

A Wetness in Dry Places: Sex and Taboo in Abubakar Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

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Abstract:

Contemporary critique of trope of sexual liberation in African literature is mostly replete with analysis of prostitution narratives, giving rise to an assumption and monolithic view of what sexual freedom or self-determination could mean. Such narratives, however, often do not yield arguments related to the critical capital of the salacious, since prostitution primarily involves transactional sex and not necessarily an inordinate sexual affair. This study privileges a generic divergence whereby analysis is hinged on the literary appreciation of salaciousness. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* departs from prostitution plot to a pornographic depiction of sexual obscenity: the venereal affair between Binta Zubairu, a 55 year old widow and grandmother, and Hassan Reza, a 25 year old street gang leader. The study investigates the existential tragedy of sexual freedom by examining the extent to which sexual relationship that is considered a taboo in a given social milieu is a recipe for self-realisation. Using a feminist view of existentialism, I demonstrate how the individual will to rise above the conventional, by escaping from being a sexually deprived human to becoming one who responds to the body's need for unbridled sexual pleasure, constitutes George Lukács and Arthur Miller's ideas of modern tragedy.

Keywords: salaciousness, tragedy, existentialism, sexuality, taboo, feminism

Studies in the driving force of patriarchy against the struggle for sexual freedom of the female body in African literature often re-imagine sex as a trope that ascribes existential agency to women. When this agency is denied, the subject's dehumanisation manifests in forms of mental, emotional and physical debilitation (Kammampool 2018, 1). The undermining of the subject's agency leads to her confinement to "the periphery and beyond the view of society and its culturally sanctified 'norms'" (Jonet 2007, 199) where she is expected to quietly exist. Maria Frias (2002, 8) suggests that the aim of such confinement is to disallow women from exercising their agency, to rid them of any opportunity to be on top/take control (literally/literary), to cast them as sexual objects who are not able to set their sexual pace, rhythm, intensity, and variety. Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* engages the power dynamics of this gender relation in a provocative narrative that metaphorically represents and resists the embodied objectification of the black female body as an element of female sexual experience. In Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the female body is further sexually objectified as one that must conform to society's moral code. The predominantly

Muslim northern Nigeria with its strict religious and moral codes – figuratively rendered as “dry places” for the purpose of this study – serves as the socio-cultural background to the layers of sexual taboo. And, against this background, the full realisation and experience of one’s sexual and sensual freedom is articulated as “wetness,” serving as a homophone for stimulation of desire (to whet) and as well as a counter-metaphor (wetness) to the stifling “dryness” of the society of the text.

Critical reception on sex and amorous exchanges in contemporary African fiction is yet to significantly enquire into the salacious aspects of sexuality. Previous scholarships on the subject of sex and sexuality are mostly centred on their commercial facets, such as image of the prostitute and the human rights violations associated with sex trafficking (see Homaifar 2008; Nwahunanya 2011; Stratton 1998; Reinares 2014). Contemporary critiques on sex in the Nigerian novel also explore the articulations of romance and the issue of sexual liberation. Onyebuchi James Ile and Susan Dauda have looked at the effect of harmful traditional practices on women and girls in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (Ile and Dauda 2016, 11), pointing out that such practices limit women’s self-actualization, and that revolting against such practices is inevitable, albeit with grave consequences (14). The present study breaks from the conventional discourse around sex and sexuality in contemporary African literature by undertaking to generate a reading which focuses on the liberating power of a salacious affair. To this end, I view the disruption of those “harmful traditional practices” as taboo, and classify the inevitable revolt against such taboo and its attendant tragic end as proceeds from the literary tradition of modern tragedy. To achieve this form of reading, I use the feminist model of existentialism as a derivative method of analysis. The aim, therefore, is to consider both the role of making free choices on fundamental values and beliefs to be essential in the attempt to change the nature and identity of the chooser, and the overall perception of individual freedom and its opposing societal prescriptive morality.

