



CONCURRENT MEDIATED LITERARY RESPONSE TO INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN ELNATHAN JOHN'S "BORN ON A TUESDAY"

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Abstract

*Literature is not taken as seriously as it ought to be. Most people tend to think that all literature is mere fantasy "stories" to be read or listened to, to while away time, and therefore it is nothing other than entertainment fit for the idle. This has been so since the invention of creative fiction. Over the centuries however, and with the emergence of African creative fiction, which came at the time of struggles against colonial domination, literature was put to more functional use than mere entertainment. Through a thematic analysis of Elnathan John's novel, *Born on a Tuesday*, the paper intends to show how literature can be, and has been, put to such serious use as the concurrent mediated response he adopts as a means of combatting of insecurity in Nigeria. The study also proposes how literature in its various forms such as drama, film, and music can, in all their subtle ways, be used to solve internal security challenges.*

Introduction

The perception of literature by a cross section of Nigerians as mere entertainment is not a helpful one. It is the reason why literature is not taken seriously, leading to the loss of its other higher benefits, including its role in the nation's social, political, and economic development. This, probably, is also the reason why many Nigerians do not buy books to read, nor read the books they are given free. It explains why (from my experience as a literature teacher) many do not want to spend money to pay tuition for their children or wards to study literature and other arts subjects in higher institutions. It may also be the reason why Nigerian governments and the managers of the education sector downplay the role of literature and the arts.

Literature in the context of this paper is not limited to its three conventional forms of drama, fiction and poetry. It is also an art, which works in consonance with other art forms such as music, film, dance, painting, journalistic writings, and even the social media which, of recent, have become the cheap and popular outlets for literary activities, for good or for bad. In examining literature and security challenges therefore, the need to interrogate social media as a handle for literature also becomes imperative.

Literature is an artistic cultural product, with both direct and indirect social and economic values. We may not have writers in Nigeria who live off their works as it happens in other parts of the world, but writing has brought wealth and fame to quite a number of literary practitioners, including Africa's first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, the world-acclaimed Chinua Achebe, and several other award winners such as Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The more direct economic values to the society are in the areas of employment, production and sales, which the publishing industry provides to individuals

as well as accruable revenue from taxes. These are only in addition to the bigger socio-cultural values, such as the promotion of culture, history, education, and socio-political awareness, which also impact on national security and development in significant ways, apart from the fact that it can be used directly to address many social problems including security challenges. Every good work of literature contains, in varying degrees, a combination of these values, which can be harnessed and used as part of the means to solve internal security problems.

Literature, the world over, evolves and thrives alongside society's political and socio-cultural development trends, which is why it is often referred to as a mirror of the society. As a mirror, it reflects (and, therefore, chronicles) what the writer observes, and reveals how he reacts to, or feels about what he reflects. Even when it thrusts us back into the past, and sometimes into the future, it does so with the aim of having us relate those experiences to the present. It is in this way that literature instructs, suggests, cautions, directs and influences positive action in the society, which can or may lead to change. This change (when it results) is usually slow, but it is change all the same. But because literature reflects and chronicles events that are happening or have happened, there are works that deal pointedly with the subject of Nigeria's security challenges, which has been on the platform of national discourse for about two decades.

The Writer and his Society

Every writer has a duty to satisfy the reader's crave for entertainment. Very few writers, however, are satisfied to stop at this point. Most African writers and critics have argued that such a thing as 'art for art's sake', that is, literature for the sole purpose of entertainment, or expression of the author's ego or pent up feelings, is not for Africa, and therefore anyone with such disposition should keep his scribbling to himself. Literature for us, and for all oppressed peoples, should bundle along with entertainment, an ideological bait (even if very subtly), to address one problem or another. No one has decreed this, but it has come naturally to every patriotic artist, and if there are Nigerian writers who write purely for entertainment, they would be very few and far apart.

The speed of change occasioned by literature would depend on the genre and the approach employed. Written modern poetry for example, would not encourage social change as easily and quickly as drama would, even if both were performed before a live audience. Oral poetry, especially in form of songs would probably do better. So would the novel. Thus, writers who are anxious and eager to bring about change must turn to drama (especially in the theatre for development form), or film, in order to spontaneously reach multitudes simultaneously. Whether it is spontaneous or gradual, literature, especially in its performance state, remains a powerful tool and an important ally in combating security challenges, especially of the nature being experienced in Nigeria.

