

# Self-Assertion as a Variant of Ego in Razinat T. Mohammed's the Travails of a First Wife

Rinmak, Kuretmenan David, Jocelyn Nishe Moupshin

Federal College of Education, Pankshin

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## ABSTRACT

The literary world has accorded writers the opportunity to express their selves without reservations and to share feelings and dreams. Several scholars have decried violence against women and the misrepresentation of women mainly by male literary authors. However less attention has been given to the portrayal of female ego as a positive tool for self-assertion in African literature, especially Nigerian literary works. This paper viewed ego positively in the works of contemporary female works. The research used Freudian theory and African womanism to establish the existence of female ego. Using Razinat T. Muhammed's *The Travails of a First Wife*, this researcher did a critical literary analysis. The theories helped to understand the emotions and motives for such ego exhibitions by the characters. Findings showed that, the state of being a woman is a notion the woman is proud and willing to defend. The paper concluded that the ego of the woman is in identifying herself as a woman who is strong and able to carry the burdens of others.

Keywords: African womanism, female ego, Freudian theory, self-assertion

## INTRODUCTION

The psychological state of being of any man cannot be separated from his/her social life and it will not be wrong therefore, to believe that the woman will be going through a lot of psychological imbalance seeing that her social life has been mitigated by the man. As mentioned above, women constitute a good number of the Nigerian population and are very active in playing their roles. Makama asserts that:

Women constitute about half of the population of the Nigerian State and are known to play vital roles as mothers, producers, managers, community developers/organizers etc. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. (115)

This explains why a woman would feel hurt to see that not only is her place relegated to the background of social relevance, but also her personality is painted as 'weak'. Even though she may be relatively disadvantaged in terms of physical prowess, only to her fragile constituents, this notion of "weak" has seemingly been extended through the social construct of the male gender to other areas like performance index, mental capacity, power structure and so on. Knowledge of some of this lopsidedness is enough drive to make the woman go into self-defence.

This work presents the textual analysis of a selected Nigerian female writer whose works relate to the discourse on the portrayal of female ego within the Nigerian context. The text, Razinat T. Mohammed's *The Travails of a First Wife*, is a text from the northern part of the country. This research asserts that women struggle to give themselves a good level of persistence to achieve self-identity in the text selected for the research. The author of the selected text shows that women's strong will could break barriers set in the

society which could limit a woman from achieving certain goals. At the end of the novel, these characters are able to show how daring they could be in their struggle to attain their desired goals.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Feminism has always been a platform of struggle created for the womenfolk to be heard in the male-dominated society. There have been various aspects of injustice meted on the female folks by the society which have been voiced out through feminism. This of course is not a tool used just by female folks, as some male writers have also contributed to decrying certain acts against women. Concerns like male dominance over women which unfortunately seem to be practised in every society, have been looked into and discussed by scholars and writers. There are issues of maltreatment of female folk which is exhibited in two folds: intra (within the women's gender) or inter (between the men and the women). Research into violence carried out on female folks by men and by extension society has also been explored by researchers. Linda Kwatsa wrote about how single women are portrayed as characters in some selected African Literary Texts. This is a practical example of male writers presenting a wrong idea of female characters. Sadia Zulfiqar Chaudhry wrote about African writers and the politics of gender. Sadia's work revealed the fact that women are into writing about gender with regard to women on the political front.

The researcher found out that less attention has been given to ego portrayal by the female characters in texts written by female writers who have risen in defence of the self-demeaning pictures painted by the male writers in their works, this research, therefore, fills this gap. This study explores the various ways the selected female authors have portrayed female ego in the depiction of characters in their works and exposes the existence of ego in females, exposing the truth about the 'being' that is in existence in the woman.

### Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to ascertain the existence of the female ego in the text. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify instances of ego displayed by the female characters in the texts;
2. discover the factors that triggered the exhibition of such ego in the selected texts and
3. explore the effect(s) of ego displayed by the affected characters to other characters in the selected texts.

### Research Questions

Below are the research questions:

1. What are the instances of ego displayed in the text?
2. What factors are responsible for the exhibition of ego by the characters in the text?
3. What are the effects of ego displayed by the affected characters to the others in the text?

