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# What about Love?

## *'Defiant Love' and Civic Dissent in Season of Crimson Blossoms and The Death of Vivek Oji*

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### Abstract

This article examines the representation of love in two contemporary Nigerian novels, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Inspired by bell hooks's understanding of love and Dani d'Emilia and Daniel B. Chávez's manifesto *Radical Tenderness Is ...* I suggest the concept of defiant love as a tool for analysing love as a form of civic dissent in these novels. 'Defiant love,' as I understand it, embraces the complementary duality of love as emotion and action. Consequently, to allow the emotion of love to evolve in violent and patriarchal circumstances already constitutes dissent with the status quo. I argue that the two novels explore relationships and alliances that defy patriarchal structures, in particular gender norms and heteronormativity. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* depict the potentiality of defiant love, be it between a middle-aged widow and a young man, or queer young people, in socio-political contexts of continuous political and ethnic tensions, oppression and violence. The novels negotiate what constitutes dissent and what role affects play in moments of civic dissent.

### Keywords

feminist and queer literature – radical love – Nigerian literature – affect and dissent

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## 1 Love and Civic Dissent, Love as Civic Dissent

Dissent, understood as the refusal to accept the status quo of power relations, is frequently associated with the mind and the fist—with critical thinking, protest, and violence.<sup>1</sup> While we are quick to name protests and riots as displays of civic dissent, we frequently neglect to acknowledge that dissent originates in individual emotions that, when based on shared experiences and social interaction, become collective emotions. Emotions like frustration, despair, rage, and powerlessness can awaken the desire to resist oppressive circumstances and become the impulse to seek out like-minded people for collective resistance. Emotions have the potential to be even more than a drive to action, or a drive to dissent. In this paper and through my analysis of two contemporary Nigerian novels, I argue that emotions can constitute dissent itself, and in particular a form of dissent that aims for structural changes or a revolution. One of the most energetic affects is love—or, at least, it is one of the best represented emotions in literature. Here, I refer to love not only in the sense of romantic love but to love as an intimate emotion at the core of interpersonal social relationships. Love, like most emotions, refuses a precise definition. We might locate it somewhere between feeling and action, as bell hooks suggests in *All About Love*:

To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility. We are often taught we have no control over our “feelings.” Yet most of us accept that we choose our actions, that intention and will inform what we do. We also accept that our actions have consequences.<sup>2</sup>

hooks considers that, where love is concerned, feeling and action are inherently linked. To this, I add that love also comprises a political dimension. Bearing in mind this third dimension, the connections between feeling and action become more palpable and visible, especially when the concerned love defies norms and power relations.<sup>3</sup> I propose to reconsider our understanding of the

1 See Mark Redhead, “dissent,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/dissent-political>, acc. 19 April 2022.

2 b. hooks, *All about Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 13.

3 See: Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Pr., 2004); Eleanor Wilkinson, “On Love as an (Im)properly Political Concept,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35.1 (2017): 57–71.

political dimension of love, and I suggest rejecting the idea that politics and civic dissent are solely manifested in public and through protest or violence. Rather, I advocate for a focus on everyday experiences and intimate gestures that defy patriarchal and heteronormative structures and as such contribute to a radical transformation of society. I argue that two contemporary Nigerian novels, namely Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2016) and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020),<sup>4</sup> can help us understand such a radical potential of love and its role in civic dissent. In these novels, love as an emotion and an action are overwhelmingly present; therefore, I propose to read these two novels alongside each other and to explore the complexities of love and its political dimension.

Reading Ibrahim and Emezi, I was reminded of the radical manifesto *Radical Tenderness is ...* by performance artists and educators Dani D'Emilia and Daniel B. Chávez (2015). In this manifesto, D'Emilia and Chávez examine different aspects of tenderness and conclude that this expression of love can be articulated in various and diverse forms. Additionally, tenderness is a conscious and explicit embracing of dissent, which makes radical tenderness political: "Radical tenderness is to dance among dissident bodies in a workshop [...] Radical tenderness is to assume leadership when your community asks it of you, although you may not know what to do, or how to do it!"<sup>5</sup> D'Emilia and Chávez conceive radical tenderness as ambiguous and fluid. They claim that anyone can express radical tenderness, even unconsciously or unpremeditatedly. This notion is in unison with the broader definition of political love Eleanor Wilkinson suggests in *On Love as an (Im)properly Political Concept*:

Love is never only about joy and "good" affects, love has a multitude of different affects, and these negative "bad" affects might also be political. Political love is not just about collective joy, but also love as fear, love as disappointment, love as rage, love as domination. Therefore, rather than simply dismissing "bad love" as "not political," we might instead seek to recognize the political dimensions of both "good" and "bad" forms of love.<sup>6</sup>

4 Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2016); Akwaeke Emezi, *The Death of Vivek Oji* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020).

5 Dani D'Emilia, Daniel B. Chávez, *Radical Tenderness Is ... A living manifesto* (2015):1/2, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f5Kd91d2u-5F7iTbPfrSyNoHouQVhsLc/view>, acc. 25 April 2022.

6 Wilkinson, "On love as an (im)properly political concept," (67).

Love, as Wilkinson explains, can both strive for “good” and “bad” objectives without losing its political dimension. Or, if we consider D’Emilia and Chávez’s claim of unintentionality of radical tenderness to be equally valid for love more broadly, love’s aim can be love itself, which in itself is a radical political act. Such an approach evocates Audre Lorde’s suggestion that defying the status quo of patriarchal and heteronormative structures by claiming love and the erotic as agency can create more than interpersonal emotional bonds: it can create coalitions.<sup>7</sup> Lorde’s idea aligns with Godfried Asante’s examination of alliances of (queer) Africanness.<sup>8</sup> To this, I add that coalitions born out of love and tenderness constitute defiant forms of civic dissent in everyday practices.

