

# BEYOND THE MANTRA OF SEXUAL ALLEGORY: AN EXAMINATION OF NEGO-FEMINIST COMPLEMENTARITY IN ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S *SACRED APPLES*

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## Abstract

It has long been established that in African literary-creative space, Andro-texts have mostly succeeded in articulating the patriarchal norm far above the matriarchal credo. This has been partly attributed to the fact that for a very long time, male authors have dominated the writing and criticism of African Literature. However, in recent male writings, there is evidently a shift of concern to the plight of women. This study, using Gimba's *Sacred Apples* as its text-for-criticism and adopting Nego-Feminism as its theoretical tool, seeks to establish this seeming thematic shift and focus now visible in African literary creative space. Nego-Feminism is a relatively new theoretical premise which confronts the issues of patriarchy and female dominance through negotiation and non-confrontational attitudes in dealing with the feminist struggles that occur on the continent. It considers the implications of patriarchal traditions and customs and aims to dismantle them and negotiate for a better position for women thereby suggesting for social freedom that ensures equal treatment of both sexes. Gimba, on the other hand, in his *Sacred Apples*, reveals the growing gender consciousness among Northern Nigerian male writers. His concern in the text indicates the extent to which male writers also portray the ways in which the patriarchal society of Northern Nigeria oppresses women and the primacy of complementarity between the sexes for the socio-economic and political growth and development of the society. This study therefore establishes that, far from the clamour of radical and liberal cravings of feminist ethos in the Northern Nigerian context, complementarity between the sexes, as entrenched in Nego-feminism, encourages better gender relations.

**Keywords:** Andro-texts gender, nego-feminism, northern Nigerian, patriarchy, non-confrontational, complementarity

## Introduction

The critical-cum-creative terrain of gender politics has been a deeply nuanced and contested phenomenon in Africa's literary landscape in the manner it clashes, first of all, with the deep seethed patriarchal values and the cultural and religious norms cherished by Africans. This instance, many critics would argue, is responsible for the cautious reception given to feminism in Africa especially by male writers who see the trend not only as a counter artistic discourse but as a loaded political campaign that threatens to usurp their age long family leadership grip. Feminist tendencies are even ferociously opposed to in societies that are more religiously inclined as Northern Nigeria. As a result of the embedded influence of Islamic doctrine not only as a means of worship but all forms of social interactions, Northern Nigerian Muslim faithful are very conservative and cold to any socio-cultural innovation as Western imported feminist radicalism. This explains the long silence of writers on this issue particularly in this geographical location.

However, with the emergence of writers as Gimba on the literary scene, a more defined sense of commitment to the advocacy for the rightful complementary roles of spouses has surfaced. Gimba, in the ilk of Kamal, is opposed to the western oriented radical feminist creed. He creates an enabling environment of complementarities of Nego-feminist aesthetics for his characters and interrogates the suppression and subjugation of the rightful place of women as a result of the misinterpretation of the Islamic religious scriptures.

Feminism, throughout its long history, has always been seen as "woman's conscious struggle to resist patriarchy" (Widdowson & Brooks, 2005). However, this definition of Feminism does not mean that men cannot be part of the struggle. In this vein, Achichie puts it thus; 'A feminist is a man or a woman who says yes, there is a problem of gender as it is today and we must fix it to better it' (2021).

In saying so, Achichie re-echoes the unisex direction to gender struggle and strips it of its baggage and constraints by giving men the privilege to partake in women's struggle. This position has already been

taken by Ama Ata Aidoo in African feminism to key-in men's movement into the struggle (2009). Therefore, it is crucial for men to be part of the feminist agency if feminism is to attain its goal of liberating women. Men must be a part of the struggle. In fact, men probably bear more of the responsibility for ending the oppression of women since men have been alleged to be the main perpetrators of that very patriarchal oppression. Contrary to what is believed about female movements for equality seeking in society, the struggle will also be men's concern. Issues and attitudes are changing and if African feminism is to continue to rise as a discourse and impact Africans lives, it is important that the trend changes as well – and a better option, as this study avers; is Nego - Feminism.

