



A Survey of Dearth and Trend of Female Literary Writing in English from the Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract— *There is an apparent paucity of literary works written by women in English from the northern vis-à-vis southern part of Nigeria in the corpus of the country's literature. Adopting a mixed-method approach, this paper surveys availability or dearth of female writers in the northern region by focusing on the three north-eastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Gombe states. Quantitative and qualitative approaches, through questionnaires and interviews, and Consensus Workshop, through Focus Group Discussions (FGD), are administered to gather the data for the discussion. The paper found a dearth of women writers in the northeast region and concludes that readership, publication opportunities, level of education, and social choices of the medium of expression are among the factors responsible for the dearth. The paper also found a recurrent motif of love, family, and marriage as the thematic and stylistic complexities of the available female work of fiction that follow the Soyayya trend. Possible amenable measures, which include organizing competitions and book projects, are proffered as recommendations.*

Keywords— *Female Writers, Northeast Nigeria, Dearth, Trend, Fiction in English.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies have suggested a shortage of internationally recognised female works of fiction and poetry in the English language from northern Nigeria (Malumfashi, 2019; Ajeluorou, 2018; Kassam, 1996, Ousseina, 2002; East, 1936). The first known internationally acknowledged feminist novel written in English is Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* in 1984. There were, however, established literary works before Alkali's novel, written by northern Nigerian women in Arabic *Ajami* and widely acknowledged in the region, as far back as the pre-colonial period. This was as a result of the region's contact with Islam and Arabic literacy, which came in through the eleventh-century trans-Saharan trade route. Nana Asma'u, the daughter of the Sultan of the Sokoto Caliphate, Usman dan Fodiyo, was a well-known poet in the northern region in the nineteenth century. She witnessed many of the Fulani Jihad battles and wrote about her experiences in a prose narrative known as *Wakar Gewaye* (The Song of Wandering). She left behind a large collection of poetry

that emphasises women's positions as leaders. She promoted women's rights within the ambit of Sunnah and the Qur'an (Boyd and Mack, 1997).

In the twentieth century, there was a rise in women writing prose fiction novella in the Hausa language known as *Littattafan Soyayya*. This prose fiction is the product of British colonial education, popularly called in the local parlance as *Boko*. In the 1990s, this literary fiction genre became very popular among the youths, particularly females, under what is known as the *Kano Market literature*. Even at the turn of the 21st century, very few female literary voices emerged from the region's literary space. These voices are mainly concerned with love, marital, and family issues, rather than national and broader social, racial, and global issues as their themes. The majority of female writers in this period focus on themes that are often regarded as mainly female and feminine voices within feminist discourses.

However, feminine and feminist writings have been central issues in African and western feminist

scholarship, which early Western French feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have advanced in their discourses. For instance, Cixous stresses that women writing or *l'écriture féminine* should be the kind that fights for women's rightful space in historical literary spheres (Cixous, 1976, p. 251). This is always considered as both a model and invocation for those who support her kind of *l'écriture féminine* (Conley, 1984, p. 77). This argument is also appreciated in African feminist fiction. As Florence Stratton argues, 'sexism has operated as a bias of exclusion in African Literary criticism' (Stratton, 1994, p.4). So, literary writings of women in northern, and specifically north-eastern Nigeria can be categorised under feminist and feminine writings, but largely in the Hausa language.

This paper answers the bigger question of why few or no female writers from the three states of Borno, Yobe, and Gombe states write fiction and poetry in the English language for an international audience. The paper contributes to the feminist and feminine discourse by exploring the significant factors that limit their literary voices in English. As well, the paper focuses on the thematic content and stylistic complexities of their literary works from these three states from 1980 to 2020.

OBJECTIVE(S) OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the paper is to survey the dearth and trend of women's literary writing in English from northern Nigerian states of Borno, Gombe, and Yobe. This is to be achieved through the following specific objectives:

- (i) To determine the average percentage of women writers from the three northeast states that produce literary Works in English as compared to women writers from the other states in the northern regions of Nigeria;
- (ii) To investigate the various factors that cause the likely dearth of women's literary works in English from the three states in the northeast region;
- (iii) To study the thematic concern and unique stylistic complexity as a trend among the women writers in the three northeast states;
- (iv) To proffer amenable measures to be adopted in addressing the likely factors limiting the production of literary works in the English language by women in these three northeast states in particular, and northern Nigeria, generally.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The survey intends to answer the following questions as regards the objectives for the study:

- ❖ What is the average percentage of women writers from Borno, Gombe, and Yobe states writing literary works in English as compared to women writers from other regions of Nigeria?
- ❖ What are the various factors that cause the likely dearth of literary works in English from the three northeast states in northern Nigerian?
- ❖ What is the thematic concern and unique stylistic complexity as a trend among the women writers in English in the three northeast states?
- ❖ Are there amenable measures to be adopted in addressing the likely factors limiting women's production of literary works in English in the three northeast states in particular and northern Nigeria, generally?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout history, female writers have been challenging their status as subordinates and secondary options through feminine and feminist discourses. From Sappho, the first female poet of the sixth century BC, to the present crop of English female novelists, women have been breaking barriers and making history as writers at the forefront. The first English female novelist, Aphra Behn, set the ground rolling with her 1688 novel *Oroonoko*. Mary Wollstonecraft changed the course of women's status with her provoking feminist work, the pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) while Mary Shelly became the first Sci-fi fiction writer with her *Frankenstein* (1818). Today, Agatha Christie and J.K Rowling stand as the bestselling English authors ever. Agatha's thrillers sold copies second only to Shakespeare and the Bible while Rowling is the first and ever billionaire author (Rutigliano, 2020; Giuliana and Whitten, 2015).

Generally, women in Nigeria have been active participants in the production of literary works. Southern Nigeria has produced women novelists such as Flora Nwapa, the first internationally recognised African woman novelist, whose *Efuru* (1966) was the first novel by an African woman published in Britain (Busby, 1993, p. 399), and which marked the beginning of women's literary revolution in Africa. Buchi Emecheta, 'the first successful black woman novelist living in Britain after 1948' (Dawson, 2007, p. 117), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are other well-known Nigerian female writers from southern Nigeria. Many female writers have emerged from that region but few or no voices are from northern Nigeria.

The educational backwardness in northern Nigeria has always been cited in studies as the probable factor responsible for the paucity of women writers to

contribute their quota from the region. Lack of adequate access to formal education for women has always been cited as the factor responsible for the dearth of all forms of educational endeavors, including writing in English. As Margaret Hauwa Kassam noted, 'lack of adequate education, especially, seems to be the biggest cause for the limitation of literary works by women from this part of the country' (Kassam, 1996, p. 122). Similarly, Sada Malumfashi lamented that 'the arrival of British colonialists did nothing to improve women's education [...] It wasn't until as late as 1933, that classes first opened to women in previously male-only primary schools' (Malumfashi, 2019, np).

The term 'education', as both Kassam and Malumfashi observed, refers only to being educated through formal schooling, not including knowledge acquired in Arabic and Islamic education. Northern Nigerian women, such as Nana Asma'u, were literates and had engaged in writing literary materials before the advent of British colonialism and formal education (Boyd and Mack, 1997). Arabic literacy along with Islamic education was introduced first to north-eastern and then northern Nigeria through the trans-Saharan Arab traders and missionaries in the eleventh century (Balogun, 1969). Formal western education, however, was brought to northern Nigeria in the twentieth century by the British colonialists and Christian missionaries. It was invariably due to this mode of entry of the formal western education that the predominantly Muslim populace of the north received the new form of education with some degree of apprehension. The fear shared in the region at that period was that the new form of education was a device to 'Christianise' the already Muslim populace, and so the people were antagonistic to it. This antagonism continued up to the twenty-first century in the form of *Boko Haram* Islamic fundamentalism from the northeast, the first point of Islam entry to the north and the area of focus of this paper. So, these reasons may be the impediments to girls in the region acquiring formal education. There may be other factors that this research sets to corroborate and expound on.

In addition to educational backwardness, popular love and family themes that evolved out of the *Soyayya* genre in the Hausa language became a trend that limits women's writing in the English language. This genre started in the 1980s in Kano, the largest Hausa city in northern Nigeria, and became widely accepted in the northern region. It was self-published literature, written and distributed mostly by Hausa female writers under strict censorship of the authorities in Kano state. Before the advent of this genre, there were virtually no women writers in the northern Nigerian scene writing through the Roman

script. After the introduction of the Hausa *Bokoby* the British colonialists in the 1930s, Hausa fiction literary competitions were introduced to boost literary activity in northern Nigeria (East, 1936; Yahaya, 1988). But, there was no female voice from the region among the early writers (Adamu, 2006; Ousseina, 2002). However, when in 1978 a writing competition was organised by the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC), a female voice emerged. Hafsat Abdulwaheed won second place with her 1980 novella *So Aljannar Duniya* (Love is a heaven on Earth). She initially wrote it in the English language but was unable to get it published due to economic and social reasons, so translated the manuscript into Hausa and sent it for the literary competition. With the publication of *So Aljannar Duniya*, she became the first published Hausa woman novelist using the Hausa Boko roman script (Malumfashi, 2017). Hafsat has been the mother of the Nigerian veteran journalist, Kadiriyya Ahmed and Hadiza Isma el-Rufai, a wife of a Northern Nigerian governor of Kaduna state, Nasir el-Rufa'I. Hadiza has also established herself as a female writer in northern Nigeria with her *An Abundance of Scorpion* (2017), a story of a woman seeking love, peace, and happiness (Ajeluorou, 2018).