The writer does not stand or think on the side of insecurity. That is the exclusive preserve of the politicians and the military Generals, and perhaps their war mongering business associates. These would, and may have hired a few writers to promote their cause, including war. But it is rare to point to a truly Nigerian (or African) novel, poem, or play that has (directly or indirectly) caused a fight, not to talk of war (I am yet to find an example). Any Nigerian (or African) writer who puts his art at the service of those who cause insecurity is not worthy of his calling. Those who create insecurity do it for the benefit they derive from it. Literature never thrives in times of insecurity: its creation, production, sale, and consumption (the aspects that create jobs, cash from sales and tax revenues) are either slowed down or

made impossible when the environment is in a state of turmoil. Active literary creations themselves do not happen in wars or crises situations, although these have inspired many great works, composed, rewritten and edited in more tranquil times. A few poems may have been scribbled during the Nigerian Civil War and a few other more extensive literary works may have been hurriedly put together immediately after the war. But the major literary works on the war—since literary production, like all forms of production, requires a reasonable degree of freedom and comfort—came years after the war, and are still being created.

Literature and National Security

No human society is known to exist in a complete state of peace and security, with no threat of any kind whatsoever. Nevertheless, some societies have unique security challenges and Nigeria is one of them. The security challenges that Nigeria has experienced in the last two decades are similar to those that many countries in the world are facing; insurgency, and ethnic and inter-religious or sectarian violence. In the case of Nigeria, these have been peculiar to specific parts or regions of the country; the Middle Belt region and the northern (most especially north-eastern) parts of the country. Nigerian writers have used their literary works directly and indirectly to address these challenges. As it should be expected, most of the works that deal with the challenges are from the areas where the challenges have been rampant.

The Nigerian society in particular faces many and diverse kinds of internal security challenges, although often, the tendency is to limit discussions to the violent type—insurgency, armed robbery, and religious and ethnic conflicts—which result in wanton killings and the destruction of homes, properties, and farm produce. It is not surprising therefore, that of recent, Nigerian writers, mainly from the violence prone areas have focused much of their attention on responding to these aspects of insecurity. This does not suggest however, that writers of earlier generations were not concerned about internal security. Socio-cultural problems such as youth delinquency, drug abuse, unemployment, population explosion, poverty, hunger, corruption, ethnicity, lopsided government patronage, the destruction of nature and the environment, and many more are the other forms of insecurity that writers such as Mohammed Sule, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide, Abubakar Gimba, Festus Iyayi, Zainab Alkali and many others have addressed over the years and generations. In other words, insecurity has many causes, some immediate and some remote; literature covers all of them and may therefore be used to address them. This essay therefore focuses on works that deal with the recent wave of violent religious fundamentalism, using one novel as a case study.

There is a sense in which one can say that all literature aims at promoting peace and progress. Put differently, literature is all about maintaining a balance in the human society. Seeking a balance is what writers have in common, what makes them advocates of security, because security engenders peace, and peace means many things. The absence or presence of threats in this “many things” form the subject matter of most works by writers. At the risk of repetition, these “many things” include — in addition to entertainment — outright condemnation of negative values such as corruption, crime, violence, fanaticism, bigotry, ethnicity, and a whole lot of others. But the writer does not only condemn ‘things’, he also upholds and supports those ‘things’, which exist, that are symbols of the peace being sought. These would include upholding the good things in the people’s culture, history, education system, and many more.

Literature may not (and cannot) be the only solution to the problems of insecurity in Nigeria, but it could be one of the most effective tools for neutralizing the causes. Although many

causes have been identified, most of those responsible for Nigeria's security challenges are ideological, and ideological problems are best solved through conscientization, which is the more reason why literature should be engaged. No one should be asked to give up his or her beliefs or ideology, let alone be forced to do so. Through gradual conscientization however, they may be brought to the understanding and acceptance of the right to existence of other beliefs and ideologies. With this comes the needed balance that produces the state of peace, and the amelioration of internal security challenges. This is what literature does. It is the advantage that literature has above political, military, or any other approach.

The fact that most people see literature as mere entertainment and therefore nothing to be taken seriously does not nullify its many influences on the society. Writers have been intimidated, jailed, maimed, exiled, and even killed because of what political authorities see as threats to their existence and control over their jurisdiction in some literary works. The fear has never been that the writers would take over governance, but that they would influence the mass of readers and instigate them against the authority, the fact that there is very little reading going on in Nigeria notwithstanding. Art is long and life is short, says Hippocrates, the Greek physician. Literature does not seek a one-day through one-person change; good works of literature exert influences that span hundreds of years, molding minds from generations to centuries.

