

The Image of Men in Recent Nigerian Women Writing: A Womanist Reading of Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the representation of men in the work of Hadiza Isma El-Rufai, focusing on how she depicts her male characters. Using Womanism as a theoretical framework, it highlights the portrayal of men in *An Abundance of Scorpions* and indicates a paradigm shift in the depiction of male characters in the novel. The paper finds that, rather than being oppressors or victimizers, the male characters are kind, sympathetic, considerate, thoughtful, and often oppressed or manipulated by some women against other women. This contrasts sharply with the portrayals in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, where men are depicted as untrustworthy, wicked, and ungodly. The paper concludes that most male characters in *An Abundance of Scorpions* are depicted as partners in progress, always ready to assist female characters in acquiring education and achieving economic independence. In summary, the findings reveal that El-Rufai, as a contemporary female writer, portrays men positively, viewing them as generous, supportive, caring, and philanthropic rather than indifferent or intimidating.*

Introduction

In recent time, there has been a proliferation of writing by women authors from Northern Nigeria, a region where female voices were previously all but stifled with the exception of Zaynab Alkali, whose identity became a household name in 1984 with the publication of her maiden novel – *The Stillborn*. Until then, women voices in this region were barely heard, especially in the creative writing sphere in which English is deployed as a communicative tool. Presently, women's voices in English from northern Nigeria are loudly heard. In fiction,

they take centre stage. Writers like Fatima Ba'aram Alkali, Zahra Tabi'u, Rashida Lawal, Azizah Idris Muhammad, Safiya Ismaila Yero, Razinat T. Mohammed, Phebe Veronica Jatau, Asabe Kabir Usman, Maryam Bobi, Habiba Nur-Alkali, A'aisha Abdulkareem and Khadija Abubakar Jalli, among others have emerged and established themselves.

Notably, from the publication of *Efuru* in 1966 and *The Joys of Motherhood* in 1971 by Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, the two prominent female writers from Southern Nigeria and *The Stillborn* in 1984 by Zanyab Alkali, the image of men like that of women in male authored texts has become a hotly debated issue and an interesting area of scholarly research. This is because in texts, like *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *People of the City* (1963), *The Concubine* (1966) and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi and Ayi Kwei Armah respectively, women are ascribed ugly stereotypical images as dependant, helpless, gullible and whores or mere appendages to male characters. Such negative portrayal of women compelled the above named female writers to enter the literary scene to correct the lopsided images ascribed to them and fight male chauvinism in African Literature. Thus, the arrival of African women writers into the literary scene has brought new approaches and perspectives to African Literature. Saje (1993:10) put it that, "The entrance of female writers into the hitherto male-dominated world of African Literature has, to a great extent, changed the stereotypical image of the African women." They came up with their own perception of the woman and tried to advocate for her rights no different from man. In her essay, titled "The Female Predicament in the Nigerian Novels", Acholonu (1994:38) describes the status of women in early Nigerian literary scene as:

Most of the Nigerian novels written by men fall short of giving us a full representation and comprehensive picture of the contemporary Nigerian women who have

successfully distinguished themselves in various skills and professions.

Ogunyemi (1998:60) corroborates Acholonu's stance when she states that:

Nigerian literature is phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience.

It is as a result of such characterization that female writers emerged to challenge such unfavourable depictions. According to Zakariyah (2012:227) "Female writers' works are symbolic responses to the hostile cultural stimuli against women, and that the trend will continue as long as the obnoxious cultural practices against women are not addressed." In other words, their efforts to present assertive and individualistic female protagonists have helped to salvage the lop-sided image that male writers have created.

However, with the emergence of contemporary African-cum-Nigerian female writers, like Razinat, T. Mohammed, Azizah Idris Muhammad, Safiya Ismaila Yero, Bilqisu Abubakar and Hazida Isma El-Rufai, among others too numerous to mention here, 'the war of revenge' seems to be over. These writers portray men positively in their texts. They regard them as partners in progress and not oppressors or victimizers. It is against this background that this paper, deploying Womanism as its reading technique, examines the portrayal of male characters in Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* (2017).

