Hausa Literature Debates Series 1

Hausa Literary Expression in the decade of 1990s: A further contribution to the *Soyayya* Genre Debate

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Introduction

The recent debates that punctuated the pages of this paper about the merits or demerits of the more or less recently created Hausa *soyayya* genre of creative writing, I feel, loses sight of many salient and very significant points in the literary development of the Hausa nationality and how it reflects on the uses of the novel. In this presentation, I intend to take the position of a protagonist of the Hausa literary expression in general, but the *soyayya* genre in particular, situating my arguments within the analytical framework of at least *four* uses of the novel in any society.

The Hausa ethnic nationality has established themselves as great travelers and scholars spread all over the West African sub-region. Their iterant mercantile capitalism has established the dominance of the Hausa language all over sub-Sahara. And yet despite long tradition of Islamic scholarship, the Hausa intellectual class has not succeeded in using their grasp of the Arabic writing form (or even the alphabets) into recording their experiences. It would appear that the many clusters of Hausa ethnic groups in various countries of the West African sub-region establish vibrant host communities, complete with schools and trade centers; but without an effective popular *literary* tradition. The masses of works written was essentially religious in nature. Even the quintessential Hausa popular literary (as opposed to religious) classic, *Tarikh Arbab Hadha al-balad al-Musamma Kano* (the Kano Chronicle) whose writing started sometime around 1650, was written, according to some perspectives, not by Kano mallams but by some resident Tripolitanian scholars (working with the Kano mallams and the Palace). Such apparently frivolous writing of history (interlaced with folklore) was not what the Kano mallams were used to.

The establishment of the Translation Bureau in 1930 and its literary competition of 1933 yielded the first clutch of now Hausa boko literature classics (*Ruwan Bagaja*, *Shehu Umar*, *Gan]oki*, etc). It must be kept in mind that the scholastic tradition of the Hausa has always been the preserve of the *mallam* class; consequently even in popular literature the fountainheads, being carved out of that class, reflect their antecedent traditions. Times, as they say, change. Thus enter the *Soyayya* literary genre to close the millenium.

New Dimensions of Hausa Literature

The biggest reaction to contemporary Hausa popular writers was that having acquired the technology to rapidly express themselves in their language, Hausa fiction writers tended to produce works that are less than desirable for a conservative society like the Hausa society. The predominant class of such writings fall into the Mills and Boons mold, or the *Soyayya* genre.

Both the protagonists and antagonists of the genre do have their relative points and this forum has provided them with an opportunity to express these points. Looking at the antagonists, one does appreciate that many of the books probably do not follow the conventional "rules" of creative writing. Plot and characterization seemed pretty thin on the ground. The scenes (settings) and the narrative forms, are at most, lackluster. Overall, authors seemed more motivated by market forces to recoup their initial investments, than filling an intellectual void or advancing the cause of Hausa literature. Compromises are then made between what the author wants to write and what the market wants to buy. The dominant philosophy thus seems to be: *pile them high and sell them cheap*.

Further accusations have been that the genre — besides being insipid and lackluster — encourages the development of undesirable traits and behavior among their class focus; adolescents and twentysomethings. An example of this observation is given by Danjuma Katsina — a literary critic and author — who wrote that "….looking at the background of these books nothing beneficial will come out of them but foolishness, lack of direction and immorality…" ("Death to the 'soyayya' novel!" The *Write* Stuff, *New Nigerian Weekly*, 5 September 1998 p. 15). He was joined by Ahmed Mansur who scornfully wrote that "it is high time we did away with junk" (Re: The 'best' Hausa books 1998; The Write Stuff, New Nigerian Weekly, 19 December 1998, p. 15). He further argues that, "…most novelists are irrevocably damaging the attitudinal and ideological perceptions of readers towards the marriage institution, thereby throwing the youths, particularly girls, into the devil's arms…" I will not go into the structural polemics of the two writers, as I am sure that will be taken care of elsewhere.

