

## Politics, Identity and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Richard Ali's *City of Memories*

Onyebuchi Nwosu & Elliott S. Uguru

**How to cite the article:** Onyebuchi Nwosu & Elliott S. Uguru, "Politics, Identity and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Richard Ali's *City of Memories*," *Ahyu: A Journal of Language and Literature* 2-3 (2021): 12-27. DOI: 10.56666/ahyu.v2i.57


To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.56666/ahyu.v2i.57>

 Published online: 04 Dec 2021

---

 Submit your article to this journal

---

 View related articles

---

 View Crossmark data

---

---

## Politics, Identity and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Richard Ali's *City of Memories*

Onyebuchi Nwosu & Elliott S. Uguru

**Authors: (Corresponding):** Onyebuchi Nwosu, Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, P.M.B. 1010, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. **Email:** buchinosu@yahoo.com

Elliott S. Uguru, Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria, **Email:** elliottuguru@gmail.com

**Published date:** Dec 04, 2021



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

**How to cite the article:** Onyebuchi Nwosu & Elliott S. Uguru, "Politics, Identity and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Richard Ali's *City of Memories*," *Ahyu: A Journal of Language and Literature* 2-3 (2021): 12-27.

DOI: 10.56666/ahyu.v2i.57

### Abstract

The North-Central part of Nigeria especially the city of Jos was once a bastion of peace and a settler's haven because of its azure weather, fertile vegetation and infectious cordial and hospitable inter-human relationship among its inhabitants. As Nigeria's 'melting pot', Jos has a significant place in Nigeria's politico-economic and social history. In recent times, Jos has witnessed and keeps witnessing some political and social upheavals. As literature is a reflection and representation of the society, this study examines the extent to which the social and political events in Jos, North-central Nigeria, characterize the basic ingredients with which Richard Ali concocts the events in his novel, *City of Memories*. Applying the theory of New Historicism, the essay evaluates the literary dimensions of ethno-religious violence which are taking frightening dimensions in Nigeria, and identifies possible suggestions made in respect to their causes, consequences and possible ways of management and control.

**Key words:** *New Nigerian fiction, ethno-religious; identity; politics; conflict; new historicism.*

### Introduction

Among the phenomena that have shaped Nigeria's current socio-political landscape are identity crises, ethno-religious violence and political instability. While most parts of Nigeria seem to be grappling with these turbulent scenarios, the North-central geopolitical zone seems to be the hardest hit. From Taraba state to Benue, Plateau to Nasarawa states, violent crises orchestrated by citizens against one another seem to be

increasing instead of abating. The rate and manner at which these problems erupt sometimes defies strategies and systems that are put in place to check and curtail them. They cause huge human and material losses, thereby placing Nigeria high on the list of one of the most unstable states in Africa (Chanci and Odukoya 1). But as observed by Dubey, there is a link between literature and society such that "what happens in a society is reflected in literary works in one form or another." This makes literature a mirror of the society as it embodies the social, historical and political events that characterize a given society (Dubey 2). There is an emerging crop

of Nigerian writers who display a serious and proportionate sense of historical immediacy in their portrayal of events that characterize Nigeria's socio-political and economic situation. These writers seem to be constantly alive to their social responsibilities and as such are not daunted by the myriad of social problems and political issues confronting the nation; rather, they manifest indications of enormous dexterity in recreating and representing Nigeria's most recent socio-historical realities in their works.

One of such writers is Richard Ali who in his debut novel, *City of Memories* (2012) presents a glowing historical picture of the intermingling issues of identity, religion and politics as they affect the people of North-central Nigeria. This paper therefore investigates the extent to which the socio-political events obtainable in North-central Nigeria, particularly in Jos can be said to be among the basic historical materials that Ali appropriated in his literary engagement in *City of Memories*. To carry out this task, this paper is schematized into four main domains. While the first part appraises some scholarly discussions on the key concepts addressed in the paper by highlighting the contributions of some notable social scientists in the area, the major thrust of the second segment is a concise discourse on New historicism, the theoretical framework through which its primary tenets are applied in the study. Next is the identification and analysis of the implications and influences of the concepts of identity, ethnicity, religion and politics in the artistic concatenation of *City of Memories* by Ali. Efforts are made to assess some reviews and comments that the novel has so far elicited, while reiterating the fictional adumbrations of intractable violence and insecurity which has become the bane of North-central Nigeria.

The paper adopts the principles of New Historicism, which approaches a text through the socio-historical angle in analyzing Richard Ali's *City of Memories*. This theory which was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1970s is a reaction against the formalistic perspectives of New Criticism. It arose as one of the "reactions to the view that literature can be studied in isolation from its social and political contexts" (Childs and Fowler 43) and "in place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meaning, its effects and also its later critical interpretations and evaluations" (Abrams and Harpham 218). From the foregoing, efforts are made in this study to identify the influence of historical events and socio-historical conditions in Ali's *City of Memories*. In applying the theory, discussions are channelled towards ascertaining the extent to which *City of Memories* is a recollection of aspects of present and past social situations of North-central Nigeria. The paper thus, considers the historical epoch portrayed in the novel paripassu Nigerian history in order to arrive at the context under which it analyses the events in the novel. Acknowledging that *City of Memories* has rich historical, political and social elements drawn from North-central Nigeria, it evaluates how these historical elements are utilized in creating the story in the novel.

