

Examining the Role of Women in National Development in Bilqisu Abubakar's *To Live Again* and Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions*

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Abstract

Again, paper, using Reader Response theory as analytical framework, aims to explore the indispensable role of women in national development as portrayed in Bilqisu Abubakar's *To Live Again* and Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions*. The paper is premised on the assumption that women writers contribute enormously to the development of a nation. In their writings, the selected writers vividly depict the significant roles women play in the society and how these roles have helped national development. The central female characters in the two texts are portrayed as caring, humane, kind-hearted, dedicated and concerned individuals not only to their fellow women but to other members of the society. On the whole, the study observes that Abubakar and El-Rufai use their novels as potent medium of enhancing women's development and encouraging them to be educated in order to contribute to national development.

Key Words: National development, women writers, *To Live Again*, *An Abundance of Scorpions*

Introduction

Over the years, literature has been a template for writers to encode their feelings, thoughts and opinions on various topics. In other words, it remains the potent medium through which nationalists, in this context, writers of fiction address various societal issues ranging from insecurity, poor leadership, moral decadence, financial corruption among a plethora of other disheartening social problems militating against national development in the West African countries, Nigeria inclusive. Differently put, Nigerian novelists, in most of their fictional works, have examined (and are still examining) the extent to which different institutions contributed to the development of the society. According to Saje (2019:21):

The Nigerian novels are mostly concerned with the problems of nation building and therefore patriotism. The Nigerian novelists pre-occupy themselves with the task of perfecting a Nigerian society making Nigerian references that could be derived from Nigeria's socio-political realities. The story pattern is mostly

Nigerian dealing with a number of themes that directly or indirectly affect the Nigerian society.

The elucidation above explains that literature, particularly the novel genre, penetrates all the aspects of life with a view to addressing social problems and to achieve progress about life and living in general terms. Thus, literary writers deploy the novel genre to teach, inform, entertain, record and enlighten the society on issues at stake with a view to assisting and sanitizing them in order to give their contributions to the progress of the society.

More importantly, the novels written in English by women from Northern Nigeria have attracted a considerable critical attention mainly due to their relevance and significance to gender discourse and national development. Prominent among such writers include Zaynab Alkali, Razinat T. Mohammed, Talatu Wada Ahmad, Maimuna Bala, Hauwa Mohammed Sambo, Fatima Alkali, Hadiza Isma El-Rufai, Azizah Idris Muhammad and Habiba Alkali, among others. Mohammad (2022:43) asserts that, "Northern Nigerian women writers have continued to write their stories, reconstructing their alternative realities." In other words, their writings are predominantly preoccupied with gender related issues such as marriage, polygamy, domestic violence, girl-child and her education, early/forced marriage, sour relationship with in-laws, sexual harassment and the contributions of women to the society's progress. It is against this background that, this paper, deploying the Reader Response Theory as the theoretical framework, examines Bilqisu Abubakar's *To Live Again* (2007) and Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* (2017) to depict how the authors portray the roles women play towards national development through their support and assistance to miserable, depressed and heart-broken women and make them live a happy and fulfilled life.

Synopses of the Two Novels

(a) *To Live Again*

Set in a fictional village of Babbar Dutse, Bilqisu Abubakar's *To Live Again* (2007) tells the story of Uwani Inuwa, a beautiful lady who prefers to marry Mallam Ahmad, a young penniless but well-mannered primary school teacher against the choice of her parents, Alhaji Abdulkadir, a fabulously rich old man in their locality. After their marriage, Ahmad gets a state government scholarship to further his study. Not long after his graduation, he is promoted to Gimbiya Unity College, one of the famous secondary schools in the city and given a bungalow to relocate there with his family. Gwaggo, his old mother, prevails on him to marry a second wife because she wants to have a large number of grandchildren. To please Gwaggo, Ahmad marries Khadija Usman, the daughter of one of the school's matrons. She gives birth to two bouncing baby boys in a quick succession. After Khadija, Zulai is given to Ahmad as his third wife and he married Hajara, a very rich widow, as his fourth wife. She possesses him all to herself. Tired of

unjustifiable maltreatment, Uwani complains to Ahamd of his total abandonment of her but instead of being comforting, he mercilessly lambasts her and eventually divorces her. With the assistance of Nana Mansa (a Ghanian woman, who teaches Uwani how to read and write), Uwani gets admission into Caliphate University to read Law. Having passed all her exams, she goes to Law School in Lagos and is befriended by Barrister Jumoke Adefarisan. During Jumoke's dinner party, Captain Umar, the son of Ambassador Shehu Usman, falls for Uwani but she hesitantly responds to him. However, when Umar proves to be different from her ex-husband, she accepts his marriage proposal. In this novel, Abubakar treats other issues of abject poverty, early and forced monetary marriage, love, ingratitude, betrayal, polygamy, rampant divorce, female education, conflict between tradition and modernity, friendship, politics, gossip and girl-child hawking, among a plethora of other issues that affect the life of women, particularly in northern Nigeria.

