



## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the impact of political instability and the crises of governance in Nigeria as depicted by Abubakar Gimba in his political novel, *Footprints*. Political instability is a common occurrence in many African countries in general and Nigeria in particular; which always affect her unity and peaceful co-existence. It is important to note that political instability arises from the prevailing incidences of perceived social injustice and discrimination among the citizens and the inability of the government to address the challenges the masses are faced with. Furthermore,

# POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND CRISES OF GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S FOOTPRINTS

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## Introduction

African writers have been greatly influenced by the evolving phases of Africa's history Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial in terms of their literary output. For instance, during the Colonial era, the writer's main concern was reconstructing Africa's image distorted and bruised by colonial intrusion. During independence, the concern turned to that of social criticism (that is attacking and exposing injustice). This is also what some critics refer to as critical self-examination, which is interrogating the performance of the new African elite that have gained political power from the colonial masters.

The main focus of Gimba in *Footprints* is about a nation in transition. This nation in transition will best be appreciated and understood if we analyse the author's depiction and portrayal of the physical terrain. The setting of the novel is Songhai, which is recognizably Nigeria from the evidence in the sphere of social problems, unstable government and general apathy in the society. The issues raised, discussed and highlighted in the novel are multifarious. It is therefore, correct to assume, or one will not be wrong to accept the opinion which recognizes the novel "as a political commentary that throws more light on contemporary African society" conveyed craftily through the experiences of the two families: the Jibrán's family and Mukhtar's family. Furthermore, it may not be farfetched to consider the novel as that which directly examines "contemporary state of affairs in Nigeria. In his previous novels, Gimba appreciates being prescriptive, didactic and admonitory. Gimba's prime concern in this novel centers on contemporary issues affecting the Nigerian nation. Some of these contending issues include political instability, poor leadership, electoral malpractice, violence and incessant strikes



there has been a recurrent and sustained argument that the Nigerian state, like her counterparts in Africa and other countries of the developing world, underperforms due to lack of state capacity to deal with the contemporary complexities of governance. The paper draws its data from secondary sources by using excerpts from the novel, *Footprints*, in analyzing instances of political instability and crises of governance in the country. The literary theory used for this paper is critical realism. The Nigerian leadership has failed in several areas prominent among which include security, absence of rule of law and the provision of visionary leadership, electoral malpractice among others.

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due to the failure of the government to address issues undermining the performance of workers both at the public and private sectors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research adopts Critical Realism as its theoretical base. This is a theory that reflects the novelist's attempt to tell a story that is convincing to the reader. In other words, realism is an accurate and detailed documentation, a deep sociological perception and observation of the material facts of life. It is a movement against romanticism which began in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Emile Zola. Romanticism presents life as we would have it be, more picturesque, adventurous and heroic than the actual. Realism has spanned close to two centuries and therefore like Marxism, it is subjected to different and various interpretations. Different shades of meaning are therefore attached to the concept. These include fictional realism, socialist realism and romantic realism among others. In this study, our concern is with the fictional realism. This is a synthesis of fantasy and realism. Here, the novelist/writer gives a comprehensive and candid portrayal in an artistic manner. That is, facts are shaped by the creative skills of the writer. Abrams notes that the term realistic novel is usefully applied to works which are realistic both in subject and manner throughout the whole rather than in part" (141). Gray corroborates this position when he notes that realism is best used for writers who show explicit concern to convey an authentic impression of actuality, either in their narrative style or by serious approach to their subject matter (24). In this situation, the response of the perceptive reader after reading a realistic work would be the acceptance that, life is joyless, lovely or empty.

Realism is thus, the basis of art. Criticism of the novel therefore cannot be meaningfully accomplished without reference to realism, hence our resolve to employ it in the analysis of Gimba's *Footprints*. It is therefore hoped that, the realistic portrayal of a material is an effective mechanism to lay bare the human personality in the text.

### **Political Instability in *Footprints***

At the political front, Nigeria started out with a democratic government in 1960 as well as a fairly robust economy based on agriculture. But two coups in 1966, one in January and another in July



truncated the democratic experiment. The peaceful co-existence of many ethnic groups making up the nation was further shattered by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) during the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon.

The instability that plagues Nigeria's political terrain also afflicts the economic landscapes of the country. First, each government jettisons the policies and programmes of its predecessor with the effect that continuity is never guaranteed. Secondly, the kleptomania and unbridled corruption of the ruling classes (civilian or military) turned the country's oil-boom into its oil-doom.

