

Paradoxes of Religion in the Prose Fiction of Northern Nigerian Women: A Study of Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound*

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Introduction:

The Nigerian northern bloc is an extensive, highly variegated and multi-layered, geo-political and cultural space. It forms a pendulous stretch from the east to the west coast of the northern part of Nigeria and this is also inclusive of a large middle belt. In this large space, there is a plurality of cultures, traditions, peoples, religions, linguistic groups and histories—a potpourri of sorts. Thus, a discerning reader of the emerging literatures of this region cannot regard them in any kind of homogenous or monolithic manner. There is, therefore, an immediately striking contradiction that is subsumed in the very notion of 'Northern Nigerian' literature. The heterogeneity of this region is complexly symbolic of the multiplicities, divergences and the syncretism of the influences that nuance the lives and realities of the people of the entire nation.

Recent times have seen an exponential growth in the numbers of female writers as well as a simultaneous growth of two traditions of writings. On the one hand, we have those writing in Hausa, one of the major indigenous languages of Northern Nigeria. Seemingly emerging out of the *kule*, by the early eighties these women are evolving the growing tradition of *Litattafan Soyayya*³—a genre of popular romance stories sharing many similarities in form and character with the tradition of market literature/ chapbooks which first emerged in Onitsha, South East Nigeria shortly after World War 11. Nigerian veterans of that war returned and resettled in the commercial hub in Onitsha. As a result of their exposure and experiences many of those veterans began writing and publishing in its most elementary forms. The Onitsha market literary genre lasted from about the late nineteen forties till around the early sixties. The Kano market literature that these Hausa women seem to have galvanized and which is still persisting, is perhaps the reason why Ibrahim Aliyu Malumfashi (2011) insists that with more than 200 published works by northern Nigerian women in circulation, we cannot hold the view that women from the north are 'silent' or 'dormant'.

This new literary genre has massive readership all over the North although Laura Mallonnee (2016) regards it as subversive and eroding of trado-cultural norms of Islamic puritanism and restraint. The '*soyaya*' wave of expressive sexuality has become a predominant feature of northern Nigerian women's literature. A critical evaluation of the central themes of most of the novellas reveals an exploration of expressive sensuality, erotic fantasy and emotional relationships which have been hitherto repressed in both literature and reality. The apparent eruption of poetic license in the evocative language of otherwise taboo subjects is akin to the build-up of pressure resulting in an uncontrollable detonation of emotions. But it is SHEME (1998) who calls attention to an important critical aspect that defines the writings of early northern Nigerian women. He explains that initially, it was the men who wrote the narratives of the women and the credits for the writing erroneously went to the 'scripter' not the 'narrator' 35.

The ancient literary milieu of a woman's creativity encapsulated in male authorship is not peculiar to the African experience, but may be interpreted through the postulations of Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1978). Showalter recognizes the Feminine Phase under Gyno-criticism, where female writers adhere to male dominated values and acquire pseudonyms in order to cover their gender. From the late 1990s to date northern Nigerian women's literature has experienced what critics describe as a "feminist revolution ... that forcefully advocates against conservative Muslim traditions... where dozens of young women are rebelling through romance... against a strict interpretation of Islam propagated in the North." (thehindu.com 2016).

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The emergence of most feminist writings within specific cultures often experience this phase before the revolution against repressive gender bias, and the gradual evolution of the legitimacy and recognition of women's literary perspectives. Through the acquisition of western education and developing alongside the Kano market literary tradition, is a plethora of writers of the English language expression, these include: Regina T Muhammed, *Habiba, The Travails of a First Wife*, Bilkiisu B Abubakar *To Live Again* (2007) and *The Woman in Me* (2010), Edify Yakusak, *After they Left* (2016, Kurdan Bks) among several others. Our attention in this paper is, however, on two of the writers of English language expression— Asabe Kabir Usman in *Destinies of Life* (2014) and Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound* (2012).

