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**Post-Colonial Conflict in Africa: A Study of
Richard Ali's *City of Memories***

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Abstract

This paper is a critique Richard Ali's City of Memories as it reveals the facets of post-conflict in Africa. This topic has had many divergent approaches in the local and international arena. Through Ali's fictional characters, an insider's view is presented. The city of Bolewa performs becomes a microcosm of the larger issues that form the bane of conflict in Africa, especially with the emerging problem of terrorism. The major issues through which conflicts arise are viewed as the quest for history and identity, fanaticism and leadership and the notion of nationhood. Other pivotal areas of influence in the novel are the role of feminism and the use of water as a leitmotif for love. In

the protagonists of Ali's City of Memories, the labyrinth of history, religion and politics are surmounted for the experience of a stirring love story.

Introduction

Post colonial conflict in Africa has been a topical issue since many African nations gained their independence in the 1960's. The backdrop of these conflicts has been as varied as the nations of the continent itself. This paper is an attempt to approach contemporary Nigerian fiction as it presents these conflicts in the fictional communities of the North-East and North-Central regions of Nigeria. According to Anup Shah, conflict issues in Africa has been "ignored, oversimplified, or excessively focused on limited aspects" In order words, an insider's view is necessary for an understanding of the matters arising and the context in which these matters arise. Shah has also stressed that "occasional coverage is provided, but not anywhere near the volume like we had seen during the build up and the ensuing crisis in Kosovo, or Iraq or Palestine/Israel, each of which were serious conflicts but in terms death and displaced, were often far less than many conflicts in Africa. This is an accusation of the neglect from political and economic super powers above at the expense of developing countries of the world. Shah relies heavily on the yearlong study done by Virgil Hawkins on some major media outlets in the year 2000. According to him,

Death toll from conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo is literally one thousand times greater than that in Israel-Palestine, yet it is the object of greater media coverage... intricacies and nuances of the conflict, political situation and peace process are almost obsessively analyzed

and presented African conflicts are frequently brushed off and dismissed as being chaotic, or worthy of some vague pity or humanitarian concern, but rarely of any in-depth political analysis.

This view is also held by Shirley Mthethwa-Sommers who also believe that it is due to general impression that “Africans are enraged beings who murder one another ebulliently and are therefore, undeserving of extensive media coverage.” This scholar reviewed a book titled *Ethnic Conflicts in Africa* and highlights some pertinent issues in the review. Among them is the posture that “colonial powers utilized the segmentation of ethnic groups to their advantage. The divide-and-rule policies of colonial administrators assured the docility of different ethnic groups and thus shielded them from the menace of insurrection. Another bone of contention is the rivalry between the economically secure and the poor. They often turn to ethnicity as an anchor, particularly if those who are better off belong to a different ethnic group. According to her this is not mere jealousy but the inability or refusal of those who possess wealth to distribute resources.

These are commonly held views by people within and outside the continent. Subsequently, an attempt shall be made to compare these views to the depiction of socio-political conflict in Richard Ali's *City of Memories*.

The Quest for History and Identity

A Zambian Chief once remarked that “my people were not Soli until 1937 when the Bwana D.C told us we were... the concept of Zulu as a distinct ethnic group did not emerge until 1870 (Bob Geldof) this concept of identity is reiterated in *City of*

Memories through its major characters. These are Faruk Dibarama, Rahila Pam and Ummi al Quassim.

Faruk's quest for identity begins when his love affair with Rahila causes a huge stir between the families. This quest is an introduction to the history of dynasties and philosophies which influenced groups of people to carve out an identity for themselves. Faruk is considered an enemy by Rahila's mother because his father is not just a Muslim but also her political opponent. This results in Rahila returning Faruk's engagement ring. This makes Faruk seek advice from the motherly Hussena who directs him to find answers from the history of his mother's experience with the powerful suitors striving for her love. It seemed like history was repeating itself all over again. In defense of his identity Faruk tells Rahila:

Maybe am comfortable with my identity, but not in the way you think. My Father's Fathers are Kanuri, his mother is not, she was actually from Tera tribe now in Gombe district, my Mother's grandfather was Fulani but I cannot say was Fulani for she couldn't speak a word of Fulfulde; she spoke Hausa. So which one do you want me to claim as my identity... I could be you Rahila- a finder of middle grounds. For me to take myself seriously, exclusively as you would, means fragmenting myself into at least seven bloodlines, seven cultures (Ali, 132).

