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### The Subtle and the Strident: A Comparative Study of Bagudu's "Come Home" and Verissimo's "Things"

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#### Abstract

The rapid advancements in information technology, particularly the internet and digital communication, have shrunk the world into what is often referred to as a "global village," facilitating instantaneous communication and interaction across geographical boundaries. Time and space have become less significant as people are united in a single global community, leading to easy access to information on events with the speed of lightening. Female assertiveness has been greatly influenced by this development as stories of women who have overcome adversities and achieved successes are prevalent on social media platforms, serving as inspiring examples to other women across Nigeria and other parts of the world. Literary works by Nigerian female writers, as well as some of their male counterparts who address gender related issues, often portray female protagonists that are no longer docile but revolutionary in challenging any impediment that comes between them and the attainment of greatness. This paper, adopting Nego-feminism and Radical feminism as critical tools, comparatively explores Hadiza Bagudu's poem, "Come Home" in her collection, *With Love* and Jumoke Verissimo's "Things" in *The Birth of Illusions*, and contends that, in spite of the wave of radicalism in addressing gender issues that sweeps across the Nigerian society in recent times, including the North; not all female writers of Bagudu and Verissimo's generation (twenty-first century female writers) are influenced by this development to advocate for a radical approach vis-à-vis gender-related problems. A number, especially from the Northern part of Nigeria, where Bagudu hails from, are advocates of soft-pedaling by women when faced with any gender based challenge as is evident in the poem "Come Home" while Verissimo is the example of those who go radical as portrayed in "Things".

**Keywords:** Subtle, Strident, Comparative Study, Bagudu's Come Home, Verissimo's "Things"

## Introduction

Before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in the history of Nigeria, the Southern protectorate which was dominated by the Yoruba and Igbo speaking people, had for many centuries developed along the indigenous form of traditional education and culture, and for barely seventy-two years, 1842-1914, imbibed the European form of education regarded as Formal or "Western Education". The missionaries established mission schools and people became literates in the Roman script (Jayeola-Omoyeni and Omoyeni, 2014).

Given the above development therefore, women in the Southern protectorate gained access to Western education much earlier than their counterparts in the North, where, not until in recent times, it was considered unnecessary and wrong to educate girls in any system, Islamic or Western, since they were destined for domestic duties assumed not to require education. That explains why from 1900 to 1965, the women from Southwest and Southeast

had been mobilised for political activities, a development that was antithetical to the position of the Northern Nigerian women. (Yusuf; Mba, as cited in Ani, 2012).

This early exposure to Western education which the women in the Southwest and Southeast enjoyed makes them to be in the forefront as far as the Nigerian women literary scene is concerned. And their approach to issues that concerned womanhood with its attendant challenges in a patriarchal society is often assertive and radical.

Sheba (2007) in her study of Yoruba female poets, gives credence to the assertion above by positing that all the poets examined in the study have one thing in common which is their admonition for women faced with gender related problems to “speak out so they can stay free from unwarranted harassment” regardless of how the society will react (p. 138).

In Northern Nigeria, there are the Hausas who are the major ethnic group and predominantly Muslim by religion, and the minority ethnic groups that are predominantly Christian on the other hand. Ayoola and Hunsu in their study of Islamic Feminism and the discourse of female-authored novels in Northern Nigeria contend that these two religions (Islam and Christianity) do not encourage women to compete with men in public space. Notwithstanding, they assert that while many Christian women appear to have broken out of the strangle hold of patriarchy; a lot of their Muslim counterparts have dreaded to do same, given the doctrinal orientation of the two religions which differ to a great extent. And having examined the works of Asabe Kabir Usman and Saliha Abubakar Abdullahi, they conclude that the tone of the creative effort of most women writers from the Northern part of Nigeria with Islamic background is not expected to be overtly critical of the patriarchal culture that prevails in their societies as it is the case with their Christian counterparts (2014). In fact, in most cases “the writers advocate implicitly the acceptance by woman, of her role in society as assigned to her by patriarchy” (Abolusawu-Sekula, 2000, p. 88).