Critical Works on *An Abundance of Scorpions*

As far as the available data reveal, El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* is mostly interpreted from linguistic perspectives by critics like Yahaya (2020), Hashim (2021) and Garba (2021), among others. Yahaya (2020) examines how power is invested along gender lines through language

choices in El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* and Alkali's *The Descendants* using Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach as the theoretical framework. Concentrating on gendered scenes, lexical choices, transitivity patterns and prepositional patterns, this critic identifies the structural patterns in scenes which portray the female characters' assertiveness, boldness and agility. He argues that "The main characters of the books are women with varied levels of education; age and socio-economic dynamics but they all have strong ideals and sense of selfhood" (99). He further notes that El-Rufai in *An Abundance of Scorpions*, her first novel, changes the direction of the tradition of African women writings where men are more or less seen as the monsters who are always trying in one way or another to dominate or enslave women at every opportunity. The novel's central theme according to this critic is that of love, strength and perseverance. He adds that "It is a story of a woman by the name Tambaya, who suffered in the hands of women as against the normal storyline where women have been shown to be maltreated by men... It is an uplifting story of a woman who suffers the malice of other women as a result of greed, jealousy and corruption" (106). It is this paradigm shift in the characterization of men and women in the works of contemporary African female writers like El-Rufai the present study seeks to examine.

Garba's (2021) study is a pragmatic analysis of *An Abundance of Scorpions*. It employs Austin and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory as its theoretical framework. The critic categorizes the utterances of the characters in the text according to the five major categories of speech acts proposed by Austin and Searle: expressives, commissives, declaratives, representatives, and directives. The findings indicate that the writer uses language expressively to achieve a pragmatic effect in her novel. Additionally, the study reveals that each speech act encompasses a broader range of sub-acts, each with a specific significance in a given speech situation. Consequently, the writer employs different speech acts to convey her intended meaning. The

study concludes that El-Rufai explores pragmatics from all angles in her narrative. She utilizes her characters to achieve a pragmatic effect in her discourse, with expressive and representative speech acts occurring most frequently in the text. This suggests that she allows her characters to perceive the world as they understand it (15).

Hashim (2021) examines the place of Northern Nigerian women in religion as portrayed in Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound* (2014), Bilqisu Abubakar's *The Woman in Me* (2018) and Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* (2017) from two perspectives. First, the contribution of women towards religious development, and second, the socio-cultural factors that trigger modern women of Northern Nigeria to begin doubting and questioning some religious dogmas, especially the ones that support the superiority of man over woman. He argues that:

Religion as a pervasive socio-cultural institution is not only paramount but a necessary tool used in shaping the world view as well as directing the day-to-day affairs of believers. Throughout history Northern Nigerian women have played important roles in organizing religious activities as well as propagating the teachings of the message of religion. Even though, hardly are they placed in any politically or socially recognized position, Northern Nigerian women, like their counterparts in the South, directly or indirectly have significant impact in every religious endeavour (1).

To prove his stance, this critic cited some instances from the novels that depict how women writers from Northern Nigeria are always proud and conscious of their faith, and they play very important roles in promoting and propagating the message of the religions they so much believe in. Hashim further argues that, "The current development in digital technology, important changes and awareness within religious

space enable women to open their eyes and understand the reality of things... Women begin to have their voice heard in religious discourse" (16). Thus, despite the fatalistic nature of the Muslims, especially in Northern part of Nigeria, the women in the novels examined such Safiyya and Rosie begin to question manipulation in religion. However, according to this critic, Tambaya, the protagonist in *An Abundance of Scorpions*, is conscious of her religion despite being a modern Hausa woman. She is portrayed as an obedient wife. Also, she never hesitates to pray. Through her, El-Rufai, as Hashim argues "indicate that Dua (supplication) is the only solution to human problems. For this reason, she encourages people to always pray in everything they endeavour" (14). The study concludes by pointing out that the three writers examined are not only writing to tell the good news of religion; they are also exposing how it is manipulated in order to serve personal interest of religious leaders as well as their followers (19).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Womanism as its theoretical guide. Womanism is a branch of African feminism grounded in the racial, sexist, political, cultural and economic realities of the women. It is an approach in which women should have a holistic perspective towards patriarchy and female subjugation. It aims at redefining the position of women in the society, as reflected in most African female writings. In other words, Womanism is ethnically and culturally rooted. It does not seek to negate differences; rather, it seeks to harmonize and coordinate the differences, so that they do not become irreconcilable and degenerate into violence. The womanist, therefore, is one who strives for self-assertion and self-commitment, justice and fairness for herself and all oppressed people; and also appreciates her difference with others as well.

