

EXPLORATION OF CHILD LABOUR IN ELNATHAN JOHN'S *BORN ON A TUESDAY*

Somtochukwu J. Metu

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
somtochukwu.metu@unn.edu.ng/+2348084416290

Godstime Eze

Department of Theatre and Film Studies/Institute of African Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
godstime.eze@unn.edu.ng/+2348063850575

&

Chiamaka Chikelu

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
amakaclare894@gmail.com/+2349136823616

Abstract

An art work elicits critical engagements based on the perception of the researcher. Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* has engaged critics from the perspectives of religious fundamentalism, postcolonial anarchy and the bildungsroman, among others. Distinctively, the present study subjects the text to the discourse of child labour. The interpretation is drawn from the undesirable realities surrounding the chief character Dantala and other Almajirai in the work. The children are exposed to danger consequent upon neglect by their parents and society. The incidents in the text implicate the problem of manipulation and victimisation of children whose vulnerability leads to the series of abuses they undergo in their lives. Victims of such social crisis often end up in mental and physical agony, have no access to schooling and in some cases meet Psychoanalysis is applied as the analytical theory for the study. The adoption of the theory is based on its appropriateness to the traumatic experiences suffered by Dantala and other children because of the social crises. The result from this research shows that child labour emanates from negligence of parents or guardians, bad governance, religious extremism and poverty; thereby reducing children's chances of harnessing their full potential.

Keywords: Child Labour, Trauma, Almajirai, Vulnerability, Indoctrination, Exploitation, Abuse.

Introduction

Literary productions, especially those with the appellation; African Literature, are replete with human experiences bordering on social, political and religious aspects of human lives in society. Pioneer African writers were mostly preoccupied with precolonial and colonial experiences of the people. They were seemingly concerned with the kind of "a literature which takes up and explores themes that are nationalistic" (Habib 743). Subsequent works are fraught with the ideas of postcolonial disillusionment, feminism, wars, migration and cultural alienation. The authors oftentimes focus on the existing trends by using their works to either attack some anomalies in society or respond to such issues by bringing the people's consciousness to prevailing situations. Writers deal mostly with certain realities that confront their societies. as evident in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*. The narrative captures the exploitation and use of children to carry out some nefarious activities such as begging, thuggery, banditry and stealing which hinder their potential as future leaders. It is the situation that informs the engagement of the present research from the perspective of child labour, using the aforementioned text. Child labour is inimical to growth and development of children. According to the International Labour Organization, "the term "child labour" is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development" (np). Children who find themselves in such situations are usually in danger of sustaining psychology and physical injuries. This is encountered in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* through the characters of the almajiris like Dantala and his brothers, as well as "the boys who sleep under the kuka tree in Bayan Layi ..." (John 1). These characters who are mostly in their teens are used not only as beggars to help sustain poor/low-income families, but also as tools for perpetrating violence in the names of politics and religion. Dedan Onyango defines Child Labour as "any activity which the child undertakes to help the family in its subsistence efforts or to help himself in his own subsistence efforts" (9). Poverty, social and economic inequality accelerate child work, thereby engendering their exposition to harmful activities. It can sometimes lead to a child's grievous denial, health hazard and even untimely death. Anindita Dutta has argued that "child labour ..., was part of a gruesome system which snatched children of their childhood, health and even their lives" (2).

Critical investigations in *Elnathan John's Born on a Tuesday* reveal growing interests in the reading of the text from different theoretical dimensions. Some critics view the work from the point of view of religious extremism/fanaticism, Bildungsroman, political instability and postcolonial anarchy. There appears to be little or no interest in the exploration of the novel in the light of child labour; thus, creating a gap in scholarship. The present research is, therefore, focused on evaluating the narrative through the critical lens of child labour. Consequently, it bridges the gulf left by previous studies. The incidents in the text implicate the problem of manipulation and victimisation of children whose vulnerability leads to the series of abuses they undergo in their lives. By way of objectives, this article examines the mental/traumatic and physical impacts of child labour on Dantala and other young characters in *Born on a Tuesday*. It also explores various aspects of exploitation and subjection of children to harmful conditions that inhibit their chances of harnessing their potential. It is the focal point of the study to show how the affected characters in the primary text survive in the midst of the stormy society they found themselves in.

