Poetic Moderns: Silence and the Female Body Aesthetic in the Poems of Halima Lawal, Victoria Sylvia Kankara, Habeebatu X!, and Hauwa Shafii

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Abstract

Contemporary poetry from northern Nigeria shows a remarkable shift from the traditional, moral and religious concern with identity and social cohesion to what may be called a "modernist" concern with the body and the pleasure of self-assertion. Indeed this is a key theme in the poems of Halima Lawal, Victoria Sylvia Kankara, Habeebatu X!, and Hauwa Shafii. Of these poets, Victoria Kankara is a Christian in an overwhelmingly conservative Muslim cultural formation, where the "woman's body" is racked by discourses of sin, anti-individualism, anti-pleasure, and anti-delightful inwardness. Indeed, silencing is one of the strongest tools against inclusion in any society, rendering the silenced victim mute and devoid of self-expression. Using a deconstructive framework, this paper analyses the theme of silence and its relationship to the female body in the selected poems of Halima Lawal, Victoria Sylvia Kankara, Habeebatu X!, and Hauwa Shafii. The argument is that an important shift is taking place in the poetry of northern Nigeria, where female poets are adopting an active voice to speak about the woman's body and affirm the pleasure of self-assertion.

Introduction

Contemporary poetry from northern Nigeria shows a remarkable shift from the traditional, moral and religious concern with identity and social cohesion to what may be called a "modernist" concern with the body and with the pleasure of self-assertion. Indeed this is a key theme in the poems of Halima Lawal ("The Silent Style"), Victoria Sylvia Kankara ("Loveless Survival"), Habeebatu X! ("The Beloved" and "I'd Ruin You"), and Hauwa Shafii ("a brief history" and "the body as destructive tool"). Of those poets, Victoria Kankara is a Christian in an overwhelmingly conservative Muslim cultural formation, where the "woman's body" is racked by discourses of sin, anti-individualism, anti-pleasure, and anti-delightful inwardness.

Post-colonial modernity came to northern Nigeria through the 1903 conquest of the region by the British colonial-military-cultural machine. To preserve its rule, the British had to enter into a *rapprochement* with the pre-colonial cultural and political institutions. This is called "indirect rule", which allowed the inherited traditional structures to remain intact but were only required to admit some elements of modern education and modern infrastructure, from town planning to public works. We could call all this "northern Nigerian modernity" which created the conditions for the rise of urban culture, social mobility, and new modes of living, at least within the educated class. The period also ushered in new forms of conceiving the self which eventually began to erode the bonds of tradition-bound social relations, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and, for many newly educated people, opened up new ways of exploring interiority and inwardness.

The early poets or traditional singers and oral performers before 1903 were content to work with religious themes, cultural cohesion, religious revival, or the tradition-bound practices

of identity irrespective of religion and ethnicity. There was a sense of rootedness, emotional attachment to the land, culture, or a specific community. Lawal, Kankara, X, and Shafii, all born between 1970 and 1990, the high watershed of Nigerian modernization and northern Nigerian modernity, are wholly concerned specifically with modern themes. These included romantic concern with the female body, female sexuality, the problems of language and linguistic expression within a textual medium (poetry) that values, in the words of Charles Baudelaire, "the ephemeral, fugitive, [and the] contingent" (1986, p. 37).

For example, whereas the early female poets such as Nana Asmau were concerned with what may be called "the poetry of God", these contemporary poets were concerned with the "poetry of the body", especially the female body. That is, their focus is on the body in pleasure; the body in crisis; the body in conflict with the mind or with tradition; and the body as the *locus classicus* of female self-assertion. In the context of this discussion, we could say that each of these poets subscribes, in a somewhat defiant manner, to what David Frisby calls "the newness of the present" (1985, p. 16). For these female poets, the affirmed *newness* is the veritable presence of the female body, that which has been valorized in male discourse, hemmed in with restrictions and prohibitions by patriarchal discourse, and valued as a sex object in the male cultural unconscious[1]. Marshall Berman has described the process of modernity and its impact on human subjects as one of a permanent revolution in the human conception of the self, individualism, secular culture, liberal values, self-assertion, and the new conceptions of the representation of human action and motives:

> There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils— that is shared by all men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity". To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world— and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air (Berman 1993, p. 15).

Thus, with and for the poets under discussion, "the future has begun", a future in which self-exploration, self-affirmation, and the affirmation of the female subject and its inward valorization have begun to be respectable and veritable themes in artistic expression and poetic play. Indeed, each of the four primary poets gives pride of place to the representations of the female body and the body itself as the fulcrum for female self-assertion and a basis of the search for what Nietzsche would call the creation of a new *horizon*:

> This is a universal law: a living thing can only be healthy, striving and productive within a certain horizon. If it is incapable of drawing one round itself, or too selfish to lose its own in another's, it will come to an untimely end. Cheerfulness, a good conscience, belief in the future, the joyful deed— all depends on the individual as well as the nation, on their being a line that divides the visible and clear from the vulgar and the shadowy", what Nietzsche calls "the vulgar and the shadowy (1997, p. 63).

In the poems discussed below, locus of this horizon, cheerfulness, good conscience, belief in the future and the joyful deed is the female body and its many "needs" and its subversive play in the face of tradition-bound ideas and practices within the larger culture and society. The four poets endorse Nietzsche's view and also see the female subject as needing horizons and a sense of unconditional beliefs for her to be healthy, strong and productive within a certain cultural space. For humans to be capable of drawing a horizon around themselves, and thus be capable of losing themselves in another's horizon, they would need conditions that would promote or enhance their cheerfulness, good conscience, belief in the future, and the *joyful deed* (the artistic-poetic representation of the "female condition").

Interpretive Framework

The interpretation of the primary texts in this discussion is based on what may be called a "deconstructive reading" or theory (pioneered by Macherey 1978; Derrida 1978; and de Man 1979). This interpretive perspective consists, in summary, of the following arguments: that a text usually *says* one thing and *does* another; that *contradiction* or *inconsistency* in a text is not a factual error but the immanent dynamic of textuality; and that language/text is irrevocably divided against itself, in the words of Davis and Schleifer (1991, p. 167). It is "at each moment different from itself, turned against itself in the temporal folds of error and irony"; that literary criticism is not a passive discourse of the text but a performative discourse, a *poetic* practice in its own right.

