

REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN NIGERIAN NOVEL

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Abstract

*Inter-ethnic relationships have generally been central to Nigerian literature and the Civil War in particular has boosted the tradition of looking at how communities interact; but some areas in Nigeria have been out of contention in the Nigerian novel. In recent times, however, areas such as the Middle Belt that were never anticipated by the earlier literatures have become central to the discussion of Nigerian literature. This paper examines recent efforts by writers of the Middle Belt extraction to produce books that deal with implications of the interaction between unequal power blocs in terms of ethnic and religious movements in Nigeria. It uses Emmanuel Egoya Sule's *Sterile Sky* (2012) and Edify Yakusak's *After They Left* (2016) to show the explosive nature of the differences between various factions of religious and ethnic groups in the country. The paper uses Homi Bhabha's notion of Unhomeliness to foreground the manner in which the new novels give explicit descriptions of the violence that has become a norm in the Middle Belt and provides a broad picture of the frontiers that are opening up in Nigerian literature. It discovers that it was the mismanagement of ethnic differences that has led to antagonisms among groups. As leading scholars like Moradewun Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee have posited, these novels present a motivation for greater interest in the implications of ethnicity in African literature because they show ethnic undertones which were either disregarded or integrated into other groups in earlier literatures.*

Keywords: representations, violence Nigerian novel, Sule, Yakusak

Résumé

Les relations interethniques ont généralement été au cœur de la littérature nigériane et la guerre civile en particulier a renforcé la tradition d'analyse de la manière dont les communautés interagissent ; mais certaines régions du Nigeria sont hors de combat dans le roman nigérian. Cependant, ces derniers temps, des domaines tels que la Middle Belt, qui n'avaient jamais été anticipés par les littératures antérieures, sont devenus centraux dans le débat sur la littérature nigériane. Cet article examine les efforts récents des écrivains de la Ceinture du Milieu pour produire des livres traitant des implications de l'interaction entre des blocs de pouvoir inégaux en termes de mouvements ethniques et religieux au Nigeria. Il utilise celui d'Emmanuel Egoya Sule *Ciel stérile* (2012) et *Après leur départ* d'Edify Yakusak (2016) pour

montrer la nature explosive des différences entre les différentes factions des groupes religieux et ethniques du pays. L'article utilise la notion d'Unhomeliness d'Homi Bhabha pour mettre en avant la manière dont les nouveaux romans donnent des descriptions explicites de la violence qui est devenue une norme dans la Ceinture du Milieu et donne une vue d'ensemble des frontières qui s'ouvrent dans la littérature nigériane. Il découvre que c'est la mauvaise gestion des différences ethniques qui a conduit aux antagonismes entre les groupes. Comme l'ont affirmé d'éminents chercheurs comme Moradewun Adejunmobi et Carli Coetzee, ces romans incitent à un plus grand intérêt pour les implications de l'ethnicité dans la littérature africaine, car ils révèlent des connotations ethniques qui ont été soit ignorées, soit intégrées à d'autres groupes dans les littératures antérieures.

Mots-clés : représentations, violence roman nigérian, Sule, Yakusak

Introduction

Inter-ethnic relationships have been very central to Nigerian literature since the civil war period. From the civil war period, Nigerian literature began to pay greater attention to the failure of governance, the rise of coup makers, and the struggle between unequal ethnic blocs for control of the country. Consequent upon the Civil War which boosted the tradition of looking at how communities interacted, most discussions of Nigerian literature usually deal with inter-ethnic and inter-religious groups when not dealing explicitly with corruption. Similarly, although tribalism has always dominated public discourses in Nigeria, these discourses did not come into fiction until the Civil War period. The Civil War (1967-70) turned tribalism into almost a universal theme in Nigerian fiction as a result of the realization that there was the need to resolve the relationship between ethnic groups within the country in order to arrive at some kind of national cohesion. But while that was going on, some areas in Nigeria were virtually out of contention. Properly speaking, to the best of our knowledge, no fictional books discuss ethnic problems in the South-East of Nigeria. For example, the relationship between the Igbo and the minority areas in the South-East did not quite enter Nigerian literature until the Civil War books like Elechi Amadi's *Sun Set in Biafra: A Civil War Diary* (1973) and Saro-wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) were released. Although both books are historical non-fiction; they have biographical depth, giving personalized