### **Issues of Identity, Ethnicity, Religion and Politics in North-Central Nigeria**

Nigeria is a pluralistic country where resources and leadership positions are keenly contested, leading to a series of inevitable conflicts. In substantiation, Chanci and Odukoya (2016: 1-2) observe that

Nigeria is synonymous with deep divisions which cause major political issues to be vigorously and violently

contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious divisions...Therefore, breakaway, breakdown, civil strife, minority nervousness, and violent clashes, all of which would typically be regarded unusual in normal states are common forces or actual occurrences in a divided state[like Nigeria]" (1-2).

Osimen et al (2013: 79), while corroborating this, aver that "Nigeria's large number of ethnic groups, inequalities among them in size, resource endowment, education and access to state power and resources, her highly developed and factionalized indigenous bourgeoisie makes her ethnic situation perhaps the most complicated in Africa". This has produced a scenario which Osaretin and Akov (2013: 349) describe as "a plural, highly complex, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious polity, with a diversity of ethnic groups." Nigeria as portrayed above is one of the most complicated multi-ethnic states and this has made the country a haven of social conflicts and political violence.

Identity is a hot contentious and controversial concept, for in spite of the "several scholarly attempts at defining identity, [it]... is still fraught with definitional vagueness" (Nnorom and Odigbo 2015 18). Onyibor describes it "as the state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing" (1-2), while Nnorom and Odigo insist that it is "... any group attribute that provides recognition or definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually or collectively" (18). "Identity can be said to be an individual's sense of belonging to a group (if) it influences his political behavior" (Erikson qtd in Chanci and Odukoya 2). Identity is one's trait of identification derived from the individual's membership of a group. There are various forms of identity, among

which is social identity which according to Onyibor "are those associated with one's rights, privileges, responsibilities, and sanction... [or]... identity [that] is related to social groups to which an individual belongs and with which they identify" (2). Another form of identity is Cultural identity which has much to do with the identity of a group or culture of an individual as far as one is influenced by belonging to that group or culture. "It is influenced by several factors such as one's religion, ancestry, skin colour, language, class, education, profession, skill, family and politics" (Onyibor 2). Next to cultural identity is ethnic identity. An ethnic group, according to Nnoli, is a "social formation distinguished by communal character of their boundaries." (qtd. in Madu and Goni 150). It also represents a "social collectivity whose members not only share such objective characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myth, culture, religion, and/or political organization, but also has some subjective consciousness or perception of common descent or identity" (Suberu qtd in Madu and Goni 150). Ethnicity becomes a situation when members of a cultural community interact and associate with one another or as Madu and Goni put it, "it emerges when the members of an ethnic group become characterized by a common consciousness of their identity in relation to other groups with in-group and out-group differences becoming marked with time" (150). They however remark that "such exclusivist identity-based discrimination undoubtedly results in conflicts over scarce economic resources and socio-political goods" (150). It is obvious from the above that when an individual considers his cultural affinity first before taking any action or distributing any resource among competing ethnic groups, that person is exhibiting an attitude that can best be regarded as ethnicity. This implies that loyalty to, or defence of, one's ethnic group

may not necessarily be bigotry but the unreasonable defence of, and loyalty to one's ethnic group to the detriment of others, is. However, all the various forms of identity identified above are crucial factors in Nigeria especially in the North-central in North-central region which has so many ethnic groups living together. As Faleti notes, "conflicts that are caused by crisis of identity are usually the most dangerous and most violent because identity is an unshakeable sense of selfworth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is socially, physically, psychologically and spiritually safe" (18).

Religion is another identity factor that is at the core of this study. Any value that is unrestrictable to an individual or a belief which an individual holds so dear is the person's religion. Religion as defined by the *New World Encyclopedia* "denotes a set of common beliefs and practices (and its relationship to humanity and the cosmos) which are often codified into prayer, ritual, scriptures and religious law" (1). Expatiating the meaning, *Catholic Encyclopedia* opines that "in every form of religion, is implied the conviction that the mysterious, supernatural Being (or beings) has control over the lives and destinies of men. Especially in lower grades of culture, where the nature and utilization of physical laws is but feebly misunderstood, man feels in many ways his helplessness in the presence of the forces of nature" (2). Thus, religion is strongly tied to the worship of an absolute being or phenomenon which anchors on the "the consciousness of one's dependence on transcendent being and the tendency to worship Him" (Sulaiman 90). Religion is a thing of the emotion and one feels totally threatened, if one is deterred from carrying out any religious obligation. People rise easily in defence of their religion because they believe

their fate is inextricably attached to it. That is why Sulaiman believes that "religious violence is, specifically, violence that is motivated to some degree by some religious precepts, texts, or doctrines. This includes violence against religious institutions, people, objects or violence motivated to some degree by some religious aspects of the target or precept of the attacker" (90). It means that religion breeds conflict and violence because of its emotional nature as threats are usually directed to nonadherents of a religion when a person of another religion occupies a position of authority. This has been the case of Jos, where there are adherents of the Christian, Muslim and Traditional religious sects.

