

Hausa Literature Debates Series 6

He Said, They Said: The Polemics Over Contemporary Hausa Novels in Northern Nigeria¹

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Sources:

- Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Hausa Literature in the 1990s", *New Nigerian Weekly*, Saturday April 24 and Saturday, May 1, 1999.
- Ibrahim Malumfashi, "Beyond the Market Criticism", *New Nigerian Weekly*, Saturday May 15 1999.
- Abdulaziz S. Malumfashi, "Babinlata: A Writer with a Difference", *New Nigerian Weekly*, Saturday May 22 1999.
- Ibrahim Sheme, "Of Market Forces and the Hausa Novel", *New Nigerian Weekly*, Saturday June 5 1999.
- Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Idols of the Marketplace: Literary History, Literary Criticism and the Contemporary Hausa Novel", *New Nigerian Weekly* Saturday June 12, 1999
- Ibrahim Malumfashi, "Dancing Naked in the Market Place", *New Nigerian Weekly*, Saturday July 17, 1999

"...most of the Kano Market Literature pamphleteers see my kind of criticism as envy, competition and, worst of all, sabotage. This I have to come understand might not be unconnected with their demented capitalistic mind that sees criticism as a weapon in "killing" the goose that lays the golden eggs for them..." (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99).

"...Since the demise of the legendary Alhaji Imam, many writers...have been trying to step into the shoes he bequeathed, but none of them has succeeded. Such contemporary writers are legion; the indefatigable Ibrahim Sheme, the writer of *The Malam's Potion*, Kifin Rijjiya....Dr. Ibrahim Malumfashi, who intended to continue with Imam's famous *Magana Jari Ce* but ended up wasting his time writing the serialized *Wankan Wuta*: a book that questions the creativity of the writer as it, appears to be a hopeless plagiarism of an Indian film, *Khudgaz*, and Jeffrey Archer's *Kane and Abel*. Though they have through their various works been preserving Hausa literature as well as promoting the reading habit among the Hausa people more than during the Imam era, unfortunately none of them has matched Imam's great genius and wisdom..." (A. S. Malumfashi, NNW, 22/5/99).

¹ The flurry of literary activities by Hausa youth (aged 18-32) in vernacular prose fiction in Northern Nigeria drew a flak of criticism — both for and against. This paper presents a distilled perspective of the criticisms from the popular press in Northern Nigeria in 1999.

"...most of Shakespeare's plays are full of histories, history of disorder, unsuccessful wars abroad, cold wars at home, harmony after war, etc. Most of these histories Shakespeare meticulously grafted from so many materials and historical sources, not from formal school system, but through personal taught process. Shakespeare went through a mass materials...employ (ing) the same method in the construction of his comedies and tragedies..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99).

"...it is thus clear that neither law nor public morality, nor the public's neglect nor the critic's scorn has ever seriously deflected the dedicated novelist from his self-imposed task of interpreting the *real* world or inventing *alternative* worlds. We can only contribute to the intellectual development of our Hausa nationality by giving a free, objective room to all genres, including the *soyayya* genre. Let Hausa literature find its value in the society. If it is trash, it will soon fade away, unsung. If it is a classic, it will endure long after we are gone..." (Adamu, NNW 1/5/99).

"...Why do I refer to such kind of articles or opinions (like Dr. Adamu's) as market criticism? There are many reasons but we shall be contented with the most important and serious ones. Dr. Adamu is a science educationist, an associate professor of Education, but not an expert in Hausa literary history..." (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99).

"...Malumfashi's' main problem was that I was not an expert on literary history but an educationist. This is a label I accept with total humility. Education as the act or process of educating or being educated, is indeed the "mother of all" disciplines, and it is by this entrance gate that I entered the arena of literary criticism. True, I am also a scientist. And yet recourse to scientific authority and method is the outstanding trait of 20th century criticism..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"...Prof. Abdalla should know that in literature there is no demarcation line between an educationist and literary critic. It is a deep bore-hole that can be regarded as a bottomless pit..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99)

"...Let us extend the search for the expert and see how far we can stretch it....Should we really read any of Shakespeare's works, knowing full well that he did not attend any university and had no degree in...and therefore could not really be an 'expert' in writing since he was not properly trained? And are we to stop reading Abubakar Gimba's novels and ask him to write treatises on economics instead?..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"...Classifying or adequately analyzing who is an expert is problematic. True, academic qualifications do not necessarily make an expert, but they add to the sweetness of his argument and fortification of his ideas..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99).

"...Well, I do not regard myself as an expert in this field, but I believe I am reasonably well read on the subject matter..." (Malumfashi, 15/5/99).

