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Underlining religious sidelining: Islamic Feminism and  
Marxism in Mohammed Umar's *Amina*

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## SYNOPSIS

Having received scant critical attention, primarily due to the tendency to be read as an ideological manifesto rather than as a well developed piece of literature, Nigerian novelist Mohammed Umar's novel *Amina* (2005) is considered by critics to be representative of Marxist overtones, comprising references to literary and political works also closely associated with Marxist thought on the conception of an equitable society. Nevertheless, as this study shows, it is possible to delineate an ostensibly Islamic framework within which the novel and its characters emphatically operate, prompting the novel's main protagonist Amina to take up the cause of women's rights, social justice and economic welfare in her society. As this analysis will demonstrate, the obvious Islamic influence on Amina's mission for women's socio-economic justice and equity are evident in the explicit references to and reproductions of Islamic texts in the narrative—the Qur'an, the hadith and more particularly the Prophet Muhammad's farewell sermon. Read within an Islamic feminist framework of feminist political action as found in the Qur'an and Islamic literature, proposed by notable feminist thinkers Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke and Hiba Rauf, among others, this paper will posit Umar's re-examination of concepts that are typically associated with Marx's ideology, and that are eagerly labeled as Socialist, resulting in a conceptual and theoretical imbalance that accounts for the marginalization of religion in postcolonial literatures.

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Social and historical realities of African women's lives must be considered in any meaningful examination of women in African literature (Carole Boyce Davies, 1986, p. 6). African texts, as cultural productions, must not be decontextualized from the cultural contexts that gave them life to which they refer. Any epistemology or theory that is alien to the African environment must be used guardedly as a frame of reference, at best, and not as a substitute for the literary texts themselves (Obioma Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 22).

## Introduction

In a recent essay on the work of literature, its uses and purpose, Simon Gikandi alludes to the well-known and ever-present challenge faced by non-European teachers of European literatures in sustaining “literature's mandate as a mode of consciousness outside its universalist claims” (Gikandi, p.12). Gikandi raises the important point on the sensitivity to historical difference by drawing attention to the flawed “universalist claims” by colonial writers who assumed that the monuments and places they were writing about had universal resonance, thereby “enhancing the colonized sense of the unhomely” (Gikandi, p. 12). The feeling of unhomeliness is particularly pertinent to literary studies precisely because it evokes the insensitivity to alternative modes of thinking. Several postcolonial critics have intuited the urgent need to acknowledge historical difference; specifically, the need to identify that which qualifies as the “practice of thinking,” largely mediated, as Gikandi confesses of his own literary education, through Marx, Sartre and Fanon (Gikandi, 2012, p. 13). Most notably, Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out the predominance of the European mode or Western modes of thought that is “at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations” (2000, p. 16). And more famously, Edward Said has also observed:

the universalizing discourses of Europe and the United States assume silence...of the non-European world. There is incorporation, there is inclusion, there is direct rule, there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgment that the colonized people should be heard from, their ideas known (quoted in Majid, 2004, 170–171).

A case in point about both the indispensability but also the glaring inadequacy of Western modes of thought, as Chakrabarty pertinently states, in dealing with reality in non-Western societies, is the Nigerian writer Muhammad Umar's little-known first novel, *Amina* (2005), that is uncritically accepted as a work of Marxist inspiration. As a result of the infrequent acknowledgment of non-Western peoples' sources of inspiration, those discourses such as Islam in the case of *Amina*, are uncritically ascribed to Western modes of knowledge or epistemologies such as Marxism in this case.

Relatively unknown and new to the literary sphere, Mohammed Kabir Umar grew up in northern Nigeria, and worked as a journalist before moving abroad to study law, political science and journalism at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, at Moscow State University and Middlesex University. He currently resides in London<sup>1</sup>. Although *Amina* has been translated into 13 languages, till now, it has received scant attention, highlighting its ideologically-driven motives rather than its literary value. Among the few reviews received so far, Suling Tan calls it more an ideological narrative than a well developed piece of literature or art (p. 324). Similarly, Emad Mirmotahari points out that the narrative is more “issue-driven,” and that “there is little convincing character development,” coupled with “wooden passages” and “wooden dialogs.” Mirmotahari does, however, recognize that the novel's moral center resides in the Prophet's sermon as a guiding force in the main protagonist's life and mission, adding that the insertion of the Prophet's farewell sermon evidences “how Islam itself mandates social justice and action.” In his review of the novel, Michael Janis draws the connection between Queen Amina, the 16-century queen of Zazzau or Zaria who governed the Hausa, and Umar's contemporary Amina who is also an elite but must rebel against gender oppression and corruption in her society. Janis calls the novel a Marxist manifesto since the plot of the novel revolves around a young African woman's struggle for socio-economic justice and welfare—objectives typically associated with a Marxist–Socialist ideology. Furthermore, Janis argues that the Marxist blueprint for social change for the rest of Africa is also an ideology that African feminists embrace for gender equality and rights in Africa.

