

## World without a Word: Reading Silence in Selected Recent Nigerian Poetry

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### Abstract

*Trauma is not a recent motif in Nigerian literature. Literary critics have copiously investigated into the trauma of Nigerian Civil War. However, the Boko Haram insurgency, which has ravaged many communities majorly in the North-East of Nigeria, has introduced a new dimension of exploring trauma into Nigerian literature. The literary dimension is patterned around what, in a broad term, may be called 'trauma of Boko Haram'. The inability of traumatized Nigerian female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency to unequivocally express the extent of atrocities perpetrated against them by those who should ordinarily be their saviours, confidants or helpers (after the attack) is the main focus of this study. Trauma theory was used to analyse the selected poems taken from a book edited by Ojaide et al. (2019), *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram*. It was established, on the one hand, that these 'doubly' traumatised women are forced to subsist merely in a world of silence – the sole response to the second phase of trauma – by these 'traumatising tools'. On the other hand, the women's silence is sustained or prolonged by the subconscious awareness of loss of hopes of recovery. It can be concluded, then, that all the 'artificial situations or measures' created to silence the crying voice of the female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency accordingly aggravate their traumatic memory.*

**Keywords:** *trauma; Nigerian; insurgency; silence*

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### Introduction

Exploration of conflicts or violence has long been an invaluable subject matter of Nigerian literature. Ethno-religious conflicts are a common occurrence in some parts of Nigeria mainly because of the heterogeneous, multicultural make-up of the country

(Chinwokwu & Arop, 2014). Once, the country had fought a civil war caused by a demand for secession from the Igbo, one of the three major tribes in Nigeria, who felt cheated in the country's scheme of things (Whitehead, 2008). For decades, the Nigerian civil war has largely reshaped and altered the dimension of literary scholarship in Nigeria. The Nigerian literary

landscape henceforth becomes an avenue for offering perspectives on the causes as well as the after-effects of the war. Chimamanda Adichie has widely represented the trauma of the war in her novels (Ayodeji, 2021). In his critical discussion of generational trauma as the source of inspiration for Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Makosso (2020) establishes an interconnectedness between trauma (of Biafra war in this case) and literary works. This trauma of Nigerian civil war also informs the birth of Soyinka's (1975) *The Man Died* where he "...explicitly figures his prison experience, which represents his own traumatic encounter with the Nigerian state, as a journey through hell" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 19).

In the same vein, the emergence of militant activities in reaction to the environmental degradation and neglect of the indigenous people resulting from oil exploitation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has also triggered another critical dimension in Nigerian literature. Literary and critical works have been written to address the dual problem of environmental degradation and militancy in the region. Nwahunanya (2011) submits:

In a lot of writings from the Niger Delta, the social dislocation engendered by oil exploration are interrogated through the poetic, dramatic and fictional evocation of certain inherent contradictions that have featured in the physical and psychological landscape of the region...writers have through creative literature increased their pressures on sensitive minds in their calls for a dispassionate reconsideration of the environmental and human right issues which repeatedly constituted their thematic focus (Nwahunanya, 2011, p. xvi).

Nwahunanya (2011) has only stated the obvious. Tenure Ojaide, a poet and literary critic from the region, has made the Niger Delta issues the thematic hub of his works (Olughu, 2019). In Ojaide's (1986) *Labyrinths of the Delta*, just as in most of his other collections of poems, the poet focuses on the neglect of the Niger Delta region by the oil firms and the government. Ahmed Yerima is another writer whose plays have been directed towards ending the gory era of environmental

degradation and militancy in the Niger Delta (Ekpe & Thompson, 2020; Nwaozuzu, Abada, & Aniago, 2020). As a matter of fact, by way of solving the problems associated with oil exploitation in the region, plays "...have taken the position to call for resource control. Others have joined the call for climate justice especially with the current state of gas flares, oil spillage and loss of vegetation" (Uzoji, 2016, p. 56).

