



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF SELECTED ARABIC LITERARY PROSE WORKS OF ḤĀMID MAḤMŪD IBRĀHĪM AL-HIJRĪ

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Abstract

Literature, as a branch of the humanities, reflects the socio-cultural realities of its environment. Like other generic forms, Arabic literary prose in Nigeria contributes to portraying societal issues, including the status and treatment of women. With a focus on gender inequalities, this study aims to examine the depiction of women in Nigerian society through Arabic literary prose. Purposive sampling technique was used to select three novels by Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī (*Khādimul-waṭan*, *Ma'sātul-ḥubb* and *Intiqām*), which were analysed through thematic and textual analysis within a qualitative descriptive design, using feminist literary criticism as the interpretive framework. The findings reveal that al-Hijrī writes as a sympathetic chronicler of women's condition: his prose exposes, with evident compassion, the class, religious and patriarchal pressures under which women suffer, yet it stops short of granting women decisive agency over their own fates. The study concludes that Nigerian Arabic literary prose is nonetheless a valuable medium for raising awareness of women's issues and prompting reflection on gender balance.

Keywords: women's representation, Nigerian Arabic literature, feminist literary criticism, gender inequality, al-Hijri

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Creative writing is, without doubt, a reflective documentation depicting different components of any given society. Arabic literary prose has, of recent, been playing the role of projecting society by highlighting the gaps and inequalities in many societal practices. Gender inequality is a ubiquitous thematic focus of contemporary literary writers, and Nigerian writers of Arabic literature have also been engaging with it. Given the commodification of women in Nigerian culture, and Arabic literature of Nigerian authorship being heavily influenced by the practices of the Islamic religion, it is highly relevant to assess how women are presented in the prose works of Arabic literature in Nigeria.

Commodification is described as the attitude of valuing things not for their utility but for their power to impress others or for their resale possibilities (Siegel, 2006). This definition aptly captures how women are viewed and treated in most Nigerian societies, irrespective of location and size. Nigeria, like many other African nations, is largely patriarchal in nature, and this explains why women are often subjected to pleasing men. The inequality accommodated by culture leaves women at a great disadvantage that requires conscientious effort to arrest and bridge. In these works, al-Hijrī exposes the unfair treatment of women in Nigerian society in many forms. He also presents how women themselves, sometimes unconsciously, aid the narrative of impressing men. This paper therefore examines how al-Hijrī throws light on inequality against women and advances positive approaches to arresting the problem.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian society is largely patriarchal, and women frequently occupy subordinate positions across social, economic and cultural life. While the representation of women has been studied extensively in Nigerian literature written in English, Arabic literary prose of Nigerian authorship, a growing but under-examined body of writing, has received little critical attention on this question. Existing scholarship on Nigerian Arabic literature has established the field's Nigerian character and thematic range, but few studies have examined how women are specifically portrayed within it, or how such portrayals engage with the gender realities of the society the literature reflects. This study addresses that gap by examining the representation of women in three Arabic prose works by Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī, asking how a male Nigerian author writing in Arabic, a language closely tied to Islamic and cultural tradition, depicts the condition, treatment and agency of women.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

- i. examine how female characters are portrayed in the selected Arabic prose works of al-Hijrī;
- ii. identify the themes relating to gender inequality and the treatment of women in the texts;
- iii. analyse, through feminist literary criticism, the extent to which the novels represent women as passive subjects or as agents of their own advancement; and
- iv. assess the contribution of Nigerian Arabic literary prose to raising awareness of women's issues and promoting gender balance in society.

Brief Profile of Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī

Because literature often reflects the experience and ideology of its writer, a brief account of al-Hijrī's background is relevant to understanding his treatment of women. Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī was born in Aigoro, in Ilorin East Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria, on 9 May 1976 – the same rural, Muslim, Yoruba setting in which his novels are set. He began his education under his father, who taught him the Qur'an and elementary subjects, before studying at the Dārul-'ulūm School of Arabic Studies in Ilorin and completing his secondary education at Dārul Hijrah for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Kano between 1993 and 1998 (Jamiu, 2014).

