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Polygamy and Forced Marriage as Sites of Gender Oppression in Northern Nigeria: A Womanist Reading of Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba*

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Abstract

The paper explores polygamy and forced marriage as systems of oppression targeting women in Northern Nigeria using a womanist approach in the novel *Habiba* by Razinat T. Mohammed. The purpose of this critical interrogation is to find out how these cultural and religious practices systematically undermine women's agency, self-worth and autonomy in Hausa-Muslim patriarchal systems as portrayed through the protagonist's horrific experiences of child-bridehood and polygamous subjugation. The problem under research is expressed in the fact that even after legal changes, there is still persistence of these institutions: poverty-based forced marriages and polygamy, psychological and socio-economic violence against women and these issues support the objectification of women. Based on the womanist theoretical framework of Alice Walker, which seeks the holistic liberation of the Black/African woman against intersecting oppressions (racism, sexism, and class) and intra-gender conflicts, the study employs a qualitative, close-textual analysis approach. It explores the issues of characterisation, narrative voice, symbolism and motifs of theme in *Habiba* to reveal the subversive undercurrent of female solidarity and self-assertion. The anticipated outcome unveils how the novel condemns these oppressive ways and how the novel highlights the womanist avenues of empowerment, awareness of consciousness, and resistance. Finally, the discussion adds value to African feminist literary discourse by presupposing the reality of Northern Nigerian women and promoting transformational gender equity.

Keywords: Polygamy, Forced Marriage, Gender Oppression, Womanist Theory, Northern Nigerian Literature

Introduction

In this study, the author explores the issue of polygamy and forced marriage as some of the central locations of gender oppression in Northern Nigeria by analyzing the novel *Habiba* by Razinat T. Mohammed (2013) in a womanist literary reading. It addresses the way in which these rituals, encouraged by a set of cultural practices and religious interpretations, systematically deprive women of their freedom, their dignity and equal opportunities in the Hausa-Muslim patriarchal society. By putting the core experiences of the protagonist in focus, the chapter has shown the ability of literature to bring into light the intersectional struggles of women in Northern Nigeria, as well as to lead to a change of that nature.

Polygamy and especially polygyny is the practice where a man marries more than one wife simultaneously. This marital system is culturally and religiously supported in Northern Nigeria, according to the Islamic law that does not forbid a man to have as many wives as

long as he treats them equally. But in reality, polygamy tends to create competition, emotional abandonment, and financial pressure among the co-wives. Forced marriage, by comparison, is a marriage formed without the free and full consent of either or both parties, often of young girls being married off to pay debt, reinforce family ties or to relieve poverty. These practices are the most important mechanisms of gender oppression, which can be considered as the unequal treatment of people individually, depending on their gender, in a systemic, institutionalized way, leading to the subordination of women in the social, economic, and political context (Ajayi, 2021).

The field on which this research is based is womanist literary criticism. Womanism, coined by Alice Walker (1983), refers to a black feminist or feminist of colour who believes in the survival and wholeness of whole people, both male and female (p. xi). It is also in contrast to feminism in the West, which does not consider separatism, but rather a holistic view that takes into consideration race, class, gender and cultural specificity and fosters the well-being of the community. Womanism was further developed in the African context by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) as a theory that acknowledges the strength, nurturance, and commitment of Black women to their entire community. This framework has been used in the study of literature to enable scholars to question texts on the basis of the distinct experiences of African women to various forms of oppression.

This lies in the transformative possibilities of literature that is the motif of the advertising of how polygamy and forced marriage are being thought in womanist discourse. Such creative pieces as Habiba do not just reflect the realities in society, but also confront it as it reveals the psychological trauma, lack of education, and loss of self-worth of female characters. Womanist reading is especially important, as it focuses more on the voices of marginalized African women and seeks to empower them without assuming they cannot preserve their cultural identity. This enquiry is crucial in the era when, even though national and international laws have been established against child marriage, the custom persists in Northern Nigeria because of poverty and tendencies of cultural bias of religious teachings. This study thus contributes to ongoing debates in African gender studies by showing that fiction can serve as a space for resistance and awareness creation.

Literature Review

The scholarly publications on the issues of polygamy and forced marriage in Northern Nigeria have so far focused mainly on the consequences of polygyny and forced marriage on women, including their sociological, legal and public health effects. In the region, the most common form of polygyny is found. It is very much embedded in the local cultural norms and it is often supported by interpretations of Islamic law.