In recent times, a considerable amount of attention has been directed towards documenting and criticising the violent activities of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigerian literature. A terrorist sect, Boko Haram - which literally means "'Western education is a sin'", "...is a local phenomenon based in northern Nigeria but is part of what could be described as a franchise of the transnational Islamist movement with global ramifications" (Ojaide, 2019, p. xvii). Given their negative impacts on the lives of their victims, the continuing brutal activities of the Boko Haram terrorists urgently demand critical assessment by literary scholars. An exemplar of the adverse effects of their atrocities is contained in the report that "Girls and women kidnapped by Boko Haram often face mistrust, discrimination and persecution upon their return to their communities..." (UNICEF, 2016, p. 4). Also, Abubakar (2017) clearly pictures the disorderliness that has set in when she says,

The trauma experienced as a result of terrorism is similar to that of holocaust, wars or genocides. Thus, survivors of terrorist attacks suffered from devastation, wretchedness, loss of mood, confusion, feeling of insecurity, haunting memories, hallucinations and images etc (Abubakar, 2017, p. 122). Abubakar (2017) highlights the fact that terrorist attacks, just like conventional wars, often render the victims greatly traumatized. This view is corroborated by Adepelumi (2018) when the findings of his research indicate that all the participants were emotionally distressed after Boko Haram attacks in the form of killing or kidnapping (pp. 123-127).

Nigerian writers, then, being the conscience of the nation, cannot fold their arms and look on/away while killings, destruction of property, and disruption of divine order rend the air. Writings primarily centred on the

devastating and traumatic effects of the Boko Haram activities on the survivors have seen the light of the day. This way, the Nigerian literature has lived up to its social function including tackling injustices done to the people of the country.

This paper seeks to explore how the crying voice of the womenfolk (consequent upon attacks by the Boko Haram insurgents) has been consciously silenced by certain 'traumatising tools'. The selected poems are taken from *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram* edited by Ojaide et al. (2019). It is argued, then, that most of what should ordinarily constitute the coping measures turns out to be artificial situations created to silence the crying voice of the womenfolk, and consequently aggravate their traumatic memory. Already, it is an obvious fact that the womenfolk are traumatized after Boko Haram attacks (Abubakar, 2016). This present work purports to show that life even becomes more traumatizing for female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency with the discovery that certain measures put in place to alleviate their suffering turn out to be a ploy to silence them, thereby making them sight no path to quick recovery. In the end, it is hoped that the work will provide some insights into why the trauma sustained by most female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency does not easily abate despite conspicuous efforts by governments, NGOs, and relations.

### Portrayal of Trauma in Nigerian Poetry

In their introduction to the UN's poetry collection, *Sauti: Poems of Healing*, Milić and Davis (2021) write: "Poetry has been used throughout the centuries, in many different cultures and languages, as a medium for expressing some of our most beautiful feelings and some of our troubles, longings and sufferings" (p. 9). The exploration of critical issues affecting the nation has always been the preoccupation of Nigerian poetry (Magaji, 2020). Onyejizu (2021) states that "Nigerian poets in their meditative, socio-political and revolutionary aspirations towards salvaging the society from plunder and ruin, reflect these quandaries" (p. 193). This means that Nigerian poets serve as the watchdogs of the government, and their poetry has undergone

several developments. One major development in the criticism of Nigerian poetry is the classification into three generations of Nigerian poets. This classification done by Funsho Ayejina in his "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-native Tradition" (1988) has generated a lot of debate (Okùnroyè, 2011). Harry Garuba sees such an exercise as too hasty: "For a body of writing as 'young' as Nigerian poetry in English, to suggest over-categorical demarcations at this point in time would be foolhardy" (qtd. in Okùnroyè, 2011, p. 65).

In Nigerian poetry, there are passing references to (psychological) trauma in two major discourses: oil exploration (with its resultant militancy) in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian civil war. Usually, a motif of national trauma caused by bad governance permeates these discourses. But while it can be said that this motif cuts across the works of all the generations of Nigerian poets, it is markedly portrayed by poets of third generation. Awuzie (2019) quotes Egya as stating that the third generation is "widely believed to have been announced by and in the 1988 anthology, *Voice from the Fringe: An ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poets*, edited by Harry Garuba" (p. 82). These poets write poetry in form of rage and dirge to censure socio-political ills of the nation. For instance, Hyginus Ekwazi, one of the third-generation Nigerian poets, views the nation as traumatised in his poetry collections, *Love Apart and Dawn into Moonlight* (Aguale, 2020). A similar view is expressed in Adebisi-Adelabu and Aguele's (2017) exploration of the traumatic experience of the poet-persona in Hyginus Ekwazi's *The Monkey's Eyes*. In their conclusion, Adebisi-Adelabu and Aguele (2017) see the persona as a metaphor for a Nigerian traumatised by the ongoing experience of bad governance.

