

THE REFLECTION OF ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S LIFE IN "SUNSET FOR A MANDARIN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to project the historical and biographical linkage between Abubakar Gimba's life and his novel, *Sunset for a Mandarin*. With the aid of the author's background, the paper traces the qualities found in the life of the novel's central character that are similar to the author's. Also by applying New Historicism School of literary theory on the text, the historical, cultural and political forces behind the literary text can be discovered. Again, the paper highlights the meaning of fiction before tracing the brief history of Nigerian fiction, digging from the pre-colonial Nigeria to the present day Nigeria in order to give an overview of the Nigerian fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is an important body of knowledge that shapes the man and the society to the extent that it attracts the attention of various scholars across the world for ages. Its impact, influence, contribution and power over the society led to the emergence of many writers and critics whose works are studied from generation to generation, depending on the issues under discussion. A literary work produced by a particular writer is a subject of interpretation by many readers who perceive it from different perspectives, because every individual has his way of understanding. This brings to fore the platform upon which Abubakar Gimba's *Sunset for a Mandarin* is understood by some critics as the author's life as a civil servant under the Nigerian military government.

In Nigeria, many writers reflect their life experiences in their literary works in an attempt to echo the reality of their struggles, achievements or disappointments. For instance, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* gives us the story of the author's incarceration during the Nigerian civil war by the Nigerian federal government. Furthermore, Ken Sarowiwa's ordeal in his struggle for the emancipation of Ogoni people, his people, is reflected in his novel *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary*. Similarly, Zaynab Alkali's background contributes in the presentation of her novel *The Virtuous Woman*. Therefore, the life of an author is strongly significant in understanding the content of his literary text.

Abubakar Gimba tries to highlight the glimpses of his life experiences as well as the images of Nigerian government in *Sunset for a Mandarin*. Although Nigeria is not mentioned throughout the text, but there are some names that are familiar with its people, history and geography.

NIGERIAN FICTION

According to Dictionary.com, fiction is the class of literature comprising works of imaginative narration, especially in prose form. In other words, it is the work which is classified as novels or short stories. Therefore, Nigerian fiction is concerned with the novels produced by Nigerian writers centering on the issues affecting the country.

By tracing the evaluation of Nigerian fiction, one should not ignore orature out of which we have folktale, myth and jests inherited from generation to generation. There is also no way one can overlook the existence of *ajami* form of writing in which Arabic letters are used to write in Hausa after the coming of Arabs in the region. Most of the stories written in the indigenous languages of Nigeria had some elements of orature in them, including the famous early novels written by Nigerians in English like Amos Tutuola's *Palm wine Drunkard* (1952) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). They were followed by a lot of novels such as Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the people* (1966), T.M. Aluko's *One man, One Wife* (1959), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961), Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1970), J.P. Clark's *Bekeferomo's Their America* (1970), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), *Elechi Amadi's The Concubine* (1966) and others. These are classified as the as the first generation of Nigerian

fiction writers whose major concern were reaction to colonial discourses, culture, rural versus urban, tradition versus modernity and independence disillusionment.

Nigerian civil war and its aftermath also brought about new writers that could be regarded as second generation Nigerian writers. Isidiore Okpewho's *Last Duty* (1976), Kolo Omotosho's *The Combat* (1972), Chris Agbani's *Ministers of the Board* (1985), Abubakar Gimba's *Innocent Victims* (1998), Labo Yari's *Climate of Corruption* (1978) and others, fall under this category. Most of these novels deal with the issues of corruption, war, relationship in divergence to the earlier ones.

What can be regarded as contemporary Nigerian fiction include Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky* (2013), Richard Ali's *City of Memories* (2012), Nweka Nwelue's *The Abyssinian Boy* (2009), Jude Dibia's *Walking With Shadows* (2005), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Achebe's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and many more. Most of their themes are about the contemporary issues of Nigeria. This is just a brief account of the Nigerian fiction which can highlight to us its journey so far.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is framed on New Historicism, the school of literary theory which was first developed by critic and Harvard English Professor, Stephen Greenblatt, in 1980s. Other influential scholars behind the eruption of New Historicism are Michel Foucault and Lynn Hunt who were both teaching at UC-Berkeley during its rise as a postmodern approach to history.

