Journal of Higher Education & Research Society
A Refereed International
ISSN- 2349 0209 VOL- 6/ ISSUE- 1 APRIL 2018

WOMEN, MARRIAGE AND RELIGION IN *SACRED APPLES* OF ABUBAKAR GIMBA

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Abstract

Matrimonial union between man and woman is an approved and highly regarded institution in the sight of God Almighty, both in the religions of Christianity and Islam. It should be an enjoyable union._Apples as used in the title of the text are a metaphor for enjoyment. Sacred App1es therefore, is a sanctified enjoyable union of a man and woman. Unfortunately, marriage institution has become a serious arena of gender conflict with the woman widely believed to be at the receiving end. Marriage institution is the area where Abubakar Gimba focuses his literary binoculars in Sacred Apples. Although the setting of the novel is the ancient Songhai Empire, it is undoubtedly a representation of the predominantly Islamic society of Northern Nigeria where the writer hails from. This paper analyses the perception of the writer to the issue of women relationship with men and struggle for equal rights.

Key words: Women, Marriage, Religion, Patriarchy, Islamic Feminism.

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Introduction:

Sacred Apples is essentially about the matrimonial vicissitudes and struggles of a modern woman in a society that is not only patriarchal but also troubled by social and moral maladies. Zahrah and Yazid have married each other for nine years during which time they have three children: Umaymah Bilqees and Mustapha. Yazid has a girl-friend who, for wishing to marry Yazid, schemes the separation of Zahrah and Yazid by contracting a person to write a letter to Yazid in the name of Zahrah threatening to kill him if he would not stop his relationship with his girl-friend. Without taking his time to find out the authenticity of the letter, Yazid impulsively divorces his loving and loyal wife, Zahrah. Jolted from her erstwhile blissful matrimonial home to the larger society, Zahrah comes face to face with the bitter lot of women. From the attack of mobs on her and her children, to Dan-Easker's attempt to rape her, the slander and blackmail of her person in her work place by a senior colleague, Midioka, her travails in her marriage with Nousah to Yazid's attempt to deny her the joy of motherhood after Zahrah is married to Nousah, nothing but problems trail Zahrah. However, with her education and strength of personality, reinforced by the encouragement and support she enjoys from her enlightened half-brother, Ya-Shareef and an amiable couple, Miriam and Rashad who become loyal and faithful friends of Zahrah, she triumphs over her circumstance, although she develops a hysterical personality because of her fear of men.

Zahrah lives as a single parent after the death of her second husband, Nousah. Propelled by the heritage of maltreatment of women in her family, her own ugly experiences in the hands of men, the fear of her own female children undergoing the same thing and her concern for a change in the bitter condition of the women-folk, Zahrah becomes a member of a women society. However, the pull of Islamic tradition and some indictments of the women's society force Zahrah to change the course of her feminism.

Women Suffering and Contestation:

In the cultural geography of the novel, one of the ways the women are subjugated is through the promotion of girl-child marriage over her desire for knowledge, especially in Western education. This is because by denying the girl-child Western education of a higher standing or university level makes it easy for parents or men to circumscribe the woman. Yazid's grand-father

although an Islamic scholar, is patriarchal in orientation. Zubaydah, Zahrah's grand-mother, is a metaphor of the patriarchal tradition. Her world-view is moulded by what men have ascribed to women. She and Yazid's grand-father believe that Zahrah's getting married is more important than her pursuit of university education. The author states as follows, 'Both Yazid's grand-father and Zubaydah had said that, marriage was more important for her than her pursuit of her education' (pp. 54-55).

To Zubaydah, women's acquisition of higher Western education is nothing but an agent of immorality in the society. She talks to Zahrah in this way, 'Well… I trust you ... but, I understand that our universities, the ivory towers, these days have truly towered above academic excellence and freedom. There is... freedom of almost everything.' (p. 54)

Zahrah's desire to acquire university education is not mortgaged even though she is coaxed into marriage and stays in her matrimonial home. Ya-Shareef, Zahrah's half-brother, an enlightened Muslim, discountenances the inversion of the injunction of the Qur'an which places girls' marriage over seeking for knowledge, explaining that the first thing God exhorts humanity to do is the search for knowledge. Zubaydah's assertion that the only knowledge Allah enjoins us to seek for is that of Islam is countered with the prophetic tradition which exhorts people to seek all knowledge but with regulated application, which Ya-shareef affirms thus, 'Even, knowledge about evil or the devil himself is essential... the problem is not with knowledge, but the application' (p. 55).

