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Islamic-Hausa Feminism and Kano Market Literature: Qur'anic Reinterpretation in the Novels of Balaraba Yakubu

Novian Whitsitt

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 moniker is Kano market literature. Avid readers have little difficulty in locating booksellers who have strategically positioned themselves in the midst of every potential direction of foot-traffic. Sidewalk displays, market stalls, and independent book kiosks dizzy onlookers with hundreds of appealing book covers of youthful couples acting out different love-interest scenes. Currently, 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.

The popularity of Kano market literature rests firmly upon its subject matter, one that has proven quite controversial within the conservative Muslim environment of Hausa society. As expected from any work of romantic pulp fiction, *Soyayya* novels preoccupy themselves with sagas of love and marital relationships. Some writers depict the ordeals faced by courting lovers whose aspirations of marriage are continuously frustrated by meddling family members or uncooperative parents, and others explore the challenges of maintaining healthy relationships in the aftermath of matrimony. In either case, writers address the reality of Hausa youth confronting dramatic social change in an era when traditional mores must negotiate the onslaught of contemporary sensibilities. The swirl of cultural pluralism has generated consternation over the conventional practices of gender relations, and Kano market literature situates itself at the core of this discussion. The romantic novels have become an explorative forum for the socially and culturally loaded issues of polygamy, marriages of coercion, *pardah* (the Islamic tradition of seclusion), and accessibility of education for females. As a result, the literature indirectly and candidly questions the gender status quo and works to modify the social, familial, and educational position of Hausa women.

Public opinion harshly criticizes the literature for allegedly corrupting the minds of the youth, especially young women. Much of the response is based on hearsay, as most people have only familiarized themselves with the literature through word of mouth. Common belief holds that most books are read by female youth in secondary schools and that the vast majority of the works have prompted moral decay. Critics contend the romantic stories

promote sexual promiscuity and the encouragement of youthful disobedience of parental desires in conjugal affairs. Others maintain that the literature is so riddled with so-called Western notions of love that it no longer reflects any modicum of Hausa tradition. For such critics, the swift banning or brusque censoring presents the best solution to the problem.

Contrary to public perception, all *Soyayya* writers assert that the novels are created with the ultimate intention of instilling proper moral behavior among the reading constituency; and as they contend, the didactic intentions of their stories are unmistakable. In order to clarify their ethical agendas, numerous writers include prefaces that unequivocally explicate the thematic direction and instructive nature of various novels. Writers, without exception, feel a sense of social responsibility in advising a youth confused by the volatile social climate. Readers confirm that the literature has had the desired effect, claiming that the books are beneficial on several levels. In their estimation, *Soyayya* novels 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 trope of stories is a vehicle for the social concerns of writers. Books become thematic commentaries on the place of *auren dole* (forced marriage), *auren mata biyu* (polygamy), *purdah* (female seclusion), and *ilimin mata* (women's education) in contemporary Hausa society.

Both male and female writers address the issues of gender relations, but women writers have understandably proven more committed to communicating the female perspectives and concerns. Women writers and readers maintain that though male-authored texts concur with the general literary sentiment of female empowerment, they too frequently privilege the masculine emotional response and fail to explore the psychological reactions of women regarding the problematic institutions of forced marriage and polygamy. Speaking from first-hand experience, female writers imagine heroines who must navigate their way through conservative familial politics in order to secure their aspirations of marital choice or educational improvement. Other female protagonists encounter the emotional adversity inherent in co-wife relations due to a husband's ineffectualness in executing unbiased treatment.

Hausa women writers are undeniably feminist, in the sense that they possess an awareness of the constraints placed upon women because of their gender and a desire to dislodge these constraints, thus creating a more equitable gender system. The single most important consideration in the construction of Hausa feminism is the significance of Islam, given that the religious faith colors virtually every aspect of social relations. Writers have attempted to negotiate the tensions between cultural/religious tradition and the elements of modernization by identifying themselves as Muslim writers who do not see these forces as incompatible entities. Regardless of the religious veracity of their claims, writers have been condemned as espousing un-Islamic teachings when condemning forced marriage, discouraging polygamy, or encouraging women to further their education at the expense of the tradition of seclusion.

The Islamic legalistic notion of *ijtihad*, the historically accepted practice of reinterpreting the Qur'anic philosophy on 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 of those not well versed in the origin and development of the *Shari'a* (formal Islamic law) maintains that it is totally divine and immutable in form, and such a view is often encouraged by a conservative class of religious clerics (Engineer 6). In truth, the *Shari'a* never came into being instantaneously but went through an agonizing process of evolution. Its configuration never remained static as well; 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 reform (Stowasser, "Gender Issues" 34). The implementation of *ijtihad* in the early Islamic community constituted the dynamic element of Islamic law, but its admittance was barred after the decline of the Abbasid empire in the twelfth century (Engineer 6). The formulated *Shari'a* then reflected an inert and perpetual quality. In the religious spirit of *ijtihad*, Hausa female writers have sought to alter cultural interpretations of certain Qur'anic codes of behavior. Thus writers insist that the call for social change and female empowerment occurs within the sanctions of Islamic doctrine.

