



FEMINISM AND THE NORTHERN NIGERIAN MALE WRITERS: A CASE STUDY OF GIMBA'S SACRED APPLES

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Abstract

The paper explores feminist tendencies among the northern Nigerian male novelists and uses Gimba's Sacred Apples as a representative study to depict how male novelists champion the cause of women liberation. Feminist theory is used in the analysis of the primary text. From the onset feminism has been and still is the way forward for the emancipation of women from male subjugation and this suggests social freedom that ensured equal treatment of all sexes. The findings revealed that there is growing gender consciousness among the northern Nigerian male writers of the three generations discussed in the paper. Because instead of the female authors, it is the male writers who are portraying the ways in which the patriarchal male dominated society of the northern Nigerian region oppresses women.

Keywords: *Sacred Apple, Feminism, Literature, Novelist, Text*



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Introduction

Feminism is one of the literary movements in the historical development of literature as a discipline just like Liberal Humanism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Modernism, Post-modernism, New Historicism, Formalism and the like. The most important feature of feminism is undoubtedly gender sensitivity, as most feminist writings portray women in a more positive light than men. According to Alkali (2007:131) Feminism can be read into any text that has a female character.

Feminist literature is therefore that literature which was meant to be gender sensitive, to empower and emancipate women against men domination. It is also a kind of work championing the cause of women just like the Marxist literature is concerned about the plight of the masses. Feminist literature must not necessarily be written by female writers alone, it could equally be by a male writer. What is important is the content of the text as well as the central message put across by the writer. Thus, it does not matter who the author of the literature is as long the focus of the writing is geared towards correcting an erroneous impression or idea concerning societal expectations of women. In fact, there are as many

male feminist writers as there are females. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer though a Marxist recognizes women in his works because he knows that women belong to a class of people usually dominated or suppressed in the society. In his novels such as *Petal of Blood* (1977), *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *Weep Not Child* (1964) among others, Ngugi portrays women who played crucial roles in a number of ways. Like the female writer, he demonstrates that women should be allowed to play central role in all social engagements. Most of his heroines are portrayed as 'versatile' like the woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. As Giginyu (2002:2) comments: "In both his earlier and later literary works Ngugi's women depiction was sympathetic. He has portrayed his women as active, resourceful, organisers and new women who participated fully in the socio-economic and political development of the continent... Indeed, Ngugi may be considered as a feminist writer who always portrays women positively in all respect. From his earlier works to the latest ones, all his portrayal favour women".

In other words, feminist literature is any literature that is purposely written or acted to highlight the social and economic disparity between male and female, and to show how women suffer various forms of subjugation and maltreatment in the hands of men. This kind of literature also goes to show women the ways forward. It presents them with ways on how to be independent and unshackle themselves from the traditional restrictions put on them by men. Feminist literature also motivates women and shows them the significant of being independent. It does this by portraying a female character in a story who while living on her own appears to be progressing to the extent that sometimes she becomes a breadwinner in her family like Li in Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984). Joseph (2006:245) asserts that "From the emergence of *The Stillborn*, Alkali's concern has been gender conscious literary approach to the representation of women and the exigencies of her experience within the patriarchal society. She creates female characters that possess the power to refine their roles in society."

That is not all, when one analyses a feminist text in most cases, he or she sees that males in the text are wicked, rude, unkind or unjust and the female characters are portrayed as kind, good and caring etc. This is quite clear in Emecheta's novels like *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) among others. Emecheta's novels constitute hardworking and determination as the yardstick for liberating a woman. In other words, she tries to fill the gender gap between male and female characterization in her novels as Chukwuma (1989:2) states: "The rural, back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman

has been replaced by her modern counterpart, a full-rounder human being, rotational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own”.

Chukwuma indicates that Emecheta portrays a very negative image of men in her works with women always suffering in the hands of men but emerge victorious at the end. Also, Kamal in *Silence and a Smile* (2005) gives a negative portraiture of his male characters. They are depicted as corrupt, smokers, womanizers, selfish, insincere and unfair. On the other hand, the female characters are given prime positions as protagonists. They are also portrayed as vocal, active and educated women who are ever ready to fight for their right especially in the choice of marriage suitors. Briefly, Feminist literature can be said to be any kind of writing, be it by a male or a female author, which was meant to bring to the attention of readers, the various hardship and restrictions placed on women by men; and also the way in which women can empower and emancipate themselves so that they live independent of any person.

