



ISLAMIC REALISM AND THE CONCEPT OF PRENATAL EXISTENCE IN JĀMI'AT AL-ARWĀH

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Abstract

Islamic realism, a philosophical approach that emphasises the interpretation reality of Islam from an Islamic perspective, is usually portrayed by Nigerian Arabic fiction writers, including Adam Yahya al-Fulāni. Previous studies on Adam Yahya al-Fulāni's works have focused mainly on rhetorical and stylistic analyses, with scant attention paid to Islamic realism in his works. This study was, therefore, designed to examine Islamic realism in Adam Yahya al-Fulāni's novels to identify the principles of Islam as guidance to every area of lives including the human prenatal stage. Abdul-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Ma'nā al-Ma'nā (Meaning of the Meaning) was adopted as the framework. An interpretive design was employed. Jāmi'at al-Arwāḥ was purposively selected based on its thematic relevance. The text was subjected to literary analysis. The novel revealed that Islamic realism has fundamental principles to navigate different worlds where human beings exist including the human prenatal stage. Human prenatal stage in the realism of Islam begins in a world that is unknown to human beings and follows by the existence in a stage of water.

Keywords: Realism, Islamic realism, Arabic novel, Prenatal development, Theory of the meaning.

1.0 Introduction

Realism is a philosophical concept that has two major versions in Antiquity. The first, transcendental or extreme realism is derived from Plato. (John Lyon, 1978). The second, derived from the Aristotelian tradition, is immanent or moderate realism. It offers an explanation for the universalism of properties, which are present in their instances across space and time (Bo R. Meinertsen, 2023). Realism in the Aristotelian conception therefore differs from that of Plato in that it concerns itself with universals. However, what connects the Aristotelian view of realism with Plato's is the affirmation that the whole subject of realism has to do with what is real in human existence.

In the contemporary period, realism has become a popular philosophical and methodological concept particularly among modern Arabic literary writers. These writers have deployed the concept as a tool with which they mirror the problems, challenges, aspirations, disappointments and expectations of human beings and human societies. For these writers, including Najib Mahfouz, Tawfeek al Hakeem, Taha Husssein, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Ahmad Sahwqi, Tayeb Saleh, Muhammad Miftah al Fayturi, realism is a form of social consciousness that reflects the contradictions and contours of life (David, 2017). This is what Afis Oladosu (2024) alludes to in his exploration of modern Sudanese literature of the late 19th and 20th



centuries. He reveals that Sudanese literary writers and critics approach the Sudanese realities and histories from at least two major standpoints: the denialists and the affirmationists. One group portrays in their writings that the Sudanese are homogenous, while others argue to the contrary. However, Oladosu further argues that the affirmationists and the denialists share a meeting point, as shown in this extract:

The period of imagined disconnection between the Sudan and the outside world, classified by Sudanese literary historians into the medieval, the Turkish, and the Mardist, ironically led to the birth of the essentially Sudanese culture.

This extract shows the meeting point of the denialists and the affirmationists: that the Sudanese are heterogenous and not homogenous. Based on this argument, Arabic literature in Sudan should be referred to as *al-Adab al-Arabi fi al-Sudan* (Arabic Literature in Sudan), that is, Arabic literature in the context of Sudanese reality. He submits that Sudanese realist writers are concerned with the individuals within the social sphere. Oladosu further states that in the Arabic narrative discourse, the initial task Sudanese critics set for themselves in the early modern period consisted of looking for Sudan in Sudanese literature.

Sabry Hafez (1993) reveals on Bayda styles of writing that starts with *hadatha* (it happened), *rawā* (he related), and *waqa'* (it took place). All these words show the narration of what really happened. Thus, realism can be understood when the word real is perceived without any fiction. It is an embodiment of everyday life occurrences. The aforementioned authors are pointing to

the realist writers, who write to mirror the happenings of their society.

