

**Predator and Prey: Islamic Feminism and the Discourse of Female-authored Novels in Northern Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Muslim women's writing from northern Nigeria has attracted feminist critical attention but the exploration of this tradition through a blend of feminism and critical discourse analysis has not been explored. This paper examines Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and Saliha Abubakar Abdullahi Zaria's *Edge of Fate* to show how these women negotiate the interstices of feminist ideology, religion, culture and Western education. It also discusses the binaries of Islamic religion and culture vis-à-vis the yearnings of the contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim woman to extricate herself from the patriarchal web of inequity and injustice. This study employed Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical theoretical framework for the elicitation of perspectives on ideology and dominance and the binaries of inequity in heterosexual relationships in the selected literary works and the socio-cultural milieu that produced them. The analysis projects the dilemma and creative impulse of the contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim woman as she attempts to overcome the forces that inhibit her self-expression without overtly upsetting the applecart of Islam and patriarchal ideologies.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, female-author, inequality, Islamic feminism, Muslim womanhood, patriarchy.

**Introduction**

Nigerian women writers exemplified by Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo and lately Chimamanda Adichie have used literature to challenge the inherent contradictions in a society where men are treated differently from women; exploitative and oppressive tendencies against women are regarded as given; and heartbreak, unending tears and soul-penetrating torment are accepted as the lot of womanhood. A cursory look at the works authored by women from northern Nigeria such as Zaynab Alkali, Saliha Abubakar Abdullahi Zaria and Asabe Kabir Usman reveals that this new generation of writers, who can be described as the voice of women from northern Nigeria, are becoming more outspoken in a socio-cultural milieu where women are often consigned to household and nursery matters. This new generation of writers have brought to the front burner of public discourse issues that affect the physical and spiritual well-

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being of women in Muslim majority northern Nigeria; issues that border on gender discrimination, oppression and suppression of womanhood and much more.

The paper examines how Saliha Abubakar Abdullahi Zaria and Asabe Kabir Usman use their prose to demonstrate the northern Nigerian Muslim woman's negotiation of the interstice of feminist ideology, gender equality and the rights of northern Nigerian Muslim women in the context of an emerging global culture. It discusses the perspectives from which both creative writers present the binaries of Islamic religion and culture *vis-à-vis* the contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim woman's yearning for release from the inequity and injustice of patriarchy. Lastly, it elicits some social and psychological explanations why the contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim woman is unable to fight the cause of Islamic feminism openly in her male-centred *Umma* (Muslim-majority community).

Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* is about Aisha, a young Muslim woman whose parents divorced when she was very young. Consequently, she was brought up by her doting father and a wicked step mum. Aisha was set for wedding in her late teens when tragedy struck; Muktar, her fiancé, died in an auto accident two days to their wedding. She is so heartbroken that she thinks she will never contemplate marriage again. A few years later, she meets Umar and with her father's encouragement, she enters into a blissful marital relationship. Barely twenty years into the marriage, Aisha literally catches her husband in bed with Nafisah, his undergraduate niece who lives with them and whom Aisha had previously regarded as her daughter especially as she is about her first daughter's age.

Aisha's shock is compounded by Umar's decision to marry Nafisah as his second wife. With her change in status, Nafisah demands that Zainab, her cousin and Aisha's daughter, address her as 'Aunty'; she sees herself as Zainab's step mum in view of her marriage to Zainab's dad. This rude shock and the attendant wrangling lead to Aisha's relocation to her father's house in another city. Soon after, Umar is arraigned for corruption, he loses his job as a senior civil servant and his property is confiscated by the court. He loses his wealth; Nafisah leaves him; and he becomes terminally ill and hospitalised. Aisha returns to nurse him; he pleads for forgiveness from her and their children. He doesn't recover from the ailment and in turn dies a broken man in his hospital bed.

Saliha Abubakar Abdullahi Zaria's *Edge of Fate* is about a young educated Muslim woman, Salmah, whose mother died when she was very young. Like Aisha in *Destinies of Life*, she too was brought up by her father and her step mum. Salmah

is an unusually gifted young woman who often receives foreknowledge of happenings around her. She has an uncanny personality that makes men fall in love with her; and she almost always has her wishes fulfilled. As a teenager, her soul becomes entangled with that of Maina, the scion of a wealthy upper class family, but they are unable to marry because of the wide disparity in their family backgrounds. Salmah later falls in love with Gidado, a previously married army officer, but the marriage breaks down after three years because Salmah couldn't have children. About four years later, Maina and Salmah run into each other by chance; they realise that they are still deeply in love. The story ends "happily" as Salmah marries into Maina's polygamous home where she is warmly accepted by Maina's children and his first wife.

