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**(Re) examining Autobiography as Social History: A Historico-Critical
Reading of Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai's the Accidental Public Servant**

ADEYEMI AMOS ADEGBOYEGA

ADEYEMI AMOS ADEGBOYEGA holds a Master of Arts in Literature from Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University in Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria. He is a Lecturer in the English Program at Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

*In literature, no form of writing aptly captures the life, times and disposition of the author to his subject matter as an autobiography. As a fact-fiction, it centers on the author, draws from his past experiences and dissects the events surrounding him at the time of writing. It thus becomes a social account that can only be adequately understood within its socio-cultural cum political milieu. It is against this backdrop that this study examines *The Accidental Public Servant* in relation to the Nigerian polity. Deploying New Historicism, the study argues that autobiography reveals the inward life of the author which hitherto the publication has been veiled from the public. It posits that El-Rufai's *The Accidental Public Servant* justifies the tenets of autobiography as a social history in relation to his personal and social life with in Nigerian polity. The study concludes that the book is a landmark documentation of history which challenges the mediocrity, complacency and self-aggrandizing attitudes of political actors who had the opportunity to turn around the fortunes of Nigeria but never did.*

Keywords: *Autobiography, Social History, Polity, Accidental, Public Service.*

Introduction

Since it was first introduced and used in literature in 1809, autobiography or autobiographical writings have remained very crucial to recounting events in human life. As a sub-genre of literature, it bears the burden of history, mirrors and reflects the author's experiences from an inward realm and accounts for the prevailing social realities surrounding him in his immediate environment. Greene (1971: 9), one of the earliest biographers posits that

An autobiography is only a sort of life – it may contain less errors of fact than a biography, but it is of necessity even more selective: it begins later and it ends prematurely. If one cannot close a book of memories on the deathbed, any conclusion must be arbitrary.¹

¹ Greene, G. (1971). *A Sort of Life*. London: Bodley Head.

The autobiographer who must have come of age when he writes – later in life – uses his intuition to select past events of his life that are related to the story he wishes to narrate in his account. When the decision to write is made, fresh insights are imaginatively given to past events. It is with this imagination that the autobiographer sees life as complete and wholesome for his story to be told. Similarly, William (1974: 364-5) in ‘Some Principles of Autobiography’ submits that

An autobiography is equally a work of art and life, for no one writes such a book until he has lived out the requisite years. During his life he remains uncertain of cause and effect, rarely sensing the full shape or continuity of experiences. But in writing his story he artfully defines, restricts, or shapes that life into a self-portrait – one far different from his original model, resembling life but actually composed and framed as artful inventions.²

Basically, the subject matter of an autobiography covers past and present events surrounding the author’s life. Its centrality is on the author and his dispositions to issues surrounding him. However uncertain these events may appear to the reading populace, they are largely based on the author’s experiences which have surely been affected by varying internal and external factors and realities. The autobiographer manipulates these factors, realities and other historical events to soothe his narratives. As such, historical evidences and the prowess of creative storytelling are fused together to underscore the role of history to human existence. Weintraub (1975: 822-3) avers in this regards that

The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is concretely experienced reality and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience [...] Autobiography presupposes a writer’s intent upon reflection on his inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important.³

² William, H. L. (1974). Some Principles of Autobiography. *New Literary History*, 5, 363-81.

³ Weintraub, K. J. (1975). Autobiography as Historical Consciousness. *Critical Inquiry* 1(4) 821-48.

The experience of the author up to the time he publishes his autobiographical account is what in its entirety Weintraub calls inward life. The autobiographer (who is usually the protagonist) becomes the social object around whom all other events in the narration revolve. All these make any autobiographical piece a reflection of the contemporary realities in the society – a social history.

The realization that history (reality) plays a great role in shaping, understanding and interpreting literature (fiction) underscores the importance of historical knowledge and as such makes it imperative as it will be done in this research to consider the influence of the social cum political context in which a book is written on its content. This makes the historian a literary artist and vice versa. Cited in Irele (1993: 98), Conrad in *Henry James: An Appreciation* submits in this regards that '[f]iction is history, human history, or it is nothing [...] A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, and the expounder, of human experience'.⁴

Consequently, because autobiography exists in a given socio-cultural milieu and locates the author within the same, it becomes a social account, purposively aimed at giving insights for a better understanding of the prevailing social realities within such socio-cultural ambience. It becomes a social history narrated as much as possible in contemporary literary traditions. The literariness there in is in its adoption of literary conventions such as; narrative techniques, aestheticism and rhetorical tropes among others. Ultimately, the autobiographer performs the function of a literary artist and for the time being becomes a creative writer (in the historical sense of creative writing) who re-enacts history and creatively selects the events surrounding his life which are seemingly relevant and appropriate to the story he chooses to narrate. Putting all these together makes an autobiographical account in all ramifications artistic.

