

Book Review: A Critical Examination of Zainab Alkali and AI Imfeld's *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern Nigeria* as 21st Century Northern Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical review of *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern Nigeria* edited by Zainab Alkali and AI Imfeld as a Compendium of 21st Century Northern Nigerian Literature. Besides, the focal question is, what has been the literature of the Northern Nigeria prior to the 21st Century? Northern Nigeria is used as a homogenous entity in terms of geographical space, but are the peoples homogenous in terms of culture? In this wise, images of cultures evolving from the various groups, and writings in the book under review provide insight into nativity and indigenous cultures peculiar to the people via folklore, songs, and environmental images. Thus, the theory of eco-criticism is used to fathom the essence of the literature of Northern Nigeria in the 21st Century as a departure from the earlier literature. This is discerned in the language, concepts, religion, realism, consciousness, gender and psyche in *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern Nigeria*.

Keywords: Psyche, Northern Nigeria, Nativity, Eco-criticism, Literature

Introduction

The concept of literature in this paper takes the initial definition of general writings other than the literature as a field of discourse and/or a discipline with the genres of prose, poetry and drama. Besides, Northern Nigeria, being a geographical space or environment, assumes the physical and political entities of North Central States, North Western States and North Eastern States. With this description of Northern Nigeria, is the herald of certain assumptions. The first assumption is that the North is a homogenous entity culturally, religiously and linguistically. As a tacit support for the assumptions, Darah (1988), asserts "Uthman Dan Fodio's *Jihad* was the main cultural event in the North in the nineteenth century. Being both a political, religious, and intellectual movement, the Jihad fathered considerable literary effort. Prior to this, the spread of Islam had affected the style, content, and purpose of literature. Some imaginative writing was being done in Arabic among the literature elite." (1)

Furthermore, Darah, opines that after the jihad, Islamic literature flourished throughout the region, and several radical movements and tendencies sprang up which used the medium of literature to popularise their credos and to criticise the power that be. Poetic verse was the favoured form of this politically-inspired literature. Moreover, understanding the literature of Northern Nigeria, an expanse of land with diverse cultures creates the advent of eco-criticism and imageries. But before going into eco-criticism, it is pertinent to understand the definition of imagery: the various images of culture. Jonathan Culler (1983) defines 'Image' and Imagery in literary criticism as, "The representations produced in the mind by verbal descriptions and for the descriptions or characterisations themselves, since the mental pictures, or images, may be thought of either as separate from words or as integral features of verbal characterisations" (51) He further says that, "images can be classified according to the sense to which they appeal – visual, a auditory, gustatory, tactile, or olfactory and by the sphere of influence from which they are drawn, such as religious, agricultural, scientific, or domestic" (51).

Eyeh (1995) observes that there are three features that can be seen from Jonathan Culler's definition of images. The three features are sense perception; word employed to create images; and perception of images via concrete objects within contexts (7). The concept of images is vital; to understanding the literature of the North in order to signify the essence of the socio-cultural, physical, economic and religious worldview of the people. Moreover, the three features observed by Eyeh are also stressed by Mordt Jon Herowitz (1979) as any thought representation that has a sensory we call an image (3). Furthermore, a person can describe an image in many ways, including information about contents, vividness, clarity, colour, shapes, movements, foreground and background characteristics, and other spatial relations (Mordt, 3).

Sequel to the above, spatial images are equally germane to the physical nature and environment of Northern Nigeria as a geographical zone. The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (1989) defines space as "unused area between two points or objects, unoccupied area or place available for use, large area (especially of land not built on): continuous expanse in which all things exist and move, outer space (universe beyond the earth's atmosphere in which all other planets and stars exist, and interval of time)" (1225).

In addition, *The Shorter Oxford English* further defines space as, 'Dimensional extent occupied by a body or lying within certain limits' (2059). This definition by the latter becomes useful in this paper because it helps to lucidly expatiate on the possibility of the Northern Nigeria nudging on eco-criticism, which is the interdisciplinary study of the connections between literature and the environment. And it draws on contributions from natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists and historians in examining the differences between nature and its cultural construction (Eco-criticism – Climate ... science.Smith.edu).

