

Critics in the Poetry of Nana Asma'u Bnt Fodio: An Overview

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Abstract: *Nana Asma'u Bint Fodio was born in Degel in 1794. She was born during the time of the Jihad reform period. Her parents came from a scholarly community which migrated to Hausa land from Futa-Toro, before the 15th century. This paper discusses the historical background of Nana Asma'u Bnt Usman Fadio and her traditional intellectual movement, is an exploration of the style and content of the poetry of Nana Asma'u bint Fodio. In other words, the study examines critical opinion in the poetry of Nana Asma'u and concluded that poetry is a vehicle for political, social and cultural emancipation. The paper further reveal that Poetry has long been used by people and African poetry today owes much to oral poetry which is a form of catharsis to use Freud's term, for the communication of ones feeling over a given situation. The Study revealed that Nana Asma'u was not only a scholar who contributed a lot to the literature produced during the Jihad movement led by her father Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, but was the first woman scholar in her time and in her area who become eminent and distinguished through her work of which made a lot of her poetry are elegies. It was concluded that Death played an important role in Nana's poetry thus the bulk of her poems are lamentations. She made death personal in her poems.*

I. Introduction

Nana Asma'u Bint Fodio was born in Degel in 1794. She was born during the time of the Jihad reform period. Her parents came from a scholarly community which migrated to Hausa land from Futa-Toro, before the 15th century, To understand Nana Asma'u one has to view her against the background of the intellectual atmosphere in which she was born and brought up, as well as see her as the daughter of the Islamic revivalist scholar, Shehu Usmar B. Fodio.

Degel, her birth place was in Gobir the most northerly part of the Hausa kingdom. The Shehu's ancestors had lived for generations in roughly the same locality. Nana Asma'u spent most of her childhood in a restrictive and totally religiously committed atmosphere. In Nana Asma'u's home there was no room for idleness. Everyone in the household had something to do every day. "Everybody in the family had his or her own timetable, time for meditation during which people kept quiet, time for trade or profession by which one earned some money" Infact all these made the home atmosphere totally challenging.

Nana Asma'u was brought up in a revolutionary and hard life as dictated by circumstances. Nana Asma'u was brought of to the learning environment. Known Islamic system of education which had been passed to Hausa land from Timbuktu. This system of education had persisted for many centuries whenever orthodox Muslims were to be found. At the age of three to four years she started to learn the Fatiha (the opening surah of the Holy Quran) by heart from her teacher. At the age of five she was given her alio (writing slate) with which she was taught words of the Arabic letters beginning with Bismi11 ah. She had to recognize the individual letters "b", "s", "m" and read them aloud to her teacher while pointing to them with her finger.

On satisfying the teacher that she could recognise the letters, the writing was washed off, and other sentences written out The classes would have been held in the open air in the women's part of the house. Asma'u and other children, boys and girls attended in the morning before 10:00 a.m and in the afternoon between 3:00 p.m and 5:00 p.m, the La'asar prayer marking the end of the afternoon classes "By the time she was ten years she had probably read the Holy Qura'an in its entirety, there being sixty h i j i b i (section)".-^ This was a necessary precondition for introducing Nana Asma'u to higher forms of knowledge. Thus, it is "when competence is reached in reading Arabic, poetry is studied much of which is also committed to memory.

The memorization of classical Arabic texts and poetry which can be done concurrently, and the study of grammar preceded any attempt made by a student to compose any work of his or her own". Nana Asma'u's education followed these lines. Proportionally her education included more than academic and religious studies. From the beginning, the Shehu, Nana' s father stressed the crucial importance of individuals patterning their life-styles on the sunnah of the Prophet and the examples set by his companions. In Ihya al-sunna written in 1793, the Shehu had written clearly that "Whatever they did, we will do, and whatever they avoided, we will avoid" (sick) In the hadith there are many examples of the Prophet exhorting people to work with their hands. An example is found in Muhammad Bello's book K i t a b a l N a s i h a t (translated and versified by Asma'u) which mentions the example of the Prophet's daughter Fatima grinding her own grains by hand". Inevitably, the

Shehu in order to set an example twined grass into ropes, "his son Muhammad Sambo carries produce to market in a sack slung across his shoulder".¹ Nana Asma'u was taught to perform household chores by the Shehu's wives and these included food preparation, spinning, soap making and hair-dressing, education and home training contributed a lot to the intellectual and spiritual development of Nana Asma'u. Nana Asma'u, correspondently, was one of the children that benefited from the knowledge of the Shehu, her father. Nana was always present whenever her father was teaching any group of students irrespective of their age or sex. This gave her an opportunity to learn intensively. This in turn influenced her very well and contributed to her being a well learned woman, a teacher, a preacher and a poet in her own right.