Between and Betwixt: Clarifying Ideology and Authorial Intent

Since, 1988 when Omolola Ladele first remarked the historic entree of Zaynab Alkali into the Nigerian literary space (327), there have been a lot more female writers following in the ground-clearing path of Alkali. What remains now is for scholars to begin to characterize and theorize the emerging tradition of female writers from the north not only within the immediate context of northern Nigeria, but also within the Nigerian mainstream of female writers' tradition. Such interrogations would be useful in appropriately evaluating the place and impact of northern Nigerian women's literature. One of such interesting studies is 'Predator and Prey: Islamic Feminism and the Discourse of Female-Authored Novels in Northern Nigeria' by K.A Ayoola and F Hunsu (2014) which shows how the female writers, of northern Nigerian extraction, use their prose to describe women's negotiation of feminist ideology, religion, culture and Western education. The authors' analysis highlights 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 (75). Our essay however, enlarges the expanding critical discourse on writings of similar women writers. Of particular interest to us is the important trajectory of religion in the writings of female writers in this region.

The realism depicted by female writers of northern Nigerian extraction from earliest to contemporary times is centered on a representation and interpretation of their socio-cultural reality, which is overtly patriarchal and male dominant, as defined by their Islamic and traditional heritage. Presenting this reality from the female perspective often earns these writers the label of feminists. And this is a highly contentious and controversial subject matter for many women including a large number of northern women writers, not least being Zaynab Alkali (1998) and Zainab Kankara (2006) who both deny this label. Connotations of the term feminist are somewhat extreme in nature and stimulate the ire of conservative women. Elizabeth Natalie (1985) defines feminist writing as 'committing energies actively to exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history, protesting the on-going degradation of women, celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, unfolding a revolutionary image of the woman.' (54) According to Malumfashi this 'revolutionary image' contravenes certain 'inherent Northern cultures or traditions that forbid the vehement actualization of feminist tendencies' (14).

A large number of female authors claim their writing is largely the depiction of the woman's realism, told from the woman's perspective in order to champion the cause of womanhood. They would therefore prefer to regard themselves more as 'womanists' and not feminists with an axe to grind with their male counterparts. The context of the African woman is especially peculiar as our worldview is informed by the absence of an overriding desire to discard or banish the existence and role of the male. According to Chris Dunton (1997)

In the African context "Womanism" and Modernism emerged as the African version (of Feminism) emphasized that women are given the opportunity to develop themselves and realize their potential without any form of hindrance and molestation, rather than advocate equality, so they can be active partakers in nation-building. (7, -85)

This underscores the fact that 'womanism' derives its focus from the propagation of self-discovery, economic and socio-cultural advancement for the woman, rather than a frontal castigation of the repressive male dominated socio-cultural reality. This aligns with our earlier delineation of the multiplicity of allegiances that circumscribe the writings of northern Nigerian women. In her recent study, Stephanie Newell (1997), suggests that: 'Muslim women often appear to be ambiguous or conservative...holding back from proposing radical reform and remaining within potentially oppressive domestic structures.' (214) Whitsitt (2002) posits that northern women writers: 'work within the value systems of their societies in order to contest, resist, criticize, or affirm the role of the woman without attempting to remove Muslim women from the Faith' (142). This notion recalls the literary works of Mariama Ba in *So Long A Letter* (1979) and Hauwa Ali in *Destiny* (1988).

In northern Nigeria the predominance of religious doctrine as a way of life coupled with government censorship of literary works constitute a barometer for the acceptability or otherwise of the work of art. The censorship culture in northern Nigeria as portrayed by Fatimah Kelleher (2017) in her analysis of the role of the Kano State Censorship Board, underscores a phallic repression of female literary creativity. This, as Kassam (1997) observes, denies northern Nigerian women the chance to express their voice and sexuality. In this regard, many woman writers from this region would rather remain within the ambit of societal and religious conformity.

It is within the backcloth of the proliferation of the popular fiction, that the more cerebral, refined literary works such as the writings of Phebe Jatau and Asabe Kabir Usman have emerged. Their novels explore the universal question of womanhood and the aspiration for self-realization through educational emancipation. Very significantly, both narratives deal with the complexities of emotional and marital relationships as an integral part of a woman's search for identity and validation. The individual perspective deployed by each writer however is peculiar to each writer's personal interpretation of this shared reality. Both writers demystify the glorified romanticism of the 'soyaya' themes of love with the harsh reality and repressive boundaries marital relationships often place on personal validation and fulfillment desired by the woman. On one hand, Kabir Usman explores the reconciliation of Islamic injunctions with educational advancement as panacea to the challenges of destiny. On the other hand, Jatau focuses on the single-minded pursuit of educational and professional advancement and a resistance to repressive patriarchy, marital subjugation and religious Christian bigotry.

