

A TECHNO-DYSTOPIA AND NIGERIAN CYBERSPACE: A READING OF ELNATHAN JOHN'S *BECOMING NIGERIAN*

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of high technologies and cyberspace on the middle-class Nigerian citizens which create a wide gap to the cultural living and socio-political existence of people who are depicted in a fictive nation. The text *Becoming Nigerian* is adopted to analyse the textual representation of Techno-Dystopian and social livelihood in Nigerian context through the Third wave of Eco-critical theory. The author (Elnathan John) ingeniously creates fictitious Nigerian situations in a satiric form to foreshadowing how middle-class people are inflicted with the use of machine or rather technological equipment. The paper analyses the problems of cyberspace to the cultural life of working-class citizens of the fictive Nigeria via the Third wave of Eco-critical perspective which highlights on dystopian issues in a cultural environment. However, Nigeria as a social setting, John depicts how low-income earners are suffering because they cannot indulge with the sophisticated technological machines, as such their interaction and social activities become filthy and less advanced.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Dystopia, Technology and Ecocriticism.

Introduction

This paper examines the novel (*Becoming Nigerian*) on how high technologies and cyberspace are used recently which affect social livelihood of middle-class people and turned the environment into dystopian place in the fictive nation (Nigeria). Elnathan John uses the novel as a veritable medium to depict the menace impact of cyberspace on the socialization and cultural livelihoods of Nigerian lower-class people. The paper showcases that the low earned people in a contrive

country called (Nigeria) are described as people who were agonized by the influences of cyberspace in the text *Becoming Nigerian*. The negative effects of cyberspace as observed from the text, masses are afflicted with it either individually or through socio-economic relationship among the people of the fictive Nigerian environment. So, the environmental issues and cultural living, on the other hand, are the focal concern of the Third wave of Ecocriticism which the paper appropriates to analyse Techno-Dystopian incident from the text (*Becoming Nigerian*) written by Elnathan John.

Elnathan John was born in Kaduna State, North-Western region of Nigeria in 1982. He is a Nigerian novelist, satirist and lawyer currently based in Berlin, Germany. His fiction was shortlisted twice for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2013 and 2015. He is the recipient of the Civitella Ranieri fellowship in 2015. The analytic novel, *Be(com)ing Nigerian* (2019), is a satiric novel, first published in the USA in 2020 by Cassava Republic Press. In addition, the paper establishes that the novel satirizes how sophisticated modern technologies dehumanized and escalated the problems of class divisions be it the working-class Nigerian people through excessive use of advanced technologies.

Techno-dystopia is a hyphenated word; it has been explained in different ways mostly in scientific discourses and cultural discourses as well as other related disciplines. In literature, the term Techno-dystopia has a double perspective, such as computer-based activities that lead to oppressive societal condition and the fictional futures (sci-fictions) which deal with future innovations in advanced technologies. The paper analyses how John contrives the uses of such high technologies (computers and sophisticated machines) in his fictional text in order to demarcate the social classes in the fictive Nigerian environment. However, the paper highlights that technologies which are seeing as liberation from tedious works in the contemporary and advanced environments, are fiasco façade using Third wave of Ecocriticism.

Cyberspace as dystopia in the text (*Becoming Nigerian*)

It is widely perceived that people are living through a period of radical changes of cultures and other social values which are bounded by advanced technologies. The changes at the level of technologies, as Barker (2000:99) says “The complexity of the changes taking place has led to a reconsideration of question of social determination; in particular, a recognition of complex overlapping and overdetermined causes which are chaotic rather than linear and in which culture plays a decisive role”. On this point, societies, in the modern world are experiencing changes which are hard and tough to assimilate with, meanwhile the advent of the modern technological channels caused rapid changes in social livelihoods and mode of existence. The rapid spread of Internet and other Cyber-activities bring some additional social vices. As Barker suggests above the radical changes (Technologies) bring negative impact to the social cooperation (chaos). The paper explicates those chaotic scenarios of the new technological occurrences, particularly the use of Cyberspace from the text *Becoming Nigerian* as a dystopia to the social coexistence in the fictional social milieu.

