

THE REALITY OF PANDEMIC AS A TOOL OF SEPARATION: AN EXAMPLE OF A *BEAUTIFUL THING TO BEHOLD* BY UMAR TURAKI

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Abstract

Pandemic is generally being accompanied with mass infection, of diseases, encompassing various aspects of mortality rates, disruptions of social conventions and having a profound impact on healthcare system, economic challenge mental health challenges and educational setback. Pandemics have had a significant impact on African societies, shaping narratives that reflect the realities of these experiences. The narrative reflects the challenges that delve into deeper social issues such as inequality, discrimination and the impact of colonization . The concept represents broader themes of division and separation within society. When individuals grapple with the resultant effects of pandemics, it showcases the underlying tensions, and complex nature of societal upheaval that exist in African communities. This paper provides an overview of the reality of outbreaks of infectious disease in Africa as a tool of separation in diverse ways of human existence. The focus is to espouse an African fiction by Umar Turaki Which deals with the plague or pandemic called ‘Grey’ and how it serves as an agent of isolation, alienation and loss as depicted in the novel.

Introduction

The recent outbreak of global Covid-19 pandemic which was experienced by all and sundry spreading across the continents was accompanied by mass infection, death, Isolation, loss and disruptions of social, conventions. It unarguably had a profound impact and a devastating effect on healthcare system, Economic challenges, mental health challenge and educational setback. Afolayan(2023:1) states that the nations of the world came under common traumatic experiences and that the pandemic literally surpassed preceding ordeals, such as the world wars, in terms of its ramified impacts on the health and other survival variables such as economy and shelter. Pandemics have had a significant impact on African societies shaping narratives that reflect realities of these experiences. The realities of these narratives delve into deeper social issues such as inequality and discrimination, this is in accordance with Mubiala severely restrict individual freedom.

Manase and Ndlovu(2022) posited that all this has led to various changes to valuation of the self, the way people live and relate with each other and how they perceive themselves in relation to their environment. Many African countries have experienced pandemics such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS and the most recent COVID-19 had devastating effects in physical separation through illness, death, appropriating quarantine measures and had deepened existing social divisions and inequalities. These infectious outbreaks represent equally broader themes of division and separation within the society. Michele, Marta and Giancarlo(2014) opined that “when plaque spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with the infected persons and contaminated object.

The above position is the focus of this study which projects and reveals the insight that pandemic is a sine qua non to isolation of individuals from loved ones, communities and families. These form the resultant effects of the pandemic that characters grapple with, the effect showcases the underlying tensions and complex nature of societal upheaval that exist in African communities. Authors like Chinua Achebe and Nigeria Wa Thiongo in their works explored and depicted the various ways pandemics have reshaped our understanding of these challenging moments in history of African Literature.

The lacuna in which the study is about to fill is bordered on the fact that not much had been done on pandemic as a tool for isolation, separation, and social disintegration in African Literature. It is therefore against this background that there is the need to discuss the reality of being separated from loved ones, families and communities by the outbreak of pandemic and this is done using Umar Turaki’s *Such a Beautiful Thing to Behold*. The portrayal of the realities of this pandemic and experiences by the novelist has led to the unfortunate concept of separation. The exploration of this central idea came principally by the measures applied to contain this outbreak. The study examines in broad perspective, the various ways in which the characters were grossly affected by this unfortunate incident but

with particular attention to physical, emotional, social and economic separation of the characters. In summary therefore, the general purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discourse of isolation, separation and social disintegration with respect to pandemic outbreak in African literary criticism, the study examines isolation, physical separations and social disintegration experienced by the characters of the infected outbreak in Umar Turakis' *Such a Beautiful Thing to Behold*. It also investigates and analyses the depiction of physical isolation, separation from loved ones, social disintegration and the quarantine measures employed by the writer in order to portray how families and communities were disintegrated. This paper is limited to the study of Umar Turaki's *Such a Beautiful Thing to Behold*. The essence of the choice is hinged on the basis that the novel has pandemic as its thematic preoccupation.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory is used to offer analysis on how pandemics are utilized as metaphors for societal issues in African writing. It highlights ways in which these writers assert their own perspectives in the face of historical injustices and power imbalances. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, social and political legacies of colonialism and imperialism. It focuses on how power dynamics, inequalities and cultural impositions from the colonial past continue to influence societies in the post-colonial era. It offers a critical lens through which to analyze the complexities of pandemic responses within the framework of injustices, the colonial attitudes towards race, ethnicity and identity during pandemic stigmatization of certain groups during outbreaks reflects the biases inherited from the colonial past. Kwok(2020) posits that one alarming concern during the pandemic is the rise of racism against Asians during Covid-19. He further avers that pandemic necessitated to the securing of borders – both physically and metaphorically. Which makes it almost impossible for the affected communities to access healthcare system.