He proceeded to the Republic of Chad in 1999, earning a Bachelor of Arts with distinction in 2003, and later a higher diploma and a Master's degree, both with distinction, from the affiliated university in Libya. On returning to Nigeria in 2007 he undertook the mandatory National Youth Service – an experience that directly informs *Khādimul-waṭan* (Jamiu, 2014). He presently lectures at Adamu Augie College of Education, Argungu, Kebbi State, and has recently completed a doctoral degree. A prolific writer, his works of creative writing and literary research include *Khādimul-waṭan* (Youth Service Corps Member), *as-Sayyid ar-Raīs* (Mr. President), *Ma'sātul-ḥubb* (The Tragedy of Love) and *Intiqām* (Revenge) (Jamiu, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in feminist literary criticism, an approach concerned with how literature represents women, exposes the workings of patriarchy, and either reinforces or challenges the social structures that subordinate them. As a mode of reading, feminist criticism attends to the portrayal of female characters, the distribution of power and agency between men and women in the narrative, and the values a text conveys, whether explicitly or implicitly, about women's place in society (Giang & Dan, 2024). It therefore provides an appropriate lens for a study whose central concern is the depiction of women in literary prose.

Feminist literary criticism is not a single, uniform position but a family of approaches. Its mainstream Western strands have tended to emphasise women's individual autonomy and self-assertion, often framing liberation as the rejection of male authority (Giang & Dan,, 2024). African feminist thought, however, has argued that such an emphasis does not fully capture the realities of women's lives on the continent, where family, community, motherhood and religion remain central to women's sense of self and to the strategies through which they negotiate their circumstances (Nnaemeka, 2004). From this perspective, women's advancement is frequently pursued not through rupture from men and community but through negotiation within them, and complementarity rather than confrontation is often the operative ideal (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). This study draws on feminist literary criticism in this broad sense: it uses the framework's core attention to female representation and agency, while remaining alert to the specifically Nigerian and Islamic-cultural setting in which al-Hijrī writes.

Applying this framework, the analysis reads al-Hijrī's female characters along two related axes: first, how the texts represent the conditions women face (the discrimination, pressure and manipulation to which they are subjected); and second, the degree of agency the texts grant them (whether women appear primarily as passive subjects of their circumstances or as participants in shaping their own outcomes). This dual focus allows the study to move beyond describing what happens to female characters toward assessing what the novels, taken together, suggest about women's status and possibilities in the society they depict.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, an approach suited to literary inquiry because it allows the researcher to interpret meaning, theme and characterisation rather than to measure or quantify (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The design supports close reading of the texts and the drawing out of the social meanings embedded in narrative and character.

The research material (data) was selected through purposive sampling. Three Arabic prose works by Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī (*Khādimul-waṭan*, *Ma'sātul-ḥubb* and *Intiqām*) were chosen on the basis of two criteria: (i) that the works are original Arabic prose written by a Nigerian author and set within Nigerian society, so that they reflect the cultural context under study; and (ii) that female characters and their experiences feature significantly in the narratives, making them suitable for a study of women's representation. Limiting the sample to a single author was a deliberate choice that permits sustained, in-depth analysis of one writer's representation of women rather than a broad but shallow survey.

The texts were analysed using thematic and textual analysis conducted through the lens of feminist literary criticism. Two literary elements formed the units of analysis: characterisation (how female characters are constructed, what roles they

occupy, and the degree of agency they are granted) and theme (the recurring subjects concerning women, gender and their treatment that the narratives develop).

Synopsis of the Selected Texts

Khādimul-waṭan (Youth Service Corps Member)

First published in 2008, this novel is a memoir of the author's mandatory year of national youth service, which every Nigerian graduate below the age limit is required to render. The protagonist, Nūr, a graduate of Arabic and Islamic Studies educated in the neighbouring Chad Republic, where he finished with distinction, faces obstacles even before service begins. His certificate, written in Arabic, must be translated into English — a task that can only be done at the Chadian embassy, whose location he cannot readily establish. He travels to Lagos only to learn the embassy is in Abuja, and eventually completes the process with an official's help. A second obstacle awaits at the National Youth Service Corps office in Abuja, where a female desk officer, examining his certificate, questions what use his discipline could be to Nigeria and tells him that he and his kind are suited only to mosques and leading prayers.