1. Literature, Sex and Taboo

Henry James’ assertion that “it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature” (Sampson 1970, 778) buttresses the fact that literature connects its consumers with the community of man, with his struggles and triumphs, setbacks and advancements, hope and despair, approvals and taboos. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* demonstrates how a sexual relationship that is rendered a taboo in a given place is critically re-examined in relation to its tendency to inhibit self-expression and self-actualisation in women, and how such hindrance from sexual freedom lends structure to the development of conflict and its tragic resolution.

Derived from the Tongan “tabu,” which is linked to “tapu,” a Polynesian word, and “kapu,” a Hawaiian term, taboo literally means “marked off,” or “off-limits” (Holden 2000, IX). Contrary to the commonly held notion by some anthropologists that taboo is a feature of primitive societies, it is “a phenomenon that is universal” (Durkheim 1963, 70). For Radcliffe-Brown, as quoted in Franz Steiner, taboos are connected with ritual avoidance and prohibition:

Ritual prohibition...a rule of behaviour which is associated with a belief that an infraction will result in an undesirable change of ritual status is conceived in many different ways in different societies, but everywhere there is the idea that it involves the likelihood of some minor or major misfortune which will befall the person concerned. So far as ritual avoidances are concerned the reasons for them may vary from a very vague idea that some sort of misfortune or ill luck, not defined as to its kind, is likely to befall anyone who fails to observe the taboo, to a belief that non-observance will produce some quite specific and undesirable result. (Steiner 1956, 119)

Radcliffe-Brown's overall submission, therefore, is that within the matrix of taboos is contained a certain level of danger that will befall those who contravene them, which is why they are "restrictive behaviour(s)" (Steiner 1956, 21).

Steiner (1956, 22) sees taboo as a means to an end, with such an end being the maintenance of harmony between God and spirits (the invisible world) and human beings and the rest of creation (the visible world). Breaking of a taboo endangers life and is as well seen as dreadful since it interrupts this harmony by putting everyone involved in danger. Since it is an improper action defined by the society one is a member of, the punishment for offenders could also be administered by the community. The sexual relationship between Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, for instance, is considered by the northern Nigerian community of the novel as licentious, and hence a taboo.

Sex has an underlying tendency to be a universal, physical and emotional act capable of activating a common feeling among individuals who engage in it. Yet it is an unspoken taboo in societies where religious beliefs continue to influence and dictate sexual thoughts, perceptions and acts. In other words, because religion has been allowed to shape the cultural perception of sexuality in such societies, sexual orientations that are not sanctioned by such religion are outlawed.

2. Radical Sexual Expression as a Feminist Model of Existentialism

There are two broad derivatives to the concept of radical sexual expression in feminist existential thought. While the early radical feminists agreed that "women's oppression derived from the very construction of gender and sought its elimination as a meaningful social category," today's radical feminists, on the other hand, claim that their oppression proceeds from "the repression of female values" and hence treat gender differences as if they mirror "deep truths about the intractability of maleness and femaleness" (Echols 1984, 50). Therefore, whereas early radical feminists maintained that the identification of women with nature is a patriarchal construct, "many eco-feminists and pacifist feminists claim not only that women are closer to nature, but that [their] 'bond with the natural order' makes [them] uniquely qualified to save the planet from nuclear holocaust and ecological ruination" (51). Alice Echols identifies the latter strand of feminism as cultural feminism, "because it equates women's liberation with the nurturance of a female counter culture which it is hoped will supersede the dominant culture" (51).

In contrast to radical feminists' view that female biology is a liability and thus in some cases mirrored the culture's devaluation of the female body, Jane Alpert, in her 1973 article, "Mother-

Right,” and Adrienne Rich, in her book, *Of Woman Born*, react to this earlier position by arguing that female biology is a powerful resource. Rich particularly argues:

I have come to believe, as will be clear throughout this book, that female biology . . . has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a truly human life we require not only control of our bodies . . . we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (1976, 39)

But not all cultural feminists are keen enthusiasts of biologically-based account of gender. Therefore, while Rich fails to acknowledge that her position, and that of other cultural feminists’, might reproduce dominant cultural assumptions about women being intrinsically passive and submissive, Gearhart accepts that it indeed does:

