

**Cataclysmic Effects of Nature on Man and His Vicinity: Insights  
from Wale Okediran's *After The Flood***

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**Abstract**

*After the flood belongs to the category of newer and contemporary novelistic rendition by Nigerian writers who continue to experiment with the genre of prose fiction. The text chronicles in fictional and in some instances near realistic form, life as affected by both natural (uncontrollable) and human actions. The pivotal narrative element; the disastrous flooding of the Ogunpa river produces ill-fate on human life and other societal constituents. The paper uses a sociological approach to situate the text as a work which seeks to portray literature as a social tool for use in society. The paper surmises that a sociological approach enables the writer to harness societal currents into the fictional and imaginative form of the novel.*

**Key Words: Cataclysmic, Effects and Nature**

## **Introduction**

Wale Okediran is not new on the literary scene but he belongs to contemporary Nigerian novelists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though a medical doctor, Okediran is a former National president of the Association of Nigerian Authors, from 2006-2009. He is also the Secretary General of Pan African Writers Association. He has to his credit novels, short stories, biographies and travel literature. He tows the tradition of socially aware artists who demonstrate knowledge of the society's experiences and are committed by their vibrant engagement with art. He views himself as an advocate for his society; hence, his works take on diverse social perspectives that affect humanity. In *After the Flood*, the writer attempts a realistic portrayal of life. He deploys a wide circuit of life's experiences, such that it is almost impossible for readers not to share in any one of life's circumstances as rendered by the life of the text

## **An Abridged Version of the Text**

*After the Flood* is a narrative cantered around the life of Sade Lala, a young nurse of less than twenty-five years. She is married to a civil Engineer, Stanley Lala. Despite the disapproval of her strict religious parents because he is married before and also that she is too young to marry. Her life with her husband and four months old son, Tomi and her nanny, Beauty seemed contented and undisturbed until a violent ominous and ill-fated flood throws things out of balance; Her maid is killed by the evil flood; her child is missing (taken for dead) her marriage is over and she is dismissed from work. A scandalous publication in the *City Echo*; (a metropolitan newspaper) by her spurned and injured lover, Sam Boyo, tarnishes not only her reputation but also that of her family. Her injuries and agony are endless, her best friend Nana deserts and cheats on her with her estranged husband who angrily ends their marriage primarily because she attends Nana's birthday party on the night of the stormy disaster while he is away from the town. In all of these, Sade is an optimistic woman who does not

wallow in self-pity about her predicament. She sets out to rebuild her life and in her renewed and sensible spirituality, fate throws her back with her estranged husband and opens up a glimmer of hope to finding her son.

### **The Sociological Approach**

A sociological theory to the study of literary texts is broad to the extent that it encompasses approaches that study literature as part of the culture of the larger society. A sociological approach to literary analysis pushes the limits of literary theory and criticism beyond the conservative discourse that was established by F.R. and Q.D Leavis and also A.I Richards. These posited that literary criticism should remain within the confines of the text, they insisted that there is no outside of the text. A sociological approach “embraces all aspects of the relationship between art and society.” (Kolbas 106)

Literary theory and criticism are influenced by disciplines beyond the confines of conventional literary analysis. The discourse examines the relationship that literature shares with sociology. Consequently, sociology examines society and its constituents and the relationship that exists between and amongst societal elements, structures and human beings. Kolbas further contends that in Literary sociological analysis artistic value is “constructed within a network of social, symbolic and institutional legitimization” (p.108). It examines the influences on the literary text, especially to take cognizance of the relationship between the text and extra-textual elements such as the author’s background, social and historical circumstances.

Literature shares space with sociology in that, it is interested in society as material for artistic and narrative rendition. Scholars; Wellek and Warren posit that “Literature imitates life and life is in large measure a social reality...the (writer himself is a member of society, possessed of a specific social status... addresses an audience, however hypothetical.”(p. 3). There are attempts to understand the influence of

the society on literary texts and how they (texts) function in society. The paper does not adopt a dialectical perspective, what is of interest is the relation between the literary text and social reality. Still, some of the critical ideas are influences from latter Marxist philosophers in the likes of George Lukacs and Louis Althusser.

In narrativity, the writer mimics and parodies characters whose types are found in society. The author also duplicates in fictional form situations that usually occur in society. Inevitably a relationship is created between literature and sociology. A pioneer of the area of study, George Lukacs asserts that “Literary art expresses a perspective and value system by which society operates.” (qtd in Bamidele, p.3) Lukacs in his *Theory of the Novel* draws examples from the novels of Charles Dickens. He emphasizes the relationship between history, societal happenings and artistic works especially as they fill the role of committed art. Hyppolyte Taine, also an early proponent of the sociology of literature, highlights the inter-relations of textual content, social context and time.

