Representations of the City in the Early and Recent Nigerian Novel: *People of the City* and *Alpha Song*

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Abstract
Many of the studies on the growth of the Nigerian novel have given more attention to theme and characterisation, but little attention has been given to how Nigerian novelists depict the impact of the city on the moulding of the personality of urban dwellers. This article examines the transformation of the image of the city in two Nigerian novels. The novels are People of the City *and* Alpha Song. *The study employs a postmodernist theory which privileges representation over reality. Cyprian Ekwensi and Maik Nwosu are purposively selected for the essay. The approach, eventually, will be to undertake a detailed content analysis of the two works. In the absence of the restraining influence of traditional society, city dwellers are generally culturally adrift, and with the prevalence of corruption and excessive individualism, social disintegration sets in. Early and recent Nigerian novelists portray the city differently in terms of communal, socio-political, economic and ideological orientations. While the early novel portrays the city as a place of entertainment and pleasure, free from the restraints of traditional society, a space where people's expectations and potential could be realised, there is a more radical shift in the representation of the city in the recent novel. Hence, most characters in* Alpha Song *are engaged in new forms of communalism which globalise their identity.*

Introduction

> All cities are mad; but the madness is gallant. All cities are beautiful; but the beauty is grim (Christopher Morkey, *Where the Blue Begins*, in Egunjobi, 1999: 3).

The city has always been an important literary symbol because writers have powerful feelings about the environment in which they set their works (Peter Preston and Simpson-Housley 1994). While some writers have developed deeply ingrained hostile attitudes to the village as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation and to the city as a centre of learning, communication and light; the feelings of a number of others have yielded to the idea of the village as a natural way of life, of innocence and simple virtue, but of the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock (1987) observe that for all the artistic stimulation they provided, the cities of Wordsworth, Dickens, Baudelaire, Melville, Dostoevsky, Tennyson, Eliot and Fitzgerald have predominantly negative connotations. More than half of the world's population currently resides in the city (Reader 2004) with increasing number of writers considering the city as the ideal setting for their works. Yet, most of them have continued to hold a negative view of the city resulting in a persistent negative depiction of the city and city life, thus suggesting that the city has an image problem in literature. Similarly, a close but problematic relationship has always existed between the Nigerian literature, especially the Nigerian novel, and the city especially from the advent of colonialism which "ushered in a new lifestyle that was completely alien to Nigerians" (Ofor, 1991). It is necessary, therefore, to investigate the image of the city in literature because literature influences the way people conduct themselves in the city while the behaviour of people in the city also influences what comes out as literature.

Different generations of writers treat the city differently. It is important, therefore, to examine the changes that have occurred in the way writers perceive and portray the city in the past and now. In other words, are there significant differences in the portrayal of the city of the 1950s (before independence) and the present? Are the views and opinions of recent writers different from those of the earlier writers? How has the city fared over the years? Has the much acclaimed generational difference in Nigerian literature translated to equally different ways of perceiving the city? These and other posers and the need to find answers to them inform the choices of Cyprian Ekwensi and Maik Nwosu. Nwosu's voice on the city is significant especially because of his youthful understanding of the implications of living in the city.

Theories on the City

Over the years, existing literature has attempted to evolve a pattern to articulate two varying attributes of the city and writers often express their ideas and create situations in these two conflicting ways in their works, perhaps as the sights and sounds of their personal experiences influence and shape their thoughts. M. Jerry Weiss, in his essay "Literature for Youth: The City as Heaven and / or Hell" (1981) cites the example of Charles Dickens who, he notes, creates situations and characters shaped by the London environment that could "cause readers of other times to laugh, hold their breath in anticipation, acquire a sense of the terrible to be found in the city, and find the many good things and people who inhabit the city" (Jaye & Watts, 1981: 239).

