

**Muslim Women of Nigeria and the Feminist Discourse of Shaykh Al-albani: by Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman. Kuala Lumpur: Iium Press, 2008, pp: 255. Isbn 978-983-3855-33-9.**

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### INTRODUCTIONS

It was interesting to read in a new book that there exists in my country, Nigeria, a Federal University of whose existence I, a university lecturer, am oblivious. This statement captures my feelings when, immediately after purchase, my eyes incidentally caught, on the spot, the author's reference to "Lateef Sanni, an associate professor at the University of Abeokuta" (p.154) whereas there is no such university in Nigeria and, to the best of my knowledge, anywhere in the world. What there is, rather, is the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, in the employ of which the associate professor in question truly is. And I did not need to turn to another page to find that this factual error was not an isolated oversight. The author cites in the same paragraph "Dr. Nosiru Onibon, a lecturer at the University of Lagos" whereas the gentleman in question is in the employ of the esteemed Lagos State University (LASU) and not in any way associated with the prestigious University of Lagos, never as a student let alone a lecturer. On that page alone, I encountered imprecisions in their various forms with regards to language, logic and facts and it later turned out that these are characteristic features of the book.

According to the author, the book proposes to answer the following questions: one, what is the basis of postmodern feminism and how much impact has the Western secular perspective of women had on postmodern feminism in the Muslim World?; two, in what manner does the Western secular brand of feminism differ from what is defined as Islamic feminism in this book and what is the true spirit of this Islamic feminism?; three, what are the real aspirations of Muslim women in the area of study?; and four, can these aspirations be realized within the legal and the and juristic framework of Islam as enunciated by al-Albani? However, the four chapters of the book do not really address these research questions, though questions one and two seem to have received

some attention albeit uncritically in Chapter One, "Conceptual and Theoretical Bases of Feminism." Yet one wonders whether research question three is addressed anywhere in the book as the contents of Chapters Three and Four "Muslim Women in Yoruba Land: A Historical Overview" and "the Changing Roles of Muslim Women in Yoruba Land," respectively, are bereft of the expected analytical rigour that would have enabled the study do justice to the subject which itself would have been the author's contribution to scholarship.

In question three, the author asks: "What are the real aspirations of Muslim women in the area of study? And in four, he asks, "Can these aspirations be realized within the legal and juristic framework of Islam as enunciated by al-Albani?" thereby creating the impression that the juridical implications of al-Albani's book for Muslim women in the Nigerian context will be addressed. Conversely, what is offered by the author in this regard is a panoramic view of the book with no single reference to "Muslim women of Nigeria" which is the subject of his work, as could be seen from the title. In fact, what the author offers as Chapter Four looks more like a ready-made work lying fallow somewhere and waiting to see day light. The author fails abysmally to relate such a discourse to the subject of the book and one wonders what kind of research is this.

The narrative in Chapter One has the same feature as that described above. The chapter which is the longest in the book spans 74 pages (pp. 23 – 96) and discusses the concept of and trends in feminism with regards to various Muslim countries without any meaningful reference to Nigeria which is the focus of the study, excepting, of course, in page 76 where the author writes, "According to Tijani, a Nigerian Muslim scholar and former lecturer at the University of Ibadan, ... those who fall under the label Islamic feminists in Nigeria are not only resolute but also realistic in advocating that women should be granted their full humanity and protected from all harmful and cultural

practices". Yet there is no citation on the source of this information anywhere in the book as Tijani is neither cited as a work nor as a respondent or participant in an interview. Besides, the author fails again to engage critically with the growing body of scholarship on feminism in the Nigerian context. That explains why the chapters of the book are not well interlinked as none of them logically connects the other nor constitutes a good sequel thereto.