Expanding on the premise that the mandate for social justice is organic to Islam itself, and also responding to criticisms that the novel comprises wooden passages and dialogs, and is not a well-developed piece of literature, this paper shows that the novel has much to offer in terms of highlighting those factors that have been scanted in favor of ideologies more well-known for social justice and equality such as Marxism. The novel thus becomes an instrument not merely for positing women's rights as these few readers have inaccurately called it. Rather, it contains a nuanced presentation of the relationship between first and third world discourses that needs to be fully explored. In this perspective, this paper contends that the novel is an eloquent engagement with contemporary postcoloniality, Islam and Islamic feminism, and that more than any other political, cultural or religious ideology, it is an ostensibly Islamic discourse that prompts the novel's heroine, Amina, to take up the cause of socio-economic welfare and economic justice in her community.

To this end, this analysis will first elaborate on recent theories on postcolonial Islam, cultural studies by Anouar Majid, among others, and Neil Lazarus' engagement with Frederic Jameson's theorization of third world literature and politics that poignantly highlight the reasons animating the sidelining of viable alternatives as a means to understanding social and political processes. Additionally, this study will examine some recent theories on feminism in Islam as elaborated by leading figures in Islamic feminism, Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke to trace the relevance of Amina's actions on feminist theoretical postures in Islam, positing the ways in which Muslim women engage Islam in their struggle for economic and social justice. The struggle by Islamic feminism for citizenship and justice, as Miriam Cooke puts it, gestures to the ostensibly political nature of Islamic feminism that is framed by Muslim women within the demands for gender rights and justice in Muslim societies as articulated by Hiba Rauf's influential work on the political contours of feminism in Islam. Together, these theoretical conceptions at once expose the marginalization of viable alternatives of knowledge, and conceptualize an epistemic framework that seeks to relocate alternative modes of thought – particularly Islam – on the theoretical map of postcolonial studies. Finally, this analysis will study the techniques employed by Umar in his evocation of Islam as an alternative mode of thought through references pivoted on the Qur'an, the *hadith*, Islamic history and facets of Islamic society, lending critical purchase to Majid's suggestion on the need for “viable non-Western, indigenous alternatives” in solving many of the world's problems today (2000, p. 21).

## **Islam in Northern Nigeria**

Nigeria – the most populous country in Africa, and home to the largest number of Muslims in West Africa, estimated at approximately 76 million – is also one of the most heterogeneous countries of the continent. Consisting of over 200 ethno-linguistic groups, Nigeria's population is diverse and varied<sup>2</sup>. The Hausa, one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups of West Africa and of Nigeria, makes up roughly 21% of the Nigerian population, and are concentrated mostly in the northern part of the country and in Southeastern Niger. The Hausa are predominantly Muslim. Ousseina Alidou remarks that “As much as Islam is part of Hausa religious identity, it is equally an important marker of their cultural identity”(p.132). As Alidou claims:

Even the tiny minority of the Hausa subgroups who are still animist or Christian tend to be Islamic in cultural practice and they have been assimilated to the majority Hausa Muslim community (2005, p. 132).

Islam first penetrated Nigeria in the eleventh century when the king of Kanem is said to have converted. Strong influences from the kingdoms of Songhay and Mali in the fourteenth century, and later by the pastoralist Fulanis in the fifteenth century also led to the rapid Islamization of the northern parts of Nigeria. One of the two largest cities of modern-day Nigeria, Kano, the ancient Muslim city, is situated in the Northern part of the country. The Hausas speak their own language – Hausa – with an estimated 50 million speakers in Africa, and have their own script – Ajami, meaning foreign – an Africanized version of the Arabic alphabet. Ajami is also shared across Africa by speakers of Swahili and Wolof<sup>3</sup>. To the Hausas, however, notes Tom Verde, Ajami is like a “badge of identity,” a badge of not only their Islamic but also African Islamic identity (p. 39). Twelve states in Northern Nigeria have adopted the sharia or Islamic law that animates governance, economic relation and social order. As a result, these states implement usury-free economic transactions and activities, among other Islamically influenced economic laws governing property, wealth and economic activity. Most recently, the Islamic Development Bank with its headquarters in Saudi Arabia invested \$470 million in Nigeria. Politically, as well, Islam impacts the structure of governance under the sharia with the states electing a Muslim ruler, responsible for the proper administration of Islamic law. On the social front, Islam colors several facets, including gender relations, marriage, family life and personal conduct. In recent times, however, Islam has become the topic of controversies, polemics and scandals not just around the world but in Northern Nigeria, especially since the adoption of Islamic law with regard to the amputation of hands for theft, murder and stoning for adultery that have drawn severe criticism from human rights groups<sup>4</sup>.

