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Postcolonial anarchy and minority discourse in Elnathan's *Born on a Tuesday*, Sule's *Sterile Sky*, and Yakusak's *After They Left*

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Abstract

Underrepresented areas in earlier Nigerian literature have become central to discourses in Nigerian literature. Using post-colonial theory as its premise, this paper examines recent efforts by writers of northern extraction to produce novels that deal with implications of the interaction between ethnic groups and religious movements in Nigeria. Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015), E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky* (2012) and Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* (2016) depict the explosive nature of the differences between various factions of religious and ethnic groups and describe the violence that has become the norm in Nigeria. The paper argues that the activities of jihadists and ethnic jingoists constitute post-colonial anarchy consequent upon the minorisation of people on grounds of ethnicity, religion or education. It contends that discriminatory post-colonial policies that ascribe privileges only to those with Western education exacerbate internal divisions, while mismanaged ethnic and religious differences lead to antagonisms among groups.

Keywords: anarchy, colonialism, minority, postcolonial

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Introduction

Colonialism is the idea of a superior nation ruling over another nation through force of arms. Many African countries were colonised by Western countries, but upon the attainment of independence, these erstwhile colonies of Western powers become post colonies. Nigeria is a post colony of Britain. Critics, writers, and theorists have looked at post-colonialism from different perspectives; some do so with the hyphen, others, without it. The idea is that the hyphen is also critical. Some critics argue that colonialism has not ended, that the word 'post' gives a false impression of progress, of security, whereas what is going on is neo-colonialism because African countries are still under foreign receiverships and that foreign powers such as the IMF, World Bank, Paris and London clubs of creditors are still in control in terms of geopolitical issues in Africa. Furthermore, many former colonies of the West are still in disarray because the local ruling classes that took over from the colonial masters completely replicated the habits of the erstwhile colonial masters.

Postcolonial studies highlight how colonial histories shape contemporary events and issues. Bill Ashcroft *et al* (1995) argue that "all post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem" (2). They aver that "the term 'post-colonial' is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates and addresses all aspects of the colonial experience." (2). Similarly, Lutfi Harmadi (2014) notes Edward Said's belief "that the consequences of colonialism are still persisting in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which permeate many ex-colonies" (10). Bressler (1998) defines post-colonialism "as an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in formerly colonized countries. Postcolonial literature and theory investigate what happens when two cultures clash and when one of them with its accompanying ideology empowers and deems itself superior to the other" (265). Nigeria became a post-colony in 1960. Unfortunately, what obtains in contemporary Nigeria constitutes anarchy and dystopia. Nigeria is in a state of anarchy because it is not governed on the basis of rule of law, the principles of due process and constitutionalism. There is no order. Nigerian society is a dystopian universe permanently in a state of "anomy" (Soyinka, 1974).

Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd's *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990: ix) cited in Ojaide and Ashuntantang (2020:5) see minority as "the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures." However, Maurice Vambe's (2020) argument, echoed by Ojaide and Ashuntantang that 'minority discourses are in perpetual flux' is important. Ojaide and Ashuntantang cite the case of the majority northern Nigeria producing a minority literature as an example to support Vambe's argument, pointing out that "there could be minority within minority discourses as "minority discourse is not in numbers" (8).

Sule Egya writes on Northern Nigerian literature as minority literature within Nigerian literature. Even though the population of Northern Nigeria is said to exceed that of the South, the modern literature in English has been produced almost entirely by Southern writers. Egya gives the historical indirect rule of British colonial system which allowed the North to implement its own laws, the Islamic religion, and the low rate of Western education as major reasons for the scarce literary productions

in English in the North. This is evidently a case in which the majority people have a minority status in Western education and literary production. This does not take into consideration the fact that there are other literary works in the North written in Fulfulde and Hausa but which are given the same exposure as literary publications in English” (Ojaide & Ashuntantang, p. 7).

The Almajiris in northern Nigeria are a minority group; they are an economic class marginalised, disenfranchised, and disinherited because of their class. They lack access to Western education and opportunities for self-development and self-actualisation. Worse, they do not have food; they survive at the mercy of their masters who give them crumbs that fall from the table. In spite of the fact that they share the same faith, the same religious ideology with their masters, the Almajiris are excluded from opportunity. Also, Christians constitute a minority group in the north. Their experience is part of the contestation of power between Islam and Christianity, and it is a question of ideology defined as a set of rules and practices that govern behaviour in a particular place and time.