Issues raised in literature have both specific and general implications that cut across temporal and spatial boundaries only medium gives them new faces. Therefore, the recreative artistry of the writer in putting across his message is the stimulating aspect of academic exercise (Eyeh, 1995, p. 3). Eyeh further asserts that whatever goes in a work of art is not really the message (3), but the medium. Having reviewed images, we can then approach the review of the book *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern Nigeria* in order to unearth the messages and media.

Book Review

The review of the book is carried out using the conceptual framework of images and the theoretical framework of eco-criticism. By images, one is on the part of semiotics, which buttresses the significance(s) of objects, words and spaces as utilised by different writers. In the "Foreword" to the book, Niggi Popp states that the book is the result of a joint project organised by the Swiss Embassy, the ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) and NAWAO Production (Switzerland). It is a product of a seven-day short story workshop held in May, 1995, in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria. Also, the workshop was attended by twenty (20) local participants and was guided and supported by Nigerian author, Zaynab Alkali and Swiss writer and journalist, Al Imfeld.

The book largely contains poems and short stories with a Foreword instead of a prologue, but at the end, there is an epilogue and biodata of each contributor. In addition, the book is published in Nigeria by Spectrum Books Limited, Ibadan, Nigeria in 1995. It has eight (viii) Roman preliminary pages, and one hundred and fifty (150) Arabic number-pages. In the contents are seven (vii) sectional divisions using the roman numerals and they are as follows:

- I. OUT OF THE NORTH
- II. BULLETS SPEAK, WORDS FAINT
- III. VULTURES
- IV. SONGS OF SORROW
- V. DREAMS, NO CHANGE
- VI. DIALOGUE AND SILENCE; and
- VII. FACING REALITIES.

The structure of the contents reveals that each section has poems foregrounded, while short stories come out at the end. It is also noted that there are variations in the number of poems in each of the sections and the short stories are equally not of the same length. In order to avoid the cumbersomeness of analysing each poem and/or short story one after the other, the language, themes, literary devices and concepts are explored in order to reveal their significance(s) and illustration of the geographical space of the Northern Nigeria.

The genesis of the analyses is with the people. The first poem in the first section is titled, "The Kanuri" by Abubaka Othman. The notable indices of distinguishing the Kanuri include their tribal marks which the poet refers to their "tributaries running down from their head (stanza 2, lines 3-4)" and "Their marks, their hieroglyphs," "Signs and symbols Engraved on their face" (stanza 3, lines 1-3). Again, the poet gives us the nature of their huts. "Men build stooping huts (stanza 4, while the women "wrap lappayas [...] revealing only their faces and feet. A bond of indelible tradition and religion" (stanza 4, line 4 to stanza 5, line 1). The descriptions are symbolic of the peculiarity of a people sociologically. On page 60, under the poem "Don't You See" by Idris O.O. Amali, the Idoma are mentioned. The *owuna* bird is a very eloquent bird which mimics the songs of other birds; its call signifies impending danger. In this wise, the bird is associated with the Idoma of Benue State among the North Central States. Following the Idoma, are the Tapas, also known as the Nupe who have their headquarters in Bida, Niger State, among the North Central States. The poem "We Have not Changed" by Micky Ibitomibi (pages 95-76), associate myths with the Tapa. Other ethnic groups in the North mentioned include, the Igala and the Iyara-Ijumu people. The Igala also speak the Igala language.

According to Musa Idris Okparachi in "Dialogue," a poem, Igala is a language spoken in the Middle belt of Nigeria (96), and Iyara-Ijumu people belong to Kogi State, and associated with the Iyara-Ijumu people is *Oto*, the god of natural resources. Irrespective of the ethnic groups in the North and their languages, the Hausa language is a lingua-franca.

The second point that is observed in the review is occupation. The occupation of the people include fishing, farming and hunting. Sumaila Isah Umaisha's "The Fisherman" foregrounds the fishing occupation thus, "The Fisherman manoeuvres his sharp and crooked tools (stanza 2, line 3-4 page 3) and radiant faces of waiting fish sellers fill the skiff as he sails ashore" (stanza 4, line 1-4, page 3). The fishing profession is again alluded to in the short story titled "The Second Visit" by Regina Tom Nkere-Uwem which is also used to elevate a young man's skill as a hardworking man, who "caught the biggest fish in net because he was a skilful swimmer and could go deep into the sea to cast his net" (5). Coupled with the fishing skill of the young man, Mallam Gardi, is his ability to farm. Farming is another profession peculiar to the people. The catch phrase on the number plate of Benue State is "The Food Basket of the Nation." The people of Niger State, especially the Nupe, pride themselves in the planting or

farming of rice and yam alongside the Gbari people who inhabit Niger, Kaduna, and Kogi states.