accounts of the Biafran experience, but the issues they raise have come to be recognized as very central to the discussion of Nigerian literature. Similarly, Uwem Akpan's *New York My Village* adds to the discussion of ethnic problems in Nigeria.

Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984), Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) can be regarded as books that prove that common themes run across all the regions of Nigeria and that the usual way of distinguishing between the North and the South really does not make much sense in literature because people in the North, East, or West behave in similar ways. Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* represents a major input in the discussion of Nigerian literature because it measures up to Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* as descriptions of spiritual leaders who play secular roles or secular leaders who play spiritual roles. All the protagonists in the three books end up in exactly the same way; they all end badly. The three books portray features that can be regarded as national literature because although they examine the peculiar experiences of the different regions in the country, they also show commonalities among the different regions.

However, in more recent times, areas that were never anticipated by the earlier literatures have become central to the discussion of Nigerian literature. Indeed, the same way that the minority areas in eastern Nigeria were outside the mainstream of the discussion of the human conditions in Nigeria, the Middle Belt seemed virtually not to have existed in literature. Previously, most writers who have been canonized in the reading lists in universities in Nigeria and across the world have largely been from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo Does this mean that people from

minority ethnic groups are not blessed with artistic talent? Could it be because of the politics of publishing that has given writers from these three major ethnic groups dominance over their less-prominent compatriots from smaller ethnic groups? In spite of whatever factors that might have put the minority ethnic

groups at a disadvantage, writers from the smaller ethnic groups are making their own contributions to creative writing in Nigeria. Sule and Yakusak, for example, are trying to make us understand that we cannot just lump them under the major ethnic groups especially as statistics have shown that there are hundreds of ethnic groups in the North just as there are in the South. It is against this background that the discussion of Nigerian literature today can be argued to have a new territory that was originally eclipsed. This paper is interested in the new additions that have emerged from the Middle Belt because the narrators are Middle Belt narrators. The literature of the Middle Belt shows that a new dimension has emerged in Nigerian literature. This literature shows that the unresolved issues of ethnic and religious differences have been thrown up by the riots in the North-East, the terrorism across the core North, from Kebbi, Zamfara, right through to Bornu and Adamawa states. These are the issues that the new literature deals with. If we are talking about frontiers in the Nigerian literature, therefore, this is the frontier that appears to have been omitted by the earlier literature but which has now come into its own.

I have contributed to this kind of literature by writing *Where Are You From?* (2018) which contributes to the discussion from the stand point of what can be regarded as a Middle Belt book. What I have tried to do in *Where Are You From?* forms a common circle with *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left*, except that what comes out in *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left* is the explosive nature of the differences between various factions of religious or ethnic groups. What will be regarded as an expanding frontier here is the manner in which the selected novels give explicit descriptions of the violence that has become a norm in the Middle Belt. These novels are not shy; they come out frontally to deal with the question of ethnic differences and the forms of violence they lead to. Sule's *Sterile Sky* and Yakusak's *After They Left* are about community, ethnic, and religious relationships. In studying these narrative texts, the paper uses Homi Bhabha's notion of 'unhomeliness' because Nigerians are in a postcolonial environment, dealing with issues of nation-building after the departure of the western colonisers.

Undoubtedly, there is a perennial contest for scarce resources at the centre. Nigerians are also dealing with cultures as postcolonial studies deals with cultures, people, and languages. The paper examines how and why characters in the selected texts appear not to feel at home in their own environment. It also shows the commonalities in the narratives, what makes one different from the other, how they go beyond merely giving ethnic forms in which interactions take place, and how they become elements that suggest possibilities of transcendence.