The relationship between the core north and minority elements which was never anticipated or has been underrepresented by the earlier literature has become central to the discussion of Nigerian literature. It is against this background that the discussion of Nigerian literature today can be argued to have a new territory that was not originally anticipated. The new addition that has emerged can be described as the literature of the north because the authors are northerners. The literature of the north shows that the unresolved issues of ethnicity and religious differences have been thrown up by the riots in the north-east, the terrorism across the core north, from Kaduna, Plateau, Kano, Kebbi, Zamfara, right through to Bornu, Sokoto and Adamawa states. These are the issues that the new literature deals with. This is the new frontier that appears to have been omitted or underrepresented by the earlier literature but which has now come into its own. Interestingly, I have contributed to this kind of literature by writing *Where Are You From?* (2018) which forms a common circle with *Born on a Tuesday*, *Sterile Sky*, and *After They Left* except that the selected novels are concerned with the explosive nature of the differences between various factions of religious or ethnic groups. What can be regarded as new frontiers fictions here is the manner in which the selected novels give explicit descriptions of the violence that has become the norm in northern Nigeria. These novels are not shy; they come out frontally to deal with the question of inter- and intra-religious crisis, ethnic differences, and the violent forms that they lead to. Elnathan John’s *Born on a Tuesday*, E. E. Sule’s *Sterile Sky*, and Edify Yakusak’s *After They Left* are about community, ethnic and religious relationships. In looking at these novels, therefore, it is imperative to show the commonalities in the novels, what makes one different from the other, how they go beyond merely giving ethnic and religious forms in which interactions take place, and how they become elements that suggest possibilities of transcending Nigeria’s colonial history.

Synopses of *Born on a Tuesday*, *Sterile Sky*, And *After they Left*

Born on a Tuesday tells the coming-of-age story of an Almajiri boy, Dantala, whose name translates to born on a Tuesday. Dantala does not have an accurate knowledge of his age, just as he can hardly remember his father’s face. Like most male children born by the poor in northern Nigeria, Dantala

is thrown into the Almajiri system at a very young age ostensibly to acquire Islamic education, but as he grows older, he finds himself caught up in an increasingly radicalized Islamic community. He excels at his Quranic training, becoming one of the best pupils at Malam Junaidu's Islamiyya. After completing his six-year Quranic training, a local thug, Banda, introduces him to other boys who hang out under a Kukah tree. Banda finds them a job to work for the Small Party which hopes to win the next election. Dantala and the other boys are sent to burn down the headquarters of the Big Party which later wins the election. After participating in burning houses and killing anyone who shows resistance, Dantala leaves Bayan Layi and returns to Sokoto where he becomes a protégé of Sheikh Jamal and his Islamic movement, Izala. There are different sects within Islamic religion each with different beliefs and code of ethics. The most prominent in the novel are the Izala, the Shiite, the Dariga, and what would later become the breakaway sect from Izala, the Mujahideen founded by the erstwhile deputy of Sheikh Jamal. A violent attack sponsored by a rival Islamic sect occurs and leads to the shooting of Sheikh Jamal. While some people believe that the attack was carried out by the Shiite, Sheikh insists it must have been masterminded by another sect.

Meanwhile, Sheikh's deputy, Mallam Abdul-Nur establishes his own movement, radicalises his followers, and becomes a staunch opponent of his former master. Towards the end of the novel, the Mujahideen movement launches a fatal attack on the Sheikh, beheading him and taking away his head. It is a state of anarchy as the Izala movement retaliates by forming a vigilante group, attacking and killing known and suspected members of the Mujahideen movement. At the end of the novel, Dantala, who survives a bastardised childhood defined by pain and suffering and learns English over the course of his religious education manages to also survive the crisis after spending nine months in military detention. However, Sokoto remains in a state of anarchy in which "even the checkpoint in front of the police station is manned by soldiers" (258).

Set in Kano, *Sterile Sky* tells the story of a policeman, Oduala Ede whose meagre salary cannot meet the needs and welfare of his large family and whose struggle to keep the family together is disrupted by social and religious crisis. Oduala Ede, often referred to as Baba in the novel, and his wife, Mama have a very large family with eight children. Oduala is a corporal by rank while his wife is a full-time housewife. Unfortunately, the policeman has no chance of rising fast in his career because he is not sufficiently educated. Baba's family is not just large; it is a large family with very little means. Yet, it is a very ambitious family in which the parents want their children to go to school. Thus, the source of income is important in this story. Another reason which accounts for Baba's inability to rise in the police force is his drinking habit. Instructively, however, Baba does not start drinking at the beginning of the novel. Drinking is a habit he acquires over time as a result of career frustration. Baba's ambition is to ensure that his children achieve what had eluded him. He is committed to educating his children, especially his first son, Murtala. Unfortunately, a religious crisis arises early in the novel, and displaces them from their home. Like other families, Baba's family seek refuge at a police station, but the station fails to offer protection. As it happens in the novel, the police station is ill-equipped to offer protection to citizens in times of crisis. In the end, Baba and members of his family are back to their normal life which is not normal because once the crisis begins, their lives can no longer be the same. Prior to the crisis, Baba and his wife had little control over their children due to poor finances, but the little control they had weakens

as a result of the religious crisis. The crisis further weakens his ability to hold his family together. Hence, the novel deals with ordinary people who are faced with a monumental crisis that is capable of drowning anyone, big or small.

However, the story is really about Murtala, Baba's first son who continues to go to school in spite of the crisis. It appears Murtala will survive and take care of the family eventually. Also, the fact that Murtala is attending a school where he interacts with the children of the rich appears to be part of the saving grace in the novel. The real story in this novel does not seem to be about the lives of Baba Oduala Ede and his family, what the family story tells the reader is about the weakness of the means of protecting lives in this society. The bigger story seems to be the impact of religious crises on the lives of people who would have lived normal lives, but who are unable to do so because of the absence of security. At the end of the novel, the escape route that is available is mere charity, and the will of the individual child or adult to survive.