Having nearly lost the service year to these hurdles, Nūr surmounts them and enters the orientation camp. There the cultural distance between his religious upbringing and secular camp life becomes vivid, most strikingly during a tug-of-war game that requires him to hold a female colleague's waist — a demand that leaves him shocked and reluctant, to his colleagues' amusement. The remainder of his service passes without incident until, on his journey home, armed robbers stop his vehicle and ransack the passengers. On seeing Nūr's NYSC uniform, the gang's leader orders every stolen valuable returned, explaining that he and his men had once been hopeful corps members like Nūr, driven to crime by years of joblessness after service. He advises Nūr to look beyond government employment for his survival, so as not to share their fate.

Ma'sātul-ḥubb (The Tragedy of Love)

Set in Aigoro, close to Apado in Ilorin East, the novel follows the family of Adebayo, a renowned hunter, and his wife Funlayo, whose courtship began when she bought his game. Their marriage produces a beautiful daughter, Ayoka. When war breaks out between the two communities, Adebayo is killed, leaving Funlayo with Ayoka as her only companion. Ayoka falls in love with 'Abdullah, but Funlayo forbids the match: the family is Christian, while 'Abdullah is a Muslim from an abjectly poor household. When the couple persist and become the village's gossip, Funlayo sends thugs to beat 'Abdullah in the village square; badly injured, he flees Aigoro for safety.

In Lagos, taken in by a distant kinsman, his fortunes turn — his fervent prayers are credited with ending the childless couple's long wait for a baby, and in gratitude the kinsman funds his law degree at the University of Lagos. There he meets Bose, a fellow student whose attachment to him provokes a vicious assault by a secret gang whose leader also desires her. Still in love with Ayoka, 'Abdullah returns to the village

to press his suit; Funlayo has by now relented and approved the marriage. But the reunion comes too late. Ayoka's beauty has faded, and as a qualified lawyer 'Abdullah cannot imagine marrying a woman who can barely read or write. He returns to Lagos and marries Bose, while Ayoka, unable to bear the loss of her only love, takes poison. Discovering her dying daughter, Funlayo pleads with her to stay and, in her grief, vows to follow her to the grave – the tragedy consuming both mother and daughter.

Intiqām (Revenge)

The novel centres on Ronke, a tailor's apprentice, and Tunde, a fresh graduate serving as a corps member who meets her while she is being punished for lateness and intervenes on her behalf, sparking their relationship. It deepens into serious commitment, unknown to Ronke that Tunde is only biding his time to leave her. Several motives drive him: her lower class as a mere tailor; repeated abortions for him that, a doctor confides, have damaged her womb; and a diviner's claim that Ronke is the obstacle to his prosperity – seemingly confirmed by his long joblessness, which reduces him to work as a gateman, where he begins courting other women. Ronke's elder sister, Bola, visits to find her beaten by rivals – among them Bose, who claims a prior engagement to Tunde and publicly exposes Ronke's infertility. Estranged from a family that had opposed the match, a dejected Ronke resolves to enter prostitution.

On her first night in a brothel run by a woman named Grace, an elderly patron, Alhaji Mansūr, notices she is a novice and, instead of demanding intimacy, hears her story and urges her to leave the trade. After several harmless meetings he sponsors her to London to train in fashion design; on her return she builds a celebrated business patronised by the élite. She marries the Alhaji's son, Najīb, newly returned from studies abroad, who enters politics and wins the governorship, making Ronke the first lady. Meanwhile Tunde, still scheming against her, meets only failure. During a hospital charity visit Ronke encounters him, now disabled by an accident; he learns from the diviner that he had misread the original prophecy, which had told him to keep Ronke, not cast her out.

ANALYSIS

Arabic is the first language of formal knowledge in Nigeria, having preceded other known languages of reading and writing in the country. It first reached Nigeria through the ancient trans-Saharan trade and became well established much later through the religion of Islam (Galadanchi, 1993, p. 17). The roles women played in spreading the knowledge of Arabic through Islam are well documented; the concern of this paper, however, is women as presented in the Arabic literary works of Ḥamid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī. As Abdulkarim (2020, p. 171) observes, women are ranked lower than men across the indices of development in the country and are systematically relegated to inferior positions. Using the literary elements of characterisation and theme, the representation of women in the writer's works is examined below.

