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Love Stories and Stories About Love: Popular and Literary Romance in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

F. Fiona Moolla

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Abstract: Anglophone Nigerian writer Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* opens up northern Nigerian Hausa society to an international novel-reading audience. His concern with female experience and intimate relationships resonates with the vision of Cassava Republic, the Abuja- and London-based publisher, with whom Ibrahim has collaborated. Both publisher and author are especially concerned with foregrounding romantic love. The investment in romance is, however, riven by an uneasiness about the feminist and literary potential of popular romance. A distinction is made by the author between "love stories" (or popular romance) and "stories about love" (or literary romance), which reflects the assumptions of the publisher about romance. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the feminist and literary shortcomings of popular romance are implied through the nature of the representation of the *littattafan soyayya*, or Hausa love stories, read by young women in the novel. The representation of love in the popular romances in the subplot of the novel is compared with the romance of an older woman, the protagonist in the main plot. This essay argues that the distinction made between the two forms of romance rests upon a false dichotomy and that the feminist potential of popular romance, as a genre that embodies hope, is as significant as the feminist potential that may sometimes be found in literary romance.

About the Author: F. Fiona Moolla is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Western Cape. The socio-cultural history of love as it emerges through postcolonial and African literature is the focus of her research and writing. Her next project is a co-edited volume, provisionally titled *Love at Large: Worlding Eros*.

Keywords: feminism, Hausa literature, literary romance, obstruction, popular romance, Season of Crimson Blossoms, soyayya novels

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Season of Crimson Blossoms is the novel by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim that catapulted him onto the international literary scene following its success in Nigeria. The novel was published by Parrésia in Nigeria in 2015 and went on to win the NLNG Nigeria Prize for Literature, Africa's most lucrative and prestigious literary award. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* was then published internationally in 2016 by Cassava Republic Press, based in Abuja but also with offices in London. In the landscape of contemporary Nigerian publishing, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* stands out, since it offers a rare glimpse in the world of Anglophone letters into Muslim northern Nigerian Hausa society. The novel is also unusual for being focalized through an older female protagonist, a grandmother, whose subjectivity and desires are explored through her romance with a much younger man. The literary romance in the main plot is indirectly compared in the subplot with the popular romances read by the protagonist's granddaughter. The young girl reads the Hausa-language *soyyaya* romances to escape the trauma of political violence; her father was brutally killed before her eyes. While the main plot reveals its feminist concern in the love story highlighting the older woman's subjectivity and desire, the subplot misses the feminist potential of the romances read by the young woman. Although the novel attempts to distinguish between literary and popular romance plots, with the first presented as admirable and the latter more disparaged, a closer reading of the novel will show that both forms of romance ultimately point at utopian resolutions for women: directly in popular romance and indirectly in some literary romance. Furthermore, the architecture of the plot of the literary love story is fundamentally similar to that of the popular romance, except in closure, where the wish fulfillment of popular romance presents hope, and the tragic outcome of the literary romance acts as a critique of gender injustice. The tension between these *forms* of romance also, by contrast, *informs* the publisher's implicit assumptions about romance. Cassava Republic Press has championed romance for its feminist possibility but has also distinguished between popular and literary versions of romance, valuing the latter over the former, as is clear from commissions, projects, marketing, and interviews between the publisher and Ibrahim as a Cassava author.

The Politics of Publishing and Writing Romance in Africa

Season of Crimson Blossoms was not Ibrahim's first work to be published by Cassava. The relationship between Cassava and Ibrahim has a history, and its complexities feed into assumptions and understandings of romance that are expanded in the novel. There is a clear overlap of concerns with female experience and intimate relationships between the publisher and author, which led Ibrahim to be commissioned for a prior Cassava project before *Season of Crimson Blossoms* was published. Ibrahim's "Painted Love" was one of the short stories in Cassava's *Valentine's Day Anthology*. The context of the publication of the short story, and then later also of *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, ironically suggests Ibrahim's and the publisher's discomfort with the genre of popular romance, even while promoting a focus on romance writing.