A realist depicts the undramatised life and dialect of an area. Realism finds roots in the early nineteenth century. Hence, it enhanced the prevalence of novels since their subject matters often focused on characters and themes important and relatable to the working class, middle class, and social mobility. This concept is engaged differently by the literati because realism is a significant theory in all spheres of life, including religion which is the focus of this work. Every religion has its culture and tradition that defines reality. Islamic reality manifests in language and ways of life. According to Abubakre Razaq (2004), in his interplay of Arabic and Yoruba cultures, Arabic exercises its characteristic feature of expansionism through the medium of Islam on Yoruba writers. In other words, Arabic language reflects Islam and Islam cannot do away with Arabic in the writings of a Yoruba man couple with his Yoruba culture. Jimba Mashood (2015) postulates the inseparability of Arabic language from Islamic religion and the expansionism of the language in depicting Islam.

إن العربية حكر على الإسلام والمسلمين
ويجب أن تتطابق بالطابع الإسلامي...

Arabic is the exclusive
domain of Islam and Muslims
and must continue to be used
in an Islamic manner...

(Jimba Masood, 2015)

According to Jimba in the extract above, Arabic is restricted to Islam and the Muslims. It is the language of Islamic religion. It is an evidence that there is a relationship between literature, the Arabic language and Islamic realism. The Arabic language is a fundamental tool for understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions in a given Arabic text, or for



discussing the relationship of Arabic literature to its culture such as Islam. Jimba further reiterate this fact by revealing Ogunbiyi, a Christian who authored an Arabic novel, yet uses two words with Islamic undertone. These two words, according to him, are: qādī and banī 'Ādam. He notes that Ogunbiyi is a Yoruba writer whose thought should revolve around Yoruba tradition. In the context of Yoruba culture, he argues, there is no Al-Qādī, an Arabic word, that meaning 'The Judge'. A judge does not make or execute law for the Yoruba but the king does. Also, Banī-Ādam is an Arabic phrase meaning 'son of Ādam'. He states the Yoruba believe in Oduduwa, not Adam, is the origin of their existence. This means that Ogunbiyi unconsciously used the two words having Islamic connotations because Arabic was his medium of writing. In other words, Arabic is a language of Islam and in describing Islamic reality, which manifests in ways of life, the Arabic language plays a role.

Islam has the traditions and principles that define the religion (Muhammad Hifdil Islam, 2025). Its culture dwells into its doctrines, which explains the oneness of Allah as the creator (Sayyid Qutub,). Every creature on the earth points to Allah's existence and points to His power to create on His own without any assistance. According to Sayyid Qutub, the culture of Islam is what is known as Islamic realism, which reveals the doctrines of Islam on who Allah is and Islamic doctrine on human existence on earth.

This article hinges on the assumption that Arabic novels reflect Islamic realism. In other words, it seeks to reveal Islamic realism in the world of Arabic language. Existing works have mainly focused on stylistic and rhetoric with scant attention

paid to the Islamic realism. the example of works that based their analysis on stylistic and rhetoric is Muhsin Al-Musawi's (2003) appraisal of postcolonial Arabic novel. He questioned a large number of novels that demonstrate cultural diversity and richness in the Arab societies. In other words, he questions their styles. Rashad Seyidov (2024) further reveals and addresses the grammatical structures, narrative techniques and rhetoric features of parables. In other words, he addresses style and rhetoric features of the parables. However, through the lens of Abdul-Qāhir Al-Jurjāni's *Theory of the Meaning of Meaning* which states that a text should be read beyond its surface meaning and the paradigm of interpretive research design, this article rereads Adam Yahya Al-Fulani's novel, Jāmi'at al- Arwāh. The novel is about Adham, the protagonist, who lives in Abu Al Dar Shamsudeen Al Muhitiy's kingdom. There, he was chosen as minister. He became the kingdom's minister after contesting the post with others, among whom was Jan bn Marij. He answered all the questions, but Jan and the others could not. Thus, he was appointed minister.

