

## **Biographies of Some Northern Nigerian Female Novelists in the English Language and their Contributions to the Development of Modern African Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Female writers from various societies across the world often deploy the medium of literature, nay the novel genre, to depict the different challenges of socio-cultural subjugations such as arrange forced marriage, early marriage, polygamy, divorce, hawking and denial of education, marital strife, poverty, prostitution and patriarchal/societal non recognition of women because of their sex. This paper gives abridge biographies of twelve female writers in English from northern Nigeria, these include: Zaynab Alkali (who is considered the first woman to write a full length work in English language from the region), Hauwa Ali, Razinat T. Mohammed, Bilqisu Abubakar, Nana Aishatu Ahmad, Maimuna M. Bala, Zahra Tabi'u, Azizah Idris Muhammad, Safiya Isma'ila Yero, Asabe Kabir Usman, Hadiza Isma El-Rufai and A'aisha Abdulkareem. The findings from this study reveal that these writers have contributed and have continued to contribute to the development of modern African Literature. Apart from winning several awards, their creative works have continued to receive critical attention from researchers in universities within and outside Nigeria. These writing have thus given them avenues to discuss different socio-cultural issues that have been their bane.

### **Introduction**

Women writings in English (especially the novel genre) from Northern Nigeria have in recent years witnessed remarkable growth and recognition from critics. In other words, attention has been directed to gender discourse in Northern Nigeria with particular focus on understanding the place of women within a masculinised Northern Nigerian culture. According to Olopade (2019:288), female writers from this region have used the novel genre to address cultural issues that pose challenges to their well-being and society at large. As a rider to this argument, Umar (2019:98) posits that:

Northern Nigerian female writers through their fictional works raise realistic issues of choice, conflict, enslavement and

injustice that beclouds the life of not just the Hausa female but Nigerian women in general as they attempt to fit into cross-cultural relationship in a modern world, raising the questions of ability, impediments and capability.

It is worthy of note that these women writers also write in other African languages aside the English language. These include; Hausa, Fulfulde, Nupe, Arabic among many others. In fact, there is an interesting history of women writers in Arabic and Fulfulde since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with Nana Asmau bin Fodio at the forefront.

Generally, the emergence of the novel genre in English in Northern Nigeria as Joseph (2006:239) posits “expanded the frontiers of the Nigerian Novel because the development introduces issues, themes and experiences which highlight the communality of Nigeria’s predicaments.” Thus, female writers in English from this region have contributed immensely to gender discourse in the Nigerian-cum-African Literature. In their writings, they depict the significant roles women play in the society and how these roles have helped in development of the society. With their writings, they enhance women’s development, create gender awareness and the zeal for education. Also, it is important to point out that most female writers venture into the literary world with unflinching determination and intention to correct and safeguard the already tarnished image of women by male writers. As Giwa (2014:134) writes:

The men were the voices from which the cries of the women could be heard. Consequently no woman’s cry was heard, as it were. For long however the men remained the voices as writers in real life and then as characters they create in their fiction. When women writers emerged, a shift occurred in the perception of events and in the portrayal and representation of same. Women’s voices are now heard. In fiction, they take centre stage.

Giwa’s elucidation in the reference above is an indication that Kigo’s (2008:121) optimism for women from Northern Nigeria to come out of their tiny shell and showcase their talent has become a reality thus “Voices of women from the north are beginning to emerge with likes of Professor Zaynab Alkali, and many more whose works we pray will see the light of the day.” The number of female writers in the English language from Northern Nigeria has increased over time. It is against this background that this paper attempts biographies of sixteen female writers,

may novelists in English from northern Nigeria in order to show their immense contributions to the development of modern African Literature.

It is important, in this regard, to appreciate the efforts of the Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano for initiating and hosting conferences in literature in Northern Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s where literary works of both male and female writers from the region were considered. These conferences contributed in identifying the writers and their literary contributions.

### **Zaynab Alkali**

Zaynab Alkali was born 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1950 in Garkida in the old Gongola State and present Adamawa State (though a native of Borno State). Her father- a teacher worked with missionaries as a translator. His sudden death left eleven year old Zaynab Alkali shattered; this was because, she was very close to her father. According to Danzomo (2018:28) “As her model and mentor (her father), she constantly made reference to him and drew great inspiration from his lived life: a disciplinarian father.” With the support of her mother and her elder sisters, Zaynab Alkali was able to acquire formal education. She attended Queen Elizabeth Secondary School, Ilorin- Kwara State between 1963 and 1968. The following year she proceeded to Ado Bayero College (ABC), Kano campus of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. She graduated with a B.A. (Hons) degree in 1973. She obtained her second degree in 1976. Alkali happily got married to an erudite academic, Professor Nura Mohammed Alkali and blessed with five children.

