

*The Novel as a Vehicle for Awareness.
An Exploration of Elnathan John's *Born on A Tuesday*.*

BALKISU ABUBAKAR KIGO

Abstract

Nigeria, a country of diverse people and culture, is blessed with vast mineral resources and a huge population. Nigeria is thus referred to as the giant of Africa because, despite facing corruption and various challenges, the country continues to forge ahead in an effort to maintain unity and progress. This however, proves more difficult because the country is facing serious security challenges. Criminal activities ranging from terrorism, kidnapping, political unrest, religious unrest, narcotics to human trafficking and many more threaten the existence, peace and unity of the country. The Nigerian writer has watched this development with keen interest which has developed into various themes found in the Nigerian novel. The characters bring to life stories of how these different forms of criminal activities can cripple a nation, turn the people into destitutes, and if care is not taken, bring on a full-fledged war. This awareness which is created by the Nigerian writer brings the problem closer to the people and society. This way, the people become more conscious about what happens around them, and devise ways of preventing or tackling the problems before they receive help from the relevant authorities. This paper is therefore concerned with how these issues are explored in the Nigerian novel. Its focus, however, is limited to the novel, *Born on a Tuesday*, by Elnathan John.

Introduction

The state of insecurity in Nigeria has become a major source of concern to all. This is clear from the different forms of criminal activities happening in various parts of the nation. In the North, the fight with Boko Haram is far from being over, because the terrorists devise new means of inflicting terror on the people every day. In the South West, armed robbery is a major source of concern, with armed

robbers carrying more sophisticated weapons than the Nigerian Police. In the South-South, the fear of kidnappers is the beginning of wisdom. Victims range from the elderly to even the young ones, the main aim being to extort a huge ransom from well-to-do families. The recent arrest of a high profile kidnapper, Chukwudi Onwuamadike (popularly known as Evans), is a pointer. There are also constant political unrest and ethnic and religious crises in various parts of the country. The institutions and agencies (the military, state security agencies, the police, immigration, and prison service) charged with the responsibility of protecting the lives and properties of the people, are overwhelmed with various acts of criminality.

Insecurity is the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection. It can also be defined as being open to a threat or danger, from which there is no protection. It is also a state of being vulnerable to some threat. Our working definition is that insecurity is the inability of the state to overcome the multi-dimensional threats to the well-being of her people and to maintain a productive peaceful state. "Like the scenario described by Thomas Hobbes in his notion of "state of nature" (86-90). Living in Nigeria today has come to feel like experiencing in real terms, the danger and fear of the unknown, brutal anarchy, reckless insecurity, and apparent war of all against all" (Uwah 79). The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to portray how these issues are explored in the Nigerian novel, with particular emphasis on the novel, *Born on a Tuesday* by Elnathan John.

Theoretical Framework

The work applies postcolonial literary theory, which is a diverse interdisciplinary field influenced by various thinkers such as Edward Said, Bill Ashcraft, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Aizazz Ahmad. The theory evolved around the subject of postcolonial literature. Some of the issues associated with postcolonial literature involve problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly colonized people. However the term postcolonialism was not used until the late 1980s; theories surrounding its concern have been

published since the 1960s. In 1961, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was published out of the Algerian struggle for independence from France. He examined whites versus blacks, good versus evil, rich versus poor, to cite a few. From that point on wards, the study of postcolonialism has attracted the interest of so many critics and scholars. Additional factors that attracted scholars to the theory of postcolonialism is the question of what happens to culture from the beginning of colonization to the present, that the formal termination of colonial rule does not erode its legacy and the culture left is a combination of "the colonized one and that of the colonizer, often characterized by contrasts and antagonisms, resentment and blended practice". (Dobie 2006). The two are no longer recognizable as having separate culture's thus, issues spring up concerning the development of national identity, identification of cultural histories and knowledge, the precolonial nature of the colonized and the colonized resistance to the power that has dominated them.

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* is an exceptional coming – of – age story about a young boy and an intimate look at the way young men seek purpose in a world ripped apart by political and religious violence. In the story, religious leaders and Politicians serve human interest in the name of God. The acts perpetuated by these people are not about religion and ethnicity, but about money and politics.

The Novel, Born on a Tuesday

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, is the coming of age story of a young boy Dantala. 'Dantala' means born on a Tuesday in Hausa language. This young boy grows up amidst problems and struggles to make his journey to adulthood. He fights hard to understand love and sex, friendship and also to pursue his drive for knowledge and self-expression, while living in the thick of wholesale mayhem and death. He is an *almajiri*, a word used in Hausa to refer to a child who has left his home in search of Qur'anic knowledge. After his Qur'anic education, Dantala is stranded because he does not have the fare for the bus to his village. He then hangs out with a gang of street kids until they are paid to cause trouble during an election. The aftermath of this trouble causes the death of some boys and forces

Dantala to run away. He ends up in a mosque run by a kind and peace-loving imam named Sheik Jamal. The sheik recognizes Dantala's good nature and intelligence and engages his services in running the mosque. Dantala's journey begins from here. He navigates the world of Islamic sectarianism and battles with love, sex, ignorance, insanity and brutality in his attempt to find a place in the world.

