

MEMORIALISING AND ARTICULATING BOKO HARAM-INDUCED TRAUMA IN SELECTED POEMS FROM *THE MARKAS*

Abiodun David AKINPELU^{*1}, Kazeem ADEBIYI-ADELABU²

^{*1}Department of European Languages Education, Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Nigeria

²Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0857-642X>

²<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5071-8032>

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Abstract

Trauma engendered by Boko Haram activities, as depicted in Nigerian poetry, encapsulates deep-seated trauma at individual and collective levels. Existing studies on the representation of Boko Haram atrocities in Nigerian poetry focused on survivors' silence, belatedness, and traumatic amnesia, while overlooking victims' capacity to articulate and memorialise their experiences. This study, therefore, examined the memorability and speakability of Boko Haram-induced trauma by examining the thematic representations of trauma in selected poems about Boko Haram. Joshua Pederson's model of Trauma Theory, complemented by Stef Craps' Postcolonial Trauma Theory served as the framework. Seven poems from *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram* were purposively selected due to their thematic relevance and subjected to literary analysis. Eight thematic categories emerged from the representation of traumatic experiences: sexual violence, hypervigilance, survivor-guilt, suicidal ideation, altered identity, ecological loss, routine vicarious traumatisation and tears as emotional release. Sexual violence is remembered in the painful nexus between traumascapes — spaces in which traumatic events have occurred and traumatised individuals continue to experience their effect. Hypervigilance is voiced as a symptom of traumatic recollection, while ecological loss is memorialised as a corollary of Boko Haram insurgency. Survivor-guilt, routine vicarious traumatisation, suicidal ideation, altered identity and tears as emotional release evoke traumatic memory. The study concluded that the selected poems about Boko Haram thematically embody the speakability and memorability of trauma.

Keywords: Boko Haram in literature, Memorialisation of trauma in poetry, Nigerian poetry, Poetry about Boko Haram, Speakability of trauma

Introduction

The transformation of Boko Haram, formally known as amā'at Ahl as-Sunnahti lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), from a local religious sect into a highly violent group has engendered devastating consequences. The year 2002 is widely cited as the period in which Boko Haram emerged. According to Anugwom (2019) and Cook (2018), the group's adoption of violence as a modus operandi date from 2009 onward. Their violent credentials, which include assassinations, bombings, abductions, and other brutal atrocities, have inflicted severe psychological trauma on communities across northern Nigeria, particularly in the northeastern region. Bamidele *et al.* (2018), who investigated internally displaced persons

affected by Boko Haram terrorism in northeastern Nigeria, found that 63% of the victims met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This alarming figure underscores the prevalence of trauma among Boko Haram's victims. According to the study, the causes are not solely medical; social, economic, and cultural factors are also implicated. In recent times, there have been reports that Boko Haram has begun infiltrating other regions of the country. The group's insurgent activities have resulted in the deaths of thousands and the displacement of millions from their homes. Taken together, Boko Haram has engendered not only physical and material distress, but also severely undermined individuals' mental wellness. This further justifies the need to engage with the trauma experienced by victims from different disciplinary perspectives,

including literature, a cultural platform that reflects diverse shades of human experience, including Boko Haram-induced trauma.

Boko Haram has been represented in Nigerian literature across the major literary genres of drama, poetry, and prose fiction. Among these, prose fiction has received the greatest creative attention, with novels such as Wale Okediran's *Madagali*, Adaobi Nwabuani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, and Isha Sesay's *Beneath the Tamarind Tree* exploring various dimensions of Boko Haram insurgent activities. Although Elnathan John's novel, *Born on a Tuesday*, foregrounds insurgency driven by religious fundamentalism, it does not directly engage with Boko Haram violent activities. There are also prose narratives on Boko Haram that combine survivors' testimonies with the authors' journalistic perspectives. A notable example is Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*. In the genre of drama, the award-winning play *Embers* is the most widely known work on the Boko Haram insurgency.

Compared with prose fiction and poetry, drama is the least represented genre in Nigerian literature on Boko Haram. The poetry genre is characterised by literary productions of writers, some of whom are primary witnesses to the insurgency. For instance, Abubakar Othman, Razinat Mohammed, Safiya Ismail Yero, Nereus Tadi Yerima and Idris Amali are writers whose cultural proximity to the Boko Haram war theatre informs the traumatic memories represented in their works. In fact, Othman, Mohammed and Amali, who formerly resided in Maiduguri, the epicentre of the insurgency has affirmed their firsthand witnessing of trauma-triggering violence perpetrated by Boko Haram. Consequently, the traumatic memories recalled and articulated in their poems suggest that Boko Haram-induced trauma may both be speakable and memorable. It is important to note that not all literary witnessing of the insurgency constitutes the representation of trauma personally experienced by the poets. Razaq Malik Gbolahan, for instance, articulates a form of vicarious witnessing of Boko Haram violence mediated through media source (Nlebedim Nzube, 2021) This mediated exposure can be regarded as

an inspiration for the grim portrayal of the traumatic terrain of northern Nigeria in his poetry collections, *No Home in this Land* and *The Other Names of Grief*.