After They Left tells the tragic story of a couple, Samuel and Mafeng, who conquer all impediments and are triumphant in love only to be tragically separated by a civil strife. Barely nine months into Samuel and Mafeng's fairy-tale love and reunion, tragedy strikes one afternoon shortly after Samuel returns home to the warm embrace of his wife and step son, Jugu. Mafeng serves her husband lunch; and as he eats, Samuel "thought he heard some noise in the distance" (*After They Left*, 14). As the sound "got clearer" both Mafeng and Samuel are able to decipher it because "it was the sound that haunted the dreams of many in Jos ... A mob was approaching" (14). This catastrophe signals the shattering not only of the love between husband and wife, but also the cruel murder of Samuel, and the sadistic rape and near death experience of Mafeng. Only the children whom Samuel had had the foresight to hide inside a drum of water escape unhurt. Although Mafeng, after being raped and hit on the head loses consciousness and lays half dead on the floor, her children, Kim and Jugu are hopeful that they could take refuge in their grandparents' home at Anang. Holding her brother's hands, they both run towards their grandmother's house. As they run, Kim notices that dead bodies lay left and right (66). What disturbs Kim the more as they journey towards their grandparents' house was that "the cries of the living over their dead loved ones created a cacophony of wailing sirens" (66). Yet, Kim and Jugu do not stop; they trudge on, hoping that their grandparents would look after them. Alas, Kim's grandparents' house had not been spared.

After wandering for days in the forest surviving only through the benevolence of nature, the children find themselves in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp apparently set up by the government to provide refuge for the homeless. Kim is relieved and hopeful that here is a chance to survive and start anew. However, her innocent hope is dashed when she realises that the manager of the camp, Madam Mati is merely "a business woman, capitalising on an opportunity" (199). Madam Mati has "already made plans" (128) on organizing her abduction and sale into forced prostitution. Fortunately for Kim and her brother, they are able to escape from the camp eventually. Thinking that their mother was dead, they set off to Abuja in search of who Kim believes is their only surviving relative, her maternal aunt, Lydia. Unknown to Kim, her mother had survived the attack, and had also sought her sister's assistance to launch a search party for her children. At the end of the novel, Mafeng is re-united with her children. In spite of the joy of finding her children alive, however, what is evident in the novel are the devastation of

a people for reasons they did not create, the disruption and destruction of lives that otherwise would have been normal, and the constant fear of attacks that would definitely recur because nothing has been done to resolve the problem. It is instructive that only a “thrice-day curfew ... had been imposed following the attacks.” After three days, “the city had regained a bit of its sanity” (156). It is in the unwillingness of the government to properly address the problems that the novel draws its significance.

Commonalities in the selected novels

Sterile Sky deals with a breakdown of law and order in Kano leading to a breakdown of normalcy in a family of minority elements living in this city of different cultural groups. *After They Left* is concerned with a breakdown in a sense of community. The major events in *Born on a Tuesday* are election violence, political crisis, militancy, terrorism, and armed insurgency. In all the novels, the reader is confronted with a breakdown of civility in society. Also in the novels, the breakdown is not yet raised to the level of a civil war. In the light of the above, it is possible to identify common trends in the novels. The maintenance of law and order is dependent on a central authority that can impose civility in the society. Once civility breaks down, it becomes impossible to entrench negotiations. The despair in *Sterile Sky* is deep because the characters are unable to seek protection from the police. The police are a mess. The tragedy of citizens in the face of non-existent police protection is encapsulated in the depiction of Baba Oduala Ede as a policeman. When riots break out, he is unable to protect his family; he takes them to a police station just like ordinary citizens do, but the police can neither protect their own nor the general populace. Hence, Baba and his family are at the police station when he loses one of his sons. Baba spends eighteen years in the police force without promotion, and without training to help him do better on his job. There is also no mentoring. Admittedly, Baba is a drunk, but there is no rehabilitation. The DPO threatens to sack him if he fails to find an escaped criminal within twenty-four hours, he fails and is sacked. Realising that he has lost his means of livelihood, Baba starts to laugh in a manner suggesting that he may have lost his mind. The DPO responds by directing another policeman to take Baba home, not for medical attention. Clearly, organisations in this society do not operate like proper organisations. A Police force is supposed to be an organisation in which a superior person gives an order, and an inferior person obeys, but this fails to happen in this novel. Also, in the police force, discipline is maintained by a certain sense of responsibility being developed first by the organisation. The organisation ought to be responsible for its workers not only by paying their salary but also by giving them uniforms, boots, and other necessary materials. In the novel, the police force does not provide Baba with the means of living as a police officer. Consequently, he is just a ruffian in uniform.

