

Streetism and African Children: A Narrative Analysis of *Born on a Tuesday* by Elnathan John

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Abstract

The problem of street children in Africa is a growing concern. Many children in a bid to escape from domestic violence, poverty and appalling living conditions, have turned to the streets in search of better opportunities. These children spend their days and nights living and working on the streets, living in absolute squalor and degrading circumstances. The girls and in some cases, the boys are forced into sexual relationships for protection and food, making them prone to disease and malnutrition. They are often trafficked without education or medical care. Some of them may have no choice; they are abandoned, orphaned, or thrown out of their homes. They live a life of trauma, held captive to their constant cycle of poverty and helplessness, with no hope of a better future; only despair. These children find security and relief from life's anxieties within their group. By extension, some of these children are on the streets because of mistreatment, neglect and lack of basic necessities of life. As a result, they find ready homes in unoccupied dwellings, uncompleted buildings, market places, under the bridges and wastelands more than their family homes. There are a number of common misconceptions about street children; for example, misconceptions about who they are and why they take to the streets. The focus is on the concept of 'streetism', the manifestation of Streetism in the selected text, their vulnerability and emotional and psychological trauma in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*. Psychoanalysis and Trauma theories informed the theoretical framework of this paper. The paper applied a qualitative methodology, with primary and secondary sources read and carefully analyzed. These children are vulnerable, and are at risk of physical, social, emotional and cognitive violations. By allowing these children, to struggle against all odds to live like adults, the selected author brings to fore, the trauma these homeless and abandoned children go through in the African continent. This paper, hence, concludes that street children should be treated as part of the society, not as destitute and as such be properly guided and nurtured.

Keywords: Streetism, Domestic violence, Homeless Children, Street children, Poverty, Vulnerability

Introduction

The term 'streetism' according to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, refers to 'the life situations of street children who usually live and engage in menial jobs'. These children experience homelessness and they live on the streets of towns, cities and villages. 'Streetism' is a global phenomenon that is characterized by vulnerable children migrating to the streets in urban areas in developed and developing countries (Le Roux, 2001). For a long time, vulnerable children whose personal and ecological resilience resources were depleted have been adopting 'streetism' in order to fend for themselves or supplement family income (De Moura, 2005). 'Streetism' has to do with children on the streets at the mercy of the weather. These children lack shelter and other basic things in life, such as, food, portable water, healthcare, sanitation, education and the like. A street child refers to a person under the age of 18 who works in the street regularly for economic gain (De Moura, 2005). Work here refers to all paid services and all manner of activity performed for economic gain. It is not easy to define street children because they are a heterogeneous group of children, and the term itself bears serious emotional overtones (Guernina, 2004) and (Panter-Brick, 2002). In this regard, (Mahlangu, 2002) notes that there are many attempted definitions of street children; however, there is no single, universally accepted definition of street children. Notwithstanding these definitional variations, (Lewis, 1998) and (De Moura, 2005) see street children as young people, under the age of eighteen, who have made a decision to leave their homes and live on the streets

in order to take care of themselves without the support and protection from their parents or guardians. Street children have strong connection to public spaces like streets, markets and parks. The street plays an important role in their everyday lives and identities. Street children depend on the street for their survival; they live on the street, work on the streets and have network on the streets. 'Streetism' is a concept which means 'living on the street' or 'being part of the street'.

In many cities of the world, especially the developing countries, children have been the subject of abuse, neglect, exploitation and are even in extreme cases murdered. These children, either by design or default, become victims of circumstances. As a result, they find ready homes in unoccupied dwellings, uncompleted buildings, under the bridges and wastelands more than their family homes. It also includes children who might not necessarily be homeless or without families, but who live in situations where there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults. The street child concept is also used to refer to street children who do scavenging and rubbish picking, in addition to living and working on the streets (Panter-Brick, 2002). Among those children who do scavenging and rubbish picking, there are those who stay permanently outside their homes with no family ties (children of the street) and those who occasionally return to their homes (children on the street). These categories further magnify the heterogeneity of street children as a group and emphasize definitional difficulties.

