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## Diasporic Review of Every Day is for the Thief by Teju Cole

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### Abstract:

#### Every Day Is for the Thief review – return to Lagos

Written before his acclaimed *Open City*, Teju Cole's story of homecoming exposes Nigerian corruption. Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* opens as it means to go on, with a jeremiad against the corruption and sense of hopelessness in which Nigerian society wallows and which it seems incapable of escaping. The unnamed narrator has to pay a bribe, right under a sign that says, "Don't give bribes", as he applies for a visa in the Nigerian consulate in New York. The bribe-givers know they shouldn't give bribes, the bribe-takers know they shouldn't take them, but both are helpless, it seems, against an almost metaphysical force that drives them on this path, with no end in sight. At the embassy a man says over and over, as if trying to convince him, "This should be a time of joy. You know. Going home should be a thing of joy."

The narrator is returning to Nigeria after 15 years of absence; he left, we find out much later in the book, under a cloud, after his father's death, and after a spat with his mother. He is studying psychiatry in New York; he also aspires to be a writer. He is coming home to reconnect with the past, and to see if he wants to stay. It is through this scout's-eye view, always prospecting for a congenial and habitable environment, that the narrator appraises Lagos, and makes his judgment; and it is understandable that often the judgment is harsh. *Every Day Is for the Thief* was originally published before Cole's critically successful *Open City*, and some of the narrative threads run through both books. Indeed, *Every Day* appears to be a prequel to *Open City* – both narrators went to the same military secondary school, both grew up in Lagos, both left for New York after their father's death, both are studying medicine. Although it is not stated anywhere by the publisher or the author, it is logical to assume the two narrators are one person.



## INTRODUCTION

Unlike most narratives of return, in which the place returned to, now seen through adult eyes, appears shrunken, here it appears larger. "The hallways of the house are bigger than they used to be. The floor is broad and covered with curiously soft white tiles. It is as though I have shrunk in the years since I was last here ..."

Lagos, and the rest of the country, have also changed. Nigeria is now a democracy, and is more open; the Chinese, the Germans, the Indians, the Lebanese – they are all here, joining the scramble for oil dollars that is the source of Nigeria's prosperity, and also the source of its corruption. And yet, the change appears to be superficial. The traditional and the superstitious are always there, side by side with the modern.[1]

Teju Cole has a photographer's eye for detail. A goat on its knees reaching for stunted grass, a determined struggle for survival, suddenly gives way to another kind of struggle: local boys brazenly extorting money from the narrator's uncle and aunt. Each chapter takes us to another setting, another institution – a museum, a market, a bookstore – which the author then uses to examine the general state of politics or art or religion in Nigeria.

Cole is searching for what he describes, using an image from Tomas Tranströmer, as a "spot of sun that moves over the house walls and slips over the unaware forest of flickering faces ...". Sometimes one wonders if the narrator is looking hard enough, or in the right places. One wishes, sometimes, that the storyteller would take a detour from the well-trodden middle-class avenues, the museums and art centres, and shine his prospector's torchlight on the backstreets and hovels and tenement houses written about elsewhere by Ben Okri and Cyprian Ekwensi. Lagos is a city that stirs up ambitions not only in the writer, but also in the reader. And one feels that this writer will be back with more on this exhausting, but still unexhausted city.

The last chapter begins to take that detour, albeit belatedly. This is perhaps the best section in the book, bringing us closer to the unspeakable mysteries and magic of place. A colony of coffin makers work wood, while all around them on the floor are the golden wood-shavings whose "bouffant" beauty almost undermines the grimness of the fact that soon a body will be laid to rest in one of those coffins. Here, for a moment,

we are free of the book's too insistent complaints about the shortcomings of the city and the country; we are presented with its magic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The moment of returning to Nigeria is a significant motif in the literature of the Nigerian diaspora. This chapter examines the diverging attitudes towards Nigeria in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007) and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). While Atta's novel evinces an attitude of nation building and of trying to improve the country, Cole's book presents a detached visitor and observer who highlights the more negative aspects of the Nigerian imaginary. As he is confronted with Nigeria's rampant problems and social ills, the novel introduces three sets of problems that are saliently depicted in Nigerian diaspora literature, namely the lack of consistent provision of electricity, the ubiquitous corruption, and the proliferation of internet fraud.

*Every Day Is for the Thief* is a 2007 novel by Nigerian-American author Teju Cole. The unnamed protagonist of the novel returns to Lagos after fifteen years in New York City, only to find himself changed by living abroad and confused by the city.[1] The novel was first published in Nigeria, but was later republished in the United States.[2]

## CONCLUSION

A man leaves New York to return to Lagos for the first time in 15 years after the death of his father and a fight with his mother. He realizes he is not as comfortable in his home country as he expected to be.[2]

## REFERENCES

1. Wolitzer, Meg (26 April 2014). "In 'Every Day Is For The Thief,' Cole Chronicles A City's Reality". NPR. Retrieved 12 March 2017.
2. "Briefly Noted". *The New Yorker*. 31 March 2014. Retrieved 12 March 2017.