Literature Review

Despite its recent entrant into the world of literature, Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* has garnered critical attention in various dimensions. The text is mainly understood from the points of view of religious fundamentalism and material exploitation. For instance, Susan Dauda has studied the narrative from the point of perspective of extremism among Islamic fanatics, particularly in Northern Nigeria. She argues that the problem of fanaticism, in connection with Islam, has been in existence in Nigeria since the emergence of the religion in the 11th century (16). Dauda's interpretation of *Born on a Tuesday* is that the text revolves around the issue of religious unrest as told by Dantala, the protagonist. She traces the bigotry noticeable in Islamic religion to the eighteenth-century jihad of Usman Dan Fodio that took place in Hausa territories. The move, she argues was a conscious attempt to eradicate syncretism and embrace the core principles of Islam. However, she acknowledges that the planned religious revolution triggered a political element affecting state formation and conflict (Dauda 16). Her submission is that Islamic extremism started with some reform movements among Muslims, with the Maitatsine led by Muhammad Marwa whose approach is militant in nature. The group, according to her, condemned Western values and radically opposed the leadership style of the political class. Dauda also contends that

religious fundamentalism in Nigeria has given birth to terrorism. She points out that the case of the dreaded Boko Haram activities in the country has shown how extreme some radicals can go in defense of their faith. She regrets that "since its uprising, the Nigerian government has not been able to contain the group" (17). This has emboldened the insurgents who keep increasing in their numbers. Hence, the incessant killings of vulnerable civilians. Dauda notes that such extremist orientation accounts for the crisis encountered in John's *Born on a Tuesday*. Her conclusion is that it takes unbiased level of commitment to achieve victory over the menace caused by religious extremism.

Similarly, Mohammed Mostafa Hassouna admits that Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* captures the theme of religious fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria. In his article, "Religious Fanaticism in North Nigeria: Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*," he maintains that the narrative is thematically preoccupied with Islamic bigotry. He recognizes that the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's North has created room for the emergence of literary works that confront the group's dangerous posture in the country. Like Dauda, Houssana believes that the teachings of some religious fanatics such as Malam Abdul-Nur is responsible for the increasing spate of Islamic fundamentalism in the North. He alleges that Abdul-Nur is an Islamic fanatic who thrashes young boys and steals money donated for the mosque (258). He notes that such double standard contributes to the misleading indoctrination of the younger generation into fundamentalist ideals of the religion. Moreover, he blames the vulnerability of the almajiris to the continued sustenance of the ugly system. He blames the trend on the unwavering conviction of the extremists about the absolute rightness of their actions, and their willingness to die for what they believe in.

Essentially, the opinion of Houssana is that the crisis that has bedeviled the country, especially the Northern region is as a result of neglect on the side of the leaders. His portrayal of Dantala and the Kuka tree boys in Bayan Layi justifies why the almajiris are easily mobilized to cause havoc in society. The narrative, argues Mostafa, "... depicts a picture of violence in Bayan Layi and how youths speak about killing as easy and normal there" (268). He delineates the text as encompassing what he refers to as Verbal fanaticism which is propagated by Abdul-Nur with his inciting speeches. The second which he calls Armed fanaticism is the kind witnessed by Dantala in Bayan Layi where his Quranic teacher, Malam Junaidu, whips them for their inability to assimilate his Arabic teachings.

In "Surviving Trauma through Perseverance in Crises Situations: Exploring Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*," Egbunu D. Egbunu and Umar M.

Aisha examine the traumatic effects of the conflicts in the novel on both the young and the old characters. They refer to the Boko Haram menace in Northern Nigeria as the root cause of insecurity in the land, which has subjected the people to physical and mental agony. According to them, Dantala's persevering disposition in the face of the suffering he passes through from adolescence to adulthood contributes to his chances of surmounting the family and social challenges before him. Egbunu and Umar also opine that the Nigerian society has become porous to security problems, thereby hampering the peace and harmony desired by the citizens. The duo observed that insecurity has become a serious challenge to nationhood and global peace (Egbunu and Umar 537). They note that the diverse nature of insecurity accounts for literature's utilisation of creativity to tackle social realities in various societies. They argue that Elnathan John has deployed his imaginative prowess to project related experiences in Nigeria, using fictional figures. They depict Dantala's character as a symbolic one. Their point is that having been born on a Tuesday which, according to them, is a significant day of the week, he is predestined to act out the purpose of his birth. Dantala's name, emphasized Egbunu and Umar, is metonymic of clear fatal struggle that only time can determine (583). They see the protagonist's early involvement in juvenile delinquencies as capable of jeopardizing his life and future. Nonetheless, they attribute his spirit of perseverance as his major survival strategy.

Egbunu and Umar further argue that to survive the ugly realities of life, man needs to persevere in any situation he finds himself. They project Dantala as a model whose doggedness is worthy of emulation. Their insistence is that the author intentionally wants establish the efficacy of optimism even in desperate conditions as seen in Dantala's life, and his willingness to continue in his struggle for survival. They maintain that Dantala's failed attempt to find peace and respite in Sokoto after leaving the troubled vicinity of Bayan Layi is an indication that life for his kind is a tortuous one. Nevertheless, he has taken comfort in his encounter with Sheikh Jamal, as well as his friendship with Jibril. They emphasize that hope and providence play symbolic role in Dantala's perseverance and survival of his traumatic encounters (Egbunu and Umar 539). Their conclusion is that perseverance is an antidote to mental trauma resulting from insecurity in human societies. They understand John's *Born on a Tuesday* as the author's conscious effort to expose government complicity in the people's travails; and also proffer solutions to the crisis facing the masses. Thus, literature is portrayed as having the capacity to provide a pathway for a collective fight against insecurity in a given society.