However, as a protagonist of Hausa writing and writers in general, I intend to provide contrary arguments to the relevance of the *soyayya* genre within the specific analytical framework of the uses of the novel. I will use European writers as case in point.

Uses of the Novel

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.

And it is this point that seems to be overlooked by the antagonists of the *soyayya* genre. The 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 (e.g. *In Da So*, Ado Ahmad; *Kwarya ta Gari*, Bala A Babinlata; *Ummulhairi*, Yusuf. Adamu; *Bakandamiyar Rikicin Duniya*, Dan Azumi Baba).

A counter-movement to this naturalistic philosophy is realist literature, showing that there was no justice in life and that the evil and the stupid must prevail. Such morbid styles (as represented for instance by some of Thomas Hardy's works) had deliberately been ignored by most popular European novelists. Dickens achieved his criticisms of Victorian society (1837-1901) not so much by means of realism as by the prolific invention of comic characters and situations that were presented sometimes affectionately, sometimes in fierce contempt, but always with the utmost intensity. Dickens sustained his vision of life and the structure of his novels by such pervasive metaphors as entombment, imprisonment, and rebirth. It is interesting to see the emergence of such category in the *soyayya* genre (e.g. *Duniya Sai Sannu*, Ado Ahmad; *Zinaru*, Bala Anas Babinlata).

Any reader of fiction has a right to an occasional escape from the dullness or misery of his existence, but he has the critical duty of finding the best modes of escape — for instance, in dreams of love that seemed to reflect some innate Freudian hopescapes of not only the writers, but also the readers. Indeed the provision of laughter and dreams has been for many centuries a legitimate literary occupation and has thus served as an escapist basis. It can be condemned by serious devotees of literature only if it falsifies life through oversimplification and tends to corrupt its readers into belief that reality is as the author presents it. The *soyayya* genre is guilty in this respect in that the escapism of the genre is at variance with social realities. However, it could be argued that the depressed economy with its attendant tightly restrict life-style choices has created pressure points among youth in the Hausa nation adequately addressed by the escapism of the *soyayya* genre (e.g. *Kibiyar Ajali*, Naziru Adamu; *Sara Da Sassaka*, Bala A. Babinlata).

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).

There are, of course, European antecedents. Günter Grass, in post-Hitler Germany, sought to revivify a language that had been corrupted by the Nazis; he threw whole dictionaries at his readers in the hope that new freedom, fantasy, and exactness in the use of words might influence the publicists, politicians, and teachers in the direction of a new liberalism of thought and expression. Whether this high-end can be ultimately achieved by the *soyayya* genre is debatable. As also to whether it is desirable or not especially with regards to its impact on the further development both the English and Hausa language among the Hausa.

While the novel can certainly be used as a tool for the better understanding of a departed age (*Shehu Umar*, *Ruwan Bagaja*, *Gan]oki*), 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.

In European literature, the unrest and bewilderment of the young in the period after World War II is reflected in novels like J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954). It is notable that with novels like these — and the beat-generation books of Jack Kerouac; the American-Jewish novels of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth; and the black novels of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin — it is a detached spirit that is expressed, the spirit of an *age* group, *social* group, or *racial* group, and *not* the spirit of an entire society in a particular phase of history.

A preoccupation with current political and social problems is evident in a number of contemporary African writings. Among the more prominent are *Songs in A Time of War* (1985) by Ken Saro-Wiwa; *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) by Tanure Ojaide; and *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* (1980) by Syl Cheney-Coker. Other works are more oblique in their approach, causing some critics to brand them as escapist. These works include *The Famished Road* (1991) by Ben Okri, Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), and South African novelist Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995).

