

Reinventing self in Aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'Fari* and Muhammed Umar's *Amina: A Novel*

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Abstract

Reinventing self is a profound process that comes with introspection and a resolution to embrace new opportunities, behaviours, and mindsets. This paper examines this process of reinvention of self in the lives of the heroines in Mohammed Umar's *Amina: A Novel* and Aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*. The study is a qualitative research based on close reading, interpretation and analysis. Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory (which explores the emotional and psychological responses to distressing events in society), and Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism (which examines the power dynamics and gender inequalities in society) are deployed as theoretical frames to interrogate how the heroines in the novel mitigate their traumatic experiences and reinvent themselves in the novels. Umar's *Amina* is born into a wealthy family while Abdulkareem's *Teni* comes from a deprived background. Findings indicate that both heroines have dreams of purpose-driven lives that will benefit humanity, and they refuse to give up on their dreams despite the pain and trauma they experience on the journey to self-reinvention. *Amina* and *Teni* challenge the norms and expectations of their respective social milieu in their quest for meaning and a sense of purpose. And they prevail. The heroines consciously step out of their comfort zones, embrace change with its pain and discomfort, and courageously pursue the life they envision. In conclusion, both protagonists demonstrate that self-reinvention is not solely about personal transformation, but more about finding ways to impact others positively, regardless of one's starting point. Their stories provide a powerful message that no matter where one begins in life, purpose and service to humanity can drive transformation.

[258 words] *

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Introduction

A significant corpus of literary works produced by contemporary authors of fiction from the Northern Nigerian region reflects the depressing conditions endured by women and girls in that part of Nigeria. These writers highlight the multifaceted Northern Nigerian narrative, while diligently challenging entrenched stereotypes. A careful examination of gender dynamics in this region reveals the existence of deeply ingrained practices and belief systems that militate against the well-being and progress of women and girl-children. These practices continuously hinder the realization of their full potentials as well as interfere with their ability to lead fulfilled lives. This is demonstrated throughout the texts selected for this study in general, and specifically in the lives of

the respective heroines therein, namely, Teni in Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*, and Amina in Muhammed Umar's eponymous fiction, *Amina: A Novel*. Consequently, women within this stratification, just like the heroines mentioned above, often find themselves subjected to traumatic experiences. The Northern Nigerian Muslim woman is particularly hampered by multiple challenges, stemming from her gender and the burdens of tradition and religion. The tendency towards biased application and misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines as they relate to the treatment of women add to the women's burden. This situation results in perpetual trauma for women, hence the need for reinvention of self for women who wish to escape from the burden of their trauma.

Self-reinvention is an incredible act of self-love and empowerment. It entails identifying patterns, values, or activities that no longer serve one, and nudges the individual to choose better options. It is about stepping outside one's comfort zone, embracing change, and courageously pursuing the life that one envisions. Self-reinventing is a profound process that comes with introspection and a resolution to embrace new opportunities, behaviours, and mindsets. It is a journey of self-discovery and growth, which enables individuals to align more closely with their aspirations and values (Jenkins, 2024). Every journey of self-reinvention begins with a clear assessment of one's current circumstances, and the notion that the individual must accept the need for change, which is often the challenging part.

This study is concerned with the characters' (Teni and Amina's) ability to reinvent themselves, and make impact in their various communities. The transformation cannot take place unless the characters have reached a point in their existence that they feel dissatisfied with their present condition, and desire more from life. Ultimately, self-reinvention is about taking hold of the reins of one's life as well as taking decisions and actions that will result in positive outcomes. Taking action is where and when true transformation takes root. While introspection and planning are crucial, transformation happens through action. Until the first step is taken, the vision remains merely an idea. Each action, no matter how small, creates momentum, turning aspirations into tangible outcomes (Murphy, 2024). Taking action is both the hardest and most rewarding part of self-reinvention, it is where one's courage and strategy meet opportunity, and where dreams begin to become realities.

The theme of self-reinvention forms the nucleus of the discussion surrounding the two texts under review: A'isha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari* and Mohammed Umar's *Amina: A Novel* (hereafter referred to as *Amina*). In both narratives, the protagonists grapple with dissatisfaction with their existing circumstances, leading them to desire transformation. Their journeys accentuate the courage and resilience required to transcend societal norms and personal limitations. In *Yar'fari*, the protagonist's dissatisfaction stems from an internal conflict and external pressures that compel her to redefine her sense of self. Similarly, *Amina* depicts a heroine whose quest for change reflects her willingness to challenge conventions and embrace growth, even in the face of patriarchal and cultural restrictions from her community.

Teni in *Yar'fari* and Amina in *Amina* embody the essence of self-reinvention, as they step out of their comfort zones by choice as well as through the force of circumstances, and navigate the complexities of change with determination. This analysis highlights the themes of resilience and growth in the heroines' journeys. Their experiences of trauma and subsequent introspection point to the human capacity to confront hardship, and to adapt, and evolve. The resolve to embrace new opportunities, behaviours, and mindsets becomes a turning point in their lives that keeps them focused on their life goals.