Generally, Nigerian poetry on the subject of Boko Haram has received minimal critical engagement from the framework of trauma. The genre remains largely underexplored from the perspective of trauma theory, a framework that could offer new insights into the poetic representations of suffering and pain. The prospect of therapeutic intervention makes such a framework necessary. Armstrong (2020:296) observes that although poetry has the tendency to have memorable language, "it nevertheless inhabits a markedly marginal position within the scholarly field of current trauma studies". Adebisi-Adelabu (2023:79) has also observed this lacuna in the studies of Nigerian poetry. It is also important to note that Nigerian novels and plays, particularly those that thematise the subject of Boko Haram insurgency have been more studied from the lens of trauma. Adewuyi (2022), Udoette (2024) and Fadare (2026) are the existing studies that have engaged with trauma engendered by Boko Haram in Nigerian poetry. Adewuyi and Udoette, drawing on Caruth's trauma theory, largely privileged trauma as belated, unspeakable, and marked by loss of agency, silence and subjects' inability to fully recall traumatic experience and victimhood as the only possible experiences that victims of Boko Haram's terrorism have.

Although Fadare (2026) draws on postcolonial trauma theory, it does not address the speakability and memorialisation of trauma induced by Boko Haram. Consequently, this gap limits a deeper understanding of the diverse responses of victims and survivors to the trauma engendered by the insurgency. However, this study leans on Joshua Pederson's model of trauma theory and Stef Craps' postcolonial trauma theory to argue for the possibility of speakability, memory, resilience and survivor agency alongside pain and suffering. Through this, the study investigates how Nigerian poetry subverts muteness and amnesia in the context of Boko Haram-induced trauma.

Joshua Pederson's revised model of trauma theory

The assumptions of Joshua Pederson's model of trauma theory were employed to guide the analysis. The reason for this choice is that, unlike the unspeakability, belatedness, and amnesia associated with the first wave of trauma theory, Pederson's model emphasises the possibility of recalling and articulating trauma. To complement Joshua Pederson's trauma framework, this study drew on Stef Craps' model of postcolonial trauma theory. This provides a lens for understanding the cumulative, structural, and culturally situated dimensions of Boko Haram-induced trauma. Significantly, Craps' model foregrounds the postcolonial context that underpins this study.

First-wave trauma theory largely excludes non-Western experiences from its conceptual canon. While Euro-American histories such as the Holocaust, 9/11, and the Vietnam War receive extensive scholarly attention, traumatic experiences in postcolonial contexts are often marginalised or overlooked. In this regard, Stef Craps observes the failure of the founding texts of trauma theory to "promote cross-cultural ethical engagement", this monocultural bias, Craps posits, "sits uneasily with the field's ethical aspiration" (2013:3).

Apart from recognising the need to engage the global scope of traumatic experiences, histories, and cultural forms, postcolonial trauma theory also challenges the adequacy of the event-based model that underpins Western trauma epistemology in accounting for trauma in postcolonial contexts. Instead, it conceptualises trauma not only as the result of specific, identifiable events but also as a condition shaped by accretive, everyday forms of structural violence. Rather than assuming that trauma can be explained solely through moments of catastrophic rupture, postcolonial trauma theory calls for the recognition of experiences that are insidious and cumulative in nature. It also challenges mainstream conceptions of trauma that frame the condition primarily as an individual phenomenon. As Craps (2013) reminds us, an exclusive focus on the individual psyche diverts attention from the

broader social and structural conditions in which trauma occurs. Such an approach, pathologises affected populations, reducing them to passive victims or sufferers devoid of agency. An individualised perspective to trauma prioritises psychological recovery while neglecting the cultural, political, social and economic systems that produce and sustain trauma.

Pederson's model of trauma theory leans on Richard McNally's copious research on trauma in the field of psychology which repudiates the idea of traumatic amnesia and unspeakability. In one of these publications, *Remembering Trauma* (2003), McNally argues that traumatic memories are usually unforgettable unless they occur in the first two years of life or if the individual suffers brain damage as a result of the event. McNally's extensive research on traumatic memories has significant implications for literary representations of traumatic memories. Central to his findings is the fact that survivors can recall traumatic experiences graphically and do not usually forget their trauma. He further argues that, while people may not consistently think of their trauma, this should not be misconstrued for an inability to recall such experiences.

Pederson, therefore, draws on these medical findings to argue that, as scientific understandings of trauma evolve, literary theories of trauma should also be revised accordingly. Consequently, he challenges Caruth's (1996) model, which emphasises amnesia, silence and textual gaps. Some of the revisions in his new model of trauma theory, published in the article *Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory* (2014), are noted below.

Rather than seeking textual aporia and absences in texts, literary scholars should focus on engaging with the actual text for analysis. He notes that the advantage of such an approach is that it can offer fresh interpretations of both new and existing texts and avoids perpetuating the idea of traumatic amnesia which may be harmful to survivors.