Faruk's history and identity reveals that the painful past which his parents left at Bolewa was manipulated by two men madly in love with the same woman. The other casualties were only instruments used to play out the bloody incident which ended

the lives of both men. The engagement in war over of the love of a beautiful woman is a universal theme resonating from Greek history in the battle for Helen of Troy. In Faruk's philosophy, the one identity that he lives by; is the identity of love. As far as Faruk is concerned, the dichotomy of tribe and religion is a cultural construction that can be fully integrated where there is no compulsion. This view is expressed by the reigning Emir of Bolewa when Faruk interviews him about the uniqueness of the Bolewa community. The Emir explains that:

Bolewa is a unique Emirate, Suleiman al Quassim got his flag from Caliph Bello, son of Uthman dan Fodio, but his influences were not those of Sokoto or Gwandu. Suleiman was a Fulani soldier for the Saifuwa sultans of Kanem Borno before he fell out with them and fled here to the Southern tip of Borno... his influences, though he was soldier were from a Zaghawa scholar named Yazid al Hakim, who had in turn been instructed in Persia in a tradition of Shia ... so while our ancestor remained a Sunni, he was partial to the Sufi teachings of his teacher al Hakim and not dan Fodio or Imam Malik... for him, all monotheists were brothers, and while he felt the Marghuzawa and their traditional beliefs should be exposed to Christianity or preferably Islam, he expressly forbade their persecution (Ali, 187).

Thus, Faruk's discovery is also the discovery of an ideal community. The conjectures that brought about the trail of a bloody history of conquests and wars, based on religious and tribal philosophies has wasted precious human lives

unnecessarily. In Faruk's view, his discovery of his parent's history has shown that unfulfilled love can lead to insanity as with his mother. Beyond this, Faruk is told by the reigning Emir that,

The past is the place of our memories; it is the garden where the flowers of memory never die. Corruption comes with time. That is why we age and the aging, the growing worse cannot be stopped. But we can slow its progress with one of our own, a progress into the past to our own city of memories... For if we push our memories and experiences far back enough, there is always a paradise of some sort, an Eden before the fall...
(Ali, 192)

It is Faruk's initiative to pick up the past, stitch it together and decide what action to take in order to create a future with a memorable past. He remembers the peaceful past of Bolewa before the conflict and takes it as a memory that will guide him into a peaceful future, implementing the philosophy of Suleiman al Quassim who tailored Bolewa to become a sanctuary for all its inhabitants despite the prevalence of Jihads of in the 19th century.

Rahila Pam's quest for history and identity begins with her interest in Student's unionism. This interest is shared with her father who was also a unionist. She is a child raised by elitist parents but a disagreement ensues when she falls in love with Faruk. Eunice Pam reflects on the scandal of her daughter having an affair with Faruk as a personal slight against her image in the society. Hardly did she examine the situation as a natural occurrence in the maturity of a young woman. Her

aggressive reaction initially causes the result she desired; but her declaration of war against Ibrahim Dabirama and all he stands for, boomerangs against her. After Eunice Pam's arrest, Rahila confronts the ugly image of the extreme measures taken by her mother in the name of love. Rahila's journey of self discovery comes towards the end of the novel. She laments over the loss of innocent lives over the purely personal matter. Her disenchantment leads her to a Bible College in the outskirts of town where she isolates herself pull her thoughts together. By this time, Eunice Pam had been accused of treason for orchestrating an upheaval. Rahila Pam shows herself to be a rational thinker. At first she had inwardly accused Ponsahr, the pastor, of bigotry until she heard the full sermon. In her thoughts she accuses religion of turning a blind eye to African slavery. She is convinced that no religion has been able to explain how the Slavers had enslaved Africans in the name of God or Allah. Her sojourn at the Bible College was not one for strengthening her faith but for her own self discovery. She had been hiding behind the portrait of her powerful mother not having the courage to step forward for what she really believes in. Because Rahila had built a towering image of strength around herself, she is afraid that her present predicament may prove that she is a weakling. She explains to Funmi that, "I could not understand it and set out to redefine my nature and my place in the scheme of history. My relations with everything, with the class I was born in, and all the other social obligations... my coming here is the maturing of that contradiction" (Ali, 254).

