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Mapping Boko Haram's Menace: A Geocritical Exploration of Idris Amali's Poetry

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Abstract

Geocriticism flourished tremendously after the spatial turn with the ground breaking work of Bertrand Westphal which Robert J. Tally Jr. had since developed. It is a theory that rethinks the configuration of place in literary studies. It analyses literary texts through a spatial lens. Geocriticism evolved from Geography and was embraced by many other disciplines especially literary studies. It offers fresh perspective on the representation of a text as an implied map to read the content of place. This essay examines the nexus between poetry and geography by subjecting the poetry of Idris Amali to geocriticism and focusing on the manifestations of literary cartography. It employs Westphal's geocritical methodology by applying polysensoriality, geocentrism and stratigraphic vision as theoretical framework to read Amali's collection of poems in *Tears of Desert War* (henceforth *Tears*). The collection records the menace of Boko Haram insurgents, the plight of the victims and the execration of top military officers whose corrupt and dishonest roles foist the insurgency on the people. The essay shows that the cartographic implication of the poems provides detailed picture of the North Eastern Nigeria, the epicentre of the violence. It concludes that Amali, through the poems, maps villages ravaged by Boko Haram; bodies of Boko Haram victims; and top military officials as geocritical spaces through which the reader understands the misery and menace of insurgency in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Poetry and Geography are two separate disciplines, yet both of them bear some similarities, especially in the area of representation of place and space. Whereas poetry depicts them as setting, through the medium of words and some literary techniques such as imagery, figurative devices and symbolism, geography does the same through maps. This introduces the idea of literary cartography to literature, where the writer considers it as an implied map. Cartographic mapping of literary texts helps the reader to grasp "the extra dimension of 'place'" (Al-Khafaji 26). Maps are considered as representations of not just the existing space, but as imaginative projections of space that has direct bearing with people's lives (Kang et al. 141). Wael M. Mustafa considers the map and the text as "a spatial trope" functioning as both "a structuring agent, and a signifying element in literary theory" (1751). A proper reading of the text can help inscribe meaning and give a sense of organisation to the literary map. In a nutshell, poetry and place are inexorable and give shape to the envisioned map.

Literary cartography has introduced new angles and methods to literary studies and geocriticism. According to Jianqing Tuo and Yuan Zhang, "Tally's literary cartography projects a map of human existence through literary mapping, for the sake of humans' well-being" (82). For this reason, mapping transcends physical landscape to human life forms. That is, the concept of mapping also entails mapping the human body as a spatial entity. In this connection, the literary text has the ability to create the authors' space and time. Thus, "their space and time is conditional" (Isgandarova 331). This implies that space and time can be influenced by the surrounding events or the ongoing experience as revealed by the said space and time. Also, Tally considers the writer as "a map-maker" and the critic as "a map-reader". Hence, he uses the term "literary cartography" to describe different ways that writers use to map social spaces" (Tally 17). Thus, literary cartography represents a critical aspect of geocriticism.

This essay relies on geocritical theory and it draws attention to the spatial and geographic contexts of the literary text. Geocriticism explores several ways in which the writer represents space. According to Tally (Jr.), "it explores, seeks, surveys, digs into, reads and writes a place: it looks at, listens to, touches, smells, and tastes spaces" (3). Tally's view of ecocriticism aligns with Westphal's concept of

polysensoriality, a critical element of geocriticism. In Westphal's view, a reading of place should encompass many senses evoked by the place being mapped. Kristen Egan has written that "ecocritics dwell too much on space" but the truth is that, space is everything because the object of literary representation abounds in space (952). As Muriel Rosemberg has explained, "Geocriticism's object of study is space, or rather places (highlighted by art)" (289). The essential focus of geocriticism is the comparison of literary representation of space with geographical depiction of reality which has been incorporated into a text. Hence, geocriticism shows the existential ties between human beings and the world conveyed through literary representation.