The novel's main thrust is how young men are seduced by religious fundamentalism and violence. Dantala's experience begins when he meets with Sheik Jamal and his assistant, Malam Abdul-Nur. "Sheik is kind, he is different from Mallam Junaidu in Bayan Layi, who made us beg even after working on his maize farm" (61). This impression of the Sheik's kindness is to have a lasting effect on him. In his note book, he notes the Sheik's calm and compromising attitude in explaining the role of Western education in Islam. He states that the Sheik believes that Muslims should try to acquire knowledge in every field of learning, including science and technology. His assistant, Mallam Abdul-Nur, however, has a contrary opinion. He believes that Western education and anything associated with it is 'haram'. This seed of discord planted by Mallam Abdul Nur forms the background of the story.

Religious Indoctrination

This refers to a process of imparting doctrine in an authoritative way, forcibly or coercively causing people to act and think on the basis of a certain ideology. This is explored in Elnathan's novel through the character of Malam Abdul-Nur, who unlike the Sheik, is uncompromising and confrontational. After his return from Saudi-Arabia, he forms a new movement in opposition to the Sheik. "Many of the young people who used to be with us now follow Malam Abdul-Nur. They have left the open arms of sheik and fallen under the strict hand of the new leader of Firqatul Mujahidden Li lhyau Islam, who I hear has organized them into units and team" (186). Abdul-Nur's approach is violent and very radical. Very soon his followers prove unruly and aggressive, but his group grows in number every day because of the monetary enticement. Members are given loans to start new businesses or revive old ones, Abdul-Nur's stand is that "it is haram to go to

university and work for the government” (187), so he encourages his followers to set ablaze their school certificates before joining his movement.

He calls the modern Islamic universities ‘so called Islamic universities’ because they have adopted western education then he takes a more direct hit at the Sheik by saying that the basis of the Nigerian government is kufr because democracy is ‘a disgusting, anti-Islamic, western invention which seeks to introduce liberal ideal and kill Islamic values. He adds that working for the cause of kufr makes a person a kafir. He emphasizes the word ‘kafir’ and says that it is the obligation of every able Muslim to forcefully challenge and remove ungodly infidel rulers. Not through elections, because elections themselves are part of a system of kufr, but by force, because Muslims are bound by submission to the will of Allah (196).

Mallam Abdul-Nur reaches the peak of his atrocities by killing the Sheik. He is later arrested while trying to escape across the border with a lorry full of dollar notes and machine guns. His arrest signals the beginning of a religious riot, where his house is set ablaze and a few of his members killed.

Elhathan John's moving story is perhaps a sad echo of the religious crisis Nigeria is currently faces. The Shiia movement in Nigeria was founded by a young Northern Nigerian man in the late 1970s when he was a student at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He was said to have become so impressed with the 1979 Iranian Revolution that he wanted one at home. He became the leader of the Islamic movement in Nigeria, and has been gaining followers ever since. Their quarrel with the Sunni Muslim is over the issue of succession after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH),

In recent years, Sunni and Shia relationship has been increasingly marked by conflicts and the emergence of the Boko Haram sect in 2002 does not help matters in anyway.

This in essence, is the dispute between the two denominations. Each group has its opinion on this subject about which the scholars of both denominations have written hundreds of books both detailed and brief. All those books written about this subject, in spite of their length and details, did not cause the Shites to change their beliefs about Khilafah, not even by one inch. These books had the same effect on the Sunnis.

They considered that their beliefs are more deserving of being followed (Musawi 7).