Cyberspace is part and parcel of the contemporary advanced technology (Internet). Though, it has been viewed from different scholarly perspectives as Ardevol (2005:1) opines that “Cyber- as a prefix is used to refer to activities and social movements carried out through Internet, such as ‘cyberactivism’, ‘cybercafe’, ‘cyberart’” from this excerpt, cyberspace can be attributed to any activity that has to do with the technology in the Internet. It is observed from the text that Internet opens a new social strategy or economic class division in Nigerian context. The Internet cultural interaction brings harm and deformity of character as John depicts in the text. Those who have the privilege and opportune to use the Internet, as a distinct social class in Nigeria, are abusing the space to vilify people the hate and lampooned others. John depicts also the ill-impact of the Internet in the text *Becoming Nigeria*, there is a sub-heading “The Internet” as the extract below shows:

The Nigerian God is also online. As a worshipper, you are not obliged to be good or decent on Facebook or Twitter all week except on Friday and Sunday, both of which the Nigerian God marks as holy. So, you may forward obscene photos, insult people, forward lewd jokes on all days except the Nigerian holy days. On those holy days, put up statuses saying how you are crazy about God. P12.

From extract above, John has shown that cyberspace was used to exchange online messages, as the words “Facebook” and “Twitter” are highlighted. To navigate, more especially on some occasional days because John says “on Friday and Sunday” as on those days the religious people are offering prayers so John calls them “worshipper” also. On the other days of the week, the space of the Internet is used to vilify and tender any form of abhor message that may lead to social disorder or violence as John states above like “obscene photos” and “insult people” are done. This incidences of social problems as John demonstrates above like “forward obscene photos, insult people...” are the typical examples of Techno-dystopia on the cyberspace. At this juncture, the issue is rhymed with the words of Annshini (2022:233) who views literature that has exposed the apocalypses of new technologies as stressed “Literature is one of the best ways to generate frightening scenarios in which humanity suffers from hunger, lack of water, extreme colds and burning hot. Human is portrayed as the cruel and selfish character in the dystopian novel who suffers because of their irrevocable damage on earth.” To emphasize on this note, human activities through writings on media handles scare or disturb the peaceful coexistence of social being of a society. As the extract above indicated that human (people who patronize Internet) caused cruel incidences that shown such nasty attitudes of them. Similarly, John, in the text (*Becoming Nigerian*), portrays how excessive use of Internet in a wrong way have caused lies and fake greetings, for instance, to post messages “like a Twitter hashtag with your pastor’s Sunday sermon: #SundaysWithJesus#JesusRocks#SundaySermon#Crazy4JC#” as John

describes in the text. These sample of messages are satirizing the manner of the fake faith of the people who have done such unrealistic gesture only on occasional days to disguise as they are men of God. Cyberspace, on the other hand, can be seen as a cultural use of hypertext to inform, to communicate via email, websites and chat room. This culture develops from the people who are always online and glued to machine and their everyday activities in cyberspace is providing social disruption as analysed from the novel *Becoming Nigerian*. Barker (2000:104 cited Bell 1973) suggests that “a post-industrial society is characterized by the shift from industrial manufacturing to service industries centred on information technology.” In line of this extract, John presents Nigerian context as a post-industrial society where service industries play a significant role in developing information technologies. Post-industrial society is marked by the social classes, where there is shift from manual works to professional works. This change of depending heavily on strenuous work of masses for manufacturing goods to the use of technology, so economically affect the class division in a society. In conjunction of this John has reflected the impact of class division because of changes of technological implements in the text. The extract below illustrates that:

In Nigeria, a person who is able to purchase a generator for personal use and run said generator every time power goes off is a member of the middle class. Note that this is different from the group of lower-class people who are able to save to buy generators for their small-scale business-like hair salons or barber shops. Middle class people own a generator at home. P53

From the extract above, John has revealed the wide gap between lower class people of the fictive Nigeria and the ones called middle class people in terms of economic power to possess a techno- machine (generator). As the classes differed in the manner of using the machine,

for instance, the lower-class people are using it for commercial consumption while the middle class people are using it for domestic purposes which is most likely for Internet and other online communications. This social gap suggests modern technical skills which is not acquired by most of the lower class people. It can be seen in the words of Bell (1973:374) that “the new class structure is centrally connected to the growing importance knowledge and technical skills in post-industrial society”. Meanwhile, the middle class people are usually operating the Internet (machine) for technical purposes unlike the lower class people who are dominantly using it for business as John shown in the excerpt above that machine (generator) is used for running businesses for the lower class people. Moreover, middle class people, in the fictive nation called Nigeria, have access to Internet because generator provides power that may lead them to the pages like Facebook, YouTube, smart houses Skype and TikTok at their comfort time. Unlike lower class people who operate generator only for commercial purposes.

