

## **The Burden of Womanhood: The Role of Northern Nigerian Woman in Family and Nation Building: A Womanist Reading of Veronica Phebe's *The Hound* and Rezinat Mohammed's *Habiba*.**

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**Abstract:** African literature projects deeply embedded and enduring patterns of thoughts alongside the feelings and behavior of the society from which it is drawn. In so doing, it recounts the struggles and challenges of the communities for which it is written. The Nigerian writer as an African, probes and responds to the yearning of his nation. This paper is set to focus on the northern Nigerian woman/writer because, the African woman both as a writer and character in the society is surrounded by societal issues that affects her directly or indirectly. As such, the writer is faced with the task of voicing out these issues, projecting female characters that bear the burden of womanhood and the effect of this burden, using the two northern Nigeria writers in the texts, *The Hound* and *Habiba* in examining the societal burden placed on the northern woman and the effect of this burden on her and the nation. An effect that turns out to instill a negative personality and perception in these characters as the struggle for self-actualization and the challenges of being women or are destroyed by these impediments.

**Keywords:** Womanhood, societal burden, *The Hound* and *Habiba*, self-actualization

### **DISCUSSION**

Women arguably have been participants in the concept of modern African nation whether actively or passively. Women are producers of knowledge and instrument for cultural renewal. The female voices forcefully grew out of the social and political transformation. They air their opinion and make their voices heard on the clarity of their difficulties in society. In emphasizing this focus, Sutherland-Addy[13] and Daw believes that

Contemporary African women writers experiment with form in way similar to contemporary writers all over the world, ...African women writers do not lose sight of the social, political and economic conditions that influence their lives, nor have they diminish the inspiration off their oral and literary heritage (2005,5)

Over the years, the patriarchal nature of African societies, have placed the woman on the aspirations to escape the role written for her by society. This woman is described by Duton [3] as trying to be one whose "mental, emotional and spiritual growth is determined to discover the meaning of womanhood, free of the coercive engendering which her community attempt to instill in her." This is in an attempt to discover how relevant the woman could be in the overall development of her community at large. The

roles she plays as a daughter, wife, mother, sister, mother/ daughter in-law, and co-wife, these roles plays all through her life, moving from one designation to another, or sometimes playing two or more of these roles co-currently. This is generated by the burgeoning of fiction by African women writers which revealed that political emancipation had done little to erode entrenched patriarchal traditions of male dominance and female subservience[15].

The northern Nigerian woman as an African woman has her roles defined by history, cultural practice and religion... subservience to the role of men." [4]. This woman is cast in the traditional mold as set by traditional to shoulder her burden in "marriage, procreation, wifehood, motherhood and widowhood in African fiction, "[10, p-13]. The girl child's duty at puberty is to wait for and attract suitors in marriage and consequently produce children especially male heir for her husband,----she battles with "her biological peculiarities such as menstruation, painful child labor, nurturing infants, and bearing menopause. "[7].

In line with societal expectation, demands and fashion, the early Africans literary within the traditional milieu, communicated a picture of a male-dominated and male oriented society." [12, p- 18]. Harrow, taking a sociological look at the discrimination against enslavement of the African woman, and her writings argues that "The degrees to which works are penned,

the manner in which these texts are critically received and the role women occupy within the general body of African literature are all reflective of societal attitude towards woman.” (170)

This did not deter the woman from writing as the consciousness of her significance to society grew every day, giving rise to the urge to be an active rather than a passive member of her society, adequately contributing her quota to nation building. This erupted from the post-civilwar experiences in Nigeria literary history when the vulnerability of the woman in crisis/war situation became more vocalized by writer; especially the females. This was interpreted to be ‘feminism’. This was mainly in an attempt to correct the dented image of the African woman and inspire her to excel and reach for greater heights.

Because the alienation of the female is from society or the men in her life and the expectation these men generally have of her are formalized and legitimized within and outside her community. Women all over the world have always aspired “to escape the role written for her by patriarchal society.” (Dunton, 213) This attempt at self-realization includes the mental, emotional and spiritual growth of a woman. This is the entire ideology of feminism gender equity and women however are encouraged to reject the roles as they alienate the women who surrender to and practice them.