Cassava has published some of the most celebrated Nigerian (and other African) authors, including writers in the diaspora. A key dimension of this woman-led publisher's mission has been to give prominence to romance fiction through reappraising the significance of romance in contemporary African culture. The focus on romance needs to be considered against the backdrop of the general neglect of romance in international literature,

but, more specifically, the overshadowing of romance in established African literature and scholarship. This effacement has been identified, most notably, by the prominent Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo, who passed away in May 2023. Aidoo suggests that writing about love among canonized twentieth-century African authors may have been perceived as frivolous in light of the harsh realities of African history (Aidoo 11). In the twenty-first century, this position has changed, with many continental and diasporic writers turning their attention to personal relationships and intimacies, showing how such concerns are as important as questions of cultural encounter, colonization, and race, among other issues, which have prevailed in African literature. Cassava Republic has been a crucial part of this change with its concentration on romance, mainly through its Ankara Imprint, launched with six romance novellas on 15 December 2014. Cassava's publishing director, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, suggests that Cassava moved to romance publication since she discovered from Sapphire Press, a South African romance imprint, just how immediately experienced and addictive African romance could be. Smitten by romance, Bakare-Yusuf felt challenged to subvert some of the racial and gender norms of Anglo-American popular romance ("Q and A with Publisher").

Cassava's second intervention was the *Valentine's Day Anthology*, conceived just three days after the Ankara imprint was launched and swiftly published online on Valentine's Day in 2015 (*Valentine's Day Anthology* n. pag.). The *Valentine's Day Anthology* is an anthology of romance short fiction commissioned from seven of Africa's leading authors, both male and female, which "reflect[s] the realities of African lives" (*Valentine's Day Anthology* n. pag). Abubakar Adam Ibrahim was one of the seven writers commissioned to write a short story. Cassava likely considered commissioning Ibrahim for the romance anthology since his previously published short fiction shows a marked awareness of emotion and personal relationships, especially channeled through female subjectivities. (Ibrahim's short fiction includes the collection *The Whispering Trees*, first published in 2012 by Parrésia, and republished in 2021 by Cassava, among other short stories published elsewhere.) His little-known first novel, *The Quest for Nina* (2009), also puts romance in the spotlight by exploring the ambiguities of eros through a widowed husband's obsession with his late wife. The fact that Cassava's two projects were contiguous but, nonetheless, developed separately, implies a distinction assumed by the publisher between popular romance and a more sophisticated form of romance represented by the *Valentine's Day Anthology*. It is revealing, for example, that the Ankara popular romance imprint reinforces the assumption that romance is a "women's genre," since the published Ankara authors are only female, while the *Valentine's Day Anthology*, reflected in its project brief, actively commissioned "literary" writers, both male and female, "to counter the stereotypical perception of romance" (Shercliff, "*Valentine's Day Anthology*" n. pag.), which one assumes is represented by the Ankara series, but not the *Valentine's Day Anthology*.

In some ways, this distinction (and hierarchy) is carried through in Ibrahim's short story, and then later his novel *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Ibrahim's story in the *Valentine's Day Anthology* relates the relationship of two medical doctors, focalized through the older male hero, Yaro. Yaro meets Inara, the young house officer, when she works at the hospital in Abuja where he is a consultant. Inara is natural and unconventional but clearly very attractive, since she is reputed to have enamored many of the wealthiest men in the city. We are told that she "loved as she lived, without inhibitions" (33). On their initial encounter, the heroine takes the first step and invites the hero on a date. The chemistry is indisputable. Inara leaves her distinctive quirky style on Yaro's bedroom, painting each of the four walls a

different color: "canary yellow, lime green, azure and carnation" (33). Feeling trapped in their relationship, Inara says that she has to leave Yaro. To persuade her to stay, Yaro asks her to marry him. Inara departs to do humanitarian work in Darfur but keeps in contact with Yaro by email. In Darfur, she unsuccessfully tends to a dying boy who has a pet canary in a cage. Upon the boy's death, she frees the canary since, as she writes to Yaro, she does "not believe in caging things, even if done in the name of love" (35). The couple happen to meet at an airport lounge more than two years later, where Yaro says to Inara, "[l]et me show you that love isn't a cage" (35). Again, the couple part, to be reunited more than two years thereafter when Inara shows up on Yaro's doorstep saying, "[s]how me how love is not a cage" (35).

"Painted Love" is constructed around a tension, namely the challenge of writing a love story that pushes against gender and racial stereotypes without overtly appearing to do so. Thus, we see, countering gender stereotypes, that the heroine in the story has the more active agency than the hero, even though the narrative is focalized through the male subjectivity. Furthermore, the lovers are African, but the focus is wholly on the personal relationship rather than on historical, political, and social issues, which have tended to be the focus of African literature that has entered world literary circuits. The story also has to be a love story, making it fit the theme of the *Valentine's Day Anthology*, but it needs to avoid the romance formula, which would have given it the overtones of an Ankara popular romance novella, against which the *Valentine's Day Anthology* positions itself.

