

# Fact as Fiction in Debo Kotun's *Abiku*

by

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## Abstract

This paper discusses fact as fiction in Debo Kotun's novel, *Abiku* wherein the interesting locus of history and fiction is expounded as an expose on Nigeria's recent political history to establish the book as a worthy example of a novelistic hybrid of history and fiction. Thus this work shows that in its bid to articulate social and historical reality, it also harnesses the intricate resources of fiction and history as a socio-historical aesthetic imperative.

## Introduction

Apart from the generally accepted notions of underdevelopment, African creative imagination is confronted by a number of challenges, and a more daunting task is how to unleash this creative energy in an atmosphere that is most certainly not conducive for such activity, as underscored when it is mentioned that '*...in Africa today, all literary activities take place in the midst of poverty, exploitation, wild urbanizing processes and cultural alienation, but also amidst an undercurrent resistance to those dehumanizing syndromes*' (Yai 1986: 41). And while one admits that given the above scenario, the creative impulse could still radiate a bubbling energy, yet we can ask how creativity is made to give a desired impact, against a backdrop of seeming apathy in the market of literary ideas.

The aesthetic and stylistic direction of Debo Kotun's *Abiku* can be situated within the inherent root-seeking quest of the African self. Thus, the novelist engages history and societal realities set in Nigeria under military dictatorship to provide a discourse in social history as he refreshes one's knowledge of recent Nigerian history by introducing literary embellishments which contribute to his enduring brilliance as a creative writer.

As I intend to show, the literary worth of *Abiku* is inseparable from its historical reverberations, thus one way of appreciating this is to compare Kotun's account of actual events to the events in actual historical perspectives as he attempt to weave fiction into the accounts to allow the actualities of the accounts to be easily deciphered.

### **The Intersection of Fact as Fiction**

Kotun's theme centered post-independent Nigerian history with artistic finesse, and even though the events are not entirely alien to reckoning, the reader is nonetheless held in awesome suspense as the events unfold, a method scholars have identified in Africa novelistic trends as a reconstruction of history (Okpewho 1980). Yet, as far as Ogundele is concerned, this claim to an historical exposition is mere pretence, myth, rather than history have engaged contemporary literary and creative impulse, he thus states that '*...although there is much ado about myth, history and literature in African literary discourse, the overwhelming bulk of that labor is expended on myth and literature, with fairly little to spare on history and literature* (Ogundele 2002: 126)'.

Intractably, Kotun's engagement with historical reconstruction seems to be a subtle response to Ogundele's challenge. Interestingly, Kotun also lends a mythical dimension to his narrative, but as we have explained elsewhere (Coker, 2003), naturally gets immersed in his satiric agenda, and the intermittent "remembrance" of mythic undercurrents in the book betrays the work as basically committed to social and political reformation, and a conscious engagement in social reality, for example 'when Dr. Ademola entered, the mood in the operating room changed. He took one look at the face of the little boy who lay unconscious on the bed. But the ones that caught his attention were the two old scars on each cheek of the boy's face.... (p.46)?

These foregoing instantiates of Kotun's attempt to assert mythic relevance unconsciously makes his plot discordant, but certainly does not encumber his literary agenda, and in fact, his satire is well orchestrated and satisfies the African literary heritage of commitment to the letter.

Kotun's experiment in fusing history into fiction and vice-versa is remarkable, and thus brings Africa's messiahs of pain to the centre stage while scarcely veiling their identity thus he describes a set of African rulers:

*Sakara looked up and saw a seven-headed phantom seated where Akin had been only seconds before. From the neck down the monster was dressed in uniform of a general. The head farthest from the neck on the left reminded Sakara of the warlord from the horn of Africa. The next one looked like that of the butcher of Entebbe, irritating its neighbor, the five-billion dollar man from Kinshasha. In the middle was the obnoxious head of the sleeping giant of Africa from Lagos, lashing an effeminate smile at the Sergeant-turned General from Monrovia. Next was the Tuareg Colonel turned president for life from Tripoli (pp. 144-145).*

It is instructive to note that the above descriptions of Africa's despotic rulers are a painful symbolism of the anguish of the people. Society, as direct recipient of the impact of misrule, power and lust is worse off. Ibitokun (1995: 164) laments '*...it is a great pity that some degenerate, opportunistic rulers, as they run after wants on earth, oppress their subjects to the extent of making them consider their own needs as if they were their wants*'.

In the same way, Kotun seems to advocate less shielding of historical figures in national literary representations, and the task of social reformation infer literary activity to shed avoidable artistic diplomacy to enhance the weight of the social and political lampoon, a development that could situate in Karibi T. George's probing of how '*... the artistic device of the oral story telling tradition and fictive imagination married to (re) construct past and contemporary social experience in Nigeria (George 1991: 107) ?*'

Hence the critic identifies what he calls "A Qualitative Approach to African Literature" and says it helps in regarding history as dynamic and not static which follows that the marriage between history and fiction in Kotun's *Abiku* is a confirmation of the viability of this contention, therefore fiction is the enablement for dynamic history, in this respect. Correspondingly, having stated the foregoing, the question that agitates the mind is the efficacy of the novel's fictional apostasy, and Ngara litmus test suffices that '*...a serious writer must be concerned about humanity and his society; a serious African write must address to the human predicament in general and to the African situation in particular (Ngara 1982:28)*'.

