



## Novel Traditions in Contemporary Northern Nigerian: A Generic Analysis of Three Novels from Northern Nigeria

DR. DANLADI ABDU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, KANO

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the current trends of literature in English from northern Nigeria, focusing on three acclaimed and contemporary novelists, namely AbubakarGimba, Zaynab Alkali and Aliyu Kamal. It examines the way the three novelists handle and portray contemporary realities in northern Nigeria. The three novelists are from different states of Northern Nigeria in that their thematic treatments will be critiqued or measured within the context of contemporary generic model. Therefore, a close reading of the three novels is done. The finding of the study reveals that the three novelists converged in three depiction of the theme of education and marriage as a generic model models. Similarly, Kamal and Gimba converge on the theme of tribalism as far as their thematic treatment is concerned. However, Alkali diverges in the treatment of self-independence women, advocating for women to liberally liberate themselves from patriarchal bondage. This reveals the social commitment of the three writers in the depiction of contemporary social-cultural realities in northern Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Novel Traditions, Novelists, Northern Nigerian and Generic themes*

### I. Introduction

This paper explores novel traditions in contemporary northern Nigeria, focusing on the thematic preoccupation of the three major novelists from the region. The study deploys Contemporary Generic Model (CGM) to analyze the selected novels and come up with features the novelists converge or diverge in the exploration and depiction of contemporary realities about their region-northern Nigeria. In addition, the study evaluates, using the selected novels, the current trends of novel traditions in English in the region.

Literature, by virtue of its imaginative power, penetrates into the socio-economic and political life of a people (Orabueze, 2005). This penetrating power of literature into the fabric of a

society enables creative writers to explore wide range themes which appeal to their creative inspirations. They use any genre appropriate to their thematic exploration that could aptly contain and convey their messages for the consumption of people. As argued by Hawthorn (1985), "the novel form is a recent phenomenon which was approximately said to have emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. p.3" This underscores the fact that a plethora of themes by northern Nigerian literary writers are designed and depicted in a novelistic form and they achieved universal recognition and acceptability (Jaji, 2015).

### Novel Tradition in Northern Nigeria (an overview)

The novel genre was recent phenomena in northern Nigeria compared to other two genres which were rigorously exploited by northern Nigerian writers. Corroborating this, Abodurin (1990) expatiates that in the past, only a few writers from northern Nigeria were able to produce novel in English because western education was not recognized and embraced owing to western overtures associated with it. In addition, poetic writings were practiced by them much earlier than novel writing, which was predominantly exploited using local languages (Joseph, 2006).

### Statement of the Problem

There are many writers in Northern Nigeria that have written good master piece of novels in English now compared to the immediate pasts. However, their works have received little critical attention from critics and students alike. Novel writing is a genre that many northern Nigerian writers ventured into in the recent past. . Added to this, based on the burgeoning works reviewed, the three writers` novels have not been researched from comparative angle. Each writer`s novels were analyzed individually. This is what informed the conduct of this research: *Novel Traditions in Contemporary Northern Nigerian: A Generic*



*Analysis of Three Novels from northern Nigeria with a view to address the gap.*

## II. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (a) To read closely the three novels with a view to identify how the three writers converge and diverge in the portrayal of their thematic thrusts.
- (b) To identify the three novelist handles characters in the portrayal of their themes.
- (c) To explore the current trends of novel traditions in contemporary northern Nigeria, using the Contemporary generic Model (GCM).

## III. Review of Literature

Abodurin (1990) argues that literature in English in northern Nigeria is pathetically scanty and largely infused with sluggish imitation of Indian films, European novels etc. This is corroborated by Jibril (1990), who laments that the limiting barrier in producing acclaimed works in northern Nigeria is caused by lack of western education and contemptuous attempt to create something imaginatively, using ones creative initiations. The scholars above fail to realize the fact that literature, in native languages, occupies a prominent stage in Northern Nigeria. For example, a volumes of novels heavily imbued with wide range of contemporary themes are massively written or produced by novelists in Hausa and Fulfulde. This is strongly buttressed by Abba (1997 ) that "Amongst the northern Nigerian Languages, Hausa, as the Linqua Franca of north, is the most popular Language for literacy purposes, books in languages other than Hausa are rare" (p/4.)

