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Islamic-Hausa Feminism Meets Northern Nigerian Romance: The Cautious Rebellion of Bilkisu Funtuwa

Novian Whitsitt

Abstract: This study of contemporary Hausa literature analyzes a northern Nigerian body of popular fiction currently referred to as Kano market literature and known to Hausa speakers as *Littattafan Soyayya* (books of love). The popularity of this genre of romance rests firmly upon its subject matter, one that has proven controversial within the conservative Muslim environment of Hausa society. On the surface, the novels are preoccupied with love and marital relationships, depicting the ordeals faced by courting lovers or married couples. However, on a deeper level, the novels have become an explorative territory for the socially, culturally, and religiously loaded issues of polygamy, marriages of coercion, purdah, and the accessibility of female education. In effect, Kano market literature reflects the rapid social change confronting Hausa society and positions itself as a voice offering a new perspective on gender relations. This article examines closely the works of arguably the most celebrated woman writer, Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa. Acutely aware of her rigid social and religious milieu, Funtuwa offers suggestions to young women who desire a greater level of control over their familial relationships and educational direction.

Résumé: Cette étude de la littérature contemporaine Hausa analyse un corps de fiction populaire issu du nord du Nigeria et communément appelé littérature de marché Kano, et connu en langue Hausa sous le nom de *Littattafan Soyayya* ("livres d'amour"). La popularité de ce genre de roman à l'eau de rose est résolument fondée sur son sujet, lequel a été l'objet de controverses dans le milieu musulman conservateur de la société Hausa. En surface, ces romans se préoccupent de

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Novian Whitsitt lived in Kano, Nigeria, during the summer of 1994 and the academic year 1997–98. He worked closely with numerous writers and readers of Kano market literature as he began a literary, cultural, social, and religious critique of Hausa popular fiction. He completed his doctoral work in African languages and literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2000, and he currently teaches at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in the Departments of English and Africana Studies. He has published articles on popular Hausa literature and noted women writers, specifically the prolific Balaraba Ramat Yakubu.

l'amour et des relations maritales, décrivant les rudes épreuves auxquelles sont confrontés les amants amoureux ou les couples mariés. Cependant, à un niveau plus profond, ces romans sont devenus un territoire d'exploration des questions problématiques sociales, culturelles et religieuses touchant à la polygamie, aux mariages forcés, au purdah, et à l'accès des femmes à l'éducation. En réalité, la littérature de marché Kano reflète la rapidité des changements sociaux auxquels la société Hausa se trouve confrontée, et se positionne en tant que voix offrant une nouvelle perspective sur les relations entre les sexes. Cet article fait un examen approfondi des œuvres de l'écrivaine certainement la plus célèbre, Bilkiu Ahmed Funtuwa. Extrêmement consciente de la rigidité de son milieu social et religieux, Funtuwa offre des suggestions aux jeunes femmes qui désirent exercer un plus grand contrôle sur leurs relations familiales et sur leur orientation scolaire.

Kano Market Literature

In the urban areas of northern Nigeria, a burgeoning corpus of contemporary Hausa popular literature has captured the attention and concern of the entire Hausa community. The literature can be found in the cities of Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, Katsina, and Sokoto, but given that the majority of the books are written and sold in Kano, **the literature's English name is Kano market literature.** Avid readers have little difficulty locating booksellers who have strategically positioned themselves in the midst of every direction of foot-traffic. **Sidewalk displays, market stalls, and independent book kiosks appeal to onlookers with hundreds of book covers of youthful couples acting out love scenes.** This genre of popular romance fiction, known to Hausa speakers as *Littattafan Soyayya* (books of love), enjoys huge popularity as interested parties voraciously devour books and await the soon-to-be-published works of their favorite writers.

As a literary phenomenon, Kano market literature possesses aesthetic, thematic, and social similarities with the Onitsha chapbooks that were sold in the eastern Nigerian market from the forties to the sixties. The difference between the two groups is one of language. Onitsha literature, written predominantly in English, catered to the tastes of the more or less literate, Westernized Nigerians (Reeves 1968:2). Written in Hausa, Kano market literature contributes to the growing body of indigenous African written literature, and it has the potential to reach a large constituency of Hausa speakers, many of whom have a poor command of English. Most of the content of Onitsha literature pertained directly to the wave of change in the social climate of the time. The emerging chapbooks coincided with the social migration from the rural areas to the urban quarters in this east-

ern region of Nigeria. For the most part Onitsha authors wholeheartedly accepted and embraced the new values, making the literature an ally of change. Western norms integrated well with Igbo cultural attitudes of democracy, work ethic, and achievement (Obiechina 1973:7); hence, contemporary society and its values inspired little skepticism. The modern era simply necessitated the renunciation of supposedly archaic traditional customs.

