

RE-READING VIOLENCE AND INSURGENCY IN TWO AFRICAN NOVELS

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Abstract

Terrorism is today, a global phenomenon that is threatening almost all nations of the world. This real and present danger is most felt in third world and developing countries. This is because of the glaring lack of requisite and effective security architecture and equipment. Non state actors therefore exploit this lack and use it to terrorize, intimidate and subjugate the masses through violence, kidnapping and other acts of lawlessness. This paper discusses the portrayal of violence and insurgency in two African novels with a view to highlighting this social malaise for possible lessons.

Key words: Violence, Terrorism, Insurgency, Kidnapping, Boko Haram.

INTRODUCTION

Restiveness and societal upheavals are prevalent issues in African literary discourse as many strands of terrifying activities have emanated from these attitudes ravaging the African community. The issue of insurgency, though recent in African literature, is old in socio-political and religious discourses. Nigeria, one of the most populous countries in Africa, which is bordered by Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin Republic, is faced with different shades

of insecurity ranging from suicide bomber attacks, bomb killings by unknown gunmen, kidnappings, banditries, rape cases, genocides, homicides and a host of others. These acts could be traced to the handiwork of the different insurgent groups that have been ravaging the country since the late 90s till date. However, the major insurgent group in Nigeria at present, is Boko Haram which predominantly operates in the North Eastern part of the country. It is the *Jamaatul Alissunna lid da a wa wal Jihad*, an Arabic phrase meaning, people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teaching and Jihad. In 2002, the founder and leader of this group Muhammad Ali, declared Borno State immoral and hopeless. N.I.O and D.L-B assert that "Muhammad Ali and co decided to perform the traditional Hijra which is a withdrawal before jihad. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) withdrew from Mecca to Medina. In his own case, Ali and his followers withdrew from Maiduguri (the Borno State capital) to Kanama in nearby Yobe State" (9).

The villagers in Kanama initially called this group the "Nigerian Taliban" (10) not Boko Haram because of their views about Islam as they seemed to have accepted the name and projected themselves as the original Taliban in Afghanistan authentic heroes. Eventually, Ali and his people called their base in Kanama 'Afghanistan' where he invited other Nigerian Muslims to join him. What he wanted was an Islamic Organisation which would carry out a revival of Islam as it used to be in the time past but he never succeeded in his quest before he died. However, before his death, Ali told Nigeria that his group will keep fighting the Nigerian state, his exact words which he used to describe his sect were "*Kashin wuya* -a bone stuck in the throat" (10). Exactly, what it has eventually become today.

Thus, after the death of Ali, the surviving members of Nigeria Taliban relocated to Maiduguri in Borno State with their new leader, Muhammad Yusuf who began the process of rebuilding

the group. “Yusuf was a much more organized character than Muhammad Ali. He had clear ideas of what he wanted and almost immediately he began to implement his ideas.... Mohammad Yusuf was a colorful character. He was an eloquent speaker and he really seemed to know what he was talking about” (11-12). First, he changed the group’s name from Nigerian Taliban to Yusufiyya Islamic Movement (YIM) and later to its present name; Jama’atul Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jihad which is literary translated in Hausa as Boko Haram due to their beliefs and actions. With this reformed Yusuf’s new group, rebellion started in full operation in Bauchi State on July 26, 2009 and has since then spread to other parts of Nigeria especially the Northern part. The group has since 2009 existed with known preferences in religious belief and social practices. The dreaded Boko Haram group brought a new dimension of terrorism into Nigeria as it employed suicide bombings, assassinations, kidnapping, murdering the civilian population, and targeting security forces for political objectives.

Boko Haram, which literarily means, Western education is forbidden, in Hausa language is a controversial Nigerian extremist Islamic group that seeks to impose Sharia law in the northern part of Nigeria. Though, the group originated in Maiduguri in Borno State, located in northeast Nigeria, the reformed and more sophisticated group, a small unit then, founded by Mohammed Yusuf started recruiting unemployed graduates, poor street rascals and jobless Almajiri at his father-in –law (Muhammadu Ndimi) mosque in Maiduguri. According Don Michael Adeniji;

A group of radical Islamic youths under the tutelage of an intemperate Islamic scholar, Alhaji Mohammed Ndimi of the Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State in northeastern area of Nigeria formed the core of the Boko Haram sect. Alhaji Ndimi was an apostle of the Mohammed

Marwa...zealot Islamic preacher who settled in Kano and preached against the westernisation of Northern Nigerian Elites and its corrupt effects on Islam. (171)