The contemporary world is still enmeshed in regarding women as appendages and, the 'other', and labelling women who excel in their work as wayward. While women have made much progress in the personal, communal, national and international development, these are not recognised as they should because of the inhibiting garb of gendered myths and beliefs that condition what they should or should not do.

Few Nigerian male authors have been able to extricate themselves totally from the depiction of pervasive negativity about women. They have used their literary works to promote the elements of the African female identity 'divine equal of man in essence, as daughter, as wife and as a mother'. It is the concern of this paper to show that some African male writers as Gimba, 'men of good will' as Ba (1991) would call them, have transcended the sexual allegory and hence have been writing with 'gender on their agenda'.

An example of such a writer is Abubakar Gimba. Gimba is what Oba (2005) calls 'a giant oak of the North' (p.5), who apart from having added some half dozen to his collection, has gone on to provide an inspiring leadership to the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Babajo (2003) notes that Abubakar Gimba is a gem 'completely detribalized, and his novels show undistinguished patriotism, honesty, and a clear conviction as to the realities of African cultures' (p.437-9).

This paper, as mentioned above, examines Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994) as an embodiment of 'repositioning crusade' in gender roles from a 'Nego-Feminist perspective'. The novel accounts for Gimba's empathy for women in a fast changing Northern Nigerian society. His is not only an attempt to balance the situation but to further prove that if a man loses his brain in the literary jungle, women 'of good will' and zeal are always there to show him where to find his senses. And to further show that women can lead a virtuous life alone, independent of what the society views as cultural obligation, he masterfully points to the weak points of some cultural practices that deny women their status in the society and most of the time backing his stance with religious illustrations. Gimba, in *Sacred Apples*, seems to echo what Thiong'O (2004) said about his major female character in *Detained* (his prison Diary) 'because the women are the most exploited and oppressed of the entire working class, I will create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and struggle against the conditions of her being' (p.10).

### **The Praxis of Nego-Feminism**

The discovery that opens for men and women the way to achieving true womanhood devoid of gender bias, or at the very least, a very manageable gender bias, is the business of Nego-feminism. It appeals to both male and female egos to tolerate each other and negotiate a common agreement between them in order to take sexism to a higher level. It is, therefore, an observable lead, not only in Nigeria and Africa, but also finding solutions for the woman of the world at large. Nego-feminism, by this therefore, steps out of the continent to reach out to the global wo/man. In recasting women, Nego-feminism asks, isn't it a borderless world? Sisterhood is global; hence, the ability to conceive feminism globally and the coexistence of the sexes will be decisive for the overheated polity on sexism.

Nego-feminism is more aptly defined by the theorist herself, Obioma Nnaemeka. In her paper, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way" (1999), she sees it as "the

feminism of negotiation; no ego feminism” (p. 360). The corner stone of the theory then is with issues of soft-peddalling in the game of antagonism with (wo)men folk so as to recognise a more rewarding equal partnering. Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace, conflict management and resolution, negotiation, complementarities, give-and-take, and collaboration. It is truly tempting to think Nego-feminism is the exception which proves the rule as it argues simply that it is only weak people that seek revenge; strong people forgive, while intelligent people ignore. And this contradicts Western feminism.

The highly significant attraction of its name, negotiation-feminism, not only suggests the broad range of its tolerance: in one bold sweep it has eliminated so much of the unfruitful discussions of offensive literatures or the embattled conflicts in novels that give the impression that all men are (potential) rapists and wife-beaters, or at the most, sisterhood or solidarity among women is shown as a possible doubtful source of solace or a vague anchor of hope.