However, female character portrayal in Nigerian literature by female authors in recent times is greatly influenced by the rapid advancements in information technology, particularly the internet and digital communication, which have shrunk the world into what is often referred to as a “global village,” facilitating instantaneous communication and interaction across geographical boundaries. We commonly see the portrayal of very assertive female characters in novels and plays or personas in poems regardless of the author’s religious and cultural affiliation.

Abdulkarim (2020) asserts that:

The contemporary female fictional writers appear to be steeped in factual realities at the expense of imagination. These new fictional writers are concerned with issues that are contemporaneous and topical... The ways these new writers write are impacted by the new Nigerian reality or that of the entire world, and their writings differ from that of the early female writers most especially in addressing and tackling female issues. Some female writers show serious commitment to narrating the woman experience through literature, from a more radical point of view (p. 150).

Binta Mohammed, a Muslim who hails from Kano, for example, presents an assertive persona in her poem, “Single Girl”, anthologised in *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern*

*Nigeria*, edited by Zainab Alkali and Al Imfeld. The poem centres on the personal experience of a single girl whose right to freedom is trampled upon. The poet reveals the disadvantaged position of a woman in a patriarchal culture of the North aided by religious seclusionist dogma. A woman is not free in her singleness neither is she in marriage. The dilemma is “a farce!” according to the poet. The persona who is a single woman, in a rebellious tone, “begs/You [man] to leave her single/Lovely world alone” (97).

Even in some male authored literary works from Northern Nigeria also, we see more assertive female character portrayal to reflect the reality of a more enlightened modern Nigerian woman regardless of regional affiliation. A good example is Audee's Yarinya who “is so resolute in asserting her personality so much that her father's aggressive counter reaction means nothing to her” as she struggles to free herself from the whims and caprices of patriarchal forces around her, and she triumphs (Daniel et al, 2018, p. 335).

The question this paper seeks to find answer to is whether all female writers in Nigeria today, from the South to the North, are influenced by this development and have become advocates of radicalism in tackling gender-based issues or there are some who differ in their approach. The exercise is carried out using the poetry of Hadiza Bagudu who hails from the North and Jumoke Verissimo who hails from the South. Their collections- *With Love* and *The Birth of Illusion* respectively, were both published in 2015.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts two theories as the critical tools for the analysis of the poems under study. Nego-feminism is chosen for the analysis of “Come Home” because it gives credence for a better understanding and appreciation of the poem, given its tone and atmosphere. While for the analysis of Verissimo's “Things” on the other hand, Radical feminism is found fitting. Obioma Nnaemeka put forward “Nego-feminism” in her painstakingly researched 2005 paper titled: “Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's way” having discovered that women's issues and patterns of tackling them are not homogenous across continents and nations.

Ebunoluwa (2009, p. 232) avers that:

feminism has failed in its global ambition to address the needs of women worldwide. Feminism as a practice addresses the needs of middle class white women. Because of the inadequacies of feminism, the African American women evolved the concept of womanism to meet the needs of Black woman in America. Second, we revealed that although womanism purports to address the needs of all Black women, African American womanism alone is generally inadequate for the specific concerns of African women in Africa. This then leads us to the question of an African variant of the feminist theory. Whereas various attempts have been made to meet this need, nevertheless no consensus have been arrived at, and from feminism, womanism, stiwanism to motherism, there is yet to be a commonly accepted indigenous theory peculiar to African women in Africa.

Nnaemeka's nego-feminism directly flows from “negotiation”. It is “n-ego” which translates to “non ego/ no ego”. It is therefore a feminism that is free from egoistic tendencies which neither male nor female holds. The centre of her theory emphasizes “complementarity

of sexes” (Nnaemeka, 2003, p. 360). Nego-feminism charges both sexes to be willing-partners in progress. In short, where the notorious Western and radical feminism is extreme, side-lining some aspects of African culture, Nego-feminism is open to the present and the future.