Emma Shercliff, in an interview with Ibrahim, discusses the writing of "Painted Love" against the backdrop of northern Nigeria, where Ibrahim's fictions are set. The interview takes place just before the publication of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* in Nigeria. When asked about who the Nigerian writers of romance are, Ibrahim answers that it is mainly women, "and I think that the men who do write sometimes do that under a pen name, because they don't want to be identified as romance writers, as these emotional people, who are very sensitive to love *and all that*" ("Q&A with Author" n. pag., emphasis added). The derision detected in Ibrahim's reference to "love and all that" is made explicit when Shercliff asks whether Ibrahim would ever consider that *he* wrote romance. His answer is a resounding "no," since he suggests that he never set out to write romance in writing "Painted Love" and *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. He adds further that he does not "even know if [he] writes love stories." He suggests that "[m]aybe I write stories about love," which presumably challenge romance stereotypes and formulae, and that these are "essentially … different from love stories," which are formulaic ("Q&A with Author" n. pag.). This clearly presents some awkwardness for Shercliff in relation to the *Valentine's Day Anthology* story written by Ibrahim for Cassava. Shercliff asks, "So when you were writing your story 'Painted Love', were you approaching that differently, because you'd been asked to write a romance story?" ("Q&A with Author" n. pag.). Ibrahim responds, "Yeah, obviously. I couldn't kill as many people as I wanted. [Laughs]. You know, I set out to write a story with a happy ending, I was conscious of the type of audience I was writing for at that time. So it's a deliberate effort to tone down some of the things and some of the complexities that you usually bring into your other stories. And I was focused on love, romance, happy ending, people not dying" ("Q&A with Author" n. pag.). Thus, in the effort to write a romance, the author needed to simplify the narrative, "tone down … some of the complexities," bearing in mind what for Ibrahim is the simpler readership of romances. Complexity, or rather its lack, is a term that comes up again in the interview to contrast the formulaic nature of romance, as opposed to more

"intellectual" reading. It is this complex juggling act between the imperative to write romance for the *Valentine's Day Anthology* and the author's critique of the genre that determines the inconclusiveness of the happy ending of "Painted Love," where the couple is united, upon condition that either is free to "fly away" at any point. Paradoxically, in "ton[ing] down … complexity," Ibrahim reveals the complexity of the romance genre, whose "formula" is as open to sophisticated literary permutation as other genres.

The Literary Romance Plot in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

Season of Crimson Blossoms presents us with an unlikely romance protagonist. Binta Zubairu is a devout fifty-five-year-old Muslim grandmother, set up in the city of Abuja by her well-to-do son after her husband was killed in inter-religious conflict in her former family home in Jos. Her house is a sanctuary for various generations of women in the family, affected by internecine or domestic strife, including two daughters, a niece, and a granddaughter. Binta's niece, Faiza, lives with her after the violent deaths of her own immediate family. Binta's daughter Hadiza also returns to the maternal home after leaving her second husband. Binta is irritated by Hadiza's presence, since Hadiza married a husband of her own choice and can provide no persuasive reason for leaving her marital home. Binta's house is burgled by Hassan Reza, a handsome twenty-five-year-old small-time marijuana dealer and henchman of a wealthy and unscrupulous politician, who subsequently becomes Binta's secret and forbidden lover—secret and forbidden for many reasons, but, most significantly, because Binta is so much older than Reza. In this society, as in many others, the sexual desire of the older woman is erased, often considered abnormal or embarrassing, and would be even more questionable if the object of desire was a man young enough to be her son.

Female sexuality has, generally in most cultures, veered between extremes, where women have been seen to be hypersexed, needing to be controlled, or seen to be entirely without desire, the objects only of the desire of men. This transformation is clearly tracked in Anglo-American society, where the hypersexed female of the medieval period, presented, for example, in the cuckolded husbands in Chaucer's tales, is succeeded by the pure and virginal "angel in the home" of Victorian England, who is then replaced by the sexually liberated woman embodied in the flapper of the early twentieth century. When women's sexuality was brought out from the shadows in Anglo-American culture in the twentieth century, mainly the sexuality of young, as opposed to older, women was explored. The stereotype of the mother held fast to the older woman, whose sexual desire was generally considered spent, at best, and perverse, at worst. A handful of cultural texts address the "sexual twilight" of the older woman, including Hanif Kureishi's film *The Mother* (2003), and, of course, the latter part of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, where the geriatric Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza finally consummate their love, to their children's embarrassment, on a ship that flies the cholera flag, to dissuade other passengers embarking to discover the ignominy of their aged passion. The romance of the older woman is the feminist concern at the heart of *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, contemplated through the specific cultural and religious context of Hausa society.