### **The Text as a Social Document**

The novel as a genre became a concrete artistic phenomenon in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, types of novels are easily classified according to their concerns. Examples are the apprenticeship novel known in German as the *Bildungsroman*, other examples are Wole Soyinka’s *Ake*, Camara Laye’s *The African Child* and *Radiance of the King*. There is also the novel of manners, i.e Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The sociological novel also known as the social novel is often addressed by many other names i.e the “social problem novel”, or straight way as the “problem novel”. It is often a work of fiction that draws from societal issues to construct its narrative. “A social issue is some problem or concern connected to the larger issues that affect society in general... This type of issue often shows up as a theme that affects the plot and outcome of the society.” (Study.com)

The text *After the Flood* opens with a quote from George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) “There is a tide in the affairs of women, which taken at the flood leads God-knows-where.’ This quote from a nineteenth century poet, sets the universal atmosphere of the effects natural disaster on human life which is the narrative that sustains the novel. A violent ominous and fated rain, floods the Ogunpa river. “It was not long before the swollen river broke its banks...Before long it washed away bridges and houses...” (p.8) What began like a “torrential rainfall” destroyed the city and its inhabitants. The narrative records that the rain lasted for sixteen hours set the city back sixteen years. (p.50)

In Literature, social issues that affect people in society are harnessed in a text through the deployment of artistic elements. The author is of the opinion that “titles of texts must reflect the story line” (p.2). This is a strategy to arouse readers interest in the works. In this he fills Bamidele’s position that: “Artist must have sympathetic interest in human beings...they must have direct contact with public opinion...Artist must improve human thought...they should contribute to the survival of society...it is a social task” (p. 38). Chukwu and Onyema also agree that “one of the roles played by literature is recreation of society, such recreation captures the sensibilities and conflicts in the affected society” (abstract).

The title of the text, *After the Flood*, refers to the consequences of the flood disaster that racks life and displaces society. In this extended passage one of the major effects is captured as such; the passage train coming in from Kano was oblivious of the unfortunate happenings in Ibadan:

Since electricity and communication facilities had been disrupted by the flood, there is no way the train driver could have been forewarned of any imminent danger, especially as the station master and his officials are

busy struggling for their lives two miles away from the muddy waters of the Ogunpa river (40)

Accidental death awaits over two hundred men, women and children coming from Kano. Okediran concedes that “much of literature is a reflection of society, its good values and its ills and that there is nothing new under the sun.” (Tribune online 3) This statement justifies the gory description of the tragic aftermath of the flood.

Furthermore, the author adopts a form of artistic discourse known as foregrounding. To “Foreground is to bring something into prominence, to make it dominant in perception” (Abrams and Harpham 139). In foregrounding the writer uses familiar objects and things but with an intensity. Though, initially, used mostly in poetry, the device has found its place in other genres of literature. In the text *After the Flood*, Okediran heightens and intensifies the tragedy caused by the flooded Ogunpa River. He appropriates a technique common to poetry; repetition. Repetition takes many forms in terms of graphic and gory details; persistent use of adjectives and images of destruction. The writer harnesses destructive adjectives to describe the ominous flood. These are: “howling wind..., claps of thunder”, “heavy storm”, “rapid flashes of light,” “jagged lighting,” “rainstorm,” “roar of thunder” “Angry Flood” “Loud Clap of Thunder” (1;8;34). The narrative spells inescapable tragic consequences of the flood on life, society and its institutions.

The major events in the text generate from and are sustained by the fated flood. Kolbas posits that a critical analysis from a sociological point “...succumbs to the immediate circumstances of the empirical world as it stands...” (106). Empiricism in the text provides that, The Ogunpa river is “Thirty -Four kilometre long... flows mainly through densely built-up parts of the city... forty-nine streams and two big rivers and pour their water into the Ogunpa” (48). In addition, the inhabitants of the city dumped “different kinds of refuse” and these clogged the river and imbedded free flow of the already muddy waters

into the city where the “angry flood flowed. There was overcrowding and the “streets were narrow” (8). Again “many dilapidated buildings stood in utter defiance of planning regulations” from the verifiable evidence in the text it is clear that nature took advantage of an ugly situation (8).