But if by believing that women are by nature less violent we reinforce the sex roles that have held women down for so long, then perhaps it is time to dare to admit that some of the sex-role mythology is in fact true and to insist that the qualities attributed to women (specifically empathy, nurturance and cooperativeness) be affirmed as human qualities capable of cultivation by men even if denied them by nature. (1982, 271)

In the same vein, Echols (1984, 54) admits that critics such as both Florence Rush and Andrea Dworkin have equally criticised biological determinism. However, cultural feminists have shown more interest in a kind of struggle against male supremacy that begins with women exorcising the male within them and maximising their femaleness. Hence, “while radical feminists were generally careful to distinguish between individual and political solutions, cultural feminists typically believe that individual solutions are political solutions” (53).

Generally, the emphasis that women’s more extensive experience with nurturance inclines them towards peace and ecology is widespread among cultural feminists. But as we shall see in the character of Binta Zubairu, and from her relationship with Hassan Reza in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, pandemonium, not her intended nurturing of peace and warmth, is the outcome of Binta’s individual, radical sexual expression. Her adventures end tragically – for the men whose contact with her should yield peace – because she is caught up in a conflict between fully espousing the ideas of sexual liberation and pandering to societal standards of sexual repression. Following this line of thought, one can see that the nuances of sexual relationships and their prohibitions and checks by society, using extant traditional practices, are therefore problematic, particularly when examined from the viewpoint of existentialism, an approach which emphasises the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

3. Literature and Existentialism

In literary criticism, the understanding that humans fashion out their own meaning in life by making rational decisions in an otherwise irrational world is central to the subject of existentialism. The crux of its philosophy is the embrace of existence in the absence of satisfactory explanation of its purpose. Embracing existence, in this articulation, relates to the recognition and exercise of personal free will, which invariably comes with individual responsibilities. In literary thought, such responsibilities are essential in rising above the fundamentally absurd human condition of suffering, deprivation and inescapable death.

Existentialism follows Søren Kierkegaard's (2008, 15) rejection of Christian religion's and science's reduction of human experience to dogma and objectivity. In Kierkegaard, anxieties inherent in human existence could only be subjectively discovered and resolved by individual action. Friedrich Nietzsche's privileging of reason and rationality over faith stretches the argument started by Kierkegaard. With an approach that emphasises an understanding of life from a personal perspective (Buchanan 2011, 285), Nietzsche replaces the idea of a fixated truth (God) with one of science and rationality, where both are drawn from the instance of personal experience. By relegating the subject/object duality, Edmund Husserl proposes an intuitive knowledge system in which primordial prejudices are to be eschewed for a renewed understanding of the world through – not a bracketed analysis but – a direct engagement and description of every phenomenon (Moran 2000, 42). This phenomenological reduction, following Martin Heidegger, is best exemplified in poetry (literature), since the latter is capable of yielding greater, deeper insights into worldliness than scientific knowledge could. Therefore, in literary analysis, we follow Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of an individual's insertion of self into the social and political world of the text (2007, 54).

The existentialist thoughts of Simone de Beauvoir, an important existentialist who spent much of her life alongside Sartre, is of significance in this study considering its profound connection with the feminist contentions and questions in the novel, *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. De Beauvoir writes about feminist and existential ethics in her works, including *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* which serve as forerunners for Second-Wave Feminism. This wave of feminism refers to a period of feminist activity from the mid 1960s through the late 1970s, an era in which cultural and political inequalities are seen as inextricably linked, and one in which women are encouraged to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicised – the personal is political (De Beauvoir 2011, 136) – as well as reflective of a sexist, dualist structure of power and stereotyping. This, therefore, calls for an existential analysis that shuns and questions the limitations of subject/object dualism and scientific objectivity (generalisation) or religious fixations and norms.

Simone de Beauvoir devoted her work to the re-evaluation of the existentialist concept of freedom and free will. As an existentialist, she asserts the precept that existence precedes essence and that therefore one is not born a woman, but becomes one (2011, 330). Her feminist existentialism hence prescribes a moral revolution. She questions philosophy's lack of understanding of the historical and specific nature of women's oppression, and also questions how, if everyone

possessed the freedom to make decisions and the capacity to take existential “leaps into the unknown” as existentialism suggested, the endless oppression of women could be explained. Did men choose to oppress women, or was the freedom to choose actually illusory (especially for women themselves)? Beauvoir argues that women have historically been considered as the “Other,” as a deviation from the normal, as outsiders attempting to emulate male “normality,” and that this attitude necessarily limits women’s success.