### Significance of the Study

The woman has been projected in most works as a dependent being, whose livelihood depends so much on the male counterpart. This means she is seen as completely weak and helpless without the presence of a man. Women today and feminists have risen to criticize this idea, and this is becoming obvious in the literary world. Female writers have risen to project strong women in their literary works just to correct the fact that a woman is equally strong and has a role to play in the public domain of society, and not just as one to be relegated to the background. This work, hence, agrees with Okoh's study which she states that there is a new direction for the fight in granting women a voice,

On a personal level, it (feminism) is a state of mind, a way of thinking, an alternate perspective from which to understand the world. It means a woman becoming aware of a distortion in her social status as a woman. Seeking to correct this distortion, the woman moves in a new direction in search of autonomy, self-assertion and empowerment. (7)

Okoh, here, talks about feminism as a tool for finding distortions in life that seem to have terrible effects on the personality of women. This explains why this study is needful and hence important to expose the fact that these female writers using female characters with ego are trying to correct an ill that has eaten deep into the souls of the female folk and which needs to be addressed. The idea of ego by female writers in their female characters comes with the responsibility to correct a self-image that has been tampered with. In other words, the show of ego by female writers through their characters is to give the hurting woman a good level of confidence to carry out her daily chores both at the home front and in public places where she always has difficulty accessing.

‘Ego’ as a word seems to have a negative interpretation as all that comes to the mind is an aspect of human existence that makes any human overbearing on others. Another point that labels ego as black is the relationship it has with pride. Pride is synonymous with ego. Ego only becomes bad when too much of it is exerted, but on a normal scale of self-identity defence, it is harmless, thus explaining why this study is needful. This work explores the ego as a tool that drives one into self-defence.

This is to say that in every situation where ego is displayed, an action might have prompted it in such a manner that the person affected tries to defend his/her self-image. It is obvious that both the man and woman figure in society have egos just that the male ego seems to have been more prominent than that of the female. The overbearing nature of man’s ego, however, might have pushed the woman into bringing hers out. This work, therefore, explicates the female ego, not in a manner to castigate but to bring an understanding as to why these writers have resolved to ego display in their characters and writings.

This work tends to expose an aspect of the woman’s struggle in the Nigerian literary world which has so far received less attention. The woman has suffered neglect not only in proper representation but also in the fact that her self-image has been tarnished by the male counterparts in the portrayal of who the woman is in their literary texts. This work would enlighten the public on the fact that most cases of ego portrayal by women are a result of the psychological need to positively represent the being that has been wrongly represented by society. Ego is a tool used by Nigerian female writers to survive through the harsh representation of men in their (men’s) work. Through the selected texts, the researcher identifies the ways by which the woman has tried to present her real being and abilities.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Feminist theory focuses on women’s experiences and highlights various forms of oppression which the female gender is subjected to in society. A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a “patriarchal” society as a tool that might have been used to hinder or prevent women from realizing their creative possibilities. Also, such persons see women’s cultural identification as merely negative objects to men as the defining and dominating “Subject.” The variant of feminism used is African womanism, a theory by Chikwenye Ogunyemi. This variant of feminism projects the being of the woman and what her true identity is without challenging the authority of the man.

Categorizing any action or work as a work of gender must require some visible evidence for judgment. Kwatsha explains that when a particular thing’s character is either masculine or feminine or when that thing exhibits patterns of difference by gender, then that thing under study is said to be gendered (128). This only brings to bear the fact that most works that are categorized as works under feminism must have shown some clear evidence of femininity in them and hence the need for that reference.

Considering feminism under gender, there is a need to answer the question: What is feminism? Sotunsa avers that;

Feminism is concerned with females not just as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category. Feminists share the view that women's oppression is tied to their sexuality. This is so because women's and men's biological differences are reflected in the organization of society. Based on those differences, women are treated as inferior to men. Whether as a theory, a social movement or a political movement, feminism focuses on women's experiences and highlights various forms of oppression which the female gender is subjected to in society (4-5).

This elucidates the fact that feminism is so much concerned with the social liberty of the woman who has been bound so much by her sexuality though it has not been her choice to be such. Okoh, Juliana opines that feminism is,

First and foremost a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. On a personal level, it is a state of mind, a way of thinking, and an alternate perspective from which to understand the world (7).

This means it is another eye with which the world and all that revolves around it is seen. Feminism, therefore, seeks to grant her the liberty to enjoy other social benefits accorded the men by society. This is a true reflection of Nigerian society today, the male gender is at the helm of affairs, with just a handful of women in some parts of the public society. One would have thought that society would be different by now, with women properly infused into the political, social and economic spheres. Unfortunately, that is not the case, as women who are seen in high places have seriously struggled to get to such positions.

