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## Women as muted voices and silenced subalterns in Razinat Mohammed's *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories*

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**Abstract**

Women, especially in northern Nigeria have become the silenced "subalterns" due to misconceptions about the Islamic religion especially on issues of polygamy, domestic violence, segregation, exploitation, dehumanization and various types of abuses meted on them. This paper seeks to examine how female characters are depicted in Razinat T. Mohammed's *A Love like a Woman's and Other Stories* and the various mechanisms that have situated them into the position of the silenced subalterns. Anchoring on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" the paper argues that women in *A Love like a Woman's and Other Stories* are doubly marginalized and are constantly silenced by men due to the northern tradition and the misinterpretation of the Islamic religion. This paper posits that women are continually held in a vicious cycle: from birth through death, they are given defined roles. More so, the paper surmises that at adolescence, women in Northern Nigeria are forced into early marriages, bastardized under polygamy, politically dehumanized and sabotaged economically in a male-dominated society.

**Keywords:** Northern Nigeria, postcolonial feminism, subaltern, women

**Public Interest Statement**

The study is significant because it lends its voice to the fight against women subjugation. It avers that women are continually held in a vicious cycle: from birth through death, they are given defined roles. More so, the paper surmises that at adolescence, women in Northern Nigeria are forced into early marriages, bastardized under polygamy, politically dehumanized and sabotaged economically in a male-dominated society.

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## Introduction

Women especially in northern Nigeria have been given a subaltern status and their voices have been silenced due to the patriarchal nature of the society. Women tend to experience prejudice within the socio-economic and political sphere in their societies. According to Hajo Sani women become victims of “prejudices not because of some verifiable biological- established inferiority” (40) but because of the misinterpretation of the tenets of the Islamic religion. As such, the greatest obstacles that tend to subjugate women stream from cultural practices and sexual stereotyping of social roles especially in Northern Nigeria where the society has vested so much power on men while making the woman disadvantaged. Fundamentally, these types of practices affect women because from birth women are “victimised circumstantially that, she loses her dignity and self esteem (Aisha 98). As such, this paper examines how cultural practices and stereotyping of women continue to situate women in the realm, and how men see women as subalterns and voiceless. For instance, a divorced woman within the society is demeaned and it becomes extremely difficult to remarry while a man can get married and divorce women as many times as he likes should be docile and submissive while their prescribed roles should end in the kitchen. Women also experience a form of discrimination especially in the northern part of Nigeria when it comes to the pursuit of certain courses in the university. More so, this paper interrogates how these issues are presented in Razinat Mohammed’s *A Love like a Woman’s and Other Stories*. Most importantly, this paper argues that these stereotypical representation of women has been conjured by culture and tradition to keep women in the space of the “subalterns” as postulated in Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988).

In an attempt to demystify and deconstruct established derogatory myths about women which include visualizing women as reproductive machines or sexual objects. This paper examines how the female characters in Razinat T. Mohammad’s *A Love like a Woman’s and Other Stories* present women as the silenced voices within a patriarchal society like northern Nigeria. In addition, the study adheres to the tenets of feminism, because it relentlessly questions the notion of male supremacy and oppressive societal mores and norms. Also, feminist readings of Mohammad’s *A Love like a Woman’s and Other Stories* set out to decentre, deconstruct and reject fixed notions of essentialism in the current dialectics of gender discourse. Thus, the “subaltern woman always stands in an ambiguous relation to power subordinate to it, but never fully consenting to its rule” (Spivak 79). As such, these discourses explore the dual marginalization of women because societal myths have assigned her determinate roles. Razinat Mohammed is a writer and product of the northern society, who cannot divorce herself from the Triple Heritage as observed by Ali Mazrui that northern Nigerian society has been influenced by traditional practices, Islamic religion and western colonization (72). Hajo Sani stresses on the problems of the ‘Triple Heritage’ especially for women because the northern Nigerian society is “closely in touch with cultural practices dictated by norms and Religion is deeply misinterpreted as such it becomes difficult to challenge these practices” (161) Ali Mazrui’s ‘Triple Heritage’ therefore implies that because this heritage only reveals the various influences which are tradition, Islamic acculturation and Western influences. These influences affect women in northern Nigeria because selective norms especially issues of

polygamy and education are grossly misinterpreted from the Northern tradition thereby muting the voices of women and making them subalterns.