As a neologism coined by Alice Walker (an African American novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist and social activist), Womanism is concerned with the wholeness and well-being of all humanity – male,

female and the black community. In other words, womanists advocate that for sustainable change to be achieved in the society, men and women should work together harmoniously and complement each other's efforts. Walker (1983) describes a womanist as:

A black feminist or feminist of colour... who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually... Committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, expect periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist... Womanism is to Feminism as purple to lavender.

From the reference above, it is clear that there is no place for separation in Womanist ideology. Men and women are expected to work collaboratively for the betterment of their society. Walker's Womanist theory is a critique of and challenge to radical white feminist theory and practice. She states clearly that womanists are not separatists, but rather traditionally universalists. She illustrates this by means of the metaphor of the garden in which the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity. This is an indication that tolerance is desired for a peaceful co-existence of both male and female.

Kolawole in her book, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997) elucidates that African Womanism is the one that takes care of the rights of women of African descents alone. Her attempt at defining Womanism goes thus:

To Africans, Womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. It is generally believed that Alice Walker brought the word into focus as an aspect of African

Americans' appreciation of mature womanhood in a girl... The consciousness that informed Womanism, however, transcends individual awareness and is not new to African women (Kolawole, 1997:24).

From this reference, it is apparent that the African women's mobilisation had begun long before the Western feminist's movement. According to Akorode (2011:44):

Womanism is the black woman's intellectual framework that articulates her standpoint on self, community and society. It is committed to forging positive self-definition, self-relevance, self-reliance, self-discovery and self-independence that is capable of fighting racial and sexist oppression.

This definition explains that womanists unlike feminists believe in the emancipation of the total race and not that of the women alone. While Western feminism negates men, Womanism accommodates them. It embraces men as partners in progress and it seeks to end all forms of oppression: race, class and gender. Womanism is neither against marriage or child bearing. It is also the struggle of women to be free, the belief that women too, are human beings and should be treated the same way men are treated.

Thus, as a theory, Womanism evolved as a rejection of feminism by many black scholars and critics notably Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985), Carol Boyce Davies (1986), Chandra Tilpade Mohanty (1991), Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993), Gwendolyn Mikell (2003), Molara Ogundipe Leslie (1994), Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997), among others. These critics have questioned the homogeneity of Western feminism. In essence, Womanism is an Afrocentric gender perception that celebrates blackness and black people's unique experience and lifestyles. It makes the aspirations, needs and desires of the black women its priority and is aimed at

achieving self-definition and self-actualization for black women. Clearly, Womanism like all social theories has a number of tenets. It explores the human conditions; thus transcending the concern with the condition of one gender against the other, based on the premise that each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. It explores things, such as compromise, understanding and complimentarity which a womanist critic is expected to identify in her interpretation of works. As such, womanism is deployed in the analysis of the portrayal of male characters in Hadiza Isma El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* to depict how men are portrayed as partners in progress not oppressors or victimizers.

The Portrayal of Male Characters in *An Abundance of Scorpions*

A critical examination of the portrayal of male characters in El-Rufai's *An Abundance of Scorpions* reveals the attitude of a womanist writer towards men. While female characters are positively portrayed, male characters, in contrast, are depicted negatively in nearly all the works of feminist writers such as Nwapa, Emecheta, and Alkali. In contrast, womanist writers like El-Rufai, Abubakar, and Mohammed offer a more ambivalent portrayal of their characters. They illustrate that among women, there are both wicked individuals and those who are kind and sympathetic men, ready to support women in their pursuits. The novel under study features many male characters, but this analysis will focus only on those who play significant roles, including Yakubu, Baba, Aminu, Idris, and Alhaji Surajo Lawal.

Yakubu: A Loving and Considerate Husband

Yakubu is the first male character we meet in the text. He is the caring, loving, considerate and responsible husband of Tambaya. Though he dies prematurely, he is remembered for his kindness, loyalty and generosity throughout the story. As a pediatrician, Yakubu works at Katsina General Hospital and to make ends meet he also works for three hours twice a week at a nearby private clinic which enables him to take good care of his wife and daughter as well as his old parents,