She proposed it as a culturally appropriate and compliant model which upholds negotiation as well as feminism without ego either from the men or women as the theory of egoism is despicable and ‘unAfrican’. Nnaemeka contends that African women should be willing to negotiate with and around men in conflicting circumstances in ways that are congruent with Africa’s historical and cultural context. She valorises negotiation and compromise which she believes is rooted in the value system of Africans. By negotiation here, she does not mean pacifism. In her words, a woman should know “when, where and how to detonate patriarchal landmines. In other words, she knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts”. Nnaemeka’s theory is built on the indigenous, charging all humans male and female to be keen partners in the progress journey. Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace or conflict management, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, collaboration, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration” (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 377-378)

Radical Feminism on the other hand, emerged from the social movements of the 1960’s-the civil rights movement, the new left movement and the anti-Vietnam war/peace movement, arguing that women’s subservient role in society was too closely woven into the social fabric to be unravelled without a revolutionary changing of society itself (Avanti, 2006).

The philosophy underlining the theory is characterised by an opposition to male dominance, the need to challenge the status quo in order to radically reorder society and reorganise families and other institutions (Samkange, 2015, p. 1173).

In fact, Radical Feminism encouraged a division of the sexes (Bassey and Simon, 2012). Gardener (2004) succinctly asserts that:

Radical Feminist theories attack masculinity rather than simply defending against sexist charges about women’s inferiority. Their vision of masculinity can be violent and negative, void of any of the positive characteristics traditionally assigned to masculinity (p. 40).

Radical Feminists argue that women’s subordination is not rooted in relations of production but in specific relations of reproduction and sexuality. They contend that housework can be looked at as reproducing and not producing labour power (Makama 2013, p. 119).

Lorber in addition also posits without mincing words that:

Radical Feminism argues that patriarchy is very hard to eradicate because its root -the belief that women are different and inferior - is deeply embedded in most men's consciousness. It can best be resisted, radical feminists argued, by forming nonhierarchical, supportive, woman-only spaces where women can think and act and create free of constant sexist put-downs, sexual harassment, and the threat of rape and violence (pp. 16-17).

This brand of feminism can be said to have attributes of rebelliousness, fearlessness, political awareness of sexism and an unpardonable drive for equality between the sexes; a struggle which instills fear in men while thrilling women on the other hand (Kolawole, as cited in Alkali, Rosli, Wan Roselezam and Jariah, 2013, p. 239). Its proponents believe that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider as inherently oppressive and dominating patriarchal system (Adeleke, 2017, p. 129).

### Subtlety in Hadiza Bagudu's "Come Home"

The poem "Come Home" (p. 18), focuses on unfaithfulness which many married men indulge in with impunity because the society the poet hails from seems to see nothing wrong with it since the man enjoys the right to have up to four wives as provided by the religion of Islam. This theme is explored side by side with that of moral surrender by women who are the victims. It is disheartening that even when a woman knows that her husband is seeing other women outside, she does not have the courage to look him in the face and challenge him for indulging in such because the system does not provide for that. Ironically, the same system that confers on the man the right to have multiple women does not confer the same right on the woman. It rather frowns at her when she indulges in any affair outside matrimony. The women in the Northern region have been acculturated into silence even when they know that their men indulge in extra marital affairs.

Although social media platforms in recent times as pointed earlier, spread a wave of influence that even in this Northern part of Nigeria which is predominantly Islamic, we see pockets of violent reactions by twenty-first century women against what they perceived to be acts of unfaithfulness among other reasons despite the right men have to be polygamous. A good example is the case of the fourteen-year-old Wasila Tasi'u who was accused of poisoning her thirty-five-year-old husband three others to death in April, 2014 (Abubakar, 2015) Mariam Sanda, also, killed her husband in November 2017 due to perceived unfaithfulness. According to Azeez, Mariam "discovered certain nude photo of a lady on her husband's phone and that was the genesis of a three year legal battle" (2020, p. 107).