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). Charles Bressler (1999) defines post-colonialism “as an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in formerly colonized countries. Postcolonial literature and theory investigates 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, 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 Egeya 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. Egeya 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 not given the same exposure as literary publications in English" (Ojaide and Ashuntantang, 2020:7).

Synopsis of *Sterile Sky*

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 crises. Oduala Ede, often referred to as Baba in the narrative, and his wife, Mama, have a very large family of eight children. Having many children appears to be the way of life of the people in this society as evidenced by Baba and Mama's neighbours like Helen's family. Helen's mother has six children, and is pregnant with the seventh child at the time of her brutal killing. Another family has about nine or ten children. Oduala is, however, a policeman, 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 resources. 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. Earlier in his life, Baba was enrolled in school by his own father. Unfortunately, Baba's uncles were unhappy that Baba was getting an education whereas they were working on the farm. They did not want Baba to feel more important than other members of the family. Eventually, Baba's father bowed to pressure from his own siblings and withdrew Baba from school. Consequently, Baba left home in annoyance, went to Ilorin where he met a sex worker that facilitated his employment into the police force. Baba's ambition is to ensure that his children achieve what eluded him. He is committed to educating his children, especially his first son, Murtala.

Unfortunately, a religious crisis occurs early in the novel, it is the religious crisis in Kano where Baba works and lives with his family. The crisis displaces them from their home. Like many other families affected by the crisis, Baba's family seeks refuge at a police station where they and other residents were supposed to seek protection, but which fails to offer real 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. Because the family is being scattered, the little control Baba and his wife had over the children begin to weaken. The control has not really been there before due to poor finances, but the little control which the parents have weakens as a result of the crisis. It is an unfortunate situation of a man who lacks the financial resources to get so many children together who now has a religious crisis to contend with. The result is that the crisis further weakens his ability to hold his family together. His wife's business is affected by the crisis which also affects everybody's life. Hence, the novel deals with ordinary people who are faced with a momentous 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.

Synopsis of *After They Left*

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 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 the foresight to hide inside a drum of water escaped unhurt. Although Mafeng, following 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. Fortunately for Kim and her brother, they are able to escape and 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 in launching a search party for her children. At the end of the novel, although Mafeng is in hospital having lost a lot of blood from the attack, she is reunited with her children. In spite of the joy of finding her children alive, what is evident in the novel is 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 continue to reoccur because nothing has been done to resolve the problem. It is from the inability of the government to properly address the problems that *After They Left* draws its significance.

Commonalities in *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left*

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. In both novels, the reader is confronted with a breakdown of civility in society. Also, in both 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 police force in both novels is representative of the Nigerian State. Theories in Political Science show how organizations in Third World societies do not behave like organizations, how they have armies in which inferiors do not respect their superiors, bureaucracies do not operate like bureaucracies, and schools in which education is not given high premium. These theories present all the modern organizations that ought to lead to development in Third World countries as practically out of tune with the nature of bureaucracies of armies, and of schools in western countries. Looking at the novels from this angle, the reader understands why the only life

that is possible with the characters is a life of desperation because no expectation can be met. And where citizens' expectations cannot be met, despair becomes the only outcome.

The despair in *Sterile Sky* is deep because citizens are unable to seek protection from the police. The police itself is in 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 to seek protection 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 any further education or training to help him do better on his job. There is also no mentoring. Admittedly, Baba is a drunk, but there is no rehabilitation, there ought to be. The DPO threatens to sack him if he fails to find an escaped criminal within twenty-four hours; he fails and is sacked. Realizing 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 to the situation by directing another police man to take Baba home, not for medical attention. Clearly, organizations in this society cannot operate like proper organizations. The Police Force is supposed to be an organization in which a superior officer gives an order, and an inferior officer obeys, but this does not happen in this novel. Also, in the Police Force, discipline is maintained by a certain sense of responsibility being developed first by the organization. The organization ought to be responsible for its workers not only by paying their salary but also by giving them uniforms, boots, and other necessary accoutrements. In the novel, the Police Force does not provide Baba with the means of identifying himself as a police officer. Consequently, he is just a ruffian in uniform.