For the analysis of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, I propose the term ‘defiant love.’ Defiant love, as I understand it, describes loving relationships, both romantic and non-romantic, that question and defy societal norms, power relations, and the general status quo. I argue that by means of their existence, those loving relationships or alliances already constitute acts of civic dissent, which those powers they resist try to repress (again). The *Radical Tenderness Manifesto* serves me as a source of knowledge and inspiration for this definition of defiant love, because its authors emphasise and embrace the inherent contradictions of tenderness and its political potential. In tracing and understanding defiant love in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, I explore the functions and limitations of defiant love within the novels and reflect on their contributions to our understanding of civic dissent in the contemporary Nigerian context. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* are not romantic novels but critical explorations of norms, oppressive structures and corruption in times of political turmoil in Nigeria and, therefore, serve the purpose of my study well.

## 2 Defiant Love and Female Lust—*Season of Crimson Blossoms*

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim’s acclaimed debut novel *Season of Crimson Blossoms* was first published in 2015 and awarded the prestigious Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2016. In an article in the Nigerian newspaper *The Guardian*, Jennifer Nagu points out the essential role love plays in the novel: “The novel explores the

7 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in: *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Pr. 2007): 53–59.

8 Godfried Asante, “Decolonizing the Erotic: Building Alliances of (Queer) African Eros,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 43,2 (2020): 113–118.

theme of love, heartbreak, hope, desire, the human condition and our collective humanity. It examines the moral rules we live by.”<sup>9</sup> I argue that the novel not only “examines the moral rules we live by” but also defies those rules or norms by centring defiant love, that is, a form of love that challenges power relations and patriarchal societal structures by simply existing and creating improbable coalitions that transcend social class, age, and gender. Drawing on Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s understanding of feminist alliances as both affectively charged and sites of the intertwining of intimacy and power,<sup>10</sup> Godfried Asante states that: “[t]his point of connection, it seems, regularly gets overlooked in the theorizing of political resistance to state power in Africa. Africans loving Africans in various ways outside the heteronormative matrix of power can provide alternative futures and visions of the living [...]”<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, the heteronormative matrix also excludes sexual and caring relationships between middle-aged widows and young men in their twenties, like Binta and Reza in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Based on these assumptions, my analysis of the novel highlights the manifold ways in which Binta and Reza defy dominant structures and show their civic dissent by embracing their relationship and love.

Despite the novel’s success and wide circulation on both a national and an international level, scholarly engagement is still limited, and predominantly focuses on the sexual aspects of the main protagonists’ unconventional relationship. Onyebuchi James Ile and Susan Dauda, for instance, explore the links between tradition and sex, and Binta and Reza’s transgressions in the novel. However, it is striking that the two scholars would repeatedly point out gendered inequalities, and still neglect to link the idea of ‘tradition’ to patriarchy. The authors’ brief plot summary emphasises cultural restrictions imposed on Binta as a woman as follows:

The book centres on the affair of fifty five year old Hajjiya Binta and twenty six year old Hassan “Reza”. This kind of relationship is regarded as taboo in virtually every culture in Nigeria. However it is more so in conservative Muslim northern Nigeria. The irony however is that what is regarded as taboo for women is a regular practice by men. Society tolerates a fifty five year old man who has an affair with a twenty something or even less year old lady but changes the rules when it comes to women. Related to

9 J. Nagu, “Season of Crimson Blossom [*sic!*]: A literary criticism,” *The Guardian*, November 6, 2016, <https://guardian.ng/art/season-of-crimson-blossom-a-literary-criticism/> (acc. 30/04/2022).

10 G. Asante, “Decolonizing the Erotic: Building Alliances of (Queer) African Eros,” 116.

11 G. Asante, “Decolonizing the Erotic,” 116.

this is the issue of sexual repression among women. Hajiya Binta wanted more out of her sexual relationship with her husband but is restricted by a culture that regards women who do so as wanton or promiscuous.<sup>12</sup>

While I agree with the authors that the differences between what is socially accepted for middle-aged men (having a sexual relationship with a younger woman) constitutes a taboo for a woman of the same age, I disagree with pinpointing culture as the source of these inequalities. To omit both the patriarchal nature of the traditions described in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and the presence of affect, as opposed to only lust, in Binta and Reza's relationship, reduces, in my opinion, the powerful representation of defiant love in the novel to only one of its aspects. Similarly, Daniel Chukwuemeka focuses on the aspect of salaciousness in Binta and Reza's relationship and examines their resistance to patriarchal taboos, commenting only in passing on the role political violence plays in the novel.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Oloaye and Amanda Zink's study of the novel focuses on the body as a "site of converging ideologies", and embodied shame with a focus on Binta.<sup>14</sup> This approach to the novel, albeit important, overlooks the vital role of love as emotion and action, which in my understanding constitute acts of civic dissent, and as such, transcend bodily experiences but highlight the union of mind (as the centre of emotion) and body (as the tool of action). Additionally, the above studies of Ibrahim's novel share a homogenous understanding of women's sexuality and sexual practices in Muslim settings in Nigeria, neglecting testimonies by Muslim African women, which highlight the diversity of sexual practices.<sup>15</sup>

*Season of Crimson Blossoms*, set between contemporary Jos and Abuja, portrays a predominantly conservative Hausa society, and revolves around the

12 Onyebuchi James Ile & Susan Dauda, "The Cultural Realms and Their Implications for Development: A study of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*," *Nile Journal of English Studies* 3 (2016): 13.