For a book published in 2008, it is interesting to note that "the field research was embarked upon in 1998" (p.3) though this is contradicted by the statement that "this study actually began in 1997" (p.5). Again the author writes that "the entire research spanned between January 1998 and May 2003, but follow-up contacts were made in 2004 with some of the very early respondents..." (p.3) and these stimulate this reviewer's curiosity. A meticulous look at the author's acknowledgements reveals his repeated reference to "my supervisor," "my thesis for a doctorate," "the original thesis," "my thesis committee," "to complete my dissertation," "my academic study and the writing of this books," "in the course of my study and the writing of my thesis" in various parts of the four-page acknowledgements. These and other features of similar nature in the book suggest that it was originally a dissertation submitted for the award of a doctorate. A closer look at the bibliography reveals that seven works have been attributed to the author out of which five are closely related to the subject of the book. Out of the five, two are journal articles and other two, self-published works, whereas the fifth is his dissertation entitled "The Socio-religious Status of Muslim Women with reference to the Work of Shaykh al-Albani," and submitted for the award of a doctorate in 2005. One can now understand why the book under review fails to relate both the feminist scholarship and Al-Albani's work to the Nigerian experience of Muslim women as such a contribution was never made in the "original doctoral thesis" that metamorphosed into the book.

The two journal articles are entitled "Feminism in Postmodern Society: An Islamic perspective" (2005) and "Muslim Women and the Islamic State between Political Activism and the Islamic Law: An Analysis of the Jilbab al-Mar'ah al-Muslimah fi al-Kitab was al-Sunnah of Shaykh al-Albani" (2006). Both works derive directly from the thesis and address the issues addressed in Chapters One and Four of the book under review, respectively. As regards the two self-published works, one of them was published in Abeokuta, Nigeria under the title: "The Hijab of the Muslim Women and A call to Every Reformer,"

in 1997 and runs in 36 pages while the other was published in Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria under the title "Feminism and the Contemporary Society" in 2001 and runs in 106 pages. This confirms the author's statement that "this study actually began in 1997" (p. 5), as noted earlier. Accordingly, what the author fails to declare is that the second work was an improved version of the first and that his doctoral thesis which was published under the title under review was merely a revised version of the same work that was published in 1997. This line of argument will be supported with evidence in subsequent lines.

**For Instance, the Author Writes (2008: 171):** Aishah was the first product of the Prophet's educational scheme for women; she attained the rank of a great theologian, an authority on the Hadith and political adviser to the first three caliphs. Her political advice was eagerly sought by them virtually on all matters. She reported 15% of the traditions that al-Bukhari collected a percentage far greater than that of Ali, the fourth caliph. According to "Urwah Ibn Zubayr, her ward and pupil, there was no scholar greater than Aishah among her contemporaries in Qur'anic and Hadith science, poetry, literature and history...

The above quotation was a reproduction from an earlier version of the book under review where the author writes (2001: 34):

The first product of the female educational project launched by the prophet was his youngest wife, Aishah. She became a great Muslim theologian, Hadith authority and political adviser. Her political advice and religious ruling were eagerly sought by the three caliphs. She reported 15% of the traditions of Imam Bukhari, a percentage far greater than that of Ali, the fourth caliph. According to 'Urwah Ibn Zubayr, her ward and pupil, there was no scholar greater than Aishah among her contemporaries in Qur'anic and Hadith science, poetry, literature and History...

**Of Similar Nature Is the Author's Statement That (2008: 169):** ... a Muslim man, Abdur-Rahman, ... argues that the only criterion for determining the suitability of a profession, whether for men or women, should only be its legitimacy in Islam. He therefore objects to the non-participation of women in any lawful profession... Another important criterion, according to Mr. Oseni should work only in an environment that is comfortable...

The above quotation, again, is a reproduction from what is contained in an earlier version of the book which was published under a different title and where the author writes (2001:35):

According to Alhaja Mrs. Giwa, a Muslim woman must be in all professions to make their impact felt in the society. Mrs. Ajibade however adds that Muslim women should work in any comfortable and nice environment... In the same vein, Professor Abdur-Rahman holds that the criterion to be considered in choosing a profession by both Muslim men and should be its legitimacy in Islam. He does not support the non-participation of Muslim women in any lawful profession. Another criterion, according to Mr. Oseni is the personal interest of the Muslim woman. To him, Muslim women can choose any of the above profession once they are interested.