Related to the above point is a conception of the text as a system of *traces*. This means that to write is to write *more* or *less*, or *other*, than is otherwise possible. This allows the critic to read, as it were, the silences, gaps, disjunctions, aporias, spaces and fissures of, and within, texts; the impasses of meaning, or what Eagleton calls, in memorable phrase, the points where texts "get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves" (1983, p. 134). This also permits, as Johnson has pointed out, extremely "productive ways of studying the politics of language" (1995, p. 46). Deconstructive reading involves a critique of logocentrism (the notion that extra-discursive reality is directly given to the subject without a discursive intermediary, also called *parousia*, i.e., the myth of the given); an insistence on the *divided* nature of the sign *(différance);* the denial of an autonomous realm of fiction or of non-fiction; the notion that the text transgresses the very laws it sets up for itself, so that it goes to pieces, so to speak; and that every reading is a misreading.

The deconstructive method does not view reading or analysis as the *recovery* of the original intentions of the poet, or as a *complete* interpretation or explanation of the poem. In this model, the poem cannot be completely described, that is to say, brought to the stage of conclusive demonstration (closure). This is because linguistic, historical, and discursive fields

are not amenable to totalistic analysis or closure. Thus the text and its writer must be held in constant tension and *différance* (deferring and deferment of meaning). Derrida writes,

> Literary interpretation or a focus on any text should tend "towards the so called 'minor loci of [the text], neglected problematics or footnotes— things that can irritate the system and at the same time account for the subterranean region in which the system constitutes itself by repressing what makes it possible, which is not systematic (2002, pp. 4-5).

Halima Lawal's "Silent Style"

In this unrhymed four-stanza poem, the poetic narrator evokes, through imagery and symbolic allusions, the disappearance of language for the female subject. And yet the "silence" of the female does speak in the "affirmative" tones of stillness and shadowy lures, what Jacques Lacan would call "desire" (which is both an unstable "sufficiency" and a lack)[2]. The poetic narrator presents "History" and "Remembrance" as "non-human" yet intimate and comforting to the female narrator. Yet again, the poetic narrator evokes the idea of "seeing double", where one sees the past, remembrance, recall, and recollecting of the past as a potentially vibrant structure but which is yet "defeating", presumably for the "hapless" female subject who sees the past as a bad memory. Yet the recollection of the past is also a preparation for a kind of *rebirth*, for example, the rise of the female subject from a signifier for weakness and absence to a signifier of vigour and presence.

In this poem, a father wants his daughter to marry (someone) because an unmarried daughter is a cultural taboo in the community. So he asks his daughter to marry if only to save his dignity in the community. The daughter accepts his proposal even though she does not really wish to do so. So, she succumbs to the cultural code and sees herself as "Walking faceless in a mob/My life going up in smoke". The last image conveys the female subject's compromise with the psychic-symbolic-cultural order which, despite her compromise, plunges her into the space of "neutering" and "self-dissolution" ("going up in smoke"). As the poem progresses, the female subject's identity and subjective autonomy are dissolved in the semiotics of "the ancestral promise", of female subjection and submission to the culturally-sanctioned "grace" of marriage and the faceless life of being "wedded" to a male-defined subjectivity and cultural code.

Nevertheless, as the poem's sensitive and discriminating attitude expands, the theme of "silence" which had occupied centre stage begins to crack and it eventually bursts out, takes over, and overcomes in resistance and “revengeful fury" the melancholic self-negation of an obedient daughter. Innocence is now transformed into a pained, “coral snake” with “a soul as cruel as death”. This is a powerful symbolism for the devastating impact of repressed feelings on the psyche of the individual. Initially, the poetic speaker inhabits a “still and silent” space, where the “shadows” of a “dusty and cold” history “merge into each other”, bringing forth memories of a “life prematurely wasted”. By the end of the poem, however, in a move that can only be described as a return of the repressed, the “bittersweet memories” of childhood and innocence return, metamorphosed into the spirit of the Devil himself, “Mephistopheles” and in this new form seek only revenge for a soul now dark and cruel as death. In this poem, "silence" is epitomized as "a tomb", the habitation for death. Silence, which also means the death of

speech, is also at the same time, the death of a life once lived and cherished; a symbol also for a wasted life. When it does acquire a soul, its soul is the soul of death, living in a tomb of boredom (“silent heigh-ho”) and the residue of a "melancholic mind" that can understand its "metamorphosis" and "depth" despite the cruel deprivation of speech.

In spite of all this, the silence of the female who had hitherto been deprived of language and speech turns out to be rich in metaphors, symbols, and tropes because, although without speech, it has a vigorous grammatology on its side: the capacity to encode and inscribe, in words and images, its own "deep style" in the form of "silent styling". Here, silence becomes *writing*, becomes the *poem itself*, capable, like speech, of performative acts and persuasive, calming effects on the poet-writer-inscriber. It is here that silence, in the form of the *text* of the poem and its symbolic allusions, becomes a form of *self-fashioning*, one that defies and enables "silence" both at once, one that gets it to *erupt* and to *rise* into a "deep style", one that can handle, and has persuasively handled, the female melancholy and alienation in the media of imagery, diction, and what Derrida would call "the mark". In essence, then silence gains voice in poetry a clear message to women in northern Nigeria to *write*, for in writing they get a voice, and in writing their voice is immortalized.

Derrida has argued that "the authority of final jurisdiction is neither rhetorical nor linguistic, nor even discursive". On this view, the “mark” inaugurates the notion of "text" (in this case the poem, "The Silent Style"), which should "mark" the limits of the linguistic as the antithesis of silence. For Derrida, "the mark is not anthropological; it is prelinguistic; it is the possibility of language, and it is everywhere there is relation to another thing or relation to another. For such relations, the mark “has no need for language" (2002, p. 76). We could thus argue that Lawal's poem marks the moments of a "troubled mind" and that of a "body-in-pain", all affirmed in "the mind-in-the-eye", namely the poetic lines, the poem's powers of invocation in the structure of the stresses and pauses of the text, and the verbally and syntactically self-reflexive use of words and images in order to convey, paradoxically, the Other of speech: “silence”. Yet this so called "silence" has acquired the capacity to "speak" its deep *experiences*, state of mind, and a self that could encode messages. This is the significance of the title of the poem: it is a *silent mode of speaking* that is the poem itself. A poem speaks to one in utter silence; the very example of Derrida’s “mark”. Lawal's poem, and the narrator within it, has succeeded in evading the conventional and structural problems of "speech" and "speech presentation". The poem called "Silent Style" can "speak" (in words, verse, rhythm, imagery, and figures of speech) without appearing to vulgarly complain about the female condition. Thus, while our persona has silenced her physical speech in deference to her father and his “dignity”, she finds metaphoric speech in poetry, allowing the lines to “speak her silence” through the words of an elusive poetic speaker who could never be apprehended in the physical world of fathers and dignities.