They argued that to understand a literary piece, we need to understand the author's biography and social background, ideas circulating at the time, and the cultural milieu. They seem to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. Furthermore, New Historicism concerns itself with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority not a "truth" but a "cultural construct" reflected in a given work.

New Historicism is all about paying close attention to the historical context of literary works. After all, plays, poems, novels, art in general are a product of specific time and place. As a literary theory that promotes the author's background and the historical events that are dominant during the publication of the literary text, applying New Historicism on *Sunset for a Mandarin* will aptly capture the meaning of the literary text.

AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

Abubakar Gimba was born on 10th March, 1952 in Nassarawa Lapia Local Government Area of Niger State. He attended Guju Junior Primary School (1959-1962), Government College, Keffi (1965-1969) where he obtained West African Examination Council Certificate. Gimba

proceeded to the School of Basic Studies Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (1970-1971) before joining the same university for B.Sc. Economics (1971-1974) and then his M.Sc. Economics in University of Cincinnati Ohio U.S.A,(1976-1977). Gimba did his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in South Eastern State of Nigeria. He started working at Northwest Civil Service in August, 1975 as a Planning Officer in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. After the creation of Niger State, he joined Niger State Civil Service where he held many positions before reaching the position of a Director and then Permanent Secretary. In the Banking Sector, Gimba rose to the position of the Executive Director of Union Bank of Nigeria Plc. and United Bank of Africa (UBA), respectively. He was a member Governing Council of some Tertiary Institutions in Niger State, a former member of the Presidential Committee under General Abdulsalam Abubakar. Gimba was also the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), the Chairman of Ahmadu Bello University Alumni Association and then served as the Special Assistant to the Nigerian Senate President on Budget and Finance, David mark.

As a novelist, Gimba wrote *Trial of Sacrifice* (1985), *Witness to Tears* (1986), *Innocent Victims* (1988), *Sunset for a Mandarin* (1991), *Sacred Apples* (1997) and *Footprints* (1998). As a poet, he wrote *Inner Rumbings* (2002) and *This Land of Ours* (2001).

PLOT SUMMARY OF ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S SUNSET FOR A MANDARIN

The novel begins with Hamzah waiting for this boss at the Oval Office while the boss was having a meeting with the Chairman Revolutionary Administration Council, RAC. After the meeting, on their way home, the boss informed Hamzah that a new State Military Administrator is posted to this state during the Revolutionary Administrative meeting. Hamzah was shocked with the sudden change because he did not expect it and he did not like parting with his boss, Major Khalid, the nice gentleman whose closeness to him transcends to calling each other ‘friends’. Then a sudden fear gripped Hamzah, the fear of not knowing who would replace his boss, how good he would be, he was totally confused before Major Khalid comforted and assured him that the new boss is a nice man.

The arrival of the new administrator with a smile and good sense of humor eased Hamzah’s tension, Commander Abbud was warmly welcomed to the State. Major khalid’s departure after the handing over left not only Hamzah with a broken heart, but the entire people of the State who applauded the man for his commitment to the development of the State. The new SMA drew Hamzah close to him, for he was briefed by the former SMA about Hamzah’s dedication to work. They worked harmoniously together, thus Hamzah became comfortable with the way things were going with his new boss. Though Hamzah discovered some weaknesses of Commander Abbud, he rated the man as good military administrator aspiring to serve the State with his best ability.

Things started falling apart when Hamzah fell sick that he could not even go to the office. During his absence, huge amount of money got missing under the watch of his junior

colleague officers temporarily holding the office. When Hamzah was summoned and informed about the scandal, he took responsibility as the head of the treasury just to save his fellow civil servants involved, but he promised to present his findings later. Without giving enough time for his investigation and a chance for his defense, Hamzah was asked by Commander Abbud to retire from his job which he refused. To Hamzah's surprise, he was sacked over the accusation of misappropriating millions of money belonging to the state's treasury. Hamzah was arrested in the nation's capital city when he visited his former boss to brief him about his innocence of the accusation. The charges for the arrest were framed. After his release, armed robbers beat the hell out of him in their quest to get the share of the stolen money he had never set eyes on; this led to his admission to hospital for six months.