Malumfashi (2007) observes that Hausa novels, at the moment, become more prominent in some Northern Nigerian States. At best Kano has become the most spring board for the sales of the books. According to Falani (2022), this makes Kano state the hub Market Literature. Malumfashi (2006) observes that the secondary school leavers, wives with low literacy and semi-iterate adults find the novels written in Hausa extremely attractive and interesting. Besides, they hold them with high esteem, as their intractable companions.

Umar (2012) observes that literature in English from Northern Nigeria is a nascent one; aspiring for recognition on the worlds literary scene. Implicit in its budding protrusion, the potential writers in the region are not ideologically committed to write in English. To borrow from Abdulraheem etal. (1990), this is occasioned by the reasons that the northern part of Nigeria was not adequately immersed in 'white man's education' during colonial

era. He adds that Western education was inimically frowned and relegated to background by the northern elites.

In his book, *Understanding Literature and Literary Appreciation*, Abdu (2013) contends that literature in Northern Nigeria had been in existence as old as the society itself. Poetry, rendered in oral form, had been more prominent and powerful than say drama and prose. This underscores the existence of and the inclusion of the elements of Arabic literary traditions in literary outputs produced by many writers from northern Nigeria in Hausa, which is seen largely in the genre of poetry.

At best, contemporary novelists, writing in English, are emerging in Northern Nigeria. For example, Kamal's novels, in commensurate terms, attain literary height but they are not widely circulated as Gimba's and other writers (Shabba 2015) This amplifies the fact that a paradigm shift is witnessed with emergence of a crop of writers, from the region, such as Abubakar Gimba, Zaynab Alkali, Helon Habila, Laboyari, Ibrahim Tahir to mention but a few whose novels are heavily imbued with contemporaneous themes (Opaluwa, 2007). One can say the emergence of such novelists is seen as a manifestation of a great literary achievement. In support of this Ingra, (1985) argues that "Committed African novelists are extremely sensitive to the social problems of their day and coming to grip with them, hoping to play their parts" (p.:12). This underscores that novel is a narration that tells rather than enacts and this distinguishes it, in an important sense, from drama. Jeremy (1985) contends that what sets novel apart from other genre is its ability to incorporate a lot from human life and experiences through its narrative features or power. Using the three novels of Kamal, Zaynab and Gimba would justify to the above mentioned claims.

As far as literary contribution of Gimba is concerned, Fajenyo (2008) puts that the potential of Gimba's fiction as a propitious framework for advancing the cause of northern Nigerian literature is not far-fetched. In addition, Kabir (2005:158) remarks that Abubakar Gimba is a male writer with difference: first, he hails from Northern Nigeria; an area that is rich in oral folklore but lacking creative writers in the English language

In the same vein, Jaji (2015) sees Kamal's novels as the novels that explore the conflicts and tensions of Hausa/Fulani community and the encroaching denudation of their culture by materialistic modern society. David (2006) adds that Kamal's voice from the North deserves attention whenever the novel in English is mentioned.



#### IV. Methodology

The population of this study is textual; therefore the three novels are going to be closely read and analysed on a chapter by chapter basis with a view to coming up with generic themes in contemporary northern Nigeria. This indicates how the three novelists converge or diverge in the depiction of northern Nigerian experiences.

#### Data Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

In this section, each novel will be discussed from its plot summary and its thematic focus.

##### Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apple*

##### Plot Summary of the Novel

The novel begins with exposition of the central heroine, Zahrah, who takes a bus to New Timbuktu to see her grandmother. She and her grandmother are portrayed as intimate partners, caring for each other. This underscores the sense of belonging and communalism inherited and nurtured by African norms and values. The narrator says "she knelt down and embraced her grandmother" (P.5).

Zahrah is depicted as a woman overshadowed by patriarchal domination; yet she is depicted as a courageous character with visionary insight. Her husband, Yazid, maltreats her and divorces her, leaving her with a bunch of children to take care of. Supporting this, Kabir, A. (2006) points out that *Sacred Apple* captures the life of Zahrah, a woman torn between living the traditional life of passivity and the challenging life of a career woman.

