

Religion in ‘The Fourth World’: A Study of Elnathan John’s *On Ajayi Crowther Street*

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Abstract

With the rise in socio-economic austerity in Nigeria, people seek for a respite and a way out of their challenges. Religion provides that easy way out. However, some religious leaders set out to use the same religion as an oppressive tool both for their families and their congregation. As literature mirrors the society, Elnathan John’s *On Ajayi Crowther Street* foregrounds this pertinent issue in contemporary Nigeria. This paper therefore leaning on the postcolonial discourse and utilizing the content analysis method, explores religion and the ‘fourth world’, that is, the world peopled by the vulnerable, defenceless and the gullible. It probes religion as a construct used for deceit and to exploit. Thus, it is discovered that these custodians of religion, especially in Nigeria has found a readymade business venture where their investments yield quantum returns and that these leaders themselves are quacks and predators. Premised on this discovery, it is hoped that through this creative wake up call, people will be alert to avoid falling into this scam of religious deviousness and quackery.

Introduction

Otherwise known as creed, faith or belief, religion is the belief in and the worship of an entity considered a supreme being. From the earliest creation, man had always been concerned with questions regarding his/her existence in the universe- the nature of his being and the purpose of his existence. He had also been preoccupied with life beyond the earth, asking such questions like where do I come from? Where do I go after here? This preponderance of existential questions like these prompt the belief in a sovereign entity that is in control and oversees the entire universe. In contemporary Africa, two foreign religions- Islam and Christianity predominate, having conquered Africa’s traditional religion with the whip of colonialism. But while these two creeds are believed to be dynamics of peace, harmony and societal development as its adherents preach, one witnesses now a downward trend of ills ranging from hypocrisies, deceit, fanaticism based violence, terrorism, domination and oppression in the name of religion.

On the other hand, most African countries and developing nations of the world are classified by the West as the third world. These third world countries are mostly nations bedecked by poverty, unemployment, hunger and disease. However, drawing inference from Ifeoma Okoye’s insistence in her novel *The Fourth World*, Onyeka Iwuchukwu contends that, ‘... apart from this recognized third world, there is another unrecognized world which she names the fourth world’ (2). To Emenyonu, it is, ‘... a world whose citizenship is not defined by race, colour, geographical location, tongue or creed ... the universal world of the poor found everywhere on earth ... a world of voiceless humanity, the ignored and despised found in rich as in poor countries ...’ (Foreword to *TFW*). As such, while holding on to Okoye’s insistence and Emenyonu’s explication of the features of this fourth world, this paper extends the fourth world to include the vulnerable, the gullible, the desperate and the defenceless as it is seen in *On Ajayi Crowther Street*. This paper focuses on Christianity and the church, headed as it were by the overseers, generally known as pastors, papas or daddy[ies] in today’s Nigeria.

Literature in Africa has never been for the sake of beauty alone. African literary outputs have always combined aesthetics with purpose, for according to Helen Chukwuma, ‘the present is too real and pressing to be ignored’ (ix). For this sake, Onyeka Iwuchukwu claims that, ‘the writer has been variously described as a guide, a teacher, a moral barometer, the conscience of the society who examines and recommends a way to higher ideals for a better society’ (2). Thus, the writer, ‘... arouses in the reader a true sense of himself, evoking his past and linking it to the present’ (Chukwuma, vi). That writer, ‘recreates for us the problems and effort of a people creating a viable culture in response to the

demands of their environment and it gives us frequent insights into effect on men of the culture they have created' (Dan Izevbaye, 17).