Poetry thus becomes a means of inscribing the consciousness in text and in writing, in the “mark” thereby freeing it from the “tomb” of boredom and death. This poem is a painful depiction of the fate that has befallen many a girl in northern Nigeria: handed over into loveless marriages with virtual strangers in the name of saving the dignity of their fathers or their families. Thus the woman becomes currency to be exchanged for respectability in order that her father, the patriarch, may preserve his worth in a patriarchal society. The female body is a

“coin” to be used in “purchasing” a certain desired image for her father; and like any coin, she loses her identity (“walking faceless”) and self-worth, defined, like the coin, only by her purchasing power. It is no wonder then, that again like the coin, she loses her warmth, the warmth of being human, and takes on the indifferent coldness and cruelty of death and of the snake.

The "Silent Style" is that which presents the self-assertion of a female subject in a kind of ironic mode. In fact, we may call "The Silent Style" an ironic poem because it encodes all the usual senses of irony and how it works: the distinction between the poet and the words of a fictitious character; a manner of speaking that implies a discrepancy (difference); tension, ambiguity, and stress in text, voice, and attitude; and the creation of a poetic space which functions as the middle ground between *what is said* and *what is meant*.

Thus Halima Lawal's poem is a kind of satire in which silence leads to speech, to a kind of "speech-in-enquiring" that brings into play a semiotically-organized "reply" to the culturally-conditioned male subject that considers marriage as the ultimate significance, and the symbol, of female worth. The poem is a vigorous assertion of the capacity of the female subject to speak without having to use conventional language; and asserts value and self-worth through the "mark" of silence. A self-fashioning without the use of the vocal cords, the poem becomes the best possible medium for presenting the female aesthetic for like the proverbial witch, it “speaks in tongues”. Thus Halima Lawal and her poem's narrative consciousness have undermined a key aspect of the Categorical Imperative in northern Nigeria that women be silent and veiled, which has, in its full impact, denied the woman's life as “will to power". After centuries of those imperatives, the female will-to-power has become, or assumed, a life-denying form, trampled under the harsh boots of patriarchy. The outcome, on this score, is paralysis and weariness. To overcome this paralysis, the “silenced” woman must fashion out in “silent style” a mark that speaks without vocal chords – poetry.

Victoria Kankara's "Loveless Survival"

This is a 3-stanza blank verse which makes little or no use of traditional rhyme or meter. The theme of the poem is the loneliness felt, and actually lived, by a female poetic speaker. The term "loneliness" is given a tropological twist in that the female narrator is married. The structure of the poem seeks to vindicate a new kind of cosmic loneliness, despite the presence of a spouse. The marriage itself is presented and narrativised as a kind of loneliness which is also a kind of loveless-ness. The poem opens with a symbolized idea of marriage as a kind of "infection", a kind of disease that has no cure, even though in traditional societies, such as you would find across the majority of northern Nigeria, marriage is the cure for the lonely female. Not for the lonely male though, who is really only lonely by choice. Society “looks the other way” as the lonely male seeks and finds “companionship” in “extra-marital arms”. Besides, since only the female is kept in seclusion – called *kulle* in northern Nigeria – the male hardly ever suffers loneliness, being free to move about and socialize with friends. This is why marriage is a cure only for the lonely female. But what we see, ironically, in Kankara’a poem is a speaker who is married yet is “infected by loneliness”. It would seem, then, that not only has marriage not cured the speaker’s loneliness, it is itself the *cause* of her loneliness.

So here, marriage is a kind of death prescription: infecting the speaker and choking her sense of self, her identity as a human subject, and casting her as just the object of external desire. The traditional conception of marriage as a romantic union between a man and a woman, and based on love and affection and a set of duties, commitments, and the taking of eternal vows, is undermined in a single stroke: "my nuptial cords are twang-less", another death imagery since twang-less cords produce no music – they are slack, loose, inelastic (all the ways that cords *shouldn't* be) rendering their sound music-less, toneless, dead. And since love is the music of marriage, now that the nuptial cords are twang-less, it means love itself has died. For that reason, even love cannot be expressed in poetic language because love poems "are hard to write". The "disease" of marriage renders love impotent; marriage thus becomes a prison-house of love, a jail where the flower of love is incarcerated and, starved of the sun (which has "drowned…somewhere beneath the river") wilts, withers and dies.

Unlike the poem or the poetic, love is "poorly designed", and thus becomes the antithesis, or the Other, of marriage, which is supposed to be a *harmonious* union of opposites. A loveless marriage is a symbol of blindness, insanity, and the anemic exchange of empty vows, a "misalliance" that pulls the petals of roses "off from their hinges" to "reveal only thorns". Even the thorns themselves are not ordinary thorns; in a hyperbolic move, these thorns have "fangs" which are "bared" menacingly, immediately evoking the image of an angry, venomous snake ready to strike and draw blood.

Unlike the space of love and affection, anemic marriage lacks music, the romantic steps of the dance; it is, rather, a dystopian space in itself, a kind of "soulless poetry of the spirit", full of unloving pangs of the death-drive. Even the gifts of the antithetical Other, the bridegroom ("the husband"), never restore the energy of true, transcendent love. In the poem, the female-human condition is mired in an ironic self-assertion: it wants to sleep over its troubles but that can potentially end in death. It wants loveliness in the form of "rose petals paving [its] aisles", so that it could inaugurate its more desirous and vigorous Other; and yet even the anticipated Other is potentially racked in "monotony". The poem poses the question: how should the self's "being-in-the-world" be or become? The poetic narrator is clear that the answer to that question lies in a wholly dystopian succumbing to benighted conditions, to the condition of eternal anomie, namely the un-decidable space in which the metaphor for life, sweetness and light, the Sun, is drowned in the river of pulsating tropes of "death" and "depression".