### **Synopsis of the Novel**

Zarah, the wife of Ibrahim Shehu, has been married for more than 30 years. Unfortunately for her, she bears no child for her husband. Ibrahim, backed by the custom of his religion, decides to add not just a wife, but two wives with the hope of getting a child to inherit his property.

Before the marriage, Ibrahim and Zarah had been involved in sexual relations which led to the birth of Babagana. He (Babagana) is still alive but living with Zarah's parents and cannot be brought home to live with his biological mother, whom he addresses as Aunty, not knowing she is his biological mother. This is what the custom demands. The presence of the child (Babagana) makes Zarah stand her ground on not selling her house, the one she built in Damaturu before she even got married. They stayed in that house before Ibrahim got a job and built the house they were living in. This decision makes her relationship with her husband go sour to the point he issues her a divorce letter. With the help of her uncle, the matter is settled and she returns home.

The idea of adding another wife is not a notion most women pray for, even in the Islamic religion that allows it. Zarah shows that, she feels betrayed by her husband, whom she believes is partly to blame for her inability to bear children again after the series of abortions she had to make before they got married. Ibrahim does not treat her well but grants her less attention after he gets married to the two wives. Though Zarah feels terrible about the kind of treatment she receives, she decides to stay strong for the sake of her dreams and aspirations.

At the end of the novel, all things might have gone sour with her when she desired to fight the battle her way, but her strength and determination to stay strong to defend and protect her integrity remain with her. This shows how strong a woman can be when it comes to fighting for her place, anywhere.

## Instances of Ego Portrayal in the Novel

The novel is a story centred on Zarah and the challenges she faced in her matrimonial home. It captured some of the challenges women in the North face, mostly the Muslims. The first major issue captured is the right given to the man to marry more than a wife. In this case, Zarah became disturbed when Ibrahim informed her that he was bringing another wife to the house, not long after that, he informed her that he was bringing not just one but two wives. This made Zarah feel betrayed by the person she loved and sacrificed a lot for. This is a case against womanhood and her beliefs. Though this is not just a case peculiar to the North, it is more rampant there as both the culture and religion allow the man the right to marry more than a wife. This act triggered a reaction from Zarah, who though from the region, is not comfortable with the decision taken by her husband.

Zarah took it upon herself to pass her message to her husband about her disapproval of the issue of his second and third marriages. An instance from the book is captured thus; “Zarah pushed one of the chairs back and sat on the opposite side of the table, facing him. She was determined not to eat with him. She folded her hands and placed them on her lap under the table (51).” This is an incident that happened not long after Ibrahim broke the news to Zarah of his intention to marry another wife. She is not happy about that, this was a way to show her unhappiness at his act of betrayal. In a way, it was her little protest if only it would have any effect on his decision. The news triggered her to act in the best way she felt she could. This act belittles the woman and also injures her pride and ego, hence, Zarah feels she needs to react.

After this incident, Zarah gets into serious thinking of her life, recounting how well she treated him before he got to this spot. “As she sat on the carpet reclining on the edge of the bed, she told herself that it was the beginning of self-assurance (58).” This led to many other decisions that brought ego into play like this one,

She blamed herself for showing him too much love and giving him the impression that aside from worshipping Allah, he was next. Did he think that she was so ugly that no man could want her for a wife? At the thought of that, she quickly reassured herself that a woman did not need a husband if all that was in marriage was what she was experiencing in Ibrahim’s house. (58)

Her thoughts here speak of a disturbed woman and wife who had gone through a lot as regards pain in her home. She feels her self-worth is being ruined by her husband who is so much bent on betraying her trust and love. If only most men understood the worth of a woman, why would they want to bring more than one into a home, if not for their selfish reasons? She even resolves to stop praying for him, since after a prayer is answered, he gets back to her with the wrong acts.

... all she knew at that material time was the fact that she was never going to pray for him again... since he was getting himself other women to give him the happiness he wanted, she could not waste her breath or sleepless nights on him ever again. Having decided, Zarah went into her own room... (69)

When these women eventually come to the house, Zarah suddenly notices her place in the house is threatened so she needs to be wise and know how to save her pride. The first instance of ego portrayal, came up when she stopped cooking on the day assigned to her. It was obvious that her husband was giving more attention to Kellu, who was pregnant, than her. She decided to pass a message to him.