Empirical study by Ahmed (2021) has established that the intrahousehold bargaining power of women in polygamous marriages is much less than in monogamous marriages. This is a situation that adds to the gender inequality and emotional tensions between co-wives. Likewise, Amzat (2025) investigates the nature and dynamics of power, sexual health issues, and communication problems among the polygynous Hausa-Muslim family, highlighting the restrictions on women's agency that are imposed by gender hierarchy and selective religious interpretations. Child marriage and forced marriage have also been the focus of a great deal of research. The practice is common, especially in Northern Nigeria, where girls are often married off very early in order to reduce poverty or to reinforce family connections. Ajayi (2021) associates these institutions with cultural practices that legitimize gender-based violence and female subordination, leading to the deprivation of education, obstetric and psychological trauma throughout her life. Bolarinwa et al. (2022)

also substantiate the multilevel analysis's conclusion that child marriage remains spatially concentrated in the northeastern states, such as Sokoto, Kano, and Jigawa, where its impacts are intergenerational, even with the presence of the Child Rights Act.

The literary field has seen Northern Nigerian female writers use fiction to reveal the reality of women within these oppressive structures. Several critical studies on Habiba have been conducted by Razinat T. Mohammed (2013). Chukwu and Nwachukwu (2023) use a foci-feminist approach to emphasize intra-gender oppression, namely how the female characters are reinforcing the victimization of younger women. Ekpo (2022) explores the novel as a tragedy that represents the girl-child within a system of patriarchal and religious oppression. One of the few womanist readings offered by Umar (2016) is the comparison of Habiba with *The Hound* by Veronica Phebe, which emphasizes the overall weight of womanhood and nation-building.

A wealth of research has emerged, but there are significant gaps. The majority of the research that has been done so far is based on sociological or legal approaches (Ahmed 2021; Amzat 2025 and Iloka 2023) and does not often use creative literary works as tools for critical and resistant culture. Mohammed's *Habiba* has received some literary attention, but these analyses have tended to be general feminist ones focusing on victimisation and intra-gender conflict (Akpore 2018, and Inuwa 2021). They have rarely adopted womanist perspectives of consciousness raising, communal healing, and subversive agency. To the best of my knowledge, no literature has provided an extended womanist interpretation of the novel that allows for questioning of polygamy and forced marriage as interrelated mechanisms of gender oppression and points the way toward culturally relevant strategies for women's empowerment. This study aims to fill these gaps by analysing *Habiba* from a womanist perspective and demonstrating how literature can challenge oppressive marital norms and promote transformative and context specific gender equality in Northern Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach used in this research is the womanist literary criticism. Womanism, as an idea, was first expressed by Alice Walker in her groundbreaking book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), where she defines womanist as a Black feminist or a feminist of colour engaged in the survival and wholeness of whole people, male and female (p. xi). Walker's formulation focuses on self-definition and audacity, adopts a comprehensive approach to the liberation of Black women, and rejects the separatism associated with Western feminism. Within an African context, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) developed and indigenised the concept of womanism in her theory, which she referred to as a Black-centred philosophy but described as accommodationist rather than confrontational. According to Ogunyemi, African womanism aims at finding meaningful union among Black women, Black men, and Black children and claims that men need to change their sexist positions (p. 63). Contrary to radical feminism, African womanism encodes the future of community, cultural specificity, and the inter-relationship of gender with other opposing forces like class, ethnicity, religion, and tradition.

The main advantage of Womanism is its intersectional and culturally based nature, recognizing the layers of oppression that African women experience and not denying their identity as a community or their cultural realities. It is unified, incorporating race, class, gender, and cultural heritage in Favour of female solidarity, motherhood, and male complementarity instead of animosity (Ogunyemi, 1985; Stanley, 2021). This model is particularly useful for studying the literature of Northern Nigeria, as it legitimises native

knowledge systems and religious backgrounds without mechanising Western universalisms. Moreover, womanism is deconstructive and reconstructive: it reveals the violence of patriarchy and emphasizes ways to become empowered by raising awareness and opposing the enemy collectively (Umar, 2016). This focus on wholeness and survival makes it a potent prism through which to view texts dramatizing the agency of women within apparently overwhelming restrictions.

In addition to these strengths, however, the theory of womanism has certain weaknesses that have been pointed out by a few scholars. Though some critics have suggested that the womanist movement was not as radical as some held, that is, its accommodationist stance, in particular on dialogue and complementarity with men, may not have been radical enough to be of concern to those who see the patriarchy as something to be upset. Cheryl J. Sanders (1989) and Heidi Safia Mirza (2004) have claimed that the womanist movement was not sufficiently radical as regards its orientation toward men. Likewise, Okafor-Maduka (2025) argues that the emphasis on civic peace and communal harmony can sometimes be seen as minimising the importance of intra-gender conflicts and the need for structural opposition. In addition, the theory's historical context in African American history and culture may feel somewhat inflexible when applied to different ethnic and religious minorities, for example, the Hausa-Muslim of Northern Nigeria, where culture and religion are inextricably linked. Lastly, the anti-separatist ethic of womanism can lead to an incomplete examination of what is often a temporary feminist separatist strategy some women might see as having to undertake for their immediate survival and resistance.