As with the love story represented by "Painted Love," the story about love narrated in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* also relies, for the most part, on the plot structure of the

popular romance. The society defined by the novel against which the lovers struggle in order to be united is a conservative one, which proscribes the intimacy of unmarried, unrelated people of the opposite sex; which regards sex between unmarried people as a major sin; and which would regard as scandalous the relationship between an older woman and a younger man.

The couple meet in an unorthodox way that strips many of the social barriers that ordinarily would separate a man and a woman who are strangers to each other—the couple meet when Binta catches Reza trying to burgle her house. When Reza discovers the house is occupied, he tries to rob the householder of her personal belongings also. In a tussle to get her mobile phone, Reza rips Binta's hijab, or head covering, off revealing parts of herself that should be seen only by men of the household. The exposure creates an intimacy that is developed further when Reza guides Binta, holding her from behind, dagger in hand, into the bedroom. The scene is very finely balanced between violence, potentially ending in rape (though it does not), and the most intense erotic chemistry connecting the characters at their meeting, and foreshadowing the erotic desire that constitutes the heart of the ongoing attraction between the couple. It is the instant connection between Binta and Reza that leads Reza to regret his action and motivates him a few days later to return Binta's stolen property.

Sexual attraction is a feature of the encounter, which gets reinforced again and again in the narrative, and sexual attraction, as the relationship matures, develops into more altruistic forms of love. The physicality of the connection is, in addition, contrasted with the relationship between Binta and her late husband, Zubairu. Binta had been married off to Zubairu at the age of sixteen or seventeen, when her father feared for her reputation as an unattached, nubile young woman. In her marriage, Binta does not experience sexual pleasure, since her husband regards sexual desire in a woman as inappropriate, and "as a practical man … fancied their intimacy as an exercise in conjugal frugality" (51-52). The sexual desolation of her marriage is made even more desolate in the decade of her widowhood, likened to a "patch of wasteland" (45).

Ironically, the difference in age between Binta and Reza is both that which constitutes their attraction and that which destroys their relationship, since it is a barrier, the crucial love story element identified by Pamela Regis in the landmark study, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, which cannot be overcome in this story about love. It is important to note that it is not so much the difference in age that is an issue as it is Binta's being older than Reza. The novel provides numerous other socially condoned examples of older men courting or marrying younger women. Indeed, the rival for Binta's affections is the much older Mallam Haruna, whose courtship with the younger Binta is entirely socially admissible. Maimuna, furthermore, is Reza's biological mother, who, as a seventeen-year-old, was given in marriage to Reza's father by his friend. The husband foisted on her is much older than she is, accounting, in part, for her dissatisfaction and eventual abandonment of the marriage. It is important also to note that the opprobrium attached to an older woman's relationship with a younger man has more to do with social and cultural norms than it does with religious precepts. Islam does not proscribe marriage to an older woman; in fact, drawing upon prophetic precept, marriage to an older woman is encouraged by Islam, a practice that has, however, not significantly impacted Islamized cultures. The first (and longest) marriage of the prophet of Islam was to a wealthy, influential widow, significantly older than himself, who proposed marriage to him, rather than him to her.

Linked to the obstruction of the difference in age is the overtone of incest in the relationship, which creates the attraction from the first meeting but also is a prohibition on the relationship. Binta is not just old enough to be Reza's mother, but the narrative throughout foregrounds specific ways in which Reza is like Binta's younger son, Yaro, and the particular ways in which Binta is like Reza's biological mother, Maimuna. Binta's immediate sensory apprehension of Reza at their first encounter is the "pungent" smell of marijuana, which brings with it "gusts of memories eddying in little swirls around her mind" (12). The memories are of her son, Yaro, back in Jos, who, as a teenager, had taken to smoking weed. Reza's rebelliousness and difficult relationship with his father are also constant reminders of Binta's son, who was killed in a police raid fifteen years prior. Binta's forgiving attitude to Reza for the life he has fallen into, which led him to rob her, in part is her attempt to atone for her lack of understanding of her son and lack of courage in standing up to his harsh father, which led to Yaro abandoning his family for a home in the Jos underworld. Binta is highly conscious of the incestuous nature of her attraction, which causes her some self-reproach: "His caramel eyes, with their imploring look, sucked her in and teleported her back to that day, so long ago now, when she first looked into her son's little brown eyes and swooned in the cascades of maternal adoration. It disturbed her, this constant reminder of her son when she looked at Reza. But Reza was not Yaro. He was her lover" (105-6). Maternal feelings also lead Binta to encourage Reza to give up criminality and educate himself. The relationship between the heroine and hero is thus doubly interdicted since Binta is an older woman, in a social context where the woman-lover cannot be older than her beloved, and the fact that her lover is like her son.