Writers like Mohammed are greatly influenced by their environment. This is why Jean-Pierre Durix observes that 'literature is anchored in a particular moment of time and the writer is often conditioned by his environment' (xi). This view is in consonance with S.E Ogude that 'there is a sense in which every literary work is a response to a definite historical and socio-political condition' (1). For Ngugi wa Thiong'o, literature embodies in word-images the tensions, conflicts and contradictions at the heart of a community's being and becoming (27). In tandem with the role of literature, Mohammed in *A love like A Woman and Other Stories* presents how women are held and silenced by the debilitating gender asymmetries and male-constructed practices especially in northern Nigeria.

More so, the short story genre has been used by northern Nigerian writers such as Abubakar Gimba, Zaynab Alkali, Ibrahim Sheme, Razinat Mohammed and Abubakar Adam as a veritable medium for the representations of man's new and changing visions of social reality. Thus, *Something to Live For*, *Sterile Water*, *Laila* and *A Love like a Woman's* in *A Love like a Woman's and other Stories* are analysed to reveal the subaltern experience in a postcolonial society like northern Nigeria. This prompts the use of postcolonial feminism as an analytical tool.

### **Postcolonial Feminism**

Postcolonial feminism is anchored on the underlying relationship that exists between colonialism and patriarchy. According to Chris Weldon *Feminist Postcolonial Discourse* examines the "gendered nature of the history of colonisation" (285). This is because the colonial legacies have distorted the structure of colonized societies. He adds further that "colonial has not only affected wealth and levels of development and the composition of former colonies and Western societies, but also national cultures, including literary traditions and popular culture, otherness and ethnic differences"(26).By implication colonialism especially in postcolonial societies, has created "other", and this otherness could be interpreted to mean the way women have become stereotypes due to western ideals or the importation of Islamic ideologies.

Gayatri Spivak in her works (1985a, 1985b, 1988, and 1990) has played significant roles both in defining the field of postcolonial studies and in shaping debates on postcolonial feminist works. In *'Can the Subaltern Speak'* (1988), she analyses the relations between the discourses of West, impact of colonialism and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern woman. This paper adopts Gayatri Spivak's *'Can the Subaltern Speak'*(1988) because most theories in African feminism have not been adequately developed to serve as analytical tools. Razinat's *A Love like a Woman's and other Stories* will be analysed using Spivak's *'Can the Subaltern Speak'* (1988).

### **Textual Analysis**

In *"Sterile Water"* Mohammed reflects the frustration of the Northern Nigerian woman. The protagonist Kulu reveals three different representations of the subaltern woman. She is a demeaned

woman, dehumanized wife and an exploited subaltern. According to Ayoola Isaiah:

The Northern Nigerian woman has numerous responsibilities as a daughter, a wife, mother, sister, mother/daughter in-law and co-wife defined by history, cultural practices and to some extent religion and subservience to men. (89)

This echoes Spivak's view in "Can the Subaltern speak" that the economically disadvantaged, 'poor', 'black' and 'female' become the 'doubly other' (90). The subaltern woman in Northern Nigeria is a victim of the cultural and religious practices; she experiences subjugation by male established canons from culture and tradition. Also, she is exploited because of imperialist tendencies because she is a woman from a Third World Country. As the character in the story, Kulu's husband, Samaila argues thus: I am a man; it is the mother's responsibility to place something on her child's plate. That is not a man's job...I don't know how long it will take you to understand our culture (30).

