

The Impact of Women in Northern Nigeria Novels: Reflections From Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs Andother Stories* and Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*

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Abstract

*For no fault of the women, society and men have come up with beliefs that have overtime been used to undermine the roles and status of women in society. In most cases, the women are described as the “weak’ and vulnerable”. This belief promotes the idea of patriarchy in society. Early literary writings in Northern Nigeria project patriarchy through the disdainful indifference and cruelty that the men characters subject the women characters to (if they ever appear). However, with the introduction of feminism as a literary ideology, conceptions on the roles and status of women began to change. The emergent trend as it affects the representation of women in subsequent Northern Nigeria novels is therefore, examined through Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997). and Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994) This study focuses on the novelists' use of feminism as an ideology to underscore the need for women liberation from the shackles of societal inhibitions and patriarchal domination that have continued to dwarf the potentials, abilities and capabilities of women in Northern Nigeria overtime. Indeed, that they have been described as mothers, housekeepers and house wives whose voices really do not matter in the scheme of things in society is what the contemporary literary works under this study have come to challenge.*

Keywords: Impact, Reflection, Patriarchal domination, Feminism, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

Literature as a concept has been defined by a number of scholars. Without recourse to any specific definition, we would want to posit that literature is a reflection of the happenings in society. For it is by so doing that we shall be able to examine and appraise the socio cultural practices of the people of Northern Nigeria and how such translate into treatment of characters as projected in the novels of our focus. Literature is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history.

According to Michael Jerone (1988); literature is:

a human product, a humane art. It cannot be carried on (created), understood (studied), or appreciated (experienced) outside of its definitive human context. The general science governing that human context is socio-historical (2).

Likewise Pinel Vinn Shava is of the opinion that:

Literature is a piece of writing that is valued as a work of art. It records and reflects societal experiences- its values, problems structure and event. Literature embodies the writer's evaluation of his world or illuminate its possibilities.

Lindfors (1982) in an attempt to contextually situate issues within known milieu posits that:

When examining anything that has changed overtime, usually it is a good policy to begin at the beginning. The past can teach us much about the present, so we ought to try to place our subject in historical perspective by asking a number of questions about its evolution. How did it come into being? Why did it assume this shape rather than another? What forces influenced its growth and development ... (p. 1).

That our subject of study is a phenomenon of change presupposes that we ask questions similar to those enumerated above if we must come to terms with the concern for an appraisal of the impact of women in Northern Nigeria, particularly, as exposed by the novels under study'.

Northern Nigeria is a culturally diverse region with certain collective identity. It today houses a number of states carved out of the former Northern Region of Nigeria. Records over time have shown that literary writings in Northern Nigeria from the pre-colonial era were pastime of the men. Women writers have indeed lagged behind their male counterparts. Sani and Ibrahim (1997) in justifying this claim recall that:

For instance, in 1985, stock and price list issued by the most influential publisher of literature in Northern Nigeria, the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC) Zaria, out of a total 68 literary titles; only one poetry book was authored by a woman, i.e., Alkalami a I-lannun Mata

*(The Pen Welded by Women); an educational piece in the Hausa language
by H. Hauwa and H. Yai Shehu. (pp. 1-2).*

The medium of writing in Northern Nigeria appears from the beginning to have been Hausa and other native languages. However, as is the tradition with other regional literatures. The upsurge for creative writing witnessed the upcoming of popular fiction in English particularly after Nigerian's political independence.

Our investigation into the status and roles of women in Northern Nigeria as captured in the novels with Northern Nigeria setting is therefore a search into what things are in operation as the concern the women in Northern Nigeria society. Then and today, Northern Nigeria Literature in English like other popular regional works of art is said to have been dominated by male writers. Certainly, these writers concern themselves with the tradition of presenting the women as characters within the milieu of a male oriented and dominated world. They explore the existing basic societal inferences and religious obligations to promote patriarchy. This condition in Northern Nigeria and by extension the view of the wider world unfortunately, presents women as objects to be oppressed and exploited by the men.