Interestingly, it is the love theme in Hafsat's novel that set the pace for romance novella writing among female writers in Hausa known as *Littattafan Soyayya*, which flourished within the Kano Market Literature. The Kano State Islamic *Hisbah* censorship board created in 2001, however, ensured that the contents of these *Soyayya* novellas conform to cultural and Islamic religious dictates in the society. As part of 'cleansing' those fictional works that failed the screening test, the censor board burnt many romance novellas confiscated from the markets in 2007 (Whitsitt, 2002). Glenna Gordon reveals that fictional works written under this genre are regarded as taboos once they contradict the cultural codes that request modesty on issues about love, sex, and any intimate social relationship between sexes (Gordon, 2011). Such restrictions always ensured issues in these fictional works never contradict the cultural and Islamic religious injunctions. Gordon (2011) interviewed Sa'adatu Baba Ahmed, one of such female writers whose novella was confiscated and burnt, and asked her why her text failed the screening. What she revealed captured the conservative cultural ideal about morality in the region. The fault was a mere physical contact that describes a husband hugging and wiping away tears from the face of his wife. That fleeting physical contact between the sexes, according to the Board, would encourage premarital sex and promiscuity among the young female readers. The novella of a leading writer in the genre, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu with a title *Alhaki Kwuikwiyo* was translated into English as 'Sin is a Puppy

that Follows You Home' in 2012. The novella became the first Hausa text written by a woman to be translated into English and published.

Studies have also cited religion and culture as limiting factors for female writers writing in English in the northeast (Musa, 2019). As it's obtained in most parts of northern Nigeria, parents in the northeast marry off their daughters at the onset of puberty. Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, one of the prolific Hausa woman writers, was herself married off at the age of 13 (Malumfashi, 2019). Within the cultural convention of the region, even when girls attend schools their education usually ends after completion of primary school, by which they moved to their husband's houses as child brides. Very few girls obtain secondary and tertiary education because tradition requires them to be married early in life. This has been captured in almost all available literary works of female writers in the northern region. Most of Alkali's characters are also married off from that age. This may be a limiting factor for them as writers to acquire higher education that would bring out their proficiency to write in the English language. Although presently there are few females in the region having access to higher formal education, there appear to be limitations due to the activities of Boko Haram insurgents, who for the past one and a half decades were on a rampage, destroying schools, killing students, and teachers and abducting girls in schools (Joda and Abdulrashid, 2015). Their activities have virtually halted educational activities in the region. This may also be a limiting factor for the production of educated females writing in English from the region within the last two decades.

Taking all these together, this paper attempts to corroborate those findings on education, literary trend, and religious-cultural factors as limiting women's literary production and explore other probable reasons that are constraining the production of women's literary works in English in the northeastern region.

III. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method is adopted for this study in order to provide authentic, dependable, and enlarged information on the research questions. It is an approach espoused by the pragmatists through incorporating quantitative and qualitative techniques. Mixed method proponents uphold that the amalgamation of both techniques assists in providing a bird-eye view on a problem from different perspectives. Having a mixed method is considered the best approach for this paper based on the assumption that "no investigative strategy is essentially superior to another" (Saunders et al 2012, p.141). The combination of

the two methods decreased the possibility of reaching deceitful endings (Yin, 1994).

Research Methods

Qualitative and Quantitative method of data collection was adopted through the use of questionnaire, interview, and Focus Group Discussion.

Quantitative Method

Quantitative data was collected from publishers, English and literary studies students, female lecturers as well as literary clubs and associations members through structured interviews and questionnaires.

Structured Interview

Written interviews were administered to publishing houses in the northeast and other parts of northern Nigeria targeting publishers and editors. Questions for such interviews were sent in advance and were followed up by a face-to-face discussion.

Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires were also sent to departments of English and literary studies in six universities and three colleges of education from the three states of Borno, Gombe, and Yobe in northeastern Nigeria, targeting heads and lecturers in the respective departments.

Qualitative Method

Qualitative data were collected through Focus Group Discussion, unstructured interviews, phone conversations as well as library and desk reviews.