Reza's attraction to Binta is similarly "incestuous." At their first encounter, when Binta turns around to retrieve her jewelry, Reza muses that she is "[p]erhaps a little heavy around the hips, a little heavy at the bosom," but she is "[n]ot too mamarish" (14). The identification with Reza's own mother is cinched by Binta's gold tooth, at the sight of which Reza is taken aback, whereafter Binta exclaims, appealing to Reza's sense of filial respect, "*Haba!* My son. I am old enough to be your mother. Please" (14). Reza's own mother is an exotic beauty who was forced into marriage to Reza's older, unattractive father. She leaves the husband, and her six-month-old son, for a life in Jeddah, inviting the appellation "The Whore of Arabia." Reza is caught in a love-hate relationship with his mother, idealizing her as an orientalised Madonna figure: "Her fleeing footsteps echoed in his memory amidst the swirl of musk, the gleam of gold in her teeth, and her beautiful face shimmering like an image under water" (41). But he also hates her for having abandoned him.

These barriers make the relationship ill-fated from the outset, ominously symbolized by the smell of cockroaches, an odor that assails Binta's nose whenever something disastrous is about to occur. The title of the novel, *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, is an index of the significance of the flower symbolism present throughout the novel, which captures both Binta's rapture in love and the tragic conclusion of the relationship, foreshadowed right at its outset. Crimson blossoms allude to the flowers of the flame tree in the courtyard of the house belonging to Munkaila, Binta's son. His young daughter collects the fallen petals to float them in a cup of water. Binta's niece, Faiza, in an absentminded reverie, melancholically utters the words "[s]eason of crimson blossoms" (207). Earlier in the novel, Binta identifies with the petunias that her daughter Hadiza plants in her own garden. Looking at the flowers, we are told, "That was the precise moment, Binta would reflect later, that the petals of her life, like a bud that had endured half a century of nights, began to unfurl (45)." The crimson

blossoms thus come to symbolize her passion, which had lain dormant in all the years of her marriage, but they also ominously suggest the price paid for her forbidden love affair with the young Reza.

Shortly after Faiza utters the poetic phrase "season of crimson blossoms," she deflates the magic of the moment by saying, "[b]lood" (207), proleptically suggesting the cost of Binta's scandalous relationship. (Faiza's identification of the petals with blood is caused by the trauma of having seen her father and brother being hacked to death before her eyes.) The flower imagery highlighting the obstacle in the relationship, which cannot be removed, is layered further through reference to the "corpse flower," or titan arum. At their first encounter, when Reza breaks into Binta's house and she is first unsettled by him, it is suggested that he had "sown in her the seed of awakening that would eventually sprout into the corpse flower, the stench of which would resonate far beyond her imagining" (14). Later, Binta is told about the corpse flower by her other daughter, Hureira, who had watched a documentary about the flower that blossoms only once in thirty years and "stinks like death" (189). Thereafter, at one of her trysts with Reza, Binta says that she feels like that flower that blooms after "all those years of waiting" but that her blooming "does not feel right" (192), hinting at her premonition that hers is a love that will never be accepted. Lying at the heart of the novel, thus, underscored by the flower symbolism, is the idea that the factors for attraction in the relationship also cause its destruction. Destruction in attraction is the barrier that cannot be overcome.

As a tragic romance, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* thus presents, as we have seen, the plot elements of the romance, as outlined by Pamela Regis, including society defined, the meeting, the attraction, and, in particular, the vital element of the obstruction. Where *Season of Crimson Blossoms* departs from the plot structure of the popular romance is in its conclusion. Since this is a story about love or literary romance, rather than a love story or popular romance, it is most significantly the happily-ever-after ending that needs to be eschewed. Thus, the intense and addictive romance between Binta and Reza finally sees Binta's elder son, Munkaila, killed at Reza's hand, and Reza himself murdered by the politician for whom he works, who comes to regard him as a dangerous risk. The novel, however, also constructs a hierarchy of romance through its critique of popular romances, represented centrally by the *soyayya* romances read by the young women in the novel.