Another factor that exacerbates strife in the North-central region of Nigeria especially since the return to civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999 is politics. To this, Nnorom and Odigbo observe that "Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 produced a climate that precipitated the resurgence of identity crisis in the political landscape. This seems to have intensified identity conflicts in Nigeria especially in areas where inequality and primordial ties have gained significant status." (17). This has invented a phenomenon known as identity politics where primordial ethnic and religious identities are put forward as the basic consideration for political patronage and support. Ambe-Uva, while defining this kind of political concept, says that it:

refers to the political activity of various ethnic, religious and cultural groupings in demanding greater economic, social and political rights or self-determination. Identity politics claim to represent and seek to advance the interest of particular groups in society, the members of which often share and unite around common experiences of actual or perceived social and economic injustice, relative

to the wider society of which they form part and exist in. (44)

The essence of identity politics is to cater only for the interest of members of one ethnic, religious or social group at the detriment of other groups. This breeds conflict and “means more than sole recognition of ethnic, religious or cultural identity.... [but] seeks to carry the identities forward, beyond mere self-identification, to a political framework based upon that identity” (Osaretin and Akov, 350). Basically, when two or more persons are seemingly interested in a particular thing, this breeds contestations which ultimately leads to conflict as each person will try to justly and unjustly outwit and outmaneuver others. This usually culminates to violence which according to Wolff is “the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desire of others” (11). The presence of numerous ethnic nationalities in Nigeria increases the scope and dimensions of conflicts as each group contests to gain political, social and economic advantages over others. This has exacerbated the spate of violent conflicts which Abah et al believe are caused by many factors, some of which are::

religious entrepreneurs who fan the embers of violent ethno-religious crises [by] evidently mobilizing negative ethnicity, religious schism, pitch one ethno-religious group against another.... Partisan political activities are used as avenues through which groups are mobilized, identities rigidly reinforced [and] often infused with excessive religiosity.... A large body of youth who are able-bodied but idle, unemployed, frustrated and aggrieved with the social system are ready to be recruited and mobilized to engage in violent ethno-religious conflicts...The inability of the security agencies to guarantee security of lives and

property as well as bring those responsible for the conflict to book. (3)

These factors listed above are responsible for the increasing rate of violence in Nigeria.

One of the centre-points of ethno-religious and political conflict in Nigeria is the North-central geo-political zone and of more concern to this paper is the city of Jos, which is the capital of Plateau State. According to Abah et al,

since the emergence of the nascent democracy, Plateau State has become a permanent flashpoint. The state which did hitherto been deeply one of the most relatively peaceful in Nigeria, has been deeply enmeshed and suffused in ethno-religious conflicts characterized by genocidal attacks, maiming and killings of several persons, loss of business investment, industries and property worth several millions of naira... The violent conflict which has remained a recurring decimal has severally (sic) threatened the nascent democracy, national security and brought the nation to the brink of disaster” (2).

To this end, Ambe-Uva reels out some major ethno-religious conflicts which have erupted in Jos in the recent times to include:

...the Mangu-Fier Borer conflicts in 1984, the conflicts in Jos and Bukuru between the indigenous communities and settlers which culminated in the explosions of April 1994, the Mangu-Bukkos conflicts of 1992 and 1995, the Bukuru Gyero Road conflicts of 1997 between the Birom and Hausa communities, the Mangu-Chagal conflicts of 1997, the conflicts between Bassa and Igbira communities in Toto Local Government (now Nassarawa State) in Doma, Awe and Keana, The Jos Crisis of 2001 and the



27 April 2004 clashes between rival ethnic militias in central Plateau State etc. (41)

Sadly, “Jos, the capital city of Plateau State in Nigeria has over the past decade witnessed violent communal clashes across ethnic and religious lines. These clashes have claimed ‘thousands of lives, displaced hundreds of thousands of others and forced and fostered a climate of instability throughout the surrounding region’ (Osaretin and Akov 2013 349-350). The city of Jos with its azure and highly clement weather and rich mineral deposit (tin ore), was a bastion of activities and the centre of commerce during the colonial era and as such attracted people from various parts of Nigeria. The conflicts have not abated in recent times so the task to carry out in this paper is to identify and analyse how these political, religious and ethnic tensions in Jos are evidently portrayed in Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*.

### **Politics, Identity and Ethno-religious Conflicts in Richard Ali’s *City of Memories***

In his review of Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*, Wandama Wandiga remarks that the identity that identity issue is one of the major thrusts of the novel, though it is seen as seen, as fallout of Africa’s colonial experience. He affirms that though conflicts in Africa may be misunderstood by outsiders, thoroughbred ‘sons of the soil’ like Ali knows how to fictionalize them to achieve great aesthetics and literary value. Identifying the setting of *City of Memories* to Nigeria’s immediate past, he asserts that “in Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*, the author recognizes the intricacies that history has laid in the Nigerian nation such as history of coups and counter-coups, assassinations and mistrust” (317). Still identifying the issue of mistrust, Chiagozie Nwonu argues that, “with *City of Memories*, Richard Ali attempts to give

traction to the largely inexplicable ethnic and religious violence in the North of Nigeria. He traces histories and traditions and succeeds largely in showing the existing mistrust” (2). This line of thought, though perfunctorily stated, is evidently the task this paper is set to address.

In Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*, ethnicity and religion are depicted as intrinsic factors that play a dominant role in the social cohesion of people in any society. The issue of ethnicity however cannot be discussed in this paper without a close recourse to the position of the North-central and the sentiments that go with it as depicted by the author. In the novel, Ali notifies the reader at the outset that the people that make up the fluid entity called the North-central see themselves as a minority group. “There is no other place for us, we are all from the central minorities, marooned in the centre of the country and landlocked amidst fault lines...” (*City* 9). This statement is made by a student leader during a visit to an ex-military man but now turned politician, Ibrahim Dibarama. As a notable politician in the area, the students’ visit is to invite him to deliver a speech in their polytechnic. In the same manner, Ali also highlights ethnicity as a major problem confronting this part of Nigeria. Ibrahim Dibarama makes this evident in his speech to the students a fortnight later. In the speech, he enthused: “The North-central presents a peculiar problem. Unlike the other states of the federation that comprise no more than three or four ethnicities, the North-Central contains at least sixty” (37). This plurality of ethnic nationalities complicates almost every issue arising in the area. All political moves are interpreted from the ethnic angle while each ethnic group strives to dominate the other.

Having done this, Ali through his authorial voice, narrows down to a particular city in the

North-central area by erecting a mystic aura around the city of Jos. Choosing Jos as a city to illustrate the conflicts emanating from ethnicity and religion in Nigeria, he outlines the historical antecedents of Jos and the reasons why it is rapidly declining from a peaceful haven to a theatre of strife. We read:

Jos was a city on a bed of mountains; it had always drawn people to itself—like some sort of jewel in the heart of the country. Through the peril of upward-winding trails with sudden fatal drops, through the cold that started like a lover’s touch and seeped then killed like poison, through passes guarded by rocks that would fall on heads without warning—men came through. The British came seeking fortunes, laying rugged railway lines to ferry their plundered tin and minerals to the sea and England. Brawny labourers and wily tradesmen from all the lands of the Niger, seeking fortunes of varying sizes, came as well. Each person, each group, embarked with private motives but the end of their journey was always the same—stop the plateau, time ossifies them indifferently so they all became natives. (63)

This is how Jos turns out into a “melting pot” and amidst this influx of people comes fear and resentment from the indigenous people represented in the novel by Eunice Pam who tries to lecture her daughter Rahila that other inhabitants like Ibrahim Dibarama who are first from other parts of Nigeria, and are of the Muslim faith, want to take over the state. The older woman has seen her daughter’s acquaintance with Faruk, Dibarama’s son and even her acquiescence to marry him as an affront on her person and ethnic group too.

“Dibarama and his son are using you!” the older woman shouted. Rahila kept quiet. “The Muslims want to take over

this state. Look what they do; Christians are killed every time anything happens in Kano, in Bauchi, in Sokoto. Every time anything happens, they go out and burn churches. Can’t you see that North Central must remain a heartland? For Christians, for the northern Nigerian minorities. Can’t you see the line of faith dividing the country into two? Can’t you see what Dibarama and his son stand for? (71)

By all means, Eunice Pam tries to integrate her daughter into her camp of bigotry but Rahila stubbornly rebuffs it:

I hate your politics mother. You are not doing this for the sake of religion... have against...my love for this boy? It’s for you, for you, Eunice Pam the mighty woman — to project your goddamned power!... I am not going to give him up...I do not care who his father is, I do not love his father... Don’t ruin my life with your politics and your envy. (71-72)

Her mother’s response reveals much: “I provide you with a house, a home and an identity.... And you say I am envious?” (72) The daughter’s response equally points to a struggle to assert herself, and create her own identity instead of what her mother wants her to be: “...You think that I’m just an idiot bundle that fell from Mars? I have my identity in me, you only contributed. Why should you hold all of me to ransom, mother? ...I do not need your crusade of politics. I have my identity, but you cannot see it. I seek it, I define it. And I do not need your evangelical-crusade, bitter-bile politics to bottle me up!” (72) Rahila here battles hard to extricate herself from her mother’s encapsulating desire to clone her into a political bigot like her. That is why at the end of the novel she stands out among the people who are not overly identity conscious and fanatical about religion.



In the novel too, Ali reveals that religion is an ardent breeder of conflict and animosity. Dibarama harps on this in his address to the students once more.

Religion is a dangerous thing to play with. It's just like fire, and once it starts burning, it's not so easy to put it out. Yet some of the politicians in this state have continued to infuse the differences of religion into the identity equation. I see it but they do not see or pretend not to see, that playing with so powerful a fault line as this can only lead to misery.... (37)

The same thing applies to religion-centered education which is practiced by inhabitants of Jos, the city in the novel. On one occasion, as Rahila is passing through an Islamic college, she thinks of the structure of the school and the fate of those graduating from it.