Similarly, in *After They Left*, the heroine's husband, Samuel is a police man. 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). Is it a coincidence that both narrators present situations of absolute despair with regards to the police force? I argue that the failure of Baba in *Sterile Sky* and of Samuel in *After They Left* to protect themselves, let alone their respective families, is a sad commentary by both narrators on the failure of constituted authorities in their society. If the institution that is most representative of the State lacks protection for those that constitutes it, it means that such an organization 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 violence. In *After They Left*, the narrator informs the reader early in the narrative 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 from Askari. Moreover, when Mafeng observes from her hiding place how her husband’s blood progressively drops from different parts of his body, “releasing vermillion pigments on the floor, she courageously comes out to plead on her husband’s behalf. The result 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 scene 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 (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.

A corollary to the above point is that there is evidence in the novels indicating that the narrators do not see an end to the crisis plaguing their society. *Sterile Sky* does not show the possibility that the crisis could come to an end because the differences in this society cannot be resolved by one group converting to another group's religion. Similarly, in *After They Left*, there is no indication that the crisis could come to an end because the crisis seems to be internal to the area. Unfortunately, too, the perpetration of violence is not limited to adult members of this society; teenagers and young adults take part in unrestrained violence against their neighbours. A patient at the hospital where Mafeng is admitted after the attack recounts that the people that attacked her own home, set the house on fire, and left her husband to burn to death are "young angry boys" the oldest of whom could not be more than fifteen (90). Yet, they perform a "celebrating dance" in front of the house they had just set ablaze. And when they find the woman kneeling down in front of her burning house as her husband burns to death, a young boy raises a cutlass, aims at her neck, but cuts her hand in the end (91). In all, about three hundred people are mercilessly killed in the attack (93). It is important to point out that recurring violent attacks are not limited to Jos and its environs. Phili, who is a fellow refugee of the heroine's daughter, Kim's, comes "from a camp in Kaduna" (111), another city in the North.

Also, the reader's expectation that the heroine, Mafeng, who has been at the receiving end of violence, would treat her fellow humans with respect comes to naught when Mafeng exhibits ruthless violence towards a fellow woman. It is more shocking because her victim is a kind-hearted nurse who has shown her uncommon care and compassion. Not only does Joy offer a

listening ear to Mafeng's tales of woe, Joy goes all the way to assist Mafeng physically by helping her to exercise, cooking special meals for her at personal cost and labour, and serving as an intermediary between Mafeng and the doctor in order to facilitate Mafeng's early discharge from hospital. Nurse Joy takes practical steps with genuine intention to assist her fellow woman in distress. Rather than appreciate Joy's kind gesture, Mafeng capitalizes on Joy's kind-heartedness to get an escape from the hospital where her survival has been made a priority by the health workers. Mafeng "noticed an iron rod lying on the floor ... she picked up the iron rod and landed it at the back of Joy's head. Joy crumbled to the ground face flat. Next, she walked over to Joy's bag on the table took out her wallet, removed all the money in (155). It seems that in this society, violence and inhumanity to humans have become the norm that can never change. This is perhaps the reason the young man who lays next to Mafeng in the hospital "started to cheer" as Mafeng unleashes violence on a woman who had shown her nothing but kindness. It is hardly surprising; therefore, that Mafeng's daughter, Kim, appears to be ungrateful and selfish, attributes that can snowball into violent tendencies as she grows older. Kim "looked still, hoping to see Phili. She hoped Danjuma had given up the chase, but it did not bother her much. All she wanted now was to be with someone familiar" (177). Apparently, Phili's fate in the hands of their abductors does not bother her in spite of the sacrifices the boy had made towards her safety. Kim is not different from her mother or the rest of the members of her society.