In Pursuit of Education: Navigating Religious Undercurrents

A comparative analysis of *Destinies of Life* and *The Hound* highlights uniformity and consistency in the depiction of the socio-cultural and religious milieu of both narratives. There are parallels in their presentation of a male-dominated society, which depict women as essentially repressed and subjugated in northern Nigeria. Both narratives highlight inequity in the access to qualitative education and the challenges of forced and early marriages which the girl-child faces in her quest for self-actualization. This reality is peculiar to the socio-religious realities of a largely Islamic, traditional patriarchal society.

Asabe Kabir Usman categorically states in an interview with Dr. Adebola Adetunmbi that her authorial intent in her writing is to:

...give an insight into a typical Hausa cultural setting; address the question of the girl-child as well as explore the different ways women can face and overcome the challenges they might face in a society dominated by men. I am of the view that the northern Nigerian girl-child will hold on to education as the key to her emancipation just as Aisha used education as her tool to achieve her dreams in life. (Kabir Usman, 2017)

For Phebe Jatau, her creative intent is almost identical; through her writing she aspires to become a 'change agent' who 'proffers solutions' to how the girl-child can 'achieve self-actualization through the dint of hard work, determination and strong will via the vehicle of education.' (2014)

However critical evaluation of these authorial statements reveal what Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) describe as the theory of the 'Fallacy' of Authorial Intent (2): which illustrate the discrepancy between what the writer claims she intends to achieve and what the narrative content of their literary works actually communicate. Although both writers advocate educational emancipation as a primary weapon of self-actualization and psychological validation, Asabe is not as emphatic in her delineation as Phebe. From our study of the two texts, there seems to be a fundamental divergence in their perceptions of the path towards self-actualization and emancipation. For instance, Phebe achieves her aim by the single-minded educational pursuit of Rebecca, her protagonist. Her plot is built around the quest or journey of adventure sequence and, each chapter in *The Hound* is built around each hurdle the protagonist overcomes in the process of attaining this goal. Quite significantly, the conclusion of Phebe's narrative encapsulates the protagonist's self-actualization by the attainment of the highest educational qualification. She is thereby empowered for social relevance through advocacy against discrimination and inequality among the women in her environment.

On the other hand, Asabe, in her novel builds her sequence of events essentially around the institution of Islamic marriage: the concept of early and arranged marriages and the impact of marital incompatibility, separation and polygamy on society. The narrative explores how the protagonist deals with the harsh challenges of destiny, as well as how she responds to societally inflicted travails experienced by northern Nigerian women.

Focus is essentially on the psyche of the vulnerable girl-child as she transforms into womanhood within a male-dominated patriarchal society. The thematic kernel of the narrative unfolds a sequence of tragic events which are extraneously induced, such that the protagonist has to contend with overwhelmingly predestinated fate.

These experiences may be categorized as trifocal. First, we have the challenges of the socio-familial context into which Aisha is born: the psychological trauma of being raised in a dysfunctional home where she is deprived of maternal love, care and is subjected to the whims of capricious step-siblings and a cruel step-mother. Unloved by those closest to her, Aisha finds she has to desperately compete for the emotional attention of her seemingly aloof father. Secondly, Aisha is challenged with the tragic death of her groom on their wedding day: a fate or destiny-induced occurrence which breaks Aisha's spirit and alters her capacity for emotional commitment. Thirdly, Aisha is again dealt with the traumatic emotional challenge of the total breakdown of her marriage to Umar. Betrayed by Umar, her husband, of twenty odd years, Aisha is emotionally drained and destabilized as she faces two more onslaughts of fate-induced tragedies. As part of her destiny, she is compelled to deal with the death of her favorite son and the pre-mature death of her beloved father. Hers is a long nightmarish narrative of loss, betrayal and death; all in a society that entrenches female repression and male-domination. Thus, in very profound terms, Aisha feels, almost overwhelmingly at first-hand, isolation, alienation, and loss.