Aspects of the realities of separation depicted in the Novel

Turaki portrayed characters who experienced the various aspects of separation, isolation and disintegration in *Such a Beautiful Thing to Behold*. These depictions presented the effects of pandemics in various degrees and dimensions. These separations were accompanied with death and physical separation from loved ones; negligence from the government, isolation from other neighboring communities and quarantine measures applied to contain the ailment. Turaki paints a picture and describe vividly the emergence of an infectious disease known as “Grey” and its resultant effects on the characters. In the Nigerian village of Pilam, the story delves on how they are being ravaged by “the Grey”. The mysterious disease solely affects the adults in Pilam, it changes the colour of their eyes to grey and in turn impedes their ability to function properly. Turaki describing the Grey says.

Dunka studied his eyes in the knife-size silver.... Of his father's mirror. He had first seen the Greg lodged in them two days ago.... His gaze had been rendered a monochromatic silver by the Grey.... It stole the color from your eyes as it killed you quietly (14)

This eventually distorts their health and finally leads to depression and death. The village is deserted as some adult died in the cause of the diseases while some decided to find solace in other nearby towns. The family of four siblings being depicted in the novel has – Dunka, pannum, Panshak and Rit. The grey eventually separates the once united family. Turaki Portrays separation based on the painful death of all the adults in the village who are infected by the grey. The last adult to die was Nana Ritdirne, their neighbor who almost stood in place of their mother.

Turaki reveals that:

He carried her to the mouth of the grave that had been dug for her husband a year before after he had gone missing... after uncle Golhak had left to look for him... and never returned. Dunka's father had dug it alone... even though they could see how the Grey Crouched over him like a black storm waiting to break (16).

Aluko (2023) 277 writing about separation during pandemic posits that face to face interaction was replaced by face to screen interaction which was witnessed on the narratives of lock downs, physical distancing, social distancing, face-masking, internet church and online congregation, working from homes and virtual learning among others (277). The above was the narrative explicated in the novel under study. Turaki portrays physical separation which comes from quarantine measures applied to contain the diseases. Uroko and Nwaoga (2021) reveal that the government promulgated laws to halt human and vehicular movements. This actually forms an unpleasant experience for the people of Pilam as they are deprived from crossing over to their neighboring town for fear of the spread of the disease. Dunka, the eldest of the siblings decides to find a cure by all means having heard Nana Ritdirnen's words to find the cure in fifteen Goma street. Pagak and asking for Matyin, a woman with an assume cure for the Grey. Dunka being determined to scale through the barricade that has been erected after the Grey has come to Pilan(19) and the dreaded vigilante group who patrol the perimeter between the two villages. The residents of pilam having seen that the Grey is spreading

massively decide to relocate for respite; they however, meet a huge resistance from the soldiers sent by the government. The entire men were massacred leaving only few parentless, emaciated children to aimlessly walk around the village. Turaki asserts.

Somewhere between the settlements, they met a wall of soldiers sent by the government. The refugees ignored the commanding officer's instructions to turn back and tried to barge through the perimeter of wire mesh and barrels. Dunka did not witness the massacre but the explosion of firearms and the cries of dying flew across the distance and tone into his being like shards of glass (22).

Another source of separation experienced in "Turaki's *such as Beautiful Thing to behold* is physical separation from family and loved ones. It is the desire of every family to stay together and united during the surge of the highly transmissible infections. Ernst (2020) writing on the Toll separation takes on families with pandemic, asserts that separation and especially prolonged separations between parents and children are harmful to children and it's really considered to be a traumatic thing for a child to go through. She further says that separation, even for a short period of time has the ability to affect child's development and mental health.

Turaki portrayed in this instance, a once united family who is disintegrated by the emergence of grey. Dunka's parents are killed by the grey and thus the four siblings all went their separate ways. Dunka disappears to find the cure for the dreaded disease, Panmun elopes with her lover Zumji, Panshak's whereabouts are unknown. Tongzum and Tongrot as small as they were, were left behind by their parents. Zumji was separated from his dear father and finally separated from his dear woman Panmun. Turaki reveals each having been once filled with life now dead and separated from their original purposes. To the Grey that had become part of her (245). The children in the entire village were all separated and left to cater aimlessly for their selves; the whole village of Pillam was deserted. Turaki posits thus;

how many families remained in this place? How many people? Had anybody bothered to take a tally of the dead? To write their names? Who remembered them when it was just children who were left behind (246).

These separations had profound effect on the mental development of these children in accordance with what Ernst (2020). The traumatic experience was highly devastating. Rit, the youngest among the siblings becomes emotional, depressed and lonely when all her siblings were dispersed and separated from her. Turaki narrates:

Rit cried and cried, but sleep never came that night. It was her first time in the house alone, all by herself in the dark... But her two brothers were missing and her sister abandoned them... She was alone in the world (116).