who live in Kano. Giving comfort to his wife is among his hobbies. When Tambaya is disturbed about having only one daughter, Yakubu assures her that he is satisfied with the one child they have but Tambaya insists on taking a fertility drug. It causes bloating and nausea in her. Indeed, she commends Yakubu for his patience and tolerance as she reveals that, "Yakubu put up with my mood swings and the days of crying that followed each failed procedure. He never complained" (p.3). Likewise, Yakubu is always ready to please his wife. He helps her with domestic works. He is not like Audi Adam, who regards his wife, Dijangala, as a house-maid in Kamal's *Life Afresh* (2012). He is also good in cracking jokes solely to please his wife. Thus, when they are about to leave Katsina for Kano in order to celebrate Sallah there, Tambaya wonders if the space in the car can take all their luggage. In a funny romantic way, Yakubu says to her, "Just wait and see. I'm a good packer. Isn't that why you married me?" (p.8). Tragically, before they reach Kano, Yakubu and Fatima (their daughter) die in a fatal accident. And after his death, it is discovered that he owes debts to three people but Tambaya promises to pay for him, being an amiable and a nice husband.

Baba: A Generous and Amiable Father-in-law

Baba, Yakubu's father, is among the prominent male character, who plays a significant role in the text. He is a good father-in-law. We first meet him in the hospital eagerly waiting for Tambaya to regain consciousness after the accident, which claims the lives of her loving husband and her only beautiful daughter. When Tambaya opens her eyes, Baba is the second person she recognizes after Esther, her confidant. Tambaya narrates that:

My father-in-law was the one sitting on the chair this time, reading the Qur'an. Baba was a tall man with a long Fulani nose on which now rested a pair of round rimless reading glasses. I watched him for a long moment. He seemed to sense my eyes on him and lifted

his head. With the help of a walking stick, he heaved himself up and trudged to my bedside (p.11).

As a highly religious person and a man of great wisdom, Baba asks Tambaya about her health first before employing string of persuasive words to comfort her and sympathizes with her about the inevitable lost. In a preachy but pitiful voice Baba console Tambaya:

Tambaya, we all came from God and, for sure, we're all going back to Him. Only Allah knows why these things happen. The most important thing for all good Muslims to remember is that Islam means total submission to the will of God. And this, hard as it may be, is His will; it is His plan. If it's any consolation, they both died instantly. They did not suffer. Indeed, they are blessed. Allah took their lives in this glorious month of Ramadan (pp.11-12).

Clearly, Baba is not like Grandfather, the unsympathetic and self-opinionated father of Bala Gano, who makes the life of his daughter-in-law, Hajjo's mother, miserable and extremely unbearable, leading to her death in Kamal's *Hausa Girl* (2012). Contrarily, Baba is a kind in-law and generous to a fault. After Tambaya is discharged from hospital, he pleads with her to stay with them and even asks Suleiman (Yakubu's brother) to propose to her because he wants her to remain in their family. Appreciating her in-laws' unflinching kindness and loyalty, Tambaya reveals that, "Yakubu's parents took good care of me. They ensured that there were always people around praying with me" (p.15). Pointedly, both Baba and Mama, his wife, treat Tambaya like their own biological daughter. Even Tambaya confirms this when she says to Suleiman, "Baba is most generous" (p.26). In fact, it is through him that the author graphically depicts a society that is evolving out its patriarchal beliefs and tending towards seeing women with a great sense of worth and value. As Baba says to Tambaya, "Really sometimes women can even be better than men" (p.118).

Aminu Giant: A Supportive Brother

The next male character who plays a crucial role in the text is Aminu, Tambaya's supportive brother. After his graduation from Barewa College, he ventures into the textile business in Kano but when it collapsed, he relocates to Ghana to explore the gold-mining industry there. Unfortunately, it does not work for him either. However, instead of coming back to Nigeria, he tries another job being a determined person and eventually gets the job of a sales agent in a pharmaceutical company. After some years, he marries Jamila, a Ghanaian woman. He is always ready to help Tambaya. Thus, when Tambaya leaves Baba's house because of Maryam (Suleiman's wife) and relocates to Aminu's house, Tambaya says to him, "You're doing enough already. I'm an extra mouth for you to feed, and with your wife expecting -." He quickly cuts her off and replies that, "I've told you before, now that you have neither father nor husband, you're my responsibility" (p.51). But Tambaya still believes that she should not be a burden. This statement really annoys him and he says to her, "What are you talking about? We're Africans. You're my sister. My home is your home" (p.51). This shows that the ultimate calling of the Womanist writer is for her to show commitment to the survival of males, females and children; the willingness to show that the independence of women lies not in their breaking away from and rejecting the presence of men in that struggle but encouraging cooperation and unity to promote a world built on communal values rather than individual pursuits.