Accordingly, the novel postulates, highlights and fictionalizes social-historical realities as we remind ourselves that African literature and its writers share boundaries of social consciousness and functionality, which explains the political activism of writers like Christopher Okigbo, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka and others who incorporate the satirical temerity of their works. And notwithstanding, Kotun blanks off pretension and dons pungency in the novel that can possibly link to the concrete situationality of the post 1983 Nigerian state, and virtually all the major events and personalities in the country's political landscape till 1994 are adequately represented in his work.

In short, Kotun's central character Sakara, a student of military power benefits from the machinations of Babassa and through Sakara becomes a searchlight who understands the psychology of power while the consequences of unquenched thirst for power leaves the society desolate economically and psychologically. And in like manner, the uses his characters to lament Nigeria's breakdown of facilities, norms and values, e.g. '*... Ademola walked over his desk in the parlor and, hoping against all odds that a miracle might be in the offing.... He stared at the black rotary telephone which looked more like a decorative relic than a communication instrument. Intimidated, the phone did what it had always done...(p.24)*'.

Thus the grim realities of misrule and socio-economic decadence are captured by Kotun reflecting a reality of power play and corruption setting the fulcrum of discourse. And like several other African writers, he shares a vision of social reformation via a deployment of aesthetic and artistic light to champion a fresh course. Kotun's sees a better society through a people with a perfect knowledge of their history that would enable the right cause of action as he fulfills the imperative of a literature and art of social commitment.

In *Abiku*, the struggle is not limited to mere interplay between fiction and history, it also employ devices that constitute a well-marshaled literary agenda through the aesthetics of myth to present and reverberate naturally, thus Kotun's attempt at deploying the oral tradition prove quite worthwhile, a literary sill supported by Kabiru T. George as he states that '*...the employment of the artistic resources of the African oral tradition in addressing... [the] contemporary social history of Africa continues to engage African writers concerned with creating artistically authentic African literature (George 1991: 107a)*'.

Therefore, there is a drive for social and historical engagement which accounts for the novelist's artistic honesty, without leaving any benefit of doubt for his critics. As a result, we can say that approaching the subject of history in contemporary African novel has been confounding, as demonstrated by Kotun illustrating that what is responsible is actually inseparable from the economic woes that contribute to the African literary canon than span the face of continued de-humanization and bestiality in the polity which appears rather tasking.

Okpewho, (1980) however, provides a logical interpretation of the whole scenario as he considers tradition as a dynamic in its refinement, preservation, revision, and replacement which juxtapose the parameters that Karibi T. George (*op.cit*) places his qualitative approach, posing the question of where does this leave *Abiku* in the emerging trend of African literature providing that the implication are certainly far-reaching. Consequently, the preservation of history as a well utilized modus in *Abiku* helps to drum the fictive essence of the narrative while the characters hardly disguise, and thus are identifiable figures in Nigeria's political history with the mention of specific names and places. For example, Ikeja hospital certainly exists in the Nigerian state (p.44), and in fact names of towns like Lagos, Abeokuta and Yola are evidences of a writer's commitment to representing the nation's history in his fictional work, a tendency situated in the Kotun's confessed literary impetus.

In refining the history of the *Abiku*'s milieu, the novelist understands the role of the artist as the society's teacher, and although though there is a veiled attempt at presenting a people's history, Kotun still succeeds in conserving the fiction aspects of his historicity. Hence in representing military rulers, he unifies them in logic rather than personality to construct the event that informs the plot this is interestingly not particularly restricted to any military government in Nigeria, placing it as an instructive to understanding the psychology of military adventurisms, irrespective of time or space. This posture seemingly place Kotun as a meta-historical narrator whose art is heavily dependent on social reality as he proves that a constant revisit of history in African creative imagination is pertinent for political order and tranquility. Thus Kotun's *Abiku* occupies a strategic position in fictionalizing Nigeria's collective agony as it also functions as a factual discourse exposing and articulating his work as a socio-historical *expose*, in tandem with the satiric beckoning of Nigeria confirming Chinweizu's and others opinion that '*... it is the creative artists transmutation of his/her Donne that determines the significance and effect of the raw material ...*' (Ogunsanwo 1995: 43).

In a final consideration, Kontun's convergence of history and fiction, although not the first, it represents a major voice as he reveals his perception of the reality-fiction dichotomy, clad with a mythical title to place a testament to a dialectic literary construct that informs of that history could be made interesting with fictional embellishments, and fiction could in juxtaposition, breathe life through history to fuse the challenges the African creative imagination, as it mirrors collective angst. Thus Kontun's novel demonstrate the back and forth of Nigeria's history, and locates the solution to the imperatives of "*the drama of existence which compounds the drama of being*" (Ibitokun 1995) within society. Undoubtedly, finding an ally in Abiola Irele's declaration that "immediate engagement with history is the outstanding attribute of the modern African writer" (1981:69), and Stuart's observation that '*...the self apprehension of the African world in terms of concepts and categories can be embodied in properly [placed] African forms which can be considered to have artistic merit*' (Stuart 1995: 376)'.

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