The concept of womanist theory in the current research is based on a close textual critique of Habiba by Razinat T. Mohammed (2013). The structure sheds light on the way polygamy and forced marriage existed as two interrelated centres of gender oppression by analysing how the protagonist developed into a child-bride and was made into a forced polygynous victim. The inner struggle of Habiba is read between Walker's and Ogunyemi's settings of self-definition and collectivity survival, respectively, and a subtle defiance against patriarchal and religious dominion. The theory allows the study to transcend the documentation of victimhood and anticipates the presence of womanist strategies of consciousness-raising, role flexibility, and the reimagination of the family and community as spaces of potential transformation. By placing the lived experiences of Northern Nigerian women at the heart of the offensive, this application moves the struggle of literary criticism into socio-cultural advocacy by showing how literature can challenge oppressive matrimonial organizations and by suggesting culturally visible and acceptable avenues to gender equity.

Research Methodology

The study employs qualitative textual analysis through several close readings of *Habiba*. Important passages, which describe the forced marriage of the protagonist, who becomes a child-bride, her further enrolment in a polygamous family, relations with co-wives, and her experience of patriarchal and religious authority, are singled out and put under thorough scrutiny. The literary features of characterisation, plot, symbolism, imagery, dialogue, and the narrator's voice are discussed to demonstrate how these practices are used as a means of gender oppression. The review is always informed by the essential womanist principles-most especially the dedication to the survival and well-being of the whole community and to the agency of the Black/African women. The method is not only a means of criticizing oppressive systems but also of highlighting the ways of consciousness-raising, female solidarity, and transformations in gender relations that the text recommends.

Forced Marriage: A Place of Economic and Patriarchal Bondage

Razinat Talatu Mohammed is a Nigerian academic and award-winning author, currently with the University of Abuja, teaching Feminist Literary Criticism. Many of her pieces delve into the overlapping roles of gender, culture, religion, and poverty of women in Northern Nigeria. Her novel *Habiba*, published in 2013 (also a finalist for the Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Prose), has been a literary critique of the socio-economic and patriarchal structures in Hausa-Muslim society through the lens of its young protagonist.

Forced marriage becomes a major tool of female oppression in *Habiba*, as the fate of young girls is being turned into an economic survival for the family. This practice is a stark reminder of womanist issues of the worthlessness of women's lives in the context of poverty and patriarchy. Habiba is an intelligent thirteen-year-old schoolgirl who has to carry out domestic duties and has a keen interest in education. After a horrible rainstorm kills her brother and hospitalises her grandmother, Hamsatu, though, her father Saleh and grandmother agree to arrange her betrothal to the wealthy but elderly Mallam Zubairu in exchange for family debts (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 95–141). This transaction is a perfect illustration of the womanist critique of how cultural and religious norms become tools of the economic desperation of the society, resulting in the loss of girls' autonomy and aspirations. Mohammed reveals forced marriage not only as a cultural norm, but as an economic and patriarchal system of women that creates intergenerational cycles of female oppression through Habiba's story.

Hamsatu's emphasis on early marriage highlights the cultural script in which the value of women is linked to marriage and childbearing (especially male offspring). When Sadia (the second wife of Saleh) is deliberating on the machinations of Hamsatu:

> His mother believes that she is doing him a favour; her only son cannot be subjected to the shame of having to rear an illegitimate child in his house. Young girls are forced to get married whenever their womanhood is first felt. Was that all the real fear of the old woman? (Mohammed, 2013, p. 49)