"...So how many books does it take to read to become an expert in a genre? What does it take to become an expert in Hausa literary history? Chains of

degrees from Wisconsin and SOAS, with tutelage under Neil Skinner and Graham Furniss?..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"...Prof. Abdalla Uba Adamu...completely mis-read my synthesis of his "competence" as a literary critic. My only problem is that I found his performatic indulgence quite trite..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99)

"...Novelists, being neither poets nor philosophers, rarely originate modes of thinking and expression. Poets such as Chaucer and Shakespeare have had much to do with the making of the English language, and Byron was responsible for the articulation of the new romantic sensibility in it in the early 19th century. It is rarely, however, that a novelist makes a profound mark on a national language, as opposed to a regional dialect. Nevertheless we are beginning to see the emergence of this contribution to Hausa literature in the Enghausa vocabulary form that creeps now and then in some of the writings . (e.g. Badariyya, Balaraba Ramat; So Tsuntsu, Hamisu Bature; Allura Cikin Ruwa, Bilkisu S. Ahmad)..." (Adamu, NNW 1/5/99).

"...The age of an imaginative literature should be viewed from the generic distinctiveness of the environment and world view that provides it. The classical books in Europe are not the same in Hausa land, so also the modern or renaissance. Dr. Adamu did not know this because he was using the wrong barometer in analyzing a wrong sample otherwise, how could the uses of the novel in America or Europe be the same in the Hausa society? This can only happen when we push the globalization to the extreme..." (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99)

"...While the novel can certainly be used as a tool for the better understanding of a departed age (Shaihu Umar, Ruwan Bagaja, Gandoki), it can equally be used as an instrument of describing today (the soyayya genre). It must be pointed out that the novel as an expression of the spirit of an age group does not necessarily speak on behalf of the society. (Adamu, NNW 24/4/99)

"...What kind of tool did Abdalla Adamu use in referring to Shaihu Umar, Ruwan Bagaja, Gandoki as "books of the departed age," and the Soyayya books as "describing today? Is it traditionalist aesthetics, sociological excavation, systemic perspective, materialistic theorization or structural anatomization? In literary history, as well as stylistics, the age that matters is that of a diachronic and synchronic, while in thematic considerations, we talk of discourse—the level of meaning or semiotic — the cultural and other categories of meanings, apart from semantics..." (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99).

"...Novels in any society are not expected to be didactic; although at the very base level, they reflect a philosophy of life. For instance, as the novel became increasingly popular during the 18th century Europe, writers examined society with greater depth and breadth. They often wrote revealingly about people living within, or escaping from, the pressures of society. Many authors implicitly criticized characters attempting to ignore society and its conventions, and they criticized society for failing to satisfy human aspirations..." (Adamu 24/4/99).

"...While talking about the commitment of the writer to his society it is important to add that ideally no write-up is without a focus. As such the Kano chapbooks are predominantly didactic. There is nothing more ludicrous than insinuating that such "mere erotic imageries are capable of corrupting the whole society. If one insists on that one is correct because one is not talking about now but the future..." (Malumfashi 15/5/99).

"... If Abdalla Adamu was not sure of the efficacy of the Hausa adage, *da yayyafi kogi can cika*, let him ask Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino how many letters he got from readers between 199-1997? The same goes for Babinlata, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, Zuwaira Isa and Bilkisu Ahmad Funtua, who are the most popular writers. Let him ask them how many phone calls they receive from readers. What do the readers want? How do they feel about the Soyayya books? Ask Gidan Dabino how many girls came to him since 1991 with their matrimonial problems? How many girls ran away from their parents and took refuge either in his office or home because they were to be wedded to men they do not like? (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99).

"...yes, I am aware of the numerous phone calls Ado Ahmad receives regularly from distraught girls pouring out stories of sorrow about their marriages (the scripts of which could easily form the basis of a series of stories). But wait a minute. These girls have access to phones, which reveals something about their social status. They are entrapped in miserable and unhappy relationships, which reveals something about their parents. They read Ado Ahmad (and others) and suddenly they see salvation of a sort, which reveals something about their need for information...Have we considered the alternatives for those who have no access to Ado Ahmad as social interpreter to drive home the misery in their lives? Have we considered what happens to those who run away from miserable matrimonial homes — right into the arms of a magajiya or a local neighborhood pimp? So is Ado Ahmad committing a crime by providing a medium through which these girls are counseled, rehabilitated and an agreement reached with their parents?..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"....The (soyayya) genre merely reflects the predominant philosophy of the current society. For instance, the novels of Jane Austen, designed primarily as superior entertainment, imply a desirable ordered existence, in which the comfortable decorum of an English rural family is disturbed only by a not-too-serious shortage of money, by love affairs that go temporarily wrong, and by the intrusion of self-centered stupidity. The good, if unrewarded for their goodness, suffer from no permanent injustice. In the whole current of bourgeois Anglo-American fiction life is seen as fundamentally reasonable and decent. When wrong is committed, it is usually punished. The soyayya genre happily reflects this with its generally predictable endings. (Adamu, NNW 1/5/99).

