

Surviving Trauma Through Perseverance in Crises Situations: Exploring El-Nathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*

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Abstract- Various researches have focused on the current crises situations and insecurity in Nigeria and beyond, articulating their respective concerns for this social predicament. Innocent Nigerians, young and old have been subjected to traumatic experiences; carnage, brutality and family disunity resulting from these conflicts. Literary writers are not left out of the attempt to compile and document the literatures of these conflicts, through their creative works. This paper examines the traumatic experience of individuals in the face of insecurity, such as Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, as depicted by El-Nathan John in *Born on a Tuesday*. This he succinctly presents through the character. Dantala whose perseverance throughout the various challenges helps him to survive the crises that featured in his life from adolescence to adulthood. This survival is achievable, the author argues, through the positive significance of perseverance, as the protagonist suffers both family and socially induced trauma.

Index Terms- Surviving trauma, perseverance, crises situations, Boko Haram, insecurity, Northern Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Insecurity is a serious challenge to nationhood and the peaceful co-existence of Nigerians. It has come to be an area of discourse to both literary and non-literary scholars globally. This is because, it is a serious challenge to nationhood and global peace. The fact that insecurity and crises situations are diverse in both nature and cause creates the need for specification in its study. Since the sub-divisions of insecurity such as food insecurity, environmental insecurity, job insecurity and the like are also in existence, personal (social) insecurity is the primary focus of this paper. Literature utilizes creative imagination in projecting suggestive possibilities of social realities and emergent issues. Kehinde and Mbipom argue that:

Literature captures the diverse forms of interaction between various parts of a society and its people... African literature constantly reflects an attempt at narrating the African experience, the struggles associated with imperialism and its relics of denigration and oppression which seem to remain visible features of post-independence Africa. This accounts for the African writers' attempt at foregrounding the tension that

exists within the shores of Africa, with the aim of asserting the African nation above all forms and conventions of imperialism and neo-colonialism (62).

The socio-cultural/developmental issues raised by Chinua Achebe and his contemporaries in their novels several years back turned out to be prophecies of our Nigeria of today. This is possible because the writer's muse/inspiration tends to arise from the emergent issues of his time and environment. Ngugi Wa Thiongo argues that, "Both the writer and his works... try to understand, reflect and interpret" (158), the conflicts of values within and outside Africa, for life and humanity. The use of these works to document or recreate historical events such as colonialism and the Nigerian Civil War has created knowledge and discourse for the younger generation who did not witness these events. In the emergent social realities of various forms of crises and insecurity in Africa and Nigeria in particular, the literary writers "have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as advocates of radical social change. Their works thus both reflect and project the course of Africa's Cultural Revolution" (Lindfors 22).

One of the scores of war and crises situations on victims is the trauma of loss, whether human or material. In addition, the survivors of these crises live with the after effect memories of these unpleasant experiences. Certainly, these experiences adversely affect the victims' lifestyle or perception of life. This paper interrogates the lingering psychological consequences of conflicts and how the characters survive and overcome the trauma of such crises in the novel, *Born on a Tuesday* which focus on Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is psychoanalysis. Ordinarily, psychoanalysis is a body of techniques connected to the study of unconscious mind which will be a basis for treating mental health disorders. Established around the 1890s in Australia by Sigmund Freud and greatly developed by writers like Josef Breuer, psychoanalysis was basically hinged on dream which the founder said was significant to its later evolution. As a scientific discipline, crucial among its tenets, according to Labov William (27) were: (i) a person's development is determined by the events of childhood; (ii) human behaviour is shaped by

irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious; (iii) there can be mental imbalance when there are conflicts between conscious and unconscious materials and so on.