Literature solves problems, not through the gun or legislation, but by *falsifying* information that the writer picks from his society and thereby making it nobody's story, turning it into a universal story; making it an anybody's story! This is not to say that the story would not relate directly to the society, or that the events and the personalities involved would not be known. In a story such as Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* for example, readers familiar with African history would know that Kamini, Kasco and Gunema are Idi Amin of Uganda, Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, and Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea respectively, and that the main character in *King Babu* is Nigeria's Sani Abacha. Members of the immediate community from which the characters and events are drawn can easily connect them to the actual events and people. This is precisely what is meant by literature being a reflection of the society, because the events and personalities are taken from real life. It is just that the story now takes on a life of its own and becomes of significance larger than those of the actual personalities and events. Literature calls upon us to extrapolate the lives and events in the story to similar lives and situations around us. In this way, we can learn lessons and bring about changes in our lives and in the society. It is in this way that literature can contribute to solving security challenges.

There are works of literature all over the world that have been used to address security challenge in its various manifestations. With specific regard to violence, which has been very common in Africa, and especially in Nigeria, there are many examples to cite. Going back to the early days of African literature, when most writers responded to colonial violence, these responses range from the revolutionary calls to action, such as we find in Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Rene Maran's *Bound to Violence* to subtler responses such as Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement*, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, Chimamanda Adicie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and this writer's more recent response to ethno-religious violence in my *Deeper into the Night* to mention just a few. There are quite a number of works in this category, including Edify Yakusak's *After They Left*, Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*, Adamu Kyuka's *Bivan's House* and Abubakar Adam's *Crimson Blossom*. Many others have responded through poetry and short stories, amongst which are Ben Ubiri's *The Chibok Girls* (poetry), Zaki Biam Blues (poetry collection, edited by Moses Tsenongo) and *Serenades of*

Zaki Biam (short fiction) by Terhemba Shija. Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* falls in this category of responses. In dealing with ethno-religious and sectarian violence, these writers are, in fact, dealing with the national security challenges that have dominated national discourse in the last one-decade or two.

Writers of the engaged tradition (especially those in Africa and the Third World) are endangered species even for engaging the authorities over bad governance. In situations of violent internal crisis, even journalistic reporting is commonly censored. Often (and this happens even in war situations), events are too sensitive to be released to the public. But the writers seem to have found a way around the embargo. What John has done with his novel, as many writers responding to the violent crises in the North do, is concurrent mediated critical response. This is literature that dares the censor in crisis situations, chronicling the events as they happen in a way that seeks to bring disparate parties to the round table. At the end of the Nigerian Civil War, the head of state, General Gowon, had declared a "no victor, no vanquished" situation. These were seen as mere words as nothing practical followed and in the end, there was a victor and a vanquished.

What concurrent mediated literature does is to immediately (concurrently) create awareness, in an objective manner, of the dangers of the situation to all parties and suggest a way in which the situation may be arrested before it gets out of hand. In *Born on a Tuesday*, John offers a practical lesson by bringing together two religious sects engaged in a deadly conflict over who controls the crowd of Muslim faithful in Sokoto State. But art is a simulacrum of reality, and not the reality itself. Therefore, rather than set his story in one of the burning northern states, the author chooses Sokoto, one of the peaceful states in the north, to further beat the censor, should there be any attempt. In the end the audience is presented with a balanced and objective critique that seeks to mediate between all parties, yet, without glossing over the apportionment of blame.

***Born on a Tuesday* and Internal Security Challenges**

Born on a Tuesday is a novel about violence and the breeding of those who perpetrate violence. It is a novel that draws attention to the mainspring of religious fundamentalism, one of the major causes of violence in Nigeria (and many parts of the world). It is also a novel about the role of politics in violence, and what politicians and responsive governments and their security agencies could and should do in response to signals of brewing violence. It traces the development and tragic experiences of a young boy named Dantala (born on a Tuesday), who is recruited into violence at a very tender age, but who escapes it to become our barometer or prism through whom we watch, and eventually experience the massive destruction that is caused by sadistic violence. In cautioning against fundamentalism—revealing the ugly side of it—the author hopes that those saddled with the responsibility of ensuring security would be part of his audience, directly or indirectly.

Fundamentalism is the belief in strict, literal interpretation and adherence to scriptures. This arises from the belief that the holy books contain literally and directly the words spoken by God. But that is only theoretically speaking. In practical terms however, it goes beyond this, and may be defined as the desire, not only to aggressively proselytize but also to force others to accept one's religion, and be ready to kill and/or die for this cause. As far as historical records go, this has been the exclusive approach of two of the world's contending modern religions; Christianity and Islam. They are the two to finger when discussing violence as security breach in Nigeria.