"...by making inferring that Soyayya books are describing today, Abdalla is merely being atavistic. Does he mean to tell us that between 1990 and 1998 the Hausa society is rabidly engrossed in love and romance? Does that mean the era of SAP and Abachanornics was an era of gigantic love escapades and

romantic topsy-turvy?... the period between 1991-1998 was the worst period in the life of most households: pervasive poverty, hunger, miser, school drop-outs, riots, political miscarriage, corruption, prostitution, an thuggery were (are?) the picture that confronted (confronts?) us. How com then love and romance too the centre-stage in our chapbooks and not any a these economic problems?..." (Malumfashi 15/5/99).

"...SAP and Abachanomics? Bah! That is the concern for adults with jobs, kids, homes, mortgages and lemony cars..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99)

"...A final fall-out of the Hausa novel is that it stimulates reading culture — a process through which youth are now focusing their attention in learning things from the books; in other words, gaining incidental education..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"...As I have been saying for I years, our preoccupation with the Kano chapbooks, the drums we beat in their commendation and ululation our over-reliance on these young writers as our literary saviors will, if care is not taken, bring down Hausa literature. I said it over and over again, that market pamphleteering is just a vogue where it thrived. It was never taken to be a "contemporary literature" but an adventure within a given literary landscape..." (Malumfashi, NNW 12/5/99)

"...Malumfashi makes the distinct error of assuming that the Imam era...was the best that we all deserved....He was apathetic to its own appalling shortcomings such as the imprisonment of the society in a cell occupied by genies, witches, demons, tyrannical emirs and courtiers, ignorant and fatalistic populace...The fact that most of the literature of that bygone epoch was a translated or even plagiarism copy of yet another bygone (and foreign) era was lost on him. That era can be accused of stultifying the emergence of a really indigenous Hausa literature...However, this is not to say Abubakar Imam and the grand old fellows of his time didn't deserve our adoration. As pioneers, they will continue to enjoy the privileges of earning our fascination for laying the foundation of it all, even at the behest of our grandparent's colonizer, and shall have our perennial gratitude for immortalizing our language and culture in a way..." (Sheme, NNW 5/6/99)

"...The fact is that Hausa novelists in Kano have provided a facility through which youth can acquire love for books and reading; certainly a primary objective for any literate society. We hope there would be more of these Commercial Libraries that will help to turn away kids from drugs, crimes, juvenile delinquency, gangerstrism and destructive idleness..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99)

"...ours is such kind of capitalistic literary endeavour the chapbooks made their writers comfortable and popular. But as the phenomenon started declining from 1997, they had to cling to another mode at sustenance. They thus came into the home video thing..." (Malumfashi, NNW 15/5/99).

"...he described as "capitalistic literary endeavor" the effort by the current Hausa writers, saying the so-called chapbooks have made their writers

comfortable and popular."...What on earth did Malumfashi expect? Artists are always supposed to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and this includes making money from the sale of their works and becoming popular among their patronizers. A bad artist is one that fails to attract good sales or inspire adulation in the society....(Sheme, NNW 5/6/99).

"...Since literature is the keystone to understanding the heart and mind of mankind, it should not be left to any Tom, Dick and Harry to play with..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99).

"...the fact remains that the contemporary Hausa novels have, warts and all, made important contributions to our society in the last two decades. However, like all grains, there can be found among them bad ones, but that shouldn't push us into burning the farm where they are produced or the barn in which they are kept. Willy ninny, they have documented a part of our culture—even if it includes the bad part. For this, we should hug their authors or write the right alternatives ourselves. Covering the abject failure to checkmate them with the blanket of spurious postulations is equal to the attempt to climb up to yonder heavens in order adjust the balance of the moon..." (Sheme, NNW 5/6/99).

"...Indeed, my primordial concern was to support any activity that encourages reading culture among Hausa youth. Reading is certainly an educational activity. By that fact, any writer, whether of Nuclear Physics, Ethnomathematics, or *Badariyya*, becomes my concern..." (Adamu, NNW 12/6/99).

"...I wish to re-state that the Kano Market Literature may possibly live for the next 450 years as nightmarishly adduced by Prof. Abdalla. It may serve as a token in opening new vistas, especially reading culture among less-literate market women, young school leavers and married women as succinctly put by Ibrahim Sheme. But one thing it will never do is saving Hausa prose fiction from extinction! What the market literature is now doing is lullabying us to deep slumber, colonizing our thoughts in romantic delirium, instead of liberating us from the clutches of capitalism and its local comprador collaborators..." (Malumfashi, NNW 17/7/99).

"...Any writer who refused to see that there is a linkage between values, cultures, politics and economics of his people is doomed. We should not just sit and brood over romance, sex and jealousy among co-wives, we should go beyond that...Aren't there other social, economic and political issues worth treating?..." (Malumfashi, NNW, 17/7/99)