The thought was painful to bear and she turned off the gas cooker, set the pots down and returned to her room. She was going to dare him to see what it could come to; she was no longer accepting the unfair treatment at his hands or anyone else’s. (145)

The only reason this happened is because of the pregnancy of Kellu. Ibrahim’s attention completely went to



Kellu and so Zarah feels neglected. This act has a psychological effect on her. This made her feel dejected and sad. It therefore explains her actions. She hopes to derive pleasure in the fact that he will become unhappy and possibly see reasons with her. She hoped this would bring his love for her anew when he finally saw her plight.

Having mentioned earlier two major scenarios were captured by the author, the first being a case against womanhood, which triggered the reactions expressed by Zarah. The second situation is against motherhood. The theory of motherism comes into play here. This theory promotes the mother-child relationship and everything that concerns motherhood. No mother will see this relationship threatened and remain comfortable. The situation at hand is that Ibrahim demanded that Zarah sells her house in Damaturu. The major reason why he is demanding that the house be sold is the fact that he feels his wife is possibly threatening to become established one day and he will lose his respect before her eyes. It could also be because he no longer cares for her business. This is the same man who used to drive her to the said house just so they get the rent, and now he is demanding that the house be sold but Zarah refuses (196). This Zarah's recalcitrance does not go down well with Ibrahim as he takes that as disobedience to him. Zarah on the other hand was thinking of her son and what he could hold as his, this explains her refusal to sell the house.

### **Projected Motives for the Display of Ego**

Men in the northern part of Nigeria backed by the Islamic culture, have the right to marry more than a wife. This act is not something most women are so comfortable with as seen exhibited by Zarah in the novel. At some points, she questioned society for accepting the idea of a man marrying more than a wife but would not accept a child to be brought into the matrimonial home even though the child is for both parents.

Desperate as she knew she was, she could not take him to their home because society continues to frown at the circumstance of his birth seventeen years on. But did it seem okay for her husband to marry any kind of woman into the home she had helped build without consideration for her feeling or even think of her investment in his life? (28)

An unhappy Zarah was thinking to herself after leaving her parents' house to break the news of her husband's marriage. These are events that eventually motivate Zarah into making most of the decisions she took in her matrimonial home. Even Kellu who later realises that another woman is coming to the house the same day she is coming to her husband's house did not find the news acceptable. (43 – 44). Zarah, the protagonist made her major decision of not selling her house for reasons that she feels would save her from the uncaring disposition of her husband.

Her first reason is for the fact that it is her only security (196) and so parting with it will be difficult. She has gone through a lot in the house. Seeing that she has no child and also the fact that the attention of her husband is diverting to the other wives, she feels scared that she might never benefit from her husband. So that house is her only security if she eventually loses everything from her husband to the other wives.

Secondly, she was considering what her child, outside of wedlock with Ibrahim, would have. The society has made it impossible for them to bring him into the home. This makes Zarah scared that he (Babagana) will be left with nothing if she eventually sells the house. She explains this to Ibrahim hoping it will have an effect on him and make him change his mind.

Allah knows that I will not wish any harm to come your way but since my son is not recognized by you and society as your own, I want to leave the house for him. What with your wives filling your house with children, where does that leave that poor boy? Please I will not sell that house for any reason. (198)

This excuse does not change Ibrahim's mind because he still gives her a divorce letter when she insists on not selling the house. Zarah has a very good reason to hold on to the house, being that it is the only asset her son will have, because it is obvious, that Ibrahim is not showing signs of having the child at heart. So, Zarah's rigidity is quite logical in this context.

In another scenario, we find another reason for ego display. Aside from the fact that she needed to get something to keep for her son, she also has an ambition for herself. She explains thus, "In her head, she had plans to establish herself as an estate owner, starting with the house in Damaturu..." (220). She has a plan of really becoming someone, and the house is something she intends to start with. She has understood that the road to gaining her self-identity cannot be possible if the house is sold. She, therefore, had to do anything possible to defend it.

Zarah has seen that she has lost it with her husband, there seems to be no hope for anything coming up. She only needs to stay in the house so that the society will not laugh at her. Aside from that, she also needs to make plans for herself to become a great personality. This is explained below

She was scared because society was a conservative one that still did not recognize a woman if she was not appended to a man, as a wife. In her head, she had plans to establish herself as an estate owner, starting with the house in Damaturu but she could not even begin just then, she needed the protection that only marriage could provide and when she was more grounded and confident, she would think of something for her old age. (220)

Zarah has no plans of giving up on her dreams, as she thinks of herself and her son, both of them deserve to live happily and this depends on her and her insistence. So, her personality needs to be intact and protected so that nobody can question her.