(b) *An Abundance of Scorpions*

Abundance of Scorpions (2017), El-Rufai's first published novel, tells the gruelling tale of Tambaya Matawalle, who loses her loving husband, Yakubu (a paediatrician at Katsina General Hospital) and her only daughter, Fatima, in a fatal accident on their way from Katsina to Kano for Sallah celebration. Shortly after their death, it is discovered that Yakubu owes a huge sum of money to three people and all that he left cannot pay for it. Also, his old poor father, Baba, cannot pay for it, too. As a result, Tambaya travels to Accra where her brother, Aminu, resides in order to get a job and settle her husband's debts. Failure to get even a petty job for about six months coupled with the cruel treatment she receives from Jamila (Aminu's indifferent wife) compels Tambaya to come back to Abuja where her confidant Esther lives with her family. However, before she left Accra Esther informed her in a letter that their friend, Mulikat with whom they attended the same secondary school who works directly with the First Lady, promises to give her a job at the children's hospital in Abuja. Unfortunately, Tambaya's optimism is shattered when Esther tells her that the promised job is not approved due to some political reasons. As a good friend, Mulikat offers another job (as a matron) to Tambaya at a Government Orphanage in Gadam built by the wife of the Head of State as her pet project. At the orphanage, the unfriendly and sarcastic attitude of Miss Scholastica (the head of the Child Service Unit), makes Tambaya experience some discomfort and misery. Miss Scholastica regards Tambaya as an intruder and a threat to her influential position. However, with determination and perseverance, Tambaya gets a permanent offer at the Orphanage. Eventually, she is convinced by Esther's soothing and stimulating words to marry Alhaji Surajo, a philanthropist and a good Samaritan who dearly loves her. Female education, friendship, mutual love, marriage, polygamy, marital conflict, unemployment, abject poverty, ingratitude, excessive desire for material wealth, girl-child hawking, prostitution, abysmal corruption among security

personnel, reckless driving and child trafficking are among the issues dexterously addressed in the text.

Theoretical Framework

Reader Response theory is the analytical tool used in the analysis of Abubakar's *To Live Again* and El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions*. Wolfgang Iser is identified as the most influential theorist of Reader Response otherwise called "The Phenomenological Theory". Iser (1978:280) buttresses that:

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act, the dynamics of reading are revealed. By making this decision, he implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text.

Iser maintains that reading is "an activity that is guided by the text; this must be processed by the reader who is then, in turn, affected by what he has processed." He goes further to assert that the text is the compass and map, the reader is the explorer. However, the explorer cannot disregard those unexpected boulders in the path which he or she encounters along the journey that are not written on the map. Reader Response Criticism argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which a reader creates his own text-related performance as against the theory of Formalism in which the reader's role in re-creating literary works is ignored.

As a theory, Reader Response focuses its attention on readers and their experiences on literary work. According to Iser, the theory of Reader Response involves a transaction between the text's informed meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader. Therefore, Reader Response Criticism advocates the fundamental tenet that literature exists as a transaction between the physical text and the mind of the reader. Umar (2014:48) asserts that this theory (Reader Response) conceives that literary works stand upon two poles, the creative and aesthetic poles. The creative pole deals with the craftsmanship of the author in putting down his imagination as literature, while the aesthetics are only discovered through the interaction between the reader and the text.

Abdu (2018:95) explains that "Reader Response theory is a school of criticism which maintains that readers actually contribute to the meaning of works of literature." This means that in Reader

Response, the reader is essential to the meaning of a text for it is he that brings the text to life. Abdu further notes that:

Reader Response as a theory studies the interaction of reader with the text. The text is incomplete until it is read. Each reader brings something to the text that completes it and that makes each reading different. For this school of thought, the literary text has no life of its own without the reader (96).