Thus, with Zahrah's interest and determination, and the scriptural inversion on women's acquisition of university education in the Western secular tradition dislodged by Ya-Shareef, she goes to university. With her university education, Zahrah not only gets a job after being heartlessly divorced by Yazid, but also becomes a feminist activist. As a feminist, Zahrah diagnoses the kernel of the subjugation of women by men in these words:

> *It's all mind control. Brainwashing. Misinformation, misinterpretation and manipulation. They tell us to stay at home, and in the kitchen, while they roam the streets. When you keep someone in a closet, you shield him from knowledge. And ignorant people are most pliable tools for manipulation and domination. Women are made ignorant by men (p. 298).*

Coterminous with the neglect of women's education which makes them to be easily manipulated by men is the mischievous interpretation of the Qurʾan message that we are all equal before God and that we will be held to account for our interactions. This means that the mode in which we interact with one another 'will determine our ticket to paradise.' One of such interactions is in the context of marriage. However, this Qur'an message has been misinterpreted by patriarchal scholars to promote the idea of male superiority and the dominance of women, both in this life and Hereafter. Zubaydah, an adherent of the patriarchal order says, 'In the old days, we use to be told that, a woman's paradise after her death starts from, and is assured by, her husband's home here on

earth.' (pp. 42 – 43)

Zahrah, with her prodigious intellect and discerning mind rejects the above statement as a mere construct meant 'to hold women down in marriage' (p.43). Ya-Shareef equally believes that such an idea is a cultural construct meant to make women obey their husbands and preserve the marriage institution. But he believes the preservation of the marriage institution should not be the sole responsibility of the women. It is important to provide a detailed quotation on Ya-Shareef's view on the above cultural construct to appreciate its full significance:

> *When it comes to the affairs of the Hereafter, I am afraid... we are all on our own. Equal before God. That is my understanding of what our Book teaches. Except... that, marriage being an interpersonal relationship, as in all, our interactions. And only in that sense, do we hold each other's ticket to Paradise. But even then, we are ultimately responsible for our tickets to Heaven, or to Hell. We have to work for them. (p.43)*

The silence that follows Ya-Shareef's explanation signifies the poverty of truth inherent in the cultural construct that the woman's destiny here and in the Hereafter is dependent on the man. Ya-Shareef is a man who does not believe in the patriarchal doctored teachings of Islam. He is educated, enlightened and shrewd. He identifies with the struggle of women for equal rights but does not believe in the radical brand of feminism that emphasizes 'self' at the expense of society. He does not believe in the feminism that is repugnant to marriage or that is not rooted in divine guidance.

Zahrah is a woman who exudes a robust revolutionary spirit, a sense of dignity and self-worth. Earlier, she has shown this by rejecting her grand-mother's move to reconcile her with her former husband, Yazid or to rush her into another marriage. Zahrah does this not minding the social stigma accorded a divorced woman and her family by her patriarchal society. The author captures Zubaydah's apprehension thus, 'She feared that her grand-daughter's name would be smeared by a broken marriage. A dark-sport on the family image' (p. 27).

Economic dependence of women on their husbands is yet another source of their manipulation by men. In spite of the fact that Zahrah has acquired university education, she had sacrificed the idea of taking a job on the altar of the love she has for Yazid, and because of her belief that the house-wife's enormous responsibility will be appreciated. Alas, it turns out to be an illusion. Yazid divorces her without any feelings, partly because she is not a career woman. It is from Miriam's narrative perspective that she gets to know the truth. The author reports:

> *Zahrah's total error, Miriam had told her, was not taking a job. Consciously surrendering her destiny into the hands of a man, without any counter indemnity. Blind trust, to which only a few men are entitled* (p. 72).