Alkali’s insatiable quest for knowledge ushered her back again to her alma mater (Bayero University Kano) for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in African Literature in 1989. She completed the programme successfully in 1995. She is an internationally acclaimed writer who has travelled widely. Ahmad (2003:123) writes that “Zaynab Alkali has conducted reading tours of *The Stillborn* and her other literary works in Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Canada, United State of America at various times since 1985.” Her global recognition is not unconnected to her creative works. Her work as a writer began in 1978. They are works that explore and portray the complex experiences of women in a patriarchal male-controlled society, and their struggle to overcome their problems. She gives insights to the plight of African women in a

phallogocentric male dominated society and how education is used as a ‘weapon’ for liberation through the display of the lives of her characters within a larger cultural and social force in Nigeria, specifically northern region.

Professor Alkali is often referred to as the first female writer in English to emerge from the Northern Nigerian region as Ibileye (2006:254) put it that:

Zaynab Alkali is considered to belong in the league of pioneers of the literature in the region (Northern Nigeria) and the focus of her writing is therefore inevitably a reflection of the socio-cultural realities of that society, first and foremost, and the Nigerian society at large.

Alkali has published five novels and a collection of short story titled *The Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997). The novels are:

- (1) *The Stillborn* (1984)
- (2) *The Virtuous Woman* (1987)
- (3) *The Descendants* (2005)
- (4) *The Initiates* (2007)
- (5) *Invisible Borders* (2016)

According to Adinuba (1987:13) Alkali’s novels “examine the problems and dilemma of young girls in rural areas who are determined to live fulfilled life in spite of certain odds surrounding them.” Also, Joseph (2006:245) asserts that “In Alkali, the female voice is firmly grounded. From the emergence of *The Stillborn* (1984), Alkali’s concern has been a gender conscious literary approach to the representation of women and the exigencies of her experience within a patriarchal society. She creates female characters that possess the power to refine their roles in society.” As a feminist writer, Alkali shares the view that Nigerian women have not been adequately represented in Nigerian literature written by male writers as they are often ascribed minor character roles that make them vitally ignored. In her earlier novels, she examines and appraises the socio-economic and cultural conditions of women in Northern Nigeria in relation to their male counterparts. In doing so, she positions herself in and around the institution of

marriage. In *The Stillborn* (1984), for instance, she portrays female characters that suffer at the hands of their husbands yet appear more capable, independent and successful at the end. In other words, Alkali's novel *The Stillborn* since its publication in 1984 has attracted considerable critical attention because of the notion that the text is a moving and inspiring text which places the author among the selected group of writers who have focused and deepened readers' understanding of the situation of women in patriarchal African society of the northern Nigerian region. Nguty (2008:58) argues that:

Alkali's portrayal of women condemns the unfair and oppressive treatment of the African women trapped in the claws of traditional beliefs but shows confidence in the ability of women to become hardwork. In *Stillborn*, Alkali uses Li, the principle character as a symbol of courage and determination, the two virtues that help her to become "the man of the house."

Significantly, it should be made clear that in *The Initiates* and *Invisible Borders*, Alkali's characterization and thematic concerns have undergone a kind of stylo-literary transformation. She focuses on contemporary issues from a different perspective without dwelling much on feminist issues or the usual theme of women emancipation. Instead, she depicts issues that affect the society at large. The two novels indicate the recent shift in Alkali's writings particularly in terms of context and concern. In the words of Giwa (2016:312):

Alkali's concern with the girl education, early marriage and polygamy is by now tested and rested, even if temporarily, as the society has since moved forward... Having noted the transformation of the society in favour of female education, the author now tilts her attention to something else. Not that these themes are absent, but what is foregrounded are other issues relevant to the present day society; issues that affect both men and women alike- like social responsibility and political consciousness.

Thus, Alkali's portrayal female and male characters in her recent novels shows a paradigm shift in her characterization. She tries to give both sexes the opportunity to achieve their aims in life.

**Hauwa Ali**

Like Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali also started writing in 1980s but is not as prolific as Alkali. Not much is known about her writings. Her main critics are Ohaeto (1996), Kassam (1997) and Edwin (2016). She was born in Gusau, Zamfara State in northern Nigeria. She taught at the University of Maiduguri and her novels – *Destiny* (1988) and *Victory* (1989) were published in Enugu by Delta Publishers. Her best known novel, *Destiny*, won the Delta Prize for fiction. Hauwa died in 1995 of breast cancer.

Hauwa Ali has been described as one of the women writers in 1980s northern Nigeria “giving voice to (their) creative talents “within” walls of religion and culture”. Kassam (1997) in her article, “Behind the Veil in Northern Nigeria: The writing of Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali” compared the thematic concerns of the two northern Nigerian female novelists and states some of the challenges they experienced as writers. She argues that:

Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali come from north-eastern Nigeria. They are highly educated women and both of them are university lecturers, belonging to the small class of writer in northern Nigeria who write in English as a result of their exposure to western education and culture... Although Alkali published her first novel in 1984, while Ali started writing only in the late 1980s, both writers can be placed together at the forefront of female writing from northern Nigeria and they share several novelistic preoccupations, especially a concern for education and the status of women in society. Female education is promoted in both women’s novels as a necessary tool for social change and modernization (p.123).

