

# Literature

## Be(com)ing Nigerian: A Guide

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The author of *Be(com)ing Nigerian: A Guide* is Elnathan John, a Nigerian satirist, novelist and lawyer. He was born in 1982 in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria. For his university education, he attended the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria where he obtained a Law degree in 2007. He was called to the Nigerian Bar after attending the Nigerian Law School in 2008 (Caine Prize, 2014).

He is a recipient of the Betty Trask Award (2017) and the Miles Moorland Writing Scholarship (2018). He was also the 2015 Civitella Ranieri Fellow. In 2019, he was one of the judges of the International Booker Prize (now Man Booker International Prize). He is in addition one of the 2019 recipients of the Berlin Senate grant for non-German literature. He lives in Berlin, Germany (Caine Prize, 2014).

### Book Review

This satirical work takes a humorous jab at the entity that is Nigeria, its people, and their “Nigerianness.” It borders on different aspects on the average Nigerians’ willingness to stress the major features of the society, especially when it comes to holding their religious and political leaders accountable for the state of their nation. Interconnected in this guide are the quadric nuances of power, corruption, hypocrisy and religion. It explores the abuse of power and authority and the role of religion in widening the gap between social classes (John, 2019).

The text is divided not into chapters but into titled pieces with subunits running commentaries on religious, political and other social issues. The introductory part is styled to depict the Genesis account of the Creation Story; only this time, we learn of the engendering of the nation, Nigeria. The division of Nigeria according to land mass and the further division according to class structures and the neo-colonialism that still exists in this independent nation are explored in this introductory part (John 2019). The remaining parts of the text start off with a guide that begins with the marker “How?”

The first guide is about “How to Worship the Nigerian God.” Here, Adams explores the difference between the Christian God and the Nigerian Christian God. The disparity can mostly be seen in the manner and objects of worship. He outlines some issues like prayer, enemies, attributions, elections, respect, miracles, money, the Internet, and the way Nigerians present them to God as the difference. Every prayer said by a Nigerian is geared toward suffocating his neighbor or widening the pay gap between him and his relatives. The injection of irony alongside the satirical tone of the writing does not go unnoticed as the pages of the text are read while acknowledging the aggressive pattern of the prayer by an average Nigerian. This radical, aggressive and loud manner of prayer by Nigerians is aided by one object which John identifies as the loudspeaker. Indeed, loudspeakers are mounted in places of worship in Nigeria as if God is deaf. Congregants from different denominations also

measure the decibels of the sounds coming from different speakers mounted at strategic spots in churches with the intention of making sure their prayers get to God's ears before those of others (John, 2019).

The second guide is on "How to Be a Pastor in a Nigerian Church." The qualities that help one attain the status of a Nigerian pastor are highlighted. These include the possession of a private jet, promiscuity, demand of tithes from parishioners (without remitting tax to the government), total subservience of congregants, dalliance and alliance with politicians, and claim to the fountain of miracle. These qualities are earthly issues, but they matter to a Nigerian pastor (John, 2019).

"In Sickness and in "Health" is the next guide in the text, with "How to be Sick" as its first subunit. To be sick as a Nigerian requires total discretion. The reasons, causes, and diagnosis of one's ailment must never be disclosed to the public. In "How to Die," what can be seen is the different ways Nigerians dramatize death and the kind of death with which they do not wish to be associated. Nigerians understand that death is an event, the need to be popular before one's demise, the need to die among one's peers, and the importance of one's death broadcast on many of the social media (John, 2019).

"How to Show Love" follows the guide on death. It shows the forms in which love is expressed in Nigeria. Whatever form love takes, it is materialistic. It is largely shown through food. Lovers cook for their loved ones to show the extent of their love. Love in Nigeria is also shown through selective blindness to issues that will normally break up a home. Love in Nigeria is diminishing, submissive, and dismissive (John, 2019).

