

# *Eat Me* by Patience Agbabi and *Material* by Ros Barber

## How do the poets present relationships?

Both the poems *Eat Me* by Patience Agbabi and *Material* by Ros Barber present the theme of interpersonal relationships. While both poets illustrate different kinds of relationship, with *Eat Me* portraying the relationship between a woman and her partner, while *Material* chronicles a daughter's memories of her mother, each poem displays the difficulties that can arise between people, and how often these are visible only in hindsight. Additionally, both poets make use of tone and voice in order to portray the narrator's feelings for another person, whether these feelings are positive or negative.

One technique which is employed by both poets is the use of voices. For example, in *Eat Me*, the voice of the speaker's partner can be heard in the fourth stanza - "*The bigger the better ... I like big girls, soft girls, girls I can burrow inside*". This line hints at the attitudes of both the speaker and her partner towards their relationship; for example, the phrase "the bigger the better" implies that the speaker's partner objectifies her, as this phrase is often used to describe inanimate objects or even events, but is rarely used in reference to a person. In addition, the repetition of the word "girls" implies that the speaker's partner has a patronising attitude towards her, as his reference to her as a 'girl' rather than a 'woman' could suggest that he sees her as immature, or as being on a different intellectual level to him (which is further suggested in the fact that the features he says he finds attractive are entirely physical, implying that he does not see her personality or intelligence to be important). The fact that this is the sentiment which is present in the speaker's mind suggests that she feels bitter towards her partner, as she is preoccupied by the negative aspects of his personality and treatment towards her. Additionally, the narrator's focus on this particular phrase, which does not mention her directly, but instead refers to "girls" in general, could suggest the speaker feels that her partner does not value her as a person, as he refers only to himself and the gratification he gets from "big girls", rather than showing any appreciation for her personality or concern for her feelings. Overall, this reference to the partner's voice suggests an imbalance in power in the relationship between the speaker and her partner, in which the partner has control over the speaker, and the speaker feels bitter about this, but does not do anything to stop this.

In *Material*, meanwhile, the voice of the speaker's mother appears in the final two lines of the poem, "*this is your material / to do with, daughter, what you will.*" In contrast with *Eat Me*, the speaker's mother directly addresses the speaker here, calling her "daughter". This implies that the speaker has a close personal relationship with her mother, as "daughter" is often used as a term of endearment, suggesting that the speaker's mother loves her daughter and views her in a positive light (unlike in *Eat Me*, where the speaker's partner appears indifferent to her). In addition, by using the word "daughter", the speaker's mother acknowledges their specific relationship, which aligns the two of them together and establishes a clear connection

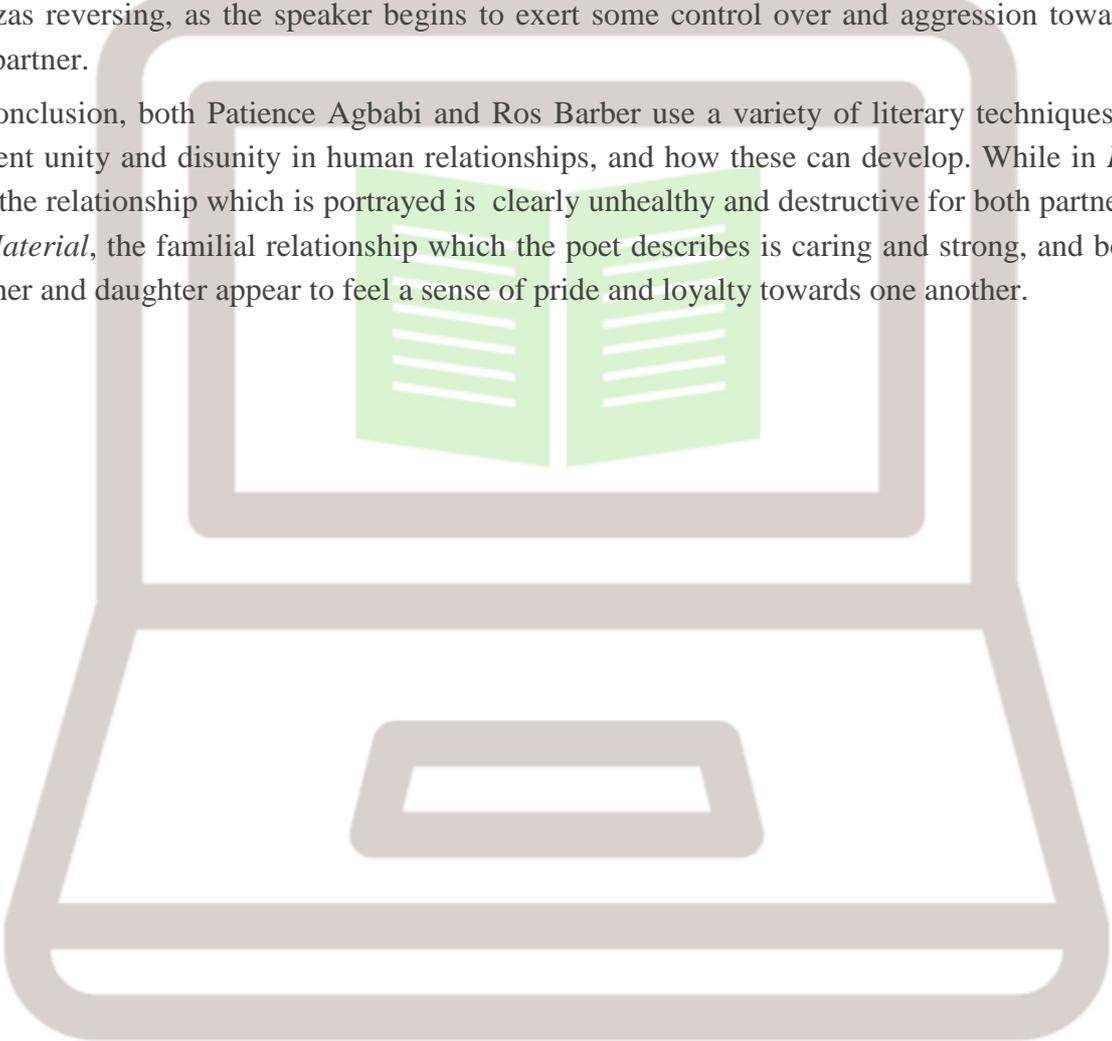
between them. This could suggest a sense of pride, as it is part of human nature for people to want to be associated with people or things they are proud of. This is particularly significant given this line's placement at the very end of the poem, as in the preceding stanzas, the poet expressed feelings of guilt and doubt over her own skills as a parent (for example, "I raised neglected looking kids"), which, given that the poem itself is primarily about the poet's mother, could suggest the poet felt that she was not living up to the standards her mother set up while raising her. However, the fact that the poet closes the poem by reflecting on this line from her mother suggests that, despite her uncertainties, she feels that her mother would be proud of her, further emphasising the strong bond between them. This also contrasts with the use of voice in *Eat Me*, where the voice of the speaker's partner can be seen near the beginning of the poem, suggesting that this voice is not the solution to the problems the speaker faces over the course of the poem (as is the case in *Material*), but rather the cause of them. The use of voice in both poems demonstrates the ways in which either a close or unhealthy relationship can have a profound impact on the people involved.

