

INSECURITY AND EMANCIPATION IN NIGERIAN FICTION

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Abstract

Most studies are limited to the negative implications of insecurity. This paper is a deviation in that it tackles insecurity from the positive forces embedded in it that push individuals to anticipate freedom and emancipation. The paper uses the Psychoanalytical Theory to argue that insecurity contains positive seeds that can propel characters to liberation from their predicament. In so doing, illustrations are taken from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006), and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010). The analysis of the texts discovers that through the movement of themes from contentment, perseverance, disillusionment, and anguish to those of hope, emancipation and a new beginning, writers of contemporary Nigerian fiction have embedded the thesis of insecurity propelling characters from suffering to freedom in their novels. Then, with the techniques of flashback, flash forward, symbolism, relocation and escape, the study found that these works are aesthetically embellished to project the thesis of this paper. In all, the paper urges critics to balance the study of insecurity in both its complexities and ambivalence.

Keywords: Insecurity, Ambivalence, Disillusionment, Hope, Emancipation

Introduction

In both urban and rural environments of the Nigerian society, insecurity can be said to be the defining issue of the 21st century. So many critics have tackled the issue of insecurity from the disadvantageous impacts of the phenomenon. Others have investigated insecurity along the lines of dislocation in the religious and other fabrics of the society. However, there is also the positive

effect that insecurity produces in people and society generally. This is the focus of this paper. This paper argues that in the rural and suburban societies of Nigeria, insecurity may have led to the liberation of individuals and the society at large. Though the negative effects of insecurity may outweigh the positive impacts, it is expedient to research how creative writers of the fictional genre in Nigeria have utilised the issue of insecurity in the emancipative praxis of the romantic world of characters in the African novel. Using the psychoanalytic literary theory, the paper shows that Nigerian fiction contains instances where insecurity is used as a tool of liberation. As such, illustrations are drawn from Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006), and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi Wives* (2010).

The security situation in Nigeria has thrown up several critical and investigative works on the causes and implication on the society and country (Perouse de Monteclos, 2014; Adfu, 2018). Omilusi (2016) categorized the implication of the security situation in Nigeria negatively when he subjects the phenomenon to the socio-economic dislocation, humanitarian crisis, infrastructural destruction, and severing of diplomatic relationship with other nations. The downbeat circumstances in the people's lives and the development of the country occasioned by the security situation is surmised in the words of Omilusi that it "reflects the failure of the state to be more accommodative, attentive, and responsive to the issues it purported to have represented from its initiation" (p.37). The idea Omilusi tends to portray is that when there is no security of the lives of citizens, the government can be termed a failure since security of lives and property is the ultimate goal of a responsible government. While the negative implications of insecurity revealed by Omilusi are apt and representative of the situation of the North-East of Nigeria which he used as a case study, it is nonetheless difficult to gauge how insecurity has propelled individuals who are directly affected by it to adapt to it and thereby keep moving forward with the broken pieces of their lives.

Also, in the field of drama and theatre, the search for the causes and implications of insecurity is engaging both content creators and critics alike. An instance is the critical study of Ahmed Yerima's *Heart of Stone* by Jonathan (2019). Ahmed Yerima's *Heart of Stone* dramatizes the story of Musa, a well digger, who is lured into the terrorist fold through the influence of religious ideology. The outcome of the activities of Musa and his cohorts to both individuals and society is cast negatively to reflect the disastrous implication of insecurity in the society and the Nigerian situation in the present (Jonathan, 84). In critically analysing the play by Yerima, Jonathan discovered that the implications of insecurity extend beyond socio-economic and humanitarian hardship to the deceit of political and religious leaders "who exploit the innocence and poverty of their followers to their own selfish end" (p.86). More so, the negative adaptation of globalization through the use of technological tools developed by the western world to develop and facilitate structures of insecurity also points to the fact that both the content creator and the critic are only interested in casting insecurity in a negative light. The glimpses of hope and renewal embedded in the issue of insecurity are not highlighted.

