The Intersectionality of Culture, Identity, and Gender: A Critical Exploration of Razinat T. Mohammed's *The Travails of the First Wife*

[1]**Azan Baba JAMES**, [2]**Grace ADOKWE**

[1,2]***Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi***

Corresponding author's email: azanjames6@gmail.com Telephone: +234(0)8160924892

Abstract
This study undertakes a critical examination of the intersectionality of culture, identity, and gender in Razinat T. Mohammed's novel, *The Travails of the First Wife* (2015), employing an intersectional framework to explore the complex power dynamics shaping the experiences of the protagonist Zarah. Through a nuanced analysis of the intersections of culture, identity, and gender, this research reveals how Zarah's life is influenced by a web of power involving her husband, co-wives, family members, and societal norms. The findings highlight the ways in which Zarah's multiple identities intersect to produce unique forms of oppression and marginalization, underscoring the significance of considering the complex interplay of social factors in understanding individual experiences. The findings reveal how culture, identify, and gender intersect, particularly in the context of northern Nigerian societies. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersectional nature of women's experiences to develop effective strategies for empowerment and social change.

Keywords: intersectionality, identity, gender, travails

Introduction
The intricate web of culture, identity, and gender has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, particularly in the realm of literary studies. Razinat T. Mohammed's *The Travails of the First Wife* offers a poignant exploration of these intersecting dynamics, shedding light on the complexities of women's experiences within patriarchal societies. This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on intersectionality, employing a critical framework to analyze the ways in which cultural norms, identity formation, and gender roles intersect to shape the lives of women in the novel.

According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar on intersectionality, "the intersectionality of multiple identities complicates the experiences of individuals and groups, revealing the need for nuanced understandings of power dynamics" (24). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of Mohammed's novel, where the protagonist, Zarah, navigates

a complex landscape of cultural expectations, identity formation, and gender-based oppression. As Zarah's story unfolds, it becomes clear that her experiences cannot be reduced to a single axis of identity; rather, they are shaped by the intersecting forces of culture, patriarchy, and societal norms.

Scholars have long recognized the importance of considering the intersections of multiple identities in literary analysis. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins notes that "intersecting systems of oppression shape the experiences of individuals and groups, requiring a critical examination of power dynamics" (21). This insight is particularly relevant in the context of *The Travails of the First Wife,* where Zarah's experiences are shaped by the intersecting forces of patriarchy, cultural norms, and societal expectations. As the novel illustrates, these forces can have a profound impact on women's lives, limiting their agency and autonomy.

In a seminal work on intersectionality, Ange-Marie Hancock emphasizes the need for nuanced understandings of power dynamics, arguing that "intersectionality provides a framework for analyzing the complex ways in which power operates in society" (12). This framework is particularly useful in analyzing the ways in which cultural norms, identity formation, and gender roles interweave in *The Travails of the First Wife.* By examining the web of power dynamics in the novel, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which women's experiences are shaped by connected systems of oppression.

As Saba Mahmood notes, "the agency of women is often shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they live, requiring a nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics at play" (203). This insight is particularly relevant in the context of Zarah's story, where her agency is shaped by the cultural norms and societal expectations that govern her life.

The intersectionality of culture, identity, and gender is a complex and multifaceted issue, particularly in the context of *The Travails of the First Wife*. As this study will demonstrate, the novel offers a powerful exploration of these issues, highlighting the need for nuanced understandings of power dynamics and the complex ways in which they shape women's lives.

The Travails of the First Wife is a thought-provoking novel that explores the complexities of women's experiences within patriarchal societies. Set against the backdrop of cultural and societal expectations, the novel delves into the themes of identity, power dynamics, and the struggles of women in navigating these complex systems. According to bell Hooks, "patriarchy is a system of oppression that perpetuates the dominance of men over women, requiring a critical examination of power dynamics" (17). This theme is central to the novel, where Zarah's experiences are shaped by the patriarchal norms and expectations that govern her life.

