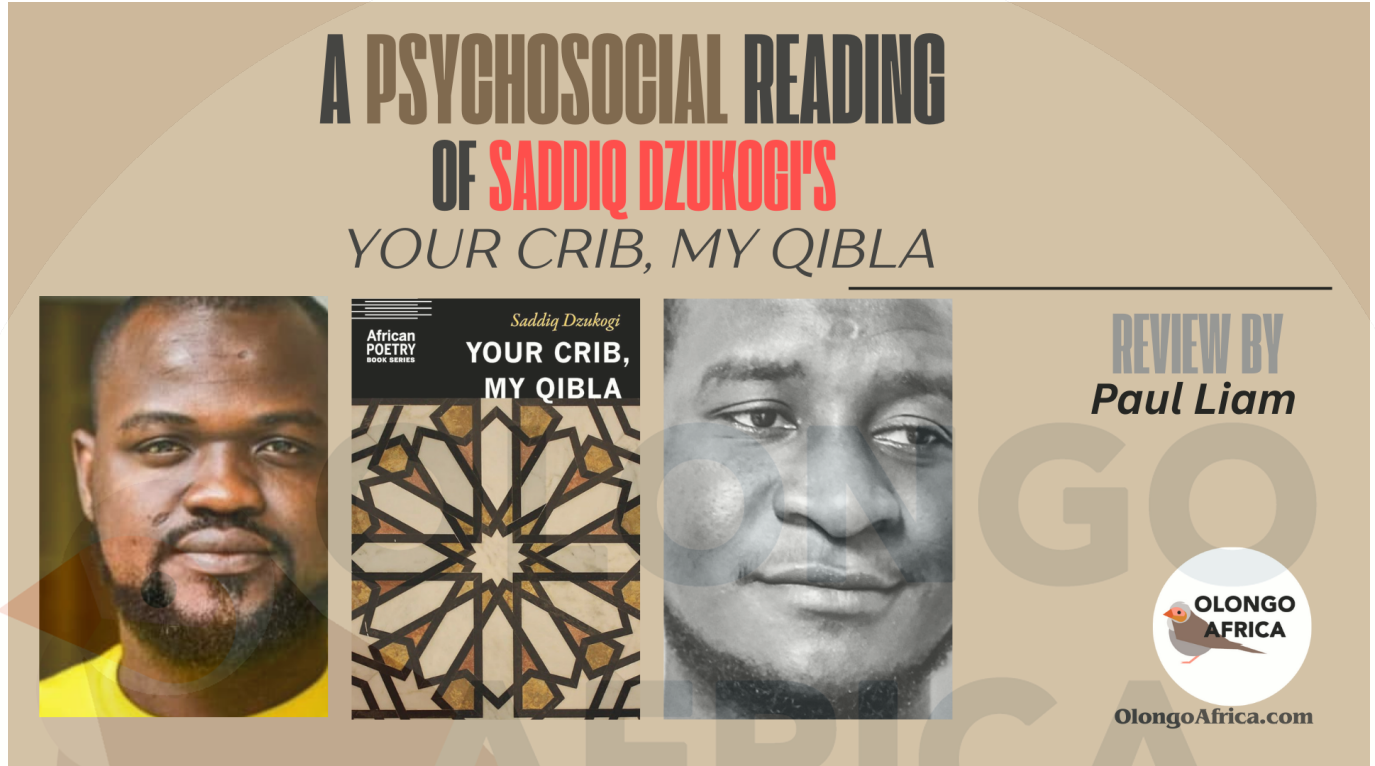


A Psychosocial Reading of Sadiq Dzukogi's *Your Crib, My Qibla*

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John Pepper Clark, the renowned Africa poet, playwright and scholar, in his acclaimed poem "The Casualties" offered a profound postulation on the complexity of war and victimhood when he remarked that "The casualties are not only those who are dead..." as a response to the divisive rhetoric and counter accusations that trailed the Nigerian civil war of 1966-1970. He asserts that the casualties of war are not only those who were dead, wounded, or displaced by the war, but also include all those who suffer one form of loss or dislocation occasioned by the war. One may assume Clark's response was not intended to invalidate the pain of those who were directly affected by the war, but to highlight the far-reaching consequences of the war psychic of the citizenry, irrespective of which side of the war they were on, since it generally causes displacement and psychological distress even on non-actors. Of course, several decades after the war, the entire country is yet to heal from the dislocation and division it left behind. Clark also reminds us that those who died from the war are far removed from the consequences of the war. In other words, the dead are unaware of the pains and suffering endured by those who survived the war.

