



Naked Light & The Blind Eye is a story set in a society that has gone through phases of change but the changes seem to make the lives of the inhabitants worse. The narrative is told in interlocking stories that comprise three parts and which are the main sub-divisions of the text. Each short story unravels into another interrelated story that helps the reader make the connection between the different mini-stories. In part one, the reader is introduced to Solomon Wenku, the main protagonist in the novel. The novel begins with the disappearance of Solomon's wife, Tani, and this greatly troubles Solomon. But it also creates for him the occasion to reflect on his life and it is through his reflections that we

know about the larger society and the influences that have shaped the life of his community. This first mini-story reads like a monologue. Solomon takes in every detail of his surroundings and

Pristine Village and Decadent City

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Naked Light & the Blind Eye

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then begins to analyse each situation with a critical and sceptical eye.

The first part of the novel is set in a flat in a city suburb, where Solomon lives with his wife, Tani, and their two

children. The story moves from the flat into a slum where Tani goes to live with her friend, Shadun, after she is battered by Solomon. Whether it is in the suburb or the slum, the city described is dysfunctional, filled with heaps of garbage, potholes, beggars and general chaos.

The physical environment in a way depicts the chaos in the social environment as portrayed by Solomon's life, which is chaotic. He is in a second marriage that is often on the brink of collapse. It is a marriage of convenience more than anything else, driven by nothing other than the survival instinct of the partners. Solomon's wife has deserted him and gone to live with her

friend in an informal settlement. He has tried living a few days without her and realized that life has become unbearable. Despite his wife's tantrums, she has apparently played a critical role in making life tolerable. He goes to fetch his wife back but the price is almost equivalent to the dowry he paid to get her in the first place. One is left wondering whether there is not some collusion to extort money from him, given the dubious character of his wife.

In a flashback, the chaos and decadence of the city is contrasted with the pristine rural life of Oroke. The reader is taken to the world of the villagers of Oroke, who live up on the hills, far removed from the trappings of the modern world. Although some have descended to the valleys, those who remain continue to lead their lives oblivious of the changes that inevitably impact on their way of life. Their rural life is juxtaposed with the modern, urban decadence and sub-human existence and poor living conditions in the slums, which are depicted as a place of ugliness, filth, decadence and despair. The urban periphery is then contrasted with the suburban, which is modern, with the lives of the inhabitants considered to be better; but the unreliability of the water and power supply and the uncollected garbage immediately negate the idea of a well-resourced suburban existence because basic essentials are lacking. One is left asking what really is the difference between the lives of the slum dwellers and the suburbanites except for the structure and larger space of their dwellings.

The text describes a community full of tragedies, both private and communal. Tragedy in the private sphere is personified in Solomon Wenku, who starts as a promising young villager only to be confronted with tragedies in his urban existence. Although Solomon is one of those who got a good education and moved from the village to escape the misery of Oroke, the narrative suggests that his life is inextricably linked to the village. He has had affairs in this village, doing whatever he wishes just because he is educated and even siring a child with an elderly man's wife. It is in this same village that Benu, his first wife, had succeeded in trapping him down to a marriage that later ended in divorce. Solomon's marriage to Tani, the 'unspoilt' rural youngster, begins on a promising note as she initially accepts to continue living in his rural home. Her move to the city opens up a whole new world that she could only have dreamt of and the marriage takes a turn for the worse. Tani is depicted as a barbaric, crude villager who, despite her attempts to climb the ladder to middle class respectability, remains rooted in her unrefined ways. Despite her upper class pretences, her very demeanour and speech are depicted as irredeemably barbaric and beyond redemption. When in the presence of women like Mrs Farshi, whom she considers a threat to her 'throne', all her barbaric, unrefined,

uncultured and ill-bred ways emerge: she shouts when calling her daughter (Lokoma), curses and swears shamelessly and loudly, without an iota of concern for the visitor.

Solomon looks back at his life and is disillusioned that, despite having had better opportunities, his old age was filled with despair no different from that of the villagers who had remained in Oroke. Worse, he was broke and stuck in a loveless marriage. His life tragically ends when he is incapacitated by a stroke and Tani decides to desert him.

Part 2 of the novel begins with Tani attending the funeral of Solomon, dressed to kill. We are then shown Tani and Benu locked in a struggle over Solomon's property, with the mediator trying to ease the tension and resolve the conflict by narrating a number of parables. How this conflict is resolved is not clear, but it appears that in the end there is a semblance of peace. The narrative then takes a turn when Tani decides to stay in the village with her relatives. Her stay is depicted in a series of bizarre stories. In a flashback, we are taken to the life of Solomon and it is here that the details of his two marriages emerge. Tani (Solomon's second wife) is depicted as an unruly sex-crazed teenager who used underage boys to fulfil her sexual desires and then graduated to an affair with the village shopkeeper. In addition, Tani is depicted as coming from a dysfunctional family. What began as a love story between Tani's parents takes a dip when Tani's father remorselessly has affairs with other women despite pleas from his wife. Tani's mother decides to take revenge by seeking lovers from among the men in the village. Her affairs end tragically when her own husband sexually molests her. His wayward ways too come to an end when his own cat bites off his genitals.

