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IDENTITY CRISIS IN ABUBAKAR'S *SEASON OF CRIMSON BLOSSOM*: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This paper attempts what may be called a Psychoanalytical Study of Abubakar's Season of Crimson Blossoms (2015). It has been argued in this paper that the identity of the central characters, Hajiya Binta Zubair and Hassan Reza is dependent upon their repressed and suppressed desire. A critical study of the text in question reveals that these repressed desires have come back in an unguarded way and apparently define not only the identity of the hero and the heroine but also serve as the moving force of the actions in the plot of the story. Freud's psychoanalytical method, which is the perspective adopted in this study, is a type of literary criticism that examines literature through the prism of psychoanalysis. It discusses the psyches, complexes, and mental conditions of the characters. It is crucial to keep in mind that all of Freud's work relies on the idea of the unconscious. The results, the paper argues, should reveal a rupture in the identity of the central characters due to an unresolved conflict between their conscious and unconscious worlds so that their past or suppressed desires now manifest in the process of their identity formation and the symbolic representation of the inner world of the central character, Hajiya Binta, through manifestation of her suppressed desire depicts in a more wider sense the internal struggle of many women in Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

This paper studies Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* from a psychoanalytical point of view. The study explores the characters' psyches, complexes, and the structure of their minds in a model championed by Sigmund Freud. This means that the study navigate on the complex nature of the central character's conscious and the unconscious with a view to seeing the implication their suppressed desire has on their identity formation. Freud's psychoanalytical method, which is the perspective adopted in this study, is a type of literary criticism that examines literature through the prism of psychoanalysis. It discusses the psyches, complexes, and mental conditions of the characters. It is crucial to keep in mind that all of Freud's work relies on the idea of the unconscious. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) is a 21st century novel which is written based on the form and content of the supposedly the post-modern novel in Northern Nigeria literature in particular and Africa in general.

Classical African writers of the 20th century write what was considered a weeping literature, unhappy literature and literature of colonial resistance (Nnolim, 6). This might be due to the reason that Africans' experience of slavery and colonialism was horrible and lamentable. Most of the novels produced then were geared towards championing the course of Africans and their cultural identities. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), for example, were among the most celebrated African classical novels that were written in the traditional realist form, depicting either Africans' quest for cultural reintegration or struggle against colonial domination. Charles E. Nnolim, in an essay entitled "African Literature in the 21st Century: Challenges for Writers and Critics" argues in this direction:

Africans, having lost pride through slavery and colonialism created a modern literature from the ashes of these past experiences. It became a literature with a strong sense of loss: loss of our dignity; loss of our culture

and tradition, loss of our religion, loss of our land; loss of our very humanity. Is it any wonder that the titles of our most celebrated literary works highlighted these losses? Have we forgotten Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*... (Nnolim, 7).

It is in view of the above statement that early modern African literature limited its domain to only colonial issues; writers explored issues that were related majorly to either African culture or struggle for independence. However, in the heyday of the 21st century, with the changing of the world order from modern to the postmodern world order and because of globalization, everything changed, from science and technology to literature and philosophy. These changes affected the world of African literature and criticism. To represent the postmodern experience of the 21st century and how it impacts on the Northern Nigerian people in literary works, there is a need for a paradigm shift in form and content of the literature in Northern Nigeria. This opinion is equally shared by Nnolim as he posits that to redirect and resituate African literature to fit the 21st century in both content and style, "we need a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope to give artistic impetus to a new world order. Our writers, in this new epoch of globalism dominated by a technologically oriented new world order must create new Africa" (Nnolim: 2006). This simply means that if modern literature in Northern Nigeria centered on the colonial experience, post-modern literature in Northern Nigeria should depict the complex realities of the 21st century people in Northern Nigeria.

It is against this background that this paper examines Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* from a psychoanalytic point of view. It delves into the unconscious of the characters and shows the extent to which their inner world could as well be a symbolic representation of their external world. The

text in question is chosen because of its Post-modern aesthetics. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* depicts a fragmented reality in northern Nigeria. The use of non-linear narrative technique is evident in the text. No wonder when the novel was first published, it receives an international praise. Binyavanga Wainaina argues that "...this is a very moving book, a love story, with the unlikelyst of protagonists... a Muslim mother with grown up kids, and her robber. My novel of the year. Just beautiful" (quoted in Ibrahim, 1).

