

The Godfather's Shadow: Political Patronage and the Crisis of Leadership in Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Sieged*

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Abstract

Nigeria's democratic evolution has been persistently undermined by entrenched systems of political patronage that privilege personal allegiance over competence and accountability. This paper interrogates the phenomenon of political godfatherism as a systemic driver of leadership failure within a postcolonial context, using Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Sieged* (2012) as its primary text. Set in the fictional African state of Bivan's House a transparently allegorical representation of Nigeria, the novel provides a critical space for examining how entrenched patronage networks erode meritocracy, institutionalise corruption, weaken public institutions, and reproduce cycles of governance failure. The study is grounded in Postcolonial Theory, with particular reference to the works of Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, and is supported by close textual analysis. The paper argues that Usman exposes how political actors, bound by godfather networks, become instruments of private interests rather than public service. Focusing on the relational dynamics between the godfather figure, Kamalun, and his protégé-turned-governor, Merima, the analysis demonstrates that political patronage in *Sieged* operates not merely as a background condition but as a determining structural force that shapes leadership outcomes, constrains individual agency, erodes democratic accountability, and legitimises systemic dysfunction. The paper concludes that the crisis of leadership in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood or addressed without a sustained interrogation of patronage politics as both a cultural practice and an institutional structure embedded within the postcolonial state.

Keywords: Godfatherism; Leadership Crisis; Political Patronage; Adamu Kyuka Usman; Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

Political godfatherism is a patron-client arrangement through which a powerful individual deploys wealth, influence, and

network capital to install a protégé in public office in exchange for unwavering loyalty and a guaranteed share of state resources. It has emerged as one of the most structurally

destabilising forces in postcolonial Nigerian governance. Scholars across political science and African studies have consistently documented how such patronage systems undermine democratic institutions, weaken accountability mechanisms, and sustain a crisis of leadership that has defined much of Nigeria's postcolonial political history (Richard Joseph 343-44; Claude Ake 7-9 and Shola Omotola 135). Joseph's foundational theorisation of African politics as "prebendal". A situation in which public offices are treated as prebends to be appropriated by officeholders and their networks. This concept provides an indispensable conceptual lens for understanding the systemic character of this phenomenon (344). Ake further argues that leadership failure in Africa is rooted not in individual moral failings but in the personalisation of power and the structural absence of accountability (9). This position shifts analytical attention from character to system.

Within Nigerian literary culture, the crisis of leadership has attracted sustained creative interrogation. Chinua Achebe's oft-cited diagnosis that the trouble with Nigeria is "simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1) has functioned as both a critical touchstone and a generative

provocation for subsequent writers. Works such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ochei Anejoh's *Power Drunk*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* map the moral decay and systemic corruption that characterise post-independence African states, foregrounding the complicity of political elites and the suffering of ordinary citizens (Armah 56; Ngũgĩ 78 and Anejoh 35). Within the Nigerian context specifically, Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* offers a satirical anatomy of authoritarian excess, while Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* renders the lived texture of state repression and popular resilience under military rule (Soyinka 23; Habila 41).

Existing scholarship on these canonical texts has illuminated the literary strategies through which postcolonial African fiction functions as what Biodun Jeyifo calls a site of "moral commentary," challenging oppressive structures and advocating for alternative social arrangements (29). However, as Larry Diamond observes, the subversion of merit by loyalty within patron-client networks constitutes a structural, not merely a moral, problem. It has become a structure that, by design, produces ineffective governance and widespread political disillusionment (45).

Comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to Adamu Kyuka Usman's novel *Sieged* (2012), despite its sustained and formally sophisticated engagement with precisely these concerns. Set in the allegorical state of Bivan's House, a transparent fictional surrogate for postcolonial Nigeria. The novel traces the intertwined careers of Kamalun, an archetypally ruthless political godfather, and Merima, the pliable protégé he installs as head of state. In doing so, *Sieged* extends and deepens the literary tradition of political critique in Nigerian fiction while offering what this study argues is a theoretically coherent anatomy of godfatherism as a structural determinant of leadership failure. The near-absence of sustained literary analysis of Kyuka's work and the underdevelopment of literary approaches to godfatherism as a structural, rather than merely thematic, is the gap this study seeks to fill. It also constitutes the research space the present study occupies.