Pederson also suggests that trauma theorists should intentionally search for instances in literature, where narrators or personas provide augmented details, when recalling their traumatic

experiences. According to him, this affords the critic the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the victim's trauma and its painful effects.

Finally, Pederson proposes that scholars engaged with the representation of trauma in literature should focus on representations of experiences that are "temporarily, physically, or ontologically distorted" (2014:339). This implies that attention should be paid to instances where there are representations of experiences such as alteration in memory, confusion, and dissociation from the environment. Based on McNally's evidence, Pederson posits that these experiences do not efface the memory of trauma.

Engaging with Boko Haram in literature

The emergence of literary representations of Boko Haram is closely connected to the sect's prolonged reign of terror in northern Nigeria, particularly, the northeastern region. Since the early 2000s, the insurgency has generated fictional and non-fictional representations across genres, including testimonial narratives, journalism, interviews, novels, drama and poetry, often in hybrid forms. Patience Ibrahim and Andrea Hoffman's *A Gift from Darkness*, Wolfgang Bauer's *Stolen Girls*, and Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*, for instance, combine testimonial and journalistic modes to document survivors' traumatic experiences. Similarly, Wale Okediran's *Madagali* and Adaobi Tricia Nwabuniani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* represent the psychological and gendered dimensions of insurgency, while Soji Cole's *Embers*, Ahmed Yerima's *Pari*, and Tosin Jobi Tume's *The Victims* dramatise the violence and its consequences. Poetry has also provided an important medium for bearing witness to Boko Haram-induced trauma, as evident in works such as Wole Soyinka's *A Humanist Ode for Chibok*, Leah, *The Markas*, Razaq Malik Gbolahan's *The Other Names of Grief*, among others. Collectively, these works demonstrate the capacity of literary forms to memorialise individual and communal experiences of insurgent violence.

Critical scholarship, however, has developed unevenly across these genres. In poetry, Adewuyi Aremu (2022) examines silence as a

manifestation of the trauma experienced by women victims represented in *The Markas*, arguing that their verbal constriction derives from a prolonged consciousness of loss and diminished hope. While valuable, the study concentrates primarily on women and therefore leaves insufficient room for the experiences of men and children. More importantly, its emphasis on silence risks presenting traumatic responses as homogenous, whereas survivors may alternatively employ silence as coping strategy or actively articulate their experiences. Nureni Fadare (2026) examines trauma in Razaq Malik Gbolahan's *The Other Names of Grief*, but does not specifically address its memorability or speakability. Monica Udoette (2024), meanwhile, argues that the victims represented in Gbolahan's poetry possess an "unclaimed experience" that inhibits recollection and articulation. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's model, Udoette consequently foregrounds traumatic silence and unrepresentability. These studies indicate that critical engagement with Boko Haram-induced trauma in Nigerian poetry remains substantially informed by the Caruthian paradigm.

Studies of prose fiction have similarly explored the psychological, physical and gendered consequences of Boko Haram violence. Ajibola (2018) examines violence and trauma in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* and Habila's *The Chibok Girls*, while Akinpelu (2021) focuses on insecurity and its underlying causes in *Born on a Tuesday*. Dissanayake and Nadaswaran (2024) approach the sexual violence suffered by women in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* and *A Gift from Darkness* through feminist, postcolonial and womanist perspectives. Kekeghe and Akuburunwa (2025), on the other hand, investigate the relationship between physical wounds and psychological trauma in Okediran's *Madagali*. Although these studies expand understanding of the consequences and representations of insurgency, only some explicitly employ trauma theory, and those that do generally privilege traumatic amnesia, aporia and unspeakability.

Drama provides a somewhat different perspective on the question of traumatic articulation. Nasir and Omorodion (2023), in their

analysis of Soji Cole's *Embers*, juxtapose Caruth's conception of traumatic unspeakability with Joshua Pederson's argument that traumatic memories can be recalled and articulated. Their analysis of characters such as Memunah, Idayat, Atai and Talatu demonstrates how narratives of abduction, rape, loss and displacement can constitute acts of traumatic articulation. Akinpelu (2023) further identifies the destruction of the IDP camp in *Embers* as an expression of radical agency. These studies, therefore, provide an important counterpoint to the dominant emphasis on traumatic silence and support the possibility of remembering and speaking trauma. Nevertheless, their focus is primarily on drama rather than poetry.

The following review reveals a significant gap in existing scholarship. Although literary studies have extensively represented Boko Haram-induced violence across genres, critical attention to trauma in Nigerian literature has largely been shaped by the Caruthian concepts of unspeakability, traumatic amnesia and unrepresentability. In poetry particularly, limited attention has been paid to the capacity of survivors and poetic personae to remember, articulate and negotiate traumatic experiences. While Nasir and Omorodion's study of *Embers* demonstrates the usefulness of Pederson's conception of traumatic memory, and thereby aligns with the present study's rejection of an exclusively Caruthian model, the question of the memorability and speakability of Boko Haram-induced trauma in Nigerian poetry remains insufficiently explored. This gap is addressed by examining how selected Nigerian poets transform traumatic experiences into memorable and speakable narratives, thereby foregrounding not only suffering and silence, but also agency, articulation and memorialisation.