Trauma is a prevalent theme in contemporary literary studies that often necessitates the utilization of the trauma theory to explore an individual's experience of a traumatic event or situation within a text. Trauma as a theory was developed by Sigmund Freud through his psychiatric practice with psychologically challenged patients. His observations were recorded in several publications, and form the foundation on which other scholars have built their own studies. One of such scholars is Cathy Caruth, whose perspectives of the trauma theory are on the emotional and psychological responses to distressing events in society. In her work, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), she explains that a traumatic experience is not possessed by any individual or group, and therefore, its impact can never be captured by direct reference. Going further, she contends that through the notion of trauma, we come to a new understanding that permits history to arise where immediate understanding may not. This study is also based on Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's brand of Feminism called African Womanism, which examines the power dynamics and gender inequalities in society.

The publication of Okonjo-Ogunyemi's book *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel* (1996) signals the birth of this theory. The intersectional lens of the Feminist theory evolves the modes that gender, culture, and societal norms relate with and influence the characters' traumatic experiences, while the Trauma theory provides a framework for examining the psychological and emotional impact of the experiences on the characters. Trauma theory seeks to establish trauma as a major factor in the lives of the heroines in the selected texts, and highlights the difficult path that they tread to mitigate their trauma. The Feminist theory explores the feminist issues that abound in the texts, and why the heroines' femininity tends to be at odds with their society, tradition and religion.

Trauma Theory: A Brief Survey

The term “trauma” originates from the Greek word 'Traumatikos' which means 'wound'. In a broader sense therefore, discussing trauma entails addressing inflicted wounds, which can be physical or psychological (<https://www.etymonline.com>). In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not necessarily upon the body but upon the mind. Caruth (1996 p.4) avers that:

... what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly... .

To demonstrate how repetition seems to be at the centre of trauma, Caruth (1996) refers to the parable of 'the wound and the voice' in Torquato Tasso's epic poem, “Jerusalem Liberated” as cited by Freud (1920) in the third chapter of his work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Caruth (1996) emphasizes that what seems particularly striking in Tasso's poem is not just the unconscious act of inflicting injury and its inadvertent and repeated occurrence, but also the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, ironically released through the wound. This indicates that a wound, physical or psychological, possesses a voice, although the voice may remain

unheard, it nonetheless exists, a moving and sorrowful voice that appeals for sympathy, comfort, and at times, vengeance.

It should be noted that the difference between Freud and Caruth is that Freud dealt with trauma as part of his psychiatric and psychoanalytic treatment of his 'injured' patients, while Caruth only borrowed Freud's ideas to apply them to the analysis of characters in literary works. Psychological trauma as stipulated by Freud, seems to be much more than pathology, or a simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses an audience in an attempt to tell of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.

Davis and Meretoja (2020), aver that in the 20th century, Sigmund Freud and other early psychoanalysts found themselves faced with the experience of soldiers returning from the trenches of the First World War, and the theory of trauma became increasingly psychological. It manifested as a form of lasting injury on the mind caused by a shocking event that tends to elude recall and representation (p. 2). Trauma theory therefore stems from both the medical and legal concerns that emerged during the industrial revolution that began in England in the early 19th century.

Caruth's (1996) definition of trauma is that it is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 11). Therefore, trauma is more or less “a silent scream” of an individual who is not given appropriate attention by others, but is a powerful force that disrupts and transforms the individual and collective memory and identity.

Davis and Meretoja (2020) affirm that trauma theory as a dimension of literary inquiry and textual interpretation is attributed to the canonical works of literary critics and theorists such as Cathy Caruth (1996) and Shoshana Felman, the psychiatrist Dori Laub (Felman and Laub 1992), and the historian Dominick LaCapra (2001). Trauma theory has over time been shaped by Romantic aesthetics, 19th century psychopathology, 20th century psychoanalysis and psychiatry, post structuralism, Holocaust studies, memory studies, medical humanities as well as post-colonial studies. Furthermore, Davis and Meretoja (2020) explain that trauma has become a common part of our everyday phraseology, which has also signaled a shift in our general relationship and understanding of this concept from what was known or thought to be in the past. There is now a wide recognition of how past violence, in words and in deeds, leaves marks on the present and future, how injuries of the past return to haunt the sufferer, as well as how past injustice need to be remembered and worked through so that a repetition can be avoided. The far-reaching consequences of trauma extend well beyond the initial event, frequently resulting in enduring psychological and emotional wounds that can persist throughout the individual's lifetime.

In this study therefore, the researcher shall select representative but painful experiences, memories, dreams and subjective mental states through an exploration of narrative structure, language, and form to showcase their traumatic impact on the characters of the novels under study, namely: Amina in Mohammed Umar's *Amina: A Novel* and Teni in Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*.

African Womanism: A Brief Survey

According to Mwedzi (2012), the *Oxford English Dictionary* recorded its first entry of the word 'feminism' in 1894, having imported the term from France where it first appeared in 1872. Feminist Criticism as a broad discipline examines how literature and other cultural works

reinforce or challenge the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. Consequently, several philosophers rose in defense of women's rights and privileges. Prominent among them were Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).