The contradiction here is that Rahila who believes in freedom from all forms of oppression is being tested to prove her beliefs in a personal way. The test is evident in her ability or inability

to free herself from the imposed prejudice that her mother is instilling into her. Can she see Faruk as an intelligent and attractive suitor without the question of ethnicity or religion? She probes the question: who is Faruk, and who am I. The difficulty lies in the question of the possibility of isolating herself from the history that has made her. If that is impossible, then how has that history shaped her personality and how will it influence her choices? For Rahila, it is process of defining herself and deciding how she will face the future. What she readily admits, is her love for Faruk. She tells Funmi that people cannot approve of her relationship with Faruk because they have dared to love each other. Is love, a force strong enough to overcome the obstacles that have been set before her? This is a question that she must answer independently before she faces the world. According to her father George Pam, the society is not working because there is a lack of mechanism for keeping society in balance therefore the society is in a dystopia. He tells Rahila that,

For example, decades back we had the Northern Nigeria Development Company which had been formed in the 1920's as a balancing mechanism for the Northern Region—everyone knew what to expect, a sort of charter, disagreements were settled in conferences. In the late 50's and 60's, the mechanism of balance was the NPC party Chairman, Sir Ahmadu Bello... he was assassinated in the Igbo coup in 1966 and everything here went out of a whack—a vacuum ensued. Into that space Eunice Pam and her counterparts had sneaked in their fundamentalisms (Ali, 95).

A divisive structure has already been set. It is Rahila's choice to fall into it, or step out of it. Her choice is not surprising because she has been portrayed as a strong willed personality. She is torn between love for her mother and love for Faruk, two parallels that will not meet especially for Eunice Pam. Faruk shows himself as reasonable and forgiving person because he tries to secure the release of Eunice from clutches of the government who see her actions as seditious.

The quest for identity and history is also identifiable in Ummi al Quassim beginning from her autobiographical notes and culminating in her insanity. This insanity is first revealed through the foreshadowing technique used by Richard Ali. In the love notes between Ahmed Anwar and Ummi; Ahmed expresses his love for Ummi using the word "ishq" to emphasize its intensity. Hussena Bukar later explains that this word implies the "beyond" of love as equivalent to madness. This becomes the background to which the feud between Ummi's lovers burnt up the Emir's stables and later caused the killings in Bolewa. Eventually, the object of their love looses her mind from the trauma of all the ensuing events. Ummi is a victim of the fate foretold by an old woman she once met by the stream when she was a young maiden. The woman had said to her: "Your beauty shall ensnare Lions/ Ruining Princes and Commoners... Your beauty shall never fade/ For it carries sorrow by its side. In her autobiographical notes she succumbs to her sad fate when she writes thus: My first glimpse and my first infantile wail were to the setting sun and so it my life has played out – setting sun after setting sun (Ali, 69). In her surrender to fate and its sorrowful attachment, her mind is too fragile to comprehend such an unfortunate tragedy. She was later hospitalized after the riots at Bolewa and Ibrahim Dibarama loses his beautiful wife who it

seems never really belonged to him in the first place. Her true love is Ahmed Anwar but her marriage to Ibrahim Dibarama was arranged by Hussena Bukar and Hassan Abba to conveniently end the rivalry between the two Princes. Ibrahim Dibarama's gain from the marriage arrangement was for him to find some direction in his life after the trauma of the Nigerian civil war. The memoir is inconclusive because by its conclusion Ummi is psychologically strained. Right from the early scribbles, a melancholy tone is present because Ummi is unable to fix the pieces of her life together. Ummi al Quassim is the matrix in the centre of all the unfortunate events, yet she gains nothing from her experience except the happy moments she shared with Ahmed Anwar who had finally won her heart. It is not stated whether she genuinely loved Ibrahim Dibarama but we understand that he loved and cared for her. The only assurance that remains with Ummi right through her state of insanity is her beauty; this is the major quality that Ummi is identified with.