Narratives through FGD

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with female students of English and literary studies from six universities and three colleges of education in Borno, Gombe, and Yobe states was conducted. The FGD was conducted through a Consensus Workshop, which is a specialised way to help a group reach a consensus on a phenomenon (Gilbraith, 2018). The FGD engaged the female students in a discussion by grouping them to brainstorm the research questions and to give their responses in their groups. The responses of the smaller groups were then clustered on related themes and reflected upon in a larger plenary group. The FGD also focused on problems and prospects for aspiring or unpublished female writers from the region so as to build amenable measures as recommendations.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted with the heads of departments, female lecturers, and selected female members of literary organizations and associations in the six universities, three colleges of education, and three literary associations in Borno, Gombe, and Yobe states of

the northeast. The interview bordered on issues affecting producing literary works in English in the region. Data gathering included a recording of the interview responses and recorded telephone conversations, which were later transcribed. Consents from the respondents were first received before the recording and transcription of the responses.

Reviews

Secondary materials were reviewed from journals, textbooks, and newspaper articles as regards women writing in the three states and the northern region generally. This was meant to answer research questions that the questionnaires, FGD, and the direct interview could not adequately provide. The data collected through these sources were analysed and reviewed, and fully acknowledged.

Sampled Population Size

The population for the survey came from Yobe State University and Federal University Gashua in Yobe State; University of Maiduguri and Borno State University in Borno State, and Federal University Kashere and Gombe State University in Gombe state. In addition, Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua from Yobe State, College of Education Waka Biu from Borno State, and Federal College of Education (Technical) Gombe from Gombe state were also sampled for the population. Literary associations from the three states were also part of the sampled population. Others are the University of Maiduguri Printing Press in Borno State and Ahmadu Bello University Press and Northern Nigerian Publishing Company in Kaduna state. The study was limited to these six (6) universities, three (3) colleges of education, three (3) literary associations in the three states, and three (3) publishing houses in northern Nigeria.

Structured interview questions and questionnaires based on the research questions were sent to the nine higher institutions in the three states, targeting respondents from the departments of English and literary studies. The targets were the nine (9) heads of the departments and twenty-seven (27) female lecturers, two (2) each from the nine (9) institutions making up thirty-six (36) respondents. For the FGD, forty (40) female students from each of the nine (9) higher institutions participated in the consensus workshop, targeting three hundred and sixty (360) participants. In addition, two (2) participants from each of the three (3) publishing houses were selected, making a total of six (6) participants. Six (6) members from each of the three (3) literary associations, making up a total of eighteen (18) participants, were engaged through unstructured interviews. So, a total of 420 participants were

targeted through the different methods of data collection for the survey at different times in the course of the study.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through a discussion of each research question. Responses for the questions were derived from the unstructured interviews, interviews, questionnaires, and consensus workshop proceedings. The unstructured interviews conducted as part of the qualitative data were recorded and converted to printed documents for the analysis. For the structured interviews, responses were recorded as they were given and were later analysed. The points that the female participants came up with through the FGD consensus workshop answered some of the research questions and formed part of the suggestions or amenable measures to be taken to answer the relevant research questions.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data collected are discussed based on the research questions and the responses of the target population to achieve a particular objective. In other words, a research question is taken to formulate the items of a questionnaire, interview, or the FGD topics in relation to the stated objective. This was answered through the appropriate method adopted, by the responses of the population. The findings of the research based on the questions are presented below.

(a) What is the average percentage of female writers from Borno, Gombe, and Yobe states writing literary works in English?

The first Research Question demands to find out, through interviews and questionnaires, the percentage of published female writers in English from Borno, Gombe and Yobe states. This question was posed to respondents from the three publishing houses and the three literary associations in the three northeast states. The objective is to determine the actual percentage of published women novelists or poets in the northeast between 1980 and 2020. Responses from the publishing houses revealed no record of female writers from the region who have published creative works with them. Female members in one of the literary associations identified a female member who has published a collection of poetry from a less known publishing house and all three associations in the state identified four (4) major published female novelists that they have read their works. A further review of literature on the question revealed very few published female writers from the northeast region.

(b) What important position does creative writing occupy in the northeast region?

This research question was directed to heads of departments as well as sampled female lecturers in the nine tertiary institutions in the region. Responses were also gathered through the consensus workshop conducted through the Focus Group Discussions in these institutions. Their responses on the items of the questionnaire, interviews, and FGD on this question were collated and summarised at the point of saturation to answer the research question as follows:

Are there any females in the northeast writing fiction and poetry in English?

This item of the question was aimed to establish paucity or availability of female writers to corroborate the responses of the publishing houses and the literary associations. Ninety percent (90%) of the respondents stated that there are very few female writers in English whom they have read from the northeast. The ten percent (10%) of those that stated there are female writers in the region continued to cite Zaynab Alkali, Raznat T. Mohammed, Habiba Alkali, and Fatima Ba'aram Alkali as the only prominent female novelist voices in the region. Other women writers cited are unpublished poetesses who use online sources as the medium to showcase their works.