Kano market literature possesses the same popular allure that the Onitsha chapbooks did forty years ago, and the plethora of book stalls attests to their success. In choosing a literary style, Soyayya writers have followed their Onitsha predecessors and have found the mode of “romance” effective in communicating social concerns. Regardless of time and place, the tensions between tradition and modernity in epochs of social transformation have continuously revealed themselves in the social and cultural dynamics of courtship and marriage; hence, the social value of romance literature lies in its placing such a subject center stage. The contemporary Hausa romance novel shares the Onitsha literary concerns of offering advice to a public experiencing social and cultural ruptures in an era when traditional values must negotiate the onslaught of modern life.

Hausaland, historically a traditional space determined to repulse foreign cultural influences, has experienced a tremendous influx of external social pressures. The cultural interface between indigenous and foreign norms and the unsettling of ancestral ways can be traced to the beginning of the colonial experience. The Hausa people were quite successful in minimizing the effects of cultural contamination. But more recently, Western culture has made inroads through the media—cinema, radio, and cable television. Popular icons are no longer traditional Hausa performers but the likes of Jean-Claude Vandamme, Tupac Shakur, and Michael Jordan. The impact of Western ways has been furthered by the increased immigration of southern Nigerians, such as Igbos and Yorubas, who typically have had greater exposure to the Western world. A non-Western cultural infusion also contributes to the climate of social change, as Indian films are arguably the most popular cinematic pastime among the Hausa.

The swirl of cultural pluralism has generated consternation over conventional gender relations, and Kano market literature has situated itself at the center of this discussion. The romantic novels have become an explorative forum for the socially and culturally loaded issues of *auren mata biyu* (polygamy), *auren dole* (marriages of coercion), *purdah* (the Islamic tradition of female seclusion), and *ilimin mata* (the education of females). Hausa writers treat the complexity of these dilemmas seriously as they explore the intricacies of the Hausa traditions. Herein lies the crucial distinction between Kano market literature and Onitsha chapbooks, which simply endorsed the wholesale acceptance of Western ways and values. Soyayya novels offer no easy solutions to these cultural perplexities. Writers are cognizant of the omnipresent Islamic sensibilities, and an overt support for

Western cultural tendencies would only alienate themselves from their audience. Their Muslim identity supercedes any other allegiance, and they write from the perspective of a conservative religious and cultural environment. However, the dominant Islamic identity of the writers does not imply conformity of opinion.

Over the course of a year (1997–98), I conversed with sixty Hausa writers in the areas of Kano, Kaduna, Zariya, Sokoto, and Katsina, conducting extensive interviews regarding their opinions of Kano market literature. I spent time speaking with avid readers and with the general public as well, trying to gauge their estimation of the popular literature and its contribution to Hausa society. Based on that research, I have concluded that public opinion criticizes the literature harshly for allegedly corrupting the minds of the youth, especially young women, who supposedly fall victim to the sexual promiscuity encouraged by the works. In an open letter to Soyayya writers, the editor of the religious magazine *Gwagwarmaya* (Struggle) wrote:

Right from your book cover the design is sinful. . . . Similarly when somebody reads your books he will see that the inside consists of sin and forbidden things. And when it comes to letters in the books to believe in them will make somebody deviate from the teachings of his religion. Quotations like “my better half” (*rabin raina*), “the light of my heart” (*hasken zuciyata*) and other lies make you wonder whether the writer should not be lashed. (Quoted in Larkin 1997:429)

Much of this response is based on hearsay, as most people have familiarized themselves with the literature only through word of mouth. In my study, which involved 209 interviews representing a cross section of the Kano population, less than 2 percent of the group had ever completed reading one of the Soyayya novels. Yet common belief still held that most books are read by female youth in secondary schools and that the vast majority of the works have prompted moral decay and youthful disobedience of parents. Others maintain that the literature is riddled with Western notions of love and does not reflect Hausa tradition. According to the social critic Hamisu Abdullahi Gumel, Soyayya writers attempt to inculcate readers with Western notions of romantic behavior. “My problem is not with these love stories,” he says, “but with the European-like characters and the indecency and immorality in the name of romance. It is not the Hausa culture for two lovers to be seen going out together visiting hotels, casinos or to bathe in swimming pools” (Gumel 1998:14). For such critics, censorship or an outright ban on the literature represents the best solution to the problem.