Such myriad practices have placed women like Kulu in a subaltern position, and a silenced victim because culture has mandated for her the role and responsibility of a father. This is why Spivak explains Kulu's dilemma that for the postcolonial woman 'being was the remotely orchestrated far-flung and heterogeneous project to constitute....the other' (75) and "the subaltern is not similarly privileged and does not speak in a vocabulary that will get a hearing in institutional locations of power" (73). Kulu's voice is muted within her matrimonial home and even within the patriarchal society where men wield power. Thus, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* identifies male power as the basis of female oppression and insists that the 'interior colonization' which emanates from privileging the male, has been passed on to successive generations as a natural phenomenon (58) echoing de Beauvoir's exposition in *The Second Sex* that "Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine. The contrary facts of experience are important against the myth. To pose women is to pose the absolute other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being" (17). Women such as Kulu become the "other," and victims of men's "interior colonization" which have silenced them.

In essence, female exploitation is sustained by tradition because the oppression of women is socially designed. This explains the maltreatment and exploitation of the northern Nigerian woman by tradition and Islamic practices and the resultant lower social status because of their sexuality. Samaila is blessed with five children whom he cannot cater for, yet, he refuses to allow Kulu go for family planning. Kulu gets pregnant which eventually leads to her demise. These male established stereotypical codes about women are presented thus:

God created a woman with many eggs which need to be brought forth before they accumulate and cause internal problems.....Yes! and God created man with many seeds which you must sow until the last drop before it causes you some internal problems ...the Almighty God that created the female know what He was doing. Whether from the higher or lower animal, the female's reproductive system is the same. (Mohammed 35-36).

The above excerpt gives a gory picture about the way men visualize women. According to Betty Freidan “women become bodies or opaque spaces, angels or monsters...but hardly regarded as actual human beings in the world” (25). These societal established codes showcase an inherent ‘otherness’ where Samaila sees Kulu as a reproductive machine and equates her with lesser animals, accentuating the underlying features of an ‘oppressive husband in his ‘symbolic order’ accustomed with ‘a language shop soiled in the mouth of the others’.” (Spivak 74). The statement by Samaila “God created a woman with many eggs which needs to be brought forth” adumbrates the derogatory view held about women. Also, Samaila urges Kulu, his wife to expel her eggs or die early, but she maintains her argument that giving birth to children without the means to cater for them will take her to an early grave. Samaila tells her dangers of family planning. Family planning brings about “Cancer of the uterus, breast cancer, cancer of the ovaries... have you ever heard of cancer of delivery?” (36) Samaila exposes his poor understanding of family planning and the way women are visualized by men as objects created to satisfy their urges when the need arises. Vendi, the chemist shares similar views about women. He states that “Kulu is still beautiful, why should she go for family planning because she is a lizard that must expel her eggs”! This image of women as reproductive machines echoes Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that ‘the female body has been controlled and contained, aestheticized and made small...women carry the cultures horror of carnal contingency’ (145). This view resonates in Freudian ‘Phallocentrism’ and the fatality of the feminine situation is a result of ‘an anatomic defectiveness’ (78).

By implication, Kulu is a subaltern because as Spivak rightly states that “man is the subjective centre, the norm, transcendent and self defining, woman remains immanent, defined” (83), this is also in line with Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “women are the ‘Eternal Feminine’ unable to transcend her discursive imprisonment” (17). Kulu held in the shackles of a patriarchal society ventures into the dreamland where she wishes for luxuries, love, and care, thereby revealing the imbalance in class structure. This is achieved through the stream of consciousness technique which creates a contrast between her impoverished status and the life of the affluent.