Indeed, Yazid does not deserve the trust Zahrah gives him. He is bereft of love, understanding and care. He rejects the pleading of Ya-Shareef and his junior brother for their sister's innocence on the issue of the letter that is written to Yazid threatening to kill him. After the mob's attack on Zahrah and her children in which the children are thought to have died, Yazid goes to Rabbah and Minsrah only to see Ya-Shareef and Zubaydah respectively. He does not see his former wife, the mother of his children! (p.26). In his carelessness, he fails to assess the character of his second wife before marrying. He lacks the tact to handle the issue of his second wife's flirtation with his boss and this costs him his job. His failed marriages are symptomatic of his inability to manage himself and others.

So, by recklessly divorcing Zahrah, Yazid forgets her labour of love to remain as a house wife. After the separation from Yazid, Zahrah becomes a career woman. This ensures her material independence. She is given a quarter in which she stays with her children until she is pressured to abandon it for her matrimonial house after she marries Nousah. When she starts experiencing squabbles in Nousah's house, she moves out because she has a job. Even after she re-unites with Nousah, she decides to stay in her quarters in order to be independent and to avoid the jealousy and rivalry of her co-wives, Salma and A'alimah.

Marriage harbours many agonies for women. In the cultural geography of the novel, tradition bestows the ownership and custody of children on the father, thereby denying the woman the joy of motherhood. Immediately after Zahrah's separation from Yazid, Zubaydah, whose world view is moulded by the male supremacist construct, asks Zahrah when Yazid is coming to take his children. She makes it clear that Yazid has the right to take his children when she says, 'No ... because they belong to him,.... the fathers have the children ... Yeah. ... that's our tradition, our culture.' (p. 47) On this tradition, Zahrah retorts:

> *Tradition...? To take my children...? Over my dead body! We both own the children ... not him alone. We could discuss their welfare together .... After all we both have the responsibility for them. But I can't just be deprived of them. (pp. 41-48)*

Ya-Shareef, whose identification with the feminist struggle is from the perspective of pure Islamic teachings, condemns the culture that gives the ownership of children exclusively to the male parent when he says:

I think... Zahrah was right. No particular parent has the sole right of ownership over children, as if in fact children are properties. It's a question of responsibilities and responsibilities are shared between the mother and the father. The tradition that overlooks this is defective (p. 48).

He goes further to explain the position of child or children ownership/custodianship in Islam as follows:

> *In any case, the Great Tradition under which the marriage that produced the children was contracted gives women, the mothers, prerogative of first taking charge of minors. The father has a chance only after a couple of other female relatives on the mother's side are considered... if they are non-existent* (p. 48).

Several years after Zahrah's separation from Yazid, she keeps custody of their children and when Yazid out of jealousy demands for his children after Zahrah is married to Nousah, she refuses to release them to him. Yazid's threat to take court action on this matter or Nousah's insistence that Zahrah gives the children to their father does not move her. Unequivocally, she tells Nousah:

> *I am not a paddy field where you go and throw your seeds, and at the end of the season, you harvest your crops and go away till another season of planting. The children belong to the two of us... the father and the mother and perhaps the latter even more so.* (p. 185)

Indeed, Zahrah never gives any of their children to Yazid. They remain with her but she allows them to be visiting their father. She is revolutionary. Like Ugadiya and Barrister Irene Offong in Ikonne's *Our Land* who confronts or puncture the patriarchal tradition that prohibits women's ownership of land in their community, she creates a social disequilibrium that interrogates a long settled cultural practice of male-parent ownership and custodianship of children in her society.

