X-raying Insecurity in Nigeria in Selected Short Stories from Sumaila Umaisha's *Hoodlums*

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Abstract

Insecurity, the state of being exposed to danger, harm, injury, risk or anxiety, is a global phenomena. Precisely, terrorism, rape, kidnapping and the likes constitute some of the major inhibiting factors to global peace and human development. Hence, Governments at all levels, religious bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations, and Civil Societies, have continued to engage various approaches and mechanisms over time to tackle this menace. In this context, the imaginative arts are not left out in the process of restoring global sanity and peaceful coexistence. In light of the above, this paper explores how Sumaila Umaisha interrogates incidents of insecurity like terrorism, rape and kidnapping in Nigeria in *Hoodlums*. It also identifies and contextualises the remote and immediate factors that have given birth to the incessant crises in the Niger Delta, and the various religious and ethnic clashes around the country to foreground how characters who are trapped in these violence and the psychological as well as the emotional trauma that become their lot. The paper concludes that through the use of imagery and symbolism, Sumaila Umaisha creates a narrative space for genuine representation of the menace of insecurity in Nigeria through imaginative arts.

Introduction

The essence of this paper is to x-ray how the imaginative arts are a tool for combating insecurity with instances from selected stories from Sumaila Umaisha's *Hoodlums*. It is a given that one of the major banes of humanity in contemporary times is insecurity. To be secured is to be safe, free from and not exposed to harm. It is the state when the individual or a society is dependable, assured, free from anxiety. Arising from this notion, insecurity will then imply the opposite of security. It is the state of being exposed to danger, harm, injury, risk or anxiety, and so on. As a global phenomenon, insecurity permeates the entire human gamut including jobs, food, politics, economy, finance, social, demographic, gender or sexual, health, environmental, relationship, religion and morals.

In Nigeria, major causes of insecurity are unemployment, lopsided development, corruption, weak judicial system, nepotism, and lack of proper manning of coastal borders, among others. The implication of this is the quest by the ordinary citizen to seek protection by using alternative and illegal routes to acquire wealth, fame and material satisfaction. This has in turn birthed terrorism, rape, kidnapping and the likes which constitute some of the major inhibiting factors to global peace and human development in contemporary times.

The effects of insecurity are most severe among children, women, the aged and other vulnerable groups. The victim of any form of terror arising from insecurity is often sorrowful, gripped in fear,
traumatised and psychologically tortured. In Nigeria, the tripartite evil of terrorism, rape, kidnapping and other organised crimes have become a clog in the wheel of national progress, family and community peace. Hence, millions of parents have had to live "through the traumatic period of desperate expectation and suffocating suspense" (xi) because their children were kidnapped; or witnessed the devastation, humiliation and agonising scenes of the evil of rape on them.

Insecurity is ostensibly the foundation of ethnic conflicts, especially in Nigeria. Closely related to this is the so called minority versus majority dichotomy which places some ethnic groups at economic and political advantages over others. The militancy and oil bunkering that have become the norm and threaten the peace in the Niger Delta are also by-products of insecurity. In recent times, there have been clashes between Fulani and communities across Nigeria.

On the question of ethnic upheavals arising from insecurity and the subduing of some ethnic groups by others, Suberu refers to an editorial from *The Guardian* (February 9, 1993) on the Zangon Kataf riots as follows:

> Throughout the country...ethnic minorities are in ferment. They are striving to shake off age-long usurpations, to cast off the yoke of distant suzerians and to take their own destinies in their own hands. This ferment, which this nation can ignore only at its peril, is what has been subsumed under the national question. It is real, and it is urgent. To pretend that it does not exist is to be deluded (vi).

The above view is apt in understanding the tension of ethnicity and the extent it has or could go to determining peaceful co-existence in the country. It follows that the ongoing debate on the national question which has led to suggestions on the restructuring of the country by reducing the number of States to six according to the geopolitical zones, or creating more States and Local Governments Areas is also a by-product of insecurity. This view is corroborated by Suberu also averse that: "a key feature of recent Nigerian politics is strident agitation by ethnic minority communities, and other presumably disadvantaged groups, over what is now widely referred to as the "national question" (1).