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive research design, firmly rooted in the traditions of hermeneutics and textual analysis, to explore how Boko Haram-induced trauma is represented in the selected poems. The primary text examined is *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram*, edited by Tanure Ojaide. *The Markas* is an anthology consisting of poems and short stories

that represent the violent activities of Boko Haram and the profound traumatic aftermath of these acts on their victims. As this study is interested in Nigerian poetry, data were drawn exclusively from the poetry section. Not all the poems were selected; rather, only those that thematically foreground Boko Haram-induced violence and its traumatic effects were purposively selected for critical analysis. Seven poems were selected from the anthology. Some of these poems, apart from representing traumatic experiences engendered by Boko Haram, foreground survivors' resilience, agency, and prospects for healing. Many of the selected poets are residents of northern Nigeria, thereby positioning them as primary or secondary witnesses to Boko Haram's violence. Some of these poets have subconsciously internalised cycles of trauma, which are subsequently articulated through their artistic creations.

Witnessing and speaking trauma in *The Markas*

The analysis begins with Abubakar Othman's "Trembling Night". As a resident of Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria, the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, Othman witnessed the violence firsthand. In an interview he granted to Folu Agoi (2021), he noted that Maiduguri had been a symbol of Nigeria's unity in diversity until Boko Haram's violent incursion, which led to a traumatic transformation of the city's once peaceful identity. Also, reflecting on his experience of Boko Haram's insurgency, the poet-survivor states in his review of *Madagali*, a novel on Boko Haram war by the physician-writer, Wale Okediran, that he was a direct victim of the group's violence. These violent encounters included Boko Haram's invasion and subsequent occupation of his home, during which all his books were burnt, reflecting the group's ideology that education is forbidden. On the inspiration for his writings on Boko Haram, he averred that, witnessing the upheaval, devastation, and forced displacement, inflicted on a once peaceful place and beautiful people by insurgents constitute a reality that no writer with a sense of social commitment can ignore. These traumatic experiences are also vividly recalled in his poetry collection *Blood Streams in the Desert*. In "Trembling Night", a poem included in the anthology, *The Markas*, the

poet memorialises the group's violent onslaught in the following lines:

The bombs blast
Trembling up children in deep sleep
I perch on the edge of the bed
A restless city of fleeing residents
Of corpses floating like flocks
Corpses whose eyes have refused to close
We keep vigil over the city
Of murdering by the state and terrorists
In the name of God and country (Othman cited in Ojaide, 2019, p. 42)

Consistent with Joshua Pederson's trauma theory, the poem can be read as a literary representation of vividly recalled traumatic experience of what transpired during the gory sleepless night engendered by Boko Haram. The poem's representation of persistent sleeplessness foregrounds the psychological effect of Boko Haram violence. Apart from the adults, the sleep deprivation experienced by the children is foregrounded through the kinesthetic imagery of "trembling". Poor sleep has far-reaching consequences for the cognitive, emotional and overall well-being of children. Clinical research suggests that children who experience disruptions in their sleep are prone to poor academic performance, difficulties with emotional and memory regulation and general childhood flourishing (Sadeh, 2007, Okorie and Weber, 2024). Perhaps, traumatic effects, such as those depicted in these poetic lines, account for one of the reasons children from the northeast are not at par academically with those from other parts of the country. The poem also evokes a range of traumatic experience, including death, hypervigilance, haunting by the dead, and other manifestations of individual and collective suffering endured by the residents. Furthermore, the poem's straightforward representation of these traumatic experiences, without recourse to the gaps and silences posited by Caruth, validates Joshua Pederson's argument that survivors of trauma, including victims of Boko Haram's violence, are capable of recalling and articulating their experiences. This is significant because it enables memory communities to access, acknowledge, and preserve the suffering endured

by victims.

Nereus Tadi Yerima is one of the poets from northeastern Nigeria who have memorialised Boko Haram violence which continues to engender deep-seated psychological trauma on the inhabitants of the region. As a poet-scholar, he has deployed his craft to comment on social, cultural, and historical issues like migration and dislocation, peace advocacy and the trauma associated with Boko Haram insurgency. Apart from his poem, "Sister, the sky is grey again" in *The Markas*, these traumatic experiences are also vividly recalled in his poetry collection, *Season of Sounds*. In the poem under analysis, the poetic persona, in a voice characterised by hypervigilance, a manifestation of trauma, alerts another victim of Boko Haram's atrocity about their traumatic condition. The persona articulates the anxiety that mirrors the quotidian experiences of individuals and communities in northeastern Nigeria in these lines:

Sister, the sky is grey again
Grey again, grey again
Ah, sister, sister, the times

The times play foul (Yerima cited in Ojaide 2019, p.1).