Yet Gimba underscores the serious implication of childlessness in marriage. A marriage without a child or children is especially problematic to the woman because the failure of procreation is always blamed on her. The inability of Salma and Nousah to produce children is put on the former. A'alimah, another wife of Nousah does not think that her husband is responsible for her inability to conceive. It is this cultural thinking and desperation to be pregnant that drives and sinks these co-wives into the mischievous world of the marabouts. Meanwhile Nousah has a fertility problem. When enlightened and concerned Miriam and her husband, Rashad, discover that Zahrah's inability to conceive is straining her relationship with her husband, Nousah, and reason that Zahrah cannot be held responsible for this since she has children in her former marriage, they bombard Nousah with anonymous letters asking him to go for a fertility test. It is after Nousah is treated of his fertility problem that Zahrah becomes pregnant. She loses the pregnancy after taking

the poisonous apples that nearly cost her her life. On behalf of Zahrah, Rashad and Mariam challenge the patriarchal notion that women alone are to blame for procreation problems in marriage. By the action of Mariam and Rashad, and the consequence on Nousah and Zahrah, Gimba seems to imply that in procreation problem in marriage, men should be reasonable and courageous enough to go for fertility tests and treat themselves of diseases relating to fertility rather than putting the blame of childlessness squarely on the women alone.

Man's chauvinism, greed, erotic aberration and bestiality all constitute serious provinces of women's tragedy. Contrary to the Quran injunction that women be called by their fathers' names, Yazid, though educated but patriarchal insists that Zahrah be called by his own name. After her separation from Yazid, Zahrah realizes with bitterness through her friend, Miriam that she is wrong to have taken her former husband's name as her surname. The practice of answering a husband's name to Zahrah upon her realization is, 'A small step in marital compromise, but a great leap towards marital subservience' (p.74).

The sorrow involved in answering the husband's name is that after divorce, the woman has to delete the former husband's name from her name and change to another after getting married. Meanwhile a divorced woman carries a social stigma that affects her and members of her family. Zahrah vows not to take any husband's surname, if she would ever marry again. Zahrah`s vow in this issue is one of the portrayals of Islamic feminist agenda of the writer in the novel. The tradition in which a woman has a husband`s name in her name is Western. In Islam, the woman married or unmarried answers the father's name.

Women pay heavily for men's erotic aberration and greed. Yazid is not content with Zahrah but also indulges in extra-marital affairs. It is his girl-friend who schemes the fall of Zahrah's erstwhile matrimonial bliss. Dan-Easker, a notorious criminal, attempts to rape Zahrah who is not only passing through the pain of divorce but also the apparent loss of her children. Zahrah wisely scares off Dan-Easker by telling him that she had separated from her husband because the husband has tested AIDS positive, 'because he has AIDS' (p.23). Frightened at the prospect of being infected, Dan-Easker lets Zahrah go. Thus with her wit, Zahrah subdues Dan-Easker's attempt to rape her, his superior physical power as a man and his possession of a gun notwithstanding. Being scared off, Dan-Easker tells Zahrah, 'And what are you undressing for? You want me to ... with your AIDS...? You want to destroy me... kill me?' (p. 23)

Some years later, Dan-Easker, in his bid to marry Zahrah kills Nousah, the second husband of Zahrah by poisoning some apples meant for him. Zahrah herself narrowly escapes death because she has only eaten a small part of the poisoned apples. By Nousah's death, Zahrah and her co-wives are reduced to sudden widowhood.

An-Najmu is an embodiment of religious desecration. Religion of God is supposed to usher in peace, love, social and moral sanity in the society. Religious scholars and preachers should not

only be the transmitters of religious messages but also to live exemplary lives. However, An-Najmu, a profound Islamic scholar, preacher and critic is ironically also an epitome of wickedness and hypocrisy. When corrupt government officials that he criticizes threaten to expose his life of debauchery, he stops preaching against them and becomes their ally. He is a dubious marabout with unrestrained lustful passion. He causes bitterness and enmity between Nousah's wives, Aalimah and Zahrah by telling the former that the latter was her obstacle to procreation and that as long as Zahrah remains in the house Aalimah will never be pregnant (p. 192). He also connives with Dan-Easker to kill Nousah by poisoning some of his apples so that upon his death, An-Najmu would marry his wife, Aalimah and Dan-Easker would have a way to marry Zahrah. This is after he has cajoled, sedated, violated and impregnated Aalimah. An-Najmu is said to be a mentor to many criminals in the society. Both Dan-Easker and An-Najmu cannot escape the consequences of their iniquities. Dan-Easker is caught by the long arm of the law and is sentenced to life imprisonment and death. On behalf of his victims, nature exerts a full measure of justice on An-Najmu. He dies and is cremated in an inexplicable inferno that engulfs his house.