In *Footprints*, two major characters namely, Wahab and Raji argues that, "Political instability in Nigeria owes much of its causes to internal factors in most cases. One such factor are; the failure of the political class to strictly comply with the basic tenets of democracy and constitutionalism" (53). Due to political instability the focus of the leadership becomes parochial with the overriding consideration for personal survival rather than national development. Therefore, by particularly picking grouse with the political order, Gimba is indirectly commenting on the state of hegemony-the power and authority structure of the society. For like Frantz Fanon, the black nation bourgeoisie namely those at the helm of affairs, whether uniformed or not, are self-centered, greedy, parasitic, unscrupulous, cynical and unproductive. They are the messenger class who has failed in lifting the status quo of their emerging nation-states. This attack on leadership both civilian and military portrays Gimba's anger and disappointment at the behaviour of the neo-colonial black elite, which, apparently, he shares with probably the majority of African writers. This concern with retardation, stagnation and inability to develop or progress due to poor vision and mission of the ruling class probably influenced Gimba to choose the title of this novel as 'Footprints'. The novel, therefore, laments the loss of opportunities represented by independence and the great possibilities at nation building. He shows this lamentation in various guises:

*... yes, there are people, politicians who want to serve to leave a footprint in the sand of time to make a name, for recognition, or driven purely by their conscience to serve out of conviction democracies service on principles. But here? Such people are few, very few. In fact, such politicians are an endangered species, endangered by the judgment of the electorate who pay less attention to men of principles than to men who spend fortunes to get elected, and must recover their principals (104).*

Gimba is of the view that the failure of leadership is both that of the leaders and the led. This position is expressed by Nashaam, Halifa's mother who says: "we can't heap all the blames on leadership... The led, the followership is just as culpable" (279).

The debate rages on. The issue of development cannot be discussed as the leadership holds the bastion to initiate schemes for development. Therefore without, unique, conscious and selfless leaders, the community cannot transform. In this light, Jibran contributes in the debate by suggesting that whether civilian or military, and whether the qualities of the leader are humble and modest, the followers cannot be absolved of blames. Thus, a 'lizard's excreta in bedroom must have been possible due to the crack in the room's wall', and Jibran believes that: "We the followers (are)... indicting ourselves by heaping the blame for all our ills on our leaders (280-1). He further asserts that:



*... the military did not create the problems of leadership. Rather the lack of good leadership provided the moral alibi for them to intervene. (For) if we have had humble heroes... that is, leaders who are selfless, honest, fair, firm and fast in delivering justice, the military wouldn't even think of coming on to the arena of power (281).*

These submissions indicate that more than anything, Gimba's concern with politics, political order and political instability. The novel is concerned with political empowerment, the rights to rule, and be ruled, and has examined the various roles of institutions such as the family exemplified by the two key families- the Jibrán and the Muhtar, the union of teachers, bankers, road users, and students, the military, the police secret agents etc., The author shows that without mutual respect, defined vision and specified mission, progress is difficult to attain. Primarily, the highlight of the novel is not lack of progress; rather it is lack of central think tank of decision makers who could catapult the new nation into great heights.

The novel also exposes a social reality through portraits of a depressing situation, subsumed in discourses and dialogues over the Nation State of being. The revelations of the perception of the various social groups and classes are laid open to us in the bid to answer the question: could these classes change the society, move it forward? Similarly, the political class has questioned the ability and/or possibility of progress by one dominant unit of the society, the elites.

### **Crises of Governance**

The plot of this novel is described by Tanimu Abubakar as “a mega-narrative, a typification of discourse!” Which stitches several narratives into a multiplicity of contending views centering on the social cohesion not only individuals and organization such as the homes and families, but government itself. This now brings us to the enumeration and evaluation of the other key plot, the public issues, and the narrative that “mediates discussion on nationhood, development and democracy”. For it is from inter-relation of the societal matters that we note the effects on individuals as examined in the private and personal plots.

The “petroleum- rich” Nigerian state, confronted by socio-political instability, high degree of corruption, mass hostility to the “public”, and poor macroeconomic management, continue to display the attributes of a state in crisis. The background and setting of *Footprints Songhai*, is recognizably Nigeria as evidenced in its acute scarcity of petrol and truncated transition programmes and incessant strikes. An assessment of the novel will substantiate this claim.

The politics of fuel scarcity and its inherent impact on individuals and family is first established at the very start of the novel, as the narrator states:

*... she knew that she could not go out to look for him. Where would she start the search from? And she could not do so on foot. She felt hamstrung. Helpless. And for once, she felt some bitterness towards whosoever had anything to do with petrol scarcity. Why shouldn't she? They had forced her husband to spend the night outside... (7).*



Her anguish is further accentuated by her son's inquisitiveness. He wants to know he would go to school and why his father is not at home. To further complete the picture of life in a developing society, the novel portrays Jibrán engulfed in feelings of frustration and stress at Africoil filling station eye-witnessing may ordeals, from that tyre to the killer mood of the crowd. It is a society in transition. A society characterized by diversion "from the path of progress by a combination of social, political and ideological factors" such as the indisciplined behaviour of citizens even at petrol stations.