Specifically, Ali’s *Destiny* (1988) is written from the point of view of a young unmarried woman and presents education as “the gateway to a successful, stimulating future.” The novel *Destiny* tells the story of sixteen-year-old Farida, who is forced by her guardian, uncle Abba, to marry a rich middle-aged man, Wali el-Yakub against her fervent desire for a higher education. According to Edwin (2016:166):

Wali and Farida share nothing in common and there is a considerable age gap between the two. Their marriage makes Farida extremely unhappy, though she soon gives birth to Faisal, her first child, and adjusts to marital life without, however, losing hope of an opportunity to study further.

Thus, it should be pointed out that before the marriage to Wali, Farida is shown protesting against the choice of a husband made by her guardian and her rebellion almost makes her commit suicide. At the end, she divorced him and married Farouk, the person she dearly loves. According to Kassam (1997:122) “Farida is given to Wali because of his wealth subverting love as a criterion for marriage. Her guardians forced her into the marriage because according to them, they want to be secure financially in their old age.” Equally, Ali’s second novel, *Victory* (1989), continues some of these themes and also introduces questions about inter-cultural marriage.

### **Razinat T. Mohammed**

An indigene of Borno State, Professor Razinat Talatu Mohammed is a short story writer, novelist, essayist and poet. She teaches Women Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Maiduguri before she has transferred her service to University of Abuja, where she is now the Head of English department. Her Ph.D. thesis, *Intra-Gender Oppression in Selected Works of Nawal El-Saadawi and Buchi Emecheta* (2004) published by Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany in 2012 has greatly influenced her as a critic and writer. This has been testified in a 2010 interview where she affirms that, “Women as their own problem is crucial to my life as a critic.” Also, in a paper titled “Re-Thinking the Woman in Northern Nigerian Literature” Razinat co-authored with Abubakar Usman in 2017:209, opine that, “The plight of the woman in the North should be blamed not only on the overbearing attitude of men but also on the thoughtlessness and wickedness of women towards their fellow women.”

Born in Maiduguri on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, Razinat Mohammed attended Gwange 1 Primary School in Maiduguri from 1972 to 1978 and Federal Government College Ido-Ani in Ondo State from 1978 to 1982. She had her first degree at the University of Maiduguri in 1987 and her second degree at the same University in 1997. She obtained her Ph.D. in 2004 from the University of Maiduguri. She rose to become a Professor of Feminist Literary Criticism and Creative Writing in 2018. As a writer, Razinat made her debut in 2006 when her first book, a collection of short stories; *A Love Woman’s and Other Stories* won the maiden ANA/Lantern Prize. She wrote two novels: *Habiba* (2013) and *Travails of a First Wife* (2015). The novel *Habiba* was a finalist for the ANA Prize for prose 2014. Her other works include another

collection of short stories titled, *My Daughter, My Blood* (2021) and her first collection of poems, *Another Lie* (2021). Some of her works have appeared in national and international anthologies like *Camouflage: The Best of Contemporary Writings from Nigeria*; *The Gong Books and For Women Collective: A Tribute of Nina Simone* (USA); *Fire Flies: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*; *Pyramids: An Anthology of Poems from Northern Nigeria*, *Voices that Sing Behind the Veil -Anthology of Short Stories from Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by Ivor Agyeman-Duah, among others. She is also the Author of “Female Representation in Nigerian Literature” <https://www.africanwriter.com>, among others. Razinat was a Resident writer in El-Gouna, Egypt from May/July, 2011. In addition, she also co-edited an anthology titled; *The Markas: An Anthology of Writings and Feelings on Boko Haram* which is about the Boko Haram crisis in Maiduguri together with Tanure Ojaide and Abubakar Othman.

Significantly, Razinat writes most of her works about the suffering and problems that women experience in her society. For instance, in *Habiba*, she depicts a society where women are confronted with various problems particularly in their marital homes. According to Saje (2019:12) “Razinat T. Mohammed in her novel *Habiba* (2013) addresses the plight of women in African societies. The novelist has seriously lamented the sad situation of women who are inadequately empowered, in general, and the girl-child.” Some of the published articles on Razinat works include: Dooga’s “Linguistic Choices and Gender Roles in New Nigerian Literature: An Examination of Alpha Emeka’s *The Carnival* and Razinat Mohammed’s *A Love Like a Woman’s and Other Stories*” (2009), Irany’s “Socio-cultural and Generational Conflicts in Razinat Mohammed’s *Habiba* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*” (2016) and Saje’s “Literature, Gender Role and National Integration: The Plight of the Girl-Child in National Development in Razinat T. Mohammed’s *Habiba*” (2019). There is also an unpublished B.A Project titled “Interrogating the Northern Nigerian Society: A Case Study of Razinat T. Mohammed’s *Habiba*” (2015), Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