Nego-feminism describes a new paradigm that can finally take us beyond ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in an endless ‘gender war’. It proposes that if women and their adaptable selves are really going to take over the world, there is the need to make certain that some men are brought along. This is essentially because feminism is after all about cooperation. As feminists develop alternatives to ease gender injustices, they also seek ways to empower and emancipate women against male domination. This goes to show that feminist literature must not be written by females alone; it could equally be written by a male author. What is important is the content of the text as well as the central message put across by the writer. Thus, it does not matter who the author is as long as the writing is geared towards correcting an erroneous impression or idea concerning societal expectation of women. As Nego-feminists remind us that “in the end, the choice of what kind of world we live in is up to every one of us” (Eisler 1995, p. 214).

### **Nego-Feminism and the Northern Nigerian Novel**

The Nigeria literary scene has experienced an increase in the publication of novels by male authors. However, there is no evidence

of strong female characters; rather, they are given peripheral roles. In Okri's masterpiece trilogy, *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), the patriarch of the family decides the family's daily actions and holds the power to influence their thoughts. The male character is not only the central exponent but also the antagonist who dominates other people. Daughters are often depicted as commodities rather than persons, taken under the father's authoritative wing until the time comes to pass on that responsibility to their husbands. Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) is set in Lagos in the context of military dictatorship with the story narrated by a socially conscious journalist who abandons his studies at the university when his roommate succumbs to acute psychotic depression. Habila's *Measuring Time* (2006) is set in Keti, a small community located in North Eastern part of the country. The story revolves around Mamo, the protagonist. In these works, the female characters are not fully developed; rather they are depicted as appendages to the men. According to Nnolim,

'Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness, both for themselves and for their male counterparts. The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy.' (p. 165) 'The motivational force of most Nigerian female writers is the creation of biased images of womanhood in the writing of most male writers. To deconstruct certain distortions of womanhood, the women writers create central women characters in their works that are free from men's subjugation.' (Cited in Sylvester-Molemodile & Mba, p. 111)

However, since the advent of the feminist movement and the increasing awareness of women about their rights and the power of the pen in addressing issues that are peculiar to women, there has been a stiff opposition from members of the society, especially the male folk.

Women that identify with the feminist movement are regarded as disgruntled and frustrated women that have decided to embrace western culture in order to have an avenue to vent their frustrations. Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a remarkable change,

awareness and recognition in the Nigerian society in the perception of feminism thereby leading to an increased consciousness of the plight of women and the need to improve their lot in patriarchal societies. The issues that are peculiar to women such as spousal abuse, violence against women, unwholesome widowhood practices, and discrimination against women have been of major concern to legislators, Non-governmental organisations and women's societies. The sensitisation of the public on the oppression of women and the need to protect their rights have led to a renewed interest of the male folk in championing the cause of women and exploring ways of liberating women from the shackles of tradition, culture and societal norms that tend to inhibit the emancipation of women. Although such men in Nigerian parlance are called 'woman wrapper', they have realised the need to protect women's interest and ensure gender equity, fair play and justice. In essence, men are beginning to realise the need for a positive attitudinal change towards women's issues and the positive role that women can play towards the development of society. The actions of these men aligns with Hooks' definition of feminism as 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression' (viii). Kannen averred that his definition 'accounts for the possibility of feminist men, as women alone cannot end societal oppressions' (n. p). Sylvester-Molemodile & Mba agreed that:

Even various well-meaning males realise the necessity of empowering women, exercising free exploration of feminine potentials and its contributions to societal development. Hence, the emergence of male feminist writers is in line with gender struggle, structural modes of modernization and enforcement of renegotiation of respective political and intellectual agenda and recognition for women. (p.108)

Also, Muhammed et al opined that 'feminism is not only by and about women as men too have risen in defense of women (p. 137).

This study discusses Abubakar Gimba as a 'male feminist' writer in Nigeria and his contributions to the growth of feminist literature

while taking into cognisance his peculiarities and the goals he seeks to achieve in his works particularly in his novel, *Sacred Apples*.