Thus the rampant Freudian sexuality of some of the *soyayya* genre merely speaks of the spirit of innate *adolescent* sexual expression and consequently do not necessarily reflect societal norms. As the German-American writer Thomas Mann critically observed in *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), an artist must be involved with society. *Soyyayya* writers, as artists, are definitely involved with the society. (e.g. *Kyan Dan Miciji*, *Allura Cikin Ruwa*, Bilkisu S. Ahmad; *Dufana*, Ashabu Mu'azu Gamji; *Masoyan Zamani*, Ado Ahmad; *Hajjaju Lubabatu*, Nakanka S. Aminu; *Budurwar Zuciya*, Balaraba Ramat). It is ludicrous to presume that such mere erotic imageries are capable of corrupting the whole society, and gives a naïve view of society. It also says nothing about *responsible parenting* which many parents shirk away from and point accusing fingers at *soyayya* writers. Critics always also ignore the *endings* of such novels which reveals their inherent morality.

It could, of course, be argued that the society is ultimately shaped by its young, and corrupting the young eventually corrupts the society. To prevent this from happening, the social antecedents that lead to the need for the *soyayya* novels (and it must be stated that these go beyond the market forces; perhaps the answer lies with Freudian analysis) must first be addressed. In other words, what motivates the writers — money or Freudian expressions? What would be the payload of such literary repression — poverty or uncontrolled Freudian expressions?!?

Finally, novels have been known to influence, though perhaps not very greatly, modes of social behaviour and even, among the very impressionable, conceptions of personal identity. And perhaps it is this that is causing most of the problem for the *soyayya* genre. I argue, however, that this should not be a source of concern. This is because even in European literature, the capacity of

D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) to engender a freer attitude to sex, has never been assessed adequately. Banning or damning books such as *Dufana*, *Matsaying Lover*, as being salacious is an over-kill, especially if *Dare Dubu Da Daya* (with all its vivid pornographic imagery) was not only allowed a free reign in a more conservative Hausa society (late 1940s to 1960s), but was also actually broadcast in the early 1980s over the radio! But perhaps the reason why *Dare Dubu Da Daya* escaped literary "death threats" was that it was written by an Arab, so it must be good!! If it was written by, say Bala Anas Babalinta, a *fatwa* might have been issued on him!

This represents a small portion of the uses of the novel in any society. Others include reportage, propaganda, arbiter of lifestyles and taste which I feel are stages yet to be attained by the *soyayya* genre at this infant stage. The main thrust is therefore that the *soyayya* genre is merely developing along the same patterns that emergent and mature literature has followed in various countries across the centuries. There are always those who will glorify "classic writers" (Shakespeare, Abubakar Imam); just as there are those who will glorify "trash literature" writers (Jilly Cooper, Joan Collins, James Hadley Chase, Harold Robbins). It must be appreciated that whatever the platform, literature serves a specific useful purpose to its audience. And if in the case of the *soyayya* genre it will lead to debates and counter-debates and more production of counterpoints and arguments, then the more the merrier!

Banning some of the books such as had been done by the Kano ANA or setting up a Government committee as done in Kano to scrutinize the manuscripts are both counter-productive measures which will stifle further creativity. Creativity cannot be muzzled by self-appointed guardians of public morality. If the book is distasteful enough, the market will reject it — sending a powerful enough message to the author to revise strategies and focus. For instance, the first printed edition of Hamisu Bature's *Matsayin Lover* generated so much distaste for its portrayal of lesbian relationships that the author was forced to withdraw it from the market and entirely re-write the story, removing the offending bits. Similarly, Ado Ahmad, perhaps one of the leading vanguards of the genre, seemed to have "reformed" and stopped writing in the genre. He has since moved to the *prayer* genre. It is not clear exactly why he recanted from the genre he helped to establish, but social response could have been one of the reasons.

Moral concern, however, is as old as the novel itself. Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote what is considered the first great novel of the Western world, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (Part I, 1605; Part II, 1615) and what is considered by many to be the overriding moral purpose of the form— to teach individual human beings what is possible to specific men and women living in specific societies.