It is a similar scenario in *Sterile Sky* where there is no indication of a possible end to the religious crisis that is plaguing the North. 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 definitively non-indigenes. 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.

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 narrative, Baba admonishes 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 in 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 the unfortunate situation across Africa where there are narrators that the people respect and idolize, but whose solutions are no longer solutions. Because of the inability of the narrator to show how Baba’s reference to these leaders is relevant to the basic problems in society, much of what the narrator does through Baba is mere conjecture. It is possible to argue that Baba’s life appears to have been messed up the more by reading these books because he has nothing useful to show for having read the books. It is significant that by the time the reader gets to know that Baba has read these books, his life has ended virtually:

His face had become thinner, more wrinkled and dissipated with his beard threatening to swallow his lips. His lips had turned quite dark. His eyeballs were bloodshot. His neck had grown leaner, veined. He wore a tattered, long-sleeved shirt torn at the elbows and a pair of faded jeans. His body stank of marijuana (283).

Evidently, all the books Baba claims to have read add up to nothing in relation to the life he is living because reading the books has provided no hope either for him and his family or his society. The realism in *Sterile Sky* is gory. It is the reality of how Middle-Belt people live.

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 appear to be from a particular cultural group, the Middle Belt. 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, it appears that two groups are fighting and laying claims to the city of Kano. Clearly, therefore, the two narrative texts share more commonalities than differences. The most significant difference between *Sterile Sky* and *After They Left*, perhaps, is that *After They Left* is a story of the Middle Belt whereas *Sterile Sky* is a story of Middle Belters living in the North.

Elements that Suggest Possibilities of Transcendence

In spite of the pervasive hopelessness in both novels and apart from giving accounts of how different ethnic and religious groups interact and the crisis that emanates from the interactions, 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 the society? 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, public enlightenment on the need for citizens to cultivate a pan-

Nigerian vision, and, most importantly, governmental actions. For example, one of the ways to offer a possibility of transcendence is for the narrators to have characters that may either be a solution or a promise of a solution to the crisis. None of the novels proposes these elements directly. However, it is imperative to examine 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).

Unfortunately, Baba's wife, Mama, does not want her children to continue to go to school. She insists on returning to the village with the rest of the children where the children will have no access to education. Murtala manages to escape the prospect of a life of drudgery in the village through the parents of his school mate who promise to sponsor his education. Mama's first daughter is married to a Hausa man who Mama detests. Mama does not believe that education can solve any problem. All that education can provide, as far as Mama can see, is the kind of escape that her daughter, Imatum has had. Mama believes her daughter is lost by marrying the Hausa man. In the same way, she believes that education will take her children away. She does not see the recuperative possibilities that education provides. All she sees is that, if her son goes to school, he will be lost just the way her husband is lost to his family by having a bit of education. And truly, her husband is lost at the end of the novel. The question then is: Is it true that education takes people away from their families, their communities? Put differently, what is the implication if people do not go to school because they think education would disrupt their tradition, their sense of themselves? The novel does not provide an answer, but as the reader follows Murtala's odyssey, it becomes increasingly evident that there is a possibility of a conversation if more people go to school. What then can the reader hope to see in Murtala as an adult? Perhaps, the reader can expect that if he does well in school, he will return with a

lot of knowledge. But by that time, all his siblings would have been uneducable and unemployable. What it means is that this is a society rushing towards despair. Even if Murtala acquires an education, he might have an Obi Okonkwo problem. The man who returns from abroad with bright ideas about how to develop his society, but finds that he cannot even help his family not to talk of the Umuofia Progressive Union unless he takes bribes. But part of the reason *No Longer At Ease* is like that is also because Chinua Achebe's character remains an ethnicist throughout the novel. Obi Okonkwo is a character lost in the environment of his backyard which is precisely what Mama's attitude is in *Sterile Sky*. It is an unhelpful attitude.