The accurate interpretation of such works – which could be in different forms such as diaries, memoirs, personal letters, and journals – must be circumstantially done within the same social, cultural and historical context in which it is written. The knowledge of past and prevailing events around the polity will go a long way in placing the text within the social edifice. Additionally, a concrete recognition of the author's intention is germane to adequately assess the

⁴ Irele, A. (1993). Narrative, History and African Imagination. *Narrative*1(2), 156 – 172. Retrieved on November 17, 2020, from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107005>

autobiographical account. This in the words of Mandel (1968: 220) is because the purpose ‘will be the motivation [...] which drives the autobiographer to his desk and which accounts for the self-view that emerges in the work [and also] help to establish the criteria for form, scale, order and the like’.⁵ Eventually, the identification and understanding of the author’s intention will go a long way and aid in the appropriate reading and interpretation the text, having in view its target audience. My concern here is not on the accuracy, falsity or otherwise of the message contained in the selected autobiographical account but on the interpretation of the experiences presented by the author in his piece.

The contention in an autobiographical account is usually the distinction between fact and fiction. The thin and an almost unidentifiable line of distinction between fact and fiction as represented in any work of art – especially since literature draws basically from human experience – makes the portrayal of real life and factual events which is the goal of autobiography difficult, if not almost impossible. Oriaku (1998: 2) says that ‘it is often difficult to say where the writers have consciously distorted the facts to such an extent that we can question the purity of these works’.⁶ Either way, an autobiographical account – a fictional representation of fact – presents information that is important to the formation of that character and the personality of the author. It can thus be classify as a bildungsroman, a novel genre. Philippe (1999: 245) submits in this regards that ‘bildungsroman share with autobiographies the desire to inform and give a message to their readers’.⁷ This presentation in the words of Oriaku (1998: 6)

[...] may start from his childhood memories of self and advance up to his old age or he may limit himself to a specific stage or landmark experience in his life.

In either case, his selection of a particular range of life as well as relevant

⁵ Mandel, B. (1968). The Autobiographer’s Art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 27(2), 215 – 226. doi:10.2307/428849

⁶ Oriaku, R. (1998). *Autobiography as Literature*. Ibadan: Humanities Research Center.

⁷ Philippe, L. (1999). Emotion and Motion in Catherine Caswell’s *Open the Door!* Towards a Female Bildungsroman. In Sophie, M. (Ed) *Féminin/ Masculin: Littératures et Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes. 233 – 247.

incidents and experiences will be determined by his need to present a unified view of his life or the phase (or span) of it being highlighted.⁸

It is pertinent to note here that most autobiographical accounts follow this rather sacrosanct format targeted at a revelation of the personality of the autobiographer by concentrating on the different aspects of his life as presented. This same fashion of presentation is what Nasir Ahmad EL-Rufai's employs in his autobiographical account, *The Accidental Public Servant*. EL-Rufai uses the account in *The Accidental Public Servant* for the purposes of 'self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation and self-justification'.⁹ All of these in the words of Oriaku are the 'native milieu of autobiography' (11)¹⁰.

It thus become clear from the above that EL-Rufai in *The Accidental Public Servant* attempts to provide justifications for his actions as a political appointee, to exonerate himself from the image smearing and character assassination that trailed him after he left office and also provide justifications for the downward turn of events in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, where he served as a minister in particular and in Nigeria generally.

Theoretical Insight

The theory adopted for this study is New Historicism. New Historicism is one of the context oriented approaches to the study of literature. Literary theorists in this school of thought do not regard texts as an island or study them in isolation. Texts here are placed and studied within a larger context of historical, religious, social or political backgrounds. The New Historical Criticism theory or New Historicism was developed because there was a need for an approach that looks at a literary text differently from the ones that existed before. Drawing from post-structuralism and deconstruction, new historicism adds historical dimensions to the study and discussion of texts. Klarer (1999: 93) avers in this regards that 'history, therefore, is not regarded as isolated from the literary text in the sense of a historical background but rather as a textual phenomenon'.¹¹ In the

⁸ Oriaku, R. (1998). *Autobiography as Literature*. Ibadan: Humanities Research Center.

⁹ El-Rufai, N. A. (2013). *The Accidental Public Servant*. Ibadan: Safari Books.