Another technique used by both poets is the use of recurring imagery. In *Material*, this is in the form of an extended metaphor of a handkerchief, which represents the care of the speaker's mother towards her daughter. For example, the poet describes how, when her mother owned hankies, "she'd have one, always, up her sleeve." This metaphor implies that the speaker's mother was there for her throughout her childhood, as the word "always" implies a constant presence (suggesting also that the speaker felt she could rely on her mother to be there for her). Also, the phrase "up her sleeve" could suggest that the poet's mother always managed to find a solution to the speaker's childhood problems, as people often describe a person who creates an answer to a seemingly impossible situation as having something 'up their sleeve'. Later in the poem, the poet compares handkerchiefs to disposable tissues, emphasising that tissues are readily available from "late night garages and shops" for "50p", while handkerchiefs are more valuable, being bought from "department stores" and often given or received as a "Christmas gift". This implies that the speaker sees her mother's love as being permanent and irreplaceable, as the handkerchief, which represents this love, is much longer lasting than the "tissues", which could suggest that the care of the speaker's mother remains unchanging despite changes in circumstances (these being represented by the gradual replacement of handkerchiefs by tissues in much of society). This extended metaphor is another example of the close and loving relationship between the speaker and her mother, whom the poet views as a consistently caring figure.

Agbabi also uses recurring imagery in *Eat Me* - specifically, the imagery of water. This imagery first appears in the line "I was his Jacuzzi". A Jacuzzi generally contains a large volume of water, but one which is confined to a vessel of a particular size, which could suggest that the speaker feels as though she is being repressed by her partner (this is particularly evident given that she describes herself as "his", implying that she feels he has ownership of her). However, a volume of water that great which is limited to a small container is usually under some pressure, which hints that the speaker feels a growing resentment towards her partner which would have quite a considerable force were it to be

released, which foreshadows the eventual end of the poem. As in *Material*, this imagery is developed as the poem progresses; in the succeeding stanzas, the poet consistently uses imagery of running water, such as a "tidal wave", which implies a sudden and powerful force. This could suggest that the speaker begins to realise the anger she feels towards her partner and move towards taking action against him, as once a large body of water has been set in motion, it suddenly becomes very difficult to contain. At this point in the poem, the reader begins to see the hierarchy of power in the relationship which was evident in the opening stanzas reversing, as the speaker begins to exert some control over and aggression towards her partner.

In conclusion, both Patience Agbabi and Ros Barber use a variety of literary techniques to present unity and disunity in human relationships, and how these can develop. While in *Eat Me*, the relationship which is portrayed is clearly unhealthy and destructive for both partners, in *Material*, the familial relationship which the poet describes is caring and strong, and both mother and daughter appear to feel a sense of pride and loyalty towards one another.



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