However, notice that the poetic narrator is not content to see everything in a negative light: the space of un-marriage or non-marriage, the space of female freedom from a union with a man, a husband, does create the veritable space of her self-assertion, one that both the poem itself and the poetic narrator wants to affirm as desirable, the realm of freedom in which a true human-female "horizon" is possible. In stanza 2 (lines 15-19), we see that the female narrator was once happy in her marriage because "Now there are no more roses to nurture and sniff at", and the husband's gifts of money and other assorted marriage items are now no longer interesting. In this hauntingly dystopian poem and behind the poetic speaker's wholly schizoid conception of marriage lies a deliberate and obvious exaggeration which is skillfully used to achieve a certain effect on the reader or the audience. Perhaps the hyperbolic-dystopian representation of marriage (or her marriage to a husband that remains unmentioned) does

suggest both a humorous undermining of the marriage institution as a whole or that the best possible marriage is one between female consciousness and female desire. The poetic speaker's, magnification of her condition as one of "prosaic depression" and a "hierarchy of monotony" is a secret assertion of an "excess" that can be found only in a "wedding" of sorts and not in marriage.

Thus the title of the poem is both ironic and hyperbolic: the poem itself strives, in the end, to embellish the hellish condition of a loveless marriage with a man and offer an embroidered picture of a female subject lost in a male-dominated world and relationship. She wants, in other words, to escape from a loveless survival (in a male-dominated world) into a new set of "aisles" where she could walk into a synthetically accomplished union where there are no males or husbands but other females ("rose petals"), a place where we imagine ourselves "strutting to Mendelssohn's piece, our best feet forward" – that space of Music, Desire, and Self-presence which only the wedding, not marriage, could provide.

For our poetic speaker, then, happiness has been left behind, in the rose-strewn aisles where she marched to Mendelssohn's piece, her best foot forward, looking ahead to her "I dos" and a marriage where love will continue to grow and flourish. But the water that would nourish the flower of love turns out to be the river that drowns the sun; and she has no one to blame but herself, since she it was who "turned a blind eye" to the "vices that will rise like an edifice to choke [her] sanity". The signs had always been there, but she chose to settle for a "misalliance" built on "poorly-designed love". Herein lies the contradiction in the poem. On the one hand the speaker claims that she has "no hand" in her own pain, meaning that she is not responsible for it, yet on the other she admits that she herself "turned a blind eye" to the [man's] vices. Perhaps it is this confusion that makes love poems "hard to write". Ultimately though, the poem sounds a warning to girls who, blinded by love, walk into marriage with the best of intentions "our best feet forward" only to be confronted by loneliness and possible loss of sanity. Here, the speaker calls on women to heed their instincts and never ignore any warning signs when it comes to settling on a spouse; for what the woman in love had turned a blind eye to would return to haunt her and snuff out her life's flame in much the same way that the river drowns the sun.

Habeebatu X!'s "The Beloved" and "I'd Ruin You"

In "The Beloved", the poetic or lyrical "I" deploys, in its performative acts, the trope of *prosopopoeia* in that the poet is represented as an imaginary figure that speaks, or has to speak, through a rhetorical figure, the lyrical "I". Note that in this poem the "I" which speaks is here describing its situation as a "beloved body" which should be handled in a particular manner. The notion of a poet speaking about herself as a "living, pleasuring, pleasurable body" is what is meant by *prosopopoeia*, which may be defined, following Anderson (2001: 140), as "an absent or imaginary person" speaking or acting "through a rhetorical figure or inanimate object, embodying personal qualities". On this reading, the poet, now an inanimate object, makes herself the subject of her own understanding by reading herself into the text or the poem as the "beloved body". Yet the poet wishes that she were thought as a living body, with its own self-loving space as the centre of the body. However, this she could do only by re-inventing and fabricating herself; by, for example, imagining herself as a self-creating, self-loving body, as a person displaced into a series of body organs ("lips", "hands", "tummy").

That is why the lyrical "I" splits herself into two, or rather re-distributes herself into two dimensions: as Mind – a "talking head", the spinner of poetic significance – and Body – the site of sensation, desire, and even orgasmic pleasure ("... she spills into beautiful stars"). The body takes an active role as an agent of desire: it unleashes "pleasure" and "sexual self-love" unto itself, "touching" itself, and being in touch with its "pleasure centres" ("the lips that blush in the faintest pink", the "dark haven of the sky"). In the process of evoking a poignant imaginary, it turns itself into the object of its own desire and, in that very process, achieves a stunning, earth-shattering, self-inflicted, self-provoked, self-induced orgasmic recrudescence.

The body, this lyrical, speaking, narrating body is also the metaphor for yearning and satisfaction, want and fulfillment all at once ("You are as nothing/You are nothing/You are as everything/You are everything")[3]. This narcissistic self-indulgence is clinched, in figures and allusions, by the Mind telling its Other, the Body to be the sole object of the Mind's postulations and narrativizations, to help the Mind to better "Set [its] words free", to “plant flowers” in the Mind, pay attention to its "music", and give it “wings” to fly. Only then would Mind and Body become one, like the "ocean". Only then would Mind and Body embrace, become united in an ecstasy of sexual re-birth in the form of "lovers" and “flowers” of beautiful embrace. Only then would the explosive desire or consummate pleasure (the "beautiful wings" of "being-in-the-world") and Song (the Poem, "the words", the poetic performance of the Mind as the Lyrical "I") achieve communion and a blissful union in a single presence of being: "the music of crossed lovers".

In this poem in which figurative language (Mind) and sexual desire come together, both the lyrical I and the real poet encode a masturbatory, self-pleasuring subject which creates the illusion of a present Other, a ghostly male sexual agent. Here we encounter a persona unabashedly declaring her sexual desires for a male object – the “beloved”. The sexual imagery is palpable. From the torn skirts of the sky which then “reveal/Lips that blush in the faintest pink” (a clear reference to female sexual anatomy) to the “thrusting” of the moon “into the dark haven of the sky”, causing the sky (“her”) to “spill into beautiful stars”, we see the sexual act in cosmic imagery. The identification of the female body, the speaker’s body with cosmic bodies such as the sun, moon and stars is a tribute to the timelessness of both the sexual act and the female body. It is also an affirmation of the *naturalness* of the sexual act; that is to say, the sex act is as natural as these cosmic bodies. This identification with nature continues into the second stanza where the speaker’s desire for the beloved is likened to the “thirst of the Bedouin/Trapped in the …Sahara”. In this regard, the speaker’s desire is as natural as the thirst for water that would attend getting stranded in the Sahara; it would therefore be cruel to deprive her of water or to stop her from wanting to slake her thirst. For this she needs the beloved, who is captured in the metaphor of the gushing fountain of the Amazon which drips “rivulets of blessed water”. One can imagine the sheer joy with which the Bedouin would greet the sight of the fountain; and one can imagine the rawness of the Bedouin’s need and the eagerness or even desperation with which she would plunge herself into the fountain. What the speaker alludes to with these lines is the inevitability of desire and of the law of attraction, which, for her are as natural as the metaphors employed to represent them.