**Bilqisu Abubakar**

Bilkisu Abubakar, an indigene of Kaduna State, was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1976. She attended Labani International Primary School, Kaduna from 1985-1990 and proceeded her secondary education in the same school from 1990-1996. Thereafter, she went to Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto where she obtained B.A English Language from 1999 to 2003. She also attended Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, affiliated to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where she obtained Post Graduate Diploma in Education from 2005-2006. She taught in different schools in Sokoto and Kaduna before she applied to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 2009 where she got M. A. English (Literature) in 2014. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. with special interest in literature at Kaduna State University (KASU). Bilkisu is an active member of Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), English Studies Association of Nigeria (ESAN), Linguistics Association of Nigeria (LAN) and Literary Scholars Association (LSA), among others. Her interest in the discourse of religion, gender and polygamy in the predominantly Hausa Muslim society of the Northern Nigerian region is greatly applauded by critics since the publication of her first novel, *To Live Again* in 2007 and her second novel, *The Woman in Me* in 2010. In her interview with Unoma Ngueme Azuah, a United States of Americans based literary scholar and writer in 2010, Bilkisu bitterly but joyfully expresses that, “I started writing about fifteen years ago as a housewife. I came into writing by chance. It was not necessarily because I had always loved writing, but because I was lonely and unhappy. It mostly started because I resorted to recording my pains and passions in my diary.” Acknowledging the author’s stance on her writing, Musa (2021:63) buttresses that, “The characters in Bilkisu Abubakar’s novels are typical of those identified by Watt (1957) in his theorization on the characters of a good novel: as individualized, with family background, history, class, cultural affiliations and with invariable socio-cultural experiences; from everyday life with naturalistic or plausible circumstances.” This explains that, what Bilkisu writes about cannot be divorced from her experiences in life, so to say.

### **Fatima Ba’aram Alkali**

Fatima Ba’aram Alkali is the eldest daughter of Professor Zaynab Alkali. She was born on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1974 at Maiduguri, Borno State. She attended University of Maiduguri Primary School from 1979-1984 and Federal Government Girls College, Yola from 1985-1990. She obtained

degree in Law in 1999 from University of Maiduguri. Thereafter, she proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where she obtained Masters in Law from 2003-2006 and Ph.D. in Law from 2007-2015 in the same university. Presently, she is an Associate Professor and the Dean, Faculty of Law, Nile University, Abuja.

As a writer, Fatima is a poet and novelist. She has twenty-four poems in *Secrets of Silence (Poetic Thought)*, an anthology she co-authored with Alkali's sisters (Habiba and Amina Alkali). Her novel *Personal Angle* was published in 2008 by Ababa Press, Ibadan. It won the 2009 Abuja Writers' Forum (AWF), Ibrahim Tahir Prize for prose. Dahiru (2022:163) opines that:

Although the novel (*Personal Angle*) touches on issues related to politics and business, the central message of the novel is the depiction of the ideal woman, who has dignity, etiquette, and integrity that both religion and culture in the northeast want to see. The novel focuses on the aim of marriage, which should be a union for peace and happiness, not a place to fight for rights.

Also, Roseline and Lilian presented a paper titled "Achieving Self-esteem through Education and Financial Freedom: A Reading of Fatima Ba'aram Alkali's *Personal Angle*" in the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference organized by the Department of English and Drama in collaboration with Centre for Gender Studies, Kaduna State University on the theme: Trends in Female Writing and Gender Discourse from Northern Nigeria held from 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2021.

### **Maryam Ali Ali**

Maryam Ali was born in Jos to the family of Alhaji Muhammad Tukur, the Sarkin Fulani of Gangare Jos. She graduated from the University of Jos in 2001 majoring in Islamic Studies. She obtained M.A. Islamic Studies from Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto in 2010. Her ardent desire to be educated once more entices her to proceed to Bayero University, Kano where she obtained Ph.D. in Islamic Studies in 2018. The title of her doctoral thesis is, "The Position of Hijab in International Politics". From 2013 to 2015, Maryam served as the National Treasurer of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Presently, she is a lecturer at Sa'adatu Rimi University of Education Kumbotso, Kano (she has been there since 2008 to date).

As a Northern Nigerian female writer, Maryam is one of the women making waves in the sphere of creative writing in Kano. She writes in Hausa and English. The titles of her novels in English are “Chief Dudu and the Golden Seat” published in 2001 by Eureka Publishers, a division of Maarifa Ventures, Jos, Plateau State and “The Faces of Naira” published in 2006 by NNI Publishers Limited, Ilorin, Kwara State. Maryam has written two other novels in Hausa: *Sai Gani Na Biyu* and *Fuskokin Naira*. Maryam is also a prominent poet. She published poems in reputable anthologies and local newspapers. *Lost to the Alpenglow* (2015) is her poetry collection that soothes the nerves and connects with the reader.