It must be emphasized at this point that the shades of exploitation of the women overtime are not necessarily as a result of any inherent weaknesses that the women are naturally endowed with but those that society and men have set for them to perpetually keep them in a state of subservience and servitude. That we today have literary works produced to challenge these traits is a drive towards cutting a new identity for the women an identity entirely different from what it used to be in the past.

Women in the Eyes of Men and Society

The men overtime have generally exhibited some characteristics that place them high and above the women. This belief structured within the ambit and purview of patriarchy has over the years been responsible for the domination of the women by men. Walum (1977) reflecting on the concept of patriarchy presents two major perspectives and submits that:

The bio-genetic explanation is based on the idea that, because male dominance is culturally universal, it must be genetically caused and it must play a major role in the survival of the human species. Males and Females, the proponents argue, are physically and hormonally different. Males have a higher level of androgens, the "aggressively" hormone, whereas females have a monthly hormonal cycle. (p. 141).

The implication of this submission is that, generally, anatomical and hormonal differences between the males and the females presuppose that the men are more set apart for energetic tasks hue the women for certain biological factors that allow them to perform biological roles of child bearing and lactation are for domestic works.

Furthermore, Walum (1977) explores on the perspective of bio-cultural theory in the advancement of male chauvinism (patriarchy) when he says:

In hunting and gathering societies, meat (protein) is scarce, and men have monopoly on hunting and fishing. However, contrary to common opinion, men are hunters not because they are physically stronger or more agile... it is primarily because hunting and carrying burdens are incompatible activities. Women are not only carrying foetuses in uterus, upsetting balance in latter month, but they carry nursing infants. (p. 142).

There is a clear deduction from the above that men have an edge over the women. Male domination shown through the rights and privileges he has to control and distribute scarce goods and services as the provider while the woman only engages in child bearing and rearing.

Similarly, Obafemi (2008) in a discourse on gender politics is of the view that:

Women are defined relative to men, who typify humanity. All religions give credence to this man-derived personality of woman. Both the Bible and the Koran assert that Eve was created from the rib of Adam; so as to assist him...The African traditional religion gives roles to women, which are inexorably inferior to those of men - as wives, mothers and home-tenders. (p. 80).

The implication of this is that the man is stronger and therefore superior to the woman. The woman at best is to the man; a helpmate and this has been the situation over time.

Patriarchy and the Women Fold

Patriarchy is a phenomenon that is used to portray men as superior to the women. Joseph (2003) discussing along this belief submits that:

Patriarchy is an ideology that gives men confidence. Subordinates the female to male or treats the female as an inferior being. (p. 161).

This submission is in agreement with the belief and practice of the Northern Nigeria society. Indeed, teachings of the Islamic belief, Christianity and the traditional beliefs of the people Northern Nigeria clearly support patriarchy.

Islam on one hand is said to have classified women as properties to be acquired by men for sex and discarded just as the Judeo-Christian myth of creation clearly defines woman and her expectations. The NIV Study Bible in the Book of Genesis (Chapter 2:21-22) says that:

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, while he was sleeping; he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

This is an attestation to the belief that God created woman out of man and for man.

Accordingly, the Holy Bible in the Book of (I Peter 3:17) describes the woman as ‘weaker vessels who should be submissive to their husbands and call their husbands their masters’.

The positions of these religious beliefs allow the men in Northern Nigeria to treat the women with lesser dignity. They accord the women the status of “servants” to be used, oppressed and exploited at will. This explains why it is not strange to have female characters in their works of art take roles that are traditionally ascribed to them without complaints.

Feminism and Northern Nigeria Literature

Developments over time, however, began to raise some questions in the minds of writers generally. Such questions have to do with raising issues and voices over the decades of gender inequality. The attempt to question the rationale behind this gender inequality by the emergent female authors and some of their men counterparts with flair for gender issues as it were is not to create or draw a battle line between them and the earlier male authors. Instead, the attempt is geared towards spirited efforts by both sexes, to struggle against the negative, oppressive, exploitative and harmful trado-religious, socio-cultural and societal beliefs and practices that are known to have been obstacles to the full realization of the potentials of the women over time.