Hiding under the generally misunderstood deeply rooted culture of ascribing the roles that Islam attributed to women, the typical Northern Nigerian male perception of woman has been very traditional to say the least. The question is how Islamic are those traditional values? Are they just patriarchal extension of dominance under the religious pretext? Specifically, these are the kinds of issues *Sacred Apples* raises and tasks the reader to look for answers within the pages of the book through the travails of a strong female character. The traditional values, beliefs and practices are critically analysed using practical examples from what obtains presently in the society. This enables the reader to glaringly see the evil of some of such traditional practices and how they are tackled through negotiation between the sexes. Because of the subtle and non-confrontational manner the author tackles the issues, the best theory to relate this approach is Nego-Feminism. This is because, apart from the theory being non-confrontational to male writers, it is at the same time bent on seeking avenues to restore every right of women through dialogue and logical argument which Gimba proves to be a master at in the pages of *Sacred Apples*.

Achonolu (1995, p.92), observed that Buchi Emecheta together with Molaria Ogundipe-leslie and Ama Ata Aidoo “have misunderstood feminism to be synonymous with violent confrontation, militancy, and aggression” (p.92). And in actual sense, Mcfedden clearly tells the world that her brand of Feminism is confrontational and nothing else. The feminist discourse has been very confrontational and looks at men as enemies of progress and the opposite sex whose job is to use the phallus as a symbol of authority and dominance.

Unlike mainstream Feminism, Nego-Feminism, as defined by the theorist herself, Nnaemeka (1999), in her proposition and its definition in her paper, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way” (1999), is “the feminism of negotiation; no ego Feminism” (p.360). Nego-Feminism describes a new paradigm that can finally take us beyond ‘winners’ and ‘looser’ in an endless ‘gender war’.



A critical study of Nego-Feminism under the broad heading of African Feminism and by extension Feminism itself, shows that the term has a space in African literature and criticism because of the accommodative nature of Africa's traditional values and its perception of the symbiotic nature of the relationship that exists between man and woman since pre-colonial days. It is within this mutual relationship that Gimba, in *Sacred Apples*, presents to us a character – Zahrah – who as an embodiment of the values Nego-Feminism is out to uphold. Achola (1977), in an attempt to call the attention of women to look inwards in their struggle with men, has this to say;

African Scholars, and especially women, must bring their knowledge to bear on presenting an African perspective on aspects and problems for women in local societies. Scholars and persons engaged in development research planning and implementation should pay attention to development priorities as local communities see them. (p.13)

Therefore, according to Nnaemeka (1999), true development of women folk in Africa, involves much more than slogans from the West; at its heart, there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfilment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount in the struggle for the emancipation of women. In that her seminal paper, under what she calls 'culture, development and (western) Feminism, in her quest to make a strong point on the (ir)relevance of (western) Feminism, as a tool for analyzing African Female experience, she employs the service of Vincent Tucker;

The development discourse is part of an imperial process whereby other peoples are appropriated and turned into objects. It is an essential part of the process where the 'developed' countries manage, control and even create the 'third world' economically, politically, sociologically and culturally. It is a process whereby the lives of some peoples, their plans, their hopes, their imaginations, are shaped by others who frequently share neither their lifestyles nor their hopes nor their values. (p.1)

From the submissions of Nnaemeka, it is clear that the Northern Nigerian Narrative, which is shaped and characterized by the dynamic nature of cultural evolution and reformation from people's encounter and negotiations with their common heritage over a long period of time, Nego-Feminism provides an important platform for such intellectual interactive activity with the wo/men folk. A literary stand point that is not *bole kaja* (come down let's fight) in outlook, but a mutual, collective journey into the inner feelings of both men and women with a view to understanding differences and 'negotiating' a way forward for the good of all. The goal will be accomplished through honest effort to humanize and respect both parties through finding those points of convergence within the cultural practice of the African communities involved; the principles of give and take; compromise; tolerance and deliberate seeking of balance.