Children of the street are facing a clashing situation where they are totally visible as they reside in public open space and at the same time, invisible due to the continuous violation of rights. Moreover, they lack care and protection of families and authorities, therefore entering into the huge world of marginalization and social exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theories applied in this paper, are the Psychoanalytic and Trauma Theories. The development of psychoanalytic theory from the work of Sigmund Freud has an influence on literary criticism. It helps in exploring the relationship between the writer and the text. Trauma theory in literature has to do with the assertion that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Trauma theory first appeared in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, where she posits that the traumatic event "... is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly ... to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1991). This fragmentation is manifested in the way our world view is altered; the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world, are all profoundly altered by traumatic experiences.

Street Children Narrative in *Born on a Tuesday*

The story of *Born on a Tuesday* is narrated by Ahmad Dantala, a young almajiri, who leaves to study in an Islamic school that is far from home. We first meet him in Bayan Layi where he studies in a Sufi Quranic school until he becomes a member of a street gang led by Banda, a political thug. When a police bullet kills Banda in the violence that erupts during an election, he runs away, only to end up in a Salafi mosque. The Almajiris in northern Nigeria are a minority group; they are marginalized, disenfranchised, and disinherited because of their class. These are children who beg on the streets and do not attend secular school. They lack access to Western education and opportunities for self-development and self-actualization. Worse, they do not have food; they survive at the mercy of their masters who give them crumbs that fall from the table.

Born on a Tuesday tells the coming-of-age story of an Almajiri boy, Dantala, whose name translates to born on a Tuesday. Dantala does not have an accurate knowledge of his age, just as he can hardly remember his father's face. Like most male children born by the poor in northern Nigeria, Dantala is thrown into the Almajiri system at a very young age ostensibly to acquire Islamic education, but as he grows older, he finds himself caught up in an increasingly radicalized Islamic community. He excels at his Quranic training, becoming one of the best pupils at Malam Junaidu's Islamiyya. After completing his six-year Quranic training, a local thug, Banda, introduces him to other boys who hang out under a

Kukah tree. Banda finds them a job to work for the Small Party which hopes to win the next election. Dantala and the other boys are sent to burn down the headquarters of the Big Party which later wins the election. After participating in burning houses and killing anyone who shows resistance, Dantala leaves Bayan Layi and returns to Sokoto where he becomes a protégé of Sheikh Jamal and his Islamic movement, Izala.

In *Born on a Tuesday*, the narrator introduces us to the street life he and the other boys live when he says “The boys who sleep under the Kukah tree in Bayan Layi...” (John, 2015, p. 1). Dantala explains his and his friends’ criminal lifestyles in Bayan Layi when they queue up to receive a paltry two hundred naira to go and burn down the Big Party’s secretariat because of an election in which the Small Party loses: “Banda tells us there are machetes, daggers and small gallons of fuel in the back of the truck. We will get two hundred naira each for taking the votes that were stolen. Two hundred sounds nice I can buy bread and fried fish. I haven’t had fish in a while” (John, 2015, p.13). To an average man, bread and fried fish might not provide enough motivation to perpetrate violence, but for the hopeless Dantala and his friends living under the Kukah tree, it justifies the need to steal, kill and burn down the Big Party’s secretariat. These street children live on the edge of time; not sure of what the next day holds for them. This is the tragedy of the African society where there is no functional system to provide the most basic social welfare to its childhood population in order to avert the catastrophe of being controlled by their stomach and not their brain.

The desire to survive leads these street children into becoming monsters both in appearance and in action. This is seen in the description of Gobedanisa by the narrator “His face is a map of scars, the most prominent being a thin long one that stretches from the right side of his mouth up to his right ear” (John, 2015, p.2). Banda, a street lord is fully aware of the societal neglect and the fact that his survival is his sole responsibility just like the other children of the street. He prepares himself to unleash terror against a society that has contributed greatly to his dehumanization. We see this in the following words “Banda had a talisman and three amulets on his right arm for knives and arrows. Nothing made out of metal could pierce him...he was wearing his rusty ring with the sharp edges” (John, 2015, p. 2).