13 D. Chukwuemeka, "A Wetness in Dry Places: Sex and Taboo in Abubakar Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*," *Humanities Bulletin* 2.2 (2019): 145–157.

14 Elizabeth Oloaye & Amanda Zink, "The Muslim Woman's Body as a Speakerly Text: The gendered embodiment of religion, trauma and shame in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*," *Body Studies* 2.5 (2020): 40–52.

15 See for instance Nana Darko Sekiyamah & Malaka M. Grant's blog *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women* (<https://adventuresfrom.com/about/>, acc. 17 May 2022), N.D. Sekiyamah's book *The Sex Lives of African Women* (2021), and P. Hendricks' *Hijab: Unveiling queer Muslim lives* (2009).

relationship between Binta, a 55-year-old widow, and Hassan, nicknamed Reza, a 25-year-old political thug and weed-dealer, who first meet when he breaks into her house, and is surprised by her unexpected return home. After a brief and threatening encounter, Reza manages to escape with Binta's valuables, but brings them back a few days later. Despite the nature of their encounter, both instantly feel attracted to each other, and subsequently start a romantic and sexual relationship that eventually becomes public knowledge. The narration is split into various plots which take the readers back and forth between Binta and Reza's past and present. While Binta lives a normative and socially accepted family life and for a long time adheres to societal norms, Reza is a rebellious teenager and an "outlaw" in Abuja's marginalised neighbourhood San Siro. He increasingly becomes involved in more criminal activities that surpass political rallying to culminate in the kidnapping of a politician's niece. At the end of the novel, Binta's adult children learn of the relationship, and Munkaila, her eldest son, challenges Reza. The argument quickly turns into a physical confrontation with a fatal ending for Munkaila. On the run, Reza turns to the senator, for whom he has been working, seeking refuge, but due to the latter's links to Munkaila, the senator orders Reza's assassination. Finally, Binta is left without both her son and her lover.

While defiant love, lust, and the problematic closeness between violence and love are of great relevance to both Binta and Reza, the novel emphasises the life-changing impact the relationship has on Binta already in its opening sentences: "Hajiya Binta Zubairu was finally born at fifty-five when a dark-lipped rogue with short, spiky hair, like a field of minuscule anthills, scaled her fence and landed, boots and all, in the puddle that was her heart."<sup>16</sup> The portrayal of a middle-aged woman experiencing a new romantic bond with and sexual desire for a man without condemning this female character speaks of the author's feminist consciousness, and of the novel's contributions to current feminist debates about gendered perspectives of aging. In Ibrahim's choice of main female protagonist and his form of representing love resonates bell hooks's theories of love. hooks emphasises the impact of feminist movements on the discourse of love, in general, and on our understanding of love and ageing, in particular, and argues that feminists draw our attention to the determinative impact power has on love, including romantic love. hooks notes the shifts in the presence of power and love from girlhood to adolescence to adulthood and middle-age:

16 Ibrahim, *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, 9; further page references are in the main text.

Fascinating research on girlhood is happening these days. It confirms that young girls often feel strong, courageous, highly creative, and powerful until they begin to receive undermining sexist messages that encourage them to conform to conventional notions of femininity. To conform they have to give up power. Giving up power has been what aging has traditionally felt like for most women. And with the loss of those feelings of power came the fear that we would be forever abandoned, unloved. Now midlife and thereafter has become not only a time to reclaim power but also a time to know real love at last.<sup>17</sup>

As the novel suggests, the newly found romantic and sexual relationship with Reza marks a new beginning in Binta's life. It ends in autonomy, including the sexual. This process of empowerment necessarily entails dissenting and challenging power relations. The romantic and sexual relationship with Reza is, for Binta, the first one she chooses out of her free will, as her father's patriarchal power was decisive in her marriage:

Binta heard him [her father] thundering about how big his daughter had grown under his roof and how men now watched her jiggling her melons in public places, and how it was time for her to start a family of her own. He stormed out, kicking his food out of the way. Binta ran into the hut to weep at her mother's feet. The woman turned her face away to the wall, her hand poised uncertainly over her abdomen. Two days later, Binta was married off to Zubairu, Mallam Dauda's son, who was away working with the railway in Jos.

25–26

This short excerpt raises various issues in respect to love and interhuman relationships. Firstly, it displays the loss of parental love, in particular of fatherly love, which bell hooks mentions in her preface to *Communion*.<sup>18</sup> Unexpectedly to her, the sixteen-year-old Binta is no longer seen as a child but as a woman. Secondly, this flashback exposes the patriarchal strategy of victim blaming. While for Binta and her schoolfriends “singing about a prostitute who hid a stolen veil under her arm and [...] jiggling their little buds” (25) is a game, Mallam Dauda sexualises their behaviour and claims the girls are indecent. It is this game, the simultaneous sexualisation and adultification of the girls, that lead

17 b. hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: Perennial, 2003): 7.

18 hooks, *Communion*, xi.

to Binta's forced marriage to an unknown and absent older man. Ultimately, the male gaze and patriarchal power determine the girl's fate.

Although the novel does not explicitly engage with the role of love in Binta's marriage, her sexual agency is briefly mentioned. Its portrayal highlights the contrasts between the forced relationship with Zubairu, which reinforces patriarchal structures and oppression, and the defiant relationship with Reza. In their conjugal relations, Zubairu is dominant; pleasure, or at least Binta's pleasure, is of no relevance to him: "Zubairu was a practical man and fancied their intimacy as an exercise in conjugal frugality" (50–51). Even more, he actively represses Binta's sexuality and shames her:

She wanted it to be different. She had always wanted it to be different. And so when he nudged her that night, instead of rolling on to her back and throwing her legs apart, she rolled into him and reached for his groin. He instinctively moaned when she caressed his hardness and they both feared their first son, lying on a mattress across the room, would stir. 'What the hell are you doing?' The words, half-barked, half-whispered, struck her like a blow. He pinned her down and, without further rituals, lifted her wrapper. She turned her face to the wall and started counting. The tears slipped down the side of her closed eyes before she got to twenty.