Given this, Jan, the son of Marij, was jealous and furious and vowed to have him expelled from the kingdom. Adham was driven by what he loved most: curiosity for knowledge. He wanted to know why Jan and some other competitors had existed before him and were still living. He began to seek the cause of eternal life. Jan, aware of Adham's investigation, used it as an opportunity to achieve his goal. He told Adham that the secret to eternal life was to eat from a forbidden tree. Then, Adham ate the forbidden fruit with his wife and was banished from the kingdom to a place known as Umu Al Qurā. If the above discuss demonstrates the context of realism,



at this juncture, It is pertinent to discuss Islamic realism

Islamic Realism

Islamic realism is what portrays Islam in the real sense of it. This could be understood through its foundational principles that according to Umar (2024) are information to be known by a servant about his Lord, information he must know about his religion information he must have about his prophet. Also, Islamic realism can be understood through Shari'ah, the divinely revealed law that comprehensively regulates every dimension of human life such as spiritual, moral, social, economic, and political, as ordained by Allah. Within this framework, reality is not understood as value-neutral or detached from transcendence; rather, it is perceived and interpreted through divine guidance. In this sense, what may be termed Islamic realism refers to an understanding of reality that is grounded in the normative structure of Shari'ah, where human experience is harmonized with revealed law and moral accountability. Islamic law is a comprehensive and historically developed legal tradition derived from multiple authoritative sources.

What Muhammad Ahmad Munir (2017) describes as the premodern Islamic legal tradition refers to this structured methodology of deriving legal rulings from revelation and juristic reasoning. Within this framework, Islam is defined not merely as a set of beliefs but as a normative system that regulates human conduct through legal and moral injunctions. The primary sources of Shari'ah are the Qur'an, the Sunnah, ijmā' (consensus), and qiyās (analogical reasoning). In addition to these foundational sources, jurists also employ subsidiary principles such as istihsān (juristic preference), maṣlaḥah mursalah (consideration of public interest not

explicitly addressed in the texts), 'urf (custom), istiṣḥāb (presumption of continuity), shar' man qablana (previous revealed laws), and madhhab al-ṣaḥābī (the opinion of a Companion). Together, these sources and methodologies demonstrate that Islamic law is not arbitrary but a coherent epistemological system through which Islamic realism may be understood, that is, a worldview in which reality is interpreted and regulated through divinely guided legal principles. Existing scholarship on Islamic realism further elaborates this concept, presenting diverse critical interpretations of how this normative structure is reflected in intellectual and literary discourses.

Furniss Weisberg, Meg (2015) argues that the novel *Nazīf al-Ḥajar* questions the primacy and validity of Western novelistic and philosophical structures and offers an alternative, spiritually based "reading" of the desert as both metaphor and ecosystem, based on balance and interconnection. She reveals that the author of the novel, Ibrahim al-Koni, draws on Tuareg practices and Sufi mysticism to depict the Sahara Desert as inclusive, proportional, and balanced. Ferial Ghazoul (2014) investigates the representation of Muhammad and Islam in three novels, and finds that Ghazoul addresses the image of Islam with specific emphasis on the message of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, who delivered the message, as portrayed in three postcolonial novels: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999), Assia Djebar's *Loin de Medine: Filles d'Ismael* (1991), and Salim Bachi's *Le Silence de Mahomet* (2008). Mujahid, Basil (2010) argues that Arabic literature had a great impact on Malay literature, due to the cultural connection with Arabic through Islam, as seen in the novel, *Hikayat Faridah Hanum*.



The review above does not holistically reveal Islamic realism in its true sense. Thus, it does not address the principles of Islam of the prenatal stage. However, to continue with this stream of knowledge, it is pertinent to explore how al-Fulāni depicts Islamic principles in *Jāmi'at al-Arwāḥ*. The concept of principle is well portrayed in *Jāmi'at al-Arwāḥ* (The Gatherer of the Souls) in an exchange between a boy, Saymus, and Shaykh Tufan. The boy was given a book of principles by the king in the palace. He was unhappy about it because he thought the book was not eternal. However, al-Shaykh Tufan told him why he should be happy. He said, 'Do you not realize that it was the knowledge of principles your father, Adham, was ignorant of and that caused him to be chased away from the Sultan's kingdom?' The boy said, 'Are you mocking our father?' The Shaykh replied that the issue is beyond that; these principles are ranked high, and every human is expected to bow to them. Hence, the principles in the book given to Saymus guide humans to achieve eternal life. In other words, the concept of principles means guidance. It is portrayed thus (105):