### **Contemporary Perspectives on Islamic Feminism**

Feminism generally refers to the body of work concerned with the social, political, and economic equality of women by challenging the deep-seated nature of gender subordination in a society. Margot Badran (2005, 2009) distinguishes between secular and Islamic feminism; while the former generally describes an all-inclusive women activism in Muslim-majority countries, the latter describes Muslim women's activism based mainly on a rereading of the Qur'an by Muslim women. We don't quite see the need for the distinction between secular and Islamic feminism. To us, any struggle for the emancipation of Muslim women from the clutches of patriarchy in Muslim-majority communities can be accurately described as Islamic feminism. This movement has become inevitable in this age of enlightenment where more people of different races and climes are becoming increasingly aware of their fundamental human rights as global citizens (Moghadam, 2003; Mahmood, 2005). The preamble to *The Charter of the United Nations* reaffirms "faith in the fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small..." The movement is concerned with the variety of ways in which patriarchy, along with other axis of male domination, is being challenged in an Islamic framework. Hence it is often seen as a movement of people who retain their Islamic conviction, but promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by alluding to relevant verses in the Qur'an to support their stance (e.g. Badran, 2001; Barlas, 2002).

Although Islamic feminism continues to spread because of its agenda of relevance and enlightenment, it continues to generate much controversy in the form of opposing perspectives and arguments. According to Margot Badran (2008:26), detractors in the West "portrayed feminists as man-haters" while others in the East branded them as "perpetrators of cultural treason and, ironically in so doing

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‘colluded’ with westerners in declaring feminism western” (ibid). This view is echoed by Rochelle S. Whitcher (2005:8) who observe that Islamic feminism is often in direct contention with the powerful religious elite because it often “flaunted basic religious doctrine and ... challenged the patriarchal structure of Islam itself.” Islamic feminism emerged as a result of the need to check sexist and patriarchal tendencies in the practice of Islam in Muslim-dominated countries. According to Valentine Moghadam (2002:1158), Islamic feminists combine their religious reinterpretations with recognition of universal standards, such as the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Very much like many other Middle Eastern religions, the practice of Islam in most Islamic countries is overwhelmingly male-centred prompting Fatima Mernissi (1991) to observe that the religion has put a “sacred stamp onto female subservience”. According to her (ibid:23), the school and the workplace had until recently been considered the exclusive preserve of men and the privilege of maleness; hence access of women to education and paid employment in Muslim-majority countries is “one of the most fundamental upheavals of the twentieth century”. Reacting to criticism from proponents of patriarchy, she said, “If women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Qur’an nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interest of a male elite” (Fatima Mernissi, ibid:ix).

The Islamic feminist movement comprises mainly practising Muslim women, who are preoccupied with resisting the unequal treatment of women in Islamic societies. Many of them are not comfortable with being called feminists, and they actually resisted being branded as such initially, because such branding frames them as anti-Islam and blasphemers. At the risk of being misunderstood or ostracised from the Islamic community, they have continued to resist the injustice and the trajectory of patriarchy and male-centred practices that prevail in Islamic countries exemplified by Iran, Morocco and Egypt. Asma Barlas (2008:19), for instance, came to terms with her identity when she writes: “if my reading of the Qur’an is feminist simply by virtue of being based in and on the Qur’an, then, clearly I am an Islamic feminist and there’s no escaping that fact!” According to Rochelle S. Whitcher (2005:7), women are now returning to the texts of their faith, exemplified by *The Qur’an* and *The Hadith*, and are working within the confines of Islamic ideology to reclaim their rights as Muslims.

Margot Badran (2006) observes that Islamic feminism has incurred enemies from Muslim men “who fear the loss of patriarchal privileges” and a minority of Muslim women “who fear the loss of patriarchal protection”. This is because its members

have taken on the task of eradicating many patriarchal ideals often glossed as Islamic and promoting globally acceptable ideals of gender equality through feminist reading of the Qur'an. She observed that Muslim converts in western societies were faced with a "painful contradiction between Qur'anic ideals of justice and equality and oppressive patriarchal practices that prevail in many Islamic communities. She argued that there is no reason biological duality should be allowed to diminish the ideal of fundamental equality of all human beings. She illustrated with Qur'an 4:34 which contains the expression "*qawwamuna 'ala*", and has been used by generations of men to justify and perpetuate male authority over women. She argued that this patriarchal reading has grossly exaggerated the significance of men over women. She also alluded to the popular belief amongst Muslims that a woman's path to heaven can only be attained first through obedience to her husband. However, Islamic feminists reading of the same verse places the statement, "*qawwamuna 'ala*" in the context of childbearing and nursing only and not as men having responsibility over women at all times. Patriarchal interpretation of this and many other verses in the Qur'an, Badran asserts, are self-serving and erroneous. She concludes that patriarchy, as ideology and practice, "fundamentally disrupts the Qur'anic ideal and practice of human equality". Elsewhere, she writes:

Islamic feminism is very much a work in progress. To engage in Islamic feminism is to stretch our minds and to expand the parameters of knowledge, and to develop and refine new analytical and conceptual vocabulary. It is to forge new bonds and extend the scope and forms of our collective and everyday activism. It is also to enter an embattled arena and perhaps this is a sign of Islamic feminism's urgency and relevance (Margot Badran, 2008:34-35).

According to Margot Badran (2009:3), secular feminism and Islamic feminism approach gender equality differently. While secular feminism concentrate more on the implementation of gender equality in the public sphere and appear silent on the private sphere or family domain, Islamic feminists advance "compelling arguments that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to the Qur'anic principles of human equality and gender justice" (ibid:4). Secular feminist movements that arose in various Muslim-majority countries were organised more on national frontiers than religious; hence the ideologies they espoused were not anchored solely on the Qur'an unlike their Islamic counterparts. Consistent and organised feminist activities in different geographical and national boundaries led to the emergence of all-inclusive and pluralistic descriptions of secular feminist movements exemplified by Egyptian feminism, Syrian feminism and Iranian

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feminism. Badran (ibid:5) observes that Islamic feminism is basically in the singular, because it “seeks to maintain a focus on what is an intellectual endeavour or *ijtihadic* project of articulating a coherent model of an egalitarian Islam, and one that can serve as a template for religious and socio-cultural transformation.” Secular feminists and Islamic feminists are not rivals, neither do they oppose each other; indeed they complement each other by working together to achieve shared goals in the Muslim-majority countries they are found.

It is important that Islamic feminism be taken seriously as a liberatory force and certainly not as a cult of dissident Muslim women; hence focus should be placed more on perspectives espoused and the methodology employed rather than the gender or the religious affiliation of its proponents. We subscribe to an all-inclusive definition accommodating all scholars with Islamic feminist conviction, irrespective of gender or religious leaning, whose writings and activities demonstrate commitment to the emancipation of Muslim females from the patriarchal web of sub-humanisation, inequality and injustice. This is why we have reconceptualised Islamic feminism as a movement comprising Muslim and non-Muslim men and women working towards the eradication of all traditional and social practices that perpetuate the impression that the Muslim woman is unequal to males in both the private and public spheres.

### **Islamic Feminist Activism in Nigeria**

Islamic feminism, Margot Badran (2009:285) observe, is a “global discourse that is continually fed by the local, while the global discourse likewise animates the local.” The term feminism or feminist, be it secular, Muslim or Islamic are not in general circulation in Nigeria. However, Islamic feminism in Nigeria is used to encapsulate the activities of Muslim women who espouse ideals that are comparable to those promoted by Islamic feminists in other climes. Islamic feminism in Nigeria dates as far back as 1985 when Muslim women from various associations decided to unite under the umbrella of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) to champion the cause of gender equality in the country. The organisation has been actively involved in the promotion of laudable ideals which include nationwide campaign for the education of girls, provision of health care service for women and children and organising women empowering programmes across the country. Many more Nigerian Muslim women were impelled to identify with feminist ideals in the wake of the adoption of *Shari’a* laws by twelve Muslim-majority states in northern Nigeria shortly after the country’s return to democracy in 1999.

Muslim male-dominated legislatures in most of the Muslim-majority states in northern Nigeria saw the nation's return to democracy as an opportunity to institute patriarchal ideals by the incorporation of *Shari'a* laws into their states' statutory laws. *Shari'a* law, for instance, stipulates death by stoning for a woman found guilty of adultery and amputation of the arm for a person found guilty of stealing. Shortly after the adoption of these ancient laws, two common women, Amina Lawal of Katsina State and Safiyatu Husseini of Sokoto State, were arraigned before *Shari'a* courts in their respective states. They were summarily tried, found guilty of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning! Human rights activists and feminists both within and outside Nigeria immediately rose to the occasion by mounting vigorous media campaigns against this shocking travesty. The women were able to appeal their conviction through legal representation offered by women rights activists and the judgment was subsequently overturned by higher *Shari'a* courts. Margot Badran, (2009:287) described the acquittal of the women as a "triumph of the principles of Islamic equality and justice over patriarchal inequities".