Another significant theme in the novel is the struggle for identity and self-definition. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "the struggle for identity is a fundamental aspect of human experience, particularly for women who are marginalized and oppressed" (145). This theme is particularly relevant in the context of *The Travails of the First Wife,* where Zarah's identity is patterned in line with cultural and societal expectations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Intersectional Framework. Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a critical lens for analyzing the complex ways in which power operates in society (124). This framework is particularly useful in understanding the experiences of individuals and groups who are marginalized and oppressed, as it highlights the intersecting systems of power that shape their lives.

According to Vivian M. May, "intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding the complex ways in which power operates in society, highlighting the need for nuanced understandings of power dynamics and resistance" (23). The intersectional framework allows for a critical examination of the ways in which power is exercised and maintained through a nexus of social structures and institutions. By examining the nexus, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which women experience multiple forms of oppression, and how the experience can be transformed through resistance and social change.

Literature Review: Exploring the Complexities of Polygamy, Cultural Identity, and Gender Roles

The complexities of polygamy, cultural identity, and gender roles have been explored in various academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Polygamy, a practice where one individual has multiple spouses, is a complex and many-sided issue that combines with cultural identity and gender roles in various ways.

Aisha Phoenix provides an analysis of the complexities of polygamy, noting that,

> Polygamy is a practice that is often stigmatized and marginalized in Western societies, reflecting broader cultural and social attitudes towards non-monogamous relationships. The practice of polygamy is often linked to specific cultural and social norms that shape women's experiences of marriage and family in complex ways. (101)

Hanan Kholoussy's work on polygamy in Egypt provides further insight into the complexities of this practice. According to Kholoussy,

> Polygamy is a practice that is deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts, and its meaning and significance can vary greatly depending on the specific cultural and social context in which it is practiced. In Egypt, for example, polygamy was often practiced as a means of securing social and economic stability, particularly for women who had limited access to education and economic opportunities. (123)

This insight features the importance of understanding polygamy within its specific cultural and social context.

Sylvia Tamale observes:

> Polygamy is a practice that is often shaped by patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions, which can have a profound impact on women's experiences of marriage and family. In many African cultures, polygamy is practiced as a means of reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics, with men often holding significant power and control over women. (156)

This demonstrates the need for a critical examination of the power dynamics that shape the practice of polygamy. The complexities of polygamy, cultural identity, and gender roles require a careful analysis that takes into account the specific cultural and social contexts in which polygamy is practiced. By examining details of power, culture, and identity, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which polygamy shapes women's experiences of marriage and family.

The complexities of polygamy, cultural identity, and gender roles are further highlighted in the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, who argues that

> Polygamy is a practice that is often linked to specific Cultural and social norms that shape women's experiences of marriage and family in complex ways. In many societies, polygamy is practiced as a means of securing social and economic stability, particularly for women who have limited access to education and economic opportunities. However, this practice can also be linked to systems of oppression, including patriarchy and sexism, which can limit women's agency and autonomy. (145)

This insight illuminates the need for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which polygamy intersects with cultural identity and power dynamics. Furthermore, the practice of polygamy can have significant implications for women's experiences of marriage and family. According to Marnia Lazreg,

> Polygamy is a practice that can be both empowering and disempowering for women, depending on the specific cultural and social context in which it is practiced. In some cases, polygamy can provide women with a sense of security and stability, particularly in societies where women have limited access to economic opportunities. (210)

> The complexities of polygamy, cultural identity, and gender roles are also explored in the work of Ifi Amadiume, who argues that, "polygamy is practiced as a means of reinforcing social and economic ties between families and communities" (123). Amadiume accentuates the importance of understanding polygamy within its specific cultural and social context. In addition, the practice of polygamy can have significant implications for women's experiences of motherhood and family.

