



IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN POST-COLONIAL NORTHERN NIGERIA: AN EXAMPLE OF E. E. SULE'S *STERILE SKY*

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Cite this article:

Oluwatoyin Umar (2023), Identity Conflicts in Post-Colonial Northern Nigeria: An Example of E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*. International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics 6(1), 46-56. DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-JPRIU0ET

Manuscript History

Received: 2 Feb 2023

Accepted: 8 March 2023

Published: 28 March 2023

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ABSTRACT: *Ethnicity and religion have continued to play significant roles in preventing the attainment of national identity in post-colonial Nigeria. Within the ambit of the post-colonial theory, this study examines the concepts of identity and hybridity in the inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations that result in the recurring Northern Nigeria's violent crises as expounded in E.E. Sule's novel, Sterile Sky. This study shows that the north of Nigeria has, to a great extent, been unable to achieve a hybridized identity with the rest of the nation. Ethnic and, especially, religious identity remain the preferred identity as well as the primary cause of conflicts in Northern Nigeria. In Sterile Sky, ethnic, and especially religious identity are identified as the preferred identity in the cosmopolitan city of Kano, and the primary cause of conflict in Northern Nigeria. This work is a contribution in providing an understanding of the post-colonial conflicts in Nigeria through literary evaluation.*

KEYWORDS: Identity, Postcolonial, Conflict, Religion, Hybrid.



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a nation where sectionalism and conflicts, in the form of ethnic, regional and religious differences, have continued to widen the crack in the superficial wall that was erected by the colonial system to keep the country intact as a post-colonial nation-state. The division and the dividing factors are becoming 'louder' than the paradoxical song of cohesion, which the 'nation' has so laboriously chanted. In the north of Nigeria, sectionalism and exclusionism have pervaded the social, political and economic lives of the people. Yet, in comparison to the literary representation of the post-colonial conflict situations, especially the Nigerian civil war as portrayed by writers of southern extraction (Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, Eddie Iroh, Isidore Okpewho, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, among several others), not much has been written about the situation in the north. This might be so since Nigerians, for the most part, do not define themselves by a common national heritage. Ogundipe (2014) argues that Nigeria has no national literature that reflects and promotes a single identity of the nation. Nigerian Literature, therefore, reflects the true picture of the diversity and divisions that distinguish the country. He maintains that what Nigeria has is a collective body of the country's literary production.

Turning the spotlight on the prevailing northern Nigerian crisis has become imperative. Among the numerous perspectives that have been adopted by Nigerian writers in presenting the historical experience and the post-colonial conflicts in the country, writers of Northern origin have recently taken on the problems of ethnic and religious conflicts, which have besieged the region. Novels by northern authors about the experiences of the north have addressed issues of ethnic conflicts, religious riots, and the insurgency in the North East, North West and North Central; as well as the settler-indigene dichotomies in the North Central, among other problems associated with the post-colonial identity in Northern Nigeria.

Within the space of the two decades between Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Kano* of the 1960s, as portrayed in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, to Sule's *Kano* of the 1980s in *Sterile Sky*, a deeper sense of separate identity from the rest of the country's other ethnic and religious groups has developed among the people of Kano. By the 1980s, the struggle for a primarily ethnic, and especially religious identity has led to an increase in violent conflicts in the city. It is worthy to note at this point that in Northern Nigeria, ethnicity and religion go hand-in-hand and can therefore not be evaluated entirely as separate notions. While some writers from the north, such as Ahmed Maiwada in his novel *Musdoki*, have addressed the misconception that the north is a monolithic entity, it remains a fact that there is a strong religious dimension to the northern identity. Therefore, while they are seen generally as the people of the "Hausa North" by the southern part of the country, the religious and ethnic differences that cause separation within the north continue to prevail. Sule's fictional account of the Kano crisis provides an example of the conflicts as they affect the Northern city of Kano. However, unlike some writers who have focused on the historical and sociopolitical implications of issues that have led up to the conflicts, Sule has focused more on how the conflicts have impacted the everyday, and especially, the socio-economic lives of ordinary citizens. Sule's contribution to the narrative on post-colonial conflicts has, however, provided some insights on the Nigerian post-colonial identity question.



