

### **Season of Crimson Blossoms.**

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim.

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In this phenomenal debut novel, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim paints an engaging, intricate, and cleverly layered portrait of the human condition. The narrative is set in the ultra-conservative Hausa Muslim society of northern Nigeria and revolves around the subversive relationship between a fifty-year-old widow, Hajiya Binta, and Reza, a twenty-five-year-old drug peddler and political thug. With the deftness of an expert wordsmith, Ibrahim weaves the threads of the narrative into a tapestry against the canvas of the tragic aftermaths of interreligious and socio-political upheavals, violence, and despicable corruption on the psycho-social fabric of individual, familial, and communal existence.

At its core, the narrative is about the quest for love and healing amidst the grimness of an immense sense of loss, unresolved grief, filial abandonment, repressed emotions and sexual desires, unspeakable trauma, and societal disillusionment. Each of the central characters grapples with existential angst. For example, after enduring a loveless and sexually deprived marriage as an underage bride, Binta also bears the grief of the sudden loss of her first son, Yaro, with whom she is denied maternal connection, and the subsequent loss of her husband to interreligious violence. Similarly, her young niece, Fa'iza, suffers severe post-traumatic stress disorder (mistaken as demon possession requiring an exorcism) after witnessing the gruesome murder of her parents and younger brother by her maths teacher who leaves their "bright, red blood, warm and sticky, splashed across Fa'iza's face" (77). Reza, meanwhile, manifests what could be defined as the symptoms of

the primal wound. This makes the novel excellent material for a psychoanalytic reading.

The captivating narrative opens with Binta's dramatic encounter with Reza during a burglary at her home: "Hajiya Binta Zubairu was finally born at fifty five when a dark-lipped rogue with short, spiky hair, like a field of miniscule anthills, scaled her fence and landed boots and all, in the puddle that was her heart" (9). While Reza shuffles around with Binta, a dagger held closely to her throat, "the friction of her rear against his jeans made his crotch bulge and push hard against her" (14), she realizes "in the muted terror of the moment, that this was the closest she had been to any man since her husband's death ten years before" (13). Reza takes her things and leaves, "having sown in her the seed of awakening that will eventually sprout into a corpse flower, the stench of which would resonate far beyond her imagining" (14). This chance meeting rekindles the dormant embers of Binta's unrequited desires and repressed sexuality. By their second meeting, "the little spark of concupiscence deep within her had burst into a flame" (55), and swiftly flares into a fiery affair, one that does not only defy rigid religious regulations and stifling patriarchal dictates, but also significantly alters the trajectories of their lives. Unsurprisingly, Binta's quest for self-redemption is met with repugnance. She ponders the sheer hypocrisy of society and bemoans the lack of empathy from "people including her niece, who had no inkling of the lifetime of deprivation she had endured", but "looked at her with eyes that gleamed with accusations" (284). Ultimately, Binta realises that for countless women living in patriarchal contexts like herself, the dream of being and living freely "can be dainty and beautiful, like butterflies, and just as fragile" (310).

*Season of Crimson Blossoms* provides valuable insight into the socio-cultural context of northern Nigeria, which serves as a microcosm for most Islamic and patriarchal African societies. It scrutinises the corrupt Nigerian society where the youth are deprived of requisite opportunities to excel. Instead, they are deployed by unscrupulous politicians to "get in the gutters and do dirty jobs" (303), while their own children study at prestigious universities abroad and lead extravagant lifestyles. For insatiable and power-thirsty politicians like Senator Buba Maikudi, "there are no permanent friends in politics but permanent interests" (301). Therefore, regardless of their loyalty, fellow politicians, corrupt police officers, and street mercenaries such as Reza, Gattuso, and the other boys at San Siro are merely expendable pawns in the political game of chess.

However, the most pertinent crux of the novel lies in its feminist engagement. The novel highlights the plight of women in the Hausa society under the weight of institutionalised patriarchy and overzealous religion. Ibrahim particularly excoriates the irrationality of discriminatory cultural strictures such as the practice of *Kunya* (Yusuf 11–2) or sense of propriety, which works primarily to suppress sexuality and inhibit a woman’s expression of love and affection towards her first son or children. The novel further explores feminist issues such as forced and underage marriages, polygamy, ageism, and the desexualisation of older women by patriarchy.

The richness of the novel lies not only in its modest prose and alluring lyricism, but also in the subtlety with which the author enunciates the social issues that encumber his society without being overly didactic. With the proficiency of an African folklorist, Ibrahim begins each chapter with a proverb that foreshadows the events that follow. For example, the proverb at the beginning of the second chapter reads: “*A butterfly thinks itself a bird because it can fly*” (23). The narrative is enriched by sparse sprinklings of magic realism exemplified by the “the pungent smell of roaches” (23) that often presage “something inauspicious” (9), and “the cat with its white-tipped tail and gleaming eyes” (119) that always prances the fence whenever Binta’s suitor and nemesis, Mallam Haruna, visits.

In conclusion, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* explores what Chimamanda Adichie refers to in her article entitled “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience” as the “grittiness of being human” (emphasis in original) (50), and the “idea of a common humanity” (46). The novel is indisputably a daring and fresh addition to the contemporary African literary canon.

#### Works Cited

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**Susan Adaora Okpala**  
**adaorasusan@gmail.com**  
**North-West University**  
**Potchefstroom, South Africa**  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2885-939X>

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