

The Nigeria Political Class and the Quest For Good Governance in Abubakar Gimba's *Innocent Victims*

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Abstract

*Emerging from the experience of colonialism, Nigerians craved for assessable and affordable leadership and governance from the emerging politicians who took over the mantle of leadership. Unfortunately, such hope was dashed as they failed in their promises and responsibilities for entrenching sustainable development in the country. This paper examines Abubakar Gimba's novel *Innocent Victims* and explores his idea of the leadership question in Nigeria and the quest for patriotic, dedicated and committed leaders that will transform the nation to the peak of development bearing in mind the abundant human and natural resources the country is blessed with. The paper observes through a Marxist interrogation of the novel that morality is an essential element in good leadership. It also explores the class stratification in Nigerian political system that negates the lower class, such that it affects the leadership and governance demonstration in Nigeria, hence, good governance and development has eluded the nation. It further craves for a shift from the present phenomenon to a more proactive state.*

Key Words: Colonialism, Leadership, Corruption, Governance and Development

Introduction

The emergence of Nigeria after the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria protectorate is no doubt out of conviction to ease and facilitate the onerous task of colonial administration. Although Nigeria was the creation of European administrations, it would be an error to assume that, its people had little history before its final boundaries were negotiated by France, Britain and Germany at the turn of 20th century.

The formation of Nigeria as a nation in 1914 did not go without contradiction as it has been argued that, colonialism posed a series of implications on the nation and its people. The first problem was the conflict arising from the integration of people of diverse languages, cultures, values and interest. These conflicts and crisis have continued to persist till date. However, the presence of colonial masters in Nigeria brought some social changes, both negative and positive cultural development. Some of the positive changes arising from the introduction of modern agriculture, western education, communication, trade and commerce and others that improved the welfare and social co-existence of the people while negatively, the introduction

of western life which is in conflict with the native culture posed a lot of concern.

The colonial masters introduced a new form of administration and justice alongside new economic and western idea. Western education was made available to a wide range of Nigerians through the activities of Christian Missionaries. This period witnessed the beginning of major social changes in the country which include rapid growth of the Nigeria economy. This is supported by Daniel Ajayi Crowther when he states:

The British administration created a huge free trade in the past. British protection of traders made them move freely with the result that, not only the volume of internal trade rose steeply, but exporting and importing became easier. (190).

Other positive developments are in the area of administration, the rule of law, technology, and healthcare system and so on that brought about social changes and political gains in the country. Consequently, upon these developments, the few educated Nigerian elites were not comfortable and satisfied with the administration and this gave rise for agitation for independence and self

rule. This agitation gave birth to a movement which was piloted by nationalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahamadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Herbert Macaulay and host of others including students organisations. The movement later faced a setback in view of the nature of the expected new Nigeria characterised by diverse tribal, political, religious, cultural and social barriers. Yet, arising from collective determination, sacrifice and commitment by these elites, the desired dream saw the light of the day as it was later achieved.

The quest for independence and self-rule by the Nigerian political elite was to provide effective leadership. The leadership was to afford Nigerians a say and participatory role with a view to providing more purposeful development in the area of cultural and social affiliations and other key sectors. The nationalists claimed that, development under the colonial administration was not enough in view of the abundant human and natural resources in the country. Accordingly, the colonial masters paid lip services to the development of the country while they concentrated in exploiting the nation's resources. These created the hunger to have independence and self rule to effectively harness the economy for rapid and desired development in all sectors of human endeavour among Nigerians. The struggle soon yielded a result. It was a dream come true.

However, under the newly emerged independent leaders, the developmental structures established by the colonial administration only survived for a short period of time before it started dwindling as the new leaders begin to deviate from patriotism to self centeredness. This ugly tendency started manifesting in the form of negative trends like tribalism, corruption, envy, ethno-religious crises, incessant military coups, political crises and host of other social ills. This resulted in social, economic and political instability in the country.