4. An Existential Attitude towards Sex

In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the existential attitude of the two main characters, Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza, towards their sexual affair is variously portrayed in the ways they react to the socio-cultural and traditional prescriptions and expectations typical of the predominant Muslim northern Nigeria.

Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche “shared the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject – not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual” (MacQuarrie 1972, 18). While the predominant value of existentialist thought is commonly acknowledged to be freedom, its primary virtue is authenticity (Flynn 1986, 39, 53). In the view of the existentialist, the individual’s starting point is characterised by what has been called the existential attitude or “a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world” (Solomon 1974, 1). For Kierkegaard, each individual – not society or religion – is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely, or “authentically” (Watts 2003, 4-6; Lowrie 1969, 37-40). In this study, authenticity is one aspect of existentialism that is employed in the analysis of the internal thought processes related to the sexual relationship between Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza, and its significance on the self-realization and sexual expression of the former.

Authentic existence involves the idea that one has to “create oneself” and then live in accordance with this self. What is meant by authenticity is that in acting, one should act as oneself, not as “one’s acts” or as “one’s genes” or any other essence requires, for the authentic act is one that is in accordance with one’s freedom. In contrast to this, the inauthentic is the denial to live in accordance with one’s freedom. This can take many forms, from pretending choices are meaningless or random, through convincing oneself that some form of determinism is true, to a sort of “mimicry” where one acts as “one should.”

How “one should” act is often determined by an image one has of how one acts, as a hustler, a sales rep, a receptionist, and so on. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre relates an example of a “waiter” in *bad faith*: he merely takes part in the “act” of being a typical waiter, albeit very convincingly and thus he is “taking himself to have a fixed nature that determines his actions” (Webber 2010, 1). This image usually corresponds to some sort of social norm, but this does not mean that all acting in accordance with social norms is inauthentic. The main point is the attitude one takes to one’s own freedom and responsibility, and the extent to which one acts in accordance with this freedom. The

sexual attraction between Binta Zubairu, a 55 year old widow and grandmother, and Hassan Reza, a 25 year old street gang leader is considered salacious by other characters in the novel, and thus a taboo for a reason that borders on its contextual inappropriateness and its extant disregard for accepted societal conventions in matters of sexual propriety.

The contextual inappropriateness of their sexual affair is so-called given its oedipal nature. Hassan Reza reminds Binta Zubairu of her late son Yaro, with whom she missed opportunity to form an enduring filial bond due to the restrictions which the traditional practices of her society has placed on the expression of such affection between mothers and their first children. (Binta Zubairu, being a first child, also failed to establish such relationship with her own mother.) Therefore, after Binta Zubairu's first awkward contact with Hassan Reza, Hadiza is surprised that her mother, Binta Zubairu, suddenly started talking about her late brother:

It was the first time since his death, fifteen years ago, that she had heard her mother make reference to him. It had seemed to her, when she thought about him, that they had buried not only his corpse but also his name that was not a name. And memories of him as well. (2015, 17)

It is a "name that was not a name" (17) because Binta Zubairu never called Yaro by his name. This reverence to the "Kunya" tradition of not calling the first child by their name nor showing them filial affection (Yusuf 2005, 11) serves as a pointer to the cultural deprivation of expressing motherly love towards her first son. Yet "memories of him" (17) linger, but this time brought back by her encounter with a young man to whom she is sexually attracted, an encounter which comes with the "moistening of her long-abandoned womanhood. . .provoked by someone who reminded her of Yaro" (28) her late son. Nevertheless, Binta Zubairu reminds Hassan Reza, in return, of his mother: "I robbed this woman who reminded me of my mother. She had this golden tooth, you know, just like my mother..." (38). Also Hassan Reza's real name, Hassan Babale, is said to have "sounded like an echo from his memory" (46) of his short-lived or rather un-nurtured relationship with his mother.

