



Gender, Conflict and Human Rights in Northern Nigerian Novel

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Abstract

This paper investigates the question of gender, conflict and human rights in northern Nigeria society using the novel *Yar'fari* (2020) by A'aisha Abdulkareem. The study seeks to delineate the critical need for gender equity, peace and conscientization towards human rights for females in northern Nigeria in particular and other regions at large. Consequently, this study opens up how Nigerian literature plays a vital role in explicating the gap between men and women, boys and girls generated by cultural restrictions and patriarchal constructions which often translate to gender conflict. Using the theoretical tool of Africana Womanism as propagated by Clenora Hudson-Weems, this paper addresses gender, conflict and the necessity to take action and create harmony, balance, justice, complementarity among sexes geared towards strengthening human rights and fundamental freedom. Put together, the text *Yar'fari* signifies a coherent engagement to challenge gendered conflicts, oppression and human rights encroachment in all forms.

Keywords: Gender, Conflict, Human Right, Northern Nigeria, Africana Womanism, Justice, Harmony, *Yar'fari*

Introduction

Varied definitions of the term gender exist. Gender is said to come from the Latin word 'genus' meaning kind or race. Gender refers to socially or culturally constructed distinctions and roles associated with being male or female. Gender is the "socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviors, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis" (<https://gender.jhpiego.org/analysistoolkit/gender-concepts-and-definitions>). Gender also implies the economic, social, political, attributes and opportunities associated with being women and men. The social definitions of what it means to be a woman or a man vary among cultures and changes over time. Gender is a sociocultural expression of particular characteristics and roles that are associated with certain groups of people with reference to their sex and sexuality (<https://gender.jhpiego.org/analysistoolkit/gender-concepts-and->

definitions). It highlights hierarchical relations and roles between males and females. This often translates to conflict precisely, gender role conflict as the male or female adheres to traditionally assigned gender responsibilities and duties.

“Conflict” on the other hand is defined as a “clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought process, understanding, interests, requirements and even perceptions” (<https://www.managementstudyguide.com/understandingconflict>). However, beyond the notion of conflict, this paper highlights the role of gender inequality in producing or exacerbating conflict on gender relations. The outcome of this kind of conflict is the “restriction of the human potential of the person experiencing the conflict or a restriction of another person's potential” (James, 1982, p.44). Thus, gender conflict limits not just women/girls but boys/men’s well-being and human potential. However, gender conflicts in the novel, *Yar’fari* shows men as perpetrators and women/girls as victims. By this, the text of study unfolds how some of the characters have been emotionally restricted by sexism within households leading to unequal value given to women/girls access to education, and decision-making in the northern Nigeria locale. Small wonder, women’s role in most societies is traditionally to take care of the household and the children, while the men’s role is to provide for the family by working outside the home. In this regard, the distribution of gender roles favor men and disadvantage women thereby propelling conflicts and human rights violations as replicated in the novel *Yar’fari*.

Explicating Human Rights

Human rights are those rights that belong to every individual whether man or women, girl or boy, infant or elder—simply because she or he is a human being. Human rights are standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. They are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. Along these lines, human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings - they are not granted by any state. These universal rights are inherent to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. They range from the most fundamental - the right to life - to those that make life worth living, such as the rights to food, education, work, health, and liberty (<http://www.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/how%20work/unsystemicordination/gendermainstreaming-issuesbrief-en%20pdf.pdf>).

Attaining equality between women and men and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are fundamental human rights. Women/girls around the world regularly suffer violations of their human rights throughout their lives. Also, the

Organization of African Unity in article 18 specifically mentions “the obligation of African States to “ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women and ensures the protection of the rights of the woman and the child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions” (http://www.claiminghumanrights.org/au_charter.html). Furthermore, the Millennium Development Goal 3 focuses on gender equality and empower women as well as emphasizing that “girls’ access to education is imperative for achieving gender equality” (<https://www5.worldbank.org/mdgs/>).

Despite the existence of several laws and regulations, women still do not enjoy equal rights like men. There are social, cultural and traditional patterns that perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and risks to women’s full enjoyment of their human rights. The relegation of women and girls have been attributed to the consequence of colonialism which involves the services of men and not that of women, thereby making them outsiders in the colonial value system. This is vividly captured in that “the inter-gender polemics of women as-outsiders in Africa involves such issues as the marginality, subjugation and relegation of women. They are marginalized within the praxes of professional, socio-political and economic self-acclaim. They are also subjugated to subservient roles and relegated to the performance of their biological roles and a life of domesticity” (Uko, 2006, p.85).