Similarly, in his essay "Cities of Mind, Urban Words; The Dematerialization of Metropolis in Contemporary American Fiction," Ihab Hassan (1981) acknowledges that there has always existed a struggle, a war, so to say, between two cities. One of them he describes as the city of "human fulfilment" and the other of "inhuman deprivation". Submitting that ambiguity constitutes the central archetype of the city, he explains that the dual image of the city provides humanity with a willing tool with which to recover the ancient debate between nature and civilisation. He recalls that the city has always been seen as a "crime against nature" and that it remains the "crime" that consciousness itself perpetrates, against creation (Jaye & Watts, 1981: 107). The tendency for the novel to often portray an innocent young man from the country coming to experience urban sins and pleasures, Hassan further contends, is directly traceable to the nature of the city which he believes compels writers into a certain idealisation of its orders or disorders.

However, not all writers or scholars balance the negative and the positive attributes of the city in the way Hassan seems to do. To the majority of scholars who have been concerned about the city, and more importantly, to writers of fiction, the city is either heavenly or hellish with no possibility of a convergence. In Williams Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), for example, "the city is a machine for dying. Spurred on by sex, junk and money, Burrough's city finds its centre in the human body which it uses to control, negate and finally exterminate." Also, in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Both cited by Hassan in Jaye & Watts (1981: 103-104), the author's depiction of the madhouse is both a metaphor and a microcosm of "the modern city which ruthlessly exploits the poor, the powerless, and the deviant." Drawing extensively from a novel written by Jeronimo Ruiz, Pedro Juan Soto also illustrates the author's aversion to the city through the vituperations of one of the characters:

> I assure you that I'll do anything to avoid returning ever again to this city. Here is where you find the exhausting struggle for existence. On the surface you find many skyscrapers, many cars, many charitable and religious institutions, lots of noise and movement but beneath the surface, there is only vulgarity, hypocrisy, fraud, competition, boredom, misery, pain. ("The City and I," in Jaye and Watts, 1981: 187).

Clearly therefore, a good number of writers have written and depicted situations in their writings describing the psychological kinship between the individual and the city and have consistently blamed the city for its unwholesome influence on the individual. In his 1961 classic, *The City in History***,** Lewis Mumford examines the origins, transformations and prospects of the city and concludes that the city facilitates the unfortunate and unhelpful decisions that its inhabitants make (Reader, 2004, 304). Pedro Juan Soto also challenges what he describes as the sociological superstition of the "melting pot" accusing it of trying to impose itself on the city immigrant by expecting him to deny his own culture. According to him, the assumption that once an immigrant arrives in the city, he would adopt and defend the urban culture as Odia Ofeimun (2007), seems to suggest, is unrealistic since the city never manages to define its own culture. He asserts that "it's not possible to cut away the roots of any human being" (Jaye & Watts, 1981: 90), stopping short of calling the city an impostor.

Holding the second position are those who celebrate the city as an end in itself. These people conceive of the city as an archetype of dynamism; a place that may awaken a feeling of awe but not of violence. Unable to understand the growing anti-urban culture in America, Leo Marx (1981) offers his fellow Americans what he perceives as compelling reasons why American writers should convey an affirmative attitude toward city life. He contends that "Americans have been a city building, city dwelling people right from the beginning;" observing that "even the European occupation of North America was a process of relentless urbanisation." He admonishes them to reflect a preference for an urban way of life reminding them that when the republic was founded, roughly nine out of ten Americans lived in a rural environment "but by now, that fraction is less than three out of ten." He gives more reasons for loving the city:

> Cities, after all, are the places where scholars, artists and writers naturally congregate. They do so because… most of the vital institutions of mental production universities, libraries, theatres, museums, galleries, publishers, printers, almost invariably have been located in cities. Cities are the places where ideas travel most quickly, where one can most readily become knowing..(Marx, in Jaye & Watts, 1981: 65).

Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates in "Imaginary Cities America" (1981) affirms the positivity of the city by describing it as the "fountain of emotion" where an individual can experience a "cacophonous" variety of sensation. She believes in the validity of William James' remarks as far back as 1907 regarding the city of New York in which the city was painted in magnificent and extravagant terms. Oates perceives the city as a place of godliness because, according to her, it does retain its aura of the sacred. Again, individuality and anonymity, two of the city's most hateful attributes because they negate the communal way of living that exists in the countryside, constitute, for Oates, some of the greatest and most fascinating assets of the city.

> The city's gifts of anonymity, the promise of wages for work - wages agreed upon in advance – make the individual possible for the first time in history **(**Oates in Jaye & Watts, 1981: 18).

Above all, Oates is of the opinion that the condemnation to which literary minds have subjected the city over the years is an indication of their fascination for it. In her view, the intensity with which the city has engaged their attention is a demonstration of their realisation that the city is indeed "a phenomenon - an outrage, a spectacle, an emblem of ingenuity that seems frankly superhuman" (18).

Postmodernist Theorising on the City

In exploring the intricate and often problematic relationship between literature and the city, postmodernist theorising on the city is relevant. Postmodernism has many influential arguments; but two of these arguments advanced by two French philosophers, Jean Francois Lyotard (The End of the Grand Narratives) and Jean Baudrillard (The Loss of the Real), are particularly relevant to this article.

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) argues that "supernarratives which purport to explain and reassure are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality" (Klages, 2006:174). He defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives." He observes that all aspects of modern societies (modernism) depend on grand narratives but that grand narratives of progress and human perfectibility are no longer tenable. Grand narratives, he further contends, "serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organisation or practice" (Klages, 174).

Lyotard maintains that the 'grand narratives' of human progress and liberation have lost credibility and that there is no way we can form one unified coherent idea of how the world or human beings operate. Lyotard's postmodernist idea produces the assumption that there is a particular form or way to view the world because, according to Lyotard, neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence or meaning. "They are radically decentred" and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives' which are "provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances" (169). Lyotard insists on 'micronarratives' which he admits are different and largely incompatible but which he assures help us to understand 'small situations' and local events.

Baudrillard's influential book, *Simulacra* (1981), which Klages reports was first translated into the English language in 1983 as *Simulations,* contends that 'reality' is no longer possible in the world of images and simulations which he observes have come to characterise the contemporary age of mass consumption and technologies. The book, concerned with the depthless world of the 'simulacra,' asserts that "there is no longer a real external world;" that "reality is gone for good and what we have left is only appearance." He posits further that there has been an "implosion of image and reality" and that the real is now defined in terms of image. He defines the signifier-signified relationship as a relationship of a symbol to a notion of reality. He explains that "signifiers are representations, be they pictures, symbols, words or anything at all that points to something else outside of themselves, something which supposedly has a reality of its own regardless of how it is represented." With *Simulacrum* however, there is no signified, only the signifier. In other words, there is only a representation without an original thing that it copies, no level of existence to which a signifier refers. With *simulacrum,* reality collapses into representation and there is no distinction between

representation and reality. "Everything exists as all surface, all signifier" **(**Klages, 2006: 169-171**)**.

According to postmodernist submissions, whatever we see in the city is worthy of celebration. Postmodernist ideas are in support of the multiplicity and pluralism of the base of authority in the city. The postmodern notion of the city, therefore, will appear to be that the city is good, that the slums are good and that a city like Lagos works!

People of the City* and *Alpha Song

One outstanding characteristic of Ekwensi's writing about the city is his portrayal of the city as 'a must-come-to' (irresistible)place, even in spite of what he depicts as the city's ugliness. Emmanuel Obiechina (1975) observes that Ekwensi writes "with a profound knowledge of someone who truly knows the city," as evidenced by his void description of the physical environment of Lagos. Obiechina notes further that Ekwensi graphically:

> …captures the physical and social environment of Lagos in his fiction; relates his characters to the environment successfully and demonstrates with conviction, how the environment provides the opportunity for people from different parts of the country to throng the city either in search of freedom, or in pursuit of the limitless opportunities which they perceive exist in the city (*Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, 150).