As a literacy theory, psychoanalytical criticism has to do with looking at literature and the psyche as things that are fundamentally entwined. In describing how psychoanalysis works in literature, John Kennedy & Dana Gioia postulate that there are three approaches to the study of works of arts. It investigates the creative process of the arts, it attempts a psychological study of a particular artist and the third, which is more relevant to this paper as it analyzes fictional characters. The theories go further to argue that:

Freud's study of Oedipus is the prototype of this approach which tries to bring about modern insights about human behavior into the study of how fictional people act. While psychological criticism carefully examines the surface of the literary work, it customarily speculates on what lies underneath the text – the unspoken or perhaps even unspeakable memories, motives and fears that covertly shape the work, especially in fictional characterization (722).

In other words, doing a psychoanalytical study of a work of literature requires a look at the mind of even the author and the characters. Since a look is taken at the traumatic effects of insecurity and how perseverance can be an antidote in such a situation, the psychoanalytical theory will be appropriate.

Reflection on Insecurity and Conflicts in Nigerian Literature

The security problems in Nigeria, such as insurgency, militancy, ethno-religious as well as environmental conflicts, etc have resulted in uncountable human and material waste. It is therefore an issue of concern to literary writers across Nigeria. The portrayal of characters asserts that, while the innocent suffer and however survive through perseverance, the perpetrators get away with the acts or perish in the ensuing conflicts. The victims are left traumatized to either survive the experience or get destroyed by it. The fast spread of social conflicts in Nigeria has over the years inspired several literary writings across the three genres of literature.

Since the bitter experience of the Nigerian Civil War, writers like Isidore Okpewho in *The Last Duty*, Buchi Emecheta in *Destination Biafra*, Akachi Ezeigbo in *Roses and Bullets*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, among others, project in their respective imagination, how some of the war victims survive the trauma through perseverance or not, the bitter experiences of the Civil War, several years after. Beyond the Civil War, other writers have also projected imaginative experiences of their characters' survival or tragic end as a result of conflict or crises resulting from communal, ethnic or religious clashes. In the famous Niger Delta environmental crisis, Tanure Ojaide in his fiction and poetry, Helon Habila in *Oil on Water*, Nwoye in *Oil Cemetery*, Aliyu Kamal in *Fire in my Backyard*, Adamu Kyuka Usman in *The Death of Eternity*, among others have in their respective ways articulated the trauma of environmental insecurity and its resultant conflicts like militancy and man's vulnerability in these situations.

The emergence of Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, which has led to gory human carnage and waste inspired the writing of the novel, *Born on a Tuesday*, the text of this paper. El-Nathan John's creative imagination is suggestive of the

fact that perseverance is a viable means of surviving the traumatic experience of insecurity as depicted by his protagonist, Dantala.

Perseverance: An Antidote to Personal Insecurity in *Born on a Tuesday*

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* is a novel whose lead character's labyrinthine contact with life threatening violence of different faces is iconic of perseverance as a potent panacea in the face of obstructionist realities. As Ben Okri posits, "life does not give you what you want or deserve, it gives you what you see, discover and fight for" (44), we are what we discover, what we find and not what we found ourselves in. The novel's title, which translates as Dantala in Hausa as a male child that is born on a Tuesday is symbolic of being born to the confines of violence which started on a Tuesday. Dantala's name is metonymic of a huge predestined struggle that only time can heal.

Dantala's presence in the habitation of the prepubescent street urchins under the *kuka* tree in Bayan Layi who "like to boast about the people they have killed" (1) is bad contact with the conventional uncertainties of life which are capable of annihilating the victim. Through perseverance, however, the infant prodigy escapes notorious characters like Gobedanisa who prides himself as a perpetual killer and talks about it in a manner that "you will think he would get *aljanna* for it (killing), that Allah would reserve the best spot for him" (1-2). The *kuka* boys' notoriety is extended to political hooliganism which makes them set ablaze the Big Party office upon the instruction of the Small Party as Banda leads them. The social environment of Bayan Layi affects the protagonist and other characters so much so that he "joined the Kuka Tree Boys who smoked wee-wee and didn't pray" (34). But as a result of the crisis that led to the death of Banda and other boys, Dantala assertively pulls out of the shock of being a social misfit. He retraces his steps by running away from Bayan Layi to Sokoto to live a decent life as an almajiri under the tutelage of Sheikh Jamal. One of Dantala's Psychological reaction to the trauma of insecurity and crises is to leave the environment in a (symbolic) run, This helps him to over-come the trauma of such experiences and search for safety. When the Kuka Tree Boys were attacked by the police, Dantala runs away from Bayan Layi:

I run, I cut through the open mosque avoiding the narrow straight road.