Zahrah and her children had an accident in which she loses her consciousness and her children sustain minor injuries. Yet none of them dies. The accident occurs when an agitated mob put the police in motion and action, firing tear gas, in different directions, to disperse them. In the event, the car, in which Zahrah and her children are driven, is set on fire. By Allah's Mercy, two generous couples, a Christian as the wife and a Muslim as the husband, come to their rescue. In the rescue effort, Zahrah is nowhere to be found but all her children are rescued and left in the custody of the couple, Ya Sheriff and Miriam. She, Zahrah, thinks that her children are burnt in the car thus, not certain where they are alive or not (P. 9).

Meanwhile, she tells her mother how she is rescued by police and hospitalized and catered for by a nice female nurse (P.11), the accident scene is artistically brought to the fore, because it forms the fulcrum of the thematic concern of the novel, in which Samaritanism as opposed to "I don't care attitude" is emphasized or reinforced. It is, therefore, intertwined into a vital concern by portraying a

couple realized through inter-tribal marriage. Living in peace and nurtured by national ethos and discarding sectional and tribal sentiment, the couple, especially Miriam, shows resilient and determined struggle to put Zahrah's children off the danger. This is occasioned by her concern for the children's lives. The narrator says: "Oh! my God...said Miriam, her voice betraying concerns, as she watched the scene through her pair of binoculars. It is a woman and her kids in side (P. 33). The following themes are depicted in the Novel:

##### The Theme of Intertribal Marriage

This theme forms the driving force of the narrative of the novel. By intertribal marriage, Gimba attempts to locate and situate Nigerians under a monolithic umbrella. Gimba portrays how a Muslim is allowed to marry a Christian woman; for the practice is recognized and approved in Islam. Yarashaf, a Muslim, is shown as a husband of Miriam, a Christian and their roles in the novel are one of artistic excellence of the novel, because it brings to the fore what is approved through the prism of Islam.

##### The Theme of Education

The novelist portrays the theme of education in relation to the central character, Zahrah, Miriam and Yarashaf. The level of education acquired by Miriam, a Christian, prompts her to go to rescue Zahrah's children during the mob accident. Equally, through education, Zahrah is able to secure a job and take care of her abandoned children that Yazid, her ex-husband, cannot take care of.

##### Kamal's *Silence and a Smile*

##### Plot Summary of the Novel

In the beginning, the central character, Ashiru Lawal, a young graduate, who comes back from National Service (N.Y.S.C) to his town, Kano. On reaching home, he discovers that his room has been burgled. He suspects his brother, Sadiq, for breaking into his room. Dije, the mother of Sadiq, rushes and takes sides with her son, abusing Ashiru and accusing her husband of taking sides with Ashiru. The fighting fuels tension in the family. His father is angered with his wife's unfavourable comments given that he is a man of high moral standing. Obiechina, (2007:326) is right when he says writing and reading a novel imply widening the imaginative capability of the writer and audience, so that one appreciates a portrayal of social reality. For what Kamal does is an attempt to depict socio-cultural realities.

Ashiru does not respond to her, he just walks to Larai, his stepmother, who adopts him after the



death of his mother. Larai begins to complain about the unruly behaviour of Hamidu, her son, who is aimless person lacking visionary insight. Ashiru consoles her and promises to take care of the case. The next day, he visits his friend, Isa, and, to his surprise, finds him already married to Zohra, his relative. They are Fulani and strongly believe in kinship marriage. Isah introduces Ashiru to Zohra and they have pleasant chats.

As he is about to leave for home, Ashiru catches a glimpse of Diya, a girl he suddenly falls in love with. She is an immediate sister to Zorah. He has known her for long, since she was much younger, but now she has changed and is of marriageable age. Their love is indeed strengthened by Isa and Zohra who feel that the two match each other. Diya becomes very committed to Ashiru despite the fact that her parents do not allow her to marry him because of their belief in kinship marriage, as conducted between Zohra and Isah.