Similarly, in *After They Left*, the heroine’s husband, Samuel, is a policeman. When he tries to appeal to the leader of the mob that has come to attack his family, Askari replies Samuel with “a broad swipe on his face with the flat side of the wicked-looking machete” (18). In spite of Samuel’s position in society as an officer of the law, when he tries to plead further with Askari to spare him, Askari, the *suya* seller in the local market, deals Samuel “another blow on the shoulder after which the rest of the horde pounce on him with cudgels” (18). In *Born on a Tuesday*, the police institution is as ineffective and useless. When Sheikh Jamal is murdered, the mastermind

behind his assassination, Abdul-Nur, is promptly arrested by soldiers who take “him to police headquarters to hand him over to the police (226). The police take him into custody, but someone “called from Abuja to secure his release” (228). The result is that the violence continues unabated until soldiers re-arrest him. It appears that “there is someone involved at a very high level.” Hence, an old man comments that “if people become violent, it is nobody’s fault but the police and the government” (228). The absolute loss of confidence in the police institution is evident in the way the soldiers waste no further time in killing Abdul-Nur when they arrest him the second time. Could it be a coincidence that all the authors present situations of absolute despair with regards to the police force? I argue that the failure of Baba in *Sterile Sky*, of Samuel in *After They Left* to protect themselves, let alone their respective family, as well as the inability of the police to bring a criminal to justice in *Born on a Tuesday* is a sad commentary by the novelists on the failure of organisations in their society. If the institution that is most representative of the state lacks protection for those that constitute it, it means that such an organisation cannot perform services for the society. Hence, in *After They Left*, the heroine’s ward mate at the psychiatrist hospital recalls that he once approached a police station following the death of his parents in a violent attack, urging the police “to probe and look into the matter” (139), but the police sent him away.

Another common trend in the novels is the prevalence of violence. In *After They Left*, the author informs the reader early in the novel that “living in Jos can best be described as living by the foot of an active volcano that could blow up at any minute. The result – catastrophic!” (14). Samuel’s recognition of the leader of the mob, Askari fails to earn him sympathy by Askari. Moreover, Mafeng observes from her hiding place how her husband’s blood progressively drops from different parts of his body, “releasing vermilion pigments on the floor, she courageously comes out to plead on her husband’s behalf. Sadly for her and her husband, instead of reprieve, what she gets is a flicker of “a strange fire in the eyes of Askari” as his eyes are “fixated on her breasts. He tore her panties with the machete flung her to the ground and leapt on her” (19). Not done, Askari deals her “a blow to the head” (20). This is not the only violent event in the novel; it merely sets the stage for more violent attacks. As the novel shows, it is not only the heroine and her family that are targets of violent attack by the rampaging mob, their neighbour, Mama Nakwat is not spared:

Her head been bashed in and her left arm removed. Her body was lying on the floor, mangled and out of shape ... the right side of her face had become almost flat, a black deflated ball with red stripes, like a giant had stepped on her (p. 65).

Similarly, the reader is confronted with a situation of anarchy and chaos in *Sterile Sky* where characters cannot cross peacefully from one town to another. In *Born on a Tuesday*, it is a situation of horrific violence and sheer inhumanity of man to fellow man:

They drag Sheikh out and make him kneel by the taps. They take off his turban. They slap him across the cheek. They tie his hands behind his back and lay him on the ground. Then one of the men brings out a short knife. He steps on Sheikh’s

head then rolls him over to make him lie on his belly. 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 (p. 222).

In his essay, "State Violence and the Writer," Nwagbara (2009) holds that "violence entails doing harm or damage to a person or thing; and this usually elicits pain from the receiver of the action, which violence produces" (123). This resonates in Gerald Priestland's "The Future of Violence" (1974) where he asserts that "the essence of violence is that physical power is deliberately employed with the ultimate sanction of physical pain" (11). "Violence, the sheer use of physical force to cause harm thereby creating emotional distress, physical pain, and psychological desolation shapes Nigeria's historiography and political architectonics" (Nwagbara:123). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this experience pervades the country's literature, thereby linking literary texts produced to terror. In Trotsky's notion, each literary work is a product of the materials drawn from a writer's ambience or social facts in the writer's social environment (Siegel, 1970:13). Nwagbara agrees with Trotsky in his remarks that the Nigerian novel is a mirror of social experience in Nigeria (123). It is against this background that *Born on a Tuesday*, *Sterile Sky*, and *After They Left* are concerned with social realities, the dilemma of a people, their aspirations, fears, and challenges, through the lives of characters as mirrored in the northern region in particular and Nigeria in general.

A corollary to the above point is that there is evidence in the novels to suggest that the authors do not see an end to the crisis plaguing their society. In *Born on a Tuesday*, it is difficult to see how there can be meaningful dialogue between the government and different movements within the same religion. This is evident in the failure of the peace meeting the government initiated between the Shiites and the Izala movements prior to Sheikh Jamal's brutal murder. Perhaps, the government is unaware that there are more than two opposing movements in the state. As it turns out, the Shiite movement neither organised nor participated in killing Sheikh Jamal. The cell-like structure of the various groups is open to factions and splits, and there could be no guarantee that someone speaking for a group is truly representing the group or speaking for all members of the group. For example, up until Sheikh's murder and subsequent detention of Dantala and Sale in the same military cell, Dantala was certain that Sale was a member of the Izala movement. Sale was the ICT specialist and had recently begun to teach Dantala how to use the computer. However, Dantala discovers that Sale had all along been a closet Mujahideen while pretending to belong to Izala. Dantala remarks that: "If anyone had told me that Sale was a Mujahideen, I would have said it was a lie" (240-1).

