

## Literature and National Security: The Almajeri Education in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*In the twenty-first century, the study of literature must reflect the dynamics of society. In other words, there has to be a way in which literature, in refining our faculties and heightening our sensibility, must be functional –that is, the knowledge of the scholar of literature must not only be concrete and practical, but also applicable. Training in engineering and technology-based subject is geared towards producing graduates who will eventually engage in practical things, using tools and skills. Quite unlike training in engineering and technology, training in literary education demands also practical engagement, but not with tools but instead with knowledge: Years of preoccupation with texts mean being exposed to information –what might be termed here to be macro information on cultural types, political, religious, historical, sociological, philosophical and human psychological types. The objective of this paper is to examine how literature could be concrete and practical and how its information types could be transformed into knowledge and how the knowledge could be applied in life’s various situations, especially how it could be useful in the awakening of the consciousness of the Almajiri in Northern Nigeria and make them partners in driving of social change in Nigeria. John Dewey’s philosophical theory of Instrumentalism is required to make this possible. John Dewey had theorised that human thoughts could be channelled into focused power and directed specifically at identifying problems and providing solutions. The methodological approach is inductive, deductive, interpretive and scientific in the sense of closely observing texts and initiating an interactive process between the texts and the mind so that John Dewey’s philosophical theory of Instrumentalism*

**Keywords:** Literature, National Security, Almajeri Education, Instrumentalism, Nigeria

### Introduction

Terry Eagleton in his *The Death of Criticism*<sup>1</sup>, had spoken of the rude shock a clerk in his office might experience when she stumbles on the thought that her boss is actually paid, and very well for that matter, for just reading poetry and prose. If she realises this and perhaps begins to make noise about it, the authorities might again realise that, indeed, they might be wasting money on a venture that has no purpose. When they come to realise this, it would mean the death of criticism.

Terry Eagleton chose this anecdote to relay his message of how people might come off with the impression that literary education is an exercise in futility because, as Edward Said had demonstrated in his *Orientalism* in an exchange with an old college friend of his who once worked in the department of defence for a period during the Vietnam war, literature or the cultural realm and its expertise seemed institutionally divorced from their real connection with power (see Said, 2003: 2-3). In fact, what he wanted to say was that literary education should be taken very seriously, because it contained things needed to build a man or woman for social

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<sup>1</sup> *The Death of Criticism* was a lecture delivered by Terry Eagleton at the Hesburgh Centre Auditorium on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2008.

change. In other words, as earlier mentioned in the abstract, texts contain macro and micro information types, which if properly harnessed and transformed have the capacity to release great energy enough to change our world.

On the individual level, culture as a macro-information type has micro-information types, for example, values, morals, belief systems, ethics. Politics as a macro-information type has micro-information types, too, for example, power dynamics, power relations, political players and politicking. The micro-information types of religion are the denominational issues, the Moslem/Christian issues, the supernatural issues, etc. The micro-information types of history will be all about origins, evolutionary trends, hindsight and foresight, etc, while the micro-information types of sociology will orientate the individual on human relation, its motives, interests and needs, gender problems, etc. The philosophical micro-information types will be on life, its essence, its future, how it is spent, etc; and finally the human psychological micro-information types are always about human behaviour and psychology.

All these are pieces of information derivable from texts, but which also demand transformation into knowledge. It is at this stage that information transformed to knowledge becomes power. This power that the individual, that is, the scholar of literature possesses is actually that state that he has attained in his level of cognition that has made it possible for him or her to become a better person or a bad person. That state must, however, be made concrete and practical through the application of the knowledge, which has actually made him or her powerful.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Over the centuries, scholars have debated the need for education to be functional. The ability of the scholar/critic of literature to become a mediator in Conflict Resolution is only one aspect of his or her method of making his knowledge practical or functional. The critic or reader may decide to apply his or her knowledge, which has become a source of power for him or her in fighting against oppression and injustice anywhere he or she senses them. He or she may decide to go into party politics and seek elective office to affect people's lives thereby. He or she may even begin to apply words to paper, that is, become a writer. The fact of a writer being a person who is making his or her knowledge practical or functional lies in the fact that, first of all, he or she has a reason for wanting to write –what the Marxist critics would call authorial intention in writing: if he or she is not trying to reform a morbid psyche, he or she might intend to teach or raise issues about a condition that he or she thinks needs to change. He or she could even inspire a revolution. He or she might decide to report events as well as ensure that people become informed, because it is in being informed about something or a situation that change becomes inevitable.