This development opens up the quest into the representation of female characters differently from what used to be the case. Thus, the emergent roles as are assigned the women characters gave rise to a new chapter in Northern Nigeria novels, particularly those of the two authors this study is concerned with. The development in their works clearly demonstrates their exploration into the ideology of feminism that is primarily concerned with the emancipation of the women folk.

Feminism as a literary theory is a worldwide ideology commonly employed in gender discourse. It is a term believed to have been coined by a French Philosopher, Charles Fourier in 1837. Nevertheless, its usage today is not limited to the Western World. It has been embraced worldwide though with modifications as may be occasioned by cultural and economic realities of the embracing nations and societies.

Joseph 2003 asserts that: feminism is a worldwide ideological and political movement directed at changing the existing power relations between men and women in a patriarchal society” (p. 161). Similarly, Balogun (2007) submits that:

Feminism is an attempt by the women folk to universally liberate itself from male chauvinism and patriarchy. While the shift is not intended to cause gender terrorism, it aims at making the position of women at home, at work, at school, in the street, etc. more challenging to themselves and their men-folk in the social phenomenon... .Because of its interest in social issues, feminism, like Marxism, is historical, political and it proposes a dynamic ideological commitment. (p. 204).

It is obvious that owing to a number of factors, feminism has been given colourations. We today have terms like “Western Feminism”, “African Feminism”, “Radical Feminism”, “Post-Feminism”, as

shades of the feminist' literary theory. Notwithstanding, one thing peculiar to feminism is its centrality on addressing the imbalances in gender issues as they affect the women folk.

To explore into this role, Joseph (2007) submits that "feminism started with women movements in the 1960s with exhibitions to depict the skills of women in various disciplines" (pp. 192-193). However, with time, this gradually featured the exhibition of concerted efforts to show that the women are human beings with rights, capabilities and capacities for exhibition of equal potentials like their men-folk.

The idea behind the foregoing is to create an opportunity to preach the need for women to be treated with decorum, respect and dignity. This uncommon moving voice is can\ assed in the novels and other literary works that we now have. Indeed, these contemporary works feature the representation of female characters playing roles uncommon to the women in earlier works. This resounding breakthrough by the authors owe a lot to the theory of feminism that allows for the introduction of a new trend in the literary works that began to hit reading shelves as from I 970s till date.

This development enlarges the movement for women liberation. Particularly as observed by Joseph (2007) thus:

...feminists no longer discuss minorities and disadvantaged groups. They now focus discourse on the concepts of marginality to debunk the identification of the margin (women) wit evil and the centre (men) with good. Just like the post-colonial authors wrote on metropolis or rewrote their masters' narratives, post-feminists or the margins also write collectively, speaking for or on behalf of a group rather than individuals in order to postulate a change in the patriarchal system such that will make both sexes to be appreciated for their worth. (p. 195).

As it is within the purview of our study, our interest is on an appraisal of concerns of the current Northern Nigeria novelists as distinct from earlier works of art that promote patriarchs. Recent works now react differently to the old tradition of women subjugation by the men. Hence, our choice of Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994) and Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs and other stories* (1997) to justify the influence of feminism as a dynamic ideological commitment for the actualization and realization of the advancement: of egalitarianism, conservatism and radical responses in the women characters as opposed to the idea of men's superiority that dominates a number of earlier works of Northern Nigeria literary writers.

Zaynab Alkali's Presentation of Women in *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997)

Quite a number of women writers' of literary works in English in Northern Nigeria are University graduates, married and with flourishing career prospects. Zaynab Alkali is one of such female writers and is about the most celebrated of the female writers from Northern Nigeria. She holds Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in African Literature from Bayero University, Kano and is a Professor of African Literature in the Department of English, University of Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. She has a number of written novels in English to her credit.

Zaynab Alkali is a product of society and therefore cannot be separated from her society. As an African woman writing about African women, her works are in a way conditioned by her nature, culture and beliefs over time. This probably can explain why the brand of feminism some critics may advocate for may not necessarily be apparently visible in her works.