Suberu's comments were made more than two decades ago, hence, an indication that ethnic agitation has been a recurring decimal in the Nigerian historical space. This is more so that the author further submits that "ethnic conflicts have long been recognized as one of the more fundamental threats to institutional stability, political order and state cohesion in the multi-ethnic societies of the Third World" (4). Such tension has led to the formation of socio-cultural groups with ethnic colourations. Okebukola supports this view when he says that,

> in the last two decades, the West African sub-region has been plagued by intra-state conflicts, Ethnic and religious clashes were common in most countries in the sub- region, with some escalating to full scale civil war...bringing with it death, destruction and despair to the citizenry (qtd. in Best vii).
As a panacea to these plethora of problems, Governments at all level, religious bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations, Civil Societies, the military, and peace groups have continued to engage various approaches and mechanisms over time to tackle the menace. The creative arts is not left out in this process of restoring global sanity and peaceful coexistence. Thus, Sumaila Umaisha's short stories in Hoodlums interrogate incidents of insecurity like terrorism, rape and kidnapping in Nigeria. The stories focus on the kind of violence perpetrated in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and elsewhere paying attention to the trauma and psychological effects on the characters. The collection reveals, among others, that individuals or groups exposed to insecurity are often left bewildered and perplexed.

**Commitment in the African Imaginative Arts**

Commitment has been seen by Adereth as a situation where the artist “becomes aware that the real nature of his art is to focus attention on an aspect of reality and thus, invariably pass judgment” (qtd. in Egede 45). This is in concordance with Achebe’s view on genuine commitment in arts. He argues that true or genuine commitment is:

> ... a sense of obligation or a strong attachment to a cause. When we speak of a writer’s commitment we mean his attachment to a particular social aims (sic) and the use of his writing to advance these social aims. This, of course, implies a belief that literature can and should be used as a force for social change, and a writer has a responsibility to do so (qtd. in Gbileka’a 51).

African imaginative art over the years has become a useful tool for the portrayal and actualisation of the African dream of liberation, celebration of cultures and the actualisation of a friendly landscape as well as the projection of the African worldview in general. Through these arts, people become conscious of the happenings within their localities. Therefore, by engaging arts with certain tasks, African artists have therefore ensured that the cultures, politics, economics, social and religious life of the people which together constitute their historical process, are captured in such works. Ker affirms that “our literature is the fullest record which we have of our aspirations, our analysis of our mistakes and how we have faced them” (32).

A people's imaginative or creative art, therefore, must be “…part of a social situation and must be approached primarily as a mode of collective belief and action” (Nnolim 1). It must be, in the words of Emenyonu, “an imaginative creation of a people’s account of their social, cultural, political and economic perspectives at a given time and place” (qtd. in Nnolim viii). In furtherance of this role of African art, Chinweizu et al. submit that:

> African literature [arts] and its criticism should not be divorced from the masses, that the language should be within the ken of the average reader that the subject matter should deal with every life and realities of the people and that our literatures should not divorce themselves from the participatory nature of earlier orature (qtd. in Nnolim 29).
In other words, the concern or preoccupation of African creative art is social realism or what Achebe labels “the burning issues of the day” (qtd. in Ngugi 7), which Chinweizu et al. tag “political engagement in literature” (254). Wa Thiong’o elaborates on this concern thus:

All art aims to evoke; to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition. But the evocation of man’s active will requires more than either mere expressions of feelings, striking mimesis of reality, or pleasing construction of word, tone or line: it presupposes forces beyond those of feeling and form which assert themselves simultaneously and in harmony with emotional forces, fundamentally different from them (7).

Obiechina’s observation gives a class dimension to the literature. He states that the Nigerian creative artist,

…should have a special allegiance to the down trodden in the Nigerian society, to the socially handicapped, to the women, the sick; all those who are not able to fight their own battles. The writer should put on his armour and charge into battle in defense of the defenceless. It is my view that the writer in Nigeria of today has to take his position against the oppression of the people, all forms of brutalities, all unwarranted violence against the masses (qtd. in Nnolim 223).

The commitment of the African creative writer must imply emphasis on the political life and landscape of the continent evoking images that clearly portray the worldview of African people and their relationship with themselves and the outside world. African creative arts must show a way out of the socio-economic, political quagmire, and the general insecurity created by the way the continent has been structured.

