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Amina by Mohammed Umar. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005. 252 pp.
ISBN: 1592214045

The back cover of Mohammed Umar's novel *Amina* points out an absence that has been noted by Africanist scholars and critics in recent years—English-language novels by northern Nigerian authors. But it is not entirely clear that this novel has redressed this absence while delivering as a piece of literature. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that Umar sacrifices aesthetic nuance for a dialogue- and “issue”-driven¹ narrative, showcasing cultural and political currents that characterise contemporary northern Nigeria—rampant government corruption and dysfunction, the victimisation and second-class citizenship of women, poverty, continued and inequitable economic dependence on the West—and the way in which “conservative” Islam acts as an ideological shroud or, more accurately, an apology for these ills.

There is little convincing character development, and intense human experiences like losing a child and spousal abuse are narrated in a remarkably matter-of-fact and incidental manner; nor is there mention of the certain emotional turmoil that must result from the eponymous character Amina's subsequent pregnancies and obligatory intimacy with a husband with whom she shares so little. The reader never really gets emotionally drawn into Amina's transformation from a meek young wife of Alhaji Haruna, a wealthy and prominent legislator, to a conscious and active organiser, educator, and public leader. Her friend Fatima, a university student and intellectual, has something to do with the change, and so do the loss of her young child Rasheed and the beatings she receives from her husband. The narrative picks up some emotional charge at the end, during the confrontation between the women's group and the police, which results in the death of one of the young organisers.

Amina is replete with wooden passages like, “But women have no interests,” (p. 175) and “Men are born to rule; there's nothing you can do to change what is ordained by Allah” (p. 17), which highlight the collusion between strict *sharia* law and women's subjugation and exclusion from public life. These exchanges are offset by equally ubiquitous and wooden dialogue pointing to how Islam emancipates and empowers women if “interpreted correctly.” In a rhetorical and provocative declaration associating Islam with social justice and empowerment, Fatima states, “From what I've seen of the West, it practises Islam without Muslims, while in Muslim countries, you have Muslims without Islam. In the West there is accountability, faithful pursuit of knowledge, cleanliness, respect for human lives, property and dignity and so on” (p. 44). The Prophet Mohammad's “Farewell Sermon” appears as an insertion in the novel, evidencing how Islam itself mandates social justice and action, and that these concepts are not merely a gratuitous gesture at a “balanced” view of Islam by modern intellectuals.

But *Amina* does summon a key conflict in sub-Saharan African literature produced in Muslim societies—Islam's role as both a source of regression and a catalyst of progress and justice. As such, the ghosts of Nuruddin Farah's *African Dictatorship* trilogy and *From a Crooked Rib*, and Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*, for example, haunt the pages of Umar's novel.

Also, in a comparatively rare move in African prose, *Amina* directly refers to other pieces of African literature and writing (Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*, and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*), a choice that reinforces the feeling that Umar's crafting a work of literature was secondary to producing an intellectual polemic. The allusions to, and invocations of, other relevant African literature generate a sense of novelty in the way these texts operate in the social context that Umar's novel captures, as if the ideas offered by these African thinkers are a new "arrival" in northern Nigeria. *Amina* reads like it could have easily been written (and set) in the 1960s. Aside from the publication dates of the aforementioned works, there is little indication that this is intended, nor is it clear whether the vanguard "isms" of the 1960s African political discourse are indeed "new" in northern Nigeria.

While it lacks the power and idiosyncrasy of Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, an enigmatic historical narrative examining Islam in northern Nigeria, *Amina* offers a much-needed glimpse into this particular African cultural milieu in modern times. It is a reminder that social, political, and cultural self-reflection is alive and well among northern Nigerian intellectuals and cultural figures, and that even acerbic critique of revered institutions is not off limits. Lastly, *Amina* testifies to the possibility and desirability of grassroots politics in Africa, of change from "below" and within.

Reviewer

Emad Mirmotahari received his PhD in Comparative Literature at UCLA. His primary area of focus is the modern and contemporary African novel. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Tulane University's Department of English, where he teaches African and postcolonial literatures.