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 and suffers throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, Mafeng and her children have become Lydia's dependents who, imaginably, will help to educate the children since Mafeng has lost her husband and has neither enough education nor skill that can guarantee her employment. However, it is necessary to point out that Lydia does not hold a career in spite of her education. She derives her privileges from her marriage to a politician, member of the House of Representatives, just as Mafeng was once married to a Senator and had access to wealth. What this means is that the rich are always insulated from crisis. In *Sterile Sky*, Murtala's benefactors watch the violence from television in the comfort of their homes. So also does Lydia in *After They Left* only learn about the Jos violence from the television. Lydia tells her sister, Mafeng that: "I can't believe all these happened and I didn't know. I mean, I heard about the attack on the news" (171). It may be disputable, therefore, to suggest that education alone can solve the problem, or that the crisis is entirely ethnic and religious in nature. This is because a situation in which the rich are living in reserved areas is an issue of social inequality, not an ethnic or religious one. When it concerns illiterates, it is basically an ethnic and religious problem, but when it involves

the well-to-do members of the society who live in the best parts of town, it is neither of those. It is a major problem of inequality, and the fact that some can afford to buy their safety, while others cannot.

Another element that suggests the possibility of transcendence is public enlightenment on the need to cultivate a pan-Nigerian vision. The novels advocate this by showing what happens when people choose to 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. Moreover, her insistence on returning to her village is borne out of illiteracy. If she were educated, she would have known that there was no other solution other than self-advancement. It is significant that in spite of the magnanimity of the rich family to accommodate, feed, and send her son, Murtala, to study abroad, Mama insists on returning to her village. The situation in the narrative presents a tragic paradox where the educated environment, the city, has become hostile and perpetually prone to violence whereas, the village, considered as a symbol of ignorance and poverty now appears as a place of security and a beacon of hope for victims of violence in the city. Even worse, she is returning to the village with all her children who are going to be condemned to illiteracy and perpetual poverty and drudgery. The reader has seen what the village can do to them because they once relocated to the village, but did not fare better. The novel, therefore, gives a picture of how a society comes to having millions of out-of-school children who nobody is providing for. What the narrator 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. It is one of the characteristics of the state of postcoloniality. Nigeria as a postcolonial State has not achieved the social engineering

required for an equitable and just Nigeria as a nation whose citizens are proud Nigerians. The absence of a cohesive, equitable and just nation creates grounds for citizens to seek solace in their nucleus ethnic and religious groupings. Sule appears to be advocating accessibility of education for all 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. However, it is more significant that Mama has gone to the village before only to encounter problems. Food is scarce, money is unavailable, her contemporaries mock her for returning home penniless. When she returned to the village earlier, she was thoroughly emaciated, and her children had suffered. Yet, Mama is once again village-bound. Clearly, therefore, the solution that Mama seems to propose, that is, I stay in my own community and you stay in yours is unsustainable because there is no peace even in her own community or village. The best way to understand how Mama's position is not plausible is to study Yakusak's *After They Left* so as to discover that the crisis will move to people who are not necessarily domiciled in the North. That is to say, you are in the North, you are hunted by rioters, but those who claim to have run away from the North and have relocated back home find themselves in the same crisis in the Middle Belt. What this means is that while in the North, they do not feel at home, and when they are at home, in the Middle Belt, they do not have peace. Properly speaking, the reader is confronted with the same kind of society in both novels.

What I consider as the most important element that can suggest the possibility of transcendence is governmental actions which events in the two novels suggest are absent in their society. The government is not interested in preventing or finding lasting solutions to social strife in the society. 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 the

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. The heroine, Mafeng attempts to unravel the causes of frequent violent attacks in her society:

This is Nigeria, this is the north. All they need is a statement that is termed blasphemous', a preposterous squabble over a farmland, a gratuitous demonstration over government policy, a pithy enforcement of one's religious beliefs and ideologies over a non-believer, a sudden guerrilla attack by herdsmen or an act done in retaliation of any of these things. Anything can make this people attack especially if it is tainted with ethnic or religious colouration (134).