The college, a few hundred yards away, was of the ubiquitous sort found all over northern Nigeria. It comprised a head Mallam, two or three resident disciples and multitude of students who could be from anywhere, come to learn the Quran and Muslim law. It used to annoy Rahila that whole generations of children were being offered to an Arab culture that would not help them in any way. No one is ever employed if he can recite the Quran by heart or even the Bible from Genesis to Revelation—not even if he can pour out the entire epic of Shaka Zulu. (86)

This is blatant but suffused condemnation of an education that is not in tune with modern realities but imparting identity only. Rahila's effusive ranting above is not on Islamic education per se, but on its outcome which only imparts Arabian identity on the learner. The same applies to overt learning and concentration in imbibing the Jewish culture

that is inherent in the Bible as well as one whose educational energy is vested more on swallowing all the educational pills offered by his ethnic nationality. It is this form of formal and informal education that has produced some orthodox Christian sects like the Christ Church whose pastor Reverend Ponsnar Zadok preaches hatred for nonadherents as he does to Rose, Dibarama's mistress when she pays him a visit. A fanatic Christian, Zadok does not hide his hatred for people of other ethnic groups and religions. From his name, he is of the plateau blood but detests with passion, people of other climes and faith. Hear him address Rose:

Our opponents want to capitalize on our Word to destroy us. They believe that Christians will not be involved in counter attack; they believe that we are taught to turn the other cheek.... Time and time again, here in central Nigeria, the Muslim Fulani have destroyed our crops with their cattle... Time and time again, incidents of rape, incidents of cattle-rustling — always it is these half-animal Fulani.... The Bible as you well know, Rose, does not say we should adopt stupidity!.... Hausa settlers are now demanding an Emirate in Jos, can you imagine that? An Emir of Jos? Preposterous! Jos where our ancestors defeated the Islamizing horsemen of the Fodio jihad, the Jos plateau where all the tribes of central Sudan came for refuge from jihadists, the plateau that has been the very heart of Christendom in Africa- they want to plant the flag of an Emir here? Allah ya kiyaye! What they failed to do by war, they want to do with the threat of violence? What is that if not provocation? (127).

That a Christian pastor is vibrating in this manner depicts the level of ethno-religious sensitization and tension that is lurking in this

north-central city. But this is not out of place for having always been confronted with an opposing religion (Islam) that uses brute force to bulldoze their way into territories to convert them, they on their own have become extremely vigilant and radicalized. It is this kind of spirit that makes ethno-religious violence inevitable in the novel. And when it does come, Ali records it graphically, though in a flashback. It is told from Rahila's perspective:

Two years earlier, on September 7th, she had returned to her room from the University's Temporary Site just on the other side of the fence from Ungwan Rogo.... Maybe she slept off, she never really knew. But when she had awoken it was to the frenzied patter of slippered feet tramping past her door. So many feet. A transistor radio had been turned on loud.... "Dem don start oh!" Someone had wailed Rahila had shot off the bed....(88)

Outside, she meets other girls and, on inquiry, is informed that a riot has begun:

"What is going on?"

"They are killing people in town" (88).

It is difficult at that point to ascertain who the killers are but Ali bares this tactically when he narrates further.

By dawn, a precarious calm hovered over the students. For the hostels were located between Ungwan Rogo, a predominantly Muslim area on the outskirts of Bauchi Road. Muslim students had started disappearing one by one. Soon enough, the campus was turned into a barrack fortified this time not by [soldiers], but by Christian students and students who were indigenes of the mountains and who stayed in parts of town accessible only through neighbourhoods which their faith had been rendered hazardous. It

was then she saw how many guns there were on the campus, how red and angry eyes can become. (89)

In the second night of this melee, with the town still divided along religious and ethnic lines (Christian/indigenes and Muslim/Settlers) Rahila discovers Nabila, a Muslim girl in her bathroom. She had come to hawk groundnut around the University campus only to be caught off by the riot and killings. After assuring Nabila of security, Rahila listens to her narrate her ordeal thus:

When I overheard the girls saying that Christians were being killed, I knew that they would kill me also because I am a Muslim. I could already smell that things were burning and I thought of my father. I did not want my mother to suffer because of me if I was killed, if I did not get home. So, I hid in the bathroom. I slept there. There were plenty of mosquitoes there but I folded myself into my hijab..." (91).

Nabila's father, a truck driver, has died in similar ethno-religious mayhem in Kano during the Maitatsine riots that besieged the city some years ago. "Nobody knows if it were the zealots or the soldiers who killed him. He never returned. They found his trailer burnt. My mother knew he was dead" (92), Nabila narrates to her. Rahila has to take Nabila home to her mother some days later when the crisis subsided and from there she strikes a robust relationship with her family. In that instance, a Christian saves a Muslim child.

This is almost the same scenario with Rahila's friend Sekyen, who is equally rescued by a Muslim man during the same ethno-religious fracas. Below is her narration:

I was with Nansel then and when I left his place, I decided to go home instead of coming to the hostel. What I did not know was that the crisis was already in

full swing.... We were just outside Bauchi Road when we first saw the smoke, burning tires, buildings. We were afraid, a hush fell on the bus, there are about twenty of us in that bus... Someone tuned into the BBC and it was there we heard that there was an on-going religious riots in Jos ...Out Jos....Out of the blues four boys, none of them above eighteen, appeared in front of the bus, in the middle of the road. We had to stop. One of them had a gun..... A boy opened the side door and climbed in. He was a boy. But he had a machete in his hand and there was blood on it, there was blood lust in his eyes.” (198).