The third occupation of the people is hunting. Hunting skills give the hunters the opportunity to use their skills whenever they kill game to impress and win the hearts of their would-be in-laws at the birth of girls. These three professions are native to the people in a pastoral setting. Simon Nguty writes about this in his short story, "The Victim" (39).

Thirdly, naming is delineative of nativity. Throughout the book, the following names are for humans. Sa 'asatu, Ayuba, Fartisi, Lare, Muma in Kabura Z. Garnuwa's "Sunset from Ga'anda" (4) ; Mallam Abdullahi, Mallam Gardi in the short story, "The Second Visit" (6) by Regina Tom Nkere-Uwem. There are also, Faridah, page 24; Hajara page 83; Isah, 87; Kaa Aisa, Ngam Fatu, 99; Hamza, 122 and Mamman, 128. In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, he inquires on, "What is in a name?" Names belong to the field of onomastics and are conventions for distinguishing between people, places and things. They are equally used to differentiate concepts from ideas.

After the naming of humans come those of objects which are symptomatic of their ascription to the North. The people wear *gare*, as sleeveless tunic (7) and caftan (122). *Zaure* (7) is the entrance to the compound, a round hut which is used to receive visitors and to prevent them from entering the main house. *Chamis* (shawl) and *gele* (head tie) are used by women.

The word *Ambalia* (57) is mentioned in Idris O.O. Amali's "I Sing the Songs" as an Hausa, name for flood, while on page 60 the word *Atetrekwu* is an insect with a sharp shrill cry head in Idomaland particularly at night. *Owuna* is the Idoma name for a very eloquent bird which mimics the songs of other birds, its call signifies impending danger. These two belong to the poem "Don't You See" (59-60) by Idris O.O. Amali. Furthermore, Quran mentioned in the short story "Footloose" (122) by Zaynab Alkali, symbolises the religion of the people.

In addition, this other indication of religion is that women wrap lappayas, revealing only their faces and feet which has been talked about on page 1 and as observed by the Kanuris. Also, in Halima I. Adamu's poem "Children of Bosnia," (page 25), "Idi'l Kabir" a Muslim festival is alluded to as children "spread like rams slaughtered at Id..." Similarly, in Binta Mustapha's short story, "Kaa Aisa" a devout Muslim does not take her own life (104).

Fourthly, corroborating the Islamic religious life of the people of the North is their other way of life, which is indigenous in nature and would be referred to as culture. Every member of a family holds strongly the in-laws as a bond and this is evident in Regina Tom Nkere-Uwem's short story, "The Second Visit" In the short story, Mallam visits his in-laws (wife's parents) first, to pay homage. These people received him happily and asked after their daughter. Mallam visits them in order to inform them about how Death has threatened to take his life and to covet their prayers. Moreover, the Northerners define masculinity and family continuity with bearing a male child. Death in the same immediate story above tells Uwani, Mallam's wife that "... the way to live on is to have a child. I gave you a chance to live on in a son." (18). The philosophy, African philosophy behind this is that those who do not have a son die, but should they do, they will live on. Again, the Northerners keep the chastity and sanctity of young girls from birth "as it was the custom to *dot* girls at their infancy." (39). Added to the Hausa culture is the belief in polygamic lifestyle: Nhuasoh married two wives in Simon Nguty's short story, "The Victim" (39-53)

On page 102, we have the observation of burial rites, "The body was washed and wrapped in a white cloth and placed in a *ngauna*, a wooden stretcher specially kept for that purpose..." Then we have the young always kneeling to greet the elders and "The elders would

place their hands on the heads of the young people – blessing them. (103). These two cultural traits are found in Binta Mustapha's short story "Kaa Aisa".