### **The Effects of Ego Displayed on Other Characters**

To start with, Zarah's refusal to cook on her scheduled date on the roaster affected the family. Her hungry husband got angry when he realised food was not coming his way that day from the house. This had a psychological effect on him and her "Kishiya", that is the other wife in the house. Ibrahim had to go and buy food outside for the three of them in the house (145). This act by Zarah incurred an extra expense on the family for the day.

The effect of the refusal to sell the house in Damaturu made Ibrahim angry. His interpretation of that act is that Zara is simply disobedient, "you disobey me, right?" (196). the society in Northern Nigeria gives men high regard, and it is expected that the woman honours everything he says and demands his wife (s) to do. So, this act is regarded as damaging to his pride. So, to redeem his pride which he held in high esteem to him, he threatened her with a divorce letter. (201)

### **The Travails of Womanhood**

The author projects the worth of the woman by exposing the pain the woman goes through while the man enjoys the abundance of choices to make. The woman has been narrowed to just a choice of accepting what the husband demands and says. Any form of disagreement is regarded as disobedience and unacceptable. Razinat Mohammed had to first of all bring out these struggles in her writing and by so doing, projects a victorious woman who goes through a lot just to be a woman and mother.

These two concepts fall under the African feminist movement, "African womanism" and "motherism". While the first theory projects the woman and all she goes through to the public view, the second theory

seeks to celebrate the relationship between the mother and her child. These two aspects of the woman were challenged by her husband who felt she was no longer giving him what he so desired and deserved. He first of all married two wives, this is an offence against womanhood. Then, he later demands that she sell the house she owns in Damaturu. Zarah refuses to sell the house. after all, she feels this will be a threat to motherhood because she has been saving the house so that her son will have something to cling to. This shows the motherly affection she has towards her child, though society is not fair to her, her child can stay under her roof and be treated as a son, she feels she could still have her way of making sure he enjoys life.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The research was able to establish these facts about the female ego from the text. The woman is first of all proud of her being a woman as we could not find at any point the character regretting being born a woman. Secondly, the woman does not intend to challenge the authority of the man, she still respects his position as the African tradition and culture demands.

Razinat Mohammed, in her text, *The Travails of a First Wife*, depicts ego in a very subtle manner. There is an instance of resistance, but how Zara handles her case is subtle. This cannot be far from the fact that the environment has influenced the behaviour of the Zarah. Zarah has the responsibility of taking care of herself and her son seeing that her husband has a new set of priorities. Despite all that her husband threatened to do, she stood her ground on the fact that she would not sell her house, to someday hand it over to her son as an empire she might have built. This presents her as a mother who is so concerned with the well-being of her child.

Zarah had her reason for the display of ego. She needed to protect her future and that of her son from being destroyed by her husband. She did not see the wisdom in selling the house she built and their saving grace when her husband was yet to get a job for the mere fact that her husband felt threatened by it. Zarah was at a point left to choose between her marriage and her pride, she had to keep both and somehow, she succeeded at the end of the day.

Zara's display of ego affected other characters in the novel. The research was able to bring that out and it is summarized here. Zara's outright refusal to sell the house she built infuriated Ibrahim. The thought of selling the house on the other hand left her uncertain of the future of her son. The futuristic effect of keeping the house is the fact that her son will happily have something to cling to, because his father, Ibrahim, will not include him in any of his entitlements when he dies, because he was conceived out of wedlock. The presence of the house, unfortunately, makes Ibrahim angry, this is not far from the fact that he feels Zarah is gradually feeling she could brag of some assets too and eventually start challenging him.

## CONCLUSION

Womanhood is a blessing, the woman needs to celebrate her being and her abilities. She has been misrepresented and now seeks to correct the wrong picture painted about her. The selected text reveals that ego in women exists and have been portrayed in the text selected. The portrayal of ego shows the willpower and emotional strength of the Nigerian woman. The Nigerian female writers have done well in portraying the female ego. It was found that the ego displayed in the selected text has both positive and negative effects on the other characters in the selected novel. The research was able to point out ego depiction from the fictional work selected for the research and tagged it self-assertion ego. However, the portrayal of the strength of the woman by this selected Nigerian female writer is in response to the wrong depiction of women by Nigerian male writers. This has given the woman a good level of confidence in herself and also informed the world about who the woman is.



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