THE POST-COLONIAL IDENTITY AND HYBRIDITY

The post-colonial discourse has continued to find application in literary studies as it combats the residual effects of colonialism in post-colonial societies. Tejumola Olaniyan (2007) cites Ngugi wa Thiong'o's description of the post-colonial condition as a "more dangerous cancer" than the colonial experience (639). In the 2010 Audrey Richard's Annual Lecture in African Studies, Achebe (2011) has also asserted that what is happening in Africa today can be traced back to colonial experiences, which have resulted in disjointed, inexplicable, tension-prone nation-states today. Ashcroft et al. (1994) describe the term as one which is now used to primarily examine the processes, effects of and reactions to colonialism from its onset to the present times.

Scholars of post-colonial African studies have attempted to answer the question of identity and the history of the colonized African people. The post-colonial identity is one that has been influenced by the history of colonialism. Theorists and scholars have given various perspectives on post-colonial identity. Edward Said (1993), for example, has rightly stated that whatever the colonial influence is in any society, existing cultural identities cannot be denied. Said however points out that today, no one is purely one thing if actual experience is to be considered in the definition of identity. Bhabha (1994) argued that cultures do not have fixed and unchangeable traits. Bhabha, through his concept of hybridity in post-colonial studies, has suggested a position of in-betweenness. Bhabha's argument is that a new alliance formulates itself when there is a new situation (Bhabha, 1990). Thus cultural differences among post-colonial people can be articulated in the hybridized space.

Expressing the popular view held by many Nigerian writers and critics, Okafor (2008) has identified the lack of national identity in Nigeria as a problem caused by the colonial administrative systems. In his view, nurturing and encouraging the nation to grow under separate identities did not make room for harmonious relationships – the South with its Western orientation while the orientation in the North was Islamic. In a similar observation, Wilfried Fueser (1986) described the politics of pre-independence Nigeria as one, which took on an ethnic complexion that can be paralleled to the colonial emphasis on tri-regional instead of national administration as formulated by the Richards Constitution of 1951 (1986). Achebe (1983) takes the blame further in *The Trouble with Nigeria*. He condemns the "pre-mature", "half-hearted", and "plain deceitful", "threatening gestures" that have been made against the word tribe (6). According to him, the word has continued to stay around since work has been provided for it to do; for instance, a Nigerian child is made to state his religion, sex, state of origin and tribe on an admission form. Merit is denied in favor of several partisan considerations (Achebe, 1983).

Indeed, the identity issues in *Sterile Sky* are major divisive, and by extension, conflict factors, which continue to widen the gulf between the northern Muslim and other Nigerians. The violence that rages in post-independent Nigeria, like that of India as portrayed in Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight Children*, is typical of a people struggling with postcolonial hybrid identity, which quickly gives way (if ever it was attained) to narrowed identities; the concept of nation gives way to ethnicity, religious beliefs as well as political convictions. It is obvious that, like the concept of unity described by Frantz Fanon (1980), the idea of unity only served the temporary function of shaking colonialism to its very foundation after which the idea crumbled in the struggle to occupy the posts vacated by the colonial masters. Fanon (1980) rightly predicted further that the fight that ensued will also lead to religious rivalry.



It is, however, important to observe that pre-colonial Islamic influence has positioned the Muslims in the North to retain an Islamic identity, considering Edward Said's argument on the role of actual experience in the definition of identity (Said, 1993). The contact with Islam in the North has given the northern Muslims an identity that is different from the post-colonial identity of other parts of the country. Among the Hausa – Fulani Muslims of Northern Nigeria, the ethnic identity has not only been totally integrated with religious identity, but is also on the verge of being completely submerged by it. The influence of Islam before colonialism in Northern Nigeria has resulted in what Bhabha (1990) has described in his interview with Rutherford as a new alliance, which has demanded the translation, rethinking and extension of principles. In other words, the Muslim identity has been formed and nurtured several years before contact with the West.