Yusuf's activities and vehement attacks on western civilization brought the group's activities to national limelight. As an intelligent jihadist, Yusuf schemed his way through to attract and win the hearts of many. A number of people bought into the new image of the sect but others had their suspicions and it is off record that Yusuf sought foreign aid and support for his organization as he applied for assistance to both Algeria and Saudi Arabia, with the former obliging and the latter refusing. It is alleged that at this point, some Nigerian politicians like the former governor of Borno State tried to get this sect to serve as their own private army. N.I.O and D.L-B asserts that;

One of the most tragic things about the soap opera of Nigerian politics is the insincerity and the hypocrisy of Nigeria's political leaders. This terrible thing is evident all over the country. If a political leader recognizes a group of people as a danger to the society, the right thing to do would be to nip the problem in the bud. This is probably what politicians in Europe and America will do. In Nigeria, the political leader in question will try to use that dangerous group to further his or her own political gains. (18)

However, with the aid of former governor of Borno State, Boko Haram gradually increased in their numbers as Mohammed Yusuf

attracted people who were mostly school dropouts, unemployed, and disgruntled. Stuart Elden reveals that “Boko Haram Jihadist group shared a common ideology (jihadist) with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda groups operating in the Sahara and Sahel region” (25). On April 24, 2011, the Boko Haram group issued the following statement in Maiduguri as captured in *Tell* of July 4;

We want to reiterate that we are warriors who are carrying out jihad (religious war) in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the traditions of the Holy Prophet. We would never accept any system of government apart from the one stipulated by Islam because that is the only way that the Muslims could be liberated. (48)

With the view of liberating Muslims, under the guise of Islamic religion, Boko Haram carried out its radicalization activities without interruption for about seven years. During this period, the group was considered peaceful, as there were no major provocation between it and the Nigerian government. However, their mission and belief became clear to the society when the group isolated itself from the Muslim population, who did not share their ideology and a statement, signed by Alzawahiri (a BH spokesman) noted in *Tell*, July 4; saying that; “... we would never be ready to compromise and we don’t need amnesty. The only solution to what is happening is for [the] government to repent, jettison democracy, drop the constitution and adopt the laws of the Holy Quran” (50).

From the foregoing, this Jihadist group has continued to perpetrate violence using guerrilla warfare in many parts of Nigeria, especially in northeast Nigeria, where they mostly operate. In spite of the efforts of the Nigerian government and its allies to eradicate

the Boko Haram insurgents, the group still poses a grave threat to the sovereignty of Nigeria and its neighbors in the region. In 2014, the group abducted two hundred schoolgirls from Chibok village in the Borno State of Nigeria. The abduction drew the attention of the international community, and provoked worldwide condemnation. In response to this, Boko Haram group further pledged allegiance to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 to consolidate their network and gain more recognition.

However, while studying the concept of insurgency, it is seen as an armed disorder against a constituted authority. An insurgency may take the form of ethnic or religious identity related to political or economic struggle. Insurgents tend to use guerrilla tactics such as bombing, ambushing, kidnapping, killings, and assassination in order to create fear or gain recognition. From David Galula's view, "insurgency is a prolonged struggle conducted systematically, in order to achieve specific intermediate goals leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order" (48). Thus, it could be seen that the fundamental goal of all insurgent movements is highly influenced by class difference or struggle which could be strategically political, and directly functioning through multiple lines of struggle as their main aim is to bridge the gap between the classes while aiming to usurp a particular existing government.

Thus, this paper discusses how some literary artists, use their works to depict insurgency activities in Nigeria, like Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* and Tracie Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*. In *Born on a Tuesday*, John lucidly captures the incubation of insurgency, through the teaching of religious intolerance and extremism by some Islamic religious leaders while *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is a simulation of the abduction of the Chibok Girls, that is, the manifestations of their activities, as they utterly reject western education and way of life.

Marxist Revolutionary Violence

This study is premised on the concept of revolutionary violence which remains a prevalent issue in contemporary theory. It is important too as a facet of recent revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary political practices. In particular, the emergence of a widespread focus on terrorism as a global force demands fresh thinking about the way in which ideological frameworks, whether secular or not, lend themselves to deployment in justification of violence. For much of the twentieth century, Marxism provided the most widely used conceptual framework for contemplating revolutionary violence. Sartre's prefatory gloss on Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* underlines the ideological dimensions of Fanon's analysis, making the idea of class consciousness in the colonial context work in favour of a maximally permissive policy of revolutionary violence. According to him;

The rebel's weapon is the proof of his humanity. For in the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remain a dead man, and a free man; the survivor, for the first time, feels a national soil under his foot. (Sartre, Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. 10)

Thus, Marxist literary theory helps to explore the struggle between the insurgents and colonial power and its impalpable presence in the nation state, Nigeria. Marxist literary theory serves as an exposure and interventionist philosophy in the inequitable distribution of services between the lower class and the upper class in the society. It's a theory propounded by Karl Heinrich Marx

(1818-1883) and his friend Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) in Paris in 1844, as they explain the principles of communism (later called Marxism). This ideal was expounded in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). According to Terry Eagleton,

Marxist criticism is not merely a “sociology of literature”, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history (553).

