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Interview

Contested Memories: An Interview with Richard Ali

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Abstract: Two themes in the growing field of third generation/contemporary Nigerian literature, especially fiction, are the Civil War from 1967 to 1970 and negative effects from the long years of military dictatorships. The physical strife, otherwise known as the Biafra War, ended in 1970, but it is still recounted in Nigeria's postcolonial literature so that there is no shortage of memories of how or why Biafra emerged and fell. In this interview, Richard Ali recounts the background to his novel, *City of Memories*, and challenges narratives that have portrayed the Muslim-dominated Northern Nigeria as the assailant of the Igbo ethnic group, whose attempt to secede from the federation led to the clash in Biafra. Ali contests the conclusion of these narratives of victimhood and suggests that critics and historians look elsewhere for the causes of the bloodshed, including ethnic divides, corruption, mismanagement of power, poverty, and other problems that plague post-independence Nigeria.

Keywords: Biafra, Nigerian Civil War, contemporary Nigerian literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Born in the early 1980s in Kano, the heart of Northern Nigeria, Richard Ali belongs to the current group of Nigerian writers. Unlike his contemporaries such as Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, and Sefi Atta, Ali is currently based in Nigeria, specifically Abuja. Law is Ali's formal profession, but he began writing fiction and poetry much earlier, with his earliest work written in the late 1990s. A stern critic of the Nigerian government, Ali knows well the negative impact of

ethno-religious conflicts in his homeland. His novel, *City of Memories* (2012), depicts the socio-political problems affecting post-independence Nigeria.

The interview took place via email between 3 January and 31 March 2015.

Your maiden novel, City of Memories*, is a fascinating text. What inspired you to write it?*

Ali: The inspiration for it came during one of the civil crises that have wracked the city of Jos, my adopted hometown. These crises have often been called "ethno-religious conflicts," a convenient shorthand, which is misleading. Regarding my novel, the specific crisis that comes to mind happened in September 2001. My family, feeling that our house was at a dangerous location in the city, fled with our most valuable belongings to the safety of the mobile police barracks. An impression was left on me when I was passing through the city and driving past other people, noting curling billows of smoke that could be anything from a burning tire to a house or a human being. We did find safety at the mobile police barracks. I remember hearing the breaking news of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks while we were there. A few days later, the town calmed down and we went back home. You have to realize that Jos is a resort city, a cosmopolis, in order for you to understand the gravity of the trauma.

I carried a sense of this loss with me to Zaria where I studied law. This was a time when I was negotiating an identity for myself. I think my displeasure with factions and the fractionizing social tendency finds it roots here. The return of democracy to Nigeria brought with it an emphasis on factions—religious, ethnic, "zone," and similar—and these factions were being insisted upon by those who benefited from division, willy-nilly, and with increasing vehemence. We were in the process of mistaking, or pretending to mistake, fractions for wholes, where such a shorthand as "Muslim" or "Berom" or "indigene" became charged with such connotations and claims that we [forgot] we [were] talking about individuals, each with blood, desire, love, and fears. I was at the centre of it. I say this with all the responsibility of conceit, of my vantage to

my times from the unique perspective of my own life. The identity I created for myself, having factored in my background and the contributions of my family to Nigeria, particularly to the dissolved Northern Nigeria and later to Benue and Plateau State, was one that insisted on rising above faction, one that sought the higher perspective, the more complete whole.

That is where *City of Memories* comes from. It is an attempt to reclaim the wholeness of Jos, the city where I grew up and spent most of my childhood. The novel is also an attempt at a creative response to a social tendency that I knew was evil and would lead only to more anarchy and trauma. This was long before the Boko Haram scourge started in the same geography in which the novel is set.

The actual material for the book came from a short story I wrote in 2006 in my attempt to come to terms with the continued civil crises of Jos. It was a story about Ummi al-Qassim and my angle was this: What if these civil crises over which we are killing each other actually started as a love affair gone wrong, one whose roots and tale we do not know? In other words, what if the certainties over which we harm one another are merely old lies? The interplay of this curiosity and my history inspired *City of Memories*. Of course, at the beginning of the novel, Ummi al-Qassim is already dead from the weight of her story. The other characters flounder about their lives in the shadow of that death.