Fanaticism and Leadership Identified as a major cause of conflict in the Post Colonial Era

In Richard Ali's *City of Memories* the author recognizes the intricacies that history has laid in the Nigerian nation such as the history of coups and countercoups assassinations and mistrust. Despite this, Ali portrays a country in the context of a military regime with politicians and ex-military men who have gained experience from the pains of the past. These leaders are courageous enough to take positive actions.

The civil unrest depicted in the Bolewa community was caused by personal interests. Ahmed Anwar was an Arab who converted to Christianity returning the same time as Usman

Waziri who strengthened his faith studying Islamic theology in Egypt. Although Ummi was now married, they had not buried the hatchet. Their rivalry forms the bedrock of the conflict. The blind followers rout the city with blood for a cause they were ignorant about. On the other hand, Eunice Pam surrounds herself with characters thirsty for vengeance. The motive that unifies them all is the desire to destroy, for the assassins and arms dealer, it is purely monetary. At a personal level, Varak holds a grudge against his people for not recognizing his nobility after his father had died in exile but he also hates the Fulani because they rose to power on the wings of the British. Tyorse Mark hates the Fulani for ravaging their farmlands and hates the central government for imposing taxes on indigenous landholders. Bolaji's role is to deliver ammunitions to any location on demand. This group of people organized the explosion of mayhem in the central part of the country. They are unstoppable except for the intelligence report that enabled Ibrahim Dibarama to counteract the insurgency and effectively arrest the kingpin. In this scenario Ali emphasizes the importance of leadership working in tandem with the executive and the law. This kind of leadership is undeterred by religion or tribalism. Ibrahim Dibarama gains the trust of Hodio Ardo, a Fulani Chief who informs him about the building up of arms in a remote village. He envisages that the crisis is set to begin from there, therefore; he prepares for the confrontation. Ibrahim lives by the principle that he must not become a victim for the second time. He ruminates thus:

The last time something similar happened in Bolewa, he had been amidst the swirl of it—had been helpless to halt the madness. He had not understood it, it had taken the death of Ummi and

a re-evaluation of the war for him to understand. But now, he was schooled in all of Janus's faces. Now he could force history to rewrite itself (Ali, 175).

From the comment above, it is clear that the picture painted about Africa being a continent of war and disorder can be turned around positively if the right leaders are in power. The assumption that conflicts erupt solely because of some "old fault lines" (175) is questionable. The comparison of leadership role in Ibrahim Dibarama and Eunice Pam shows that power can be used for good or evil. The religious fanatics who followed Ahmed and Usman into war did not understand what Hussena explains in these words:

Religion has a way of calming the restless spirit of the hotblooded young; it does this by suppressing their true feelings, seeking to transmute a hellcat's rage into tranquility without seeking even to understand the rationale and effect of either. And by doing that, what it shows the world is something grotesque, an automaton of an abstraction.

Understanding the Notion of Nationhood as neither Religious nor Tribal

In Richard Ali's *City of Memories* various characters understand the notion of nationhood in different ways. Ibrahim Dibarama explains that he first identified Nigeria through the eyes of Sir Tafawa Balewa (Ali, 51) who was organizing the legislators to form the NPC as a front for the Northern region and subsequently the whole of Nigeria. He had believed in the inclusiveness of all Nigerians until he was murdered in 1966.