The treatise of Chukwu and Onyema grounds that in the text, *After the Flood* the author addresses the relationship between man and nature, and how man’s neglect of nature produces the reprisal unleashed by the angry nature which leads to consequences of enormous destruction. The author pulls together all the elements that constitute a society and the happenings there-in. Literary sociologist submits that although the novelist depends on and greatly exploits the resources from the social environment at his disposal, to remain within the realm of literature, the writer creates a fictive life, that is the life of the text. Here, the elements of daily life are assembled into a systematic scheme and are controlled by the narrative apparatuses of the omniscient narrator, flashback, suspense, paradox and others. All these are deployed with appropriateness, depending on the concern he focuses his artistic lens on.

Sade, the protagonist of the text suffers a dual catastrophic experience from mortals and nature. The flood conspires against Sade and subsequently ‘kills’ her son, Tomi. It is difficult to survive. The flood submerges the two-story building where Sade lives and her entire neighbourhood. Beauty who is left in the house alone with the Four months old baby at the time of the flood acts quick and sensibly by locking the baby up in a bucket with a string that snapped to lock (Okediran 10-11). This she does at the expense of her own life. Soon she “lost grip on the laundry bucket as it was swept through the open door to join the river which had overrun the house” (42-43).

The sociologist, Max Weber outlines four major social types that human action fits into. These are: Traditional, Affective, Value and

Instrumental Social Actions. These elements can be appropriated for analysis of the sociological novel. Sade Lala fits into the affective social type whose actions are determined by emotional state. She is the young married woman who still maintains relations with her unmarried friends in the instance of Nana Okolie. She is the conscience-ridden person who does not want to break a promise. The protagonist's inability to refuse her friend leads to grave consequences; the end of her marriage; a scandalous story published in the *City Echo* and termination of her appointment as a nurse because she intentionally misses night duty so as to attend the party.

The novel exhibits its socio-cultural context by making the tragedy widespread. Sade is just one of the many people affected by the flood. As it turns out she can be said to have come away luckier than other inhabitants of the city of Ibadan. The destruction witnessed by other people is colossal. The author narrates that the cries of children made orphans and the wails of parents who lost their children "intermingled with the howling of dogs" (47) to worsen the gory picture, the stench emitting from the dead remains of animals and human sput the lives of rescue workers at risk (Okediran 63).

Beginning from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the novel as a social document concretised its contextual outlook. It dispensed with romance, fantasy and picaresque writing as had earlier been its preoccupation. The genre of Prose fiction which the novel is part of touched base with the society by dwelling on more realistic issues as the subject matter of the novelist concern. Bamidele posits that "Realist literature as they appear in their content force the writer to have sociological interest in what goes on around him" (78). Okediran in factional form portrays the modern Nigerian society of the oil boom era, he uses Ibadan as an up-close case. During this time, easy and quick money derived from the sale of massive crude oil laid the endemic foundation for corruption. This is evident in the construction of shoddy and substandard houses and poor drainage system.



Due to the apocalyptic effects caused by the flood, the people of Ibadan, a prominent and ancient city in Nigeria converge for a council meeting at the Ibadan City Hall. The chairman of the council is in attendance. In this sort of scenario, the presence of journalists is inevitable, as stories from such incidences form very good raw material for their journalistic adventure. At the town hall meeting the council chairman, the city's inhabitants and the press men form an imaginary triangle within which a lot of despicable happenings are revealed amid a rowdy and accusatory session that the writer describes as "a babel of voices" (49). The reader is made to understand that Council officials accept bribes and approve the building of houses in areas where they shouldn't be built. Contractors construct narrow bridges and culvert and the inhabitants too, have refused to use refuse bins on the pretext that they are situated distances from their houses, instead they use the already compromised river as a refuse dump. 'Does the city have a masterplan?' Why did it take the firemen over an hour...' (50) are some of the insightful questions from journalists that disclose about an unorganised society ridden by ineptitude from its leaders and follower alike. The people's lukewarm attitude is evident in their neglect of the natural environment, and this they do to their own peril, because nature bounces back with a powerful vengeance and unavoidable draconian effects.

From a technical aspect, the storm as a social occurrence in society doubles as a motif. "A motif is a conspicuous (clearly visible element attracting notice and attention) such as a type of event, device, reference or formula which occurs frequently in works of literature" (Abrams and Harpham 229). Therefore, the story of the storm and its untold consequences is the pervading narrative of the text. The writer submits that "the storm which had shattered the quiet life of the once sleepy city had lasted sixteen hours but the attendant destruction had put the city more than sixteen years back behind development" (50).