A reading of *People of the City* confirms Obiechina's observation as Ekwensi's hero, Amusa Sango, informs the reader very early in the novel that his mission for sojourning in the city is "to forge ahead" (3). Unfortunately, probably because his fellow city dwellers have a similar mission, there is a tendency for them, irrespective of age, gender, social or financial status to live in a kind of rat race. Every inhabitant of the city seems to be running after something, especially money, and each of them is desperate to 'make it.' The purpose for which money is being sought varies from character to character but they all seem united in their common goal to make money. For Amusa Sango, his determination to make money at the beginning of the novel is simply "to forge ahead" (3) but at the close of the novel, his reason changes. Sango now wants to make money to show his father-in-law that "it was not only those who were born into high society who became somebody" (119). Bayo's quest for wealth also begins on a legitimate note. He succeeds in arousing the reader's support and sympathy when he explains to his friend Sango that:

> I have suffered too much in this world and now I have made a decision [...]. Everybody is becoming something. I must become a serious man and move with the times (66).

But what begins like a noble resolution of a decent and determined young man soon assumes a dangerous dimension as Bayo launches into quackery. Posing as a medical doctor and engaging the services of another man as a nurse all in a bid to 'make it' quick, Bayo and his collaborator attempt to dispense fake penicillin and syringes.

Another character, Lajide, is by no means a poor man. But in spite of his wealth, he cheats and double-crosses equally dubious business partners all in an effort to make more money. In Aina's case, her quest for money is as frivolous as it is pathetic. She tells Sango pointedly

that “It’s money I want now […]. I want new clothes. The native Accra dress […]” (69-70). After her imprisonment, her mother’s behaviour also reveals that she is the one who encouraged her daughter to make money so as to sustain her; and there is enough indication in the novel to suggest that Aina’s mother supports and encourages her daughter’s parasitic behaviour with Sango. Thus, in Ekwensi’s view, city dwellers are plagued by an obsession with money. This obsession also drives them to make mistakes some of which often prove catastrophic.

This view of the city is shared by Nwosu, whose *Alpha Song* deals with a collection of desperate people. One of the characters in the novel,Angel, abandons her family to sojourn in Lagos in pursuit of a life her family cannot afford. According to her, her parents earn an income that “only ensured that no one starved” (187), whereas, her one desire in life is to move into the “big league” which she can get only in Lagos. Her determination to achieve her goal is however accompanied by desperation. Hence, Angel tells lies about her life, her family, even her name all in a bid to make enough money that can facilitate the achievement of her goal. Indeed, Angel’s true story and real circumstance remain unknown throughout the novel. What is clear about Angel is her desperation to achieve whatever goal she has set for herself.

Tamuno probably represents the only exception to what seems to be the general malaise of desperation afflicting the characters in *Alpha Song* since he is not an immigrant to the city. Ironically, however, he seems to be the worst hit by the bug of desperation. Tamuno is desperate to prove to his unknown parents that he does not need their love, care and support to survive. Hence, he declares emphatically: “Beyond a point, it’s no longer a game: its break-neck hustling with everything you’ve got” (28). Tamuno tries to desperately cling onto life even as gunshots are being fired into him. His attackers and eventual killers had to fire as many as fourteen bullets into him, yet “every bullet went into him and he was still alive” (117). Even Chief Stephen, Tamuno’s long-time friend and business associate, is unable to understand the reason for Tamuno’s desperation:

> I still do not understand. Excitement? Anger? Attitude? Laughter at the society or revenge for parental abandonment? There was something more, but we may never understand it (117).

Only Bantu seems to understand why desperation is the controlling spirit in the city as evidenced in his description of the city as the “capital of desperation” (35). Desperation often underlies the motives of city dwellers’ sojourn in the city as nearly all the characters in *Alpha Song* are in the city either because they desperately want to run away from problems they believe exist elsewhere but not in the city or they are in desperate pursuit of perceived opportunities in the city.