Mohammed in *A Love Like a Woman’s and Other Stories* reflects the daunting problems faced by women as they are continually held in the shackles of tradition and cultural practices. In a bid to survive, Kulu resorts to selling bean cakes to cater for their five children. Kulu here occupies that subaltern position of the victim, the objected other, scape goat and so on encoded in the Spivakian sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (73). Thus, taken to mean or challenge the colonial notion that white men are taken as saviours (agents of ‘civilization’) and brown men are the colonised while black women like Kulu are colonized by white men (imperialism), black men (her fathers, husbands) through male established codes thereby relegating her to the subaltern status of the ‘doubly other.’ Samaila on the other hand is also disadvantaged, relegated to the lower class but his ego would not allow him take up a job as a watchman, thus, Kulu suffers as the ‘subaltern’ a victim of male supremacy. She is disadvantaged economically, socially and culturally. Northern women such as Kulu become victims of the “marginalization of non white peoples (third world countries) and the dual marginalization of non white women” (87).



Tradition still plays a phenomenal rule in the Northern Nigerian society. Heidegger states “Tradition, as long as man exists, its existentia, ‘an objective presence (39). Foucault also stresses the importance of tradition thus by such presupposition, tradition exists within a space where man inhabits. Foucault stresses the importance of tradition thus:

Tradition exists within a space where man inhabits like other things, though it achieves liveliness in most cases, it’s for man a way in which life is regulated and forthwith derives meaningfulness... Man therefore will interpret every traditional activity as sacred (70).

However, these traditions usually counter balance the desires of women. Samaila voices out that it is the mother’s responsibility to put food on her child’s plate relegating the role, marital institution and religion has placed on him. These deep-rooted attitudes and practices contribute to the sustenance of inequality between men and women, shelving women as subalterns due the patriarchal nature of the northern Nigerian Society. Through Kulu in ‘Sterile Water’ Razinat challenges essentialism.

The silencing of woman by men is also presented through the characters Laila and Afi in the story Laila and “Something To Live For” respectively. Their travails in their marriages are synonymous with the travails of Gayatri Spivak’s Bhubaneswari Bhaduri. Bhubaneswari committed suicide because of the Indian woman’s inability to speak, and worst still, she was unable to communicate with her immediate family. Laila and Afi epitomize women who are held up in marriages in which they are unable to communicate with the men in their lives due to male-established codes. Salisu, Afi’s father sees Afi as a means to acquire wealth. Afi is married off at a tender age to the highest bidder Uduma. Men see Afi as a chattel that can be sold to the highest bidder, Uduma, her husband promises to milk her dry until she gives birth to a son. Uduma, Afi’s husband believes that getting Afi pregnant continuously until she gives birth to a son for him is the only way she “can compensate for the huge amount of money he had paid as bride price. (26). Afi was not allowed to communicate with her father and her husband. All decisions were taken on her behalf without her consent. This implies that female voices in a patriarchal society like northern Nigeria are muted by male voices.

In addition, the burdens of the woman is limitless, as such, in a state of despair Afi says about herself that “She must have been born into this world to suffer such a destiny” (Mohammed 8). She therefore “descended into the abyss of the new world” ( Mohammed 10), Afi adopts an escapist method where her bottled up desires are realised only in a dream. In her dream she meets a man who loves, cares and respects her. For Afi, dreaming enables her escape from Uduma, who is the symbolic agent of marital enslavement. Afi is dehumanised, traumatised, silenced, bastardized and exploited. Unlike Spivak’s Bhubaneswar who commits suicide, we meet Afi who is determined to challenge her gender asymmetrical status as the “silenced center” because there is something to live for, which is her daughter.

Furthermore, Laila is a woman who believes strongly that a woman needs education’ (60)

but her husband visualizes her in a domestic space thus:

Salisu did not approve of her continuity with her studies, on the grounds that Home Economics was an area that every woman ought to have been taught from home. In fact, he did not approve of married women going to school instead of keeping their homes and being there whenever they were needed by their husbands... (61).