Contrary to public perception, Soyayya writers such as Ado Ahmad, Al-Hamees Bature Makwararee, Bilkisu Funtuwa, and Balaraba Yakubu assert that the novels are created with the ultimate intention of instilling proper

moral behavior among the reading constituency. Every writer stressed unequivocally their didactic intentions and their sense of civic and religious duty as cultural navigators aiding the confused in an era of social transformation. In order to clarify their ethical agendas, they include prefaces that explicate the thematic direction and instructive nature of their novels. And despite public opinion, individual readers do confirm that the books are helpful on several levels and possess the dual attributes of entertainment and instruction. Readers can experience an array of pleasurable fantasies while remaining conscious of the fact that the romantic stories are vehicles for the social concerns of the writers. Both male and female writers address issues of gender relations, but understandably women writers have shown themselves to be more committed to communicating female perspectives and concerns. Women writers and readers maintain that though male authors agree with the general sentiment of female empowerment, they frequently privilege the masculine emotional response and fail to explore the psychological reactions of women to the problematic institutions of forced marriage and polygamy. Often speaking from their own personal experiences, female writers imagine heroines who must navigate their way through conservative family politics in order to pursue their aspirations of marital choice or educational improvement. Other female protagonists encounter the emotional adversity inherent in co-wife relations.

Hausa women writers are undeniably feminist, in the sense that they are aware of the constraints placed upon women because of their gender and they desire to dislodge these constraints. But the feminist perspective of Kano market literature inevitably is bound up with the ubiquitous presence of Islam in northern Nigeria and with Hausa culture and politics. The problematics of a feminist point of view involve the widely accepted notion that “mainstream” feminism, which purports to speak to the needs of women universally, emerged from white, middle-class, Western culture. Many Third World women and women of Third World descent living in developed countries feel that this mainstream feminism, by confining itself to issues of gender discrimination (Johnson-Odim 1991:315), neglects the many other factors contributing to their oppression.

The narrow construction of feminism has been addressed by many African critics such as Carole Boyce Davies, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who seek to expand the discussion to include issues of gender, class, race, religion, and caste. African feminism has thus become an ideology committed to freedom from oppression based on political, social, economic, and cultural manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual, and class biases. It recognizes the connection between the oppressive effects of colonialism—which reinforced existing systems of social inequality while introducing new forms of social stratification—and the social position of women. With the achievement of independence, much of the social, sexual, and racial inequality continued to thrive within the colo-

nial economic structures that remained intact. Given these social consequences, African feminism places a study of colonial imperialism within its critical praxis.

Considering the interactive oppressions that impinge upon the lives of African women, the phrase “multiple jeopardy,” as coined by Deborah King, describes well the distinct features of African womanhood (1998:47). In developing a black feminist ideology, King expounds on the notion of “multiple jeopardy” in order to emphasize the numerous agents of oppression to which African American women are subjected. The model translates well to an African milieu insofar as it expresses the simultaneous ramifications of sexual, racial, cultural, economic, and political injustices.

The multiple jeopardy experienced by African women gives rise to a number of tensions between the interests of nationalism, feminism, and racial politics. African women may feel multiple allegiances: community affiliations, ethnic identification, global womanhood, and racial solidarity. The African woman writer’s identity may vacillate between a bond with global womanhood and one with her culture and race. Such a writer may also maintain a commitment to the particularities of class, caste, nationality, and religion. These multiple allegiances inevitably breed conflicts of interest as African women are occasionally forced to side with the camp of “sisterhood” or with that of their culture and tradition. Such controversial subjects like polygamy, female circumcision, and obligatory motherhood problematize female or cultural solidarity. But within a working paradigm of African feminism, the theory makes allowance for a certain flexibility in loyalties, refusing to impose a fixed or rigid analytical agenda. The complex living conditions of African women necessitate that they be allowed the freedom to choose allegiances that may prove contradictory.

Within the context of multiple allegiances or multiple jeopardy, the single most important consideration in the construction of Hausa feminism becomes the significance of Islam, the religious faith that colors virtually every aspect of social relations. Contrary to the popular Western perception of Islam, Islamic feminists universally profess that all of their needs can be fulfilled by proper adherence to the dictates of Islam. Despite the hostile tide of public criticism, which considers many of their ideas about forced marriage, female seclusion, and female education to be un-Islamic, they repeatedly affirm that the reforms they seek to implement involve no disloyalty to their faith. Muslims, in general, herald Islam as a faith that champions the rights of women, rescuing females from the oppression inherent in the *Jahiliyya* era, the pre-Islamic age of supposed ethical ignorance (Mernissi 1987:35). In the estimation of Islamic feminists, the central feature of the rules of conduct contained in the Qur’an, the supreme source of Islamic law, is the intent to improve the social position of women. The writers see themselves as negotiating the tensions between cultural/religious tradition and the elements of modernization, steeled in the faith that these forces are not incompatible entities.