Literature is agog with the adverse impact of oil exploration/exploitation on the region and its people (Nwahunanya, 2011; Chijioke, 2018; Akingbe, 2019; Akingbe & Onanuga, 2021; Ojaruegbe, 2022). Commenting on Ojaide's poetry collection, *The Endless Song*, Onwuka et al. (2019) declare that the poems "capture succinctly Nigeria's socio-political and cultural history and the national trauma it has engendered" (p. 1). Ojaide's and Ikiriko's

incessant allusion (in their poems) to the November 1999 hanging of the Niger Delta/Ogboni environmental activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Sani-Abacha regime indicates that many people still live with this traumatic memory (Okunoye, 2008). Jeyifo (2004) similarly argues that in Soyinka's poetry collection, *Outsiders*, "personal deprivations and collective traumas are powerfully fused" (p. 273). Jeyifo (2004) specifically mentions "Calling Josef Brodsky for Ken Saro-Wiwa" as a "a powerfully moving funeral dirge linking the deaths (and lives) of the Russian poet with the Nigerian novelist and environmental activist" (p. 274). These critical analyses project the national trauma which the killing of Saro-Wiwa has caused.

In addition, poetry on Nigerian civil war has enjoyed massive literary criticism (Gehrmann, 2011; Awuzie, 2021). "Nigerian [civil] war poetry", Okuyade (2012) writes, "reveals the traumatic experience of Nigerians in turbulent times" (p. 23). Working on the Nigerian civil war poetry, Okuyade (2012) samples the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark, Gabriel Okara, Chinweizu and Odia Ofeimun as representing the traumatic experience of the war. The three-year civil war which marred the geographical-cum-ethnic composition of Nigeria ended in 1970. Yet, memory of the war continues to rear its head among Nigerians, notably the Igbo who still feel marginalised in Nigerian politics and governance. Perhaps this imaginary continuation of the war accounts for its thematic relevance in literary scholarship long after a truce was reached. Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, no core Igbo person has been elected President. This marginalisation, coupled with the memory of the civil war, informed the renewed agitations for secession by such groups as the now-notorious Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) headed by the detained Nnamdi Kanu. It is believed in some quarters that the resurgence of secessionist groups in Eastern Nigeria is a consequence of "trauma and grievances held by the Igbo people of Nigeria, as a result of perceived or actual repression and marginalization birthed by the memories of Nigerian-Biafra War" (Onwatuwegwu, 2020, p. 571). Although famous for his novels, Chinua Achebe, has also written poems delineating the

traumatic experience of the war which he personally witnessed. Realising the pathetic situation of his people, Achebe employs poetry to appeal for sympathy towards the suffering Biafrans (Okoye, 2015).

Dalley's (2013) analysis of Chris Abani's *Songs for Night* via the lens of trauma theory reflects "the concept's emergence as a generic framework mediating representations of history in various contexts" (p. 445). This successful attempt at using trauma theory to analyse Nigerian civil war poetry means, for Dalley's (2013), that the theory can be adapted in non-Western contexts. This assertion underlines the understanding that the theorisation of trauma is recently being shed off of its Western privileging to the advantage of other cultures, races and groups (Novak, 2008). Much as this adaptation is possible, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no critical work has employed trauma theory to analyse poetry on the Boko Haram insurgency. In fact, perhaps because 'trauma of Boko Haram' is an emerging phenomenon generally, critical works on it are almost as scanty as creative. Egbunu and Umar (2018) use psychoanalytic theory to show how people endure the insurgency. This is one critical work available on the trauma of Boko Haram. So, the choice of trauma theory for the analysis of select recent Nigerian poetry on the trauma caused by the Boko Haram insurgency is justified. Using trauma theory, this present work investigates how trauma of Boko Haram (suffered by female victims) is being prolonged by the people or measures who/which should ordinarily help hasten the victims' recovery. It is argued in the paper that this situation, termed 'the second phase of trauma', worsens the traumatic memory of the victims, making them groan in silence.

### **Traumatic Memory**

The paper adopts trauma theory to analyse the selected poems. Pioneer mothers of literary trauma theory have focused so much on the distortion of the victim's/survivor's memory after a traumatic event (Herman, 1992; Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1995). To them, a traumatic event is not a straightforward, easy-to-remember event. The displacement of time and place which attends its happening makes its narration an arduous

task. This is a contention which also makes representation of trauma almost impossible even in literature since it defies witnessing. Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) remains an authoritative voice of the inaccessibility of traumatic memory. She has made unequivocal submissions to present her argument in this respect. She argues that:

*Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory. Beginning with the earliest work on trauma, a perplexing contradiction has formed the basis of its many definitions and descriptions: while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control (Caruth, 1995, p. 153).*

Caruth (1995), drawing her insights from Freud's major works, concludes that traumatic memory is not an ordinary (explicit) memory that can easily excite recollection. The reason for this difficulty in recollection of a traumatic event hinges largely on the loss of perception at the time of its occurrence. Caruth explains elsewhere: "The breach in the mind – the psyche's awareness of the threat to life – is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly" (Caruth, 2014, p. 22).