The boy who has vowed to kill any Christian in the bus, subjected them to a religious test by telling each of them to recite a verse of the Quran. A Muslim man who was with them in the bus recited a verse on their behalf and confronted the boy. He beat up the boy and pushed him down from the bus wondering why they (the boy and his gang) should be harassing the family of a fellow Muslim when there are many infidels to kill. With that, the boys ran away with the one that had has a pistol dropping it. This man later turns out to be Faruk, Ibrahim Dibarama’s son who proposes to marry Rahila but is being opposed by her mother and brother. One remarkable thing with the novel is that the author uses real names of physical settings like cities, streets and villages.

Also, Ali in *City of Memories* identifies the kind of political system that breeds conflicts and raises ethnic, religious and identity bar. Remembering an interlocution she had with her father George, Rahila recalls how proud her father was to tell her of the exploits of the Berom people who are her ancestors: “There is nothing superior about the Hausawa. Here

by these hills, the horsemen of Muhammed Bello’s jihad were defeated by us, mountain dwellers time after time” (67). He takes her daughter through the history of the people of the plateau and accuses the region of reaching a point of dystopia which he defines thus: “Dystopias are created when societies lack a mechanism lack mechanism of balance within them. And when there is no mechanism of balance, nobody can predict how each of the antagonistic of antagonistic segments of such society will behave.” (68). North-central Nigeria as projected in *City of Memories* is in a situation that every group in the area is suspicious of the other and everyone is ready at every moment to defend itself against any political or social action inimical to them which any group may initiate. The indigenous Christians people are ever ready to defend their land and religion with the last drop of the blood, for as George sums it, “It is hard to draw any line of faith anywhere on the plateau and if ever attempted, the line will be drawn with blood” (67). The area is charged with all forms of identity sentiments and that is why any little squabble will degenerate into a communal imbroglio.

The politics of North-central Nigeria as presented in Ali’s *City of Memories* is crude and brutish. Some North-central politicians are not only presented as purveyors of violence and identity conflicts but as promoters and financiers of ethno-religious conflicts in the region. How then can it be explained that Mrs. Eunice Pam, a high ranking politician not only hired assassins to eliminate Faruk, the only son of Ibrahim Dibarama, her major political opponent but also is a provider of arms to ethnic bandits terrorizing the region. In a telephone chat with a gun runner who is later identified as Ade Bolaji, she discusses how the weapons she has ordered will be safely delivered to the cities in

the region where they will be used to cause mayhem:

“I need secure lines of transit. To five points. Jos city, Bida, Takum, Goma and Garun Mallam”

The gun had arrived. Bolaji had delivered.

“Did you get everything” [Mrs Pam asked]

“Yes, 1,000 AK 47, Chinese made. Machetes in quantum”

“I have some people in the police. Send a sketch of the route to me and I’ll arrange

the cover . Give me a week. And the boy?”

“He gets the first shot”

“She nodded “Good”

The line died. (101)

A lot of information is easily inferred from the cryptic telephone altercation enacted above. First, Mrs. Pam’s order of 1,000 rifles and countless machetes is ready and efforts are now being made to deliver them to the named locations. Second, through the conversation, she reveals that she has people in the police who are on her side and will provide cover to protect the weapons and make sure they safely arrive at those locations without being confiscated by law enforcement agents. Next, the chief function the guns will do is to aid in the elimination of some of her political enemies, especially enemies especially ‘the boy’ Faruk, the son of Diabrama, whom she does not want to marry her daughter. From these, it is clear that politicians fuel ethnic crises in the region by arming the indigenous militias that span through the region. Also, Mrs. Pam has some allies in almost all the states in the region. For instance, in Niger State, Varak “a tall Nupe man with the eyes of a natural agitator” (122), works closely with her. In Benue state, a Tiv man “who had the hubris of a deserter philosopher” (122), and by name Tyoorse Mark is her ally. There is Bolaji

Ade who is a shrewd gun runner “whose importance lay in his ability to deliver ammunition — any sort to any place” (123). Most of these people have one thing in common; they have deep-seated hatred for the Hausa/Fulani. For instance, Tyoorse Mark is said to have strong dislike for “Islam, the vehicle of the 1804 Jihad, so he [has] spent millions bringing crusading evangelicals from America and elsewhere, infusing right wing Christianity into local ethnic tensions” (123). Furthermore, Mrs. Pam and her allies are also portrayed in the novel to be responsible for an ethnic uprising in Benue as her daughter confesses to Sekyen her friend. “My mother engineered the uprising in Benue. A hundred people died there because she wanted to hit back at Faruk’s father... because of me...” (196).