Interestingly, before Tambaya's arrival, everything is set accordingly. The room which she resides in is decorated so much that she really appreciates it when she arrived. Not only that, Aminu also tells her to feel at home and relax. He then says to her, "Here's a key to the main house. You can go in and make yourself breakfast. Jamila never wakes up before noor" (p.56). Also, being very kind, Aminu lets Jamila's brother, Musa, and her sister, Zaynab, reside in this house and takes care of all their responsibilities. In fact, he is not aware of the ignoble

treatment and untold humiliation Tambaya faces from Jamila, his treacherous wife, and Tambaya never tells him about it. He completely believes that Tambaya is leading a comfortable life in his house. Thus, when she tells him that she is moving back to Nigeria (she is promised a job there), he looks unhappy but she convinces him that Esther and her husband, Idris, will give her all the necessary support.

To further prove his brotherly support, Aminu accompanies Tambaya to the motor station and gives her huge sum of money to take care of herself before she begins to receive her salary. This really surprises Tambaya and thus narrates what transpired between her and Aminu before she left Ghana in the dialogue below:

My brother looked glum all the way to the motor-park.
Just before I boarded the station wagon, he brought out
an envelope from his pocket and pressed it into my palm.
Tucked inside were three crisp one-hundred-dollar notes.
'What's this for?'
'Your plane ticket from Lagos to Abuja.'
Knowing it was money he couldn't afford to give away. I
pushed the envelope back to him. 'There's no need for
that. I can take the bus, just like I did when I was coming
here.'
He refused to accept the money. 'You should go by air.
It's easier.'
'But this is too much even for a plane ticket.'
'You may have a job waiting for you, but it will take
some time before they start paying you. You'll need
money for immediate expenses' (p100).

Tambaya thanked him profusely and left. Since then, they had not met until Aminu ran to Abuja with his little son, Farouk, to escape his wife's threat of taking Farouk away from him. She had divorced him and wanted to marry Alhaji Ibrahim, her former boss. After Tambaya

returned to Nigeria, Aminu also suffered and experienced various types of maltreatment from Jamila. This is why he quickly fled to Nigeria to avoid her cruelty. The narrator reveals, "He was right. As a foreigner, he stood no chance at all. In any case, unlike in Nigeria, the culture in Ghana was largely matrilineal" (p.194). Thus, when Tambaya met him at Esther's house on the very night he returned from Ghana, she easily noticed that:

He'd lost so much weight that his shirt and trousers hung from his torso. He had large bags under tired, bloodshot eyes, and he'd grown an unkempt beard. For a brief moment, it seemed like he was going to smile, but he couldn't muster the effort needed (p.192).

Yet, Aminu is uncomfortable staying in Abuja for fear that Jamila could easily locate him. Therefore, he decides to go to Kano to meet his classmate and friend, Alhaji Surajo, a well-known business tycoon in Kantis Kwari Market. Aminu tells Tambaya, "They'll come after me, I'm sure. That's why I'm going to Kano. With millions of people there, they'll never find me" (p.195). However, since he left for Kano, he has not been heard from again by the end of the story.

Idris: A Caring and Responsible Husband

Idris, Esther's husband, is another kind man in the story. Although not much is said about him, his personality and impeccable manners invite thoughtful analysis. Through him, the themes of religious tolerance, mutual love, and inter-tribal marriage are explored in the text. Despite being a Hausa Muslim and Esther an Igbo Christian, Idris understands family responsibilities well. In fact, he is the catalyst for Esther's achievements. Even Tambaya is fascinated by the harmonious way the couple leads their marital life. Through her, we learn that:

Both Esther and her husband worked for the government. She was an architect and he, a chemical engineer. Idris, though, had been trying for ages to get

employment with ELF, a Multinational Oil Company (p.44).

Luckily, after some years, Idris finally gets the ELF job. He tells Tambaya, "After all these years, everything is happening so fast now. I'm going to Port Harcourt next week to start work. Esther and the kids will join me in September, and then we leave for France" (p.107). Before marrying Esther, Idris had to use persuasive words to convince Hajiya, his mother, who opposed his marriage due to their religious and cultural differences, to accept Esther as her rightful sister-in-law. He eventually succeeded. One thing that attracts Idris to Esther is her uprightness and loyalty, a quality that is evident throughout their marriage. Initially, the relationship between Esther and Hajiya is sour, as Tambaya reveals:

The relationship between Esther and her mother-in-law had improved greatly over the years, but I still remembered those early days when, in Hajiya's eyes, Esther could never do anything right. Hajiya, naturally, wanted her son to marry a nice Hausa Muslim girl. She'd been appalled when he told her he wanted to marry Esther. 'A Christian? You want to marry someone who doesn't wash her anus after shitting?' Idris insisted, and his mother came to understand that alienating Esther would drive a wedge between her and her only son' (p.302).