The history of geocriticism cannot be written without considering the role of Westphal. In the words of Peng Zhao-na and Pen Shi-yu, "the term and theory of geocriticism was first put forward by Bertrand Westphal" (458). Westphal identifies three characteristics of postmodern space: Spatio-temporality, transgressivity and referentiality. This entails that a geocritic must explore how the idea of space and time helps to construct meaning in the literary text. As for transgressivity, Westphal insists that the reading of space must transgress the border of that space and it must show a referential relationship with humans. Westphal also identifies four critical elements of geocriticism and they are: geocentricism, stratigraphic vision, polysensoriality and multifocalization. Although Tally (Jr.) is another leading figure in the field of geocriticism, however, this essay relies specifically on Westphal's geocritical methodology. According to Peng and Peng, "the central tenets of Westphal's theory of geocriticism can be summed up in four propositions: geocentrism, multifocalization, polysensoriality and stratigraphic perspective" (460). The analysis of Amali's poetry employs geocentrism, polysensoriality and stratigraphic techniques.

Yogesh Kashikar explains that geocriticism "considers all writings as a map" and seeks to recognize the real and imaginary places (15). Geocritics examine the spatial underpinnings inherent in the text. They show to what extent the fictional place reflects the real. The same idea resonates in Amany Eldiasty's exploration of geocritical reading. The scholar explains that while engaging in a geocritical reading of a written text, the critic should pay attention to "the geographical landscape" being portrayed so as to determine the extent to which the characters and the author are able to "exhibit the fictional space" to reflect the critic's understanding of the real space (10).

The poetry of Idris Amali, contained in *Tears of Desert War*, reflects the pain, death and misery caused by Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria. The collection, satirical and scathing in its conception and portrayal of facts, remains the most authentic portrayal of the menace of Boko Haram insurgency. Patricia Garcia applies geocritical perspective to reading the female fantastic (1-11). Terezia Guimard employs Westphal's geocritical theory to literary texts (169-178). Sarah Ager uses the geocritical approach to reading the role of the desert in Penelope Lively's literary texts (205-16). Ifeyinwa J. Ogbazi and Miracle Mara use the geocritical theory to evaluate migrant spaces (1-13). Finally, Zhao-na Peng and Shi-yu Peng explore geocritical theory to read Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (457-61). Many of the critics, who have engaged the geocritical methodology to read literary texts, have ignored texts that interrogate the portrayal of insurgency. This leaves a critical gap in how the landscape of violence is depicted. This essay explores the literary cartography of Idris Amali's poetry and reveals that the poet in *Tears of Desert War* engages in mapping villages ravaged by Boko Haram insurgents, bodies of their victims, and top military officers through the deployment of geocentrism, polysensoriality and stratigraphic techniques.

Mapping Villages Ravaged by Boko Haram

The major preoccupation of this section is the huge economic challenge, following the destruction of villages, which are the economic nerve centre of the North Eastern part of Nigeria. Amali maps villages ravaged by Boko Haram through Westphal's geocritical tools, such as geocentrism and stratigraphic vision. These involve a focus on the sense of place and that of time. Amali in the poem, "Tears of Desert War 1" maps villages ravaged by Boko Haram in the following lines:

> Gamboru Ngala where are thy cows
> That humiliate cows of the far seas
> As our hopes are drowned
> In cascading tears of desert war. (lines 19-22)

The above stanza maps "Gamboru Ngala" as a village renowned for cattle breeding. The rhetorical question in the opening line functions as a statement rather than a question. The speaker laments the halt to animal husbandry in the village owing to the activities of Boko Haram. Amali's geocentric focus is on Gamboru Ngala because it depicts the loss of lucrative cattle business in the village. The cattle herders, out of fear have abandoned their land since the government has failed to protect them.

There is a strong stratigraphic vision when the speaker presents the intractable connection between the past and the present as though there was a temporal continuum. This is what the opening question maps for the reader. There was a time in the past when the village of Gamboru Ngala excelled in cattle breeding. But at present, there is a total ruin of that business. Therefore, the speaker personifies "hopes" as being "drowned" in the "cascading tears of desert war". The sense of hopelessness pervades the stanza.