However inappropriate this sexual encounter is, it is a mark of freedom for Binta Zubairu, a relationship that has impacted "the petals of her life, (which), like a bud that had endured half a century of nights, began to unfurl" (46). This newly found wetness, this budding sexual freedom, is found in her subsequent sexual escapades with Hassan Reza, which breaks down the "reinforced fence that imprisoned her scented dreams" (139). This freedom is a contrast to the "dry" sexual suppression she has endured in the hands of her late husband, "the stranger she had spent most her life with" (26). The times with her late husband are described with visual images of uncertainty and suppression thus:

Memories of his touch were shrouded in a decade of cobwebs. What she recalled, albeit vaguely, was the sensation of his hands pressing down on her shoulders, his lower lip clamped down by his teeth to suppress his grunts as his body hunched over hers. (26)

Zubairu, her late husband, "was a practical man and fancied their intimacy as an exercise in

conjugal frugality. It was something to be dispensed with promptly, without silly ceremonies” (50-51). But Binta “wanted it to be different. She had always wanted it to be different” (51). Yet she is sexually enslaved by the snares of societal instrument of sexual repression such as ethical expectations that are rooted in moral prescriptions. Following such emotional and ethical entrapment, her tendency to own, exercise and enjoy her sexual life is branded a taboo. Just as her late husband would not condone her attempt to express her sexual desire, (for instance, by stopping her from caressing his hardness when she, “instead of rolling on her back and throwing her legs apart...rolled into him and reached for his groin” [51]), Dijen Tsamiya, the marriage counsellor of Kibiya town, also instructs her against exploring her sexuality:

“See how you look into my eyeballs. Don’t look your husband in the eyes like that, especially when you are doing it. Don’t look at him down there. And don’t let him look at you there, either...” (49)

Her love-making with Hassan Reza negates and breaks this convention and frees her from the shackles of sexual subjugation, as, “With his tongue, he unlocked something deep within her” (56). While her late husband’s hand evokes an image of suppression, Hassan Reza’s tongue does the opposite in inducing a palpable image of sexual liberation.

But to what extent does Binta Zubairu, bound by the fringes of patriarchy and tradition, religious order and cultural norms, act in accordance with her freedom, with the concept of choice and authenticity residing at the heart of existentialism? Being a member of a society that brands her carnal extrication a taboo, she often becomes self-judgemental, seeing as “her search for Yaro in the eyes of a stranger had unshackled her long-suppressed desires and left her objectionable stench of fornication clinging to her” (54-55). She nurtures feelings of guilt after each sexual encounter with Hassan Reza. In many occasions, after having sex with Hassan Reza, she heads “to the bathroom to wash away her indiscretions” (60), “the objectionable smell of fornication she was certain she exuded” (53). She is not aware, however, that Hassan Reza also wonders “why he was sexually attracted to a woman who was older than his mother” (59). She enjoys love-making with Hassan, but feels it is not right, likening herself to “some stupid flower,” which her daughter says “waits a lifetime to bloom” (178):

“I was just thinking how much like that flower I am. I have waited my whole life to feel...as I do when I’m with you, you know...No one has ever made me feel this way. But like that flower, after all those years waiting, when I bloom, it doesn’t feel right. I don’t know if you understand me.” (179)

Just like the flower’s bloom takes a lifetime, Binta Zubairu’s sexual liberation comes at the eleventh hour of her life. And the timing is accompanied with doom, since sexual affair by someone of her old, grandma age of 55 (with a much younger Hassan Reza of 25 years old) is considered by society as a taboo.

