

Institutionalised Human Follies from A Little Child to A Full-Blown Adult: A Study of Wale Okediran's *The Boys at The Border*

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Abstract

Universally, human existence is one that is mostly characterised by follies. The tendency to be involved in follies arise irrespective of class, status, culture, nationality, religion, gender and race. This becomes quite alarming because at every point in time, due to greed, graft and corruption, humans are constantly and restlessly looking for ways and means to be engaged in greed, corruption, graft and other related heinous acts. Africa, no doubt, has taken the lead as many of such cases of human follies are glaring, thus, making countries in the continent to be really giants in all ramifications of the word "giants". It is against this backdrop that Wale Okediran sets *The Boys At the Border*, portraying how those who are crime fighters in Nigeria get involved in such follies and as such, move from the position of crime fighters to crime perpetrators. This work therefore, examines the theme of institutionalized human follies in Wale Okediran's *The Boys at the Border*. The work makes use of realism as its working theory while adopting the qualitative research methodology. The work identifies those institutionalized oddities that are associated with customs and the military at the Nigerian borderline. It is evident from our analysis that corruption and other related crimes have been institutionalized as they take place in high places of our territorial boundaries. The work therefore, concludes that unless those in charge of maintaining law and order on our borders desist from these unscrupulous and incongruous acts, Nigeria as a nation will keep being like maggots in shit on the one hand, and on the other hand, will keep being looked at with great suspicion by foreign nationals.

Key words: follies, borderline, institutionalised, little child, full-blown adult.

Introduction

In every administration in Nigeria, beginning from the days when Nigeria had her independence to the present-day society, fighting of social ills in the Nigerian society has always been the concern of leaders. Whether this is done in all honesty or as a gimmick, the Nigerian populace has over the years, been meant to have a feeling that the leaders of Nigeria, have as a matter of paramount importance, the desire to make Nigeria a most liberal and incorruptible society.

Whether this whole scenario is realisable in Nigeria is what is yet to be determined. But events on ground have however, shown that Nigeria is a failed state, as nothing works for the

good of the generality of Nigerians. Those who can feel a little bit of goodness, are the select few who belong to the ruling class or those that determine how Nigeria can be run. Therefore, the downtrodden of the society are the worst hit, as many who belong to this category can neither boast of two square meals a day, nor the resources with which they can make life more bearable.

The reason for this sort of happening is not farfetched; our Nigerian leaders and those who have found themselves in top leadership positions, are in one way or the other, corrupt to the core. Be it in the military, other paramilitary organisations, the police, the university, and especially within the political circle, the story remains the same. The

entire Nigerian socio-economic and political structure is highly polluted by dishonest elements, whose major concern as far as the Nigerian project is concerned, is that of pilfering from the national treasury, at the expense of the poor masses. Self aggrandisement is the in-thing in Nigeria. No matter what it takes, the fulfilment of this phenomenon becomes uppermost in the minds of those who are involved in controlling the economy of Nigeria. Wale Okediran being a Nigerian writer, is touched, hence, his literary production of *The Boys at the Border* which exposes to a greater extent, iniquitous and dastardly acts of leaders of the Nigerian descent.

Realism as a Concept in the Literary Circle

In espousing realism as a literary concept, George Becker posits that:

It is a bundle of tendencies, some of which concern the form, others the content of the narrative. As it relates to form, it is, if you will, and in a very general way, a transcription of facts, based on documents, or observation and experience. As it relates to content, it is the ability and the desire to express all aspects of life. (41)

From the excerpt above, one will not be out of place to say that a realist writer must necessarily rely more on observation as opposed to the romanticist's dependence on invention and imagination. The realist techniques therefore, seek to a greater extent, to document human follies that are quite concrete and that can be verified and confirmed within the human society. Thus, realism is a classical demand of art to show life the way it is, especially by a depiction of the average people and commoners of the society, the commonplace, the middle class and their daily struggles with the mean verities of everyday existence – these are the typical subject matters of realism.