Today in Nigeria, Nigerians are faced with the challenges of insecurity occasioned by religious extremism. As always, the terror is unleashed by religious sects. Previously in history, a macro-information type, the Maitasine Islamic sect terrorised Nigerians and justified their action through misappropriation of Koranic injunctions. Today in history, the Boko Haram are terrorising Nigerians and justify their action through a medley of reasons that are religious, political and ethnic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work deploys John Dewey's philosophical theory of Instrumentalism, which argues the human thought must be directed at identifying problems and providing solutions. His philosophical theory "holds, roughly, that the forms of human activity, including thought, are

instruments used by people to solve practical problem. In Dewey's view, thinking is not a search for "truth" but an activity aimed at solving individual and social problems, a means by which humans strive to achieve a satisfactory relationship with their environment" (Bruder & Moore, 111). In other words, reading is an activity because thinking is inherent in it. When we read texts we interrogate issues in them and with that we are able to conceptualize implied problems and then we can also envision solutions to those problems.

### Literature Review

The chaotic state of the Nigerian state at present could be compared to the situation of England during the Victorian period, where the progress made in science and technology brought man to the brink of apostasy. The fact that science could not verify the existence of God led many to trust solely in the proven capacity of the human mind. Boldly the German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared in his fictional work, *Thus Spoke Zoroaster* or *Also Sprach Zarathustra, that God was dead ... that He died in his pity with humanity* (see Nietzsche as translated by Hollingdale, 1975: 114). The Godlessness of the age as well as the doubt cast upon the divine authority of the Church led Mathew Arnold to propose in his *Literature and Dogma* (2002) the need for Literature to take the place of religion. This he thought was possible because in his *Culture and Anarchy* (2004), his social criticism and his own way of defining his Humanism, literature was carrier of culture, because its humanism consisted in getting rid of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, prejudice and a continuous quest for the ideal. Therefore, in his *Literature and Dogma* (2002), he argued that sacred texts should be read as literature because values and morals are derived from them and as such they contained things to make us better persons. In other words, the people of that time should read sacred texts whether or not the existence of God was verifiable or not, because reading them would eventually make them men of culture or people who have overcome their ignorance, prejudice, narrow-mindedness and continually desire the ideal or perfection.

By implication, therefore, literature must come to the aid of religious bigots. As George Gordon, the early Professor of English Literature had said, 'England is sick and ... English Literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has triple function: still, I suppose to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the state.'<sup>2</sup> Rephrased one may say: Nigeria is sick and literature must save it. Our religions having failed, and social remedies being slow, literature must now not only delight us, but also instruct, heal the state and save our souls.

Recently, the Federal Government of Nigeria had shown interest in getting to the root causes of religious extremism among Moslems in Nigeria. The Almajiri factor has been identified as one of the causes of religious extremism in Nigeria. Somehow, they have come to terms with the fact that the high rate of poverty and ignorance among some class of individuals or Almajiris in the North, whose condition was occasioned by some form of religious perception and belief, caused the frustration that led to this cataclysmic turn of event in Nigeria. Now the federal government is thinking of rehabilitating this class of individuals through education. Now the question is: what type of education do these people need? What type of culture will the education teach them? Education liberates the mind, especially good education in the humanities. Vocational education no doubt will teach them practical skills, which could help

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<sup>2</sup> This is quoted by Chris Baldick, 'The Social Mission of English Studies' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford 1981), p.156 and which Terry Eagleton was considerably indebted because of its excellence in scholarship. It was later published as *The Social mission of English Criticism* (Oxford, 1983).

them in creating employment for themselves; however, for their ignorance to be conquered, for their minds to be liberated, for them to become truly free and genuine human beings, who will harness the potentialities of their mental faculties, who will make their knowledge functional and applicable, they need that type of education that will make them become men and women of culture. They should be exposed to the transformational effect of knowledge. Their education should be such that occurred in Renaissance and Reformation period in Europe (see Johnson, 2001:44), where a brand of humanism, literary humanism and a method of approach to textual issues evolved. Like a humanist, they should be encouraged to look at things objectively, to value the power of reason without necessarily rejecting the Godhead, to question the origins, authenticity and credentials of texts, even sacred texts, to, in fact, practice rational Islamism and see whether it is possible to evolve Islamic humanism, which has taken root in countries like Turkey, where the great Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gülen has emerged as a love-and-peace-force (see Gülen, 2010:31). They should be bombarded with texts, literary texts as Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015) and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015), which expose life as lived by street urchins or almajirai and other social miscreants. These texts could be simplified if need be, because they will certainly help to promote sympathy and fellow feelings among people deserving to be saved from the indoctrination of religious extremists. In fact, literature should be made to train such persons in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs exist (see Eagleton,2008:22).