Similarly, Helon Habila, author of *Oil on Water* and *The Chibok Girls* also praises the author's power of narration. "Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* is a tender love story set against the backdrop of religious violence and politics in northern Nigeria, told in the slow, naturalist style reminiscent of Stephen Crane and Zola. Perhaps the best book I have read this year." (quoted in Ibrahim, 1). The novel under study demonstrates the paradigm shift in the 21st century novel writing in Northern Nigeria. Unlike the market literature and/or weeping literature of the 20th century literature in northern Nigeria, the text in question revolutionises novel writing due its focus on more complex issues like the mind, philosophy, environment, religion and global politics (insurgency) history, and socio-political issues of northern Nigeria.

Brief on the Primary Author

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim was born in 1979, in Jos, Plateau State of North-central Nigeria. Ibrahim obtained a B.A. Mass Communication at the University of Jos. He is an established journalist and holds a post as an editor at the Daily Trust newspaper. Besides being a practicing journalist, Ibrahim is also a *fictional* writer, essayist, columnist, and a critic some of his notable literary works includes *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *Whispering Trees*. His works, specifically, *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, **attracted** not only national recognition but also international. Leila Aboulela, author of *The*

Kindness of Enemies, praises Ibrahim's creative capability by opining that *Season of Crimson Blossom* is "A rich and vibrant novel with shades of brutality, romance and the pressures of a close knit community" (quoted in Ibrahim, 2). Also, Binyavanga Wainaina commends the author that "Abubakar Adam Ibrahim is exactly what Northern Nigerian Literature should look like"... (Quoted in Ibrahim, 2). The above commendations mean a clear testimony of the author's ability to not only internationalize Northern Nigerian Literature by attracting international writers and critics but also change content and style, perspectives and dimensions of Literature in Northern Nigeria to fit the pressing changes of the post-modern world order.

On the Primary Text

Season of Crimson Blossom is a debut novel authored by an emerging post-modern northern Nigerian writer, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim. Set majorly in the outskirts of Abuja, the Nigerian capital, the novel depicts, in a subtle way, an illicit salacious affair between Hajiya Binta Zubairu, the 55-year old widow Muslim widow and Hassan Reza, the 26-year old drug dealer and local gang leader. The novel, equally, delves into the story of Sen. Buba Maikudi, a roguish politician who selfishly uses Reza's controlled political thugs residing at San Siro to intimidate political oppositions at rally for a token that cannot even cater for their daily expenses. The first paragraph in the first page of the novel is a microcosm of the entire novel. As readers, we are introduced to the worries and the complexities of life the central character, Hajiya Binta Zubair, may likely encounter in the course of the story.

Published first by Parresia Publishers, in 2015, in Nigeria, Cassava Republic got the permission for its subsequent international publications. It was then published in Germany, Kenya, South Africa and the United Kingdom. In 2017, Cassava Republic released it in the United States of America. The novel became a winner in the literary contest, the

2016 Nigerian Prize for Literature. This is considered the biggest literary award in Africa. *Season of the Crimson Blossoms* is one of the few Nigerian novels that depict Nigerian Hausa people and the Hausa language that receives international recognition. It is not surprising that Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese writer, author of *The Kindness of Enemies* opines that *Season of Crimson Blossoms* is "a rich and vibrant novel with shades of brutality, romance and the pressures of a close knit community" (quoted in Ibrahim, 3).

Theoretical Framework

The assumption upon which this research is premised is that *Season of Crimson Blossoms* is an exploration of the characters' mind and how their suppressed desire manifests in an unguarded way. To test the validity or otherwise of this notion, psychoanalysis is chosen as a framework. Freud's Psychoanalysis is a type of literary critical approach which uses psychoanalytical lenses to understand literary works. It addresses the psyches, complexes, and mental diseases of the characters. It is important to remember that Freud's whole body of work—including psychoanalysis—is predicated on the idea of the unconscious. This is the portion of the mind that controls our behavior and is located outside of consciousness. According to Freud, our unconscious mind, not the conscious mind, is what drives our conduct. He distinguished between what humans are aware of and are not aware of in the human mind. Many concepts from psychoanalysis and literary criticism, including oedipal complexes, sublimation, and suppression, were presented by Freud.