This notwithstanding, the novels of Zaynab Alkali have centered on stories that firmly suggest her modest strides as a passionate advocate of radical change in the ways and manner that men regard and behave towards women in Northern Nigeria.

A statement at the back cover of Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs and Other Stories* gives a vivid summary of the novel as it reads thus:

The Cobwebs and Other Stories is Zaynab Alkali's fourth major work. It is a collection of Six Stories, of varying lengths, in which she introduces us to some salient features and dominant values of her society in wind-swept, semi-arid, North-Eastern Nigeria, Land of ancient Bornu Empire. Human relationships and foibles are handled with great sensitivity and composition, with gender issues coming to the fore. (Cobwebs... 1997-back cover)

Similarly, Jowitt (1997) in an article titled "Brushing the Cobwebs off Our Eyes" in the "New Nigeria Newspaper" on Zaynab Alkali's *Cobweb and Other Stories* says that:

The six stories though written at different times possess a common theme, each developing a variation. In each, a woman of independent mind and feeling strives to come to terms with complexity; usually the harshness of experience she undergoes is encounter. In fact, it is hard not to feel that we are meeting the same woman, whose point of view dominates each story. In all but one of the stories, the central figure is married, but in three of them, "The Cobwebs", "The House of Dust", and "Saltless Ash", her crucial experience is loneliness and despair that result when the marriage proves, from her point of view a failure. (p.13).

The first story "The Cobwebs" centres on the experiences of the protagonist identified as Mama. At the time of her introduction, she is already twenty three years old female character whose travails in the novel are overwhelming. She focuses on issues of self-realization and attainment of freedom and liberation for women from all inhibitions. Mama is married to Aliyu not by choice but by the fact that as a woman, she had no right to choose who husband would be. The society as she says decides for the woman. This can be attested to by the expression: "In Beta, woman did not have to think, the man always did the thinking for mankind" (p. 17). Aliyu is thirty three years old, married to another wife with a dozen of children from several mothers. He has no known job and one wonders what Mama, a university student is doing married to this man if not for injunctions of religious and societal beliefs.

Mama initially was to read medicine in the University but on the orders of Aliyu she had to read education. While in school, Mama gets involved with a boyfriend called Imam despite her marriage to Aliyu. This development looks western and alien to her culture but as it is, that seems to be the only source of succour to Mama who is wrecked in the over zealousness of her estranged

husband. No wonder we have Mama on returning to school with mountain of problems from her husband, going to see Imam as accounted for in the novel thus:

Mama visits Imam in the hostel for counselling ... she cried as she never did in a long time. And consequently, regardless of her marriage bond, Imam draw her into his arms.... They were close, closer than any of them could remember, closer and alone. Slowly and gently, he rocked her to and fro until the tears ceased. Just as slowly he eased her head unto the groove of his arms until they both felt comfortable, perhaps too comfortable on the long soft settee. (p. 40).

It is obvious that Zaynab Alkali presents Mama and eventually, Ladi (her sister) as female characters who have taken up the feminist ideology to address their plight. She shows Mama on the course of women liberation as she chooses to fall in love with Imam and go to Ladi's place instead of her matrimonial home. The discussion at Ladi's place also shows that Ladi who had to drop out of school to marry her husband is expressing a different view as she says: I no longer asked for laughter or a kind word from a husband. For me, recently, sister, what is happiness but a roof over my head and food to eat? (p. 53).

This liberation instinct as we are to see in Ladi's thinking makes way for her to resolve that after her Idda, she would go to Laleri and join a sewing institute for training and thereafter become gainfully employed. She is determined to make it in life so that no man would consider her a burden any more. In the other stories, we are introduced to Maaya, a devoted woman whose "entire life was devoted to the welfare of his (Abdu-zak-her husband) family" (p. 61). Unfortunately, Abdu-zak keeps another family and at death leaves Maaya in despair as narrated in the story "The House of Dust" and liberate themselves from practices that have continued over time to place them subjectively under men domination.