Widely acknowledged as one of the pioneer feminist philosophers, Wollstonecraft, published her groundbreaking book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792, at the age of 33. In it she depicts women as an oppressed class, regardless of social hierarchy, and argues that lack of education is responsible for their oppression. Wollstonecraft's work remains foundational in feminist thought, and is often cited as a significant contribution to feminist philosophy. Her legacy emphasizes the ongoing need for women to voice their experiences and narratives.

Various branches of feminism have been identified, including mainstream/liberal, radical, and socialist feminism. In recent decades, newer forms of feminism have emerged, leading to its proliferation. African feminisms reflect cultural differences, lived experiences, patriarchal influences, and the necessity for contextually relevant approaches that amplify women's voices. According to Amaefula (2021) “the plurality of African feminisms signposts the cultural differences among women, including the various dynamics that constitute their lived experiences, patriarchal tenets, and a recognition of the need for relevant African feminist approaches that can give women a voice” (p. 295). In the 1980s Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi introduced a brand of feminism called African Womanism, and claims that the concept better describes the African woman's engagement in social transformation than feminism does.

African Womanism focuses on cooperation between men and women, and upholds the values of the family. Ogunyemi corroborates Hudson-Weems' (1993) views that “the African woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the white feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her white male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. African men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress African women as white men have had to oppress white women” (p.25). However, Hudson-Weems' view appears to be too generalized, as it is not all white feminists who share this radical view. The African Womanism theory sees the African woman generally as a home lover and maker, and not a hater of men. She values her family, and does not see herself as being in any competition with her man; rather, she seeks ways to negotiate with him for the available space and resources. In a nut shell, the following are the cardinal features of Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism:

- (a). Complimentarity and partnership between black men and women to challenge patriarchal structures in a bid to achieve social change with the aim for a harmonious society;
- (b). Communal focus over individualism: that is, recognizing that the African woman's struggle is deeply intertwined with the liberation of the community from neo-colonialism and economic distress.
- (c). Anti-patriarchal yet non-confrontational: that is, this approach advocates a subtle, negotiatory approach to resistance against patriarchy , rather than direct, aggressive confrontation.
- (d). Rootedness in Black Culture: this means that the theory is anchored in African culture and traditions, acknowledging the specific experiences of black women in Africa and the diaspora, and celebrating the nuances of African life and familial bonds.
- (e). Motherhood as empowering: that is, the theory recognizes the centrality of motherhood, a celebratory aspect of African identity.

- (f) Focus on Intersectionality: By this we mean that the theory addresses the multifaceted issues affecting African women, including racism, poverty, and sexism, recognizing how these factors intersect to impact the lives of African/black women.

Reinventing Self in Mohammed Umar's *Amina: A Novel*

Amina, written by Mohammed Umar, is about the eponymous protagonist, Amina who leads the women's struggle to confront the issues of polygyny, domestic abuse, excision and child-motherhood as well as the agitation for social equality in the city of Bakaro. The novel highlights issues which rarely appear in the fiction of the conservative patriarchal society of the predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria. It dwells on the legal status of Muslim women, and the limitations imposed on them by traditional and religious conventions. The name, Amina, resonates with the legendary Queen Amina, the 16th century warrior and queen of Zazzau or Zaria in the present-day Kaduna State of Nigeria. Umar's fictional Amina is also born into a rich family, and is given in marriage to a wealthy man. Like the legendary Queen Amina, the fictional Amina also belongs to the elite class, but chooses to be on the side of the downtrodden and underprivileged in her community to lead a revolt against gender oppression and political corruption in her society.

Onset of Trauma

Amina's trauma begins when her educational pursuit is abruptly truncated by her father upon the death of her mother, who had been the sole sponsor of her academic endeavours. Despite his considerable wealth and influence, her father has neither regard for, nor belief in, the value of female education. Consequently, following her mother's demise, Amina is swiftly betrothed to her father's associate, Alhaji Haruna, a prominent and affluent political figure, who is already in polygynous unions with three other wives.

Amina and her co-wives live together in one compound while Alhaji maintains his private residence in the legislative quarters, and visits each wife when he pleases. The wives are under strict instruction not to visit him under any circumstance. Amina maintains a non-committal relationship with the other wives, and sees her husband only on the nights he stops by. Her relationship with her husband is not cordial. She has no friend in the family, and remains confined to and alone in her room. As indicated by the narrator, "Amina continues to live her life in the women's world of idleness... Confined to the same small district... where she was born and raised, she felt she was decaying, mentally and physically... she saw very little of her husband and they hardly spoke intimately to each other" (Umar, p.36). She finds no pleasure in the company of other rich men's wives, whose preoccupations are how to cheat, make money and live an ostentatious lifestyle.