II. Nana Asma'u Traditon As An Intellectual Movement

The view of Islam as a purgatory for women underlies most works written on Muslim women. They are commonly depicted as isolated from men, passive actors in the so-called public domain, confined to their kin groups, and so on. Such views have limited the discussion of women to the ... topics of veils, honour and shame, patriarchy, kinship and polygamy. [Though this does not under estimate the value of such topics, but the position of woman in Islam is an all encompassing phenomenon] (Abdalati 1997; Alhibri 1982, Izzedin 1953 cited in Arebi 1991:99-100).

How do we know whether a person is included or discriminated in a given community? For indeed there is the need for a criteria in which we can use to evaluate the contributions made by Nana Asma'u that later translates into a movement.

According to Bullock (2002:68-69); the three main criteria for a person to be fully included in a community are:

1. Being an equal partner (have equal access to power) in dialogue and decisions that shape the community (e.g., political, social, economic and spiritual decisions);
2. Being a respected partner in dialogue and decision-making, and;
3. Having a private life free of extra-ordinary difficulties (e.g. illiteracy, poverty and domestic violence) that hamper his or her ability to be involved in community.

For a person to fit into any of the criteria mentioned by Bullock, he must possess extraordinary qualities capable of incorporating the people, moving them as partners in progress and standing firmly in defense of their interest and general well-being. Therefore, Asma'u's responsibilities went beyond those involved with teaching. She was a highly educated scholar, upon whom the best scholar in the community could depend, an efficient manager, and a consummate mediator. One of her first state duties, at the age of twenty seven, was to facilitate the organization of the Shehu's works after his death. This was a task so important that the 'Ulama in Sokoto today draw a parallel between it and the compilation of the Qur'an after the Prophet Muhammad's death (Pbuh). Such a task required her quadri- lingual skills and intimate knowledge, which were extensive, since he had been writing since the time he was twelve. Furthermore, this project would have required an extraordinary memory to allow her to catalogue innumerable pages of unbound texts that had suffered decades of use and transportation from one encampment to another during the Jihad years. Only someone who was of unquestionable trust, and whose ability was revered would be equal to the job (Boyd & Mack; 1997:8).

Using Bullocks first criteria of inclusion, we can see that Asma'u was the woman chose by Bello to lead the caliphate women in the paths of ordoxy, to turn them if necessary from the slippery slopes leading to what she herself called 'The Satan named bori'. (Boyd; 1989:44). Asma'u was identified as Sarkin Mata duka (Chief of all women) by captive women, as an uwar-gari figure by the general populace as a mother of the faithful' by her peer group; and as a Shaikha (scholar) whose writings transcended gender by the intelligentsia. She functioned as one of Bello's aides to integrate women into a society whose ideology was rooted in Islam. A woman was able to earn herself a living by spinning an occupation over which woman had a monopoly to the extent that they organized the marketing of spun thread either through direct purchase or through commission agents. There was also a market fun by women for women near Gidado's house which, in a much attenuated form, existed until the 1970s (Ibid).

Bullock's second criteria of inclusion was being "a respected partner in dialogue and decision making". This can be seen when Nana Asma'u involves her concern in the same year as the 'miracle' at Alkalawa; Asma'u talked to the Shehu when men were getting their share-out of official appointments. Asma'u asked him, "what about us, the women?" and he replied "you will be over all the women. The women of the caliphate belong to the women and the men belong to the men" (Cited in Boyd & Mack: 1997:12).

However, Asma'u was by far the most prolific writer and influential woman to have emerged in the western Sudan during the nineteenth century; what is more, her influence carried over into the world of men. So kind her charity was a thousand fold. But she carried it to the places where decisions were made. She was not a surrogate man; she led no troops on the battlefield like Queen Amina, was in charge of nor tax collectors like the Inna, in her role as the Sarki's aide, and headed no religious cult like the Inna, In her role as the head of

bori, she made stringent and apt observations in her political verse as a wearer of the Shehu's mantle, but remained decorously within the confines of her home. (Boyd; 1989:99).