The Almajirai, the multitudes of Quranic scholars like the street children from other parts of the African continent, are the most invisible people in Northern Nigeria. They are alone in the world and must earn their living as errand-boys, street vendors, election thugs or beggars. The narrator vividly paints this during the election between the Big Party and the Small Party in Bayan Layi:

This is the moment we have all been paid for. I had hoped all this would end last night. Unlike the other boys, I am not used to this breaking and burning business. Under the Kuka tree, nothing is complete without some fire and broken glass. These Southerners cannot cheat us, after all, we are in the majority... We all have knives here... We must scatter everything belonging to the Big Party in Bayan Layi. Burn their office! Gobedanisa shouts. The crowd screams. I have always wanted to enter that office. I hear they keep money there. Banda tells us there are machetes, daggers small gallons of fuel in the back of the truck (John, 2015, p. 13).

The political class take advantage of the pain and deprivation of these street children to co-opt them into violence in order to achieve their selfish intentions especially at election time. Dantala represents the abandoned street children and he provides an insight into the phenomenon:

I like the rallies. The men from the small party trust Banda and they give him money to organize boys from Bayan Layi for them, sometimes we get as much as one hundred and fifty naira depending on who it is or which rally. We also get a lot to drink and eat ((John, 2015, p. 7).

The subject matter in *Born on Tuesday* is the Almajiri system in northern Nigeria and its far-reaching implications including the destruction of childhood innocence, the ill-treatment and abuse of children who are taught violence and a very young age and the creation of an elite class that oppresses the teeming populace of homeless children. First, the Almajiri children are turned into destitutes and made to beg alms. The proceeds from the begging are taken by their masters who also subject the children to

inhuman treatment. Dantala recalls how Mallam Junaidu made them “beg even after working in his maize farm.” Their master would go on to compel them to stand by the road, “chasing after ears.” The children also fought over food and money at the Friday Mosque (p,61). *In Born on a Tuesday*, all the characters are northern Muslims; yet, instead of peace and harmony, what has become the norm is violence of unimaginable proportions because these children have been minorized on the grounds of education and their economic class. For example, Dantala and the boys under the Kukah tree are socio-economic minorities. Hence, the criminal acts committed by Dantala and his gang in Bayan Layi can be linked to the absence of opportunity to earn a decent living. This situation compels them to use the only means available to them to survive. He says of his escape from the street:

It feels like a far away dream sometimes, leaving Bayan Layi, escaping the hunger, sleeping outdoors during the rains and harmattan...and the police guns that last day! I still hear the rat-tat-tat, the screaming, the smoke; still see the boys trying to dodge the bullets; still see Banda coughing, telling me to run as he doubled over from pain in his chest...I still feel it, the feeling of a tight string that has snapped in my chest, when I finally saw fall flat. I didn't mean to do those bad things for the Small Party (John, 2015, p. 62).

Karl Marx (2018) posits that the understanding of human needs and the structure of society begins with an understanding of man as an economic being. For Dantala and his gang, ‘economic’ describes their condition of existence, and reaffirms that humans have basic needs that must be met if their survival is to be ensured (Greene, 1976, p. 17). To lend credence to this, the novel shows the metamorphosis in Dantala's behaviour as soon as he gets the opportunity to earn a decent living by working under Sheikh Jamal.

It is significant that Dantala not only seizes the opportunity with both hands, he industriously rises to become Sheikh's assistant. Dantala becomes a changed boy who is entrusted with authority and huge sums of money because his new environment affords him a decent means of getting his material aspirations of a home, food, and decent clothing unlike what obtained in Bayan Layi where all he knew was street life with his companions who lived under the Kukah tree.

Politicians see and use these street children as ready tools to wreak havoc during elections, thereby, plunging them deeper into the path of destruction. The narrator gives us an insight of the beastly creatures the society has created of these abandoned and homeless children when he said:

The first we do is set ablaze the huge poster of the Big Party candidate in front of the market. I like how the fire eats up his face. I wish it was his face in real life. The Big Party office is on my mind. I can't wait to search the offices and drawers and take whatever I can get from there before we set it ablaze. I am the first to get the Big Party office. The others are trailing closely behind me...We push the gate until we bring it down, together with the pillars to which it is attached. Tsohon Soja is the old man guarding the place. He tries to struggle with some of the boys, grabs one of them by the neck and blows his whistle...Gobedanisa charges forward with his machete, striking him on the chest and on the neck...Now that he is down they strike at his body (John, 2015, p. 13-14).