The analysis is situated at the intersection of two complementary postcolonial theoretical frameworks. Frantz Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Achille Mbembe's theorisation of the postcolony as a space defined by "commandment". Fanon

argues that the postcolonial middle class, lacking the technical and intellectual capacity to transform inherited economic structures, degenerates into a predatory class that replicates colonial extraction under new management (152). This argument resonates powerfully with Usman's fictional portrait of a political class that enriches itself through the very institutional machinery it was ostensibly installed to reform. Achille Mbembe's emphasis on the arbitrary, often grotesque exercise of power over subjects rather than citizens further illuminates the novel's satirical representation of governance as performance and domination rather than service (102-141)). Together, these frameworks enable a reading of *Sieged* not merely as social realism but as postcolonial critique, one that situates the pathologies of godfatherism within the longer historical arc of colonial and neocolonial power.

Against this theoretical and contextual background, this paper argues that in *Sieged*, Usman systematically illustrates how political godfatherism structurally promotes leadership failure by prioritising loyalty over competence in selecting leaders. This practice legitimises corruption as a normalised mode of governance, weaponising electoral processes and the structural vulnerability of poverty, to produce

a leadership class accountable to patrons rather than to the populace. Furthermore, the novel does not confine itself to critique: it also constructs a counter-discourse that repositions the citizenry as the true sovereign in democratic governance, thereby implicitly theorising the conditions for legitimate political authority. The paper proceeds through four analytical movements: the subversion of meritocratic leadership selection; electoral manipulation and the weaponisation of poverty; the reproduction of patronage through the incumbent godfather; and the novel's counter-discourse of popular sovereignty.

Methodology

This study adopts a literary methodology grounded in close reading, postcolonial interpretation, ideological critique, and textual analysis. The primary text, Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Sieged*, is subjected to a detailed close reading to uncover how it constructs and represents themes of political patronage, leadership crisis, and class relations within a postcolonial context. The analysis is guided by postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of Frantz Fanon's national bourgeoisie and Achille Mbembe's

post-colonial and commandment, which provide the interpretive framework for examining power and governance in the text. Through ideological critique, the study interrogates how the narrative reflects, reproduces, and challenges dominant systems of power embedded in postcolonial political structures. Close textual analysis is employed to examine selected passages that illustrate the workings of authority, patronage, and socio-political inequality. These extracts are purposively selected based on their relevance to the study's thematic focus.

In addition, the study engages with secondary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays on postcolonial theory and African literature, to situate the reading of *Sieged* within existing academic discourse. Through this combined approach, the research seeks to reveal the ideological structures embedded in the text and to demonstrate how it critiques postcolonial governance and social relations.

Godfatherism and the Subversion of Meritocratic Leadership

A foundational principle of democratic governance is that leadership positions ought to be filled based on merit, competence, and a demonstrable commitment to the public welfare.

Godfatherism, as portrayed in *Sieged*, systematically inverts this principle. The selection of Merima as a political candidate is determined not by his administrative acumen, ideological vision, or popular support, but by his perceived pliability. He is, in Usman's formulation, a young man with more ambition than principle, precisely the kind of figure a godfather can mould and control. This inversion of merit-based selection is not incidental but constitutive of the patronage system. It fulfils what Fanon identified as the logic of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie, which, lacking a genuine developmental programme, fills the vacuum of governance with a politics of personal accumulation disguised as leadership.

James MacGregor Burns' foundational theory of transformational leadership is instructive here as a counterpoint. Burns argues that genuine leadership entails "leaders acting as well as caring, inspiring and persuading others to act for a shared goal that is, for the values, the wants and needs, the inspirations and expectations of themselves and the people they represent" (23). The leadership produced by godfatherism, as Usman dramatises it, is the antithesis of this model. Merima's primary competence, on his

election, is not statecraft but the management of the debt he owes his patron. The novel thus makes a structural argument: bad leadership in postcolonial Nigeria is not a failure of individual character but the preordained output of a system designed to select for subservience rather than capacity.