Northern Nigerian Male Novelists

It is obvious that the number of male writers across the three genres of literature in the Northern Nigerian region is considerable in comparison with their female counterparts probably due to the patriarchal nature of the region. To date, female children in some families in the region are not allowed to attend high level of education. Instead, they are forced into kinship marriage or moneyed marriage at the very tender age. Precisely, male novelists from this region can be grouped into three generations. The First Generation started writing in the late 1970s while the Second Generation in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the Third Generation arrived to the literary world of novel in 2010. The table below contains the names of some of the northern Nigerian male novelists and their states of origin.

Table 1: First Generation of Northern Nigerian Male Novelists in English

S/No	Name	State
1.	Labo Yari	Katsina
2.	Aliyu Jibia	Katsina
3.	Muhammad Tukur Garba	Sokoto
4.	Muhammad Sule	Kano
5.	Ibrahim Tahir	Bauchi
6.	Olu Obafemi	Kwara
7.	Abubakar Gimba	Niger
8.	Tanko Ahmad	Plateau
9.	Emman Usman Shehu	Kaduna
10.	Adah Ugah	Benue
11.	Muhammed Kabir Umar	Bauchi
12.	Joseph Mangut	Plateau

13.	Usman Zubair	Kano
14.	Yahaya Dangana	Niger
15.	Abubakar T. Balewa	Bauchi

Table 2: Second Generation of Northern Nigerian Male Novelists in English

S/No	Name	State
1.	Adamu Kyuka Usman	Kaduna
2.	Auwalu Yusufu Hamza	Kano
3.	Helon Habila	Gombe
4.	Bello Musa Dankano	Kano
5.	Ibrahim Sheme	Katsina
6.	Audee T. Giwa	Kaduna
7.	Aliyu Kamal	Kano
8.	Usman Aliyu Balarabe	Niger
9.	Saka Aliyu	Kaduna
10.	Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino	Kano

Table 3: Third Generation of Northern Nigerian Male Novelists in English

S/No	Name	State
1.	Sule E. Egya	Niger
2.	Muhsin Ibrahim	Kano
3.	Dul Johnson	Plateau
4.	Abubakar Adam Ibrahim	Plateau
5.	Khalid Imam	Kano
6.	Sa'idu Sulaiman	Kano
7.	Danladi Audu	Kano
8.	Munzali A. Dantata	Katsina
9.	Lukuman Umar Kankia	Katsina
10.	Richard Ali	Plateau
11.	Zahraddeen Ibrahim Kallah	Kano
12.	Saminu Isma'il	Kano

These classifications overlap and are not clear-cut. Those in the first and second generations continue to write. Of course, there is feminist consciousness in the works of most of the writers of the three generations. In other words, they embedded some feminist ideology in their writings. For instance, writers like Garba in *Forgive Me Maryam* (1986), Sule in *The Undesirable Element* (1977), Obafemi in *Wheels* (1997), Umar in *Amina* (1982), Gimba in *Sacred Apples* (1994), Obodum in *Die a Little* (1997) and Giwa in *I'd Rather Die* (1994) among others have not just depict instances of injustice, marginalization and other forms of hardship meted to women in the patriarchal society but also give them voice to speak as they are casted as protagonists in the above mentioned novels. As Jaji (2011:131) argues "The significance of these novels is that instead of the female authors, it is the male who are portraying the ways in which the male dominated family is oppressing women".

Other northern Nigerian male novelists like Tahir in *The Last Imam* (1984), Hamza in *Empty Courts and Other Stories* (2006) and Ibrahim in *A weird Hope* (2012) have extensively dwelled on the negative effect of forced marriage. In most of Hamza's novels in particular, one can smell aroma of feminist philosophy right from the titles of his novels like *Love Path* (1999) and *A Question of Marriage* (2008). Not only that, the content of his novels further justify that he is a male feminist writer who explores contemporary issues that concern women such as divorce, polygamy and the place of women in marriage etc. Again, his choice of women as the major characters in his novels shows his inclination towards female plight and problems.