The third and final criteria provided by Bulluck was having a free private life devoid of extraordinary difficulties (e.g. illiteracy, poverty and domestic violence) that hamper his or her ability to be involved in community. According to Boyd (1989:45):

Quite separate from the legal cases were the problems associated with the rivalries present in polygamous households. Gidado himself had five sons by Asma'u and 21 sons plus 21 daughters by other wives and concubines. There were jealousies and stresses in such situations. Each wife tried to secure the affection of her husband and promote the interests of her own children, activities which stirred competitive feelings in her co-wives. The use of kwarce (charms) to overcome rivals was only one way of upsetting the peace; back biting gossip was another. These were condemned by Asma'u who taught her students to be patient. She instructed them to distance themselves from prohibited sins such as lying, avarice, hatred and envy, and she advocated as an alternative to Kwarce resource to Qur'an.

Asma'u's main work was in the education of women in order to equip them to bring up the next generation of children within the desired ideological framework (Ibid).

The greatest of Asma'u's contribution which signifies her political and intellectual sophistication, is the 'Yan taru movement. A movement which is the backbone of her teaching philosophy and the soul of her reform strategy, hence the genesis of the Nana Asma'u tradition.

Asma'u established a cadre of literate, itinerant women teachers (Jajis) who disseminated her instructive poetic works among the masses. Trained by Asma'u, these women were extension teachers using Asma'u's works as lesson plans and mnemonic devices through which they instructed secluded women in the privacy of their homes... Nana Asma'u's training of Jajis and the 'Yan taru was community work whose primary tool was the spoken word (Mack & Boyd; 2000:76).

Asma'u relied on each Jaji to act as a mentor and to bring groups of women to her. To each she gave a large malfa hat made of fine silky grasses. Usually worn by men, the hats have a distinctive balloon shape because they are intended to be worn over turbans. A Malfa was also (and remains) one of the marks of the office used by the Inna of Gobir, the chief of women devotees of bori. Asma'u deliberately took up the symbol, and by giving each Jaji a Malfa, she at once devalued its uniqueness and transformed what it stood for. From being symbolic of bori, it turned into an emblem of Islam (Ibid:89).

When a Jaji left Asma'u to return to her home village, she walked in the midst of her group of women students, her distinguishing headgear lending utmost respectability to the group. She probably carried a copy of Asma'u's latest work (ibid:79). The women came to seek for knowledge from Asma'u because those who wished to pursue their studies had to seek out to the recognized masters, wherever they might be found and enroll themselves as their pupils (Johnston; 1967:27).

But why have the Muslim women come across in orientalist literature as isolated strangers and as individuals alienated from their society, while on the other hand, they are used as a vehicle for constructing an image of the whole culture. (Arebi, 1991:100) and feminists who believe that women are disadvantaged because of their sex; and that this disadvantage should be overthrown (Heywood; 1998:238) could still not be accepted in Muslim communities?

According to Arebi (1991:104):

My contention is that Muslim women have been unable to adopt the western model of feminism for three reasons:

The first reason has to do with the insistence of the liberation movement on wages as a liberating force.. women realize that work, as it relates to them, is a created need deliberately built into economic system so as to "push" them to it, causing them to work out of deprivation, not to achieve any self-realization... The second reason why Muslim women do not relate to the western model is the insistence of western movements that family and kinship ties are a hindrance to women's liberation. The

third reason is connected with west's identification of "the problem" of Muslim women as a religious problem.

Islam aims at the perfection of human personality irrespective of gender, class, race or ethnic affiliation. This is achieved through knowledge. Three things constitute human perfection; will, knowledge and work. Nana Asma'u had the will, she possessed the knowledge and worked for the common good of all. According to Ibn Badis "Man's life from its beginning to its end, is based on these three elements: will, knowledge and work. These three are in their turn dependent on another three: work is dependent on the body, knowledge on the mind, and will on the behaviour. Sound knowledge and strong will are the products of wise behaviour, useful work and robust body. Therefore, mankind must care for and look after these three; the mind, behaviour and body. The mind should be fed on knowledge, the behaviour of the Holy Prophet should be approximated, and strength should be given to the body by balancing diet, avoiding injury and working". (El-Tayeb; 1989:271).

The main achievement of Nana Asma'u and the entire Jihad movement is on scholarship. This notable achievement of the Sokoto Jihad movement in the field of Islamic scholarship informed the perception of the historian of the Sokoto caliphate such as Smith (1979), who describes the movement and by extension the caliphate, as an intellectual movement. (Usman: 2003:21).