This very society's political life is summarized using a journey motif: "The nation's journey towards democratic transition is halted by a persistent combination of military interventions and civilian misrule". (2)

In the novel, the foursome friends in their usual discussions debate the type of leadership and Farah says while her father Jibrán argues that: "we cannot tar all personnel in the military with the same brush..." Jibrán concludes the debate when he says:

*... The catch is, because the ballot box is easily manipulated, the bayonet has found the power stage tempting and irresistible. That's why the power stage is occupied alternatively by the soldiers and the politicians... (146)*

The acute scarcity of petrol and the continuous transition programmes from the military to the civilian clearly typify a growing nation state striving to gain its independence from the shackles of colonialism. Principal among these social indices of instability which make the nation divert from the path of progress, are the problems of governance..., rulership and leadership. Even though Gimba has identified these aspects as political and ideological indices of underdevelopment, the policy making of this nation-state, Songhai, is presided over by dreadful hordes of human predators", whether they are military or civilian. For instance, the incessant strikes, which seem endemic and endless, pervade the society. For example, teachers' strike, Bakers' strike, unions strikes in addition to the students' clandestine activities which take the government by surprise all add up to a bad picture of the society. There are several instances of this in the novel:

*... Basil looked disenchanted... with the new endless strike. The strike was now in its tenth week. And according to the plan of action of the Labour Front, if its demands were not met, the work stoppages would continue to spread across the country like wild fire... (33).*

And not quite long, the author further signals that: "... The strike was now in its thirteenth week OPERATION PYTHON WAS NOW A FULL-BLOWN GENERAL STRIKE, The Labour Front now seemed to be in control of the country... (38). As part of the parallel in the plot, the author makes the individuals to explain to the reader the impact of such strikes have on them:

*It's no less a test for the unions, who count their victory in our suffering. Apparently, it seems to me that the unions are admitting that the President is a more humane person. Squeeze the people, suffer them, the President will bulge... But, anyone who would celebrate infliction of misery on innocent pawns or... hostages is a brother to a sadist (41).*



Thus, by the time the civilian government is toppled, the state of the nation record a mild support for the military. Says the narrator:

*By ten o'clock, it was still martial music. He picked up the phone. It was stone dead: there was no dialing tone... Whenever the military sought to intervene, all communications were usually disrupted... Then came the national anthem... A speech by the/their (sic) boss himself... He accused the politicians of deliberately leading the country walking backwards with their blindfolded, and vowed that he and his colleagues in the military would not allow the retrogression to continue... (65).*

Then within the spate of weeks “The schools had at last been opened” and Haliyfah, “The soldiers were like savours to him. Then came the solidarity rallies of support from the new military government, from across the various segments and sections of the society. The foursome armchair commentators, namely, Basil, George, Farah and Haytham criticize the military rulership. But it is the mass media ably represented by the newspapers, “The Trumpeter”, “The Insider” and “The Enquirer” that “urged the people to give the new regime a chance.

Furthermore, it is important to state that Gimba’s focus in *Footprints* is not restricted to politics and power management but also with other salient issues affecting most developing nations. Gimba has also address issues of violation of human rights demonstrated both by the uniformed forces, namely, the military and police, and the efficient secret police. There are instances or highlights on disregard of human rights, for example, when Jibran is innocently framed and traumatized in prison, the nasty experiences of Haliyfah and his associates in the repressive hands of the police. Besides brutality, oppression, disillusion and despair, the novel also gives a panoramic view of corruption in its several facets. Haliyfah’s ploy reveals the English teacher’s sexual harassment incident. The rampant riots, demonstrations, flagrant hikes in fuel prices, long queues and many episodes of misdeeds fill the novel while the themes of human frailty, human nature highlight guilt, personal grief and disillusion did not escape the attention of the author.