Is Creative Writing an important subject taught as a course in the higher institutions within the three states?

Ninety percent (90%) of the respondents from the nine tertiary institutions confirmed that they were taught creative writing as a literature course in their institutions. The participants through the FGD, however, provided mixed responses to the significance of teaching the course in fostering creative work from the region. Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents said creative writing courses are relevant in providing the required language and writing tips for female writers from the region. They see teaching the course as important given that it prepares students to be effective writers and communicators. About seventy percent (70%) of the respondents, however, claimed that it is not relevant given that many renowned female writers are not graduates of English literary studies or creative writing courses in Nigeria and globally. A participant cited Fatima Ba'aram from the northeast, who is a lawyer by profession, and who has been a writer, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from southeastern Nigeria, who was first a medical student before becoming a writer. Tyler Hurst claimed that it's wrong to assume that becoming a good writer requires formal education. Good writers 'don't necessarily quote Shakespeare, nor do they use four-and five-syllable words'; they don't need that knowledge to 'impress their readers with slick verses that rhyme and flow effortlessly from beginning to end', but rather try

only to 'connect their audience' to their story' (Hurst, 2017, np). However, seventy-five (75%) of the respondents indicated that the lack of students' solid foundation on creative work and literature to be admitted into English and literary studies courses may be a factor that affects writing and appreciating creative works in the northeast. A study by Muhammad Dahiru (2020) reveals that there are no sufficient teachers to teach literature in secondary schools in the northeast states of Yobe and Borno. The study revealed that there are no graduates of literature teachers in the public secondary schools in Yobe state, which affects the products being admitted for literary courses in the universities and colleges of education within the region (Dahiru, 2020).

Further, about 75% of the female lecturers and students that responded from the nine tertiary institutions revealed that creative writing is not so popular with their female students. This finding does not corroborate the findings of Anthony (2011) on gender as a determinant of achievement in literary studies among the Yoruba and that of Anisa (2017) that girls have higher achievement in literature study compared to boys.

Is writing a glorified profession/venture in the region?

There are mixed responses to this item of the research question by the respondents. A greater number (75%) see no glory in being a writer as writing does not pay. Many see it as a hobby or recreation rather than bringing credit to oneself as a writer. Only about 25% of the female respondents support the idea that writing is a glorified venture and that women should embrace it in the region. As some argued, creative writing fulfills the requirements of Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE) as regards the function of education. NPE stipulates that one of the goals of education in Nigeria is to "raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others [and] respect the dignity of labour" (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004: p.18). Creative work provides the basic foundation for all these. As Ryan S, and Ryan D. opined, literature as a reflection of any society mirrors the human condition as well as presents ideology and challenges; it makes readers or participants think about all these through a recreation of a world seen through reading literary material (Ryan and Ryan, n.d., p.2). Creative works, therefore, develop individuals and the nation by bringing about empowerment, pleasure, acculturation, and general knowledge on different things and ideas. Based on this, few respondents consider it a significant venture to embrace.

The responses of the participants through the FGD also revealed that most lecturers in the universities

and the colleges of education were not effective writers themselves, and so show little or no regard to creative writing ventures. Responses from the FGD also revealed that most of the lecturers of literature do not inculcate creative skills to students because they also don't have such skills. After all, they have no capacity and competence to inculcate to budding writers in English and get published. Labo-Popoola observed that the attitude of the teacher as well as his competence in handling literary texts determines his output in the class and the attitudes of the students to the subject (Labo-Popoola, 2020). The available female lecturers that responded admitted they do not provide the enabling creative masterclasses to encourage budding female writers from the higher institutions in the region. As rightly observed by Ogunaike (2002), teachers of literature mostly adopt the 'take your book and read approach' and do not apply good methods and approaches. About 80% of the female lecturers in the nine higher institutions sampled admitted they use the same approach. This invariably affects the inculcation of basic creative skills and knowledge that liberates but only provides knowledge that domesticates the learners. This approach is what Paulo Freire calls the banking method as opposed to the problem-solving method (Freire, 1970) that can produce critical thinkers and creative writers.

The responses of female students, through the FGD, as well as the responses of the heads of departments and female lectures in the nine institutions, through the interviews and questionnaires, revealed that writing is not an area of specialisation in which female students pursue in academic life in the northeast region. This view is similar to a study by Fakeye (2011) on the general decline in enrolment into literature-in-English courses. As Onukaogu (2002) observed, students can use literature to connect their experiences with other experiences they encounter in life. However, about 60% of the respondents argued that female students and potential female writers lack the capacity to learn and build from the various cultural, religious, and security challenges being experienced in the northeast region, and develop as writers. In addition, taking up a course that can give skills in writing or reading texts is not popular with the female students and lecturers, which corroborates Fakeye's (2011) finding that revealed declining enrolment of students into literature classrooms and Fakeye (2012) on students not considering literature as a profitable career path.