It is committed to evaluating African peoples and reflects the “characteristics and the dynamic imperatives of the African experience” (Nnolim 86). It is an art committed to the African aesthetics, that is, “the theories and unspoken imperatives that govern the literary creations of modern African writers—imperatives that could be pinpointed as certain constants that are decipherable as recognizable features of African literature” (86).

This aspect of the discourse which is brought to a head with the views of Chinweizu et al. and Sanchez suggest the need for commitment among African creative artists and in African art. Chinweizu et al. state succinctly that “the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assumes a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writing….Because in Africa we recognize that art is in the public domain, a sense of social commitment is mandatory upon the artist” (252).

The imaginative writing of Sumaila Umaisha in the short stories is reviewed on these premises, and in accordance with Sanchez’s own submission that “every society gets the art it deserves both because of the art it favours and because artists create art in relation to the kind of relation they have with society” (112). The short stories selected for analysis show sufficient public concerns
and relate to the Nigerian experience. As the conscience of society, the author focuses mostly on the plight of ordinary citizens caught up in a society dominated by variegated security challenges. This role is collaborative of the engagements and various approaches and mechanisms by Governments at all level, religious bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations, and Civil Societies to tackle the menace of insecurity.

**Incidents of Insecurity in *Hoodlums***

*Hoodlums* is a collection of seventeen stories drawn from different themes. Of this number, "The Militants", "After the Riot", "The Hoodlums", "The Honourable Minister", "The Godfather", and "Road Block" are analysed. Majorly, the entire collection, but particularly the selected stories, reflect and represent the physical, psychological, and emotional conflicts that are the norm in Nigeria. Related to the above is thuggery, militarisation, witchcraft, prostitution, and drug addiction. From a broader viewpoint, politics, economy, religion, material possession, and cultural differences are foregrounded in the stories. Arising from these topical issues, Umaisha symbolically delineates his characters in context. As Shehu observes in a blurb comment, these characters lament and wail "through our consciousness" (qtd. in Umisha, blurb) as we read the stories. Their lamentations and wailings depict the predicament of insecurity which exposes them to various levels of violence and danger.

"The Militants" is the first story of the collection and it immediately sets the tone for the rest. Set in contemporary Niger Delta, the story depicts the psychological and emotional trauma of the child who is caught up in the firm grip of militancy. The protagonist's feelings of fear, anxiety, and resignation are compelling as a schoolchild who is trapped in the midst of a deadly attack. Having escaped from an earlier attack, Tene runs to the embrace of her mother, but just before that, a second bomb goes off killing the mother and shattering her dreams:

> Mummy was running fast. She spread out her arms when she saw Tene. The little girl also spread out her arms, running towards her as fast as she could. But just before she got to Mummy, another explosion went off close by and something she could not see lifted Mummy high and smashed her on the ground (Umaisha 3).

Also, central to this story is the negative impact of terrorism and kidnapping. On the one hand, the violent dispositions are reactionary and rebellious against economic and other forms of injustice as well as the social order. The agitators feel short-changed, insecure, and alienated in their own landscape. This feeling, on the other hand, leads to reaction which comes with destruction and further violence. And in the midst of this violence, the agitator, the government, and innocent civilians become victims as portrayed in the following excerpt:
The massive deployment of soldiers to the oil-rich region followed a bloody encounter in a bid to rescue a group of five soldiers kidnapped by members of the Niger Delta Liberation Movement...After a fierce, week-long battle, three of the soldiers were rescued while the other two were killed...Many civilians also lost their lives in the crossfire (1-2).

The psychological trauma of "The Militants" is presented more graphically in "After the Riot". The story foregrounds a typical situation after a riot or any form of violence. The story describes the anxiety, desperation and hallucinations of Zabi whose family and possessions are consumed in a riot. Akin to a typical northern Nigerian situation, the story deals with "the difference", ostensibly of religion or politics that are typical of Nigeria and elsewhere. The opening of "After the Riot" typifies the cocoon of a riot scene: "Zabi ran to the other side of the market and turned left. He leaped over baskets of vegetables, over sacks of grains, heaps of fruits, and swept through a narrow passage between rows of meat shop" (4). The killings and maiming destroy the survival of the moment and disrupt the hope of the future. The hoodlums or rioters target the sane; "those who still had a future" (5). They kill and set ablaze those on the other side, after all it is about "the difference".

