

NEGOTIATING GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN NIGERIAN FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HABIBA AND THE THING ABOUT COMPROMISE

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of gender and social change in Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba* and Maryam Awaisu's *The Thing About Compromise*, focusing on how both novels construct female agency within the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Northern Nigeria. While existing scholarship has extensively explored themes such as patriarchy, child marriage, female oppression, and women's education in Northern Nigerian fiction, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which negotiation functions as a culturally grounded strategy through which women challenge patriarchal structures and facilitate social transformation. Drawing on Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's African Womanism and Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism, the study adopts a qualitative comparative literary approach based on close reading and thematic analysis of the selected texts. The analysis demonstrates that both novels portray patriarchy as a dynamic social system sustained through economic dependence, cultural expectations, and intergenerational complicity rather than male domination alone. At the same time, the protagonists resist these constraints through negotiation, education, strategic compromise, and personal resilience instead of outright confrontation. The study further argues that education emerges as a transformative force that enables women to renegotiate unequal gender relations while contributing to broader social change within their communities. Through a comparative analysis of the two novels, the study extends existing research on contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction and demonstrates that meaningful social transformation is portrayed as a gradual process achieved through culturally embedded forms of negotiation rather than radical rupture with tradition. **Keywords:** Contemporary Northern Nigerian Fiction; Gender; Social Change; African Womanism; Nego-Feminism; *Habiba*; *The Thing About Compromise*

Introduction

Contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction has increasingly become an important site for exploring the intersections of gender, culture, religion, and social transformation. Through the works of writers such as Razinat Mohammed and Maryam Awaisu, women's experiences have assumed a central position in literary discourse, reflecting the challenges of negotiating marriage, education, family, and identity within deeply rooted socio-cultural structures. Rather than presenting women solely as victims of patriarchal oppression, these narratives foreground their resilience and their capacity to negotiate restrictive social expectations while remaining connected to their communities.

Among these works, *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* offer compelling representations of women's experiences in

contemporary Northern Nigeria. Although situated within different socio-economic settings, both novels examine how patriarchal authority shapes women's lives through child marriage, domestic expectations, unequal marital relationships, and restricted educational opportunities. At the same time, they depict female characters who challenge these constraints through negotiation, education, resilience, and strategic compromise rather than outright confrontation.

Existing studies have examined gender in Northern Nigerian literature from perspectives such as female subjugation, patriarchal domination, child marriage, and the denial of educational opportunities (A. Umar 98–104). Other studies argue that contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction increasingly questions patriarchal ideologies by foregrounding women's experiences and reconfiguring traditional gender relations

(Koledade 37–45). While these studies have significantly advanced research on gender in Arewa literature, comparatively little attention has been devoted to a comparative reading of *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* that foregrounds negotiation as the principal means through which gender relations are reconfigured and social change is imagined. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

This study comparatively examines how both novels construct female agency within culturally specific patriarchal contexts. It argues that Mohammed and Awaisu represent social change not as a radical rejection of tradition but as a gradual process achieved through dialogue, education, resilience, and strategic negotiation. By reading the two novels together, the study contributes to research on contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction by demonstrating that negotiation functions as the central mechanism through which women challenge patriarchal expectations while preserving communal relationships and expanding possibilities for gender equity.

Literature Review

Gender, Patriarchy, and Women's Oppression in Northern Nigerian Fiction

Gender, Patriarchy, and Women's Oppression in Northern Nigerian Fiction Gender, patriarchy, and women's oppression remain central concerns in the research on Northern Nigerian fiction. Arewa literature, as it is called, reflects the socio-cultural and religious structures that shape women's experiences within a predominantly conservative society. Babatunde observes that literary representations of gender have historically been conditioned by patriarchal constructions of space and social roles, particularly through the confinement of women to domestic spheres (128). Building on this position, Fadare argues that contemporary Northern Nigerian women writers increasingly interrogate the tensions between tradition and modernity, exposing the ways marriage, religion, and other socio-cultural institutions regulate women's bodies, choices, and intellectual agency (9). Therefore, while earlier literary representations often normalised patriarchy, contemporary narratives increasingly interrogate its systemic operations.