The poet continues to map villages ravaged by Boko Haram as the flame of insurgency rages in the North East of Nigeria. Amali reveals the literary cartography of Dikwa, the village known for rice farming in "Tears of Desert War 2. The geocentric vision of the poet helps to map Dikwa as the home of high quality rice farming and the speaker extols the farmers for feeding the rich and the poor. This laudable farming community is destroyed by the activities of Boko Haram terrorists who steal it from the farmers and set rice farms ablaze. A sense of loss and pain pervades the stanza as the speaker bemoans the loss of the rice farmlands and their products. Through a stratigraphic technique, the poet contrasts the present with the past. In the past, Dikwa was a flourishing village in rice production, but at present, it has become a village where "brigandage" goes on "unhindered", which conveys the ease with which the Boko Haram insurgents had their way destroying the economic fortunes of the villagers. Thus, the poet's use of fire image extenuates the vision of Dikwa as a place of mindless economic destruction.

In the poem "Tears of Desert War 3", Amali maps another village, "Kalabalge". Amali's geocentrism envisions Kalabalge's literary cartography as a place known to produce grains like sorghum and millet which sustain beer production industries. The speaker is angered by the destruction of this economic power in the region. Boko Haram insurgency has grounded the production of these industries associated with them. Hence, the speaker asks the people, where the "tons of grains" have gone, which used to "feed the million tongues" both in the east and west of the country? This presupposes the use of stratigraphic technique in which the speaker contrasts the past with the present. Kalabalge, in the past, was a famous village producing grains that supported beer industries. At present, it has become a village of ruin. It is ironic that while other parts of the country are expecting a boom in the brewing industries, Kalabalge and other communities in the north play host to "endless war of brigandage" which continues to evoke "tears of desert war". Consequently, the speaker indirectly denounces Boko Haram insurgency as a war which robs the people of their source of livelihood.

Amali takes time to mourn the destruction of rich wheat farms in Marte town, Borno State. In the poem, "Tears of Desert War 4", the poet persona goes nostalgic, recalling fond memories of the economic prosperity of Marte village, and this illustrates the stratigraphic technique. The geocentric nature of the above stanza helps to create an implied map of Marte village. Relying on Westphal's stratigraphic vision, the speaker recalls the glorious days in which the wheat fields of Marte, epitomised by "La-ama", surpasses in quality of the American wheat. Equally mind-wrenching is the fact that insurgency has scared away farmers "men and women" who "in fear" had "to abandon their fields". As can be deduced from this poem, the poet suggests that apart from the killing and kidnapping foisted on the people by insurgency, the economic destruction of the village has led to "tears of desert war", a metaphor for the consequences and tragedies of the war.

Amali evokes a picture of abundance in Banki and Gulumba towns in Borno State prior to the advent of insurgency in the state. Through Amali's poetry, the literary cartography of Banki and Gulumba reveals the evil of Boko Haram insurgency. The above two towns produce cattle and agricultural products such as guinea corn, millet and rice. Food was not in short supply as they were able to feed both the rich and the poor. Cows roam freely and "leisurely" as they graze on the rich "Green and brown grasses." Therefore, the villages of Banki and Gulumba are symbols of life in Northern Nigeria, where food production was their primary occupation. Also, food security was never in doubt. These raw materials helped to sustain the economy of the northern region. This picture is meant to engrave the sense of economic destruction and loss which insurgency has caused to the people of Borno. The geocritical evaluation of Amali's poems has been conducted through geocentrism and stratigraphic techniques to convey the literary cartography of Banki and Gulumba respectively.

One phenomenon that emerged in the aftermath of Boko Haram insurgency is the nefarious activities of middlemen who made much profit leaving the hardworking farmers of Banki and Gulumba impoverished:

> As farmers smile in the fields of great harvest
> With tons upon tons of grains make their ways
> In the cruel hands of middlemen that strip
> Farmers of their existence into misery of war
> In tears of desert war. (97-101)

There is an ironic twist to the great harvest by the farmers in the above stanza. The farmers are excited that their fields are yielding great harvest, but the sudden emergence of middlemen at the height of the insurgency has turned their smiles to tears. Many of the farmers find it difficult to enter their farms. These middlemen often bought the entire products at a cheaper rate and harvest the products themselves and make so much profit. For this reason, the farmers continue to suffer and lose their means of livelihood. The implied map presented through the poems of Amali evokes the pains, death and misery of farmers who are victims of Boko Haram. Through a geocritical analysis anchored on Westphal's elements: geocentrism and stratigraphic vision, the evil of Boko Haram insurgency is presented.