The range of the figurative *ijtihad* offered by *Soyayya* women writers reflects a wide variety of social criticism on the gender-sensitive subjects. A few have assumed a conservative view, voicing concern for the welfare of women while simultaneously preserving their attachment to traditional Islamic thought and cultural conventions. Such writers support the existence of *auren dote*, seeing it as institution that should fall within the bounds of parental jurisdiction. Writers of this traditional ilk often defend polygamy as a religious establishment and thus offer advice to women on how to cope with the emotional turmoil stemming from such circumstances. The conservative *ijtihad* within the *Soyayya* novels limits itself to the championing of female education and the abatement of *pardah* restrictions, both social features that can be notably connected with the "Golden Age" of the first Islamic community and the era of the Prophet. By summoning the social spirit of the Golden Age, cautious writers can portray themselves as "fundamentalists" while encouraging greater social mobility for females.

For some of the women writers, this degree of *ijtihad* is only one step towards progressive change. In their estimation, a more radical methodology of reinterpretation, one that examines Islamic tenets through contemporary contextual realities, will unfurl true liberation for Hausa women. In accord with many modernist scholars of Islamic law, so-called *Soyayya* extremists have advocated that rules of inheritance, polygamy, divorce, and restrictions on women's political activities need review in light of the current social environment. In the Islamic world, support for such interpretation has received scathing criticism from classical theologians, who contend that this type of *ijtihad* violates Qur'anic fundamentals for its own political agenda. An increasing number of Islamic reformists,

however, claim the right to “radical” interpretation while rejecting a blind following of the past (Fakhro 252). They freely acknowledge their consideration of sociological factors while reading the divine scriptures and justify this perspective by maintaining that every interpretation is subject to such time-oriented influences. The opinions of early jurists, those that form much of the orthodox perspective, must be viewed as evolving from their specific epoch, one possessing its own intellectual environment. The goal is to reinterpret relevant verses in order to accord women the dignity and freedom correlative to the intellectual and ethical realities of the particular generation (Engineer 5). Thus *Shari’a* law must continue to evolve if it expects to face the various challenges presented by social changes, meaning that it cannot be viewed in the abstract. The perception of the *Shari’a* as “situational” law need not sacrifice the transcendental integrity of the Qur’an but rather find appropriate social conventions that still maintain the scripture’s normative values.

More than any other writer, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu positions herself within this modernist contingent of Islamic feminists. Opinionated, outspoken, and a self-proclaimed feminist, Yakubu is either loved or despised by her reading constituency and the general public. She writes to please only God and herself by listening to her conscience, prefacing her interview by asserting that she “agrees with everything Islam decrees, without trying to make any alterations to it, given that it protects the freedom and rights of women” (Interview, 26 Oct. 1997). She writes as a woman who arduously strives to bring the exploitation of Hausa women to the public’s attention.

As with other Islamic-Hausa feminists, Balaraba Yakubu possesses multiple allegiances, espousing religious devotion and the celebration of certain cultural riches. However, she is quick to distinguish cultural habits and attitudes that work to the detriment of women’s welfare, calling for their swift abandonment. In the vein of conservative writers, she discerns education as the single most sensitive indicator of change in Hausa women’s social status, but her divergence from their opinion arises over female deference to the patriarchal order. Whereas the conservatives compromise by making allowance for the cultural implementation of *auru dolo* and the prevalence of polygamy on the grounds of its religious justification, Balaraba Ramat harshly criticizes both as institutions that inhibit women’s human potential and fail to meet the intellectual standards of modern-day society. She depicts *auru dolo* as an abusively cruel practice pre-empting educational advancement and polygamy as a prestigious pastime of men who have shamelessly deviated from its religious application.

The presently fierce feminist orientation of Balaraba Yakubu has taken some time to nurture; in other words, her uncompromising attack on patriarchal privilege developed over the course of her literary works. *Budurwa Zuciya* [Young at heart] discloses a certain subdued tone of criticism more reminiscent of her conservative peers. With subsequent novels, Balaraba was less restrained regarding issues of female oppression, feeling prepared to endure the patriarchal backlash against her undisguised contempt for the abuse of male privilege. Her first published novel, however, suggests

that she was in the process of finding her voice as spokesperson for Hausa women. From one perspective, the novel works as a broad commentary on the growing immorality of contemporary society in Kano. Yakubu offers a panoramic critique of various social circumstances, noting the ubiquitous deterioration of the social moral fiber. The list of immoral behavior consists of activities such as a father's rampant adulterous deeds, a son's alcoholic tendencies, a daughter's irresponsible promiscuity, children's lying to parents, and the greed of society at large. The value of this variety of analysis lies in its ability to satisfy the critical eye of a conservative public, placating its demand for adherence to Islamic and cultural norms of respectability. However, there exists a deeper level to the thematic content, one in which Balaraba allies herself with feminist intentions. Having met the conservative concerns of her Muslim audience, she concurrently informs the readers of the marginality and exploitation endured by Hausa women.

Budurwa Zuciya revolves around the lives of those in the family of Alhaji Usman, a wealthy trader of dishes and housewares. The large cast of characters consists of numerous wives and children, but most plot events pertain to Alhaji Usman, his son Magaji, and his daughter Ummi. Yakubu scrutinizes the lifestyle of the youth, exploring the dilemmas facing them given their approaching marital years. Regarding the life of Alhaji Usman, the story canvasses his sexual exploits and his continuously revolving door of wives. The novel begins with an argument between him and his senior wife, Asma'u, about his desire to divorce his third wife, to whom he has only been married for three months, in order to marry another woman. Following his great financial success in the market, Alhaji has become obsessed with pursuing women, to the displeasure of Asma'u. Alhaji dismisses her protests as trivial, continuing to unabashedly chase women at a frenetic pace.