Ijtihad (Qur'anic Rinterpretation) in *Soyayya* Novels

The Islamic legalistic notion of *ijtihad*, the historically accepted practice of reinterpreting the Qur'anic philosophy of human relations based on the political, educational, cultural, and economic norms of a specific era, offers insight into some of the varying religious perspectives of Soyayya writers. The assumption that the *Shari'a* (formal Islamic law) is totally divine and immutable in form is often encouraged by a conservative class of religious clerics (Engineer 1992:6). In truth, the *Shari'a* did not come into being instantaneously but went through a complex process of evolution. Its configuration never remained static; even after it assumed a recognizable shape, jurists employed the principle of *ijtihad* (literally, "exertion"), meaning individual creative interpretation of the scripture and the application of legal reforms (Stowasser 1998:34). The implementation of *ijtihad* in the early Islamic community constituted the dynamic element of Islamic law, but its practice was barred after the decline of the Abbasid empire in the twelfth century (Engineer 1992:6). The *Shari'a* as it was then formulated assumed an inert and perpetual quality. But now, in the spirit of *ijtihad*, Hausa female writers have sought to alter cultural interpretations of certain Qur'anic codes of behavior. Thus these writers insist that the call for social change and female empowerment occurs within the sanctions of Islamic doctrine.

The figurative *ijtihad* offered by Soyayya women writers reflects a wide range of social criticism on gender-sensitive subjects. A few have taken the so-called extreme view, condemning *auren dole* (forced marriage) and characterizing polygamy as an institution breeding patriarchal mistreatment of women. Such writers adamantly support the pursuit of female education at the expense of early marriage, abandonment of the Hausa tradition of *auren dole*, and masculine prudence in the quest for polygamous relations. Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa, arguably the most popular of the writers, represents a more conservative voice within Islamic-Hausa feminism, championing the welfare of women while maintaining her alliance with traditional Islamic thought and cultural expectations.

Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa: A Conservative in Revolt

Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa personifies the African feminist principle of multiple allegiances as she delicately balances her commitment to Hausa sisterhood with her Muslim identity. She maintains that *auren dole* and the religious practice of polygamy constitute the Hausa female's living reality, and consequently she offers suggestions on how to cope with such circumstances. In her estimation, women are responsible for their own emotional misery when they give into feelings of self-absorption and jealousy. With the proper attributes of religious faith, maturity, and tender affection toward

their husbands, women can find happiness in the midst of a polygamous reality. However, such a conservative stance does not preclude Bilkiu Funtuwa's overt support for female education, a belief that confronts traditional attitudes.

The works of Funtuwa all concern themselves with female protagonists who make use of their education and their religious devotion to elevate themselves to extraordinary levels of career success. Female characters pursue careers as lawyers, government administrators, and doctors while simultaneously leading charmed lives as wives of wealthy businessmen, splitting time between their northern Nigerian homes and their vacation flats in London. Despite this element of "life styles of the rich and famous," readers consistently affirm that they wade through the fantasy and grasp the moral lessons imparted.

Funtuwa's trademark is the theme of passionate love, the most memorable component of her works. She composes a literature of sentiment, in which couples share lives of intimacy and mutually enjoyed pastimes. Married couples burn the flame of passion long after their wedding day, yearning for each other's presence when careers take them away from home. Funtuwa expends a great deal of effort describing the beautiful clothing in which women dress themselves for the pleasure of men, and she portrays seductive bedroom scenes complete with props of incense and music. Female readers are instructed in the arts of romancing their husbands or future husbands. All of her novels deal generously with this exhibition of *kissa*, the capacity to arouse and excite the interest of the husband. Funtuwa argues that the display of extreme *kunya* (shyness), a respectable Hausa female trait, works against the success of marriages as husbands look outside of the marriage for companionship and conversation. Consequently, she provides instruction in the arts of love and romance with the intention of empowering female readers to overcome their reserve (interview, Jan. 8, 1998). Her goal is to help women achieve healthy and long-lasting marriages, although the corollary implication is that women are responsible for failed relationships. Women have only themselves to blame when they are unable to keep the marriage romantically potent, and those who seek divorce, according to Funtuwa, invite even greater emotional turmoil.

This wifely tendency to sabotage marriage is the main subject of the novel *Ki Yarda da Ni* (Agree with Me). The story explores the marital dynamics in a polygamous household, noting the emotional dilemmas of wives and the practical management concerns that weigh upon the husband. Aisha and Isma'il are a couple whose passionate love enables them to overcome their early years of poverty. Isma'il respects the value of education, pursuing his own studies in agriculture while ensuring that Aisha achieves her dream of attending nursing school. With time, success arrives as Aisha finds employment as a midwife and Isma'il becomes a prosperous businessman in national agriculture. Becoming the mother of four chil-

dren crowns Aisha's success, an accomplishment she manages while being immersed in pursuing her career goals.

The surfeit of wealth and happiness in Aisha's life becomes tempered the day that Isma'il announces his intentions to take a second wife. Her initial reaction is one of open hostility, but pressure from family elders, chastisement from friends, and Isma'il's tender request for her cooperation make her acquiescent. The second wife, Biba, proves to embody everything that Aisha had feared. Behind Isma'il's back, the new wife disrespects the *uwargida* (senior wife) and abuses the children. **Despite Biba's behavior, Aisha stands as a paragon of virtue, silently suffering the indignation out of respect for Islam and her husband's happiness. She** remains confident that Biba's temperament will improve with time or that Isma'il will recognize her failings.