The failure of the new leaders in their attempt to govern the nation and provide enabling environment for sustainable development in the country inspired some writers who are often

regarded as contemporary or post-colonial writers. This crop of writers channelled their arts and energy towards decrying the failure of the government to satisfy the aspirations of the citizens. It is observed that, many factors are central to the apparent conflicts and contradictions that bedevilled the country. The problem of incessant military incursion into politics and government, absence of visionary leadership characterized by corruption at all levels, inability to maintain law and order arising from high level of insecurity, ethno-religious crises and so on are all symptomatic of the beleaguered leadership crises that have faced the country since Independence.

One of such commentators on the leadership in Nigeria has been Chinua Achebe. He believes that what the country need is a visionary leader that sees all as one home. Achebe, in *The Trouble with Nigeria* writes that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simple and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with Nigeria. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership. (1)

Leadership is about leaders mobilising others to get extraordinary things done. It is about the practices leaders use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separation into solidarity and risks into rewards. It is about a climate in which people turn challenging opportunities into remarkable success. In a twist of fate, Nigeria in her about 60 years of nation hood has been in bondage as a result of the absence of the above type of leadership apart from the shortfalls of the founding fathers way back in 1960s, successive governments have been moving from one experiment and from one era to another.

Today, all hopes and aspirations of agitators are dashed as emerging leaders have



deviated from the reality to a manipulating tendency. What we are witnessing is biased, selfish and betrayal of the citizens and the nation by these leaders who use their position for self enrichment, fuelling ethno-religious crisis and other forms of social ills for their political and power interest. That is why in Nigeria today, each region is bedevilled by one crisis or the other vis-à-vis religious, political, ethnic and other forms of devilish groups like the Boko Haram, Niger Delta militias, kidnapers, herdsmen – farmers clashes and so on. This ugly development is not only a threat to national unity, but also a setback to sustainable growth and development. These and other critical issues posed serious concern to literary writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Wale Okediran, Abubakar Gimba and host of others to comment on the parlous state of nation through their literary works. Abubakar Gimba in particular has emerged as one of the contemporary writers, committed and concerned with the state of Nigeria and its people, bearing in mind the socio-political and ethno religious tendencies, churned out many literary works that reflect the ugly situation of the nation. One of such literary outputs is the *Innocent Victims*.

Leadership Failure in Abubakar Gimba's *Innocent Victims*

Contemporary African literature mostly examines the post-colonial problems that consumed most African societies especially in leadership and governance. It is important to note here that, any writer who chooses to neglect the general trend in the society and instead tries to dictate to the society what he wants to write will not find the audience for his work and will not be regarded as a serious writer. This goes to show the level of relationship that exists between literature and society. It is clear that, African creative writer who tries to avoid big social and political issues in contemporary Africa, will end up being irrelevant. Contemporary African writers view literature as a medium through which socio-political problems could be depicted and assumed remedy. This situation arises from their concern for an ideal society that seems to elude most African nations since independence. It is on this basis that, Abubakar Gimba writes one

of his most acclaimed works, the *Innocent Victims* to depict leadership and governance ills that consumed Nigeria as a nation.

Innocent Victims published in 1988 as one of most popular literary works, explores an existing cancerous disease that destroys the social and corporate existence of the Nigerian society rather than building it. Gimba uses the civil service institution to present his creative work. It depicts the long existing abuse of power, tribalism, greed, jealous, hatred, marginalization, selfishness and other forms of vices that are found in the Nigerian leadership. In the novel, Gimba laments the failure of various governments through the civil service to provide an enabling environment and necessities of life to its citizens. Also, beyond the politicians who are policy makers, we come face to face with:

The mutual trust, the type that one would rarely expect between the man at the top of the ladder and the fellow on the first rung... to him, a different kind of a boss, special and in a different class from the rest... (17)

This is a true expression on the character traits of Faruk Kolo especially as emanating from a subordinate, which is very unusual especially in the Nigerian civil service to where the relationship between high ranking officers and their subordinates is that of master servant. Despite the power tussles and promotion of self interests in the sector, Faruk remains resolute, patriotic and committed to the system. His thorough grasp of the civil service, and his exemplary style in the discharge of his duties, preaches sacrifice, commitment, selfless service and patriotism. According to him:

A civil servant could rare himself from critics only if he is selfless, becomes well organized in his conduct of official duties and remains above board. A civil servant, he would often say, should be civil and serve as truly as a servant should unassumingly and assiduously only then could the honour and pride due to the



civil service as an institution be restored.