His exploits include Sa'adiya, a secondary school girl whom he eventually convinces to quit school for the sake of marrying him. Upon her entrance in the household, Alhaji makes a mockery of the Islamic polygamist code of equal treatment. The young bride becomes the recipient of obscene gifts, travel excursions out of the country, and a disproportionately large personal allowance. As with all his marriages, divorce is inevitable when Alhaji experiences boredom or any annoying haughtiness on a wife's part, and Sa'adiya disappears seemingly overnight. The frequency of marriage and divorce leaves the reader struggling to remember the names of all the women who quickly pass through Alhaji's house. In the midst of juggling the relationships with his wives, Alhaji complicates his womanly affairs with regular visits to his prostitutes in *Sabon Gari* ("the New Town"), buying jewelry and house gifts to keep them satisfied.

The activities of Ummi, Alhaji's daughter, continue the immoral legacy of her father. Though attending secondary school, relationships with numerous boyfriends are her priority. During school breaks, she habitually deceives her parents about her whereabouts and stays with male companions. Her promiscuity leads to pregnancy, which she manages to abort with the financial aid of a boyfriend without her parents' knowledge. She maintains her sexually indiscriminate ways and irresponsibly becomes

pregnant a second time. Discovering it in the midst of the school semester, the simple option of abortion is logistically impossible. Her pregnancy becomes noticeable to school officials who instantly expel her and send her home only to have Alhaji brutally beat and disown her for the shame she has brought to the family name.

Magaji, a younger version of his father, is a juvenile ne'er-do-well whose life of debauchery consists of a steady diet of parties, hard alcohol, and loose women. The height of his scandalous depravity arrives when Alhaji discovers that his most recent bride and Magaji are sleeping together under his nose. A fight ensues between father and son when Alhaji finds the two young lovers in bed, and the first volume comes to a dramatic conclusion as Alhaji flees his house enraged and suffers a fatal car accident with a passing lorry. In the aftermath of Alhaji's death, his two wayward children circuitously find the path toward contrition, secure wholesome marriages, and boast a bright future. The senior wife, Asma'u, completes the neat ending by marrying the younger brother of her deceased husband.

With reference to the life of Alhaji, the issue of polygamy looms as the primary thematic topic. Its relevance begins with the opening scene as Alhaji and Asma'u fight over Alhaji's decision to take another wife. Asma'u has already suffered the polygamous bane of abandonment with his marriage to Kyauta, his second wife. **With her arrival, Alhaji forgot all religious expectations, lavishing Kyauta with gifts and ignoring the emotional and economic needs of Asma'u.** The prospect of a third wife enables Kyauta to experience the anguish that Asma'u had felt, given the fact that a new and younger wife in the compound undermines her favored status. When she verbalizes her displeasure too much for his tolerance, Alhaji remedies the strife by promptly divorcing Kyauta.

The attitude of African women towards polygamy is far from reaching any consensus. Some women support the institution based on its fostering a domestic environment of shared responsibilities, easing their household and economic workload (Dunbar 4). Most women, however, detect the emotional tension between wives in polygamous marriages. In Hausaland, the inherent jealousy is signified by the very term for co-wife, *kishiya*, meaning "jealous one." In *Budurwa Zuciya*, all the wives find life wretched due to Alhaji's incapacity to disseminate justice.

The practice of repudiation works as an integral part of polygamy, enabling men to speedily dismiss marriages if it suits their interests. In Yakubu's text, Alhaji employs it to facilitate his whimsical marital desires, divorcing a wife simply to make room for another. If the *talaq* (unilateral divorce pronounced by the husband) is repeated three times in the presence of two witnesses, a woman is considered divorced regardless of her feelings or how blameless she may be (Callaway 47). Though proper justification is supposedly warranted in any divorce, "justification" seems to be left to a husband's personal discretion. Such is the case with the novel's inception as Alhaji annuls a three-month old marriage hoping to make room for another momentarily appealing woman, subscribing to the Islamic mandate of a four-wife maximum. Alhaji divorces Kyauta following

her protest of his marriage to Sa'adiya; Sa'adiya is repudiated when she shows a degree of obstinacy; and Alhaji impetuously utters the *talaq* to another wife after she has complained about Alhaji's frivolous spending on his prostitutes at the expense of providing adequate food supplies for the children.

The blatant criticism of polygamy never arrives, but Balaraba Yakubu's disapproval comes in the form of the ever-present despair that pervades the household. Not only do the wives and friends lament the favoritism shown by Alhaji, but the children perceive the mistreatment suffered by their mothers and join them in their feelings of despondence. His sudden demise, within the context of the theme of retribution and redemption that characterizes the breadth of Kano market literature, leaves the clear impression that his punishment stems from his abuse of polygamous rights.

Nowhere does Balaraba Ramat more evidently display her multiple allegiance than in her treatment of *karuwanci*, the immoral profligacy associated with a *karuwa*. *Karuwa*, translated in simplest terms as "prostitute," proves to be far more complicated a status than its English equivalent. Jerome Barkow sees "courtesan" as the correct translation, being that the *karuwa* is indeed courted rather than simply solicited (326). However, even this term presents a limited portrait because of the preconceived value-judgments associated with this imported expression. Barbara J. Callaway offers the broadest definition of *karuwa* as any woman who resists marriage, engages in successful economic activity, and begins to become economically independent (42). This understanding of the word stems from the lack of a defined social place for unmarried women of childbearing age. Due to her deviation in spatial and normative terms, that she deviates further is expected and assumed. Through her portrayal of Ummi as a promiscuous high-school girl, Balaraba Yakubu perpetuates the stigma of immorality surrounding young single women. She ultimately caters to the patriarchal prejudice against them, characterizing them as incapable of upstanding behavior and thus confirming the denial of existence of a legitimate non-married state for women of marriageable age.