Islam has also influenced the contribution of northern Muslims to colonial discourse in literature. It is clear that, just as the deep-rooted Islamic-Arabic influence has strongly contributed to the shaping of the Northern Nigerian Muslim identity, Islamic influence has also contributed to the silence of the north in colonial discourse in mainstream literature of Nigeria. Shehu (2014) posits that West African Literature has privileged the colonial period which has inhibited the study of the significant impact of Islam on literary production in the north. She insists that it is important to question the gap and examine the critical silence on colonial influence in narratives that demonstrate that there are other cultural influences worth considering other than colonialism and Christianity in literature. Thus, when fiction, in this true and broad sense, is allowed to take root in the North, for the writer, the older and stronger influence, which is Islam, is bound to dominate.

In the same way that Islamic influence has contributed to the long silence of the North in colonial discourse in the mainstream literature of Nigeria, the deep-rooted Islamic – Arabic influence has strongly contributed to defining and shaping the Northern Nigeria Muslim hybrid identity. Christianity and colonialism, on the other hand, have influenced or redefined the identity of non-Muslims. The promotion of an Islamic – Arabic identity by Muslims in West Africa, and Northern Nigeria in particular is similar to the preference for an Arab identity in North Africa. According to Olusegun-Joseph (2012), “there is an enduring view by many North Africans that they belong to pan-Arabic confederacy rather than to the African Socio-ideological bloc” (p. 223). For example, the Northern Nigerian Muslims, just like Egypt, Libya and Sudan in North Africa, share a common ethnic, cultural, linguistic and Islamic identity that significantly distinguishes them from the rest of the people within their geopolitical location in Nigeria and Africa, respectively. The colonial administration had accepted the rejection of Western influence on the Hausa/Islamic cultures of the people. Gérard (2007) has noted generally that “the Muslim cultures of black Africa have shown uncommon resilience to the impact of Europe, presumably because they are proudly grounded in one of the great religions of the world” (p. 20). Thus, while the work of Christian missions gave an additional Christian identity to the African traditional religion, for non-Muslims, Fredrick Lugard's promise of support, protection and preservation of the native institutions of the Muslim emirates and religious non-interference and exclusion of Christian missions from the emirates kept the Islamic identity strong (Lipdo, 2015).

It is worthy to note at this point that in Northern Nigeria, ethnicity and religion go hand-in-hand. Many scholars from the North have attempted to counter the views that the North is a monolithic entity, often seen as the “Hausa North” by the Southern part of the country. Writers such as E. E. Sule have projected the religious dimensions to the Northern identity. In



spite of this conception of the Northern identity, the religious and ethnic differences that continue to cause separation within the north are fierce. Both Muslims and Christians of Northern Nigeria have interpreted history and their experiences differently.

DISCUSSION

Conflicts in Northern Nigeria and their causes have been reported in various fields of study. The recent literary outputs by writers such as E. E. Sule, Richard Ali, Dul Johnson, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Elnathan John and Edify Yakusak, among others, have taken the subject matter of the Northern Nigeria conflict to a deeper and more poignant dimension. Indeed these literary expressions prove that “imaginative identification is the opposite of indifference; it is human connectedness at its most intimate” (Achebe, 2007, p. 113). For this study, Sule’s *Sterile Sky* does not only provide the context required for a literary assessment of the Kano riots, but points to clear-cut examples of identity issues that are fundamental to a meaningful analysis and understanding of the situation.

The Questions of Post-colonial Identity in *Sterile Sky*

Sule E. Egya (2012) presents the problems that bedevil Nigerians living in the cosmopolitan city of Kano amidst ethnic and religious tensions. More than the socio-political cause or the implications of the conflicts, Sule’s focus is on the everyday lives of his characters, which reveals that ethnic background, and especially religious beliefs delineate the identity of the characters in the novel. It is this lack of a common national identity that triggers the tension and incessant violence in the city, thereby putting the question of cultural hybridity at bay.