Usman's portrait of Kamalun is central to this argument. The godfather is depicted as a figure whose very unsuitability for public office, his violence, treachery, and unrefined demeanour, disqualifies him from electoral competition while simultaneously equipping him for the backstage manipulation of it. As the narrator observes, "Like most high-profile politicians of Bivan's house, Kamalun was a political thug who fought his way up the political ladder by violence, subterfuge and treachery" (Usman 27). His inability to contest elections himself does not diminish his power; it concentrates it. He sponsors candidates of "some respectability" as proxies, securing through them what he cannot secure for himself. This structural displacement of power from the visible office to the invisible patron is precisely what renders democratic accountability impossible. The person who holds power is not the person who exercises it.

This dynamic is further illuminated by Mbembe's analysis of postcolonial power as fundamentally theatrical and displacing: the state performs sovereignty while real authority circulates informally, through networks of obligation, coercion, and patronage. Kamalun exemplifies this structure. His power is real but unaccountable; his authority is exercised without the exposure to democratic scrutiny that formal office would require. In this sense, godfatherism is not a corruption of democratic institutions but, as Usman implies, a parallel structure that colonises those institutions from within, redirecting their outputs toward private ends.

The novel's explicit contrast between Merima and Jamimi, the patriotic, ideologically articulate candidate of the People's Liberation Movement (PLM) sharpens Usman's critique. Where Jamimi possesses the intellectual and moral resources that genuine leadership demands, he lacks the godfather network that the political system requires for access to power. The implication is stark: the patronage system does not merely favour mediocrity; it actively excludes excellence. As Usman writes, "Africa fails because her realm of leadership is peopled by wrong persons like Boyama and his protégé Merima" (30). The novel thus

articulates what might be called a structural theory of incompetence: the production of bad leaders is not accidental but systemic, an outcome guaranteed by the logic of patronage selection.

Electoral Manipulation and the Weaponisation of Poverty

If the selection of candidates is the first site at which godfatherism subverts democratic governance, the electoral process is the second. In *Sieged*, elections are not mechanisms of popular consent but staged performances in which the outcome is predetermined by the resources and coercive capacity of the godfather network. The novel's account of electoral manipulation is systematic: vote-buying, the deployment of political thugs, and the intimidation of voters are all presented as routine instruments of the patronage system rather than exceptional violations of democratic norms.

Central to this analysis is Usman's attention to poverty as a structural condition that makes electoral manipulation possible. The political economy of Nigerian godfatherism depends on a citizenry rendered so materially desperate by years of predatory governance that the immediate provision of soap, salt, or cash constitutes a compelling reason to surrender a vote. As the novel's

narrator observes, “the people for a long time were going to have little influence in determining who their leaders would be, having by their petty individual demands sidelined themselves” (Usman 28–29). The apparent “choice” of citizens to sell their votes is, in this reading, not a free choice but a response to manufactured deprivation. Poverty, in this analysis, is not merely a consequence of bad governance; it is an instrument of it. The godfather system both produces and exploits structural poverty to perpetuate itself.

This insight connects to a Fanonian reading of the postcolonial state as a system designed to reproduce the conditions of its own dominance. The postcolonial ruling class, Fanon argues, does not develop the nation; it extracts from it, leaving behind the poverty that makes its own population manageable. Usman dramatises this cycle with particular clarity in his account of the attack-dogs—the electoral thugs who enforce the godfather’s will on election day. These figures are themselves products of the poverty that the system generates: “even the attack-dogs who become willing tools in electoral frauds are also people who have been so impoverished by their political leaders” (Usman, author’s framing). The

system is thus self-sustaining: it produces the agents of its own reproduction.