In essence, a text has no definite interpretation and thus invites the reader to participate actively in making sense of it. In other words, once a text is published, it becomes a slave in the hands of the reader who subjects it to different interpretations hence the necessity of Reader Response in the exploration of literary texts. This theory suits our analysis of the two selected texts largely because it gives pride of place to the reader of the texts.

Analysis of the Two Novels

Bilqisu and Hadiza have chosen the novel form as a means of portraying the crucial roles women play in national development. Through the portrayal of female characters such as Nana Mansa, Ladi, Jomoke and Uwani in *To Live Again* and Esther, Mulikat and Tambaya in *An Abundance of Scorpions*, the two writers depict how women sympathize and help their fellow women who are depressed and heart-broken. Their kindness towards the vulnerable women help in saving them from becoming social misfits – drug abusers, prostitutes or deranged women. Thus, in order to portray how women contribute immensely to national development, the writers in question, use the characterization of the aforementioned female characters who encourage and give hope to the heart-broken women to demonstrate how women suppose to be in their relationship with other women.

Women as Dedicated Teachers

In *To Live Again*, Nana Mansa uses her education and expertise to uplift the lives of the vulnerable women like Uwani (the heart-broken woman) to live again by acquiring Western education. When Ahmad divorces Uwani, she completely loses any hope to live again. Uwani believes that Ahmad is the definition of her life and if she loses him, she loses everything. It is Nana Mansa who takes ample time to soothe her and show her that it is not the end of the world as captured in the dialogue between them below:

“This is all too much for me to bear”, she wailed.

“Trust me, Uwani. You’ll be fine.”

“What more do I have to live for?”

“Your family and I need you.”

“Of what use am I to anyone anymore?”

“You have your life ahead of you. Don’t allow anyone disrupt that,” she persisted.

“How can I go on when all I have ever lived for is gone?”

“Why do you sound like a bereaved woman?”

“I have lost him, the love of my youth, can’t you see?”

“No, Uwani, he has lost you, his only true love” (pp.153-4).

Nana Mansa’s advice to Uwani suggests that with determination and endurance, one can achieve anything she wants. Uwani is also advised that nothing comes easy, so in her struggle for a better future, she will really be confronted with hardships and difficulties, which she must endure if she wants to actualize her dream. And to further encourage Uwani to be determined and never allow her emotions to overpower her, Nana Mansa consoles her thus, “There are other women in worse situations” (p.112). This string of encouraging words really helps Uwani to wake up from her long slumber. Nana Mansa also employs a variety of methods to help Uwani learn easily and faster as the novel declares:

Nana Mansa’s effort yielded positive result within a short space of time. Her student’s performance was amazing. The housewife was stupefied that she could read and write. Once that fact was established, the tutor insisted that their medium of communication would be strictly, English (p.113).

This assertion connotes that Nana Mansa is not only a good teacher but also a counsellor to Uwani. In other words, the optimism of Nana Mansa about the bright future of Uwani, if she acquires education appears similar to Emenyonu’s (1991:86) assertion that, “Education is the solution to problems of the African woman. It would secure her future and give her the needed economic and emotional independence she craves for.” In fact, the contribution Nana Mansa gives to Uwani is enormous, otherwise she will end as a vulnerable and heart-broken woman. Her sisterly concern towards Uwani is further expressed in these words:

If you don’t believe in yourself, you will never have a life... She advised Uwani never to underestimate herself. She told her that she could be anything she wanted to if she was determined. The sky should be your starting point, she encouraged (p.160).

The advice of Nana Mansa in the excerpt above is really a wakeup call to Uwani that if she is determined, she can achieve what she aspires. Nana Mansa is, indeed, a good and dedicated teacher who is always ready to help everyone (both women and men) around her. By

implication, the author, through the portrayal of Nana Mansa, depicts how women as teachers contribute to national development. Other teachers are expected to emulate Nana Mansa and give their quota to national growth by producing good and capable students. In essence, Nana Mansa, as a dedicated teacher, contributes immensely to national development through human resources development (developing students) which is a prerequisite for national growth and progress.