Fifthly, myth also exist among the people. In continuation of the images in the book Simon Nguty writes the poem "Midnight" (2) and expresses that through myths "we reach out and commune with ancestral spirits," (line 2-3). Also, myth is portrayed in Regina Tom Nkere – Uwem's short story titled "the Second Visit," (5). This is because Death is a portrayed character that visits the human abode, communes his intentions to the family of Mallam Gardi and there are corresponding actions and responses. Death again resurfaces in the short story "The Victim" by Simon Nguty (39-53) when it visits another family, and reincarnation occurs. In order to unravel the reason behind this strange circumstance, the people invited a masquerade who was able to discover and address the person responsible. Not long, the masquerade addresses the perpetrators: "Woman, a few hours ago, you took a placenta and hid it somewhere, and unless this placenta is restored, the child will die" (51). The masquerade unearthed the witch's calabash. Thus, the short stories cited here made use of myth in their presentations and explicitly explains the culture of the people.

Arising from the analyses of the people, occupation, naming, culture, religion and myth is the crystallisation of anthropology of the North. This further establishes nativity – that which is native and peculiar to the North and can be used to differentiate it from other geo-political zones in Nigeria. They are indigenous images. Added to these are natural images which include, the Desert and Harmattan as depicted in the poem, "The Kanuri" (page 1) and "Sunset from Ga'anda" (page 4). Similarly, there is 'Vultures' in "Vultures in the Air" by Hyelandzira A. Salami – Shaffa, where there is lamentation about the unhappiness and fate of hopelessness to the extent that the image created makes them carcasses and they are vulnerable to the vultures. Again, Abubaka Othman writes on "The Vultures" (38) with another tone of lamentation, "The Vultures have come again from distant lands across the sea, where corpses do not decay..." (line 1-3). The vultures, compared to cockroaches, are over the land as scavengers, and are images of devastation. At this juncture, the literary devices of writers as media for the expression of their messages become vivid.

Under the poems and the short stories in Section V. "Dreams, No Change" despair images loom large. Children are watched scattered in Musa Idris Opanachi's "A Country without Home" (75), Abubaka Othman's "If Dreams were True" (74) expresses perplexity of no child bearing, while Halima L. Adamu's "The Silent Style" (75-76) has a father's unhappiness about her daughter's inability to marry "Will you marry to save my dignity?" (Stanza, 3, 4th line).

Similarly, "We Have not Changed" (77-78) by Micky Ibitomibi indicates no transformation into any better living life style and in "The End of Grief" (79-89), Usiha Umar employs absurdism and alienation. Auntie Ajara, rather than being joyful over her pregnancy, prefers to terminate it, because a pregnancy in an unhappy home with unloving husband will give her a long lasting sorrow. According to her, her husband's behaviour (Isah) "lends credence to my long held belief that inside every man is a devil." (89). How true is this generalisation? This further dovetails into gender relations. Section VI "Dialogue and Silence" also have poems expressing despair and the short story. "Kaa Aisa" is written in absurdism. For example, Halima I. Adamu's "Melody" in the 3rd Stanza, 4th line (98), writes "Drowned in the Ocean of Despair"

Ironies, satire and again absurdism are used in the writings on pages 21, 22, 24, 25, 26-30, 58, 79 and 109. Section VII "Facing Realities" has series of indictments of government

policies arising from challenges being faced in the contemporary 20th and 21st modern period. There are challenges of government policies and their untold impact on the people, for example SAP, that is the Structural Adjustment Programme. Another is women's enslavement as written by Fatima Alkali in "A Woman's Fate" (113) thereby foregrounding gender and feminist consciousness, a 20th and 21st ideology. Women's consciousness is more revealed in Zaynab Alkali's short story, "Footloose" (117-129). But irrespective of the despair, ironies and absurdism, optimism is expressed in the poem, "A Woman's Fate" (113) last stanza,

That's a woman's story
But break free she will
For her strife
is her pride. Fatima Alkali.

Conclusion

The literature of Northern Nigeria could have commenced through Uthman Dan Fodio's Islamic writings (general literature), in the nineteenth century, but the image of the North has been brought out in the 20th and 21st Century in anthropological perspectives. This perspective has revealed further in addition to the religious beginning, naming, myth, culture, occupation, people in the North and they are widespread. More important is that different images are captured by many writers, male and female in poems and short stories which represent fiction largely and as literary approaches in the field of discourse, which are worth studying, analysing and evaluating. Literary concepts and aesthetics have been greatly utilised by the different writers such as irony, satire, absurdism and images. All these culminate in the semiotics and significance of the images in the literary works reviewed. In sum, the psyche of Northern Nigeria literature, that is, the mental picture of its literature are vividly portrayed through images.

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