

**The city as a destroyer of dreams in Cyprian Ekwensi's
*Jagua Nana: a study in the meaninglessness of life***

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ABSTRACT: *Jagua Nana* is peopled with characters who have left their different villages to the city of Lagos to eke out a living with the belief that life is rosier, easier and more relaxed in the city. In the city, however, these characters find that contrary to their belief, the city devours her inhabitants. These characters, therefore, resort to all kinds of means to survive. Our aim in this essay, therefore, is to show that Ekwensi 's characters commit murder, steal and prostitute in order to make meaning out of an apparently meaningless city life.

Introduction

Jagua Nana is the story of Jagua Nana Obi, Rosa, Dennis, Uncle Taiwo, /Freddie, Sabina, the taxi-driver, Bintu, people who have left their CX different villages - a symbol of “poverty, ignorance and psychic starvation” (July 240), to come to the city to make meaning out of their seemingly empty lives. Back in their villages, the lack of infrastructure like electricity, pipe-bome-water, good roads, hospitals, schools and lack of employment opportunities make life unpleasant for the characters. Day in and day out, they hear, through visitors and fellow villagers who live in the city and visit the villages from time to time, how life in the city is one smooth ride. They want “... adventure, because adventure makes life interesting” and is one of the means “of winning success in the complete life of today” (Greenlaw, et al 3-4). This quest by the characters to make a better life for themselves makes them migrate to the city. For:

...with western civilization... the ways of life and the values of the people began to change. People began to desert their rural communities for the new urban centres where there were jobs, various forms of entertainment and excitement. From their distant homes in the rural communities, they had heard stories about the cities... [which] were described as places 'flowing with milk and honey'. Therefore, many young men and women were attracted by these lofty pictures of the city and so went there to enjoy its luxuries. (Emenyonu and Oguzie42)

Also, the city is seen as a liberating factor from the clutch of tradition. Analyzing *Jague Nana*, Robert July confirms this when he says that freedom

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comes “for the individual to pattern his life as he himself may wish, not according to outdated customs and superstitions” (233). In this wise, the characters feel relieved of the restraining hold of culture and plunge themselves into any quest to make meaning out of life. No wonder Jagua “breathed in the air of freedom” (80) in Lagos after returning from her village, Ogbu, away from the prying eyes of anyone. To her, Lagos is now her home. Commenting further on the liberating power of the city, Juliet Okonkwo says:

.. the city is the symbol of the new life. As a physical location, it tears men and women away from the restricting village environment, offering opportunities for the development of the individual, both socially and materially. The city exhibits the outward signs of affluence in its glitter of night lights, its better roads, its department stores, its extravagantly dressed citizens.... It offers a new and exciting lifestyle. (132)

July and Okonkwo's observations make one understand the awe and wonder Jaguar feels when she first hears about Lagos city:

Lagos! The magic name. She had heard of Lagos where the girls were glossy, worked in offices like men, danced, smoked, wore high-heeled shoes and narrow slacks, and were 'free' and 'fast' with their favours. The night spots never shut, not like 'here' where at 8pm (latest) everywhere was shut down and the streets deserted. (126)

This is the seducing power of the city Jagua visualizes in her mind's eye. She dares everything to go there. So, she abandons her husband, family and the peaceful life in Ogbu, her village, to live in the city. She feels she has been wasting away in the village.

A look at Jagua's life will reveal that her rosy picture of the city is more a case of what Animashaun A, in his study of the implications of urbanization in Nigeria, refers to as “the push of people from intolerable rural miseries rather than the 'puli' exerted by the urban areas” (211). This push is occasioned by the unavailability of the basic amenities of life such as good housing and roads. These “intolerable rural miseries” Jagua runs away from abound in the city but they do not give her joy and pleasure because while there Jagua's life is full of loneliness, dissatisfaction and hollowness. Of course, she covers it all with cosmetic smiles. She has been more drawn to the city because of the rosy picture of it she has painted in her mind.

The city is seen too as a launch pad for the actualization of anybody's dream. There, money, good lifestyle, business and political success are thought to be easily got. The different characters all have dreams they believe must be born in the city. To them, the city is the only place on earth where their dreams can be fulfilled. So, Jagua must make money and get a husband; Uncle Taiwo must succeed in politics

and become very rich; Rosa must, like Jagua, get money and a husband; Dennis and his gang must hit it rich: These are their dreams. And all the characters seek one outlet to achieve them: the city.

Why do these characters dream? Their different dreams can actually seem to inquire into the meaning of a better lifestyle for them. In the context of life which can be seen as one's ability to "work out a plan of happy and successful living... as he struggles to understand himself and the world in which he lives" (Greenlaw et al 4), *Jagua Nana's* characters are seen working out their destinies against the high odds of "wickedness, squalor, lack, unemployment and hunger prevalent in the Nigerian society. They are "fighters, hustlers for survival... fiercely ambitious and on a quest to succeed in life" (Chukwuma 68).