It is the same argument that is adumbrated in Herman (1992). Herman focuses her work on the problem of witnessing which makes traumatic experience difficult to relay. To her, even the language fails to accurately narrate a traumatic experience, for the witness of a traumatic event is not less rendered 'senseless' than the trauma survivor. Beyond that distortion of the survivor's or witness's senses, Herman believes that, at times, the enormity of the atrocities perpetrated may defy genuine telling. Hartman (1995) buttresses this line of argument when he states: "Trauma theory introduces a psychoanalytic skepticism[...] which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a traumatic kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion" (p. 537). Hartman (1995) also borrows diverse literary concepts from classic

works to expand on the difficulty in accessing traumatic memory. He particularly finds Lacanian theory relevant in illustrating indirectness or unrealistic expression of traumatic experience: "One reason why the real does not appear directly, or why it is not expressed in a realistic mode, is that trauma can include a rupture of the symbolic order" (Hartman, 1995, p. 543). What this portends is that the reality of an experience has been distorted or suppressed so that the victim finds it difficult to relay the details with as much precision as it would capture it genuinely.

For Kurtz (2021), just like Caruth and other 'classical' trauma scholars, Freudian psychoanalysis provides us with a better explanation of traumatic memory as it "...offers the insight that a traumatic event is rarely remembered or expressed in a direct way" (p. 2). According to him, "[t]he assumption of this approach is that the workings of the human psyche are such that we can only recall or refer to these events indirectly, often in disguise" (Kurtz, 2021, p. 2). Heidarizadeha (2015) also avers that "...past trauma and traumatic memories affect the mind of the characters" (p. 789). The mind of the trauma victim becomes wounded and the process of healing such a wound becomes a herculean task for anybody. What most trauma scholars seem to agree on is that traumatic memory is a slippery site for recollection of factual events. Eniko (2016) holds a similar perspective to have concluded that traumatic memory is "...dissociated or repressed, fragmented, non-linear, and resists verbalization" (p. 218).

Thus, the inability of traumatized Nigerian female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency to unequivocally express the extent of atrocities perpetrated against them by those who should ordinarily be their saviours, confidants or helpers is the main focus of this study. The select poems for the study are analysed using psychoanalytic trauma theory. Herman's (1992, 1998) postulation that the enormity of a traumatic event might make the telling and recovery difficult is particularly significant to the analysis. It must be pointed out, however, that this paper is not focused mainly on symptoms of traumatic memory; rather, it attempts to identify what or those who help prolong trauma of Boko Haram. The paper aims

to clamour for political responsibility that would lead to genuine recovery from trauma.

### **Silence: Response to Second Phase of Trauma**

The term “second phase of trauma” must be clearly delineated as it is employed in the context of this paper. Second phase of trauma occurs when a traumatized person or trauma victim is subjected to further trauma by the very measures supposedly put in place to alleviate his/her suffering. Put simply, in this paper, female victims of Boko Haram are further plunged into the second phase of trauma by the people who should provide them means of overcoming their trauma. The victims’ response to this second phase of trauma is silence – they are caged in a world of silence where their words remain unintelligible. In their silence, they relapse more and more into traumatic memory which makes the present even worse than the past experience. In Nereus Yerima’s “Sister, the Sky is Grey Again”, the persona mirrors the pains inflicted on the womenfolk by the Boko Haram insurgents. Using pathetic fallacy, the persona associates their pathetic situation to the celestial constitution: “Sister, the sky is grey again/Grey again, grey again” (p. 1). The fact that the sky remains consistently grey is an indication that the atrocities perpetrated against the females is a routine occurrence.

The persona continues to recount the enormous losses they have suffered:

*We have fallen into thorns  
Into dry piercing thorns  
We count our losses  
Losses in the past year  
Our husbands gone  
Our children maimed  
Our houses, our houses destroyed”* (p. 1).