In essence then, this poem is an affirmation of female sexuality and the female body, body of which are shrouded in mystery and taboo in northern Nigeria. The discourse of female

sexuality is not a discourse that should be made public, belonging as it does to the “silenced” sphere of women. Considered a receptacle, the woman is not seen as an active sexual *agent* but as a passive “receiver” of and for male sexual desire. Indeed, in northern Nigeria, the woman is expected to be bashful of her body not to openly speak of it, much less of its sexual needs or desires. Women who do so are considered indecorous or even indecent. In effect, the female body is for men to objectify and define, not for women to valorize themselves.

In another bold and forward move, the speaker speaks of the difficulty of keeping her desires contained. In stanza 3, “words” are used as metaphor for sexual desire, in a move that again converges body and mind. In much the same way that the speaker’s actual words burst forth into a multitude of poems left to “litter” the beloved’s “doorstep”, so too does desire “settle in [the speaker’s] tummy like lead”, “wrapped by a pupae of silence” but which “bursts into beautiful wings and flutter of butterflies”. The words that settle in the tummy wrapped in silence are a metaphor for the speaker’s sexual desire for the beloved who alone can “free the butterflies” with his “deep kiss”. The speaker implores the beloved to “plant flowers in me” that her words (desire) would “feast on”. Again the sexual imagery is clear: actual words are trapped in the head, the mind, not in the tummy. It is sexual desire that causes a sensation of “butterflies” in the stomach, not the desire for speech. The imagery invoked by “planting” and “pupae” are connected to “insemination” and “birth”, respectively. Here is a thinly veiled request by a speaker for sexual release through the metaphoric expression “free the butterflies”. In this poem, we encounter a persona who is forward enough to declare her love and to persist in doing so, littering the beloved’s doorstep with love poems, constantly ringing his doorbell which, because she is in love, or because she is in the throes of desire, has become in her eyes a musical instrument, a “piano” out of which she “makes music”. Typical of the condition of being in love – or in lust (both apply here) – even the most mundane and practical of objects (such as a doorbell) assumes aesthetic significance. The focus in this poem is not so much the beloved as the loving, experiencing, feeling and desiring body of the poetic speaker.

An illustration of the interpretation presented above can be seen in another of Habeebatu X's poems, "I'd Ruin You" in which there is an unmistakable theme of the female desire for "in-bound self-pleasuring". In this poem of four stanzas, "female love" is a full-fledged "onanism" (deliberate erotic self-stimulation). It is, in this poem, not the external bolt of pleasure and self-gratification from the Male Other (who is "ruined" by being denied the agency of pleasuring a female) but a self-indulged and self-indulging play with one's (the female's) own body or body organs (the sites of female erotic self-assertion) – the "thighs" and what is "between" them. The poetic speaker has, in this poem, turned on herself like a recoiled snake, touching itself as itself, expelling all contingent conditions and situations, and indulging in itself as the focal point of love – the "me! me! me!" scream of onanistic play and the self-induced ataraxic delight that female desire very well knows. In this poem which declares "ruin" as its central theme, there is no poignant "ruin" but that of self-denial. The female subject is utterly "ruined" when it cannot "touch" itself, cannot give itself its own self-given erotic delight. Thus all love is ruined (as in ruins) when it is not a self-assertive play with the body, the body of the poetic self. Such non-onanistic love would be alone, isolated in the world or rather is only a deferred self-fulfillment. Thus the poem "I'd Ruin You" closes with the image of an assertive female subject which is, both at once, the subject of expression and of sexual desire

and erotic self-love. The female body thus becomes the very definition of love. What is conventionally considered a lofty and noble sentiment, “Love”, is reduced to primal bodily dimensions imprinted on the “mouth”, “between the thighs” and in the “welts” on the speaker’s backside. All three bodily parts are associated with the sexual act; as such, this poem equates love with the sex act. Indeed, in a radical move, the speaker asserts that love would be “nothing” without her and until she is his “definition of love”. In a culture that allows a man more than one wife, it is bold and forward indeed for a female to assert so strongly that she is the definition of love for her man; and she does this with anger, assertiveness and threats of ruin. By forcing her love object to identify her body with and as his meaning, definition and *embodiment* of love, she invariably brands him as *hers*, binds him to her and marks him in much the same way he has branded her (the “welts on my ass”). This completely turns the status quo on its head; where the woman identifies with the man even to the point of taking his name, here we see the man branded by the female and rendered impotent for other females since “love would never look the same if it’s not from my back” and “love is nothing without me”.

Even the threat of ruin is something of a shock for conservative sensibilities who would insist on the “gentleness” and “sweetness” of the woman. Aggression and assertiveness, along with threats and invectives are not associated with the woman. Where we expect passivity, here we see a possessive female and one who, shockingly, asserts herself and the very definition of love in the sex act and in the female body. She becomes then, the very “inscription” of love.

Hauwa Sahafii's "A Brief History" and "The Body as Destructive Tool"

"A Brief History" is a formally experimental poem and written in small letters, and consists of a 17-line first stanza, a couplet second stanza, and single line at the end. It is clearly a free verse, and uses no rhyme structure. The whole of the poem is the narrator's monologue, although it is narrated in the second-person. The use of the second-person narrative voice suggests that it is a clever device to distance the narrator from the fabric of the text, ostensibly to give it a kind of figurative "objectivity". Nevertheless, it is clear that the narrator uses the adopted narrative voice in order to address herself and to create a space of ghostly division in order for the narrator to occupy two figurative spaces at once – that of the female subject and of the female body. As Jacques Lacan (1977) has argued, the subject is subject only because it "speaks"[4].

The central theme of the poem is the female body which can be truly autonomous and self-possessed only if it does not "place a lover's name on [its] tongue". The female body must not, by implication, "speak" about its Other, the male body; that the female body loses its autonomy when it seeks to "assimilate" a male body which, for centuries ("history") has appropriated the female voice and body, has ushered in "a new religion", has aggrandized itself through a "husky voice", even though it is itself secretly without religion ("godless").