Although, Asabe, in her authorial statement of intent advocates educational emancipation as a positive response to repressive male domination and as a vehicle to self-actualization, her protagonist appears to deploy her commitment to Islamic tenets to overcome her challenges rather than the pursuit of educational attainment. For Aisha, her pursuit of education is more reactionary rather than fundamental; her responses to her challenges are informed by an Islamic worldview which is characterized by an acceptance of the prevalence and irrevocability of destiny over the circumstances of life. Fate or predestination thus appears pivotal to the narrative and underscores Aisha's actions throughout the narrative. According to Moin Quazi, (2017) an Islamic theologian:

Islam affirms...predestination, in which God's foreknowledge supersedes human free choice...it merely means that when some misfortune befalls us, we resign ourselves to it as something coming from God, instead of despairing. The doctrine of fate holds that the overall fate of human beings is governed by the foreknowledge of God...To complain against destiny is to enter a complaint against Him who holds all destinies in His Hand and whose justices is beyond questioning (2).

This is further underscored by the article's reference to some quotations from The Holy Book:

“Nothing will happen to you except what God has decreed for us.” (Q9:51)

“No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but what is recorded in a book before we bring it to existence. (Q57:22)

“But you do not will, except as God wills; for God is full of knowledge and wisdom” (Q76:30)

Thus, it would appear that a deluge of external forces of fate or destiny assail Aisha's person with pain and grief—all of which seem to be amorphous and fatalistically determined. Her response to her unfortunate experiences is fatalistic acceptance and her recourse to educational pursuits a mere panacea. This contrasts with the experiences of Rebecca who personally propagates her circumstances towards the goal of self-actualization and emancipation.

For Rebecca the pursuit of education is not as an escape valve but a pathway to attaining self-actualization and meaningfully impacting her society. Rebecca's pursuit of education is the pivotal platform of the entire narrative and her resistance to the challenges that attempt to bound her progress as underscored from the onset in the title of the narrative. We see her evolution from a secondary school student to a global scholar with a focus on overcoming the challenges and hurdles of life. We see a highly focused attitude to life that is driven mentally and manifested externally in all her actions and associations. Rebecca's pursuit of education is a conscious and deliberate agenda as opposed to Aisha who seeks educational attainment in as an escapist reaction to fill a void created by the fatalistic circumstances of her destiny or life's experience. This is also very subtly alluded to in the title of the work: 'Destinies of Life', suggesting a philosophical, somewhat existentialist position to the vagaries, indecipherability of her circumstances.

It is instructive to note that both protagonists in the two novels attend elitist Federal Government colleges in Lagos where access is granted to only a select group of students representing all regions of Nigeria. While Asabe glosses over the protagonist's experience at Queen's College, Lagos, it is this very experience of Rebecca at Federal Government College, Ijanikin, which forms the bedrock of her experiences later on her life. In the tradition of a female bildungsroman, Rebecca's experience in secondary school forms the crux of her emergence as a strong, independent character.

She overcomes multiplex limitations including—poverty, low self-esteem, communication barrier, ethnic bias, culture conflict, gender repression as well as sexual harassment. Her compelling desire, thus drives her to harness her inner strength and overcome the challenges of her life.

The Paradoxes of Religion

Appearing to frame the imaginative world of both novelists is their emphasis on the significant influences of religion in the development of the protagonists as they contend with the challenges of their personal lives. *While Asabe's protagonist, Aisha, adheres to the Islamic injunctions of a fatalistic acceptance of the predestinated experiences of life, Phebe's protagonist deploys Christianity as a basis for assimilation, inclusion and as a springboard to greater achievements. This is in contrast to Aisha who is reclusive, introverted and sinks into self when faced with the harsh challenges of her destiny. Though the challenges Aisha faces are of a deeply tragic magnitude and come in overwhelming waves, her fatalistic religious worldview often engenders passivity and acceptance of the status quo.* It is therefore useful to interrogate the compelling religious orthodoxies as espoused in these novels. For instance, in Aisha's Islamic worldview and her response to each challenge imposed on her by destiny, we see a somewhat complicit acceptance of the circumstances of her fate thereby conforming to the Islamic worldview of acceptance of one's Destiny or *Quadara*.