From the very first page of Sule’s novel, the central issue in the story is presented. Kano is experiencing another religious violence as a reaction against the planned visit of the renowned German-American Christian evangelist, Reinhard Bonke for a crusade. A horrendous mood prevails throughout the novel, in the typical Northern Nigerian city, with its recurrent religious crises in which several people are massacred. The effect of the violence on the lives of the poor people is very strong. The people live in perpetual fear and a sense of insecurity. The non-Hausa settlers from different parts of Nigeria live mostly in Sabon Gari. Like Murtala’s family, after every crisis, the non-Muslim seek refuge in the Sabon Gari Divisional Police Station and remain there until calm returns to the city. Using Okwudiba Nnoli’s illustration, Amuta (1983) has traced the establishment of distinct residential areas for different ethnic groups in the various regions of the nation to emphasis on ethnic separateness in the new Nigerian nation-state. This is seen in the “Sabon Garis (home of aliens) in Northern Nigeria” and the “Sabos (Hausa-Fulani areas) in Southern towns” (87).

The North is made up of several ethnic groups; however people from this part of Nigeria are erroneously referred to as ‘Hausa’ by the southerners. When Odula, Murtala’s father tries to explain that his state of origin, Plateau, is North Central and not North, the DPO responds scornfully, “North is North, nothing like central nonsense. Plateau, Ha-wu-sa” (p. 220). Language is central to the identity of a people. Omobowale, as cited in Joseph (2015) has noted that “the centrality of diffusion and the consequent prominence of Hausa has given the language and culture a hegemonic character which at times silences the other languages and cultures” (p. 24). The DPO then sees to it that Odula is dismissed from the Police Force after



he fails to find the armed robber who has escaped under his custody. When Odula goes to beg the DCO to help him plead with the DPO, he is told that SP Ibekwe is adamant; “That’s the position he takes if the culprit is from the North” (p. 235).

It has been established thus far that in post-colonial Nigerian society, individuals, societies or groups possess anyone of an ethnic, religious or hybrid identity. There is no gainsaying to the fact that the preferred identity for the Northern Muslim is the religious identity. Religious identity manifests itself most strongly in confrontations with people of a different religion. In Northern Nigeria, the conflicts are usually between Muslims and Christians. *Sterile Sky* is concerned with the religious riots associated with the typical cosmopolitan but predominantly Muslim Northern cities, where most of the non-Muslims are from other parts of Nigeria. The identity issues in *Sterile Sky* are majorly divisive, and by extension, conflict factors, which continue to widen the gulf between the northern Muslim and other Nigerians, specifically those living in Kano. Sule’s novel focuses on the destructive power of nurturing a purely religious identity and sentimentalities. The ‘strangers’, who are already nurturing pre-existing post-colonial conflicts of identity, are caught in the clash of identity assertion that sums up the Kano violence.

Social integration and the attainment of national identity become even more difficult with memories of past ethnic and religious clashes. During a conversation in Murtala’s class, a student who had been injured in the fight, tells the others that her mother had told her that Muslims have killed Igbos before the civil war and that it was since then that “The North and the South started hating each other” (p. 42). When a student observes that the crisis is between Christians and Muslims, and not Igbos and Hausas, Millicent, Murtala’s classmate sums it up, “Most people from the North are Muslims and most people from the South are Christians” (p. 42). Ethnicity and religion therefore continue to define the identity of the individual Nigerian; and as revealed in *Sterile Sky*, the North is synonymous to Islam and the South to Christianity (Sule, 2012, pp. 42, 219 and 220).

The lack of integration transcends generations. When Murtala tells his primary school mate, Aminu that he has been admitted to Tony Cheta College, Aminu sneers at him and says the school is full of Nyamiris (Igbos) and Kafirs (non-muslims) (pp. 42-43). The establishment of schools such as Tony Cheta College can be linked intertextually to ethnic issues like the one that led to the establishment of the Igbo Grammar School by the Igbo people living in Kano in the 60s in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, when the Igbo children are refused admission into schools in Kano (p. 38). In the notebook in which Odula, Murtala’s father has been writing down the events that have led to his dismissal from the Police Force, the issues are further enunciated. SP Ibekwe, the DPO who fires Odula, is on a mission to strike back in quiet ways against the Northerners for killing his parents and two siblings in one of the Kano crises. In the novel, the origin of Kano violence is traced to the violence that preceded the civil war, “when the North and the South started hating each other” (p. 42). The ethnic and especially, religious identity, continue to widen the gulf between the Hausa Muslims of Kano and settlers in their midst since the days of the independence heroes to the post-civil war conflicts. In Sule’s novel, Ijaguwa, Murtala’s mother, desperately and repeatedly expresses her wish to leave Kano and return to her own village. The violence creates a rift between Murtala’s parents, which eventually drives his father into substance abuse and the desertion of his family.