Badran, (2009:282) also observed that these two widely publicised incidents "catalysed a longer-term unfolding of Islamic feminism" in Nigeria. According to her:

Islamic feminists have taken pains to make the distinction between *Shari'a* as the path discerned from the Qur'an that Muslims are exhorted to follow in life (*Shari'a* as divine inspiration and guiding principles), and so called "*Shari'a* law(s)" (laws deriving from understandings of *fiqh* that are man-made and therefore open to questioning and change). The *Shari'a*, as "the path" indicated in the scripture as the word of God, is sacred; but it needs to be ascertained through human efforts. By stressing the distinction between man-made law(s) and the divine path, Islamic feminists strive to remove an obstacle in the way of those who feared that they might be challenging divine laws if they questioned *fiqh* laws derived from it (Badran 2009:285).

Asma Barlas (2002:1) is less conciliatory in her approach to Islamic feminism. Unlike Margot Badran, her writings and those of Fatima Mernissi for instance, contain radical departures from patriarchal readings of the Qur'an. Some of her arguments such as "the Qur'an does not establish men as superior to women and the Qur'an does not represent God as father or male (ibid)" are more like a

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misreading of the Qur'an than anything else and such provocative utterances risk trivialising the cause of Islamic feminism as mere hysterics and blasphemous ranting in the eyes of Muslim males. She asks:

Is the Qur'an a patriarchal or misogynistic text? Does the Qur'an teach that rule by the father/husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule, as religious and traditional patriarchies claims? Does the Qur'an advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequality on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men? ... Do the teachings of the Qur'an allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men? (Asma Barlas 2002:1)

The above and many other questions like them express the irritation of Islamic feminists. This paper is an attempt to proffer an alternative avenue to finding answers to them by using a secular theoretical framework that has proved useful for the analysis of dissident discourse.

### **A Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Female-authored Novels**

There are some methodological hurdles that need to be scaled by Islamic feminist analysts, or any scholar for that matter, seeking to interpret female-authored novels in Muslim-majority northern Nigeria. Contemporary Islamic feminists, exemplified by Asma Barlas (2002) and Fatima Mernissi (1991), subscribe to the approach of engaging in extensive Qur'anic exegeses to support their position on gender equality and justice in relation to Muslim women. According to Asma Barlas, "we need to base our readings of the Qur'an in our understanding of God." Margot Badran, who has the background of a historian, frequently combines contemporary historical analysis with her reading of Islamic texts to champion the cause of Muslim women in her research (e.g. Badran 2005, 2008 and 2009). While we appreciate the fact that these approaches are not without some merit, we consider a methodology that anchors its findings on what the Qur'an and other Islamic texts say or do not say as essentially confrontational and inherently divisive. This methodology puts Islamic feminists on the defensive and gives room for proponents of patriarchy to tag their service to humanity as anti-Islamic and blasphemous.

It is a well-known fact that anyone, irrespective of the side they belong in the divide between good and evil, can always find a scripture that supports their argument in hallowed texts exemplified by the Bible or the Qur'an. The ancient



source and sacredness often associated with scriptural texts, in this case *The Qur'an* and *The Hadith*; demand that they be interpreted with reverence, caution and a profound sense of responsibility by designated experts represented by Islamic theologians, Islamic legal experts and Muslim clerics. Too little can be gained from secular “rereading” or intellectual interpretation espoused by prominent Islamic feminists, because the Qur'an is perceived by devout Muslims as having been “revealed” from heaven. Hence, such a religious text is generally expected by adherents to be accurately interpreted only by divine inspiration and “divine revelation” by Islamic theologians or clerics. Consequently, secular readings or pronouncements by lay Muslims and non-Muslims can easily be dismissed as superficial, literary or intellectual and therefore, unacceptable at best and blasphemous at worst. We have refrained as much as possible from making direct or oblique reference to Islamic texts exemplified by *The Qur'an* and *The Hadith* to insulate our analysis from the charge of partisanship or anti-Islamic subjectivity. We have therefore, opted for an approach that better serves the libratory purpose of Islamic feminism in northern Nigeria or elsewhere.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is basically interested in analysing opaque, as well as, transparent relationships of dominance, discriminations, power and control in society. Aside from investigating social inequality as it is expressed, constituted and legitimised in discourse, it also aims to ‘demystify’ discourse by deciphering ideological perspectives in them. Very much like CDA, feminism in general concerns itself with highlighting oppressive practices against females prevalent in many societies with a view to liberating them from such unwholesome tendencies. Such practices can be exemplified by discrimination against women in both public and private spheres, and several other manifestation of unequal treatment of female children and women.