Luce Irigaray in 'Sexual Difference' argues that even subjects and discourses are centred on the "paternal, the masculine; men are viewed as masculine, signifying reason, efficiency and objectivity for women, there remains the so-called art forms cooking, knitting, sewing and embroidery"(236). Laila and Afi on another level are subalterns suffering from the male established codes of domesticity. According to Simone De Beauvoir "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women...men use them as pellets for increasing the misery of the feminine lot still further, for instance ... by making her work like a beast of burden. (46).Through Salisu, Mohammed re-echoes the derogatory images of domestic slaves ascribed to women. The male established codes that specifies courses into 'masculine' or 'feminine. 'The resultant effect of these codes is that Laila and Afi do not have a say 'in the institutional locations of power' and by implication they are the subalterns who occupy 'the silent silenced center' (Spivak 74). As victims of this 'silenced center' a metaphor for their unhappy marriages, Laila is forced to stay in an unhappy marriage because of her unborn child and Afi 'lives' for her daughter.

Thus, Northern Nigerian women are situated as 'the other; Human relation therefore inevitably involves an unavoidable struggle for the women, especially in the Northern Nigerian society where men occupy the subjective centre as fathers, husbands and most importantly as men while women are fixed objects who are utterly powerless to resist such established codes. Laila is a divorcee, She was divorced by her first husband for a flimsy reason and the society puts the blame on women when a marriage is dissolved. It is because of this derogatory image that Laila in a tone of despair says 'at twenty-one, she did not wish to be divorced twice; it would seem her fault now if she did not hold her marriage together' (65).

A divorced woman within the northern Nigerian society loses her dignity and respect. She automatically becomes a scourge, this is why the guardsman in the story 'Laila' believes Laila is no different from the illiterate wife at home despite her tertiary certificate. The guardsman says: I am a man you know, with a wife like you at home.. Just because you are educated does not make you better than my wife at home...Everything you have, she too has (63). As Bessie Head attributes this situation to the fact that tradition has entrenched male power by relegating to men, a superior position in the tribe while women (are) regarded in congenial sense as being an inferior form of human life'(17).

The story 'A Love like A Woman's' is a beautiful story that centres on the Dije, who is married to Abbas ,a man with a problem with his temperament, for 'in his childhood, he had launched some inexplicable violent attack on his playmates'(46). As the story unfolds, Abbas marries Dije without informing her that he has a psychological problem and Abbas's extended

family also kept Dije in the dark. More still, the horrors of polygamy are revealed where men sleep and women work. Abbas' father also sees women as "lizards that should expel their eggs" thus, the four wives have given birth to twenty-eight children" (47). Women in such polygamous settings suffer as 'subalterns' and are silenced because of the streamlined gender roles. The wife whose turn it is to visit Baba will have to prepare meals for twenty-eight children and three women like her. The plight of the northern woman as she is exploited in a male dominated society lives much to be desired that is why Aisha AbdulRaheem states that 'the woman is a slave conditioned to act, the role of domesticity even when not convinced of the truth and the foundation of such a condition'(193). Dije suffers from domestic violence and she is silenced by her own family and even her mother-in-law. She is battered by Abbas whose condition could be aligned with the problems of polygamy, where lots of children have to struggle for parental love. Dije and Baba's wives 'the three of them formed little circle of crying women. Each crying for herself and the sorrows of living a life as a mere tool in the hands of another' (47). Polygamy becomes a circuit marked out for the dehumanisation of women. Women in polygamous marriages, according to Spivak become 'a trace of the other in its precarious Subjectivity' (182) largely due to traditional practices and the misconceptions about the Islamic religion. Razinat Mohammed in *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* challenges the stereotypical representation of women which in turn hinders societal harmony and keep women in the 'subaltern space' echoing Tadi's view that 'Literature tries to bring out the problems of society in very human and lively forms.'(6)

## Conclusion

There is the need for self-reflexivity on gender roles, patriarchal mentalities and inclusivity of women in the social and political economy sphere of the society. Mohammed's creation of characters such as Afi Kulu, Laila and Dije is an act of feminist literary criticism, depicting women held up by male hegemony which has eroded her visibility. Mohammed in *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* through the genre of the short story critique the subaltern structure with a view to reform the patriarchal structures and the characterizations are powerfully effective towards this end.

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