The Characters

As observed by Nnolim, *Jagua Nana's* characters are compelled by the love of "money, sex, crime, power, politics" (31). July describes them as "vibrant, bawdy, opportunistic" (12) while Chukwuma sees them as "prostitutes, good-time girls, women of leisure, men of passion drift, violence and crime" (66). This is actually the picture the characters present when they are encountered. These people are initially full of hope of a good life but soon, they begin to battle against the odds they find in the city. Caught as they are in the web of sex, power and crime, they struggle to live their life to the fullest, their lives to the fullest. They seem determined; come what may, to get water out of the rock to fulfill their ambition. The city is their Canaan, the Promised Land, the land of opportunities and contentment. But, "when they reached there they soon found out that all that glittered was not gold" (Emenyonu and Oguzie 42). Do the characters give in? Do they despair of the reality they have come to find? Our aim in this paper, therefore, is to show that characters in *Jagua Nana* engage in prostitution, stealing and murder as they try to make meaning out of a meaningless city life.

Prostitution

It has been made clear that the lure of money is the principal power that is responsible for *Jagua Nana's* characters seeking the city. Few of the characters seem to realize that education is a necessary tool for success in the city. But ignorance and the rush to escape the unexciting life in the villages drive them to the city where they find themselves unequipped for any serious jobs. Unfit for any lucrative jobs, and lured there in the first place by the erroneous belief that money can be picked off the streets in the city, the women, to make meaning or create a false

sense of success, resort to prostitution. This is a trade that requires no proper skills, degree, height or weight. It is simply enough to be a woman, available, willing and eager to please one's clients. So, Jagua runs away from Ogbu where she has had an offer of marriage because "she considered herself above the local boys, most of whom she had bedded and despised as poor experience" (125) to the coal city where she grows bored with her husband who is not up to her perceived standard of civilization. After all, "She was Jagua, and the man was not Jagwa-ful" (125). From there, she flees to the real city, the real place where the action is, to "L-A-G-O-S. Lagos! The magic name..... [where she could] make herself even more Ja-gwa" (126-127).

Jagua gives prostitution her best "... criminals, senior service men, contractors, thieves, liars, the rabble, the scum of the country's grasping hands" (96), she sleeps with all. She has no preference. As long as money changes hands, she is ready, her illusion of self grandeur notwithstanding.

The same is true of Rosa, Jagua's room-mate, and hundreds of other younger and older women. They have all come to the city and now that they are there, in order not to give in to hunger and death, they resort to the oldest business in the world. The exotic night spots, bright lights, wine, and good clothes, fast living they have heard so much about all come with a price. And the price is to lie flat on your back and the legs spread wide for a man, any man to climb up and in between. This is the only way to survive. The women are tossed from one hand-dirty, filthy, smelly or clean, and perfumed-to another. They are now pawns in the hands of moneyed men.

After many years of prostitution, Jagua, like the other women, cannot boast of any significant material acquisition. Everything she possesses is all in one room: the usual iron bed, radio set, and a box of clothes. There is no money in the bank, no house in the village or town, no husband, no children, not even self-esteem. Nothing. At last, Jagua, a symbol of the other prostitutes, realizes that "Lagos for her, had become a complete failure" (129). And that she, Rosa and "many women who came to Lagos... imprisoned, entangled in the city, unable to extricate themselves from the city's clutches" (124) have been striving after the wind. Their lives have run "into these cross-currents of shame, bitterness and degradation" (133). The city has destroyed their dreams.

Stealing

Dennis Odoma and his "group of frien' [who] use to do business together... one of my frien', he's de taxi driver. And de odder three, dey are de business men. De agent" (84), the taxi driver's wife, Bintu, and Sabina, Dennis' girlfriend, have all come to the city to make

their fortunes. They too have been lured by the hope of making quick money so they can live their dream life.

Possessing no skills and education, just like Jagua and her fellow prostitutes, they find themselves at the feet of an unkind, cold and merciless city which delights in devouring her unfortunate children. But they must live. And so, they take to stealing, graduating from petty crimes like stealing of jewelry to breaking into homes and shops. From there, they move on to the big one: armed robbery.

Dennis has “lived for the moment, intensely, desperately” (93) in his rush to acquire wealth. He, like others, sees themselves as “young and wild... with no fear of anything'... no fear” (94) and so, confronting policemen in armed robbery raids poses no threat to them. In one of their raids, Dennis kills a policeman. Even illiterate Jagua knows that the “Government would never rest till they had got Dennis. He could never escape with this one because the Government must protect the policemen who never carry arms” (96). He must die.

True to Jagua's words, Dennis is sentenced to death. His crime? He was an “habitual” He had attacked a police officer before, about four years ago. They proved also that in the last four years, Dennis was in and out of prison five times. House-breaking and stealing -, counterfeit coins had planned to kill the policeman had lured him into a side street 'with intent'. (138).