The above attests to the fact that the loss of one swoop of destruction by the flood can only be gained, if at all, after many years.

As fate will have it Tomi, Sade's son survives the flood as Pa Lasisi's...eyes caught the orange coloured plastic bucket which looked out of place among the debris. As he waded through the swamp towards the bucket, the cry rang out clearly like that of an infant. Cautiously, the old man bent down and opened the cover of the spring-operated bucket. Staring into his weather-beaten face was a little wrinkled creature that was crying and sucking his fingers (51).

Still, Sade is far from being reunited with her son, as her misfortune continues. She is brought to the hospital where she works as a surviving victim of the flood. It is here that she receives her letter to determinate her appointment for dereliction of duty. When Sade tries to be gainfully employed, she is faced with sexual harassment from pastor Adeoye, the administrator of the Christian Medical Centre. He also blackmails her using the untrue story published about her in *City Echo*.

The novel of incident shares attributes with the sociological novel. Scholars contend that the "greater interest is (in the novel of incident) is in what the protagonist will do next and how the story will turn out..." (Abrams and Harpham 254). Sade moves on to accept the marriage proposal from Sam Boyo, her former lover, although she always believes that her son is not dead. She decides to marry again, against the advice of her parents, especially, her father; reverend Dada. The marriage is not to be as Sam Boyo turns out to have abandoned a mullato lady with two children in Lagos. The woman arrives the wedding reception venue and disturbs the event. (127)

Her string of unfortunate incidences continues, her estranged husband, Stanley has gone ahead to carry out a love affair with her friend, Nana, as revenge against her for leaving their son alone during the storm. She gets wind of their affair and confronts Nana but she denies it. "Stanley

and Myself? That should tell you that the story couldn't be true. You think I'll see Stanley and not tell you? (124). Sade was to find out the truth herself when on a fateful date she visits Nana's house in the morning (33). In this major incident of the narrative the writer uses the common societal ill of broken trust and betrayal. It rides upon the elements of surprise first, Nana does not know that the man she meets at a party in Lagos and eventually had intimate knowledge of is Stanley, her friend's husband (87). The other element; suspense goes full circle when Sade finally finds out.

The narrative thrives on violent storms and flooding as the pivot that rule the life in the text. After two years of the gargantuan and dastardly flood, the inhabitants of Ibadan experiences yet another of such. This is despite the building of three artificial lakes to divert water from the Ogunpa river. Sade who is now living with her parents has become more philosophic and spiritual about life. She accepts to sing a religious hymn while her father plays on the piano. Their aim is to call on supernatural powers to avert the storm. "Turning her sorrows into song, Sade sang loud and clear...

Master, the tempest is raging  
The billows are tossing high  
The sky is o' shadowed with darkness,  
A deep in the angry deep.  
They all shall swiftly obey my will.  
Peace be still, peace be still.  
They all shall swiftly obey my will  
Peace, peace be still. (p.142)

Still the fated rain and storm do not contain themselves, they follow their earlier pattern. To this, the author submits:

However, just before midnight, an explosion reverberated right through the city. The first lake, now full of water and sediment, for some strange reason, suddenly burst its concrete banks and the water crashed into the river ahead. This wall of water coursed down

speedily to the city centre where it spilled into the adjoining land, sweeping nearby houses and roads away. Many electric poles and cables also went down. By the time the water got into the second lake its fury had become unspeakable. A wall of water, mud, and debris crashed into the second reservoir. More houses, vehicles and human beings were swept away. (142-143)

To examine the above scenario, one cannot resist to say that the immensity, callousness, the devastation, the degradation and alienation occasioned by flood in human existence, can be likened to the crass destruction caused by oil spillage in oil rich areas of the Nigerian nation. In this light, Tanure Ojaide through *Ebi* and *The Activist* captures this similar picture in the following words:

Where were the flying fish that used to shoot out of the water into the air and then somersault back into the water? That spectacle was now confined to memory. The water was no longer the herb-dark drought that she liked to deep her hands and wash her face with. It was light green, greasy and smelly. The large fish population had either been decimated by chemicals from the oil industries or migrated downstream to the ocean... Things have changed so drastically we might lose everything we knew from our youth just a few years to come, she said as one who knew the area very well. The oil companies are discovering more oil onshore and offshore. We are in for disaster, if nothing is done to save our waters, land and air (Ojaide90-93).