Marx’s theory of historical materialism posits that a society’s organization and development are fundamentally shaped by the material conditions of that society’s mode of production. Thus, to understand transformations in society, Marx’s historical materialism examines the means by which human workers labour. It also considers the relationships between different social classes and the ideologies (ways of thinking) of those social classes.

To Marxism, literature belongs to the superstructure which is a product of the base realities. The Marxist approach, thus, relates literary text to the society, to the history and cultural and political systems in which it is created. It does not consider a literary text, devoid of its writer and the influences on the writer. A writer is a product of his own age which is itself a product of many ages. Accordingly, literature reflects class struggle and materialism. Thus, to Marxist literature can only be properly understood within a larger framework of social reality.

According to Strickland, Marxism views a literary text as the product of an ideology particular to a specific historical period, not the product of an individual consciousness. The text, for

Marxist critics, is judged on the basis of its portrayal of social actions. They insist that literature must be understood in relation to historical and social reality. In essence, as for Witalec, Marxists believe that a work of literature is not a result of divine inspiration or pure artistic endeavour, but that it arises out of the economic and ideological circumstances surrounding its creation.

As is seen in the case of Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, the protagonist, Dantala and his under the tree friends are made to fight the 'big political party' in order for them to take over the government; means of production and be part of the history. Tricia Adaobi Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is an attack on western education, western power, influence and control. That is why the girls were made to marry Boko Haram fighters immediately they were captured, in order to conquer what they represent as they lord over them. This can be likened to forced Stockholm syndrome as the girls are made to "love" and sympathize with their captors.

Almajiri System of Education and the growth of Violence in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* traces the incubation and birth of violence, religious extremism and insurgency in the North eastern part of Nigeria. The text explores the elusive side of today's Almajiri system of education as a prevalent culture in the Islamic religion. This system of education has evolved with time, which involves sending children away from home to Quranic schools to learn under Malams and Sheikhs. According to Asogwa Sebastine & Asogwa Dominic, "the word Almajiri was derived from Arabic "Almuhajiri" meaning an emigrant. It usually refers to a person who migrates from the luxury of his home to other places or to a popular teacher in the quest of Islamic knowledge" (15). This system of Islamic education was halted by the advent of

colonial rulers as they introduced the western form of education at the detriment of the already existing Almajiri system of education, which had been under the sponsorship of the then ruling Emirs, whom the British had deposed during their invasion and made to function as mere traditional rulers.

The advent of the British System of governance could be said to have badly affected their already existing system of education. No wonder Chinua Achebe in *Hopes and Impediments*, laments that “Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policemen and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness” (5). For Elnathan John, the major social problem is that many of these Almajiri boys are exploited and are now ready to fight the society that produced them and this invariably affects the general public. *Born on a Tuesday* begins with a statement that instigates fear in the mind of the reader- “The boys who sleep under the Kuka tree in Bayan Layi like to boast about people they have killed. I never joined in because I have never killed a man” (1). It is evident that the text depicts a world run by violence as it opens on a scary note. It explores the activities of abandoned former Almajiri boys who are left with nothing while living on the street but surviving at the mercy of corrupt politicians, who use them against their opponents during and after elections.

Furthermore, their religious leaders or teachers use these boys to satisfy their personal interest under the guise of proving their love for Allah. However, since the activities of their teachers are not regulated, the children are exposed to all sorts of extremist views that birth the problems of religious extremism in Nigeria. Some Imans, Shieks and politicians take advantage of these vulnerable children by influencing them to do their wishes in the

name of Allah's Will. According to Dantala, Malam Abdul-Nur the headmaster of the new school that will be built, tries to test his manipulative strength on him as he begins to prepare himself for the job. He asks him "If Allah asks you to do something, will you refuse? 'No,' I said, confused 'Are you just saying it, or do you understand it, what it means to do what Allah wants when He wants it, without asking why?'" (82). It is seen from his questions how he is trying to sow the idea of 'Allah's Will' in the boy's sub consciousness. Again, when a group of five men paid Sheikh a courtesy visit and tried to encourage the Muslim faithful while convincing the world that Islam is a religion of peace, - Malam Abdul-Nur interrupted the conversation by correcting the spokesman that "Islam does not mean peace ... Islam means submission: submission to the will of Allah. And the will of Allah is not the will of the infidel or the will of America. Islam means that we do not submit to anything or anyone but Allah" (84). With this outburst, it is obvious the Malam Abdul-Nur has shown himself to be toeing the line of radicalisation which he will later teach his students (Almajiri) as 'Allah's Will'.