Critics on Nana Asma'u Poetry

Nana Asma'u (1793-1863) was a princess, poet, and teacher, and is considered the precursor to modern feminism in Africa. She had such an impact of the education of women, that in Nigeria today, many Islamic women's organisations, schools, and meeting halls are named after her. Nana was a member of the Fodio clan who ruled the Sokoto Caliphate in modern-day Nigeria. Her family was part of a fundamental Islamic sect, known as the Qadiriyya, who focused on the pursuit of knowledge as a spiritual path.

She had an excellent education from a young age. She learned all the Islamic classics, memorized the entire Qur'an, and was fluent in four languages: Arabic, the Fula language, Hausa and Tamacheq Tuareg. She wrote poetry in the first three, and became well-known in her time for her poems. She was an accomplished author and respected scholar in communication with scholars throughout the sub-Saharan African Muslim world.

Her poetry addressed topics like divine truth, Sufi women saints, Muhammed, and jihad battles. She also wrote eulogies that today serve as historical documents providing insight into the turbulent political atmosphere at the time. Much of her poetry placed a strong emphasis on women leaders and rights of women within the community ideals of the Sunnah and Islamic law.

Like other women in her family, Nana Asma'u taught both boys and girls together. However, in addition to teaching local students, she made an impact on Muslim women's education by training a large network of women as educators. The women memorized Nana's poetry as teaching devices to use in instructing Islamic women. The group of women, called yan-taru, or "those who congregate together, the sisterhood", traveled throughout the Caliphate educating women, who passed on their education to others.

Today, Nana Asma'u's works still inspire Muslim women all over the world. Her life and works are a testimony to a women's right to pursue education and to be active in pursuing social issues. Her tomb in Sokoto is a place of pilgrimage for Muslims.

Amongst her over 60 surviving works written over 40 years, Nana Asma'u left behind a large body of poetry in Arabic, the Fula language and Hausa, all written in the Arabic script. Many of these are historical narratives, but they also include elegies, laments, and admonitions. Her poems of guidance became tools for teaching the founding principles of the Caliphate. Asma'u also collaborated closely with Muhammed Bello, the second Caliph. Her works include and expand upon the dan Fodio's strong emphasis on women leaders and women's rights within the community ideals of the Sunnah and Islamic law.

The critical opinions on the poetry of Nana Asma'u. It may be worthwhile to make some general remarks about the very nature of poetry as a necessary introduction to the criticism of Nana Asma'u's poetry. A poem is produced by a poet, it takes its subject matter from the universe of men, things and events. It is addressed to or made available to an audience of hearers and readers. "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" One cannot translate the word of a poem in such a way as to translate its meaning, and yet reproduce its original rhythm and colour, identical associative and aural values, all those nuances of sound and of symbolism that are a poem's very essence.

Moreover the syntactical order in which words are organised vary from language to language, and the overall effects of the words in the original may not be preserved when they are rearranged in the order imposed upon them by translation. Also there are words in each language that have no equivalent in another. "The French have no word for "home". There is no verb in English that is the exact counter-part of the German *causchen*, no does the German *qucken*" adequately render the implications of the English verb "to peer". "A poem will result when the genius of a language - its words, their sound and their sense offers the genius of a

poet an opportunity to perform a miracle ".3 "A poem gives the world back to the maker of the poem, in all its original strangeness, the shock of its first surprise".^ it is capable of doing the same for the rest of us. "A poem is a way of knowing and feeling that requires, for its understanding a modicum of imagination and some familiarity with the conventions of the art".5 Moreover a poem may take a generation to yield its full secret. One might even say that a poem's meaning varies from age to age.

M. M a r i t a i n in his book *The Situation of Poetry* touches a profound truth when he describes a poem as a form of knowledge that is "not ordered to knowing but to being expressed in a work". Its aim, method and end result is the creation of a new thing. That new thing represents knowledge that could have been realised in no other way.