According to Weiss & Wodak (2003:14), it easily aligns itself with “the perspectives of those who suffer and critically analyse the language use of those in power; those who are responsible for the existence of inequalities and who also have the means and the opportunity to improve conditions.” CDA concern themselves not only with what is said or written in the text, but what is left out of it. Hence, critical discourse analysts do not merely read political and social ideologies onto texts; rather they try to figure out all the possibilities between texts, ways of representing and ways of being, and discover why certain people take up certain positions.

We have opted for Ruth Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach to discourse analysis for our interpretation of northern Nigerian Islamic Feminist

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discourse in the literary texts that formed the basis for this paper. Her approach to mediation between discourse and society is an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological one that transcends mere linguistic and literary analysis. This is because its method integrates knowledge of the historical, political, sociological and psychological dimensions in the analysis and interpretation of a discursive occasion. The approach sees discourse as a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective (Fairclough, 1995:14). To Fairclough and Wodak (1997:258), discourse can be described as a social practice that implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive occasion and specific fields of action (e.g. situation, institution and social structures). They further describe discourse as being socially constitutive and socially conditioned because it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, social identities and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo on the one hand; and it contributes to transforming it on the other hand.

### **The Predator-Prey Metaphor and Islamic Feminist Discourse**

Zillah Eisenstein (1984:90) defines patriarchy as a system that transforms “biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the ‘Other’”. Reading Usman and Zaria’s novels from an Islamic feminist perspective, it would seem that patriarchy has ensnared northern Nigerian Muslim females into base and carnal subhuman beings to be hunted, enjoyed and discarded at the pleasure of their male counterparts. Saliha Zaria presents a stark and uninhibited description of the reality of Muslim womanhood in northern Nigeria with the following remarks:

He is a man, isn’t he? And man is a predator, the hunter and the abuser of the female sex. Many of them don’t even realise or know that they have a responsibility to their family beside feeding and clothing (*Edge of Fate*, p.104).

The predator-prey metaphor is made particularly glaring on the night of Salmah’s wedding to Gidado. It was a night that turned out to be her worst nightmare; she discovered to her chagrin that what she expected to be a pleasurable night of shared love turned out to be a brutalisation of her womanhood. Salmah was literally raped by a much older and experienced husband who must have plunged into the void of temporary insanity on discovering that his young bride was a virgin. The brute force he put into the deflowering act had such physical and psychological effect on the inexperienced bride that she went into a state of coma

for three days and she had to be hospitalised for two weeks before she could recover from the aftermath of the sexual encounter.

Her lower abdomen throbbed painfully. She ached all over. She ached in places she hadn't even known she could ache. ... Is this what all women endured? Is this what the first night is all about?" (*Edge of Fate*, p.99)

Although the reader forgives Gidado when he showers love and care on fragile Salmah after her discharge from hospital, they are surprised that he could treat her with such calculating callousness barely three years after, merely because she couldn't give him a child. Gidado asks in typical patriarchal male style: "Why didn't you tell me that you don't want my child, Salmah?" (*Edge of Fate* p.106). Gidado indecorously drops Salmah, his wife of three years, like a burning metal on learning that his second wife has become pregnant; hence Zaria seizes the opportunity to express her view of the men in her world:

Salmah was ... shocked not by the news of her mate's pregnancy but by what she heard and their actions, especially her husband's. She now agrees that **most men are inhuman beasts; intent only on their own selfish desires**, without a thought as to the feelings of others around them." (*Edge of Fate*, p.109; emphasis ours)

Salmah soon gets an opportunity to plead with her husband for his understanding of her plight. His insensitive and callous response prompts her to make an unguarded statement that profoundly summarises the view of northern Nigerian Muslim women about men: "You never think of anyone but yourself."

"A little consideration Gidado. It is not my fault that I cannot bear you a child," She cried.

"Are you blaming me for **your misfortune**?" He snapped. She stood up from the kneeling position that she was before.

"I don't know which is worse, your relatives' and wife's accusation or your own. **You never think of anyone but yourself, do you?**" She demanded hysterically (*Edge of Fate*, p.111; emphasis ours)

The reader wonders about what became of the passion and the promise of a blissful marriage that propelled what started as a whirlwind courtship between Gidado and Salmah into marriage. The couple's loving relationship was suddenly eclipsed by the visible proof of Gidado's manhood in the pregnancy of his second wife.