إن القانون يابني ليس وهما وإنما هو
حقيقة، بل هو قيد ونظام لا يفلت منه
أحد من الأحياء والأموات فإن من خرج
من قيد القانون نزع عنه رداء الخلود إذ
لا خلود إلا لمن اعترف بالقانون
وأخضع نفسه لنظامه وسلطته، فالقانون
كما ترى يفرض سلطانه حتى على من
أراد الخلود، فهو الذي يعينه على التسلق
في سلم الخلود، والعروج على برجه
العاجي الذي لا مبدأ له ولا نهاية

The principle, my son, is not an illusion but a reality. Rather, it is a constraint and a system from which no one from the living and the dead escapes,

for whoever breaks free from the constraint of the principle is stripped of the robe of immortality, as there is no immortality except for those who acknowledge the law and subject themselves to its system and authority. For whoever wants immortality, the constitution helps one to climb the ladder of immortality and ascend to its ivory tower, which has no beginning and end.
(Translation)

The extract above depicts the advantages of the principles of the Islamic religion. The principles serve as self-control for those who worship God, as al-Fulāni does. Every living soul is expected to live his or her life based on these principles in order to achieve eternal life in the Hereafter. This buttresses the Qur'anic ayah, which states: Say, O Prophet, 'Is this better or the Garden of Eternity, which the righteous have been promised as a reward and an ultimate destination?' (Qur'an, 25:15). These principles are also applied to human's existence in the prenatal stage.

Human Beings at the Prenatal Stage (Science)

The prenatal stage is a state where development occurs in humans. It is an advanced, continuous growth that lasts until birth. There are three stages in prenatal development: pre-implantation, embryonic, and fetal periods (Inderbir Singh, 2018). The pre-implantation period extends from the fusion of male and female gametes to form a single-celled zygote. This later develops into the formation of primitive germ layers in the developing organism. Development starts with fertilization, the fusion of female and



male gametes, followed by a series of mitotic divisions of the zygote into different cells, called cleavage or mitosis. This is followed by the transportation of the cleaving zygote through the fallopian tube, the reorganisation of cells into structural and functional specializations, and implantation. The embryonic period covers intrauterine life from 3 to 8 weeks. It is when morphogenetic events occur. These include the formation of a three-layered germ disc with the appearance of mesoderm between the ectoderm and endoderm, followed by the formation of various organs such as the lungs, heart, and liver, and the formation of supportive organs between mother and fetus, such as the placenta and umbilical cord. The fetal period, from the ninth week to the ninth month, includes fetal growth in all dimensions and the specialization of various body structures (Inderbir Singh, 2018).

The processes above are portrayed differently by writers in their various works. This is reiterated by Patricia Gibbs (2017) in her exploration of the representation of childbirth in the literary works of four physician-authors of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She found that several thematic trends emerged between authors of the former and latter centuries, which appear related to medical advances and cultural changes. This means that as medical research advances and cultures change, so do authors' depictions of childbirth. At this juncture, it is pertinent to discuss what prenatal stage means in Islamic realism

Human Prenatal Stage in Islam

The prenatal stage, according to Ali Subh (2018), does not start in the womb. He bases his view on the Qur'an and Hadith. He reveals that this stage of life must start with *khitbah*, making one's intent known to a lady of interest. This choice is expected to be made based on Qur'anic and Hadith

injunctions. In Surah al-A'rāf, verse 58, Almighty Allah says:

والبلد الطيب يخرج نباته بإذن الله والذي خبث لا يخرج إلا نكدا

"As for the good land, its vegetation comes out by the permission of its Lord. And that which is bad does not grow except what is bad."