### **Nana Aishatu Ahmad**

Nana Aishatu Ahmad is an indigene of Gombe State. She graduated from University of Maiduguri with a degree in English Literature and obtained M. Ed (English) from University of Jos. She has taught at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi and Federal College of Education, Gombe. She was the Commissioner of Education in Gombe from 2011-2015. Until then, she was the Dean of Faculty of Languages at the FCT College of Education, Zuba, Abuja. Though she is considered as a new author, she has contributed in both prose and poetry. She wrote two anthologies of poems titled *Vision of the Jewel* and *Voice from the Kitchen*. *The Twist* is her only novel to date. She equally contributed to anthologies like Harry Garuba (Ed.) *Voice the Fringe: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry* (13-14) and Jerry Agada (Ed.) *Five Hundred Nigerian Poets* vol.1, 2008.

Published (2007) by Informart Publishers Limited, Kaduna, *The Twist* depicts the plight of a woman in a male-controlled northern Nigerian society who grapples with her marriage and the challenges of a modern career. Amina, the heroine protagonist, is portrayed with the zeal to work hard. In other words, the issue of education is strongly emphasized in the novel as Amina’s father realizes the importance of education unlike fathers who “gladly gave out their daughters in marriage to some wealthy men and then confided about the riches of their daughters marriage would bring them” (p.8). According to Sheme (2007) “The novel tells the story of Amina Bashir, a beautiful woman caught between devotion to the sacred vows of love and marriage and the violent rejection of some insidious sins that wreck marital knots.” Besides the theme of education, there are other sub-themes in the novel such as respect for elders, the role of

international non-governmental organizations in development projects in Africa and girl-child education, among others.

### **Maimuna M. Bala**

Born on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1954 in Zuru, Kebbi State, Hajiya Maimuna Muhammad Bala is a writer, an activist, educationist and public servant. She was a three-time Commissioner – Education, Women Affairs and Social Development and Water Resources and Rural Development at different times in Kebbi State. She read B.Ed. English at Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto in 1981. She was the principal of Government Girls Secondary School, Rabah, Government Girl's College, Sokoto and Women Arabic Teachers' College, Gusau. She also served as Director in different boards and parastatals.

As a writer, Maimuna writes in both Hausa and English languages. Some of her novels in Hausa are *Dikko Dan Macede*, *Kada Mai Rikida*, *Kowa Na Son Nagari* and *Wasiyyar Sarkin Gambo da kuma 'Ya'yansa*. The novels she wrote in English include:

- (1) *A Joy in the Cradle* (2008)
- (2) *Dami: The Rural Boy* (2008)
- (3) *He Who Laughs Last* (2009)

Interestingly, some of her books have been recommended by the National Education Resource and Development Commission (NERDC).

### **Zahra Tabi'u**

Zahra is an indigene of Gumel, Jigawa State but lives in Kano. Born on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1992, she attended Summit Primary School and Al-Nur Islamiyya School, Kano for her nursery and primary education after which she proceeded to Gateway International School for her secondary education and graduated in 2009. She holds a degree in BSc in Microbiology in 2015 from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and did her National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 2016 in Kano. As a bilingual writer, Zahra writes in English and Hausa, her native language. She wrote her first novel in English – *Desire and Destiny* in 2007 while she was in her fourth year in

secondary school and it was published by H2 Concept Nigeria Limited in 2010. *Mai Tafiya* and *Farin Wata Sha Kallo*, the novels she wrote in Hausa were published in 2015 and 2017 respectively. In her interview in 2019 with Zahraddeen Kalla, the former President of the Association of Nigerian Authors, Kano branch, Zahra expresses that she was influenced by a number of writers. She says:

I adore the work of Buchi Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, which I read in my third year in secondary school. Zaynab Alkali is my role model and Abubakar Gimba with his *Witnesses to Tears*, which I read at a young age when I couldn't fully comprehend the complex grammar. And also Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Adichie and above all Abubakar Imam.

Zahra also write short stories. Her short story titled *Sometimes in September* appeared in *Telling Our Stories: An Anthology of New Nigerian Short Stories* (2015) edited by Aliyu Kamal, Rabi Abdulsalam Ibrahim and Zaharadden Ibrahim Kalla. She also has a collection of short stories, *The Mask* (2018). She is married and blessed with two boys.

### **Azizah Idris Muhammad**

Bauchi-born author but now resides in Gombe with her husband and three young children, Azizah Idris Muhammad is a bilingual writer who published twenty novels in Hausa and two novels in English. She started A.T.B.U Staff Primary School and finished at Gombe Children School, Gombe. She proceeded to F. G. G. C Bajoga, Gombe. Thereafter, she attended Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi, where she obtained M.Sc. degree in Computer Science. She is currently studying Islamic Psychology at the Islamic Online University. *Halin Zuciya* (2005), *Sabuwar Rayuwa* (2007), *Halin Ko in Kula* (2007), *Alamarin Zuci* (2009) and *Halin Girma* (2010) are some of the novels she published in Hausa language. Her published novels in English are *Surgeon's Wife* (2012) and *A Sackful of Wishes* (2018). Though her first novel, *Surgeon's Wife* is scarcely known within the critical fraternity. Her second novel, *A Sackful of Wishes* is more applauded by critics. Some of the critical works on it captured titles such as "Sexism and Construction of Boundaries through Language: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Azizah Idris' *A Sackful of Wishes*" (2019) by Fatima Inuwa and "Female Resilience in Azizah Idris' *A Sackful of Wishes*" (2020) by Khadija S. Abdu. Azizah is currently the Secretary Gombe

State Writers' Association and is a member of Mace Mutum Writers' Association. In addition to that, she runs a culinary school in Gombe.