Again, in a discourse that dwells on realism, Ferinand Iorbee Asoo posits that:

By realism, one is referring to the novelist's attempt to tell a story that is convincing to the readers. In doing this, the novelist adopts a series of techniques that ensure that fiction refers to imaginative writing that accurately reflects life as it was lived in the past or

could be lived in the present. (20)

In corroborating the above excerpt, Luc Herman writes of realism that, "in the 1850s, a relatively small number of French, German, and English authors explicitly promoted realism in their critical writings. The programmatic realists wanted their novels to illustrate their story" (3). This means that despite the many decades of the existence of realism in the literary circle, its importance is still much felt as the ills of the society are still in place even though we live in the 21st century.

Again, F.W.J. Hemming, who is one of the exponents of realism writes that: "The novelist is concerned with speaking likenesses, natural relations of the truth or at least of what may be true. People want the reflection of the world as it is: the history of the society, of its vices and virtues of the age, the portrayal of existing conditions" (11).

Content Analysis of the Text

Very many worrisome issues that bother on the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation abound in Wale Okediran's *The Boys At The Border*. One of such major issues in the novel is the clash of interest that takes place at Nigeria's borderline between customs officers and smugglers, which most times, results to outright killings. A prominent case in question is the brutal Killing of Samuel Adigwe, the Assistant Senior Superintendent of the Nigerian Customs, who is killed in cold-blood by smugglers in a most controversial circumstance.

The manner in which Samuel Adigwe dies, shows the sort of serial killings that take place here in Nigeria. The author, through the mouth piece of Bayo Adeli reports that:

From the headlight of the jeep, I could see Superintendent Samuel conversing with the men. Suddenly, the men started shouting at the superintendent and it was obvious an argument had erupted. At this stage, the superintendent brought out his pistol and asked the men to get into the jeep. The driver suddenly bent down, as if to adjust his shoes, but as he later got up, he was holding a sub-machine gun. He asked the superintendent to drop his gun.

Instead of obeying, the superintendent shot at him and, I think, he must have missed, for the next moment, the driver squeezed the trigger and pumped some bullets into Superintendent Samuel. (3)

The above excerpt is a clear picture of the type of human oddities, or better still, human follies that people, especially those who are saddled with the responsibility of watching our territorial borderlines face in trying to discharge their duties. Our borderlines have become infested with these sorts of crimes particularly, and generally, the Nigerian nation.

This singular event constitutes a major worry as this is one of the things that cause the kind of anarchies which Nigeria experiences today. In this wise, Boko haram, the Fulani cattle-rearers experience, political thuggery, kidnappers, pen-robbers and armed robbers have rendered many a people lifeless, and in all honesty, the law enforcement agencies are usually helpless, and therefore, do not respond to emergency calls by the public. The reason being that the firepower of these miscreants is superior to theirs.

The above scenario aside, there are other configurations of conspiracies and permutations that are targeted towards keeping the nation perpetually under siege by those who call themselves leaders of this country. In this wise, the military for instance, can easily come to mind as all the nefarious and dastardly acts such as corruption, greed, and graft that have all been visited upon this nation, have been orchestrated by the military, hence, Okediran's concern that Nigeria's problems started with the military and their regimes.

Though in a guise and pretense to make the situation appear as though they, the military have a cogent plan for the nation, it was, and has always been a deceit hidden in their game-plan to absolutely and perpetually keep the majority of Nigerians pauperized, hence, the people's debased and disoriented living.

Due to the death of Samuel Adigwe in the text, The Supreme Military Council, in its supposed sense of concern for his death, summarily summoned the Director of Customs, Emeka Emodi for an urgent meeting in

government house. Here, the drama for making him a scapegoat begins to unfold as the Head of State of the nation informs him that due to the crashing of petroleum products at the international market, the government does not therefore, want to depend totally on oil as the major source of revenue for the country.

As a way of nailing him, that is the Director of Customs, he is told that the president has been "reliably" informed of the country losing hundreds of millions of dollars due to the porous nature of the nation's border which is the sole responsibility of the customs. Thus, the central agenda of the Supreme Military Council as being spelt out by the Head of State is captured in the following lines:

... my advisers have come up with a startling revelation that some of the country's agricultural products, if well-tapped, could earn the country a sizable foreign exchange... cocoa and groundnuts are top on the list. Unfortunately, the activities of smugglers have not allowed the country to export these commodities as we would have liked to. (6)

The above excerpt is a clear case of the reality of the Nigerian socio-economic and political history and the contemporary experiences that have delineated in their sharpest and purest form, the sort of paranoid disposition that has visited the Nigerian society.