The themes circulating the life of Ummi are not completely encapsulated within the rhetoric of traditional female comportment. Her activities provide Yakubu the opportunity to seize a feminist moment, that being a medical discussion on the issues of abortion. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie stresses the necessity of women writers inquiring into the female biological experience, and Yakubu offers precisely that insight (61). Considering the rearing traditions of young girls that extol the virtues of early marriage and childbearing abilities, any education about the practice of abortion is surely limited. Yakubu manages to manipulate her treatment of *karuwanci* into an informative teaching moment. After Ummi discovers her pregnancy, she and her boyfriend Nasiru rush to a pharmacy to receive an abortion shot, one they believe will induce abortion after three days of its inception. Failing to abort in the three-day time period, she returns to the pharmacist who explains that the shot only induces abortion for pregnancies no older than one and a half months. Realizing their ignorance, Ummi and Nasiru go to a doctor for a standard abortion:

Ga mata nan wajen su hudu, duk su ma sun zo a zubar musu da ciki. Saboda ya san su Ummi za su koma makaranta a wannan daren, sai bayan ya sa yaransa sun gyara kayan aiki, sai ya far kiran Ummi. Ta bi shi wani daki. Bai fi rabin awa ba, sai ya kira Nasiru ya nuna masa Ummi ta barci a kan wani gado, a cikin wani daki. Nasiru ya tsorata, yana cewa 'ta mutu ne!' Likita ya ca, 'A' a ba ta mutu ba. Tana dan barci ne, don na ba ta allurarbarci, don ta huta.' Bayan Ummi ta gama barci, sai ya ba ta shawarar cewa daga yanzu, da ta ga ba ta ga al'adarta ba, ko kafin abin ya yi nisa, ta yi sauri ta zo, yana da allurar da za ta zubar . . . (I: 26)

There were four women outside, all of whom had come to receive abortions. Knowing that Ummi had to return to school that evening, the doctor had the assistants straighten up and then proceeded to call Ummi first. She followed him to a room, and in less than half of an hour, the doctor summoned Nasiru and led him to the room in which Ummi was sleeping. Fearing the worst, Nasiru screamed, 'She's dead!' The doctor calmly responded, 'No, she isn't dead. She's merely napping because of the shot I administered for the sake of her recovery.' When Ummi finally awakened, he advised her to quickly return to him if she didn't have her next menstruation, and he would give her a shot to secure the abortion. (Trans. mine)

Yakubu covers information ranging from the types of abortion to the effects of administered drugs, all facts definitely not acquired in typical households. Believing cultural avoidance of specific issues between mothers and daughters can prove detrimental to female adolescent development, Yakubu aids in the instruction of female health education and hygienic awareness. As she vocalizes her discontent for *karuwanci* and placates her right-wing audience, she indirectly speaks to young women who might find themselves faced with the reality of unwanted pregnancy and describes the alternative of abortion.

Alhaki Kuykuyo Ne [Retribution is inescapable], Yakubu's second novel, continues the popular theme of retribution and redemption, castigating patriarchal ignorance of religious expectations and simple humanity. The narrative paints a monstrous image of rich men who display contempt for Islamic principles by selfishly overlooking the needs of wives and children in order to frivolously indulge in impractical polygamous additions. A rare single-volume work, *Alhaki Kuykuyo Ne* presents a slate of multiple protagonists, similar to the characterization in *Budurwa Zuciya*, and weaves two seemingly unrelated narrative lines, which embellishes the plot development. The primary story presents a man of ill-repute, Alhaji Abdullahi, a rich merchant dealing in imported textiles. Having a wife and nine children, the miserly Alhaji Abdullahi gives his dependents a paltry daily allowance that inadequately meets their needs. Rabi, his undervalued wife, has to work in order to properly feed, clothe, and pay the school fees for her children. Alhaji conspicuously consumes his finances, entertaining himself nightly at restaurants and clubs, returning home in the early

morning hours long after everyone has retired to bed. To compound his domestic irresponsibility, he takes another wife, Delu, a seasoned prostitute, who topples any remnant of household stability. Abused by this new wife and further neglected by Alhaji, Rabi voices her anger, only to have Alhaji immediately repudiate her and disown his children.

Retribution awaits Alhaji, the first blow being a fire in the *Sabon Gari* market that consumes his stall and worldly possessions, and the second tragedy being his catching Delu in an adulterous act. Humbly he returns to Rabi begging her forgiveness, but she bitterly banishes him from her compound. Having spurned all family ties, the nadir of his fall from grace comes with severe poverty, leaving him begging in the streets for food. Rabi ultimately agrees to reconciliation after coercion from family, friends, and children.

The second storyline entails the relationship between Saudatu, Rabi's oldest daughter, and Alhaji Abubakar, a wealthy and honest businessman whose domestic life reflects a depressing polygamous reality. Despite his attempt to act judiciously, the wives constantly conspire against one another, physically fight, and create such disharmony that Alhaji seldom ventures home after work hours. Enthralled with her humble and respectable demeanor, Alhaji Abubakar avidly pursues Saudatu's hand in marriage and eventually divorces his other wives to ensure domestic tranquility. The narrative concludes as Alhaji Abubakar offers his father-in-law, Alhaji Abdullahi, financial support in restarting his textile business.