Murtala, the protagonist and narrator, himself a victim, observes helplessly, as the violence takes its toll on his parents, siblings, neighbors and acquaintances. Under the weight of incessant religious violence in the city, Murtala's father, Odula, and his mother, Ijaguwa, are forced to take decisions that tear the family apart. With an ending that borders on hopelessness of the situation in a society that has become increasingly partisan and violent, the possibility of acquiring a national identity becomes more and more doubtful, if not bleak altogether. Therefore, Sule's novel does not only provide the context required for a literary assessment of the Kano riots, but it also points to clear-cut examples of identity issues that are fundamental to a meaningful analysis and understanding of the Northern Nigerian situation.

Interrogating Post-colonial Hybrid Identities and Worldviews in *Sterile Sky*

The Islamic identity is nurtured and fortified against external influences, which are perceived as threats to the pre-colonial Islamic identity of Northern Muslims, while the identities of the non-Muslims have been altered by colonial – Western influence. On the whole, the lack of a common national identity continues to trigger the tension and incessant violence portrayed in *Sterile Sky*, thereby putting the question of cultural hybridity at bay, no matter how long Muslims and Christians have co-existed in Kano.

Sterile Sky projects how the Hausa – Fulani – Arabic hybridized identity fosters an Islamic-Arab alliance, resulting in an international religious unity, in opposition to national unity. Religious identity impels the Kano Muslims to identify with world Islam and Islamic ideologies. As portrayed in the novel, the religious crises are also often inflamed by news of international conflicts between the West and Muslim Arab nations. These external wars usually translate into religious tensions in Northern Nigeria. Murtala has once seen a poster which depicts hostility between America's George Bush and Iraq's Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. "In God We Trust" is written close to Bush's head and "Inshallah we shall win the war" is written near Hussein's head. The poster has multi-coloured figures of soldiers, armored tanks and machine guns, and there are mangled bodies of people in a flame at the bottom of the poster (p. 56). At another time, a Saddam poster celebrates his victory: "ALLAHU AKBAR; WE HAVE WON A JUST WAR" is written on the poster above Saddam's image (p. 159). These external events easily inflame crises and inspire a complete rejection of Western ideals or identity. This, by extension, means a rejection or hybridization of cultures – a rejection of an alliance with the West. It also implies a refusal to translate, rethink and extend principles as proposed by Bhabha (Rutherford, 1990), regardless of the colonial experience.

The Muslims characteristically express a totally Islamic worldview. An example is seen in the attitude of Hadiza, a Muslim woman who is severely burnt after being set ablaze by Christian youths in Sabon Gari. When Mama tells Hadiza that it is the killers' fault that she now looks horrible, Hadiza insists that "It's Allah's destiny" (p. 113). From the people's actions in defense of Islam, to their language of expression, the Northern Muslims exude a strong religious identity, an identity which they do anything to proclaim and defend. They consider every non-Hausa – Fulani, and especially non-Muslim, as "kafiri", whose presence and non-Islamic practices hinder the purely Islamic identity the people seek to promote. The first crisis in the novel, being one of several others, is a reaction against the planned visit of the renowned German-American Christian evangelist, Reinhard Bonke for a crusade. From the very first page of the novel, the horrendous mood, which prevails throughout the novel,



soars on the wings of religious assertiveness in the typical Northern Nigerian city, with its recurrent religious crises in which several people are massacred. People who have lived together for several years easily take up arms against their neighbors. Murtala's neighbor, Umar and his mother think that it is better to give up a meal than miss out in the war against "Kafiris" (pp. 6 and 7).