Civil servants, who implement government policies, include provision of amenities, such as well equipped and affordable schools, functional and standard medical centres, potable drinking water and other basic amenities for a comfortable and sustainable existence.

Amirikpa Oyigbenu's comments on the novel, clearly sets the tone of Gimba's focus in the novel. According to him:

Gimba artistically weaves the theme of tribalism in the Nigerian civil service, and present it as cancerous disease that destroys the social fabric rather than build, the evil of tribalism finds a comfortable link in the civil service of Niger State in an era of military region. Tribalism as manifested here is fanned by the twin embers of jealousy and hatred orchestrated by mediocrity driven syndrome of tribal representations as scapegoats or alibi (425)

Innocent Victims presents the struggle and clash between the protagonists and the antagonist, virtue and vice, good and evil, not only to advocate moral virtues but to show the existence of these self-generating opposites within an entity, particularly in the life of man. The fact is that every man irrespective of whatever vocations he is aligned to, has the capacity for good and evil, the prevalence of one over the other is a matter of choice.

The main plot of *Innocent Victims* revolves around the story, experiences and trial of the major character and the protagonist of the novel, Haj. Faruk Kolo. Haj. Faruk Kolo is presented as a patriotic citizen, committed civil servant, honest, sincere, trustworthy, and an advocate of fairness, justice, equity and fair play. A man devoid of selfishness and tribal sentiments in his dealings and this can be justified in his association with his office aid Mamman, who belongs to a different tribal group with Faruk, yet enjoys fair play and respect from his boss. Mamman describes his boss, thus:

He knows his boss had a lot of confidence in him and they often confided. This was the basis of relationship, the mutual trust, the type that one would rarely expect between the man at the top of the ladder and the fellow on the first rung... To him a different kind of a boss, special and in different class from the rest ... (17).

The decision of Binta and Mamman, the two assistants of Faruk Kolo to resign after being absolved shows that, as long as public inquiries are conducted, both the guilty and the innocent cannot be free of such situation; so, they are still guilty in the eye of the public:

There is no point then, Faruk told her, in your resignation. Binta agreed, rather hesitancy, but added, 'You would however, be posted away from our department...I don't think I can continue working (187).

This clearly indicates insecurity because some sort of stigma has been stamped on them by that experience. Thus, when Binta read about Faruk's compulsory retirement, she could not hold back tears. She becomes convinced that, resignation is much more honourable than for her to be kicked out. So, even though the innocent ones are exonerated, the torture and trauma cannot be quantified. Faruk's leadership in the Ministry has been practical, honest and with some elements of transparency. This is exemplified when he realises that, Mamman is suspicious of him and Binta being in the office at odd time, Faruk did not hesitate in explaining things to his subordinate. In this case, his style of leadership is different from that of the military where things are dictated at the detriment of the people as manifested in the affairs of the interim administration of the ministry while Faruk was on suspension. He says:

I believe that, compulsory retirement is a vindictive verdict in your favour...But things went wrong under you...And since



you were in charge, you would have to accept full responsibility for them. That is the price of leadership. And to own up to one's responsibility is itself an act of courage... (Ben Ali, 188).

Faruk's intelligence in articulating his philosophy in a more practical and realistic manner is compared with Gimba's philosophical direction in issues relating to national interests. Faruk understands his immediate environment such that, he states that, there is too much heartbreaking revilement of the civil servant being let loose. It is not that the civil servants are perfect but the way they conduct their affairs is uncommon. That is why they are negatively interpreted, hence, they have a duty to uphold the rules of tenets of their office and be recognised individually and collectively.