Characterisation

One of the ingredients that make novels attractive to readers is good characterisation (Najm, 1959, p. 51), since actions are woven around characters in literary narratives as they are in real life. Although it takes more than characters for a novel to mirror the society it depicts, it is important that they be carefully chosen by the writer (Qutb, 2010, p. 88).

In the first novel, al-Hijrī presents the desk officer at the National Youth Service Corps office in Abuja, where foreign certificates are evaluated before prospective corps members are cleared for mobilisation. The following exchange occurs between Nūr and the officer:

Were you not a student of Arabic?

Yes, I studied Arabic in Chad.

And what do you want with national service?

Because government doesn't serve whoever did not serve her.

Are you sure you can serve this nation with Arabic?

And why not?

Don't you know that you and your likes' place is preaching and leading prayers?

But I have a degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

Even if your certificate were that of a doctoral degree, government cannot benefit anything from you.

Thank you, your honour. The important thing is that you help me submit this letter that your superior requested be forwarded from the Chadian Embassy.

I'll do that, although I'm sure it wouldn't be of any benefit. (al-Hijrī, 2022, pp. 31-32)

This female officer's inhuman attitude toward a prospective corps member is not typical of Nigerian women generally; it appears to stem from a particular prejudice born of either religious bias or narrow exposure. al-Hijrī does not usually present women in such terms — his other works incline strongly toward positive representation — and this figure is in no way among the principal characters of the story.

In the remaining two novels, al-Hijrī characterises women in a way that truthfully represents what they experience in a typical Nigerian society. In *Ma'sātul-ḥubb*, although Ayoka is not the protagonist, the events of the novel revolve around

her and her mother Funlayo from beginning to end; other women of importance include 'Abdullah's kinsman's wife and Bose, who later becomes 'Abdullah's wife. In *Intiqām*, Ronke, the central character around whom the entire plot turns, is presented as both an enduring and a faithful woman.

Other women of real importance in that story include Kike, the orange-seller Tunde meets while working as a gateman; Bola, Ronke's elder sister, who accommodates her; Bose, who claims to have been engaged to Tunde in their village before he met Ronke; and Iyabo, Tunde's eventual wife. Several further female characters also play significant roles. It is of great relevance that al-Hijrī has a clear vision of the importance of women in society and accords them due recognition through characterisation. Such treatment by an indigenous creative writer in Arabic attests to a positive representation of women in Arabic creative writing.

Read together, these characters reveal a consistent pattern in al-Hijrī's construction of women. His female figures are drawn with sympathy and individuality, but agency is distributed unevenly among them. Funlayo wields decisive power, but exercises it destructively, against her own daughter; Ayoka is granted the will to love but not the means to secure her happiness, and is ultimately defined by her suffering; the desk officer in *Khādimul-waṭan* holds institutional authority but is reduced to a single note of prejudice. Only Ronke is permitted a full arc from victimhood to eminence — and even hers, as the analysis below shows, is an agency largely conferred by others rather than seized. al-Hijrī thus recognises women's centrality to the social world he depicts while stopping short of granting most of them full control over their own fates.

Themes

Theme, as defined in Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary, is "a subject of discourse; a topic to be discussed or developed in speech or writing..." (2010, p. 1301); hence, theme is the major content of a literary piece of any genre of literature. It is a fact that novel started late in Arabic literature of Nigerian authorship (Katibi, 2019, p. 96); this, however, does not imply that novels written in Arabic are not available or that their thematic discourse does not cover many human endeavours including women concerns. On this, Jimba (2015, p. 76) says: "surely Nigerian literature written in Arabic language mirrors life and settings that are Nigerian in all ramifications".

The first of the works being discussed here deals very little with women issues as the most visible character in it is that of the secretary in an office and few female members mentioned when Nūr was asked to hold a lady's waist in a tug-of-war-game. The remaining two works are wholly concerned with women: *Ma'sātul-ḥubb* follows Ayoka's story from beginning to end, and *Intiqām* is entirely about Ronke.