Security of Life and Property is another issue Gimba highlights in *Footprints*. The place of security in the development aspiration and agenda of any country is quite pivotal. Without security, other socioeconomic goals are unattainable. Shanum (cited by Akinola and Yagboyaju, 2013) argues that:

*No nation can enjoy lasting peace if her citizens live in abject poverty particularly if that nation is acknowledged as having the ability and substantial means to provide development and guarantee a good standard of living. Unfortunately, that is the tale of Nigeria. It is a tale of poor governance, insecurity and poverty in the midst of plenty (4).*

The novel also highlights instances of insecurity as mentioned earlier. For example, we have instances of anxiety. The acute petrol scarcity experienced by the citizens of Songhai and the attendant inconveniences and the escaping of some fracas at the filling stations where some angry and frustrated individuals attempt to set the filling station ablaze if they did not get fuel. That portends great danger to the entire people looking for fuel to buy. Similarly there is the students’



strike that results to almost breakdown of law and order and the clamp down on innocent students by security agents.

The role of the media in public education and to enlighten the masses is highlighted. The media in Songhai has failed in its primary functioning of educating and informing the public on the activities of government. The leading newspapers in the country fail to deliver on its mandate of providing truthful and unbiased information to the populace. To this end, Farah indicts the media thus:

*I was disappointed with the media in particular the print media. All the newspapers, including The Enquirer and The Insider. Their evening editions on the day of the coup carried headlines that amounted to call for celebrations. They all reported the coup in jubilant mood (67).*

And it is not long that the music begins to change. After hundred days of the regime, there is so much outcry and complaints from members of the public. To avoid unsavoury criticism of the government, or some degree of unpopularity and murmurs of discontent, ‘the military announces that its life span would not be no more than twenty-four months; after which it will hand over to a democratically elected government. Thus, commissions are set up to review the constitution and the political structure with the mandate to complete their assignments within three months. An election commission is also set up to organize elections for the care-taker government: ‘...The caretaker government would run a transitional, experimental civilian administration. And the life span of the caretaker civilian government would be just six months’ (91).

However, it is important to state that the military at this point in time is fast losing its popularity. The reason is not farfetched; their inability to provide a government that is honest and transparent. As a result different sectors of the society both public and private embark on indefinite strike in order to demand for higher pay and better conditions of service.

Therefore, Gimba decries the culture of incessant strike actions in contemporary Nigerian society. Doctors, Nurses, teachers and lecturers in Nigeria engage constantly in industrial action, thus crippling the institutions involved. Students would have to stay at home, while the sick would be abandoned unattended to in affected hospitals. The theme of industrial actions is captured both in *The Inquisitive Child* and *Footprints*. Talib’s injury sustained from the robbers’ attack and Rafiq’s sudden return from the university provides the writer with the necessary witnesses through whom he will interrogate the issue of strike action. When Taalib was brought to the hospital, Gimba reports that: ‘‘Walid could not take him to the General hospital because the doctors there were on strike’’ (p.39). From there, the thread of tragic noose begins to tighten until the death of Taalib. Gimba contends that, it is not the robbers that killed Taalib, it is the strike action by the medical workers. The author paints the gloom that attends such anti-development stance as strike action, blaming both the government and the striking workers. For the doctors and nurses, the narrative intones: ‘‘Taalib had always blamed doctors each time they went on strike over more pay, more allowances, and improved conditions of service’’ (p.39).

As a result of the strike by medical workers, ‘‘some of the patients in the ward... were already being moved out by their relatives to private clinics’’ (p.41). However, Gimba’s contention is that: ‘‘Strikes are not all about more money to workers’ pockets... it is also about improved working conditions’’ (p.44). Nigeria loses a lot of money each time there is a strike by workers, so



government has to address the issue of workers welfare and improve condition of the health and education sectors.

The caretaker government set up by the military did not last for long. Gimba, using Muhtar as a government insider, narrates how the caretaker government is sent packing. For the “younger military officers were determined to step in to stem what they termed another bungling by the politicians” (113). The tense divide between senior and junior officers does not derail the general elections but “Immediately the caretaker government started releasing the election results, protest began to mount” (113). The too many court injunctions restraining the caretaker government from swearing in the President... announced the junior military officers relieved the interim government.

### **Conclusion**

Political instability and crises of governance has been the bane of many developing countries and especially Nigeria. Gimba in his usual characteristic highlights the problems of many developing countries. Some of these problems essentially borders on the failure of government both military and civilian to provide leadership that is honest and transparent. Many socio-political and economic issues have been largely responsible for the agitations and protests by the ordinary people who have been disappointed with the non-performance of successive governments in Soghai. There is a general strike embarked upon by the labour union in order to press home their demands for a better condition of service. The strike involves many interest groups such as the student, bankers, health sector workers such as nurses and doctors all have joined the strike. The impact of the strike on individuals and the nation were highlighted. The issues of insecurity, broken down of infrastructure including lack of basic amenities have been highlighted. Thus, Gimba clearly express his displeasure on the failure of leadership in many African countries especially Nigeria. Although some of the characters also indict the followership for the role they play in not being patriotic.

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