



Humanism in Contemporary Africa: A Study of Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*

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ABSTRACT

This study purposively samples excerpts taken from Teju Cole's novel, *Every Day is for The Thief* to discuss and demonstrate humanism in the worldview of contemporary Africa. The study explores secondary texts and critical works to examine humanism as the philosophy which affirms the dignity, freedom and value of all humans with emphasis on reason as the most significant of all human faculties. Humanism aims at encouraging the all-round development of the individual which will in turn enhance positive development in the society. Contemporary issues in Africa are part of the post effects of colonialism, therefore the postcolonial theory adequately provides useful knowledge about some of these issues as reflected in the novel. Cole's *Every Day is for The Thief* illustrates the message that the socio-political problems in Africa will wither if individuals, especially those saddled with leadership responsibilities appreciate the philosophy of humanism as well as the humanity of the people they lead. The implication as revealed in the novel is that without a humane-centred philosophy to influence the worldview of the people, Africa will remain an underdeveloped continent where every day belongs to the thief and there is no day for the owner.

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Niethammer, a German Theologian, coined the term humanism in the early nineteenth century. It was derived from the Latin concept *humanitas*. Historically, Martin Heidegger perceives that humanism or "humanitas, explicitly so called, was first considered and striven for in the age of the Roman Republic....It was concerned with scholarship and training in good conduct" (244). In a similar vein, M. H. Abrams corroborates that the term was used to

signify one who taught or wrote in the 'studia humanitatis,' or 'humanities' – that is, grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy as distinguished from fields less concerned with the moral and imaginative aspects and activities of man, such as mathematics, natural philosophy, and theology. (Abrams, 123)

Humanism was specifically used to refer to the formation of young students in Greek, Latin and classical literature. It was also a movement which encouraged the youths to study classical languages instead of exclusive training in the pure sciences. Educators in the humanities were convinced that Greek culture provided the fundamental categories of thought, literary expression and the arts.

Elders has written that humanism,

Signifies the courteous attitude of well-educated persons, who distinguish themselves by their pleasant conduct, spirited conversation and the use of style in their world. The humanist promotes the culture of the mind, is well versed in the different sciences and arts and possesses those virtues which are highly regarded in inter-human contacts, such as respect of others, courtesy, kindness, for the humanists', cultivating the mind is more important than the possession of political power or great wealth (2)

Humanism focuses on perspectives in all endeavours that affirm the dignity, freedom and progress of humans all over the world. It explores thoughts on moral values and considers reason as the "universal and defining faculty" (Abrams, 123). Humanism is therefore about encouraging the all-round development of the individual by curtailing the instinctual appetites and 'animal' passions that are inherent in humans. In other words, encouraging what is humane and denouncing what is bestial.

Humanism as used in the moral sphere of human existence has been a part of African philosophy before any form of colonial interference. African humanism is "most often referred to in the Southern African context as Ubuntu (among the Zulu) or Obotho (among the Pedi). It is popularly equated with the communal values and customs of the traditional African village or ethnic community..." (H J Pietersen, 1). Every African community had traditional ethics and philosophy, although colonial representation of Africans sought to undermine that fact. This traditional ethics and philosophy upheld moral conduct based on cultural beliefs and worldviews. It promotes human dignity and respect with the understanding that an individual's humanity inter-connects with the dignity and humanity of others. What is good is defined by its ability to protect and promote the life of everyone in the community. What is evil is defined by its tendency to destroy the life of the community. Humanism in pre-colonial Africa, was actually about the survival of the community and that is the supreme value which can only be attained by valuing the lives of individuals that make up the community.

In Europe, the renaissance movement instigated and made popular the concept of humanism as an intellectual movement. In Africa, two main experiences encouraged the formal study of humanism. These major experiences are slavery and colonialism. Following the

aftermath of long years of dehumanization through slavery and colonialism, the African educated elites saw the need to reclaim their humanity. Intellectual Humanism in Africa was the product of Afrocentric thought. Malcolm X, for instance, was one influential leader of African descent who promoted a humanistic vision for Africans all over the world. He saw the need for all Africans to unite so he travelled to many African countries to teach Africans that by

Denigrating African culture and history, white Westerners had indoctrinated Blacks with a deep sense of racial inferiority. He firmly believed that before Blacks could unite and advance, they had to overcome this inferiority complex (Allen Jun).