Like Ekwensi, Nwosu also seems to believe that sexual immorality is a regular feature of city life. The protagonist in *Alpha Song*, Taneba, flagrantly refuses to contemplate marriage with a twenty-six-year-old woman in the city because she is reportedly a virgin. “A virgin, at twenty-six, in Lagos?” (142) Taneba exclaims incredulously. According to him:

> A girl who was still a virgin at twenty six, after going through the university seemed more suited for a psychoanalyst’s couch than my bedroom ((142).

He avoids the girl like a plague and begins to search for a wife among the 'experienced' women in the city because he wants 'experience' from his women. At the end of Taneba's search, he finds a woman who not only meets his condition, but one had also had a relationship with his late father! At the time of this discovery, the 'experienced' woman is already expecting the protagonist's baby. Interestingly, notwithstanding the fact that the woman possesses 'requisite experience,' Taneba is unable to go ahead with his earlier plan to go down the aisle with her claiming that what prevents him from doing so has nothing to do with morality. According to him, the discovery that his intended wife may have loved his own father is what he finds difficult to handle.

Also, Nwosu seems to hold the view that inhabitants of the city misuse the freedom that the city gives them. He illustrates this concern through the way his characters frequently change their names; beginning with the protagonist whose first name is Taneba and family name Brass but who, citing his anger against his father as reason, decides to drop Brass and adopt Taneba as his surname. Hence, he changes his full name to Taneba Taneba. Towards the end of the novel, he becomes Baneta Baneta only to announce after conducting a "symbolic burial" for his father that he has decided to reclaim the old man's name. Then, there is Elizabeth who insists that the name she uses, Lovelyn, is a "trade" name; there is also Yemisi, who renames herself Jacqueline Angel is generally known and addressed as nameless because she gives a different name to whoever asks her for that information (185). Aisha is known as "her majesty" and even Bantu, the tourist, has no immunity against what seems to be the city dwellers' penchant for falsehood as he confesses to Taneba that his name, Bantu, "was his final corruption of his much – corrupted given name" (35). He fails to supply his real name. In addition to falsifying his name, Taneba has the infamy of constantly revising the story of his life.

Ekwensi and Nwosu's shared concerns about the city notwithstanding, it is important to point out the differences in their approaches. First, Nwosu's handling of the various concerns on the city seems to have greater depth than that of Ekwensi. Even though the younger writer's presentation of Lagos as an all-comers city where the origin of inhabitants is irrelevant to the day-to-day living of residents may resemble Cyprian Ekwensi's treatment of the same subject. For example, a careful reading of *Alpha Song* reveals a dimension that is not only different from Ekwensi's style but one that is unique and much more vibrant. In *Alpha Song*, the ethnic background, or state of origin of nearly all the characters is either unknown or not clear. The origin of the major character, Taneba, is the clearest in the novel, perhaps because he is the protagonist. Taneba claims to have come from Kaiama Creek in an unnamed state. His closest friend and ally in the city, Tamuno, is brought up in an orphanage having been abandoned by his biological parents who are not known in the novel. He is picked up and raised by a kindhearted woman about whom the novel also does not provide any insight:

> He had been abandoned at birth dumped outside the orphanage. There was no way of knowing who he was, but he had been named Tamuno: the name for God in the overseer's language (*Alpha Song*, 117).

Mairo, another character with a name that suggests that she may have had a northern ancestry, is however impliedly so named because she had been born in the north (65). There is no further indication in the novel as to Mairo's real parental background or ancestry.