A ponderous didacticism reflects the crux of this novel, beginning with the punitive-sounding proverbial title ("sins are like the dog of the master that follows him home") and the lengthy two-page tirade of a preface that abuses men of Alhaji Abdullahi's character. Yakubu develops extreme one-dimensional characters of good and evil, opting to embolden her sermonic design. Characters are incapable of introspective self-analysis; those finding redemption undergo instantaneous epiphanies concerning their perversities. Yakubu views characterization as deferring to the interests of a dogmatic thematic content, here being the despicable male neglect of Islamic spousal responsibilities.

Polygamy suffers another scathing assault, described as an institution administering both intentional and incidental abuse. Even in the ideal scenario, where husbands such as Alhaji Abubakar possess religious integrity and genuine sympathy, polygamous dynamics are a self-starting domestic detonation, operating beyond a husband's control. For Yakubu, no amount of female patience will erase the emotional duress suffered by a co-wife.

The novel concludes with the reconciliation between Alhaji Abdullahi and Rabi, due simply to familial pressure from her brothers, uncles, and brothers-in-law. Rabi begrudgingly acquiesces in accordance with cultural norms, but the story implies that she had found self-fulfillment and satisfaction within her brief independence. Asma'u, in *Budurwa Zuciya*, experiences this disheartening coercion in her widowhood, and she obliges solely out of the same desire to placate the family's anguish. The conclusions leave the lingering impression that female subjugation is ultimately inescapable.

Wa Zai Auri Jahila? [Who will marry the ignorant woman?], the pinnacle of Balaraba Yakubu's feminist agenda, succinctly enumerates the various oppressions violating the well-being of Hausa women. Yakubu creates a heroine who displays a course of action to thwart gender bias, refusing to play the role of victim. She embodies the essence of female independence, possessing the intelligence and rare quality of self-reliance. As the title suggests, the role of education in the lives of women poses the central theme of the text. In addition to airing her explicit opinions on *auren dole* and polygamy, Yakubu emphasizes the significance of education in altering the oppressive character of traditional life. It potentially serves as a means to economic and psychological independence, offering a plethora of new life choices. Her call for education becomes resounding, endorsing it even at the expense of certain traditions, namely early marriage.

The novel chronicles an eight-year period in the life of Zainabu Abu, a girl living in the rural outskirts of Kano. Events begin with a conversation between her father and the Qur'anic schoolteacher, who expresses dismay over Zainabu's continued participation in class. Being a young eligible bride, her attendance violates the respected tradition of *purdah*; thus, her father quickly removes Zainabu from school, much to her dissatisfaction.

This occurrence precedes more unfortunate news from Amadu, her childhood sweetheart and first cousin, who refuses to marry her. Amadu, who has been attending Bayero University in Kano and has subsequently elevated his criteria for an acceptable woman, reneges on his marital promises. In an effort to salvage the family's dignity, her father promises Zainabu to a local *Sarki*, a chief of a neighboring village, and expedites the *auren dole* (forced marriage). Finding the old man repulsive and herself miserable in the chief's compound, she runs home and attempts to convince her parents to annul the marriage. Her return only embarrasses her father, who then promptly beats Zainabu and commands her to resolve herself to her new life.

Following her return, the *Sarki* abandons his previously cautious handling of her by sexually forcing himself upon Zainabu. The morning after, Zainabu awakens, bleeding profusely, barely able to walk, but she manages to find the strength to flee the compound and board a lorry for Kano, where she searches out a paternal aunt. Discerning her severe state of health, the aunt quickly takes Zainabu to an hospital, and the physician comments on how often he has seen young brides suffer the same sexual damage as a result of *auren dole*. He then advises Zainabu to abstain from sexual intercourse for two years, allowing her pubescent physique the time to properly mature.

The aunt arranges to annul the marriage and Zainabu takes up residence in the city, enrolling herself in night school and receiving her secondary-level certificate. Her education continues with her pursuit of a nursing career, demonstrating that academic excellence has become routine as she graduates at the top in her nursing class and easily finds employment at the Mohammed Murtala Hospital. The overriding source of motivation behind her educational achievements has been the haunting voice of Amadu, who jilted her because of her lack of education.

Seven years have passed since their separation, and in that time, Amadu received a scholarship to Oxford and completed a business degree. Flying back to Nigeria, he muses over his impending return and feels remorse about his cold dismissal of Zainabu years earlier. He dreams of meeting her again, wondering how she has fared in his absence. The day that Zainabu has endlessly awaited arrives when she sees Amadu and proudly proclaims that she is no longer the *jahila* (uneducated woman) that he left behind. Noting her scholarly and career success, Amadu eagerly pursues Zainabu again, but her feelings of resentment keep her rebuffing his advances. Only when she senses his sincere feelings of compunction about their past does she open up to the possibility of reconciliation.

The unsavory depiction of *auren dole* brings to mind Balaraba Yakubu's personal victimization, as she admittedly writes to therapeutically confront her past tragedy of having suffered two forced marriages in her early adolescence (Interview 26 Oct. 1997). Malam Garba (Zainabu's father) and the *Sarki* are made into tyrannical patriarchs, oblivious to the desires of women. Zainabu's decision to reject the tradition and flee the chief's compound illustrates the belief held by Yakubu that invented customs do not require the same obedience as religious injunctions. She traces the detailed emotional state of Zainabu's misery during her brief marriage to the chief, explicitly describing the extent of her oppression.

