



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
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Crickets Deep State

Raj Thakur

Tatenda Taibu, *Keeper of Faith: Cricket, Conflict and God in Zimbabwe's Age of Extremes*.
Liverpool, UK: de Coubertin Books, 2019. Pages 246. £ 12.99.

More often than not, larger than life genre of sports life writing is driven by a neo-phenomenon of celebrity hood. Strikingly, Tatenda Taibu's account is not goaded by the pressure of protagonist's trailblazing fetish. George Orwell, in his essay, "The Sporting Spirit", cynically observes that "serious sports have nothing to do with fair play" (195). If sport really is "war minus shooting" (195), then Taibu's vindication bear witness to interrogate, what it is for a young black cricketer to bat against Robert Mugabe's political bouncers in Zimbabwe? Layered in its post colonial anxieties and concerns, the book is a compilation of 18 brief phases of Tatenda's life, constantly informing and negotiating the political economy of cricket. Zimbabwe metaphorically becomes cricket's feverish pitch, a site of constant backlash concerning the racial balance of the team, a contesting site, with no easy answers to the Zimbabwean cricket trials till date. The narrative sutures his passionate and sincere love for cricket amid Robert Mugabe's abject colonial arrogance for British and forcible eviction of white farmers land in the post apartheid nation.

It makes for an absorbing slice of life to trace the emergence of a cricketer from the shanty suburbs of Highfield, who becomes the first black player to captain the Zimbabwe team, especially, in a sport, which had long remained to be the exclusive preserve of the white. Although, in a different setting, the moment and the figure, in more ways than one echo CLR James' classic account of the first black Caribbean captain, Frank Worrell, in *Beyond a Boundar*. For Taibu, it was more than a statement to grab coverage with his batting stance in the country's influential daily, *The Herald*, asserting how the posture was "breaking down the elitist image that surrounded it" (16). Among other topical concerns, it is also a poignant tale of a player who while touring overseas would collect all discarded kits of the teammates, so he could give it to the suburban kids back in Zimbabwe. The theme of racism runs deep in major sections and the struggle to confront its pernicious forms extends all the way to the



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dressing tagging of the black teammates as, “Nugget”, a type of “black shoe polish in Zimbabwe” (51).

Andy Flower’s “Foreword”, as a note of apprehension and concern, provides more than a standpoint to the emerging “generation of young black cricketers” (viii), steaming their way through bat and ball, representing Takashinga, the earliest “predominant black Zimbabwean Cricket Club” (viii). More than a mentor and fellow cricketer, he is a shielding figure, informing young Taibu about Zimbabwe cricket board’s tried and tested tactic of divide and rule.

Offering a flashback, “Before the Beginning”, evokes his grandparent’s witness to the horrors of “white minority rule” (7), and their ensuing journey for better fortunes towards the erstwhile Zimbabwe, Rhodesia, “the breadbasket of Africa” (8). It is here, as a struggling immigrant lot, that Tatenda is born amidst the heightened microcosm of the relentless world to come. Interestingly, young Taibu’s emergence offers a window to the nation’s sporting subculture as well. Youngsters are found grasping politics through “street talks” (8), as any open and formal discussion is fraught with peril. Kids on the other hand, ace their cricketing skills of throwing the ball with perfect hand eye coordination through their daily after school chores of “trying to hit birds with small stone” (14).

The sections like, “Boy in a Man’s World”, captures 14 years old Taibu’s vulnerable anxieties of playing in circles elder to him, who were often found indulging in the seamy side of the game, involving drinking bouts and women. His early stint with the “organised sport” (35) come in a most disorganised settings, as even in the early nineties, cricket was still under the white minority dominance. The narrative detour, “Finding Comfort in Love”, entailing Taibu’s new-found high school love in Loveness never goes awry and has an engaging charm to it. True to her name, Loveness, she proves to be a propelling life force in his loveless and unforgiving world of cricket.