The foregoing offers an instructive premise for the examination of Sadiq Dzukogi's magnum opus work of poetry, *Your Crib, My Qibla* (2021), a philosophical rendition of a father's struggle with the loss of his daughter. Juxtaposing the context of Clark's notion of victimhood vis-à-vis Dzukogi's representation of loss, we could infer a parallelism in the depth of trauma suffered by the persona in the latter's work. While Clark's portrayal dissuades the preclusive sense of victimhood by those who regarded themselves as the sole victims of the war, Dzukogi's reflection highlights a father's bout with trauma and his inability to reconcile himself with the death of his child. The point to note here is that the persona's beloved daughter is deceased and buried, and thus unaware of the broken state of her father, who is in a state of grief. Consequently, it is her surviving father who is in a deplorable state requiring repair and healing. He is the casualty of his daughter's demise. In fact, if his

daughter were to be returned to life, she would feel pity for her father.

Losing one's child, especially for a young father, is a life-altering experience that can only be comprehended by those who have had the misfortune of losing children. This situation is made worse when extraneous circumstances prevent you from witnessing the burial of your child or disallow you from visiting her graveside in the case of the deceased's mother, the sense of grief is aggravated. Thus, by undertaking a psychosocial reading of the text, we can unravel some of the psychosocial factors that heighten the traumatic conditions that accentuate the tropes of loss and grief in the work. Not only is the poetic narrator unable to accept the death of his child, but he also makes frantic attempts to perpetuate her as ever present in their lives. This sense of constancy is illustrated by the deployment of the present continuous tense, which the poet explains in the prologue to the collection when he opines that "In writing these poems I feel like I am holding her in my hands. She is alive as grief, alive as memory, alive as song" (p.6). Equally, to execute his grand objective of perpetuating his daughter, persona seems to lock himself in a mental room where he communes with his deceased daughter by activating his defense mechanism by blurring her absence by re-experiencing the priceless moments he once shared with his daughter. This assertion is corroborated by the copious references to the memorabilia that hold his daughter's memories, like her toys, shoes, gown, and the scenes of him and her in a garden where she is playing with his toes or serving him tea. An instance could be found in the poem "Marshmallows" in which the persona enthuses:

She is at his feet
playing with his toes, as though they are
an extension of her toys—
his image of love is pronounced in the way
she holds on to his big toe, rubbing her finger
across its nail—Grandmother says whatever he willed
would become. He didn't understand until now how
over the years, he sat quietly and watched her grow
inside of him, unknotting regret
until it becomes loose, like a house
made of smoke-bricks (p.15).

These imageries and instances of father-daughter moments create the illusion of a permanent presence that suggests the inability to accept the vacuum created by the demise of the deceased. But more than that, it provides a powerful vista into the subconscious mind of the grieving father and how every makes more sense with the benefit of hindsight.

The collection is divided into two parts; the first part, "Your Crib," chronicles the persona's recollection of the deceased's death and the events surrounding her burial, and the coming to terms with her loss. The second part, "My Qibla," highlights the post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by

the persona as he navigates the grief of his daughter's death. The poems are lacerating as they are evocative of the hardest emotions anyone can muster in expressing the deepest feelings of loss and grief. But the persona's grief is laced with regret and self-indictment accruing from a sense of personal failure such which makes one wonder if things could have been different had they been present or done something differently. This is the feeling we infer in "The House Held by Chaos," in which the persona reflects on some previous happenings in the house. This assertion is supported by this excerpt from the poem:

After she died, all the days he was away in kaduna
began to hawk him deeper into regret.
The whole toil of providing her a living
quarters decomposes before him.
It is unsayable what echoes inside him,
like some word that has already been said (p.14).

