity and Islam as two foreign religions responsible for the society's woes. Omodiele, also a graduate of the Ambrose Ali University total abhors the two faiths and blames their followers for the lack of peace in the society. Imatum, Murtala's younger sister, is the dissident character who breaks the binary of class and religion by marrying a rich Muslim. Apart from these major characters, the novel uses pack of characters: The Muslim killing mob, comprising of poor, illiterate children of the Hausa ethnic group, who also exploit the riotous situation to loot. The Christian killer group, made up of the Sabon gari Igbo traders, who also loot from non-Igbo shops (Sule,114). Conclusively, the story that the novelist weaves around his characters explicitly portray life in a Northern Nigerian multicultural, multi-religious setting where violence have become a predominant feature.

### ***Religious Crisis in Sterile Sky***

Northern Nigeria has had a history of religious conflicts, prominently from the 1980's. Starting with the *Maitatsine* Crisis of 1982 in Kano and Yola, with sporadic uprisings in Kaduna. These were followed by the conflict over the location of the St. Georges Anglican Church in Fagge, Kano. From then on, incidences of Muslim/Christian clashes became wide spread and regular, (see Mukhtar 23 and Balogun 12).

Scholars have attributed this development to a number of reasons. Tamuno, TN, for example blames the hostility among Muslims and Christians of Northern Nigeria to the pre-colonial history of Muslim slave-trade and hegemonies. According to him, the then predominantly animist middle belt region of Northern Nigeria became a haven for slaves traded by the Arabs. He also points to the colonial imposition of Muslim Emirs on these same communities as a further cause of acrimony, (Tamuno 386). However, (Taye 124 and Balogun 22) have respectively laid the blame squarely on what they describe as the rise of fundamental Islam and Pentecostal Christianity, with their characteristic

aggressive conversion campaigns, as well as the religious intolerance caused by indoctrination. According to them, high level of illiteracy among the followers render them gullible to the doctrines of the 'fundamentalists'. *Sterile Sky* depicts instances that suggests that ignorance among followers is one of the causes of religious crisis in Northern Nigeria.

The novel underscores ignorance by setting the crisis right in the quarters where the illiterate population resides. It also contrasts the perception of religion between the educated people (characters like Omodiele, Uncle Tony and Ola's parents) and the uneducated. (the likes of Mama Murtala, Baba Tindile, and Baba Fatima). While the uneducated, from both divides, tie every aspect of their lives to their religion, the educated are capable of handling their faiths as a personal matter, and are able to avoid hostile interpersonal interaction with people of different faiths. One example is Ola's parents' inter-faith marriage, as opposed to Mama Murtala's outright disowning of Imatum because of her marriage to a Muslim (Sule 260). Ola's parents' education and exposure enable them to respect one another's belief, while Mama's ignorance and lack of exposure limits her from understanding that people of different faiths can peacefully co-habit, as captured elsewhere in the novel:

'mama do you know that that Ola's father is a Christian and his mother a muslim?  
'...the husband Christian and the mother muslim?'  
'yes'  
'no religion for the family then. What's your friend's religion?'  
'he goes to church with his father.'  
'I see.'  
'the other children are muslims.'  
'And there is peace in the family?' (p 277)

Furthermore, in order to underscore ignorance as a major cause of religious disharmony, Sule's early setting of the story in *kwana Hudu*, a settlement predominated by the illiterate poor, sets the tone for the crisis that run the course of the narrative. The first conflict, in which Helen's family and Ukpo, among others, were killed, exemplifies the violence exhibited by both Muslims and Christians. The Muslim mob, in reprisal for the burning of a Mosque in Sabon

Gari, a predominantly Cristian locality, went house after house killing non-Muslims. This is revealed in the conversation between Umar and his mother: “*laa a ila!* Why did they set the mosque ablaze? They have poked fingers in your eyes my son.’ ‘...Hhm, the kafirs have burnt down Sabon Gari main Mosque.’...we’ll burn all their churches! We’ll kill them!” (6).

Just as the Muslim mob kill non-Muslims, the Christian mob also slay the Muslims in their own quarters. Hadiza, who luckily survived their assault with a deformed figure, narrates how Madam Well- Well was murdered:

‘...To cut a long story, my sister, we had almost moved out of Sabon Gari when we heard chanting voices again.’  
 ‘Muslims or Christian?’  
 ‘Christians. We dodged behind a building and hid. The chanters came close but did not see us. Then a small boy, much younger than Murtala, shouted, pointing at us. “Here are two Hausa women!” (111).

Contrary, while the violence rages in *Kwana Hudu, Sabon Gari, Dakata* and other suburbs (Sule 42), the residents of the GRA (Government Reserve Areas) remain oblivious to the carnage, watching only on television in the comfort of their homes, as Ola informs Murtala in page (108). Murtala corroborates this view when he tells Mama that Ola’s house was safe “because it was in a rich people’s area and crisis, no matter its intensity, would not reach there” (265).