Mapping Bodies of Boko Haram's Victims

Amali represents bodies of Boko Haram's victims as a cartographic space or a map which inscribes the pain, death and misery of the war waged by the insurgents against the Nigerian people. Westphal's geocriticism as applied in this section provides an approach to read Amali's literary cartography. One of the four cardinal principles of geocriticism is polysensoriality. It focuses on the many sensory perceptions evoked by the poet to present the picture of the ruin. This is evident in the poem, "Cascading tears of war 1". Amali depicts the body of little children as a map from which can be read the devastating impact of the Boko Haram insurgency. The above poem reveals the interwoven sense of polysensoriality especially the senses of sight, smell and touch. The motif of tears, which abounds in the poem, a clear image of sight, suggests the pain of insurgency and by extension, the predicament of the children. The tears are said to be "streaming from sunken eye sockets", this stream metaphor portrays the volume of tears being shed by the children either as a result of brutal injuries they sustained or the death of loved ones and the agony of famine. Their emaciated bodies have resulted in the "sunken eye socket". This grotesque image reveals the level of human destruction which insurgency has caused in Nigeria. There is also the sense of smell evoked through references to nasal secretion. This entails the "dripping nostrils" or dripping mucus which suggests the sense of morbidity triggered by the insurgent war. The poet also describes the agony of children "drenched" in the "wombs of war", a tactile image which suggests that the children are unable to escape from the ravages of the war.

The poet also exposes more details of human destruction mapped in the bodies of adults:

> Others consumed in caged countable ribs

And parents consumed in the inferno of war
But the long trek in desert of lions and leopards
Of the young and old in chameleon feat
Spring streams of tears of war. (7-11)

The virtuosity of the language is all the more remarkable when one reflects that the theme of human destruction is conveyed through polysensoriality and images that amplify the menace of Boko Haram insurgency. The admixture of violent images and those of peril and destruction run throughout the stanza. The key to the whole poem is in the various images used by the poet to present the message. The poet opens the poem with gustatory and visual imagery woven through senses of taste and sight. The people as presented suffer from hunger-induced insurgency when the image of emaciated thoracic region is painted with appropriate words. The victims of insurgency are "caged", which expresses the sense of entrapment. As a result, they are unable to move freely. Food becomes a problem. Consequently, many of the people are emaciated to the extent that their "ribs" are visibly "countable" as the parents of the above children are said to be "consumed", a sense of eating and a metaphor for destruction. Also, the thermal imagery or the sense of heat conveys the intensity of insurgency depicted through the word, "inferno". It is used to reinforce the menace of Boko Haram insurgency. The situation has compelled many people to embark on a "long trek" in the desert in order to escape from the war. Consequently, many of the people lose their lives to "lions and leopards" in the desert. Thus, these animals contribute to the human destruction and provide a frightening cartography of the insurgency.

Amali captures human destruction as one of the tragic consequences of insurgency in the poem, "Cascading tears of war 5":

Heaps of dead bodies of countrymen, women, children…
Laid in unidentified paupers' mass graves after each attack
Are themselves casualties and tears of war
War of revenge as renegades climb thrones. (14-17)

The artistic brilliance of the poet manifests in the apt deployment of imagery sustained through polysensoriality. The evocative presentation of the dead through visual imagery or the sense of sight is laudable. The picture of mass human destruction is presented and evoked through the line: "Heaps of dead bodies of countrymen, women, children" (14). The sense of heaps suggests huge amount of refuse, but in the context of the poem, they are heaps of dead bodies. This expresses the shocking

and bizarre picture of the dead. The intension is to heighten the number of dead people who are "Laid in unidentified paupers' mass graves after each attack" (15). By showing the great number of those buried during the insurgency, the poet indirectly calls attention to the horror of human destruction especially of lives destroyed in the insurgent war.