I run through Mallam Junaidu's maize farm. I do not stop. I run past the

Kuka tree. I will not stop even when I can no longer hear the guns, until

I get to the river and cross the farms, far, faraway from Bayan Layi" (17).

Dantala refuses to give up. Rather, he perseveres and runs away from Bayan Layi, He boards a vehicle to Sokoto on a return journey to Dogon Ice, his home town.

Dantala also uses religious perseverance as a means of surviving trauma. He seeks Allah's forgiveness, for his crimes and for questioning his authority over Banda's death. "Once I thought, *astagfirullah*... The thought stayed with me for a long time until suddenly fear gripped me in my chest for questioning Allah and why Banda was destined to die. So I kept saying

astagirullah, Allah gorgive me”(18-19). This purgation and consciousness of God becomes his saving grace in the lorry accident. Dantala thought aloud after the accident: “I think that I did not die in the lorry because I quickly realized my sin and said *astagirullah* many times” (29). His belief in the mercy of God also is also a perseverance tool for survival, as he regrets all he had done in the past. He says during the mid-day prayer:

It feels like Allah hears my whisper and answers. I can feel His greatness this morning and I am feeling sorry for the first time for all I have done. For smoking wee-wee. For breaking into shops into shops with the Kuka tree boys. For striking that man wiyh a machete. For questioning Allah on my way back to Sokoto.(29).

The implication therefore, is that man requires perseverance in order to avert the sordid realities of life such as insecurity. This kind of determination is exemplified by Dantala’s words as he flees Bayan Layi, a symbolic representation of the life of uncertainties carefully orchestrated by insecurity. Dantala says: “I run. I cut through the open mosque avoiding the narrow, straight road. I run through Malam Junaidu’s maize farm. There are boys hiding there. I do not stop. I run past the kuka tree. I will not stop even when I can no longer hear the guns. Until I get to the river and across the farms, far, far away from Bayan Layi” (17).

One can see the prodigy’s resolve in utterances like ‘I do not stop’, ‘I run past the kuka tree’ and ‘I will not stop from the extract above. Put more succinctly, John intends to affirm the potency of optimism even when the chips are down and there are psychological worries over survival.

As if the threat to life and intimidation witnessed in Bayan Layi are not enough, Dantala’s uneasy and thorny life continues in Sokoto where he hopes to find a haven. He takes solace in Sheikh Jamal and finds a budding friendship in Jibril after a journey in which Dantala sustains bruises from the lorry’s involvement in ghastly accident. With the eight thousand three hundred naira on him, there are life threatening scenarios like the death of two *almajirai* and Bilyaminu whose bodies are interred with only the driver left to convey the sad news “to their parents” (20). These gory experiences are capable of traumatizing a greenhorn. That he still survives them presupposes that when one perseveres, one will always find succour. Hope and providence are therefore symbolic in Dantala’s perseverance and survival of all the traumatic experiences.

The horrible stories shared by co-travelers in the bus that conveys Dantala to Dogon Icce are scary. Apart from destroyed farms, displacement of the inhabitants, homelessness and other havoc wrecked by the flood, motorists are not able to ply the road to Dogon Icce. The driver of the bus recounts:

The floods lasted many days; in fact we couldn’t drive into Dogon Icce and all the surrounding villages until last week. Just two rains and the whole place is destroyed. People are dying of sickness... there is no water or hospital in Dogon Icce and many people, especially children, purge until they die. The water got contaminated after the flood and although the local government chairman promised to bring water tankers, they have not seen any yet. (39)

The devastation caused by flood in Dogon Icce which the driver recounts above and the corroboration from co-travellers are by no means little channels of intimidation to Dantala and his mother. However, he journeys on and in order to cushion the psychological effects of such terrifying revelations, he goes for “a little old booklet on the dashboard”... of the bus and asks the driver if he “can have a look” (39).