To further buttress the point that ignorance is mainly responsible for the religious hostilities, Sule use some characters to illuminate the fact that the Muslims who perpetuate violence in the name of religion are actually ignorant of the true dictates of the religion. Such is revealed when the Berber who had earlier saved Murtala’s family from the Muslim killing mob inquires about them after the crisis:

‘where do you live now?’  
 ‘Kwanar Jabba.’  
 ‘It’s not far from here.’  
 ‘My mother and my younger ones have gone to the village. It’s only my father and me.’  
 ‘well, that’s good. Most people have run away’.  
 ‘The killers behaved as if the strangers didn’t have their own hometowns.  
 ‘Most people have return?

‘He looked in to my eyes’. ‘If they have things to do in their places, will they return to a place where they’ll be killed?’

‘certainly not’.

‘And yet the Prophet Muhammad *sallallahu alaihum wasallam* enjoin us to welcome strangers and live with them. It’s the strangers that bring the things that we don’t have.’ (Sule 71).

Next to ignorance, the novel tresses the cause of religious conflicts to aggressive conversion campaigns by the Christians, and the intolerance exhibited by the Muslims. Indeed, the Muslim’s reaction to the media jingles, banners and stickers, promising healing to the blind, the lame and the crippled by Reinhard Bonneke sparked the first bout of killings, Murtala narrates:

I sighted the chanting mob. Some had their fists in the air. Others wielded swords, spears and cutlasses.... i turned and saw thick smoke surging from upwards behind the mob. A kiosk with Reinhard Bonnke’s posters pasted on it caught flame... ‘They are burning houses!’

‘They are killing people! ‘Two terrified women stood by me near the station entrance. They carried on their heads trays they hawked. One of them said ‘Dem say dey no wan Bonnke to come to Kano. I no know why the man come by all means sef’. ‘But e don leave na.’ the other replied. ‘which time im leave? ‘Na now. No be him dey follow go airport so?’

It down on me. For a week now, Baba’s radio had been blaring adverts about the coming of a great man of God from Germany. he would perform unprecedented miracles like Jesus had. Blind people will see. Lame people will walk. The deaf will hear and the mute will speak. (1-2)

In another instance, the novel captures the insensitivity and disrespect that followers of the two faiths display towards one another, which often violent conflicts. The second riot recorded in the narrative depicts this. The AKALUKA crisis that occurred in December, 1994, following the beheading of a prisoner, Gideon Akaluka, whose killers accused of desecrating pages of the Quran (see Minchakpu 236 and Maier 169,).

This event is reconstructed in the novel, as narrated by Baba Peter, (Sule 205). A Christian woman accused of using pages of the Koran as toilet paper is

beheaded and her skull displayed on the streets by her killers, igniting a fresh bout of killings. Baba Peter had encountered the so- called *Jihadists* parading the skull of the slain woman:

'Haa! My people, dem don begin to kill again o.'  
 'Wetin happen? 'a frightened Baba Eddy cried, his voice filling the whole compound  
 'Make una listen, listen first, I say listen!'  
 'Baba Peter was desperate as he raised a hand eastward in a dramatic gesture'.  
 'Listen to that song!'  
 'We all hushed up to hear distant chants'.  
 'Wetin I see ehn!'  
 'Be a man and tell us wetin you see,' Baba Fatima said, impatiently.  
 'Dem cut woman head, chuch am for stick and raise am up like dis.' ....'  
 Dem say she tear paper from Koran clean im pikin nyash.'...  
 'Dem don declare Jihad now. Dem don chase every *Kafiri* commot from Kano'.

In the last analysis, Sule has brought to fore one of the most distressing aspect of live in contemporary Northern Nigeria by crafting a story on religious conflicts. The novel has shown that when violence is unleashed, everyone suffers. people from both sides of the divide lose property and loved ones. Disharmony is deepened and peaceful co-existence is threatened. The novelist condemns this situation in many instances, calling attention to the futility of such acts. In doing so, fiction is complementing the effort of the educational institutions, the law, families and all parties responsible for promoting peaceful co-existence in a region troubled by religious acrimony.

### Conclusion

The view that "a literary text is not only part of the long secular established institution called literature, but also a new possible horizon on intelligibility within social, political and ethic positions which always have a historical dimension" (Alfonso 53) is brought in to focus in the forgone discussion. The fictional portrayal of Nigeria's experiences of political instability, military dictatorship, the wanton corruption exhibited by the ruling class, the inequity in

the distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic marginalization, plagues, epidemics and other major traumatic experiences that shook the nation, such as the Biafran Civil War, the Niger Delta and the Boko Haram insurgencies, are prove to the fact that the fiction has a material reality in the world; and criticism cannot be aloof to this fact about fiction

The paper's discussion of *Sterile Sky*, particularly its focus on the unfortunate circle of violence that have bedeviled Northern Nigeria is a case in point of the *worldliness* of the text. By featuring the insensitivity, lack of respect for divergent beliefs and a total disregard for the sacredness of life that has become our reality as a nation, the narrative attests to the view that writers are keeping faith with the society.

While this paper does not claim that fiction can be a substitute for truth, if there is such a thing as the truth, following the post-structuralist scheme, it does posit that fiction can, and does reveal the complexities of human experiences in a manner that educates, informs, admonishes and, ultimately, broadens our understanding of our world. It is in this sense that the paper concludes on the note that fiction plays an important role in the society because it holds the potential to shape our perception of our world and the way we interact with other people who do not share our beliefs, values and culture.

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