Repression is associated with whatever we "forget" or disregard, such as unsolved disputes, wishes that are not acknowledged, or unpleasant experiences from the past. As a result, we have a tendency to shove these experiences back into our unconscious minds and avoid dealing with them. Repression is the act of pushing them away and into the

shadows. The conscious and unconscious minds are the two primary divisions made by Freud. Three ways exist for repression to emerge from the unconscious: comedy, slips of the tongue, and dreams. Thus, the primary distinction between repression and suppression is that in the first case, we tend to consciously inhibit our ideas and feelings, pushing them into the subconscious. It exists, even though we don't always recognize it or bring it to light. It will only be there if we unlock it. On the other hand, we cannot choose or access repression. This type of psyche is also split into three distinct portions, the ego, the superego, and the id, each of which serves a certain purpose. One's concept of self is embodied in the ego (Conscious). Our innate suppressed urges, which are mostly found in the unconscious, are represented by the Id (Unconscious). It is believed that the Superego, or conscience, is comparable to our conscience and serves as our moral center, allowing us to distinguish between what is acceptable and unacceptable.

Identity Crisis in *Season of Crimson Blossom*

This section explores identity crisis *Season of Crimson Blossom*. Here is a 55-year old lady that lost her husband, Zubairu, to a communal ire; or her slain son to a police brutality; or worries about the divorce of her daughter, Hureira; or thinks deeply about the possibility of the robbers scaling her fence. All this shows that all is not well with Binta Zubairu; we are not so sure of where her mind will be directed. This also raises some tensions that Hajiya Binta Zubairu is likely to be absent-minded throughout the story:

It was the same feeling she had had that day, long ago, When her father had stormed into announce that she was going to be married off to a stranger. Or the day that stranger, Zubairu, her husband for many years, had been so brazenly consumed by communal ire when he was set upon

by a mob of intoxicated zealots. Or the day her first son, Yaro, who had the docile face and demure disposition of her mother, was shot dead by the police. Or even the day Hureira, her intemperate daughter, had returned, crying that she had been divorced by her good-for-nothing husband. (Ibrahim, 1).

It is clear from the above quote that Hajiya Binta Zubairu does not only have a divided mind but also an absent mind. She is portrayed as someone whose character has been subjected to an ironic tone that makes her identity unstable. Even from the description of her relationship with Hassan Reza, one could notice a void, a gap, an absence or a flux in her identity.

The kind of the mimesis we have here is the one that adds-on or the thing that stands in place of itself. It is the thing that is and that is not the thing itself. Derrida, describes this kind of mimesis as a "supplement"-that which "intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as one fills a void." (Derrida, 56). The current state of Binta Zubairu as described above shows that a supplement is needed in her life. The "gaps" or "absences" in her life require a supplement to fill in. But even if a supplement is added in her life, it adds nothing to the gap because as Derrida would want us to believe it is as if one fills a void.

In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the author uses the central characters, Hajiya Binta Zubairu, and Hassan Reza as supplemental; both of them lack stable identities identity. They therefore need a supplement to complete their essence of being. Hajiya Binta Zubairu is a Muslim widow who loses her first son Yaro at younger age. Due to his early death, she was unable to show him parental "love" and care. As a result, Binta is left with an unfulfilled inner desire for love. But one is not so sure whether the unfulfilled love was for her dead husband, Malam Zubairu. Because when Hassan Reza realises

that Hajiya Binta is thinking too much, Reza asks her what she has been thinking and she responds that "I have been thinking you know, about my late husband.' You know I have spent more of my life with him than with anyone else" (Season: 186) But on the other hand, one could say she is thinking about her slain son, Yaro. This could, though, raise a question of Oedipus complex. But there are some hints that the unfulfilled desire of love Hajiya Binta Zubairu suppresses is for Yaro, her slain son. This is seen in the text at a place where Hajiya Binta Zubairu could not call her first son by his name. But this culture is being broken in the modern time. Modern parents do call their first sons by their names. A conversation between Hajiya Binta and her daughter, Hadiza, could vindicate this:

'He told me Kabir had a cut on his hand. I should go see how he is faring.' Binta envied her this liberty she enjoyed, this luxury of calling her first child by its name and holding and treating it like one's beloved. Such affection she, Binta, had never experienced from her mother, nor dispensed it to her late son Yaro. 'Don't you ever feel... strange calling him like that? By his name? Your first son? Hadiza turned to her mother and laughed. 'Lallai kam, Hajiya, this is the twenty-first century. I shall not subject myself and children to the shackles of the old ways like you did'. (Ibrahim, 57).

One can make sense from the above excerpt that Hajiya Binta is really left with a gap or absence in her life. She has an unfulfilled affection which she wants to express. This is why her contact with Hassan Reza might be the turning point in her struggle for survival. Because from the above quoted excerpt, one could notice an aporia. That means the text sounds contradictory or the text says one thing and does another thing. This could be owing to what (Davis and Schleifer, 166)

calls a text's "temporal folds of error and irony" (quoted in Bello-Kano,2). Superficially, one may think that Hajiya Binta, by questioning her daughter Hadiza for calling her first child by name means her (Binta Zubairu) resolve to preserve the old culture of the Hausa people. But far beyond that, Hajiya Binta is only trying to voice out her deep emotions, feelings, love and care which she could not express to her son, Yaro. Because of this, she feels lonely, frustrated, and depressed. The only thing for her now is to look for a supplement to fill in the gap in her life. Hassan Reza is a supplemental character that Hajiya Binta intimates to fill in the gap. This leads to a relationship between Hajiya Binta Zubair and Hassan Reza. Because they are supplementing each other, she has fallen in love with Hassan Reza and in physical appearance of Hassan Reza, Hajiya Binta Zubairu sees her slain son, Yaro. The case is also the same with Hassan Reza because he sees in Hajiya Binta his mother that is accused of abandoning him and going to Saudi Arabia for "Kano to Jedda" when he was still a child. "Even Talatu, one of his stepmothers, had said his mother was a 'Kano to Jedda'. There had been muted talks about her questionable liaison with dubious Arabs." (Ibrahim: 40). That is why one is left wondering about the relationship between Hajiya Binta and Hassan Reza. At one instance, she acts like his mother, teaching him some manners of Islam. If they meet in her or his apartment, she often asks him to say his prayers. "She convinced him to perform his ablutions and say his Salat" (Ibrahim, 127). Sometimes, she takes Hassan Reza as a source of pleasure. He is also a means of fulfilling her unfulfilled love and desire that she was unable to express to her slain son, Yaro. Though one could say her relationship with Hassan Reza has gone beyond child/ mother relation. Their relationship results into an illicit and salacious affair which attracts societal condemnation.

Shame had come much later, after they were done and lay side by side trying to catch their breath. She got up and pulled down her dress. When he had come to leave, he had halted before her as she stood by the door, eyes averted. Uncertainly, they had stood like that, until he parted the curtains and went out. And when she sensed him gone, because she did not hear his footfalls, she had exhaled. *She knew then that her search for Yaro in the eyes of a stranger had unshackled her long-suppressed desires and left the objectionable stench of fornication clinging to her* (Ibrahim, 58, my italics).

Because the supplement is a dangerous one, the relationship between Hajiya Binta and Hassan Reza will not fill the voids in their lives. Though Hajiya Binta has sexually satisfied her desire, she is after all left with another gap in her life. Now she is faced with societal condemnation over a salacious affair with Hassan Reza. When Binta pays a visit to Laraba who delivers a baby, she prays for the baby. Upon her prayer, another visitor sitting beside Hajiya Binta mocks Binta's action. For her, Hajiya Binta has no moral ground to pray for the baby because she has sinned. 'See how people turn into saints overnight. They don't realize you need to come to God with a pure heart before He answers your prayers. *Qalbun Saleem*. That is what the Qur'an says'. (Ibrahim, 274). From the above long-quoted excerpt, one notices that "defferance" is evident in the identity of both Hajiya Binta and Hassan Reza. Her intent to satisfy suppressed desire or love through Hassan Reza is being put off. It is being deferred because the narrator reveals that she is left with the "objectionable stench of fornication clinging to her" which causes a societal outcry. So if her relationship with Reza is meant to fill the gap in her life, her will to achieve this is being put-off; it is also delayed. This is a huge gap in Binta's identity. The implication of this is that Hajiya Binta's