The above passage highlights the sense of regret and duty occasioned by his being away in Kaduna to hustle for the family, which he represents with the 'toil of providing her a living quarters.' Of course, it is every father's duty to provide for his family, even if it means doing so in a city far away from home. So, we see that the quest to provide for his family took him away from them. But the depiction also highlights the socioeconomic conditions of the family. Perhaps, he would have preferred to stay with his family if he hadn't had to migrate to another state and city to fend for them. However, after losing his child, the whole struggle to provide for them becomes meaningless to him as he is overwhelmed with regret. The feeling of guilt is so heavy that he cannot express it. And because of this, he feels defeated. This notion is further buttressed by the persona's assertion that:

He does not blame himself enough because
he's living inside people who love him,
who treat him with courtesy,
who sing of how her death shouldn't push him
into a dark room (p.14).

Despite the reassuring words of his loved ones, the persona recognizes a personal failing that has contributed to his daughter's death that nobody else sees, hence their counselling him against pushing himself 'into a dark room' which symbolizes causing harm to himself or losing his mind. Such is the love of a father; he never loses sight of the duty of care he owes his children.

Islamic burial rites prohibit delaying the burial of a deceased after their death, which means that a dead person is expected to be buried within 24 hours after their demise, and in most cases few hours after they have been confirmed dead. Thus, it can be inferred that the persona's daughter was buried in his absence since he works in Kaduna while his family lives in Minna. Perhaps this explains

why in the poem, "Enigma," the persona recounts his first and second experience visiting his daughter's grave at the cemetery where he jumped the fence because the gate of the cemetery was locked. He also didn't know which of the graves was his daughter's, but depended on the description given to him by those who witnessed her burial, and with that information, he went to see her grave. The poem reads in parts:

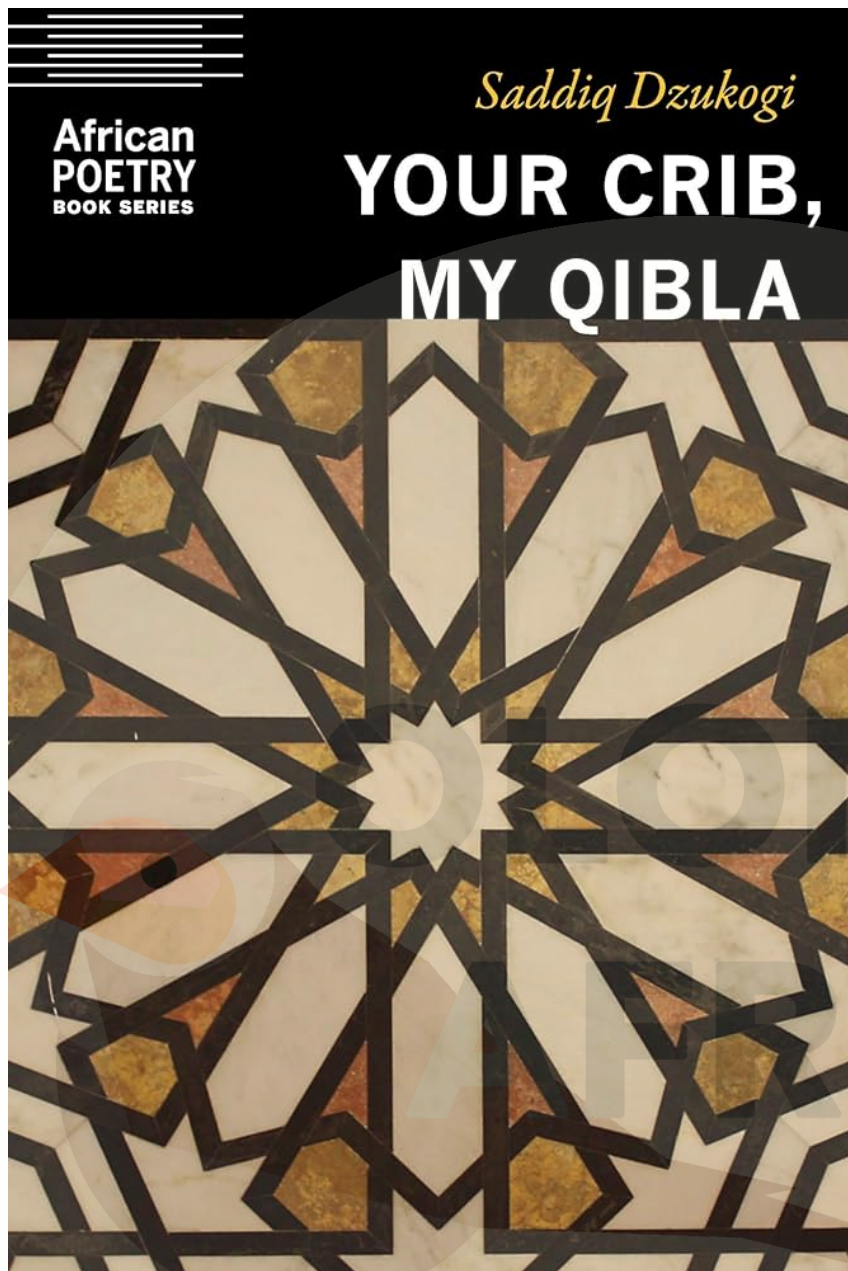
When he arrived at the cemetery
the rusty gate was in his hands, locked.
he jumped over the fence, ran all the way
to get to his daughter,
who waits for him in her grave.