Similarly, in *After They Left*, there is no possibility of an end to the crisis because the crisis seems to be internal to the area. In the case of *Sterile Sky*, the problem has to do with two different religions, but the novel also does not suggest the possibility of an end to the fighting because the differences in this society cannot be resolved by one group converting to another religion. The characters are largely poor people who are enmeshed in a serious crisis without a means of overcoming it. The characters that appear oppressed are minority elements. Hence, the novel presents a struggle between indigenes and those laying claims to being indigenous enough to be owners of wherever they are living. There is no proper story of a counter movement or an

alternative way of living in this society which can suggest the possibility that a solution might arise. What is glaring in the novel is the absence of a character that can bring change. Sule attempts to address this concern at the end of the novel by informing the reader about the books that Baba has read:

Have you heard of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Thomas Sankara, Bob Marley and Fela Anikulapo Kuti? (p. 284)

Sadly, when the reader pays attention to what Baba is saying, it does not give a sense of a solution to the current crisis. This is because the people Baba is talking about are heroes in an abstract sense. They are not related to the actual problem that is visible in this society. At the end of the novel, Baba counsels his eldest son, Murtala to avoid “religious killers as much as” he can, warning that “most people in our country are enslaved to Islam and Christianity, two foreign religions tied together by violence” (283). But Baba fails to tell his son how this can be achieved given that he himself has failed to “avoid” religious killers and their violence. This is the tragedy of this society. Indeed, what makes *Sterile Sky* important is that it presents a reality that the reader can see, and the reality is hopelessness. Baba’s attempt to find a solution by taking an idealistic position is unrelated to the problem on the ground. They are abstractions that have no impact on what is going on. *Sterile Sky* is important because it presents the reader with exactly what is going on across Africa.

The realism in *Sterile Sky* is gory. It is the reality of how minority elements in the north live. It is significant that Mama allows her son, Murtala to take her and her children to the Yoruba family, although reluctantly. But she spends a night in their house and accepts their food. She even accepts their help towards her final relocation to her village. However, in spite of the fact that Imatum’s husband has become her son-in-law, her blood has now been mixed with the Hausa man’s blood through Imatum’s daughter who is also Mama’s first grandchild, Mama refuses help from the Hausa man. Instead, she places deadly curses on her first daughter and vows never to have anything to do with her daughter and granddaughter. Mama’s attitude is an indication of the depth of hatred between the minority elements and the core northerners. This appears to be the source of the crisis. In other words, the influence of religion upon the lives of ordinary people in society seems to be the major problem in *Sterile Sky*.

Events in *After They Left* also suggest that the minority elements in the north and core northerners are unequal power groups in terms of ethnic and religious movements in their society because the minority elements are the ones who appear to lack peace as they are often targets of violent attacks impliedly from core northerners; and there is no governmental or organized means of resisting the attacks. Nevertheless, Domanski’s observation that “minorities are not immune to ethnic ideologies and their members often engage in ethnicist practices in a manner not different from the majorities” is instructive (Domanski, 2003:57). As things stand in all the novels, it seems that the only people who will survive the crisis are those who cross the ethnic boundary. Those who do not cross the boundary decay. However, it is important to point out that there are helpful and unhelpful ways of crossing the ethnic boundary. In this regard, Murtala’s

relationship with the well-to-do family in *Sterile Sky* and Dantala's relationship with Jibril in *Born on a Tuesday* appear to be suggestive of the possibility of change.

What sets the novels apart?

Events in *Sterile Sky* suggest that religion is at issue while the cause of the crisis in *After They Left* is more cultural than religious. However, both novels can be examined in the same way as social strife because there is a cultural dimension to the religious crisis in *Sterile Sky*. The cultural dimension to the crisis in *Sterile Sky* is evident in the sense that the characters that are trying to escape from the hoodlums are from a different cultural group. Murtala recounts that while his family and others of the same cultural group are displaced and are fleeing to a police station for refuge, "most Hausa people ... stood in front of their houses staring at us" (14). Although, the situation presents more than two cultural groups, but it appears that two groups are fighting and laying claims to the city of Kano. Clearly, therefore, these two novels share more commonalities than differences. *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left* tell stories of minority elements living in the north.