The route to fundamentalism (or radical extremism) is the belief that anyone that has been 'chosen' by God/Allah to preach is His representative on earth, who should be revered and feared as much as God himself. Through gradual brainwashing, followers take leave of their senses and follow the "will of God" through this earthly representative. Dantala gets a dose of this teaching quite early in life – the age at which most extremists are recruited and indoctrinated. This is why he (in a group of others) could beat up a young suspected thief, with him (Dantala) piercing the victim several times on the head with a 6-inch nail, and still tells us it is Allah that has taken the boy's life, when they later found his body:

See how Allah does things—we didn't even beat him too much. We have beaten people worse, wallahi, and they didn't die. But Allah chooses who lives and who dies. Not me. Not us (p.4).

This is means abdicating responsibility and crediting God with crime; the insurgents, terrorists style.

While Dantala himself does not become a fundamentalist, it is through his eye, through his point of view and experiences that John reveals how Islamic fundamentalism festers into violence. Living with the urchins in Bayan Layi (a locality of the masses) teaches Dantala the human side of religion – that someone may not pray five times a day but could still be a good Muslim, contrary to what Mallam Junaidu (his childhood Qur'anic teacher) had taught him; to condemn those who did not fast or pray five times a day (p.7). Dantala's argument seems to be that, if God alone chooses what happens to us, then, only God alone knows what is in the heart of people. In other words, outward piety does not reveal what is in someone's mind, which God alone sees. Dantala's education and training under Malam Junaidu (his life and experience as an almajiri), and his social moulding in Bayan Layi, were preparing him for both fanaticism and a violent life. He enjoyed inflicting physical injury on others and seeing blood spurt. Fortunately, in escaping the crisis that follows an election (in Kaduna State) and running off to Sokoto, he starts a new life under Sheik Jamal, a moderate, even Pacifist Islamic clergy who provides the protection and mental balance under which Dantala matures.

Although the novel explores different strands and levels of violence from religious sects, political groups, individuals, and security agents, Dantala's main experience comes from Sheikh Jamal's struggle to check his own followers and forge peaceful coexistence between the different Islamic sects in Sokoto (where the main action of the story is set). Apart from the incidents in Sabon Layi, all other incidents are directly or indirectly linked with his life and work with Sheikh Jamal. His life and that of Sheikh Jamal are intricately connected and they may both be seen as protagonists or heroes, with a similar complement on the side of the villain/antagonist in his friend, Jibril, and Jamal's deputy, Abdul Nur, who is Jibril's uncle. One can say that there are two heroes (or protagonists) and two villains (or antagonists); Dantala and Jamal on the one hand, and Jibril and Abdul Nur on the other. In both sets, there is a young man and an older man. This reveals the ugly side of fundamentalism; the wanton destruction of lives and properties carried out by the sect led by the villain/antagonist Abdul Nur. Jamal suffers and dies in defence of religious tolerance, and Dantala suffers innocently in the hands of corrupt state agents of security as a result of the violence unleashed by Abdul Nur's Mujahideen Sect. However, Elnathan John's sympathies clearly lie with the victims of the mayhem caused by radical extremism; victims of the breakdown of law and order in the state, but he chooses the mediated, subtler way to do it.

Rather than engage in the speculative accusations and claims of foreign powers (overseas) funding Islamic insurgency in Nigeria, or naming neighbouring countries as the exporters of bandits and terrorists (as the politicians and propagandists do), John points squarely to the

factors responsible and suggests that we deal with them. He points, for example, to how the failure to deal with local conflicts, or to identify potential criminals paves the way for citizens to easily travel abroad and get radicalized as well as get foreign funding to radicalize young innocent Nigerians. He also attacks the systemic failure that makes it possible for so-called foreign aid provider agencies to bring in pittance in cash and materials, but with subversive ulterior motives that compromise the country's security situation. He does this through an objective, apolitical lens that attracts the sympathy of all, without attracting anyone's ire.