In the midst of this confusion, the sub-conscious thoughts of the individual are revealed. Like any victim of a riot, Zabi is full of despair, hopelessness and is alienated. His hope of seeing his wife and children leads him to hallucinate, day-dream, and soliloquise. His state of mind is aptly presented thus: "He rushed the remaining distance between him and the 'woman in red', who was in reality a man in black safari" (7).

The role of the media in a Third-World nation and the bitter experience of journalism are foregrounded in "The Hoodlums", the title story. The story is an indictment for the government for suppressing the freedom of expression on the one hand, and lack of professionalism on the part of the journalists on the other. The mention of places like Rigasa, Kakuri, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and reference to riot incidents in Kaduna, among others, establishes the context of the story. Furthermore, the story is an indictment on the society for forbidding inter-religious marriage, the choice of career for children by the parents, and the loss of family values.

The reason for the riot in "After the Riot" is "the difference", which could only be inferred. However, in "The Hoodlums", the reason and nature of the riot is overtly religious differences. Every individual has a role to play for the well-being of society. Bad situations could get worse if they are not properly handled. Hence, the reportage by Ben, the protagonist and a journalist, and Muhammed Sadiq, his editor, on the riots incised more riots than stop them. Thus, the burner headlines: "Kaduna Riot: 500 People Slaughtered", "Kaduna Boils", are few instances in this regard. The police Inspector reveals this as follows:

But let me tell you, Mr. Journalist..."You and your editor and all the other journalists who help to escalate this crisis by sensational reporting are no better than them. They are all hoodlums and they will be treated as such (20).
The role of the police and other security agents in the country is also called to question. This is brought to bear by the arrest of Ben and taking him to Rigasa, while Muhammed Sadiq is taken to Kakuri, where, of course, it is a given that in the present reality in Kaduna, they would not be safe. This is how the situation is presented:

The van branched to the main road leading to Kakuri, the Christian-controlled area, as it was now referred to. It was one of the most deadly spots. The death toll so far in the area could be compared only to that of Rigasa, the Muslim-controlled area..."Then he grabbed the editor and shoved him out of the van. The van reversed quickly and drove off..."To Rigasa!" the Inspector ordered the driver" (22, 24).

"The Hoodlums" is therefore a lampoon on those who should be the conscience of society but who have failed in their responsibility. It suggests further that in a riot situation one is both majority and minority. Hence, Muhammed Sadiq, who is safe in Rigasa, a Muslim dominated area, is condemned to death in Kakuri, a Christian area, so is Ben if the situation is reversed.

Corruption, violence, election racketeering, godfatherism, pride, misrepresentation, extortion, deceit, greed and thirst for power dominate "The Honourable Minister", "The Godfather", "Road Block" and "Do or Die" respectively. Precisely, "The Honourable Minister" is a satire on the political hypocrisy and folly of Nigeria. It is a reaction to the often failed but applauded projects and policies of governments at all level. Political leadership no longer has direct bearing on the yearnings of the masses.

Set in contemporary Nigeria, the story centres on corruption, embedded in blazing siren and terror, which is the insignia of the political class. An excerpt from the story corroborates this: "Who says to be a minister is a small thing", ... what is a masquerade without the mask? Without thunder and lightning, how can the mortal appreciate what goes into rain making?" (91). Thus, the siren with which the public is terrorised is the mask the politician needs while the image of the mortal refers to the citizens.

Another vital concern of the story is the evasion of reality and fake projection of the business of governance: "Sir, this lingering industrial crisis between the Academic Staff Union of Universities and..." "What about it?" The Minister was visibly running out of patience" (93-94). Closely related to the revelation of decay and squalor is the interactive session with the Minister who picks issues with questions raised and makes fake promises to further buttress the real character and intent of the typical Nigerian politician.

"The Godfather" centres on Chief (Dr.) Odaudu Okpetu alias Godfather. He is so nicknamed "because his uncanny ability to manipulate people into and out of power in accordance with his whims and caprices" (66). Set in Gold City, the story represents Odaudu as the typical godfather, and a proud political billionaire. It is a given to have godfathers nominate people for appointment into political offices by their political godsons. And failure to do so will ordinarily lead to the clash of interests. This informs the conflict of the story. It is about power and influence, affluence,
corruption and political manoeuvring. It does not exclude political thuggery and assassination which eventually become the lot of Chief in the end.