As if that experience is not traumatizing enough, they are made to live in “...make-shift tents/Like herdsmen and their seasons”. The pitiful tone of the poet-persona here suggests that the shelter provided for them by the government is unbecoming of sane human beings. It is tantamount to being left to wander in the bush like the herdsmen (in Nigeria) do all round the season. The poet-persona continues

to affirm that they are oppressed and treated inhumanly in the filthy IDP camp:

*Ah, sister, sister, the blisters on our feet  
We have seen places strange  
We, children of the Boko Haram are  
witnesses  
In the strange world of IDPs  
Where the giants of NEMA  
Flash golden teeth to the dispossessed”* (p. 1).

The persona accuses the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) of being deceitful and of aggravating their suffering in the camps. Instead of coming to the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) with soothing words and food items, the NEMA officials ragingly tell them “Sweet tales of truckloads of goods” meant for the IDPs “...missing on the way...” They lament that they were waylaid by the Boko Haram terrorists on their way to the IDP camp and all the relief materials were snatched away. The IDPs (trauma victims of the Boko Haram insurgency) are again silenced by the false complaints (and the ‘traumatic’ experience) of these NEMA officials – though all was a mere fabrication to cheat the already dispossessed people. But the IDPs have already lost their voice, which according to Herman (1992), is a symptom of trauma.

The persona describes the experience of the IDPs as chaotic. The neglect of these female victims of insurgency by irresponsible, carefree officials in charge of their welfare is alarming. They rather take advantage of their vulnerability in this miserable condition. They (officials in charge of the IDPs) launch them (the IDPs) into the second phase of traumatic experience (which is unbelievable even if narrated by the victims). “Acquiring distance from the traumatic event allows the witness or the victim to build a narrative of the event” (Singh, 2015, p. 176). This is not the case with these women victims. Those who are supposed to give them succour in their new home turn out to be “Fat cocks feeding on our wounds” (p. 2). This inhumane act, unheard-of as it is, not only portrays these officials as heartless and insane, it does more damage to the mind of the already traumatized IDPs:

*I have seen, I have seen the tears  
Of children orphaned  
Of widows distraught  
Despite assurances from the  
Rock Despite the news of aids in dollars  
I have seen sorrow  
Maiden with deadly fangs  
Strangle the old Strangle our babes (p. 2).*

The repetition of “I have seen” brings to the reader’s mind the ability of the victim to only see but not to comprehend. Overwhelmed by sorrow, she is unable to say what he has seen. Herman (1992) and Caruth (1996) argue that incomprehensibility breeds silence. Also, the victims heard the news of aids being sent to them, but who would believe them if they say it did not get to them? And the assurances from the Rock that condition would improve are unrealistic. The Rock, metonymic of the Federal Government of Nigeria, only pays lip service to the ending or alleviating the suffering of the IDPs. Who can they then report their second phase of trauma at the camp to again? The persona asserts that they only hear on the news the humongous amount of money earmarked for the welfare of the IDPs, it does not get to them. The government officials only feed fat on their sorrow unchallenged.

It is the same gory story of the IDPs that we confront in Khalid Imam’s “In the Nest of Tears”. The persona does not appear relieved that “...as poor girls” who “Escaped from the bloody hyenas/Attacking the weak and the innocent souls” they are now sheltered by the government. The persona condemns the officials at the IDP camp who make like even more unbearable for them:

*Sadly, We are camped  
In the nest of rapists  
There, a slice of bread is gold  
While hunger is an ocean  
And the carefree beasts  
Paid to cater for us  
Like thievery rodents  
In broad daylight  
They emptied the granary  
To feed their fat siblings  
Not belonging to our camps (p. 16).*

The camps are depicted as a rough confinement where abject poverty, sexual

harassment, thievery and nepotism become part and parcel of the IDPs’ lives. The officials paid to take care of them and give them food steal the relief materials in broad daylight without any iota of shame. Since these officials are aware that the IDPs, conspicuously traumatized, have lost their voice, they (the IDPs) can be cheated without being challenged. So, the food meant for the IDPs goes to the relations of the officials who are not affected by the Boko Haram insurgency.