City of Memories *can be interpreted as a partial response of a writer from Northern Nigeria to the Nigerian Civil War narratives that have so far portrayed Northern Nigerians as assailants of the East and the minority groups that attempted to secede with the region between 1967 and 1970. Do you agree?*

Ali: I think that the roots of that unfortunate conflict lie in selfish politics patented by the Southern Nigerian political elite playing on ethnic sentiments and, by the same token, fostering ethnic stereotypes in the instances where this sentimental politics did not create the stereotypes in the first place. The North was a victim of this desire to create an Other within Nigeria. In the early 1950s, House of Representatives members

from the North were booed and humiliated in Lagos because they did not agree that an early independence was in the interest of the political bloc and the people they represented in that legislative chamber. One must pause to wonder where the assumption that the Northern Nigerian legislator was expected to act against his own interest [came] from. Then in January 1966, soldiers brought up on that same ruinous rhetoric of "Northern domination" and "corruption" decided to wreak havoc on the then Northern Region. In one swoop, [all the] architects of the Northern Region were murdered. These actions, I think, are rooted in denigratory stereotypes assiduously cultivated by Southern Nigerians, especially the press.

The sheer size of the Northern Region became a cause of concern for the rest of the country from the moment that the leaders of Western and Eastern Regions realized the shocking implication that the democracy and independence they were desirous of meant universal adult suffrage. You see? And that the NPC [Northern People's Congress] party had the Northern political space completely dominated. However, the Northern Region was huge only because it was able to keep the Northern minorities, regardless of differences, within the geo-polity of the North, in the exact way the West was unable to keep the Midwest. If you take away the Niger-Benue Basin, which is where the Northern minorities live from Zuru to Wukari, the North and the NPC would not have had the numerical numbers to dominate the politics of the First Republic. In my novel, I place Tafawa Balewa, who was also from a Northern minority ethnic group, at the forefront of Northern Nigeria. [He saw the North] as a "company of equals," an idea he sought to impose on Nigeria when he became Prime Minister. While [Nnamdi] Azikiwe and [Obafemi] Awolowo were busy building ethnic parties in Enugu and Lagos respectively, [Sardauna] Ahmadu Bello and his cohorts were building a cosmopolitan party based on the twin ideas of *kirki* and *kunya*, loosely translated as "self-worth" and "honour." So, we had a strange situation where the one region that attempted to build an internally ethnically inclusive polity in the run-up to the First Republic became the one region that the other two set about making an Other of. This is the background.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for example, Chimamanda Adichie relates celebrations amongst the Igbo community in Kano when the news of Sardauna Ahmadu Bello's assassination by soldiers reached the city. There have been similar reports of celebration in Zaria and elsewhere. Why did some people from the Eastern Region, living in Zaria in the North, who, as far as anyone knows, had absolutely nothing to do with Nzeogwu and his coup, feel the impulse to publicly celebrate the gruesome murder of the premier of the region in which they lived? What generated this impulse to celebrate? And the answer, the only answer, is that the Southern Nigerians, generally, had created an Other of us, the Northerners. How else can you come to despise a people who are your hosts, with whom you trade and amongst whom you live, so much that you [perform] songs of their leader having died bleating like a goat? It is possible only when the victims of the military coup of January 1966 had already had an effective ideological violence perpetrated against them.

The documented purpose of the 1966 counter-coup led by Northern Nigerian military officers was to secede from the Nigerian federation. You can say that we were tired of being an Other, and that we wanted out. Northern Nigerian soldiers did not topple General Ironsi's government because they hated Southerners. Even months after the killings of the leaders of the Northern Region in what, to even the most dull of savants, was a politically premeditated coup, Northern Nigerians, on the night of July 29, were not interested in seizing federal power. After the second coup, a forty-eight-hour power vacuum ensued during which the British and other interested parties finally prevailed on the putschists to assert their de facto power over the federation and not to secede. Everyone forgets that. The arrival of the Northern Nigerian political officer in federal power was a thing he was cajoled into and, while there, he learnt corruption, and coup after coup turned up even more corrupt reincarnations of this unfortunate species of strongman, admittedly with reformist attempts here and there.

Someone had to take charge. Remember the famous anecdote from Major Mobolaji Johnson then, when a rank-and-file soldier said he wouldn't take orders from him, a Major, until his Northern Sergeant came along? This was the period. So, the then Lieutenant Colonel

Yakubu Gowon took over power out of a sense of responsibility. From the get-go, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu in the East did not recognize Gowon's de facto assumption of power, preferring Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe. As [of] July 29, 1966, Brigadier Ogundipe had no troops and no officers to re-impose his seniority. If things seemed clear to Ojukwu in Enugu, they were far from clear in Lagos, and they definitely were not simple. Ojukwu outranked Gowon, but what were the odds that the officers who had planned the coup, who on being convinced not to secede, had completely rejected Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe?