Obviously, Elnathan John seeks to create a picture of how the problem of insecurity cuts across all ages in the society, from childhood through adolescence, youth, and adulthood and even to old age. But in using Dantala as his mouthpiece and point of view character, he seems to suggest the need to pay attention to the young and impressionable developing mind. As portrayed in Dantala himself, the process of radicalization begins from childhood and blossoms and fetters like a cancerous wound when it is not checked, and then it gets infectious and kills more people. This happens first, to Dantala himself, to his two elder brothers (Maccido and Hussein), and to Jibril (Abdul Nur's nephew). Abdul Nur, a Christian convert was himself young when he was converted to Islam by Jamal. Therefore, it is in Dantala's lack of radicalization, his imbibing non-fundamentalist views, and his stance on religious violence that John offers us hope for the future. The gruesome murder of Sheikh Jamal, the incarceration of Dantala, the massive destruction of lives and property by the violent Mujahideen Sect, the total atmosphere of insecurity that engulfs the state; all these are presented to the reader as a warning against any reoccurrence. The reader, while enjoying the novel as a literary work that entertains, is called upon to participate in preventing or guarding against the creation of conditions that lead to violence.

So, what has literature got to do with insecurity? Would that still be a relevant question? Insecurity can only be fought when people understand its causes and their role in them. Therefore, a novel that exposes the causes of violence, which is the worst form of insecurity being suffered in the country, is making a direct contribution to finding peace. Nigeria may be a non-reading society, but writers have continued to do their job. For literature to provide solutions to the country's security challenges it must become an advocacy tool. In this role, it reminds us of the age we are in, where there is much gathering and sharing of intelligence and a huge flow of information amongst peoples and nations across the world. By this, it questions how security agencies could fail to nip the activities of extremists and terrorists in the bud.

Literature, the Allied Arts and Internal Security Challenges

Literature, we have said, is a discipline that exists beyond its three conventional forms of Drama, Fiction, and Poetry. It subsumes other forms of art with which it has intimate relationship and works in combination to impinge on the security of any human society. These include film, music, dance, painting, and the social media. Used with literature – that is, when they adopt appropriate literary tropes like metaphors and similes – they are a formidable tool for dousing every kind of deviancy that could lead to violence, which ultimately breaches security. Yet, they can, and indeed, have been used negatively, with dire security implications and consequences. In this regard, the social media are the guiltiest. In the days when Plateau State of Nigeria (and other northern states) were experiencing perpetual crises, local musicians composed inciting songs in Hausa and own native tongues; songs which were capable of aggravating violence. On the global level, there have been films that triggered violence, with ripple effects on Nigeria. Viewed critically, these are responses that bear the burden of a particular level of nationalism, of service to a community to which the

writer/singer/filmmaker owes his allegiance. Nationalist interests operate at different levels and layers, and sometime they clash with patriotic interests, which are at the apex level of the conglomerate of nations (that is, ethnic nationalities) known as country in geographical terms.

The social media have had the most and worst impact on Nigeria's security in the last one-decade. The social media on their own are not literature or arts, rather, they are platforms endowed with the facilities to create and broadcast every form of literature—music and musical videos, film clips, drama skits, dance video clips, cartoons, paintings and photographs, and above all, stories in the form of fake news—all created from the fertile imagination of their writers and producers. A lot of killings and deaths resulting from accidents in the course of fleeing from phantom attacks have occurred as a result of creative (mischievous) manipulation of stories, news, and video/pictures. But it could easily be the other way round; we could have used these artistic literary forms to promote peaceful coexistence and social integration. As creative artists, the producers of these allied arts can, and indeed they do, just like Elnathan John and other writers, enlighten the society about how security challenges are nurtured so that the menace may be nipped in the bud.

Conclusion

Development and social change agents to bring awareness to people have used dramas and films extensively. All other forms of literature can be used in the same way if properly executed. Poetry can be sung or dramatized, and novels are often turned into movies, all in a bid to more directly, reach out to wider audiences. These are the ways in which we can use all forms of literature to combat security challenges. As Osundare (2007) has told us, the writer is not "... a king, an absolute monarch, with powers royally wide enough to "say this and it's done" ... nor is he "a pontiff, his book a bible of absolute, undisobeyable "Thou shall not"..." Such powers are beyond the writer. Yet, we must agree with Ojaide (2018), that literature plays multifarious roles amongst which are the sensitization of the reading public towards unity, patriotism, national cohesion, cultural awareness, awareness about social inequality and attempts to bridge the gap, and many more. This is the goal of every true creative artist.

As a writer that is engaged with the social problems of his country – especially the violent crisis threatening to consume it – Elnathan John has offered his audience the kind of mediated response that deals with the situation when it is hot, but without invoking the ire of the authorities or sectional interests. This is a truly functional art and in the mold of the true role of the artist in Africa. John and the many other writers mentioned earlier, who use this kind of response, point to the need for writers to respond to serious challenges on time, and to do it in ways that would douse rather than exacerbate the situation.

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