Adeniran in this novel does not just pass a brief commentary on the excesses of the successive military governments in Nigeria; he remarkably exposes one of the ugliest, non-chalant, inhuman and mundane legacies of the military's incursion into the governance of Nigeria. This of course, is considered by many, as an aberration. The legacy is undoubtedly the problem of corruption, they always claimed that they ousted the democratically elected government to uproot the evil of corruption out of the country. This military saga is not exclusively a Nigerian thing, as it has been a common social malady that has been experienced, and is still being

experienced by countries in Africa.

It will not be out of place to say that the sort of corruptible nature that Nigeria witnesses today is in its polished state as it has metamorphosed from the little child it was during the military junta, to a full-blown adult. Even though the military has relinquished power to the civilian for twenty-one years running, it is the architect of all the bad leadership, bad governance and crass corruption that Nigerians have witnessed and are still witnessing today. In corroboration of the scenario presented therefore, Ferdinand Asoo Iorbee opines that, "... the military leadership is not significantly different from the civilians it ousted from power. Both are ruled by gross materialism and greed. The final result of this abuse of power is that all the successive governments have neglected the people they purport to save" (105). Thus, in talking about corruption which has been the bane of Nigerian society, Chinua Achebe submits that:

The countless billions that a generous providence poured into our national coffers in the last ten years (1972-1982) would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle-rank of developed nations and transformed the lives of our poor and needy. But what have we done with it? Stole and salted away by people in power and their accomplices. Squandered in uncontrolled importation of all kinds of useless consumer merchandise from every corner of the globe... We have lost the twentieth century; are we bent on seeing that our children also lose the twenty first century? (2-3)

Looking at the time frame that Achebe refers in the above excerpt, it is quite possible to say that for Nigeria to move forward and reach the greatness that it so desires, the coming on board of ingenious military and civilian leaders, who have characterised the Nigerian polity especially in the contemporary times, should stop being the case. The reason for this is not farfetched as mediocres who are square pegs in round holes, are the ones who are quick to be involved in corrupt practices.

In a discourse that relates to the events in the *Boys at the Border*, Reuben Abati writes that:

... an artistic portrayal of the enduring challenges of leadership, not just in Nigeria's tottering political space, but also in Africa... we are introduced to a terribly disoriented society, where there is much conflict between rhetoric and actions, appearance and reality, individual and society, and this is reproduced not only among the political elite, but also at all strata of society...
(2)

As can be seen above, Abati sums up the socio-economic and political quagmire in the country, and by extension Africa as an "enduring challenge" bothering on leadership which the entire continent has been grappling with. The central focus of the text which is corruption, brings together the customs officers and the smugglers into a serious power tussle for supremacy, which results into a mess of relationship, leading to the revelation about the unholy criminal activities that have been going on in Nigeria. The unfolding developments in the novel too, presents them as neither friends nor permanent enemies. The only thing they have in common is their individual permanent interests which keep them afloat. All customs officers are very much aware of this fact.

In the novel, the reader can identify a clash between Peter Ikoku, the Senior Superintendent of Customs, who is not clean, and Lati Baba the kingpin of the smugglers. This goes to the extent of Lati Baba attempting to eliminate Peter Ikoku through diabolic means. Lati Baba is arrested by Ikoku and his goods confiscated. Instead of him getting credit from his superiors for arresting and confiscating Baba's twelve truckloads of imported goods, he is conspired against by his colleagues. Baba's release is facilitated and he boasts thus, "that bastard, Peter Ikoku, got me into this. I want him sacked immediately or at least, removed from that our area" (60). And true to it, he is made redundant with an immediate transfer from his base to an obscure location by the headquarters. Ikoku later informs Mrs Emodi of his ordeal that, "I was therefore transferred immediately from my post to an obscure job. That was why I resigned" (72). The nitty-gritty of this whole thing is that, Okediran tries to portray how, due to corruption in high places, the officers and men of the Nigerian

customs service can go to any extent to make sure that the perpetrators of evil on our Nigerian borderlines can be shielded to the detriment of their fellow colleagues, so long as they can benefit from such.