This conflict between the two sects is explored in Elnathan's novel. Dantala's two brothers, Maccido and Hussein are members of the Shiite sect. Hussein dies during a course in Lebanon. When he meets his brothers during their mother's funeral, his feelings are like those of a stranger and he regards them with mistrust, "I cannot help staring when I notice that their arms hang down instead of being folded below the chest as we pray. It is all new to me, this Shiite way of praying - like a different religion" (104). When Dantala tries to engage in a conversation with his brother, they end up with the same old argument about succession. When their conversion becomes difficult, he gives up. "It shouldn't have been like this. I should have been happy to see my brothers, not exhausted or suspicious or confused"(108). Alhaji Usman, the Sheik's benefactor also has his eldest son in the Shiite sect, when he couldn't persuade him, he disowns him. The son is later killed by members of a more radical sect posing as soldiers. The activities of Malam Abdul-Nur's Mujahideen is also a portrayal of the Boko Haram sect. He becomes very uncompromising and violent in his approach. He moves his followers to his new farm in a remote village and directs them to give up their phones. Without any communication with the outside world, his followers were at his mercy. This is his own version of an Islamic state. He is both Judge and Executioner, having a young man's hand chopped off for stealing meat. The boy later dies due to excessive bleeding. The Boko Haram sect in Nigeria was founded in 2001 by a young man from the North East, whose vision was to have an Islamic state in Nigeria. He began with the concept of achieving it through setting up a model Islamic state somewhere in the desert in Yobe State.

His initial followership was largely from among secondary school students and primary school pupils who abandoned their studies on the ground that western education ("Boko") was a sin ("Haram"), hence the name Boko Haram. As he got more followers, his power and influence also grew (Adeniyi 107).

Malam Abdul-Nur thus parts ways with his Sheik, who was a prominent cleric in the country, and who opposes vehemently the young man's radical views. He warns against the young man's folly on Western education and against the indoctrination of impressionable minds. The Sheik is later fatally shot while leading the morning prayers. Malam Abdul-Nur is suspected to have masterminded the assassination, to get rid of the older scholar's interrogation and criticism. Malam Abdul-Nur is a symbol of the founder of Boko Haram, whose initial steps were to eliminate any Muslim cleric who spoke against the concept and activities of the Boko Haram sect.

Politics

Politics also plays a major role in the novel *Born on a Tuesday* which opens on a political scene, The Big Party and The Small Party. Young boys like Dantala are engaged to put up posters or cause trouble. They are also asked to lie about their age in order for them to be registered as voters: "The men in the Small Party asked us to say so and gave us all one hundred naira to register and even though the people registering us complained, They registered us anyway" (8). At the end of the day when the Big Party wins, there is a big riot. Dantala and his gang leader, Banda, set ablaze the Big Party's office and burn the poster of the Big Party's candidate. "At first we made a distinction between shops belonging to Big Party people and those belonging to Small Party people, but as we become thirsty and hungry, we just break into any shop we see" (16). Banda is later shot and Dantala escapes, ending up with the Sheik.

The relationship between the Sheik and Alhaji Usman also has political undertones. He sends food regularly to the Sheik's mosque to be distributed free to the people. He is also the chairman of the mosque committee. "The land to the right of the mosque was also donated by Alhaji Usman" (56). When Malam Abdul-Nur proved stubborn, Alhaji Usman urges the Sheik to cut off ties with him because he doesn't want to be associated with Malam Abdul-Nur as it will affect his political career. During the election frenzy, Alhaji Usman doubles the amount of food he distributes on Friday and also adds bars of soap. After the death of the Sheik, soldiers were everywhere arresting suspected members of the

Mujahideen; as a result, Alhaji Usman abandoned the movement. When Dantala tries to reach out for help after being arrested, Alhaji Usman is not forthcoming. Already, a local government chairman is arrested for being one of the people giving the Majuhideen money: "Politicians, are all the same. Now that Sheik is dead, Alhaji Usman doesn't see any need to protect the movement. He is more interested in winning the election" (238). After a very long time of suffering and brutality, Dantala is released and he comes out to find that everything has changed. Alhaji Usman is now a senator and he is getting married to Dantala's heart throb, Aisha, the Sheik's daughter.

Poverty

Poverty remains the major factor for the breakdown of law and order in any society. Poverty drives the people to great extremes. Parents send out children under the guise of seeking religious knowledge, but it is actually to rid themselves of the burden of feeding and taking care of them. This system of escaping parental responsibilities gave rise to the flourishing of the Almajiri school system, where the Islamic teacher also takes advantage of the innocent kids and sends them out to beg. These children end up as prey to fundamentalists and politicians. Bayan Layi is symbolic of many such small communities which are breeding grounds for criminals and criminal activities. Dantala comes to Bayin Layi after running away from Malam Junaidu. With whom he has been for six years, but leaves because the Malam does not care for him. Yet, Dantala is in a dilemma as to where to go after leaving Malam Junaidu. "At first I still wanted to go back home, but as each day passed, I lost the desire to do so"(7). This is because there is no future for him at home as a result of the poverty situation at home; his father is late and his mother financially handicapped. This the author uses to interrogate the homelessness and destitution of children as a result of poverty. It therefore questions the role of parents, government and stakeholders in child upbringing.