The reason for choosing the street life and the violence that accompanies it, is given when the narrator tells us “I hate that he is fat. I hate his party, how they make us poor.” Here, it is clear that these children are left with no option if they must survive but to take to the streets and indulge in violent activities. He says: “At first we make a distinction between shops belonging to Big Party people and those belonging to Small Party people, but as we become thirsty and hungry, we just break into any shop we see” (John, 2015, p. 16).

The criminal acts committed by Dantala and his gang in Bayan Layi can be linked to the absence of opportunity to earn a decent living. This situation compels them to use the only means available to them to survive.

Leaving in the streets does not only expose these children to violence, it also exposes them to immoral acts like homosexuality and masturbation. We hear this first with the nightly adventure of Bilal and Abdulkareem in Sokoto thus:

As I opened the door, loosening the rope of my trousers, someone almost knocked me over and ran out. I turned and from the back of his head I recognized him as Bilal. He wasn't wearing a shirt and was clutching at his trousers like they were going to fall off. I flashed my torch in the toilet and saw Abdulkareem standing there, struggling to pull up his trousers and wipe his hands at the same time. His penis was huge and erect and he was panting like he has been running (John, 2015, p. 59-60).

Fleeing darkness, Dantala moves from place to place, mentor to mentor and repeatedly suffers heartbreak of the bone crushing kind. He is almost clinical and detached in narrating the child abuse that is his daily lot. He says matter-of-factly in that voice that haunts and hurts the soul:

I am exhausted. I slow down. I am still high and all these thoughts are suddenly going through my head; my mother who is far away, how I have hardly prayed since I left my Quranic teacher and how we only go to the Juma'at mosque in Sabon Gari on Fridays because there are people giving alms and lots of free food... We are not terrible people. When we fight, it is because we have to. When we break into small shops in Sabon Gari, it is because we are hungry, and when someone dies, well, that is Allah's wish (John, 2015, p. 11-12).

These street children become addicted to drugs and substances in order to escape from the cold, loneliness and the hunger they are experiencing on the streets. During his first encounter with Banda, Dantala says:

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. He said he liked the way I didn't cough when I smoked it. (John, 2015, p. 7).

Dantala longs for his family; to go back home but knows within him, that the street is where his daily existence lies. For in it, he finds comfort. He tells us:

They slept on cartoons under the Kuka tree and when it rained they moved to the cement floor in front of Alhaji Mohammed's rice store, which had an extended zinc roof. I cannot say when I decided to join the boys under the Kuka tree. At first, I still wanted to go back home, but as each day passed, I lost the desire to do so (John, 2015, p. 7).

According to Abdulqadir (2020), the situation is a:

Conspiracy of silence between the parents, authorities and the society at large. For the parents, the system provides an outlet and a drainage for the excess children at home. For the authorities, it is a relief that they do not have to budget for these teeming Almajiri children's education and welfare. As for the elites, they care less as long as their own children are not involved (p.24).

Almajiri is one the greatest abuse to children's fundamental rights and it is a system that leaves children vulnerable to violence, sexual and commercial exploitation. It has lasted this long majorly because of the lack of political will to address the situation.

Almajirai do not have the luxury of dreams like other children. Theirs is a life rife with hardship. They go begging for alms, feeding on leftovers, clothed in rags and filth, they do not have a say in the trajectory of their lives. They just wander and wither taking each day as it comes and eventually, drifting into a world of crime and becoming brutal. This is seen in *Born on a Tuesday* when the narrator in the opening line says "The boys who sleep under the Kuka tree in Bayan Layi like to boast about the people they have killed" (John, 2015, p. 1).

Dantala hates his father for not providing him with basic amenities: food, shelter and clothing. He hates him for sending him and his brothers away. This act separated the family. He says "...and my father sent me and my three brothers far away for Quranic training. I don't know where they are now, my

brothers. Maybe they have gone back home. Maybe they have decided to stay like me” (John, 2015, p. 15).