Contrastingly, Paul Liam perceives Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* from the perspective of materialism and stereotype in connection with man's struggle in life. He notes that the identification of other people with a particular trait or stereotype affects the way we understand them and at the time hampers national cohesion. His argument is that the story explores existential questions revolving around the meaning of man's living conditions. Such experience is typical of the life of the major character, Dantala, and others in the novel. Accordingly, Liam stresses that the narrative shows the futility of human struggle. He is of the view that Elnathan John has used the work to justify that the value of human life lies in people's ability to add meaning to it, and finding a way of maximizing pleasure in their quest for survival. He draws from Dantala's survival strategy by passing through the ordeals of an almajiri in Bayan Layi, and rising to the position of being an assistant to Sheikh Jamal, an Islamic scholar. It is at this point that Dantala experiences relief from his checkered past, despite facing some difficulties in the face of emerging religious crisis in his surroundings. Liam observes that materialism is significantly perceived in the novel as one of the major determining factors in the characters' bid to survive. The point is that man tries to devise a means of surviving challenging periods through any possible opportunity within his reach. This is evidently true in Dantala's character. He seizes the slightest opportunity to earn a decent living with Sheikh Jamal, and diligently rises to become his assistant. The situation, according to the writer, prepares a conducive ground for Dantala to harness his potential, having been given the privilege of enjoying the basic necessities of life like shelter, food and clothes, contrary to what he faced as a rascal in Bayan Layi. Liam points out that the boys' life of criminality in Bayan Layi is consequent upon the denials they suffer in the society. Oftentimes, they queue up to receive as little as Two hundred naira from the opposition party leaders to attack the ruling party and their supporters.

Furthermore, Liam acknowledges that even the highly placed in society strives to meet his existential needs. His point is that Alhaji Usman, who happens to be Sheikh Jamal's benefactor, symbolizes the representation of religion in search of the means to sustain life. It is Liam's understanding that Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* captures, succinctly, the notion that man's innate desire is to meet his existential needs. Therefore, it is apparent that some people are gullible enough to believe that offering a thing to God can open doors for them to accumulate more wealth, as in the case of the politicians, like Alhaji Usman. He also decries the stereotyping of different people of different ethnic groups in Nigeria as practically observed in *Born on a Tuesday*. His

position is that such orientation engenders national disunity and unhealthy rivalry among the people. He condemns the author's use of the narrative to profile the Yoruba as betrayers and a hypocritical set of individuals. Liam submits that a writer is like a shepherd whose works should be a guide toward charting a new way for society to follow.

Distinctively, Stephen Ogundipe evaluates *Born on a Tuesday* in the light of ethnic and religious violence in Northern Nigeria. He recounts how the country has in recent years experienced consistent incidents of inter-ethnic hostilities and religious unrest, especially in the North (133). His observation is that even though the crises usually happen between the majority Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Christian minority, the cause of the violence sometimes has nothing to do with issues relating to religion. He points out that the Northern region was homogeneously bound together until ethnic chauvinists whose unfounded rhetoric tore the people apart. Ogundipe's interpretation of the novel is based on his understanding that it portrays the occurrence of what he refers to as sectarian violence which, according to him, has destroyed the harmony previously enjoyed by people who lived together as neighbours irrespective of ethnic differences. He contends that the neighbourhood of the text's setting highlights the travails of the characters as they strive to survive in the midst of overwhelming odds (136). However, he concurs with Mohammed Mostafa that the vulnerability of the young ones to hunger and religious indoctrination makes them accessible tools for fundamentalism and violence. This, according to Ogundipe, is undeniably why the fanatics among Islamic scholars, like Malam Abdul-Nur, capitalise on the ignorance of the almajiris to recruit them as willing elements for the propagation of fundamentalist ideology. He posits that Dantala's transformation from a street boy to Muezzin give a glaring picture of how difficult survival is for children of the lower class in Northern Nigeria. He corroborates Egbunu and Umar's submission that poverty contributes to the young ones' decision to survive by all odds, particularly the case of Dantala.

In his exploration of character formation and terrorism in *Born on a Tuesday*, Dedan Onyango depicts how the deployment of character formation serves as a technique to portray various terrorist tendencies. He applies psychoanalytical tool and New Historicism in his attempt to unravel what he terms as the subconscious undertones of religious fundamentalism (Onyango vii). He admits that his addition of New Historicist theory is to account for the material, as well as historical periods of the narrative. He avers that through characterization, the hidden intent of religious fanaticism bordering on extreme