Set in northern Nigeria, the novel tells the story of Amina, the beautiful fourth wife of an influential and affluent businessman and politician, Alhaji Haruna. In her early twenties, Amina was a college student before discontinuing her university education to marry for her family's sake. As Alhaji Haruna's wife, she luxuriates in an affluent lifestyle, marked by idleness. Nevertheless, she keeps in touch with her former classmates – Fatima and Laila – who encourage her to become involved in social work, particularly in the upliftment of poor and destitute women. Both Fatima and Laila are actively engaged in college as activists for the emancipation of women. Amina is reluctant at first as she is not too confident about her own abilities, and also fears her husband's disapproval. Gradually, however, she gains in confidence to think about social injustice in far less theoretical terms, using her moneyed background to invest in women's empowerment, she joins the Bakaro Women's Association, and ultimately challenges a bill in the parliament that seeks to deny women their basic human rights. She even goes to the extent of getting imprisoned while protesting the bill that, incidentally, is promoted by her own husband. Furthermore, Amina suffers a crushing personal and emotional loss when her one-year-old infant son dies, and her husband begins to physically abuse her. Emotionally and physically brutalized, Amina's discernible contestation of social injustice is seen in her relentless pursuit of women's empowerment as the novel rests on the emotional, psychological and social maturation of a young African Muslim woman in an environment shaped by economic inequality. For her indomitable spirit and exemplary leadership in the face of personal and physical adversity, Amina is also compared to the legendary 16th century Hausa queen of northern Nigeria – Queen Amina of Zaria – who courageously took on fierce enemies and emerged victorious in numerous battles and wars, and is revered for her shrewd intelligence, organizational skills and battle-winning strategies. Along the lines of such similarities with the legendary leader, Umar's Amina exemplifies courage and spirit that liken her to African legends. To study the methods and resources Amina uses in her unwavering commitment to social change, this paper first turns to Anouar Majid's astute identification of the forces that perpetuate an ideological and political marginalization of alternative and indigenous belief systems.

## Theories at play: Islam, Marxism, Capitalism and Islamic feminism

In his work on the recent impact of Islam in politics, literature and postcolonial Islam, Majid consistently draws attention to the role of religion in shaping peoples' lives as a repository of their memories and ideas. However, religion, particularly Islam, argues Majid, as social ideology, a political system or just spiritual practice, among other indigenous systems across the world, has suffered not because of a clash of civilizations as famously suggested by Samuel Huntington, but because of more tangible economic and political forces—capitalism and globalization (2004, p.9). The lack of importance attributed to religion, argues Majid, stems from the unabashed promotion of Western-style freedom and modernity, a shorthand for capitalism, “running roughshod on the world's traditions and cultures, dehumanizing rich and poor, making life untenable for the latter, and fueling violent reactions and the politics of terror,” exacerbating such socio-economic problems the world over as sub-human working conditions, under-remunerated occupations, human trafficking, the rise of childhood labor and exploitation (2007, p. 36). Majid is also quick to point out that this critique does not target and consequently dismiss Western-style culture or systems themselves. Rather, his skepticism exposes the contemporary model of world relations that is animated and controlled by capitalistic motives, where “everything converges into the production of “commodities,” and the sphere of the “economy” renders capitalism as the “central social signification” (2004, p. 13). The steady onslaught of capitalistic imperialism or globalization, avers Majid, has thus resulted in the balance in global relations as very much a one-sided affair, stifling other voices and narratives, and leading to the “the breakdown of traditional communities that are forcibly integrated into the global economic system.” (2000, p. 7).

In an effort to recuperate those values and beliefs marginalized by unbridled capitalism, Majid calls for a genuine appreciation of “local and cultural specificities,” as well as the incorporation of “different regimes of truth into a genuinely multicultural global vision,” and the need to adopt “new forms of inquiry and protocols of discussion in a vibrant culture of ideas” (2000, 19; 69; 2007, 14). He thus urges the acknowledgment of the role of Islam, as an equally potent rubric within which the racially and socially disenfranchised may shape their struggles. With regard to “new forms of inquiry and protocols of discussion” (2000, p. 14), Majid says:

The increasing reliance of Muslim feminists on the canons of their own traditions may break the theoretical impasse that seems to block the emergence of viable non-Western, indigenous alternatives (2000, p. 21).

In a similar vein, Neil Lazarus has recently drawn attention to the tendency of Western intellectuals to read third world texts as extensions of their own culture and philosophy. Lazarus cites the influential Frederic Jameson and his critique of what is considered “canonical literature,” much like Gikandi's observation, that first world literature serves as a “universal,” thereby “preventing any meaningful engagement with the ‘third world’ (or culturally different) texts (Lazarus, p. 104). In developing his critique of this tendency, Lazarus further attributes the failure to relate to literature outside the ‘first world’ to the inability of the first world reader to effectively connect with writers of the third world, calling it “failure of cultural competence,” thus leading the first world reader to proclaim his own literature as universal. Furthermore, argues Lazarus, an extension of this inability is manifested in reading into third world literature whatever is already apprehensible by the first world reader. As will be discussed later, Lazarus' observation serves as a response to Janis' comment about Umar's novel being a Marxist manifesto, since Janis, like many Western scholars, reads third world texts as exclusively Marxist manifestos.