However, when the former proves who she really is by displaying her sterling qualities, the latter embraces her wholeheartedly. Hajiya is not like the indifferent Gwaggo, Uwani's mother-in-law, who blackmails Ahmad to marry a second wife because of Uwani's failure to give birth to more children after the birth of Yasmin and Faisal or Inna, Rosemond's mother-in-law, who also blackmails Ibrahim to marry a second wife in Bilkisu Abubakar's *To Live Again* (2007) and *The Woman*

in Me (2018). Also, she is not wicked and selfish like Hafsat, Saleh's mother who makes the marital life of her daughters-in-law, Kande and Sadiya, miserable and extremely unbearable in Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba* (2013) or Umma Sala, the pretentious but wicked mother-in-law of Hadiza Musa in Azizah Idris Muhammad's *A Sackful of Wishes* (2018). Thus, when Idris' family comes for a holiday from France, Esther asks Hajia to come to Abuja because there will be no time for them to go to the village and see her and she came. Tambaya, who is also there, really appreciates this as she says to Esther, "It's amazing the way you two get along now" (p.302).

Alhaji Surajo Lawal: A Sympathetic and Kind Man

Alhaji Surajo is also a prominent male character in the text whose portrayal is worthy of examination. In him, the author paints a sympathetic, considerate and generous man. Though we meet him at the middle of the story, the role he plays in the novel is quite impressive as far as womanist ideology is concerned. Through Aminu Salihu, Tambaya's brother, we first heard of him in the story; they attended Barewa College together. Tambaya narrates that:

When Aminu was in secondary school, he talked a lot about Surajo, his friend and classmate, but I'd never met him. I remembered Aminu telling me that Surajo had enrolled in university after secondary school. Eager to start making money, my brother had opted to go straight into business (p.195).

Thus, when Aminu lost his job in Ghana and his cantankerous wife, Jamila, divorced him and married Alhaji Ibrahim (with whom she had several affairs even before she married Aminu), his available option is to come to Kano and join the textile business that Alhaji Surajo engages in. He becomes a fabulously and famously rich man. So, when Tambaya loses contact with him since he leaves Abuja for Kano, she decided to come to Kano in search for him. Through Baba's friend in

Kano, Tambaya meets with Alhaji Surajo, a textile dealer in Kantin Kwari. Unfortunately, her subsequent conversation with him reveals that Aminu is not in Kano:

I think you know my brother, Aminu. Aminu Salihu?
You were at Barewa College together.
Ah, Aminu Giant, he said. You're his sister?
Yes.
The one who lost her husband?
Yes.
So sorry for the loss.
Thank you.
So how is Aminu these days?
My throat turned dry, and my eyes welled up with tears
(p.241).

Seeing this, sympathy is immediately registered on Alhaji Surajo's face and he quickly asks Sani (Baba's driver, who brought Tambaya to Kantin Kwari) to tell him what is wrong with Tambaya. Sani tells him that Tambaya is looking for her Aminu. It takes time before Alhaji Surajo pacifies and persuades her to control her sobbing and tell him what actually happened. She narrates him:

Two weeks ago, Aminu came to visit me in Abuja. He left the next day to come and see you. He was hoping you'd be able to help him settle down here. Things didn't work for him in Accra. I haven't heard from him since then
(p.241).

By hearing that, he promised to in give a helping hand to find out Aminu's whereabouts. He says to Tambaya, "My last contact with Aminu was when he came to me to see you after the accident. He was here for about an hour. I was the one that dropped him off at the motor-park" (p.241). Together with Sani and Tambaya, Alhaji Surajo

reports the matter to the police headquarters but they do not meet the Assistant Commissioner of Police. Yet, Alhaji Surajo assures Tambaya that he will come back to the police station. He says to her, "I'll come back tomorrow to try to see the Assistant Commissioner, so that they take the matter seriously. I'll also arrange for announcement to be placed on the radio and on TV. I'll need Aminu's photograph" (p.242). He then collects her number in order to be informing her about the progress on the matter. Since then, Alhaji Surajo has been a great comfort to Tambaya, who is in a melancholic state of mind after her brother's disappearance. Even when he goes to Abuja for a business purpose, he visits Tambaya in Gadam Orphanage to further comfort her. Thus, being generous to a fault, before he leaves, he says to her, "If you need anything, whatever it is, let me know" (p.248). Had Tambaya told him about her deceased husband's debts, he would surely pay for it.