The theme of human destruction is further affirmed in Amali's "Jos Boils" as follows:

> Jos boils again
> The malignant cancer surges
> As the extant volcanic Dogon Dutse
> In rage wears a different costume
> Erupts and pours afresh in abated anger
> Fresh hot lava that destroys
> All on her route of destruction. (1-7).

This stanza is noted for its metaphoric and polysensorial exuberance, with which the poet intensifies the message of human devastation occasioned by insurgency. The comparison of the unrest in Jos to boiling water is a brilliant example of metaphor and thermal imagery (the sense of heat). The picture being painted is one full of violence. The image of "malignant cancer" draws attention to the sense of sight to underscore the intractable nature of violence in Jos. The sense of sound or auditory imagery to depict the violence in Jos is evoked through the image of volcanic eruption. The poet also alludes to the extinct volcano, "Dogon Dutse" which is being awaken to full eruption. As a result, the insurgents are said to release "fresh hot lava" on the city which destroys "all on her route". The geocritical vision of the speaker is commendable in how polysensoriality is deployed to create a literary cartography of Jos as a city steaming in brutal violence.

Polysensoriality abounds in the next stanza thus:

> Boiling again Jos boils
> Heeding not to calls for truce
> As cannibals make feast in daylight gory festivals
> Of human flesh in the streets of Jos
> As the cries, pains and aroma of roasted human bones and flesh
> Overwhelm ghosh
> The dying city of hate. (18-24)

The image of feasting and festivity is employed to convey the mindless destruction of human lives as insurgents ran rampage in Jos. The poet imbues the mind with

visual picture of the dead. The insurgents are compared to cannibals, a metaphor for flesh eating animals to amplify their pleasure in killing. Beyond this, the poet depicts them as arsonists, concretised by evoking the sense of smell, as indicated by the olfactory imagery of "aroma of roasted human bones and flesh". There is an irony in the above metaphor. The aroma is supposed to come from roasted animal flesh, but in an ironic twist, the roasted meat is that of humans. Jos is said to be "overwhelmed" by visible images of dead bodies littering the streets. This is animated by loud "cries" and "pains" of the bereaved to express their loss. The sense of sound or hearing evoked in this stanza helps to paint the city of Jos as a place of bitter killings.

The theme of human loss also resonates in the following stanza beginning with an ideophonic sound of violence: "Gudum! Gudum! Gudum! Gudum!" (11). The "Gudum!" sound is ideophonic and it evokes the sense of fear. It is the sound of guns and explosive devices that Boko Haram insurgents used to attack the city of Maiduguri. According to the speaker, the sound "shook" the earth and destroyed the "bones" of those long buried in their graves. Indirectly, the sound that shatters the bones of the dead will invariably harm the living. Therefore, the combined senses of sound and sight help to construct the city of Maiduguri, under the siege of insurgents, as a place of heavy bombardment and shelling.

The poems, thus far examined, contain many interlocking layers of senses which provide the reader with the picture of pain and predominant mood of gloom and exasperation in order to capture the predicament of Boko Haram's victims. This explains why senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and heat abound which undergird the central message of the poems: the literary cartography of the menace of insurgency.

Mapping Top Military Officers

The preceding sections have mapped villages ravaged by Boko Haram and bodies of Boko Haram's victims respectively. This section examines how Amali maps top military officers in the poems. Amali, in two of the poems, believes that some top military officers have not only sabotaged the fighting prowess of the Nigerian troops, they have also encouraged Boko Haram insurgency to thrive. The poems are entitled: "Trial of Chief of Generals Without War" and "Try this Man" respectively. In the first poem, "Trial of Chief of Generals Without War", the poet begins the poem with literary cartography or a verbal map which presents a grim picture of the terrible working condition under which the Nigerian soldiers are compelled to fight Boko