Due to the poor inter-personal relationship between Amina and members of her husband's family, it becomes easy to spread a malicious rumour about Amina having a love affair with one of her husband's drivers called Bala. She is concerned about the effect of such a story, not only on her dignity and integrity in the family, but also in the city. The narrator explains that "She tried to anticipate the worst reaction Alhaji might have: If he divorced her, where would she go to? To whom?" (p.27). Amina is afraid and helpless at the mere thought of divorce. Aliyu (2020) affirms that Northern Nigerian women are scared of divorce because, "This stems from the religious nature of Northern Nigeria, which prescribes that a woman should always be under the authority of a man, either a husband or male member of the family... the society was a conservative one that still did not recognize a woman if she is not appended to a man, as wife" (p.241). Expectedly,

Amina's husband reacts violently to the rumour. Pulling her left ear very tightly he screams into it: "Next time I hear that you are seeing someone, I will kill you. Do you understand... If I hear that you even admire another man... I will beat you up first before throwing you out into the streets" (p.28). Amina proclaims her innocence; she swears by everything she holds sacred, and vehemently declares that she does not even know the said driver, all to no avail.

When her husband leaves, "Amina buried her head in her hand and sobbed uncontrollably. She cried for love and protection... She felt deprived of love and understanding, alienated, lonely and angry... She woke up with a heavy heart... she wanted someone to talk to, she wanted someone to tell her not to worry" (pp. 28-29). Amina needs strength and encouragement in the face of the varying challenges she is facing. She later learns that her co-wife, Alhaji's third wife, Jummai originated the story to create disaffection between Amina and her husband. This is typical of the envy and betrayal that characterize many polygynous marriages.

After this incident, Amina is again accused of infidelity by her husband. This happens when their son Abdulrasheed becomes critically ill, and Amina is unable to reach her husband. She asks one of the handy men in the compound to hold the baby while she administers his medication. Her husband comes in at that point in time and angrily demands, "What is this boy doing here, soiling my bed" (p.124). Amina tries to explain to him but he refuses to listen and starts to beat her. "You think I paid your dowry so that you can invite men into my room to soil it (p.126). The more she begs him to do something about the critically ill boy, the more he hits her. In her exasperation, Amina pleads for mercy, "I am innocent, please help. He [her son] is dying" (p.126). She pleads for her son's life and insists on her innocence, but her husband is not willing to do anything to save her son, and the boy dies. Adultery, a crime her husband accuses her of, is frowned at by many cultures in Nigeria and beyond; indeed, it carries significant religious, cultural, emotional, and legal consequences, so her husband's accusation is indeed serious, with severe implications.

The narrator describes a harrowing scene where Amina, a woman entrapped in a patriarchal society, faces extreme abuse from her husband as she watches her only child die of neglect. Amina is completely devastated by her son's death; her husband's relentless aggression highlights the dire consequences of the condemnation that she faces. The societal and religious constraints further compound her plight, and leave her with no means of escape or justice if her husband continues to accuse her. This narrative demonstrates the oppressive dynamics and lack of agency experienced by women in such contexts.

The Beginning of Reinvention of Self: Female Bonding and Communal consciousness

During her brief stay in the university before her father withdraws her from school, Amina shared a room in the students' hostel with Fatima, who was an intellectual and activist. While Fatima was deeply involved in student activism, while Amina was not so inclined. Nevertheless, their friendship continued to grow long after Amina's exit from school. Despite Fatima's impassioned entreaty for her friend to engage in community service or other meaningful activities to preempt the inevitable boredom that accompanies such passive lifestyles, Amina consistently declines to pursue such endeavours.

In her darkest hours, following her son's death, her friend Fatima stays around her, provides emotional support and care to restore her health and stability, in the process, bonding takes place, as they draw closer to each other. Amina recuperates fast, and soon returns to her normal life. It takes an unscheduled visit from Mairo, the second wife of the local Arabic and Koranic teacher to change the trajectory of Amina's life. With Mairo's prompting and pleading, Amina accepts to

follow her on a visit to Larai, a child-mother abandoned by her husband when she develops an obstetrical complication known as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), which is a complication that arises due to mismanagement during labour and childbirth, and results in continuous leaking of urine from the bladder. VVF is not only a medical condition; it is also a social tragedy rooted in poverty, early marriage, lack of education, and inadequate healthcare.

Growing Awareness of Communal Social Responsibility

Amina's journey in the novel reflects a gradual awakening to the struggles of the less privileged women in her society. Coming from a wealthy background and marrying into affluence, she lives in a bubble of comfort, oblivious of the sufferings around her, and clueless on how to respond to such malady. However, through Mairo's stories and, more importantly, her visit to Larai, Amina is confronted with the harsh realities faced by many young girls in her community such as forced marriages, lack of education, and societal oppression. This visit marks a turning point in Amina's perspective, as she begins to see beyond her privileged life and to recognize the deep inequalities that exist between her and her neighbours. It also raises questions about the role of women in her society, the expectations placed upon them, and how religion and culture are often used to justify these inequalities. On first learning about Larai's condition, Amina puts up an uncaring and nonchalant attitude. Mairo's attempt to introduce the topic is initially rebuffed by Amina, but Mairo addresses her resolutely; "You are a lucky woman... you live comfortably compared to most women here", to which Amina responds "That's the will of Almighty Allah" (p.9).