"How to Own a Slave" is a guide that deals with the hypocrisy of Nigerians. As a people who boast about how religious they are, Nigerians are modern-day slave owners. Having a constant disregard for the law, Nigerians hire minors as domestic helpers who they employ to toil for them. They make a show of being great upholders of the Biblical laws but never follow up on God's Commandments. In "How to Communicate in Times of Crises," politicians are shown to hide important information from the electorate. They alter the numbers of persons wiped out by terrorism. They feed the masses only the truths with which they are comfortable; and, with each new election cycle, they return to recycle the same election promises while cutting off communication from the people (John, 2019).

In "How to Conduct a Meeting," John throws a jab at the average Nigerian business owner who conveys meetings for the minutest of reasons. Information that can be passed across via E-mail will require a round table gathering for a Nigerian. Meetings of this nature which are expected to last for few minutes or hours end up delayed because Nigerians do not keep to time and when a meeting manages to start, time is wasted discussing topics that are different from the crux for the meeting (John, 2019).

"How to Be a Car Owner in Nigeria" is the next issue tackled by John. Buying and driving a car are not the only things Nigerians do with their cars. Before it hits the streets, a new car needs to be prayed over by a "Man of God." Remember the man we talked about in the first part of the text? He will continue to crisscross topics in this text. He blesses and anoints the new car. Of course, this comes at a price as prayers and blessed oil do not come cheap in this part of the world. But blessing the car is not enough. The new car owner needs to show the whole world that "he has arrived." Thus, he goes for a customized plate number and chooses a name that will make him stand out among his peers. He disobeys all traffic rules and makes sure he honks his horn, especially when it is not needed (John, 2019).

John tackles the Nigerian middle class in "How to Identify a Middle-Class Nigerian." There are properties and assets which only Nigerian middle-class members own: a generator set, phone credit, a car, cable television or what we call "DSTV" in Nigeria, the right contacts and connections, and international passports. Ownership of all these (not minding that some of them are essential goods) amounts to luxury for the average Nigerian. Afterward, John

directs his jab to African writers. Here he notes that writers do not need to read to be writers. They do not need editors, marketing, publicity and criticism. They, however, need to covet one or two awards and wear a certain look (preferably Ankara and dreadlocks) to complete the part. The same goes for the Nigerian journalist who in an attempt to be different stands out. This he does by colluding with the federal government in reporting and feeding garbage and falsified information to the public. He does all this in an effort to have a seat one day with the nation's law makers. This will ensure that his coffers never go dry (John, 2019).

The topic of "How to Be a Lawyer and How to Be a Police Officer" is covered under "Law and Law Enforcement." What we have here is the satirizing of the persons that are supposed to protect Nigerians. For the lawyers, protection of their identities and enriching their pockets come before the lives of the citizens. For police officers, they turn out to be criminals who perpetuate all forms of crimes against the citizens they are charged to protect. From the legal and illegal checkpoints they set up across the country to the stations, their patrol vehicles, the barracks, and the bail are all tools to enrich themselves. They all get away with these crimes as the rot is from the top of the rank (John, 2019).

In the guide "Politricking," we are invited to view the objects and features that make the work of a Nigerian politician effective. This includes, albeit not limited to, branding, "godfatherism," social media, scandals, and religion. With these tools, a Nigerian politician is able to manipulate his citizens. He can choose to use two or three of these tools at a time for effectively clamping down of his constituents. Working against a "successful Nigerian politician" is a failed attempt by an opposition party. Here, instead of checkmating the excesses of the ruling party, members of the opposition party jump ships and continue to loot until nothing is left in the country's reserve bank (John, 2019).

"How to Get Foreign Friends," "How to Be a Good African," and "How to Run a Nigeria NGO" are the next topics explored by John. While the first issue deals with doing away with anything Nigerian to establish higher chances of mingling with foreigners, the second point deals with the balancing of local and "diasporic" lifestyle for the retention of a real African identity. The third point is a huge jab on the ways the streets of Nigeria are fraught with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These NGOs are the new oil companies. People register these NGOs in the guise of using them to elevate the indigent in the society, but continue to cash out to furnish their lifestyles (John, 2019).