Coming down home, the social transformation of the Northern Nigeria, the advancement in and access to Western education, the emergence of a highly mobile elite and the increase in literacy, especially in the 1970's and 80's, created the suitable conditions for the development of the novel in English. In addition, the upsurge of writing clubs, literary societies and writer's associations, has encouraged the publication of creative works made up of short stories and novels whose themes revolve around "love, marriage, women's roles, domestic power relations and generational struggle" (Furniss 1996, p.54). Northern Nigeria therefore, becomes a fertile environment of literary expression using the English Language as a medium for transmitting the rich cultural and traditional values in a colonial foreign language. In a similar manner, Jibril (1990) further buttresses this point when he opines that;

...Northern Nigeria is a fast-changing society. National integration is progressing at a tremendous speed and not least of its agents are the mass media. This in effect means that Northern Nigerians are being brought out of their tiny shells and are having their horizons widened...consequently, we may soon be confronted by a new generation of creative writers from the North who may choose English as their medium of expression. (p.9)

As part of the fulfilment of that prophesy by Jibril (1999), many authors of Northern Nigerian extraction storm the literary scene. They include; Aliyu Jibia, Abubakar Gimba, Ibrahim Tahir, Labo Yari, Olu Obafemi, Mohammed Sule and Zaynab Alkali among many others. Out of that list, emerged Abubakar Gimba, a novelist who through his writings seek to re-invent the Nigerian dream through an obsession with the (re)positioning of gender roles in contrast to what some of his counterparts have been committed to in their writings. Gimba's novels are his contributions to the on-going social discourse in Nigeria. Gimba's preoccupation with morality and other issues related to virtues, has been recognized by many of his admirers. According to Abubakar in Okome (1999), "The creative works of Gimba are in general influenced by a powerful moral force which is subsumed in a worldview that is dominated by a powerful spiritual paradigm..." (p.106).

### **Nego-Feminist Aesthetics in Gimba's *Sacred Apples***

*Sacred Apples* accounts for Gimba's empathy for women in a fast-changing Northern Nigerian society. His is not only an attempt to balance the situation but to further prove that if a man loses his brain in the literary jungle, women 'of good will' and zeal are always there to show him where to find his senses. And to further show that women can lead a virtuous life alone, independent of what the society views as cultural obligation, he masterfully points to the weak points of some cultural practices that deny women their status in the society and most of the time backing his stance with religious illustrations. Gimba, in *Sacred Apples*, seems to echo what Thiong'O (2004) said about his major female character in *Detained* (his prison Diary) 'because the women are the most exploited and oppressed of the entire working class, I will create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and struggle against the conditions of her being' (p.10).

Undoubtedly, Abubakar Gimba in *Sacred Apples*, had a powerful vision saturated with strong cultural and spiritual devotions towards portraying a round heroine. This, he achieves, through the creation of

complex situations in line with the complexities of the cultural environment of the setting of the novel and the attitude of the society towards both patriarchy and matriarchy. Nego-Feminism, as a theory of negotiation, is best suited for an intellectual exercise in an attempt to find a voice for the wo/man in Gimba's literary sojourn without challenging the Northern Nigerian norms and cultural cum religious values especially as demonstrated in *Sacred Apples*. In finding a voice for the opposite sex, Gimba does not rely on sympathy to the plight of women but rather consciously commits his energy to gender justice and in the process finds a lasting dignity for women.

At the beginning of the novel, we come across a woman sent out of wedlock not because of her faults but because of the atrocities of her husband and his desire to take a second wife. This is irrespective of her entire life investment into the success of the marriage;

Looking back now, she felt she had only lived her life for Yazid. A sheltered life defined for her by a partner she thought was an extension of herself. Now she castigated herself for accepting to live in such an allusion. She had thought she was doing the right thing.....being a housewife, a mother and a woman on someone's terms. A senseless self-sacrifice, now...the bubble has gone a burst. There was no need for self-pity. Just to pick up the pieces and start again. Define her own life and be the person she wanted to be – a woman. (p.70)

