

# Beyond the Language Issue

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Edited by Anja Oed and Uta Reuster-Jahn



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# **BREAKING OUT, SPEAKING OUT: YOUTH, ISLAM AND THE PRODUCTION OF INDIGENOUS HAUSA LITERATURE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

*Abdalla Uba Adamu*

## **Introduction**

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the development of Hausa literature as part of global media flows that are catalytic in the redefinition of cultural identities through creative writing. In particular it narrates how youth literature in the indigenous language of the Hausa created a massive reading culture for mainly romantic-themed stories that provided an opportunity to partake in the imagination of sexual dynamics in an Islamicate<sup>1</sup> environment, and why a young, essentially male urban Hausa audience accepts this form of literature as a more accurate representation of their reality than classical Hausa literature. The second section of the paper provides an overview of the classical genres of Hausa prose fiction and leads to the emergence of contemporary Hausa prose fiction and the reaction of the Hausa civil society to this new form of discourse.

## **Four generations of creative writing in Hausa**

In addition to an extensive oral tradition, the Hausa have the most extensive and well-established literary tradition within Nigeria. Through the medium of the Arabic language script, they had the instrument to write down their literature earlier than other groups. This was made possible by contact with Islam as early as the 1320s, which exposed Hausaland to the literary discourse and activities of the Muslim world at large. And while classical Arabic remained the preserve of the clerics and courtiers in Muslim Hausa communities for centuries, the Hausa language also became Arabicised in the form of a locally adapted script, *ajami*, that opened up literary expressions for millions of literate, but not scholastic, members of the community. The scholastic tradition in Hausaland, having been generated and sustained by clerics, was essentially religious.

The British arrival in Hausaland (which later became Northern Nigeria) in 1903 introduced new elements of literary tradition among the Hausa. The Translation Bureau established by the colonial government in 1929 (which became the Literature Bureau in 1935) ensured, through a literary competition in 1933, that a

1 I adopt Asma Afsaruddin's (1999) usage of Marshall Hodgson's (1974) term 'Islamicate', for the subsequent 'modern' period (roughly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on) to describe societies which maintain and/or have consciously adopted at least the public symbols of adherence to traditional Islamic beliefs and practices.



whole new set of reading materials, and consequently literary style, was created. The literary competition of 1933 yielded the first clutch of now Hausa *boko* [i.e., written in a Romanised script]<sup>2</sup> literature written in classical Hausa. The scholastic tradition of the Hausa has always been the preserve of the *mallam* [Muslim teacher, scholar] class. Even in popular literature the fountainheads, being carved out of that class, reflect their antecedent scholastic traditions: these novels were written mainly by scholars, some of whom had deep Islamic roots and did not easily agree to write in the *boko* script in the first place, considering such activity a dilution of their Islamic scholarship. An example of this was Abubakar Imam, the author of *Ruwan Bagaja* [The healing waters] (1934), who was 22 when he wrote the novel. As Rupert East (1936: 350), the arch-Svengali of Hausa classical literature, exasperatedly noted,

the first difficulty was to persuade these Mallams that the thing was worth doing. The influence of Islam produces an extremely serious-minded type of person. The art of writing moreover, being intimately connected in his mind with his religion, is not to be treated lightly. Since the religious revival at the beginning of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century, nearly all the original work produced by Northern Nigerian authors has been either purely religious or written with a strong religious motive. Most of it was written in Arabic, which, like Latin in Medieval Europe, was considered a more worthy medium of any work of importance than the mother tongue.

Thus what emerged subsequently was a generation of Hausa creative fiction writers who defined the future of Hausa popular literature. The first generation (1933 – 1945)<sup>3</sup> were writers of what I shall call classical Hausa literature. There is no meter for making this judgement, except for linguistic style.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the linguistic style used in this category of books was the quintessentially ‘correct’ and therefore classical Hausa. The strong links between literary acquisition and the Islamic erudition connotes an Islamic and cultural respectability to this mode of expression. Consequently, the strong links between these early Hausa classics and educational endeavours confer on them an elite status not granted to other forms of Hausa fiction.