Ashiru visits his elder brother, Ahmad, and tells him about his new job as an assistant lecturer. Ahmad, who is glad with the new, is a senior officer in charge of awarding contracts. He discharges his duties judiciously on the basis of Islamic principles. He is a man of upright behaviour and a good model, as far as civil servants are concerned. He does not allow personal interests to overshadow his assignment. Kamal indicts the Nigerian civil service for not being transparent in the discharge of civil responsibility.

AljajiMalle, the uncle of Diya opposes the marriage between Ashiru and her. He arranges the marriage between Zakiy and Diya, against the wish of Diya. Zakiy is kin, a cousin and Malle (Diya's uncle) and her mother Hafsa are, therefore, very skeptical about the non-family marriage. Her relatives believe strongly in this tradition, whereby members of the family marry only within the family. This belief is backed by the fact that it strengthens relationships and makes them more sustainable. They also believe that the non-kinship marriage does not bind ties as strongly as the kinship marriage does.

The following are the themes of the novel:

#### **The Theme of Kinship Marriage**

This is the major theme in the novel, a pivot on which the novel revolves. The author indicts the society for tribal sentiment that retards the social progress of Nigeria. It revolves around the central character, AshiruLawan a Hausa man, who deeply falls in love with DiyaGarba, a Fulani girl. He is denied marry her on tribal grounds, because he is not a Fulani man. Diya, according to the wish of her family is forced to marry her cousin, Zakiy. She hates

him. From the context of this, Wright (1973:10) says: "we sometimes make mistakes of talking about values (cultural) as though they were fixed and eternal" (p.10).

#### **The Theme of Education**

Kamal's major center stage lies in the portrayal of the impact of education by depicting his central character AshiruLawal, who comes back from National Service (N.Y.S.C) to his town, Kano. Ashiru leads a decent life as a result of the exposure he has from the education. Even when scuffle or fighting between Ashiru and his younger brother, Sadiq, the mother of Sadiq, Dile, intervenes in favour of her son, abusing Ashiru. But Ashiru remains quiet and does not retaliate (P. 7).

#### **The Theme of Tribalism**

Ashiru, being a Hausa man is rejected by AlhajiMalle to marry Diya. Tribalism is one of the contemporary problems in northern Nigeria. The author here indicts the society for tribal sentiment, which he believes retards the social progress of not only Nigeria, in particular, but also of Africa, in general. Thus, in trying to bring an end to the relationship between Diya and Ashiru, AlhajiMalle buys a car (Honda concerto) for Diya to win her over to accept Zakiy (p.121)

#### **Alkali's the Descendent**

#### **Plot Summary of the Novel**

Seytu is depicted as female central character in *The Descendant*. She loses her father at a tender age. At the age of thirteen (13), she is forced to marry the District head of Dam against her wish. Unfortunately, her first husband deserts her after damaging her. She suffers Vescio Vaginal Fistula and has three surgeries. This makes her to be determined and become a professional consultant Pediatrician through sheer hard work and dedication.

At worst, Seytu's second husband marries another wife one month after Seytu gives birth to twins. The husband is inconsiderate at all. Having dissatisfied with her stays with her second husband, she deserts him without being divorced and establishes another marriage with Col. Hassan. This underscores that Seytu is radical in her world space by choosing to lead her life as result of exposure she acquires through western education. This supports Kassam. (1997)that Alkali is obsessed with treatment of women education.

Seytu establishes a cordial relationship with the chief medical director, Dr, Zaki, who gives her moral and fatherly support to contribute to economic and social change in Makulpo, through the



provision of good health care facility, borehole, and electronic generator.

Her grandmother always serves a source of joy and inspiration Seytu. The narrator says: the grandmothers prays thus: Seytu the daughter of Ilia, her affliction pulls at my heart strings. Grant her a Successful operation and cure her. Let her read and become educated. I want her to compete with the doctors in Makulpo Hospital.

Magira, the grandmother of Seytu is an indigene of Ramta but moves with her family to settle among educational elites of Makulpo to avert the encroaching of death, poverty, disease and ignorance. She embodies the contemporary woman in northern Nigeria. She sees change as inevitable in her socio-political and economic life. Although she is not an educated in the western way, she is an easy-going person. She has all her grandchildren, especially the girls enrolled in school.