Recent studies have also complicated the assumption that women's oppression is sustained exclusively by male authority. Through a study of *Habiba*, Chukwu argues that patriarchal structures are frequently reinforced by women who internalise and reproduce the very ideologies that marginalise them (48). Akpore and Ndukwe similarly contend that female characters often participate in perpetuating systems of silence, submission, and inferiority, revealing the complex dynamics of intra-gender oppression (45). Together, Chukwu, Akpore, and Ndukwe broaden the understanding of patriarchy by demonstrating that gender inequality in Northern Nigerian fiction is sustained through a complex interaction of institutional structures, cultural ideology, and intra-gender complicity, rather than through male domination alone.

Female Agency, Resistance, and Negotiation

Recent studies on Northern Nigerian fiction have increasingly shifted from portraying women as passive victims of patriarchy to examining the diverse forms of agency through which they negotiate restrictive socio-cultural environments. Rather than presenting female protagonists as powerless figures, contemporary studies emphasise their resilience, self-awareness, and capacity to pursue personal autonomy within existing communal and religious structures. Umar and Arabi argue that this agency is reflected in the protagonists' gradual psychological development as they negotiate the tension between personal aspirations and communal expectations, suggesting that resistance often emerges through growing self-consciousness rather than overt confrontation (16).

Although scholars broadly agree that contemporary female characters exercise agency, they differ in explaining how that agency is expressed. A. Umar contends that women's empowerment is primarily pursued through education, religious consciousness, and strategic negotiation, enabling protagonists to challenge inequality while maintaining communal cohesion (101). By contrast, Fadare argues that recent Northern Nigerian fiction increasingly portrays women who openly challenge traditional expectations of silence and submission, even at the

risk of social exclusion or personal sacrifice (9). Akpore and Ndukwe reconcile these positions by suggesting that female agency in works such as *Habiba* is neither uniform nor exclusively confrontational but encompasses multiple strategies through which women redefine their identities and resist patriarchal limitations (45). Consequently, female agency emerges not through a single model of resistance, but as a dynamic and context-dependent process through which women negotiate restrictive socio-cultural environments in multiple ways.

Theoretical Approaches to Gender in Northern Nigerian Literary Studies

Current studies on Northern Nigerian fiction have increasingly favoured theoretical frameworks grounded in African socio-cultural realities rather than relying exclusively on Western feminist paradigms. Scholars argue that approaches such as African Womanism are better suited to analysing gender relations within contexts where communal identity, religion, and family remain central to social life. Umar, for example, employs Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's African Womanism to demonstrate how female protagonists pursue dignity, education, and autonomy through negotiation and communal responsibility rather than adversarial gender politics (101).

Some other studies have adopted complementary theoretical perspectives to examine specific dimensions of gender relations. Chukwu employs Foci-Feminism and Intra-Gender Victimisation Theory to explore women's participation in sustaining patriarchal structures (48), while Umar and Arabi apply the Bildungsroman framework to analyse the psychological development of female protagonists (16). Babatunde similarly draws on Spatiality Theory and Kristevan Feminist Semiotics to examine how literary spaces reinforce and contest gendered power relations (128). Rather than competing, these diverse frameworks complement one another, underscoring that no single paradigm fully captures the complexities of women's experiences. This theoretical diversity illustrates the growing necessity for culturally responsive analytical frameworks in the study of

contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction.

Literature as a Medium of Social Change

Northern Nigerian literature consistently recognises fiction as an important medium of social critique and cultural intervention rather than merely a form of artistic expression. Within the tradition of Arewa literature, creative writing interrogates prevailing gender norms, challenges social inequalities, and encourages reflection on women's experiences. Umar argues that female-authored fiction promotes social justice by portraying women as resilient agents capable of negotiating oppressive socio-cultural structures rather than as passive victims (101). Similarly, Babatunde views literature as a dynamic space through which writers question established hierarchies and engage critically with changing social realities (128).

Beyond thematic representation, scholars also highlight the wider social impact of contemporary Northern Nigerian literature. Uimonen demonstrates that writers such as Razinat Mohammed increasingly use digital networks and international publishing platforms to expand discussions of gender, religion, and social change beyond local audiences (26). Therefore, contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction functions not only as artistic expression but as an active catalyst for public engagement. It remains a powerful medium for questioning social inequalities and imagining alternative possibilities for gender relations within Northern Nigerian society.

Comparative Studies in Contemporary Northern Nigerian Fiction

Comparative approaches have become an important method for examining the development of gender discourse in Arewa literature. By reading texts alongside one another, researchers can trace shifts in ideological orientation, literary representation, and authorial engagement with changing social realities. Umar and Arabi's comparative study of Zaynab Alkali's *Invisible Borders* and Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba* provides a representative example of this approach (16). Their analysis places a foundational writer alongside a contemporary novelist to examine the changing representation of women's experiences

across different literary periods. Through this comparison, they demonstrate that female protagonists have increasingly moved from positions of cautious conformity towards more self-conscious and active engagement with questions of identity, autonomy, and social expectation.