Islamic feminists identify a similar pattern of feminist activity as Majid in the reliance on one's own resources, terming it a "faith position" as proposed by Miriam Cooke, where Muslim women turn to the texts of their faith such as the Qur'an and the *hadith*, while being aware of discourses in other areas of thought (2001, p. 59). In addition, however, Islamic feminism also claims close ties to the political dimensions of feminist activities in Islam. Margot Badran and Cooke identify Islamic feminism as that which devolves within a "religious framework" and is "expressed in a single or paramount, religiously-grounded discourse taking the Qur'an as its central text" (Badran, 2009, p. 2). A global phenomenon, produced in diverse locations and sites, Islamic feminism, according to Badran, is the:

recognition of gender equality and of women's rights that a particular religion, nation, society, or culture may affirm in its basic tenets but withhold in practice...and identification of ways to secure the practice of such rights by women and men alike (2002b, p. 199).

And again more specifically, Badran highlights the referential resources of Islamic feminism: "Islamic feminism uses Islamic discourse as its paramount – although not necessarily its only – discourse in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice" (2009, p. 246). From its earliest manifestation, Islamic feminism has been a "rights-centered feminism," writes Badran, with women "as active participants in national liberation and revolutionary movements," gradually evolving to include a broader focus on social justice and equality, pervading both the private and the public sphere (2009, p.253;p. 4). In a similar vein, Miriam Cooke keys on the idea that Islamic feminism "seeks justice wherever it can find it," and that it "involves political and intellectual awareness of gender discrimination,...and the advocacy of activist projects to end discrimination and to open opportunities for women to participate in public life" (2001, p. x), stressing that Islamic feminism is an "attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women" (2001, p. 61). Specifically, activism acquires its shape from a "contextually determined strategic self-positioning," where the individual's intention is to "remain in the community out of which she is speaking, even when she criticizes its problems" (2001, p. 113).

Deniz Kandiyoti endorses Badran's and Cooke's views to develop a politically engaged discourse on Islamic feminism by tracing its history in the Middle East to its accommodation of politics in various issues on gender in numerous historically Islamic societies. Kandiyoti pertinently insists that the articulation of women's issues in Islam must be understood and unearthed within the context of the adjustment of Muslim societies to the nation state, further complicated by the ineluctable fact that women form the "inner sanctum" of "kinship-based solidarities" rather than just abstract affiliations to the state (1991, p. 11). The valence assigned to the nation-state and its politics posits agendas such as family reform, political participation etc. for women in different parts of the world during the rise of Islamic feminism, including Muslim societies in India, Bangladesh, Turkey and Lebanon, that were shaped in tandem with the political and state-building apparatuses of these countries. Kandiyoti thus describes the relation between state and women's issues:

depending on the nature of their political projects, states have variously challenged, accommodated or abdicated to local/communal patriarchal interests, with important consequences for family legislation and more important policies affecting women (1991, p. 11).

In Iran, as in other parts of the Middle East, where Islamic feminism became prominent in the public sphere, Valentine Moghadem draws attention to the transformation of Iran from a monarchy to a Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), accompanied by the shifting and

dynamic nature of women's roles, positions and rights in the public and private domains, pertaining to family, marriage, re-production, suffrage and female participation in the labor force (2002, pp.1137-1138). Thus, the feminist debate in Iran was organically tied to the question of politics right from the inception of the IRI. Mining the same vein, Moghadem calls feminism in Islam a “theoretical perspective” that aims at mobilizing “economic structures, political power, and international relations” (2002, 1165).

This engagement of Muslim women's citizenship and their increasing participation in state-processes has also been eloquently and intelligently studied by Hiba Rauf who argues that even the sphere of personal piety and private religious practice is fundamentally political since any political activity first derives from the basic unit of social life, that is, the family. Extending the family's function – mutual discussions, choice and consultation – to the social and subsequently the political and public, Rauf discounts the dichotomy between the public and the private, “the private is political” (1995, 27). This divide, when effectively broken, provides more social esteem and power to women as it extends the same principles of democracy, consultation, equality and counsel as those that animate family's relations. In her critique of Rauf's *Woman and Political Work: An Islamic Perspective*, Ellen McLarney situates Rauf's thesis within the boom in writings on Islamic revivalism in Egypt by underscoring the idea that the family is the “microcosm of the *umma*,” and consequently a “microcosm of good Islamic governance”(2010,p.137;p.139). But perhaps the most useful explanation on political Islam can be found in Charles Hirschkind's analysis that through the process of nation-building, various institutions such as “education, worship, social welfare and family” have become incorporated into the regulatory apparatuses of the modernizing state. The state, writes Hirschkind, is present at every juncture as guarantor or overseer in matters such as procedures and preconditions in matters pertaining to births, deaths, businesses etc., “as a consequence, modern politics and the forms of power it deploys have become a necessary condition for the practice of many personal activities” (1997, p. 13). Thus, if the personal has to succeed, it must engage political power, argues Hirschkind:

the success of even a conservative project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies (1997, p. 14).