The young wife's constant complaining and manipulative ploys become increasingly evident, and Isma'il divorces her for the sake of household peace. Following an interval during which Biba undergoes honest self-evaluation and religious rebirth, Isma'il asks Aisha her opinion on his potential reconciliation with Biba. Aisha strongly encourages him to grant Biba another chance and to honor the Islamic strictures against divorce. Biba returns full of deference and veneration for Aisha, and the family lives in polygamous bliss.

The novel offers itself as a "how-to" guide on coping with polygamous marriage. It chronicles the discontent of co-wives and the misconduct of both of them, followed by their overcoming of pettiness, a return to religious faith, and the ultimate attainment of wisdom and peace of mind. The positive portrayal of male behavior is crucial to this ideal polygamous marriage. A maternal aunt lectures Aisha on respecting Islamic tenets, reminding her that polygamy is not a custom but a religious right bestowed upon men. The husband, Isma'il, is a man of exemplary moral character who embodies the ideal of religious and spousal devotion. Funtuwa also emphasizes the responsibility of women in cases of divorce (commenting implicitly on the rash of divorce cases in Hausaland) and attempts to teach her women readers ways of salvaging marital relationships. In a friendly conversation at a naming ceremony, Aisha notes some of the keys to navigating polygamous life.

"Ai idan kina son ki morewa kishiya, kada ki kuskura ta ji tsakaninku da mijinki. Duk yadda ya kai da gudidi, idan har kin manne masa zai kuwa kula ki, kulawa kuwa ba 'yar kadan ba, daya kenan. Na biyu, kada ki yadda ki fara karya masa dokar da ya gindaya maku, anan ma girman ki da kimar ki az su ragu a idonsa. Sai na uku, yadda duk ta so da takalarki fitina kada ki amince, haka nan ki cije kada ki zama ke ce wadda kika fara kai kara wajensa, domin ba ki san yada tsawon zamanku zai dauka kuna rikici ba." (1997, part 2, 10)

("If you want to enjoy being a co-wife, don't make the mistake of letting your co-wife come between you and your husband. You have to be able to

ignore the undercurrent of rumors surrounding the impending marriage, that's the first thing. Second, don't ever break the rules your husband has laid down, given that it will only reduce his respect for you. Third, if your co-wife provokes or incites you, don't necessarily bring it to your husband, for you'll never know if such news could bring trouble for yourself.") (Translation mine)

Ironically, it is mostly passionate love that makes the frustrations of polygamy tolerable as Isma'il and Aisha maintain their romantic zeal in spite of the presence of Biba. Funtuwa has synthesized seemingly contradictory values by imbuing polygamous relations with romance. This idyllic representation of polygamy reflects the novel's mediation between social tensions in an era of change. Funtuwa makes a defense of polygamy based on a conservative allegiance to religion and culture. The novel expresses proper reverence to patriarchal authority, yet it sees the tradition of polygamy as compatible with the new social influences. The exciting intimacy of modern love can be experienced not only by monogamous couples but within the domain of polygamy as well. Co-wives can dream of sustaining romantic intrigue and relying on their husband for emotional sustenance. The relationship between Aisha and Isma'il is characterized by long-lasting devotion and endless affection, and the romance serves not only to improve the quality of their marriage but also to strengthen the institution of polygamy.

A second novel, *Allura Cikin Ruwa* (Needle in a Haystack), is a three-volume work that repeats the conservative message of *Ki Yarda da Ni*. Here Bilkisu Funtuwa takes up defense of auren dole, expressing the traditional opinion that marital decisions should remain in the domain of parental rights. The heroine, Asiya, a daughter of a poor messenger, excels equally in Islamic and Western schools. During a secondary school hiatus, Asiya visits an aunt in Kaduna and falls in love with a family friend, Aliyu. The intensity of their love is obvious to everyone, and her parents are supportive of their courtship, expecting the two to marry prior to Asiya's attending university.

The drama begins when Aliyu's father, a wealthy businessman, refuses to grant Aliyu permission to wed the lower-class Asiya. At this juncture, Aminu, a neighbor recently returned from medical school in Russia, offers his hand in marriage upon hearing of the disrespectful rebuke suffered by Asiya's family. Her father graciously accepts Aminu's gesture, but their agreement sends Asiya into a state of hysteria. Her parents remind her of the importance of her being married while attending university and of the groom's distinguished character. Nothing appeases Asiya, who is distraught at the prospect of losing Aliyu. The wedding takes place without her cooperation, and her rebellious ways carry over into the marriage. Aminu shows inordinate tolerance of his wife's constant verbal abuse, simply encouraging her to put faith in the master plan of God.