Likewise, Kamal, one of the recent writers from the northern Nigerian region portrays his female characters in positive roles. They are given prime positions as the protagonists in *Silence and a Smile* (2005) and *Hausa Girl* (2010). There is no much difference from the way Kamal portrays his female characters and how most female writers of the northern Nigerian region like Zaynab Alkali, Bilkisu Abubakar, Hauwa Ali, Asabe Kabir Usman and Razinat Mohammed among others portrayed their female characters. In *Silence and a Smile*, the central character Dija Garba and her friends Husna and Jummai symbolically represent modern educated Hausa Muslim women and are ever ready to achieve their ambition despite patriarchal domination. They are portrayed in a modern society where girls are allowed to pursue education without encumbrance or male preference. They also agitate for their freedom and have a blind love for their boyfriends. Mahmud (2016:64) writes: "*Dija Garba has her life transformed by virtue of her education. She has been able to fight an element of cultural oppression (forced kinship marriage) from which many girls suffer in her Hausa Fulani society. Her triumph appears to articulate author's total rejection of the forced kinship marriage which makes the lives of many girls miserable*". It is against this background that the paper discusses Gimba's *Sacred Apples* as a feminist text with a view to point out how a male writer (Gimba) explores feminist tendencies in his works.

Abubakar Gimba: The Novelist

Abubakar Gimba, an indigene of Niger state and Nupe by tribe was born on 10th March, 1952. He is arguably the most widely read northern Nigerian male novelist of the time. His contribution to literary world is great. Within a span of twenty- five years (1985-2007), he published seven novels, two collections of poetry, one book of short stories, two volumes of essays, philosophical letters to his children and other members of the society; all

of which are largely concerned with the present day Nigeria. His books are read all over Nigeria and his versatility and creativity kept being applauded by all those highly interested in works of creative and critical value. He is an advocate of freedom in his sympathy on most of his female characters. Clearly, in his novels like *Witnesses to Tears* (1987), *Sunset of a Mandarin* (1991) and *Sacred Apples* (1994), one can easily pinpoint his feminist stance. In fact, in virtually all of his writings, he always preoccupies himself with the theme of feminism even though he denied being labelled as feminist. But do we have to have what the artist or even any writer says as gospel truth? D.H. Lawrence, the famous English novelist quoted in Bhadmas (2005:69) once remarked that "Give me the novel, for the novelist is a drivelling liar." Therefore, it is our own critical analysis and reading of such works that matter and not what the writer makes obvious or what he wants us to believe. He died on 25th February, 2015 at the age of 63.

Sacred Apples as a Feminist Text

Sacred Apples (1994), the novel selected as a representative study to illustrate the feminist stance among the northern Nigerian male writers is Gimba's fifth novel. Kabir (2005:158) writes: "*Gimba in Sacred Apples has created and examined the contemporary educated woman who is also a Muslim with a stable personality; an emotional being who is aware of the shortcoming of the society towards women and for that reason that have to do with culture and traditions. He views women in the context of marriage, divorce, polygamy, single parenthood as well as widowhood*".

Basically, the narrative of the novel reflects the travails and tribulations of Zahrah, the protagonist, who is unjustly divorced by her husband, Yazid Awwal. She has three children with him- Umaymah, Bilqees and Mustapha. She is surrounded by socio-political and economic challenges. Yet she is able to liberate and transform herself from the patriarchal bondage by virtue of her education. According to Yusif (1997:121), *Sacred Apples*: "...Captures the life of Zahrah, a woman torn between living the traditional life of passivity and the challenging life of a career woman. It has answered to some of those questions today's women will want to raise concerning their rights and status in a society at the crossroads of change".