thoughts, verbal utterances and actions are discovered to be responsible for terrorist activities encountered in the text. Onyango situates *Born on a Tuesday* as a coming-of-age narrative. The Bildungsroman approach enables one to have a glimpse of the development of the narrator, Dantala, and his experiences as he tries to find his way out of life challenges confronting him. He discloses that the characters of Sheikh Jamal and Malam Abdul-Nur play vital roles in the understanding of the indoctrination of their followers into religious fundamentalism. The point is that while the former symbolizes wisdom and moderation, the latter represents extremist voice. This evident in how Abdul-Nur uses his esteemed position and inciting utterances to cause serious havoc in society. To curtail the excesses of the fiery Abdul-Nur, Sheikh Jamal engages him in a debate on the core principles of Islam. Onyango describes the debate as representing the in-fight between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind (87). He buttresses the point that the unconscious is denoted by Malam Abdul-Nur's Id impulses which is harboured in his mind, while Sheikh Jamal expresses the super-ego. Jamal's humiliation of Abdul-Nur pushes the latter to hatch a secret plan that leads to the Islamic scholar's murder. His death, according the critic, exposes Dantala to the real, which Onyango interpreted as the world of the unknown as postulated by Lacan. The study indicates that character formation is essential in the understanding of a literary work as an expression of characters' unconscious and conscious motives.

The review of previous studies in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* reveals the different dimensions in which critics have looked at the text. While some are largely influenced by the lingering fundamentalist movements in Northern Nigerian as shown in the novel, others, like Ogundipe and Onyango interpret the work from the perspective of the rupture of the bond between neighbours as a result of ethnic and religious differences and the influence of character formation respectively. The studies create a lacuna in the dearth of reading the work in the light of child labour which the current research undertakes. Hence, the views of other critics, even though justified from their own angle, differ from the focus of the present study.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The evolutionary development of psychoanalytical theory can be traced to the works of Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century. His postulations on the theory are anchored on the discovery of the unconscious, which is a reservoir of emotions, thoughts and desires that are outside of a person's consciousness. The unconscious subtly has some impacts on an individual's personality and

experience, despite the person not being aware of the influence. It examines the state of mind of individual characters in a work of art. There are also various studies and postulations on psychoanalytic theory. For the sake of this research, Brandt Steele's aspect of psychoanalysis is adopted for this study.

Brandt Steele's submissions on psychoanalysis is in relation to child labour and its attendant trauma. This makes it relevant in the interpretation of *Born on a Tuesday*. Steele, an American psychiatrist, observes that children experience traumatic moments as a result of maltreatment by their superiors or caregivers. He opines that the abuse can be physical, emotional and sexual, as seen in the subjection of Dantala and the other almajiris to harsh conditions. According to Steele, "the idea of generational repetition of maltreatment was intriguing; parents were treating their children the way they had been treated" (1002). His argument is predicated upon the premise that the trend is more or less a cycle. Fundamentally, Steele's findings on the traumatic experiences of children subjected to child labour capture the sequence of events in *Born on a Tuesday*. Steele insists that most victims of child labour try to adopt the abuse as normal part of life, which often results in misfortune in their lives, as evident in the characters of Dantala and others. He notes that, essentially, such victims are usually abused by the very person(s) to whom they look up to for care and protection. It, therefore, poses a state of dilemma or conflict for which solution is inaccessible (1016). Steele's point is that it is not mainly the physical injuries that weigh the victims down, but the realization of the absence of protection and the sense of helplessness that flood their psyche when they know that the causers of their pains and misery are those who are supposed to shield them from harm. Steele is also of the view that "in addition to having low self-esteem and a negative body image, adult survivors of abuse have an unsure sense of identity or a very mixed-up integrated one" (1017). This, according him, pushes the victims to develop lack of trust and dislike against constituted authority. Hence, they exhibit high propensity toward aggression. He concludes that it gives room for juvenile delinquencies as a result of neglect.

The research toes a qualitative research methodology that is focused on the exploration of *Born on a Tuesday* from the perspective of child labour. Its interpretation follows the tenets of psychoanalysis, especially as it relates to trauma as a part of the effects of child abuse. Sources of data for the analysis, aside the primary text, include the library and the internet. In the course of intertextuality, references are made to texts with related critical orientations. This is because of the fact that comparison of works of literature in the event of criticism is informed by what Jonathan Culler refers to as "tradition" (1386). It

therefore becomes imperative to depict the narrative as being in dialogue with other texts. The analysis of the primary text is patterned to portray the exploitation and subjection of the young characters to harmful conditions. Additionally, it depicts the prevalent social and religious factors that contribute to the predicament of Dantala and the other children. Finally, the traumatic impacts of child labour are foregrounded to establish its negative influences on the victims. This justifies the events in the primary text as portraying the helplessness of children maltreated by higher authorities and the reason they engage in different kinds of social vices in their quest for survival.