I like to think that these are important backgrounds to the Civil War, from our perspective. The killing of Igbo civilians in the North, categorically condemned and unjustifiable, was Ojukwu's pretext to make a play at a central role in history—no less than that of Father of the Nation. Read[ing] his memoirs, I see a subtext in which Ojukwu did not expect there would be a war. That was the fatal miscalculation of that decade. He had made no true preparations for war even after his forces had repelled the initial police action. When it was clear to everyone that a real war was upon Nigeria, Ojukwu, in a few months, proceeded to lose the food baskets of his Biafra. The entire war was lost by 1968. Do you fight wars by growing a beard and deploying some neither-here-nor-there rhetoric? His fatal miscalculation seem[ed] to be the belief that bluster alone could avoid a military attempt to dissuade the East from their secession. The Eastern Region had been running their parallel government since the counter-coup. So, perhaps, that was where the confidence to make a gamble came from? By 1968, when it was quite clear [that] the war was lost, Ojukwu had Emmanuel Ifeajuna and the others tried and executed for treason for stating the obvious and acting in order. Nzeogwu, who had spearheaded the January coup, was under surveillance. He was abandoned by Biafra and died at Opi Junction near Nsukka. We are told that three million people died in that war, and the North and Federalist Nigeria are blamed for these, yet most of these civilians died in the period [of] 1968 to 1970 while Ojukwu and his High Command dragged on a war that was lost already. No one points to this fact and the irresponsibility that lies beneath it. No one is

interested, so long as the Other can be blamed. The war propaganda was that the Northerners would kill Igbo people if they [Igbos] surrendered; the war propaganda was that the North was intent on a genocide, playing on the way we had been successfully stereotyped. Yet let me tell you what happened in Kano, what I know of, after the war. Northerners who had held property owned by Southern Nigerians in Sabongari and elsewhere handed over these houses and rent from during the conflict back to their owners. I have been told of Igbo men who sold their houses to Northerners in order to raise capital to trade and then bought the same houses back from the buyers down the line. There have been other civil crises in the North that have seen Southern Nigerians targeted, but not in the 1970s, and these are correctly a fallout of the utter corruption of the Northern Nigerian officer class who, while still holding federal power, had long ceased to be any sort of representative of the will of the Northern Nigerian people in the way Gowon was.

Nigeria did not start in 1960. It started in 1914, and from that time, a process of [Othering] the North and its people was set in motion with the connivance of the dividing-and-ruling British and the active participation of the Southern Nigerian elite. The events of 1966 can be interpreted as a reaction against that [. . .] racist rhetoric. As we can see in hindsight, these gave rise to a whole new set of bigger problems and reactions, the least not being the corruption of the Nigerian army. This background informed my fiction in *City of Memories*.

One of the characters, Colonel Ibrahim Dibarama, attempts to deconstruct some of the existing narratives of Biafra's victimhood. Was this your intention?

Ali: To my mind as the author, we were all victims. But each character in the book has got his or her opinion. A careful reading of *City of Memories* would show that the characters are not in agreement with each other on most things, especially on Biafra. The opinions of the Emir and al-Qassim are quite different from those of Ibrahim Dibarama. Even Ibrahim Dibarama's opinion about the war is different from that of his friend Hassan Abba. Hodio Ardo's war was different. Eunice Pam's Civil War was of its aftermath, of strong women, interpreted as feminist, at

the head of their families, making fortunes in postbellum Lagos. Yet all the older characters are bracketed by the trauma of that war. The Civil War, in the design of my fiction, is used to parallel the story of Ummi al-Qassim. At the start of the novel, Ummi al-Qassim is dead already, and the Civil War is long over. But the effects of these two events, the fictive and the real, linger and overarch the lives of my novel's characters.