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* presents a contrast to *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left* in terms of aspects of its thematic preoccupation. The subject matter in *Born on Tuesday* is the Almajiri system in northern Nigeria and its far-reaching implications including the destruction of relationship among siblings, the ill-treatment of women, the creation of an elite class that oppresses the masses, and the enthronement of anarchy on the populace, among others. First, the Almajiri children are turned into destitutes and made to beg alms. The proceeds from the begging are taken by their masters who also subject the children to inhuman treatment. Dantala recalls how Mallam Junaidu made them "beg even after working in his maize farm". Their master would go on to compel them to stand by the road, "chasing after ears." The children also fought over food and money at the Friday mosque (61). The overriding departure of *Born on a Tuesday* from *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left*, perhaps, is that *Born on a Tuesday* deconstructs the much-touted dichotomy between Islam and Christianity or between Muslims and Christians. Over the years, and in much of Nigerian literature, the tendency has been to depict a Muslim versus Christian conundrum often based on the assumption of unity among all Muslims who come together to persecute Christians. Also, unlike the Christians who are known to have different denominations with conflicting beliefs and practices, all Muslims are believed to have a common mode of worship and system of belief. *Born on a Tuesday*, however, reveals not only the divergence in the approaches of some Muslims to the religion, but also the controversial and problematic nature of such diversity. The novel provides a deeper understanding of differences among Nigeria's Muslim population. It is revealing that animosity and mutual hatred exist among Muslims simply because they belong to different movements. Dantala discloses that "no one likes Shiites in Sokoto. Everyone believes they are dangerous. Even Sheikh preaches against the way they pray only three times instead of five and how they act so uncivilized" (107). Consequently, in this novel, the cause of the civil strife is neither ethnic nor strictly religious differences. The people who perpetrate violence belong to the same religion; and they are not from different culture groups. Although Abdul-Nur comes from a different cultural group, but the followers he recruits into his movement and who he uses as agents of violence are from Sokoto.

In *Born on a Tuesday*, all the characters are northern Muslims; yet, instead of peace

and harmony, what has become the norm is violence of unimaginable proportions because some people have been minorised on the grounds of education and their economic class. For example, Dantala, his parents, his teacher, Mallam Junaidu, and the boys under the Kukah tree are socioeconomic minorities made so by the discriminatory post-colonial policy that ascribes privileges only to those with Western education. Hence, the criminal acts committed by Dantala and his gang in Bayan Layi can be linked to the absence of opportunity to earn a decent living. This situation compels them to use the only means available to them to survive. Karl Marx posits that the understanding of human needs and the structure of society begins with an understanding of man as an economic being. For Dantala and his gang, 'economic' describes their condition of existence, and reaffirms that humans have basic needs that must be met if their survival is to be ensured (Greene, 1976:17).

To lend credence to this assertion, the novel shows the metamorphosis in Dantala's behaviour as soon as he gets the opportunity to earn a decent living by working under Sheikh Jamal. It is significant that Dantala not only seizes the opportunity with both hands, he industriously rises to become Sheikh's assistant. What Dantala's odyssey suggests is that man is susceptible to the prevalent conditions around him. Dantala becomes a changed man who is entrusted with authority and huge sums of money because his new environment affords him a decent means of getting his material aspirations of a home, food, and decent clothing unlike what obtained in Bayan Layi where all he knew was street life with his companions who lived under the Kukah tree. The author's covert submission becomes even more believable with the way Dantala explains his and his friends' criminal lifestyles in Bayan Layi when they queue up to receive a paltry two hundred naira to go and burn down the Big Party's secretariat because of an election in which the Small Party loses: "Banda tells us there are machetes, daggers and small gallons of fuel in the back of the truck. We will get two hundred naira each for taking the votes that were stolen. Two hundred sounds nice I can buy bread and fried fish. I haven't had fish in a while" (13). To an average man, bread and fried fish might not provide enough motivation to perpetrate violence, but for the hopeless Dantala and his friends living under the Kukah tree, it justifies the need to steal, kill and burn down the Big Party's secretariat.

This is the tragedy of postcolonial Nigeria where there is no functional system to provide the most basic social welfare not to mention dividends of democracy to its citizens in order to avert the catastrophe of youths being controlled by their stomach and not their brain. The country is replete with cases of politicians promising and failing without any sense of remorse or concern. Dantala and his friends in Bayan Layi are products of a dysfunctional post-colonial society and a political system that does little or nothing to cater to the welfare of the poor. To further highlight man's essence in relation to his materialistic satisfaction, Dantala reveals the innate motivation of his Quranic teacher, Mallam Junaidu, who cares more about the bags of grains he receives as payment from parents of his students than his religious obligation to teach the children how to know God through the Quran and Arabic language. Dantala narrates: "It was three hundred naira from the park not too far away in Sabon Gari to get a space in the back of the trucks which carry wood to Sokoto. Instead, he gave me seventy naira, reminding me that my father had not brought any millet that year or the year before to pay for my Quranic training" (6). Similarly, Dantala's mother's life is characterised by suffering and humiliation caused by acute poverty: "Alfa said my

mother still left the village every Friday to beg by the Juma'at Mosque in Sokoto city" (6). Indeed, the novel exposes the suffering and abject lack in Nigerian society through Dantala who conducts the reader across a community ravaged by flood and disease.