The above surmises Dennis' life, hopeful at the beginning but lost at the end. For him, the city, and not his lifestyle, has killed his dream. If only the city had given him a job, an education or a trade. He sees himself as a casualty of an overpowering and consuming city.

Also, the taxi-driver gets killed in one of his raids and his body is thrown into a gutter (92). After his death, his pestering wife, Bintu, runs away. Sabina locates her (Bintu) during a ceremony and kills her. Then too, after Dennis' arrest, Sabina kills herself. The policemen's words reveal the death of another dream: “such fine gal, an' so young: go waste her life for nothing' sake” (97).

Murder

Jagua Nana tells the story of “men of passion, violence and crime” (Chukwuma 66) who commit murder in a bid to live out their dreams of success in the city. These men's lives are structured according to Chukwuma's words since their passion for easy wealth brings out the violence in them against perceived obstacles and then they commit the crime of murder.

Through the book, two passions rule the men: passion for sex and for money. It is actually the passion for money that leads to murder as the characters try to “make fast money by faster means, and

greedily... seek positions that yielded even more money” (5). The men actually relish this passion. It is secondary to the breaths they take. For example, “there is uncle Taiwo, the indefatigable policeman, who drives an enormous Pontiac and pursues his career of misleading the voters and misappropriating his party's funds” (July 232).

Uncle Taiwo's aim of joining a political party, O.P. 2, is to become rich and powerful. As a politician, he reels out false promises to and corrupts voters with money and gift items to secure their votes. The voters take his money and gifts and deliberately refuse to pay attention to his lies. Jagua is his accomplice in this deceit, having been told by Uncle Taiwo “that it was a shameful thing not to be interested in the fortunes of the city” (98). His greed for Obanla constituency sees him masterminding the killing of Freddie, both his love and political rival.

Freddie's death sees the voters doing a volte face. En mass, they vote for Freddie's party and it wins. Angry at this turn of events, Uncle Taiwo is “murdered by his party and abandoned at the roundabout. He had broken faith with them and they had blamed him for losing the elections” (140).

Freddie, the London trained lawyer, sets his hopes high on getting into the good life by winning the Obanla O.P. I constituency seat. He tells Jagua, “I wan' money quick-quick; an' politics is de only hope” (103). So he rushes headlong “into de roughest game in de whole worl... smelly an dirty” (103). Though warned by Jagua of the danger of politics and of his probable death, he refuses to listen. The lure of gold is too strong for him. His life is cut off by Uncle Taiwo's thugs. He dies without fulfilling his dreams of “... power, the winning of seats, the front-page appearance in the daily papers, the name read in the news-bulletins of the Nigerians Broadcasting corporation” (116-117). This illustrates the force that holds politicians captive, the desire to play God and be omnipresent. It is a strong desire which also leads to death in the hands of hired assassins. This assassins or murderers are actually young men labeled “wild ones” (105). These are youths who “had chiselled bodies of fighters. They wore brief shorts and briefer shirts. They were all biceps and calves. They had bull necks... stalwart. (105,113).

These youths or bodyguards are actually after their daily bread and their loyalty is to the highest bidder. Their official job is to support their own political parties and campaign for them but in reality, they kill, scare and main political opponents all for pecuniary gain.

Freddie hires five of such to guard him. Dennis Odome is one of them (105). But, unfortunately, the day death comes calling, neither the bodyguards, Freddie himself nor anybody is able to protect him. A rival thug, dressed as one of his political party members, calls him outside where he is set upon and beaten up. He is dumped into a gutter “with

the blood gurgling from his mouth. His head seemed to have been broken into two halves” (115).

Conclusion

From our analysis so far in this essay, we have been able to show that the characters in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* see the city as heaven on earth, a place where they feel liberated from the strangle hold of their villages' restricting cultures. The city is the symbol of luxury, freedom, unlimited joy and sophisticated living. There, the different people from different nations (Germany, England, Holland, America, Ghana, Nigeria etc) congregate to eat the best life offers.

Unfortunately for these characters, the reverse is the case as this “urban exposure forces the people of the city to immoral easy ways of survival” (Chukwuma 66). These immoral ways - prostitution, stealing, robbery and murder - are used to try and overcome the odds these characters encounter in the city. The lofty dreams, hopes and aspirations the characters have envisaged are swallowed up in the face of the hunger, deprivation and degradation they encounter. They have pursued freedom but found imprisonment; pursued glossy living but found poverty; pursued joy but found sorrow; and pursued money but inherited the wind. The characters are “trapped and destroyed by these pursuits” (Emenyonu and Eguzie 42). All the high hopes acquainted with them at the beginning are destroyed in the city. For these characters, life is meaningless. For these characters, the city and not their lack of education, skill or foresight, has destroyed their dreams. The city has sucked their blood and thrown them away into the dung heap; unsung, unloved and hated.

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