Tafawa Balewa was a mentor for Ibrahim Dibarama therefore he lived by his tenets for the unity of all Nigerians. Although his assassination was shocking, Dibarama would not let his dream die away. His closest companion is Rose Dakyen from the North Central region, who proves her loyalty by taking risks to rally some support for Dibarama. His other trusted companion is Zakari to whom he had explained, about his wife, saying that she was suffering from a “schizo-affective condition” (Ali, 52) which to him is a crisis of the spirit caused by the traumatic incident at Bolewa. He continues to explain that the civil war crisis has made Nigeria to suffer from a similar condition. Therefore, the country was also at the brink of being lost except something is done to save her. As Dibarama personalizes Nigeria, Ali suggests through this character that Nigerian citizens ought to personalize the country as a beloved entity that must be nurtured. The divisive elements that often proclaim personal rights need to be integrated to save the country's unity. The proclamation of individual rights, claims and counterclaims give rise to fanaticism which breeds violence.

In Richard Ali's *City of Memories*, George Pam, concludes that: “...no revolution could bloom in Nigeria from a people's revolt. He had seen the pliancy much earlier than his wife who would see it and become warped by what she saw – the only revolution the people of Nigeria would ever be involved in would be one done for them, a benevolent dictatorship, simply” (Ali, 93). To George Pam there are two conflicting ideas of authenticity in the North Central region; one is cultural while the other is political. The cultural aspect he believes involves the indigenous power-structures already in place before the British intrusion, which upheld individual uniqueness between

the Hausawa and the indigenes. The political angle is that the system of emirates was adopted by the British simply as a tool to organize central Nigeria over and above indigenous Chiefs. He further explains that once the Muslim religion was willfully accepted by the indigenes they soon became known as “Hausawa”. Therefore if any division must be made between the notion of indigenes and Hausawa “that line will be drawn in blood” (Ali, 95). From George Pam’s perspective, the notion of nationhood or indigenes is a complex one because it involves both cultural and religious dynamics that cannot easily be separated. For him, the solution lies in a leadership that is potent enough to hold the nation together despite its varying distinctions.

Hungwe Elda’s in his book titled *Interrogating Notions of Nationhood, Nation and Globalization in Post Colonial Africa: A Textual Analysis of Four African Novels*. The writer suggests that in Pepetela’s *Mayombe* race is demystified to prove that what must be regarded as a parameter of national identity is not race but “identity must be an equal shared consciousness”. In Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* Elda interprets the role of Beatrice as implying that “the feminine principle therefore comes in to mend the damage done by the failure of this ultra-masculine nation. Order is being restored by women; hence femininity is important in building the nation. Achebe hints that the masculine nation is not the ideal.” With regards to Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* Elda states that “Ngugi attacks universalism and wants African unique elements to be identified and not to be clouded by globalization and universalism” this notion Elda also shares with Achebe’s *A Man of the People* in seeing globalization as undesirable and exploitative for developing countries. In conclusion, this scholar maintains that the term

nation has its weaknesses although it can also be a source of unity.

The Role of Feminism in Post Colonial Conflict

In Richard Ali's *City of Memories* the female characters are portrayed as determined and well educated. Eunice Pam is a force to reckon with in political affairs. Her studies at the Columbia University influenced her interest politics. Unfortunately she gets involved with the politics of bitterness. She proves to be an expert in mobilizing women who are willing to do her bidding because they share a sense of loyalty to her. She achieves this by beginning a campaign to create the Mineral Fund which subsidized tertiary education fees for all girls. Her Help-One Foundation assisted indigent students with scholarships. She soon selected the most intelligent ones for her personal agenda. These women were the secret behind her power and influence in the state. The elderly Dije Shetima had no problem sharing information between Eunice Pam and the assassins because she had an axe to grind with Faruk's late mother for stealing away, Ahmed Anwar's attention.

On the other hand, her daughter Rahila, is a Marxian feminist. This philosophy influences her activities at the University campus and explains why her mother felt that she had scored a point against Rahila when she accused her of endangering other ordinary students with her unionist activities while knowing that she can hide under her mother's protection. This accusation hurts Rahila badly because she desires to be a crusader fighting for Student's rights like her dear Father had done. This Marxian influence reflects in her refusal to bask in the comfort that her mother freely provides and her conclusion that "God was no longer in religion... the truth is that faith had

been lost and re-lost a thousand times before it ever got to Africa” (Ali, 269). Her feminist tendencies show during herself exile as she tells Funmi that although they have run to a church establishment for refuge... “God is a Woman. Religion is a Man but God is a Woman (Ali, 284). In Rahila’s philosophy, the quality of protection and genuine love can only be discovered in a female personality.