Another concern in *Born on a Tuesday* that contrasts with the preoccupations in *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left* is the way *Born on a Tuesday* treats religious fundamentalism and effects of extremist politics on everyday life in contemporary Northern Nigeria. Ilori (2006) opines that "religion is a double-edged sword" because it can be a means for peace-building, national development and social integration; while at the same time, it can be a source of conflict and social upheaval (ii). Ezeh and Uwaezuoke (2010) recognise the "double-edged sword function of religion" and warn that it "can be manipulated as an instrument of destruction and disintegration of a nation" (26). Oraegbunam (2009:186-191) also highlights the positive and negative roles of religion. On the positive note, religion integrates people socially, promotes morals, leads to rebirth, encourages social or charity work, serves as an agent of social change, controls stress, and resolves conflicts. Christianity, for instance, has contributed immensely to the educational, medical, and social development of Nigeria through establishment of schools, medical and social institutions, including centres for acquisition of skills. Islam maintains Quranic schools, establishes medical institutions, and it is also involved in social work and the establishment of Islamic primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. These contributions by Christianity and Islam point to some positive roles religion plays in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Sadly, however, religion has been used and is still being used as an instrument of division, a source of social dysfunction, and conflicts thereby causing horror and trauma. Oraegbunam remarks that "religious intolerance and bigotry lead to violence, bloodshed and indeed death" (190). Religious fundamentalism has caused some of the darkest moments in Nigeria since independence. According to Joseph Audu Reni (2010), the most volatile conflict is religious conflict especially "when religion is used as a political tool, fuelled by theocratic and parochial fanaticism, inflammatory religious preaching" (4). Mallam Abdul-Nur is portrayed in *Born on a Tuesday* as an Islamic convert who betrays his original Christian beliefs by becoming a Muslim after being lured by Sheikh Jamal. Abdul-Nur betrays Sheikh Jamal by taking to extremist ideologies against Sheikh Jamal's Izala movement. After Mallam Abdul-Nur's sojourn to Saudi Arabia, he returns to plot the murder of his benefactor, Sheikh Jamal, and engineers a Jihadist movement that ushers in terrorism. Sheikh Jamal says that: "Abdul-Nur is mad. He is doing this because I floored him in the debate. He is trying to prove to me that he can run an Islamic state. But he will kill all those people...I even hear that in the village where he is, people are leaving because they are afraid of him. In just a short while he has taken over everything and terrorizes everyone including the village head" (210). Perhaps, Karl Marx is right when he asserts while commenting on the contribution of Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that "I then asked that religion should be criticized more within a critique of the political situation than the political situation within a critique of religion" (Kathleen Clarkson, 1973:23).

Elements that suggest possibilities of transcendence

Apart from giving accounts of how different ethnic and religious groups interact and the crisis that emanates from the interaction, do the novels offer possibilities of transcendence in terms of

the society rising above the violence that has become the norm? What are the elements that can resolve the religious and ethnic crisis in northern Nigeria? From what the novels present to the reader, what are the things to look at and say this is how the solution could come? I argue that what can resolve the crisis lies in the areas of education, employment, and public enlightenment on the need for citizens to move beyond their ethnic boundaries. In other words, citizens need to expand their horizon; they need to accept and respect fellow citizens from different ethnic backgrounds. The most important element is governmental action. One of the ways to offer a possibility of transcendence is for the authors to have characters that may either be a solution or a promise of a solution to the crisis. Although, none of the novels propose these elements directly, it is imperative to consider what appears to be the indirect ways in which the novelists make the foregoing suggestions. In *Sterile Sky*, Sule seems to be suggesting that the solution is that every child must go to school; hence, Baba's first son, Murtala continues to go to school even in the midst of the crisis. Placing his hand on his son's shoulder, Baba says: "Murtala, your path is that of light. Pursue it with strength and courage" (286). As the reader follows Murtala's odyssey, it becomes increasingly evident that there is a possibility of conversation if more people go to school.

The fact that education is a change agent is reiterated in *After They Left*. It is Lydia who is properly educated with a university degree and married outside her ethnic group that is able to offer both financial assistance and moral support to her elder sister, Mafeng, who has little education, remains primordial and suffers throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, Mafeng and her children have become Lydia's dependants who, imaginably, would help to educate the children since Mafeng has lost her husband and has neither enough education nor skill that could guarantee her employment. In *Born on a Tuesday*, the author seems to be suggesting that the Almajiri children need more than Islamic education; that they need Western education in order to be able to earn a proper living and make greater contribution to the development of society. The author appears to make this submission by ensuring that Dantala learns English. The reader is able to see the difference in Dantala's life and the contribution he makes even to Islamic religion by becoming more knowledgeable, confident and self-assured.

Another element that suggests the possibility of transcendence is public enlightenment on the need for citizens to move beyond their ethnic boundaries. The novels advocate this by showing what happens when people choose to cross boundary or cling to the old code of society. In *Sterile Sky*, Mama is living in accordance with the old code of society by saying that her daughter who chooses to marry from another part of the country is anathema to her. Left to her, severance is the only solution to the problem. Mama's position does not yield to a possibility of solution; it can only lead to riot or civil strife because there will never be a meeting-point. What the author seems to be saying through Mama's attitude is that those who are committed to their ethnic tradition prevent themselves from participating in the processes of advancement that could help them solve their problems. This is still the attitude of many Nigerians; and Sule appears to be advocating public enlightenment to help this kind of people see the possibility of change. It is significant that when Mama announces her final decision to return home, all the people who come to bid her farewell, including the woman leader in her church are from her ethnic group. They all speak her language. Clearly, therefore, the solution that Mama seems to propose, that is,

I stay in my own community and you stay in yours is useless because there is no peace even in her own community or village.