The narrative of exclusive victimhood is a false one. Chimamanda Adichie speaks about the emotional truth of the Civil War, a thing she seeks to capture in her novel, a thing that is hard to distinguish from the sentimentality of a particular vantage of victimhood. In a BBC interview I came across recently, she states that while everyone suffered, the Igbo people suffered the most. Here's the problem with that statement—it is [. . .] the expected knee-jerk reaction to it for other groups, for it is a Civil War we are speaking of here, to come out and catalogue their own sufferings in a bid to show that they suffered the most or at least more. And that is unseemly, misleading, and dangerous. Let me give you the parallel to this through a memoir by [a] British colonial officer in Pakistan, from the 1920s, of an alleyway where beggars displayed their deformities, the next physical impairment more gruesome than the previous one. There is, of course, the emotional truth of a deformed leg and an arm cut off, from the vantage of the individual. Such an individual has indeed suffered "the most" for they, of course, possess[ed] the lost limb. But my approach to this Pakistani alleyway is different. I think the greater truth of dispossession and loss is found in the village where these beggars come from, where perhaps a famine thirty years before made children's bones brittle and more liable to snap and where sloppy safety regulations at a local sawmill make the loss of an arm an inevitable incident. The true truth, if you permit my formulation, is the larger context of circumstances into which each beggar fits, into which, to extend it into our world of fiction-crafting, each narrative fits.

There is a line from a song by the artist Sting where he says there is no such thing as a winnable war, but just degrees of loss [and] the illusion and delusions of victory. If you say that federal Nigeria won the Civil War, I doubt that the widow of a young Nigerian soldier my mother knew in Idah would agree with you. If federal Nigeria won the war,

look back in hindsight and tell me that that victory was beneficial to the ideas that sent federal Nigeria to war. All the soldiers and their entire families, on all the possible sides of that conflict, were betrayed by the course of Nigeria after the Civil War. The emotional truth of a particular loss pales in comparison to the true truth of the mass of particular losses. The ideological underpinnings of victory fell apart quickly, and with it any notions of victory receded into illusion and delusion. To the admittedly limited extent that I know my character Colonel Ibrahim Dibarama, this is what he understands from the trauma of the massacre that the Biafran civilians in Asaba, which his unit, in my fiction, carried out. This understanding is bolstered by the story and loss of his wife, Ummi al-Qassim. It is this understanding, one that rises above factions and the fractionizing tendency, that he brings to bear in the climax of his rivalry with Eunice Pam and the ethnic hostilities in Jos. A careful reading, should this be considered by any critic, of my opinions side by side [those] of each character, distinguishing both, comparing both, would show what is particularly the author's intention and what lies in a particular character's singular opinion.

There seems to be an ongoing conflict between Nigerian writers abroad and the ones at home. Which group do you think best represents the events in contemporary Nigeria?

Ali: The true African stories and the authentic Nigerian stories are being written in Nigeria by writers living in Nigeria. I will not get drawn into the usual talk-talk on how exactly what I am pushing is indeed "the authentic" story. It is authentic because Richard Ali says it is. All right? We have a funny situation here, where a huge swathe of diaspora Nigerian writing can be captured and critiqued as writers trying to articulate to the West how Western they have come to be by means of exoticizing their origins, so they become like bats, you know, neither here nor there. It's a funny situation. I think it was James Baldwin who said, in one of his essays, that the literature of the Harlem Renaissance was a literature essentially meant to humanize the blacks to the whites in America. I read that quote as referring to a literature done on the terms of the whites. It took writers like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison to

cut the constrained self-dramatization, the monkey in the cage doing cartwheels on command to show how much of a primate just like your cute little boy they are. The Baldwinian shift saw the writing of the black experience as the black experience: no appeals, no apologies, no seeking of validation. *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison are examples of exactly this sort of authentic writing. The whites' interference with black experience is not excluded, of course, but it is not the flour of that cake. It was, rightfully, maybe sugar, maybe food colouring or vanilla flavouring, an interactive aspect, but definitely not the focus of the entire experience.

So why do so many Nigerian writers keep writing "immigrant stories" to this day after god-knows-how-many decades of going to the West for various reasons? Enough already! Write about the West from the perspective that you are Western now. Plumb the realities and unrealities of some corner of Ukraine or wherever, and if it appeals to the people of Ukraine or Europe, there you go, you get a bestseller! But the pawning off of one's remote origins is a bit of a con, you know. I mean, let's face it, you had nothing to do with it. It's sentimentality of a sort—self-serving sentimentality. That's why a writer like Helon Habila continues to have my respect. He's based abroad, but look at his novels. Consider *Oil on Water*, which is an authentic Nigerian fiction in every aspect. He is using the tools of fiction and his own skills to present a story that is complete in itself, a story on its own terms, written in its own specific geopolitical milieu. The characters in his story interact with their environment and are formed and deformed by it. Look at Jude Dibia's novels as well. [They are] definitely authentically Nigerian, although he has moved to America now, and I hope he too doesn't churn out immigrant-type fiction soon.