The concluding part of this satiric book is an advice for foreigners, wrapped in "How to Be an Expatriate in Nigeria and Tips for the Foreign Journalist Covering Nigerian Elections." The "How to Be an Expatriate in Nigeria" warns against consuming everything Nigeria and Nigerian. Rather, one should take care to mingle mostly with other expatriates. The only time friendship and companionship are to be encouraged with Nigerians is during dating and when an expatriate needs a local translator. For the foreign journalist, he is in luck as protocols are broken for him because of the color of his skin. The obstacles encountered by local journalists all disappear at the appearance of a foreign journalist. Nothing gives a Nigerian politician or religious leader undiluted joy like being interviewed by a foreign journalist (John, 2019).

The weakness of the book is that although it is a compelling satiric work about different Nigerians that one must encounter and the way it appears that Nigerians live in alternative universe, embracing corruption, accepting robbery and not even flinching when murder is mentioned, *Be(com)ing Nigerian: A Guide* lacks in arrangement of topics. Some topics should have been merged. Thus, John repeats some of the points he has made. The compilation of the topics in the content page should have been better itemized, but I choose to see this as the fault of the editor.

Indeed, John's *Be(com)ing Nigerian* has given us an update on the modern Nigerian: his growth, development, and how he measures up with the fast-paced technological modern life.

John's take in this text using satire that only few writers adopt as a tool shows the superiority of his writing style. Here lies the strength of the book.

### **Book's Greatness**

Reviewing *Becoming a Nigerian* for *The Medium*, Rodiyah Omotoyosi Mikail notes that "If you have never uttered the statement 'Nigeria is a joke', then you are definitely a fake. Elnathan John analyses this statement on every level. He brings out the joke in everything, even the sad and painful aspect" (The Medium, 2020, p. 1). She further opines that "The language is so completely Nigerian that it gives you the correct feeling of a Nigerian conversation and if there is description you find incorrect, you need to have your passport checked" (The Medium, 2020, p. 1).

A reviewer for Bookreads, one of the best book applications on Google Playstore, opines that "Elnathan John provides an affecting, unrestrained and satirical guide to the Nigerians you will meet at home and abroad, or on your way to hell or heaven. It is a searing look at how power is performed, negotiated and abused in private and public; in politics, business, religious institutions and in homes" (Goodreads, 2021, p. 1). The reviewer further notes that "From the exploration of religious hypocrisy to the inequality in matters of the heart, the collection is a jab on the Nigerian society and what it means to be Nigerian" (Goodreads, 2021, p. 1).

Also, the book has an average of 3.9 out of 5 stars from 385 ratings on Goodreads and an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars from 78 ratings on Amazon. It yielded a 14,030 exclusive title searches on Google. All the enquiries on rating were conducted on July 12, 2021.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

From the book reviewed here, I am able to uncover certain guidelines to survive in a patriarchal world as a female living in Africa, seen matriarchy and femininity from the lens of patriarchy, learnt about the childhood of one of the greatest writers in the world, learnt about subjugation and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa and, finally, how to survive or not survive being a Nigerian. The beauty of Literature lies in the language employed by the author to drive home key points. The choice to stick to a particular genre of Literature is deliberate, seeing how wide the tentacles of Literature are.

Writers indigenous to Africa are not just writers. They have voices that do not quiver. They are activists and agents of resistance to oppressive governments, societies and cultures. Through their writings, topics that are considered taboos are broached. They may disguise these issues as fiction, but our reading and understanding of these texts help us to connect the dots to the issues witnessed in our environment. This work is a call for other African writers to use their pens in calling out oppressive and unequal systems that regresses the progress made by years of civilization.

This review essay will also help researchers and scholars to identify the lacuna in their research as the texts reviewed will make great literature review material. It will also make a great read for anyone peering into the windows of literary texts written by Africans.

### **References**

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