The Popular Romance Subplot in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

The women in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* are all readers. Binta, as a practicing Muslim, reads Az Zahabi's *Major Sins*, but she also reads Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. This underlines the point made by Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, that contemporary Nigerian novels are neither "introverted" nor "extroverted," referring to the well-known distinction made by Eileen Julien, but are instead "multifocal," to use the term suggested by Madhu Krishnan (Suhr-Sytsma 341). Suhr-Sytsma observes further that "Ibrahim's novel seems less in dialogue with [international literature] than with the *soyayya* novels Binta's niece, Faiza, reads" (350). The contrast in reading predilections of the female characters addresses a much more central tension in the novel itself, around its constitution as a

romance. If Binta is the heroine of the romance in the main plot, her niece, Faiza, is the secondary heroine, or foil, against whom Binta may be read.

Faiza is an avid reader of Hausa *soyayya* novels, as well as Mills & Boon, which she gets from her two friends, sisters known in the household as the "Short Ones." The sisters run a lucrative lending library of romance novels for their wide network of family and friends. Indeed, romance is the genre that defines the existence of the young women in the novel—romance across various media and across cultures. Romance, and the lifestyles often associated with the romances they consume, shape the daily lives and the desires of the teenage girls, down to their gestures and poses. Faiza, we are told, has mastered the art of "sweeping her dress under her and posing proficiently with her hand on her lap like a queen holding court, a pose she had adopted from Kannywood home videos, which, along with *soyayya* novellas occupied the bulk of her leisure time" (18). ("Kannywood" refers to the thriving film industry associated with the city of Kano in northern Nigeria, playing on "Hollywood" and "Bollywood.") The novellas and films allow Faiza to "nurture her ornate dreams," where she could "paint her face, stick up her posters, watch Kannywood films and read *soyayya* novellas in which handsome men in sedans fell in love with beautiful girls with moon-like eyes and aquiline noses" (18). While the Short Ones hanker after the handsome real-life alpha-male hero, Reza, whom they know as a neighborhood heartthrob, Faiza is infatuated by the king of Kannywood, Ali Nuhu, whose picture she has pasted on every conceivable space in her bedroom. So taken is Faiza by the Hausa romances that her ambition of being a doctor is overtaken by her dream of one day herself being a *soyayya* novelist (19, 69).

The other older women in the household decry the girls' fascination with local romances. When Faiza tells Hadiza that she will put her face on the cover of the novella she one day will write, since Hadiza is elegantly beautiful like the *soyayya* heroines, Hadiza threatens that her jealous husband will burn all her novels, especially since they are so worthless. Binta concurs, lamenting that the local romances are all Faiza reads (19). Indeed, whenever Binta comes across Faiza reading, she lashes out at the novellas as "rubbish books" (54).

In this respect, Binta is presented as being something of a hypocrite, since she also is a reader of romance, albeit "international" romances in English. After the burglary, when she is cleaning up the house, she comes across a small pile of books. Of the books, which include Hemingway, she chooses instead to read a Danielle Steel novel, clearly marketed for "senior" women whose deteriorating eyesight make the large print of the novel easily read without reading glasses (35). Reza secretly returns to the house to give back some of the items he had previously stolen. Primed for romance by the Steel novel she had been reading, Binta's initial attraction to Reza burgeons further. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* extends in a romance context the tendency of characters in *Bildungsromane* themselves to read *Bildungsromane*, creating a vortex of reading. Binta, the romance heroine, is shown later to be reading Priscilla Cogan's *Compass of the Heart*, a cross-racial, cross-cultural romance that, despite the more pronounced boundaries it challenges, has a better chance of succeeding than Binta's intra-racial, intra-cultural, intra-religious romance.

Ibrahim elaborates on the tensions in the novel around romance, especially local Hausa romance, in the interview with Emma Shercliff referred to earlier. When asked whether there is a difference between romance and the *soyayya* stories, Ibrahim responds by emphasizing that the *soyayya* novels are also romances, but, crucially, romances with

"more morals" in respect of the representation of the erotic, because of the conservatism of the Muslim culture of their composition and circulation. Ibrahim qualifies the classification of *soyayya* novels by suggesting further that there may be "two different types of romance for two different types of people"—the *soyayya* novels for the Hausa-Fulani, where the depiction of desire in love stories is modulated by religious and cultural mores, and more "universal" (read Anglo-American) romance for others (Q&A with Author n. pag.).

