

Religion and Feminist Discourse in Abubakar Gimba's Sacred Apple

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Abstract

By employing liberal feminist theory, this paper discusses how religion and culture constitute a limitation to feminist movement in Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*. The novel is set in a society where the practice of polygamy appears to be a major setback for emancipation of womenfolk. Since literature aesthetically portrays the series of predicaments in society, it is extremely useful to take recourse to the information provided by literary texts and see how people could be made to be conscientiously aware of the problems. The objective of the paper has been to bring into fore the wealth of information on gender discourse in a feminist literature by a Northern Nigerian writer. The study of Abubakar Gimba's text will likely provide a novel perspective about Islam, society and women education. A combination of Islam and traditional culture impacts the lives of the characters.

Key Terms: feminist movement, Islam, liberal feminist theory, male-feminist, women education,

Introduction

This paper interrogates the nexus among Islam, culture and women empowerment as articulated in the text under study. *Sacred Apples* is set in the context of tradition where the right of women is being contested. Gender/feminine discourse continues to generate scholarly interest for obvious reasons that there would always be divergent opinions seeking expression on this subject

matter. While this research appears theoretically abstruse, it is in fact of a crucial pragmatic importance in present day northern Nigeria as the region struggles to come to terms with the numerous heart-breaking social, economic, cultural and religious problems. If a culture or society is said to be best represented by its art, there is no doubt that the author shows a pragmatic way to solving some predicaments of cultural and other repressive practices against women folk in certain parts of northern Nigeria.

The novel under study emerges from a society where the socio-cultural and economic realities of women have been defined by Islam. Many a scholar states rightly that the advent of Islam in the fourteenth century produced a group of Islamic clerics and reformers in the major northern cities whose activities had a lasting influence upon popular traditional practices. Through Islam and its teachings, the culture and the dominant religion are established in the minds of people and in the society by an accepted set of laws. *Sacred Apples* develops from the need to address issues affecting women in order to suggest how the girl-child could redress the patriarchal and other religious impediments. Gimba adopts a central female character, Zahrah, to address a myriad of issues concerning marriage, polygamy, girl-child education and economic empowerment of women.

The thematic thrust of the novel ranges from societal to family life: the girl-child dilemma, patriarchal holds on women, general issues concerning education, cultural and traditional impediments. Critics have maintained that in many societies and at varying degrees, women have been prisoners of culture, religion and tradition. Given this dominant practice, Gimba engages in the dynamics of struggle to accentuate the conviction that the female gender is capable of breaking the jinx of social barrier that fettered her in order to make significant difference in life and existence. The author is concerned with feminist consciousness in a society where the bog of tradition entangles in perennial conflict with Islam. Gimba's conviction is in tandem

with the position of Abdulhamid (2013, p. 87) that women participation in the process of economic, social and political development of the country can be enhanced through a girl-child education. She asserts that the denial of women's right to education stems from socio-cultural barrier, religious misinterpretation and poverty.

Theoretical Paradigm

Since the movement for women liberation started in Europe with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Right of Women*, the relationship between men and women, as artistically being portrayed in most African fictions, remains perennially confusing and inconsequential. Generally, feminism in the African literary scene is characterized by various sub-genres. Nnolim (2010, p.115) posits that "the contours of the feminist literary landscape in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular presents a panorama of ululating topography; it is a house divided in itself and at present, looks discomfortingly like the leaning Tower of Pisa". The interpretation of this assertion in a simple language is that feminism cannot be described as a unified theoretical and philosophical discourse. It is rather characterized by various ideological differences, postulations and mutually irreconcilable cultural perceptions.

In view of the fact that feminist discourse has a wide range of several sub-genres, this paper adopts the liberal feminism as a theoretical paradigm. The primary goal of liberal feminism is gender equality in public sphere such as equal access to education, equal pay, and better working condition for women and freedom from oppression and violence. The renewed commitment for economic and social equality gave rise to the revival of the liberal feminist movement in Nigeria during the 1980s. The liberal feminist groups such as Womamsm, Motherism and Accommodationalist uphold the African family system but fight to end education and job discrimination on the basis of sex. They

also challenged the dominant patriarchal tradition which combined to undermine women. Liberal feminism like Womanism emphasizes completeness, unity and equality of races and sexes in the world. According to Ezinwanyi (2012):

Womanism is a movement that celebrates women's strength as a pillar — the strength that brings men to recognise and compromise for harmonious co-existence of both sexes, in other words, womanism does not allow extremities either from the males or the females. Rather, it argues for equality and harmonious living of the two sexes. Womanism is also a special culture that reminds men with special indication that without women's full involvement in the socio economic and political systems, man is incomplete in actions as well as in achievements (p. 82).