If you want to read authentic Nigerian writing, you would do well to pick up Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees* or Emmanuel Iduma's *Farad*. If you want to get a true feel of contemporary Nigerian fiction, read the better fiction written by writers who live in Nigeria and are writing about Nigeria. Naturally, in the most dramatic fashion I can mimic, I hasten to say [that] I am *not* dismissing the writings of Nigerians in the diaspora. It's just not your best calibrated ther-

mometer to feel the heat of what you've asked about—contemporary Nigerian writing. It is a part of the larger corpus of Nigerian writing, of course.

Third-generation writings from Nigeria are not interested in blaming colonialism for the problems in the country. Instead, they examine poor leadership as the bane of Nigeria's progress. What is your own perspective on this paradigm shift?

Ali: Let us not be too hasty. Paradigm shift in blame? Has the West stopped benefitting from the gains of slavery and colonialism and ongoing neo-colonial meddling? Has Western aid successfully masked the billions of dollars in illegal trade flow[ing] out of Africa each year to the West, outflows that beggars the puniness of this aid so-called? So why the seeming shift in the emphasis of examination as if there can be just one cause for a complex social reality? Colonialism and the West are intricately to blame for Nigeria's present problems. But make no mistake about that, they are not all there is to blame. I refuse that they be made a scapegoat of, and I refuse that they be used to excuse our own participation, bodily, in our ruin and our present problems. To the extent that the issue is the emphasis of blame, I refuse a paradigm shift that takes even one jot of blame for the West, not even in favour of poor leadership. Each person must keep his/her own share of the blame firmly locked on.

But I do not think the issue should be who is to blame for the present state of Nigeria. I think the issue is who is responsible for moving Nigeria out of its present state. And the answer is firmly the Nigerian people. We need to tie up the responsibility for this thing you have called "poor leadership" to the people themselves. Colonial Great Britain and its successor state is responsible for the present state of Nigeria, but Britain is not responsible for turning the state of affairs around and developing Nigeria today. It is entirely the responsibility of the Nigerians, of the people and the leadership they let represent them. Perhaps our writers should see a thematic shift that will see them examine the ways the modern Nigerian, the African, fails his community and society today? Poor leadership is merely a symptom, not a cause.

Is there something in particular you want to say to your readers?

Ali: I wish we would each do more and treat each other better. We need to move out from behind excuses, even valid ones such as the failures in governance and in the duties of the state [and] the corruption of the elite and public sectors. We need to move out from behind these valid excuses and put on a critical historicist eye. Only when this is done will people realize their own power to make demands of the state, to make the elite more responsible to their societies. The failing Nigerian system needs a shock, and only the people [who] are awakened to their sense and place in historical terms can provide that shock, like a defibrillator shock, to jumpstart our national heart.

City of Memories is my literary love letter to central Nigeria, where I am from and where I grew up. It is also to the Northeast, a place that has been ravaged by Boko Haram in recent years. There is always a historical space, a city of memory, where all was calm before chaos, a place to which we go to know how things were before, so that we can start fixing what went wrong. In the shadow of the dead woman, Ummi al-Qassim, the four characters of my novel are engrossed in the task of finding that historical and mental place. They have varying opinions [and] make different choices, and while some [characters] are consequently destroyed, some achieve success, and some other characters find love. But the truth is that all four characters, Faruk, Rahila, Colonel Dibarama, and Eunice Pam, are variations of a single archetype—of the Nigerian. I look forward to a critical engagement that will take on this aspect of my novel. Ummi al-Qassim is all our history behind us. That is why she is lost and dead at the beginning of the book. It's up to us, the survivors who have got to thrive in her wake, to use what we know of her story to make ours better, you know, to cast a spell against chaos.

Lastly, related to this, we must stop this silliness of creating the Other within the same country when it is quite perfectly clear that we are all intricately linked in our genealogy, suffering, and traumas. When you gather up a group of people, hundreds of individuals—millions even—and then reduce them to a concept for no purpose other than denigration, dismissal, and blame, it is a primordial violence being done

to each one of those people. Let us treat each other as human beings, rank all individual Nigerians as good or bad persons, not hasten to say "the North" and "Igbos" in the sense of wielding a "Them." It's all of us in this country.

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