Elnathan John is a Nigerian writer ranked amongst the third generation writers of African literature. Ogaga Okuyade asserts that the third generation corpus of Nigerian literature 'exhibits a subtle change in its artistic curve'. He purports that, 'their styles and thematic concerns do not only impress the badge of newness and newness on their art but give them a discrete position in the evolutionary process of the Nigerian novel' (2). These crop of third generation writers do not break off with the old but in Nnolim's words, '... blends the new with the old' (53). This seems to be what Elnathan John and his cartoonist Alaba Onajin did in *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, for while not taking a break from being the moral compass of postcolonial Nigeria like Nigerian writers before him, they introduced the new by 'bringing words to life through illustration' (222). The text *On Ajayi Crowther Street* is a novel in colourful cartoons. Instead of the lengthy words that characterize the conventional novel, Elnathan and Onajin; his cartoonist resorted to words in pictures to satirize and decry the hypocrisies and behind-the-scenes of religion. Situating Reverend Akpoborie's family, the text takes a symbolic swipe of the happenings in most religious homes in contemporary Nigeria.

In exploring the author's preoccupations in the text, this paper inclines towards the Postcolonial discourse. In Chike Okoye's view, Postcolonial literatures, '... is basically the literatures written by writers of countries that have gained political independence from a colonial power' (1). These kinds of literatures, usually from Africa and other 'developing' nations of the world, often tend to posit the inhibitions and the cultural supremacy exercised on the colonized by the colonizer. This hegemony is made efficient through structures prevalent in the system that enshrines the culture of domination and vilification of the postcolonial 'other'. 'Other' is a postcolonial terminology, espoused by Edward Said that shows a stigmatization, demonization and dehumanization of groups or peoples other than oneself. To Lois Tyson, it is 'a practice used to judge others different from one self as different and inferior and hence, 'it divides the world between 'us', the 'civilized' and 'them'- the 'others'- the 'savages'. The 'savage' is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the demonic *other*)' (366). Thus, through the postcolonial discourse, machineries of subversion are uncovered and the critic brings to light the exploitative tendencies of the colonizer and depicts how these activities impoverish the 'other'.

As such, when applied to *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, the text explores religion as a structure that is used to hold the citizens of this fourth world in bondage. It exposes Reverend Akpoborie as a hypocrite who runs 'a show' for a church, using paid scammers as recipients of miracles, healings and deliverances. He, as the 'colonizer' and at the head of the food chain, exploits the gullibility of his church members and that of his family. *On Ajayi Crowther Street* as a veritable arsenal captures and satirizes the daily lives of families in modern Lagos, foregrounding social issues that revolve around religion, romance and reputation. It is worthy of note that Ajayi Crowther street with its residents, their daily lives and the ideals etched within them is a microcosm of most families in postcolonial Nigeria. Elnathan John thus exposes the evils that go on behind closed doors and how this adversely affects the people involved.

Religion in the Fourth World in *On Ajayi Crowther Street*

With the proliferation of poverty, hunger, despondency and gloom, Nigerians resort to religion as an escapist route from the horrific realities of their situations. They believe in magic; what is known as 'America wonder' in common parlance, prophecies without basis and faith without work. As a result, the custodians of religion and the church have found a viable means of milking this economic cow. Umeanolue and Nwadiakor assert that, 'in Nigeria ... religion has been abused in many ways to suit the interests of some groups of people who consider themselves as custodians and defenders of religious values and faith' (1). These custodians see themselves as righteous while others are sinners; they criticize, judge and make others the 'other'. In 2006, the entire Nigeria was agog with the story of Chukwuemeka Ezeugo, also known as Reverend Dr. King, the GO (General Overseer) in charge of Christian Praying Assembly. This 'holy' man reportedly brandishes all manner of violence on his congregation when they err. He considers himself sanctimonious and his members as sinners that must

be brought to the true knowledge of God. As a preacher, he does God's work by physically and sexually assaulting members and setting them on fire.