In the midst of the several nihilistic studies on insecurity (Ewetan & Urhie 2014), Voelz (2017) cuts a contrary view when he argues that "the concern with security allows us to explore, experience, make use of, and even take pleasure in insecurity" (p.4). Voelz used several literary works in the United States of America to illustrate his belief that "being insecure creates new possibilities and opens up spaces". In the course of his analyses, Voelz argued that insecurity is not a straight-forward jargon but a generic term that encompasses several facets of life. Apart from the captivating headlines like terrorism, killings and revolts, subtle issues like corruption, threatening situations and intolerance can create situations that make life unbearable for people. It is these life threatening situations that produce hope and liberation for the people involved. As the people grapple with insecurity, they inadvertently discover "unexpected

advantages slumbering in insecurity” (p.6). In the light of the positivity arising from insecurity, Voelz can insist that we can “begin to detect, isolate, and reject those kinds of politicizations of security which curtail democratic deliberation and sanction the state’s arrogation of the right to suspend rights” (p.82).

It is the positive impacts of insecurity on the lives of the characters Voelz studied leading to their emancipation and liberation that are the motivation for this paper. Several thematic and technical illustrations that border on the analysis of the lives of selected characters are drawn from the selected contemporary Nigerian works of fiction to prove that insecurity, when handled positively, can lead to freedom and development.

The Ambivalence of Insecurity

The process of reading insecurity in fiction must be made to reflect the situation obtainable in the society. As insecurity is not only limited to its physical manifestation, there are subtle cases of insecurity that are life threatening. But most times, these cases are confined to emotional and psychological torture. Such is the security situation that Beatrice Achike faces in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. Beatrice is the wife of Eugene Achike, a businessman cum newspaper publisher.

Purple Hibiscus is the narrative of the struggle of Eugene to hold his family together in the face of the onslaught of Christian dogmatism in its battle for dominance over the traditional ways of the Igbo people. In order for Eugene to safeguard his immediate family from syncretism, he adopts a fanatical path to salvation. As the narrow road is torturous, Eugene has to chastise both his wife and children to conform to his perfectionist view of worship. The consequences are dire for his wife and children. Even his extended family is not spared of his Spartan devotion to the Roman Catholic faith. His iron-clad will to bend all into his path of worship causes alienation and rebellion. While he views his methods as necessary to reprimand unwilling and ignorant followers, his family members see the situation

differently. They see the situation as a manifestation of domestic insecurity. In the face of the insecure circumstances, the wife takes necessary measures to chart a path for their liberation. This culminates in the murder of Eugene by his wife. But why does a loyal and obedient wife like Beatrice become the killer of her husband? The answer lies in the transformation that can occur when one is faced with a critical insecure condition.

Contentment is one of the ideals leading to a secure condition. In Eugene's family, the financial security is reinforced by the physical ambience of the environment. There are flowers and trees in the compound; these add a touch of serenity to the abundance of comfort felt by the family. Eugene has done a lot to build security for the family. However, security always gives way to conspiracy. This is the situation as Eugene tries his best to bend the family to conform to the Catholic way of life. In order to balance the desire of her husband and the reality of accommodating the views of her growing children, Beatrice begins to experience lapses in the situation she considers as secure. One instance where the fragility of her secure condition is exposed as slippery is when her son, Jaja, talks back to his father.

In his dogmatic way of life, Eugene is a non-conformist. His fanatical view of Catholicism always comes in conflict with those of others. For instance, when a person misses taking communion for two consecutive times, Eugene "always encouraged Father Benedict to call and win that person back into the fold, nothing but mortal sin would keep a person away from communion two Sundays in a row" (14). With this mind-set, it is therefore not surprising the steps that Eugene takes when he discovers that Jaja has stopped taking the communion. The confrontation that ensues between father and son reveal the insecure condition of the mother, Beatrice. According to the narrator, Eugene explains to Jaja that "you cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that". Jaja retorts that "Then I will die ... Then I will die, Papa" (pp.14, 15). The result of the confrontation is that Eugene flings a missal at Jaja which misses Jaja but destroys several figurines placed on a table. These figurines are symbolic in the life of Beatrice.

The narrator alerts the reader to the importance of the figurines when she explains that ‘she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door’ (18). Narrating further, the narrator explains that “on the day Jaja talks back on the father, Beatrice spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face” (18, 19). Then in a moment of reminiscence, the narrator uses the technique of flashback to acquaint the reader that “the last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple colour of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them” (19). In the context of the developing insecure situation in the domestic affairs of the Eugene’s family, the figurines are a symbol of perseverance for Beatrice. The “swollen eye” of Beatrice is a physical manifestation of the domestic abuse perpetrated by Eugene towards all the family members including the children.