### **Safiya Ismaila Yero**

Safiya is another resonant contemporary female voice in English from the populous northern Nigeria. Her parents are from Jimeta, Yola North Local Government Area of Adamawa State but she was born and grew up in Abuja. She attended L.EA. Primary School Area One Garki, Abuja and GSS Garki Abuja. She had her first degree in English and her second degree in Literature-in-English from the University of Federal Capital territory (Abuja) where she presently works as a Registry staff and part time lecturer. Since she joined the University of Abuja, Safiya has been secretary to committees, including council committees. Also, she obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from the Nigerian Teachers' Institute (NIT). Before joining the University of Abuja, she taught Literature-in-English and English Language at Fou'ad Lababide Secondary School, Wuse Zone 3 for a couple of years. Her Ph.D. Thesis titled "Emergent Trends in Contemporary Northern Nigerian Fiction" is a work in progress. She is married and blessed with two children.

Safiya is also a Book Assessor at the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) where she has been a resource person since 2016. Thus, based on her immense contribution to literature, she has been invited as special guest and panellist at several literary gatherings like Kaduna Books and Arts Festival (KaBAFest), Katsina Book and Arts Festival (KtFest) and Nasara Creative Team. She equally has several scholarly articles. as a novelist, her debut novel, *When there is Life* was published in 2013 by ALMAZ Books, Abuja and her second novel, *Naja* in 2019 by Malthouse Press Limited, Lagos. According to Umar and Yunusa (2020), *When there is Life* is a novel which brings to the fore the Northern woman's attempt to survive and live with the status of a stigmatized health condition like the HIV virus. The novel also creates awareness on how to live with the virus. On its part, *Naja*, as Toni Kan at the blurb of the novel writes:

Safiya Ismaila Yero's *Naja* is a coming of age novel chronicling what is to be young female and powerless in patriarchal northern Nigeria.

Naja is smart, strong willed and persistently hankering after some more than being an old man's wife at age sixteen. A chance meeting with an older more educated woman opens up the world to Naja in very unexpected ways. This novel is an important one with its focus on contemporary northern Nigeria and its echoes of Zaynab Alkali and Mariama Ba.

She is also a short story writer, poet, book reviewer and editor. Two of her short stories – *Home is no Place to Stay* and *Dashed Hopes* as well as her poem *My Northeast Dream* appeared in the recently published Boko Haram Anthology, *The Markas* (Malthouse Press, 2019). She co-edited *Gender, Folklore and Cultural Dialectics in African Literature: A Festschrift for Asabe Kabir Usman* (2019) together with Gbenge Ibileye, Remi Akujobi, Halima Amali and Aisha M. Umar.

### **Asabe Kabir Usman**

Asabe Kabir Usman, an indigene of Kagara, in Rafi Local Government Area of Niger State, was born on 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1966 in Jos, Plateau State to the family of Mallam Abdulkarim Lafene and Hajiya Aisha Lafene. She spent most of her early life in Sokoto, Lagos, Kaduna, Minna and Abuja with her foster father Alhaji A. S. Mohammed and paternal aunty Gokaka. She attended Capital School, Sokoto, now referred to as Yakubu Muazu Primary School from 1973-1975 and later Zurumai Primary School Minna from 1976-1978. She proceeded to Federal Government Girls College, Oyo, between 1973 and 1983. Asabe attended the University of Sokoto, now famously known as Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto from 1983-1988, for a B. A. degree English. She got married to Alhaji Kabir Usman immediately after her graduation and is blessed with children and grandchildren. She also got her M. A. Literature in English from the same university in 1999 and a PhD Literature in English in 2003. She equally obtained a professional Diploma in Education in 2006 at Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, affiliated to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. She taught in the same college for some years. She was employed in 1988 as Lecturer II in Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto where she rose to become a Professor of Oral and African Literature in 2010.

Prof. Kabir is an active member of African Literature Association (ALA); Nigerian Academy of Letters (NAL); Nigerian Oral Literature Association (NOLA); Linguistics Association of Nigeria (LAN) and Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). She was also the immediate past National

President of the Literary Society of Nigeria (LSN), a position she held from 2014-2016; she was the National Vice President English Scholars Association of Nigeria from 2013-2017; she has also been the National Vice President II of the Nigerian Folklore Society (NFS) since 2014. She is a member of the Forum for African Women Educationalist (FAME) an NGO that champions the cause of the girl-child education in Africa. Her interest in gender studies especially the study of the place of women in Oral and African Literature in relation to their socio-cultural background and history makes her an ardent researcher in the field and this has earned her several publications in reputable national and international journals. She has published over sixty academic papers to her credit. Commenting on Asabe Kabir's concern for women, particularly in the northern Nigerian region, Muhammad (2019:xii) expresses that, "She is passionate about the plight of women and women empowerment and focuses her intellectual prowess in the study of the place of women in Literature in relation to their Socio-Cultural background and history."