Institutionalized Oppression and the Agony of Children in *Born on a Tuesday*

The major foundation of the abuse of children in the narrative is closely associated with the structural defects in social, religious and political circles. The Nigerian society as encountered in the text is patterned in a way that children of the lower-class families are perpetually oppressed. It is the failure of the trio of family, religion and politics that are shown as the people's greatest undoing. The family bears the primary responsibility of catering for the child. The inability of parents to provide for the children's upkeep usually culminates to series of crises in the lives of the children. Sometimes, the child is exposed to an avoidable harm because of parental irresponsibility. However, the vulnerable ones are oftentimes children from poor backgrounds. They are subjected to undesirable situations like in the case of Dantala. This destroys family bond between the parent and the child. Evidently, Dantala notes that when "Alfa ... told me that my father had died months earlier, I did not ask him what killed him because, Allah forgive me, I did not care much. It had been a very long time since I saw my father and he had not asked after me" (5). Obviously, Dantala's father never cared for him. And that is more reason, like other Almajiris, Dantala is faces homelessness and is abused. The boys are left with no option than to lay their heads wherever they can just to pass the night. According to the narrator, "they slept on cartons under the kuka tree and when it rained, they moved to the cement floor in front of Alhaji Mohammed's rice store, which has an extended zinc roof" (6). This is the kind of life facing Dantala, and he is privileged to make friends with Banda who is magnanimous enough to give him one of his flat cartons to sleep on. Coming from a poor family compounds Dantala's problems. He, and the other Almajiris have to struggle with the harsh realities around them in order to survive. Upon the completion of his Quranic training in Bayan Ladi, he decides to return to Sokoto to join his family. But he cannot afford the Three Hundred Naira transport fare. Instead, Malam Junaidu

gave him Seventy Naira. Consequently, he has to "... get a space in the back of the trucks which carry wood to Sokoto" (5). It is in the course of the bumpy journey to Sokoto that one of the trucks gets involved in an accident which claims the lives of some of the boys. According to Dantala, "Other lorries and buses stopped. The people from the village near the road also came out to help. When we had finally managed to remove all the planks, I couldn't recognize either of them. I cried, without tears in my eyes, until my chest hurt. They were both almajirai like I was" (15).

The horrific death of the boys, as well as Dantala's vulnerability to unimaginable harm corroborates Anindita Dutta's aversion that child labour "... was part of the gruesome system which snatched children of their childhood, health and even lives" (2). This is the fate of the poor children of low-income earners in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*. Dantala is not the only victim of child labour in his family. His brothers are also in the same system of begging in the story. He regrets that his "... father sent them -Maccido, Hassan, and Hussein-to become almajirai in an Islamic school in a place called Tasha Kanuri" (34). The boys are treated like animals in some cases. They are beaten at the slightest provocation, even on trivial issues. Dantala remembers "when in Bayan Layi, Malam Junaidu flogged a boy who couldn't remember his Quranic verses with his tyre whip and the boy threw up blood, was taken away and never came back" (55). Such is the fate of abused children who are being harassed by those who are supposed to be their source of succor. Sometimes, the children are subjected to inhuman treatment without any justifiable reason for their oppression. Dantala's description of Malam Abdul-Nur reveals the harsh condition of children under their religious tutors.

Weak political structures contribute to a very large extent to the menace of child labour in *Born on a Tuesday*. Those in the corridors of power try to maintain the gulf between and the poor ones so that the children of the lower class remain where they are. Therefore, they keep making them promises of things to better their lives if they help them win the election. According to Dantala, "the small party has promised we may even get one thousand naira per head if they win the elections. They will build a shelter for us homeless boys and those who can't return home or don't have parents, where we can learn things like making chairs and sewing caftans and making caps" (7). The children are used by the politicians for their selfish interest without proper plans to lift them out of their impoverishment. Part of the instances of child labour is denial of access to education. And obviously, the leaders are not concerned about it. Hence, the boys are exposed to danger when they are asked to attack the ruling

party. In one of the occasions during elections, the boys engage in killing spree, burning everything belonging to the Big Party. "Pour more, pour more,' Banda tells the boy. 'No, this is enough; we need it for other places. It is petrol not kerosene.'" (12). The action of the boys is an indication of where they are placed in society, showing how inconsequential their safety matters to the leaders. Significantly, the narrator's constant use of boy(s) when referring to some of the characters, while he addresses others, like Banda and Gobedanisa, by names points to some facts. First, some of them are under aged, and are still used for thuggery. Secondly, their identity does not matter. Perhaps, some are orphans and vagabonds without a place to call home. Dantala has hinted that part of the promise of the Small Party to them is to provide shelter for the homeless and orphans among them (6). They are meant to continue in this manner until they meet a fatal end or grow into men, probably have their own 'family' and continue to propagate the cycle of almajirai. Coincidentally, Brandt Steele has stressed the possibility of generational repetition of maltreatment of children – a situation where parents attempt to treat their wards the way they had been treated (1002). Ultimately, the question of child labour *Born on a Tuesday* is projected as a systemic one. It is apparently a trend that is encouraged by important institutions like the family, religion and politics. This depicts the structural oppression of the lower echelon, particularly the almajirai class who are kept under perpetual servitude and agony.