The profile of yet another character, Yellow, indicates that he grew up in "Uzi Quarters, a middle town settlement beside a city with a generous allocation of cranks" (128). His name, Yellow, is a derivation from his skin pigmentation because he is an albino. Esther is reported to have run to Lagos from her unnamed "forgotten village" (168) while Bantu, the eloquent storyteller, belongs to nowhere and everywhere at the same time with his endless travels around the world. In the novel, Bantu usually begins his travels from Lagos moving onwards to Montego Bay, Santa Isabel, Tabiti, Zanzibar and back to Lagos from where he normally starts another round of journeys within the country. He starts an NGO somewhere only to abandon it in order to return to Lagos. There is also Lovelyn, originally named Elizabeth, whocomes to the city from an unnamed village, state or region of the country. Nwosu however considers it important for the reader to know that the reason for the young woman's sojourn in the city is because her parents' marriage is a "complex" one and the burden of looking after her younger siblings rests squarely on her. One character whose origin is the most difficult, or perhaps the easiest to explain, is Toshiba because her ancestry is traceable to four races:

> Her father was Ijaw and had named her Tongha. Her paternal grandmother was Chinese and named her after the city where she was born; Shanghai. Her mother's mother was from the Philippines and had named her Imelda. Her mother was English; she had named her Barbara. It was from these four names … she had pieced together the name she answered: To-sh-i-ba (94).

What Nwosu seems to be implying by his deliberate refusal to allow his characters to lay claims to particular sections of the country is that the intermingling that characterises city life is so potent that it strips city dwellers of tribal, ethnic or even racial affinity. In other words, there is a complex mix of diverse ethnic and racial groups in the city that transcends racial or ethnic affiliations.

Instructively, it seems that the negative implication of this intermingling and perhaps, more importantly, the undesired consequence of not having a sense of family kinship appears not to be lost on Nwosu. For example, his protagonist experiences untold inner torture due to his failure to experience normal family life as a child and even as an adult. Consequently, he attempts to fill the psychological void in his life by sleeping with young girls in the city. In the case of Tamuno, the orphan, he manages to attend a university only to win a bet; little wonder he is unable to focus on his studies, with his thesis having to be written for him by the protagonist for a fee that remains unsettled throughout the novel. Even his 'working' life in the city consists in managing nightclubs, doing 'runs' (a euphemism for drug deals) and 'helping' uninitiated friends like Taneba to get prostitutes.

As for Angel, she initially paints an enviable picture of a supposed middle class family history only to turn around to confess that she actually comes from a lower-class family whose members have been named after a shrine and that "her name was not Angel" (192). And of course, Yellow is an ex-convict and a two-time inmate of a mental home who later becomes a traffic officer in the city. Yellow's ultimate ambition in the city is to join the mainstream police force and become a veritable 'officer of the law.' Nwosu appears to be saying that the cultural rootlessness of his characters constitutes an absurdity and that it has far reaching grave consequences for the city.

Considering the foregoing, Plato might have been justified in banning the modern city from his ideal republic? Plato observes that the uncontrolled and unregulated intermixture of people of different virtues and idiosyncrasies that the city engenders is capable of inducing a corruptive force which can in turn make the society ungovernable (Jaye & Watts, 1981: 180). Consequently, he maintains that the size of his ideal city should not be larger than one in which the citizens can be addressed by a single voice (Reader, 2004,304). Many observers of city life may be tempted to discountenance Plato's submissions for lack of foresight regarding the possibilities of the microphone, the megaphone, radio, television and other modern means of mass communication. However, it is necessary to state that Plato's concern goes beyond communication problems. His aversion to large concentration of people as we have in cities appears to have emanated from the potential negative consequence of urban anonymity, which in turn fosters immorality, criminality, delinquency, materialism and all manner of bad behaviour as *Alpha Song* portrays. He seems to believe that if the population of a given environment is not too large, it would be possible to know what everybody is doing and members would serve as a check on one another.