Gimba's *Sacred Apples* aligns strongly with the liberalist feminist discourse. It seeks to promote the right of women through economic empowerment and access to education. By adopting a post-colonial, liberal feminist discursive framework, the essay seeks to interrogate feminine/gender trajectories. Writers have fictionally problematized the many grudges that the feminists have against patriarchal tradition and all-pervading ideological nuances especially as it affects various societies, where women have persistently been seen as prisoners of culture, tradition and religion. The paper posits that the emerging feminist writers from the north have critically examined the substantiation of sexual dichotomy in their societies and show how the female gender continues to be intimidated and subjugated. They do not only challenge the prevalent gender stereotypes, but also question the socio-cultural practices that hinder the girl child from achieving selfhood. In Northern Nigeria, submission to the tradition, the culture and dominant religion is established in the minds of the

writers as well as the society by accepted sets of laws or imperceptible hand of self control (Kabir, 2013). It is significant to note that Gimba aspires in his effort to act as the conscience and liberation agent in society. Besong (as cited in Yacim, 2012) argues that:

The power of the writer is not always strong to change the political and social situation of his time, but his art can become a fighting literature. He can write works that are artistically profound and politically correct; he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be (p.58).

Like Achebe, Ngugi and other literary historians who believe in utilitarian values of literature, Gimba considers the necessity of art as a reflection of society. People need to know how their society looks like and perhaps to re-examine how to promote a social change. The writer needs to expose what is happening and lay bare the vices that require amendment. *Sacred Apples* reflects the material existence and the social experience of the people.

Critical Review

It has been observed that within the postcolonial context, Fanon (1969, p. 193) advocates that, writers must align themselves to producing a 'literature of combat.' This is a literary production that moves away from the creation of the African past to a conscious attempt at addressing the concrete social issues of the day within the ambit of the nation state. Postcolonial feminist literature is a departure from the anti-colonial discourse to a vision of social change in the context of anomy. Fanon posits that while at the beginning, the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read by the oppressor, now the postcolonial writer

takes on the habit of addressing his own people. Critics have also argued that in Africa and other parts of the developing world, the basic elements of the novel form are still used to narrate stories, to present different characters and to develop themes relevant to the community.

Significantly, the novel has generated a lot of critical attentions due, possibly, to what Griswold (2000) describes as a preoccupation with issues that are more or less realistic in terms of everyday experience about recognizable characters with recognizable problems (Omotosho as cited in Umar, 2013). The thematic preoccupation of Gimba's *Sacred Apple* relates to religion, culture and girl child education. Islamic faith has long been integrated both in the cultural and social context of the author's society as reflected in the novel. Because of Islam, the marriage institution among the Muslims in the north is mostly that of a polygamous setting. This practice, according to critics, has perpetually kept the Muslim women marginalized and denied her fundamental right to self fulfillment. It has been mentioned that Islam which should have modified the tradition of the north about marriage in a right perspective is being manipulated in the same society. By implication, Gimba, like other writers from the region, reveals that the indigenous tradition overshadows the teaching of Islam. This culture has put women at a serious disadvantaged position. Gimba reconciles the feminist thinking with the practice of Islam. The setting of the novel is geographically a society where Islam has been entrenched as a dominant cultural ideology before the advent of Western Imperial authority and its Judeo-Christian education and civilization. Considering this age long tradition and cultural practices, feminist politics becomes an inevitable thematic thrust of fictions emerging from the north. In the literary front, Gimba's *Sacred Apples* treads the path of liberal feminist thought that recognizes the right of woman in Islam but canvassing for non aggressive pursuit of gender equity.

A critic asserts that as far as the world lasts, there will be wrongs, and if nobody protests or rebels, such wrongs shall last forever. For this reason, gender, feminine discourse continues to generate scholarly interest, as there would always be divergent opinions seeking expression on this subject matter. Poverty is a crucial determinant to the situation in which women find themselves in the north. With the inadequate or almost a near absence of basic necessities as shelter, health services, education, food and sanitation, there is no sustainable foundation on which to empower women. In most cases, women are extremely weak or incapacitated to help themselves, their siblings and the community.