Cultural Identity and Gender Roles: A Complex Intersection
Cultural identity and gender roles intersect in various ways, designing and redesigning individuals' experiences and perceptions of themselves and their place in society. According to R. Radhakrishnan,

> Cultural identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by a variety of factors, including history, culture, and power dynamics. Gender roles, in particular, play a significant role in shaping cultural identity, as they often reflect and reinforce societal norms and expectations around masculinity and femininity. (123)

Furthermore, the intersection of cultural identity and gender roles can have significant implications for individuals' experiences of themselves and their place in society. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty,

> The intersection of cultural identity and gender roles can be particularly complex for women, who often find themselves caught between the demands of traditional cultural norms and the expectations of modernity and feminism. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and disorientation, as women navigate the complexities of cultural identity and gender roles in their daily lives. (45)

> The complexities of cultural identity and gender roles are also explored in the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who argues: "However, these norms and expectations can also be challenged and subverted, allowing for new and alternative forms of cultural identity to emerge" (156). Sonia Kruks concurs, stating that orthodox roles "can also provide opportunities for resistance and

subversion, as women challenge and subvert the norms and expectations" (210). These assertions reveal the need for a closer understanding of the ways in which cultural identity and gender roles intersect, and the ways in which individuals navigate and challenge these intersections.

A Critical Exploration of Razinat T. Mohammed's *The Travails of a First Wife*

Razinat T. Mohammed's novel, *The Travails of a First Wife*, offers a scathing critique of the socio-cultural practices that perpetuate the victimization of women in Northern Nigerian society. The narrative revolves around the life of Ibrahim's wives, particularly the first wife, and explores the complexities of polygynous relationships, patriarchal dominance, and the struggles of women within these structures. "This is evident in the way Ibrahim's wives are treated, with the first wife bearing the brunt of the responsibilities and struggles that come with polygynous relationships" (4).

The novel also explores the theme of intergenerational conflict, particularly in the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. In many Northern Nigerian societies, older women often exert significant control over younger women, dictating their actions and decisions. This is reflected in the novel, where the mother-in-law plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the household and the relationships between the wives.

Furthermore, *The Travails of a First Wife* critiques the socio-cultural practices that perpetuate the victimization of women. The novel highlights the harsh realities of survival for women in impoverished communities, where their fates are often dictated by economic desperation and societal expectations. Mohammed's narrative underscores the urgent need for social change, advocating for the rights and empowerment of women in a context where their voices are often silenced (1).

The novel also explores the impact of polygyny on women's lives, including the emotional and psychological toll of sharing a husband. The character of Zarah, the first wife, is particularly illustrative of this theme. Her experiences of jealousy, insecurity, and ultimately, heartbreak, are a powerful portrayal of the ways in which polygyny can affect women's well-being. As Zarah reflects on her situation, she is "scared of divorce due to societal pressure" (220). This quote highlights the ways in which societal expectations can limit women's choices.

The Travails of a First Wife is a powerful exploration of the socio-cultural practices that perpetuate the victimization of women in Northern Nigerian society. Through its narrative, the novel critiques the patriarchal dominance and polygynous relationships that limit women's agency and autonomy, highlighting the urgent need for social change and advocating for the rights and empowerment of women in terms of economic empowerment, education and awareness, and the right to dignity among others.

Razinath extensively discusses the concept of gender. She asserts that,

> Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self and desire where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. (282)

This quote highlights how cultural identity and gender are intertwined, suggesting that gender is constructed through societal norms and expectations. The notion of a stable gender identity relies heavily on the concept of oppositional heterosexuality, where individuals define themselves in relation to the opposite sex.

The novel critiques the societal norms and expectations that shape women's experiences in polygynous relationships. According to Mohammed,

> Societal norms and expectations around polygyny are often based on patriarchal assumptions that prioritize men's needs and desires over those of women, and these norms and expectations can have a profound impact on women's lives, limiting their agency and autonomy in significant ways. (156)

Furthermore, as Mohammed notes,

> Women in polygynous relationships are often forced to navigate complex webs of power and privilege, where their agency and autonomy are constantly being negotiated, and where they must find ways to assert their own needs and desires in the face of patriarchal dominance. (210)

The novel also highlights the ways in which polygyny can affect women's relationships with each other. The practice often leads to tension, conflict, and competition. As Kellu is warned, "a co-wife can never be a friend" (83). This statement highlights the difficulties of forming genuine relationships between women in polygynous households, where loyalty and trust are often compromised. A critical exploration of the text reveals that polygyny is a flawed system that prioritizes men's needs and desires over those of women, limiting their agency and autonomy. This system is perpetuated by societal norms and expectations that are often based on patriarchal assumptions, which can have a profound impact on women's lives.