The second generation (1950 – 1979) of writers are what I consider writers of neo-classical Hausa literature, who seemed to be awed by, and rooted to, the literary aesthetics of the classical Hausa generation. There was a studied attempt at humor and correct mode of speech, and behaviour. The censoring hand of the State machinery was also very present in these books, especially as the task of publishing them was undertaken by the State-sponsored agencies. Further, the creation of more high schools in the era meant more books needed to be used as set

2 All translations of Hausa quotations and of titles in Hausa are mine.

3 Due to World War II, there was not much writing between the early 1940s and the early 1950s. In fact, in the 1940s, only one book was published (in 1944); prior to that the last book was published in 1937.

4 Ahmed and Daura (1970: 7) argue that the classical Hausa – the meter I use in this categorisation – is “Hausa language and literary styles which have been greatly influenced by Arabic and Islamic tradition – as opposed to Modern Hausa, which connotes Hausa language and literary styles which have been influenced by Western Civilisation and culture through the agency of the English Language”.



books for Hausa studies, and as such a large volume of these books were produced and the major examination body recommended them as textbooks. Consequently, novels such as Garba Funtuwa's *Gogan Naka* [Our hero] (1952), Abdulkadir Dangambo's *Kitsen Rogo* [The illusion] (1978), Ahmadu Ingawa's *Iliya Dan Maikarfi* [The warrior Iliya] (1951), Adamu Katsina's *Sihirtaccen Gari* [The enchanted city] (1952), and Umaru Dembo's *Tauraruwa Mai Wutsiya* [The shooting star] (1969) all became comparable with the classics, but with an admixture of fantasy, realism and even a dash of interstellar travel (*Tauraruwa Mai Wutsiya*). Their focus also altered to reflect problems of urbanisation and the greater complexities of an emergent semi-technological society.

The third generation (1980 – 1985) can be considered writers of modern Hausa classical literature, where the socially accepted linguistic modes were used in the narratives. However, it seemed that Hausa fiction was emerging from the era of fantasy into a firmer reality. The novelists in this category were still part of the State chaperonage. This was because in 1980 the Department of Culture of the then Federal Ministry of Social Welfare and Culture organised a literary competition for creative writings in the three major Nigerian languages, i.e., Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This was in line with the Federal Government's focus on culture (spawning off *Nigeria Magazine* – the journalistic magazine established by the Federal Ministry of Social Welfare and Culture – from the same Department). The winning Hausa novels were Musa Mohammed Bello's *Tsumangiyar Kan Hanya* [The hunger] (1982), Munir Muhammed Katsina's *Zabi Naka* [Your choice] (1982), Bature Gagare's *Karshen Alewa Kasa* [End of the road] (1982), and Sulaiman Ibrahim Katsina's *Turmin Danya* [The clash] (1982). The linguistic styles as well as the themes of these novels reflected attempts to retain a degree of relevancy in an increasingly changing world. But the stilted presentation of 'correct' behaviour could not capture the attention (or the money) of a new age generation of readers still in their adolescence. Tragically, the writers did not continue much writing beyond these first attempts.

The rapid political and economic upheavals in Nigeria in the decade of the 1970s and 1980s created unstable market forces that had adverse effects on book publishing and led to government indifference in book publishing.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the patronage that the three generations of Hausa prose fiction writers enjoyed from government-owned firms rapidly evaporated. Vernacular prose fiction came to a virtual standstill, especially from 1975. In order to create relevance for itself under dwindling patronage, the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC) decided to hold another literary competition in 1981, harking back at the one held in 1933 to boost sales and readership. Although eight books were selected as the best, only three were published. These included two novels, Hafsat AbdulWaheed's *So Aljannar Duniya* [Earthly paradise] (1980), Magaji Dambatta's *Amadi Na Malam Amah* [Amadi, friend of Malam Amah] (1980) and Sulaiman Ibrahim Katsina's play *Mallakin Zuciyata* [My beloved] (1980). However, *So Aljannar Duniya* was catalytic to the emergence of the fourth generation of Hausa novelists in 1981, which – from 1984 – heralded the arrival of a New Age generation. The newcomers gate-crashed the Hausa literary scene with ballistic