Thus banning merely arouses further curiosity in the direction different from that intended by the moral minority. For instance after the ban on Ashabu Mu'azu Gamji's *Dufana*, the book went underground and suddenly became a "collector's item" with price tag about four times its cover price! (from about _25 to _100).

That does not mean that all is rosy on the Hausa novel front. I do have my own reservations, but they are more of a format of presentation, rather than structuralist revulsion. The current trend now, especially from 1995 would seem to be for novelists to write their books with a film in view; effectively changing the character of their writings. The burgeoning home video and the establishment of Kalywood at Sabon Titi Kano (our Sunset Boulevard!) have given the Hausa novelists the taste for lucre. More are now writing with a film in mind; thus the innate creativity of literary expression is slowly being placed on the back-burner.

The transition from paperback to film via the script is a fairly common practice among world's A-list novelists. The point, however, is that these novelists were established *first* as writers before the lucre of Tinseltown (Hollywood, if you like) made them adapt *some* of their works into more lucrative film scripts. The literary tradition therefore gains cultural supremacy over the screenplay.

As literature, few screenplays stand on their own, nor are they meant to. A good script is not judged by the way it reads but by its effectiveness as a *blueprint* for a film. To be successful, it must be conceived in visual terms and should sustain a pace of action and dialogue in keeping with the requirements of a motion picture. Its dialogue must integrate well with other elements of the sound track, such as music and effects. I argue that very few novels have this capability; apparently a contrary view to the current craze among Hausa novelists to convert every new novel into a screenplay. They are not the only ones, however.

Some of the writers (mainly American) often abandon novel writing altogether in favor of screenwriting. For instance, Michael Crichton made the transition from novelist to screenwriter in movie adaptations of *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), *Coma* (1978), *The Great Train Robbery* (1979), *Looker*, 1981 and *Runaway* (1984). *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Disclosure* (1994). Stripped of their reel connotations, *The Andromeda Strain* and *Coma* were simply superb thrillers. And while Sidney Sheldon was the screenwriter to film hits such as *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950) *Just This Once* (1952), *All In A Night's Work* (1961) (to mention just three out of 12 movies he has scripted), yet only two of novels were adapted for the screen, *Bloodline* (1979) and *The Sands of Time* (1992). *If Tomorrow Comes* was made into a TV mini-series.

Some other writers resist the lucre of the screenplay and would prefer permanent residence on bestseller lists of either the *New York Times*, or *The Times* of London. For instance, of the many novels written by Robert Ludlum, only *The Bourne Identity* (1988) and *Osterman Weekend* (1983) were made into highly successful films. Even Harold Robbins' moderately enjoyable trash, *The Betsy* was dramatized in 1978 while his *The Pirate* was adapted into TV movie also in 1978. His many other novels remain haunting memory of a cozy evening curled up on the sofa.

Of course many also move into the reverse direction. Stephen King, the ultimate horrormeister, had virtually all his novels turned into films (e.g. *Carrie* (1976), *The Shining* (1980), *The Dead Zone* (1983) *Stand By Me* (1986) and *Misery* (1990). Similarly, virtually all of John Grishams' law and courtroom dramas are now film blockbusters (*The Client*, *The Rainmaker, The Firm* etc).

But there is method in movie madness. For instance, it could be argued that Crichton's eminently readable novels tend to be plot-driven rather than character studies and make excellent fodder for screenplays. Surprisingly pessimistic for best-sellers, they are meticulously researched and well constructed arguments supporting the author's various pet peeves — e.g. the meaning of theme parks (*Jurassic Park, Westworld*), the arrogance of scientists (*Sphere*), and the manifold abuses of political and economic power (*Andromeda Strain, Capricorn One*). Most contemporary Hausa novels do not lend themselves to such complexity and depth of vision in their characterizations. It is doubtful therefore if the simple plot lines would lend themselves to visual festivals. If they need to provide visual and aural panorama, then the novels should be left pure and alone; write a separate screenplay for your movie fantasies!