The children are not spared the security circumstances developing around the home. In the life of early adolescence of children, the motif of choice becomes an imperative activity. In one of their trips to Nsukka, Jaja and her sister, Kambili, face a tough situation that demands the choice between the fanatical Catholicism of their father, the ancestral and traditional beliefs of their grandfather, or the democratic tenets of their aunt, Ijeoma, which are also the prevailing free ideas of the university community of Nsukka. The children’s leaning towards an accommodative posture between the three choices generates a situation that becomes threatening to their lives. Papa-Nnukwu, in his dying days, is painted by his grandchildren. His son, Eugene, sees the father as a heathen. So, when Kambili brings the painting to the home of Eugene, the discovery becomes the spur that unleashes the venom of insecurity on Kambili. In the words of the Kambili, “father started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes ... Kicking. Kicking. Kicking ... A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet” (216,217). At this stage,

there is no hiding from the all-pervasive insecurity in the home of Eugene; though, Beatrice still continues to nurture hope of building a happy family.

But the family is undergoing series of life-threatening events that are scary and brutal. The issue of happiness can only result from a secure condition. Therefore, as Beatrice contemplates on the kindness of Eugene and his philanthropic gestures, she continues to endure the insecure condition of her life in her relationship with Eugene. When Aunty Ifeoma informs Beatrice that even when her late husband “Ifediora was alive, there were times ... when the university did not pay salaries for months. Ifediora and I had nothing, eh, yet he never raised a hand to me”, Beatrice retorts by rhetorically asking that “where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house?” (254,255). The implication of this interrogative piece is that Beatrice has been cornered in Eugene’s house. She has no hope for the future and Eugene is aware of this despair. But as the argument of this paper goes, insecurity contains the forces that can lead to emancipation and liberation when deployed positively. This is what happens to Beatrice in the midst of the brutality unleashed by Eugene on her and the children.

This idea of brutality caused by insecurity is one of the motives that spur Beatrice and her children to seek for emancipation in the face of insecurity. At this stage of the story, her children are in their aunt’s place at Nsukka. She has just arrived at Nsukka without any notice. Puzzled as to how Beatrice could leave her husband alone in their home, Beatrice explains that “you know that small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne?* Your father broke it on my belly ... My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it” (253). In surmising, Beatrice says of her present condition that “I do not know if my head is correct ...” (253). The forces of insecurity have taken control of her intuitive processes and the next phase is that of a bull that has been cornered; it will always turn to face the source of insecurity. And so it is with Beatrice.

In order for Beatrice to free herself and her children from the jaws of insecurity perpetuated by Eugene, Beatrice does the unthinkable. According to Beatrice, “I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witchdoctor” (294). Why does Beatrice have to commit murder to emancipate herself and her children? It is because they are already facing elimination in the hands of her husband. As the story draws to a close, through the technique of flash forward, Kambili celebrates their freedom by planning that “we will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we’ll go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma ... We’ll plant new orange trees ... purple hibiscus ... ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers” (310). Emancipation and liberation provided by the forces of insecurity makes a dutiful woman like Beatrice kill her husband to save herself and her children. The result is that Kambili placed her arm around her mother’s shoulder and leaned towards her and smiled (310). The “smiles” proves the efficacy of the ambivalence found in insecurity.

As the Nigeria society grapples with insecurity, there is no empirical suggestion that it is limited to one region of the country. Instead, insecurity affects individuals and groups of persons everywhere. The importance of combating insecurity in its entire ramifications becomes the major highlight of the novel genre in contemporary Nigerian literature. In this vein, the struggle of Ishola Alao (aka Baba Segi), his four wives and seven children in the midst of an ever changing society where the pressures of life combine with those of societal challenges, present a story that is outstandingly complex and futuristic. Baba Segi is a business man who, out of sheer hard work and determination, is able to move his life from the lower level to that of a middle-class citizen. Among his acquisitions are his four wives. They are Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Bolanle, a young graduate. As Bolanle negotiates the murky waters of polygamy, the insecurity that is the bane of polygamous homes and the emerging market economies in Africa become apparent. Though the insecurity in the story leads to death, pains and anguish among the characters of

the story, Bolanle's liberation at the end makes the story end on a positive note for her.