As Mairo proceeds to highlight Larai's pathetic condition, Amina interrupts her to ask "What's that got to do with me?" (p.9). Mairo appeals to Amina to use her wealth, her husband's influence, her education and exposure to help Larai, but she refuses, and insists that "There's nothing I can do, it is the will of God" (p.10). The dialogue portrays a tension between two interpretations of faith: passive acceptance versus active engagement. Amina's initial stance of "it is the will of Allah" could be seen as misinterpreting divine will as an excuse for inaction, while Mairo's persistence highlights that faith can and should inspire actions to alleviate human predicament and suffering. Amina's visit to Larai underscores the power of human connection and proximity in awakening empathy. Amina's subsequent actions of arranging medical care, covering expenses, and providing better accommodation (p.64), represent a complete transformation and reveals the impact of privileged individuals stepping up to address inequality.

Amina's journey from indifference to compassion demonstrates the difference that those with the means can make in the lives of those who have not. It is a journey of self-discovery and growth, which enables her to align more closely with her aspirations and values. It is a journey of self-reinvention, as she steps outside her comfort zone, foregoing the comfort and luxury she is used to, embracing change, and courageously pursuing the life that she envisions. As stated by Jenkins (2024), ultimately, self-reinvention is about taking action, which is where true transformation takes root, as each action, no matter how small, creates momentum, and turns aspirations into tangible outcomes. Amina's introspection and a resolution to jettison her former life as a lady of leisure, and identify with the needy and downtrodden, as well as become a part of her environment and embrace a new identity establish her firmly on the path to self-reinvention. She identifies the lifestyle, values, and activities that no longer make meaning to her, and casts them aside in favour of better and rewarding options.

Establishing the Bakaro Women's Organization

Having taken action, which is the hardest, yet the most rewarding part of self-reinvention, Amina

becomes resolute and surrenders herself to care for and identify with her people. She sets up and develops the Bakaro Women's Organization as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Amina stands firmly and defends the women against diverse forms of injustices against women. To drive home their point, Amina leads the women to embark on a protest code-named "zero option". She therefore addresses the women thus:

March peacefully out of your houses to the primary school and stay there until our demands are met. We are not fighting against our husbands, or against men. NO! we're protesting against harsh laws and injustice. Please don't see it as a fight between husbands and wives, women and men. If they repeal the laws, remove the taxes, assure us that the ban on our association is lifted, give full assurance that any man who maltreats his wife, sister, daughter or any other woman will be punished if found guilty, we shall return (p.186).

The women move out of their homes with foodstuffs and cooking utensils and conduct their affairs from the primary school. They properly organize themselves, and are calm and orderly. On the third day, while still camping on the primary school premises, the state security apparatus, made up of policemen and soldiers attack the defenseless women with live ammunitions. Several women are wounded, with Larai shot at a close range and killed. The women are arrested and locked up in the prison, and then charged to court. Amina is resolute in all her tribulations; she believes firmly in the cause that the women are fighting for, and speaks courageously against the horrifying injustices in the society. Her husband and other influential people visit her in her cell, and offer her freedom on the condition that she renounces the cause, and implicates the women and other perceived enemies of the government as the brain and sponsors of the revolt. She responds:

I cherish freedom, that's why I'm fighting for it, but I'm not ready to betray the cause or trade it for anything. What's the point of releasing me and detaining the women? As long as all of us are not unconditionally released, I'm going nowhere. Together we started it, together we shall finish it. On the other hand, you can keep me here if you'll only release the others. I'm not going anywhere until this case has come to court (p.218).

Her husband holds unto her and pleads with her to accept the conditions and go home with him, but she refuses. Amina is brought to court in handcuffs, branded a subversive element and charged with several crimes including high treason and sedition (p.222). A brilliant human rights lawyer defends her. In the end, Amina and the women are set free by the court. Thereafter, a change of government is announced through a *coup d'état*. The new military government clamps down heavily on the activists and freedom fighters, thus prompting them to go underground, and some flee the country. Fatima, Amina's friend escapes to Europe. Soon after that, Amina receives a call from Fatima, informing her of the United Nations' intention to present her with a Certificate of Honour at any venue of her choice in recognition of the work she has done in her community.

Thus, Amina's transformational journey takes her from a timid, sheltered individual to a fearless advocate for social justice. Her dissatisfaction with her former life of privilege and leisure serves as the catalyst for her self-reinvention. This stresses the power of personal growth and a purpose-driven living. Amina's evolution demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit, especially in the face of trauma and adversity. By choosing to champion the cause of the marginalized, Amina not only redefines her identity but also sets a powerful example of how individuals can attain

fulfilment by serving others. This shift reflects a deep, personal awakening and a recognition of the suffering of the people around her and her willingness to identify with her people and champion their cause. From the foregoing, we note the application of a major tenet of African Womanism which is emphasis on communality over individualism, which allows the heroine to carry others along, rather than attempting to improve only her own lot. Equally, this community consciousness further aids the heroine to climb out of the despondency occasioned by trauma in her life.