With Umma’s deteriorating health and Maccido, Hassan and Hussein’s adherence to the Shiite sect, life becomes unbearable for Dantala, but he remains resilient and even pledges to restore sanity to his own failing society. Like the transcendent Alwan in Tawfiq al-Hakin’s *Song of Death* who vows to liberate his people with the education acquired abroad by refusing to fulfill his familial duties of avenging the death of his father, Dantala, in the face of these uncertainties, vows to leave Dogon Icce in order to return for liberation. His optimism is revealed when he says: “Even if Umma doesn’t hear me I will tell her I want to leave. Allah knows my intentions. Insha Allah, when I come back she will see me. One day, Insha Allah, I will take her out of this place to the city, where there are hospitals and bright fluorescent lights” (51). Dantala leaves Dogon Icce for Sokoto with a lot of hope for a better tomorrow. Having such high hopes when uncertainties stare at one in the face is a massive weapon in the face of hostilities.

Dantala experiences the pain and trauma of maturity. The psychological consequences of the nefarious homosexual acts around him worries him but, Dantala perseveres and remains steadfast and upright. He witnesses illicit sexual relationships both in the motor park new the mosque and Jubril’s sexual escapades with Abdul-Nur’s wife, but he pulls through without being influenced. Sheikh Jamal’s rift with Mallam Abdul-Nur over a good number of religious ideologies is another stumbling block for him. The personality clash between the duo results in sporadic shootings which send Sheikh to a hospital for medical entreaties. This singular episode casts aspersions upon the young learner’s future as his benefactor is hospitalized. His fears are in what looks like soliloquy after pondering on how to send a text to Jubril. He says in solitary, “I am afraid that if Sheikh dies, Mallam Abdul-Nur will change towards me. Alhaji Usman may stop sending us money and the new movement will die before it has even started. I do not know where I will go or what I will do” (122).

Sheikh’s death obviously means an end of the road to Dantala and that is not out of place. However, though something of a rarity, the character of the oldest patient in the hospital is a psychological re-awakening of the ‘all hope is not lost’ philosophy of life. The nameless character “goes unconscious for months and just when they think he might not make it, he wakes up” (121). Bewildered by the conundrum, Dantala concludes that “only Allah knows what type of sickness that is that makes a man go to sleep for months” (121). The creation of such a character is a deliberate ploy to reinforce the despairing Dantala that sickness, like every other threat to life cannot kill until God wills it. As a confirmation of the veracity of such a premise, Sheikh convalesces and returns home to Dantala’s delight.

Jibril(formerly known as Gabriel), comes from Ilorin as a boy convert and relative of Malam Abdu-Nur. Jibril went through various experiences; beating, sexual molestation and abuse by Abdul-nur, he perseveres and never told Dantala. He received

punishment for Dantala's crime calmly and says to Dantala; "It is ok. Everything is over now. I already admitted that the book was mine. He has beaten me already" (88).

Dantala perseveres and pulls through the trauma of his mother's death. "I thought that I would slump over if ever I heard that my mother had died. But hearing now... I feel both sadness and relief in my heart. Relief because, Allah has taken away her suffering. Allah is merciful" (89). On receiving the news of his brother, Hassan's death, he held on to his fate in God, despite the pain he felt.

Khadija, Dantala's aunt bears physical evidences of the crises in her life; her husband abandons her for a new wife, she is stressed in the care for her traumatized sister, who suffers in silence until her eventual death. Dantala describes her thus: "She has creases on her forehead and grey hair in her eyebrows. There are no smiles left in her eyes, only dullness. She stoops slightly as she walks..." (106). In her own words, Khadija explains to Dantala all her pain and her efforts to shed tears. She says: "... I cried for my husband, I cried for Umma. I cried for my empty womb. ...So when Umma died, I look for tears... but nothing (111).