Abubakar Gimba's Presentation of Women in *Sacred Apples* (1994)

Abubakar Gimba hails from Niger State. He is an economist by training and remains one social scientist who has found himself in the literary scene. His novels are in no doubt familiar works to many readers and critics. To many literary artists, the works of Abubakar Gimba can be ranked as one of the most authentic voices from Northern Nigeria. That his home state government recognizes his efforts at literary development and features platform discourse in his honour at the Muazu Babangida Aliyu (MBA) International Literary Colloquium readily testifies to his acceptance as a model.

As stated earlier, feminism is not an exclusive preserve of the female authors. There are in the feminist camp a number of male writers who are concerned with the interests and concerns of the womenfolk. If the paramount interest of the feminist writer is to uplift the status and roles of women, then Abubakar Gimba could be counted in the forefront of feminist writers, more so, of the Northern Nigeria extraction.

Abubakar Gimba has to his credit a number of novels. He exposes in his novel *Sacred Apples* (1994) his concern for the womenfolk. The dedication of the work shows his concern for the interest of the women. Thus, his dedication note reads:

For my mother and womankind that she represents, who know what the pains and joys of motherhood and wifehood as well as those who appreciate their womanhood!

The novel *Sacred Apples* is a constructive thoughtful story of a protagonist – Zahrah. This is one woman in search of true identity in modern society. She is brutally challenged by the issues of asserting her independence, freedom, marriage life and fulfillment in life. These challenging issues set the woman in search of solutions to her plight as against the traditional resignation to the perpetual state of docility and inactiveness that the womenfolk are known for. To have a woman challenge the state of a male dominated world is an aberration that owes its root to feminism.

Zahrah is educated and armed with a University degree but married to Yazid Awwal who does not show out rightly any significant disposition that can be considered superior to that of his life. The marriage lasts for six years with three children. For reasons that have to do with the traditional position of men, we are to see Yazid divorce Zahrah. At the time of the crisis, it is Zahrah that demonstrates maturity as we can see Yazid express in *Sacred Apples* (1994) that by giving his car to convey the ex-wife and the children to her grandmother, he is but doing a great favour, he said, because of the children, his children” (p. 6).

Zahrah is presented as a character with a higher sense of judgment as she does not even want the children to know that all was not well with the parents:

She didn't want any more heated arguments with the man. Besides, she had learnt that the course of peace is best served while in dispute with men if you let them remain on their high horses (p. 6)

As if the troubles were not mind disturbing enough, we can see her response to Umaymah, her elder daughter, when she sensed some trouble as she says: “He’s not happy; that is all”, “Because we are going away leaving him behind” (p. 7). Indeed, the uncommon stoic disposition as recorded in the reasons why she has to smile to convince her daughter that all is well with the parents is according to her, because: “Children must never be made witnesses to the souring of parental intimacies” (p. 8).

Zahrah is not to be carried away by the fact that as a woman, she has to depend on another person, particularly man, to assert her being. This we have demonstrated in her encounter with the demonstrators and hoodlums as the driver drives them home. Even at the shouts of “Kill them...! Burn the bloody car! ...”, (p. 13) she does not give up on her children as she pulls them closer to herself like a hen, her chicks in the face of a threatening eagle (p. 13). Her encounter with Dan Easker that nearly resulted in a rape is averted by her resort to spirituality - prayers.

As traditional as the grandmother is, we can see her praying for reconciliation but Zahrah sees this differently. This according to Zahrah is beyond redemption because Yazid has ignorantly and or for purposes of lack of in-depth knowledge of Islamic precepts made three pronouncements on the matter of divorce. Thus, instead of contemplating going for reconciliation, we see Zahrah observing the three months waiting period (Iddah) before liberating herself fully and taking up a job facilitated by her brother Ya Shareef.