Interestingly, from that visit, Tambaya's love surges through Alhaji Surajo. He is mesmerized by her impeccable manners and the way she adoringly nurses the orphans like her biological children. He frequently calls her to ask about herself and the orphans. Out of his philanthropy, he donates a cow to the orphanage for the celebration of the New Year. The narrator reveals that:

On New Year's Eve, two men drove into the orphanage with a big cow at the back of their pickup. They had brought it all the way from Kano – a gift from Alhaji Surajo. The children watched dry-eyed as the men slaughtered the animal, skinned and cut up the carcass (p.255).

Tambaya and the orphans really appreciated such a kind gesture and utmost concern for their well being. In a phone call, she thanks him profusely for the donation. Alhaji Surajo's kindness does not end there.

When Tambaya tells him that she has been offered a permanent job as a Matron in Gadam Orphanage, he insists on driving down to Abuja to celebrate with her. Thereafter, he visits the orphanage regularly to give her a helping hand in looking after the orphans so much that they begin to call him uncle. Tambaya narrates that:

Alhaji Surajo was subtle but relentless in wooing me. He came back from Austria with the technicians, and they started work in setting up his new factory. It was a busy time for him, but every so often he drove down to Abuja. At first, he'd just sit in living room at the residence while I carried on with my duties, but gradually he started engaging the children, helping them with their homework and playing games with them. The children soon began to call him 'Uncle' (p.310).

At this juncture, it is pertinent to reveal that El-Rufai, as an advocate of Womanism, depicts the philanthropic nature of men. Her portrayal of men contrasts sharply with their representation in certain feminist texts, such as Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984) and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2006), as well as in some male feminist works like Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994), Giwa's *I'd Rather Die!* (1994), and Kamal's *Life Afresh* (2012). For instance, Alhaji Surajo is neither selfish nor indifferent, unlike Alhaji Bature in *The Stillborn*, whose love for Li, the ambitious protagonist, is insincere. Li criticizes him when she bursts out:

He was a greedy, selfish man who spread his wealth to get what he wanted even at the cost of other people's happiness. He was a cunning, dirty man who showed no interest in a woman until another man did (p.57).

Also, Alhaji Surajo is not like Nousah Waahid, Zahrah's second husband in *Sacred Apples* who married solely because of his inordinate desire for a child. Not long after their marriage, he betrays her and

breaks his promise (of not taking another wife after her) by marrying Aalimah, a young graduate and also brings back his first wife, Salma, whom he divorced, thus turning the house into a polygamous enclave. He is always in support of his other wives and completely turns his back against Zahrah.

Similarly, Alhaji Surajo is not only ready to give a helping hand in the domestic chores in his house but also ready to cook. Cooking is his hobby. When he invites Tambaya for dinner and lifts the cover of the tray before she utters a word, the delicious aroma of chicken casserole wafts towards her, causing her stomach to rumble. Tambaya is taken aback to hear that he cooked the food. Clearly, he is different from Niyi in *Everything Good Will Come*, who chauvinistically believes that the kitchen remains the female sphere. He never gives a helping hand in domestic chores to his wife, Enitan. In fact, he is afraid of being called a “woman wrapper” (p.182) by his friends. Niyi is a microcosm of macho males, who believe in the absolute submission of women to men but never Alhaji Surajo, who regards women as mates and not maids.

Likewise, Alhaji Surajo is not like Alhaji Maikudi in *I'd Rather Die!* or Audi in *Life Afresh*, who only regard women as objects of sexual gratification. In other words, men like them see women as ‘attire’ that can be changed at will. Alhaji Surajo is far from that. He sincerely and wholeheartedly loves Tambaya not for her physical appearance but her sterling qualities. Despite the romantic moments they have together, they never engage in an illicit affair. Attesting Alhaji Surajo’s sincerity and genuine love for her, Tambaya reveals that:

...But I believed he was being sincere. After all, he could have exploited my vulnerability back there at his house. A lesser man would have done so, and I'd have succumbed too. It was only because of Alhaji Surajo's restrain that we escaped committing a grievous sin (p.317).