One of the key findings of this study is that women in polygynous relationships are forced to navigate complex webs of power and privilege, negotiating their agency and autonomy in the face of patriarchal dominance. This can lead to a range of challenges and complexities, as women seek to assert their own needs and desires in a system that often prioritizes the interests of men. Furthermore, the study highlights the ways in which polygyny can create tension and conflict between women, as they compete for attention and resources. This can lead to a breakdown in relationships between women, limiting their ability to support and empower each other.

The study also underscores the need for a critical examination of the power dynamics that shape polygynous relationships and the societal norms and expectations that perpetuate the victimization of women. A clear comprehension of the complexities of polygynous relationships is essential for promoting greater awareness and understanding of the challenges and struggles faced by women in these relationships. By shedding light on the ways in which polygyny affects women, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this critical exploration of *The Travails of the First Wife* by Razinat T. Mohammed has contributed to the discourse on the complexities of polygynous relationships, cultural identity, and gender roles in Northern Nigerian society, situating itself within an intersectional framework that critiques the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression that shape women's experiences in

these relationships, including patriarchy, cultural norms, and socioeconomic status. The study highlights the ways in which societal norms and expectations around polygyny are often based on patriarchal assumptions that prioritize men's needs and desires over those of women, limiting their agency and autonomy, and creating tension and conflict between women, as they compete for attention and resources. The research unmasks polygyny as a flawed system that perpetuates the victimization of women. The study also underscores the necessity to examine the intersections of power, culture, and identity in shaping women's experiences, in order to shed light on the ways in which these forces affect women and thereby work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all.

Contributions to Knowledge
This study on *The Travails of the First Wife* by Razinat T. Mohammed breaks new ground by providing a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges of polygynous relationships. By exploring the intricacies of these relationships, we gain insight into the ways in which societal norms and expectations shape women's experiences, and how these experiences are influenced by the cultural and societal context of Northern Nigerian society.

The use of an intersectional framework in this study allows us to uncover the hidden dynamics of oppression that shape women's lives in polygynous relationships. We see how different forms of oppression, such as patriarchy, culture, and socioeconomic status, intersect and impact women's agency and autonomy, limiting their ability to make choices and assert their rights.

This study also highlights the importance of context in shaping women's experiences. By situating the study within the specific cultural and societal context of Northern Nigerian society, we gain a nuanced understanding of the ways in which societal norms and expectations influence women's lives, and how these norms and expectations can perpetuate gender-based oppression.

Furthermore, this study challenges dominant assumptions about polygyny and its impact on women. By examining the complexities of polygynous relationships, we are forced to rethink our assumptions about the practice and its effects on women, and consider new ways to promote gender equality and empowerment.

Ultimately, the findings of this study can inform policies and practices that support women in polygynous relationships, and promote more equitable and just societies. By shedding light on the ways in which societal norms and expectations shape women's experiences, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable world for all.

Works Cited

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*? Harvard UP, 2013.

Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Routledge, 2000.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." Stanford Law Review, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "The Social Construction and Institutionalization of Gender and Race: An Integrative Framework." *Revisioning Gender*, edited by Myra Marx Ferree et al., Sage Publications, 1999, pp. 3-43.

Hancock, Ange Marie. *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History.* Oxford UP, 2016.

Hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.* 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.

Kholoussy, Hanan. *For Better, for Worse: The Marriage Crisis That Made Modern Egypt.* Stanford UP, 2010.

Kruks, Sonia. *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics.* Cornell UP, 2001.

Lazreg, Marnia. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question.* Routledge, 1994.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton UP, 2005.

May, Vivian M. *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries.* Routledge, 2015.

Mohammed, Razinat T. *The Travails of a First Wife.* Origami Books, 2015.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity.* Duke UP, 2003.

Phoenix, Aisha. *Polygamy and Muslim Family Law.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Radhakrishnan, R. *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location.* U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Tamale, Sylvia. *African Sexualities: A Reader.* Pambazuka Press, 2011.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics.* Routledge, 1991.