Malcom X renounced the Christian religion and converted to Islam. However in Islam he was faced with a dogmatic system of beliefs so he developed a progressive, secular and humanistic worldview but still embracing Sunni Islam. He formed the OAAU for Muslims, Christians, Atheists, Confucians and others interested in the liberation of people of African descent.

Other early African nationalists who fought for independence and freedom from colonial imperialists were armed with humanistic ideas which enabled them to defend their people before the global community. One of them was Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was elected to the International Academy of Humanism which is composed of Humanists that are committed to free inquiry, the scientific methods of investigation, and the furthering of Humanist ethical values and principles. Kenneth David Kaunda of Zambia promoted "Christian Humanism." Humanism which stressed the importance of the centrality of humanity while embracing a progressive conception of Christianity. Kwame Nkrumah employed a Humanistic approach to African politics and identity and former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere practised what was called Catholic Humanism.

THE WRITINGS OF TEJU COLE

Teju Cole's writings are often about people and the worldview they adopt to survive in a postmodern world. Cole's first novel, *Every Day is for The Thief* published in 2007 has its main setting in Lagos-Nigeria. The novel portrays an autobiographical narrator, a middle aged dual citizen of Nigeria and the United States of America who visits Lagos after fifteen years of living in the United States. The visit affords him the opportunity to explore and reflect on the people and the happenings in the country. There are inconsistencies, contradictions and absurdities in the people's worldview. Many people are religious and materialistic at the same time; so many others are superstitious, ignorant and gullible. In his second novel, *Open City*, which is a sequel to *Everyday is for the Thief*, the autobiographical narrator, relates his diasporic experiences as he encounters people and

incidences that shaped his philosophical perspectives on the issues that make and affect us as humans.

THE PRIVILEGING OF MATERIALISM OVER HUMANISM

The materialist worldview is a philosophical belief in material things; especially physical possessions and wealth. It excludes accountability to a supernatural being so it undermines theism and validates the view that the natural world which humans are a part of is all that exists. There are six different phases of materialism. These are Ancient Materialism, Seventh Century Materialism, Eighteenth Century Materialism, Nineteenth Century Materialism, Dialectical and Historical Materialism and the current stage of materialism. During the fourth phase of materialism, also known as scientific materialism, Charles Darwin in his books *Origin of Species* 1859 and *The Descent of Man* 1871; along with T. H. Huxley in his book, *Man's Place in Nature* 1863 related the philosophy of materialism with the theory of Evolution and provided a ground for further empirical studies. The sociologist, Herbert Spencer, used Darwin's biological theory to coin the phrase "survival of the fittest" and drew a parallel with social theories to illustrate human behaviour. The phrase, survival of the fittest, correspondingly describes a social situation where self-interest is sought for through any means necessary, whether force, pretence or manipulation. This desperate quest for self-gratification subverts standards for ethics and humanity. In this social system, the financially empowered continue to survive at the expense of those who are economically weak. Furthermore, the materialist worldview functions in binary opposition to any ethical worldview that checks or undermines the quest to succeed materially in life. For the materialists, there are no limits and no boundaries to human ambitions therefore, one should do everything possible to achieve one's goal. There is no space for guilt, shame or fear to influence the human mind. The pleasure and material benefits that one can achieve in life overrules any sense of ethics, and the means by which one obtains them is of no significance. Moreover, there is no absolute and ultimate basis to decide what is right and what is wrong. For this reason, the term corruption will have no objective moral significance. Corruption becomes a social construction, an opinion or a perspective. Those who are corrupt often justify their actions by setting personal moral codes that appear rational and reasonable.