Through the deployment of pathetic fallacy, seen in the reference to grey sky, nature mirrors the grief, misery and dispossession of northern Nigeria's inhabitants, the epicentre of Boko Haram's violence. There is a nexus between the inclement weather, as represented through the grey sky imagery, and the continuous psychic disequilibrium of victims. This contrasts with the event-focused model of classical trauma theory as victims' experiences extend beyond a single incident. It thereby validates Craps' postcolonial framework, which emphasises that such experiences are characterised by multiple layers of violence that sustain and permeate everyday life. In the lines that follow, the speaker recalls Boko Haram's daily violence, revealing how trauma has become pervasive among individuals:

We count our losses
Losses in the past year
Our husbands gone
Our children maimed
Our houses, our houses destroyed (I).

The persona's vivid recollection of the multi-

layered traumas suffered by individuals in northern Nigeria, and the articulation of these experiences in explicit rather than fragmented or elusive language, challenge the traditional model of trauma theory, which assumes that agonising memories, such as those inflicted by Boko Haram are inherently unspeakable or fragmented. The significance of this straightforward versification lies in its ability to foreground the suffering of Boko Haram victims, such as dispossession, bereavement, displacement, and others without resorting to textual gaps. This representation supports Pederson's (2014) revision of trauma theory, where he underscores paying attention to the text itself, rather than gaps, while engaging with trauma in literature. Although recalling and articulating survivors' trauma should not amount to voyeurism or arrogant spectatorship as cautioned by Modlinger and Sontaag (2011), literature becomes a significant outlet where the multiple dimensions of pain suffered by communities ravaged by Boko Haram's terror are recognised and exposed.

Also, recognising "children" and "husbands" as Boko Haram's victims, supports Onah's (2022) caution against selective memorialisation, as the poem makes a detour from the tendency to focus on the Chibok school girls to include other underrepresented population who experienced similar, if not worse attacks. It ensures the memory of such groups is equally alive within memory communities, where the possibility of empathy could be explored. Also, the repetition of the image of destroyed houses opens another layer of the persona's recounting of details of traumatic experiences suffered by displaced Boko Haram victims in IDP camps and underscoring the concept of "accessibility of traumatic memory", espoused by Pederson (2014:338). In the depressive environment of the IDP camp, filled with anguish and despair, the persona recalls:

Dispersed by Boko Haram...
I have seen, I have seen the tears
Of children orphaned
Of widows distraught (2)

The poetic persona graphically memorialises the deep psychic pains of victims with the representation of tears as a marker of trauma, while

validating Pederson's insight that traumatic memory can be expressed through multi-sensory imagery. The lachrymal articulatory vent depicted in these lines intertwine, auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and gustatory imagery-the saltiness of tears and the emotional weight it conveys. Similarly, Meg Jensen (2020:74) corroborates tears as a trauma marker, through her insight that it is one of "trauma's key sensations". This response to trauma engendered by Boko Haram constitutes the lived experience of many of the millions of individuals that have been displaced from their homes.

Also, the psychological disequilibrium that displaced individuals experience is linked to officials metaphorically referred to as, "the giants of NEMA" and "the fat cocks feeding on our wounds". The alliterative line also draws attention to the person's ability to recall and articulate the manner in which people saddled with the responsibility of providing relief and succour to victims, have ironically aggravated their trauma. The quotidian experiences of displaced individuals represented in the poem align with the position of postcolonial trauma theory that traumatic experiences cannot be adequately accounted for by the event-based model. Poverty, exploitation, institutional corruption that hampers recovery and healing are instances of insidious forms of trauma that survivors of Boko Haram insurgency encounter daily.

The concluding part of the poem expresses the restorative vision inherent in recalling and voicing trauma. On a note of optimism, the persona expresses hope, despite the suffering in the camp:

But Sister, Sister
It is daybreak
Sister, prepare your seedlings
Let's begin again
The Journey to recovery (2)

The conjunction, "But" signals a tonal shift from recounting traumatic memory to embracing hope. While "daybreak" contrasts with the imagery of a grey sky, "seedlings" stand as metaphors of renewal, optimism and new beginnings. Taken together, the metaphors align with Pederson's perspective that "speaking trauma pulls it from the

realm of painful obscurity and hastens the process of rehabilitation” (2014:338).

Privileging textual narrative over amnesia, gaps and silence in the poem underscores how reclaiming the story of Boko Haram’s terror has the potential to assist survivors on their journey to healing. Also, this vision of recovery can be read within the framework of postcolonial trauma theory, which suggests that while traumatic experiences often undermine individual and collective stability, they “can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion” (Irene Visser, 2015:255). In this light, the persona’s clarion call, urging survivors to “prepare their seedlings” and “begin again...the journey to recovery” can be interpreted as a tentative gesture towards re-articulation and reclamation of identity, one that has been severely altered by Boko Haram-induced trauma but is nonetheless imagined as capable of re-emergence through acts of remembrance, articulation, and collective resolve. It also foregrounds postcolonial trauma theory’s emphasis on collective renewal, regeneration, and the possibility of life after traumatising.