Feminism is a western ideology that tends to radically frown at discrimination against women and seek gender equality. In the same light, it challenged the male-dominated literary writing and criticism... This was a conscious gender movement... it started in the 1840s in Western Europe... [7, p-19]. In the African contest however, “Womanism and Modernism emerged as the African version and emphasized that women are given the opportunity to develop themselves and realize their potentials, without any form of hindrance and molestation (rather than advocate equality) so that they can be active partakers in nation building. The writers (especially the contemporary) have in several ways emphasized the discrimination, gender inequalities, injustice, degradation, humiliation and dehumanization that women feel.” [7, p- 85]. Uko [14] describing the burden on womanhood as exemplified by writers says:

Contemporary women writers in Africa deconstruct and recreate stereotype of the voluptuous and sexual African women: the stereotype that justified her exclusion in serious matters and credible activities. These writers utilize this stereotype as a loom which to weave with hard and colorful yarn, a not just attractive, but also very taut and resilient fabric that is a critically necessary adornment for contemporary Africa. This fabric turns out to be the woman, the African women...” (2006,92)

Lamenting the situation of the African woman, Aidoo had this to say: “some of us suffer a little more, simply because we are women and our positions are nearly hopeless because we are African women.” [1, p-517]. Aidoo and her likes therefore see this treatment as powerlessness’ and dehumanization and invariably a form of enslavement or slavery usurping love, security, identity and freedom that the woman is entitled to, and needed for her psychological and physical fitness, needed first as “complete” being and then as a necessity for effective shouldering of her responsibilities and over-responsibilities.

In the Hausa/Fulani northern Nigeria, the women seem to be more burdened as their “relegation to secondary position in the society seems to affect the quality and quantity of their... output.” [6, p-117] this output is both within and outside the family circle. They are therefore retarded in their physical, psychological and intellectual ability to contribute effectively to nation building both ways. To Kassam [6], “the gender problematic in northern Nigeria revolves around the combination of physical seclusion and psychological marginalization, a situation made worse where the women are not educated.” (118)

This paper is prompted by the concern of the plight of the northern Nigerian women in particular and the African woman in general as a result of “the manner in which women are burdened by discriminatory social, economic and religious structures...” [8, p-121]. It is also the interest of this paper to critically x-ray the emerging adverse effect of this over weighed ‘burden’ on first the woman, then the family (immediate and extended) and then the larger society, as the woman performs her socio-cultural interaction. In earlier fictional works from northern Nigeria and a few recent ones (especially the male-authored ones) presented women as being total subservient to the cultural tropes and having accepted without complain the position and roles heaped on them by society, without any attempt at escaping from it. More recently, writers, especially the women, have embarked on creating female characters that are confident enough to embark on what an individual considers as the best approach to survive in an existing situation. The girl child- cum woman only exist for the benefit of the men in her life and society. Even as children and adolescents, it is the girls; the women to be, who help mothers with domestic chores.” [8, p-126] the boys or men on the other hand boss around the home, issues orders, more freely with little or no restriction. The above buttress the fact that;

The burden borne by women often has its source in traditional practices, beliefs and prejudices which have arisen partly from myth and ignorance about the role and ability of women and partly from a deliberate desire to subordinate women. Female subservience is not biologically produced but culturally

imposed. From time immemorial women the world over have been subjected to various degrees of physical, mental and spiritual domination to social economic and political exploitation[8, p-132].

In the light of the above, the relevance of the woman to nation building is underscored in the sense that, she could be productively retarded by these obstacles and her output affected so to say. In other words, the society seems to overlook the effect of these prejudices on the women despite their symbolic status as custodians of culture and tradition.”[6, p-117] both in the home front where she trains the children to be positive contributors to society and nation as well as gives pleasure to the man of the home which helps him attain physical and mental ability to participate actively in the outer society. The major concern of Phebe Jatau[5] and Mohammed Rezinat[9] is the manner and effect of societal burden on the northern Nigerian woman, which to them is both internal and external and is causing them to react to society whether consciously or unconsciously. While some struggle with so much determination to succeed against all odds and be what their male counterparts are, such as ‘Rebecca’ in *The Hound*, ‘Habiba’ on the other hand in the text, *Habiba* results to lesbianism as an alternative means of self-satisfaction as a means of getting back at society.

Rezinat’s *Habiba* tells the story of a young Hausa girl, Habiba who is both a victim of poverty, subjugation and social responsibility... Her entire life is that of total enslavement right from a very early age of her life to her adulthood. Her youth and ambition are lost in the inferno of over burden when growing up. Habiba, the protagonist of the novel at age thirteen and much to her dislike “had been chosen to keep charge of the others in a class of thirty three pupils and “she was to acquit herself with the problems affecting thirty three pupils and those of Miss Adamu whenever she herself was absent from school.” (*Habiba*,5) this was in addition to a more devastating fear that awaited her at home should she return later than expected. (*H*,6). Like Habiba her mother Kande is subsumed under the weight of marriage and is planned by her ex-mother-in-law and an obedient husband over the fault that she “... will fill... house with women.” (*H*,66) she is neglected for giving birth to only female children and this led to the eventual collapse of the marriage. Kande’s frustration is therefore transferred to her two daughters whom she took along to her second matrimonial home. She is also denied fatherly love.