(c) What are the significant factors that likely cause the dearth of women's literary writing in English in the northeast?

This research question was answered by all the sampled respondents, which include the female teachers, heads of various departments, and the students of the nine (9) tertiary institutions, editors and publishers in the three publishing houses and the members of the three literary associations in the three states surveyed. The responses gathered through interviews, questionnaires and the FGD were collated and grouped, at the point of saturation, under the following factors:

Religious Factors

Religion, *per se*, has not been cited by the respondents as a factor that stops women from writing. Age-old aversion to formal education, obviously because of its connection to Christian missionaries, has always been attributed to the drawbacks on all forms of education and educational pursuits in the region. Almost all the respondents identified the activities of the Boko Haram Islamists and their ideology as affecting any form of the educational enterprise, including the act of writing by the females in the region. Many studies have identified the Boko Haram ideological stand on formal or 'Western Education' as a general threat to educational development in the northeast, where they operate. There is no denying the fact that the Boko Haram insurgency has impacted negatively on educational development in northeast Nigeria for over a decade (Joda and Abdulrasheed, 2015) by increasing the number of out-of-school children or nonattendance into formal education in the region (Oladunjoye and Omemu, 2013). Any form of education acquired in the formal school is regarded as anti-Islam and a process of Christianization.

Participants through the FGD recount the impact of Boko Haram ideology on education and writing in English from the region. The Boko Haram group claimed that in English language class, the concept of having a 'future tense' is to claim knowledge of *gayb*, a divine providence to say what would happen tomorrow. During one of Boko Haram's propaganda sermons, a commander claimed that the addition operation symbol + in Mathematics represents the Christian Cross. This means the education aims to Christianise the people that undergo it. They gave the same interpretation to the symbol in the hospital, which they wanted to be replaced with a crescent. In Geography and Biology subjects, the shape of the earth and its rotation as well as the concept of the *bigbang* in evolution theory, are two grey areas that the group is against, claiming they contradict Islamic injunctions. Any creative work and literary text depicting cultural codes and behaviours that may contradict what they feel is the Islamic teaching become taboo. Reading *gods* and deities in some novels or recreating morally bankrupt actions are

considered acts of corrupting the religious values of the people. This is more dangerous, as they claimed, with young girls. They claimed such bad examples would corrupt young girls' morals rather than develop their capacity and make them learn and build from the experiences of others for their development in life. This supports the claims of Onukaogu (2002) and Ogden (1997) that works of literature provide life experiences for readers to learn from. Respondents cited the activities of the Hisbah censorship board created in 2001 in Kano to enforce cultural codes on literary materials as well as Boko Haram that adopted a brutal way of destroying formal school structure, abducting female students, and killing innocent women and children as factors that have impacted negatively on the creation of many female writers from northern Nigeria, generally, and specifically from the northeast.

Cultural Factors

The predominant northern Nigerian culture has been synonymous with the Islamic religion. Anything that the culture considers taboo is largely derived from the dictates and codes of the religion. The responses through the Focus Group Discussion revealed that culture as an extension of religion plays a significant role in the dearth of female writers from the region. The content and style of literary works from the northeast are limited by the dictates of the culture. Writers share similar concerns about family, marriage, patriarchy, polygamy, and other issues because these are what cultural and religious authorities would sanction. What they write and how they write, therefore, are influenced by the culture of the region. Although studies have revealed literary and language courses are considered an exclusively female area of specialization (Anisa, 2017; Anthony (2011), the girls from the northeast are discouraged from it because of cultural restrictions. Responses from the study, therefore, indicated that the mindsets of the people on moral codes are indicators that contents of some permissive literary creative works are considered to be against the culture in the northeast.

Publishing Opportunities

Responses by the three publishing houses and the three literary associations in the three states collated are summarised under three areas of concern. First, the unavailability of publishing houses in the region has been identified by almost all the respondents as a factor that limits female writers from getting their works published. Only university presses are recognised as publishers within the three states in the region, and they mostly publish educational books and scholarly journals rather than literary texts. The second reason cited by the respondents is high publishing cost, which poses challenges to poor

aspiring female writers in the region. The third reason is the absence of sponsorship, either by individuals or organisations in the region, to support budding female writers get published. The responses through the FGD consensus workshop identified the social media outlet as a preferred means for the few available female writers in the region to get noticed or read. Most budding poets and novelists chose the online medium to publish their works rather than through official publishing houses because of the cost.