As a relatively recent fictional writer, Mrs Kabir has several manuscripts in progress. Her first novel, *Destinies of Life* (and the only one to date) has been read, critiqued and translated into Arabic and French. According to Muhammad (2019:xiii) "It is about being translated into Hausa and Nupe languages." As far as available data reveal, there have been a number of articles on Asabe's *Destinies of Life* from both linguistic and literary angles. Some of the titles of such articles include: Muhammad's "From Stereotype to Individuality: Self Identity in Asabe Kabir's *Destinies of Life*" (2012), Agofure's "Gender and the Arts: A Case of Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and Phebe Jatau's *The Hound*" (2017), Ladele and Adetumbi's "Paradoxes of Religion in Prose Fiction of Northern Nigerian Woman: A Study of Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound*" (2019), Olapade's "The New Woman in Northern Nigerian, in the eye of the Writer: A Case Study of Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life*" (2019), Obakore's "Literature and Radicalisation: Exploring the Movement from Liberalism to Existential Border Situation in Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life*" (2019), Amali and Orji-Mba's "Tragedy of Life: A Study in Cultural and Religious Philosophy" (2019), Kigo's "Comparative Analysis of Asabe Kabir's *Destinies of Life* and Habiba Abubakar's *Mugun Butulci*" (2019), Gwandu and Ibrahim's "Style in Asabe Kabir's *Destinies of Life*: A

Glimpse into the use of Adjectives” (2019) and Yakasai’s “kaddara Ta Riga Fata: Nazari Da Sharhi A Kan Littafin *Destinies of Life Na Farfesa Asabe Kabir Usman*”, among others.

### **Habiba Nur Alkali**

Habiba Nur Alkali, also the daughter of Zaynab Alkali, is another budding and aspiring female novelist from the populous Northern Nigeria whose novel with an enticing title “The Phantom Army” rises the critics’ insatiable analytical appetite. She was born on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1978 in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Borno State. She attended University of Maiduguri Staff School in 1988 and proceeded to FGC Jos, Plateau State, where she graduated in 1995. She obtained a Bachelor of Science in Business Administrative in 2002 from University of Maiduguri. Habiba is married and now lives in Abuja with her husband.

As a writer, Habiba’s *The Phantom Army* is published in 2017 and *A New Theatre of War*, its sequel, is expected to be published in 2024. Mrs. Alkali also writes captivating poems. In *Secrets of Silence (Poetic Thoughts)*, an anthology she co-authored with her sisters (Fatima and Amina) in 2003, she has twenty-five poems to her credit. The titles of her poems such as “The Beggar”, “My Painful Night of Silence”, “Bondage”, “By the Riverside”, “Liberation”, “A Bleak Existence”, “Through the Eyes of a Child” and “Death”, among others, qualify her as a poet with proven agility. And in most of her poems, she largely dwells on the predicament and miserable life of the vulnerable and the downtrodden people in her society. Differently put, Habiba is a writer who joins the trend of exposing social ills for consideration. Her poem “The Beggar”, for instance, treats the theme of tragedy, savagery and cruelty of life.

Besides having interest in creative writing, Mrs. Alkali is officially a seasoned Administrative Officer with over sixteen (16) years working experience in the field of Office Administrative, Human Resource Management and Development, Innovative Forecasting and Strategic Structuring in the healthcare industry, Qualitative Research in the fields of Project Management, Analysis and Implementation, Humanitarian Aid Projects and Interventions and Application of Information and Communication Technology. In addition to this, Mrs. Alkali is a co-initiator non-profit organisation (NADI) that caters for the internally displaced persons from the

Northeast crisis of the BH insurgency. The foundation provides counselling, skill acquisition and resources to enable the reintegration and resettlement of IDPs back to their respective residences.

### **Hadiza Isma El-Rufai**

Wife to the current Governor of Kaduna State, Malam Nasiru El-Rufai, Hadiza Isma El-Rufai is one of the contemporary female writers in English from the populous Northern Nigerian region who made the entrance into the world of Nigerian fictional-prose with the publication of *An Abundance of Scorpions* in 2017, a novel that has received a big round of applause from critics and catches their eagle eye as well. The novel came into being as an inspiration of the volunteer work the author did at an orphanage in Abuja and her ardent desire to write about an orphan. In one of her interviews, she expresses that, “Creative writing is something I have always wanted to do. I enjoy practicing architecture but I think this is the right time for me to make a change.” *An Abundance of Scorpions* was presented at the 2017 edition of the Ake Arts and Book Festival. Helon Habila at the blurb of the novel describes it as “Both a heartbreaking tale of loss and an uplifting story of a woman’s strength and determination...A pleasure to read.” Significantly, Hadiza is a linguist who speaks English and French language fluently apart from Hausa, her native language.