Africana Womanism as a Theoretical Lens

Africana Womanism is a term coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems. It is ideology applicable to all women of African origin. Africana Humanism opens up new ways of speaking about experiences, struggles, social change, the struggle against subjugation and the quest for full humanity of the African woman. Africana Womanism is rooted in black women’s and other women of color’s everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. The standpoint, Africana Womanism is not feminism despite its name. Africana Womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism rather it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social, address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action (Clenora, 2004, p. xx-xxi). The perception of Africana Womanism denounces stereotypical images that depict the male as active, dominating and rational while, the female is passive and emotional. Africana Womanist writers create self-actualizing women with positive identity and strong personality. It embraces man as a partner in progress and it seeks to end all forms of oppression, race, class and gender discrimination.

In other words, Africana Womanism is black centered. It is accommodating. It

believes in the freedom and independence of women unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women, black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (Phillips, 2006, p. 65). Thus, “Africana womanist knows oppression when she (or he) sees it, and she (or he) is against it. She lives her life in such a way as to fight and dismantle oppression in whatever she can, individual or in organized formation with others” (Clenora, 2004, p. 3). Africana Womanism captures the following tenets:

1. The depiction of women as strong and memorable characters in contrast to stereotypical female characters found in male texts.
2. Women as instruments of change in society.
3. The concern for children is paramount.
4. The concern to resist all forms of discriminations
5. The concern for complementarity and mutual co-existence (Clenora, 1998, p. 3).

Conscious of the above, “the average African woman is not a hater of men; nor does she seek to build a wall around her gender, across which she throws ideological missiles. She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development and dignity alongside the men. This necessitates a dialogic stance, a mutual understanding and not a dogmatic or diachronic ideological posture” (Kolawole, 1997, p. 36). In line with Africana Womanist principles therefore, this study underscores the extent to which A’isha Abdulkareem’s *Yar’fari* reveals concerns on the subject of gender, conflict and human rights infringements in the northern Nigeria situation. A’isha uses her literary work not only to convey the cultures and traditions of the region but to narrate the realistic scenes and happenings in the region. The novel signals the view that “literature is more than just a mechanic reflection of the social reality... it does shape our attitudes of life, the daily struggle within our individual souls and selves” (Ngugi, 1982, p.6).

The Northern Nigeria Locale

The northern Nigeria region consists of nineteen (19) states out of thirty-three (33) states in Nigeria. It was formerly denoted as the Northern Protectorate during the British colonial rule. The space covers three thousand square miles, seven hundred and twenty miles from its border with Dahomey in the West, Cameroon republic in the east and four hundred and twenty miles from the Niger republic. Northern Nigeria is subdivided into North West which consist of: Zamfara, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kebbi, Katsina, Kano and Jigawa and the North Central such as Niger, Kogi, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kwara and FCT and the North East namely: Bauchi, Borno, Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe and Yobe.

Much of the northern Nigeria's geographical spread is blessed with flora and fauna, open savannah, high flat plains covered with grasses, thin and thorn trees. It comprises of major ethnic groups such as Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri with the minority groups from the middle belt. It is a Muslim dominated religion with the people relying on subsistence agriculture, herding and trading as the source of economy. The region is a heterogeneous and culturally patriarchal polygamous region. It has literature that brings to light the unique experiences and unease surrounding the de-voiced girl-child which the northern Nigeria female writers foreground.

Northern Nigerian Female Writers

Just as the title connotes, the northern Nigerian female writers are women who script about pressing socio-political and cultural issues in the region. These writers can be classified into two groupings. The burgeoning group of educated writers of English language expression such as Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, Bilqisu Abubakar, Razinat Talatu Muhammed, Phebe Veronica Jatau, Asabe Kabir, Eugenia Abu, Safiya Ismaila Yero, and at the present A'aisha Abdulkareem. On the other hand, there are the writers of the Litattafan Soyayya, tradition. These writers are slightly educated and they mostly write in indigenous languages using Hausa Language. Some of these writers are Hafsat Abdulwaheed, Bilkisu Funtuwa, and Balaraba Ramat Yakubu to name but a few.