Participants of the FGD through the consensus workshop emphasised that female writers from the northeast have always lagged in relation to creative work. Participants acknowledged attempts made to foster women's literary activity in northern Nigeria, in which women writers from the northeast were not noticed. The participants cited the writing competitions in the north which started in the 1930s with the Northern Regional Literature Agency (NORLA) writing competitions organised in the Hausa language (East, 1936; Yahaya, 1988). Females from Borno, Gombe, and Yobe, however, did not take part. The majority of female voices from other parts of northern Nigeria that took part were proficient in the Hausa language but not so adept in writing through the medium of the English language.

Poor Readership

About seventy-five (75%) of the respondents, through the interviews, questionnaires, and the FGD, cited poor readership as the factor that affects female publishing in the region. Two reasons were identified as causes of this poor readership: level of education of readers and poor reading culture in the region. The level of education of readers has been identified as a major reason. Texts written in English are not popular with young female readers because of the language challenge. The education of girls in the region usually ends after primary school and as Margaret Hauwa Kassam states 'very few young girls obtain secondary and tertiary education because tradition requires them to be married early in life' (Kassam, 1996, p. 122). Writing and reading in the English language, as identified by the respondents, become difficult tasks for most of the not highly literate females in the region. Texts that were written in English pose difficulty in understanding, appreciation, and analysis for the not-so-educated male and female readership. A study by Gubair and Samia (2019) in Sudan, which has the same religious and security challenges as northeastern Nigeria, offers a critical perspective that applies to the situation in the northeast. They identified the linguistic competence of the students as a factor that affects literary study and appreciation. They found that students of literature find it

very difficult to deconstruct a literary piece and appreciate it. The educational backwardness in the northeast has a similar effect on readers' level of competence in the English language, which would have enabled them to read a literary text effectively and critically appreciates it.

Participants also cited the use of social media and other internet facilities such as *Netflix* and *YouTube* as other reasons for the paucity of readers of published texts in the region. Most of the FGD participants revealed that the last time they bought a novel or book of poetry was as a recommended literary text in their literature courses. They revealed that they only bought books for a specific purpose, not for pleasure. They preferred watching movies to reading novels, and poetry has very little readership among the participants. With the advent of Hausa movies in the Hausa movie industry known as *Kannywood*, even the Kano Market Literature *Soyayyya* novellas become less popular among female readers. They prefer watching movies and drama on television or through the internet than reading a novel. Poor readership, therefore, discourages writing and publishing literary texts, which come with a cost. Responses from the publishing houses confirmed this state of poor readers. A study revealed that poor reading culture is a problem that is found among students in the southern part of Nigeria as well (Fabunmi and Folorunso, 2010).

(d) Do thematic concerns and unique stylistic complexity as a trend among the women writers in the northeast affect the production of literary works in English?

Almost all participants agreed that the available literary works from the region followed a unique pattern identifiable in northern Nigerian women's fiction and poetry. Most of the thematic concerns of the novels and poems from the region concentrate on love, marriage, family, religion, and peaceful coexistence. Female writing in northern Nigeria, which started in the 19th century with Asma'u bint Shehu dan Fodio's the first modern poet, writer, educationist, and feminist in northern Nigeria, followed this identifiable trend to the 21st century. Participants recognised that the themes of the novels of Zaynab Alkali, the pioneer internationally recognised northern female writer in English, also focus on love, marriage, family, and the experiences of the female as a mother, daughter, and wife. When Hafsat Abdulwaheed set the tone of the *Littattafan Soyayya*, young readers, especially girls in north-eastern Nigeria, developed a voracious appetite for these romantic fictional works. Chronicling the themes of these *Soyayya* novellas, Glenna Gordon explains that they are mainly concerned with romance, love, marriage and how best to serve husband

(Gordon, 2011, np). This trend continued to influence female writing and *Kannywood* movies in the Hausa language in northern Nigeria.