Furthermore, this separation also has a traumatic and unpleasant effect on Panshak and Arrit. It distorted their mental development and turned them into killers. Turaki reveals "I just found out that my brother may have killed someone.... Arit stopped eating and paused... I killed someone too"(259). This summarizes the traumatic effects of separation which these young ones experienced. The truth is that their future is blurred and uncertain as there is no cure or any help from the government or neighboring towns. Turaki asserts "The truth was, there was no such thing as a cure when it came to the Grey. It did what it wanted, when it wanted, to whom it wanted" (260).

Economic separation is also another dimension experienced as a result of pandemic. From the study conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the health policy promulgated to contain the spread of the dreaded disease which involves lockdowns, social distancing had a negative impact on the economy. Eferakeka, Ovharhe, and Okolie(2020), assert that the economy dwindled as global, national and local supply chain of goods and services were drastically disrupted and there was short supply and resulting into scarcity. This forms the horrific experiences of the characters in the Turaki's *such as Beautiful Thing to Behold*. The Grey pandemic in Pilam triggered scarcity of food as the adults who are to farm are all killed by the Grey leaving the "Parentless emaciated children" (21) to feast on the fruit found in the trees, though not enough for them. The disease so ravaged the adults that none had the strength to farm anymore (21). Throughout the entire period of this pandemic there was no government aid, or palliatives sent across to the ravaged victims especially the children who were all left alone. Turaki thus asserts that: the children were the true victims, the adults were dying and finding their peace in death, but it was the children who had to grapple with the problem of survival.

The government only barricaded and massacred the victims of the Grey without any external help which is always associated with pandemic. Turaki narrates that the analysts and scientists only discuss about Pilam only on the screen without physical assistance. He reveals that;

Ministers and priests debated the native of a sickness that seemed to affect the soul itself. Now pilam, its inhabitants, and the mysterious sickness had become a black hole in the consciousness of the nation.(160)

Having portrayed the degrees and dimension of the realities of pandemic as a tool of separation and the traumatic effects the victims grappled with in Turaki's *such a Beautiful Thing to Behold*. The novelist clearly posited some actions which can contribute to overcoming the dreaded disease of Grey. It is necessary, therefore to assert here that Turaki portrayed "togetherness" as a strong weapon to contain the Grey, since they were abandoned by the government and the external world. Dunka as presented did not come back with any cure, this gives him a firm resolve to look for his sibling since there was no such thing as cure when it came to Grey (260) Dunka decides to look for his siblings especially Panmun, Turaki puts it thus "I want to go and look for Panmun", "you know I have to look for her, Rit. I can't just sit and do nothing" (235) when finally they came together as one family together with the four left of the disease. Turaki thus narrates.

Sometimes, where wounds exist, words can be insufficient... But a touch... as light as an arm Around someone, as Dunka .Was doing with his sister. A gesture....As small as a head placed in trust On a shoulder, as Panmun wasDoing with her brother. These Can heal (280)

This coming together according to Turaki is intended to relieve the siblings of the memory of pain buried within them. The Postcolonial reading of Turaki's *such a Beautiful Thing to Behold* reveals how the victims in the Post colonial era are treated with negligence during pandemic. The pandemic has exposed the leadership incapacibilities and health investment cum preparedness of countries across the globe. Turaki paints a picture of bad leadership, corruption and brutality which is experienced in the African continent in the Post colonial era. No prompt response to the victims of pandemic and the exposure of the inability of the government to contain the disease due to poor leadership. The African leaders are not rapid, proactive and sympathetic in their response. According to Chidume, Oko-Out and, Aro,(2021) "The government of Nigeria has taken a cue from other countries in closing national borders.... The government does not have adequate emergency response mechanism to cater for her citizens particularly those in rural areas where the total shutdown are being enforced.

The Narrative Styles

Turaki adopts the third person or Omniscient point of view in telling his stories. This narrative technique helps him to effectively express and capture every detail of the narratives. The narrator accesses the subconscious state of the characters or some of characters that Umar Turaki deploys in telling the story and reveals the working of their subconscious mind.

There is also the structure of the texts which is developed into two parts with each part further divided into chapters with the individual names within the novel.

The first part which has "The first eight days" Ushers in the pandemic called Grey and intimates the readers into the ravages of the pandemic while the second part entitled "Burying the dead" takes the reader on the various degrees and dimensions of the Grey and the firm resolve of the characters to contain it. The Africanness of this narrative is at once visible in their language usage. The novel is set in small village in Nigeria, thus the name of characters; the setting and the kind of food Puk and mun they eat reveal this. The language is simple and easy to understand, pointing towards pouring out the narrators mind.

Conclusion

The study depicts the realities of pandemic as a tool of separation. It examines how pandemic has resulted in separation of loved ones and families, economic separation and social disintegration from the measures undertaken to contain the dreaded, infectious disease understudy. These traumatic experiences have been studied to portray the mental development of some children resulting in negative behaviors and exhibition of violent acts. It also delves into the strategy of togetherness adopted for healing since no external help in form of palliatives and adequate medical care was offered.

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