THE REFLECTIONS IN ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S *SUNSET FOR A MANDRIN*

Looking at Abubakar Gimba's *Sunset for a Mandarin* from the perspective of New Historicism, we can clearly see the presence of Gimba in the story in the personality of Hamzah, the central character of the novel. As a retired civil servant who had been in the system for many years, Gimba peeps into the mind of Hamzah and gives us every detail of his encounters with his bosses and the protocols of the civil service. Abdullahi Isma'ila pointed out in his "The Mandarin and the Creative Paths" interview with Gimba that:

"In this manner, a character like Hamzah becomes, strikingly Gimba himself in his disposition or outward manifestations and psychological makeup. To be sure, Hamzah is Gimba and Gimba is Hamzah, one and indivisible, to the extent Hamzah represents an indubitable personification of Gimba's secret identity" (pg 75).

Throughout the novel, Hamzah is very careful and cautious in the interactions with his boss, Commander Abbud, he tried all his best to remain loyal to him as he did with his former boss in line with the provision of his job. He even exceeded the limit of his personal freedom to appease the SMA by attending to his calls at any moment just to serve his duty diligently.

At this juncture, Gimba is applauded for his credibility during his years as a civil servant who held several positions in the system, he worked under many officers ahead of him, thus he gives us his experience through the attentive and alerted Hamzah.

Babajo (2001) says of him:

"Like Hamzah who becomes utterly defenseless against the tide of life that set him apart from the maddening crowd, Gimba in his public life never survived the contrivances of his inordinately ambitious contemporaries. Hamzah comes off as a likeable character just as Gimba in real life. The two are indubitably exceptional figures".

To buttress the point that Gimba and Hamzah are the same, Daniel (2000) asserted that:

“In each of his novels, Gimba has an alterego. The alterego serves as his mask through which he articulates and projects his vision of man”.... “Gimba’s protagonists are obviously his mouth piece in the novels in which they appeared. They also espouse his philosophical, religious concept of man in a changing world”.

In sunset For a Mandarin Hamzah is portrayed as a gentleman, disciplined, principled, God fearing and very religious personality who refused to take bribe when it was offered to him, he sympathized with the masses owing government money, he discharged his duties diligently. When faced with the predicament he could not control, Hamzah sought refuge from Allah by reciting verses of the Qur’an, and he didn’t play with his daily prayers. Throughout the novel, Hamzah had never given up in seeking the help from God, he was also optimistic in quest for being vindicated.

Though the novel is set in a fictional country with fictional cities and towns, it is discernable that Nigeria is presented in disguise. Babajo (2001) made it clear that:

“ the spatio-geographical setting can therefore be traced to Niger State on particular and Northern Nigeria in general. The ‘Songhai nation’ represents Nigeria; while new Timbuktu’ is its Federal Capital, Abuja, and Kindendo a state in the north of Nigeria”.

He further argued that even the names of the characters are familiar with the names from the Northern part of Nigeria, such as Hamzah, Khalid, Abdul, Waleed, Jamila, Ameerah and others, Gimba also made references with some historical names in the northern Nigeria, Nagwamatse and Masaba hall. In the novel, the chairman of the Revolutionary Administrative Council (RAC) of Songhai nation is equal to the President of Nigeria and he has blood relation to Hamzah. This may bring to the mind of the reader that the Chairman might be the representative of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida who was the Nigerian President at the time *Sunset for a Mandarin* was published. Gimba and Babangida are from the same state, Niger.

