Abi Dare’s Quiet Vision

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Abi Dare’s debut novel, *The Girl with the Louding Voice,* is one that begins on a high note, engaging the reader immediately. Narrated by a teenage protagonist who is so relatable that her voice to the reader feels like friends gossiping, the novel is set in the protagonist’s village and Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial hub. Even though it is not written in what many would consider Standard English, it is gripping and enjoyable. This method of writing English language shows that comprehension does not depend solely on works written in Standard English. The narrator’s use of simple diction also evokes vivid images in the minds of readers, complementing it as a bildungsroman. It is the story of Adunni, a teenager who is married off to an old man after her mother’s demise. She is unhappy in the marriage because her goal is to be educated. Her days as a married woman come to an abrupt end when one of her husband’s other wives dies in her hands on a trip to find the woman’s secret lover.

Remembering the village's penchant for jungle justice, Adunni runs to an old woman who her mother used to feed and the woman helps her by handing Adunni over to her brother who sources househelp for rich people in Lagos. On getting to Lagos, she becomes free of the alleged murder of her co-wife but her employer is abusive and the woman's husband is also a randy man who was bent on having sex with Adunni. In the midst of her troubles as an underaged househelp, fate smiles on her and she is rescued by a scholarship she wins with the help of a neighbor.

In spite of the numerous challenges she is confronted with, Adunni is determined to make something good of her life and she is convinced that her way out of poverty is education. She insists that education is her only way out of troubles and education will give her a 'louding voice.' Voice is used as a metaphor for empowerment and emancipation. Adunni's relentless storytelling highlights all the issues treated in the novel. It is a topical novel that begins with her father's plan to marry her to Morufu, an older taxi driver who, even though he is already married to two women, is in search of a male child. The novel underscores the evils of child marriage as she has no proper understanding of her place in the marriage and she does not enjoy sex with the man. The issue of child marriage is pervasive in Nigeria and the medical, individual and societal implications of it have been treated in fictional and non fictiona However, the friendship of her husband's second wife, Khadija is what makes the house a bit bearable as the first wife is older and abusive. Kike, Adunni's agemate who is her husband's first child is also quick to realize that Adunni is not the enemy so she is unusually kind to Adunni even though her mother is jealous of Adunni's place as a cowife. Undoubtedly, it is a feminist novel but it deemphasizes feminist theories and spotlights issues that affect women. The oppression that Adunni suffers in the novel is with the complicity of both men and women and her emancipation is also assisted by both genders. Different issues confronted by women within the patriarchal domain are disaggregated; there are intersections between the experiences of women from different levels of the society. While Adunni believes that education is her way out of poverty, the marriage to Morufu is Khadija's way out of poverty and she negotiates her family's survival within the confines of the marriage.

Jungle justice is also decried as Adunni recollects experiences of the treatment that her village has given to offenders without giving them a chance and this propels her to run away. Had she not run from the jungle justice, her life would have been cut short for an offence she did not commit. In most societies where there is low government presence, jungle justice is the norm as they are cut from the state institutions that are supposed to work. The protagonist's traumatic experiences propel the narration in an unusual admixture of trauma and the kind of honest innocence expected of a teenager. Towards the middle of the novel, when Adunni gets to Lagos, the narrative is picked up by a fictional book, *The Book of Nigerian Facts,* which could as well have been a real book as it educates Adunni on the country, daily life and the world. There is thematic coherence in the book, as excerpts from the book are inserted at the beginning of new chapters from the time Adunni discovers the book.

Big Madam, Adunni's oppressive employer in Lagos understands the importance of education; it is why she does not allow her househelps to go to school. The little education that Rebecca, the teenage girl that used to work for her has is what explained her absence. Had she not written the letter she wrote, Big Madam would not have been forced to confess her role in the girl's disappearance. The issue of underaged househelps is a topical issue in Nigeria and it is common amongst middle class Nigerians who employ children from poor households and pay them pittances in exchange for a life of servitude. Adunni's quest for education also made her audacious and she constantly questioned her oppressors who are shocked by her audacity each time. The author of the novel does not just pontificate about what education can do, she also proves it.

Patriarchy is also pervasive in the novel as Adunni repeatedly encounters men who treat her as if she is less of a person. Her father commoditizes her by marrying her off to pay the family's bills and

her husband treats her like a baby making machine. The man who rescues her when she runs away also gives her to the rich woman and does not pay her for the work she does. The rich woman's husband constantly pressures hers for sex and she compares the man with her former husband. The only men who treat her like anything worthy of being human are Kofi the Ghanaian chef and Abdul the driver, both of whom are also victims of Big Madam's oppression.

In spite of Big Madam's oppression, Adunni is able to diagnose that she is expressing her own personal frustrations on her domestic workers and she treats the woman with love. She refuses Adunni's help but after Big Daddy beats her, she succumbs and asks Adunni to sing for her to calm her down and help her sleep. Throughout the novel, Adunni is under pressure and she is made to take care of everyone she encounters. She is the real feminist, untouched by theories and highfalutin ideas, and concerned with the women around her, even those who are unkind to her. Despite the gravity of Adunni's situation, Dare finds a way to insert light entertainment into the storytelling, relying on Adunni's honest innocence. When Big Madam and her rich friends talk about buying red bottom shoes for a party, she ignorantly wonders why anyone would wear red buttocks on their feet. When Ms Tia tells her "I spent most of my life in Port Harcourt before I left for university in Surrey.", ignorant Adunni asks her "Why it is Sorry?" I ask. "Is it a sad place?"

Despite being an enjoyable read, there are a few infelicities in the novel, which do not distract from its quality anyway. Sometimes, Adunni as the omnipresent narrator knew too much because the author needed to fill information gaps and some other times, she preempted other characters making the novel more predictable and one can always anticipate the characters next move This reduces the use of suspense as a holding tool that sustains velocity in a text. Expectedly, the story ends well as Adunni is freed from the slavery of Big Madam's house after she wins a scholarship but it is not a corny ending like most 'happily ever after' endings. The topicality of the novel, reinforced by the use of facts also makes it very believable, like the coming of age memoir of a teenage girl.

This review is part of the collaboration with the NLNG to showcase the shortlisted novels for the Nigeria Prize, and their authors.

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