Finally, the brutal murder of the Sheikh by decapitation, climaxes the extremism of Malam Abdul-Nur, who has become very violent with his group as he begins to terrorize the people. According to the narrator; they drag Sheikh out and made him kneel by the tap. They took off his turban... as they slap him across the cheek...then one of the men brings out a short knife.... The man steps on Sheikh's back and pulls his hair to expose his throat. As two others pin Sheikh down, the man begins to cut" (222). These actions of religious extremism, as seen in the novel, is a total reflection of Boko Haram activities in Nigeria presently.

Indeed, one can say that Boko-haram/ISWAP activities have spiraled in Nigeria and the West African sub-region. Their;

Methods of attack have included coordinated armed assaults, rocket attacks, assassinations, kidnapping, use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), bombings (including by child and female bombers), car bombings and arson. Use of military uniforms and vehicles have been used as a tactic to get close to the intended target. (<https://www.gov.uk>> terrorism) accessed on the 19th of July, 2022

Pangs of Violence in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

Boko Haram in Hausa language, in popular parlance means 'Western education is sinful'. Ḥarām is an Arabic term. In Islamic jurisprudence the term Haram is used to refer to any act that is forbidden by Allah. As Paul Newman (2013) indicates, 'boko is an indigenous Hausa word originally connoting sham, fraud, deceit, or lack of authenticity'. However, Boko Haram's brutal assaults on schools, students, and teachers in northeastern Nigeria is quite alarming. Their anger against the western form of education led to their abduction of 276 school girls from the government-owned Chibok Secondary school on April 14, 2014, in Borno State. Boko Haram eventually traded a total of 103 of the girls for their own soldiers whom the Nigerian government had captured. One hundred and twelve girls—now young women—remain missing. This caught the world's attention and sparked a campaign for their release. Nevertheless, Journalist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Journalist Viviana Mazza managed to gather gripping details about the Chibok girls' full, extraordinary story, from their journey through the dark forest, where some leapt from moving trucks to freedom; to the months the girls spent living outdoors under a large

tree; to the pressure they faced to convert to Islam (most were Christian) and marry their captors; and, finally, to the return of some, but not all, of the girls to their families and school.

Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree is a novel addressing prevalent issues and the captivity story of teenage girls like the Chibok girls enslaved in the notorious Sambisa forest. As a fictional story based on real accounts of survivors of the Chibok girls, the author exposes the ordeal of female captivity in strikingly lucid vignettes. Apart from the journalistic and historical writings on insurgency in Nigeria, Nwaubani's novel is one of few literary works to vividly project the voices of Boko Haram's female abductees on the national and global stage. *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is the writer's attempt to humanize the stolen girls and put a face to the countless victims of the worst insurgent violence in Nigeria. In the text, the author depicts the assurgent group as destroyer of dreams and communities as they fight to eradicate every trace of western ideas and civilization. In the text, it is believed that;

They use charms that make them appear and disappear,” Abraham says. Many travelers have their journey cut short when men with bomb and guns suddenly appeared in the middle of the highway, Elijah says. They load goats, cows, donkeys, camels with explosives, then send the livestock wandering into public places where they would donate Caleb says. That's how they bombed the market in Banki and Bama, Isaac says. And the market in Damboa.... They are talking about Boko Haram. (75)

The story begins on a poetic note that captures the voice and dreams of a young girl at the verge of change. The protagonist narrator, fondly called “Ya Ta” by her parents, grows up in a

closely-knit community defined by family, school, and church. Her growing awareness of self is indicated by her sense of responsibility as the only daughter among male siblings. When her school mate and close friend, Aisha, marries, becomes pregnant, and drops out of school, it appears that Ya Ta will follow a similar pathway. But, she is nurturing bigger dreams about college, scholarship, and a profession with the potential of giving back to her society. According to her: “that is the good thing about dreaming with my eyes wide open. It’s like molding a calabash from wet clay (2). In the same vein Papa wants her “to grow up and be like the women wearing white coat in the Maiduguri General Hospital” (13) but she is yet unaware that, like the calabash, dreams can be broken, and one cannot always dream from where one left off. Fortunately, she eventually earns the Borno State government scholarship for “exceptional children from disadvantaged homes”, the principal pays an unannounced visit to her family with the good news.