Born in Kano on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1960, Hadiza El-Rufai attended her primary and secondary school in Kano. She then obtained a BSc and MSc in Architecture in (1983) and (1992) respectively from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. She also has a Masters in Creative Writing (2012) from Bath Spa University, United Kingdom. Thereafter, she worked as a lecturer at the Department of Architecture, Kaduna Polytechnic. She married Mallam Nasiru El-Rufai in 1985 whom she met in 1976 at the School of Basic Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pointedly, Hadiza, with the support of her husband set up Yasmin Foundation (YELF) in 2013 to honour her daughter, who died of an epileptic seizure in London in November, 2011. It is a non-profit literary organization purposely established to nurture creativity in children particularly the girl-child and vulnerable women to enable them enhance their literacy. Likewise, as the First Lady of Kaduna State, Hadiza has also used her office for philanthropic purposes to assist the less privilege, donating drugs to sickle cell patients in Kaduna.

**Laylah Ali Othman**

Laylah Ali Othman, the author of *Something Deep* (2018) and *Mask* (2021), was born on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1986 in Yobe State. She grew up in Kaduna, where she attended nursery and primary school but she went back to Yobe and attended Junior High School and Senior in Damaturu. She obtained B.A English from University of Maiduguri. Thereafter, she obtained a second degree from ESCAE University in Benin Republic. Her aspiration for self-reliance led her to earn a Diploma in Interior Decoration from Lotus Educational Institute, Dubai and another Diploma in Space Management from Maren School of Interior Decor and Design. Apart from being a writer, Laylah is also a business woman, who sells home furnishings such as chairs and beds in addition to having a chain of restaurants in the FCT Abuja.

**A'aisha Abdulkareem**

A'aisha Abdulkareem (the author of *Yar'fari*) officially known as Aisha Umar Muhammad is an indigene of Sokoto. She did her first degree in English at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto and her second degree in Literature-in-English from the same university. Presently, A'aisha is a lecturer with the Department of European languages, Federal University Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State. She specializes in Gender Literature with focus on Northern Nigerian Women Fiction. She teaches African Literature, Eco-critical Literature as well as Creative Writing at the University named above.

As a researcher and creative writer, A'aisha's works have been featured on several national and international literary and academic journals. One of her short stories *Binle's Emirald* was shortlisted for 2018 African Writers Award. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and a textbook on creative writing. In addition to this, she is a member of several professional and non-professional bodies which include: African Literature Association (ALA), Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Literary Scholars Association (LSA), English Scholars Association of Nigeria (ESAN), Arewa Women Writers, Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). She is also the Sokoto Coordinator of Hilltop Creative Arts Centre, Sokoto, where she mentors youth to discover, develop and showcase their potentialities in the

creative arts. She is the co-founder of *Being*, A quarterly magazine that explores personality, places politics, culture, creative arts, and entrepreneurship.

*Yar'fari*, published in 2020 by Kraftgriots, is A'aisha Abdulkareem's first novel in English. It reflects the story of a Fulani girl who struggles to answer to the obnoxious demands of the seeming misogynistic traditions that trail a Fulani firstborn girl-child. In her interview with Uchenna Emelife (2020), A'aisha Abdulkareem explained that, "The title *Yar'fara* is a Hausa word for firstborn (female). The work is inspired by the firstborn tradition in Hausa/Fulani culture in Northern Nigeria. It tells the story of a young girl's struggle to survive obnoxious tradition and how destiny casted the journey of her success." Being one of the new female vices in English from Northern Nigeria, *Yar'fari* is remarkably applauded by critics. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference organized by the Department of English and Drama in collaboration with Centre for Gender Studies, Kaduna State University on the theme: Trends in Female Writing and Gender Discourse from Northern Nigeria held from 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2021, it receives the highest number of papers presented. Interestingly, five papers with the titles: The Representation of Patriarchy in Female Writing: A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*; The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Women experiences in Asabe Kabir's *Destinies of Life* and A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*; The Representation of Patriarchy in A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*; A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Representation of Female Characters in A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari* and A Pragmatic Reading of A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari* were presented.

## Conclusion

The biographies of the twelve writers depict that the number of female novelist in English from northern Nigeria is increasing considerably compared to three decade ago when Zanyab Alkali is the only female voice in English from the region. As discussed in the paper, these writers are largely concerned and preoccupied with the various socio-cultural challenges such as polygamy, early marriage, forced marriage, prostitution, poverty, denial of education, hawking, divorce and betrayal of love, among other forms of hardship meted against women in their patriarchal northern Nigerian society. Equally in most of their works, they stress the need for women to

acquire western education. This will assuredly equip them with the necessary strength and foresight to help not only themselves and their family but also the society at large.

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