Gradually, Asiya's anger dissipates, and her opinion of Aminu improves as she recognizes all of his worthy qualities. Love ultimately engulfs the couple, and **a windfall of success follows her enlightenment.** She graduates from the university, breezes through law school, lands a governmental position as a lawyer in the Shari'a, and has four children in the meantime. The dramatic denouement comes with a courtroom showdown between Asiya and Alhaji Usman, Aliyu's father. The arrogant old man is again attempting to sabotage the marital wishes of one of his children, his daughter Murja. Listening to the advice of Aliyu, who has followed Asiya's brilliant legal career, Murja solicits Asiya's help, not realizing the enormous sense of personal interest Asiya possesses in the case. **Asiya proceeds to expose Alhaji Usman as a tyrannical father who despises the poor.** Upon discovering the identity of the skilled lawyer who has made a laughingstock of him, Alhaji Usman seeks out Asiya's father and begs for forgiveness while granting Murja permission to marry her suitor. The sense of poetic justice brings the long narrative to an abrupt end.

Auren dole has long been a subject of debate in Islamic communities. Islam ordains that marriage is contractual, meaning theoretically that both bride and bridegroom can stipulate conditions for marriage or avoid the arrangement completely. However, traditionally, the woman has not been allowed to negotiate the marriage herself; a guardian, usually her father, moderates the arrangements (Engineer 1992:107). In matters of marriage Islamic law has distinguished between a *bakirah* (young unmarried girl) and a *thayyibah* (a widow or divorcée), stipulating that a bakirah is required to appoint a marriage guardian. The Qur'an, however, makes no mention of the role of the guardian for either kind of woman (Engineer 1992:107). The inclusion of a *wali* (ward) in marital affairs is a pre-Islamic practice that was eventually incorporated into Islamic jurisprudence. Only the Hadith alludes to the role of the wali, clarifying that the guardian must obtain the permission of the bakirah.

Auren dole must be viewed within the context of culture, and again Funtuwa has indicated her fidelity to the glory of Hausa tradition. The didactic message conveys support for the rights of parents in matters of marriage and reaffirms the conventional belief that parents are adept at perceiving the best interests of their children. As with the first novel, Funtuwa draws on readers' sympathy for the protagonist as they appreciate her seemingly unjust oppression. Such compassion for Asiya makes the ultimate message all the more palpable when she perceives the error of her resisting behavior. The acceptance of parental supremacy and religious faith enables Asiya to fall in love and lead a blessed life of motherhood, career, and opulence beyond her expectations.

The role of education, the core value within Funtuwa's feminist agenda, aligns itself with her conservative tendencies in a striking fashion. Asiya begins to experience a change of heart toward marriage with Aminu in the course of a conversation shared with a girlfriend. The young woman

explains that Asiya has become a critical role model within the community, exemplifying the compatibility of advanced Western education and traditional obedience to parental wishes. The cultural stereotype of the Western-educated woman who proves incapable of expected filial behavior has been debunked, serving to enlighten public opinion on the value of education in the lives of females. Thus Bilquis Funtuwa promotes female educational opportunities without undermining patriarchal authority. For Funtuwa, change in gender norms is envisioned in small increments, and progress in scholastic endeavors becomes an essential building block for the attainment of future liberties.

As is her style, Funtuwa criticizes society and its withholding of female education with a quiet insistence. The story relates an ideal situation of parents who embrace the pursuit of Western education and a daughter with the intelligence and work ethic to achieve unprecedented success. Funtuwa criticizes the traditions of female seclusion in the same subtle manner. On the one hand, she lectures on the various facets of proper female comportment (modesty in dress, wariness of men's ulterior motives in courting, compliance with parental instruction, and religious devotion). On the other hand, her heroine eschews traditional observance of *purdah* in favor of academic and professional endeavors. On the subject of women's careers, Funtuwa manages another quiet plug for women's rights when Asiya becomes a trained Islamic intellectual and Shari'a lawyer. Her vocational choice refutes the conservative position that women should be excluded from juridical positions of power and makes an argument for women's inclusion on all social fronts.

Funtuwa's third novel, *Wa Ya San Gobe* (Who Knows What Tomorrow Will Bring?) presents itself as the most aggressively feminist of the novels chosen for analysis. The author does not abandon her conservative posture, but she adduces a critique of cultural and patriarchal oppression in a more undisguised manner. The story recounts the life of Fatima, another precocious youth, who has been raised by her paternal aunt following the death of her mother in pregnancy. The heart of the plot rests on her scholastic commitment and unparalleled excellence. The aunt, motivated by the desire to see her niece accomplish more than what she has managed with her unexceptional life of selling food, supports Fati in her academic efforts. The top-ranked student in her secondary school, Fati receives countless accolades in Islamic recitation competitions and national high school debates.