Reinventing Self in Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*

A'isha Abdulkareem, through her debut novel *Yar'fari*, reveals the plight of the girl-child in the patriarchal Northern Nigerian society. The novel focuses on the *Yar'fari* culture of the Ubare-Fulani people. *Yar'fari* is a Hausa word for firstborn (female). According to the author, the work is inspired by the firstborn tradition of the Hausa/Fulani culture. In this tradition, the first-born female child, upon being weaned, is usually separated from the biological parents, and made to live with the grandparents or an elderly member of the extended family. This practice deprives the child of parental love and care, the mindset, experiences and lifestyle of her own generation as well as her mother's generation, thus setting her back two generations.

The novel centres around Teni, a *yar'fari*, who is entrusted to her grandparents' care, at three years of age, as demanded by tradition. She becomes a cowherd at age eight, and is effectively trained by her grandparents on how to be a good wife and mother. Teni drives the herd to the grazing field every morning, at the same time as the local boys who are smartly dressed in their school uniform make their way to school. The narrator states:

All her life, Teni had always admired the few male children in the village who went to *makarantar boko* (the Western school). There had never been any female among them. She used to imagine herself in the smart uniform among the group of boys on their way to school. This thought normally came to her when she come [sic] across them as she took the animals for *kiwo* (grazing) every morning. Above all, she wondered why girls were never privileged to be among them and what they did in the school. How they come to understand and use the strange language of the school which she never understood a word of, no matter how hard she tried...As she thought about all these, she realized bitterly that she might never get to learn that language and put on that uniform because marriage was about to close the door of that opportunity (Abdulkareem, p. 14).

Teni's father, Kabiru, relocates to the city, and by sheer dint of hard work, he becomes very prosperous. Being a *yar'fari*, Teni remains in the village with her grandparents, and so, does not benefit from her father's wealth. Nevertheless, she holds on to her dream and desire to acquire education and be a very influential person in the society. This dream is suddenly aborted when Teni is thirteen years old, as her grandfather chooses a husband for her. Teni's friends are very happy and congratulate her on her good fortune of finding a husband, but she is devastated by the development, and responds to her friends:

I am different. My idea of life fulfillment is not in early marriage. No one seems to understand me. I dream of being in a big city, educated and

smartly dressed, talking intelligently in the white man's language and working in a place where I can touch the lives of people and serve humanity...does my being a female exclude me from growing up to live a life of my dreams and desires...Right now, I see no future...All I see is spending the rest of my life in a loveless marriage with a stranger I feel nothing for” (p.20).

From the scenario above, it is apparent that though poor and uneducated, Teni holds high ideals and has a bird's eye view of the kind of life she wants for herself in the near-future, which makes her different from everybody around her. The scenario also portrays the fact that in line with the tenets of Womanism, Teni sees the need for the girl-child to not only have a say in the decision of her future, but also the right to self-determination, voice and agency in complimentary relation with the men-folk.

The Onset of Trauma or the Wound

Teni is forced into an early marriage despite her father's efforts to halt it. The *yar'fari* culture separates Teni completely from her biological parents, and bars the parents from having any say or inputs in her life, thus making her the property of her guardians, in this case, her grandparents. When Kabiru, Teni's father gets wind of the impending marriage, he rushes to the village to try and persuade his father not to marry Teni off at such a tender age, but allow her to go to school. The father refuses and rebukes his son, Kabiru for daring to think that way. Disappointed and broken Kabiru returns to the city a very unhappy man (p. 38). On the part of Teni, this is a deep wound in her psyche that is crying for sympathy, understanding and reversal.

Introspection and the Beginning of Self-Reinvention

A deeply traumatized Teni is forcefully taken to her husband's house, but she refuses to give up on her dream of acquiring education. This resolution is the beginning of self-reinvention for her. The first step in the process of self-reinvention is introspection, this is usually the first signpost and call to action. This happens to be the case with Teni. Marriage appears to have closed every door of opportunity, but deep down in her, she believes that this cannot be the end of her dream. Introspection takes over at this point, as she subjectively reassures herself by soliloquizing: “No, it can't be” (p.44), Teni thinks aloud. Her marriage to Abu is not one of her dreams. “Though her dreams of a brighter future were being overshadowed by events, she had a strong feeling that something would happen to change the course of events” (p.44). She desires that change, she believes in it, and she holds on to it. These are the ingredients necessary for self-reinvention, and Teni sets herself on that journey, against all odds.

After five years in the marriage, and blessed with two lovely children, everything comes to an end as her husband Abu, whom she has grown to love, is tragically killed by police bullets during a students' riot. Teni is devastated as she becomes a widow at the age of eighteen. In spite of this, her determination which had already been triggered by her earlier introspection and awareness, remains unshaken. After the stipulated mourning period, her father, Kabiru invites her to the city to recuperate from the devastating loss.