Hirschkind also nuances his statement by drawing attention to personal piety and activities such as alms-giving, *dawa*, medical care, mosque building etc., that do not fall within the purview of the political but since they must also conform to state regulations and rules, cannot escape the political. Essentially then, the private and the political symbiotically function to shape women's rights in an Islamic society.

Several of these aspects of Islamic feminism – a Qur'an and “rights-centered feminism,” as noted by Badran, seeking “women's empowerment” as described by Moghadem, as a natural extension of the private, “the private is political” as defined by Rauf, and as an attitude to seek “justice and citizenship” for Muslim women, as conceptualized by Cooke, among others – resonate in Amina's stewardship for social justice as she consciously and strategically positions herself by using an Islamic discourse – the Qur'an, the *hadith* and Islamic history – as her ideological springboard to speak to her community from within it on gender-related issues. This prioritization of an Islamic discourse also echoes Majid's and Lazarus' emphases on third world texts and discourses that are not infrequently interpreted as extension of Western ideologies due to lack of proper training and acknowledgment of the discourses that impact the lives of peoples in the third world, outside of Europe and America.

## A template for activism: Amina's Islamic choices

Braided into the narrative of Umar's novel, Islam can be discerned in Amina's spiritual activities as she prays regularly, "the next day, Amina got up early and offered her morning prayers," she also says her "evening prayers" (p. 5; p. 242). She is mindful of her spiritual duties, for she interrupts a conversation with her friend to pray, and resumes only after completing her obligatory prayers, "Amina excused herself and prepared for last prayers. Afterwards, still sitting on the prayer mat, fingering her prayer beads, she remarked..." (p. 14). And again, she prioritizes her prayers before engaging in a conversation about social change with her friend, "allow me to say my prayers first," she says, when her friend informs her of the petrol shortage paralyzing the public transportation system (p. 64). For a young woman pre-occupied with socializing and entertaining her friends, Amina displays tremendous self-control and maturity in being able to pull herself away from conversations to first fulfill her religious duty. Her spiritual focus becomes amply clear when she rebukes a friend about mixing religious duty with business:

I think we should get something straight,... I'll go to the Holy Land when I satisfy the strict religious tests and for religious purposes only. I am not going there on business or as a carrier of goods for you! If and when I got to Saudi Arabia, it will be to perform the pilgrimage only (p. 139).

The frequent allusions to Amina's habit of praying poignantly illustrate the quotidian presence of Islam in her life while simultaneously accentuating the clarity of her priorities in the diligent fulfillment of her religious duties. Moreover, the strict religious tests she mentions in the passage above point to her deep knowledge of Islam and the respect she has for her faith by abiding by the rules of the pilgrimage such as..... And not casually embarking on a journey merely because it is incumbent on believers who are physically and financially able to perform this holy voyage.

That religion also serves as the ideological springboard for Amina's activism becomes evident as she gradually begins to engage herself in social work. She reads books and magazines loaned to her by her friends on social struggles, including Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Ngugi Wa'Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, Marx's *Das Kapital* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 46;p. 52). In light of such a selection of books, however, the ideological impact of Islam on Amina's choices may not appear to be easily accommodated. For instance, Janis says:

it is above all the Marxist paradigms of social and class struggle that shape the form of Umar's narrative, resulting in a political blueprint for Africa from a feminist perspective that envisions a 'better world' at the close of the novel (2008, p. 322).

And again, Janis attributes Amina's motivation to:

hours spent reading works such as Marx's *Capital*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Walter Rodney's *How the West Underdeveloped Africa*, she takes on the position of head of the Bakaro Women's Association (pp. 322-323).

As seen in both these statements, Janis ascribes Amina's motivation within works by Fanon, Marx and Rodney. Nevertheless, the novel also contains another compelling and relatively elaborate textual reference that Amina draws from – the farewell sermon of the Prophet Muhammad reproduced in its entirety in the novel. Interestingly, Umar only mentions the titles of Rodney's, Marx's and Fanon's influential works. He does not elaborate on the ideas

or specific notions that Amina gleans from these works in shaping her own thought process. In contrast, Umar reproduces the entire text of the sermon in the novel to flesh out the concepts present within the sermon, that Amina relates to more easily on social justice, class struggle and economic equality. The sermon, therefore, as this analysis will demonstrate, forms the springboard for Amina's actions and in relation to the other books mentioned, it is the principal force in motivating Amina. More than all those books and their wisdom, it boils down to one sermon by a powerful leader that an ordinary Muslim woman chooses to prioritize in her mission. Given her religious commitment, as seen in praying and other habits, she chooses inspiration that is closest to her beliefs and is organic to her habits—a point that is often overlooked because of the overwhelming cultural and philosophical weight of Marxism and its influence on other equally influential works of literature.