Before enrolling at Bayero University in Kano, Fati fulfills her parents' expectations by marrying a second cousin named Ahmad. Though she is truly in love with his younger brother Sulaiman, Fati could never dream of displeasing the family and thus affably accepts the arrangement. Her grace is rewarded with bountiful happiness as she graduates from the university, gives birth to a boy, has a husband who dotes on her, and enjoys an opulent

life. Tragedy strikes when Ahmad dies unexpectedly, lending significance to the novel's proverbial title. In an attempt to regroup psychologically and emotionally after Ahmad's death, Fati returns to university and receives a second degree in education from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. After a long period of emotional recovery, she marries Sulaiman when she discovers that her original love has been lying dormant within her heart. Her professional life continues its steady ascent, and the novel culminates with her promotion to the position of assistant minister of education.

Wa Ya San Gobe is an episodic drama that proceeds with breakneck speed, catapulting the protagonists from one trauma to the next and leaving the reader emotionally exhausted and wondering when the whirlwind will end. The mother's death at the inception of the narrative, the emotional separation of the heroine from her father and brothers, the scheming uncle who attempts to marry Fati off to a rich man and to sabotage her approaching marriage to Ahmad, the unforeseen death of Ahmad, the near death of her son from typhoid, her prolonged and dangerous labor with twins, and the complications of her last pregnancy requiring a flight to London for special care are only some of the catastrophes that complicate Fati's life.

Bilkisu Funtuwa couples her love of high drama with an elaborate portrayal of luxurious living. *Wa Ya San Gobe* follows the rags-to-riches formula of her other works, with a portrayal of Fati as an achiever who enjoys prosperity and fame. Her Islamic recitation competitions are aired on the radio; high school debates are nationally televised; and radio networks interview her during the graduation ceremonies from Bayero University because of her outstanding merits. She is the darling of her town, the most educated woman to emerge from the surrounding area, and she rapidly ascends the educational administrative ladder. Her contribution to the field of female education is legendary, inspiring the renowned Mamman Shata to praise her in his songs. While she receives medical care in London, CNN covers her promotion in the Ministry of Education, and the British paparazzi swarm around her when they learn of her whereabouts. Added to her celebrity status is the life of affluence afforded by Sulaiman's business acumen. He controls a successful commercial architectural company with branches dispersed internationally. He travels regularly to Indonesia, Japan, and Germany, bringing back exotic gifts for his loved ones. Family pilgrimages to Mecca are routine; jaunts to London take place over weekends; and time in Nigeria is divided between palatial estates scattered between Lagos and Katsina.

These narrative trimmings do not detract from the dominant theme of education or from Funtuwa's censure of the oppression of Hausa women. The heroine dedicates her life to the improvement of female education, making a pact with her secondary school classmates to attend the university and strive as a representative of northern women hoping to secure a level

of freedom comparable to that of southern women. In an interview following her university graduation, Fati reconfirms her commitment to the female struggle.

“Kusan haka kenan, domin idan akai la’akari da tarbiyar mu ta hausawa, mazanmu ba su cika son barin matansu na aiki ba. Amman ni ina tabbatar maka da cewa, ina daya daga cikin mata masu sa’ a duniya. Mijina na kishin kasarshi tare da son cigaban matan arewa, da taimakon Allah da na mijina na cimma wannan buri a yau.” (1996, part 2, 29)

“If one looks at our educational training here in Hausaland, they see that men are still not supportive of permitting women to work and pursue careers. I recognize that a woman such as myself is one in a million. My husband, however, is greatly supportive of progress for northern women, so with the grace of God and my husband’s support, I plan on making contributions in this area.” (Translation mine)

As a teacher and vice principal in secondary schools, Fati laments the dire state of resources and the faculty’s lack of responsibility in the smaller towns of northern Nigeria. As the new assistant minister of education she devotes herself to educational improvement, opening polytechnic schools in remote areas.

Again, Funtuwa makes conservative concessions in the interest of education, namely in her support of marriage prior to university attendance. Female university students in the novel continually discuss the dangers of *ishanci* (immoral behavior) on college campuses, which threatens to entrap naive girls. This unsupervised environment is conducive to a disregard for female modesty, conduct that Fati believes inevitably will lead to severe (and deserved) mistreatment at the hands of men. These perils of college life can be avoided through marriage, which both satisfies parental concerns and facilitates the young woman’s passage through the educational system.