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Gidado callously describes Salmah's inability to get pregnant as her "misfortune". Consequently, a hitherto loving and dutiful wife becomes expendable to the patriarchal male merely because she fails to boost his male ego with pregnancy. The death knell sounds on Gidado and Salmah's marriage when he remarks: "Don't you think it will be better for both of us? You can follow your destiny elsewhere" (*Edge of Fate*, p.111). Patriarchy does not compromise on the base and carnal instinct of males; they just have to be satisfied even if it is at the expense of female well-being. The predator has no scruples about the fulfilment of his pleasure. He is driven by pure animal instinct to satisfy his desires; hence he can be incurably selfish and predictably amoral in his pursuit of the fulfilment of such desires. In Usman's *Destinies of Life*, a friend advises Nafisah:

Let me tell you something, a man who walks out on his wife of twenty years when he finds one he likes better, a man who can leave his family for a girlfriend is not someone you should trust. Believe me Nafisah, if he could do it once, he will do it again" (*Destinies of Life*, p.55-56).

Something that patriarchy has in common with predators is their predilection for selecting weak animals as prey. The young, pregnant, sick or wounded animals in the wild often find it difficult to keep up with the rest of the herd; hence they become easy prey for stalking hyenas. Umar's choice of his niece, Nafisah, as second wife was not only a betrayal of his wife and children, but the act smirks of patriarchal opportunism. Centuries of male domination and suppression of women have produced the feeling of superiority in males and acceptance of inferiority by females in many Muslim-majority communities. This mind-set of unequal status as females in a male-centred society explains why Nafisah could not resist Umar's advances and why Aisha could not persuade her husband to reverse his unbecoming decision to marry their ward.

The plight of the northern Nigerian Muslim woman is often complicated by the stance of older women, exemplified by mothers, aunties and previous wives. Patriarchy enjoys the support of older women who have passed through its oppressive tendencies and do not see why the younger generation should be exempt from the humiliation and suffering that they had undergone. When Salmah decides to move on with her life by seeking her father's consent to remarry, her aunt and step mother proved to be more patriarchal than her father by registering their displeasure. Their protest was doused by Salmah's father's gentle admonition:

I am asking for forgiveness if I have wronged you. You must understand that this is Salmah's second marriage, and if we follow our Islamic rule, she has the right and privilege to choose her own husband now. What sin have I committed? (*Edge of Fate*, p.146)

Both female-authored novels portray the major male characters as ruthless hunters with little or no respect for the feelings of the heroines whom they portray as defenceless preys in a male-dominated world. The human relationships in both novels are built around male pleasure and are ultimately terminated at the pleasure of the male partners. The female partners on the other hand are left to pick up the broken pieces of what is left of their lives after having been emotionally mauled by their predatory male partners.

### **The Binarism of Islamic Feminism and the Discourse of the Female-Authored Novel**

Literature has always played a pivotal role in the struggle against man's inhumanity to man and more specifically in the struggle of the black race for emancipation since the days of slavery. It was drafted into the frontline in the war against racial inequality and injustice in Great Britain with the publication of literary works exemplified by Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizens* in 1974. The world was outraged and the English people in particular were profoundly embarrassed by the stark revelations in the novel. It was a major weapon in the struggle against racial segregation in America in the 1960s and South Africa's Apartheid policy in much of the second half of the twentieth century. In the same vein, Asabe Kabir Usman and Saliha Abubakar Zaria use their writings to present the grave inequality and injustices that the northern Nigerian Muslim woman is subjected to under the guise of Islam and tradition. The portrayal of northern Nigerian Muslim womanhood in these novels raises many fundamental questions one of which is: "Are there still second class citizens on this planet in the twenty-first century?"

Binarism, a mode of analysing dichotomies such as maleness and femaleness, has been found particularly germane for the discussion of gender equality and patriarchal injustice in the discourse of northern Nigerian female-authored novels. One wonders: is the northern Nigerian Muslim female different from females in other parts of the world? If the answer is no, how come it is socially acceptable for Umar and Maina in *Destinies of Life* and *Edge of Fate*, respectively, to marry more than one wife, but it is taboo for their wives, Aisha and Salmah, to follow their example by marrying co-husbands? Secondly, if the heroines of the selected novels were not second class citizens in their country, why didn't they have the same

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privilege as males to divorce their spouses? They had to literally beg their husbands to divorce them before they could walk away from humiliation and male oppression in their homes. Both authors, Usman and Zaria, who are Muslim women themselves, found it difficult to come to terms with a social system that permits a wife to be divorced merely at the husband's pleasure and not necessarily because the woman commits *zina* (adultery) or some other grave offence. It would seem from a feminist reading of the two novels that Islamic patriarchy has trapped Muslim womanhood into a base and superficial relationship in which her feelings as a human being do not count. She in turn continues to endure inequality and injustice as her "destiny" or her "fate", a position that does not resonate with the principles of fundamental human rights, equity and good conscience espoused by the United Nation's Charter.