The novel's construction of local romance as hopelessly ineffectual is carried further in the broader context within which Faiza turns to *soyayya* novels and Kannywood for consolation. Faiza is scarred by the trauma of having witnessed the brutal killing of her father and brother by people whom she knew and regarded as friends. When violence breaks out in their Jos neighborhood, her family hides out in the bathroom. Faiza's father is killed before her eyes by a machete blow to the head from her maths teacher, Jacob James, known to her classmates for his formal attire and smiling tolerance of their childish jokes. On this occasion, however, he does not smile: "His face, made fierce by warpaint, glistened with sweat and odium as he raised his machete and brought it down" (77). This moment is traumatically etched into Faiza's consciousness, physically experienced through the blood in which she comes to be covered: "Bright red blood, warm and sticky, splashed across Faiza's face and dotted, in a fine spray, the shell-pink nightdress that her father had bought her" (77). Trauma manifests in nightmares from which Faiza wakes in the night to read the *soyayya* novellas she gets from the Short Ones. Her dream of being a *soyayya* author is a dream of creating alternative, beautiful worlds: "Maybe I want to read about other things and other people and other places, about love and people being happy and not—… I want to write about beautiful things" (73). Faiza also sketches her nightmares in her *Secret Book*. At its worst, the young girl's trauma presents as bizarre behavior that leads Hureira to think she is possessed by a djinn. The Islamic teacher and spiritual healer she gets to exorcise Faiza insightfully diagnoses Faiza's condition as caused by trauma, exacerbated by her fear of forgetting the face of her dead brother. Recognition of the source of her anxieties leads Faiza to destroy her romance fantasy world—she rips off all the images of romance hero Ali Nuhu in her room. By extension, she is also destroying the *soyayya* novels, from whose pages fantasy heroes like Ali Nuhu emerge. She turns instead to painting to represent and work through her trauma. In this way the novel implies the useless futility of the wish-fulfillment dreams of the romance novel. Yet the broader social context within which the *soyayya* novels are written and read suggests greater value of these popular romances for women.

A Brief Cultural History of *Littattafan Soyayya*: Localizing Voice and Agency

Yusuf M. Adamu identifies the 1980s as the "turning-point" for Hausa prose fiction, when, with government support, prose fiction began to overtake poetry as a dominant form of cultural expression (5). But the real takeoff is linked with the self-publication initiative of a young woman, Talata Wada Ahmed, who in 1984 printed and distributed her novel *Rabin Raina* herself (Y. M. Adamu, "An Account" 7). Her success opened the floodgates on the production of novels, centered mainly in the northern Nigerian city of Kano. This literary outpouring has come to be known, often offhandedly, as "Kano Market Literature," an

appellation first introduced by literary historian Ibrahim Malumfashi, implicitly comparing it with the Onitsha Market Literature of the 1960s of the Igbo southeast of Nigeria (Y. M. Adamu, "Introduction" x-xi). Book production soared and reading publics were constituted beyond Kano among Hausa diasporic communities in other African countries, and even as far afield as Saudi Arabia (Y. M. Adamu, "An Account" 9-10). By the late 1980s, the first scholarly studies of Kano Market Literature were conducted, notably Graham Furniss's *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa*. A feature of this burgeoning literature was the number of women authors. While drawing on Hausa-Islamic cultural sources, the Kano novels of the late 1980s also tapped other influences. In his early study, Furniss proposes that "[t]he novels owe more to English-Language publishing of the Mills and Boon variety … than to any Hausa precedent" (54-5). Brian Larkin qualifies this view by stressing the construction of parallel modernities in the influence, from about the 1950s, of Indian films, among other indigenous and Arabic sources. But Indian film, in particular, he suggests, has "entered into the dialogic construction of Hausa popular culture by offering Hausa men and women an alternative world, similar to their own, from which they may imagine other forms of fashion, beauty, love and romance, coloniality and post-coloniality" (406). These varied sources have allowed the constitution of a significant romance tradition, *littattafan soyayya* (love stories), which, Abdalla Ubu Adamu cautions, however, should not be overplayed, since true romance plots constitute only about 35 percent of the novels (A. U. Adamu 51-2).