5 This argument is well explored by Emenyonu 1993.



urbanism and often raw sexuality, divesting readers from the village simplicity of the earlier Hausa classics. They were cultural cyborgs: an uneasy confluence between the two rivers of Hausa traditionalism and modern hybrid urban media-rich glocalising society.

### The lexicon of love – themes and templates of the fourth generation

*So Aljannar Duniya* led the way to the romantic focus of the fourth generation of Hausa novelists by radically exploring a love affair between a purebred Fulani girl (the protagonist, and actually autobiographical to AbdulWaheed, the author) and an 'alien' (in real life a man from the Middle East whom she eventually married). The novel also provided a second catalytic factor in the development of Hausa prose fiction, in that it did away with the Fulani *pulaaku*<sup>6</sup> and introduces a brash, assertive, loud and anti-establishment heroine, Bodado, who, armed with a degree in Pharmaceutical Sciences, comes back to her village to set up a drug store and introduce her fiancé – by no means lady-like behaviour in the Fulani mindset. Thus she discards *munyal*, *semteende* and *hakkillo* – central components of *pulaaku* – and declares, openly, her love for an 'alien' in her auntie's presence! The opening dialogue of the novel sets the pace in which Bodado informs her aunt:

Aure! Inna [maternal aunt, a mother only in *loco parentis*] ni fa na gaya muku ba zan auri kowa ba sai wanda nake so. Kun san zamani ya sake. (1)

[Marriage! Aunty, I have told you that I will only marry the man I love. You know times have changed.]

Such direct confrontation in a Fulani village was uncommon, and reflected the author's autobiographical rebellion against tradition. Her aunty – delegated to mediate in these matters on behalf of the protagonist's mother – is shocked. As she laments:

Mhm! Wannan zamani, Allah Ya saukaka. Yarinya ki zauna kina zancen auren ki, sai ka ce hirar nono da mai. Don haka fa ba ma son sa diyar mu makarantar boko. In kun yi karatu sai ku ce kun fi kowa. Me ku ka dauke mu ne? (2)

[Mhm. These times of ours. May Allah save us. Listen to you talking about your marriage, as if you are talking about milk and butter. That is why we do not want to send our daughters to school. After you finish you feel you are superior to everyone. What do you take us for?]

6 The Fulani code of behaviour, subscribed to also by the Hausa. *Pulaaku* involves important Fulani/Pullo virtues such as *munyal*, which is patience, self control, mental discipline, prudence; *semteende*, which is modesty and respect for others, even for enemies, and also *hakkillo*, wisdom, forethought, prudence in managing one's personal affairs and giving hospitality. The Pullo is trained to be stoic, never to show his feelings, to even appear introverted to outsiders and to have a deep emotional attachment to cattle. He maintains his respect by keeping a distance from others; one is a better person if one is self-sufficient and relies on few personal possessions and comforts.

Thus the battle ground and the rules of engagement have been established – female empowerment through education; and AbdulWaheed chose the most conservative arena: a Fulani settlement, considered generally more trenchant about *pulaaku* than urban Fulani.

The success of *So Aljannar Duniya* seemed to have sent a message to potential literati to pick up their pens and set to work – thus spawning a genre which the organisers of the competition that produced the novel did not envisage, or desire. The combined effects of the harsh economic realities of the 1980s (the decade of coups and counter-coups in Nigeria) ensured reduced parental responsibility in the marital affairs of their children. Hitherto the cultural perception of an educated girl in Muslim Hausa society was generally unfavourable: educated girls were seen as immoral, wayward, and impertinent. To avoid girls committing embarrassing and immoral acts, more often than not parents were eager to see that their daughters got married as soon as they were biologically mature, regardless of their level of education; if they did get to attend school at all. Pulling girls out of school to marry them off was a common occurrence in Muslim Hausaland at the time the fourth generation of Hausa novelists emerged. Therefore fantasy, media parenting from especially Bollywood Hindi films, anti-authority and a loud persistent message from bursting testosterone in a conservative society that sees strict gender separation combined so as to present Hausa youth with *soyayya* [romance] as the central template for creative fiction. It was a safety valve to repressed sexuality.