Haram insurgents. The speaker focuses on the weapons that they use, as a kind of spatial context. Amali spatialises the military, the weapons and the Nigerian National Assembly, especially the senate as institutions that entrench corruption. The speaker denounces the soldiers as victims of impoverishment and deprivation. The Nigerian "officers and men" are described as "hunger stricken". Also, the corrupt system deprives them of modern weapons to fight insurgents. For this reason, the soldiers carry 18th century armours which are ineffective against the insurgents. The effect is that the so-called officers and men become "cannon folders", which is an image of waste, loss and avoidable death. The irony is that the Nigerian National Assembly had approved a huge appropriation budget for the procurement of sophisticated and modern arms and ammunition. This, therefore, presupposes that the defence budget is being stolen by those in power in collusion with the legislators and the senior military officers. This explains why the speaker maps the legislative chamber as a place which is best described as "hollow hallow chambers of greed and grab". The words used above, when carefully analyzed, reveal much information and help to map the senate as a place of absolute corruption. For example, the word "hallow" connotes sanctity, holiness and reverence. The chambers are supposed to be the bastion of uprightness, decency and integrity. By employing the word, "hollow" to qualify "hallow chambers", it suggests that the chambers (both the House of Representatives and the Senate) lack the hallow quality. Hence, they are "chambers of greed and grab". Relying on the stratigraphic technique, it is important to remember that the Nigerian chambers have not always been this despicable. The poet wants us to know that there was a time when the chambers once upheld dignity and integrity. The spatial representation of the chamber accounts for the extenuating nature of Boko Haram insurgency in the country.

The speaker denounces senior military officers in the following words: "Let's cry conspirators in glass houses" (14). The poet employs the term "glass houses" as a spatial map to describe the seat of Nigerian military establishment. The place is evoked as the abode of "conspirators". It suggests the sense of collusion between the top military officers and some members of the legislative arm who have been given the oversight function over the military. The poet-persona is convinced that the money earmarked to buy modern weapons have been stolen by these officers in "glass houses." Relying on polysensoriality, the poet apart from using the visual image of the glass houses, uses auditory imagery in reference to "drumming voices" to orchestrate collective denunciation of what both the legislators and the military officers are doing to make the task of fighting insurgency very herculean.

Also in another poem, entitled, "Try this Man", Amali provides a broad literary map to depict the condition under which the soldiers engage Boko Haram fighters. The spatiality of this poem can be figured out by exploring the several encoded messages. First, those killed in the war against insurgency are lured with the impression that they have bought modern and sophisticated weapons. This illustrates the mapping of a very precarious space or battlefield. Second, the huge sum of money provided to buy weapons was duly approved. But, these monies have been shared and even kept in private accounts in foreign countries. Therefore, the generals are compelled to buy "fake battle gears" which in most occasions, refuse to work having been exposed to rain. Amali has indirectly spatialized the abuse of office without resorting to vitriolic statements. This linguistic maturity is commendable.

In the next stanza in "Try this Man" Amali spatializes the fake battle gears which the generals have bought and provided to the military. The literary cartography is cleverly presented thus:

> The boots pride of the infantry to match gallantly
> Dissolve into tissue of waste.
> At the heart of war, the bullets of war
> Turn into rubber bullets that fly like butterfly and drop
> At the nozzles of rickety heavily budgeted anti-aircraft guns. (10-14).

The "boots" are the prized possession of the infantry unit. With them, they match into unknown territories without fear. Unfortunately, the ones bought by the generals are fragile. Their fragility is metaphorically equated to "tissue of waste". As for the "bullets", they are inferior, in fact, they are "rubber bullets". Their weightlessness is intensified by the simile in which the poet compares the bullets to the butterfly. The implication is that, when shot, they do not hit their target. Even the "anti-aircraft guns" which they bought are "heavily budgeted" and despite the huge financial involvement, they are "rickety". Thus, weapons, military hardware and materials function as spatial configurations through which the poet depicts the wickedness of some corrupt military officers.

Conclusion

The spatial turn has ushered new perspective to engage with the diverse issues connected to place and space, through the study of literary texts. Literature and Geography, in this regard, are related. A noteworthy contribution of Geography to Literature is the advent of geocritcism from which literary cartography has its being.

The most prominent aspect of this essay is the application of geocritical theory in the analysis of texts imbued with depleted, degraded and destroyed landscape combined with the map of human misery expressed by the poet through the kind of children, adults and the dead bodies exposed to insurgency. The places revealed in the fictional poems are verifiable and real. They help to contextualize the pathography of insurgency.

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