Exploitation and Juvenile Delinquency in *Born on a Tuesday*

This paper captures different shades of exploitation of children and its attendant criminality. It follows the experiences of Dantala and other Almajirai in a typical Northern Nigerian society. It portrays how the political and religious leaders exploit the ordinary people, especially the children, for their own selfish gain. Parts of the consequences are the children's exposure to violence, crime and physical harm. The beginning of the text opens with images of neglect and the propensity to violence. The narrator states that "the boys who sleep under the kuka tree in Bayan Layi like to boast about the people they have killed" (1). The above statement depicts the children as victims of societal failures. They are described as homeless rascals and prone to violence. They are shown as sheep without a shepherd. Therefore, their vulnerability is taken advantage of by the leaders who resort to using the boys to achieve their evil agenda. During the period of elections, for instance, these boys exploited and exposed to danger. The politicians buy them off as thugs just to cause mayhem in society. Dantala says that he "... likes the rallies. The men from the Small Party trust

Banda and they give him money to organise boys from Bayan Layi for them. Sometimes we get as much as one hundred fifty naira depending on who it is or which rally. We also get a lot to drink and eat" (4). They have been brainwashed to believe that their suffering is directly caused by the Big Party in power. Therefore, the Small Party, with its ethnic agenda has decided to use the children to plant chaos in the land. The leaders know that some of the boys are under age children, but they manipulate the system to get registered as eligible voters. Dantala reveals that "since the recent voter registration I have been saying I am nineteen, even though I have to fold the sleeves of the old caftan Banda gave me. The men in the Small Party asked us to say so and gave us all one hundred naira to register and even though the people registering us complained, they registered us anyway. (6) The leaders are complicit to the children's woes. They deliberately keep them down so they can always exploit them. Poverty and hunger happen to be the major instruments used by those in privileged positions to subjugate the poor masses, especially the small boys. They are impoverished to the extent that every little offer makes them loyal supporters of the opposition party. Even Dantala confessed that "he has not seen notes like the ones given to Banda in a long time" (8). Additionally, the religious leaders are also used as tools to exploit the children. The mosque is manipulated to serve as an avenue to gain access to the boys. Dantala makes it known that "after prayers we will gather all the boys behind the mosque and give them one hundred fifty each. Then we wait. The party men will tell us what to do. Those who have their voters' cards will get an extra two hundred naira and I will collect all the cards and take them to their office" (8). It is through Banda that Dantala realizes the folly of trusting the promises of the politicians. Apparently, the promise of change in the lives of the people is only meant to win their hearts and cajole them into supporting the small party to win the election. When Dantala asks Banda if the party would build them shelter as pledged, the latter's response exposes the reception that characterize the system of politicking in the country. According to him, "I don't like to think of that; all I want is that they pay every time they ask us to work for them. After the election, where will you see them?" (9). The boys are left to wallow in their misery. The work they are paid for as Banda puts it is to cause violence by destroying everything about the Big Party, and attacking Southerners because they believe to be kin to the incumbent president. As willing tools in the hands of the Small Party leaders, Dantala and his colleagues have to accomplish the task they are paid for a night before the election. In the words of the narrative voice "this is the moment we have all paid for. I had hoped all this would end

last night. Unlike the other boys, I am not used to this breaking and burning business. Under the kuka tree, nothing is complete without some fire and broken glass. These Southerners can't cheat us, after all we are in the majority" (9-10). This quotation is a pointer to the situation around the boys in Bayan Layi, representing the condition of children elsewhere in Northern Nigeria as evident in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*. Because the children lack basic care and are subjected to undesirable realities, they resort to crime in their bid to survive. Dantala posits that "We are not terrible people. When we fight, it is because we have to. When we break into shops in Sabon Gari, it is because we are hungry, and when someone dies, well that is Allah's will" (9). This shows that the children's actions are not innate. They are more or less victims of circumstances. However, Dantala's attribution of deaths among the people to God's will is an indication of misguided religious indoctrination. Their problems are directly caused by leadership failures and the collapse of basic institutions.

Additionally, Dantala's experiences in Sokoto talks more about the exploitation of children (particularly the Almajirai) by the ruling class. It is clearly a deliberate effort to subject the innocent children to whims and caprices of the leaders who only use them for personal interests, especially during elections. The likes Alhaji Usman falls into this category. He only brings food to share among the hungry children in the mosque because of what will gain from his deceptive generosity in the long run. Narrating his experiences in one of such occasions, Dantala says:

I walk out to where the food is being shared and I see some men offloading sacks from behind a black jeep. The food is in small, disposable paper packs. Joining the rush to reach for food, I knock down a little boy. The man who dropped the sacks is shouting, asking us to wait, to calm down because there is enough to go round. No one is listening to him; no one wants to take a chance. Some people are taking as many as three packs. I am able to get two before people empty the sacks. The man was wrong. There is not enough to go round and many are left without. (20)

The mental pictures of poverty, hunger and starvation among the children is an indictment to their parents and the government. These children have no hope of a better future, because as almajirai, they are fated to end up as beggars. In Dantala's case, he appears to have been forgotten by his family that no one cares about his welfare. His existence lies in sheer luck. This is why his encounter with different persons influence his fortune at a given time. His life

practically begins to take a new turn upon meeting Sheik Jamal, unlike his former Quranic teacher – Malam Junaidu. Dantala reaffirms that “Sheik is kind. He is different from Malam Junaidu in Bayan Layi, who made us beg even after working on his maize farm. Working on a farm during planting and harvest season is better than standing by the road, chasing after cars having people turn away from you like you are a huge mound of shit” (47). The quoted excerpt depicts the reality of harsh condition confronting the almajirai. It further projects child labour as a difficult challenge to the people of Northern extraction. The narrative is part of the African experiences as captured in some contemporary African literature like Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of no Nation* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition*.