According to Ibn Kathir (2003), the 'bad land' in the ayah above refers to something useless and scanty. This is likened to the mercy of rain, which is common to every land. But lands are categorized into two based on their different reactions to the blessing of rain. There is good land, which helps crops grow. From it sprout flowers, fruits, and other benefits. On the other hand, there is hard, barren, or saline land, which lacks the ability to grow plants. This exegesis reveals the similarity between these two categories of land and the womb of a woman: not every womb reacts to the fusion of male and female gametes, and not every womb that reacts allows the fetus to grow as expected. A fetus grows better in a good womb than in a barren womb.

Ali Subh further reveals that Islam emphasizes choosing a womb, or a woman, for the fetus based on religion. In al-Bukhari, the Prophet says: 'Marry a woman for four reasons: her wealth, her lineage, her beauty, and her religion; however, one should choose for the sake of religion.' This is followed by marriage. It is the stage of love that is, giving consent by the two parties, followed by blessing. The blessing of marriage, according to Islamic injunction, is pregnancy. This is where the secular prenatal stage starts that is, the stage of the fetus in its mother's womb. The concern of this work is to explore how al-Fulāni, in his novel *Jāmi'at al-Arwāh*, depicts the human prenatal stage.

Prenatal Stage in Jāmi'at al-Arwāh (The Gatherer of The Souls)

In the *Gatherer of the Souls*, Adham and his wife were in an unknown world where they were forbidden from eating a particular fruit. This symbolises that place of human existence before the womb is only known to God. Adham and his wife disobeyed king's order and ate from the forbidden fruit. Thus, they were sent out of the king's palace. The narration further reveals how Al-Fulāni fictionalizes the state of humans before their existence in the womb. This is depicted through a character, Al-Shaykh Jabir⁽⁸⁾:

ولقد مات أدهم وزوجه بعد محنة الطرد
التي وقعت له في بلاط الأمير، والتي
نجمت عن الفسق والجهل بسر الخلود،
وهذه المحنة هي التي ساقته إلى هذه
القرية النائية المنعزلة التي يسمونها أم
القرى حيث أنجبت له فيها زوجه أبناء
كثيرين

Adham and his wife died after the ordeal of expulsion that occurred to him in the court of the Emir. This resulted from immorality, and ignorance of the secret of immortality. This ordeal is what led him to this remote, isolated village, which they call Umm Al-Qura, where his wife bore him many sons.

The above narration portrays Adham existence at a place not known in human's world. he was chased away with his wife. That put an end to their existence in the former world. The death of Adham and his wife from the former world where they were first created led them to a new world called Umm al-Qurā. According to Ibn Mandhur (2012: 349), it is called Makkah. It is a world where emotion exists. However, in the former world where Adham and his wife were rejected, there was no emotional love

between them, even though they were close. The world is symbolised to mean where the existence in humans' world is predestined and where God exists. The latter world aroused their feelings toward each other. This indicates that there should be a stage of love between a man and a woman before a romantic relationship could follow. Thus, Adham and his wife ended up giving birth to many children. The story further says⁽⁹⁾:

القرية النائية المنعزلة التي يسمونها أم
القرى أم القرى حيث أنجبت له فيها
زوجه أبناء كثيرين، منهم هولاء الأبناء
النبغاء الثلاثة الذين حصلوا على منح
الدراسة في جامعة الأرواح بأم القرى.

“The isolated village, which they call Umm Al-Qura, where his wife bore him many children, including these three noble sons whom they received scholarships to study at the University of the Souls in Umm Al-Quran”.

The isolated village can be understood from its name as a symbolic space of the natural world. This village is likened to a womb where a baby lives separately and through which a woman gives birth to children. Also, the University of the Soul is likened to the world a baby enters after its time in the womb is due. It portrays what happens after emotional love develops between a man and a woman.

The narration further describes the time when an egg develops in the womb in a metaphorical way through the character al-Shaykh Jabir, the director, and the three sons of Adham: Saymus, Yasin, and Akram. It goes thus⁽¹⁰⁾:

بل أوى مع هولاء الشبان الثلاثة، إلى
شجرة كبيرة يسمونها "شجرة الزينون"
حيث تمتد ظلالها وتورق أغصانها،
وتتساقط بعض ثمارها من حين إلى حين
وفي تحت هذه الشجرة المباركة
كان المدير الشيخ يقول لهؤلاء

الشبان... وادعا باسماء: يا بني أنا صديق
أبيكم الحميم في حياته

Rather, he took shelter with these three young men under a large tree, called an olive tree where its shadow spread out. Its branches were foliated, and some of its fruits fell from time to time. Under this blessed tree, the director, Shaykh, said to these young men: I was your father's intimate friend in his life.