Fadare similarly adopts a comparative perspective by reading Linda Jummai Mustafa's *What If...* against earlier traditions in Northern Nigerian fiction that emphasised female endurance and silent suffering (9). His study illustrates how contemporary writers increasingly foreground more assertive responses to patriarchal structures while remaining attentive to the cultural contexts in which such responses emerge. By juxtaposing these texts, such comparative scholarship reveals how Northern Nigerian literature continues to evolve in response to changing social and political debates, reflecting both continuity with and departures from earlier literary traditions.

Despite the value of this body of studies, a notable methodological limitation remains. Much of the comparative scholarship reviewed here adopts a vertical approach by pairing contemporary texts with earlier works to illustrate historical developments in the representation of gender. While this perspective provides valuable insight into literary change over time, it leaves comparatively little attention to horizontal comparisons between works produced within the same historical moment. Comparisons such as that between *Habiba* and *Invisible Borders* illuminate long-term developments in gender discourse, but they reveal less about the different ways contemporary writers respond to shared social realities.

This methodological emphasis has left important questions underexplored. Comparative studies between contemporary Northern Nigerian texts have the potential to reveal differences in ideological emphasis, narrative strategy, and representations of female agency within the same socio-cultural environment. Examining Razinat Mohammed alongside another contemporary writer such as Maryam Awaisu, for example, makes it possible to explore how authors writing under similar historical conditions negotiate

common concerns in distinct ways. The predominance of generational comparison has therefore created space for further research into the dialogue between contemporary texts and the diverse literary strategies through which they engage the changing realities of Northern Nigerian society.

Research Gap

A synthesis of the existing literature demonstrates that studies on gender in Northern Nigerian fiction have developed in several productive directions. Studies have examined intra-gender oppression, the psychological development of female protagonists, the relevance of culturally grounded theoretical frameworks such as Womanism, and the broader shift from representations of female endurance to more assertive forms of agency in contemporary fiction. Collectively, this body of work has deepened understanding of the ways gender relations are represented and contested in Northern Nigerian literature. Even so, an important gap remains in comparative studies that focus exclusively on contemporary texts and the specific processes through which female protagonists negotiate the demands of an evolving socio-cultural environment.

Although existing studies have documented broad movement from victimisation to agency, relatively little attention has been given to the complex and often paradoxical processes through which agency is negotiated in everyday life. Contemporary female protagonists frequently operate within social spaces that are shaped by modernising influences and enduring traditional expectations. Their responses involve negotiation, accommodation, and compromise rather than straightforward liberation or resistance. While *Habiba* has received sustained critical attention for its treatment of intra-gender oppression and the protagonist's developmental journey, it has not been examined alongside a work such as *The Thing About Compromise*. Awaisu's novel foregrounds the emotional and social negotiations required of contemporary Northern Nigerian women, offering a perspective that complements and extends the concerns identified by Chukwu and Fadare.

Existing studies also tend to conceptualise agency primarily as an outcome of resistance rather than as a continuing process shaped by shifting social conditions. As a result, they pay less attention to the ways agency is continually negotiated through compromise, accommodation, and strategic decision-making within existing cultural structures. A comparative analysis of *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* therefore provides an opportunity to examine how contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction represents these ongoing processes of negotiation and the varied strategies through which women navigate changing social realities.

The foregoing review indicates that, despite the significant contributions of previous scholarship, research on contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction remains limited in its comparative treatment of negotiation, compromise, and social transformation across recent texts. This study addresses that gap by undertaking a horizontal comparison of *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* to examine how both novels reconfigure gender relations within the changing socio-cultural landscape of Northern Nigeria. The next section outlines the theoretical framework that informs this analysis.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative comparative literary approach to examine the representation of gender and social change in *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise*. The analysis is informed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's African Womanism and Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism, two complementary African feminist frameworks that provide contextually appropriate approaches to interpreting women's experiences within Northern Nigerian society.

While Western feminist theories have made significant contributions to gender studies, African Womanism is suited for this study because it understands women's empowerment within the broader goals of communal well-being, cultural continuity, and cooperation between men and women rather than adversarial gender relations. Ogunyemi argues that African Womanism is committed to the "survival and wholeness of entire

people, male and female" (72). This perspective is especially relevant to both novels, where female characters seek dignity and autonomy without rejecting marriage, family, religion, or their communities.