Nousah cannot be exonerated from the offence of greed on the part of men that bring sorrow to women. Polygamy is accepted in his religion but with a condition that says, 'If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with orphans, marry one, two, three…' (p. 268). Nousah marries three wives but lack the wisdom and strength of character to manage them justly. Now, polygamy has a corollary: namely the promotion of jealousy and rivalry among co-wives. It turns Nousah's house into an acrimonious theatre of war. It makes Aalimah to subscribe to Salma's idea to seek the assistance of a marabout to fight Zahrah. The search for the assistance of the marabout to fight Zahrah brings Aalimah to An-Najmu who sedates, violates and gets her pregnant.

Rivalry and jealousy among co-wives in polygamous settings make women to become petty, for which men allege it is a weakness on the part of women. Nousah alleges women's jealousy when Zahrah discreetly cancels her plan to celebrate her first anniversary of marriage with Nousah to avoid 'a burdensome precedence for him.' This is how Nousah interprets her stance, 'Women ...! Many of you are so incurably infested with jealousy.' (p. 78)

Miriam and Zahrah debunk the popular notion that women are very jealous. Miriam rebuts Nousah's view when she says, "And thank God... we have the strength to survive the infestation... If men were to be visited with just a tenth of our affliction, they'd die!' (p. 178)

Zahrah gives a far-reaching annulment of the notion of women being the weaker sex by the invocation of the story of deadly rivalry and jealousy of the male sex against his own kind in a mythological garden as told her by her grandmother (pp. 171 – 181). The polygamous marriage practice in the society that enables men to marry many wives but women not marrying more than one husband at a time is as a result of man's extreme rivalry and jealousy of his kind over his wife. The myth which Zahrah narrates is a living one because in the society of the novel, men have the

liberty to marry more than one wife at the same time but the woman cannot because it is not acceptable to men. Nousah is dumbfounded after the myth is narrated. Symbolically, patriarchy faces expiration.

The sorrow that man's greed unleashes on the woman is not only in his indulgence in polygamy but also in his quest for quick money. The husband of Zahrah's great-grand-mother contracted somebody to kill their only child in order to make money thereby throwing Zahrah's great grand-mother into great agony (pp. 291-293). Similarly, in his bestiality and denigrating attitude to women, man inhibits women's happiness. Innocent Zahrah and her children are attacked by mobs in a protest against the increase in rent by landlords in New Tymbuktu. Zahrah is abused and beaten to the point of coma. Her children are to be cremated in the car, but with the help of the humane and courageous Miriam and her husband, Rashad the children are rescued.

The couples, Miriam and Rashad, who are security personnel, are not on duty when the mobs attack Zahrah and her children. Miriam, in particular, propelled by the spirit of motherhood moves her husband to save Zahrah's children from the hoodlums when she says:

> *Not on duty...? As a woman that knows what motherhood entails, I'm always on duty when it comes to matters like this... if I watch those children burn (sic), cremated, life for me would become a series of nightmares, in continual! (p.34)*

The couples become great and loyal friends to Zahrah after saving her children. Miriam is always a source of emotional therapy to Zahrah. Rashad and Miriam do not belong to the same faith but they are happily married. Both have love, understanding and care for each other. Gimba uses the couple to show that regardless of differences in the religion of a couple, matrimonial bliss is achievable provided the variables of love, understanding and care are available.

Zahrah suffers from the denigrating attitude of men to women in her work-place. Her hard work and resourcefulness earn her double promotion in her work-place but out of envy and lack of acknowledgement of Zahrah's ability, Midioka, a senior colleague takes to scandalizing her name saying that she does not deserve the promotion. He bitterly complains, 'That's what you women always say... you deserve it...worked for four years without any promotion and some people worked for only one year and earn a double promotion'(p.89).