In reading the story of Bolanle's struggle with insecurity, the motifs of love and perseverance come to the fore. Love makes Bolanle to marry Baba Segi though he is not educated and polygamous. Therefore, as their love grows, it becomes threatening to the other wives. Immediately Baba Segi moves Bolanle into her home and allocates a room for her, the other wives, except Iya Tope, team up to make her stay unbearable. According to Bolanle, "the other two are a different story: they have not forgiven me for the affection Baba Segi has for me. Iya Segi and Iya Femi still shout, hiss and spit. They sweep the floor, all the time singing satirical songs to ridicule me" (22). This is the beginning of Bolanle's insecurity. In the midst of the rising insecurity, Bolanle continues to persevere.

Perseverance is a virtue that is cultivated in the midst of challenging circumstances. In the case of Bolanle, she tries to conquer the disdain and antagonism that polygamy breeds. Bolanle tries to extend the love she has for Baba Segi to the other wives and their children. In fact, she even explains that "one day, they will all love me. I will buy their affection with the money Baba Segi gives me if I have to ... One day they will accept me as a member of this family" (p.23). But the more she tries, the more the insecurity in the home grows. As the antagonism from the others like Segi, who Bolanle says is "afraid that I have come to take her place" (23) grows, what begins as family squabble associated with polygamy develops into a full blown conflict. After two years of stalemate, Bolanle starts to notice that "things have changed. Now there is no pleasure in the pleasing" (43). The relationship between Bolanle and Baba Segi is not spared; Baba Segi "doesn't smile or tickle me. He doesn't make jokes about my youth ..." (43). Bolanle has to brace for the worst.

As the conflict in the home develops into a full-blown state of insecurity, Baba Segi who is supposed to protect Bolanle becomes aloof due to the non-ability of Bolanle to get pregnant. As Baba Segi puts it, "I don't know what they are planning. I fear for Bolanle ... I

am afraid of these women. I will just keep quiet and watch” (56). The other wives capitalize on Baba Segi remoteness to intimidate Bolanle. First they concoct a charm and put it in Bolanle’s room to show that she is fetish and want to harm the family or rather try and charm the man of the house to abandon his family for only her. When this does not produce the desired results, Iya Segi connives with Iya Femi to poison Bolanle and kill her. The plan would have succeeded but for sheer luck on the part of Bolanle. The birthday chicken that is poisoned and reserved for Bolanle is not eaten by her. Rather it is Segi, the oldest daughter of Baba Segi that eats the chicken. The appalling result of this deed proves the level of insecurity bedeviling the home of Ishola Alao. Insecurity often leads to death of individuals. The insecurity generated by the other wives of Baba Segi leads to the death of Segi. But this is just one facet of the insecurity facing Bolanle.

Bolanle is also grappling with infertility. Infertility is a major theme in contemporary Nigerian literature. As Bolanle fights off the threat from her co-wives, so also she fights to unravel the cause of her infertility. This implies that physically, emotionally and psychologically, Bolanle is insecure. In the midst of life-threatening situations, Bolanle inadvertently stumbles on a means to emancipate herself. Bolanle has been going to the hospital with Baba Segi for some time now. When the tests prove that Bolanle is fertile, then, the doctors recommend that Baba Segi submits himself for fertility test. The result of the tests reveals that Baba Segi is infertile. So, how is he able to give birth to the children in his house? Iya Segi takes the story from here when she explains that:

I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itched to be suckled. My husband and I tried everything ... Even the mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit. Then, I had an idea. It was a sinful idea but I knew it would bring my sadness to an end. In fact, it was more than an idea; it promised to be a solution. If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere ... So, I found seed and planted it in my belly. (p.215)

When asked about the fate of the other children by the other women, Iya Segi replies that “I misled them ... when I saw their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret. They also

followed the same path” (216). This revelation opens a can of worms that can trigger an upheaval. At the same time, the upheaval that follows opens a vista for the liberation of Bolanle.

Bolanle says that “the decision was easy” as the storm that will have swept her away has become a blessing in disguise. Looking back at the insecurity she faced in the home of Baba Segi, she feels as if she has “woken up from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation” (244). The impact of the multifaceted insecurities in Baba Segi’s house that nearly took the life of Bolanle is described by her as momentous. In her words, “it was being in his house that shook me awake” (244). At the end, she decides to leave the marriage and forge ahead with her life. Though there will be challenges ahead, Bolanle vows never to “let them hold me back. I will remain in the land of the living”. This is because insecurity has freed her from the bondage in Baba Segi’s house and now the “world is spread before me like an egg cracked open” (245). This is the positivity achievable from the torment and anguish unleashed by insecurity.