Evidently, rather than seeing man as a 'monster' or to use the usual feminist term an 'oppressor', womanist writers like El-Rufai regard men as partners in progress. Clearly, through the graphic portrayal of Alhaji Surajo, a philanthropist and a good Samaritan, who is always ready to assist vulnerable women like Tambaya, the author artistically and beautifully depicts her womanist ideology.

Other Male Characters in the Novel

Sani, Suleiman, Musa, Donatus and Alhaji Ibrahim (Jamila's former boss) are the other male characters in the novel whose roles though not major are significant. Through Donatus, for instance, the author shows how women like Miss Scholastica engage innocent men in the perpetuation and execution of various nefarious and barbarous acts against other women. Madam Schola used and misused Donatus to achieve her selfish ambition. She orders him to act as a spy, a hypocrite and an informer; to be reporting to her secretly every bit of information concerning Tambaya, that is, whatever she does in the orphanage. Thus, from the very day Tambaya assumes duty, Donatus starts his job in order to ingratiate his god-mother. He cunningly says to Tambaya, "I'm the driver. Donatus by name, Ma. Madam tell me say to clean the place well-well for you...Do you need anything, Ma?" (p.134). This way, he easily deceives her into believing that he is a kind man, who is ready to help her in the orphanage not knowing that he is one of the secret agents of Madam Schola. When Tambaya asks him to drive her to Esther's house at eleven o'clock in the night, he suspects that there must be something that Tambaya is planning. When they reach the house, Tambaya quickly goes in and Donatus runs hastily to the back of the house and eavesdrops on everything they say through the window. So, when Tambaya tells him that he can go and that Esther will bring her back, she does not see him. Suddenly, she sees him coming out from behind the house zipping up his trousers but he cleverly says to her, "I go bush to piss" (p.198). Thus, immediately he comes back to the orphanage, he narrates everything to Madam.

Madam Schola frankly says to Tambaya that Donatus has told her all that happened. Taken aback by the unexpected revelation, Tambaya bursts out that:

Ah! Loquacious, deceitful Donatus. That night at Esther's house when I went out to dismiss him, e wasn't waiting in the car like he was supposed to. He'd emerged from the back of the house, claiming to have gone there to relieve himself. He was spying on us, probably through a back window. And it was barely two weeks later that he hurriedly quit his job. The lout must have sold the information he'd gathered to Miss Schalastica (p.279).

That is why when Donatus voluntarily resigned, he does not tell Tambaya, so that she will not find out where he resides or that he worked not only as a driver but also as a spy for Madam Schola.

On the other hand, Sani and Musa are very kind to Tambaya. As Baba's driver, Sani is always ready to help her. Along with Alhaji Surajo, he travels from place to place searching for her missing brother, Aminu. Although he no longer works for Baba due to financial constraints, Sani continues to run errands for him out of kindness, even traveling to Abuja to collect money from Tambaya for Baba. Similarly, Musa, Jamila's brother, treats Tambaya with kindness. Throughout her stay in Aminu's house, he never does anything to annoy her and is unhappy with the way his sister treats her. In contrast, Suleiman and Alhaji Ibrahim behave poorly due to the negative influence of women. Suleiman is unkind to Tambaya because his wife, Maryam, does not appreciate her presence in their home. Meanwhile, Alhaji Ibrahim pressures Aminu at Jamila's behest, compelling him to travel from Ghana to Nigeria so that Jamila can marry her former boss, Alhaji Ibrahim.

Conclusion

The analysis thus far has adequately examined the portrayal of male characters in *An Abundance of Scorpions* by Hadiza Isma El-Rufai, a contemporary Nigerian female writer who takes a different approach from the conventional blame placed on men as the architects of the problems faced by women. This paper, through the lens of womanism, uncovers a role reversal. While female characters like Maryam, Jamila, and Miss Scholastica subjugate and complicate the lives of other women, male characters like Baba, Aminu, Idris, and Alhaji Surajo are more inclined to support women in their pursuit of education and economic independence. This portrayal of men alters women's perceptions of them and reveals the author's womanist stance. Essentially, this paper argues that while feminist writers often criticize men, womanist writers celebrate them. Overall, El-Rufai's debut novel, *An Abundance of Scorpions*, exemplifies a womanist text that portrays harmony, love, respect, and mutual understanding between the sexes. Consequently, she depicts men as caring, humane, generous, and supportive.

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