There was considerable reluctance on the part of the major mainstream Nigerian publishers to accept works in the Hausa language, certainly fiction, or even establish offices in the North of Nigeria. Therefore, with no one to assess and publish their manuscripts, the young Hausa prose writers in northern Nigeria had no alternative but to publish their books privately themselves. Table 1 shows the early starters of the fourth generation of Hausa prose fiction writers.

Table 1: A selection of pioneer millennium generation Hausa prose fiction writers

S / N	Title	Author (*female)	Year
1.	<i>So Aljannar Duniya</i> [Earthly paradise]	*Hafsat AbdulWaheed	1981
2.	<i>Wasiyar Baba Kere</i> [The will and testament of Baba Kere]	Ibrahim Saleh Gumel	1983
3.	<i>Inda Rai Da Rabo</i> [Where there is life, there is hope]	Idris S. Imam	1984
4.	<i>Rabin Raina I</i> [My soulmate I]	*Talatu Wada Ahmad	1984
5.	<i>Soyayya Gamon Jini</i> [Love's in the blood]	Ibrahim H. Abdullahi Bichi	1986
6.	<i>Budurwar Zuciya</i> [Young at heart]	*Balaraba Ramat Yakubu	1986
7.	<i>Rabin Raina II</i> [My soulmate II]	*Talatu Wada Ahmad	1987
8.	<i>Wa Zai Auri Jahila?</i> [Who will marry an illiterate woman?]	*Balaraba Ramat Yakubu	1987



S / N	Title	Author (*female)	Year
9.	<i>Kogin Soyayya</i> [The river of love]	A. M. Zahraddeen Yakasai	1988
10.	<i>Alhaki Kuykuyo ne</i> [A crime is like a puppy]	*Balaraba Ramat Yakubu	1990
11.	<i>Rabin Raina III</i> [My soulmate III]	*Talat Wada Ahmad	1988
12.	<i>Mata Masu Duniya</i> [Women of substance]	*Kulu M.B Tambuwal	1988
13.	<i>Kaikayi</i> [The itch]	Abubakar Bala Gyadi-Gyadi	1989
14.	<i>Kashe Makashinka</i> [Preventive killing]	Alhaji Y. Abubakar Mohammed	1989
15.	<i>Rabon Kwado</i> [Whatever is due]	*Sadiya T. Umar Daneji	1989
16.	<i>Garin Masoyi</i> [The place of the beloved]	A. M. Zahraddeen Yakasai	1989
17.	<i>Idan So Cuta Ne</i> [If love is an affliction]	Yusuf M. Adamu	1989
18.	<i>In Da So Da Kauna</i> [If there is love there will be affection]	Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino	1990

There are no specific records to show which urban cluster in northern Nigeria started the private publishing phenomenon, but it would seem to have been kick-started by the appearance of Talat Wada Ahmed's *Rabin Raina* [My soulmate] – a series of three similarly titled, but unrelated novels, privately printed in Zaria from 1984 to 1988. The three *Rabin Raina* novels were seminal for many reasons. Not only were they the first by a Muslim Hausa woman (and a graduate with a degree in Biology) since AbdulWaheed's prize winning *So Aljannar Duniya*, but they also set the tune for the battle cry of Muslim Hausa womanism – which as Alice Walker (1983: xi, Walker's emphasis) explains, is a woman displaying "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one" – by encouraging, quite forcefully, the idea of Muslim Hausa woman's contemporary western education.<sup>7</sup>