Complementing this perspective, Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism conceptualises agency as a process of negotiation rather than confrontation. The framework explains how African women often pursue change through dialogue, compromise, and strategic accommodation in contexts where direct resistance may expose them to greater vulnerability; thus, Nnaemeka defines Nego-Feminism as both the "feminism of negotiation" and "no-ego feminism" (377). African Womanism and Nego-Feminism facilitate a comparative understanding of how both novels represent social change as a gradual reconfiguration of gender relations achieved through culturally grounded forms of agency.

Guided by these frameworks, the study employs close reading and thematic comparative analysis of the two selected novels. Attention is paid to characterisation, dialogue, narrative development, and symbolism in examining representations of patriarchy, female agency, marriage, education, and social transformation. The selection of *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* is purposive, as both novels explore changing gender relations within contemporary Northern Nigerian society from different socio-economic contexts. Although the study acknowledges the broader historical and cultural contexts of Northern Nigeria, the analysis remains confined to the literary representation of gender negotiation and social change in the selected texts.

Comparative Analysis

Patriarchy and Gender Expectations

Both *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* present patriarchy not as a fixed cultural inheritance but as a dynamic social system that adapts to changing economic, familial, and social conditions. Although Razinat Mohammed and Maryam Awaisu situate their narratives within different socio-economic contexts, both show that patriarchal authority derives its resilience from presenting women's sacrifice as essential to family

stability and communal honour. Read comparatively, the novels reveal that while patriarchy assumes different forms across rural and urban settings, its assumptions about gender, authority, and female obligation remain consistent. Gender inequality therefore emerges as a structural condition sustained through everyday family practices, cultural expectations, and institutional power.

Marriage is one of the principal sites through which these assumptions are enacted. In *Habiba*, the proposed marriage between the thirteen-year-old Habiba and the elderly Malam Zubairu is tied directly to her father's indebtedness, reducing marriage to an economic transaction in which a daughter's future becomes collateral for male obligation. Mohammed, however, avoids portraying this arrangement as an act of paternal cruelty alone. Instead, the narrative reveals the competing pressures shaping paternal authority. Even while negotiating with Hamsatu over the marriage, Saleh attempts to mitigate its consequences, reflecting the constraints imposed by communal expectations (Mohammed 51). These tensions intensify when he finally concedes, pleading with Zubairu, "Take the child, but send her to school" (Mohammed 127). Although this request does not overturn patriarchal authority, it exposes its contradictions. Saleh's compromise acknowledges his limited capacity to resist entrenched social structures while recognising education as a possible path to his daughter's future.

A similar dynamic unfolds in *The Thing About Compromise*, though within a different social environment. Layla's marriage to Khalid is arranged not to alleviate poverty but to rescue her father's failing business and preserve the family's social standing. The shift from rural deprivation to middle-class respectability illustrates patriarchy's adaptability across class boundaries. In both novels, daughters become the means through which male crises are resolved. The comparison therefore challenges the assumption that education, urbanisation, or economic privilege necessarily dismantle patriarchal relations. Instead, both novelists show that patriarchy survives by adapting its methods while

maintaining the expectation that women bear the emotional and material costs of family survival.

The novels further complicate conventional understandings of patriarchy by showing that its reproduction depends not only on male authority but also on women who have internalised patriarchal values. This reflects Ogunyemi's African Womanism, which recognises that gender relations within African societies often involve negotiation, accommodation, and shared communal interests rather than simple antagonism between men and women. In *Habiba*, Hamsatu's hostility towards Kande after the birth of successive daughters reflects the extent to which female worth is measured by the production of male heirs. Her complaint that Kande will "fill your house with women" (Mohammed 6) turns motherhood into a measure of feminine value, revealing how patriarchal ideology becomes embedded within domestic relationships. Likewise, *The Thing About Compromise* presents Aunt Jamila as a guardian of conventional femininity whose constant supervision reinforces the belief that domestic labour and unquestioning obedience define the respectable wife. Rather than depicting these women as exceptional antagonists, both novelists portray them as products of social systems that reproduce themselves through everyday family interactions.