The emotional capital invested into the affectionate relationship between the heroines, Aisha and Salmah, and their respective spouses in both novels is so deep and natural that there is hardly any space left in the couples' hearts for a third party. According to Zaria, Muslim women too, like all other women, crave "a special intimacy that exists between two people who share a deep and genuine bond" (*Edge of Fate*, p.104). The arrival of a co-wife for Aisha in Usman's *Destinies of Life*; and Salmah in Zaria's *Edge of Fate*, are presented in the novels as antiquated, inharmonious and injurious to the well-being of all parties in a modern family setting. Umar's declaration, "As a Muslim, I can marry up to four wives if I can afford it" and his rhetorical question "Is it illegal for me to marry again?" (*Destinies of Life*, p.71), is tantamount to plunging a dagger to the depth of Aisha's soul. Although as a Muslim woman, she is familiar with the practice of polygamy as condoned by Islam, nonetheless she sees her husband's decision to take a second wife as a betrayal of the deep affection they both shared. When she requests divorce, Umar responds sneeringly with an air of superiority, "So you want to leave because I want to get married (p.72)? Suppose we ask, had Aisha opted for an alternative co-spouse like he did, would he have accepted it? The breakdown of the marital relationships in both novels points to northern Nigerian Muslim women's personal preference for monogamy over polygamy, which patriarchy condones.

An Islamic feminist reading of Usman's *Destinies of Life* shows that patriarchal ideals that permits a Muslim man to elevate his ward to a second wife is to be held partly responsible for Aisha's heartbreak and not her "destiny". Likewise, patriarchy is also responsible for the breakdown of Salmah and Gidado's marriage and for permitting Salmah's remarriage (as second wife) to polygamous Maina in

*Edge of Fate*. A superficial reading of the “happy ending” in *Edge of Fate* in which Salmah and her co-wife accept to share the same man gives the impression that Zaria condones polygamy and brands this fossilized patriarchal practice as acceptable to northern Nigerian Muslim women. However, a reader with an understanding of the nature of womanhood could easily deduce that the loving relationship between Salmah and Maina is too intense to accommodate a harmonious love triangle comprising a male and two rival females. Maina’s decision to take a second wife pitches his two wives in an unhealthy rivalry that is bound to erupt in violence in the near future.

Does a man have the capacity to love two or more women equally? The founder of Islam, Prophet Muhammed, was a monogamist during the fifteen or more years that he was married to Khadijat, his soul mate and the first convert to Islam. By the time she died, he had become so spiritually, militarily and materially endowed that he was assailed with the challenge of choosing wives from the array of marriageable females that were used to seal friendship bonds and family ties with him. This is a plausible explanation for his polygamous lifestyle after the death of Khadijat. According to Mernissi (1991:163), of the prophet’s nine wives, Aisha, was his favourite. He loved her so much that he caused her room to be located adjacent to the mosque where he spent most of his time especially towards the end of his life. Their loving relationship was so deep and special to him that he had little or no time for his other wives; hence jealousy which took the form of bellyaching and *fitna* (civil war) erupted frequently amongst his many women. Such incidents can be exemplified with his experience with Hafsat, who admitted to having “had a fit of anger with the prophet and sulked until nightfall” (Mernissi, 1991:143). At a stage, Prophet Muhammed had to leave home for 29 days to escape from his household palaver. There was also evidence that he gave his wives the choice to leave him as a solution to the “intense disputes” between him and them. Qayla Bint al-Ash~ath was the only wife recorded to have taken this option (ibid:172). Today’s northern Nigerian Muslim woman is tired of what generations of Muslim women have endured since the days of Prophet Muhammed; hence the discourse of *Destinies of Life* and *Edge of Fate* can be described as capturing the lacerations in the spirit of the northern Nigerian Muslim woman and her yearning to enjoy an exclusive heterosexual relationship with the man she loves.