"Road Block" takes us to the ordeals that travellers face in Nigeria. Road blocks by the police are meant to provide more security by checking vehicles to detect weapons and unsanctioned goods. However, some security agents use that avenue to earn more money from the sweats of innocent travellers. The menace has degenerated to the level of extortion, corruption and deceit as well as threat to life. This is the ordeal that Habila, alias Well-Meaning Nigerian goes through in the hands of the police as a transporter. Armed robbers also take advantage of the road blocks to perpetrate evil. The situation is presented thus:

He fished out a twenty naira note from his pocket and, keeping it away from the passengers' eyes, cut it remaining half ready to bribe the police.

Some distance to the queue, however, he sighted the real danger. But before he could slow down and make a quick U-turn it was too late.

"COMEOUTANDLIEDOWNFLAT!" one of the armed robbers ordered (108).

"Do or Die" re-echoes the political philosophy of the Third-Word where sit-tight and must-win mentalities are the driven forces of the system. For this to happen, money, blood, violence and other forms of evil are involved. This is why Senator Abu Dambo, the protagonist of the story warns Saleh, alias Kill-and-Go that "Wallahitallah, if I don't win this election I will kill you!" (109), as he hands over money to him. And for Kill-and-Go, there is no need for Dambo to be worried: "As far as this election is concerned, you are the winner...", "You have won..", "I swear...", "May thunder fire strike me dead if I fail to deliver" (109).

The must-win mentality has been the reason for rigging in elections across Africa. It is also a major temptation to the judicial system because after winning the candidate has to follow-up to consolidate on the victory. This is the case between Senator Dambo and Aalhaji Hamza in the story. Thus, having lost at the polls and at the tribunal to Senator Dambo, and realising how important Kill-and-Go is to winning elections, Alhaji Hamza grabs the opportunity to use him to eliminate Senator Dambo:

As the drug gradually gripped him, his deep-set eyes turning bloodshot, he saw the image of the two million naira cash Alhaji Hamza had just given him. A few minutes later, when he sensed that none of the hotel staff was in sight, he staggered out of the car and headed for the room. He got to the door just when the Senator Dambo was about to come out. "Get back in, you son-of-a-bitch" He pushed him back into the room, closed and secured the door (113-114).

Conclusion
The notion that the creative artist "must present a fully realized body of life and create realistic characters and situations"; and that the world presented in a work of art "should seem a reflection of normal human activity..." (Palmer 3-4) has not been overlooked by Umaisha in Hoodlums. The
qualities and technicalities which define the short story genre are also applicable in the collection. Suffice it to say that suspense, flash back, soliloquy, irony and omniscient narration are a few out of a plethora of techniques the author has used to drive his message home. Furthermore, from the foregoing analysis of the selected short stories, the grim realities of life in Nigeria are represented in a manner akin to creative ingenuity. Incidents and actions are presented graphically in a lucid and compelling language. The collapse of the political structure, economic system, religious morals, cultural values, the quest for wealth and the failure of leadership are presented as the roots of injustice and evil bedevilling the country. These lacunars have created insecurity and birthed corruption and all sorts of violence such as thuggery, rigging and other electoral offences, immorality, kidnapping, trafficking in persons, riots, armed robbery, godfatherism, extortion, deceit, assassination, and in short, all that is wrong with the country. Hence, characters are carefully delineated as either symbols of the violence or as casualties.

It is the submission of this paper that Umaisha in the stories analysed x-rays the image of a landscape akin to Nigeria, an image fitting for any Third-World nation. That incidents of insecurity have been established from the exploration of the stories. In addition, the role of the writer is to keep faith with society. Thus, in these stories, Umaisha, by using art to create a consciousness about insecurity, indicts, rebukes and ridicules the conscience of those whose responsibility it is to secure the country. He has raised a moral question and bequeathed same to the political leadership of the country. The overall implication of this is that the creative writer has taken a stand against the present state of society and calls for a change of attitude and mindset for a better one.

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