Hadiza Bagudu, in this twenty-first century poem, however, presents a persona who is not affected by the kind of radicalism displayed by Wasila and Mariam. The poem presents a persona who is very much aware that her husband sees other women outside matrimony. This is evident when she asks the following rhetorical questions:

Do you think that I don't know?  
What you do when you are out late  
Do you think that I am dumb?  
And can't see that you are cheating

Bagudu's persona in the face of this realisation, given her cultural and religious background, treaded with extreme caution in order not to hurt the man in question. She admits her awareness of an incontestable fact by saying:

I know I can't stop you

Surprisingly, she proceeds in a tone that could best be described as helplessly sympathetic to say:



But I just want you to know  
That I love you

This docility displayed by the persona is in line with the tenets of Nnaemeka's neo-feminism that admonishes women to challenge gender related issues "through negotiation and compromise" and not aggression (Nnaemaka, 2005, p. 378).

The lines from the poem above evoke a feeling of sympathy in the reader for this woman because it is painful for one to know that their right is trampled upon but more painful to realize that one lacks the power to seek for a redress because of one's gender. Such is the case of the persona who represents very many women in Northern Nigeria. In spite of the fact that the man in question has hurt her deeply, the persona still confesses love for him in order not to risk losing him.

The persona marvels at the ironic situation where the women such unfaithful men chase outside cannot compare favourably in terms of beauty and in other ramifications with the legitimate wives abandoned at home. This kind of development is laid bare when she asks:

What has she got that I don't?

The repetition of the line above towards the end of the poem serves as a means to reinforce the indignation and utter bewilderment of the persona who is conscious of the fact that the woman that stole the heart of her man does not even possess any qualities that make her any better than the persona herself. The pain she feels as a result therefore is made evident by this repetition.

The following lines:

Can't you see...she's just using you?  
Don't you even see she doesn't appreciate you?  
All the things you do for her  
She's not grateful

reveal to the reader the gullibility of such men who will abandon their wives and children at home and go spending their hard-earned money on women who will not even appreciate them. The women sucking such men dry will even call them names that depict stupidity and yet, they keep following them. One annoying thing is the fact that this practice affects the welfare of the houses headed by such men. The quality of food eaten in most of such homes is nothing to write home about because a better part of the money earned is spent on these other woman kept outside. And because such men know full well that they provided little or nothing at home, they hardly eat the food prepared by their wives. They usually have their fill at the places of these other women and come home at a late hour only to retire to bed. With this reality, yet, the persona, trapped in the web of the socio-cultural and religious forces of the Northern part of Nigeria, is reduced to only pleading with the erring man to come home. She says in the softest and placatory manner that:

Boy don't you see that it's time  
You come home to me  
Because home is where you are meant to be

The depiction of the persona in such a helpless state of being is a subtle indictment of a system that provides a fertile ground for such injustice to thrive. The persona ideally should

have every moral right to confront the man in question and berate him for his conduct but ironically, she simply pleads for him to come home.

### **The Strident in Jumoke Verissimo's "Things"**

"Things" is a very powerful poem in which the poet explicitly lays bare her philosophical standpoint against the abuse of defenseless women by brutal men through the use of the first person singular pronoun "I". In as much as she condemns men who take advantage of the vulnerability of women and abuse them, she is also able to reveal the destructive effect of moral surrender to the system. The theme of wife battering perpetrated by men and gullibility in accepting the situation on the part of the battered women are exhaustively explored and the gruesome experience made vivid by heart rending imagery of horror that are visually evocative, sending a strong feeling of revulsion through the mind of the reader.

The opening line of the poem:

The day gave. Time sent all to a schizoid panic sets the tone of an unpleasant experience, jostling the reader into a state of curiosity, wondering what the problem at hand is all about.

The next line of the poem reveals the persona lying on her back and reading her sister's letter. This sister of hers is a person "who once sprung life with a smile" but now she "had fatigued death and wrestles his will / So death never came for her". The use of hyperbole inherent in the persona's claim that her sister "had fatigued death" is necessary in order to capture the sister's real state of health which is so deplorable to an extent that death would have been a better option but it avoids her. One could see her as "she wore her pain as ornament". The simile here is used as a means through which the poet reveals the brutal nature of her sister's husband who inflicts pains and injury in her, in place of ornaments. The persona feels bad and in a radical fashion disapproves of women who show "a love-overmuch" for their husbands; because this, she feels, is responsible for her sister's condition.