Conversely, Dantala refuses to live by the old code in *Born on a Tuesday*. In spite of the respect and reverence he has for Sheikh Jamal, Dantala is unable to agree with his mentor's stereotyping of a particular ethnic group. Sheikh Jamal declares that: "A Yoruba man is a Yoruba man. No matter how Muslim they become. They stab you in the back. That is how they are. Hypocrites" (210). Although, Dantala does not disagree with his mentor openly, he reveals what goes on in his mind: "In my head, I want to agree about Yoruba people because everyone says it and you can always find examples, but then I remember that Jibril is Yoruba too. He has never stabbed me in the back" (211). It is more significant that at the end of the novel, when Dantala is released from military detention after spending nine agonizing months, what appears to be the only light at the end of the tunnel for him is the message Jibril scribbles in charcoal in his room: "I came back for you. They said you were dead but I didn't believe. I will come back again, insha Allah" (260). Throughout the novel, Dantala has reasons to question and doubt the strength of familial relationships. His mother has four sons all of whom hardly knew one another. When Dantala gets to meet his brothers, he discovers they have nothing in common because while he is an Izala, his brothers are members of the Shiite movement. Also, Dantala is unable to save his mother from poverty, disease, and death. By the time he gets a chance to visit her, her life had practically ended. She had lost her husband; her four sons had been taken away from her and thrown into Almajiri institutions. It is not until years after leaving home that Dantala discovers he had twin sisters who died in a flood disaster. He recounts how he learns "for the first time" that his "twin sisters were called Hassana and Husseina" (46). Dantala's estrangement from his family is such that makes him ask: "Is family really family if relatives are strangers to you?" (256) While Dantala's familial circumstances are somewhat unusual, what is significant here is his willingness to interact affectionately with Jibril who is from a different ethnic group, and what seems to be the author's submission that Dantala's decision to continue to foster close relationship with Jibril points to the possibility of both of them participating in the processes of advancement for their society. Already, Jibril is Dantala's English teacher while Dantala teaches Jibril Arabic. It is a symbiotic relationship that promises to yield greater good not only for them as individuals, but also for their society.

What I consider to be the most important element that could suggest the possibility of transcendence is governmental action which events in all the novels suggest is non-existent. The government appears to be clueless as to how to find lasting solutions to social strife. In *After They Left*, "the government provided funds to take care of survivors of the incident" (93), but the same government is not interested in investigating the causes, extent, or how to prevent a recurrence. After every incident, the government is quick to encourage the citizenry to move on as if nothing had happened thereby preparing the ground for another incident. An examination of Dantala's life in *Born on a Tuesday* also reveals the irresponsibility of political leaders and their culpability in fostering violence and chaos in communities. Alhaji Usman almost strictly concentrates on playing selfish political games that would culminate in his emergence as senator, and he succeeds. Through the violence that occurs in *Bayan Layi*, the author enlightens the reader on the kind of politics that is being practised in the north in particular and the whole country in general. Politicians

take advantage of the pain and deprivation of the youth to co-opt them into violence in order to achieve their selfish intentions especially at election time. Dantala represents the average youth from the north and he provides an insight into the phenomenon:

I like the rallies. The men from the small party trust Banda and they give him money to organize boys from Bayan Layi for them, sometimes we get as much as one hundred and fifty naira depending on who it is or which rally. We also get a lot to drink and eat (*Born on a Tuesday*, p. 7).

The fact that Nigeria can be described as a failed State even in democratic dispensations, (Nwagbara, 2009) is portrayed in *Born on a Tuesday* where “on the radio, the government declares a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the state and asks everyone to stay indoors or face arrest. The soldiers begin to occupy all the abandoned police checkpoints” (230).

Conclusion

John, Sule, and Yakusak’s novels are novels of crisis; they are also novels about the north, presenting northerners as a people in disarray. Significantly, a discussion of the literature of the north is a discussion of Nigeria; it is a country in disarray. *Born on a Tuesday*, *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left* show that the happenings in contemporary Nigeria are after-effects of our peculiar history. Members of the Nigerian ruling class from 1960 to date have turned themselves into kleptocrats, and there is no love lost between the rulers and the ruled. Consequently, religious riots, inter- and intra-ethnic tension, socio-economic corruption, and politics of violence hold sway. In spite of the seeming hopelessness of the situation, the novels show possibilities of transcending these post-colonial realities by problematising the contradictions, alienation, and despair in social relationships among Nigerians. Renowned Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, notes that “a writer is a person that people look up to, in whose works people are trying to see how they relate to the social, cultural and political problems that we are facing” (Na’ Allah, 2003:470). Therefore, intellectual activism is helpful in sensitising and galvanising citizens into action. The action could be to change the political leadership in their environment. Ojaide and Ashuntantang (2020) are right when they remark that “African literature is on the whole geared towards activism. Thus, literature is used by many African writers as a sociopolitical weapon” (6).

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