The bulk of the poem is also about this female body's (imaginary) struggles against the male body, which metaphorically acts and behaves like the proverbial snake (the Serpent) which "slithers" quietly into the female body – a figural reference to the phallus, which enacts "a dance with winds" (the sexual possession of the female body in coitus), comes with sweet words, and has "a hungry mouth" (for devouring the female body and its sexual resources); this Other seeks satisfaction from and within the female body as a "cosmic parasite" does. Indeed,

the male body is a body snatcher that takes over the female body and disrupts its normal working order by “opening” it up “to hold another life” (pregnancy) for example.

The image of a snake trying to coil around its object of desire (the female body) also encodes yet another image of the unrelenting male "assimilation" of the female body by way of "naming" (the female taking the name of her "owner", the husband, the male, for example). Through naming, the male exercises power over all, including the female[5]. In the ensuing struggle for hegemony, the active female subject rises up against the male *hegemon* by trying to wrestle speech from the male, by making him incapable of speech or description or naming in general, through the act of "force[ing] its mouth closed" and "stuff[ing] it with a finger or two, until it chokes".

However, in a sudden shift in tone and imagery the female speaking and acting subject eschews any hint of violence against its adversary, the male body and the naming *hegemon*. The female speaker suggests, via imagery, that a confrontation with the male body could also do or lead to "unkindness" to the female body; that the male body is all-powerful and could erase the female body's capacity for "memory for years". Thus one way by which the female body could safeguard itself is by staying away from the male body, by eschewing all contact with it and so "boycott all the roads that lead to it".

In a moment of self-deprecation, the narrator tells the female body (her own body) to "burn, evaporate": it is the only way by, or through, which it can escape from the clutches of the male-body. This "escape" would consist in shunning the male-body-subject, escaping from its "presence" by turning it into an "absence". Only then would the female-body-subject experience a re-birth, be "open to hold another life, another breath". Only then would the same body-subject be truly autonomous and be a *subject* in itself for itself. Only then would the estranged, deprived, "colonized" body "push out and find its way back home", and return to its pristine self – if only to create a space of sheer freedom, the realm of "peace and all the other salvations that do not require blood".

The poem closes with a poignant image of the female-body-subject as rising unto itself, disavowing the male-body-subject, finding peace in the space of male absence, male oblivion, and male naming. The duplicator-narrator tells the female subject that only as a veritable and an autonomous "body" would she create, consecrate, and consolidate "memory" and the capacity for "not-forgetting". In other words, the female body is itself a veritable subject of speech, action, and desire only when it has exiled, and has no need for, its Other – the male-body-subject. This allusion to the necessary absenting of the male as both body and subject implies a complete segregation of the sexes, the female from the male, so that there could be no "sexual communion", reproduction, or even the remotest possibility for "oppression".

In this utopian world of forms, images, and symbols, the female body becomes a deeply *historical* subject, one capable of naming, narrating, and positing. In this way, the female body becomes an autonomous subject, or a subject of its own subjectivity, and acquires a "body" that is gratuitously "useless" (to the male), autotelic (in its own autonomy), but nonetheless liberating and affirmative; the female body becomes a true *subject*, with an imminent "history" to boot.

The de-construction of the male-body (and the male-subject) continues in yet another Shafii's of poems, the almost "postmodern*ist*, "The Body as Destructive Tool", with both the

poem and its title rendered in small letters as if in rejection of the upper case and the capital letter, the supposed male inscription system. In this lyrical poem, the "deconstruction" of the body takes centre stage. The narrator tells of her past deed of bundling "a man into an explosive", "opposite a box marked safe". Here, we have a binary of female narrator and male subject, an explosive and a box. The binary division marks an opposition between two opposed and potentially explosive combinations. The female subject discards all sense of sympathy and empathy for the man. In this formulation, the man symbolizes danger while the box symbolizes safety. When the speaker "sets her heart loose" and tells it "go where it wants", she is horrified when her heart obviously heads for the explosive. This is a reference to the powerful pull of sexual attraction. Even when he spells danger, even when he threatens the female with annihilation, her heart will still go to him and risk destruction in him. This is the "unspoken truth of bodies" and their attraction to "all that is sin".

The box marked safe is not appealing for it is a *box*. It symbolizes nothing but imprisonment and containment which could never match the excitement of an explosion. Indeed, it could be argued here that because of the reference to "sin", the "explosive" into which the speaker bundles the man is the sex act since, outside marriage sex is considered a sin in both Christianity and Islam. The safe box, offers no excitement besides the promise of the female body remaining safe within itself. This box is also the box of convention, patriarchal control, segregation, and seclusion of the female body which is intended for the female's own safety, yet, as the unspoken truth of bodies indicates, the female body, guided by the female heart will always move towards its love object. In effect, it is not only men who are attracted to sin. The female body is just as enticed by the explosive power of sex as the male body is, like "licking caramel for the first time".

These lines are, therefore, a direct rebuke at a society which sanctions the male desire for sex while at the same time punishing the female for succumbing to hers. Women are not supposed to be attracted to sex; they are not supposed to be aroused by the "voice of a man", the voice of a man should not evoke images of a naked male body in the female mind. Yet, as the poem shows, it happens; women are attracted to sex and they are turned on by the sound of the male voice. The mention of "voice" is interesting here because in Islam, a woman's voice is part of her "nakedness" and should therefore be kept hidden. Women are not supposed to be heard in public as their voice is capable of "stirring" the imaginations of men, leading them towards sin. What the persona seems to be saying here is that the same holds true for women also: the male voice is arousing for women and so should also be considered as part of their nakedness. In this way does the poem advocate for a silencing of men, as radical as the silencing of women has been. Herein lies the subversive nature of the poem. It firsts asserts female sexual desire and then, it calls for a silencing of the male subject.

That episode gets the narrator to discover "the unspoken truth of bodies": how bodies are the sites and objects of desire, of sexual transgression, and of a deep self-realization imbued with self-love despite the prohibitions of the cultural code (societal prohibitions; "the totem and taboos" of the cultural unconscious). This cultural code, this "sin" (the prohibition of unsanctioned and unapproved union of male and female bodies) is, in secret, the *raison d'être* of male desire, even though the male subject may feel inhibited by an open or secret display of "nakedness" (the sexual act). Thus the body of the male, the male-body is *deconstructed*

(disordered), *subjected* to its desires of the flesh, and, again, *objectified* as sex object for the female. The female body in this way slithers out of the control of the male body, becoming also the "disorderly alphabets of another flesh", alphabets which the male cannot control in much the same way that it denied control of its own body to the female.