This describes the motivations in the behaviour of people in Lagos-Nigeria as portrayed in Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*. The story, through the autobiographical and stream of consciousness technique, portrays a desperate quest for material gain by many people living in Lagos. Following independence, African communities are compelled to relate with the global world. In their multiple relationships and interactions with people from other continents, new ideas leading to new worldviews are formulated and

harmonized with the African Traditional Worldview. While some nations have, through their worldviews, made significant progress in arts, law, politics, science and technology and in many other facets of life, most African countries particularly Nigeria, as portrayed in Cole's writings, have remained under-developed. What seems to be responsible for this under-development is the materialist mind-set that encourages the inability to work with a meaningful worldview that will enhance development and progress. Nigeria has numerous intellectual resources, both human and material, but a general mind-set that emphasizes undue quest for material wealth has caused the nation to remain underdeveloped. There seems to be a problem with the people's mind-set that is why corruption and violence in several ramifications characterize Nigeria as depicted in *Every Day is for The Thief*.

At the Nigerian Consulate in the United States where the narrator goes to obtain a new Nigerian Passport, he finds himself a victim of a system that takes advantage of citizens who wish to travel. The narrator describes the system as an advance form of corruption. In order to obtain a passport which the law states should be ready after application in three weeks, travellers are compelled to give a bribe, in euphemistic term referred to as "expediting fee" (12). When they fail to do so, it takes them more weeks and more effort to obtain the documents. The corrupt practice is veiled in words and inscriptions to make it appear valid. Signs such as "no cash please, money orders only" and "help us fight corruption. If any employee of the Consulate asks you for a bribe or tip, please have a discreet word with the Consul General" (13) are placed to delude the public and give a semblance of moral standards. The authority figure, which is the Consul General, who should ensure transparency is a prime beneficiary of this practice so he allows it. One of the victims at the consulate bluntly states that the officials "are crooks, you see, these people. They take the money order, which they don't give you a receipt for, and they deposit it in the account and they take out cash. That's for their own pockets" (12). This introductory incident shows how, for the sake of material possessions, words lose their meaning in human interactions. People in privileged positions use words to defraud and exploit others. This reveals how most people in Nigeria uphold a postmodern and a materialist mind-set where truth is interpreted as relative and words are arbitrary tools for people in positions of power to assert their own versions of reality, all for the purposes of financial gains. Initially the protagonist is worried by the situation in Nigeria where corrupt practices are often condoned, so he "mentally rehearsed a reaction for a possible encounter with such corruption at the airport in Lagos." (12). He is however shocked to realize that corruption is present at the consulate in New York and it appears inescapable. According to him, "to walk in off a New York street and face a brazen demand for a bribe: that is a shock I am ill-prepared for" (12). Analysing the same incident in his review of the novel, *Every Day is for The Thief*, Helon Habila describes the

scene as something beyond human comprehension. He notes that, "The bribe-givers know they shouldn't give bribes, the bribe-takers know they shouldn't take them, but both are helpless, it seems, against an almost metaphysical force that drives them on this path, with no end in sight" (1). This underscores the materialist worldview which superintends over the human considerations. In the nation, money becomes a controlling force that supersedes everything about humanity including the human will, the human conscience and the human life.

The narrator arrives at the Nigerian airport where he observes how materialism dominates the mind-sets of the citizenry. Materialism is a well-established system and a way of life for many people. One instance at the airport is captured when an official in mufti begs for money from the narrator. The airport official asks for "dollars" and "Christmas gift" but the narrator prefers to walk away without giving anything. The narrator meets Aunt Folake at the airport and on their way home, he notices two policemen quarrel with each other about collecting bribe. The narrator is disturbed by these experiences of forceful fraudulent extortion or subtle manipulations or outright begging. He notices how money is demanded because it defines relationships. The narrator comments thus on how most human interactions are determined by money:

Money dished out in quantities fitting the context, is a social lubricant here. It eases passage even as it maintains hierarchies. Fifty naira for the man who helps you back out from a parking spot, two hundred naira for the police officer who stops you for no good reason in the dead of night, ten thousand for the clearing agent who helps bring your imported crate through customs. For each transaction, there is a suitable amount that helps things on their way... (19-20)