For these reasons, Mafeng blames God for allowing her family to be attacked undeservedly. Her ward mate offers a different explanation:

God didn't kill my family members. God didn't kill your family members. They were killed by our country. A system so abysmal, so wicked, that a good chunk of its population would be killed and nothing would be done. Nothing concrete would be done (141).

The second explanation appears more plausible. To begin with, most public institutions are dilapidated and dysfunctional. Mafeng is put in a male ward in the hospital because of inadequate bed space in the female ward.

She looked around the hospital and observed its dilapidated state. The once white-ceiling was stained with brown and black patches of dried rain water. The floor reeked of a strong antiseptic detergent that Mafeng felt was too strong for hospital use, as its foul stench could make one fall ill. Even the floor had tiny potholes in it that got wider each time a cart wheeled over (88).

This kind of scenario provides the impetus for unscrupulous individuals such as Madam Mati, the manager at the internally Displaced Persons Camp who ought to be a source of succour and provider of comfort to unfortunate victims of violent attacks, but who takes undue advantage of the helplessness of victims. Madam Mati does not use her personal resources to

maintain the refugees, she receives funds and other materials from government and public spirited individuals, but she diverts the larger chunk of the resources to personal use. Not satisfied, she sells some of the refugees to slavery or ritual killers and makes more money. Because the refugees are put under her care by an uncaring government, she fancies herself as their “owner” (190). She plans on selling the heroine’s daughter, Kim, and eighteen other innocent girls to sexual slavery. She tells Kim “I’m selling you to savages. I don’t know of any child who has made it there and survived. You will live your life worse than a slave, you will pray for death and it won’t come. You will wish you had died (191). Madam Mati justifies her inhuman treatment of refugees at the Internally Displaced Camp under her management in the following words:

No structures put in place to get them out. All we get is food. The government is very comfortable leaving us in this state because they award contracts and give money to relief agencies who in turn give them kickbacks. Some people have been here for the past four years, living in the same way. No jobs. The young ones do not go to school, and many of them will live like this for the next thirty years. I’m just a business woman capitalizing on an opportunity (193).

Madam Mati’s rationalization is clearly untenable; the narrator seems to be using the situation to point to the need for an urgent holistic governmental action to reverse the trend of violent attacks in this society.

It is instructive that in *Sterile Sky*, Mama symbolically 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 Middle Belt and the Core North. This appears to be the source of the crisis. In other words, the impact of religion upon the lives of ordinary people in society seems to be the major problem in the novel. Events in *After They Left* also reveal that the Middle Belt people and Core Northerners are unequal power groups in terms of ethnic and religious movements in their society because the Middle Belt people are the ones who appear to lack peace in their own homes as they are often targets of violent attacks impliedly from Hausa people; and there is no governmental or organized means of resisting the attacks.

As things stand in both novels, it seems that the only people who will survive the crisis are those who possess a Pan-Nigerian vision. Those who fail to rise beyond their ethnicity go home and decay. However, it is important to point out that there are helpful and unhelpful ways of cultivating a Pan-Nigerian vision. In this regard, Murtala's relationship with the well-to-do family appears to be suggestive of the possibility of change, although it comes through charity. The other arrangement in which a rich man marries a young girl is a crass exploitation of the poor by the rich. It is instructive that no mention is made in *Sterile Sky* about Imatum's husband's plan to send her to school. Her education has been truncated, and it appears she will remain an illiterate wife to a wealthy top military officer.

Conclusion

Sule and Yakusak's novels are novels of crisis; but they are also novels about the Middle Belt. The greatest strength of the novels is that they show that there are parts of Nigeria that Nigerian literature has not yet covered well enough; but that with these novels, the literary camera has focused on the Middle Belt, presenting the Middle Belt people as a people in disarray. Significantly, a discussion of the literature of the Middle Belt is a discussion of Nigeria.

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