In “I Returned” by Razinat Mohammed, the persona mourns the devastating impact of Boko Haram’s violence on the northeast of Nigeria’s landscape, especially her ancestral community of Yerwa in Maiduguri, now one of the tragic casualties of insurgency. The persona’s familial abode, which used to offer solace, now stands as a traumascap. Bearing the weight of Boko Haram’s violence and its attendant losses, this trauma site awakens a torrent of emotions and painful recollections. The persona deploys rhetorical questions to bewail her Boko Haram ravaged environment:

From afar, I saw the land.

Lying bare for there was no inhibition beside the rubble

Can this be my homestead, my mother’s homestead?

Where is my father’s marbled balcony?

I see a heap of rubble and wonder if that is my uncle’s flat.

(Mohammed cited in Ojaide, 2019,p.23).

The poem represents a persona estranged and dissociated from her northeast homeland, once serene but now ravaged by Boko Haram’s insurgent activities. She is unable to reconcile

memories of its former tranquillity with the stark reality of destruction before her. In the persona’s distressed psyche, there is a disconnection between a peaceful past and a perilous present. In his revised trauma theory, Pederson invites trauma scholars to probe representations of physically distorted and surreal experiences. Although the persona’s recollection of the violence inflicted on her homestead is briefly altered, it does not efface the memory of the environmental devastation and the attendant psychic pain.

As a sequel to the portrayal of environmental catastrophe, the poem shows how trauma reshapes the collective identity of northeast Nigerians, foregrounding the deep bond between a community’s physical environment and its sense of self. The poet persona articulates the alteration in the identity of individuals in the northeast community through the symbol of the desecrated neem tree:

Even the neem tree that stood tall and proud at the entrance
Has a story to tell. Its trunk, deeply serrated and the jagged edges

Speak of mutilation done in haste.

The neem tree is Yerwa’s identity and could this sacred tree
Not be spared the horror that has befallen its people? (23).

It is not only individuals that can recall and articulate the trauma inflicted by Boko Haram, even the neem tree in Yerwa, Maiduguri, a living symbol of their identity, also bears silent witness to the insurgents’ reign of terror. Due to Boko Haram’s ecocide, the loss of this environmental succour further complicates the people’s misery. This resonates with the argument that “a traumatized earth begets traumatized people”(Narine, 2015:13). The persona expresses the state of confusion, helplessness and distress now synonymous with her people’s identity when she says:

Where do I stand in the mist of all the ruins?

Where do I place my feet to feel the soothing touch of my
motherland?

What am I to do when the hope of the land lie buried under
the rubbles? (23)

The speaker in Khalid Imam’s “In the Nest of Tears” mourns the varied forms of suffering and dehumanisation vulnerable girls experience, first at the hands of Boko Haram, referred to as the

“bloody hyenas”, and IDP camp officials, referred to as “the carefree beasts”. The animal metaphor used to depict Boko Haram members and other perpetrators of violence against survivors is similar to their portrayal in some other poems in the anthology. This draws attention to the beastly monstrosity of the group and their like, who inflict suffering on vulnerable victims. In her research on the narrative pattern of Boko Haram survivors, Doris Wesley argues that when Boko Haram survivors obliterate the name of the insurgent group and its members, they enact a communicative silence that renders their tormentors irrelevant, while also highlighting their inhumanity. She further posits that erasing the name and identities of tormentors, promotes survivors’ health and well-being (Wesley, 2021). Therefore, the persona’s deployment of animal metaphors to name Boko Haram, confers a subtle voice and agency on survivors. Whereas earlier studies like Adewuyi (2022) and Udoette (2024) argue that the traumatic experiences of Boko Haram survivors are those of silence and oblivion, this study posits that the survivors’ world is not one consigned to the realm of amnesia. Rather, their trauma can be recalled and articulated. Taken together, these articulations resonate with Pederson’s framework, which holds that unremembered and unspeakable trauma, “steals agency from the survivor” (Pederson, 2014:338).

In the poem’s next lines, the persona foregrounds sexual violence, one of the major triggers of trauma for women and girls, within Boko Haram’s den and even in the IDP camps that are supposed to provide safety. While victims experience more of marital rape than non-marital rape in some of the insurgents’ cells, they endure physiological rape and socio-political rape in the camps (Matfess, 2017, Alabi, 2022). Socio-political rape in this context indicates corruption and misuse of power by people at the helms of affairs, who are supposed to cater to the needs of survivors. It is within these traumatic spaces that the poem aptly derives its title, “Nest of Tears”, a stark oxymoron that draws attention to the trauma engendered by sexual violence in a setting that is supposed to bring relief. With tear-blurred eyes and deep grief, the narrator mourns the sexual

violence girls experience in IDP camps:

Sadly,

We were camped

In the nest of rapists...

What are they if not shameless rapists of teenagers-

Poor girls too infant to mother a child? (Imam cited in
Ojaide ed. 2019, p.16).

Rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls in Boko Haram-ravaged Northern Nigeria do not begin in the IDP camps as depicted in the lines above, such violence originates in the group’s strongholds where, according to Mwatwara and Mlambo (2024), Boko Haram members systematically rape victims and deliberately attempt to produce progeny from these assaults. While Boko Haram’s rape of girls and women is a deliberate systematic attempt to produce future generation of insurgents, camp officials largely exploit their vulnerabilities. The combination of these experiences is what has triggered the traumatic memory the persona recalls and articulates. Through the use of a rhetorical question, the persona exposes a traumatic rumination, which, according to the American Psychiatric Association, is an unrelenting web of dwelling on painful emotions, their causes and lingering effects (2020). The poem bears witness to the lived experiences of girls and women in the region, part of the millions of displaced people who are subjected to sexual violence in IDP camps. So widespread was the rape that between 2014 and 2015 the United Nations Population Fund assisted in the delivery of 16,000 babies (Mwatwara and Mlambo, 2024).

In distressing situations like this, survivors attempt to get some form of relief to alleviate the psychic turbulence around them. Acknowledging the therapeutic potential inherent in a simple narration of trauma, Pederson (2014) makes reference to Susan Brison, herself a survivor of rape trauma, who attests to the beneficial power of describing traumatic memory. Here, the poet persona seems to take a cue from Brison and Pederson’s position when she attempts to unburden trauma and pain, triggered through sexual violation. In a pensive mood and curious tone, the persona wonders:

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

The persona's references to "Phony puritan clergymen", "uncaring hubbies" and "the guards" indict hegemonic masculinity for the trauma women in northern Nigeria experience. When camp officials who prey on vulnerable women are added to the picture, and considering that most Boko Haram sexual perpetrators are men, the deeply gendered dimension of trauma in the region becomes apparent. In her criticism of Pederson's model of trauma theory, Erwin Carol acknowledges the usefulness of Pederson's ideas in understanding how trauma is remembered and articulated, yet argues that it ignores the ways hegemonic masculinity enforces social amnesia and silences survivors of sexual violence. Carol (2022:358) further contends that "hegemonic masculinity does more than mandate an impossible testimony from women; it simultaneously discredits victims' stories". This implies that even if victims have the ability to speak their trauma, as McNally and Pederson's theory informs us, sometimes, factors such as enforced silence could circumscribe them. Yet, Pederson insists that even if survivors choose silence over narrating their traumatic experience, researchers must not mistake that *enforced* choice for an 'inability to speak' (2014: 337-338). Building on his revised model of trauma theory, silence and articulation of trauma could be explored beyond McNally's clinical scope to include the ways culture and context mandate forced silence. In this regard, this could assist in identifying, for instance, the reason survivors of Boko Haram's sexual terrorism are reluctant to talk about their experience. When one considers the fact that the texts Pederson deploy in activating his theory are based on Western experiences, the need to engage silence and articulation of trauma in the context of Boko Haram's insurgency, a non-Western experience, becomes relevant. Aligned with the poem's rhetorical motif, the speaker concludes the poem, condemning the unsympathetic silence that pervades the northeast of Nigeria in the face of traumatising sexual violence:

Where is the safety
We were promised
In this nest of tears
Where beautiful petals are daily torn
By the heartless demons seemingly applauded
By the loud silence of all? (16-17).

Stigmatisation of Boko Haram survivors is also part of what aggravates their distress and enforces silence on them. In many communities in the northeast, women who return from captivity live with stigma. While their exposure to trauma is responsible for their stigmatisation, the perception of stigma itself is a trigger of trauma. They are labelled as dirty and dishonoured, since it is assumed that they are raped in the camps. Those believed to have been raped are treated as social outcasts for the violence done to them. Framing this dynamic within its socio-cultural context complements Pederson's theory on the memory and articulation of trauma, because it helps track the specific settings and agents responsible for enforcing silencing on women. This position addresses Erwin Carol's (2022) critique that, Pederson and McNally's, theory inadvertently conceptualise memory, amnesia and articulation in individualistic ways, overlooking the connection between hegemonic masculinity, sociocultural context and trauma, which risks reinforcing a discourse that has long silenced and discredited women.

The persona in Razinat Mohammed's "What Will I Say?" also recalls the harrowing experience of rape while ruminating on its future effects and uncertainties. The psychic pain of the speaker is as a result of incestuous rape perpetrated by a Boko Haram member, who is young enough to be the victim's son. Indication of this incestuous violence is represented in the speaker's traumatic rumination when she says: "What life is this anyway"?/ "When a woman is forced to swallow her own vomit"?/ "Should a son pleasure himself in the nudity of his mother"? (*The Markas*, 21). The deployment of piercing rhetorical questions foregrounds the speaker's anguished ruminations as represented in the lines filled with profound distress:

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?
When my heart carries a burden so heavy it can burst
(Mohammed cited in Ojaide ed.2019, p.20).