His view point is clearly contrary to any feminist compassion usually associated to extreme Feminism as propagated by the Eurocentric literary critics or authors such as Virginia Woolf. The philosophical thought of Feminism seeks to equalize the sexes and further preaches female dominance over the male. Gimba sets out to acknowledge a mother's plight and dilemma vis-a-vis motherhood and wifehood, hence he created a female as his main character. And for him to successfully show the contrast between the traditional setting of a full house wife and a modern working-class mother, he created another character – Miriam – who becomes not only Zahrah's close friend but

a sister of a sort owing to the conditions, circumstances and situations that brought them together. Miriam had become;

Zahra's role model as a woman: intelligent, assertive, and having a career. A job that guaranteed her an enviable independence, while remaining a wife... a good, obedient wife, saving herself the risk most women face as house wives – sub-servient partners. Independence of mind and from materiality. Dependence, Zahra thought, is a woman's worst enemy in matrimony...particularly material dependence. Miriam seemed to enjoy tremendous freedom from this. (p.72)

*Sacred Apples* is a story of contemporary realities of the social status of women in Northern Nigeria, most especially, urban, Muslim settlements of Northern Nigeria. Zahra, the main character, was built to be strong and exhibit qualities of impeccable moral standards. Gimba explores issues of marriage and the philosophy of human relationships. Zahra goes through a turbulent social life but that does not deter her from maintaining her dignity, valour, and compassion. Undoubtedly, she has made mistakes in her life and through these mistakes; she has come to fully realize what life really means;

Zahra's fatal error, Miriam told her, was not taking a job. Consciously surrendering her destiny into the hands of a man, without any form of counter - indemnity. Blind trust, to which only a few men are entitled. Yes...God says that men are under obligation to cater for the material needs of women as part of his divine division of labor. But do most men listen? (p.72)

To appropriately answer this question, a voice devoid of confrontation was given to the women. A voice well informed to identify its boundaries and act within them for the betterment of the society. This is a story of a woman in search of her identity in a modern world. Should she live as a woman of the times? – Independent, free – would she find fulfilment in marriage? She would search .....The answer, both radical and reactionary, had always been there but would her search lead her to it? Gimba, in the quest for these answers, allows his heroine to have a universal voice by allowing her to express values

that are cherished globally- those of nurturing the child. Therefore, barely six months into her new job in the Department of Trade and Industry, Rabah Regional Office as an Industrial Officer, she feels she is not having enough time with her children and resolves to quit the job. So after a long telephone conversation with Miriam, she finds herself desperately trying to explain the situation to her;

The children' Zahra managed to say. 'Yes, what about the children?' Returned Miriam. 'I don't feel happy leaving them behind...from eight o'clock in the morning till five o'clock in the evening.' 'Are they complaining...or is your brother's wife, with whom they stay, complaining?' No not at all she is a very nice woman'. 'Then, what is the problem?' Zahra hesitated then said, 'I don't know, I just can't leave them behind...I feel I have abandoned them, abdicated my responsibility to another woman and turned them into some little orphans. Motherhood by proxy... I just don't feel happy these days... (P.76-77)

Zahra, in her desperate attempt to present the evils of this lack of bond between mother and children, goes to show that, and its subsequent psychological effect on the children, despite her terrible experience of divorce, she still can sacrifice this her new job for the happiness of her children. She is echoing a critical point to the society that the current trend of abandoning children with nannies daily from morning till evening, will certainly not augur well for the society in general;

It is sad...it's a big problem...of children being brought up by surrogate mothers some competent, but most, no better than the children themselves. Besides I begin to think that we're relegating parental care to a level no better than the role of animal breeders, say dog breeding. Our children get no more care than these animals get from their handlers: when they cry, throw food at them, keep them clean or remove the ticks when the suckers pester...though we are all animals, man's superior status demands that children's care remain the most superior of vocations, playing second fiddle to nothing else. Honestly... I feel quite guilty....' (P.77-78)

We thus noted Zahra's resolution when she pleads: "A surrogate mother for my child, my jewel... While I am still alive? I will have none of motherhood by proxy..." (p.113) and she goes on to assert that, "...motherhood is much more than physical, outward caring..., it is a complex of emotional ties in explicable forces". In this submission, the point is made that woman, irrespective of her social standing, should not neglect her primary responsibility of providing emotional ties to her children as this is a responsibility endowed to her by nature.