Early one morning, after dreaming of her late husband, Funlayo wakes her daughter and they set out for the farm. On the way, the mother advises her:

...but my dear precious daughter, it is very important that you safeguard your future, for my hope in you is huge and my expectations high; do not disappoint me by betraying my trust. You are my only remaining hope in life! What will I tell your father when we meet if you marry this man who does not belong to our religion and whose prayer is different from ours? Your father was an undiluted Christian in faith and practice; I am not pleased with your connection with ‘Abdullah – he does not impress me in any way. He is an abjectly poor young man with nothing to his name; he lives on his thin, dying animals and his little unyielding farm; he surely has no future and lacks prospects... (al-Hijrī, 2013, p. 15)

This passage exemplifies what many young women endure in the society: their personal feelings count for very little. The issue here is not male chauvinism but the sacrifice of a young woman's feelings and future to religious prejudice and pessimism about a suitor. Many women experience this socio-religious pressure, even in urban settings. Ayoka remained steadfast in her love for ‘Abdullah, hoping he would return, but another woman, Bose, had won him in faraway Lagos. Rumours of his marriage reached Ayoka, and only when she saw the wedding invitation did she believe them; she then took poison and died shortly afterward.

Finding her daughter dying, Funlayo pleaded with her to stay, saying that she had now approved the relationship – but it was too late. She wailed:

Don't go far, for I am coming to you; don't leave me alone, for I am now a miserable and hopeless woman without you. Tell your father that I will join you both today, not tomorrow. Wait, so that we go together. (al-Hijrī, 2013, p. 120)

Intiqām concerns a man's manipulation of a woman for his own gain, in which the sacrifices she makes count for little. Ronke is in a precarious situation from the outset, as the following passage attests:

Ronke wakes from sleep at the sound of her fiancé's footsteps as he prepares to set out for work; he secured the job after a strenuous two-year search following his mandatory service to the nation. The job he obtained was manning the gate at one of the large companies in the middle of Lagos. (al-Hijrī, 2024, p. 7)

It is clear from the start that she is in for a difficult time. Tunde soon begins to show irresponsibility; when Ronke complains that there is no food, all he can say is that salaries are inadequate, goods are costly, and she should try something from her end, trusting that God will provide (al-Hijrī, 2024, p. 8). To this domestic hardship is added an external assault by Bose, who claims to have been Tunde's fiancée in their village. She arrives with friends while Tunde is at work and accuses Ronke of stealing him; but for the intervention of neighbours, the beating could have been worse. As she leaves, Bose hurls insults:

You criminal and fool! Do you think it possible for you to snatch away my beloved Tunde? I have searched for you a long time until I found you hidden

in this hole you call a house. You local whore and failure, leave my lover to me, for he shall marry no one but me! Do you understand, you lunatic? (al-Hijrī, 2024, p. 28)

The reason Tunde clings to Ronke despite not loving her emerges after she leaves his house: he hurries to his herbalist to report that a charm meant to bind her fortune has mistakenly been taken away by her. The herbalist reassures him and promises a stronger fortification. Back in Lagos, Tunde is given a better job with an official car, and, convinced Ronke had been the source of his misfortune, forgets her entirely.

Ronke returns to her village rather than stay with her sister Bola in the city. Before long she goes back to Lagos intending to enter prostitution; it is in a brothel run by a woman named Grace that fortune turns for her. Alhaji Mansūr, observing that she is a novice, invites her over but, instead of demanding intimacy, asks only to hear the story of her life and how she came to this trade. Moved by her account, he encourages her to leave the brothel, and after several meetings in which he never touches her, sponsors her to London to improve her fashion-design skills. On her return to Nigeria she becomes a household name in her profession, patronised even by the élite.

Najīb, Alhaji Mansūr's son, returns home on completing his studies abroad. He and Ronke are introduced, and their relationship blossoms into marriage. Najīb enters politics, contests and wins the gubernatorial election, and Ronke becomes the first lady. Tunde, meanwhile, does not abandon his machinations against his former fiancée, but is always met with failure. During one of her routine hospital visits to help settle the bills of the less privileged, Ronke enters the ward where Tunde is being treated after an accident that has damaged his spinal cord. After she leaves, Tunde dismisses everyone but the soothsayer who had foretold that Ronke was hindering his fortune, and the following exchange ensues:

Mr. Herbalist, you are welcome.