51

Emotional, physical, and sexual violence prevail in Binta's marriage; love constitutes an affect that is either considered unnecessary ([Binta to Reza:] 'You must have loved. You young ones have that luxury' (204)), or even forbidden, including motherly love, in particular to the first-born child. Succumbing to a tradition, Binta is not allowed to give in to her yearning for love for Yaro, her first-born son who later dies a violent death:

There were things she [Binta] wished she had done differently. Such as showing Yaro some affection, protecting him as every mother should do her child. And here she was, fifteen years after his death, seeking him in the eyes of the miscreant who had scaled her fence [Reza]. That felon she had shielded because she saw the shadow of Yaro in his eyes. The son she had loved, but to whom she had been forbidden to show love.

54

Eventually, Reza becomes the recipient of these forms of love Binta repressed earlier: romantic love, sexual love, and motherly love. Reza reminds her of her late son: they are the same age and share a similar lifestyle. In the novel, Binta

explicitly links him to both her deceased husband and son, as soon as Reza forces his entry into her house and assails her:

A strong arm clasped her from behind, pressing firmly across her mouth [...] She made to move but he held her tighter. His arm crushed her breasts. She realised, even in the muted terror of the moment, that this was the closest she had been to any man since her husband's death ten years before. (12–13)

She watched him come towards her. *Haba!* My son, I am old enough to be your mother. Please.'

14; original italics

Instead of fearing Reza and distancing herself from him, as readers would expect after the violent first encounter, Binta embraces her lust, tenderness, and, ultimately, love for Reza and defies oppressive norms. Her transgressive acts are actions of dissent that empower Binta and question not only traditions but patriarchy itself. The comparison of her two relationships with men, Zubairu and Reza, deconstruct gendered forms of suffering in patriarchal structures and the freedom experienced once those structures are defied. However, Ibrahim's novel ultimately suggests that violence remains preponderant in contemporary Nigerian society and still subdues defiant love.

### 3 Love and Violence in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

Setting the novel in the violence of 20th/21st century Northern Nigeria, defiant love acquires yet another political dimension, as violence is present at both a macro and a micro level, in the protagonists' personal lives and at the level of state politics and the society in general. Ethnic and religious tensions, and corrupt politicians and their quest for power at the expense of the population, constitute the setting of the novel. They also penetrate Binta and Reza's relationship. Despite the ubiquity of violence, love—motherly love, the love of friendship, romantic love—prevail and generate alliances among the novel's protagonists. This, I argue, constitutes the decisive political power of love. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* explicitly addresses this power through the voice of Mallam Haruna, Binta's elderly suitor:

After a while Mallam Haruna caressed his beard. 'Love is a wonderful thing, you know.' [...] 'Yes, yes, it is. Imagine what the world would be like without love. It would be terrible, you know. Terrible! People hating

people, people killing people. Total chaos, I tell you, *wallahi*.' [Binta:] 'Isn't that what's happening now?'

140; original italics

Contrary to Mallam Haruna, Binta has had painful experiences of having to suppress love in a patriarchal society and, therefore, is conscious of its absence in Northern Nigerian society. It is in this conversation with Mallam Haruna that Binta understands the political power of her defiant love for Reza, and purposefully decides to cast aside the feelings of shame she has had before. Instead, she chooses to fully embrace the love and lust she feels for him, and to oppose the violent, patriarchal structures that hitherto have determined her life.

Situated in a context of patriarchal and political violence, Binta and Reza's romantic relationship cannot but stand both in relation and in opposition to violence. In fact, their first encounter is a direct result of the political violence and the social inequalities that dominate the Northern Nigerian society Abubakar Adam Ibrahim describes in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Immediately and despite the violent nature of the encounter, the underlying sexual tension between Binta and Reza is implicit in the text:

Holding her [Binta], his [Reza's] dagger at the ready, he guided her to the bedroom. His breath on her neck and the heat from his body made her knees weak. She almost buckled several times. He clasped her firmly so that they tottered like an unwieldy four-legged beast. The friction of her rear against his jeans made his crotch bulge and push hard against her.

14

His arousal is matched with hers. Both protagonists reflect on their conflictive feelings about their mutual attraction throughout the novel.

The novel clearly suggests that the inherent links between violence and love are essential in understanding the dissenting and defying power of love. Both protagonists, but especially Binta, defy patriarchal norms that oppress women and female sexuality by allowing their emotions to evolve and by choosing to maintain the relationship despite their age difference and societal expectations of so-called appropriate behaviour, in particular for widows. Yet, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* positions the power of defiant love in a wider political scope and links it to the broader violent context of politics and society in Northern Nigeria. As readers, we are confronted with protagonists whose lives are continuously disrupted by party political, religious, and ethnic tensions which result in physical violence and brutal assassinations, traumatising and unbearable grief. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, love is not portrayed as an affect that

incites actions of dissent but the emotion itself constitutes dissent. Allowing love to persist, and allowing themselves to feel love, the novel's protagonists create spaces of resistance in which the surrounding violence is acknowledged but not admitted. Throughout the text, doubts and shame would overcome both Reza and Binta, still, they embrace their affects and the power of their resistance:

[Binta:] 'I don't know. You are so young, Hassan [Reza]. I don't know if this is right'. 'Why must it be right? [...] Why can't things be just as they are?' [...] Binta sighed again. 'My daughter was saying something earlier today, about some stupid flower that waits a lifetime to bloom. Thirty years, she said. And when it does, after all those years, it smells like a corpse.' 'Ha ha! What sort of flower is that?' 'I was just thinking how much like that flower I am. I have waited my whole life to feel ... as I do when I'm with you, you know.'