Patriarchal authority also extends beyond family relationships to the intertwined influence of culture and religious interpretation. Neither novelist presents Islam as inherently oppressive. Instead, both distinguish between religious principles and the selective use of religious language to legitimise unequal gender relations. In *Habiba*, appeals to parental obedience and early marriage invoke religious obligation to discourage resistance and normalise existing hierarchies. This contradiction becomes especially apparent when Habiba pleads, "Consent to be married, Father! Now, what about my school?" (Mohammed 130). Her question exposes the tension within patriarchal discourse. Although marriage is presented as fulfilling communal and religious expectations, it simultaneously demands the abandonment of the education that might secure

female independence. In *The Thing About Compromise*, patriarchal authority is sustained less through explicit religious instruction than through cultural expectations surrounding marriage and family honour. Layla's experiences show how social respectability often takes precedence over women's emotional and physical well-being, encouraging endurance rather than confrontation. Reading through Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism*, both narratives suggest that women's responses to patriarchy are rarely expressed through outright rebellion but through careful negotiation within restrictive socio-cultural environments.

Both novels ultimately portray patriarchy as adaptive rather than static. Whether rooted in rural poverty or urban privilege, it continually reorganises itself around the preservation of male authority, family reputation, and communal continuity. Yet Mohammed and Awaisu also expose the contradictions that destabilise these structures. Saleh's efforts to negotiate Habiba's education, Habiba's insistence on schooling, and the tensions surrounding Layla's marriage all indicate that patriarchal authority is neither absolute nor beyond challenge. These moments of instability create narrative spaces in which women begin to negotiate identities beyond inherited gender expectations, preparing the ground for the novels' broader exploration of female agency and negotiated resistance.

Female Agency, Negotiation, and Marriage

While *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* expose the persistence of patriarchal authority, neither reduces its female characters to passive victims. Instead, both foreground agency as a negotiated process that unfolds within existing cultural and familial structures. This representation aligns with Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism*, which understands resistance not primarily as open confrontation but as dialogue, compromise, and strategic negotiation. Read comparatively, the novels suggest that meaningful social change begins when women identify and negotiate the contradictions embedded in patriarchal systems.

In *Habiba*, negotiation first emerges through the protagonist's commitment to education despite repeated attempts to redirect her future

towards marriage. When informed of the proposed marriage, Habiba does not openly reject parental authority but asks, "Consent to be married, Father! Now, what about my school?" (Mohammed 130). The significance of this question lies not only in its defence of education but also in the way resistance is expressed. Rather than challenging marriage itself, Habiba negotiates to preserve an alternative future within the constraints imposed upon her. Her response illustrates that agency is exercised through strategic engagement with authority rather than outright rejection.

Mohammed develops this negotiated agency through Saleh's intervention on his daughter's behalf. Although unable to prevent the marriage, he appeals to Malam Zubairu, "Take the child, but send her to school" (Mohammed 127). This transforms what appears to be complete surrender into a limited yet meaningful act of negotiation. While the request does not dismantle patriarchal structures, it secures an educational opportunity that later shapes Habiba's personal development. The novel therefore presents agency as the product of incremental negotiation rather than dramatic rebellion.

A similar pattern shapes Layla's experience in *The Thing About Compromise*. From the outset, she questions inherited gender expectations without rejecting marriage itself. Her refusal to kneel before Khalid during their introduction (Awaisu 55) symbolically challenges cultural rituals that equate feminine respect with unquestioning submission. She also insists that both prospective spouses undergo medical examinations before marriage, arguing, "We need to be tested first" (Awaisu 57–59). Rather than rejecting marriage, Layla seeks to reshape it around mutual responsibility, transparency, and shared accountability.

The novel further develops this negotiated agency through Layla's determination to pursue higher education after marriage. Khalid's destruction of her university application forms (Awaisu 141, 149) represents more than domestic hostility; it is an attempt to preserve patriarchal authority by restricting educational opportunities that might redistribute power within the marriage. Yet destroying the forms does not extinguish

Layla's aspirations. Instead, education remains a site of negotiation through which she contests restrictive gender expectations. This debate extends beyond the home when Khalid's friends discuss female education, exposing competing masculine attitudes towards women's intellectual advancement (Awaisu 147–148). Awaisu thus shows that debates over women's education are also debates about changing gender identities in contemporary Northern Nigerian society.

Although both protagonists negotiate patriarchal expectations, the novels construct agency differently. Habiba's negotiations are shaped by childhood, poverty, and limited educational opportunities, making her resistance one of persistence, endurance, and gradual change. Layla, by contrast, negotiates from a position of greater educational exposure and social awareness. Her resistance is therefore more direct, expressed through verbal disagreement, personal decision-making, and refusal to accept unequal marital expectations. Rather than establishing a hierarchy of resistance, these differences demonstrate that agency assumes different forms according to women's historical, economic, and familial circumstances.