How is your health now? Is there any improvement?

There is an issue that has troubled me for days and robbed me of sleep. Do you remember that years ago I came to you about a matter between Ronke, my first fiancée, and me? You said, after divination, that she was born under a lucky star and would become successful. You added that she would aid my success – and that I should distance her from me, or eliminate her.

My son, I did not say that.

What do you mean? Did you not tell me to get rid of her?

It is you who did not understand me properly, and did not care to. (al-Hijrī, 2024, pp. 142–143)

With this lament, Tunde admits he has made a grave mistake, for the broken pot can no longer be mended.

Across the two novels centred on women, a common thematic structure emerges: female suffering originates not in a single villain but in the intersecting pressures of class, religion and patriarchal expectation. Ayoka is destroyed by the collision of religious prohibition and class mobility — her mother's faith-based objection and 'Abdullah's later class-based rejection form two halves of the same trap. Ronke is subjected to class contempt, the stigma of infertility, and a man's readiness to discard her on a diviner's word. In both cases the texts locate the source of women's misfortune in social structure rather than individual malice, which is precisely what makes them legible as social criticism: al-Hijrī's concern is less to blame particular men than to expose the conditions under which women are made to suffer.

Comparative Analysis

Placing the three novels side by side clarifies both the range and the limits of al-Hijrī's representation of women. The works can be read as a progression along the axis of female agency, from near-absence to conferred success.

In *Khādimul-waṭan*, women are peripheral. The only significant female figure, the desk officer, is granted authority but no depth; she functions as an obstacle in Nūr's story rather than as a subject in her own right. Women here are the object of a passing, negative glance rather than a sustained concern.

Ma'sātul-ḥubb moves women to the centre but grants them agency only to withhold its rewards. Funlayo and Ayoka drive the entire narrative, yet the novel is a tragedy precisely because their choices lead nowhere: Funlayo's authority is real but ruinous, and Ayoka's constancy is rewarded with abandonment and death. Here the texts represent women as fully realised but ultimately powerless — acted upon by religion, class and circumstance more than acting upon them.

Intiqām goes furthest, allowing its heroine to rise from humiliation to the office of first lady. However, Ronke's ascent is instructive in its mechanism: at every turning point her deliverance is supplied by a man — Alhaji Mansūr rescues her from the brothel and funds her training, and marriage to his son secures her status. Her defining qualities are endurance and faithfulness rather than initiative; the revenge of the title is executed by fate, not by Ronke herself. Her success, though real, is conferred rather than seized.

The comparison therefore reveals a paradox at the heart of al-Hijrī's work. His sympathy for women deepens across the three novels (from indifference, to tragic attention, to eventual triumph) but in none of them do women achieve their ends through their own decisive agency. This is the crucial distinction between al-Hijrī as a sympathetic chronicler of women's oppression and the advocate that a thoroughgoing feminist reading would require: he documents the injustice women suffer with

evident compassion, but the resolution of their struggles is granted to them by others, chiefly men, rather than won by their own hand.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in relation to the four research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: How are female characters portrayed in the selected Arabic prose works of al-Hijrī?

al-Hijrī portrays women with sympathy and individuality but grants them uneven agency. Across the three novels, female characters range from the peripheral and negatively drawn (the desk officer in *Khādimul-waṭan*) through the fully realised but powerless (Funlayo and Ayoka in *Ma'sātul-ḥubb*) to the enduring and eventually elevated (Ronke in *Intiqām*). Women are consistently central to the social world the novels depict, but most are denied active control over their own fates.

Research Question 2: What themes relating to gender inequality and the treatment of women emerge from the texts?

The dominant theme is that women's suffering originates in social structure rather than individual villainy. Female misfortune in the texts arises from the intersection of class, religion and patriarchal expectation: Ayoka is trapped between her mother's religious objection and 'Abdullah's class-based rejection, while Ronke is subjected to class contempt, the stigma of infertility, and a man's willingness to discard her on a diviner's word. The novels thus function as social criticism, exposing the conditions under which women are made to suffer.