The Novel as a Vehicle for Awareness

The striking similarities between Elnathan's story and the real life situation in Nigeria are indications that the Nigerian writer is committed to exposing the true position of things in society. He has accepted to face the challenges of creating greater awareness, in the face of extreme dangers. The story of Dantala brings to life the reality of the Almajiri situation in Northern Nigeria. These innocent children fall prey to the lure of the world and poverty remains the major reason why many of these boys leave home on their own or are sent away by their parents and eventually end up in the hands of people like Malam Junaid and Malam Abdul-Nur.

Instead of continuing to delineate the sociological and psychological damage suffered by Africans during the colonial encounter, they attempted to explore dimensions of the human condition by looking more closely at local example of extreme situations. And they did this primarily through the medium of the novel..... (Lindfors 26).

The novel is thus used as a vehicle to enhance societal development and consciousness. The writer bears the heavy burden of exposing the truth about his society. The Literature produced can be influential in changing societies and individuals and Nigerian Literature has indeed fostered national consciousness, patriotism and nationalism. Abubakar Gimba, the popular novelist from Northern Nigeria explains that "Basically, I write about social issues ... things I see around me ... I do this to draw attention to issues and let people judge. I try to mold opinion in a particular direction. But I must also say that a writer must try to convince people not to incite (Babajo 54). Invariably, a novelist attempts to create social awareness and consciousness as well as suggest possible solutions rather than instigate individuals against peace.

Other Nigerian novelists who have explored similar issues in Elnathan John's *Born on Tuesday* are increasing in number; Obinna Udenwe's *Satans and Shaitans*, explores the activities of a terrorist cult, the sacred order of the universal forces, which carries out attacks in Northern Nigeria under the guise of forming an Islamic state. Edify Yakusak's novel, *After they Left* is a proof that the female Nigerian writer is also up to the task of bringing up the mirror before the society. Her novel centers on the travails of a woman, Mafeng, and her family who is

brutally raped and traumatized after an inter-ethnic/ religious crisis. The author weaves the story through an IDP camp to a mega kidnapping /human – trafficking syndicate. The novel however interrogates the role of security agencies in the maintenance of law and order and the security of the people. *Whirlwind of Metamorphosis* by Vincent Anioke, (a very young talent), is centered on kidnapping and cultism. The Aneke's family experiences the kidnapping of a family member while another family member is caught up in the wiles of a dreaded cult. The story captures the frailty of humanity and trust, and also some of the problems plaguing the Nigerian society.

Conclusion

It is evident from our discourse that, the Nigerian writer using the medium of the novel has succeeded in creating awareness on major issues of concern plaguing the society. Through the novel many Nigerian stories are told. Readers identify with the stories as their own, as each try to find out where he has gone wrong, and what he can do to change or improve the situation:

The aesthetic experience fosters mutual sympathy and understanding which will normally help on a larger scale to draw men together, to draw our country together, since all shared experiences help to bring people together in friendship and mutual respect, for any group of people who share the same aesthetic experience have a bond between them and feel united under a common identity (Nnolim 253).

It thus remains the responsibility of the people and relevant authorities to find the way forward. The government however carries the greater burden of making good policies that must matter to the people. These policies must have a positive impact on the people and their lives:

Presently, the country is experiencing constant anarchy, rebellious revolutions, incessant rampages, distracting strikes, traumatizing violence, insecurity, kidnapping, unemployment, restlessness, bunkering of all sorts coupled with unwarranted tension everywhere on daily basis spells nothing but doom for all. What the good citizens of the land expect is a proper change of attitude for the better and the time to do so is now (Uwah 88).

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* uses creative imagination to tell the story of the activities of the Boko Haram sect and their destructive activities in northern Nigeria. The novel also suggests the possible ways through which people fall victims of this sect, both young and old.

Works Cited

- Adeniyi, Olusegun. *Power, Politics and Death*. Lagos: Kachifo, 2011.
- Babajo, A.K. "Post-colonialism and the novels of Abubakr Gimba". Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Department of English, A.B.U., Zaria, 2003.
- Dobie, B.A. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2012. Print.
- John, Elnathan. *Born on a Tuesday*. Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2015.
- Lindfors, Bernth. "Politics, Culture, and Literary Form." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ato Quayson and Tejumola Olaniyan (Eds). New York: Blackwell, 2012. 22-30. Print.
- Musawi, Musa. *A Critical Revision of Shi'ah*. USA: 1992. Print.
- Nnolim, Charles. E. "The Writer As Patriot". *Issues in African Literature*. Bayelsa: Treasure Resource, 2009. Print.
- Uwah, Innocent. Ebere. "The presentation of Crime and Violence in Nigerian Narratives: Conceptualizing the Parameters of a Failed State" *Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria (JLSN)* 4, 2012. 79-88. Print.