An integral component of her mission, the Prophet's farewell sermon hangs on the wall in Amina's bedroom in the form of a poster given to her by her friend, Fatima. Just before Umar reproduces the entire sermon in the novel as the contents of the poster, he also adds that Amina was reading Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* but “struggled with some of the words and ideas” (p. 46). Soon after, Amina looks for a good place to hang the poster in her room. This juxtaposition of the reference to Fanon's work and Amina's search for a good place to hang the poster is symbolic of the influence of various ideologies on Amina's mind. More importantly, it underscores Muslim women's reliance on the canons of their own traditions—canons Amina knows and understands better, thus making the sermon the blueprint for her activism. According to Tariq Ramadan, the Prophet is said to have addressed 144,000 pilgrims on the Mount of Mercy (*Jabal ar-Rahmah*) when giving his farewell sermon on the ninth day of *Dhu al-Hijjah* on the tenth year of Hijrah or March or April 632. Ramadan notes that the sermon was given when the Prophet made his last visit to Mecca on his final pilgrimage as he established the *hajj* or the annual pilgrimage as the final pillar of faith, “He spoke in short portions, and men around him repeated his words so that everyone throughout the valley could hear his speech” (2007, p. 196).

The content of the sermon, Ramadan notes, was “powerful and intense,” (2007, 196) and reveals Amina's preference for it overall the other books she has read on social justice and equity:

**The Farewell Sermon of Prophet Muhammad** (*Sallallahu Allaihi Wasallam*).

O people, just as you regard this month, this day, this city as sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim as a sacred trust. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Do not take usury; this is forbidden to you. Aid the poor and clothe them as you would clothe yourselves. Remember! One day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds. So, beware! Do not stray from the righteousness after I am gone. Listen to me in earnest Worship God; say your prayers, fast during the month of Ramadan, and give your wealth to charity ...No one is allowed to take from another what he does not allow him of his own free will ... (p. 48).

On closer examination of the sermon and its language and purpose, it can be noted that it is underwritten by economic categories both on the substantive level and its rhetoric pertaining to a spiritually just and equitable society. Substantively, it opens with the Prophet's injunction to first and foremost respect others and their property. Next, he instructs them to repay lenders as the crucial step towards establishing equality in relations between people. Most striking of all is the manner in which the appearance of the word “property” in the opening lines of the sermon immediately points to the nature of material reality and respect for people's belongings, paradigmatically announcing the basis of an amicable and harmonious society founded on just relations. This basic principle of respect for others derived first from respect for their property

pervades the sermon as the Prophet urges his people, one last time, to live honorably by clearing their debts.

Socio-economic respect and spiritual habits – prayer and fasting – succeed each other in a cycle of a just social order throughout the sermon as the Prophet continues his message by forbidding usury on goods and money loaned or borrowed, thus repeatedly rehearsing the importance of compassion by reminding the believers that usury is the root of economic oppression<sup>5</sup>. As a remedy to usury, he recommends charity in the believers. In short, the frequency of the economic terms –property, usury and charity – suffices to establish traffic between the spiritual and the economic imperative in an effort to establish a just society, for charity is a solution to the practice or even an inadvertent act of acceptance of usury, both acts being connected to various forms of property or material wealth. Furthermore, the economic register of the Prophet's language in his farewell message – “property,” “goods,” “usury,” “wealth,” “poor,” “rights,” “owners” and their attendant meanings – conveys a message that finds ample congruence with Amina's goals of social welfare. The rhetoric of the sermon is also pertinently linked to the fact that it is reproduced in its entirety in the novel as the ideology that Amina chooses to map her own stewardship for economic equity and justice on— no other text, speech or message makes its way into the novel other than the Prophet's farewell sermon (p. 196). It also echoes the model of the society Muhammad envisaged for his people after his death, and it is this welfare society – the crux of the sermon – that Amina, soon after struggling with Fanon (p. 46), finds most congenial to her vision of an economically equitable society. Strategically, too, the sermon is crucial to Amina's vision as it appears in the novel right before she decides to wholeheartedly engage in social activism. The emphasis on an equitable society via the practice of charity in the Prophet's sermon gestures to one of the cornerstones of Islam, also known as its five pillars, the Zakat or 2.5% charity, instituted with the intention of economic equality. The word *zakah* in Arabic means purification, and in principle, the cutting back of one's wealth or its purification when given to others facilitates the balance needed for growth and development. As Neal Robinson suggests, the institution of zakah should be seen in the “context of Islam's stress on the fundamental importance of charitable giving,” he also comments on the socio-economic function of zakat as its practitioners purify “their greed and selfishness,” and that it “discourages hoarding of capital and stimulates investment in the means of production or merchandise of which is usually regarded as zakatable” (1999,p. 111; p. 115). In short, the economic and financial nature of zakat is to ensure that wealth is equitably distributed and not concentrated in the hands of only a few. Several Qur'anic verses also support the principle of an equitable social system<sup>6</sup>. This spiritual obligation subtending social equity and justice as mandated by the Qur'an was emphasized by Muhammad not only throughout his prophetic career but more emphatically albeit succinctly in his short farewell message to his people. Soon after hanging the poster in her room, the imprint of the Prophet's farewell sermon and its underlying message indelibly surface in Amina's language, imbued with examples from Islamic history and practice, unmistakably signposting her ideological inspiration:

Let me remind you that our religion is opposed to exploitation, and oppression. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) was totally against enslavement and bondage. He once said that “Allah wishes to ease your burdens not to make things more difficult.” We call on you and other state officials, and tradition and religious leaders to follow both the letter and spirit of the actual teachings of Islam (p. 187).

And again, she nimbly relies on her Islamic identity to articulate the moral and spiritual impetus of her motivation and actions:

As a Muslim, I'm bound not to turn my back when I see any leader commit injustices. The Holy Prophet said, "Let him who sees a situation in which injustice is being perpetrated endeavor to change it." I think that justifies my position (p. 239).

Both these passages are militant, too, as they underscore Amina's purpose—opposing injustice. She handily quotes a verse from the chapter on women in the Qur'an, Al Nisa, verse 28, "Allah doth wish to lighten your (difficulties)," and then from a hadith of the Prophet condemning injustice (Ali, 2006, p. 193). The context of this Qur'anic verse emphasizes the notion of increasing wealth by "traffic and trade by mutual good will" as one is considered burdened if he/she nurses ill-will and selfishness in matters pertaining to wealth and property (Ali, 2006, p. 194)<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, the *hadith* Amina partially quotes is widely recognized for its message on social justice. The entire *hadith* reads as follows: "Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand, and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue, and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart, that is the weakest of faith" (Nawawi, 1999, p. 193). As the hadith suggests, it is not enough to just hope that evil will disappear; it is therefore incumbent on every Muslim, to oppose evil in action, and promote good deeds (Nawawi, 1999, p. 193). Furthermore, in his explanation of this *hadith* on social responsibility, Imam Nawawi adds that "the word 'see' means knowledge of something, no matter whether one actually sees it or not," emphasizing the moral responsibility and duty of every Muslim to oppose injustice (Nawawi, 1999, p.193)<sup>8</sup>. Amina thus effortlessly embroiders the ideas of social justice and equity – ideals emphasized in the Prophet's sermon – into the fabric of her own mission. Furthermore, her Islamic inspiration can be found in the facility and ease with which she quotes from the Qur'an to scaffold her purpose, "Allah is never asleep," she says when welcoming new members to the association to emphasize the Qur'anic idea that God is guiding her at all times in her mission (p. 198).

On the organizational level as well, Amina's group, the Bakaro Women's Association, is passionately spurred by the desire to infuse Islamic ethos in the people involved. To this end, they organize a "Social-Educational Week," distributing pamphlets not only on education and health but also on religion, effectively articulating their objectives of education within an ostensible Islamic framework. In his speech to the women, the teacher explains:

As you're all aware, education is vital in any society. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was quoted as saying that "the search for knowledge is a sacred duty imposed upon every Muslim." For Those women who for any reason cannot attend classes at the moment, we've plans to send our female members to teach them in their homes (p. 79).

Amina's friends as well—Fatimah and Laila – mine examples and references from Islamic texts and history. Although Janis has noted that Fatimah is Amina's mentor, "an independent woman...who stirs up trouble in the town of Bakaro," it is not hard to see that Fatima alludes just as much to the Qur'an as does Amina, for it is Fatima who gives Amina the poster of the Prophet's sermon, and also states in her speech on International Women's Day in Bakaro that Islam is "for the emancipation of women" (p. 322; p. 47; p. 84). Amina's friend Laila, the head of the support group, also makes frequent references to Islam as she prefaces her speech with examples illustrating the egregious misuse of Sharia aw, pertinently evoking usable examples from Islamic history as foils to the abuse of Islamic law in Nigerian society:

we have read the holy books and simply could not find any case where women were treated in such a barbaric way. On the other hand, we found many verses and examples where women were treated with dignity and respect. Our understanding of the religion is that during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SallallahuAlaihiWassallam), women were equal to men. His first wife Khadija (May Allah be pleased with her) held an esteemed position in society. His last wife Aisha (May Allah be pleased with her) was a well-

known poet and an accomplished military leader. If we are to apply the same Sharia law today, most of our rulers would have their hands chopped off for stealing public funds (p. 201).