Another factor responsible for the spate of ethno-religious violence in North-central Nigeria as illustrated in Ali’s *City of Memories* is internal wrangling among the members of some ethnic nationalities. In the novel, there is a serious misunderstanding between Hodio Ardo, the moderate conservative leader of the Fulani of Guma who lives peacefully with the Tiv. Ali, in the novel, introduces his domain, thus: “His part of the central Nigerian plains was the domain of Fulani herdsmen and Tiv husbandmen and over a period of three hundred years, tensions over grazing and water rights had tested the harmony necessary for them to live peacefully” (130). However, he has a rival, a radical Fulani by name Hurami Rukki, who has been opposing him by accusing him of being too lenient and circumspect. Ali introduces this villain through Ardo’s thoughtful vituperations this way: “He [Ardo] stopped. It was that bastard Hurami and his men, he thought sadly. Hurami had been his rival for the Fulani chieftaincy of Guma ten years before. Now, it would seem that he still

wanted to be chief. A swaggering homosexual bastard! Allah forbid, Hodio shook his head and thought—no, my own Fulani cannot have earned Allah’s displeasure so much to much so to earn Hurami as chief. He spat contemptuously onto the grass” (130).

Sadly, by the time Hurami appears in the novel, he is already in a town four kilometers of Guma called Sabon Jimeta overseeing the distribution of rifles to over one hundred and fifty men. His description is couched in the image of Yusuf, the maverick leader of a fundamentalist sect that transformed to Boko Haram in Borno state:

An orange Mercedes 911 truck was parked by the mosque and beside it stood a portly man—Hurami Rukki.... When the crowd of about a hundred and fifty males had gathered, he motioned to them to follow him—he ambled to the back of the truck where he pulled down the tarpaulin cover with flourish. A gasp ran through the crowd. One half of the truck bed was full of neatly arranged rifles. Crates housing ammunition stood stacked at the far end. Between these two were other cartons on top of which were scores of brand new machetes. (150)

Hurami commands each of the one hundred and fifty mujaheds to choose the weapon of their liking. Then “one of Hurami’s sons, pulled ladder to the open truck bed, and under the watchful eyes of his father, began to distribute the weapons to their confederates...” As they are carrying out this act, Hurami is wearing a gold ring of a Fulani Chief in his nose meaning that he has declared himself a Fulani chief in defiance of his rival Hodio Ardo. The next day, Hurami and his cohorts attack Guma and a news report on it reads: “Twenty three killed in Guma. Hundred and five wounded in Christian village” (152).

In all these, Richard Ali suggests some ways out of this seemingly intractable conflagration

of ethnic, religious and political crises rocking the North-central region. The first and major one is through his manner of narration and characterization. As the novel ends, two things are clear: one is that Faruk and Rahila are set to get married in spite of Eunice Pam’s stiff opposition. That Faruk, a Fulani Muslim of Bolewa origin is going to marry Rahila, a Berom Christian, means the ultimate intermingling of progressive forces. This is because both because, both characters, earlier in the novel, have shown that they do not have inordinate religious and identity consciousness. Through their impending marriage, Ali seems to be preaching accommodation instead of segregation. Through Faruk and Rahila, the seeds of a new spiritual renewal are set to sprout in the land! These new seeds will be completely detribalized and non-religiously fanatical. After all, both Faruk and Rahila, though conscious of their ethnic and religious identities, try to accommodate others. In the novel, Rahila has to safeguard Nabila for some days in her room until the riot is over after which she takes her home to her mother and even as the novel is ending she is also sponsoring Nabila’s secondary education. In the same vein, Faruk saves the lives of Sekyen and other Christians in the same bus with him on the day the religious riot broke out simply because he does not believe in fanatic or ethnic quest to exterminate or dominate people of other ethnic groups or religion.

Also, in *City of Memories* there are two key cities that serve as the settings of the novel. One is Jos in North-central and the other is Bolewa, in North-eastern Nigeria. With these two cities which individually represent a place of memorable events for the characters, Ali puts forward an analogy. Placing Bolewa, a multi-ethnic city in Borno axis side by side Jos, Ali points the way forward. Bolewa as periscope in the novel used to have ethnic and religious fracas caused by two suitors of



one of her royal princesses by name Ummi Al Qasim. These two suitors, Ahmed Anwar and Usman caused a great mayhem in the city with their different religious inclinations until the people called them to order and decided within themselves to live in unity irrespective of their religious or ethnic background. That is why in Bolewa, Maryam Bazza's father, a foreigner, feels free to live and prosper there, despite his foreigner status. When Faruk embarks on a self-identity quest in Bolewa, he hints on this point when he confesses that "this Emirate (Bolewa) has more Christians and foreigners than any I have seen, yet there is no strife, no discrimination, nothing. [But] in Jos, we are having problems between indigenes and settlers, between Christians and Muslims, but in Bolewa, nothing. I met a Bamaguje last week and he did not feel threatened in any way" (143). To add to this confession, the Emir of Bolewa to whom the confession is being made replies that "...when people don't have major lines of division like religion, there is a greater scope of inclusion" (144). This means that for peace to reign in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Jos, religion and ethnicity should be completely de-emphasized. Ali with the novel seems to be calling for an end to infighting among the ethnic and religious groups in Jos. He also seems to be urging for concerted efforts to fix the crises in the North-central region for as Rahila notes in her final discussion with Funmi, a character in the book, "the North-central state is a mini-Nigeria and I believe that if we let it fragment, it will be the beginning of the dismantling of Nigeria" (212).