All the graves are unmarked. Someone
said he will find the one where a dry tree
branch slants over with much enigma.
Because fetish people go in to steal

A corpse, the police stopped him from leaving (p.17).

The above passage clearly affirms that he was not around when his daughter was buried. It also reveals his encounter during his first visit to the cemetery and how he was detained inside for jumping over the fence, because it is against the law to jump over the fence into the cemetery, as fetishists go inside to steal a corpse. It took his father-in-law posting the bail to release him. However, the second time he visited was with his wife, who couldn't go inside the cemetery because women are not allowed inside a Muslim cemetery. The narrator relays the experience thus:

The second time he visited,
he did so with her mother, held outside,
only able to touch her child through him.
Like other women, she's not allowed inside.
Her mother waves her pain at him,
her face in her palms (p.17).



One can only imagine the tragedy of a grieving mother visiting the cemetery to see her daughter, but is not allowed inside. Imagine the trauma of watching your husband beside your late daughter's grave from outside the fence because women are not allowed inside the cemetery. While the prohibition of women from entering the cemetery is justified according to the tenets of Islam, to a non-Muslim observer, this practice may come off as unfavourable to women. For example, in Christianity, attendance by women at a burial is seen as an opportunity to honour and mourn their loved ones who have passed away. The crux of this essay is to illustrate that psychosocial factors, such as those x-rayed above, could compound the sense of grief of the deceased's family. For example, not being present at the final hour of your child's death because of distance, not being present at her burial, and getting detained inside the cemetery for jumping the fence could be hard to erase from the mind of a grieving father. As if to corroborate this assertion, the persona in the last art of the poem reflects on the tragedy of the father not being able to comfort his grieving wife beside their daughter's grave. He submits:

He can never get to comfort her

By the grave of their child. To be able to lay

Her hands where her child rests,

She pulls the good from his heart (p.17-18).

The above excerpt accentuates the emotional torture the mother passes through as a result of her inability to touch her daughter's grave and honour her beside her husband, even though she is standing right there at the gate watching her husband pray over their daughter's grave. Normally, both parents should be able to share such a unique moment together, comforting each other as they pray for their deceased's soul by the graveside.

To return to the motif of the permanence of Baha, the deceased's life, in the poem "Shahada," which is the Islamic declaration of faith in God, the persona reimagines an alternative world in which his daughter is alive and he is dead. And she performs the symbolic ritual of helping him proclaim his Shahada before breathing his last on earth. The poem is represented below in full for emphasis:

Today Baha is not dead—Her tears reveal deep love

for him. He prays his daughter's hand turns

the sponge that would wash his corpse—

the rite of passage pressed into her forehead,

a prayer mark from birth—

in this dream state he is dying. She passes

on the shahada into his mouth after her tongue

formed the words, a scrum if flowers

beside her knees, hands lift toward the sky

as if she is trying to open a doorway,

his body slips into the bowl, as he imbibes the water

she spit Quran verses into.