Moreover, events in *Alpha Song* point to the fact that while Plato's ideal city may not be feasible in the modern world and his fears about society becoming ungovernable now overtaken by the modern technologically based method of governance, his assertion about the negative consequences of the intermingling of people of diverse backgrounds and histories who throng the city remain valid going by the implications of cultural rootlessness as suggested in *Alpha Song*. Tamuno, the night club manager and drug dealer, is ignorantly worshipped by the boys he recruits to do his dirty work for him. Fondly called the 'Don,' Tamuno is not only feared by his boys, as they also respect his 'ingenuity' and desperately wish to be like him. It is instructive that many of his boys continue as bodyguards, bouncers and armed robbers in the city long after Tamuno's demise. One of the sad but inevitable consequences of cultural rootlessness in the city, which is brought about by unhealthy intermingling of people from different backgrounds, is the eventual arrest of one of Tamuno's boys as a member of a notorious robbery gang. Tamuno also ends up being brutally murdered by suspected rival drug dealers in the city. Invariably, therefore, the intermingling of different people in the city is capable of inducing, and it does induce, a corrupting force on city inhabitants, some of whom may have been innocent and well-meaning when they newly arrived the city.

Indeed, Nwosu's conception of the city is deeper and different from that of Ekwensi in many respects. *In People of the City* (1954) for example, Ekwensi labels the city as "an enemy that raised the prices of its commodities without increasing his pay; or even when the pay was increased, the increased prices immediately made things worse than before (54). On the other hand, Nwosu demonstrates in *Alpha Song* that the city does not only worsen empathy, it also creates a disposition of empathy which may not be formal but which makes people believe they can rely on one another. The reader sees this in the way Yellow's co-city dwellers rallied round him when he travelled to his village only to return to the city with insanity supposedly inflicted on him by his village uncle. Also, whereas, Ekwensi concentrates on portraying the city as a place of enjoyment but where moral irresponsibility is also at its peak and shows how the conflict between the old and new values of individualistic tendencies in the city affects the city dwellers, Nwosu focuses on the city's moulding and re-moulding of its inhabitants.

Perhaps, what constitutes the most significant departure between Nwosu and Ekwensi, in their respective handling of the city can be illustrated through Nwosu's insistence that the

cultural rootlessness in the city engenders kindness and gives hope of new and decent forms of communalism among city dwellers although it must be acknowledged that the city is characterised by chaos, disorderliness, unhealthy competition as well as sexual and other types of immorality. In *Alpha Song*, in spite of the hero's love for night life, fun and women, he is categorical in his determination to avoid shady business deals in the city. A more apparent proof of the positive possibility in the city is illustrated in the protagonist's chance encounter with Mairo, a girl still in her teens but who has already become a full-time prostitute in the city. Following Taneba's chance encounter with the young girl and upon his shock discovery that she is a professional prostitute, the protagonist resolves that:

> The same way that I had been adopted – by my maternal uncle, by Mama Senegal, by Tamuno – I had adopted her in my heart, perhaps as the little sister I never had.... if ever I did nothing else, this was one girl I would save.. (65).

With his moral and financial assistance, Taneba not only saves Mairo from the inglorious life of prostitution, but also gives her the privilege of going to school and becoming a university graduate thereby adequately making it possible for her to settle down as a married woman and later, a mother. Also, notwithstanding Taneba's addiction to clubbing and nightlife which is capable of turning him into an irresponsible person, he demonstrates uncommon dedication and diligence to his job throughout the novel, regularly earning his employer's commendation and accolade. "I am very happy with you, Taneba ... I am very pleased with you and I do not usually tell this to my employees" (201), his employer tells him with sincerity. Indeed, *Alpha Song* is replete with positive possibilities and incredible optimism.