According to Daniel Pipe (2015) in a recent study of Muslims in 23 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Europe reveals the preponderant belief in *Quadara* or Predestination, which is indicative of the religious undercurrents in Asabe's *Destinies of Life*, rather than the vigorous pursuit of educational emancipation by the protagonist, as the writer claims. From her earliest years as a child, Aisha is exposed to the concept of the pervading will of Allah for one to 'accept' the circumstances of life.

The novelist depicts the complexities of her parents' forced early marriage, fraught with marital incompatibility as the reality of Aisha's earliest years as a child. The marriage of her parents, Awwal and Maryam, was arranged and consummated without the couple's consent which was an unacceptable Islamic practice producing Aisha as its first fruit. The narrative describes Maryam's psychological state in the marriage thus:

No one asked her how she was feeling in a loveless marriage. She was expected to keep up appearances. Her weapon was her religion, Islam. (p. 13)

The psychological and emotional trauma Aisha suffers as a young girl which results in her insecure, introverted nature makes her turn to her religion for succor, an opiate, which stabilizes her emotionally considering the depravity and brutality she suffers from her step-mother and step-sisters. The emotional depravity Aisha suffers at the instance of her step-mother is described thus:

Aisha became withdrawn and quiet especially because she had no one to complain to. Aisha wrapped her loneliness around herself with an ease born of familiarity. She forced herself not to think of what she was missing— the love of a mother. ...But the loneliness hurt....the aloof posture she forced herself to adopt hurt. ...Despite all the odds, Aisha was a very intelligent girl (15).

It is interesting to note that she is described as having 'memorized the whole Qur'an by the time she was in Primary 5. Thus, at the earliest stage of Aisha's youth she has imbued all the teachings of Islam through her memorization of the entire Holy Book.

Aisha's very first experience of decision-making is also, apparently, influenced by adherence to Islamic teaching of ceding of all rights of decision to the oldest male relative of a woman. When Aisha meritoriously completes her secondary education and fulfills her burning ambition of attaining an outstanding result in her West African School Certificate examination, she is faced with the opportunity to choose the path for her next line of progression towards her career. When her father asks her about her plans for the future she responds subserviently "You are my father. Whatever you decide for me will be accepted" (18) Here, we see complacent transference of the molding of her destiny to the hands of the dominant male figure in her life, allowing him to make decisions on her behalf despite her earlier assertions of a determination to pursue her academic career.

This underscores a conscious and deliberate submission to male superiority, thus conforming to the Muslim injunctions of total submission and submissiveness to the male family members, irrespective of personal aspirations. Throughout the narrative, we see Aisha consistently and meticulously observe each and every ordinance of Islamic injunctions; we also witness a constant repose to prayer and meditation on her Qur'an even at the point of great provocation. This is especially exemplified when her father grants her a long-awaited permission to see her mother after a lifetime of maternal deprivation and Aisha engages in grateful repose of Suratul prayers. Her step-sister's jealous, intrusive, verbal assault and violation (haram) on her spiritual exercise is countered by Aisha's stoic adherence to Islamic comportment and rectitude. After Amina's aggression *'Aisha was dumbfounded; she got her Holy Qu'ran from the bed where Amina had flung it and continued her recital'* (19).

This incident symbolizes Aisha's deployment of Islam as a fundamental protective veneer against all the psychological, socio-cultural and destiny-induced vicissitudes of her life. Aisha's response to one of the most catastrophic incidents of her destiny, the death of her groom a few hours to her wedding, reveals an intertwining of education and religion as escape valves for Aisha. On the day before the wedding we see Aisha:

"After her Magrib prayer, she sat to use her rosary, begging supplication to Allah, the Lord of the world, to make her dreams of becoming Mrs. Muktar true...Aisha was elated. Her dreams were finally coming true...little did they know their destinies had been sealed" (p.28).