In *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, Reverend Akpoborie is the custodian, the daddy GO of The Reformed End Time Ministries. He displays his zealotry and sainthood by disturbing the serenity of a Sunday morning with a loud honking of his car horn as he hurries his family to church. To show that he is a leader extraordinaire, he shames his wife in his message as he screeches to his congregation, 'Let me hear you say, may we never miss the Lord's trumpet just because we are painting our faces!!!' (4). An unwitting audience might think that daddy GO is really concerned for their souls but in actual fact, daddy GO's message came about because he was still seething with anger at his wife who made him late because she was dressing up. To defend himself, he says, '... Besides, if you all weren't so tardy, there would be nothing to talk about' (16). By this, John reveals the moral flaw of unforgiveness, and 'holier-than-thou' in the Reverend gentleman. To assure himself of his holy status, he resorts to shaming his family, criticizing and embarrassing them. In this holy man's household, there is constant nagging and quarrelling, such that Mary; their daughter berates them, 'Do you guys have to let the whole neighbourhood know when you are quarrelling? ... sounds more like fighting' (16). Although *The Holy Bible* which is the Christian religion's source of faith in Titus 1: 7, 1st Timothy 3: 1 and 4 and Ephesians 5: 25 outlined the conducts for any man in the position of a bishop, Akpoborie's ways go against the holy writ. The passages expound that one who must be a bishop '... must be blameless ... not self-willed, not soon angry... [he must be] one that ruleth well his own house ... [he must], love [his] wife even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it'. However, in contrast to these passages, one finds that the Reverend's love and ruling of his own household is vengeful and it is by his own standards of 'offend me and I retaliate hard with barking, shaming, criticizing, condemning and castigating'. The word of God in his mouth thus becomes a tool of oppression and subjugation, psychologically holding his family in irrepressible fear and the need to keep up appearances.

Furthermore, Elnathan John's bitter sledge hammer falls on the clerics; the religious overseers who are blindfolded, even though their eyes are physically open. They see the truth; they know the truth but they refuse to acknowledge the truth. They see the ills in the society and know the right things to be done, but they refuse to speak against it because they too are culprits. In a meeting of landlords of Ajayi Crowther street concerning the issue of noise pollution from generators, grinding machines and car horns, Rev. Akpoborie turns a blind eye to the growing concern of noise pollution in their neighbourhood. He wears the garment of self-righteousness, exonerating himself from being a contributor to the public menace. When he is accosted by his neighbours on his Sunday morning honking of car horn, he retorts; 'I don't see how honking can be used in the same sentence as grinding machines or generators!' (29). He carries himself so highly and assumes the issue being raised against him by other residents as a personal affront.

Recall earlier the mention that Nigeria's harsh socio-economic realities push Nigerians into seeking relief in religion and believing in magic and 'magicians'. These daddy GOs know it and they resort to using it to their advantage. In the text, Reverend Akpoborie exploits the gullibility of his congregation by hiring motor park touts as miracle receivers in order to bamboozle them into thinking that he is the real deal. These kinds of churches draw a large number of people to their events and the miracles one witnesses in meetings such as these are often referred to as 'arrangee miracle' in common Nigerian lingo. From the text, we learn that '... Good miracles cost money ...' (36). It therefore follows that for the reverend gentleman to pay dearly for miracles; his congregation would have contributed to it through diverse offerings and seed sowings. Here, spiritual quackery and miracle merchandize is the name of the game and 'good miracles' are an investment where he expects returns, sometimes not in cash, but in fame or in both.

Moreover, Akpoborie knows he is a fraud therefore he resorts to brain washing and tilting the truth in order to justify his cunningness and deceit. In a meeting with his assistant; Pastor Diego, an interesting conversation ensued;

Reverend Akpoborie: We need to think of a crusade theme and an idea for the next quarter.

Pastor Diego: Another miracle service will be great

Reverend Akpoborie: Yes, but I don't like the guys you got us the last time. They cost us too much money

Pastor Diego: I am sorry about that Daddy. I will negotiate before I bring anyone else

Reverend Akpoborie: I wish we didn't need these scoundrels. But people need to be helped to believe ... Why bother if you can't really heal people ... Think of it this way. When the Lord asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, do you think he didn't know there was a sheep that could be used nearby?

Pastor Diego: He must have known, He is all knowing

Reverend Akpoborie: Exactly. So technically, by human standards, it was a trick. A lie ... But the Bible says that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world.