Come early noughties and the unholy alliance between cricket and politics is laid bare in the section, “Tough at the Top”. As the tension runs high between Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Movement for Democratic Change



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(MDC), the immediate fallout of the economic recession and lopsided land reforms were to be witnessed through cricket. The commentary, here, extends to Mugabe's "Operation Murambatsvina", a form of smart city move in modern parlance, aimed to, "drive out the rubbish" (65), unfortunate target being poor city dwellers, shanties and roadside vendors.

Contrary to the conventional sports autobiographical trend of immortalising records, here is an uncanny resolve to portray relentless de(feats). From recalling clobbering moments of being a victim of Chaminda Vaas's bowling record of 8 for 19 to a member of a batting squad bowled out for one of the lowest scores of 38 (124), the phase only attests to his greater perseverance. Jack Brown, a British collaborator for the book, brings in more than a journalistic brilliance and proves that he is an established academic. The testimony to which is Tatenda's "Acknowledgement" note, worth a mention, "you are tall and I am short . . . you are white and I am black, so how you managed to articulate this story the way did is nothing short of inspirational"(246).

It is against the backdrop of 2003 World Cup, that cricket's deep state crisis becomes starker in the portion, 'World Cup of Woe'. It demonstrates how Zimbabwe's vulnerability as an aspiring co-host nation was augmented by Mugabe's sanctioned land eviction of white farmers. Furthermore, the subsequent victory through rigged elections in the years preceding the 2003 World Cup added to its woes. From the warning letter to English cricket board, reading, "Come to Harare and you will die" (92), to Andy Flower and Henry Olonga's "death of democracy" protests at the World Cup, the collective subconscious of Zimbabwe come to the fore here (94).

His brief stint with 2008 Indian Premier League is depicted on a convivial note. Rarely bewitched by the money spinning, star studded format, he was soon to become a franchise owner, Shahrukh Khan's ten year old son's personal favourite. The reason being, "my diminutive height made him believe that we were the same age" (172).

The engrossing parts like, "More Than a Game" and "Lone Ranger", marks captain Taibu's Sisyphean struggle at cricket while unearthing the lack of financial parity in the team. In a larger bid to buy his silence, the attempts range from a promise with "lot of money in private meetings with the hierarchy" (146) to a next morning headline, reading out, "black



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boy being used” (168) redacted with all white players in the background. With regular threats to his life becoming a routine affair, his brief sequence of self imposed cricket exile thus sets in with his refuge in Christian faith. The phase only proceeds his comeback with greater conviction, hence, justifying the title, “Keeper of Faith” in myriad ways.

The particular strength of the book lies in its uniform candour, even to expose how cricket’s superstructure driven by the International Cricket Council (ICC), since its inception, have always favoured ones in power. The sections like, “The Awakening” and “Trying to Keep the Faith”, unpacks its hegemonic white might. It foregrounds not just ICC’s soft corner for South African apartheid era, but also its ulterior motives (driven less by cricket interest than by money and glamour) to lay off Zimbabwe and other minnows nation from the World Cup till 2023. On the hind sight, for the English it appeared that Mugabe was a third world bully against whom they could claim the moral high ground in the name of political and financial instability. This, in turn, for Mugabe, became a fertile ground to justify his autocratic rule, where cricket became his potent political field to bat on with no umpires. Taibu’s childhood cricket mate, Stuart Matsikenyeri’s afterword goes beyond the nostalgic whiff. It acquaints one with the young protagonist’s cricketing rites of passage marked by compelling account of triumph over adversity. The narrative intimacy of the book is further enunciated by Taibu’s deftly chronicled set of coloured photographs.

Above all, Taibu’s account adverts how at times, life writing becomes more a responsibility than an exercise in recollection. The best books about sport are, of course, about more than just a sport, Taibu’s cricket memoir testifies it. The work not only makes for a significant addition to the evolving subaltern historiography of sports but also for the academic grasp of sport as a loaded cultural text.

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