This kind of scenario creates a suitable environment for those considered as touts, hustlers, thugs and armed robbers to look for ways to extort money from citizens. These category of people are also not different from those at the Consulate, the airport and other official places who are obsessed with money and will do anything possible to exploit and divert what is meant for the public. Billboards hang the caption "Corruption is illegal: do not give or accept bribes" yet the condition under which those billboards come to be is rife with corrupt practices. So much money is usually allocated for such projects but the government official and the contractor who are responsible for placing the billboards are corrupt. They divert most of the money for personal consumption and use very little to construct a substandard work. The narrator reflects on the attitude towards money, the "informal economy of Lagos... It puts pressure on everybody" (18). There is pressure on everyone to get rich. In a short time after his arrival at

the airport, the protagonist confronts "the demand from the immigration officer, the toll booth story, the Ikeja police: three clear instances of official corruption within forty-five minutes of leaving the airport" (18). Disturbed by the situation he experiences a sense of helplessness and a feeling of alienation which can be deduced from his thoughts:

I have taken into myself some of the assumptions of life in a western democracy—certain ideas about legality, for instance, certain expectations about due process— and in that sense I have returned a stranger. What the trip back from the airport makes me think, and what is confirmed over the course of the following days, is the extent to which Lagos has become a patronage society. (19)

When humanity is commercialized and every act is viewed from the perspective of material wealth, then society degenerates and progress is inhibited. When people view life from the perspective of money alone then there will be no need for shame, no fear of accountability and no need for guilt. The absurdity that makes the narrator laugh or respond in "stunned silence" (105) is the logical outcome of a materialist worldview. The lack of attention to details, poor maintenance culture and corruption by aviation authorities leading to multiple plane crashes in the country are all done to divert public funds. Such quests for material gains limit the human potential and ability to thrive. The situation in Lagos Nigeria that has made corruption prevalent is what Paglia foresees in a secularized society with contempt for the spiritual aspect of humanity. It "sinks into materialism and self-absorption and gradually goes slack". (Quoted in Berlinski, 12)

The materialist worldview allows for the desperate efforts by groups and individuals to make money even at the risk of personal injury, imprisonment or death. Those who uphold this worldview reflect on reality and morality exclusively from the perspective of financial benefits. They believe that anything that will bring in money is right. Such a mind-set justifies criminal and violent activities in Nigeria. An example is seen in the proliferation of internet cafes in Lagos where many young people patronize and indulge in advance fee fraud also known as "419". The narrator describes this criminal activity as "endemic in Nigeria" (25). A visit to Tomsed Cyber Café gives him the opportunity to witness a man indulge in the act. Watching the act the first time is an enthralling experience and he describes it thus "I feel as though I have discovered the source of the Nile or the Niger" (26). In a short while, the narrator witnesses six other incidents of internet fraud. The moral implication of the act on the Nigerian society strikes him and gives way to a feeling of irritation. This is emphasized by the additional information concerning the practice given by his cousin, Muiyiwa who explains how the universities are the nerve-centre of the activity. He tells the narrator

how that for most of the boys, the goal is to get cash so they can “live large’ and impress their mates on campus” (27). In order to gratify this desire, the young men are willing to compromise the integrity of their nation and give up any sense of patriotism. According to the narrator, they are “mangling what little good name their country still has” (27). The idea of love for one’s nation and the need to protect and preserve it has no meaning in a materialist postmodern world. Law enforcement officers who are expected to guard against the practice are key accomplices. It is common for police officers to arrest offenders but it is often “a catch and release programme” (29) after the officer is bribed. The officer’s justification for accepting bribes is not different from what other law enforcement agents have to grapple with. The narrator gives the reason as follows:

Most officers earn between ten and fifteen thousand naira a month. They quite literally cannot survive on such salaries, which amount to less than one hundred dollars. A friend of my father’s, an immigration officer, was once transferred out of state and to a remote area of the country because his refusal to take bribes affected his colleagues’ earnings and, by extension, their ability to provide for their families. (21)

Accepting bribes becomes a moral right for individuals and families to survive so it creates a cycle of corruption that is accepted as norm. The narrator condemns the practice where by what is right is what will bring in money irrespective of anything and anyone who gets hurt in the process.