Yakubu's argument against *auren dole* is premised upon a discussion of customs, characterizing it as a gross cultural misunderstanding of Islamic tenets. The practice has long been a subject of debate in Islamic communities. Islam ordains that marriage is contractual, theoretically meaning that both bride and bridegroom can stipulate conditions for marriage or avoid the arrangement completely. Traditionally, however, the woman has not been allowed to negotiate the marriage herself; a guardian, usually her father, moderates the arrangements (Engineer 107). Islamic law has distinguished in matters of marriage between a *bakirah* ("young unmarried girl") and a *thayyibah* ("a widow or divorcee"), 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 category of women. The inclusion of a *wali* ("ward") in marital affairs is a pre-Islamic practice that was eventually incorporated into Islamic jurisprudence (Engineer 107). The Hadith is the only Islamic source that alludes to the role of the *wali*, and it clarifies that the guardian must obtain the permission of the *bakirah*: "The widow shall not be married until she is consulted, and the virgin shall not be until her consent is obtained" (Bukhari 42).

Her attack on the proliferation of polygamy in Hausaland, however, pertains specifically to a religiously approved norm, meaning that Yakubu has become the brunt of contempt for classical scholars and a conservative public. Always a source of controversy within the Islamic community, polygamy has been the subject of modernist exegesis as well. The Qur'anic passage regarding the practice reads:

Should you apprehend that you will not be able to deal fairly with orphans, then marry of other women as may be agreeable to you,

two or three, or four; but if you feel you will not deal justly between them, then marry only one, or out of those over whom you have authority. That is the best way for you to obviate injustice (*Sura Al-Nisa*, verse 4).

Common opinion concurs that the ethical stipulation of distributing justice is a condition taken lightly by Muslim men, given that even the Qur'an predicts that most believers would not be able to fulfill it: "You cannot keep perfect balance emotionally between your wives, however much you may desire it, but incline not towards one, leaving the other in suspense" (*Sura Al-Nisa*, verse 129). Traditional opponents of polygamy point to this verse, couple the Qur'anic stress on the impossibility of equal treatment with the command that polygamy should not be practiced if injustice is feared, and argue that Islam plainly indicates that monogamy is the norm.

In contextual terms, modernist scholars concentrate on the marital norms surrounding the Qur'an's revelation. Islam, with its birth, had been a restriction and not a liberalization of the degree of polygamy practiced (Lemu 15). The Qur'anic verse not only imposed a limited number of potential wives but ordained an added condition of equitable treatment. The central concept of the entire passage is the dispersal of justice, concluding that "justice to orphan girls on the one hand, and the rights and interests of women whom men intend to marry, on the other, receive primary consideration" (Engineer 102). Islamic historians also agree that the verses regarding polygamy were revealed immediately following the Battle of Uhud and were meant to provide guidance to the Muslim community in the wake of the disastrous affair (Engineer 102). Seventy of seven hundred men were slain in the battle, severely reducing the number of males responsible for women and children. Thus modernist scholars hold that the practice is contingent on an excess in single or husbandless women in a society where there is no other reasonable solution to the problem.

The proponents of contextual reinterpretation of divine scriptures operate on the premise that the Qur'an consists of two documents or voices that have distinct concerns (Karmi 81). The first articulation deals with social and practical questions, establishing a specific legalistic and regulatory response to the contemporary sociopolitical context. The second voice is consumed with the spiritual, transcendently moral, and philosophical concerns, thus embodying the ethical ideals of Islam. Two dissimilar voices within Islam exhibit competing perceptions of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic agenda for society, and the other being the espousal of a noble vision (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 66). The Qur'anic ideal has insistently impressed the transcendental belief in the spiritual essence of every Muslim and the correlative equality of all individuals. The first voice, however, has largely directed the body of political and legal thought while the second has left little trace of politically tangible results within the law (Karmi 81).

The competing voices find expression in verses that are seemingly contradictory as some indicate equal status of the sexes while others proclaim

the superiority of men in certain instances. Again, modernist scholars explain such a basic contradiction as being the coupling of normative and contextual Qur'anic statements. At this point, a dialectic is achieved so that "scriptural guidance is accepted by concrete people in concrete circumstances and guidance does not remain an abstract idea" (Engineer 10). The Qur'an was undoubtedly revealed for the whole of mankind and for all times, and yet it embodied a social order acceptable to Arabs to whom it was revealed, meaning that it had to possess a pertinence to their lives in order to be effective (Karmi 82). The immediate relevance of revelation took scriptural shape by including elements of history, culture, and tradition. Beyond these socially specific factors, however, there exists much that is normative, offering goals of human behavior across boundaries of time and place. Modernist scholars clarify that the transcendental norm is unmistakably indicated, and in future times, when concrete circumstances become more conducive to the acceptance of the ideal, an attempt to move closer to it should begin in earnest (Engineer 10). The goal is to adapt the social precepts of seventh-century Islam to a contemporary age by distinguishing between the normative and contextual voices in the Qur'an. Secondly, the contextual verses must be interpreted with sensitivity to those historical traditions, specifically when they pertain to the status of women in that civilization.

Operating on the understanding that the Qur'an consists of a legalistic and ethical voice, Balaraba Yakubu focuses on the latter, basing her argument on the transcendently moral code embodying the institution of polygamy. The central concept of the verses on polygamy iterates the administration of justice. In the description of marital affairs with the *Sarki*, Yakubu again characterizes polygamy as the primary source of domestic unrest. When the co-wives hear of Zainabu's approaching arrival, the eldest wife, Habiba, gloats over the thought that the youngest wife, Azumi will no longer be the recipient of special treatment. In spite of this probability, Azumi tries to maintain an affable exterior, but feelings of rejection fill her private moments.