178–179

Both Binta and Reza intentionally embrace their feelings and explicitly contrast this with repressing their feelings in the past. In the novel's present, they struggle to not succumb to the violence that surrounds them. However, they fail, in particular Reza, who, as a weed dealer and political thug employed by a senator, actively contributes to the violence.

In addition to Binta and Reza, there is another protagonist in the novel who constructs a safe space built on the notion of romantic love, although in her case the romantic love is more abstract: Fa'iza. She is Binta's niece and moved in with Binta after witnessing her father's brutal execution in the family's home during riots in Jos in 2008:

When they [rioters] broke down the bathroom door, her father went first, hands raised above his head. Fa'iza felt a warm liquid run down her thighs and pool around her feet. 'Spare my children, please.' Mu'aza knelt down before the armed mob that had invaded the house. 'Kill him! Kill him! What are you waiting for?!' It was a woman. Fa'iza knew then that she would never forget the voice of that woman. She would never forget the hate in it. She perceived the contagious nature of hate that makes one want to murder people they have never interacted with. Or people with whom they have eaten from the same bowl, mourned alongside and shared laughter, people with whom they have nurtured the verdant canopy of a friendship that was on occasions closer to kinship.

75

The traumatised Fa'iza<sup>19</sup> seeks refuge in *soyayya* literature, as a reader and as an aspiring writer: "Fa'iza sighed. 'Me? Maybe I want to write about other things and other places and other people, about love and people being happy and not—'" (72). Fa'iza contrasts two emotions, hatred that sparks disastrous violence, death and traumatising, and love that leads to happiness. She assumes the predicament stated in the *Radical Tenderness* manifesto that "radical tenderness is to know to say 'no.'"<sup>20</sup> Fa'iza's engagement with *littattafan soyayya*, Hausa romance literature, is not merely a coping mechanism, but a deliberate choice. *Soyayya* for her represents more than an escape from the violence that surrounds her, literature enables her to feel and revel in love, and to intentionally refuse to participate in the hatred and violence that dominate the societal context of the novel. It is the active refusal of violence that turns *soyayya* and the feelings this literature awakens in Fa'iza into a defiant love that is both personal and political, because intentional refusal is, as Legacy Russell affirms, a powerful feminist and political tool of resistance.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* suggests that defiant love is not a strong enough resistance to the violence that dominates the Northern Nigerian society as represented in the text. Binta and Reza's relationship is slowly permeated by violence. It is first through Reza himself that violence invades their bond of defiant love, when he almost strikes Binta:

The moment congealed into a haunting image: him standing over her, arms poised, frozen, one motion away from striking, eyes angry and daring, facial muscles quivering; her looking up to him in consternation, terrified even. When he put his arm away from her, Binta put her hand on the cheek he almost struck [...], she felt the ripple of the sheer menace that had just rocked the nest they had built together and cushioned with desire and other sentiments they refused to name.

207

They keep seeing each other, but the power of their defiant love diminishes gradually. Simultaneously, news about their relationship spreads around the neighbourhood, until all of Binta's adult children know about it. Eventually,

19 For a more detailed analysis of Fai'za's traumatising see Audee T. Giwa & Jesse Bijimi, "Trauma, Reminiscences and the Memory Symbol in Selected Characters in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*", *Journal of Language and Linguistics* 6.2, 2019, 38–45.

20 D'Emilia and Chávez, *Radical Tenderness*, 1.

21 Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2020).

Munkaila, Binta's eldest living son, and Reza get into a fight, during which the latter unintentionally kills his opponent. As Munkaila is a banker with links to politicians, they seek revenge. On the last pages of the novel, Reza is killed, too. Ironically, his murder is ordered by the same senator for whom he used to work. Thus, the novel suggests that love, no matter how defiant it might be, is not yet powerful enough to destroy societal, political, and patriarchal violence.

#### 4 Defiant Love, Queerness, and Hair—*The Death of Vivek Oji*

Fatal violence both in relation and opposition to love is a central topic in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) too. In fact, the novel starts with a brief sentence that functions as chapter one: "They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died."<sup>22</sup> This opening sentence implicitly suggests that Vivek's death is caused by violence, and that their death should not be perceived as an isolated occurrence but understood in its context of political tensions, in which markets are burnt down. Notably, the novel links political tensions and violent riots to heteronormativity.

The plot takes us back and forth between the novel's present, the day of Vivek's death and its aftermaths, the history of Vivek's family, their<sup>23</sup> childhood and adolescence to the day their parents change the name on their tombstone to 'Vivek Nnemdi Oji,' whereby their parents finally acknowledge Vivek's gender identity and selected Igbo name, Nnemdi. In fragments, numerous flashbacks and in a polyphony of voices, the novel narrates Vivek's short life in Ngwa, a town in South-Eastern Nigeria, from their birth on the same day their grandmother Ahunna dies, to their death and its aftermaths. In their first year of university, Vivek unexpectedly starts to change. They withdraw from their parents and society, spend most of their time locked in their bedroom, and, most disturbingly to other protagonists, they stop cutting their hair. It grows long—too long for it to be considered proper for a young man. Only Vivek's cousin Osita and their friends Elizabeth, Juju, Somto and Olunne manage to convince Vivek to emerge from isolation. In the course of the novel, the readers find out that through loving bonds the group of friends create a safe space in which all of them can be their queer selves. Osita eventually becomes Vivek's