Women as Good Friends

It is obvious that good friends play a significant role in shaping and moulding one's behaviour and vice versa. In other words, the influences of friends in one's life are embedded in proverbs such as "A friend in need is a friend, indeed", "Better be alone than be in bad company" and "Birds of the same feather flock together". In *To Live Again*, Abubakar uses the portrayal of Ladi and Jomoke to depict how good friends contribute to national development. In other words, Ladi (Uwani's roommate in the Caliphate University) who is depicted as a young lady from an affluent family socializes with people from poor family like Uwani. She heartily welcomes Uwani to the university and promises to assist her in anything. The novel declares that, Ladi as a modern woman, "never subscribed to relegation. She believed that both sexes were important and should complement each other" (p.173). Her perception of life certainly differs from Uwani's, she argues that if a man truly loved a woman, he would stick to her. Hence, she faults Uwani for staying too long in Ahmad's house to suffer unnecessarily from her wicked co-wives, who charmed her affectionate husband to maltreat her and eventually divorced her. Ladi's sisterly concern really transforms Uwani from a timid villager to a modern woman, who speaks perfect English and dresses modestly. In essence, through the graphic portraiture of Ladi, Abubakar depicts how women supposed to behave in their relationship with their own gender. In other words, women, according to Ladi, should not fight one another for husband's attention and recognition. Instead, women should see themselves as partners in progress. This will contribute to national development.

Similarly, the friendship between Uwani and Barrister Jumoke Adefarasin is another clear example. As Uwani's intimate friend in the Law School in Lagos, Jomoke tremendously assists Uwani throughout her studentship there. Despite their social and religious differences (Uwani as Hausa Muslim woman and Jomoke as Yoruba Christian), their friendship is strong as it imbibes the reciprocal love and assistance. It is at Jomoke's wedding party at the prestigious Lekki Peninsula that Uwani meets Captain Umar, the son of an eminent Ambassador, who dearly falls for her. Initially, she rejects him but with the intervention of Jomoke who attests his sterling qualities and enviable personality, Uwani listens to him and registers what he says. Truly, Jomoke plays a significant role, more of a match-maker than a counselor in convincing Uwani to accept Umar's marriage proposal. And they turn to her when they have misunderstanding until they get married. Thus, through the character of Jumoke, the author portrays how women

promote national unity by befriending and assisting people from other parts of Nigeria. Jomoke and Uwani's friendship symbolizes peaceful coexistence among Nigerians of different parts of the country devoid of tribal hatred and religious bigotry. Such peaceful coexistence is a prerequisite for national development and societal progress.

Women as Concerned Individuals

Being a beneficiary of the kindness and philanthropy of other women, Uwani Inuwa in *To Live Again* also embraces the ideals of sisterhood which preach mutuality of help, sympathy and empathy to people in miserable condition. Differently put, Uwani, who after being reformed, also helps victimized women like Asma'u (her childhood friend) whose evil co-wives turned mad. The novel relates that, "Uwani was drenched in tears as she saw her good old pal out in the world, half-naked and heavily pregnant" (p.233). In a spirit of sisterhood, Uwani gives clothes to Asma'u to cover her nakedness and asks one of the road side food sellers to give food to Asma'u whenever she needs it and promises to pay for the money. Through Uwani's sisterly concern towards Asma'u, Abubakar buttresses the need for women to always assist and support their fellow women. In other words, they should do everything possible to help other women out of their predicament and vulnerability. This will help them to bring an end to all sorts of marginalization, oppression and intimidation in a male-dominated society.

In addition, Uwani's reply letter to Hadiza, another childhood friend of hers (who is divorced by her husband Awwal), is full of sisterly concerns. She admonishes Hadiza never to give up in life. Her separation from Awwal is supposed to serve as encouragement to her to be educated. This is because, "It is never too late for anything" (p.278). She also writes to her that:

You have so much to live for. I don't need to take an inventory in this letter. Try putting Awwal behind you and consider him a closed chapter in your life. Like my friend, Ladi would say, "Life is too short to be wasted" (p.278).

Uwani also advises Hadiza to pick up a hobby in order to forget her miseries. She then encourages her to consider rearing or poultry to enable her to stand on her feet and be independent economically. Uwani concludes her letter by reiterating that:

Hadiza, my friend, it's not yet over until it's over. If roses can bloom beautifully with thorns, why can't we? I'm willing to give love a try again because there's always a second chance. It could be better than the first; at least I can attest to that. It is going to be a new beginning, a fresh start. I want to emphasize, like I tried to suggest earlier in this letter, that if it can happen to me, it

could happen to anyone, including you my friend, if we believe and have faith. There is so much to be thankful for, the best of which is the chance to live again (p.281).