Muktar dies only a few hours after this supplication; following his death come admonitions from her father and all family members for Aisha to accept the tragedy as, in her father's words, it is 'the will of Allah'. This falls on deaf ears as Aisha sinks deep into the abyss of depression. It appears Aisha cannot find solace in her religion as 'No one knew how to get through to Aisha, no amount of incantations or prayers blown into Zamzam water could cure her' (32). When through the help of counseling and the passage of time Aisha is able to emerge out of her cloud of depression, education takes over as a surrogate to happiness and coping mechanism for life:

Aisha missed one academic session and when finally, a new academic year began, she agreed to go back to the university to continue her studies. At school she became withdrawn and had only one obsession: study and this she did, giving no room to social activity...her unhappiness suppressed in work. (33)

This underscores the protagonist's pursuit and acquisition of education not as emancipative aspiration, as the writer claims is her authorial intent. Unlike Aisha, Rebecca in *The Hound* challenges her limitations by recognizing them early and psychologically resisting her circumstances. For instance, exasperated by her poverty she asks:

"Why am I so poor?"...She was totally conflicted...she was poor they were rich...she wanted to belong but they already had their bubbles of friendship. (34)

She however underscores the feminine peer support she receives from Mulikat, her best friend as critical to the attainment of her goals. According to Rebecca "She learned to study from her friend Mulikat, who, though not outstandingly brilliant...was a bookworm. She read her books over and over again...she excelled. Rebecca learned to do the same." (46). Her personal partnership and network with Mulikat becomes a mutual support system through sisterhood and a shared vision for educational emancipation. Feminine peer support is however sharply contrasted with a need for validation from her peers. When Rebecca is assailed with the fear of failure and weighed down by the dire consequences her father's death she turns to a group of classmates for succor:

She did not get sympathy from her friends. Instead they were disgusted at the reason for the meeting. One after the other they hissed at her and walked away....She wanted reassurances, encouragements, and motivation...The Fighter in her rose up. She became resolute. She would take her Destiny in her own hands and run with it....She encouraged herself, mapped out study strategies and began a regiment of study subject by subject. She went to the examination triumphant. She attained a Division One in her School Certificate. Her Father was over-joyed. (51)

In a manner that is almost antithetical to Aisha's reclusiveness, Rebecca reaches into the deep recesses of her mind for self-motivation which propels her to successful attainment of her set goals. This capacity to reach within herself and strive for excellence through self-discipline also accounts for Rebecca's educational journey from secondary to Higher School Certificate level.

Though she is assailed with financial challenges during her Higher School Certificate, through determination and personal resourcefulness Rebecca is able to sponsor herself through school. Very significantly the underlying influence of her Christian faith is pivotal to her psychological and emotional stability in school:

They had church fellowships; born again folks shared the gospel to try and convert others. There were two camps: the believers and the unbelievers; you had to belong somewhere. The spiritual challenges were numerous and too real for Rebecca not to join the camp of the born again...Rebecca wanted to belong. She joined the group. She found the equilibrium she needed. (42).

Rebecca's initial feelings of alienation and ostracization are balanced by her inclusion in the Christian group as she attains acceptability and develops a foundation to launch her plans for self-propagation. Through her fresh religious affiliations she is able to integrate herself into her socio-cultural environment.

Conclusion:

In this study, both writers explore the concept of challenged marriages within a male-dominated society as experienced by their protagonists. Both Rebecca and Aisha are representative of the emerging northern Nigerian woman seeking self-actualization and driven by the aspiration for educational emancipation. Both writers reveal an attempt to balance the pursuit of self-actualization, address the challenges of gender bias and subjugation, while attempting to still remain within socio-religious Muslim norms.

Conservative cultural traditions expounding a repressed, subjugated status of married women in this context appear to often conflict with aspirations on self-identity and cognitive self-worth. As both writers seem to suggest, marital frictions arise within the hegemonic, cultural context that circumscribe the lives of women in many parts of northern Nigeria.