Similarly, although Esther works in a nightclub; she never takes part in immoral activities which her colleagues indulge in on a daily basis as she refuses to be seduced by any of the club's patrons. Rather, she carries out her duties with utmost diligence and earns her living without subjecting her body to sexual abuse just as she never engages in any activity she reasons may endanger her life. Also worthy of note is the fact that there are decent men among those that patronise nightclubs in the city. For example, Esther secures a decent job while still working at a nightclub and her new employer happens to be a club patron who gives a personal attestation to Esther's good character, explaining that he has observed the young girl over a considerable length of time and has found her worthy of being his employee. Also, Esther's acknowledgement of Taneba's good character is a testimony to the fact that the city is not wholly populated by vagabonds, prostitutes and the never-do-wells: "You be better man, proper person. God dey inside your heart…" (169).

Another character in the novel, Tricia, is a worthy illustration of the presence of chastity in the city. Taneba meets Tricia at a nightclub, but she refuses to give in to his amorous advances demanding instead that the protagonist cultivate a proper and decent relationship with her if he truly cares about her. "I don't sleep around. I just come here to have fun" (126). she tells Taneba with confidence and without mincing words. To Tricia's credit, she refuses to yield to Taneba's persistent effort to sleep with her throughout the story. Thus, events in *Alpha Song* and the attitude of some of the characters in the novel provide support for Egunjobi's (1999) assertion that cities are inherently neither good nor bad and that cities are like fire that can be used or misused. This view of the city is succinctly summarised in Christopher Morkey's *Where the Blue Begins,* cited in Egunjobi (1999: 3).

It is worthy of note that although old generation writers like Ekwensi recognise the capacity of the city to give its residents limitless pleasure and abundant opportunities, they are however wary of the pleasures and opportunities it provides and do not seem to believe that the city possesses significant redemptive qualities. In *People of the City*, for example, the hero, Amusa Sango, and his newly wedded wife, are set to flee the city at the end of the novel. They are ready to relocate to the Gold Coast because they want "a new life, new opportunities" (120). It is only in faraway Gold Coast that he and Beatrice the Second can hope to discover a new life and a new sense of peace, not in the city.

By contrast, the hero in *Alpha Song*, Taneba Taneba, returns to the city despite his previous unsavoury experience and in spite of the fact that he now suffers from a terminal disease. The impression the reader gets at the end of the novel is that Taneba will not abandon the city until he dies even when his circumstance does not suggest that there is something tangible for him to hold on to. Therefore, while Ekwensi seems to regard the city as a parasite that is capable of offering only superficial enjoyment but which is inherently harmful to its inhabitants, Nwosu appears to perceive the city as a celebration of humanity's continuous quest for civilisation and globalisation. Nwosu's submission seems to be that although the city is far from being perfect, it is nevertheless worthy of investing hope in.

Conclusion: The Image of the City in the Nigerian Novel Today

In the end, textual analysis of *Alpha Song*, which is taken as representative of contemporary Nigerian fiction writers' submission on the city, reveals that contemporary Nigerian fiction writers acknowledge that the city is a difficult place to live in, especially in view of its numerous negative characteristics such as high cost of living, absence or inadequate social infrastructures, unhealthy competition and loneliness among several negative attributes of the city. Like their older counterparts, they are also worried about the tendency of the city to frustrate or even destroy the dreams of its inhabitants. However, younger writers like Nwosu and Atta depart from their older counterparts in the way they privilege the city as a metaphor for cultural rootlessness and especially in their insistence on celebrating, rather than lamenting it.

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Nwosu, a contemporary Nigerian fiction writer on the city, seems to find the postmodernist approach to understanding the city quite fascinating and helpful, especially the aspect that counsels the celebration of whatever that is found in the city, as well as using prevalent specific situations to understand and assess particular circumstances and characters in the city rather than passing judgment or reaching conclusion based on established universal truth. However, it is pertinent to state also that the city may be in danger of a worsening image crisis as more people continue to come into it in search of employment and other opportunities that are believed to be available in the city but lacking in the countryside. But the positive disposition to the city by younger writers and the growing number of 'city children writers' (writers born and/or raised in the city) who make the city the setting of their work promises a greater prospect for a redeeming image of the city since the characters in such city novels are likely to have a globalised identity.

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