The persona's "pallid lips" instantiate Cathy Caruth's (2014:149) idea of "self-silencing" in the wake of sexual violence, an enforced muteness engendered by what could be described as double-layered shame. This is because the shame that naturally comes with rape becomes aggravated by the feeling that another shame could be elicited from talking about the experience. In this regard, Caruth seems to indirectly agree that the silent response of survivors to trauma comes with the agency of deciding not to articulate their experience. This lends credence to Pederson's position that if the traumatised person does not want to speak of her trauma, such reluctance should not be misconstrued as "an inability to speak" (2014: 337-338). Taking a cue from Craps (2013) and Simi Malhotra et al.(2025), this witnessing should prompt memory communities across the world to recognise that many societies- especially in the Global South, including northern Nigeria- are traumatised not merely by isolated events but by prolonged, everyday forms of suffering that clinical psychologists, Maria Root and Laura Brown categorise as "insidious trauma". The shame, humiliation, and social stigmatisation that women who are sexually violated by Boko Haram endure fall within this category of trauma. Ultimately, this awareness ensures that survivors' painful experiences are not confined to the space of social amnesia. Driven by shame and anger symptomatic of trauma, the persona expresses suicidal thoughts and the grisly wish to kill the growing foetus in her womb. These are articulated in these lines of despondent rumination:

If I could strangle his unformed neck and pull out each
Artery, will my desired solution come?
Why should I live on, to feel this pangs continue to hit my
fragile ribs?
What life is this anyway?

When a woman is forced to swallow her own vomits? (21).

Apart from women who are forcefully impregnated by Boko Haram, children that are products of this violent encounter also face discrimination and stigmatisation. The reason for this is that it is often believed that the children have

Boko Haram's ideology and DNA ingrained in them at birth. This transgenerational trauma is what has made Matfess (2017) to conclude that the stigma against this generation of children will haunt the northeastern community for years to come. Despite the difficulty the persona experiences in the articulation of trauma, the deployment of imagery that express seemingly unspeakable suffering validates Pederson's (2014) argument that "traumatic memory is often multisensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well". There is also the deployment of scatological imagery in "swallow her own vomits". Therefore, the expressions, "strangle his unformed neck", "pull out each artery", "feel this pangs", "hit my ribs" and "swallow her own vomits" deployed in the poems are non-verbal cues that articulate the persona's deep trauma.

Speaking from the point of view of a housewife in Safiya Ismail Yero's "My Northeast Dream" the poet-persona memorialises the deep psychic pain associated with the violent manner her daughter is abducted by Boko Haram members. Her inability to protect her pubescent daughter from Boko Haram's abduction exacerbates her survivor-guilt and intensifies her psychological distress. She articulates this anguish when she laments, "I should have hidden her in the ceiling"/ Instead of beneath the bed from whence taken"/ I wailed she wailed as they dragged her away. The persona's disturbed psyche is emblematic of the collective anguish experienced by individuals who manifest survivor-guilt in the Boko Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria. Other perspectives the speaker deploys are those of a farmer and a pupil who, despite the trauma they endure envision a peaceful region as depicted in these lines: "My Northeast dream is to"/ "Till the soil not souls"/ "Bury seeds not corpses"... "go to school in peace"/ And not be haunted by maimed bodies"/Floating in streams of blood" (Yero cited in Ojaide ed. 2019:67-68). These perspectives represent articulation of the possibility of resilience and life-affirming assertions of agency on the part of survivors of Boko Haram violence.

Conclusion

Compared to previous studies that posit that trauma is unspeakable and circumscribed by belatedness, this study, using Boko Haram-induced trauma, demonstrates that trauma can be recalled and articulated. While peculiar sociocultural contexts and responses to trauma could sometimes engender silence, it does not result in loss of memory. The study also validates Pederson's trauma theory that trauma can be represented in a straightforward manner, without necessarily resorting to textual gaps and lacuna as assumed by the Caruthian model of trauma. The research extends Joshua Pederson and McNally's theoretical framework, which foregrounds the speakability and memorability of trauma, by demonstrating that, beyond medical paradigms, socio-cultural contexts offer alternative ways of understanding Boko Haram-induced trauma. The present study further corroborates the findings of earlier studies such as Akinpelu's (2024,2026)

examinations of the speakability and memorability of Hurricane Katrina-induced trauma in Osundare's poetry and Adebisi-Adelabu's (2026) study of trauma engendered by the Nigerian Civil War in Ekwuazi's poetry collection. Through the analysis of the figurative tropes deployed in the representation of trauma in the selected texts, the paper has demonstrated a better understanding of the traumatic plight of Boko Haram victims. This could enable societal empathic unsettlement, that is, responding to the victims' trauma without appropriating them. The study strongly holds that traumatic amnesia and silence could do more damage to the survivors because their unpleasant experiences could be confined to the realm of oblivion and societal amnesia. Insights from the study could complement the understanding of Boko Haram-induced trauma by psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and other professionals involved in the rehabilitation and care of survivors.

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