Furthermore, armed robbers invading homes are a common occurrence in Lagos. In the course of their operation, little or no regard for human life is displayed. The case of Mr. Adelaja who is murdered by such men is one of the numerous tragedies. His wife is now forced to live with “the memory of the man she loves forever tied to the degradation of that one night” (42). The perpetrators of such acts however do not have this consideration. In their worldview, the material benefits far outweighs the pain and trauma they inflict on others. Since they are younger, smatter, and stronger; they deserve all the good things that life can offer.

THE EXPLOITATION OF PEOPLE THROUGH RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY AS REFLECTED IN EVERYDAY IS FOR THE THEIF

The place of religion in a society is highly significant. In literature, religious themes are prevalent. This is the assertion of Bennett and Royle in their exploration of the concept of God as a theory for interpreting literary texts. The idea of God implies religion and religion in simple but inconclusive terms is human effort to apprehend the realm of the divine and the supernatural. Religion can be a personal or an intimate spiritual experience for the individual at the

same time it can extend to cultural activities in any given society. Bringing the focus to Christianity as a religious worldview, Judeo-Christian ideas are as Bennet and Royle observe “more pervasive and insidious than many people, including non-practising Christians, agnostics or indeed atheists, might suppose” (224). These ideas form a coherent body of thought that require critical attention. In Cole’s writings, the narrator’s main interest in religion is to show elements of absurdity and the hypocritical practice by individuals who limit their vision of reality and use religion to exploit the ignorant and gullible masses.

What motivates corruption in Nigeria is a worldview which is largely materialistic but disguised in religion and exhibited in irreverence. Nigerians are more materialistic than they are religious. Religion is a means for material gains. Often religious expressions are a means to manipulate and exploit others. Many call on God and employ religious diction to pursue their materialist quest. In such instances, faith in God and the moral code of religious faith is ignored. Having a religious worldview is often accompanied by the consciousness of another life where the consequences of every human action and intention will be judged. In Christianity, Islam and the traditional religions practised by Nigerians from the precolonial era, adherents have always been called upon to eschew obsession with materialism so that they can live selfless and ethically oriented lives for the well-being of the society. The assumption is that since Nigerians are very religious, they should also be humane and ethical. Unfortunately, this is not the case because being religious does not translate into being moral. There are many religions and each religion has an ethical code. These differences have been responsible for religious fundamentalism, religious bigotry and religious superstitions. What can be observed is that a large number of Nigerians are materialists but religion serves as a decoy to hide this fact. This is evidenced by the number of false prophets who use religious symbols and doctrines to financially exploit gullible citizens. Secular humanists argue that religions have done very little to change or stop the increasing rate of crime in the society. In Nigeria there are many who are religious but they still indulge in crime and other immoral activities. In some instances, rather than prevent crime, religions promote a narrow minded worldview that encourage groups and individuals to accommodate unlawful behaviours especially when the outcomes of such behaviours are in the interest of a religious group. This probably explains the absurdity of why many are religious but they exhibit little or no sense of the ethical life. Therefore, despite the beliefs and the admonitions in the core of the teachings of most religions, the pervasiveness of materialism still persists in Nigeria. It is for this reason that a critical attitude towards religious beliefs become necessary.

The common position often asserted by secular humanists is that religious beliefs inhibit social and individual progress. It is argued that religion is primarily responsible for some of the atrocities in the world today

because it encourages ignorance and intellectual sloppiness. Challenging situations which people can confront and resolve are left for God to handle. Secular humanists are of the view that religion limits people's vision of reality and leads to delusion. Religion encourages gullibility, degrades human dignity and represses one's emotions. Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* presents instances that illustrate such opinions about the religious worldview. The narrator devotes chapter ten of the novel to analyse the antics and life style of Pastor Olakunle. The Pastor's sermon is about wealth and good health. The congregation is enjoined to have faith so that they will never be sick again. Humanists interpret such claims as ridiculous because they believe that sickness is a part of the natural processes of life some of which can be prevented and cured while some cannot be prevented. Therefore to convince a people who are bedevilled by poverty and who are mostly living in unhealthy environments as reflected in the novel, that sickness is banished out of their lives by a supernatural force shows a high level of credulity on the part of the victims. Also the flamboyant and luxurious life of Pastor Olakunle and Pastor Michael is in direct contradiction with the rate of poverty in Lagos. This portrays the high rate of religious delusion that has characterized most people in Lagos-Nigeria. The material wealth of these pastors is a symbol of attraction for the numerous members of the church and their gullibility lies in their inability to see and think beyond the façade of gleaming wealth.