These two groups often convey themes such as poverty, hardship, betrayal, jealousy, teenage pregnancy, marital pressure surrounding women in their writings. In recent times however, their works are bringing to fore critical conversations in northern Nigeria literature. They capture the new realities of northern Nigeria women in the post-colonial era. Thus, "the thematic preoccupation of many African women writers' creative writings, particularly those from Northern Nigeria have been the elevation of the images of women to a dignified status in their works" (Suwaiba, 2020, p. 94). In addition:

Women authors who wrote in English Language in the northern States of Nigeria have certain attributes in common. They are university graduates, some with more than two degrees. They are married with children and have good steady jobs. They are very conscious of their rights and responsibilities as women authors living in a male dominated society, including a male dominated field. (Ahmad & Badmus, 2016, p. 72).

The northern Nigerian woman as an "African woman has her roles defined by history, cultural practice and religion ... subservient to the role of men. This woman is cast in the traditional mold as set by tradition to shoulder her burden in marriage, procreation, wifehood, motherhood and widowhood ... (Chris, 1977, p. 2). In the face of these, "contemporary African women writers are not only establishing the new woman who is free to love and express love, they are also essentially surmount all sexist depictions and picturesque portrayals" (Leslie, 2020, p. 93). This woman or girl tries to

be “one whose mental, emotional and spiritual growth is determined to discover the meaning of womanhood, free of the coercive engendering which her community attempts to instil in her” (Chris, 1977, p. 3). This perception emboldens the woman or girl-child to self-discovery and self-realization of her aspiration.

The Writer A’aisha Abdulkareem

A’aisha Abdulkareem (officially known as Aisha Umar Muhammad) holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a Master of Arts, Literature in English from the Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria. She is a Lecturer with the Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State Nigeria. She specializes in gender literature with focus on Northern Nigerian Women Fiction. A’aisha is as well a creative writer and all round literary enthusiast. Her works have been featured on several national and international literary and academic journals one of which—a short story 'Binle’s Emerald' earned her third place in the 2018 African Writers' Award. A’aisha has a special interest in the girl-child and most of her works revolve around gender. She employs her foremost novel *Yar’fari* to draw awareness to the Yar’fari culture of the Ubare- Fulani people. Here, the culture demands that as soon as the first child is weaned, the child is severed from biological parents to foster parents who often are close or distant relatives. Severed at the age of two from her blood parents, Teni, the central character in *Yar’Fari* is in a dilemma between culture and her ambition for education. Teni is married off to Abu by her grandparents with no second thought about her desires and fundamental Human Rights thereby leaving Teni and other characters in the novel as victors or as victims.

Consequently, the greatest achievement of the novel “lies in the novelist’s ability to move beyond mere exposition of the social crimes against humanity to powerfully demonstrate through the lives of the main characters the ways out of the degradation these humans find themselves” (Cornel, 2013, p. 25). Small wonder, female critics deploy their creative works as ways to give power to the female point of view, by rejecting patriarchal expressions, and abuse of human rights that has culturally dominated literature. Female writers seek to expose and bring an end to this type of domination, focusing specifically in the conventional roles of women which are primarily domestic. Female writers therefore, perceive creative literary works as canvases through which females reject reductive myths of suppression, conflicts and human rights oppression.

Gender, Conflicts and Human Rights in Yar’Fari

The novel *Yar’fari* underscores gender, conflicts and human rights abuses in northern Nigeria space and how a young Fulani girl, Teni tries to maneuver through such configurations. Conflict is observed between Teni and her grandfather from the paternal

side, conflict between Baba Teni and his father, and conflict between the Teni and the cultural values of 'Yarfari' that suppresses the human rights of the first child. Other female such as Ruuma, Husseina- Teni's mother are not left out of the torment.

Yar'fari brings to fore how the girl-child is denied paternal warmth and care from her biological parents due to the traditional dogma associated with the first child. Since Teni is the first child, she is the possession of her grandparents who decide her fate in life:

Teni has been living with her maternal grandparents since the age of two in the remote village of Kwane. She was given to her maternal grandparents shortly after she was weaned. Being the first child severed her from her parents. Thereafter, in line with tradition...the tradition of giving out the first child to relations led to Teni's father's negligence of his daughter to better life alone.... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 8)

To make matters worse, Teni is severely undervalued such that she is not allowed to have access to school as boys. She strides between been a herds-girl (taking animals for grazing) and performing of house chores. The novel puts it:

All her life, Teni had always admired the few male children in the village who went to makarantar boko (the western school). There had never been any female among them. She used to imagine herself in the smart uniform among them the group of boys on their way to school. This thought normally came to her when she came across them as she took the animals for kiwo (grazing) every morning.... Above all she wondered why girls were never privileged to be among them.... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 14)

The conflict of interest in the novel sheds light on how the girl-child struggles with the thoughts of been deprived education while the boy-child is sent to school. The novel makes known the prejudiced belief that values one sex over the other. This brings to attention, the idea of gender stereotyping, discrimination, and unequal power relations between boys and girls.