Truly, Uwani is optimistic about her friend. She hopes that Hadiza will draw much strength from this letter in order to forge ahead with her life and live again as she (Uwani) does. Thus, through the portrayal of Nana Mansa, Ladi, Jomoke and Uwani, the author pinpoints how women promote human resources development by turning the miserable and helpless people into useful and independent people who would serve as stepping stones for national development.

Women as Trusted Confidants

In *An Abundance of Scorpions*, El-Rufai presents Esther and Mulikat (Tambaya's friends) as generous women who are always ready to assist Tambaya. Through their characterization, the author advocates for sisterhood among women. For instance, when Maryam makes life difficult for Tambaya in Yakubu's family house, Esther asks her to come to Abuja and stay with them. Esther's unflinching loyalty and kindness towards Tambaya is illustrated when she tells Mulikat to find job for Tambaya to enable her become self-reliant. She also encourages Tambaya to marry Alhaji Surajo who proves to be a kind man. Similarly, Mulikat Aremu is always ready to help and support vulnerable women like Tambaya, who are victimized by other people. As an important woman who works directly with the First Lady, Mulikat does not forget her close schoolmates like Esther and Tambaya. If not for her utmost concern, Tambaya cannot get a job in Gadam Orphanage. Even after Tambaya is employed, Mulikat does everything possible to see to it that Tambaya is given everything she needs (accommodation and good feeding) there. What a sisterly concern! Thus, through the portrait of Esther and Mulikat, the economically independent and philanthropist women (who are very much ready to help vulnerable people, particularly their fellow women to prosper in life), El-Rufai artistically explores the ideals and concerns for sisterhood among women which transcends the bounds of their religious affiliations and tribal inclinations (Mulikat, Yoruba Muslim; Esther, Igbo Christian; and Tambaya, Hausa Muslim). The author employs the characters of Esther and Mulikat to show how people from different ethnicity, region and religion can live peacefully. Their mutual friendship makes peace thrive in the society which symbolises national development.

Women as Caring and Humane Matrons

Like Esther and Mulikat, Tambaya also plays an indispensable role in national development. As a Matron at Gadam Orphanage, Tambaya promises to treat the orphans like her own biological children. She asserts that, "Parental love was the only thing the children here would lack and I determined to fill that void" (p.144). Through her portrayal, the author demonstrates the woman's instinct of caring, loving and catering for others, especially children, in this case

orphans. She is like Miriam George-Rashad in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* who also nurtures children. This confirms the popular Hausa adage, "A child is everyone's." Expressing her ardent desire to look after the children in the orphanage, Tambaya soliloquizes that:

I was charged with caring for sad, docile children in a cheerfully decorated orphanage. But I was determined to help these children find some fun in life. I'd be a surrogate mother to them, and with me not having any children of my own, this could turn out to be a perfect symbiosis (p.151).

To augment her admiration for children, Tambaya acts the role of oral artist. Every night, after dinner before the orphans retire to bed, she narrates different interesting stories to them to inject into them the principles of living, virtues and expected behaviour that will help them to become responsible individuals in the society. In other words, the aim of telling such tales to them is to encourage them to mould their lives after good characters and point the penalty of evil behaviour to them as typified in the bad characters in the stories. Tambaya acts in accordance with the Child Right Acts (2003) which stipulates total protection of children from all kinds of violence such as child labour, child trafficking, neglect, sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Thus, as a caring and humane person, Tambaya gives motherly love, care and protection to the orphans in addition to fighting all the violence committed against them. In this way, they will be patriotic citizens and good nation builders not nation destroyers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper, in examining the paramount roles of women in national development, has demonstrated that, Abubakar's *To Live Again* and El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* portray women who assist and guide miserable and heart-broken people. Thus, the writers have used their novels to bring to lime light the major roles women play in the promotion and attainment of national development through improving human resources which is a prerequisite for the advancement and progress of their nation. Emphatically, through the sterling personality disposition of female characters such as Nana Mansa (as dedicated teacher), Ladi and Jomoke (as good friends), Uwani (as a concerned individual), Esther and Mulikat (as trusted confidants) and Tambaya (as caring and humane matron), the authors prove that women's contribution to national development is paramount. In essence, the paper reiterates the various roles of women in societal progress and national development.

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