Technological Dystopia in *Becoming Nigerian*

A Technological Dystopian society describes as a chaotic and disruptive activities of advanced science and technology in a society in which law, government and social conditions are solely operating for the benefit and well-being of a few citizens. This contrast Howard P. Segal’s article (1986) “Technological Utopianism” which views technology’s impacts as extremely positive. In Nigerian context, the advanced technologies are not providing utopian situation to the lower and middle social classes. The phones (cellular phones) as advanced technology used by the majority of Nigerian people are typical example of techno-dystopia in Nigeria as John delineates in the text. The cellular telephones create social differences and tensions to the users. The extract from the text below highlights that as:

Mobile telephony is big in Nigeria. Often however, many in the lower classes have need to say that their “credit” ran out. Sometimes they send those “Please Call Me” messages. God

forbid that a middle-class Nigerian threatens their standing in life and society by sending a "Please Call Me" message. Members of this class are those who never have to tell you "I could have called you but I don't have credit." They can afford to top up as soon as their credit runs out. In this category, lower middle class are those who can afford to top up almost immediately but sometimes have to tell the people they are calling: 'Please let me go across the road to buy recharge card. I will call you back.' (Or better still, 'Hold on let me send my house-girl to buy me credit.') I know many lower-class people use this "I will call you back" line too. But the difference between a lower-class person and a (lower) middle-class person is that the middle-class person often does go and buy the credit. The middle-class person calls you back. The upper-middle-class person in this category is one who never runs out of credit, because they top up regularly without waiting for it to finish. P54.

The excerpt above, is analysing how advanced technology (cellular phone) inflicts the social life of the fictive Nigerian people more especially the lower-class people. John has shown that the lower-class people could not afford to recharge their cell phones when it runs out to enable them to make calls or use for other communication purposes. Such absence of credit caused social, psychological, and emotional imbalance to the lower-class Nigerian people, it therefore signifies dystopia. It also hinders other social facilities be it access to Internet and online services. So that to highlight a breach of social trust among the users of the cell phones, because one might promise to call back but could not do that because of there is no power of purchasing credit. However, John demonstrates how impoverishment splits the social classes in the fictional Nigeria. The lower-class people cannot top up their cell phones, they cannot complete their calls, they cannot sustain and access to other facilities of their mobile phones. The middle-class people are those who can afford to top up their cell phones

with credits as John described, they can manage to call back when they say so, they also facilitate other phone devices because they have credit in their phones. While the third category are the upper-class people, these categories have never allowed their phones credit to run out because it is a shame for them to loss credit for making calls or to use it for a subscription of data which they would use for Internet services, because as John portrayed in *Becoming Nigerian*, everything is not free for the citizens.

These class divisions are the factors that mark the social differences to the people of fictional Nigeria as John has shown that in the text *Becoming Nigerian*. The lower-class people have used the misfortune of lack of credit to lie and ignore certain calls which causes a lot of chaos and misunderstanding among the people in the text. In addition, John has shown also that inability to make a call for the lower-class people, the effect is seriously for the psychological imbalance to the affected people because if one cannot make a call, one is revealing his economic status of abject poverty which is a problem. Thereby the feelings of such social downgrading deteriorate inner feelings and lead to physical tension a times which exemplifies Techno-Dystopia.

In the same vein, John writes a sub-heading in the text “Social Media” where he demonstrates the social debauchery of the cyberspace in the livelihood of fictive Nigerian people. Social media relates immensely to the web-based services which allow the users to communicate, to share some information such as texts, pictures, sounds and even videos fast online. On this point, John navigates the narration through depicting how politicians are using social media to achieve their ill-purposes or to win that for which they desire. The extract below highlights that:

Now I know I have said those people no social media are good-for-nothing. I insist that in real voting terms, they are useless. But it is important to have people who fight for you in the media. In Nigeria there is no good or evil. There is only for and against. An evil person is one that has no one fighting for them. There is poverty and unemployment in the land, so getting people to post

tweets and Facebook posts for you is not very expensive...it is these ones who will identify any bad thing said about you and attack appropriately. P.94-95