Thus the body as such is "deconstructed", deprived of the notion of essential meaning which supposedly exists outside the free play of the signifiers of the body which will ground all meaning. Yet the poem is undecided as to which body, the female's or the male's, is or should be "licking caramel for the first time", or which is without what the narrator calls "sin" (taboo). This space of the un-decidable is what the poem itself seeks to occupy, at least in its desire for the "destructive tool" (if only to case the Body in general in the wondrous circuits of desire). And, having deployed the *image* and *notion* of the "deconstructive tool", the poem and its narrator have implicitly set up the Derridean notion of *différance*. In Derrida's hand, *différance* is deployed to fortify the contention that meaning is unstable, that the human subject can think authoritatively and positively only by *silencing* and negating opposite meanings, as in the hierarchy male/female, female/male, flesh/desire, desire/flesh, etc.

Thus one way or another, the poetic narrator is setting up a hierarchy of sinfulness: the male body always leaps at the "touch of what is sin" (its propensity for corruption and succumbing to the allure of sexual stimulation ("as though licking caramel for the first time"). On the other hand, the female body itself is not without temptation for "another flesh". So, what do we have here? It is *différance* ("deferment" in which "to defer" and "to differ" come together in the space of "disorderly alphabets"). It conveys the notion that the play of signification which is the poem under discussion can only be deferred, never fully achieved. In sum, the poem is unable to "speak itself": all it can achieve or imagine is the endless spillage, slipping and sliding of its tropes and images. As Derrida puts it, *différance* is "the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by which elements relate to one another" (1981: 27).

Conclusion: The Poem as Representation

In the preceding discussion of the poems and the primary authors, it is poetic representation that governs the way in which the Body (both male and female) is imaged, cast in a role, and ascribed the powers of evocation or invocation or the lack of them. Yet, because those poems have set up a hierarchical opposition of the male and the female body, the figural elements used to convey that hierarchical process or structure, rest on the dubious, and ultimately untenable promise of pure being, ontological fullness, the self-effacing hegemony of the Origin, and an originary, self-evident Plenitude, whether of the female or the male subject. The metaphysical tendency to see the human subject as only a bundle of tissues, bones, neurons, and ligaments (the body) creates the myth of the given, an all-consuming narcissism of a female body or a male body that cannot and would not admit of difference, of dependency and cooperation, of ambiguity and anguish.

And if the body can also be the body of pleasure (*jouissance*) or pain, it is so only if it exists in a subject, a subject that is also *subjected* to language, culture, the symbolic, and the unconscious[6]. Or, there is no ultimate truth in what the poems have represented: they all are only the expressions, the more or less profound imaginative and emotional experience of the poet (or the poet's imaginative response to an event or idea in the empirical world, natural or

cultural). Yet those poems also present a moral message that offers profound insight into a life or about life; or the alleged "truth" of an event or action or an ideal or the immutability of human desire or such.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, language is essentially "figurative" and that there is no such thing as non-figurative or an un-rhetorical, "natural" language. For Nietzsche, figurative (or poetic) language can never arrive at the truth of the object it seeks to pin down. One implication of Nietzsche's argument is that the tool we use to "define" or "represent" things and essences (the body, the female, the male, desire, lack, insufficiency, oppression, subjection, the subject) namely language, is itself rhetorical, and not referential or even representational (in the empirical-realist sense), so that the trope, the rhetorical device, is the only conceptual instrument available to human beings. In this sense, poems are conceptual fictions, performatives, and pieces of figurative language[7]. Which means that we cannot jump from the figurative language of the poem, or the poems discussed above, to denotative language because such language contains no *criterion* of truth but only "an *imperative* concerning that which should count as true":

> It is not difficult to demonstrate that what is called 'rhetorical' as the devices of a conscious art, is also present as a device of unconscious art in language and its development... No such thing as an unrhetorical, 'natural' language exists that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices.. Language is rhetoric for it only intends to convey a *doxa* (opinion), and not an *episteme* (truth)... Tropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature (1968, p. 516; pp. 278-79)

Nietzsche's view above alerts us to the role of tropes in the creation of the human field of effects, around which is enforced all the forms of power within the culture or a symbolic scheme. All the poems we have discussed are part of what may be called "the politics of language" as deployed by women poets, and whose goal is to depict the complex ways in which some women, at least the poets in question, have apprehended, represented, and *shaped* a particular way of viewing the "battle of the sexes" and ways in which cultural and political power, has created the present but changing system of values by which men and women relate in real life.

All the poems above show a marked shift in thematic concern from earlier female poets such as Nana Asma'u. Where earlier poets had been concerned with preserving and promoting accepted societal norms and cultural codes, these newer poets show a preoccupation with the female body as a cite of signification. The focus is turned, not outwards towards the collective, but inwards towards the individual self and individual experience. These poets are also not ashamed to talk of female sexuality and the ways in which sexual desire inhabits the female body and dictates some of its actions. They also draw parallels between the male experience of love desire and the female experience of the same showing that, in the end, both are the same.

Notes

1. Fatna Sabbah has argued that the dominant Muslim view of woman is as an "omnisexual woman, and as "woman-as-body", and whose "positive cultural attributes are silence and immobility: "she speaks and laughs rarely and never without a reason" (1988: 25).
2. According to Freud and Lacan, for example, desire is always a haunted space, both a short coming and a negative experience. Yet desire is always there, like reality itself.In this sense, desire equals lack As Lacan writes, "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the the difference the results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting" (1977: 287). Consider also Nietzsche's aphorism: "In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired" (1989: 93).
3. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) argues for the performativity, not performance, of sexual identity, that the sexual disposition is not an origin but the effect of repeated performances, and that gender is constituted by repeated acts. In this way, she questions the conventional feminist understanding of the distinction between biological sex and cultural gender. This can be seen in the discussion above on the female body as "performing" in repeated acts of representation and symbolization of sexual difference.
4. Consider Lacan's argument that language is a network, a "net over the totality of the real... the plane of the symbolic" (1988: 262). The "real", which is death, can be seen in Shafii's image of violence and explosion (in The Body as Deconstructive Tool") as the only occasion for the narrator to speak about or symbolize its "acts" in the world.
5. Naming is a kind of violence in itself; it is domination by means of the word, that is, of ruling the world by giving it names. Blumenberg (1983: 641) cites the example of Francis Bacon who, whenever he "describes paths to knowledge in the present, his language is filled with toil and violence" A call, for Bacon, is the same as "command": "for whensoever he shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again control them" (cited in Blumenberg 1985 : 642). However, if this is the case, and if Judith Butler is right, women, too, can "name" and participate in "naming" as performative acts.
6. In the context of this study, Lacan's argument that the subject of the unconscious can only come into being through a relation with others and with the Other. Sean Homer argues that the "subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis has no permanent or persistence... there is never a point in time that the subject can be said to finally emerge as a stable and complete entity" (2005: 74). This is also the argument of this study, especially in relation to the incapacity of the female subject to be both "mind" and "body" at the same time. Indeed, the fact that the female poets have to employ a narrator, as anyone else, drives home this point.
7. Figurative language, as this study has shown, is and has also what Lanham (1976) calls a "motive for eloquence", since, as McLaughling (1995) has argued, language does give meaning to experience and it is the system that mkes human ideas possible. Thus in writing their poems, our female poets had had to use language, and in the case of their poetry, a figurative language that is both a motive for writing and for the eloquence by which they symbolized the female situation in relation to the dominant male order.