Peni, the cousin of Seytu, is a victim of early marriage arranged by her mother who is depicted as greedy. She succumbs to tradition of her community. She acts to the dictation of her uncle Aji and her mother Dala instead of acquiring western education. Peni, after she is battered severally by her husband MaduChimba, is liberated from the unaccomplished marriage but, at worst, not living fruitful life like Seytu. The following are the themes of the novel:

### **The Theme of Unsuccessful Marriage**

Seytu is depicted as female central character in *The Descendant* who experiences bitter marital experiences. At the age of thirteen (13), she is forced to marry the District head of Dam against her wish. Unfortunately, her first husband deserts her after damaging her. She suffers Vescio Vaginal Fistula and has three surgeries.

### **The Theme of Education**

This theme is linked to the way Seytu becomes economically self-reliant, having acquired education. Alkali effectively depicts this theme by contrasting Seytu and Peni her cousin who is not educated at all. Peni, being illiterate, is engrossed in consulting oracle for her brighter future.

### **Women Subjugation**

Seytu and Peni are typical example of female characters that are martially subjugated in the novel. Seytu is abandoned by her first husband, who marries a young girl. She suffers from vescio vagina fistula after the birth of her daughter Hawwa. Similarly, she suffers her second husband Yerima Gamma who relegates her to the background after giving birth to a twin .On the other hand, Peni is

forced by her mother and father to marry a butcher for their personal gains.

### **Self-Independence**

Seytu is woman who rejects all forms of subjugation inflicted on her by second husband. She vehemently forsakes him and marry a husband of her choice, who she feels recognize her worth. This demonstrates the contemporary woman depicted by Alkali is prepared, if need be, to discountenance both marriage and traditional institution that is inhibitive to her self-realization”(154). The female characters are not against marriage or men, they only reject relationships that oppress or reduce their worth.

### **A Comparative Critique of the Three Novels from Generic Themes**

From the generic model perspective, tribalism is a model on the basis that the two novels: *Silence and a Smile* and *Sacred Apple* are optimistic in idealizing society devoid of tribalism. In *Silence and a Smile*, Kamal indicts northern Nigeria tribes for insisting on establishing marital union on tribal identity. In the novel, the central character, AshiruLawan a Hausa man, who deeply falls in love with DijaGarba, a Fulani girl, is denied marrying her on tribal grounds, because he is not a Fulani man. In the same vein, Gimba depicts the impact of inter-tribal marriage as the best strategy that could promote peace in northern Nigeria. Yarashaf, a Muslim from Northern Nigeria marries Miriam, a Christian from southern part of Nigeria and they live peacefully. One can say that the Gimba and Kamal converge on one major theme as one of contemporary generic model that takes a center stage in their novel tradition Both writers are so much dissatisfied with tribalism. As such, they operate as social reformers, hoping to eradicate the stigma.

Similarly, the three writers also converge on the treatment of education as the generic model. Through this theme, the three writers champion the causes of masses and also cling onto their literary effort for the total overhaul of socio-economic life of both males and females in northern Nigeria. For example, Alkali and Gimba depict how education can change the life of women in Northern Nigeria. The instance of Seytu in Alkali's *The Descendent* and Zahrah in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* underscores the impact of education as mean of women liberation. Aligned to this, Kamal sees education as major center stage of socio-cultural change. In this, he demonstrates how youths can attain the economic height. Typical example is in the character of Ashirulawal who completes his degree and secures



employment as lecturer. The three writers stress the aspects of human and social changes of Nigeria.

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### V. Conclusion

The three novelists converged on the same generic model as far as their thematic treatment is concerned. This reveals the social commitment demonstrated by the three writers in the depiction of contemporary social-cultural problems that deter Nigeria from moving forward. The creative efforts of the three writers fit to the context of contemporary realities of northern Nigerian. The three writers share also the same style in their creative values, which are rooted in the progress of Nigeria. In other words, their writings situate them within the category of Alternative Tradition icons on the basis that they have creatively depicted northern Nigerian socio-cultural situations. The issue of marriage, education and tribalism are contemporary realities of northern Nigeria. The three writers are from different states in northern Nigeria but they are converged in the same thematic focus.

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