The theme of female education requires consideration within the context of the modern educational environment. In terms of secular education, Kano is the least educationally developed of all the Nigerian states, a fact that reflects the predominant influence of Islam (Callaway 131). A system of Islamic education has long existed, as Qur'anic schools have flourished since the sixteenth century. The methodology in the schools has changed little from the time of inception, emphasizing the importance of acquiring Qur'anic knowledge and maintaining Islamic traditions. Though Islam attaches great significance to education for all Muslims, male attendance in Qur'anic schools has far outweighed that of females, a statistic reflected in the novel when Malam Garba withdraws Zainabu from school due to pressure of *pardah*. Behind closed doors becomes the only respectable place for a female of marriageable age.

In 1978, with most of the Muslim leaders endorsing the Universal Primary Education (UPE), the northern state governments rapidly increased the number of both Islamic and secular schools, urging parents

of boys and girls to send their children. The massive education drive could not instantly change the traditional attitude towards female education, which still considered it unwise to invest in female tutelage given that women were married young (Yusuf 92). In 1980, the Agency for Mass Education was established in Kano, developing literacy programs specifically for adult women (Yusuf 93). Only thirty women enrolled in the Kano City Women's Center in 1980; but by 1983, there were more than thirty centers with over 10,000 female students. In the novel, Zainabu hears about the adult women's school from a radio advertisement sponsored by the Agency of Mass Education. In effect, Balaraba Yakubu provides the reader with an accurate, detailed description of the school's organization and curriculum, answering all of the practical questions of potential female students.

The role of female portraiture is a core element in the text's reflection of Islamic-Hausa feminism. In relation to the other two novels, *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?* shows a type of liberal progression in moving away from classical African female stereotypes as reflected in the characters of Ummi and Delu. Both of these women embody the behavior of the "whore, high-life floozy, concubine" model (see Bell; Wachtel; and Schipper) and display Yakubu's sense of conservative ambivalence. The love for didacticism remains, but the novel gives a new depth and complexity to character development. Balaraba takes an introspective look at the thought process of the protagonist, closely monitoring her struggles and subsequent choices. The personal growth of Zainabu, her maturing into an educated and economically-empowered equal of her male peers, encompasses the scope of the text.

Zainabu embodies a full-dimensional character, one that exudes a spirited and strong-willed nature. From the beginning, she exhibits determination, expressing her dissatisfaction with her father's decision to exempt her from Qur'anic school. In the case of marriage to the *Sarki*, Zainabu makes her contempt known to the parents, instead of silently acquiescing to parental wishes as tradition demands. She refuses to be cheated out of her personal happiness, which here happens to be her educational pursuits. Miserable with life in the *Sarki's* compound, she flees the marriage and defies her father's expectations, summoning the tenacity to ignore her molested state and make her way to Kano. The act represents her explicit rejection of *awren dola* and commitment to securing her own personal goals. She ultimately fashions herself into the model of female educational excellence and career success.

Her change in perspective on male/female relationships proves to be Zainabu's most distinguishing characteristic. The traditional Hausa division of labor and power in the family unit has dictated that women are economically dependent on men, given their limited freedom in aspiring for economic activities outside of *purdah*. By placing her studies and career ahead of marriage, Zainabu becomes self-empowered, psychologically and financially autonomous. When Amadu returns from England, the *jahila* has evolved into a successful career woman, without need of male security. He proves tentative in approaching his old girlfriend, discerning that she no longer remains enamored of him but perceives herself as his equal.

The works of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu remain absorbed in exploring gender norms and the power differential embedded in traditional relationships. A writer with a clear political agenda, Yakubu is highly disturbed by what she has personally experienced and observed, and her discomfort leaves her no opportunity to welter in the language of love, reminiscent of some of her creative peers. Her expedient concerns prevent her from engaging in dreamy fantasies, for such trimmings of extravagance and wild opulence would distract from the critical impact of her social commentaries. Her novels include characters of wealthy means, but their activities never assume an element of unreality present in the works of other writers, such as weekly trips to Germany, Japan, and England and business ventures abounding over the globe. Her stories reflect the social, spatial, and economic norms characteristic of middle-class living, meaning that a majority of readers readily identify with the portrayed lifestyles.

Yakubu avoids allegiance to cultural traditions if it means compromising her feminist agenda to customary patriarchal privileges. In *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?*, as Zainabu flees the Sarki's compound and ultimately blossoms in Kano because of her efforts of escape, *aurun dolo* and *purdah* bear only oppressive traits. Co-wives in all of her novels experience unavoidable misery at the hands of men who long for the charms of new brides. Balaraba Yakubu unrepentantly characterizes gender norms as modern-day slavery that resigns women to a life of poverty and ignorance.

In *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?*, Zainabu's new economic empowerment, which highlights a profound shift in the Hausa social structure, has clearly affected the nature of her relationship to Amadu. This fundamental change in their attitudes towards one another suggests a radical contextual reinterpretation of verse 34 of *Sura Al-Nisa*. The verse reads:

Men are appointed guardians over women, because of that in respect of which Allah has made some of them excel others, and because the men spend of their wealth. So virtuous women are obedient and safeguard, with Allah's help, matters the knowledge of which is shared by them with their husbands. Admonish those of them on whose part you apprehend disobedience, and leave them alone in their beds and chastise them.