¹⁰ Oriaku, R. (1998). *Autobiography as Literature*. Ibadan: Humanities Research Center.

¹¹ Klarer, M. (1999). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.

same vein, Abrams is of the view that new historicism interfaces between history and literature. According to him, the historical mode which is the mainstay of new historicism is

[...] grounded on the concepts that history itself is not a set of fixed, objective facts but, like the literature with which it interacts, a text which needs to be interpreted; that a text, whether literary or historical, is a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consists of what are called representations - that is, verbal formations which are “ideological products” or “cultural constructs” of a particular era; and that these cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm and propagate the power-structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society. (249)¹²

Pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt in his book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980)¹³ new historicism in some other discourses referred to as new historicism and cultural materialism usually seeks to understand texts whether literary or non-literary historically and places emphasis on the historical and social contexts of texts. In the words of Vince, ‘New Historicism and Cultural Materialism seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies, all of which in varying ways privilege the literary text and place only secondary emphasis on historical and social context’ (6)¹⁴.

New Historical Criticism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. Popularly called the New Historicists, practitioners in this school of thought concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the notion of power, the complex means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth

¹² Abrams, M.H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

¹³ Greenblatt, S. (1980). *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ Vince, B. *Literary Theory*. (2002). Retrieved from Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/literary/>.

and authority reflected in a given work. This theory does not look at texts independently but consider some other factors that might have influenced the writer. Delahoyde buttresses this point by giving a further description of New Historical Criticism. He indicates that: ‘history here is not a mere record of facts and events, but a complex description of human reality and evolution of preconceived notions. Literary works may or may not tell us about various factual aspects of the world from which they emerge, but they will tell us about prevailing ways of thinking at the time: ideas of social organization, prejudices, taboos, etc’ (2).¹⁵ Doing a new historicist analysis therefore entails understanding a text from its historical and political dimensions. The critic examines the cultural context which covers; issues, struggles anxieties, politics and power structures of the era in which the text was created. It is from this background that I hope to adopt New Historicism in my engagement of EL-Rufai’s in *The Accidental Public Servant*.

Synopsis of the Book

*The Accidental Public Servant*¹⁶ is an account that reflects the life, times and experiences of its author, Nasir Ahmad EL-Rufai while he served in two different public capacities: first as the Chairman of the Bureau of Public Enterprises, BPE and later as the Honorable Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, FCT. The seventeen chaptered book has a prologue, an epilogue, an afterword, endnotes, appendixes and photo sections. The book centers on the transition of the author from his private enterprises to the public service in Nigeria.

The author begins the story from his familial background through to his educational background and his early debut into the private sector, a construction company. It was during these years, which he chooses to call the formative years, that he acquired his characters and personality traits that will sustain him when later he switches from the private sector to public service in which he as remained up till the present serving in different capacities. He recounted his sudden or rather ‘accidental’ venture into the public service when he was appointed as a member of the General Abdulsalami Abubakar’s transition committee in 1999. When he was subsequently appointed as the chairman of the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE) by the President Olusegun Obasanjo’s led

¹⁵ Delahoyde, M. (n.d.) *Introduction to Literature*. Retrieved from: <http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/new.hist.html>

¹⁶ El-Rufai, N. A. (2013). *The Accidental Public Servant*. Ibadan: Safari Books. 712 pages. \$64.88.

administration, his refusal to do things the “Nigerian way” got him into trouble. After the expiration of his tenure at the BPE, he was nominated and appointed as the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T). During his years as a minister, his challenges multiplied. Although he worked assiduously with his team at the Federal Capital Territory’s administration, his refusal to compromise his stand on the platform of friendship and acquaintances in doing government businesses and his belief that such businesses must be in the interest of the public gave him tougher times and more challenging troubles. Prominent among this was his stand against the third term agenda of President Olusegun Obasanjo. All of these happened during the political administration that spanned between 1999 and 2007.

The failure of the third term agenda, having served two consecutive terms, brought the political administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo to an end in 2007. The events that ensued for the author after his exit from political office in 2007 were rather devastating. He became an enemy to the new political administration under President Umaru Musa Ya’radua. The witch-hunt after him forced him into exile where he remained to escape arrest, secret trial and ultimately death. While in exile for twenty-three months, between 2008 and 2010, he fought the government back with everything he had until the radar was clear enough for him to return back to the country. He returned home, reunites with his family, friends and associates and continued the business of criticizing the government to make her alive to her responsibilities to the citizenry. In the end of the book, the author who currently, at the time of this research is the executive governor of Kaduna state, north-west Nigeria, expresses optimism that with the great natural and human resources in Nigeria, if the problem of bad leadership can be done away with once and for all, Nigeria will be a great nation.