There is also the tragedy of the village madman, Kanida, who, in a feat of hunger, steals some puppies and makes a meal out of them. He is then confronted by some rough men eager to sniff the life out of him for eating the puppies. He is beaten and when passersby see him being attacked, they intervene on his behalf. His life is spared, thanks to the intervention of villagers who sympathise with him. Kanida is again caught stealing plantains by the owner of a farm near his abode. The young farmer strikes him and he falls down to the ground, wailing. When the farmer then rushes to get a knife in order to kill him, Kanida seizes the opportunity to escape. He lives to see another day but does not stop his pilfering and anti-social ways. His playing with fire comes to an end one night when he decides to sneak into a number of homes, seeks out the women and rapes them, starting with Tani's sister. Kanida is caught and taken to the centre of the village where he is clobbered to death by a mob; his body is not buried but thrown into a

forest in the village believed to be an abode of evil spirits.

In the story of a young boy who is caught by a teacher stealing foodstuffs from his kitchen, the boy is given three options of punishment, all of which are likely to result in severe bodily harm. The delinquent finally chooses to lose one ear. The cutting of his ear gives him such excruciating pain that his scream reverberates in the neighbourhood, but there is no one to rescue him because the nearest homestead is very far. The boy goes home and reports to the elders, who then confront the teacher. The teacher swears at the elders and tells them that they can do whatever they like but that whoever reports him to the police must be ready to die. Given the option of reporting the matter to the police and losing their lives or letting the matter rest and saving their skin, they choose the latter. The narrative depicts a total breakdown of law and order where the aggrieved villagers take matters into their own hands and the authorities represented by the police have little or no influence in dealing with civil cases and conflict among the villagers. Every offence is met with untold brutality.

In the story of a woman who stole some yams, she was stripped naked and frog-matched to the village shrine where she was forced to drink a concoction administered only to people who commit abominable acts in Oroke. Drinking the concoction symbolises one's social death, the destruction of one's reputation and exclusion from communal life. When this is done, she is as good as dead because she is ostracized and left to suffer with her children. Yet, it appears that women are treated more harshly than men; this woman is publicly humiliated, dehumanized and shamed; and in addition, she is handed over to the authorities. There is no end to her woes until she dies. The yam thief is the metaphor of the woman who is poor and has no recourse for her poverty. When she steals to feed her children she is brutalized, dehumanized, humiliated and shamed in a way that men are not. Women's treatment is worse than that of men who commit similar offences. The cruelty with which her pilfering is met is incomparable to the transgressions of the men that rape women and kill fellow villagers and get away with it. While the delinquent offender loses an ear and in fact has the sympathy of the elders who then confront Manari the teacher, there is neither mercy nor sympathy for the woman and the whole village turns up to witness her humiliation. This story is reminiscent of the woman in the bible caught in adultery and whom the whole community was ready to stone had Jesus not intervened, challenging anyone who had not sinned to cast the first stone. Ironically, in the biblical story, the man with whom the woman had committed adultery was not in the

picture, again reinforcing the universal discrimination against women and their oppression across cultures. In Oroke village, customary laws are depicted as cruel, harsh and punitive against women much more than they are to men. Men can get away with the same crimes for which society condemns women to oblivion.

Towards the end of the second part of the novel, soldiers invade the village of Oroke, kill randomly, injure, maim, and rape women indiscriminately. Those who dare question the actions of the soldiers are either treated with brutal violence or disappear without a trace. The same violence is depicted in part three of the novel, where people in the city are stopped at roadblocks and have to bribe their way out or else get killed. We are also shown the arbitrary arrest of innocent people who then have to bribe their way out of police cells. The novel succeeds in depicting a hopelessly corrupt society, where there is no law and order and where the agents of the state use their power with impunity to kill, rape and arrest civilians simply going about their business. Although part one alludes to the invasion of the village by white people and then by Arabs, the presence of the military in the village emerges towards the end of part two of the novel and in part three, where the story is set in the city. Everything in this society, from the rural to the urban, from private to public spaces, from the young to the elderly, is depicted as being chaotic. Hopelessness, despair and disillusionment pervade the public and private lives of people in a society that seems to have disintegrated.

The novel is successful in portraying the chaos in the physical, social and political environment; at the same time, it succeeds in bringing out the despondency that accompanies the chaos. One is left wondering whether in the midst of all the confusion, chaos and oppression, the author could not find or create space for beauty, order, tranquillity and hope. Although the text successfully describes life under the Nigerian military regime, there is a gap in the transition to democracy and how the life of the protagonists might have changed. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the contribution of the novel to depicting life under military regimes. This tragic narrative is told with bits of rib-cracking humour. The author uses a range of stylistic devices such as suspense, flashbacks, metaphors, poetry and parables to enliven the tragedy as it unfolds. It is the story of a society encumbered by a range of challenges for which there are no easy solutions. It adds to the growing anthology of works emerging from Africa and makes an interesting reading.