For the persona, these human acts are less as agonizing as the disgraceful maltreatment from the clergymen in the camps. He poses a rhetorical question to express his amazement at the ungodly display by the men of God:

*What do you call the phony puritan  
clergymen  
In the camps defecating in their place of  
worship  
Or those uncaring hubbies who bribe the  
guards  
To have sex with their daughters  
Or wives in exchange of stolen food? (p.  
16).*

These clergymen willingly desecrate their worship centres with utter disregard for the wrath of God that could befall them. Similarly, fathers who are supposed to be protective of their daughters and wives even bribe the guards in the camps to copulate with them in order to curry favour. The IDP camps turn out to be a microcosm of hell for the female victims who go through unspeakable benevolence in the hands of men. Freyd (1994) avers that some abused girls/women suppress the memory to protect their relations. There is nobody to trust in the camps any more: insecurity and delusion reside with the IDPs. Little wonder, then, he refers to the camps as a “...nest of tears/Where beautiful petals are daily torn/By the heartless demons seemingly applauded/By the loud silence of all” (p. 17). The “loud silence of all” is an oxymoron which best describes the reaction that follows the madness women have to contend with in the camps. The men (obviously not all), who are the culprits, seem to enjoy the ‘freedom’ to deal with the women, and enjoy their silence even better.

The supposed insensitivity of the government to the plight of the victims of the Boko Haram insurgency is the focus of Folu Agoi's "Tears for Chibok." The poet-persona satirises the top Nigerian government officials who do not seem to bother much about the killings in the land. Angered by the government's uncaring attitude to the bombing of Nyanya Motor Park which led to the killing of not less than seventy-five people on April 14, 2014 and the Boko Haram attack on Chibok, a community in the North-East of Nigeria, which led to the abduction of two hundred and seventy-six schoolgirls, the poet castigates the powers-that-be:

*Nyanya on my mind  
And Chibok  
Leading Hiroshimas starring comic stars  
Star comics thrilling crowds, shocking  
crowds Toothless daddies dancing disco,  
cracking jokes, solid jokes  
Panting, sweating, striving to spice up their  
sons' funeral (p. 9).*

Those who are supposed to help fight terrorism and assist the victims are caught in the shameful, even insensitive, act of merrymaking. Their action is analogous to knowingly reveling in setting the Hiroshima record in those communities attacked. The poet-persona seems to see no difference between what happened in Hiroshima - where the first ever atomic bombing occurred - and what obtained in Nyanya and Chibok. To the poet, the political office holders stage comedies where dirges are expected from them. He calls them out: "Starring dandy daddies tending palm wine/Fondling funny mummies singing carols at Requiem Mass" (p. 9).

In Razinat Mohammed's "What will I Say?" rampant familial abuse that has become the new way of the land is the concern of the poet who was brought up and still lives in Maiduguri, one of the epicenters of Boko Haram insurgency. The persona hits out at harassment and further traumatizing of the female victims by their close relations. The rhetorical questions: "Is it expected that a father views the nakedness of his grown daughter?/Or should a son pleasure himself in the nudity of his mother as she takes a bath" (p.

21) are intended to buttress the extent of incest in the land. Of course, the persona knows that these strange "...laws are not taught by words of the mouth" (p. 21). This knowledge partly contributes to the reason why it is difficult for the victims to recount these pathetic tales of incest. So, the persona is saddened by the extent at which incestophiles abuse their female relations. A victim of incest herself, the persona has no word to realistically explain how she was impregnated by her son. She asks:

*What will I tell the world happened to me?  
What will I tell this child kicking so hard  
inside of me?  
How can my words form on this pallid lips?  
Round the clock, this child kicks and my  
heart is stilled  
Perhaps he is furious that he lies in the  
wrong bed  
What could I do when the times have  
changed?  
And strangeness takes over the land  
A son kills his own father and ties the  
mother to her iron bed What do you call  
this phenomenon that has overwhelmed  
the land?  
This son who poisoned his brothers  
because they would not tow his line  
What can I say about this harvest of woe?  
(p. 20)*

The persona is obviously traumatized, having been raped and impregnated by her son who had already killed his father for no just cause. The same son later killed his brothers for not supporting his line of action. The mother now carries the burden of an unborn child to whom she does not know how to explain the weird scenario that had caused his birth.

The fact that a son who ordinarily should shoulder the responsibility of protecting her mother from the shackles of terrorism has impregnated her makes the persona far more traumatized. Confined in this unspeakable or /unheard-of state, he loses his voice of reasoning and begins to flashback: "I am a woman who gladly suckled her infant in her youth/But must be gagged for a second suckle by an adult?/What is there to tell except of the bleeding of a woman's heart/Hunted by the

twist in her fate?" (p. 20) These lines confirm that she experience a change of fortune when she was raped and impregnated at her old age having already had (a) child(ren) in her youth. She therefore continues to weigh various options in finding a solution to this rigmarole of a situation. She ruminates over whether or not to kill the child, but the guilt would not let her live happily thereafter.