Back in her father’s house, where she taught life would be better for her and Ummi, though Habiba “figured they had their own lives to live and her own destinies to define,” (*H*,15) she was however naive to believe that, the time has come for a change in their ‘lives’ (*H*,15) and that change was in her father’s house. But she had her nagygrandmother to contend with. As

she settled into normal life which included schooling in her father’s house, her grandmother masterminded her marriage without her consent to a man old enough to be her father as a 3<sup>rd</sup> wife. The old woman here is observed as an epitome of tradition and culture which subjugated powers becloud Habiba’s future and destiny.

Having being an unconscious mother and comforter to Ummi all these years, Habiba found herself at that tender age being forced into marriage and actual motherhood. Sadiya, Habiba’s stepmother is also burdened with the subjugation imposed by marriage perpetrated by this time a fellow woman (her mother-in-law) to the helpless silence of her husband Saleh. This explains his inability to stop the destruction of Habiba’s future through early marriage by his mother. Though, he attempted to resist his mother’s decision, unforeseen circumstances such as the storm that ravaged the town and the successive disasters, over shadowed Saleh’s ability to do so. The after effect of the storm resulted in Saleh’s disappearance living the burden of the family on both Sadiya and Habiba.

Another woman yet burdened is Maimuna, Saleh’s younger sister. While she bears the major burden of looking after their sick mother, she receives the news of her husband’s death, plunging her into widowhood and single parenthood, another phase of burden “had just been placed on her lap, and the uncertainties of what to expect...” (*H*,87) afterwards, Saleh’s loan from Mal. Zubairu could not be paid at the appointed time and Habiba was eventually given to him as a payment for her father’s debt of six hundred thousand naira (N600,000) and thereafter, Saleh disappeared leaving behind a family for Habiba to carry as burden in addition to her own burden of a crumbling future. It is ironic to note that Habiba’s younger brother who played a manly role in ensuring Habiba’s marriage to Mal. Zubairu, did not partake in shouldering the burden of responsibility created by their father’s disappearance.

With no education to hold on to, Habiba had no option than to accept her lot as a wife at that early age, take care of her husband’s need as well as cater for her sister, Ummi, abandoned stepmother and younger ones; A burden too much for her to shoulder at age sixteen. Expectedly, Mal. Zubairu fell short of being the loving, considerate and responsible partner, she needed. As such, she sought solace in her co-wife as a lesbian partner after the birth of her son. All other women who directly and indirectly partook in the process of sealing Habiba’s fate, “knowing it had to be a case of forced marriage, ... were sorry for the girl because they knew also that she could not be saved from the brutal fate.”

It is clearly established here by the author that, the burden borne by womanhood is rooted not only in traditional practices such as early marriage or only perpetrated by males, but it is also engineered by fellow

women such as Habiba's grandmother and through the mischievous and selfish tendencies of men like Mal. Zubairu. They therefore serve as obstacles to self actualization and education of these women placing them at the helpless mercy of the men and society. Owing to the above, it is established that most marital relationships in northern Nigeria are not built on love, compatibility and companionship, but on abuse, subjugation and low or no moral backing which retards the woman's contributions to nation and society. Thinking about her father and Mal. Zubairu, Habiba surprisingly realized that in this whole event of her life;

She could not place her father or Alhaji Zubairu... in all of these ...her father's treachery was by far crueler than the lethargic state that Zubairu had condemned her. In her mind's eye, she saw herself in some years to come: a half-illiterate, old woman with numerous children because she knew there was no escaping for her.... She needed to assume a state of mind to keep her sanity. (H,169).

The burden of a loveless marriage is compounded by the fact that the frequent rape by Zubairu her husband "each time she was asked to visit him, had resulted in a pregnancy. This to Habiba is "because she was a naive and obedient child to their father." (H,168). In all of these, she concluded that "A disposition that would invariably compel Zubairu to send her away was what she had to work on finding." (H,169)

In Phebe Jatau's [5] *The Hound*, the story of northern Nigerian woman is told first, from a Christian point of view and then it presents a protagonist who is able to raise her head above the waters of over burden, poverty, subjugation, patriarchy, easy or no access to education to attain a level of self -actualization. The social relevance of the woman as she contributes to society is predicatively fulfilled by Rebecca, the protagonist, "At age nine, Rebecca already knew hurt and pains of the reproach poverty brought with it. She vowed never to be poor. She promised to work hard to overcome poverty." (*The Hound*,32)

This consciousness grew by the day, as its reality stares her in the face. Her classmate also discriminated against her because she was poor. A consequence of which is the obsessed determination to overcome poverty despite her deficiency in English, she worked extra hard in school to pass her exams. Rebecca was subjected to hawking items which enabled her to contribute to the preparations to go to a boarding school. Besides, with the frequent threats of her father staring her in the face, she had no choice but to be good. Unlike Habiba in Rezinat's novel, Rebecca was a determined child as "She became resolute: she will take her destiny in her hands and run with it... she encouraged herself, mapped and study strategies and began regime of study subject by subject... she came out of the examination hall triumphant."