Through Zahrah, Gimba shows that by putting her physical and mental energy into good use, a woman can get herself properly integrated into the general framework of the development of her society. As Kabir further remarks "Gimba is out to praise and celebrate

the dignified woman who knows her worth, limits, what she wants and what is expected of her in a changing society that is male dominated”. That is why she classified him together with Ngugi (1967), Ousmane (1970) and Laguma (1979) as writers “who have glorified womanhood in their writings”.

As a social crusader, Gimba in *Sacred Apples* is preoccupied with the plight of women in a male dominated northern Nigerian society and feels that the only way forward is through the medium of western education. To achieve this, he casts a heroine female protagonist in person of Zahrah- a university graduate who uses her education to rebel against the male-folk and eventually overcomes all obstacles. Her saving grace was her education with which she was able to get a job and fend for herself and her children after her tumultuous marriage. Zahrah is depicted as a dedicated and determined woman typical of Li in Alkali’s *The Stillborn* (1984) and Seytu in *The Descendants* (2005). Gimba’s choice of her as his major character is noteworthy. He could have chosen Ya-Shareef, her brother, Rasheed or Yazid to be the protagonist of the novel. But to show his interest in the womenfolk and the difficulties associated with being a woman, he chose a woman. She is portrayed as the prototypical independent woman who struggle towards self-identity. After Yazid divorced her, she spent five good years in spite of the pressure from her grand-mother and her brother before getting another marriage. She realises her mistake in being totally dependent on Yazid during their marriage and decided to make herself as independent as possible. She dusts her paper in order to move into the labour market and with the help of Ya- shareef, she got a job. She also got her own apartment and moved out of her brother’s house. This movement from her brother’s house to hers is symbolic. Because being a working mother was not enough to assert her independence, moving out on her own was. Her independence on Shareef was largely reduced and she could for the first time in her life experience real independence. She lived on her own without any interference from any man until she gets married to Nousah. Her grandmother Zubaydah is also depicted as an old woman with a lot wisdom and foresight so much so that she always advises Zahrah on how to go about her life especially in her relationship with the opposite sex.

Zahrah became involved in the women societies and contributed her time and knowledge to its advancement. She rose to the position of a deputy chairperson of her own local chapter. She had her opinions and made decisions based on her own convictions. Though her religious convictions moderated her actions, she does not allow herself to be

dominated or pushed into a corner. She is shown to be a hardworking, dedicated and understanding woman, yet she kept facing problems in the hands of her two husbands. This also goes to show the writer's stance with regard to men in the text. Through her predicament, the author suggests that husbands should see their wives as helpmates, not as slaves or house-help. As Miriam (Zahrah's confidant in the story) asserts "Women are just as capable of any achievement as men; they don't need to employ any outward extraneous forces to excel" (p.91). That is why Zahrah admires her for her exemplary qualities. The narrative reveals: "*Miriam had become Zahrah's role model as a woman: intelligent, assertive and having a career: a job that guaranteed her an enviable independence while remaining a wife. A good obedient wife, saving herself the risk most women face as house wives- subservient partners (p.72)*".

It is pertinent at this juncture to point out that Gimba depicts most of the male characters in the novel under examination negatively much like say typical female writers, such as Ba, Nwapa and Alkali. And the female characters like Zubaydah, Zahrah and Miriam are positively portrayed. Aside Shareef and Rashid through whom the reader sees the author's vision more clearly and who function as the author's mouthpiece, other male characters in the text have a blot on their character. Yazid, for instance, is described as one who is hasty in taking decision. He divorced Zahrah without having a thorough investigation about the mysterious letter he found. The irony of it is that it was the devices of another woman who exercised intellectual and emotional power over him, that destroyed his marriage. His regret later in the novel, by wanting to go back to his wife showed that his decision was fickle. Yazid equally behaves hastily when he realises that his boss is having affairs with his wife whom he married after Zahrah. The boss is also portrayed in a bad image by showing him as someone who engages in infidelity.