However, in spite of Faruk's selflessness, dedication and commitment to his work, he was framed up in a calculated plot to get rid of him for the selfish reason of gratifying the mischievous character of Haj. Za'alim. This is a reflection of the Nigerian civil service in which the innocent people are framed up and sacrificed by self interest elements to achieve personal interests. While Faruk is as honest, sincere, dedicated and morally upright, Haj Za'alim is seen as sycophantic, mischievous, envious, wicked and over ambitious. Unfortunately, Faruk Kolo, who is an astute and upright leader as described by Isma'ila in *Isma'ila and Fajenyo*, thus:

is enmeshed in a web that is rooted in parochial tribal sentiments perpetuated by his close associate and confidant, Za'alim. His main problem stands from the facts that, he comes from a minority tribe that has dominated top posts in the civil service of the state. This makes Za'alim envious and determined to upturn the application (134).

High Level of Indiscipline and Laxity in the Society

Gimba, explicitly depicts the high level of indiscipline and laxity in the civil service. This

act affects the efficiency of civil service and negatively affects the entire society. Lack of punctuality and closing before time has ruined the Nigerian civil service. In his address to the workers in the Department of Food and Animal Production, Samah Solomon (the Military Overseer) states that "let that clear...I am aware of your civil service mentality, slow, sluggish and stupidity. I vest can't stand your ways" (46). He further advises them that, "And one thing I hate is lateness, or for someone not to be on seat when he is supposed to" (47).

Faruk Kolo and Mamman represent a counter force to heed the alleged unproductive nature of civil service to pave way for positive change and development in the society. Although Faruk acknowledges the operational differences between the civil service culture and the Military, he admits the lacklustre and inhibitive nature of the civil service. As such, he suggests that, civil servants should always acknowledge that:

A civil servant...could save himself. I criticize only if he is selfless, becomes well organized in his conduct of his official duties, and remains above board. Only then, the honour and pride due to the civil service as an institution be restored and the civil servant accorded the dignity which is his sacred duty to his society deserves (56).

Consequently, the unconscious moral wishes of Faruk are repressed by the conscious forces of the society which are represented by Za'alim. Oyegbenun also observes that, the backdrop of accusation of the civil servants for inefficiency has been the cankerworm that seeks to destroy the institution. This is exemplified in the character of Za'alim, the Director- General for Special Duties (3). He further states, the hatred and envy by Za'alim against his friend is due largely from the facts that, he (Za'alim) as Director-General, Special Duties, has no cabinet schedule, while Faruk as Director-General in the Department of Animal Production has cabinet schedules and other office larges. That is to say a fact, that the hatred is further because, Za'alim's



ethnic group is represented at the top only by himself as a Director-General but without portfolio.

While this observation is correct, yet, we see Za'alim representing a system that has totally decayed, as such, could only produce his likes that are selfish and naïve in their thinking. Thus, Isma'ila and Oladeinde (eds) could not have been more correct when they state that:

Innocent Victims introduces to us the machination resulting from a stagnated civil service. As book makes obvious, Faruk Kolo becomes a tragic victim of not only his rivals, but also of system that is impervious and reciprocal of the values of goodness and productivity. It is only in such a system that, villainy, envy and treachery of redundant civil servants are given expressions alongside the equally brutally and senselessly myopic administration (123).

From the above, it is clear that Gimba, explores leadership problem in the civil service, such that it is manifesting in our societal domestic mores and values. Civil service which is the linking productive institution between the leaders and led fails in its responsibilities. This failure also affects the entire society as it derails the progress

and sustainable development of the society.

Conclusion

The message in the *Innocent Victims* is clear. The novel dwelled on public affairs, corruption, governance, human management through leadership and other related issues. The major concern of the writer in the novel is for us to be tolerant in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. One should exercise restraint. This concern is highlighted in the predicament of the protagonist whose peaceful life is ruined as a result of petitions written by his close friends in every of his achievements as a hardworking career civil servant. The story revolves around the sudden frame up and subsequent investigation to ascertain the culprits and bring them to book. The moral point is that cheating does not pay and the innocent ones are always exonerated no matter how long it takes to find the truth or the extent of the case. It is in this regard that, the story explores the concept of innocence and evaluates the trauma of exoneration.

Gimba exhibits the class relationship between the haves and have nots both in power and economic status. The leaders continue the manipulation of the resource at the detriment of the downtrodden masses thereby escalating socio-economic predicaments in the society. Hence, such negative tendencies should be addressed for maximum development.

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