The narrator is also highly critical of what he calls "Evangelical Christianity". He regards it as an "epidemic... that has seized the country, especially the south" (109). He states that,

Church has become one of the biggest businesses in Nigeria, with branches and 'ministries' springing up like weeds on every street and corner. These Christians are militant, preaching a potent combination of a fear of hellfire and a love of financial prosperity. Many of the most ardent believers are students in the secondary school and universities. This is the worldview in which prayer is a sufficient solution for plane crashes. Everyone expects a miracle, and those who do not receive theirs are blamed for having insufficient faith. (109)

The significance of this comment is that the Christian worldview as practised by most Nigerians, limits the appreciation of true humanism. It corroborates what secular humanists observe about having a religious worldview that conditions the human mind to be satisfied with not knowing, not caring, simply living for the moment, dependence on miracles and looking forward to an imaginary transcendental reward after death. Adherents are not challenged to exercise their intellectual capacities in rigorous research so they can

find solutions to issues bedevilling the society. Everything is left to God who is expected to solve all human problems. In her novel titled, *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes of Ifemelu who returns from the United States of America to discover how common the word "God" is in Lagos and how popular (507). God is mentioned in every conversation and called upon in prayer in every situation even when obviously fraudulent and corrupt practices are being perpetrated. The popularity of God in the worldview of many Nigerians has made the proliferation of churches and the commercial activities of religious charlatans lucrative. In Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, the writer vividly portrays the mind-set of an unenlightened Nigerian who is convinced that being a pastor is the easiest path to financial wealth. The character, Dele, reveals his thoughts in Pidgin English thus,

I dey think make I open church. Dat na where the money de these days. If you wan' make big money go become pastor, I swear. You don' see the big big cars wey dey follow these pastors when dem commot? De one wey I see yesterday na only Lexus and Jaguar full everywhere like san-san. Some even get private jet for this Nigeria! Tori Olorun. (229)

What Dele illustrates is the fact that in many Nigerian Churches, one's moral character does not matter, the dedication, willingness to serve, and all the qualities that are associated with pastoral work are insignificant. All that matter is the flamboyance and financial gain.

Ignorance, greed and religious gullibility is the subject matter in Cole's *Every Day is for The Thief*. The narrator observes how "supernatural explanations are favoured for the most ordinary events...nothing happens for natural reasons" (109). This has caused the lack of progress, the inability of the exploited masses to challenge their oppressors and demand for better living conditions. This has left the people disconnected from reality. "Even the president of the federation is unable to get away with from constant God-talk and in this he is very much like his constituents" (108) Olusegun Obasanjo, the president being referred to had written in one of his books *This Animal Called Man* that "the fundamental wrong in man is his godlessness, his autonomous conduct which is decided without reference to God" (205). Such God consciousness and constant reference to God is what secular humanists consider as a problem to humanity. Chinua Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria* writes on "the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers- a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centred pedestrianism" (11). The situation being highlighted by Achebe seems to have worsened with the increasing proliferation of dubious religious institutions. Often, political leaders fail in carrying out their responsibilities, instead they employ religious leaders to

pray for them and call on the people for “a time of national prayer” (105) when avoidable tragedies occur and when amenities that can easily be made available are denied.

At the National Museum in Onikan, the narrator meets one of the employees, a woman who talks to him in a hostile manner and correspondingly sings sweetly of “The glories of her Lord” (60). She lacks appreciation for the artefacts and she is incapable of any innovation to enhance the standard of the museum because she sees herself as “a victorious Christian, among the idols” (60). The narrator also learns of one of the directors of the Lagos Museum who “had been too superstitious to handle some of the items in his care. The man was a Muslim and he feared the fetish power of the masks and statues” (62). The humanist narrator finds it worrisome that one with the educational qualification who has risen to the position of a director of a museum, is unable to form a scientific view of his profession.