Participants identified, as a thematic trend, love, family, and peaceful coexistence as basic motifs in almost all works written in English by women from the northeast. The novels of Zaynab Alkali, from *The Stillborn* (1984), *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997), *The Descendants* (2005) to her most recent novel, *Invisible Borders* (2016), all focus on issues of marriage, child bride, polygamy, cultural and religious codes, girl-child education, and other factors that affect the female in northern Nigeria. Participants identified all these motifs as building the general love themes and peaceful family coexistence. *Personal Angle* (2008) and *The Phantom Army* (2017) are the novels of Alkali's two daughters, Fatima Ba'aram Alkali and Habiba Nur-Alkali, respectively, which the participants identified as the fresh voices of female writers from the northeast. The themes of these novels also focus on family, marriage conflict, and the position of the female in Islamic society, Fatima's *Personal Angle* won the 2009 Abuja Writers' Forum (AWF) Ibrahim Tahir Prize for Prose. Although the novel touches on issues related to politics and business, the central message of the novel is the depiction of the ideal woman, who has dignity, etiquette, and integrity that both religion and culture in the northeast want to see. The novel focuses on the aim of marriage, which should be a union for peace and happiness, not a place to fight for rights. Habiba's *The Phantom Army* also reflects the experiences of women in relation to the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast (Ibrahim, 2018). Lots of unpublished female writers were identified by the participants. Like Habiba Nur-Alkali, they also come up with additional motifs on personal emotions (Musa, 2019) and issues related to the conflict in the region. Participants cited the works of Razinat T. Mohammed, who has already established herself as a voice to reckon with among the female writers in the northeast. Her works cited by the participants include *A Love Like Woman's*, *Habiba*, *The Travails of the First Wife*, *A New Line* and *My Daughter My Blood*.

The FGD concludes that the works of these four (4) female writers have been essential reading for literature courses in the nine (9) higher institutions selected for the study. The novels are *for* and *about* the northeast because of their current and cutting-edge contribution to the cultural perspective of the region required and accepted in relation to marriage, family, polygamy, and the position of women. This as well conforms to the main trend of the literature in northern Nigeria.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper broadly set to investigate women writing in northeastern states of Borno, Yobe and Gombe in northern Nigeria. The objectives include identifying the availability of women writers or their paucity, investigating the various factors that cause the likely dearth of women's literary works in English, and the thematic concern and unique stylistic complexity as a trend among the women writers in these selected states. Through a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative data collection, the study discovered a paucity of women writers from the northeast region. The study also found that religion, culture, publishing challenges, and poor readership were some of the probable factors that cause the dearth of women writers in English in the three states under study. The study also discovered that the few available women writers prefer social media outlets and other online media to read or get their works published. The themes of the few available texts also revealed the recurrent motifs of marriage, family, polygamy, girl-child education, and peaceful coexistence in society. This finding has expanded the scope of the existing literature on feminist fiction in northern Nigeria, particularly from the northeast region. Although the conclusion reached from the data collected through the different methods was at a point of saturation, still, further research is suggested on other states in the northeast and the northern Nigerian region or anywhere in the world to corroborate the findings of this survey or validate the instrument used for the data collection.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The fourth objective of the survey aimed to identify amenable measures to be adopted in addressing the likely factors that limit women's production of literary works in English. The paper recommends the following, based on the findings and conclusion.

- Organise female literary competitions and retreats in the northeast region

Like other female writers across the continent, female writers from a war-ravaged region of northeastern Nigeria need robust literary competitions and workshops, especially to write for and about peace. 'Write for Peace', an online story writing workshop and competition outlet from South Sudan that started in 2020, is apt for the northeast in the promotion of female writing. South Sudan shares conflict experiences with northeastern Nigeria, so, issues raised by the entrants to the competition would not only raise the number of published female writers but could help in fostering peace. The competitions, just as obtained in South Sudan, could act as powerful counter-narratives against divisions and gender-based violence. In

the same vein, good values and creative critical thinking could be encouraged through the competitions. Winning entries could be published and distributed to schools in northeastern Nigeria as formal reading texts in English literary studies. The higher institutions, publishing houses, literary associations, and the relevant government authorities in the region can facilitate the formation of such competitions.

- *Literary outlets for the female writers*

Women remained strong change agents in any society and literary activities are important avenues to bring the desired change, especially peace as a post-conflict measure in northeastern Nigeria. The BBC World Hausa service *Hikayata*, a story writing competition exclusively for women, has helped in discovering lots of female writers from northern Nigeria. The budding novelists explore biases on female rights, stereotypes, cultural exclusions and other social and economic conditions of women in northern Nigeria. Female writers in the northeast region should be encouraged to be part of existing or created writing forums such as the 'Poets in Nigeria' Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) as well as local and international literary clubs and associations. This should be the responsibility of all stakeholders.

- *Organise a Book Project for female writers*

The displacement of women in the region comes through the tripartite factors of peace, security and gender. Women are the most affected by the conflict. About 53% of the displaced in the region are women and girls. The displacement comes with the attending consequence of poverty and hunger, which are all fadders for literary writings from the region. A book project would produce novels, anthologies, and collections specifically for women. It's the responsibility of all stakeholders to identify a funding body to sponsor such a book project that would promote female writing in the region.

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