Suffice to mention that the efforts of Rasheed (a major in the army) and his wife, Mariam; in rescuing the children from the hoodlums and returning them to their mother endeared the two families together. This relationship opens the eyes of Zahrah to a number of issues that enable her to see herself beyond the restrictive horizons imposed on the womenfolk. In the course of this relationship, Mariam serves as a source of encouragement to Zahrah. She counsels her to forget the past and face the future. She recounts that Zahrah's fatal error is not taking a job and consciously surrendering her destiny into the hands of a man, without any counter indemnity. In response, to this development, we can see the awareness that begins to make Zahrah feel differently as she says:

Must conjugal contracts get adhered to according to a dual mode of reading-one loudly; the second is very silent whispers. The rights of the husband and the responsibilities of the wife get a loud reading, while the rights of the wife and the responsibilities of the husband get an inaudible whisper (p. 72).

She goes further to say that 'when the silent reading becomes audible, the woman gets her rights as if it were a privilege, and the man's responsibilities dressed like favour' (p.93).

Without any regrets, part of the liberation lessons Zahrah receives from Mariam is the need for the woman to retain her family name instead of remaining tied to her husband's name. Accordingly, she marvels at Mariam George Rasheed, her friend's name, as opposed to hers; Mrs. Zahrah Yazid — a man she is no longer married to. Zahrah taking up the new challenges abhors what she calls mothering by proxy" (p. 77). She is not prepared to allow someone else train her children as even as a working mother, she says; "motherhood is much more than physical outward caring ... it is complex of emotional ties, inexplicable forces".(p. 113). This belief translates to single motherhood that today has become a common practice.

A new lease of life has come upon Zahrah as she goes to assert that when men fail, they create a dependence syndrome in women. But this must not be so, as she submits that:

Which, (dependence syndrome) we try to fight by picking up a gauntlet, to meet our needs and prove that we can be masters of our destiny: (p. 81).

Being divorced does not send the woman into life of promiscuity. Infidelity or prostitution as some female characters in some novels have been portrayed to engage in over time. We are to see Zahrah taking the challenge of remarriage with a serious concern. Ya Shareef and others try as much as possible to convince her with soothing words such as think most men act out of concern for women" (p. 10).

Zahrah as we have shown is an epitome of simplicity, yet decisive when it comes to her roles, status, capability and capacity. She demonstrates at her place of work uncommon outstanding qualities that earn her promotion to the envy of Midioka. His defamation stories notwithstanding, we witness progression in Zahrah's life. She eventually gets remarried to Nousah who characteristic of Northern Nigerian men is having other wives.

Her experience with the other wives, particularly, Aalimah does not make her loose her senses. She acted when due and eventually relocates to another apartment to avoid distraction. She has personal security and empowerment guaranteed by her job. Although, she had to lose her husband to death for the sake of the “Sacred Apple” that Dan Easker and An-Najmu poisoned and gave the family to eat. She overcomes and forges ahead with her life.

Zahrah seeks freedom even for her daughter Umaymah by opposing her desire to marry her lecturer, Dr. Haaris. She as it were, desires that the daughter does not pass through her own kind of experience. Although with kind counsels from all friends and relations she eventually bows to her daughter’s desire.

Indeed, Abubakar Girnba presents in Zahrah a woman that demonstrates equal potentials with men, a woman that challenges societal practices and forges ahead to find solutions to her problems. As recorded in the protagonist’s own words, even when “they (men) all assume the image of personality of Al-Aswad”, she must settle “as a true career woman, not just a working mother” (p. 267). She preaches the need to seek knowledge by encouraging going to school and studying the blueprint which to her is the Quran. This she equally preaches to her daughter, Umaymah as she chooses to marry Dr. Haaris.

In all, she seeks freedom from all inhibiting agencies, for it is only by so doing that the women can realize their potentials in life and thereby remove themselves from perpetual bondage.

Conclusion

The epitome of the struggle for self-independence by the womenfolk just as, Zaynab Alkali places side by side, the good and bad effects of women liberation and women subjugation for society to learn from. This is elaborated in the activities of Mama as an educated girl taking on her husband Aliyu and her father as men given to women exploitation. In conclusion, we are left with no option than to take to the disposition that the two selected novelists have in their works represented women in an order that projects the changing roles and status of women from what it used to be in the past. This achievement, we cannot separate from the growing interest of these authors in feminism as a trend in literary discourse that desires to give women the opportunity to realize them themselves and develop their potentials to the fullest.

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