Again, the projection of the military dictatorship in the novel is similar to the despotic attitudes of the military rulers in Nigeria. They don’t obey the rules and regulations of the civil service appropriately when it comes to the issue of executing their job. For instance, Hamzah is always thinking of how to discharge his duties excellently without hurting his boss, though he is mindful of the provisions of his role under the civil service. Hamzah used to come to his office early in the morning, work on his files, attend to his guests, answer his boss' call and stay late in the office. Therefore, Hamzah’s mind is always full of thoughts and very strict on his principle. This made Babajo (2001) to sum up the novel: “It is distinct in its portrayal and depiction of traumatic and excruciating experiences of a principle minded character. The character brings to our mind classic character in African fiction such as Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, the great priest of Olu, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, and Mugo in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, “He is a thoughtful fellow, a man who is besieged by thoughts, doubts and the quest to fulfill the ideals of this profession. Hamzah is very observant”.

We were told in the novel that Hamzah was not informed about the meeting which outcome lead to the emergence of his new boss on time neither was his boss aware about the sudden change, the change started with immediate effect and the handing over was made within twenty four hours. Even the speech of the new SMA was not formal during the occasion. There is also the hasty demand of the new SMA for his commands to be obeyed instantly, for example, he wanted his first public speech to be cancelled just because someone casted doubt on the credibility of the speech despite the fact that the whole people of the state were anxiously waiting for the speech. He also wanted one old man to be retired from working at the state house without following the due process. Furthermore, he insisted that Hamzah should make some payments that were of less important over those in need of emergency attention. In addition, he forcefully retired Hamzah from the civil service simply because he felt Hamzah was stubborn and stiff to his principles.

Various reports across Nigeria point accusing finger to the civil servants for their contribution towards the blooming of corruption. Hamzah helplessly listened to his boss whenever he was complaining about the poor attitude of his fellow civil servants, but tactically depended on them. When his sister, Ameera, was complaining about the way they were slowly dragging the payment of her philanthropic clinic, Hamzah defended civil servants as usual. Even Hamzah is aware about the lapses of his profession in the country. This brings to fore Gimba's argument in his book *Letter to the Unborn Child* where he responded to Chinua Achebe's claim that the problem with Nigeria is leadership. Gimba asserted that the people of Nigeria are also problem to the country.

To Gimba, other people who are not leaders contribute to the stagnation of Nigeria's lingering progress. Through his characters, we see how police men and military men oppress people either by harassing them to give bribe or by tormenting them to follow orders. Hamzah encountered such type of torture while in detention where he met people with different heart touching stories that led their illegal and extended detention in the cell similar to hell.

In the same vein, Gimba gave us the picture of how government manipulates media to suit its purpose, in other words, he projected the power of the government in fighting its course. Initially, Hamza had no intention of taking the government to court ever his plight. He was warned against it by his friends though he briefed his lawyer in case the government may decide to take legal action against him based on the false accusation on his neck. This is the reflection of uncountable cases of how governments trample upon the rights of the helpless figures standing on its way. Moreover, government is regarded as money making industry through which individuals enrich themselves over night.

Thus, there is rivalry and competition among the civil servants who happened to be in the leaders' kitchen cabinet. There is no doubt, Hamzah's hardwork, dedication, loyalty, honesty and sacrifice to his profession are what made major Khalid and Commander Abbud to draw him closer to them. Waleed who happened to be his colleague, was envious of his elevation, therefore, he tried all his best to see the end of Hamzah's long romantic dinning with the kings. Waleed conspired the misunderstanding between Hamzah and the SMA, Commander

Abbud. Hamzah remained calm despite the fact it was hinted to him that his friend has turned to his enemy, because he was in competition, he was not envious or jealous with his colleagues.

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With the help of a literary theory, New Historicism, we are told about the political issues as well as the impact of military government in Nigeria through tracing the historical and the cultural background of the author, Gimba.

CONCLUSION

Abubakar Gimba is a talented Nigerian literary writer whose contribution to the development of Nigerian literature cannot be ignored. In his quest for the projection of life under the military government and the experiences of civil servants under the system, he wrote *Sunset for a Mandarin*. Amidst the unfolding events within the text, Gimba highlights his life experiences in the person of the central character of the novel. Framing the paper under the approach of New Historicism paves way to the understanding of the background, history, culture and political influence that shape the events unfolded in the story.

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