Pastor Diego: I have never thought of it this way. (Pgs 22-23)

Karl Marx believes that religion is the opium of the masses. Like opium gives relief; albeit temporary, religion, like opium is administered by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience when being exploited. This is the situation here as Pastor Diego and the 'people who need to be helped to believe' are being preyed on and manipulated to believe by their oppressor; Reverend Akpoborie. He uses the scripture that he twisted to his own advantage to exploit their gullibility and vulnerability into parting with, not only their money but sometimes material gifts like cars and land. It is important to note that the Reverend himself does not go for these 'miracle arranging missions', in order to save his reputation, rather he sends his stooge Pastor Diego. This alludes to the fact that he is fully aware of the morality or otherwise of his tactics but still, he indulges in it because he clearly holds no regard for his flock.

Another ruse used by some religious custodians in contemporary Nigeria is their deliverance outreaches and programmes. In today's Nigeria, church people have become enamoured with 'fire, back to sender and fall and die' prayers to supposed enemies that are out to mitigate their progress. As well, religious leaders equally utilize this avenue to their own advantage. In the text, when the government pronounces a law against homosexuality, the pastor sees another viable business venture. With Pastor Diego as his middle man again, they planned to, '... have a special deliverance session for these sick people' (106). But to have the deliverance session, they have to, '... tell those boys that they have one more job to do', even though, '... this will likely cost a lot more' (106). Hinting at the economic exploitation involved in this game, Pastor Diego says, 'I see potential in this...' (106). This implies that this is a business venture and the Reverend is a business man, for him to pay a heavy amount to touts in order to help people believe, the congregation would have been paying much more for it through various other means. Ironically, while the Reverend is organizing crusades to cure homosexuals by casting the spirit of homosexuality away from them, his son Godstime was having a homosexual relationship with his friend Onyeka. The novelist here decries this societal trend of inattentive parents, especially from the household of clerics, who through religion and keeping up religious values incite so much fear that there is no openness between members of the family. In the text, Reverend Akpoborie's children find it easier to talk to their aunty Susan instead of their parents. Unfortunately, Pastor Diego is equally not a saint for he was carrying on a clandestine sexual affair with Keturah; the Reverend's daughter, which resulted in an illicit pregnancy. Elnathan and his colleague through this literary piece present a morally depraved society that wears an outward garb of sainthood and spirituality, a hypocritical society that is more interested in keeping up appearances than in what goes on inside.

Again, in outlining the prerequisite conditions for one to be a cleric, the bible stipulates that such a person must be blameless. Reverend Akpoborie is not blameless. He is a rapist that preys on defenceless house maids. Kyauta is a defenceless housemaid in the Akpoborie household; a hapless young girl who, 'we are helping ... by giving her a job and a room' (53). No one in the family except for Mary actually cares about her. Mrs Akpoborie praises herself because, 'In many houses, the maids sleep in the store. Here she has her own room!' (53). Mrs. Akpoborie's attitude towards Kyauta is in contrast to Mrs. Bucknor who took Kyauta in after the rape incident and actually treated her like a human being. The Bucknors were not overly religious but they were open-minded and humane. Ifeoma Nwafor opines that the [girl] - child abuse has now become a global problem. To her, vulnerable children, especially

the girl child, are most times abused by people who are supposed to love, cherish and protect them. The abuse often ranges from physical injuries, abandonment, sexual abuse or child labour. In Kyauta's case, the abuse is sexual. She tells her friend Sikirat, 'Every time pastor is touching me ... Every time when his wife is not around, he will call me to church office and touch me by force' (117). Not only does Reverend Akpoborie sexually abuse Kyauta but he resorts to his usual means of twisting the scriptures to his own advantage in order to justify his wrong. When Kyauta summons the courage to tell him off, he says to her;