The book is replete with instances of wholesale and unacknowledged excessively long quotations from or reproduction of the two earlier works. Further illustrations include the information contained in page 1 of the 1997 work which is reproduced in page 61 of the 2001 work, that in page 2 (1997) reproduced in 63 (2001) and 5 (1997) reproduced in 65 (2001). Similarly, substantial part of page 11 (1997) is reproduced in 204 (2008), of page 19 (1997) in 206 (2008) and of page 20 (1997) in 209 (2008). Instances of these, again, are numerous.

The author provides an excessively long bibliography spanning over 20 pages. However, most of the notable authors or authorities who feature in the book as in-text references are missing in the list. They include Mitchell, cited on page 26, Simone De Beavor (p. 30), Annie Leclerc (p. 31), Sandra Lee Bartky (p. 31), Foncault (p. 31), Helene Cixous (p. 31), Jan Goodwin (p. 78) and numerous others. Similarly, the author cites *Time Magazine* on page 19 and *The Nation* and the *National Year Book of Nigeria* for 2002/2003 in page 137 but both of them are missing in the list. However, he features *New Straits Times* of Malaysia twice in the list whereas only one of them has a corresponding reference in the text. Even at that, the references listed by him are wrongly cited. It is common knowledge in research that in a bibliography government publications, books, journal articles, chapters in edited books, conference proceedings and unpublished sources are meant to be stated separately and treated differently and not lumped together as though they are all of the same orientation. Unfortunately, the author puts all these together in one single basket and treated them as being of the same nature.

The linguistic errors in the book include "this book replies to the Western feminist writers" (p.1) instead of "... replies the Western..." for "reply" is a transitive verb; "Islam preceded the coming of Christianity ... in Nigeria" (p. 98) instead of "Islam predated Christianity..." or "Islam preceded Christianity..." for, "the coming of" is redundant; and "the effects of the impact of the work on

family life" for, it is superfluous to employ both "effect" and "impact" as inter-dependent variables. As regards the errors of fact, they include "the sole aim of British education was to christianize Muslims" (p. 101) whereas it was aimed at converting the local people who were not all Muslims and civilize them, "the Yoruba... regard the Oba as the representative of the Orisha, or God" (p. 97) whereas the Yoruba do not see *Orisha* as God; it is rather a god that functions as an intermediary between them and *Olodumare* Who, to them, is the Supreme Being or God and "colonialism... made secularism the basis of the educational system brought to Nigeria" (p. 142) whereas the colonialists brought the Bible alongside the Plough and the Church alongside the School and this is settled by the fact that the author himself identified conversion to Christianity as the aim of Western Education, as noted earlier.

These and other errors of similar nature that are contained in several pages of the book are utterly inexcusable for a person with minimum expertise (as most of them are also linked to more serious conceptual errors) let alone a specialist at a highest academic level whose expertise is attested to by Dr. Abdur-Razaq Kilani who edited the first edition in 1997, wrote a foreword to the second in 2001 and also featured as the external examiner from Nigeria! when the work was submitted as a doctoral thesis in Malaysia, in 2005, as exposed by the author's acknowledgements.

This book has indeed contributed to scholarship in no small measure. At least, it gives a new dimension to academic research by passing as the only serious academic book, more so that it has earned its author a doctorate, which quotes rumours from the market place several times to support very important claims that would have marked a turning point in scholarship, if adequately substantiated. The author has incredibly made a 255 page book out of statements that sound more like the words of drunkards in night clubs. Another angle to the author's contribution to scholarship lies in the fact that this book is probably a revolutionary inkling into how doctoral dissertations and academic books will be written in the future.

It is however regrettable that the book is associated with the name of Dr. Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, one of the numerous upcoming Nigerian Islamic scholars whom I am familiar with as one of my former students. If truth must be told, this book does no credit to his name and I wonder what informed his demonstration of such a low quality of scholarship and despicable standards of verification. Yet I cannot but commend him for this bold attempt and wish him best of luck in his subsequent engagements with scholarship or intellectual discourse.