The poet is of the opinion as suggested in the poem that men do not deserve hundred percent love and care because they will always take undue advantage of that and abuse the women who make such sacrifice. It is ironical that rather than having the love the woman portrayed in the poem has for her man reciprocated, what she gets are:

An eye-patch, broken tooth,  
A slit cheek  
As labels of a love-overmuch

The images evoked by the words above show that the sister is passing through an unpleasant experience as a result of being seriously battered. The persona reads the letter and discovers that her sister has resolved that "she would not care for what the world thought / If he left her alone, or if she left him alone". But even with this resolve, the persona fears that because of "these love-overmuch" which is "one of the many things that shatter female bones" her sister has that tendency of returning to the same man that almost took her life because she always says, "you know I loved him so much". The persona, through whom Verissimo lays bare her mind, is "turning into a crumbling rock / Wondering why" the sister previously

“craved a return” after such brutal experience. The metaphor in “crumbling rock” is not accidental. It is intended to capture the persona’s state of despair. The frustration this kind of attitude causes the persona makes her to wear out like the crumbling rock and become despondent. This despair is further made clear when the persona says:

I became a Moses on Mount Sinai  
I pleaded “God! God! God! Not again.”

The biblical allusion to the encounter between a frustrated Moses and the children of Israelites on one hand and God on the other in Exodus 32, is skilfully woven into the poem by Verissimo to enhance a better understanding of the frustration suffered by the persona which is occasioned by an attitude exhibited by many a woman who will choose to remain under the same roof with men that have abused them to the extent of inflicting injury in them. Just like the children of Israelites who chose to go back to false gods that failed them, some women who are abused most times disappoint their relations who strive to get them freed from the bondage they have been subjected to by their men. It pains the persona to see a woman that has become a person “who was without a brain or kept it out of work / Now seeks to be nothing but the return of pain”. Notwithstanding the seeming resignation to fate, the persona cannot just be indifferent to the plight of these battered women. The sympathy she has for her sister and her resolve to reach out to her make the persona to ask the following question:

I saw the mountain become a river and then sand  
I cooked my joy for a woman’s will summed in tears?

The question above is rhetorical and at the same time paradoxical. A mountain becoming a river and then sand is an expression that does not seem to make any sense on face value but when examined critically, the reader will understand that the expression captures the incongruities that characterise a scenario where a man will profess deep love for a woman and will later turn her into a punching bag after he has taken her as a wife.

The love he earlier professed will make way for an aggression that will leave her “broken into tears bones and blood / Her face, towed with blows, gloom and throes”. The persona is determined to stretch a helping hand in a situation like this but not without the victim making some effort towards getting liberated. Her sister finally makes one and “it happened that” her lover-turned-tormentor “never returned, after, she screamed-with / her own voice”; so says the letter. The poet here is suggesting that women should not believe that remaining with a man who is nothing but a brute is virtue. It is very clear that she calls on women in such bondage to free themselves from such men as early as possible before they are ruined. Verissimo’s position in this poem is quite radical as evident in her advocating for women to avoid giving themselves in total submission to their men and to also leave as soon as they discover that their men have turned into beasts. This attitude is the exact opposite of what one sees in Bagudu’s “Come Home” where the persona is pleading with her man who goes cheating to come home because she loves him as she professes.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is convincingly evident that culture and religion are factors that still exert influence to a greater extent in conditioning the minds of Nigerian women poets



even in contemporary times as they tackle gender-based issues in their poetry. The seeming conservative nature of the Islamic religion towards accepting changes that come with modernity especially as it pertains to women makes Bagudu's persona treads with caution in "Come Home" as she voices out her feelings with respect to the place of women in her society. Verissimo from the Southern region challenges the negative practices spurred by the patriarchal forces in her social milieu without any fear of being ostracised. She criticises moral surrender in the face of injustice perpetrated against the woman through the voice of her persona who radically admonishes her sister to eschew the habit of showing too much love for a man because it will make him think he is indispensable and treat her the way he wants.

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