He floasts when she scours qursiyu

against his eyes. Today, Baha is not dead,

she is the shield that repels a surfeit of darkness

from owning his body, an eel out of mud-water (p.42).

The poem represented above is the manifest display of unbridled love of a father willing to reimagine a world in which his beloved daughter is not only alive but plays a cardinal role in his last days on earth by ensuring that he takes his last oath of allegiance to God. There can be no love greater than the wish of a father that his children outlive him. And when this trust is broken, a father is incapable of healing, as exemplified in the poem above.

The second section of the collection "My Qibla" conveys a dialogue between a father and his dead child in which they bare their hearts to one another. While the daughter sows hope in her father, he, on the other hand, is burdened by his failings towards her. In the last three stanzas of the opening poem in the second section, titled "She Begins to Speak," Baha urges her father not to overwhelm himself with grief and encourages him to move on with life. The last stanzas are hereby produced for emphasis:

There is grief inside, as well,
But it's only by looking that you can
Get it out. They won't detonate,
Not if you stare, taking your eyes off them
Is like removing the pins. Do not despair,
My body is stardust across the night sky,
And rays across the day's. Do not let your body
Continue as a village, sacked and burned (59-60).

In his response to his daughter in the poem "Journey Home," he narrates his efforts to get his father to halt her burial till he arrives, but both his father and aunt rejected his plea. He wanted to witness her final moment when she would be interred, but it was not meant to be, and by the time he arrived, she had been buried. "Abba" reveals:

On the road from Kaduna to Minna,
over the phone, I begged my mother
to ask father to wait, not to bury you
in my absence. I cried. I yelled at my aunt
when she asked what difference it would make
whether I was there or not. I just wanted
to see you dead, as if seeing you dead will bring you back.
I poured faith into what is broken
hoping a miracle would justify their action.
In my mind, even though it was going close
to its limits, the car sped in slow motion (p.61).

the above poem is telling of the psychosocial conditions which inspired the poems in the collection,

as well as the unabating sense of grief astutely problematized through the use of symbolism and instructive imageries. A young father was begging his father not to bury his dead child in his absence, but his plea was rejected, and he only came to receive condolence messages from sympathizers. It is as though the author is still struggling to find the right words to convey the depth of his pain. The magnitude of the psychological impact of this act of betrayal on the bereaved father's psychic cannot be quantified. This explains the deep sense of guilt that runs through the collection.

In conclusion, it is important to note Dzukogi's commitment to refined artistry, which he achieves with this collection. The technical consciousness evident in the work is indicative of unprecedented growth on the part of the author, both in terms of language dexterity and aesthetic nuances. For example, the author deployed multiple narrative voices in the collection; there are the third-person, second-person, and first-person approaches in the work. It also employs dialogue, such as in the second section of the collection between Baha and Abba. Beyond the thematization of grief, the collections highlight several salient social issues that require careful examination to unravel. It also critiques certain practices that under the agency of the vulnerable members of society. For example, why was it so impossible to consider his request to be able to see his daughter's corpse before her burial, even while he was already on his way to Minna? The refusal by his father and aunt to grant him this important wish suggests that the voices of young people do not matter in society. Also, the fact that a mother cannot enter a cemetery to pay her last respects to her buried daughter is problematic. Finally, one's socioeconomic conditions can be a barrier to the realization of certain dreams, which explains why he had to be away from his young family to fend for them. Above all, *Your Crib, My Qibla* is a sad reminder of the tragedy of death and its attendant consequences on the survivors who are not better than the deceased.

Paul Liam is a poet, writer, culture critic, and author of two poetry collections, *Indefinite Cravings* (2012) and *Saint Saint Sha'ade and Other Poems* (2014). Regarded as one of Nigeria's notable contemporary literary critics, Liam has written extensively on Nigerian literature and is widely published. He is the co-editor of Ebedi Review and has served as a judge for several literary competitions in Nigeria, including CBAAC's Festival of African Literature, HIASFEST, Splendors of Dawn Poetry Foundation's Poetry and Short Short Story Competition, TY Buratai Young Adult Literature Prize, etc. Liam is a 2014 Fellow of the Ebedi International Writers Residency, Ìsẹyìn, Oyo State, Nigeria. He is also a strategic and development communication consultant based in Abuja.