Funtuwa in the Continuum of Islamic-Hausa Feminism

Under the rubric of Islamic-Hausa feminism, Bilkisu Funtuwa presents a conservative perspective, dedicated to the welfare of women but also faithful to traditional Islamic thought and cultural conventions. With her staunch advocacy of female education she is an indisputable champion of women’s rights. Her lessons on how to cope with emotional confusion stemming from polygamy and auren dole have aided numerous readers in improving the quality of their marriages. At the same time, the theoretical flexibility of African feminist discourse allows her feminist convictions to be subsumed by a patriarchal authority that demands female honor and mod-

esty. The heroines Fatima and Asiya both demonstrate the possibility of a Hausa woman's receiving a Western education and making a positive contribution to society while submitting to Islamic tradition, displaying *kauna da kissa* (love and arousing affection), and keeping men satisfied. In *Allura Cikin Ruwa*, one of Asiya's many eager pursuers comments,

"Kin san babu abin da ya fi yi ma namiji dadi irin ya dawo aiki ko anguwa an bato rai a can waji ya zo gida matarsa ta gyara masa. Har abada irinki Asiya ba ki gundurar da namiji." (1994, part 2, 3)

("You know there's nothing that brings more pleasure to a man after a day of tortuous work than his return to a wife who will sooth his anguish away. Thus don't ever lose that supreme interest in your husband.") (Translation mine)

Funtuwa regularly spices her narratives with one-sentence remarks about men's superior intelligence. In *Allura Cikin Ruwa*, in the aftermath of Asiya's stubborn refusal to cooperate with Aminu in marriage, she comments to herself that the intelligence of a woman is no different from that of a beast (1994, part 3, 45). At that moment in the novel the idea is meant to be humorous, but it still suggests the self-effacing subservience of women within Hausa cultural codes. **The recurring figures of the manipulative mother-in-law and the treacherous co-wives also play to conservative opinion and patriarchal authority. Women's untrustworthy tendencies, conspiratorial nature, and easy malevolence all justify their exclusion from greater social responsibility.**

Yet despite their conservatism, the texts manage to suggest a modest ijihad, a general reemphasis of original Islamic values and the neglected freedoms for women. Funtuwa's feminism evokes a kind of return to the Golden Age of Islam, the age of the Prophet, with her female protagonists embracing the behavior exemplified by the "mothers of believers." In the vein of Aisha and Umm Salama (two wives of the Prophet who were renowned for their intelligence, political acumen, and knowledge of Islam), the heroines excel in knowledge, both Islamic and Western, and are visibly active in all facets of society as they are given the freedom to pursue their talents in various careers. Their identity is multidimensional, encompassing roles beyond those of wife and mother.

The fiercest public criticism of Bilkisu Funtuwa and other Soyayya writers has been directed toward their supposed attack on Islamic principles and cultural traditions. But Funtuwa ardently professes her religious and ethical motivations for writing, and indeed a close reading of Islamic injunctions pertaining to the responsibilities of women supports her claims. Her endorsement of female education, for example, finds an abundance of corroboration in the sources of Islamic law. From the Golden Age of the Prophet to the Hausa jihads of Usman dan Fodio, female figures have estab-

lished themselves as scholars, poets, and historians contributing to the social, political, and economic progress of Muslim communities. The high aspirations for female education that Funtuwa and her characters share are no anomaly within Islamic and Hausa tradition. Similarly, their repudiation of the culture of purdah and their refusal to extricate themselves from social interactions fall well within accepted practices. Seclusion was an historical accretion and was not mandated by the early Islamic Shari'a, which only called upon women to be modest in public and to conceal their charms from men outside the family. Actually the Qur'an enjoins modesty in attire for both men and women with the hope of achieving social piety and avoidance of temptation and distraction. The idea of purdah was acquired from Persian and Byzantine societies, which secluded women out of deference and honor, not in order to humiliate them (Farah 1968).

Funtuwa has reinterpreted Islamic tradition from a contemporary vantage point, noting the distinction between the normative ideal of chastity as expressed in the Qur'an and the antiquated means of achieving it. In an age when women are decreasingly perceived as the weaker sex in need of male protection, purdah is not necessary. Women have proven that they are capable of moving about alone and unviolated, able to protect their chastity while earning their own livelihood and working outside the home. Thus they can respect the demands of their religion while participating in the modern world. Funtuwa shows that it is possible to balance the sociological with the theological, thus providing Shari'a with the flexibility to face the challenges presented by social change while upholding the transcendental essence of the Islamic law.

Kano market literature, maligned by its society for its failure to perpetuate traditional Hausa norms, has assumed the difficult task of reconciling diverse social attitudes. In a world in which the champions of cultural authenticity see themselves in opposition to the modern social order, Soyayya writers aspire to create an acceptable blend of past and present. Kano market literature experiments in cultural grafting, hoping to pose workable suggestions for social change. Overwhelmed by the immediacy of their growing pains, conservative Hausa communities often conceive of Soyayya writers as a cultural enemy. But history will view the works of these writers as vital contributions to social transformation of Hausa-Islamic culture.

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