### Critical reaction

By 2000 there were more than 600 fourth generation Hausa novels. When it became clear that there was a massive audience for these indigenous prose fiction authors (and especially among young school girls), the Hausa traditional society reacted with either outright condemnations in mosques, conferences or radio pro-

7 For an exploration of Walker's conception of womanism as it applies to Hausa prose fiction see Adamu 2003.



grammes.<sup>8</sup> The new novelists were seen as providing templates for sexual proclivity among young, conservative, gender-segregated Muslim youth. This critical theme was taken up by one of the most consistent critics of the genre, Ibrahim Malumfashi, in "Akalar rubutun adabin Hausa na bukatar sauyi" [Need for changing the direction of Hausa literature] (1991). The article contained one of the most structural and earliest attacks on the new Hausa writings. Coming from a writer and academic, this particular essay conferred on the polemics of new Hausa writings some form of legitimate authority.<sup>9</sup> Malumfashi accuses the writers of being culturally irrelevant and suggests that there were themes for Hausa writers to work on, such as poverty, education, economic depravity, rather than romantic escapism which seemed to be the only focus of the new prose fiction writers. He also subsequently coined the term, *adabin kasuwar Kano* [Kano market literature], in contemptuous comparison to the defunct Onitsha market literature in southern Nigeria to describe the new genre (Malumfashi 1994: 14).

As a consequence of these reactions from the civil society and academics, the Kano State Government, where the phenomenon started, reacted by establishing a Books and Films Production Control Agency in 1996 to control the process. This, however, floundered because there was no specific legal backing to ban the novels. The public perception of the new literature was not helped with the appearance of about ten further novels between 1998 and 2003, which seemed to fuel conservative apprehension of the new genre. These novels included Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's *Wane Kare Ne Ba Bare Ba* [Is the man a dog or just an outcast?] (1995), Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa's *Kyan Dan Miciji* [Fatal beauty], Al-Khamees Bature's *Matsayin Lover* [Lover's stand], Ashabu Mu'azu Gamji's *Dufana* [The flood], Zuwaira Isa's *Zata Iya* [She can], Lubabah Ya'u's *Malika* [= proper name], Maryam Kabir Abdullahi's *Gajen Hakuri* [Impatience], Rabi Ado Bayero's *Auren Zahra* [Zahra's marriage], Larabi's *Komai Dadinki Da Miji* [The deceptive husband] and Kamalu Namowa Bichi's *Sirrin Loba* [Secret love]. All of these novels have one central theme: descriptions of often explicit sexual or suggestive scenes. Two of them, *Matsayin Lover* and *Sirrin Loba*, were the first Hausa novels to describe lesbian love; often, as in *Matsayin Lover*, rather explicitly, at least for a conservative society. The controversies merely indicate the sabre rattling that goes on when writers explore themes rather done than spoken about. Interestingly, about six of the writers of the soft porn / 'naughty' novels are women.

8 See, for instance, Abubakar 1999, a religious attack on the *soyayya* genre in which the author, using copious quotations from the Qur'an and the Hadith, argues that the only love approved by Islam is legal (married) love; any exposition on love outside marriage is un-Islamic, and on this basis, the entire lot of the *soyayya* genre stand damned because they encourage immoral behaviour amongst Muslim youth. He also attacks the recent crop of Hausa home videos, which, perhaps not surprisingly, were hotwired to the *soyayya* writings.

9 When public critical discourse started on the new novels, there was considerable aggression in putting forth opinions and counter-views about the value of the new literature. Indeed the polemics often degenerated to a personal level of attack which often obscures the main issues of the discourse.