Aside Jibril's illicit sexual affair with his own brother's wife which Dantala witnesses and he is overawed, he is further bewilderingly embarrassed by an encounter with a veteran prostitute that Jibril introduces him to. In his naivety, Dantala, after being cajoled into agreeing to have a 'taste of haram' goes to the brothel and had an encounter with a prostitute. What is arguably the crescendo of individual insecurity is Dantala's detention and incarceration in a cell over the alleged membership of the Mujahideen sect. Sale's astonishing involvement in the movement marks another of Dantala's close shave with death since the former was an acquaintance of the later in Sheikh's custody. There was an ample opportunity to initiate Dantala into the sectarian movement, especially given his being a patsy. The abysmal condition of the cell and how human beings are murdered with reckless abandon are all enough to make any on-looker conclude that it is Dantala's end of the road. One of the inmates called Samaila "has a running stomach and is throwing up. It looks like Cholera... He has been stooling all afternoon. Now he is too weak to even move. At some point he stretches his hand to me" (242), Dantala narrates. With deaths of other inmates always before him, Dantala is christened a landlord in the captivity. A Mutu, the soldier that brings the 'catch' into the cell even refers to Dantala as landlord. He says, "Landlord, I have brought you new tenants" (246). After the heinous use of pliers and screwdrivers all to sniff life out of both guilty and innocent souls, A Mutu renames Dantala as 'black spirit'. As he regains his freedom, he discovers that his love, Aisha is married to a senator, but he remains unperturbed. Immediately, he, as ever, professes his perseverance and says, "I think of all things I must do: cut my hair, wash with hot water, start writing out my story. Then take a bus and go wherever it is headed (261). This is probably the apogee of Dantala's resilience in the face of uncertainties. Despite the plethora of forces that try to erode the right to existence of a resolute individual, he remains firm in his decision to live. The author's creative decision to make Dantala a formidable character is borne out of the need to sustain the authenticity of the narration, the need for someone to tell the story; an insider in the mystery of the insurgency in Northern

Nigeria. This is therefore a clarion call to survivors to come forward to tell the real story. Taking a bus to go wherever it is headed is a strong desire and ambition to undertake another journey of life no matter how thorny and narrow the route is. With the plans that Dantala unfurls at the end of his saga, there is a spirit of return, reprocessing fears that are overtly triggered by the societal fragility felt within and outside his own society as its fundamental values are seriously jeopardized from both inside and outside forces. It is observable that Dantala is tested (and he has tasted), his courage re-examined and his perseverance reckoned with through the very dark mirror of uncertainties. Let it be noted that through the confrontations, according to Fred Botting, emerges "a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety; transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits" (7).

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, though a creative piece, delves into the uncharted waters of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria. The novel creates a spider's web of all the issues, people and places related in one way or the other with the mystery of these religious sects. It presupposes the active and inactive roles of Islamic scholars and politicians in the genesis and existence of these sects. The character Dantala is used to exemplify the immediate and remote experiences of the casualties of the activities of the sects and the effects of these activities of the life of these individuals; family, society and nation. Most importantly, it presents a character's struggle for survival in the face of life's challenges and insecurity.

The lingering nature of the scary experience of the homosexual act perpetrated by Abdulkareem and Bilal exemplifies how tortuous sordid realities can be. The psychological burden such experiences bring upon the victim is depicted in the reminiscences Dantala has after witnessing the ungodly act. Dantala recollects, "*Astighfirullah*, but I find myself still wishing Abdulkareem and Bilal would fall inside a well of soldier ants that will eat them up slowly... though I thought it was all gone, I still have these dreams. I hate them more because the dreams seem to go on forever..."(62). When the dream of witnessing two male adults forcing themselves into each other continues to pummel a tenderfoot like Dantala, there is evidence of psychological torture capable of constituting psychological insecurity. That is seen in the way the feelings surge forward at every slight opportunity. When Mallam Abdul-Nur decides to admonish Dantala over the latter's avoidance of the boys who smoke around the mosque, he says, "...and it (the experience) all came rushing through my head..." (63). More to the fact that escaping the effects of psychological insecurity is not a jejune affair is yet another round of psychological torture to which Dantala is exposed. He remembers that