Dan-Easker (Al-Aswad) also is not isolated. He is portrayed as mischievous and irresponsible liar. Initially, he pretends to be kind and generous to Zahrah by swearing to God that just he wants to help her but turn out to be a moron eventually. He is described by the author as "A man, dressed in a long kaftan with a white cap to match" (p.18). He is also a good grown man and kept beard. All these images give a picture of an idle and good personality. Later, Dan-Easker was found to behave in a different way, trying to oppress and rape Zahrah. Zahrah's plan to lie to him that she is HIV positive is also an element of feminism. The author uses it to show how intelligent women are in getting themselves out of

any danger that confronts them. In fact, the character of Dan-Easker summarizes everything that is bad about men, according to the writer. Even the name 'Dan-Easker' is a Hausa expression meaning a crook. In the end, we are left to know that he was the mastermind behind all the suffering of Zahrah. He kept tracking her whereabouts in order to achieve his aim.

Another male character negatively portrayed in the novel is Zaki Midioka. He is one of the Zahrah's friends at her place of work. He is jealous, gossip and rude person. He started envying Zahrah when she was promoted few months from the time of her employment, which he felt should not be so. He insinuated that her success in her job has to do with her relationship with Nousah even before she marries him. And Zahrah is said to have stood up and taken courage to fight against him. She reacted to his false accusations with two resounding slaps and also made a big statement. She was not a woman to be toyed with or messed around with, simply because she is a single working woman/mother. Ordinarily, culture and tradition will not allow a woman to defend herself in such a way, but because she has asserted her independence, she could do so and get away with it.

Likewise, Nousah Waahid, Zahrah's second husband is portrayed as a deceiver and betrayer of trust. He could not keep his words concerning his relationship with Zahrah. Not long after their marriage, he broke the promise by deciding to marry Aalimah, a young graduate whom he refused earlier and also decided to take back his first wife Salma whom he divorced thus turning the house to a polygamous enclave. Zahrah's discourteous and bitter experience in Nousah's household result in moving out of the house and go to Ya-Shareef's house to stay. Because the other two wives had teamed up against her and fabricated false malicious allegations that made Nousah to support them and even beat Zahrah. He completely turned his back against her. Here, the author explores the issue of polygamy to show how men abuse the polygamous marriage and make it instrumental for women oppression.

After the death of Nouash, Zahrah decided not to marry again. She had had enough marital experience for one life time and each of them left her scalded and scarred for life. Her grandmother's arguments in the dream, her brother's talks, even her friend Miriam, could not make her change her mind. She has done with men and the marriage institution. Her grandmother's reasoning that she will be hungry again and will enter the garden to eat an

apple met with a vehement 'NO' from Zahrah. Through her Gimba no doubt has been able to successfully project his feminist ideology.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that there is growing gender consciousness among the northern Nigerian male novelists. In other words, they are sympathetic to the predicaments of women in their patriarchal chauvinistic society. And in most of their writings, they pinpoint instances of injustice, marginalization and other forms of hardships like early forced marriage, divorce, polygamy and denial of equal educational right as male children. These are some of the issues clearly treated by writers like Tahir, Sule, Kamal, Hamza, Giwa, Ibrahim, Garba and Gimba whose novel (*Sacred Apples*) is used as a representative study to illustrate feminist ideology among the northern Nigerian male novelists.

On a note of finality, Gimba's *Sacred Apple* depicts a woman's struggle to be free from male domination. He uses the life of one woman and explores contemporary issues that concern women such as divorce, polygamy and the place of women in marriage among others. Through this projection of the plight of women in the society, Gimba portrays his feminist ideals and show that independence for a woman does not have to have the negative connotation that the society imposes on it. Zahrah goes through all her painful and difficult experiences and eventually becomes strong on her feet not dependent on any man for anything. Most assuredly, *Sacred Apples* is a feminist tract for it centres on the plight of women at the hands of men and in society as a whole. We can safely say that the novel is a clarion call to women to fight against those norms and traditions in society which do not favour them. Traditionally, when marriage takes place, the woman becomes subject to the whims and caprices of the man. A society like northern Nigeria does not castigate him for being unfair or unfaithful to the woman, yet it expects the woman to live on his terms. Clearly, Gimba, through Zahrah glaringly shows how educated women in the northern Nigerian region are able to fight for their right.

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