On the discrimination and violation of human rights, Teni is denied access to education while the boy child is allowed to go to 'makarantar boko' (the western school). This is against the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims the equal entitlements of women and men to the rights contained in it, "without distinction of any kind, such as ... sex" (<https://www.ohchr.org>). This violation impacts the girl's potential to thrive in the society. By this, the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that mask the woman/girl child is portrayed. Hence, gender conflict occurs when a person or persons encounter distress, discomfort or negative consequences. One cannot but wonder, the rationale for sending the boy-child to school and side-lining the girl-child. Probably, it is to prepare the boy-child for the role of becoming the head and breadwinner of the family while, the girl-child who might not be a worthy investment is steadily loaded prepared to assume her role as an item for marriage, child bearing, domestic labor and source of wealth for the family. Hence, the writer, Abdulkareem creatively laments the

Human Right infringements:

To every young girl in Kwane, getting a good husband was the ultimate interest. This was what the society had managed to instil in them, making them believe that marriage was the ultimate success in their lives and a fulfilment of their womanhood, subsequently followed by childbirth. The life cycle of the girl-child is characterized by all these. Education never had a room in this house of fulfilment. (A'aisha, 2020, p. 19)

The undue yokes in the quotation, validates Africana Womanism theory which generates a new way of talking about the relationship that robs Teni from the journey towards full humanity. As she suddenly becomes a target of interest and early/forced marriage instead of education:

Teni was gradually becoming a young beautiful Fulani woman.... At the age of thirteen, she was already considered by the people to be ripe enough for marriage. Expectedly, suitors both young and old began to flock Baba Salisu's house, seeking her hand in marriage.... Against, her father's plans to take her away to the city to start school, Baba Salisu, and the members of Kabiru's family met and picked a suitor for her from the numerous suitors... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 9-11).

Baba Salisu is the patriarchal male figure from Teni's maternal side that has effectively imposed the idea of marriage for Teni by so doing, frustrates her chance of educational advancement. Also, Baba Elamu, the patriarchal male figure from her paternal side those not help matters, rather, he assists in accomplishing the marriage arrangement. The novel unfolds how gender-role conflicts and strains can impact ideal societal expectations and appropriateness.

In this conflict of views, Teni's father, Kabiru is not spared the brunt of gender conflict and Human Right cruelty. He cannot go against the Yar'fari tradition to support his first daughter's dream of going to the city to get education. He has no say in the matter as Teni is abandoned to their whims. The novel explains:

What! Kabiru, are you out of your senses? Have you forgotten that it is against traditions to go to school? His father poured out his questions angrily but Kabiru did not reply. You have been in the city for over ten years, why the sudden interest in this girl's affairs, we have never interfered in how you manage your other children but this one is ours, Yar'fari, don't forget. She is our business, stay clear (A'aisha, 2020, p. 37-38).

By using the Africana Womanism theory to speak "for the entire black race, female and male alongside all humanity" interrogates the domesticated role for the girl child which is often restricted solely to forced marriage that culminates in grief and conflict between father and daughter. The novel puts it:

As Teni left Baba, her mind was in turmoil. She did not know what to think. She thought of her father who had earlier promised that he would take her to the city.... She thought of the education she had so desired, the inferno of her life spread like an oasis in the horizon before her.... All I see is spending the rest of my life in a loveless marriage

with a stranger I feel nothing for. All I can understand from this whole scenario is a bondage that has no end.... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 12-20)

Through the extract, Teni's expression of disdain for early/forced marriage in contradiction to her dream for education challenges the dominant system of female subjugation where the girl or woman belongs solely to the private domain. This aligns with the tenets of Africana Womanism that opposes the exclusion of the woman/girl-child from educational advancement and progress. In other words, the novel counters the "traditional/cultural systems that usually define an ideal true woman as a woman who displays "religion, piety, sexual purity, wifely submission and content with her domestic seclusions" (Phillips, 2006, p. 199), rather than for self-realization, self-actualization and advancement.