<sup>22</sup> Emezi, *The Death of Vivek Oji*, 1. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>23</sup> In order to acknowledge the main protagonist's shifting gender identity I shall use the pronoun 'they' throughout my article, even when in the novel Vivek is referred to as 'he' by the other characters and as 'I' whenever Vivek's voice is the narrator.

lover, as Vivek gradually transitions into Nnemdi. Feeling safer and more like themselves, Nnemdi gradually leaves the closed spaces of their friends' homes to walk around town, in particular the market area, albeit their friends' worry for their safety. It is during one of those public outings that Nnemdi finds themselves in the middle of a riot at the local market. When Osita finds them and tries to convince them to head back into the safety of home, the two get into an argument, and Osita accidentally pushes Nnemdi to the ground. The head injury Nnemdi sustains proves to be fatal, and they die in Osita's arms before the two reach the hospital. In order to conceal Nnemdi's existence, Osita undresses his cousin's body, and leaves it naked on the porch of their house, where Kavita, Vivek/Nnemdi's mother, finds it. Persistent in her quest to uncover the events that led to her only child's death, Kavita eventually convinces Osita, Elizabeth, Juju, Somto, and Olunne to tell her the truth about Vivek/Nnemdi. The only secret that remains concealed to the other protagonists is Osita's involvement in Vivek's death. Solely the readers are privy to this revelation.

Similar to Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater*, *The Death of Vivek Oji* addresses issues of queer gender identities and sexualities, mental health, mixed-raced identities, and violence. In difference to the former, the second novel opens space for the exploration of love as both an emotion and an action, and, even more explicitly than *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, represents allowing oneself to feel love as an intentional act of resistance to norms and societal violence. Here, too, the violent societal context finally permeates and affects interpersonal relationships.

The novel suggests that the protagonists need a secluded space of love, acceptance, and kinship so their emotions can grow into a more political defiant love. As children, Vivek and Osita take over the then empty room of the former live-in house help and make it their own room. There, they can freely explore their identities and bodies in childhood and early adolescence:

We stayed there when we wanted to be away from the grown-ups, our bodies sprawled over dusty-pink bedsheets, eating boiled groundnuts and throwing the shells at each other. Aunty Kavita left us alone there, only shouting from the back door if she needed anything. De Chika [Vivek's father] never even set foot inside. All of this made it a little easier for me to hide Vivek's thing from them when it started.

22

For their love and tenderness to evolve, Vivek and Osita need to distance themselves from their parents who represent heteronormativity (in particular De

Chika, Vivek's father) and violent religion (Mary, Osita's mother). At first, their love is brotherly, but nevertheless radical in the sense that the two boys allow tenderness to be part of their daily routines, thus undermining norms of hegemonic masculinity that construct tenderness as a female quality. Vivek and Osita intentionally resist norms imposed on them by the adult world outside the room that they call the boy's quarters. Later, Vivek gets what appear to be hallucinations and short blackouts. Osita chooses to keep those a secret and to look out for Vivek—it is the emotion of love turned into action. Soon, Osita eventually disrupts the safe space of love and kinship he and Vivek have created by inviting Elizabeth into the room. The love and tenderness Osita has hitherto reserved for Vivek, he now directs towards Elizabeth. Again, love gives way to the creation of a space of love and opposition to the adult world in the boy's quarters, although this heteronormative one excludes Vivek: "I like it here,' she [Elizabeth] said, twirling around the room. 'It's like our own little world.'" (29). Vivek reacts to the loss of the bond of defiant love with violence and transgression. They not only get into frequent fights with boys at school and in the neighbourhood, but one day quietly watch Osita and Elizabeth during intercourse from the door of the boy's quarters. Even though this appears to happen as a result of one of Vivek's episodes of hallucinations and blackouts, Vivek's transgression into Osita's sexuality temporarily breaks the loving bond between the two, and Osita stops visiting his cousin for several years.

As Osita grapples with his own sexuality and attraction to men, Vivek radically changes, both emotionally and physically. The transformation that is most concerning to others, particularly Vivek's parents, is the growth of their hair: "[De Chika to Osita's mother:] 'Mary, I don't know. I don't know what is happening to my son.' De Chika sounded worried. 'Do you know he stopped cutting his hair? If you see him now, just looking like a madman ...'" (53).

Vivek's hair becomes one of the most important symbols of resistance and defiant love in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Mary, Osita's mother and Vivek's aunt, belongs to a radical Christian congregation. She and the congregation's pastor point out the power of Vivek's long hair, albeit within their Christian narrative: "Supernatural forces are feeding on him—on *your child* [Vivek]! Pastor said we must cut his hair because they [demons] are drawing their power from it, like the locks of Samson" (76, original italics). Indeed, Vivek's hair is powerful because it symbolises their transition and the revealing of their gender identity. Those protagonists who radically and defiantly love Vivek/Nnemdi accept their hair, those who remain violently normative reject it. Most notably, Osita's attitude towards Vivek's hair changes as his romantic love becomes stronger and more transgressive. At first, Vivek's hair perturbs Osita:

When De Chika said Vivek had stopped cutting his hair, I'd thought that highest, it would be touching his shoulders. It had always been curly, long enough to fall over his face—we used to joke that if he relaxed it, he would look like he was in a Sunsilk advertisement. [...] Now it was below his shoulder blades, tangled, a little matted against the blue cotton of his shirt. He had lost weight and his neck seemed longer, his face balanced on top of it. [...] He smiled at the look on my face. 'Nna mehn, it's not as if I'm a masquerade. Stop looking at me like that.' 'Have you seen yourself?' I shot back. 'Are you even sure you're not a masquerade? Jesus Christ.' I sat across from him and leaned my elbows on my knees. Clearly, something had seized my cousin.