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Appendix
Halima Lawal
THE SILENT STYLE
A visit a place
Still and silent
Shadows lure
And merge into each other
A stumble into a history
Dusty and cold
That stands close to my heart
Crying in bittersweet memory

Of life prematurely wasted

The eyes of my mind
Stray to the past
Dad was there
A connoisseur
A panacea
Head bowed down
Shoulders sagged
Like a lion in shameful defeat
Now and then
He shook his head and sighed
He felt beaten and broken
Afraid even
My heart scud missile
Shoot to Dad
He uttered my death sentence
'What is it, Dad?
I can offer a life to make yours happy'
Dad whispered
'Will you marry to save my dignity?'

I see myself
Walking faceless in a mob
My teeth bared in laughter
My life going up in smoke
My happiness crushed
Beneath my ancestral promise
And I seek to hide my lifeless life
Behind a lethe of grace
And silent heigh-ho

At once
I am in the silent place
Still as a tomb
I am metamorphosed
Into melancholy Mephistopheles
A coral snake in revengeful fury
A soul as cruel as death.

Victoria Sylvia Kankara
LOVELESS SURVIVAL

Now that I have been infected by loneliness and
My nuptials cords are twang-less,
Love poems are hard to write.
It is like causing the soul to wreathe

In the pain in which it has no hand.
We may be architects of our lives,
But many of our loves are poorly-designed.
Rather, we settle for the impunity that comes
With our misalliances, turning a blind eye to
The many vices that will rise like an edifice
To choke our sanity, which we exchanged for
The sheer thought of rose petals paving our aisles,
Imagining ourselves strutting to
Mendelssohn's piece, our best feet forward.

Now there are no more roses to nurture and sniff at.
The petals pulled off from their hinges
Reveal only thorns baring their fangs.
Not all the money in this life could replace the love in my soul:
For when all is spent, I'll still resume my old status.

Sleep is the dress rehearsal for death.
But how do you rehearse, live a loveless life?
How do you survive this hierarchy of monotony and
The prosaic depression that fills you,
Laces your being with its torment?
How does the heart outlast its own pain?
Somewhere beneath the river, the sun drowns.

Habeebatu X!
The BELOVED Series

1.
Beloved, you are the sun as he tears
The skirts of the sky to reveal
Lips that blush in the faintest pink
You are the moon as he thrusts
Into the dark haven of the sky
As she spills into beautiful stars

Beloved, you are the thirst of the Bedouin
Trapped in the winds of Sahara
With naught but sand for companion
You are gushing fountain of Amazon
Dripping in the rivulets of blessed water
Quenching all desires

Beloved, you are all I have.
You are all the things I lack.
You are as nothing. You are nothing
You are as everything. You are everything

2.
Beloved, do not tire of me
Of the poems I have left
Littered on your doorsteps
Or the music I make from
The piano of your doorbell

Do not tire of me
And the songs I sing
Off-key and off-tune
To serenade you
Or the bruises on your toes
As I tap dance to my tune

Beloved, do not tire of me
Adorn your night sky
With the twinkle of my poems
Sing my song to the owl
And the crickets
Hold my hands, let's dance!

3.
Beloved
The words I want to say
Settle in my tummy like lead
In the depth of an ocean
Wrapped by pupae of silence
The longer I stay with you
They burst into beautiful wings
And flutter of butterflies

Beloved, kiss me deeper
Free the butterflies
Listen to the music of crossed
Lovers. Plant flowers in me
Let the words feast on them
Lilies, poppies, chrysanthemums

Beloved, love me
Set the words free
Beloved, I love you

Habeebatu X!
I'D RUIN YOU

Love would never taste the same

If it's not from between my thighs
It would never feel the same
No longer like pulling my hair
Making me scream

Love would never sound the same
If it's not from my mouth
It would never feel the same
No longer like me laying still
Waiting for you

Love would never look the same
If it's not from my back
It would never be the same
No longer like the welts on my ass
Wearing your mark

Fuck! I'd ruin you
Till love is nothing without me
Till I'm your definition of love
No longer what your heart wants
But me! Me! Me!
I'd ruin you

hauwa shafii
a brief history

your body is yours until
you place a lover's name on your tongue.
after, there's a new religion. godless.
a husky voice. a release. a dance with winds.
mine slithers, opens as a hungry mouth
every time an ocean advances.
when it begins to latch onto a new name,
i force its mouth closed, stuff it with a finger or two. until it chokes.
but you do not do unkindness to your body
and walk away free.
your body will evade a memory for years,
boycott all the roads that lead to it
burn. evaporate.
it will ignore. look away. untangle and rip
the fabric of shame;
open to hold another life, another breath;
push out and find its way back home.

your body will create a vacuum to fit peace, and
all the other salvations that do not require blood.

your body, however, will not forget.

hauwa shafii
the body as destructive tool

once, i bundled a man into an explosive,
placed him opposite a box marked safe.
i set my heart loose and said, go where you want

then watched in horror as it did.

the memory pulls me back to the unspoken truth of bodies:
how they leap at touch of all that is sin, as though
licking caramel for the first time.
all that is sin
like every time it carves nakedness out of the voice of a man
who, though naked by it, does not exactly love it.

the disorderly alphabets of
another flesh.
or the first time the body draws the
edge of a blade across itself
to muffle the riotous crowd inside