Often the screenplay writers, going overboard with the availability of CGI facilities in most studios mutilate the simplicity of the earlier novel for visual fest. For instance, Robert Heinlein's 1958 novel *Starship Troopers* was transformed into the 1998 movie Starship Trooper (directed by Paul Voerhen) with bugs being kept alive by a river of leprous yellow acid. Hausa home movie producers, operating on a tighter budget of course could not afford such lavish productions at the moment. The end product is a hybrid — neither a full novel, nor a full screenplay, and unsatisfactory movie.

Thus my main reservations about the current trend of novel-to-films among Hausa writers is that that the lucre of money and fame (although more of fame than the money) may push them too much into scriptwriting at the expense of the more fundamental literary task of novel-writing. This tends to cast creativity aside and make authors more concerned with what Executive Producers/Financiers want rather than what the ordinary Hausa reader wants. And if this happens, it would be a sad end to a brilliant experiment.

Luckily, there are many out there who see the task of novel writing first and foremost as a literary activity, rather than a movie gateway to fame and riches. And that is not because they cannot muster enough cash to turn their novels into scripts; they simply enjoy the art of writing (I count Yusuf Adamu and Ado Ahmad among these idealists). I think we should have more of them.

Conclusion

From the initial arguments presented earlier, it is thus clear that neither law (Kano State Government Censorship Committees) nor public morality (Kano ANA) nor the public's neglect nor the critic's scorn (Danjuma Katsina, for example) 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 it 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. In any event, *the soyayya genre has captured the minds of twentysomethings and adolescents of Kano circa the decade of 1990s*. It has freed this generation of the shackles of insipid non-contextual literary classicism. Children of the silicon milk feed, they embrace the technology that provided them with the freedom to explore their innermost universes.

It is significant that the amateur who dreams of literary success almost invariably chooses the novel, not the poem, essay, or autobiography. Fiction requires no special training and can be readable, even absorbing, when it breaks the most elementary rules of style — so to answer Ahmed Mansur, it does welcome "all sorts". It tolerates a literary incompetence unthinkable in the poem. If all professional novelists withdrew, the form would not languish: amateurs would fill the market with first and only novels, all of which would find readership — as clearly demonstrated by the *soyayya* genre.

And in any event, the situation is not all bad. I argue that the *prayer* genre of books — religious pamphlets which condense or draw attention of specific topics of Islam to the general public — arose as a counter-culture to the *soyayya* genre. This is an excellent development because it not only provides readers with wider, richer choices, but also educate the society. The *prayer* genre would not have developed the extent it did if the *soyayya* genre had not been there for it to oppose. Such counter-movements have always served as a basis for growth and development. For it to be sustained the original subject must not be killed by misplaced parochial moral minority.

So instead of gripes and moans, let us reactions and counter-reactions. The prayer genre is one reaction. Let some of the more concerned antagonists and protagonists among our fiction writers set up an anti-novel movement — that produces works of art that radically differ from the norm. Instead of some empty rendering of an empty biography of an equally empty individual who in the final analysis has done nothing to his society, let us see historical fiction; set in 17th century Kano or similar. Let us create a plot around the caravansaries that dotted the trans-Saharan trade landscapes in the 18th century. Give us a family saga centered mercantile capitalism in 20th century Kano.

Further, let us see criticisms on elements of writing such as the plausibility of the *plot*, the realism of the *characters*, the blending of the *scene* with the plot, the power of the *narrative* style, and the *scope* of the story (and let us not quibble over whether the printed forms of *soyayya* genre represent a *novel* or a *novella*, please).

As the Stoic Greek philosopher Epictetus (55-135 A.D.) said, "…If you would be a reader, read; if a writer, write…" Curiously enough, as far as is known, Epictetus *wrote nothing*. His teachings were transmitted by Arrian, his pupil! He must have been a good reader, then!