Call to action – Quest for Education

Education stands out as one of the major aspects of female reinvention of self. In most feminist novels, education is depicted as bringing about a change of lifestyle and mentality, as well as serving as a signpost of financial and economic independence. Teni's earlier resolve is now activated into action as she decides to pursue her dream of educational attainment. So, surrounded

by her parents and siblings, Teni recovers rapidly, and then discusses with her father her desire to acquire education. She receives the blessings and full support of her family members. Her father considers how impracticable it is for her to enroll in primary one, at the age of nineteen, and hires private teachers to teach her at home. Teni's mother takes over the care of her two children, and that enables her to pay full attention to her studies.

After a year of intense hard work, denying herself the pleasures and comfort that her father's palatial home offers, and deciding to step out of her comfort zone, her teachers certify her good enough to write the National Common Entrance Examination. Teni writes the examination, and passes with good grades. She is offered admission into the Federal Government College, Biara, a co-educational boarding school. The thought of being separated from her children makes her to reject the idea of a boarding school, but her parents lovingly explain to her why she needs to make that sacrifice with an assurance from her mother that the children will be well looked after. She accepts.

Teni arrives the boarding school with a determination to make the best of the second chance that destiny has offered her. She focuses all her attention on her studies, and ignores every form of distractions including taunts and insults from her classmates, who derogatorily call her "Mama of the class" because of her age (Abdulkareem, p.98). Her commitment pays off as she comes out as the most outstanding student the school has ever produced. The support she gets from her family and the school authority, as well as her unyielding determination to change her status in life enable her to navigate the complexities of her transition from a traditional, constrained role to one of independence and self-empowerment. The school authority awards her full scholarship, and makes her the senior prefect of the school in her final year.

Teni performs exceptionally well in her Joint Admission Matriculation Examination and gains admission to study Medicine in the university. She performs very well in the medical school. The narrator points out that: "After her junior MBBS, Teni emerged as the best medical student, and won the USAID grant of two hundred thousand dollars, a Canadian citizenship, and an automatic employment on graduation" (p.107). In her 400 Level, she is selected to represent the university alongside other students in an International Medical Seminar in the United Kingdom. It is during this seminar that she meets Imran, a young handsome Consultant Surgeon from her university. Teni qualifies as a medical doctor, gets married to Imran after her graduation, and they relocate to Canada. She passes through the stages of self-reinvention: first, she becomes dissatisfied with her standing in life, and desires more. Secondly, she consciously steps out of her comfort zone, embraces change with its pain and discomfort, and courageously pursues the life she envisions.

Style and Narrative Techniques

Style is the particular manner or technique by which something is done, created or performed. In writing, style may be said to be a distinctive manner of expression which differentiates one's individual mode and tenor of expression from another. The French Naturalist, Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon (1707-1788) on delivering his epoch-making *Discourse on Style*, on the occasion of his admission to the French Academy in 1753, said "The style is the man himself". This celebrated dictum remains the best known of his shorter pieces, and basically means that one's chosen style reflects one's essential characteristics, in other words, a writer's style will bear the mark of his personality.

In literature, style is the way in which an author writes and/or tells a story. It takes into account

literary devices such as diction, tone, figurative language and word choice. It is what sets one author apart from another and creates a unique “voice” and “tone” that the audience hear when they read. Narrative techniques simply suggest different strategies that a writer adopts to tell his story in order to make it memorable without boring the reader. There are many narrative techniques in the two novels under study, some of which include:

Simplicity of Language and Diction

One style that unifies these two writers in the approach to their novels is simplicity in the use of language. Both writers' choice of diction is that of the simple, ordinary, everyday use of words and expressions which allow for easy reading and comprehension. For example, in Umar's *Amina*, the first chapter begins thus:

It had gone midday and the sun was high in the sky as the two young women walked calmly out of the women's university hostel. In the carpark outside, they leaned on a white Mercedes saloon and continued their light-hearted chatter for a while. Eventually, one of them adjusted the red beret on her shoulder-length hair, the other rearranged her headscarf. (*Amina*, p.1).

Similarly, in Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari*, an excerpt from the first chapter reads as follows:

“When Teni was three years old, her father, Kabiru, relocated to the capital city in search of greener pastures for himself and the family, while Teni looked for greener pastures for the cattle in Kwane. Husseina, Teni's mother, however refused to follow her husband to the city until he announced his intention to take a second wife some years later” (*Yar'fari*, p.8).

Use of Dialogue

The use of dialogue as a literary device has been copiously employed by both writers. This helps to bring out the characters' traits in the two novels. For example, the conversation between Amina and Mairo in *Amina* reveals how far removed and ignorant Amina has been to the sufferings of other women in her neighbourhood and how much she values her life of leisure and affluence. In the ensuing dialogue, Mairo's character traits reveal a caring and sympathetic heart as well as the fact that faith can and should inspire actions to alleviate human predicament and suffering:

Mairo: “You are a lucky woman...you live comfortably compared to most women here”, to which Amina responds “That's the will of Almighty Allah” (p.9).