### Conclusion

From all that has been discussed so far in this paper, it is evident that Nigeria's socio-economic and historical realities are appropriated by Richard Ali in the creative development of his novel, *City of*

*Memories*. Among these issues, the most prominent ones are ethnic and religious-centered violence, identity crises and politically-motivated violence. Through the activities of some characters and certain events in the novel, the causes and consequences of these socio-political forces are enunciated. It is obvious from the novel that politicians manipulate the naivety of some people to foment and perpetuate violence in the society as Mrs. Eunice Pam and Ibrahim Dibarama are depicted to be strong financiers of militias and those who procurer arms and ammunition with which violent activities are carried out in the novel. However, in spite of her political connections, Mrs. Pam and her royal allies, in the novel, are detained and are being prosecuted. It is also noticeable that most ethnic and political crises emanate from personal squabbles and misunderstandings of some political gladiators in the society as it is the case between Mrs. Pam and Dibarama. Internal squabble among members of the same ethnic nationalities is portrayed as another factor that aggravates violence in North-central Nigeria, for example, the leadership tussle between two Fulani leaders in the novel, Hodio Ardo and Hurami Rukki sparks off killings and destructions of property in Guma. By and large, Richard Ali's *City of Memories* is to a large extent a reflection and representation of the socio-economic and political experiences of the people of North-central Nigeria especially those in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic city of Jos.

### Works Cited

- Abah, O E.. *et al.* "Ethno-Religious Conflict Management in Nigeria: A Case Study of Plateau State, 2001-2010" *National Journal of Human Resources* vol. 1 2011. 20-56.
- Abraham M. H. and Harpham G. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (9<sup>th</sup> Edition) London: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.

- Ali, R. *City of Memories* Lagos: Paresia, 2012.
- Ambe-Uve, Terhemba N “Identity Politics and the Jos Crisis: Evidence, lessons and Challenges of Good Governance” *African Journal of History and Culture* 2:3, 2010, pp.42-52.
- Chanci, H. and Odukoya, O. A “Ethnic and Religious Crises in Nigeria: A Specific Analysis upon Identities (1999-2013).” *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2016, pp. 87-110. <https://www.accord.org.za/ajer-issues/ethnic-religious-crises-nigeria> Accessed 20 July 2021.
- Dubey, A. “Literature and Society” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 9:6 March-April, 2013, pp. 84-85.
- Faleti, S. A. “Termination of Protracted Social Conflict in Africa: Victory or Consociation?” *Perspectives on Peace and Conflict in Africa: Essay in Honour of General Abdusallami Abubakar* (ed.) Albert Isaac. Olawale Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, UI, 2005, pp. 230-247.
- Madu, A.Y. and Goni, I. “Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Taraba State and its Implication on Soci-Economic, Political and Educational Development of Youths” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews* 4:3. August, 2013, pp.149-155.
- Nnorom, K. and Odigbo, J. “Identity Crisis and the Challenge of Peace-Building in Wukari-Nigeria” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4:1, 2015, pp.17-24.  
DOI:[10.5901/mjss.2015.v4n1p17](https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v4n1p17)  
Accessed 12 Dec. 2021.
- Nwonu, C. “Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*: A Review” July 21. <https://paresia.com.ngblog2012/07/21/richard-alis-city-of-memories-a-review-2012>. Accessed 2 Jan. 2021.
- Onyibor, M. I. “National identity and Crisis of Integration in Multi-Ethnic Nigeria: An Existentialist Perspective” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 6, 2016, pp. 1-12.
- Osaretin, I. and Akov, E. “Ethno-Religious Conflict and peace Building in Nigeria: The Case of Jos, Plateau State: *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*.2: 1, 2013 pp.349-360.
- Osimen, G. U. *et al*, “Ethnic and Identity Crisis: Challenge to National Integration in Nigeria” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 16:4, 2013, pp. 79-86.
- , “Religion” *Catholic Encyclopedia* [www.newadvent.org/cathen/127389/htm#a1](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/127389/htm#a1) 1988. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.
- Sulaiman, K. O. “Religious Violence in Contemporary Nigeria: Implications and Options for Peace and Stability Order” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29:1 2016, pp.85-103.
- Selden, R. *et al*. *A Readers Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* London: Pearson Education, 2005.
- Wadinga, W. “Post-Colonial Conflict in Africa: A Study of Richard Ali’s *City of Memories*” *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2:4, 2013, pp. 308-326.
- “What is New Historicism” [aresearchguide.com](http://aresearchguide.com).  
<https://www.aresearchguide.com/new-historicism.html> 2021 Accessed 12 Dec. 2021.
- Wolff, S. *Ethnic Conflicts: A Global Perspective* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Author's profile: Onyebuchi Nwosu, PhD**, teaches courses in English language and Literature at the Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria. . His interests in research include African literature, especially

contemporary poetry and oral literature with special interest in the aesthetics and functionality of oral and scribal arts. His critical essays have been published in national and international journals with some also appearing as book chapters. **Email:** <buchinwosu@yahoo.com>.

**Author's profile:** Elliott S. Uguru teaches is currently an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Nigeria. His research areas include postcolonial studies, literary and cultural studies, literary theory and criticism, and gender studies. He teaches courses in English language and Literature. **Email:** <elliottuguru@gmail.com>.