Hassan Reza, on the other hand, does not understand why the affection they share must be right in accordance with outsiders’ set standards of morality: “Why must anything be right or wrong? Why can’t things be just as they are?” (178). While Binta Zubairu’s existential stand is

ruffled by her awareness of society's stand on her relationship with Hassan Reza, the latter's stems more from his understanding of circumstances that inevitably push one into a particular path in life:

“We are like clothes...We get rumped, and creased and torn, sometimes irreparably. Some of us are stitched up, patched up, others are discarded. Some clothes are fortunate. Others are not. They are born into misfortune and ink spills and whatnots...” (180)

The feeling of guilt by Binta Zubairu shows that she is aware of the salacious nature of her relationship with Hassan Reza, and its possible consequences in a hypocritical society such as the one they live in. For it is a society where a “perpetual divorcée Ladidi” (256) condemns the sexual, existential preferences of Binta Zubairu and is viewed objectively as more acceptable than Binta Zubairu as long as she, unlike Binta Zubairu, repeatedly engages with older men; a society in which Munkaila, Binta Zubairu's son, would rather endorse Mallam Haruna, a man with “reputation as a vibrant proponent of plural marriage” (190), to marry her widowed mother, than pause to find out why her mother ever prefers a relationship with a younger Hassan Reza; a society where a corrupt and deceitful politician, senator Maikudi, makes fun of Hassan Reza's sexual proclivity and refers to him as “dan iska,” an abusive Hausa term which means useless person or a fool.

As noted earlier, there is a certain level of danger that befalls those who break taboos. But the logical arrival at such misfortune in *The Season of Crimson Blossoms* is what sets it apart as modern tragic novel, different from classical form of tragic expression or account whereby punishment against norm breakers are divinely ordered. It could be argued that the shame Binta Zubairu faces in the hands of her fellow women and her ultimate punishment, the loss of her son Munkaila, who is inadvertently killed by her lover, Hassan Reza, in the latter's attempt to wrestle himself away from Munkaila's ferocious attack, is a divinely orchestrated punishment for her unbridled lasciviousness. However, such argument panders to classical tragedy. The idea of human struggle is central to both traditional and modern tragedy. But, while the former deals with the struggles of great personalities who face ruinous challenges, the latter chronicles “society, the men rooted in it, and the relationships against which they are incapable of successful struggle” (Lukács 1965, 155); while divine fate is behind the hero's tragic flaws in traditional tragedy, man, not fate, is the center of his own tragic downfall in modern tragedy. In combating the scheme of things that degrade her, Binta Zubairu sets herself against “the seemingly stable cosmos,” the “‘unchangeable’ environment” (Miller 1978, 3), and from this comes her tragedy.

Hassan Reza's tragedy also proceeds from a similar logical, tragic necessity. Senator Maikudi could afford to spare Hassan Reza's life and still put him to good use, but he instead regards him as a disposable liability and, most importantly, a useless goon ultimately due to Hassan Reza's sexual lifestyle than because of his failure to complete the task of assassinating the senator's political opponent. Senator Maikudi, in his moralist sentiments despite being a corrupt politician, is thus an embodiment of the hostile, rigid “environment” against which Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza struggle.

5. The Repression of Female Sexuality

An underlying problem that proceeds from the suppression of female sexuality using the repressive parameters of traditional practices is the prevention of the victim's expression of their full humanity. And from the foregoing, it is inferable that the disruption of the status quo by any woman in a society that perpetuates such prejudice is seen in terms of breaking a taboo: religious and cultural. The Eve story and that of other female religious and historical archetypes project women as weak and prone to sin; thus a woman's sexuality is referenced in the context of seduction with malicious intentions and therefore outright condemned.

But sexuality and sexual expression are not just a matter of sexual intercourse. They constitute a psychological affair that does not just distinguish our uniqueness from others but most importantly acquaints our minds with the anatomy of its power and the capabilities of our humanity. The salacious affair between Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza is therefore a manifestation of the enigmatic "bond between mothers and their children" (2015, 246), such bond which cultural feminists agree emanates from a woman's "bond with the natural order" (51), which designates Binta Zubairu as uniquely qualified to save Hassan Reza from ruination, but a bond which normative social standards brand a taboo and, thus, deny both characters:

...when she looked into his eyes and saw the vortex of emotions, she thought of her son Yaro, to whom she never gave the chance to tell her how confused he must have felt...How could the world not understand what he was going through, how he needed her, how she needed to save him as she had failed to do with her own son? How could they judge her? (273)

Just as it is with Hassan Reza's life struggles, Binta Zubairu is also a victim of gender inequality and subjugation of women. As her son Munkaila remarks, Binta Zubairu has "always enjoyed teaching" (30); but early marriage deprives her a lot of such privileges to attain that image of a fulfilled self. Hence she urges Hassan Reza to return to school and recreate himself, a step she considers their redemption, that is, "making him a better person" (265).