She is at a crossroads, not being able to figure out what to do to the unborn child: whether to terminate the pregnancy or allow it to grow. She eventually waves aside the option of killing the child because he has become attached to her. But the basic issue with the persona is, provided she let the child live, what and how will she explain the strange happening to him? While her silence in itself is traumatizing to her, narrating the traumatic experience to the child could spark off generational trauma. However, since "These laws (of inbreeding) are not taught by words of the mouth/Tell me then how to pronounce my words to this child when he comes!/Tell me what I will say to this child who is both a son and a grandson!!" (pp. 20-21). As Herman (1992) notes, "The enormity of a terrifying event could make it unspeakable (Herman, 1992). It could be deduced from the persona's statements that this traumatic memory that revisits her at every thought of the child will continue to feed on her silence – a silence that traumatizes her the more.

An attempt is made in this section to identify those who constitute traumatising tools by subjecting Nigerian female victims of the Boko Haram insurgency to a second phase of trauma. Using trauma theory, the analysis of the select poems shows that these traumatising tools (e.g., incestophiles) aggravate the traumatic memory of the victims whose sole response is silence.

### **Silence Sustained: Recovery Still a Mirage**

Herman (1998) states that recovery from trauma "cannot occur in isolation" (p. 145), but the victims here seem disconnected. The road to recovery still appears closed, thereby prolonging the agonizing silence in the crying voice of the female trauma victims. Across the

selected poems, there are numerous pointers to the impossibility of the women's recovery from the trauma sustained from the attacks by Boko Haram. In Nereus Yerima's "Sister, the Sky is Grey Again", the persona says they are tired of only subsisting on the promises and hopes of recovery:

*They shout the mercy of gods  
To the broken souls  
I heard them say...  
But sister, sister  
It is daybreak  
The clouds are gathering  
Clear your fields  
Sister, clear your fields  
Prepare your seedlings  
Sister, prepare your seedlings  
Let's begin again  
The journey to recovery (p. 2).*

From the repetition of "clear your fields/prepare your seedlings", it can be deduced that the women have been told several times to prepare for a better way of living, but the promise is never fulfilled. The journey to recovery seems to have not been started; only promises rend the air and the awareness of this fact makes life more traumatizing for the victims of insurgency.

Also in Yerima's "News", the poet details the losses which have marred the victims' being. To him, all hopes of recovery are lost for the land and the victims. He believes that the government has been overpowered by the terrorist sect: "Flies drive away bees/We are lost/Lost in Sambisa Forest/Our land is lost;/Lizards chase away snakes" (p. 3). He describes the annihilation of the different parts of Northern Nigeria: "They say Gwoza has fallen/Dambia is scattered/Bamais feverish/Damaturu wails (p. 4). The poet's tone foregrounds a clear lack of recovery: "The pot has broken/Who can gather it?/Who can mend it" (p. 3). He continues: "We are lost/Lost like MH370/Like sheep in the desert" (p. 4). The refrain "We are lost" and the similes comparing the enormity of the loss to that of the lost MH370 aircraft and a sheep lost in the desert entail inability to recover the lost lives, property, and sound health. Trauma of Boko Haram and total recovery are thus presented as being mutually exclusive. This assertion widely

contradicts trauma theory's promise of ethical consideration to better humanity (Craps, 2010). So, the poet-persona warns: "Sister, on your marks/Women, are you there/Children, it is time to sprint" (p. 3). It is time to flee from persecution, harassment, killings and destruction. But they can only flee the site of a traumatic event, they continue to nurse the memory in silence.

It is a similar scenario that Yerima presents in "Peace will Return". He uses loads of metaphors to indicate total loss of peace in the land. Contrary to the title of the poem, he declares: "Peace has gone with the wind/Birds in a stormy night/Cripples on a thorny path" (p. 6). He however states that it is not only Nigeria which experiences insecurity, but "Peace [is] gone all over the world" (p. 7). He thus appeals for peace in the land. But this appeal is a vague exercise which may not bring about a practical result. This elusiveness of recovery is also insinuated in Folu Agoi's "Part of a Whole" where the poet, in appealing to the terrorists, urges them to see difference in faith as an advantage to humanity and accept others the way they are:

*Help tell blind mortals fighting for God Almighty:  
In my neighbourhood lies something lacking in me  
Just as in me lies something lacking in them  
In each lies something lacking in others  
Everyone being a part of a bit orbit* (p. 12).