(T.H,50) Rebecca succeeded in her quest for education at least to HSC level with the support and motivation of her parents, especially her father who emphasized that even if he dies their mother must make "sure Rebecca completes her university education..." (T.H,59) This is as a result of the predictable wisdom of 'Baba' that education will make Rebecca more relevant to both family and nation and more importantly actualize her.

Rebecca took full charge of her life and made decisions on her own, on Baba's death. The JAMB admission disappointment, the teaching job offered to her thereafter and her eventual marriage to James, were all her decision though influenced by men like James. Rebecca had a mind of her own and she thought over any situation she found herself. So, she was aware that "she had only teachers' grade II certificate. She needed to also move up the ladder." (T.H,71) To achieve this, she accepted the teaching job though "she knew the value of university education" (T.H,73) she accepted her husband's encouragement to enroll at the institute of education to complete a two year sandwich course in librarianship..." (T.H,72)

When Rebecca eventually entered the university with the intervention of Mrs. Ogunkoya, she had to live with the burden of pregnancy and poor financial condition while she studied, because "James would not consent to their use of contraceptives." (T.H,90) Yet, he suggested a D&C when the pregnancy came and on her refusal, "he refused to provide any assistance towards the arrival of the baby." (T.H,90) The birth of the 'hydrocephalus' baby saddled Rebecca with the extra burden of motherhood, alongside battering and lack of care as well as the challenge of university study. The marriage eventually collapsed and Rebecca moved out disappointed at marriage. However, the psychological trauma of a failed marriage and an invalidated baby did not deter Rebecca, because "in the midst of all these, Rebecca graduated in flying colors..." (T.H,93)

At every stage, she hounded for whatever she wanted as they never came easily even on merit; the job at the university, her post-graduate programs and the job challenge too. In all of these, there was also the need to shoulder responsibilities of other family members, who were not privileged to be like her (T.H,103) This burden left her with no savings and therefore financial imbalance.

Inwardly, Rebecca felt the hunch that she had not reached the peak of self- actualization she sought for and the eventual opportunity of a second Ph.D in the United States climaxed her dreams and aspiration, this is coupled with the facts that, she got a fellowship for the duration of the study from the Ford Foundation and the relevance of the course (Ph.D Literacy Education) to the nation and specifically the rural populace were her driving force. "She was interested in how to help



women like her to do school and be self-actualized in spite of their challenges and limitations.” (T.H,111)

In conclusion, the African, Nigerian and the northern Nigerian females are plagued with the challenges of survival or actualization in a patriarchal society right from birth. Though their birth may not be welcomed, they however get their unfair share of the family burden and society while she is denied access to certain privileges that could boost her actualization, notable among which is education through which the female could contribute to national development.

While Habiba’s parents masterminded the death of an actualized future for her by their selfish tendencies, Rebecca’s parents gave her the necessary home training to withstand life’s challenges and tackle temptations. The two heroines were disappointed by their husbands (chosen or chosen for), Rezinat T. Muhammad[9] is of the opinion that, as much as or woman wants to overcome male domination, she is sometimes hindered by compressed traditional tropes to a level of helplessness like ‘Habiba’ and therefore forced to accept her situation negatively or positively. Veronica PhebeJatau[5] on the other hand, portrays a woman whose “complicity and the active role she plays in muffling her voice against an unjust system” [11, p-99] becomes her driving force to being socially relevant. To the author, “A woman loses the right to complain about male domination if she helps to maintain the *status quo ante*.” [11, p-99]. This is because, to her, silence is not golden in the face of oppression. It is worthy to observe that women contribute to the heart ache of fellow women. Habiba’s grandmother is used to this effect [2, p- 67]. Though she “represents the typical voice of tradition and a past,” [2, p-67] in which the female is only appreciated for how good a daughter she has been and how good a wife and mother she could be even to the most undeserving man. Though women like Habiba are beaten to submission physically or psychologically and either accepts it the way it is or re-acts to it irritationally such as Habiba’s resort to lesbianism with her co-wife. However, the real enemy may not actually be the male counterpart but ignorance, intolerance and stagnant societies that are resistant to change. Women being the larger population therefore, hold a place in gender definition of development in societies. Men therefore, should not be seen as enemies but women should rather seek change in society by first changing how they think about themselves and their potential relevance to nation building and then attempt to proffer practical change to how men think and view them, within the family and in the larger society.

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*Directions in African Literature. Special issue of African Literature Today, 25, 82-93.*

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