6. Conclusion

The metaphor of "a wetness in dry places," from the above study, reveals the literary existentialist feature of the novel on two poles of association. One, it is "at the twilight of her sexual life" that Binta Zubairu's "desires had finally been unleashed" (265). And yet "the lifetime of deprivation she had endured" (265) is only momentarily rescued by a salacious affair, considered as licentious and thus as perpetrating a taboo. And so she finds in the end that, even with that symbolic blossoming of her sexual life, she is "fighting against loss all the while" (289), and that "There is nothing quite like fighting against loss and, despite one's best efforts, losing all the same" (260). But perhaps what is important even in this loss is the healing that comes with expressing her sexual desire, for humans heal by releasing, not by suppressing.

This understanding is what particularly emphasizes the work's literariness, vis-à-vis its

propagation of tragic existentialist thought. For existentialism takes into consideration the underlying concepts of human free will, maintaining that human nature is chosen through life choices, without there being social values and structures to control the individual; it is not a ground on which to dictate “what is” as enough in life, and yet it does not presuppose that the attainment of wealth, pleasure or honour can make one live a good, peaceful life. Instead, its creed obtains in seeing a person as best when struggling against their individual nature, and thus fighting for life. Hence decisions are not without stress and consequences, and the individual will have to confront at some point forces that are not necessarily rational, such as the unnatural and arbitrary traditional religious and written/unwritten rules of society. And yet this understanding of tragedy does not assume that people are basically good but ruined by society or external forces. In an individual’s struggle, personal responsibility and discipline are vital to their survival, for if worldly desire is ultimately futile, and the individual pursues happiness and freedom, then such pursuit envelops them in a web of culpability.

Therefore, the salacious affair between Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* is a leeway to a full expression of their humanity through the discovery of their past losses and their attempts, in the present, to fill the emotional void which those losses have created in them. This is the sense conveyed in Binta Zubairu’s assurance to Hassan Reza when she says to him, “I want you to understand why I have not given up on humanity, and why I won’t give up on you” (229). To them, the status quo, the “what is,” is not enough. However, their pleasurable freedom has a catastrophic end; because the “wetness” (sexual freedom; and desire for sexual pleasure) exists in dry places (a society with sexual repression as part of its social norms). Their decision to break a taboo, therefore, comes with its corresponding tragic consequences. But then, it is the traditional and distinctive mark of the modern tragic hero to struggle for this freedom. As Arthur Miller puts it:

But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear of insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us – from this total examination of the “unchangeable” environment – comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy. More important, from this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn. And such a process is not beyond the common man. In revolutions around the world, these past thirty years, he has demonstrated again and again this inner dynamic of all tragedy. (1978, 3-4)

Tragedy, for Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza, therefore obtains in the emergence of a slippery ground (when the blossoming of their “wetness” clashes with the “dry” mud of societal values). They barely had a chance to savour the experience. Their flawed human nature manifests in the way they are incapable of escaping the tragic futility of worldly pleasure. It is a tragic futility considering the abominable status of their indulgence as taboo, and since in an attempt to fulfil this sexual

gratification, they act against their surrounding cosmos/environment. They learn, ultimately, but on a slippery ground which facilitates their fall.

Finally, following existential thought, Binta Zubairu and Hassan Reza do not necessarily have to be good persons, basically, who are ruined by society. What is instructive to note is how they struggle to get more out of what life has offered them, and how, given their human nature, they fail to uphold the personal responsibility required of them in their journey to freedom and pursuit of happiness. This failure therefore exposes their guilt, and, at the same time, the futility of their worldly quest. This way, the literariness of the text is unfolded as an estranged language, one in which the subject of sex and taboo resists a definitive, traditional interpretation, but instead yields other possibilities, such as the one we have explored above: the metaphor of “a wetness in dry places.”

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