In the story, there is a symbolic place called the *Shagaratu al-Zaytun*. According to Ibn Mandhur (2012: 444), it is a tree with fruits, as the narration also points out. This tree is likened to the period when the fetus in the womb is about to be born, just as the fruits on the tree will be ready for eating at any time. the director, Jabir, who knows when it is time for babies to leave the isolated world for the world of the souls, were under the tree with the Adham's three sons. A mail met Jabir under the tree to inform him of the three boys' admission to the University of the Souls. That is, the world where souls exist. The story metaphorically illustrates that the time was due for the boys to enter the human world through pregnancy.

Al-Fulāni pictures the above narration on how Adham and his wife were close in the world of unknown to human beings that symbolises their own womb. The story is an adaptation of Quran's story of Adam and Hawau as the narration change the name to Adham. It portrays existence of human beings with God before the womb. Also, it symbolises that both Adham and his wife had been destined to love each other in the world where emotion exists. Thus, they disobeyed kings order and were expelled from the world that serve for them as womb to the world where emotion exist. Their

characters in the novel change in line with their new world of emotion. Adham and his woman are referred to as husband and wife in their new world due to their emotional feelings. The narration goes further as thus: "*The isolated village, which they call Umm Al-Qura,*" they were chased to an 'isolated' village, a symbol of a world between the heaven and the under earth. This buttresses the words of Almighty Allah in (The Qur'an 4:3) "*then marry those that please you*" as Adham married the wife that pleased him.

Adham and his wife loved each other, and must have proposed to each other before being portrayed as husband and wife in the narration. This is what Ernest Davis (2020) confirms in his exploration of marriage proposals in Shakespeare's plays: there is an explicit proposal by couples who are in love in the plays. He reveals that the proposal either occurs on stage or is described on stage. This mirrors what happens in the human world. This must have happened between Adham and his wife. The narration further reveals that they both had children together "*where his wife bore him many sons*". It buttresses the words of Almighty Allah in the Quran (30:21) "*And He placed between you, affection and mercy*" (Yusuf Alli, 2026) The word mercy in the ayah suggests to mean pregnancy.

The narration further reveals that the only way that Adham's children take to the gatherer of the souls, that is, human world is through boat. The boat symbolises the womb. The boat as it is known can, only move on water. This buttresses the words of Almighty Allah in Quran (86: 5-7) "*He is created from a water gushing forth, producing from backbone (al-sulb) and the ribs (al-taraa'ib).*" the narration in the text goes thus:

كانت السفينة هي الطريق الوحيد إلى جامعة الأرواح



“Boat is the only way to the gatherer of the souls”

The narrations reveal that prenatal stage in Islam starts from the soul being in an unknown world to human, then moves to a stage of water that prepares space for the soul in the womb as water paves way for the boat’s movement.

Conclusion

Reading beyond the surface meaning of the narrations, realism, according to the analysis above, is the portrayal of the true picture of a particular concept. It is a philosophical approach that touches every area of existence, including religion. The analysis above reveals Islamic realism as having laid-down principles that serve as guidance for Muslims. The principles are also applied to what can be called the prenatal stage in Islamic realism.

The novel Jāmi‘at al-Arwāḥ portrays Islamic realism when it is read beyond the surface meaning. The study revealed that the prenatal stage of human beings in secular realism starts from the womb, while in Islamic realism, fetus first exists in a place known only to God before moving to human world where it first exist in form of water. The Islamic belief is that a good womb will carry a good fetus, while a bad womb will carry a bad fetus. This is why Islam enjoins choosing a religious woman who will have a good womb to bring the fetus to their world.

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