John emphasizes that cyberspace as a web-tool is used in the text to annihilate or deform the image and respect of anybody who appears to go against someone in politics. For this reason, John says also that social media is “good-for-nothing” if it is used for vilifying and deforming social reputations of individuals. This idea infuses with the Singh’s words (2016: 1) that “social media abuses the society by invading on people’s privacy” to shade light on this, personality of people is highly valuable, but as John narrates in the text, during campaign people are hired specifically for social media jobs. These types of people do not value the image or calibre of the person who goes against their right person or (boss). They would use any trash word out of their memory to strike back in the name of protecting their party member or Boss. This hazardous act of the social media aids destroys the sense of cyberspace as to borrow the term from Crawford (2003) *e-utopia*. Crawford proposes that electronic or digital media is meant to comfort, to entertain, to enlighten, to provide sense of humour to the users and other people who patronize it. Unfortunately, John describes in the selected text that cyberspace is used as *e-dystopia* in contrast to *e-utopia*.

Eco-critical Reading on *Becoming Nigerian*

The word ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert as it appears in one of his literary articles titled: “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978). The theory emerged in waves, the First-wave which propagates the analysis of “nature writing” of the nineteenth century in American Literary Texts-Transcendentalism and “green studies” in the Great Britain. This has justified that the first-wave is divided geographically. In America, the texts that depict “nature writing” are written by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry

David Thoreau and many others but these are the prominent ones. They depict natural settings, nature, and a kind of spirituality that relate both humanity and nature itself, as Buell (1995:9) highlights that “American literary history thus presents the spectacle of having identified representation of the natural environment as a major theme”, this became the philosophical centre of American literature in nineteenth century. While in Great Britain, the authors who are regarded as naturalistic writers are William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats to mention few, these green authors reflect the beauty of nature and separate aesthetic quality of rural over urban as well as nature over civilization in their texts. The first wave develops on western Greek and Roman “nature literature”. So, Greek and Roman “nature literature” are as old as western pastoral philosophy itself.

The second wave of Ecocriticism prevailed in the 1990s, as Bressler (2011) opines that the work of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) marked the interest of the second wave whereby the text “touched off environmental concerns” more evidently, the second wave emphasize on present-day environmental crisis. This point goes with the notion of Glotfelty’s (1996: xviii) definition that “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” In conjunction of this, the contemporary Nigerian writers are concerned with the recent technologies that directly affect the affairs of the citizens in which the environment is also effected physically.

Cyberspace penetrates every social affair of Nigerians more especially politicians who are regulating the affairs of the system of government and other cultural system. The political and social system are the strong issues that trend in the fictive country named Nigeria because of the democracy. Going by this John in the text (*Becoming Nigerian*) reveals how the Nigerian politicians use the social media and other online handles to attain their democratic ambitions. On this spectrum, Ecocriticism views such socio-political turbulences as environmental crisis which relates to dystopian ecology. The extract below would emphasize the point:

Try Twitter. People don't realise how powerful it is. You can, from the comfort of your room, rouse thousands of followers to the holy task of insulting the government. Otherwise, with some "brown envelopes" you can have journalists who will always run your story and give you interviews. If you use Twitter you need a lot of followers. Followers are the key to your success. It is they who will make sure your thoughts get retweeted to the ends of the earth.

P.104

From the excerpt above, John highlights ecological dystopia through the use of cyberspace in the fictive Nigerian cyber-users "insulting the government", to assail government publicly online is a sign of disrespect and unpatriotic act which attributes to Eco-dystopia. This nonchalant and insensible attitude is mostly causing physical demonstration, riots, chaos and destructions of public properties, as Eco-critics called it dystopia. Thus, such actions happened as a result of negative use of cyberspace that trigger most of the half-educated people to vandalize the earth. As John calls it "to the ends of the earth."

Conclusion

This paper selects one of the Nigerian contemporary fictional writers (Elnathan John) and analysed his text (*Becoming Nigerian*) on how the recurrent technological advancement destabilizing the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of the common and the middle-class people of Nigeria, which the paper establishes as Techno-dystopia. The paper also did the analysis based on the subheadings namely: Cyberspace, Technological Dystopia, Eco-critical Reading on *Becoming Nigerian*, in order to examine the novel from the spectrum of techno-dystopian literature which is conglomerated some strands of the Third wave of Ecocriticism. However, the paper highlighted more on the way the chosen text embedded with social class divisions using

cyberspace which critically exposed the social hardship and economic constraint among the social strata in Nigerian context.

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