A Historico-Critical Reading of *the Accidental Public Servant*

On the early pages of the book, EL-Rufai acquaints the reader with his familial background and his early school life in Katsina state, northwest Nigeria. A son of a peasant farmer, EL-Rufai’s love for and devotion to western education spurred him to achieve greatness. Perceivably, he embarks on this to recounts his personal experiences of having to rise from grass to grace through sheer hard-work, dedication and commitment, virtues that were relegated to the backline during

the military despotic rule in Nigeria. These virtues against what obtained in postcolonial military Nigeria became for him, a life sustaining virtues. *The Accidental Public Servant* is a story about a young Nigerian boy, growing up and having acquired a good educational qualification, ventures into a private practice of quantity surveying and building consultancy.

This period coincided with the transition of Nigeria from military despotism to democratic rule in 1999. As events gather momentum for the transition to democratic dispensation, the desire of General Abdulsalmi Abubakar led administration in 1998 to prepare a fertile ground for the democratic elections and subsequent hand-over to be held later in 1999 prompted the search for committed, dedicated and hardworking Nigerians to serve in the transition committee. This search for individuals that will guarantee a successful transition to the incoming political administration brought the author, Nasir Ahmad I-Rufai to the limelight of the public service and politics in Nigeria. He will later be appointed as the chairman of the Bureau of Public Enterprises BPE and the honorable minister of the Federal Capital Territory FCT both under the first and second civilian administrations of President Olusegun Obasanajo. Thus, the period of the author's life covered in the book range from his teenage years to 2010 when he returned from the United Kingdom after twenty-three months, between 2008 and 2010, which coincided with the period Nigeria lost her president, Alhaji Umaru Musa Ya'radua.

In a characteristic autobiographical style, which in the words of Oriaku (1998) centers on the author's 'selection of a particular range of life as well as relevant incidents and experiences [which] will be determined by his need to present a unified view of his life or the phase (or span) of it being highlighted' (6)¹⁷, El-Rufai provides a justification for his actions, reactions and inactions on the range of his life covered in the book. In his words, 'I am writing this book to put on record my version of events, in my own voice and in my own hand' (xxxix).¹⁸ It 'lays the foundation for why I think the way I think and why I took the actions that I took when I was in public service'. (xxxiii).¹⁹ A review of events in Nigeria after May 2007 when the author left office as the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, having stood strongly against Chief Olusegun

¹⁷ Oriaku, R. (1998). *Autobiography as Literature*. Ibadan: Humanities Research Center.

¹⁸ El-Rufai, N. A. (2013). *The Accidental Public Servant*. Ibadan: Safari Books.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. xxxiii

Obasanjo's third term presidential ambition sometimes in 2006 even as an insider, a cabinet member of the administration at that time will reveal that what warranted his account in the book were the witch hunt, negative attacks and image smearing campaigns that ensued against him and the political will to question and query his political stewardship especially between 2003 and 2007 as a minister. He is no doubt conscious of the happenings around him and he is driven by the passion to clear the multiple disgruntled opinions in his direction. He tags the book 'a story of my years in government and after'²⁰, and this places him at the center of the unfolding actions and events.

A critical look at the life and personality of Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai will clearly reveal a number of significant personal, social and largely political factors, forces and experiences captured in his 2013 biographical account, *The Accidental Public Servant*. The lack of political diplomacy, bureaucracy, due process and accountability in conducting the affairs of government which were the *modus operandi* of Nigeria's democracy and were more powerful as against the ideal tenets of democracy took the center stage when the author ventured into the public space and politics in Nigeria. His venture in to politics, devoid of the traditional Nigerian bureaucratic bottlenecks, especially god-fatherism and partisanship syndrome is what the author termed to be his accidental venture into the public service in Nigeria. This particular incident remained viable in his memory several years later.

Similarly, the author acknowledges the complexities of the public space in Nigeria, the paradoxical nature of public administration, the uneven and imbalance implementation of policies as well as issues that have bedeviled Nigeria ever since the colorful mosaic of her postcolonial history. In his words,

Nigeria's governance outcome really depends on a series of accidents rather than any meritocratic or rigorous process. [...] I believe that we have failed to develop any process of identifying, training and rewarding leadership, of putting people who are potential leaders through a crucible to determine their preparedness and worth. Instead, people just emerge out of nowhere. (57)²¹

²⁰ Ibid, p. xxxiii

²¹ Ibid, p. 57.