The plot structure of *Sacred Apples* revolves around the collapse of a nine-year-old marriage between Zahra and her husband, Yazid. For reason that bothers on a spurious allegation, Yazid gives his wife an irrevocable divorce of three pronouncements. This is a prevalent practice among Muslim couples in a dominant Islamic society portrayed in the novel. Zahrah confirms this when she tells her grandmother, Zubaydah that "he wrote it, and told me so verbally in his words, he said he has divorced me, not just three times, but a thousand times...so there is no basis for any reconciliation" (Gimba, 1994, p. 29). In view of this nature of divorce, Zahrah relocates to her grandmother's home to re-strategise a way forward. On getting back home, her grandmother proposes reconciliation between the estranged couple, but the nature of the divorce as far as the traditional religious practice is concerned remains impossible. For this reason, Zubaydah feels dejected in her response to the matter. She laments: "Yazid himself? He should know that it's wrong. Our religion forbids? it... it's sinful" (Gimba, 1994, p. 2). Zahrah's divorce poses a dilemma for her as a divorcee and single parent responsible for the caring of three children. She shows determination not only to forge ahead but also to stay away from her estranged husband and every other man. Zahrah is imbued

with an inner strength and capacity to withstand the predicament that threatens her. Gimba passes the message of hope to Muslim women enjoining them to explore themselves to discover and utilize their latent potentials.

In a patriarchal society reflected in *Sacred Apple*, the author does not condemn polygamy as an institution for obvious reason of religious injunction. However, through his main character, he preaches against the docile, blind submissive, subjugated and dependent woman who sees her husband as an indispensable entity in the face of tyranny. Gunba believes that after several decades of feminist writings in the north, Muslim women have made a significant progress in their socio-economic standing. In line with this positive outlook, he creates a modern woman in the north who can be independent, confident, and intelligent, focused and face adversity with courage. The forces against Zahra are both physical and abstractive, yet she survives.

The case of women in Northern Nigeria is worth considering particularly from the way the religion is being manipulated to suit the whims and caprice of the patriarchal dictate. Zahrah laments: "Himm...religion... religion? When it comes to dealing with women or their wives, many men are guided more by their whims and passions than by principles or religion" (Gimba, 1994, p. 29). Here the novel bemoans the cultural influence rather than the religious interpretation. Gimba condemns the abuse of the process of polygamy rather polygamy itself. He shows how men sometimes practice polygamy in a way that is injurious to their women. The passions of individuals obviously overshadow the teaching of the Islamic faith and, in the aftermath, place women at a disadvantaged position. Gimba portrays the ordeals of women in marriage even as he advocates education as an essential tool for challenging part of the inequalities. The education that Zahrah possesses becomes the weapon she employs to forge ahead and define a new life.

According to Kabir (2013, p.487} "education and economic autonomy become avenue for survival for the oppressed women." In a related development, Urnar (2013) argues that the thematic concerns of *Sacred. Apple* suggests that Gimba subscribes to women's education at all levels. The concern for girl child education constitutes what Gimba considers as the philosophy of national development. Armed with a university degree before her divorce with Yazid, Zahrah secures a job through the assistance of her brother, Shareef. With a paid job at hand, she braces up for the challenges of a nursing mother and a career woman in a public establishment. Through her job, she provides sustenance for her children while at same time contributes to national productivity. The image of Zahrah paints by the author is that of a woman who rises above cultural inhibitions to become useful not only to herself but to her society as well.

Sacred Apples thus interrogates several feminist issues including the notion that a woman must be under the control of man in order to have a fulfilled life. Guided by his socio-religious background, Gimba employs Zubaydah to prompt Zahrah to contemplate another marriage. Though Zahrah initially rejects the thought of re marrying, her grandmother becomes extremely bitter as Zahrah could visualize in her dream. The narrator points out (Grimba, 1994):

Zubaydah was angry with her. Why had she refused to marry" Nousah on account of his earlier marriage" She scolded Zahrah not only for shunning polygamy, but for doing so with disdain while yet, she was a product of polygamy (p.40).

Zahrah gives reason for her reaction to what her grandmother suggests to her in a dream. She tells Zubaydah (Gimba, 194).

She had no disdain for the institution itself, hut the practice. Most men, she wanted to tell her grandmother, had bastardized the institution and turned marital homes into houses of horror for women. The limits and conditions set out in the Book for the practice have been conveniently ignored by many a man to the greater detriment of women, resulting in abuses and humiliation that place some of them only a little bit above slaves (p.173).