The terrorists' understanding of this distinction in faith will go a long way in making them sheathe their sword and embrace peace. While it is not uncommon to now find some people devising spiritual means of working through trauma (Visser, 2015), that recovery is elusive surfaces in Khalid Imam's "In the Nest of Tears". The persona, having been camped "in the nest of rapists" (p. 16) called the IDP camp, suffers more trauma than the Boko Haram has subjected her to. The poet-persona confusingly poses a question: "Where is the safety/We were promised" (p. 16). She sees no safety in view; so, their crying in silence will continue to ritually punctuate their traumatic memory for long at the camp.

Finally, in Razinat Mohammed's "I Returned" (23), there are indications of lack of hope: "What am I to do when the hope of the land lies buried under the rubbles" (p. 23). For the persona, the hope of recovery is deeply buried under the rubbles where nobody can find it. Likewise in his poem, "Haram", Uvie Giwewhegbe is more precise about what constitutes the beginning of a journey to recovery:

*And when we heard Shekau is dead  
Killed like he killed  
"It will be a relief"  
Say those who believe  
Whose prayers Heaven has blessed  
With grace that cannot be seen but with  
"patience" Haram! Haram!  
The lost voice of Haram!  
Time shall come, o yes and soon that the  
news will not be you  
But a new Nigeria, in greatness and truth"*  
(p. 27).

The poet seems to have attached hearing the dreaded name 'Shekau' (leader of the Boko Haram) to the loss of all hope of recovery from trauma. Having giving up any hope of a human solution and unwarily wearing the religious garment that assumedly befits a typical Nigerian in a situation like this, the poet believes that only prayer can bring about recovery, that Boko Haram and its leader will soon be annihilated and peace will reign in Nigeria again. Indeed, this prayer is another unpractical idea of a journey to recovery.

In this section, dialectic of silence is revealed: first, government's lack of spelt-out plan for the victims' recovery is a form of silence; second, the victims' silence resulting from the prolongation of their traumatic memory. In between this portrayal of silence, there is a call for political responsibility which could genuinely hasten processes of working through trauma.

## Conclusion

Trauma is not a recent motif in Nigerian literature. Literary critics have copiously investigated into the trauma of Nigerian civil war. However, the Boko Haram insurgency which has ravaged many communities majorly

in the North-East of Nigeria, has introduced a new dimension of exploring trauma into Nigerian literature. The literary dimension is patterned around what, in a broad term, may be called 'trauma of Boko Haram'. As traumatic memory is not an explicit, easy-to-remember or straightforward kind of memory, representing this trauma of Boko Haram in Nigerian literature becomes difficult, but remains a scholarly task all Nigerian writers and critics alike must not shy away from. One way the recent Nigerian poetry has represented trauma of Boko Haram is to underline how the loud crying of the womenfolk (consequent upon attacks by Boko Haram) has been consciously 'silenced'. This literary representation suggests that female victims of Boko Haram are further plunged into the second phase of trauma by the people who should provide them means of overcoming their trauma. 'Second phase of trauma' suggests a situation where a traumatized person or trauma victim is subjected to further trauma by the very measures supposedly put in place to alleviate his/her suffering. Silence is the usual response of the victims (as exemplified by the Nigerian female victims of Boko Haram insurgency) to this second phase of trauma – they are caged in a world of silence where their words, even if uttered at all, remain unintelligible. In their silence, they relapse more and more into traumatic memory which makes the ongoing experience worsen their trauma.

The inability of traumatized Nigerian female victims of Boko Haram insurgency to unequivocally express the extent of atrocities perpetrated against them by those who should ordinarily be their saviours, confidants or helpers (after the attack) is the main focus of this study. The poems selected for this study are taken from a book edited by Ojaide et al. (2019), *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram*. The analysis done using trauma theory reveals that the officials in IDP camps where these women are housed, the government which pays only lip service to their recovery and security, most male relations (fathers and sons especially) who should be their confidants or comforters but take comfort in harassing them sexually become 'traumatising tools'. On the one hand, these 'doubly' traumatised women are forced

to subsist merely in a world of silence – the sole response to the second phase of trauma – by these 'traumatising tools'. On the other hand, the women's silence is sustained or prolonged by the subconscious awareness of loss of hopes of recovery. In all, while the paper argues that trauma of Boko Haram is prolonged by certain people/means, it calls for political responsibility that would lead to genuine recovery from trauma.

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