Viewed through African Womanism and Neco-Feminism, both novels redefine resistance as a culturally grounded practice of negotiation rather than confrontation. Neither Habiba nor Layla seeks to dismantle family, marriage, or religious institutions. Instead, both works to reshape them by creating space for education, dignity, mutual respect, and personal autonomy. Although their negotiations do not produce immediate transformation, they gradually unsettle inherited assumptions about gender, authority, and women's social roles, showing that everyday acts of negotiation can contribute to broader patterns of social change.

Education and Social Change

In both *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise*, education extends beyond the acquisition of formal knowledge to function as a crucial form of negotiating capital within patriarchal structures. However, reading the novels comparatively reveals that education is not configured as a uniform pathway to absolute

liberation; rather, its function, accessibility, and limitations are deeply mediated by the protagonists' specific socio-economic contexts. Mohammed and Awaisu demonstrate that while education enhances female agency, it does not immediately dismantle the structural constraints of patriarchy.

In *Habiba*, education is configured as a fragile, aspirational commodity negotiated primarily between men. Habiba's determination to continue her schooling persists despite her impending marriage, captured in her appeal, "Consent to be married, Father! Now, what about my school?" (Mohammed 130). Yet, her access to education ultimately depends on male concession. When Saleh pleads with Malam Zubairu, "Take the child, but send her to school" (Mohammed 127), education becomes a transactional condition of the marriage arrangement. Here, education is not a mechanism of immediate liberation, but a delayed investment—a foundational step that might allow Habiba to accrue negotiating capital in the future. The structural constraint remains severe: her intellectual future is entirely subject to the goodwill of an elderly husband and the established norms of rural child marriage.

By contrast, *The Thing About Compromise* explores the limits of education within an urban, middle-class marriage where the protagonist already possesses foundational educational capital. Unlike Habiba, Layla actively pursues higher education to renegotiate power dynamics within her existing domestic sphere. Khalid's destruction of her university application forms (Awaisu 141, 149) exposes the persistence of patriarchal anxiety despite class privilege. His action demonstrates that while education equips women with the critical consciousness to demand equity, it does not automatically neutralise a husband's domestic authority or his capacity to restrict her advancement. Thus, in Awaisu's narrative, education functions less as a guaranteed exit from oppression and more as a highly contested site where gender relations are actively debated, as further evidenced by the competing masculine attitudes toward educated women among Khalid's friends (Awaisu 147–148).

The comparative significance of both

novels therefore lies in their nuanced treatment of what education can and cannot achieve. Viewed through the theoretical lens of Nego-Feminism, neither protagonist uses education to sever communal ties or achieve total Western-style independence. Instead, they pursue education to accrue the capital necessary to negotiate better terms of existence within their socio-cultural realities. While education expands their critical consciousness and capacity for dialogue, Mohammed and Awaisu are careful to show that structural constraints—whether in the form of rural marital transactions or middle-class domestic control—persist. Ultimately, the novels suggest that social transformation in Northern Nigerian society is a cumulative, highly contested process, wherein education provides the necessary leverage for negotiation rather than an instant dissolution of patriarchal power.

Conclusion

This study examined the representation of gender and social change in *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* through the complementary lenses of African Womanism and Nego-Feminism. The comparative analysis demonstrates that both novels present patriarchy as a dynamic socio-cultural system sustained not only by institutional structures but also by economic pressures, religious interpretations, and intra-gender complicity. At the same time, the texts reject

portrayals of women as passive victims by foregrounding negotiation as a culturally grounded strategy through which female characters pursue dignity, education, autonomy, and social participation.

The analysis further reveals that social change in the selected novels is represented less as a revolutionary break with tradition than as a gradual process of renegotiating relationships, family expectations, and gender roles from within existing socio-cultural frameworks. While the two authors differ in narrative emphasis and characterisation, both depict agency as emerging through resilience, strategic compromise, and the continuous contestation of restrictive norms. In doing so, they challenge simplistic binaries of submission and resistance that have often shaped discussions of gender in African literary criticism.

The comparative reading of *Habiba* and *The Thing About Compromise* in this study demonstrates the value of combining African Womanism and Nego-Feminism to illuminate the complexity of gender relations in contemporary Northern Nigerian fiction. It also shows that negotiation functions not only as a survival strategy but as a mechanism for imagining meaningful and sustainable social change.

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