This section considers the diverse ways the girl child or woman tries to oppose cultural restrictions and walk the paths towards liberation and empowerment. The novels states:

So while every young girl in Kwane village admired Teni, she thought differently. Her idea of a fulfilled life was not in a marriage where she had no choice and say, but in a future where she could be a personality, who had gone to study, speaks the white man's language.... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 19)

Furthermore, she declares her manifesto:

I am different. My idea of life fulfilment is not in early marriage. No one seems to understand me. I dream of being in the big city, educated and smartly dressed, talking intelligently... and working in a place where I could touch the lives of people and serve humanity.... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 20)

The above extracts voiced by the main character Teni makes public her zeal to confront patriarchy. Though a young girl of thirteen, the novel portrays how she begins to wail loudly to contest the imposed marriage. Teni refuses to be trivialized, silent or voiceless. She fights back amidst sobs and wailings. The novel depicts the scene of protest: "After all these, it was time to go. Teni increased the volume of her wailing and held on to the pillar at the entrance of the room, refusing to move towards the door on the onward journey to marital life and an uncertain future, chosen for her by her family" (A'aisha, 2020, p. 44).

In the case of Teni's friend Ruuma, she was arranged for marriage to her father's friend's son Bello to seal a business friendship. To avoid the conflict of interest in a forced marriage and human rights abuse, Ruuma takes the lethal option of suicide days to her proposed wedding. The novel puts it that:

Only her mother noticed the volume of the venomous anger Ruuma' disposition showed throughout the wedding festivities. Other members of the family were in frenzy over the ceremony especially as it meant more money from Alhaji to increase their stock of gold trinkets and clothing. It was therefore a rude shock to everyone when Ruuma was

found dead a few days later from poisoning, evident from her suicide note and the cup used to consume the poison.... (A'aisha. 2020, p. 22)

The choice of suicide as a way out of her dilemma is not a route for Teni. Rather, she continues to be hopeful even as she sought alternatives to oppose the “whole idea of marriage” (16) and revert the abuse of her fundamental human rights.

Despite Teni's subtle resistance, soon, she is married off. Her life is never the same again. “She hated everyone whose action or inaction contributed to the rape of her childhood and innocence” ((A'aisha, 2020, p. 43). Through her mother's suggestions Teni gradually sees the essence of family and the necessity to support her husband, Abu get a university education. This corroborates the standpoint of Africana Womanism “the concern for complementarity and mutual co-existence” (Clenora, 1998b, p. 3). Teni's cooperation for her husband to acquire education is geared towards human rights appeal for all to have education. Unfortunately, Abu dies from a stray bullet during a school protest.

Now nineteen and a widow, Teni refuses to be deterred by the countless hurdles to get education- her fundamental human right. With the support of her father, she gets home-schooling to enable her get into secondary school. Soon, the moment to assert her resourcefulness, her personhood and desires had come. This validates Africana Womanism's tenet for self-discovery. She becomes one of the best in her school “Teni's result was one of the best ever produced by the school according to the principal... (A'aisha, 2020, p. 102). “Teni metamorphosed from that naïve vulnerable and docile young woman into a beautiful matured and intellectual woman reckoned with by the international society” (A'aisha, 2020, p. 106). This correlates the need for the: “transformation of the economic, political, social, psychological and legal circumstances of the powerless...which disvalue, disempower and disposes women with its central objectives tied to the needs of women to opportunities, facilities, skill acquisition and position of authority, especially within the political sphere” (Makama, 2017, p. 8). Teni becomes a matured woman that is empowered to decide for herself what she desires, as well as support other girls knowing they are valuable and they have human rights and dignity that must be respected. Taken together, the study unveils that gender, conflicts and human rights are linked in fundamental ways to harm gender relations hence, the dire need to address them.

Conclusion

The study circumscribes how the northern Nigerian novel *Yar'fari* delineates gender, conflict and human rights. The paper reveals that gendered processes and the conflicts that ensue in patriarchal contexts often disadvantage women's or girl's fundamental human rights. In this light, the text underscores the need to raise a voice

against child marriages, forced marriages, lack of access to education and what it means to disempower the girl child. The study reveals that though the male child could also be a victim of human right abuse as noticeable in *Yar'fari*, however, the drawbacks are more on the girl-child. Using Africana Womanism, the paper underscores that the centrality of women, men, boys and girls must work together for gender equity, human rights, empowerment and development in order to promote peaceful, inclusive society for the sustainable development of the northern Nigeria space and the world. Above all, the study highlights the necessity to propagate laws and policies that support gender equity in all facets of life.

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