Here, the womanist convergence of age, gender, and honour is exposed: the girls are defended in advance against perceived sexual perversion by getting married and education is therefore a subordinate affair. Saleh first turns it down, claiming paternal authority: The girl will go to school until I cannot afford her school fees. The person who received something should also give you back, since I will not permit you to do the same to me (Mohammed, 2013, p. 50). However, it is poverty that prevails; when Saleh falls bankrupt, he is forced to take the money Zubairu offers him with Habiba as security: I have complied with your proposal of giving you out in marriage... You will be taken to school at the house of your husband (Mohammed, 2013, p. 142). Habiba's anguished plea, "No! But how should I know about marriage now?... I would like to attend school, please" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 142) is rejected, which emphasizes the effacing of the female child's authority. In terms of womanism, this coerced marriage is not a one-off occurrence but a system. It is a way of reproducing the cycles of female oppression as the daughters bear the burden of fatherly failure. Zubairu, who happens to be almost in his sixties and a relative of Habiba's late grandfather, perceives the transaction of the marriage as follows: "If that is the way you want it, Saleh, then I suppose I have no choice but to demand you my money the first thing next day" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 95). The novel is therefore an x-ray of the way Sharia-legal practices conceal economic coercion, denying Habiba the wholeness that Walker (1983) believes education fosters for self-actualisation. Results show that forced marriage in this case is the twenty-first century bondage and that the body of Habiba is being traded as

property, a phenomenon that resonates with the womanist demands that call to abolish the practices that divide the potential of Black/African women.

Dehumanisation and Intra-Gender Oppression as Polygamy

The polygamy within *Habiba* is represented with a depth of gender oppression where women become sexual and reproductive commodities within the harem of a man and this creates competition instead of sisterhood in womanism. Zubairu is a habitual polygamist who has four wives at a time according to Islamic permission, and other wives have been divorced due to his strong-headedness (Mohammed, 2013, p. 141). The reason he chose to marry Habiba is to feel alive again: "The youth is fresh, and, as they say, the old wine in a new bottle was all that was required to make a person liven up his life" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 141). He treats women as objects, when talking about his favourite wife Hauwau he says: "She is a woman who belongs to a king... his invaluable wealth" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 141), and he proudly talks about his household: "He loved every woman because she possessed a certain quality... He had married seven wives in his lifetime. At any one time, he maintained a total of four of them" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 141).

Co-wives are dehumanised in this polygamous set-up as they struggle to gain favour, time, and resources. The introduction of Habiba breaks the current wives (Ramatu, Rabi, Hauwau), although the writing reveals that polygamy normalises male entitlement by putting women at the burden of emotional and physical work. The way that Zubairu consummated the marriage with the underage Habiba is shown as rape, and he raped her violently: "The story shows her trauma as chastity stolen during bleeding and pain" (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 155-157). This is condemned by womanist theory as an infringement of wholeness in which the female sexuality is policed and exploited in the name of religion. When one of the co-wives eventually looks back upon the brutal destiny of the child brides, the habit is brought out as a refusal to be avoided, but a devastating one: "Each knew it must be a case of forced marriage. Their sadness was on behalf of the girl since they were also aware that the girl cannot be saved" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 142).

The intra-gender processes enhance the oppression, which is one of the major concerns of womanists. Hamsatu, as a woman, imposes patriarchal standards on her granddaughter and daughter-in-law, Kande. Following the birth of girls only by Kande, Hamsatu plans her divorce: "This woman will fill your house with women" (Mohammed, 2013, p. 5). The self-victimisation conceals her complicity:

> Hamsatu sings his dirge of Saleh after he dies: A woman is nothing without a husband woo... It is preferable to dying in the hands of the same child who is courting you than dishonour (Mohammed, 2013, p. 52).

This feminine support of polygyny and early marriage breaks any possible form of solidarity, which goes against the spirit of womanism, which upholds the value of loving women and community survival (Walker, 1983). However, the text is indirectly accusing of this kind of complicity: the silence of Sadia and the betrayal of Kande are examples of internalisation of subjugation and reproduction of women themselves to survive.

Results prove that polygamy perpetuates male dominance at the cost of economically and emotionally poor women. Zubairu uses his wealth to practice it, but it results in co-wives such as Habiba being isolated, young, pregnant, and trapped. This is comparable to womanist intersectionality: the class (poor vs. wealthy Zubairu), gender, and religion are combined to suppress women in Northern Nigeria.

Womanist Resistance, Subversion *and Pathways to Wholeness*

Although oppression is widespread, *Habiba* refers to womanist resistance and confirms agency and other relations as a way to community wholeness. Trying to escape to their mother, Kande in Dalori, rebuffing the proposed union, Habiba and her sister Ummi:

> What are we going to do, Habiba?... And can't we go back to our mother at Dalori, should we be not happy here? (Mohammed, 2013, p. 135).

This act is an act of womanist defiance despite being thwarted - the superiority of self-preservation to cultural obedience. The inner determination of Habiba after getting married, such as the conception and management of the polygamous family, points to the dawn of consciousness.