The narrator also visits a bookshop where there are categories of books but he notices that the largest section is devoted to ‘inspirational’ and Christian books. There are more customers in that section of the bookshop which reflects the kind of literature that many Nigerians read. It is of concern to the narrator that classical works of literature are very few and less attention is given to them. Denying the obvious and stating the contrary is a way that Nigerians disconnect from reality. Biblical interpretations are given to encourage the Christian adherents to believe in the power of the tongue. They should claim wealth even when there are little or no efforts to create welfare programmes that will address the high level of poverty in the country. They are also asked to claim good health when no effort is made to address healthcare and resolve environmental problems that allow diseases to fester. An instance from the novel is when the narrator suffers from malaria and a friend pays him a visit. The friend, Oluwafemi, reprimands the narrator for saying he has malaria, “I don’t say things like ‘I have malaria.’ The tongue is very powerful, you know.” (121). But the narrator insists on his scientific view which he explains as follows:

The female Anopheles mosquito has caught up with me. That’s the reality. It’s the plasmodium parasite denaturing my red blood cells that makes it so, and the sooner I admit that to myself, the sooner I can start treating the disease, Oluwafemi. There’s no point in being counterfactual (122).

The point raised against such a religious mind-set is that it is uncritical and detrimental to one’s health. The narrator is against the practice where many Nigerians deliberately avoid going to the hospital to take medications because they expect a miracle. Rather, they go to churches that “promise more biological miracles” (116).

Often, religious practices are a mockery in Nigeria. They are hardly in line with reality even though the country is declared the most religious country with the happiest people in the world. The narrator questions: “Religion, corruption, happiness. Why, if so religious, so little concern for the ethical life or for human rights? Why, if so happy, such weariness and stifled suffering” (110). The narrator is convinced that the pervasiveness of religion has not addressed corruption in Nigeria, it has rather provided a cover for criminals and immoral people to hide and deceive the ignorant and gullible populace. Secular humanists are confident that if all religions are eradicated, the world will be a better place, this is the reason Dawkins calls on all of humanity to imagine with John Lennon, a world without religion (1). Teju Cole’s suggestion is that true humanism, which encourages human potential and human welfare will be attained if all religious beliefs are relegated and people are free to decide what is right or wrong from the perspective of human reason and experience.

HUMANISM IN EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF

The main character who is the nameless narrator in the novel represents the model of a humanist in the 21st Century. He is one who is educated and acquainted with the subtleties of human nature. His passion for science is reflected in his training as a psychiatrist. His love for history, literature, art and music are captured in his visits to the National museum, the Muson Centre (Musical Society of Nigeria), the bookstores and the Jazz shop; which further depict him as the model of a well-educated man. Unlike the renaissance humanists who held onto their religious convictions, the narrator’s main interest in religion is to show its absurdity and expose the hypocritical practice by individuals who limit their vision of reality or use it to exploit the ignorant and gullible masses. He notices a decrepit Peugeot 504 with a sticker that reads “Relax! God is in control”. The sight alerts him to a consciousness, the “fact that nobody is in control, no one is ultimately responsible for anything at all” (113). This is the common assertion of secular humanists, that humans can only be responsible for themselves. This is also in line with Postmodernist interpretation of reality which maintains that there is no absolute and ultimate being who is responsible for anything that happens. The only sense of responsibility lies with individuals as humans to seek for personal meaning and not to depend on God. Every human action or inaction is expected to be judged by reason and human interest and not by any religious doctrine because religion is a belief initiated and practised by people in the society.

It is common for humanists to engage in some form of Activism against lawlessness and other forms of social injustice. Such attitude is reflected when the narrator feels the pressure to challenge the officials at the consulate but the grand conspiracy to uphold the materialist worldview makes it so difficult for the narrator

to question the authority. He inwardly expresses dissatisfaction with the conspiracy as follows: "Isn't it this casual complicity that has sunk our country so deep into its woes? The question, unspoken hangs in the air between me and my interlocutor" (12). An older man who understands the dilemma they are all in cautions him:

Hey, hey young guy, why trouble yourself? They'll take your money anyway, and they'll punish you by delaying your passport. Is this what you want? Aren't you more interested in getting your passport? Than trying to prove a point (12).