In the second account of violence narrated by Uncle Tony, Murtala's maternal uncle, the Muslim students of the university have risen up in defense of Islam, to punish two students for defiling the holy campus with sins of the flesh (p. 163). The two students, a Yoruba boy and a Calabar girl, have broken the rule, which prohibits male or female students from entering each other's hostels. The two students are killed; their bodies are mangled and publicly displayed to serve as an example to other students. The action leads to protest and retaliation by non-muslim students, who kill four Muslim students, two males and two females, in ways similar to how the other two students were killed. The President of the Muslim Students' Association declares a Jihad (pp. 161 – 153). The university is shut down following the violence that ensues.

The third religious crisis in the narrative begins with the allegation that a woman has torn out a sheet of paper from the Koran to clean her child's backside. The woman is beheaded and her head is impaled on a stick (p. 256). Riot breaks out and non-Muslims seek refuge in Sabon Gari Police Station as usual. The three instances of violence recorded in the narration have their root causes in identity conflicts that stem from perceived disregard for the Islamic identity which the city struggles to uphold against the invasion of strange cultures. In Sule's fictional account of the Kano conflicts in *Sterile Sky*, the clash of worldviews, which is the root of post-colonial conflict in Northern Nigeria, complicates the moral question that simply seeks to identify who is right and who is wrong.

There is an irony in the Muslim – Christian conflict however, as portrayed in *Sterile Sky*. While the conflict is mostly tagged as Muslims versus Christians, in reality most of the people on the Christian side of the divide do not hold unto a purely Christian identity and often do not share an identity. As seen in the earlier evaluation of Mama, Murtala's mother's conflict of identity, and for most of the non-Muslims in the novel, their traditions and their contact with Western culture and religion have simply produced a hybrid identity, which is neither purely traditional African nor Western Christian.

In the novel, Odula, Murtala's father who suffers the agony of religious violence with his family for being a Christian rarely goes to church, and whenever he does, he returns home with a litany of criticisms (p. 54). When his wife reports that their daughter Imatum no longer attends the same church with her and their other children, he responds, "I don't interfere in such trivial issues as church problems" (p. 143). Even his son, Murtala loses interest in God, church or prayer (pp. 40, 221 and 223). After leaving his family and starting a different life, Odula remains poor, hopeless and helpless but becomes more philosophical, and religion, especially God, now totally has no place in his worldview.

However, by the time Odula is re-introduced in *Makwala* (Sule, 2018), a sequel to *Sterile Sky*, it is obvious that Odula has not entirely stopped believing in the powers of a supernatural being. He screams for help as he single-handedly takes the difficult delivery of his son by the mad woman he impregnated; "God, why don't you come to our aid? How could you be so



wicked! Help! Help! Help! Help! Is there any person or god who can help?! ...(p.26). By the end of the novel though, Odule once again expresses a total loss of faith.

Sterile Sky also presents the humanist and African traditional views of Omodiale, Murtala's neighbor, and Uncle Tony, Murtala's uncle. Both Omodiale and Tony, who have escaped death for being "Kafiris", during the Muslim – Christian crises, cynically present rationalist views on the killings and other issues of life. They dismiss the significance of God or religion in human affairs. Omodiale has faith in nothing. He smokes marijuana and sleeps with different girls, including his neighbors' daughters, Fatima and Murtala's sister, Imatum. Omodiale blames the killings on religious instructions. He relates the conflicts to the history of humans and traces the history of human beings killing one another to religious injunctions and holy instructions, as well as man's desire to dominate others. Omodiale condemns the violence on which primitive societies are founded; religious accounts of killings that were based on holy instructions; empires' conquests, the world wars, the Holocaust, the Great Purge of the Soviet Union, slave trade, colonialism, the brutality of apartheid in South Africa; and racial violence across the world (p. 91). Omodiale places the blame on religion, especially Christianity and Islam. Sule presents a parallel, albeit, minor character to Omodiale in his novel,