In the circumstance of Aisha, we are initially presented with an ideal Islamic marriage where love, mutual respect and peace hold sway for 20 years. This is enabled principally by Aisha's Islamic commitment and total submission to her husband's progress and happiness. She sacrifices her personal finances and professional progression for the ascension of her husband to the peak of his career. Her father's vast influence and network within the Federal Civil Service facilitate her husband's successful career. A Feminist critique of this 'ideal' Islamic marriage would question the basis of the substitution of her professional advancement, the repressive truncation of her aspiration and Aisha's consignment to domesticity at the altar of marital harmony. This is perhaps an affirmation of male-domination as an acceptable characteristic in Islamic marriages.

With the introduction of polygamy into their marital equation, Aisha loses her peace. The conflict is not as a result of polygamy as an entity in itself, since this is an acceptable Islamic injunction, but the abusive physical and psychological trauma Aisha suffers from Umar and his family, despite her years of sacrifice and support. We may therefore question why polygamy is an accepted Islamic tenet while polyandry is an illegal act punishable under the penal code? At each abusive onslaught from her husband we see Aisha seek repose in her religion through her constant supplication and prayers. Her final exit from the marriage is also based on religious injunctions, allowing divorce when the couple has irreconcilable differences. The heart-rending challenge of restoring her sense of self-worth after the psychological ignominy of the separation is once again enabled by her religion.

The depths to which Aisha degenerates emotionally after the separation, question the conclusion of the narrative and her ultimate reconciliation with Umar. The dialogue between Umar and Aisha at the prologue implies forgiveness and reconciliation based on the Islamic injunctions and tenets: this negates the psychological emancipation and restoration of self-worth she appeared to have re-gained when she left him. It therefore seems that the Islamic worldview propagates the maintenance of a repressive marital environment based on forgiveness and forbearance.

We also see a chauvinistic toleration and permissiveness in the inability of the male to control his desperation for sexual liberty depicted in Umar's mid-life crisis and manifested in his desperation for Nafisah. Ironically the writer, though female, subconsciously condones this deviant sexual tendency in the male, by giving perspective to the psychological thought processes of Umar explaining his uncontrollable desire for Nafisah. A revelation of Umar's mental state and his helplessness in the face of his emotional and physical needs generates empathy in male readers and tolerance in female readers.

The fact that the reconciliation occurs as concluding part of the narrative, underscored by religious affirmations for forgiveness propagates the maintenance of the emotionally and psychologically repressed woman

within the context of Islamic marriage. This is in sharp contrast with the depiction of the complexity of marriage in Phebe's novel, *The Hound*. From the onset James, Rebecca's husband is depicted as a chauvinistic male with deep-seated feelings of insecurity and a massive inferiority complex. His parochial worldview of attempting to limit his wife's professional and academic progression by restricting her to obtaining a diploma certificate is informed by his own feelings of inadequacy. This is in direct conflict with Rebecca's life-time ambition of pursuing educational emancipation. The relationship becomes physically, emotionally and sexually abusive when Rebecca gains admission into the University.

Depicted as a caricature of Christian bigotry, James seems to deploy religious fanaticism and hypocrisy as tools for the oppressive subjugation of women. James' lack of any significant educational qualification and his professional stagnation fuel his jealousy and resentment of Rebecca's educational progress, thereby breeding unfounded suspicion and enraged castigation at her every move. He deliberately manipulates the Christian injunction of wifely submissiveness which he translates to tyrannical repression and opportunity for emotional imprisonment. In contrast with Asabe's depiction of an initially ideal home built on Islamic injunctions, Phebe's portrayal of a Christian marriage is an outright critique of the hypocritical fanaticism practiced by James and the deployment of Christian puritanism and submission as façade for subjugation and oppression of the woman. While Asabe seems to propagate reconciliation and forgiveness as pivotal to Islamic injunctions, on one hand. Rebecca on the other hand, exits her abusive relationship and continues her 'hound' for educational emancipation until the conclusion of the narrative where she attains a maximum degree of self-actualization and fulfillment. Asabe's narrative is thus somewhat complicit in perpetuating the long-suffering and repression of marital inequalities, whereas Phebe's story is more liberating as her protagonist breaks loose from an abusive relationship informed by socio-culturally and religiously imposed norms.

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