Through these characters, it can be concluded that in post colonial Africa, feminism may be manipulated negatively for destructive purposes. From Rahila’s personage, we can identify women as intelligent and passionate people who operate on the principle of our shared humanity and justice rather than hatred. Rahila demonstrates this trait in her adoption of Nabila as a young friend whom she sponsors in her educational pursuit asking for nothing in return. She feels compassion for Funmi who had been sexually abused by an uncle. The dividing line between mother and daughter is the motive behind their female bonding. One is genuine while the other is manipulative.

This positive kind of feminism is championed by Ngugi and Achebe’s female characters, as expressed by Elda:

The female characters Wanga, in *Petals of Blood* and Waringa in *Devil on the Cross* who are playing active roles in their nation’s histories by resisting being pushed or tempted into accepting subservient, degrading or decorative roles. Equipped with education, resilience and the will to survive, females are placing no limitation on their capabilities, and Achebe expresses the urgent need for strong female voices in African societies

The Water Motif as a Symbolism of Love

One of the recurrent images or dominant idea in Richard Ali's *City of Memories* is the search for water. From the beginning of the novel, the insane Umami al Quassim in her soliloquy is straining to fetch water from this "deep deep well" (Ali, 7). Her thoughts are clear enough to remember the love poem that Ahmed Anwar once wrote to her but his personality is no longer real nor stable in her mind. She thinks that she must mourn for her son that was shot dead in her stomach. She thirsts for water that she is unable to fetch.

Similarly, Faruk is struck by Maryam Bazza's rhythmic movements as she fetches water from the well and for this reason alone he begins to notice her. To Faruk, Maryam was a girl at the well. She later expresses her interest in him and her desire to be recognized as a woman by Faruk. Faruk's composure is commendable because Maryam easily offered herself to him but he did not take advantage of her. He is attracted to her but identifies her as immature and an archetypal Umami al Quassim. Maryam's journey to the well is in a bid to achieve some sense of love and belonging from Faruk with whom she has fallen in love with. Drawing water from the well is an act of initiation into the triangular love affair of loving someone who loves somebody else.

In Faruk's definition of love as he expresses it to Rahila, he says:

Love is the dry grasses waiting for the rains to return, I think of it as faith; those grasses could just dry out and die or burst into flames and incinerate themselves but they don't they hold on. And when the first rain comes, faith pays off

and they are green again. That is love to me (Ali 98).

The binding motif in these illustrations is water and all these characters are seeking for love from the deepest recesses of their hearts. Ummi is unable to find it. Maryam Bazza's love is not reciprocated because of Rahila's presence in Faruk's heart. Rahila must pass the trial of her love for Faruk like the "dry grasses waiting for the rains to return" she waits for Faruk to return and find her. His love is like the rains that rejuvenate the luster in her heart, giving her hope for a fulfilled future.

Conclusion

Post colonial conflict in Africa is filled with many dimensions of which Richard Ali has not ignored. In *City of Memories*, it can be said that despite the seeming complexity of conflicting ideas and beliefs, tolerance and mutual respect made the Bolewa community a haven. This, however, did not happen easily. Bolewa learnt from the bitter lesson of past conflicts which they desire to erase from their minds. Some issues highlighted in this discussion include: the quest for identity and history; fanaticism; the notion of nationhood; the role of feminism, love and rejuvenation. Richard Ali's fictional construction stirs interest through the use of suspense, which is at its highest during the assassination attempt. Fate still plays a vital role in Faruk's and Maryam's escape from the assassinator's target. Faruk's strength of character is admirable because of his courage to face the conflict head-on until he finds the answers he is searching for. These answers prepare him for maturity and self actualization. From this study of Post colonial conflict in Ali's *City of Memories*, it is evident that conflict in Africa may be misinterpreted by outsiders. The most

pertinent problem that can be identified in the fictional representation is that leadership in Africa is most important for peace.

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