Laila circumscribes her crisp speech by first noting that she has indeed read the scriptures. She adroitly cites Qur'anic verses that urge respectful and equal treatment of women before proceeding to delve into the most tangible model used by Muslims – the first Islamic society – where Muhammad, through his daily speech, actions and habits, provided the blueprint for future Islamic societies. And finally, to maintain the momentum of the Islamic framework of her speech, she evokes two powerful examples from Islamic history – Khadija and Aisha – as undeniable models of strength, respect and dignity to aptly justify her stance on women's welfare. Together, the evocation of the Qur'an, *hadith* and examples from Islamic history as usable examples of social justice and women's welfare bring into focus Islam as an alternative mode of thought that the protagonists find congenial to their purpose of social justice and equity.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown the unfair ascription of the logic reticulating Amina's actions to exclusively Marxist or socialist inspiration. As Gikandi pertinently draws our attention to the ever-present tendency to overlook historical difference in favour of other well known ideologies, he not only reveals the well-acknowledged bias among scholars, but also the limitations of the “universalist claims” of literatures (2012, p. 12). Umar's novel rescues the “social and historical realities of African women, tangibly illustrated in Amina's agency as a Muslim woman in a northern Nigerian society as she confidently relies on the “canons of her own traditions” in the emancipation of women in her society (Boyce-Davies; Nnaemeka; Majid), and effectively emerges as a contemporary instrument of social transformation.

This privileging of Islam in Amina's mission echoes what Cooke evocatively calls an “attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women (2001, p. 61).” As a spokesperson for social justice, hers is a conscious decision; she succeeds in embodying several features of Islamic feminism as elaborated earlier, a “rights-centered feminism,” as identified by Badran insofar as she is personally impacted by Islamic feminism, Moghadem's observation that Islamic feminism works to mobilize women, and Rauf's statement that the “private is political,” gesturing to a feminism that moves seamlessly between the public and private sphere, also reflected in Badran's writings (2009, p. 254, p. 4; 2002, p.1165; 1995, p. 27). Amina matures not just as a socially conscious and responsible citizen but also in the private sphere as a woman stoically battling marital abuse and the untimely death of her infant son. All of the above features and dimensions of Islamic feminism acquire specific valence in Amina's and her friends' evocations of undeniably Islamic sources of inspiration siloed from the Prophet's sermon, the *hadith*, the Qur'an and examples of women in Islamic history. The sermon is also reproduced in its entirety in the novel, thus innovatively pointing to the novel's technique of powerfully presenting the protagonists as embodiments of an alternative mode of thought, and crucially suggesting that attending to the impact of these references in Amina's work may be more constructive than attributing her actions to an exclusively Marxist influence. The significance of recognizing the Islamic frame of reference as Amina's motivation focuses attention on a Muslim's situation in the world today, bringing much-needed light to bear on a Muslim woman's feminist engagement with her own ideological and spiritual resources.

## Endnotes

1 [www.longstonebooks.co.uk](http://www.longstonebooks.co.uk).

2 Toyin Falola. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge UP, 2008.

3 Tom Verde, "From Africa in Ajami" *Saudi Aramco* September/October, 2011. 35–39. Verde explains that Ajami is not a language itself but the alphabet script is used to write a language: Arabic – derived letters to write a non-Arabic – in this case African language. Ajami derives from the Arabic *a'jamiy* meaning "foreigner" or more specifically, "non-Arab." Ajami thus came to mean an African language written in Arabic script that was often adapted phonetically to facilitate local usages and pronunciations across the continent, from Ethiopia in the east to Sierra Leone in the west.

4 Human Rights groups condemned two cases involving women who had had children out of wedlock and who had been sentenced to death by sharia courts in northern Nigeria.

5 In the Qur'an, in chapter 2, verses 276–283, God forbids the use of usury, "Allah will deprive usury of all growth but will give increase for deeds of charity." (115–116). The following verse further encourages "regular charity" and urges believers to "give up what remains of your demand for usury" (116). The verses that follow all point to mercy and kindness in economic dealings, "if the debtor is in a difficulty, grant him time till it is easy for him to repay but if ye remit it by way of charity, that is best for you if ye only knew". Together, these verses focus on the kindness and good-will subtending economic transactions and relations. More information on the nature of economic dealings and finance in Islam is found at [www.islamicfinance.com](http://www.islamicfinance.com).

6 Ali (2006). Chapter 2 verse 110, among several other verses in the Qur'an (Chapter 2, 43; 177, 277, chapter 4, 162; chapter 5, 55), describes the explicit command to pay zakat, "and be steadfast in prayer and regular in charity" (48).

7 Ali (2006). In the footnote to this verse, and the one that follows it, Ali paraphrases the meaning of these verses to emphasize that God cautions people against greed and urges them to use property to increase it by means of trade and traffic and by means of mutual good will (193).

8 In his explanation of this hadith (#184) in a chapter entitled "Enjoining good and forbidding evil," Imam Nawawi explains the purpose of this hadith in that it has a social impact on the well being of the community as it urges individuals to spurn evil first in action and then in speech.

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