Dantala's Memories and Traumatic Experiences

Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* is not just a coming-of-age narrative about Dantala, it also captures the mental introspection of the chief character and his struggle to survive the ugly realities of life. Dantala, as well as other Almajirai, is severely abused as a child that he lacks the mental organization to give a chronological account of his experiences. He has hinted on Banda's dissatisfaction with his inability to recount past experiences; He says "I don't know how to tell a story, that I just talk without direction, like the harmattan wind that just blows and blows, scattering dust. Me, I just like to say it as I remember it. And sometimes u have to explain the story. Sometimes the explanation lies in many stories" (2). This is a corroboration to subsequent account of the checkered story of his life, his abuse and near-death experiences. Dantala passes through a lot of traumatic moments as he tries to battle some existential circumstances. His dream is to find meaning in life and live a decent life. His encounter with the kuka tree boys compounds his woes as he is faced with pains of learning under Malam Junaidu and surviving among the boys in Bayan Layi. Life with the kuka tree lads teaches him a bitter lesson as one has to fight in a bid to survive. His fight with Alfa shows the precarious nature living in the midst of such rascals as the kuka tree boys. It is a memorable experience in his life. He recounts that “that day, I cried like I had never cried before. I followed Banda he gave me the first wee-wee I smoked. It felt good. My legs became light and after a while I felt them disappear, I was floating, my eyes were heavy and I felt bigger and stronger than Banda and Gobedanisa and all the boys under the kuka tree” (5). Smoking, among the boys, is common. The older ones take advantage of the naivety of the likes of Dantala to subject to additional abuse. Dantala is emotionally and physically battered, especially on

his arrival in Sokoto, after the motor accident that claims the lives of two boys in the lorry. The picture of the gory death of the young lads tortures him for the rest of his life. In his words, "my head is pounding and my bruises are getting sore. My whole body is trembling like when I was thinking bad thoughts towards Allah in the lorry. ... I think that I did not die in the lorry because I quickly realised my sin and said *astaghfirullah* many times" (16). He takes solace in his superstitious belief that everything that happens is the will of God. It is in his character to attribute people's actions and its consequences to Allah's decision. Consequently, he is obsessed with the thought that Allah watches everything he does. Therefore, he feels his presence around him all the time. "It feels like he hears my whisper, and answers. I can feel his greatness this morning and I am feeling sorry, for the first time, for all I have done. For smoking wee-wee. For breaking into shops with the kuka tree boys" (23). His acknowledgement of God's supremacy and inclination to uphold divine teachings influence the choices he makes. Dantala contends with the pain of losing his father and watching his mother helplessly turn into a vegetable. He grapples with the hollowness of a hermit, having no one to lean on. His regret is that "it feels strange not having a father and having a mother who can't talk to you; it makes me feel alone and cold like standing without clothes in the rain. When I want to scream and cry, I hear Sheikh Jamal's voice in my head: Allah knows why. Allah knows why" (47). His strong belief that God is not unaware of everything that happens becomes his only consolation.

Haunted by vagaries of existential struggles, Dantala tries to balance the memories of his various encounters with people as life tosses him up and down. It is not just about the things that happen to him directly. Sometimes he is struck by the pains of others, especially children, around him suffer. He reminisces his childhood experiences with his siblings and the agonies of some lads under the tutelage of the strict Malam Junaidu. He notes that:

Many memories float in my head. Memories of when all my family was still in one house in Dogon Icce. When Maccido used to pinch me and I would cry and nobody believes when I say what he did. ... When in Bayan Layi, Malam Junaidu flogged a boy who couldn't remember his Quranic verses and the boy threw up blood, was taken away and never came back. The memories dance around in my head like my image dances around when I look at myself in a pool of water that isn't still. (55-56)

The metaphor of the moving water with his image re-emphasizes Dantala's tortuous journey as he faces life challenges. The mental introspection reenacts the tone of the speaker in Fidelis Okoro's "The River Flows." Despite his ordeals, the world/life, as represented by the water, remains in constant motion. Different incidents in Dantala's past often re-engage his thoughts as he tries to remember everything that has taken place in his life. His encounter with Jibril in Sokoto also has its own tales of pain. Jibril is constantly beaten by his wicked uncle – Malam Abdul-Nur. Usually, Dantala is portrayed as the bearing the pains suffered by those around. The torture often leaves him in tears and sorrows. For insurance, when the book with the picture of a naked woman is found in their room, he lies that it belongs to Jibril. The incident earns Jibril a severe beating from Malam Abdul-Nur. As usual Abdul-Nur calls him into his office. Dantala recounts that "when Jibril came in afterwards, he took off his shirt. ... When he turned and I saw the new wounds on his back, tears began to roll down my eyes. All through the night, I could not stop tears from coming from my eyes" (65).