57

Gradually, Osita's attitude towards Vivek's hair changes, until it is inherently linked to his romantic and incestuous love for Vivek/Nnemdi:

In the picture, Vivek was wearing the dress, a wraparound tied on the left of his waist. The neckline fell into a V, showing the bone of his sternum. His hair was down and falling around his face. Juju had combed and plaited it with gel into a hundred small plaits, then let them dry and released them into many small waves cascading down his body. He was sitting in my lap with his legs crossed, the dress riding high on his thighs, his torso leaning forward as he laughed into the camera. One arm was around my neck and I was looking at his face. My expression made me cringe. It was, for a lack of a better word, adoring. Unfettered.

231–232

Once Vivek begins to embrace their queer gender identity and sexuality, the world outside their body and room becomes an unbearable space: "Chika wasn't surprised by Vivek locking himself in his room; it was normal at this point, so he didn't ask any questions" (79). The worried Kavita invites Rhatha and her daughters Olunne and Somto to visit them to provide Vivek with some company. Contrary to the adults, Olunne and Somto support Vivek's decision to let their hair grow (94–95). So, Vivek opens up to them, allows himself to be loved by the two girls, and to love them back. Immediately, a new kinship,<sup>24</sup> built on a love that defies heteronormativity, is formed:

24 See also Emilia María Durán-Almarza, "Uncomfortable Truths: Queer Strangers and Gendered Necropolitics in Akweke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 58.1 (2022): 75.

The girls dragged me [Vivek] out. I don't think they meant to. [...] I was drowning. Not quickly, not enough for panic, but a slow and inexorable sinking [...] So I was giving up. That afternoon Somto and Olunne burst into my room and spoiled my whole plan. They knocked first, but I ignored it. Then they knocked again and I heard a flutter of quick conversation before one of them turned the handle and opened the door. [...] I sat up in bed as they came in, in time to see Olunne close the door, a slight sorry across her face. I'd drawn the curtains, but Somto switched on the light. [...] [Olunne:] "I said, I think you look pretty. Your hair is beautiful."

110–111

This unconditional acceptance of others, their individual gender identities and sexualities is defiant love that creates community and kinship; it is love becoming action in bell hooks's words. When their room turns into this space of kinship and acceptance, Vivek is ready to exchange it for other spaces of queer kinship, love, and safety.

## 5 Love, Kinship, and Violence in *The Death of Vivek Oji*

Similar to Binta and Reza in *Season of Crimson Blossom*, defiant love requires a safe and private space to establish itself as a strong affective bond between the protagonists in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. In Emezi's novel it is first the boy's quarters, then Vivek's room, and finally Juju's or Olunne and Somto's rooms, just as it was Binta's bedroom and later hotel rooms in Ibrahim's novel, that provide the protagonists with spaces of freedom and love. Figures of authority and the violence of the wider societal context are barred from these spaces, yet cannot be completely excluded and ignored. Sani Abacha's death, and the riots that spread all over town are closely intertwined with heteronormativity in the Nigerian society Emezi describes. Deviations from norms are surveyed and punished, especially when it is deviations from masculinity: "Some people can't see softness without wanting to hurt it" (113). It is clear that affects like love or grief do not have a space in society, they must be hidden away in the private. Political, religious, and ethnic tensions (152–159), paired with heteronormative patriarchal violence shape the lives of the novel's protagonists: Gender inequalities as well as homo- and transphobia regulate their family lives to the degree that they result in secrets, lies, fear, and the suppression of love and anger.

After Vivek's death, Kavita finds herself estranged from her husband and isolated from her friends because of her persistence to uncover the events that

led to her only child's violent death. Her rage fuels her determination. Finally Vivek's friends open up to her:

Something in her knew that whatever they were coming to say would be a culmination of the weeks she'd spent harassing them for answers. It seeded a small anger in her. When she had told Chika they were lying, when she told their parents the children were lying, no one had believed her. Yet here they all were—even her own nephew—lined up on her sofa with their guilty faces, holding secrets behind their lips. She wanted to slap them.

212

She quickly finds out that the secret is Juju, Elizabeth, Somta, Olunna, and Osita's love for Vivek, a love that urged them to protect Vivek from themselves and from the violence that surrounds all of them: "‘We were trying to protect him,’ continued Juju, ‘and we were also trying to protect you and Uncle Chika’" (213). Clearly, the young adults are conscious of the violent and patriarchal societal context that not only represses queer gender identities and sexualities but also feelings.

This brings to mind Sara Ahmed's idea that norms, i.e. gender and racial norms, "surface as the surfaces of bodies; norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are 'impressed upon' by the world, as a world made up of others."<sup>25</sup> To refuse the impression of the heteronormative script on one's body can provoke discomfort in heteronormative others, but also in queer selves. Bodies are linked to spaces, and feelings of comfort or discomfort determine which spaces human beings take up and how they inhabit them:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surfaces is instructive: In feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the "stitches" between bodies.<sup>26</sup>

25 Sara Ahmed, "Queer Feelings," *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall & Annamrie Jagose, with Andrea Bebell & Susan Potter (London, New York: Routledge, 2013): 423.

26 Ahmed, 425.

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, coming together in elected kinship, accepting their non-normativity, and nurturing positive emotions, makes the friends' love defiant of societal norms and resistant to the violence that surrounds them. The radicality of the protagonists' loving bond lies in the fact that they intentionally create this space of defiance and safety; they indulge in pleasure,<sup>27</sup> happiness, and love. In this space of kinship that builds on defiant love, Vivek can fully embrace their queer gender identity and express it openly:

Vivek said it [wearing long hair, dresses, and make up] was just a part of who he was, that he had this inside him and he wanted the opportunity to express it, so that's all we [his friends] gave him, that opportunity. I know it's frightening to see him look so different. I [Juju] was worried, too, when he told me, when he started dressing this way. But he was so happy, it really made a difference.

