Vagabonds! – A Refusal to be Defined

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Definitions belong to the definers, *not the defined.*
- Toni Morrison

What does it mean to bring a city to life? To show its shapes and contours without yielding to the oft-tendency to romanticise? Eloghosa Osunde's riveting debut, *Vagabonds!*, answers through a set of interlinked stories which can be read as a whole or independently, unearthing a new dimension to Èkó – also known as Lagos. But that is not all Eloghosa answers. She shows what it means to *survive* as a queer person or as minorities in this bustling city of over 15 million living, breathing, sometimes even dead bodies.

This is important to highlight: *Vagabonds!* creates a heterogeneous universe for characters who defy classification and just want to be. *Vagabonds!* is a module of narratives that thrive on the diversity of forms, narrative and linguistic aesthetics. Defining the book would do no justice and would be ironic. *Vagabonds!* powerfully resists hegemony and traditions that dominate the fiction form.

Vagabonds wander from place to place as part of their quotidian life, and in *Vagabonds!*, though set in Lagos, this is still the case. You will find characters restless in spirit, moving from one life to another, arriving in Lagos to chase something: people, love, healing. Searching. In this way,

Vagabonds! is a book about movement, about this inability to call one place home.

There is a world behind the Lagos we see: something underground and above the surface. A powerful force that dictates how things operate in this cramped city. Many books have been written about Lagos from several angles: political, human, and more. But Eloghosa's debut does more in mystifying and personifying the city, digging deep into what makes it an intriguing space. This we see is as spiritual as it is human.

It is steeped in several religious metaphors and connotations: 'in the beginning, there was Èkó' and quotes above chapters 'Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed…' and characters that grapple with, confront or return to religion. These show the profoundly religious country in which the book is set, creating illumination for why these vagabonds are vagabonds in the first place. When asked about her influences in an interview with Elle Magazine, she mentions the Bible. 'It's one of the highest expressions of what language can do to a spirit.'

It's no wonder the writing crosses language. 'A Welcome Note From the City' is sprinkled with pidgin, which, when listened to via audio recorded by the author herself and a few others, brings a different flavour to the reading experience, to the understanding of Lagos as a spirit, not just a city. Yes, in Lagos: eyes will watch you: amebo: 'So na amebo we be. Busy body. Eye service. Na our spirit be dat. Who wan challenge us? You don see us? Na who born dem?'

In this book, spirits, not just of the city, hover and live with us. Almost halfway into the novel in 'Rain', we meet Wúrà Blackson, the eclectic fashion designer who makes clothes made of stories, whose child, Rain, suddenly appears one day — fully grown. It's possible this was interrogating the expectation of women to be mothers, irrespective of their place in life. Still, it's much more: Eloghosa's ability to make your skin crawl, to pull the rug under your feet, to make your heart leap for joy. And in 'Overheard: Fairygodgirls', we find spirits protectively watching over young girls, gifting them with books that will change their lives. It's like Eloghosa is explaining: sometimes, these things (as in discovering a good book or finding companionship) *no be coincidence.* It's the spirits at work.

Vagabonds! explores the lives of several people — mostly queer — who grapple with love, survival, their belief system, and more. In Doubting Thomas, Eloghosa draws a parallel between the biblical Thomas who waited until he saw the holes in Jesus' hands to believe, and Thomas, a young man in Lagos who has heard several myths about Lagos and Nigeria from his uncle. The latter is testing the stories and myths. And there are several such 'myths' embedded within themselves throughout *Vagabonds!*: the game in which Nigeria lost to India 99:1, 'do not share your hairbrush with anyone, so they do not steal your destiny', don't bend down in the market at night, you will find another world, etc. This story invites the reader to question the stories in *Vagabonds!*, and to not think of myths as just myths.

There is desperation too, an all too familiar feeling for Lagosians, especially those who move from other parts of Nigeria. Johnny from Johnny Just Come comes into the city to work for a man who harvested organs, sacrificing his voice for the things money can buy. Of course, there were consequences. But not in the way you might expect.

Tatafo is a gentle and chaotic, tender and rough guide throughout the stories. Their tone is friendly, gossipy, breaking fourth-walls, eager to walk us through this journey of lives, very complete lives. In the beginning, Tatafo helps us understand the Eko better. For things we have thought of but might never have been able to articulate, Eloghosa gives us language. Eko embodies many signifiers. There is Èkó for aesthetics — Èkó for show — Èkó who reports to Owo, Èkó with an army of spirits whose watchful eyes, especially Tatafo's, that Èkó depends on for information, Èkó as a city but not a city —

it repels categorisation. And in the end, Tatafo (the cliffhanger) gives us expo, setting the pace for what to expect in the next couple of stories.

If there's one thing, *Vagabonds!* is not, it is not 'shy' in the queer lives it is normalising, protecting, and advocating for: 'There are simple and good and straightforward and well-behaved people, I'm sure. But this is not a book about them.' We read of love where characters know this cannot be not because there's anything wrong with their love but because society and the powers that be frown upon it, and it breaks their hearts, and ours too. Or of long and beautiful written letters, grieving a lover and reminiscing what they had as in 'The Only Way Out is Through.'

Vagabonds! is a book that forces you to pause and contemplate other experiences. For writers and other creators, this book does more. It is an excellent example of how to create a book that is beyond all categories simply *true*. That's the kind of impact this book will have. It is, and will be a Bible.

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