When Uncle Tony refuses to go to church during a visit to Murtala's house, Murtala's mother questions his action and he simply says, "Don't worry about me, Big Sister. Christianity and Islam are foreign religions that don't merit my attention anymore...The ancestral way our fathers worshiped God is the best way for me" (p. 40). In response to her question on whether he still believes in Jesus, he says "Oh yes, I know he existed in history.... Jesus Christ was a great humanist of his time. Every history has its great humanists" (p. 40). The various examples of identity conflicts, especially among non-Muslims have located them in positions of in-between identities. Mama's religious worldview, as portrayed in the novel, is however not purely Christian. Mama calls on both God Almighty (p. 83) and her ancestors (p. 84). The syncretism of religions exhibited by Murtala's mother is mostly associated with non-Muslims who have ended up with "...a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). It is worthy to note that Mama reads her Bible and sings Christian songs whenever she is angry with her family (pp. 126, 153 and 218). Early morning family prayer becomes serious only when her husband deserts the family and on some occasions, Mama questions God for their plight, as she desperately seeks to return to her village. Religion becomes relevant to the extent that it serves Mama's purpose. In a similar manner, Baba Fatima, Murtala's neighbor, does not hesitate to convert to Islam in order to escape death during one of the Kano riots. He hopes to go back to Christianity when he retires to his village (p. 87).

The Northern Nigerian situation can be captured in Stuart Hall's evaluation. Hall (1994) asserts that the intervention of history is what determined what we have become. To him, cultural identity is both a matter of 'becoming', as well as of 'being'. To Hall (1994), identity is whatever name is given to the different ways the narratives of the past position a people or the ways they choose to position themselves (p. 394); identity is thus, "a positioning" and not "an essence" (p. 395).

Sule challenges the 'positioning' in Nigerian communities through his portrayal of the relationship between Ola's parents in *Sterile Sky*. Ola's father is a Christian and Yoruba, while his mother is a Muslim Hausa woman. Murtala wonders how a Christian and a Muslim



who “always hate each other” can be married when his own mother does not even like them to have Muslim friends (p. 73). It is noteworthy that through the marriage of the wealthy and enlightened parents of Murtala’s friend, Ola, Sule shows the possibility of harmonious coexistence by the two religions. Sule takes a stand with Bhabha, who questions established categorisation of culture and identity and argues that a new alliance formulates itself when there is a new situation, which may demand that principles should be translated, rethought and extended (Rutherford, 1990). As the theorist to first use the term hybridity in post-colonial studies, Bhabha (1994) has argued that while hybridity “is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures ...it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid (p. 120).

CONCLUSION

As a subject matter that has mostly been the preoccupation of writers from the Southern part of the country (especially the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War), post-colonial conflict, as treated in *Sterile Sky* provides a much needed insight on the different dimensions to the conflicts. While existing literary works have contributed much in presenting and analyzing writers’ concerns on the Northern Nigerian situation, the ethnic and religious identity questions in literary works by contemporary writers such as E. E. Sule provides significant perspectives and further understanding on the postcolonial issue. Sule’s novel focuses on the destructive power of nurturing religious identity and sentimentalities. With an ending that borders on hopelessness of the situation in a society that has become increasingly partisan and violent, the possibility of acquiring a national identity becomes increasingly doubtful.

People have continued to define themselves by increasingly different identities that make living cohesively in the culturally heterogeneous society difficult. Earlier works have simply viewed issues along the North/South divide. It is however clear that, ethnic origin and especially religion, determines a person’s identity within the Northern states, resulting in the frequent violent conflicts in the region. The problems identified in this study do not merely remain as answers to the questions on identity and conflicts in Northern Nigeria. They reveal that the solution to the problems of lack of national identity must be pursued deliberately. The solution to fostering a national identity does not primarily lie with the individual Nigerian who are still grappling with the concept of nationhood in their ethnic and religious enclaves. The task of making national policies that will foster oneness lies with those who have taken on the responsibility of building the nation. When the solutions continue to be sought only in helpless supplications of the suffering Nigerian people, which affirm their religious positioning, despair pervades; with bloodshed and fumes from the charred carcass of nationhood beneath the sterile sky.



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