"In a universe in which everything has meaning and in which all meanings are related and symbolised one another, the poet lives perpetually on the age of discovery ".6 it is the poet's function to understand, to interpret to learn what it is he is being told, by giving form to the formless and a body to the Bodiless. The true relation of reason to inspiration in poetry and of substance to form was first convincingly set forth by Dr Johnson's successors. Poetry to them was simply "the expression of the imagination only another name for clearest insight, amplitude of mind and reason in her most exalted mood".' They held the poet to be one who sees into the world of human experiences with clear and comprehensive vision. "The passion which stirs to life his creative instinct does not distort the truth but reveal it. Whilst his function is to communicate neither knowledge no moral instruction but power " Closely allied to the above the artist has always functioned in African society as records of mores, and experience of his society as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence himself. In,a paper "Why African literature?" David Rubadiri has spelt out the themes that would excite African literature for a long time as politics, race and self consciousness with a search for identity. Augustinho further said poetry coming from Neto and Siphon Sepami a, exhibit the quality of having matured out of the concept of asserting the colour identity. They represent to a large extent their feelings about the condition of their people, or human being through orientation of the protest culture which have gone to the extent of revolution in Neto Cheney Coker, in *A Poet in Exile* states that the very existence of an African writer is itself a political statement and assert that poets should live. The content of what they write, otherwise it would be used against them by the very people who constitute their readership. Recognition may be the only reward they should expect because the poet is obviously going to jail, especially if he is an African poet".

In the *People's Mood*, Mbulelo Mzamane recommends literature to politicians as a kind of political barometer to gauge popular feeling".10 He then rightly observed that the revolutionary poet is one that concretizes the aspiration of his people for a better life thinks that the movement see to the possibilities of realizing that goal. Garbai also affirms that a working definition of culture could be based on the idea that political domination in itself is an act of culture. "If imperialist domination has the vital need to practise cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture" Poetry has been a part of a cultural act or practice since the days of cultural nationalism. "Art is culture based and culture specific" It is important to mention that culture has to do with self definition" Arguing further, Garbai says that the understanding of culture is based on the relationship between words and their meaning and how the poet might manipulate them. To understand any society in terms of their songs, music or poetry or any genre one has to comprehend and appreciate the culture. "The relationship according to Garbai between culture and poetry within the tangible aspect of a society is determined by the concentration of all the existing factors that formed the environment. Hence culture incorporates the tradition through dynamic representation for new values "However, Donatus Nwoga, in *African Literature Today* No.10, said African Poetry is that which includes the transcendental elements which provide the poet an opportunity to retain his audience by being relevant to his tradition. The angle of vision of the artist is affected by natural social and spiritual freedom within which he is operating". He also describes poets as those who hold up a mirror to the society and in this way raise significant questions over the operations of the artist.

In addition poetry is a vehicle for political, social and cultural emancipation. Poetry has long been used by people. African poetry today owes much to oral poetry and "it is a form of catharsis to use Freud's term, for the communication of ones feeling over a given situation". Writing poetry may not quite be an achievement, but a poet's attitude to the political problem in the society would determine his relevance and actual achievement. It is in this way that poetry in Africa can be understood as an art which is channeled to propagate ideas to influence the community. This does not mean that poetry is outright propaganda. Social realism both as a technique in poetry and a practical reality occupies an important place in African literature In this general vein Ruth Finnegan further views "Praise poetry as the most developed and elaborate poetic genre in Africa ".17 The elegies glorify virtues, express the people's beliefs, joys, sorrows and notion about right and wrong. A lot of Nana's writings are actually elegies.

III. Conclusion

Nana Asma'u was not only a scholar who contributed a lot to the literature produced during the Jihad movement led by her father Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, but was the first woman scholar in her time and in her area who became eminent and distinguished through her work.

Nana Asma'u correspondently was one of the children that benefited fully from the knowledge of the Shehu her father. Nana was always present when her father was teaching any group of students irrespective of their age or sex. This gave her a golden opportunity to learn intensively. This in turn influenced her very much and contributed to her being a well learned woman, a teacher, a preacher and a poet. Nana was also educated by her elder brother Muhammad Bello. Her own observation of Bello's activities as a brother and also as a teacher gave her great courage in her own undertaking. A lot of her poetry are elegies. Death played an important role in Nana's poetry thus the bulk of her poems are lamentations. She made death personal in her poems. After all funeral dirges are not for the ears of the dead, they are for the living. Therefore, Nana made the dirges vehicles of a lamentation, philosophy ideas on morality and comments on the general human condition. Nana praised the way in which people attempted to reach high standard of behaviour most accepted in Islam.

Some of her elegies can be described as Sinner poems. They are deeply religious, devotional and prayerful. The Islamic belief in Allah and the life-after-death also shaped the tone of her poetry.

Each of the individuals Nana eulogised contributed greatly to the development and the success of the society. They were people with worthy qualities. In her injunctionary poems on the other hand, Asma'u conceptualises life-after-death. The conclusion of a span of life on earth is not an absolute end to everything but death is a sign post for the possibility for life at another level.

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