This has eventually resulted to corruption and the unquantifiable level of highhandedness, bred by the political elite and has become characteristic to the Nigerian polity. The experiences of Nasir at the BPE where he started his public service career reaffirm this. In his words,

Upon entering the BPE, I, like many other Nigerians, attributed our country's famous lacklustre progress to corruption. What I soon discovered was that corruption is really only a symptom of Nigeria's problem. The true culprit behind our country's lacklustre progress is actually much deeper and even more difficult to identify, but for the time being I refer to it as disastrous political leadership and bad decision making leading to a culture of impunity. (71)²²

It is from this perspective that the author develops several important themes, most of which are peculiar to governance and public administration in Nigeria. Some of these include; the irony of the Nigerian society where opportunities for betterment and advancement are squandered each passing day, the high profile corruption in the public service, lack of due process in the public service, nepotism and favoritism in conducting the affairs of government, self-aggrandizement and power mongering of politicians, politics of hate and sentiments, ethnicity and tribalism against the common national good of Nigeria and Nigerians, as well as the urgent need to revamp the public service and the *modus operandi* of conducting the affairs of government in Nigeria. The most evident theme, which runs through the pages of the book, is perhaps the search for self or selfhood, a selfhood characterized by integrity, dignity and doggedness that cannot be easily impugned by prevailing and surrounding circumstances. This personifies the author.

While Nasir acknowledges the prevailing realities in Nigeria, he is still optimistic. His optimism is that soonest; a new dawn will break in Nigeria. In his words,

Our challenges are many, but our opportunities outstrip them. We will however have no chance of overcoming these obstacles without commitment and sacrifice from a critical mass of our people. Our country has amazing potential,

²² Ibid, p. 71

and to watch these opportunities squandered by each passing day I considered to be nothing less than tragic. (488)²³

To correct this anomaly, Nigerians against the current resignation to the fate of bad leadership must show interest in the affairs of government, hold the government accountable and do so in utmost national interests.

The more we choose not to care, the more we choose to opt out of politics, stay on the sidelines or move abroad, the more we choose to resign ourselves to cynicism, the more our resignation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and our daily reality. The more we fail our children and their children. The more we decree a life of suffering and limitation for each child that wakes up in this land. (488)²⁴

This is what he sets out to achieve with his encompassing account in *The Accidental Public Servant*. El-Rufai's final submission is in hope. 'I hope this book has accomplished what I set out to do, which is to make the case that public service should be something every serious Nigerian should consider if truly we are determined to put our country back on the right track'. (488)²⁵

The entirety of the narrative presented in *The Accidental Public Servant* which can thus be regarded as an account of the author's stewardship in the public space between 1999 and 2013 when the book was published adds to and ultimately seeks to redirect the myriad of controversial opinions that have been expressed on the personality of the author while he served at the BPE and the FCT. It passes for a social history, relevant to understanding the *modus operandi* of the socio-political milieu in a bid to achieve a radical change in the ways of conducting the affairs of the public and running the government in Nigeria.

Consequently, that the author, Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai is still very active on the Nigerian political scene, now serving for the second term of four years as the democratically elected governor of Kaduna state, northwest Nigeria, having won the first gubernatorial elections on the platform of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) in 2015 fulfils Dele Olojede's prophesy in

²³ Ibid, p. 488

²⁴ Ibid, p. 488

²⁵ Ibid, p. 488

the afterword that ‘Nasir I-Rufai is to a degree chastened by his experience, but one gets the sense that this is a leader willing to bleed for the good society we all seek. I will hazard a guess that, before too long, he will be back in the fray’ (492).²⁶ It also justifies his assertion that when the book was published that ‘[M]y years in government – about nine in all, and the aftermath – are too short to present more than a snapshot of the challenges of being in public service and politics in a developing country like Nigeria. (xxxii-iii).²⁷

Conclusion

Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai’s account in *The Accidental Public Servant* spans from the last military dispensation in Nigeria, to the transition to democratic dispensation in 1999 and thereafter. It is an account of the author’s trainings and professional practices both in the private and public sectors in Nigeria. With Nasir at the center of the unfolding events, the book is a quietly compelling socio-historical document that testifies to the great social misdeeds and atrocities that have been committed against the Nigerian state and the need for a radical change. Nasir El-Rufai has succeeded in creating a strong sense of the earlier and crucial times he has carried in his memory about Nigeria and Nigerians. He recognizes the complexities of the Nigerian society and develops several important themes that cannot be easily ignored in a bid to understand the rationale behind some previous actions, reactions and inactions of past frontline political actors in Nigeria, himself inclusive.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 492.

²⁷ Ibid, p. xxxii-iii

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