Secondly, if we take a glance at history, we will observe that Islam came about during a period of frequent wars when too many men died on the battlefield. Women became so many that even if every man married four wives, there would still be many women without husbands. At the time Islam was instituted, a Muslim man was permitted to marry up to four wives by the patriarchal tradition that

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prevailed at the time. However, this practice is no longer popular amongst educated people who are better informed about the psychological and physiological nature of womanhood. A feminist reading of the selected novels leaves the reader with too many questions some of which are as follows: Does the same blood flow through the veins of Muslim and non-Muslim women? Why should the northern Nigerian Muslim woman be expected to endure her marriage as her “fate” or the “destiny” of femaleness instead of a relationship between two equals? Why should the northern Nigerian Muslim woman unlike her counterpart in other climes continue to accept the patriarchal practice of plurality of wives and other acts of gender inequality in the private sphere in this age of globalisation? Why should it be the man’s prerogative to divorce his wife and not the other way round? Questions like these point to the unequal treatment of northern Nigerian Muslim females as second class citizens in Usman and Zaria’s novels.

Perhaps, Usman and Zaria’s survivalist instinct or the need to remain alive and relevant made it imperative for both authors to employ ambivalence as a creative tool to mask the real import of their message. A patriarchal reading of *Destinies of Life* will blame Aisha’s exposure to western education and feminist ideals for the calamities that befell her marriage through the breakup of her marriage and the untimely death of her son. However, an Islamic feminist reading will see the novel as a demonstration of the disaster that accompanies patriarchy. Likewise, *Edge of Fate* could be misread as a celebration of polygamy on the one hand, or an exposé of the destructive consequences of polygamy on the other hand. Even when it seems the author conceals her message in ambivalence, the real message is not lost on a sophisticated reader who could discern overwhelming evidence of gender inequality and flagrant abuse of women’s rights in the novels. Although the literary works are not overtly critical of patriarchal culture in northern Nigeria *per se*, the heart-rending narrations by these female authors in male-centred communities speak volumes about their individual and joint perceptions of the plight of the northern Nigerian Muslim woman. Such reading between the lines is sufficient to make a modern reader arrive at the conclusion that the practice of Islamic patriarchy is unequal and anti-female.

Do Usman, Zaria and other northern Nigerian Muslim women who write on the plight of northern Nigerian women qualify for description as Islamic feminists? Or put differently, do they describe themselves as such? In the era of militant Islamic fundamentalism epitomised by the activities of the Boko Haram sect and the breakaway faction, JAMBS that abducted and killed seven expatriate workers in northern Nigeria, it is suicidal for these lone voices to shout their feminism over



the roof top. Basically, the practice of both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria does not encourage women to compete with men in the public space. While many Nigerian Christian women appear to have broken out of this mould, too few of their Muslim counterparts have dared to rock the applecart of Islamic patriarchy. This probably explains why many African feminist scholars, exemplified by Kolawole (1997) identify with a less confrontational version of feminism known as “womanism”. Asabe Kabir Usman and Saliha Abubakar Abdulahi Zaria live and work in a cultural milieu where women who are outspoken on patriarchal issues risk ostracism. Consequently, the tone of their creative efforts is not expected to be overtly critical of patriarchal culture in which they are lone voices in a desert of gender inequality and female oppression. They have survived as literary writers in a community that frowns at prose fiction mainly because of the relative immunity they enjoy as Nigerian academics. Asabe Kabir Usman lectures at the Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto Nigeria; while Zaria lectures at the Federal College of Education, Zaria, Nigeria. They both enjoy some form of protection from their respective higher institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Margot Badran (2009:296) observed that Islamic feminism in Nigeria is “a work in progress”. Indeed the task of moving a culture away from patriarchal domination, as it is practiced in northern Nigeria, towards egalitarianism is bound to be “long and full of perils” (ibid:296). Debates about gender equality and justice for northern Nigerian Muslim women and elsewhere will continue to feature prominently in literary works by Nigerian and non-Nigerian authors. We did observe that there is an inherent contradiction in the methodology of confronting Islamic patriarchy with arguments from *The Qur'an* and other sacred Islamic texts because these are the tools that have been used successfully by generations of adherents of patriarchy to oppress females and assign them subhuman roles in relation to their male counterparts.

Our analysis of female-authored northern Nigerian novels has shown that the Hobbesian scenario of survival of the fittest, whereby males lord themselves over their female counterparts, exists in northern Nigeria and much of southern Nigeria. We like to observe that opportunities abound for empirical studies on oppression and unequal treatment of females in every part of Nigeria. We recommend that feminist scholars, or any analyst for that matter, should employ an analytical framework with a global appeal when researching into issues that border on freedom, equality and justice. With a better understanding of God as a fair and loving father by adherents of all faiths and the continued evolution of human

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development in the positive direction, the feeling of gender superiority would give way to a new era of mutual respect between the male and female genders.

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