I went into the toilet and locked the door. Then I brought it out. I didn't want to. I tried hard not to, but the feeling was strong and raging in my body like the fast running water in a river during the rainy season. At first I just held it. Afterwards I shut my eyes and stroked it, slowly, then quickly until a feverish cold passed all over my body and gripped me and made my legs wobbly and I needed to use my left hand to support myself against the wall. When it passed, I had made a mess of the toilet floor, my hands and my trousers (63).

The efforts towards self-flagellation from masturbation as seen in the experience above depicts the concerted efforts required of man in order to move away from the trauma of psychological insecurity. This paper posits that the mess on the floor is symbolic of how the Nigerian land is messed up by the spoils of insecurity of different kinds. When insecurity severs the dreams and aspirations of individuals of a society, there is need to resort to togetherness as a way out of the pit. In other words, when adversaries strike the individual dwellers of a nation state, the spirit of collectivity should be invoked by the members of the society in order to wage the appropriate war against the whims of insecurity. This is what the collective rescue of the woman with grains of wheat on her head who “slips and falls flat” (42) owing to the psychological consequences of their community exemplifies. When she begins to wail over the total loss of the contents of her polythene bag, “the other women take her by the hand to lift her up” (42). Therefore, instead of wailing over the ugly accompaniments of insecurity, the individuals are to take shared responsibility as illustrated by the helping hands lent the falling woman.

Umma’s dementia is a consequence of trauma over the loss of her children: Hassana and Husseina to the flood that ravaged Dogon Ice before Dantala arrives. This depicts environmental insecurity and its psychological effects. When Umma sees Dantala, she only “looks up at him, smiles and without saying a word, gets up and leaves the room” (46). This reaction as a result of a progressive deterioration in cognitive function due to damage in the brain is not unconnected to the untimely death of her twins that were carried away by the flood. The psychological war she wages against this ugly psychological state shows the required perseverance when there is an attack by such environmental insecurity.

The taxonomic upsurge of religious sects across the two major religions in Nigeria: Islam and Christianity constitute some form of insecurity to the populace. In both religions there are sectarian and denominational divisions and these are largely responsible for the palpable unrest among members of society. In *Born on a Tuesday*, John mirrors some of these sectarian divisions and how they are a part of the causes of insecurity in the nation state. For instance, the upsurge of the *Mujahideen* and government’s crackdown on it leads to loss of many lives. However, the manner in which Elnathan John incites the people against the movement is a deliberate ploy to reawaken the consciousness of the people to denounce a traumatizing development like sectarian division. Dantala recollects, “Outside the mosque, boys are gathering and piling old tyres. Everyone has a stick or machete. The police have disappeared from the streets. People begin to scream and burn the tyres and write on walls with charcoal: ‘we don’t want Mujahideen’” (229).

III. CONCLUSION

The scholarly attention of this essay was on interrogating perseverance as an antidote to the trauma that insecurity subjects the individual members of society. After subjecting the novel,

Elnathan John’s *Born on a Tuesday* to a thorough literary investigation, it was discovered that the novel x-rays the ugly accompaniments of insecurity in Nigeria and attempts to proffer alternative solutions to the menace instead of the obviously impotent efforts of the government. Looking at the psychological and psychic nature of the effects of insecurity, the author proffers perseverance, that is, the die-hard spirit in the face of life threatening woes. Instead of despairing, the author feels man’s mental firmness as seen majorly in the defiant character of Dantala can only catapult him to the other phase of life. One other angle is the crave for some collectivity in confronting insecurity and its institutions. In other words, there is a clarion call on those reduced to subaltern societies by insecurity to rise up to the challenge and bring it to its heels. Therefore, literature especially the novel can be a tool with which polemics can be provoked, literary artists called upon and the entire populace re-oriented towards fighting insecurity in Nigeria.

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