The narrator also seeks to actively raise consciousness against the materialist consciousness that has perverted the mind-set of most Nigerians. He achieves this through his reflections thus:

No one seems to worry, as I do, that the money demanded by someone whose finger nurses the trigger of an AK -47 is less a tip than a ransom. I feel that my worrying about it is a luxury that few can afford. For many Nigerians, the giving and receiving of bribes, tips, extortion money or alms- the categories are fluid- is not thought of in moral terms. It is seen either as a mild irritant or as an opportunity. It is a way of getting things done, neither more nor less than what money is there for. (20)

The general atmosphere of complacency and tolerance for corruption is a source of worry for a humanist but for those with a materialist mind-set, morals are relegated and truth is relativized. There is no basis for judging human actions and behaviours. Selfishness and greed are interpreted as a survival strategy. Without the consciousness of God's judgement, there is also no moral basis for anyone to restrain the pursuit of instinctual appetite and animal passion that the renaissance notion of humanism discourages.

The narrator finds a space to address the common misconception about humanism. In his interaction with Adebola, a senior secondary student of Mayflower School that was founded by the renowned Nigerian humanist and human rights activist Tai Solarin, the narrator wants Adebola to understand that "a humanist is someone who believes in humanity, someone who celebrates human ability and potential. That's where we get the word 'humanities' from" (46). He differentiates the term from an Atheist, which is one who does not believe in God. The younger man is adamant, holding onto what was taught at school that a humanist is one who does not believe in God. The short space this conversation occupies in the novel leaves out several issues regarding the history of humanism. However, the novelist, obviously wishes to set a critical discourse on

humanism in the Nigerian novel. The narrator rightly observes that humanism in its beginning had no connection with disbelief in God. The exclusivist claim by several atheists, deists and agnostics to humanism has significantly altered its meaning. Addressing this misconception is the focus of Ritchie and Spencer when they made a case for Christian Humanism. They assert that "the idea that human flourishing had to entail the decline of religion needed- and still needs- demythologizing" (6). In Nigeria, the body that promotes humanism is the Humanist Association of Nigeria led by Leo Igwe. The anti-religious stance of the association has generated some controversies and attracted suspicion. The Association faults the Nigerian Society and the governments at various levels for discriminating against atheists and agnostics as well as persecuting and abusing people who renounce their religious beliefs. It also condemns what it terms as harmful and exploitative superstitious beliefs like spiritual deliverance, blind faith, prosperity gospel and supernatural healing. The association supports the rights of gays and lesbians, in addition to acts like euthanasia and the rights of women to commit abortion as a personal choice. In a society with many religious people, there will certainly be apprehensions that anti-religious humanism will undermine traditional and cultural values which have produced social cohesion and coherence in the society. Already, Religion in Nigeria is an institution where many people are able to find purpose and meaning therefore the majority will not appreciate a worldview that undermines the spiritual side in humans.

The narrator condemns religious beliefs that hinder progress, as well as the excessive materialism that encourage greed, selfishness and violent behaviours. This is seen in Lagos where religion, greed and materialism are responsible for the lack of progress as depicted in the novel. Nevertheless there is hope in the few individuals like the woman in the Danfo bus who is reading a book by Ondaatje "a challenging work of fiction on Lagos public transportation" (37). The narrator also finds hope and respect for individuals who are accomplishing creative works in the country like the photographers he meets at an event in the Goothe Institute. These are "people who, against all odds, keep the flame of aesthetic struggle alive" (56). The narrator contemplates on the worldviews that form the bases for the problems confronting the Nigerian society and wishes for a humanistic outlook as a panacea to life. There are still possibilities for the human spirit to thrive and be creative. This tempts him to consider living in Nigeria but by the end of the story he weighs the options and prefers to return to the United States. Although a sense of nostalgia for Nigeria remains with him to the end of the novel, he could not dismiss the fact that most of the institutions in the country lack the true spirit of humanism. The culture of the mind is near absent and the country is "a hostile environment for the life of the mind" (37) where it appears "Every day is for the thief" and nothing is said about a day for the owner.

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