Research Question 3: To what extent do the novels present women as passive subjects or as agents of their own advancement?

The novels represent women predominantly as subjects acted upon rather than as agents acting. Even Ronke, the one character permitted to rise from humiliation to eminence, does so through agency conferred by others (rescued and funded by Alhaji Mansūr and elevated through marriage to his son) rather than through her own decisive initiative; her defining traits are endurance and faithfulness, and the revenge of the title is delivered by fate rather than by her hand. In none of the three works does a woman secure her ends through self-driven action.

Research Question 4: What contribution does Nigerian Arabic literary prose make to awareness of women's issues and gender balance?

Notwithstanding this limit on female agency, the works make a substantive contribution to gender awareness. By documenting the injustices women face with

evident compassion (and by doing so in Arabic, a language closely associated with the Muslim, patriarchal culture under examination), al-Hijrī's prose sensitises readers to the reality of women's mistreatment and models the possibility of women's advancement, even where that advancement is not yet self-authored. Nigerian Arabic literary prose thus emerges as a medium capable of raising awareness of women's issues and prompting reflection on gender balance.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that al-Hijrī writes as a close and sympathetic observer of women's condition rather than as a committed feminist. Nigerian society, as his works depict it, is dominated by men's concerns, and the novels beam light on how little attention is given to women's issues. They mirror inequality in the handling of women's concerns not only by men but by women themselves, as seen in the way Ayoka is denied the freedom to choose her partner by no other person than her own mother (a scenario which ended in the tragic death of both mother and daughter). The desk officer in the first novel is a brief flash of negativity from a woman, though even her conduct results from prejudice. The last novel elaborately represents how women are manipulated to fulfil men's needs: Ronke does succeed at last, but the trials she endures are inhuman and reveal the cruelty visited upon women.

A brief critique of the works helps to grasp their shortcomings in representing the struggles women face. The feminist writer's concern is to sensitise and motivate women toward eradicating male domination. This is not the concern of al-Hijrī, whose sole aim is to shed light on the inequalities visited upon women. In the three novels, women nowhere consciously assume influential status except in *Intiqām*, where the protagonist becomes the governor's wife. A thoroughgoing feminist writer would prefer to place women in the driving seat, and would want female characters to take decisive, self-initiated action toward freedom rather than being rescued or fought for by men.

This judgement, however, must be qualified. Measured against Western radical feminism, al-Hijrī's reliance on male benefactors to rescue his heroines appears a failure of feminist vision. Viewed through African feminist thought, which values complementarity, community and negotiation with, rather than rupture from, family and men (Nnaemeka, 2004), Ronke's advancement through cooperative relationships is not necessarily a denial of female agency but a culturally grounded form of it. The limitation in al-Hijrī's work is therefore better located not in his heroines' recourse to men as such, but in the passivity with which they await deliverance: even within a complementary framework, his women are given to endure rather than to negotiate, to be chosen rather than to choose.

Finally, al-Hijrī's works hinge women's advancement on spiritual guidance rather than on conscious personal planning. Ronke, following Alhaji Mansūr's guidance, depends on the assistance of others to transform her misfortune into success. In more thoroughly feminist narratives, the steps toward success are expected

to be initiated by the woman herself, or inspired by other women, without overbearing male involvement.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of women in three Arabic prose works of Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī. It finds that al-Hijrī writes as a sympathetic chronicler of women's condition: his novels expose, with evident compassion, the class, religious and patriarchal pressures under which women suffer, yet they stop short of granting women decisive agency over their own fates. Even his most successful heroine rises through the intervention of others rather than by her own hand. That this critique comes from a writer working in Arabic is itself significant, and it responds to Eke's (2021) call for representation that de-stereotypes women's expected roles and celebrates their competencies and narratives. The study concludes that Nigerian Arabic literary prose is nonetheless a valuable medium for raising awareness of women's issues and prompting reflection on gender balance, and it recommends that future writers move beyond documenting women's oppression toward depicting women as agents of their own advancement. Further research might extend this inquiry to a wider range of authors and texts, and to a fuller comparison between Arabic and English-language representations of women in Nigerian writing.

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