struggle is a never-ending one. It is a journey that has a beginning without an end and the more Hajiya Binta Zubair's will or desire is delayed or deterred, the more she renews her effort in getting another supplement that could fill the gaps in her life. But this flight and fall continues indefinitely.

Similarly, the death of Hajiya Binta's husband is central to the question of stability in Binta's life. On the question of sexuality, it seems Hajiya Binta is either unable to control her suppressed desire or her husband was unable to satisfy her even when he was alive. Sexually, she feels suppressed, disturbed or even handicapped. It is ironic that whenever Binta has sex with Hassan Reza, she forgets to remind herself that it is a sin against God. It is even there in the Islamic book (Az Zahabi's *The Major Sins*) she reads. Perhaps one can argue that she may read Az Zahabi's *The Major Sin* and still go ahead with her sin because it is common to find people preaching what they do not practice. In the text below one can see how Hajiya Binta urges Hassan Reza to be more energetic when he comes to sleep with her:

He turned to her and smiled and she saw how handsome he looked, how his glazed eyes seemed so peaceful and yet so far away, how young he really was. 'Action zalla'. He raised his joint at her before putting it back to his lips... 'God, what am I doing?' Her voice was low because she was addressing herself. (Ibrahim, 210).

It is yet another instance of Binta's crisis of identity. It is clear from the above passage Hajiya Binta finds pleasure in her illicit affair with Hassan Reza. By asking such a rhetorical question ('God what am I doing') it suggests that she is still conscious of the fact that she is committing a major sin she reads in Az Zahabi's *The Major Sin*. At some occasion, Mal. Haruna, who intends to take hand in marriage, begins to engage Hijiya Binta to go

outing with him. But Mal. Haruna is the same person going round the society and discloses her affair with Hassan Reza to the people. "I know all the things you have been going round saying about me. ... I don't want to have anything to do with you. Just allow me to whore myself to whomever I please." (Ibrahim: 315). It is the same Mal. Haruna that reports Hajiya Binta to son, Munkaila. When Munkaila becomes aware of her relationship with Hassan Reza, he left Abuja for Jos. Coincidentally; he meets Hassan Reza coming out of Binta's home. As Hassan Reza tries to run away, Munkaila engages him. Reza then struck him on the back of the head with a wood and Munkail paints and dies. This is yet another gap in Binta's life. We can notice that Binta takes Hassan Reza as supplement to fill in gap in her life and "supplement" as Derrida argues is "the possibility of perversion, regression towards an evil". (Derrida, 67). Munkaila's death shows open-endedness in Binta's use of supplement to fill in gap in her life.

Conclusion

Even though Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* might be interpreted from a Realist or Naturalist perspective, this research declared it a Post-modern novel. From the discussion above it has been argued that the text in question is mimesis or portrayal of post-modern characters with shattered and unstable identity. Through the characters of Hajiya Binta Zubair and Hassan Reza, the research stressed that they are both supplemental characters; while Hajiya Binta sees in Reza her slain son, he, Reza, also sees in Hajiya Binta his mother who abandoned him for Kano to Jedda. The paper concluded that the illicit affair between Hjiya Binta and Hassan Reza questions our ability to suppress our animalistic tendency. The big irony is that being religious has gone beyond one's ability to acquire only Islamic knowledge. Both

knowledge and practice need to be applied together. This is seen in the characters of Hajiya Binta Zubairu. She is portrayed as religious and is also respected by all and sundry in the society, yet she has fallen victim of following her desire. These are the "gaps" and "absences" that we all have as human beings.

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