Mairo: “You are right...do you know Larai”

Amina: “No. Who is she”. As Mairo proceeds to explain Larai's pathetic condition, Amina interrupts her to ask “What's that got to do with me?” (p.9). Mairo appeals to Amina to use her wealth, her husband's influence, her education and exposure to help Larai, but she refuses to do that initially, and insists that “There's nothing I can do, it is the will of God” (*Amina*, p.10).

Also, in *Yar'fari*, Teni's dialogue with her friend Leema shows that although patriarchy is pervasive in Northern Nigeria, each family applies it based on its own merit. It does not offer a blanket approach for every family. The dialogue goes thus:

Leema: "I met someone today,"

Teni: "Tell me about him"

Leema: "He was a part of Fati's groom's entourage from the city. His name is Sule".

Teni: "What is he like". She asked excitedly.

Leema: "Hmmm, he is tall and fair complexioned. I think I like him, although I just met him. He said he was from the house of Magajin Rafi Kwane. He lives and works in the city.

Teni: "Aren't you lucky? At least you met and chose your man...When is he coming to see your family?"

Leema: "I haven't decided. I still need to know him more".

Teni: "You love him, don't you".

Leema: "He is gentle and good natured, although I just met him..."

Teni: Then go ahead and give him a chance. Look at me, I married a man I never knew. But here I am, getting along quite well. Not to say the least. You are lucky to know him and you seem to love him..." (*Yar'fari*, p. 46-47).

The discussion between the two friends reveals that each family still has the final say on what is best for them. While Teni's grandparents believe and actually chose a husband for Teni, Leema's parents permit her to have a say in who she wants to marry.

Use of Local Colour

The two writers make use of local colour by employing Hausa words and expressions in the speeches of characters in their texts. In the novel *Amina*, there are Hausa words like *Amarya* (p.142), *Jindadi*, (p.85), expressions like *Maraba da zuwa* (p.59) and *Hanjin jimina, akwai nachi, akwai na zubarwa* (p.95). The use of local colour situates the novels in their Northern Nigerian cultural environment. Similarly, the novel *Yar'fari*, is loud on its Northern Nigerian setting by its copious use of Hausa words and expressions like, *makarantar boko, kiwo* (p.14), *Na'am Baba, Shinkafa da wake damai dayaji* (p15), *Shigo, Maraba, Sabon Gari* (p.16), *kayan gara* (p.25), *San nu da zuwa, yaya aiki?* (p.71) etc. All these words and phrases showcase the rich heritage of the local language and the patriarchal culture that go with it.

Use of Arabic Expressions

Arabic expressions used by the two writers also re-enforce the local colour, but more than that, they re-enforce and project the Islamic world-view of the people which becomes both the tradition and culture that has given rise to patriarchy as depicted in the novel. Some of them in *Amina* include: *Assalama Allaikum, Amin Allaikum Wa'asalam* (p.40), *Allahu Akbar* (p.42), *Subahana Lillahi* (p.63), *almajirai* (p.69), *Wallahi Tallahi* (p.125), *In sha Allah* (p.139) etc.

In *Yar'fari*, Arabic words and expressions used include *Asalamu alaykun, Ameen, wa alaykum*

salaam (p. 23), *subhi* (p. 27), *Magrib* (p. 29), *Muazzin* (p.39), *Fatiha* (p. 40), *fidda'u* (p. 91) etc.

Use of the Omniscient Narrator

The use of the omniscient narrator technique distances the authors emotionally from the story. This technique affords a bird's eye view of all the characters. Both Mohammed Umar and A'aisha Abdulkareem make extensive use of this literary device to tell their stories.

Conclusion

The stories of Amina in Mohammed Umar's *Amina* and Teni in A'aisha Abdulkareem's *Yar'fari* create a fascinating contrast, as they depict two distinct yet converging paths of self-reinvention. Both protagonists challenge the norms and expectations of their respective social environments in their quest for meaning and a sense of purpose. Born into a wealthy family, and living a life of leisure and affluence, Amina's story indicates her strength of character and the courage to renounce privilege and comfort in order to align with the marginalized in her community, thus demonstrating empathy and a commitment to justice. Her journey suggests that true fulfillment lies not in material wealth but in serving humanity, and advocating for the voiceless.

On the other hand, Teni is born into a poor family and suffers severe lack and deprivation. Her story exemplifies resilience and determination by rising above a deprived background to create a life of prosperity both intellectually and in material wealth. Her dream is to live a purpose-driven life that will benefit humanity; thus, she refuses to give up on her dream despite the pain and trauma she experiences on the journey to self-reinvention. The success she makes out of her life becomes a tool for empowerment, as she uses her achievements to uplift others who face similar struggles.

In examining the subject of reinventing self in the novels, this paper highlights the major requirements for that endeavour. The appropriateness of the novels selected to analyze and interrogate the subject matter is also established. Although the heroines in the two novels originate from very different backgrounds, their life goals are the same, namely: to change their statuses in life. Both protagonists demonstrate that self-reinvention is not solely about personal transformation but about finding ways to impact others positively, regardless of one's starting point. Their stories provide a powerful message that no matter where one begins in life, purpose and service to humanity can drive transformational change.

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