Gimba in a Nego-Feminist approach, attacks religious bigotry and the self-imposed discrimination accrued from cultural biases, to illiteracy and the male dominating ego. To further express his belief, he weaves the narrative on marriage, the long human and social heritage, to show that if gender roles can be negotiated within the family structure, then our society will achieve maximum development without having to borrow anything from the western concepts of Feminism. Zahrah, the major character, is depicted as a knowledgeable, wise, caring mother and wife. She is not afraid to consult extensively when faced with situations or circumstances out of control. These qualities signify an attempt by the writer to (re)position gender roles in the narrative.

Gimba, by making Mariam a close friend of Zahrah, has created a culture of friendship between modern women, even though they are of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Mrs George Rashad is a Christian, an intelligence officer, and one whose composure and countenance inspires Zahrah to be more self-reliant and independent minded. Also to further explain the need for men to extend a hand of friendship and recognition to women, Gimba came up with a male character - YaShareef - who is versed in both the religious and the cultural obligations of his society. This enables him to view negotiating gender roles in a contemporary Northern Nigerian setting as something long overdue. On women's education, YaShareef opines that: "men do have equal responsibility to protect and preserve marriage and ...if girls are to be forced to do anything at all, it should be to acquire education, learning and not marriage...." (p.56) This brand of negotiating

Feminism implies men's 'superiority' to women only as "men are a *degree above* women..... a degree of *responsibility*, not of *superiority* (p.305, emphasis original). Therefore, as a young man with both Islamic and modern education, he reasonably but respectfully challenges the old (mis)interpretation of some old scholars that barred young girls from pursuing education while encouraging early marriage:

'I respect Yazid's grandfather', Shareef said, but as a learned religious scholar, he should know better....the first word revealed in our book is of guidance is *Read* and not *Marry*. Marriage is therefore secondary to education'. But the learned man said the command refers to religious education, said Zubaidah. 'Well God knows best but I will disagree. It is too convenient and narrow an interpretation exhortation to *Read* is for mankind to seek for knowledge. Not just religious knowledge....but all types of knowledge. Boundless knowledge...knowledge could be divided into disciplines, but cannot be confined to a boundary...in any case, when does any knowledge become religious? Where is the dividing line? How do you determine it?' (p.55)

Looking critically at Shareef's submission, one cannot but agree with his perception and interpretation of what seeking for real knowledge in Islam is all about. Knowledge as a universal term cannot be dichotomized into just the religious and the secular for the convenience of some self-serving scholars to the detriment of the society at large

## Conclusion

The relationship between man and woman on earth is not meant by nature to be an antagonistic one. Universal human values have pointed to the needs for maintaining intimacy, love, passion, commitment and trust with one another. The Nego-Feminist framework, if studied in depth and utilized maximally, will open a way for such enduring human values. It is a guide for dealing with the Feminist struggles now making waves globally in a much more subtle means to emancipate women from the domination of men while at the same time



maintaining the bond between the sexes. This paper has demonstrated, using a Northern Nigerian Novel and setting, that those international and borrowed approaches under the garb of the emancipation of women are not suitable for the society and its cultural heritage. Therefore, instead of fighting for imaginary rights, women are encouraged to look inwards and look clearly for those areas where they feel they have roles to play for the betterment of the society and negotiate with the males through commitment to ensure a lasting harmonious relationship. Part of that commitment is what Abubakar Gimba shows on the pages of *Sacred Apples*. He carefully creates heroes and heroines who are willing to negotiate and find a common ground with the intention of saving the society as their primary focus. And he has set the example that for the unity of the family and the society in general, you do not need ‘men of good will’ only, but certainly ‘women of good will’ as well. It is good will combined together from the two parties that will ensure a harmonious coexistence in the society; not only among men and women but their siblings, who presently, as pointed in the novel, suffer greatly because of the inability of their parents to create a more conducive atmosphere for their survival.

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