To Midioka, Zahrah used 'bottom power' to get the promotion. He tells Zahrah in these words, '.... in gratuitous bawdry benefiting from gracious lewdness...' (p. 83). Zahrah boldly defends her dignity by slapping Midioka twice. Even when they appear before their supervisor, Nousah, she could not

be cowed. When the patriarch, Nousah, blames her for first assaulting Midioka, she is not remorseful. Nousah says, 'And for a woman, to first attack a man... it's unbecoming. Women don't do what you did.' (pp. 96 – 97) Zahrah is equally to challenge her boss:

> *So, a man has a right to treat a woman anyhow…? I am not crazy, sir…. I reacted like a normal human being ... women aren't created only to allow men to visit all sorts of outrage on them. (pp. 96 – 97)*

Unambiguously, Zahrah is the quintessential woman who rejects women's maltreatment by men. The height of her fight against patriarchy is her joining the women's societies. In a tone that elicits our sympathy, the author tells of Zahrah's belief and determination:

> *Though, she believes that such ought not to be a woman's life. It must change. Men ought to realize that. And that was why she had long joined the women's societies. She believed she should fight for women. Whensoever she looked back, she feared what Umaymah and Bilqees would one day go through at the hands of men Used. Abused, and thrown into the toilet, and flushed down like toilet paper! (p.296)*

Conclusion:

In *Sacred Apples,* Gimba works for the social transformation of women from a subjugated position to a position of equality with men and the moral rejuvenation of the entire society. In so doing, he lays bare the root causes of female subjugation, that is, religious fraud, cultural and social factors that form the basis of women's subjugation. Through monologue and dialogues of or among his characters and the authorial voice, issues of religious fraud are exposed and analyzed. In the same vein, the poverty of logic inherent in some cultural constructs is highlighted. Besides, the author's heroines are presented as determined, eloquent, wise, strong and revolutionary in order to convey the message that women, too, have personalities of valour like the men. For his moralistic mission, he has created exemplars: men and women of noble character ending nobly while the ignoble end ignobly.

Gimba`s feminist aspiration is Islamic. The thrust of Islamic feminism is the liberation of women within the framework of Islam. The school of Islamic feminism believes that there is oppression of women in Islamic societies as a result of degradation of Islamic tradition and distortion of the sacred text. It buys such Western ideas as universal suffrage, human rights, educational and economic empowerment of women and the involvement of both men and women in the liberation of women but it is opposed to the radical feminism of the Western world. This is why the radical feminist disposition in the heroine is vanquished for Islamic feminism. Thus her hatred for marriage and determination to stay as single parent after her separation from Yazid is reversed. Her condemnation of polygamy is faulted. Zahrah marries polygamous Nousah. Her excessive fear

of marriage for Umaymah is subdued. Umaymah marries Dr. Harris. Zahrah cherishes motherhood which is an ideal of Islamic feminism. Zahrah and Miriam are educated and materially independent. They are visible and active. In these characters, Gimba portrays women`s educational and economic empowerment as critical in the negotiation of patriarchy. Zahrah realizes that the women society which she joins to fight patriarchy has no 'blue print' but dependent on mundane intellectualism. The catching slogan of the society, 'what men can do, women can do better' is a misconception of gender equality, 'a self serving equalitarian rhetoric of infantile feminism' (p.91). Zahrah sees radical feminism as that which 'dewomanises' the woman. It is a feminism that makes women behaves like men. It is a feminism that makes women to dress like men exposing the sensuous parts of their anatomy. She resigns her membership of the women society. Finally, Ya-Shareef, leads Zahrah to believe that her feminism should be rooted in Islam and Zahrah herself is convinced that Islam 'is quite equalitarians' (P. 305).

Gimba has genuinely identified himself with the plight of women in his society. *Sacred Apples* is a remarkable propagation of Islamic feminism but with some weaknesses. Zahrah's development of a hysterical personality in her fear of men makes her a psychological victim of the patriarchal order she fights gallantly. Zahrah's hysterical personality may not inspire some women to fight against the patriarchal order. Moreover, viewed from the point of social realism, Gimba's vision of Islamic feminism may be difficult to realize in Northern Nigeria today, considering the fact that the attempt to revive Islamic laws in the region in recent times has not produced any significant result. The region is not insulated from the effects of Western civilization. What is more, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is not Islamic, and it is over and above any form of law in the country. Suffice it to say that Gimba's Islamic feminist project may be a utopian scheme.

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