217

In the space of their kinship and rooms, Vivek is safe and happy, but soon they want to share their joy and comfort with the outside world. They want to leave the 'bubble,' as Osita calls it:

I couldn't help but be happy for him. I had surrendered by then, you see, and we were in Juju's house, in our bubble where everything was okay and the outside world didn't exist. [...] Everything would have stayed okay if he hadn't left the bubble. If he hadn't felt the need to start going outside and putting himself at risk. How were we supposed to protect him if he wouldn't stay inside?

232

Outside the bubble, the political and patriarchal violence, from which defiant love and kinship protected Vivek/Nnemdi, erupts. The power of the defiant love between Osita and Vivek becomes weaker, when the first tries to repress the comfort of the latter. Vivek/Nnemdi refuses a protection that necessarily suppresses their feelings of comfort and joy. Finally, it is no one else but Osita who kills Vivek/Nnemdi:

"You're ashamed of me," she [Nnemdi] said, her voice surprised, "That's why you don't like me going out like this. It's like you're always ashamed,

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27 Sara Ahmed defines queer pleasure as follows: "Queer pleasures are not just about the

Osita. First of yourself, then of us, now of me.” “Jesus Christ. That’s not true. Abeg-” [...] She tried to pull away and started hitting me. “Let me go! Hapu m aka!” I lost it. “*We have to go now!* Do you know what they’ll do to you?” Nnemdi gasped and wrenched away from me with all her strength, breaking my hold. I was startled by the pain in her eyes, surprised that the truth could hurt her so much. She pulled herself away with such force that she stumbled, and her heel caught on a stone, and she fell. [...] I saw her head strike the raised cement edge of the gutter at the side of the road. I saw her body slump, eyes closed, blood pooling into the sand within seconds.

235

Like *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, violence prevails and defeats defiant love in *The Death of Vivek Oji*.

## 6 Conclusion

Dissent refuses to accept the status quo, but what is refusal if not an emotion, just like love? Abubakar Adam Ibrahim’s *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* explore, as I have shown above, the potentiality of love as an act of dissent. Drawing on bell hooks’s writing on love, I argue that love that turns into dissent is not merely an emotion but an action too. For love to be both an emotion and an action of dissent, this love does not have to be conscious and intentional, as suggested in *Radical Tenderness ... A Manifesto*. Literature can serve as a mighty tool to examine love’s power of refusal and dissent, while simultaneously showing love’s political potential and limitations. *Season of Crimson Blossoms* engages with this dynamic explicitly through the figure of Fa’iza and her dedication to *soyayya* literature. The novel depicts the need for love in an environment dominated by political, physical, and patriarchal violence. Both *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* portray defiant love as the only viable resistance to multiple forms of violence, although violence proves to be stronger than defiant love.

The two novels deconstruct our notions of political power and demonstrate that the mere existence and embracing of love can be an act of dissent. Thus,

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coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies “gather” in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies.” Ahmed, “Queer Feelings,” 437.

the two texts highlight that dissent does not necessarily have to start with an extensive number of people. Rather, it suffices if only one or two people create spaces which embrace the political power of love and defy oppressive norms to dissent. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, it is particularly heteronormative patriarchy that the protagonists defy through their explorations of love and newly established alliances.

In Ibrahim's novel, Binta and Reza struggle with their feelings of romantic love and lust not only because of their considerable age difference but also because of patriarchal norms that violently suppress female sexuality in Northern Nigerian society. Despite those oppressive norms, Binta and Reza embrace their love and lust for each other and feel liberated. Particularly Binta experiences notable changes in her life and reflects on the past suppression of erotic love for her deceased husband and motherly love for her also deceased oldest son. Both Binta and Reza learn to understand how the violent political and patriarchal context has determined their lives and how powerful love can be as a political tool against oppression. *The Death of Vivek Oji* goes even further in its subversion of heteronormativity by placing a group of queer teenagers at the centre of its narration. The bonds their defiant love creates allows them to feel safe and happy in the secure spaces of their own rooms, as even their parental homes are not free of patriarchal violence. Adults represent violent heteronormative patriarchy and are, therefore, perceived as a threat to the teenager's defiant love and alliances. The novel emphasises the interactions between the macro and micro levels of society. As soon as Vivek ventures outside of his room and parental house being his true self, Nnemdi, they are surrounded by political and patriarchal violence, and, like Ibrahim's novel, *The Death of Vivek Oji*, also ends in the violent defeat of defiant love.

It is notable that in both novels the widespread political violence that surrounds the protagonists permeates and determines the relationships and alliances which grow out of the embracing of their defiant love. Ultimately, in both novels defiant love fails and is overpowered by violence. Death is the consequence, even if accidental death. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, Reza kills Binta's son during a row, and in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Osita's pushes Vivek to the ground in what turns out to be a fatal struggle to take Vivek back home, into the safety of a secluded and caring space.

Thus, the two contemporary novels emphasise the interrelation between the macro and micro levels of society and highlight the need for more relationships and alliances that question and defy oppressive structures, in particular patriarchy and heteronormativity. Simultaneously and contradictorily, the novels show the limitations of the power of defiant love. For defiant love to become

an effective political tool against political and patriarchal violence, the emotion has to be shared by a broader group of people, the novels suggest. Expressing dissent does not appear to automatically grow into a radical transformation of the status quo. Readers are left to individually reflect on this limitation of defiant love, and to wonder whether defiant love can ever become so proliferate that it finally does overpower violence.

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