### Readership of the new novels

In 1999, I conducted a survey of 1,100 school boys and girls to determine their response to the novels (Adamu 1999). Some of the respondents were forceful in expressing their views. The following are fairly typical, free-form responses from those who do not read the novels:

If you read Hausa novels, you won't improve your English. They also teach you bad habits. Further, if you read them, they sexually arouse you. (19 years, male, all-male college, urban)

I used to read them before, but my parents ordered me to stop because they corrupt our culture. So I also scolded myself and stopped reading them. (15 years, male, all-male college, urban)

The reference to the sexuality of the novels was one of the main factors of resistance by the culturalist conservative establishment against the novels. Using fairly simple descriptions of romanticism, the authors evoke a world of sexuality and sexual freedom, transporting the readers to a fantasy world where culture, belief and reality became suspended. Thus for youth not used to scenes of emotional expression, especially in popular culture, the novels provide an alternative route to dousing the raging testosterone fires.

However, it was not only the male readers who had comments to make about the sexual nature of the novels. This is shown in fairly typical responses from sampled female readers:

Stop including European life-styles, and also stop revealing the secrets of marriage. (16 years, female, inner-city college)

They should stop putting things that are improper because you don't know where it might lead to. They should also stop detailing physical relationships between a husband and a wife. (15 years, female, inner-city college)

They have become corrupted and put things that are improper. This is dangerous because some younger ones might wish to repeat what they read in real life. (17 years, female, inner-city college)

These views are forced on the readers because of the linear and didactic nature of typical Hausa stories – themselves based on the structure of the Hausa folklore which provides a direct link between an action and its consequences; without any alternative endings or details of how the conflict was resolved. Further, the Islamic environment in which the authors operate provides additional conditionalities of acceptance of their narrative. It is interesting, for instance, that sexuality is linked with being European by the respondent – revealing a common belief in Muslim northern Nigeria of the 'decadence' of Europeans.

The overwhelming, though not exclusive, focus of the novels on romance created a space for demands for other forms of narrative. According to some respondents:



In order to educate their readers, they should include stories of sadness and kindness. They should also educate youth on how to avoid going astray such as telling lies and others. (14 years, male, inner-city college)

They should show youth the dangers of not going to school so that we can develop our nation and become more patriotic. (17 years, female, inner-city college)

This again reveals the didactic and often sermonising expectation of Hausa prose fiction – the expectation that stories should ‘preach’ goodness to avoid badness – an expectation that is in fact directly from the Qur’an where in numerous places the Muslim is urged to observe and promote what is proper and to prevent what is improper (*‘amr bil ma’ ruuf wa-n-nahi’ anil munkar*) in accordance with the call made in the Qur’an by an Islamic state. Although the Qur’an expects and enjoins every Muslim to play a positive role in the propagation of good (*ma’ruuf*) and suppression of evil (*munkar*), it has been made an obligation on a section of society to remain engaged in it. So far as Hausa novelists consider themselves ‘preachers’ – drawing attention to vital lessons of life for their young readers – then this particular religious obligation also falls on them.

### Conclusions

The availability of cheap printing presses in the aftermath of the political activities in Nigeria in 1978 gave young urban Hausa novelists the opportunity to engage in the creative process of prose fiction. Seeking to depart from the entrenched traditional mindset of the Hausa Fulani cultural establishment that emphasises strict gender segregation – itself based on Islamic tenets of the society – the new youth literature tilted predominantly towards romantic themes. With transglobal themes liberally borrowed from Hindi films and escapist European literature of James Hadley Chase, Robert Ludlum and the seamy tales of Nick Carter, the new Hausa novelists provide a literary focus and alternative to the global media onslaught in a traditional society. With increased availability to the technology, production had increased; and with the modernisation of the society – in terms of appropriating cultural and behavioural icons of the western world – the reception of the novels has reached an all time high; a process that had earlier (in 1996) bothered the culturalist establishment. The availability of global media in all forms merely entrench this new form of literature for urban Hausa youth in Muslim northern Nigeria.



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10 Note that many Hausa novels do not carry standard publication information such as date, place of publication or publisher. A fairly comprehensive database of fourth generation Muslim Hausa prose fiction writers is maintained online at <<http://hausa.soas.ac.uk/perl/Project/index.pl?project=hausa>> by Graham Furniss and Malami Buba of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.



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