At times, the distress orchestrated by insecurity can envelop a whole community. In such a scenario, the entire society is placed on the brink of extinction. In this case, the forces that engender insecurity are not physical, emotional or psychological but environmental. In such scenario, man races against the clock for survival. But in the midst of this environmental apocalypse, the forces of insecurity still push individuals to chart new vistas and openings that lead to their emancipation and liberation. This is what transpires in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow* (2006).

Yellow Yellow is the narrative of the socio and economic disruption in the lives of the people of the riverine areas of the Niger Delta occasioned by the environmental degradation of the area as a result of crude oil exploration and exploitation. The rupture of pipelines carrying crude either due to age or sabotage leads to the pollution of farmlands and the aquatic life. In this state, a whole group of people can be rendered insecure due to the loss of their

livelihood. In order to survive, people like the protagonist, Zilayefa or Yellow-Yellow, have to strive for survival in the midst of insecurity.

The type of insecurity resulting from the lack of the means to survive can be considered as one of the worst scenarios of insecurity. The violence is not directly aimed at the people. In this case, the means of production are attacked wilfully or accidentally. Such is the case of Zilayefa's mother and others when a ruptured pipeline spills crude oil that destroys the farms of the villagers. The result is that the some of the villagers "lost their farmland that day" (4). The complications arising from the environmental degradation of the area go beyond the destruction of farmlands and means of livelihood. In the words of Zilayefa, "the day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither ..." (10). The ultimate consequence is the disillusionment arising from both the destruction of the means of livelihood and the dreams of the people is violence.

The embers of violence are fanned by lack of the basic things that can enable survival of the people. The frustrating situation is described by the narrator that "farming and fishing, the occupations that sustained my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother no longer provided gain. I had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods ... every year it was harder to catch fish ..." (p.39). The available option for the boys is to "kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work" (p.9, 10). The reaction of the government is to militarize the region. The betrayal by the leaders of the region also adds to the anguish of the people. Most times, the people are alerted to the news that the king and "his elders had received monetary compensation, meant for the village, from the oil company and shared it amongst themselves" (40). Surmising these acts that add to the disillusionment of the people, Zilayefa says that "these images darkened the canvas of my life" (40). At this stage of her life, the forces of insecurity begin to activate other avenues of survival in the heart of Zilayefa.

The girls in her village are getting pregnant in their teens and moving to co-habit with their boyfriends. This means of leaving the insecure home of one's parent is not safe since it means one still has to remain in the village to face the insecurity that is ravaging the lives of the people. Instead, Zilayefa opts for escape; for as she puts it "I quietly begged God to include an escape from the village in my plan" (43). Though, while in Port-Harcourt after her escape from the village, Zilayefa encounters so many challenges, there is no doubt that the seeds of flight sown in the midst of the insecurity of lives, properties and dreams she suffered in the village continue to imbue her with hope of survival. Thus, when she nearly dies from the abortion she carries out to terminate her pregnancy for Admiral, her boyfriend, she still continues to look for means of survival in midst of her travails. "I do not know what to expect, what I would feel, or if I would live to see the next day", she says (177). But Zilayefa is confident that "if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria" (177). In the throes of anguish, Zilayefa decides to "focus on completing my education and making my mother, Sisi, and Lolo proud of me" (177). At the end, Zilayefa can boldly say that "I was grateful to see another day ... the rest I would have to figure out" (178). This is the positive spur that insecurity can reinvigorate in people when they are driven to the edge of human existence.

Conclusion

The analysis of the illustrations taken from three contemporary Nigerian novels have buttressed the thesis of this paper that insecurity produces both negative and positive seeds, and that when properly harnessed, insecurity contains forces for emancipation and liberation. To this end, this study has tackled the phenomenon of insecurity from the angle of its positive contributions. The paper argues that as contentment gives way to hopelessness and disillusionment, people are rendered with no choice but to harness the forces of insecurity to create avenues of escape and emancipation from their existential border situations. The ambivalence inherent in

insecurity can only be utilized critically in the criticism of creative literature when the positivism in insecurity is placed on the same page with the negativities. This demands an unbiased approach to the study of insecurity since the phenomenon of insecurity will continue to bedevil the society in its physical, emotional, psychological and environmental forms.

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