However, the good news and dreams are threatened and shattered when Boko Haram invaded her peaceful community and unleash their violence on them. Nwaubani interweaves this coming of age story with the gradual encroachment of Boko Haram terrorists. Her portrayal of the desires and vision of the teenage narrator and her peer friends make their capture and abuse more tragically poignant. YaTa and her friends Sarah and Aisha are kidnapped while their families murdered, and they make the difficult choice to do whatever they need to, to survive. They are forced to learn verses from the Quran, marry Boko Haram militants as the girls are used to compensate the fighters- “Rijale, great fighters, commander of the great army of Allah.... These are the virgins that Allah prepared for you” (176-177). At this point young and innocent Ya Ta wakes to reality that “the rest of us have been

preserved for rijale. We are their reward for being brave murderers” (177). The young girls are indoctrinated with their version of Islam, but YaTa knows this is not true Islam because of the Muslim friends she has grown up with. It is this interpretation of Islam that Nwaubani is careful to repeatedly point out is radical.

For Ya Ta, death seems to be the only viable option of escape. They battle with hunger, sexual violence and abuse daily. “Night after night, I pray it will not be my turn. I pray that Al-Bakura and Malam Adamu will choose someone else” (146). In the forest, time becomes meaningless. “I arise each morning with no strength to think of tomorrow morning or the morning after tomorrow. I retire at night with no courage to think of tomorrow night or the night after tomorrow” (169). Ya Ta is also the keen observer of her captive environment. Through her observations, Nwaubani exposes the strategies by which Boko Haram insurgent group brainwash their female captives and make them suicide bombers. Ya Ta questions Boko Haram’s beliefs about Islam and western education and concludes that “Boko Haram has nothing to do with Allah” (157). She unmasks the group’s contradictions, noting that the insurgent group thrives on the very things they condemn. “If they hated Western education so much, why did they bother with guns and trucks, which you could learn how to make only by going to school” (158). Boko Haram condemns western education, but, ironically, uses western warfare technology to fight western education.

As the novel underlines the impact of violence on their captives, it also exposes a growing national and global problem with regards to power struggle and that of the liberated captives who survive the fight of ‘two elephants’. For the liberated captives, the future will certainly not be as they had previously dreamed it.

Ya Ta desired to ‘fly’ but her dream of going back to school is subdued by the knowledge of her pregnancy for a masked terrorist husband, whose identity she may never know. A man who only talks whenever he is seeing Boko Haram videos defeating Nigeria troops in his laptop which make him to shout praises to Allah. She recounts in one of the videos

They leap off the vehicle and plant the black and white Boko Haram flag in the front of a building with a sign that reads “Gwaza Local Government Authority”. Then they set fire on the green-white-green Nigeria national flag and cheer. Allah be praised my husband says (202).

The violence and fight against western belief preoccupied the novel. As the voice of Boko Haram’s many female victims, the protagonist narrator occupies an important position. She is the readers’ eye into the terrorists’ camp. As a male reporter advises her, “It’s important that you tell her your story. ... You have to tell her everything that happened. That is the only way the world can know, so that they can continue to look for the other stolen girls and rescue them from Boko Haram” (287). In all, Nwaubani articulates in this intriguing story of power and supremacy struggle in the form of violence and its human and material costs, the challenges of insurgency in the twenty-first century Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, Insurgencies arise as a result of intense discontent and dissatisfaction with the current political and social reality; as well as, indoctrination, religious extremism, rage against Western ideas and civilisation, exploitation of the poor and

deprived masses such as the Almajiri by the society that produced them, amongst other factors. These are often in opposition to the existing government, neo colonialism, social order, religious majority, or entire government system. Thus, when people believe that their grievances cannot be addressed within the current structure, such popular dissatisfaction provides the drive to mobilize supporters for action. The mobilization includes raising funds, training fighters, organizing, acquiring supplies and weapons, and planning to execute their actions as in the case of today's Boko Haram in Nigeria. If equity is not returned to institutions of government, one is afraid that more and more people will become discontented and seek extra-judicial ways of venting their anger. This can only lead to more agitations and or insurgency as a consequence of loss of confidence in state institutions'

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