The two authors writing within the same contemporary era lament the social ineptitude and insensitivity of man towards the natural environment and the ensuing despoliation and waste that accompany such negative action. This subsequently destroys not only natural

resource but also human, other lives and socio-economic structures along with it.

Again, fate, as manipulated by another flood disaster draws Sade close to her estranged husband, Stanley. Stanley as the owner of LATOM, a construction company had wins a fifty Million Naira contract along with two other contractors to construct three lakes. It is reported that the government spent Two Hundred Million Naira (151) to re channel the Ogunpa River. This rescue effort by the government is to forestall another flood destruction. The shoddy and insincere job carried out by the contractors, left the town of Ibadan with the destructive replica of the flood that happened two years ago. It is announced on radio thus: “More than three hundred people were feared dead last night in Ibadan when the Ogunpa River flooded its banks again... It is still difficult to get the correct number of the injured for a precise count is yet impossible...” (Okediran 145)

Unlike the other floods, this time, the Federal Military Government went into quick action, it sets up a commission of inquiry to investigate the contractual work carried out on the Ogunpa River (148). The Federal military government also directed politician, contractors and former government officials to submit themselves to police stations near to them (149). By this drastic move of the government, the contractors; Stanley inclusive are reminded in police custody.

Sade moves away from Ibadan and starts her new nursing posting in Ife at the Baptist Hospital, where Pa and Mama Lasisi have taken her son, who they name Moses for treatment. Stanley is also detained in prison in Ife. Consequently, narrational coincidence cause Sade and Stanley to meet when she visited the prison as a member of a charitable Christian sisters’ group. The Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). It is also this association that initiates Stanley’s release from prison on the grounds of innocence. At Baptist Hospital Sade comes upon the orange-coloured plastic bucket with the inscription S. LALA

that Beauty uses to save Tomi's life (173). This provides her clue and she follows a trail to Kano to retrieve her lost baby from the benevolent American couple Dr and Mrs Graham with whom he lived. Sade encounters hardship in the hands of strangers (Mr. Shelima and his wife) and security agents in her bid to recover her son. At the closing of the narrative, the author ameliorates the tragic consequences of the flood by reuniting Sade with her husband and son. He seems to be advocating that the family unit is a solid structure that is crucial to the society's survival and so it should be preserved.

Okediran uses the flood as metaphor to examine a human condition; that is the gruesome and disastrous consequences that attack life and society when man by sheer neglect refuses to pay due attention to the environment. Douglas Kaze examines flood as a figurative trope. He posits that in *After the Flood* Okediran "fictionalise the Ogunpa river and provides a text for examining how flood intersects the domains of family community and nation." As a narrative tool, he submits that the flood is used for multilinear purposes to "tell multiple stories" of the complex interaction amongst nature life and policies (Abstract).

Historically, the novel is set in the 1970s in the "sleepy city of Ibadan the time of the oil boom. At Nana's birthday party the reader is made to understand that "many people were rich and showed it" (Okediran 6). This major natural endowment produces massive wealth, but as the events of the text show oil wealth is confiscated into the coffers of a few privileged individuals through outrageous contract sums. The writer uses retaliation from nature in its ominous form as a protest, outcry and rebellion against unfair treatment and injustice from her custodian. All forms of supernatural powers; the African religion and the Christian one, do not appease the storm. Its attack is likened to the human vengeance of a man propelled by powerful cosmic elements.

## Conclusion

The text *After the Flood* exists as a work of art that follows the convention of prose fictional narrative. Here the author through his subject matter pays homage as well as sustains the tradition of committed artistic writing; a code that has echoed from literary forebears. This famous saying from Achebe's, "The Novelist as teacher" that: "I would be satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers" sets the tone of committed writing in African Literature. Again, still relevant and sustained in the twenty-first century is when Achebe says: "Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure... Art is important but so is education..." (qtd in G.D. Killam 4). Okediran in *After the Flood* portrays a glaring picture of the sort of disillusionment that is visited upon Ibadan which is used as a micro portrait of the Nigerian nation. The author uses his novel to fulfil the critical mandate of which Emenyonu writes that:

clearly, therefore Achebe and his contemporaries, saw their artistic roles as those of 're-education and regeneration' and believed the novel was an arena in to which to wage 'wars'... (but) without a proper understanding the African writer's theory of the function of the novel in Africa, the reader may be tempted to see the African writer as engaging in matters outside the realm of the novel as a work of art. To accomplish the task which the African writer set ... it is obvious that he/she had (has) to step outside the box of literary traditions or conventions (xi).

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