#### Discussion

Texts as Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015) can help to promote sympathy, fellow-feelings and understanding of the dangers of religious extremism. For example, from the text we are able to understand why parents send their children away to become Almajiri. We could read that portion to pupils or students and have them talk about things in the text. As Dantala puts it, "All I know is that when the rains first stopped falling and the millet dried up in the farm, my father sent them –Maccido, Hassan and Hussein –to become almajirai in an Islamic school in a place called Tashar Kanuri" (43).

What then is the first plausible reason parents send their children to Islamic schools to become almajirai? Poverty! When parents have many children from marrying many wives and there is any kind of natural disaster or mishap, to ease off the burden of taking care of these children, the first instinct is to send them to Islamic school under the pretext that they are going to receive training in the way of Allah. This is not to rule out the fact that there are parents who genuinely send their children to Islamic school to be trained in the ways of Allah. By sending these children out, they are exposed to the varied experiences Dantala is exposed to and many of these experiences are negative and dangerous as we shall see.

As the text reveals, many of the children are sent out to beg and when they complete their training they do not have money to go back to their parents, some even would no longer know where they came from or who their parents are. So they end up sleeping anywhere they see – under the bridges or under trees like the Kuka tree boys. With no means of sustenance, they give in to criminality by joining bad gangs. Some of them become tools in the hands of unscrupulous politicians, who use their influence over Imams to use the Mosque as recruitment ground for their evil. They also mingle with other boys who have become criminals and lack value –boys as Banda. There are many Bandas in the streets of the North. As Dantala further narrates:

I like Banda because he is generous with his wee-wee. He doesn't like the way I tell him things that happen when he is away in Sabon Gari in the centre of town. He says I don't know to tell a story, that I just talk without direction, like the harmattan wind that just blows and blows, scattering dust. (Elnathan, 3)

from smoking wee-wee, they certainly will graduate into taking other dangerous drugs. With the addiction that comes with drug use, human life will definitely worth nothing to them; for as they caught the Igbo who tries to steal some gallons of oil from Maman Ladidi's house, Dantala grabs a long nail and pierces the thief's head with it many times and he does that with a certain relish because the thief is Igbo, even though he claims to be Idowu, a Yoruba boy. But Dantala knows he is Igbo because he has the nose of an Igbo. (Elnathan, 4) He is able to do what he did because he is under the influence of wee-wee. He does it with relish because he has prejudices against the Igbo. As he confesses, "I followed Banda and he gave me the first wee-wee I ever smoked. It felt good. My legs became light and after a while I felt them disappear. I was floating, my eyes were heavy and I felt bigger and stronger than Banda and Gobedanisa and all the boys under the kuka tree. (Elnathan, 7)

All the scenarios painted above are all what almajirai face because they left home to come to train under Mallams. These are all the processes towards becoming willing tool in the hands of terrorists, because, eventually, all these individuals get recruited into terrorism. A country serious about her National Security must pay close attention to these things: the reasons parents send their wards away to Quranic schools, what becomes of the children while there, etc. Even while they are in these Quranic schools or in the Mosques, close attention must be paid to what they read, what they are taught and how they are taught. Close attention must also be paid to the Imam and what they teach the students. Let us pay close attention to these:

Malam Abdul-Nur did not raise his head from his exercise book  
When he asked: 'if Allah asks you to do something will you refuse?

When I did not answer, he stopped writing, dropped his pen slowly  
Massaged his eyeballs. Then he looked at me:

'No,' I said, confused.

'Are you just saying it, or do you understand it, what it means to do  
What Allah wants without any question?'

'I don't understand.'

'Are you ready to do what Allah wants when He wants it, without  
Asking why?'

'Yes.'

'Yes. I know you will.' (Elnathan, 82)

Here the recruitment process is exposed. It starts through this sort of manipulation and this is very important in national security intelligence gathering. It is expected that those being recruited do not ask questions and this exactly what literary scholarship prepares one for: to keep asking questions and this is why literary education must be encouraged in all schools in the Muslim North of Nigeria.