In the bid to combat crime that has been prevalent, especially, on Nigeria's borderline, the Head of State saddles Emeka Emodi with this task. He swings into action as he summons all his Deputy Directors for a meeting. Unknown to him, they have an ulterior motive. According to them, Alhaji Jibo, Malam Hanayo and Alhaji Shamir, Emodi has "allowed the man [the President] to harass you into taking up a case you know you can't handle, just because you were afraid of being replaced" (12).

It is quite disheartening to be made conscious that those to whom you repose much confidence, and refer to as your colleagues, can turn around to become elements of opposition to you and even plan out a way to bring you down. This has been the fate of Emodi, the Director of Customs. Instead of supporting him in his fight against general human follies, the directors are seen sabotaging his efforts as they are taken over by rancor and squabble orchestrated by sectarian considerations and crass egocentrism.

This, coupled with the daunting task assigned him, Emodi is quite sure that meeting up with the Head of State's desire is unrealistic. At the point much pressure is mounted on him and with the realisation that the task is indeed a daunting and herculean one, he gets very upset and vents his anger on some military officers as he fires at them:

I have irrefutable reports from my intelligence unit that certain members of the armed forces are colluding with the smugglers in their nefarious activities. We even have cases of some diplomats using diplomatic bags to smuggle, not to talk of those army officers who personally guide trucks loaded with contraband goods into the country. (30)

The above is a true picture of what happens on our country's borderline, both in the past and contemporary times. The unbridled desire to amass wealth against all odds, by leaders at whatever level they lead, makes Nigeria and Nigerians to

live and exist in an uncertain time, as no one is sure of what happens next. Predicting Nigeria and her leaders, especially on what maybe, becomes a phenomenon that can only be imagined than explained. Thus, integrity, honour, decency and decorum are thrown to the winds. Often times, in Nigeria and many African nations, clowns are passed-off as leaders. Such leaders dubiously loot the country's treasury which usually leads to the nation being grounded. The present socio-economic and political situation is indeed a reflection of the reality of our time and space. In this whole drama of madness for wealth acquisition in the country, B.J. Dudley advances two major causes of corruption among Nigerian leaders:

The first is that by making politics the principal avenue to wealth and the possession of wealth the path-way to membership of political class... the economic class and the political class were brought into congruence ... The second point is that with politics becoming the chief means to the acquisition of wealth membership of the political class became a highly sought for. (16)

Furthermore, closely interwoven with the problem of perennial corruption in the country, is the divisive, competitive and sectional strive; personal vendetta, malicious and self-motivated feud which all prove a lack of the much sought for patriotism even among the top echelon of those in whose hands the destiny and aspirations of millions of Nigerians lie. Here, danger is lurking around the corner, since a nation that stands against itself cannot and will not become one indivisible entity, thus, the virtue of togetherness will always be a mirage. Needless for President Muhammadu Buhari at Nigeria's 60th birthday, to make it point-blank that what Nigeria needs mostly now is 'togetherness' as this can never ever be!

Emodi's indictment of the military is not without a price to pay for it. He and his directors are invited by the military to offer possible explanations further. But the trio of Alhaji Shamir, Malam Hanayo and Dele Adepeju all deputy directors, have shunned away from telling the truth. This is deliberate as Shamir and Hanayo,

together with Jibo have actually been on the lookout for any opportunity such as this one, to run Emodi down. Firstly, it is that they are interested in his job, as he is from the southern part of the country. Secondly, for Adepeju, the risk of speaking the truth is too high as this will jeopardise his chances of catering for his people properly; to this, he laments that he "... didn't want to get ... involved in the whole matter, ... I ... have five children ... the youngest barely three years old and aged parents. That is why I had to do what I did" (39). Thus, he is afraid of losing his job, should he speak the truth. So, despite their behaviour to him, in the inner recesses of their hearts, they are very much convinced that Emodi their boss, after all, tells the truth as they agree together that:

It's not only the army boys who smuggle. Almost everybody that travels out of the country, from professors to musicians bring one thing or the other under the guise of personal effect... I'm sure the case of Emir and the fifty-three suitcases is still fresh in your mind... what do you think goes on at those private jetties? Are they not owned by big shots in the country? Do we know what kind of goods they import and export? (14)

Right from the time of Nigeria's amalgamation in 1914, through independence in 1960 to the present-day Nigeria, the political class and the military have always resorted to religious and ethnic sentiments as an easy and cheap bargaining tool to secure power and favour. Every Nigerian who truly lives in Nigeria should by now be aware that divisions and sectional mindset are ingrained into the bloodstream of the nation.

Two instances in the novel, vividly call the reader's attention to the reality of what happens or the things that happen in our Nigerian society. The first is when Adepeju, obviously a Yoruba man links an Emir to an incident of corruption, his fellow ethnic man, Jibo reacts negatively thus as he, "suddenly flinched at the mention of the Emir. As a conservative Hausa man, he felt it was taboo for anyone to bring the name of any traditional ruler into a topic as embarrassing as smuggling, but he managed to control his anger" (14).

The other is when the Head of State wants

him to explain his involvement in a bribery scandal that has been making the rounds, which has remained unabated for several days, rather than own up to the crime of which he is evidently found to be guilty as charged, Alhaji Jibo decides to appeal on the grounds of tribal sentiment. It is equally important to state here that this same person becomes the new Director of Customs, having succeeded in influencing the outright dismissal of Emodi who hails from the East. In response to his being accused of bribery, Alhaji Jibo retorts, "thank you your Excellency. In fact, I was thinking of coming over to see you to explain before I got your message. You see Sir, the whole thing is nothing but a calculated attempt to slander my name and get me into trouble" (86).

In contemporary Nigeria, it is the same story as the novel enunciates, of appealing to ethnic sentiments to cut corners, gain undue favours, evade justice and judgement and even most times, to steal, maim and kill. Tribal considerations play out in numerous ways in Nigeria: in the area of employment, competence is thrown to the winds. During elections, leaders are elected and most of the times selected not on the basis of qualification but on the basis of religious and tribal affiliations. The negative effects of all these on the nation is enormous and the recovery of the opportunities lost has equally been a big challenge to the nation that is reeling in pain, disillusionment and despondence, due to tribal pettiness.

The text further presents more realistic Nigerian social dynamism equally relevant to many interest groups, particularly the proponents of African-based ideology – African religion. This is what is referred to as magic realism. This aspect is introduced in the novel by Lati Baba, the notorious kingpin of smugglers. He brings Agadagidi popularly called "The wise one" to unravel the mystery surrounding the killer of Samuel Adigwe and at the same time, shield such a killer. In this wise, Atere the killer is made known and given protection simultaneously. He is fortified against arrest as Agadagidi enchants, "no one has seen the wind. Therefore, they will never see you. No one remembers the dream of a deep sleep... therefore, everything about this crime will be forgotten" (22). And true to it, "the Department

of Customs and Excise continued its search for Samuel Adigwe's murderer for the next two weeks without any luck" (24).

Conclusion

From the foregoing in this work, it is quite glaring that Nigeria as a country has been bedeviled by the corruptible nature of leaders, both as leaders in governance or as those who lead people in various organisations in one way or the other. Nigeria's problem is thus, one of a social transformation of the mind and a total revolution of the heart on both the side of government and the individuals. These two can be made possible by personally and collectively having a positive change of their ways of life which will in turn effect a positive change on the entire society.

In sum, the bulk of the social

transformation agenda which is expected to bring about a national transformation of the economy, security in the entire society is to be spear-headed by the decision makers at the level of governance and individual persons. Being that Nigerian government is a kleptocratic one, what we need as Nigerians is that we all should learn to become revolutionaries in our various ways to have a better society. We must be, as Julius Lester puts it, "... the revolutionary is concerned with a total change in a society's institutions, for it is the institutions which shape the individuals. At the same time, the revolutionary knows that to change the institutions he must change himself" (ix-x). By the time this happens, the plethora of socio-economic and political problems that confront Nigeria will be reduced if not totally eliminated.

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