Are you trying to tell me about God? What the hell do you know about God?
Do you know what it means to be filled with the Spirit? To perform wonders?
Let me tell you about God. By the time you get to where I am, you will receive
the grace to do things that others cannot do (93)

For Reverend Akpoborie, the conclusion of the whole matter is that '... in the presence of grace, sin means nothing' (93). By this, Elnathan John and his cartoonist uncover another devious trend in Christian religion in today's Nigeria. Now, one witnesses a departure from the traditional Christian teaching of sin and consequence in favour of the message of grace that allows one to sin. This type of grace is termed hyper grace. It highlights the doctrine of once saved, always saved, no matter what the person does afterwards. In churches that espouse the hyper grace theme, the leaders cannot be judged worthy as they live sinful lives, and often engage in sexual immorality, abuse and drunkenness. As should be expected, waywardness and all manner of impunity emanate from churches following this trend. Bishop Okwudili Eze of Zion Heritage and Miracles Ministry, Abuja in an interview with church times Nigeria purports that the hyper grace message is a message from 'the pit of hell fashioned or designed ... in order to make people unconscious and treat sin with levity', as such, leaders can then manipulate members to their own advantage, having absolved them from God's wrath for their wayward lifestyle. Again, the writers of this text draw attention to the plight of vulnerable young females serving as helps in many Nigerian households who are often sexually exploited and abused. In Akpoborie's case, he uses his prominent place as a man- of- God to manipulate Kyauta to give in to his demands. He justifies his evil with the scripture twisted perfectly to suit his purpose. The author shows his contempt for this menace by Kyauta's refusal for sexual domination, preferring instead to leave the Akpoborie's household than to remain under oppression.

By being devious, men- of- God in today's Nigeria displace God in the minds of people and enthrone themselves instead. They desire reverence as it is with God, but then, they force that worship from people by scheming and resorting to all manner of sham and deceit. What is unnerving however, is that people do not see through this deviousness but rather continue to troop to these religious charlatans to be exploited and ravaged. Nonetheless, although the situation may look gloomy, the writers are still hopeful that there is still remedy for Nigeria. They depict this by contrasting Mrs. Akpoborie's attitude towards Kyauta with Mrs Bucknor's and the Akpoborie's family with the Bucknors. They also contrasted Keturah's character with that of Mary. These contrasts show that there are still progressives in Nigeria despite the extremes. These progressives prefer dialogue instead of confrontation. In the meeting of landlords, with Mr. Bucknor's intervention, heated arguments were doused and a compromise of putting off every noisy thing at twelve midnight was reached. Through his intervention, even the sanctimonious Reverend agreed to quit his Sunday morning car horn honking. Again, the Bucknors took Kyauta in after she left the Akpoborie's household. It was through Mrs Bucknor's that Kyauta got the medical attention that she needed, they treated her like a human being, offering her better pay and working conditions. It was through them as well that Reverend Akpoborie was apprehended and brought to book.

In contrasting Keturah's character with that of her sister Mary, the text highlights a breed of Nigerians that are open minded, unprejudiced and not quick to judge and criticize others. Mary, in refusing to be, '... a dumb follower', represents the Nigerian who refuses to be cowed, but subjects ideas and ideals to scrutiny before absorbing them. It is the Marys and the Bucknors from this text that Elnathan John and Onajin wish their contemporary Nigerians to be.

Conclusion

Elnathan and Onajin are parts of the society that they tried to depict in their graphic novel *On Ajayi Crowther Street*. It is to be applauded that they have taken on a creative redemptive mission in this novel. They succeeded in reflecting the pathetic culture of religious deception that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society and how it has been used against the weak, defenceless and gullible. The text also reveals a society that is mostly concerned in presenting a sanctimonious cover for a clandestine world of secrets and lies. In all, the novel presents itself as a wakeup call for a social transformation that will hopefully bring an end to religious deception and exploitation in the Nigerian society as can be seen from the character of Mrs. Bucknor who stood up for the right thing to be done by having Reverend Akpoborie face the music for his crimes.

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