As it is in Bayan Layi in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015), so it is in San Siro in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossom* (2015). As the narrator in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* puts it:

San Siro, as the place eventually became known, was special. In the feigned ignorance of the neighbouring police post, its fame blossomed. In the evenings, it teemed with young men whose motorcycles would crowd the entrance and take up most of the street. The riders, and many others beside, would be inside enjoying thick joints and lively arguments about life seen through cannabis fumes. They debated football and ganja-inspired philosophies plucked gingerly from the precipice of inebriation. Dealers, too, came for the serrated leaves. At San Siro, the weed was supreme. On the side, some of the boys dealt other things –codeine, solution, tramol and other assorted mixtures, but for the rogue with spikyhair, weed was the thing. (Ibrahim, 36)

The scenario is the same at the place of gathering of these street Urchins. Not all of the street urchins are entirely bad; some are good but somehow find themselves among people, who have, somehow, become evil influences. As the protagonist, Dantala states:

Gari

Banda was never an almajiri like me. He was born in Sabon

Like most of the other boys but didn't attend Quranic school. Malam Junaidu had warned us about the kuka tree boys, who come to the mosque only during Ramadan or Eid days –yan Daba, thugs, who do nothing but cause trouble in Bayan Layi. We despised them because they did not know the Quran and Sunna like us and did not fast or pray five times a day. 'A Person who doesn't pray five times a day is not a Muslim,' Malam Junaidu would say. Now that I am also under the

kuka

Tree, I know they are just like me and even though they don't Pray five times a day, some of them are kind, good people – Allah knows what is in their hearts. (Elnathan, 7)

What can be gleaned from this exposition is that the children vulnerable to being manipulated into becoming terrorists are not only those sent away to Quranic schools by their parents: there are children who are simply thrown to the streets in Northern Nigeria to fend for themselves. Banda in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* and Reza in Adam Abubakar Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* are examples. Both are easy recruits by politicians as thugs who do all their dirty jobs of killing political opponents. They use them to promote prejudice and whip up ethnic or religious sentiments.

The fact that Malam Abdul-Nur in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* starts a Mujahideen and begins to burn every civilizing tools shows that for evil to thrive and thrive very well, ignorance must first be unleashed. As Dantala narrates:

I reach the source of the smoke and find a huge crowd. People are throwing boos and papers into the fire. Malam Abdul-Nur is supervising the burning, adding kerosene any time the items the items being dumped seem to be overwhelming the fire. every time the flames leap from the pile the crowd screams: 'Allahu Akbar!' There is excitement on their faces and many

are jumping and pumping their fists in the air. Malam Abdul-Nur has told them that before they can truly join his movement they must burn any school certificates they have. They are also burning the books by Hausa writers because those books corrupt women with tales of illicit love affairs. And they are burning CDs of Hausa movies, which he says are products of Kano, a city of corrupt wealth, usury and decadence. (Elnathan, 190)

Furthermore, as he preaches to his congregation in his mosque, he tells the people:  
how Islamic societies were self-sufficient and pious and progressive. The Europeans needing to conquer Muslim people, sought to start by conquering their culture through worthless and sinful education. He says that if Europeans had come with guns and ships, it might have been easy to fend them off. But they came with liberal ideas and education to slowly eat at the root of Islamic civilization and control. (Elnathan, 196)

By these actions, they confirm that ideas have enormous power and influence. It is these ideas in the texts, literary texts that must be used to liberate the intending fundamentalists. Here again, government has enormous role to play; however, if the government is dominated by people with extremist views on religion as Abdul-Nur, then the state becomes even an instrument of destruction.

A particular Governor of a Northwestern State in Nigeria was once caught on camera on different occasions encouraging religious prejudices that would encourage hate and violence. When such individuals are in government, the state is used to encourage oppression.

### **Conclusion**

In fact, to use literature to liberate the minds of a large population of Northern Nigerian peoples, texts as these must be compulsory texts in all their schools. The incidents in the texts must all be pointed out in literature classes and students or pupils made to interrogate them. They need to be made aware how brainwashing starts; how manipulation is engineered by the Malams in all their mosques. Even some Quranic verses in the texts must be laid bare for the students or pupils to interrogate them and build their opinions and by so doing demystify certain things. The Malams, Imams and Sheihks must also undergo periodic training in deconstruction so that they can understand the processes of centring and decentering so that they can be aware of the logic by which systems hold themselves in power. When they become aware of these, they will be able to keep themselves in check; and when they are able to keep themselves in check, they will be incapable of manipulating the people learning under them.

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