Men's superiority was founded upon the ancient Arab economic model that placed the financial burden upon men (Stowasser, "Gender Issues" 38). The ensuing logic, within a theological view tempered by a sociological perspective, warrants that male superiority would thus be reduced given a woman's achievement of economic self-sufficiency or her substantial contribution to the household income. Having just returned from completing school, Amadu has not yet found employment, meaning that the income differential actually works in Zainabu's favor. Balaraba Yakubu has eliminated any rank, authority, and the delegation of tasks that would justify women's obedience in exchange for material compensation. Though not formal religious treaties, her works thus serve as broad-minded and progressive *ijtihad*, dramatically reordering the designated family structure and its residential stability.

The fiercest public criticism of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu stems from her supposed attack on Islamic principles and cultural traditions. Yakubu and other *Soyayya* writers would consent that they are attempting to undermine certain cultural norms that have proven inimical to female rights, such as forced marriage. Hausa culture and Islam have become so intertwined that a sizeable portion of society believes forced marriage to be a religiously endorsed practice. When chastised for un-Islamic rhetoric, however, Yakubu ardently professes her religiously ethical motivations for writing, and a close reading of Islamic injunctions pertaining to the responsibilities of women authenticates her claim. The endorsement of female education finds an abundance of religious corroboration in the sources of Islamic law. While the Qur'an acknowledges that faith facilitates the spiritual and moral development of Muslims, it consistently articulates that knowledge expedites their intellectual capacity and thus stands next to faith in importance. "He grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and whoever is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good, and none takes heed except those endowed with understanding" (*Sura Al-Baqarah*, verse 270). The analogy of knowledge as wealth embodies the import of the following Hadith as well: "There shall be no envy but two—the person whom Allah has given wealth and the power to spend it in the service of Truth, and the person whom Allah has granted knowledge of things and he judges by it and teaches it to others" (Bukhari 3:15). Muhammad made it incumbent on those who came to him in search of knowledge to impart the same to others (Hadith—Bukhari 3:25; Bukhari 3:37) and mandated that even those considered to be the lowest strata of society should receive education to the highest degree (Hadith—Bukhari 3:31). From the Golden Age of the Prophet to the Hausa jihads of Usman dan Fodio, female figures have established themselves as consummate scholars, poets, and historians contributing to the social, political, and economic progress of Muslim communities. Consequently, the high aspirations for female education, shared by the likes of Yakubu, pose no anomaly within Islamic tradition.

Yakubu attempts to alter cultural perceptions of *purdah* that extricate "respectable" women from social interactions outside the domestic space. Female characters routinely defy the physical restriction as they attain university degrees and pursue professional careers. 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 conceal their charms from anyone other than their own men. Acquiring it from Persian and Byzantine societies that secluded women out of deference and honor, not humiliating treatment, Muslims saw *purdah* as fit to apply to their own women (see Farah). The Qur'an solely enjoins modesty in attire for both men and women with the hope of achieving social piety and avoidance of temptation and distraction. Yakubu, as well as a majority of *Soyayya* writers, have reinterpreted the Islamic tradition of *purdah* from a contemporary sociological position, noting the distinction between the normative ideal of chastity as expressed in the Qur'an and the antiquated contextual means of achieving it. In an age when women are increasingly perceived less as the "weaker sex" in need of male protection, *purdah*, in the contex-

tual sense, is not necessary. Women have proven they can move about alone and unviolated, capable of earning their own livelihood working outside of the home. Thus women can protect their chastity without observing *pardah*, meaning that they have adhered to the theological norm and concomitantly kept in step with the present sociological climate. Yakubu promotes balancing the sociological with the theological, a perspective that will provide the situational *Shari'a* flexibility to face various challenges presented by social changes while reflecting the transcendental essence of the Islamic sources of law.

Yakubu goes beyond the scope of most *Soyayya* writers in her figurative *ijtihad*, finding the traditional polygamous perspective incongruous with the prevailing intellectual milieu. With its inception, Islam had sought to restrict polygamous aspirations, limiting the number of potential wives and imposing the critical prerequisite of equitable treatment. Yakubu's discouragement of the institution finds justification in the Qur'anic emphasis on the male dispersal of justice in marital relations, an ethical stipulation that even the Qur'an believes to be beyond the compassionate capacity of most men (*Sura Al-Nisa*, verse 129). The contextual recognition surrounding the Qur'anic revelation following the Battle of Uhud reinforces Yakubu's so-called radical assertion as well. Thus Yakubu places herself with other modernist scholars who contend that the Islamic world should perceive the institution as conditional.

Kano market literature, maligned by its society for its failure to perpetuate traditional Hausa ways, has assumed the thankless task of suturing diverse social attitudes. In a world where some vehemently champion cultural authenticity in contrast to others who perceive themselves as members of a modern social order, *Soyayya* writers epitomize African popular literature by aspiring to create an acceptable blend of past and present. The literature's defining syncretic nature operates on an artistic level as Hausa oral tradition and contemporary romance formulas amalgamate in a neoteric fashion, but the syncretic essence is better personified by the ideological admixture of seemingly opposed principles. Kano market literature experiments in cultural grafting hoping to pose workable suggestions for social change. Overwhelmed by the immediacy of its growing pains, conservative Hausa communities can only conceive of *Soyayya* writers as a cultural enemy, but history will view their contributions as an operative link in the endless social transformation of Hausa culture.

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