Similarly, Dantala's memories of his dead mother and brother torment him. What pains him more are the circumstances surrounding their fatal end. Apart from his mother who is hit with a strange sickness, his deceased brother happens to be a jihadist. They have traveled to Lebanon on a special sect training. While Maccido and Hussein try to conceal how their brother – Hassan, died in Iran, Dantala is suspicious that it might not be unrelated to religious extremism. The sad news breaks him down, and he laments, thus: "For the first time since Shuaibu told me Umma was dead, I feel that pain in the nose that comes before tears. I cry for the brother that I did not know. ... My head is spinning as I think of the many things that could have happened, why they were in Lebanon and what made Hussein mention Iran" (81). The reference to Iran strengthens his conviction about Hassan's circumstantial death.

Notwithstanding the joyful transformation his encounter with Sheikh Jamal has brought into his life, circumstances beyond his control make things worse. Things begin to fall apart following Malam Abdul-Nur's grand conspiracy against Sheikh Jamal. The text is a depiction of the narrator's traumatic experiences as he transforms from one stage of life to another. The mental agony he passes through is an indication of the trauma he is subjected to as an almajiri and eventually an orphan. The work is a justification of Julie Agbasiere's position that "literature was conceived to be functional and writers have ever since then strived to make their works useful to society" (71). Its usefulness lies in the thematic projection of child labour as part of the social problems confronting the Nigerian society, which is evident in the narrative.

Conclusion

Child labour has become an evolving discourse in literary studies. Its emergence is due to the depiction of abused children in art works. The trend follows contemporary issues which are part of human experiences as captured in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*. The phenomenon portrays children who are subjected to harsh and debilitating conditions that inhibit their growth and development. This is evident in the characters of Dantala and other Almajirai in the text. The inability of their parents to cater for them expose them to serious harm as they depend on alms from the public, especially unscrupulous politicians who use them to perpetuate violence during elections. Additionally, they are maltreated by some of their Islamic teachers, like Malam Junaidu and Malam Abdul-Nur. The conditions the children find themselves in constitute child abuse as they are denied formal education and access to the basic necessities of life. This research justifies that child labour is a discourse perspective in *Born on a Tuesday*. The evidence of such interpretation is manifested in the maltreatment of Dantala and other Almajirai in the novel. The point is that their vulnerability to danger is orchestrated by inadequate provision of the children's basic needs; thereby reducing their chances of harnessing their potential for a promising future. They become prone to rascality and juvenile delinquency. This study projects the text as a viable tool for a discursive analysis in the light of child labour. As a source of endless interpretations, the narrative can be read in other dimensions, depending on how it grasps the gaze of a critic.

Works Cited

- Agbasiere, Julie. "African Literature and Social Commitment." Major Themes in African Literature, ed., by Damian U. Opata and Aloysius U. Ohaegbu, AP Express Pub., 2000, pp. 71-83.
- Dauda, Susan. "Ending Religious Extremism in Northern Nigeria: A Study of Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*." Nile Journal of English Studies, vol. 3, December 2016, pp. 16-20. NileJES, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20321/NileJES.v2i3.97>.
- Dutta, Anindita. "Children in Dickens Novels." *International Journal in English Language and Literature*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2014, pp. 1-4. www.arcjournals.org.
- Egbunu, D. and Aisha Umar. "Surviving Trauma Through Perseverance in Crises Situations: Exploring Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 8, Issue 5, May 2018, pp. 537-541. <http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP,8.5.2018.p7768>.
- Habib, Rafey *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.
- Hassouna, Mohammed. "Religious Fanaticism in North Nigeria: Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*." *Hermes Journals*, vol. 7, no. 3, July 2018, pp. 257-288. <https://doi.org/10.21608/herms.2018.71681>.
- International Labour Organization. "What is Child Labour?" 2020. www.ilo.org.
- John, Elnathan. *Born on a Tuesday*. Black Cat, 2015.
- Liam, Paul. "Materialism and Stereotype in *Born on a Tuesday*." *African Writers Magazine*, 19 December 2019. www.africanwriter.com.
- Ogundipe, Stephen. "Conceiving Neighbourhood in Northern Nigerian Fiction." *UTAFITI*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 133-153.
- Onyango, Dedan. "Character Formation and Terrorism in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* and Obinna Udenwe's *Satans and Shaitans*. MA Thesis, Dept. of Literature Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University, 2019.
- Steele, Brandt. "Psychoanalysis and the Maltreatment of Children." *American Psychological Association*, December 18 1992, pp. 1001-1025.