Most unorthodoxly, the novel describes the intimate relationship between Habiba and co-wife Rabi as a place of pleasure and resistance to patriarchal violence. Their relationship provides them with emotional and physical comfort after a milk accident, which creates intimacy (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 173-174). This gay love is an inversion of heteronormative polygamy, resonant with the womanist inclusivity that appreciates the loving relationships of women beyond the authority of men (Walker, 1983). It undermines the competition of polygamous families, creating a micro-community of support. The idea of co-wives is further humanised through Rabi and Habiba, who are also called an aunty, or Yagana (sister), which is likely the first indication of sisterhood (Mohammed, 2013, p. 141).

The momentary crusade by Saleh, who initially focuses on Habiba's education, is also a manifestation of disjointed male complicity, though economic needs dominate. These details indicate the positive underbelly of womanism: oppression is never complete. The book criticizes the inability of Northern Nigerian society to safeguard girl-children and imagines survival using education, maternal relationships, and female solidarity.

Synthesis of Findings

The x-ray of *Habiba* affirms the polygamy and forced marriage as powerful points of gender oppression that are reinforced by the economic vulnerability, cultural misunderstanding of Islam, and intra-gender enforcement (e.g., the role of Hamsatu). The passages between pages 5-157 depict female bodies as currency, that is, traded in debt relief, honour, and male pleasure to disrupt education and wholeness. However, there is rebellion in the effort to escape and in subversive intimacies that align with womanism, which believes in healing rather than dividing the community. Such results support the novel's feminist literary intervention: the stories of Northern Nigerian women require the comprehensive liberation of their voices, bodies, and desires. It might be followed up in future research by comparative womanist readings of Mohammed's oeuvre, including *The Travails of a First Wife* (2015), to trace the changing depictions of polygyny.

Conclusion

This womanist interpretation of *Habiba* by Razinat T. Mohammed (2013) has revealed that polygamy and forced marriage are both overlapping forces of gender oppression in the Hausa-Muslim sociocultural environment of Northern Nigeria. Based on a womanist framework described by Alice Walker (1983), which demands that women of colour survive, experience wholeness and collective thriving, and dismisses separatist propaganda, the given analysis has x-rayed the novel to reveal how these practices commodify the female body, derail girl-child education, impose economic dependency and break potential sisterhood. The major findings indicate that forced marriage is a type of bondage in the new era, where Habiba's betrothal to old Mallam Zubairu is settling of debts by her family at the

cost of her dreams (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 95-142). In its turn, polygamy turns out to be a form of institutionalised dehumanisation, making co-wives a sex and reproduction object and promoting intra-gender competition instead of solidarity (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 141-157). Nonetheless, the text is pointing to the womanist protest in escape plots, resistant intimacies (the union of Habiba and Rabi), and momentary claims of maternal and sisterhood with the evidence that it is possible to heal in community despite patriarchal and matriarchal comity (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 135, 173-174). These factors highlight how Ogunyemi (1996) extrapolates the concept of womanism in the African context, where cultural peculiarities necessitate intersectional analyses in favour of comprehensive liberation rather than imported feminist discourses.

The policy, education, and gender discourse in Northern Nigeria and other similar postcolonial societies are the implications of these findings that go beyond literature analysis. First, the novel reveals the misunderstandings of Islamic Sharia and Hausa culture that justify child marriage and polygyny to keep generations of girls in poverty and illiteracy. The disrupted education of Habiba highlights the sheer necessity of enforceable laws, including the reinforcement of the Nigeria Child Rights Act (2003) to Sharia-compliant states, alongside community sensitisation programmes that repackage education as a religious and cultural mandate and not a Western imposition. Second, the illustration of matriarchal complicity (e.g., the institution of early marriage in Hamsatu points to the internalisation of patriarchal standards, which means that the gender interventions should involve women of all ages to break the chains of self-subjugation and establish the real sisterhood. According to Walker (1983), this set of implications authorises the vision of wholeness by relating literary criticism to the wider advocacy: literature such as *Habiba* is a product of consciousness-raising, nd asserts the legitimacy of practices which are disruptive of the potential of African women and attentive to their agency and cultural contexts. Academically speaking, the paper confirms the notion of womanism as a decolonial lens that can be used to take action against region-specific oppressions without the need to essentialise Islam or Northern Nigerian culture and therefore adds value to African feminist literary works and challenges monolithic views about Muslim women in global discourses.

Overall, *Habiba* by Mohammed (2013) is an effective literary attack and unobtrusive call to action. With a womanist approach to giving Northern Nigerian women a voice, this paper confirms that the only freedom that can be achieved is one that demands the destruction of the oppressive practices and the cultivation of the relationships that reinforce the survival of the community. Scholarship and advocacy in the future should be based on these in order to translate the literary wisdom into real change.

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