The role of the military in electoral conduct adds a further dimension to Usman’s critique. The character of Makwu, described as “the lone moral voice” of the ruling party UAC, articulates the normative contradiction at the heart of militarised elections when he argues that “an election day, a day of franchise, is a day of freedom of the people” (Usman 43). His dissenting voice is promptly overridden by Boyama’s cynical *realpolitik*: “Democracy is not a drink you take in one gulp, no matter how much you like its taste. Like whisky, you must take it in little sips, else you will not be able to handle the madness that will follow” (Usman 43–44). Boyama’s metaphor reveals the paternalistic logic that underwrites the postcolonial authoritarian’s self-justification: democracy is too dangerous for the people to exercise freely, and therefore must be administered in controlled doses by those who know better. This rhetoric of managed democracy, Usman implies, is the ideological cover for the suppression of genuine popular sovereignty.

Merima’s own clear-eyed assessment of the political landscape confirms the structural nature of this arrangement: “From what he had seen of Bivan’s house politics in

recent times, Merima believed for a long time to come it was going to be a game in which victory would always lie with the contestant backed by the most formidable godfather” (Usman 28). This is not cynicism but realism—a rational reading of a system whose logic is transparent to its participants. The tragedy, Usman suggests, is not that political actors fail to understand the system but that they are compelled to reproduce it to survive within it.

The Incumbent Godfather: Boyama and the Reproduction of Patronage

A distinctive and underexamined dimension of Nigerian godfatherism is the role of the incumbent leader as godfather. The outgoing office-holder who engineers the succession to protect his interests beyond the end of his tenure. *Sieged* gives sustained attention to this figure in the person of Boyama, the outgoing prime head of Bivan’s House, whose investment in Merima’s candidacy is driven not by confidence in Merima’s capacity but by the need to install a successor who will shield him from accountability. The logic is explicit: “When you misuse power, you are forced to want to hang on to cover your tracks and perhaps continue to misuse power. You pick a successor, someone you so much despised, to

sit over your mess and cover your tracks for you” (Kyuka 132).

This dynamic reveals a secondary function of godfatherism that goes beyond the installation of compliant leadership: it operates as a mechanism for the intergenerational immunisation of the political class against accountability. The patronage system does not merely produce bad leaders; it insulates former leaders from the consequences of their bad governance. Succession, in this model, is not a democratic transfer of power but a contractual arrangement between patrons, premised on mutual protection and continued extraction. Usman’s representation of Boyama’s ambivalence about Merima is particularly revealing. Both Boyama and the UAC party chairman are troubled not by Merima’s incompetence but by his integrity: his moral uprightness, they fear, signals a potential refusal to do their bidding once in office. As Boyama laments: “You put someone you think is a skunk, and so will live with the stench of your fart and will not turn up his nose. But a skunk is known to be a traitor. Once he seizes the reins of power, he would tell you he is not your robot and it would hurt you so badly” (Kyuka 132). The anxiety here is not that the godson might prove incompetent but that he might prove too

competent, too independent, too principled to remain an instrument of his patron's will. In the patronage calculus, moral integrity is a liability.

This passage invites a reading through Mbembe's position on the "postcolony" as a domain governed not by law but by the personal will of the "big man," in which institutional office is permanently subordinated to informal networks of obligation and command. The fear of an independent successor is, in this framework, a fear of institutionalization. It is a fear that the state might begin to function according to its formal rules rather than its informal ones. Godfatherism is, in this sense, structurally hostile to institutional development: it requires the perpetual subordination of the state to private networks.

Counter-Discourse: The People as the Legitimate Godfathers

Usman's novel is not merely diagnostic; it articulates a normative counter-argument that constitutes its most original and theoretically significant contribution. Against the perversion of godfatherism as practised by Kamalun and Boyama, the novel advances an alternative conception of political obligation in which the citizenry, the people, are posited as the only legitimate godfathers of elected leadership. This counter-discourse, embedded most explicitly in the novel's later passages, inverts the logic of patronage by relocating sovereignty where it constitutionally and morally belongs: with the electorate. The novel's most direct articulation of this argument comes in the form of an admonitory voice addressing leaders who have betrayed the public trust:

You have betrayed the people's trust and used the power they gave you to serve yourself. You are an ingrate. The people are bitter, resentful and haunted, afraid of what is about to happen to you. Out of power, you elected another person to succeed you. This is another act of ingratitude, betrayal and contempt for the people. You were not elected to elect others but to serve the people. Why did you do this? Whoever you elected out of your betrayal, ingratitude and contempt for the people can only be treacherous, ungrateful and contemptuous of you. Snake offspring can only be snakes. The one you elected will become ungrateful to you and will not do your bidding. (133)

This passage is rhetorically remarkable in its reversal of the godfather's own logic. The warning to the godfather, that the godson will ultimately betray him, is deployed not as a moral condemnation of the godson but as a structural critique of the patron-client relationship itself. The system, Usman implies, is self-defeating: the same dynamic of self-interested loyalty that makes the godson useful to the godfather also makes him unreliable. There is no honour among political patrons because the system is founded not on principle but on interest.

More significantly, the passage repositions the act of popular election as a sacred trust rather than a contractual transaction. The leader who selects his own successor arrogates to himself a power that belongs to the people, committing what the novel frames as a compound act of ingratitude, betrayal, and contempt. The solution the novel proposes is unambiguous: "if you allow the people to elect the one that will succeed you, you are grateful to the people and the people will be grateful and respectful to you" (Usman 133). Popular sovereignty is presented not merely as a procedural norm but as an ethical obligation.

The character of Jamimi functions as the novel's embodiment of this alternative

political vision. Where Merima's political identity is entirely derivative constituted by his relationships of obligation to his patrons, Jamimi's identity is constituted by his relationship to the people he seeks to serve. He is, in Usman's framing, the kind of leader that the system of godfatherism is structurally designed to exclude: competent, principled, and genuinely popular. His marginalisation within the novel is not presented as a personal tragedy but as an indictment of the system—evidence that, as currently constituted, the postcolonial political order cannot accommodate or reproduce genuine leadership.

Makwu's dissenting voice within the ruling party performs a similar function at a more localised level. His argument that elections ought to be "a day of freedom of the people" (Usman 43) is immediately overridden by the logic of the patronage system, but its presence in the novel is significant. Usman ensures that the normative alternative is always audible, even when it is structurally inaudible within the political system. The novel thus maintains a distinction between what the postcolonial state does and what democratic governance ought to do a distinction that is, finally, the source of its critical force.

Conclusion

Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Sieged* constitutes a rigorous literary anatomy of political godfatherism as a structural rather than incidental feature of postcolonial governance. Through the intertwined careers of Kamalun and Merima, the novel demonstrates with sustained analytical precision that the crisis of leadership in the fictional Bivan's House—and, by transparent extension, in Nigeria—is not the product of individual moral failure but the logical output of a patron-client political economy that systematically selects for subservience, legitimises corruption, forecloses meritocracy, and insulates the governing class from democratic accountability.

Read through the postcolonial frameworks of Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, the novel's satirical portrait of godfatherism emerges as a significant contribution to postcolonial literary and theoretical debates on the contradictions of state power in Africa. Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie and Mbembe's theorisation of the post colony and commandment illuminate how the novel exposes the persistence of colonial logics within contemporary political structures. Usman's intervention, however, extends

beyond diagnosis. By articulating a counter-discourse that repositions the citizenry as the only legitimate source of political obligation, *Sieged* advances a normative argument about the conditions under which genuine democratic governance might become possible. The people, the novel insists, are the true godfathers of leadership; all other claims to that role are usurpations.

The paper has argued that *Sieged* makes four distinct structural arguments: that godfatherism subverts meritocratic selection; that it instrumentalises electoral processes through the weaponisation of poverty and coercive violence; that it reproduces itself intergenerationally through the incumbent godfather's engineering of succession; and that its internal contradictions—its inevitable production of ungrateful godsons—contain the seeds of its own potential dissolution. Collectively, these arguments constitute a coherent postcolonial political theory articulated through the medium of fiction.

As a contribution to the literary discourse on power and corruption in postcolonial Africa. Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Sieged* represents political godfatherism not merely as an expression of individual corruption but as a structural mechanism of postcolonial governance that subverts meritocracy,

compromises democratic accountability, reproduces elite domination, and perpetuates leadership failure within the Nigerian state.

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