This outburst supports the notion that in a patriarchal society depicted in the novel, the whims and passions overshadow the religious law. Zahrah later re marries in spite of the bitter experience attendant upon her first marriage. She marries Nousah, a man who shows love, compassion and understanding. However, the marriage which appears blissful and promising at the beginning starts to crumble because of the intrigues of Zahrah's co-wives. She found herself in the midst of a polygamous family with all its attendant predicaments. The courage as well as the determination with which she withstands the intrigues and machinations of the co wives is worth considering, Zahrah insists (Gimba, 1994):

it's a cultural outgrowth, and a malignant one, the institution of polygamy in our religion. The Holy Scripture exhorts men to treat women equally, yet, here we are fighting each other for preferential treatment, wanting superiority over each other, fighting for unequal treatment... It is not supposed to be so. We are all equal before our man and God. We only owe ourselves mutual respect. Arid

the best of us is the one that is best in conduct in our dealings (p.175).

This narration shows that polygamy as a form of marriage institution is not inherently bad as portrayed in many feminist theorists. The problem lies squarely on envious individuals who are parties to it. This opinion is in consonance with the submission of Abubakar Bilqisu (as cited in Yacim, 2012) that "People believe I hate polygamy but this is not so; it is the abuse of the institution that I dislike because I am a product of polygamy, and it's been a wonderful experience" (p. 54). Gimba (as cited in Worugi, 2015) believes that feminist organisations like the International Commission for Abolition of Sexual Mutilation (CAMS) founded in 1976, which proposed to work towards enhancing women's status in society through the abolition of institutionalized polygamy, obligatory motherhood and illiteracy of women failed to appreciate how polygamy is conceptualised in Islam. Zahrah does not show the readers that polygamy is bondage for the women. She shows an understanding of the gulf between what the religion preaches and what the traditional attitude of individual is, even though, it is obvious that she is caught between the desire to be a committed, dutiful wife and a working-class woman in an unfriendly polygamous home. She finds herself in the midst of co-wives who plot evil that eventually thwarts her desire for peaceful marriage. In the polygamous set up reflected by Gimba, Zahrah's second marriage turns out to be set for another trauma and failure. Remarkably, Zahrah depicts an embodiment of the modern educated woman, who, according to Asabe Yusuf still in Umar (p.533) is entangled in the web of two opposing forces: the assertiveness she receives from education and the passivity of cultural practices often encouraged by men to serve certain interests. Sonia Chattas Soliman (as cited in Joseph, 2007) argues:

The Qur'an provides the Muslim with a set of laws, values and principles that constitute a standard of conduct and a way of life. It proclaims the partnership of men and women and their equal spiritual and human values of each sex. However, local customs and male ascendancy in society have put women under men's control (p. 220).

The argument is that most often, cultural tradition is superimposed on the society but given the semblance of religion to accord the practice a divine authority. Gimba's (1994) *Sacred Apples* brings Islam in to limelight by reflecting how religion is being misrepresented. The narrator, in a quite authorial voice, states clearly through Ya-Shareef, that "the problem has not been the blueprint (the religion, the Quran). The problem has been the practice, adherence to commandments. The misapplication and outright violation, such is the nature of mankind" (p.304). *Sacred Apples* is a fiction which has made it clear that education, according to Islam, is not a prerogative of the men. The girl- child needs to be supported so that she can take her place of pride in society. Gimba concludes his feminist religious outlook by denouncing the so-called superiority of men over women. He uses the last testament to mankind as a basis of his assertion that "women are equal to men. No more no less. Quite clearly the book states that "men are a degree above women, a degree of responsibility, not of superiority" Gimba, 1994, p. 305).

Conclusion

Gimba is a prominent male feminist writer whose novel promotes the right of women in a non-radical approach. His work is different from the radical feminist that is merely destroying and ruining many family lives. The family relations and family lives are falling prey to aggressive radical feminism. *Sacred Apples* depicts a female character, Zahrah, but the author deliberately

denies her the radical traits that women commonly possess in several other feminists work in Nigeria. Gimba canvasses feminism within a defined social, economic, political and social context. His novel has been selected in order to highlight the true meaning of woman. Feminism with unlimited liberty is merely a source of destruction for many women depriving them of motherly love, injecting them with frustration, depression and annoyance. Zahrah is a victim of all the negative qualities that can be seen in the narration, yet the novel has tried to move away from promoting a scandalous means of resolving gender conflicts

The author also reminds readers that religion will always remain a serious challenge to Northern Nigerian women as long as it is used to justify oppression and disempowerment. It is critical that religious leaders participate in ensuring that an enabling environment is made possible for women to play effective roles in society. Culture is closely related to religion. It is imperative that all cultural practices that are inimical to women's empowerment are kept at the lowest ebb. The cultural barrier is usually less when women move up the class structure.

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