Dantala gives a gory narrative of how he killed the Big Party man trying to escape from a burning building and his body burnt by Banda, himself dying shortly afterwards from a gunshot:

I strike behind his neck as he stumbles by me. He crashes to the ground. He groans. I strike again. The machete is sharp. Sharper than I expected. And light. I wonder where they got them from. Malam Junaidu’s machetes were heavy, I hated it when we had to clear weeds in front of the mosque or his house or his maize farm. The man is not shaking much. Banda picks up the gallon and pours some fuel on the body. He looks at me to strike a match. I stare at the body. Banda seizes the match box from me. He squirms only a little as the fire begins to eat his clothes and flesh. He is dead already (John, 2015, p. 16).

The street instils in the narrator and the other street children, a heart of brutality and barbarism. It teaches them to be harden-hearted and unforgiven. They see the society as an oppressive system, one that is responsible for their homelessness and abandonment. They seek revenge for the injustice meted out to them and this is reflected in the following expressions by Dantala. He says “...as we become thirsty and hungry, we just break into any shop we see” (John, 2015, p. 16).

Violence begets violence and the life of crime these street children are pushed into, does not end well. The street consumes these children and Banda pays with his life in a society that has produced him and his kind. This we see when Dantala says:

As I see the first person go down, I turn and run. I look for Banda. He is not running. He is bent over, coughing, holding his chest. I stop. ‘Banda, get up!’ I scream, crouching behind a low fence. They are getting closer. Banda has to get up now. I want to run; I want to hope his amulets will work. But I linger a bit. H gets up and starts to run. Then he falls flat on his face like someone hit him from behind. He is not moving (John, 2015, p. 16-17).

Dantala paints a picture of his escape from street life in the closing chapter of Part One when he says “I run past the Kuka tree. I will not stop even when I can no longer hear the guns. Until I get to the river and across the farm, far, far away from Bayan Layi” (John, 2015, p. 17).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the living conditions of the street children in *Born on a Tuesday*, and how societal neglect and abandonment have culminated, over the years, in children moving into the streets to eke a living and ensure daily survival. This paper has also, shown manifestations of ‘streetism’ in *Born on a Tuesday*, pointing out the negative effects it poses to the society in general. It means African leaders have failed in their duties to provide people with basic needs. Many parents have also failed to help their children to achieve their dreams of having access to the basic needs of life. Parents, no doubt, have greater influence on what becomes of their children. The large concentration of children on the streets is an eyesore and a sign of the breakdown of parental responsibility. The street children are not being given any specific training. They are invariably being prepared for a life in the street, one synonymous with crime.

From the analysis of the text under study, it becomes clear that these street children are victims of both family and societal neglect. Poverty and hunger alienate the individuals. This is the reason for which the children devote themselves to sordid activities in the streets: stealing, alcohol and drug consumption individually or in groups or gangs like Dantala and the boys under the Kuka tree in Banya Layi. The harshness of street life and the dangers to which children living on the streets are exposed make it a necessity for them to dance to an adult’s tune in return for protection. They hope to make a living from these practices known as social vices. Caught between the rock of family breakdown and the hard place of street life, these street children need a safe valve for the miseries of their existence and as a way of escape, resort to drug and hard substances. Dantala in *Born on a Tuesday* is a clear manifestations of this reality. The traumatic experiences of the children of the streets linger through their adult life. The

traumas and conflicts of early childhood have lasting effects that are ruled by unconscious forces which shape their personality to behave the way we see them.

This research has established that violations of children's rights, especially rights of children who are abandoned and labelled street children, are on the increase in Africa as a continent. It is a growing problem as we have seen in *Born on a Tuesday*, as more children join the street to ensure their survival. *Born on a Tuesday* embodies the traumatic experiences of the abandoned children in Africa, the life they live, and their view of the society they live in. By their focus on the traumatic violence on and by children, *Born on a Tuesday* invites the reader to mourn the real loss of young lives in various situations in Africa. Also mourned is the loss of innocence emblemized by the designation "child" in Africa and elsewhere in the world, and a future made bleak by the physical decimation and psychological crippling of the continent's children. The objective of the selected text is not simply to indulge in scenes of revolting violence against these children, but to show and then condemn the human-induced precariousness of life of street children in the African countries where their stories are set.

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