What has loosely been termed *littattafan soyayya*, romance novels, often, however, present a wide range of themes and social issues. These Hausa novels indisputably present women's voices more strongly than other contemporary northern Nigerian forms. Ousseina Alidou tracks the effacement of women authors in the development of Hausa literature in Roman script, contrasted with "what Hausa-Fulani Muslim women intellectuals had achieved in the Hausa *ajami* writing tradition" (146). ("Ajami" refers to the use of Arabic script to write Hausa.) Alidou regards the women writers of the Hausa novels of the late 1980s as the legatees of the storytelling matriarchs of Hausa orature. She proposes in regard of the dominance of the love story that:

> the love story virtually became in modern literature what the folktale is in the oral mode—women's literary arena. Relatively confined to the domestic space, the love story became a new means of making public what in Hausa society belongs to the private space. It became a means, in other words, of women inscribing themselves in the sphere of men through exposing the struggles and traumas of the hidden world of the domestic to the outer world of the public. To this extent, then, the love story came to assume a subversive, transformative, and even revolutionary potential. (147)

Alidou suggests further that precisely because of its political implications, the importance of the love story has been "down-grade[d] … by classifying it as 'popular literature'" (147). Alidou adds, referring to Fadia Faqir, that:

> The art of love story writing by contemporary Hausa women in Hausa language fulfils the same purpose as that of the writing of autobiographies by contemporary Muslim Arab women writers. By painting their lives through biographies or through fiction, Muslim women are cross-culturally

> interrogating both the patriarchal interpretation of Islam, patriarchal representation and interpretation of sociopolitical realities, as well as the perspective of outsiders speaking for them. (148)

The feminist potential of the *littattafan soyayya* is underscored more specifically also by Novian Whitsitt, who notes that the "romantic novels have become an explorative forum for the socially and culturally loaded issues of polygamy, marriages of coercion, *purdah* (the Islamic tradition of seclusion), and accessibility of education for females" (119). Shifting the focus to affect studies, Umma Aliyu Musa emphasizes that "there are substantial elements of anger spread across Hausa women's narratives which deserve attention and [should] not … [simply] be relegated to the box called 'romance'" (4). (In the context, this is not a rejection of romance, rather an appeal to consider the complexities of romance.) Given the controversial nature of their themes, which have included explorations of eroticism and same-sex desire, the *soyayya* novels have been rejected by those in power and by publishers, have been banned (A. U. Adamu), and have even, in 2007, been burned by the Kano state government's censorship board (Musa 7). Scholarly studies of the *soyayya* novels suggest, in addition, that they may not be as saccharine as Ibrahim's novel and comments might suggest. Indeed, the *littattafan soyayya* might in their social complexity represent a greater threat to patriarchal authoritarianism than *Season of Crimson Blossoms* does. In the Q&A referred to earlier, where Bibi Bakare-Yusuf discusses the launching of the Ankara Romance Series, she observes, "Soyayya romance novels might sell 50,000 copies, 100,000 copies." She adds that "[n]o literary fiction in English in Africa sells that kind of quantity" (Q&A with Publisher n. pag.). The continued popularity of the *soyayya* novels suggests further that they engagingly address questions that matter to its readership.

Conclusion: The Obstruction of Obstruction, or How to Avoid the Happily-Ever-After Ending

Obstruction in closure, it is contended, is the only difference between the "story about love" (*Season of Crimson Blossoms*) and the love story (the *soyayya* novels). As we have seen, both Ibrahim's novel and the novels of the Hausa writers address key feminist concerns in a general and localized setting. Both *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and the *soyayya* novels feature most of the essential plot elements of a romance narrative, including, in addition to a clearly defined hero and heroine, secondary or rival heroes and heroines. The main difference between Ibrahim's novel, the literary romance, and the *soyayya* novels, the popular romance, in respect of plot is that the *soyayya* novels remove the obstacle at the ending, constituting the romance, or wish fulfillment, while *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, true to the tragic mode that appears to power romance, maintains obstruction until the end. In other words, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* avoids the happily-ever-after ending to distance itself from the "romance formula" while actually relying on the essential elements of popular romance throughout. Reza suffers a physical death and Binta experiences a "social death" as a persona non grata among her family and community. The deaths, real and metaphorical, of the lovers at the end of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* challenge the romance where the lovers, through their demise, have their love immortalized. Instead, in this story about love, value is created

through the open romance ending, which leaves the central social issues unresolved and primed for continued debate. Projecting a future social utopia through the union of the lovers when the obstacles are removed is the romance of the romance. The *soyayya* love stories are empowering since love is shown to conquer the unjust social barriers that keep the lovers apart. Here the heroine and hero are given the agency to overcome, and value is created through the construction of a future reality where oppressive social obstructions have been removed. Thus, rather than regarding the story about love as articulating a vision of social justice for women, which the love story eliminates through escapism, we may need to see the two modes as operating in parallel, distinguished mainly by the ending. While the happily-ever-after ending of the popular *soyayya* romance is a model of the world set right, the tragic ending of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* suggests an unfulfilled desire for the world to be better.

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