

POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD IN HELON HABILA'S
*THE CHIBOK GIRLS: THE BOKO HARAM
KIDNAPPINGS AND ISLAMIST MILITANCY IN
NIGERIA*

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Abstract

In this article, the author critically examines the politics of victimhood in Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram kidnappings and Islamist militancy in Nigeria*. The novel is a non-fictional narrative of the most gruesome terrorists' abduction of 276 schoolgirls of Government Secondary School, Chibok, in Bornu State, Nigeria, which occurred on the 14 April 2014. The article is framed on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which offers a compelling perspective for understanding the psychological and narrative dimensions of traumatic experience that comes in the forms of repeated flashbacks and nightmares of cycles of violence and neglect as suffered by the Chibok girls. Through the literary analysis of Habila's narrative choices, thematic concerns, and detailed description of socio-political context, the article interrogates how the phenomenon of victimhood is constructed, represented, and finds expression to portray socio-political events both in Nigeria and outside the shores of Nigeria. The article finds that Habila's work goes beyond journalism to serve as a powerful socio-political commentary. It exposes the Nigerian state's failure to protect its citizens, especially women and children, from terrorism and systemic neglect. Through first-hand interviews and investigative visits, Habila reveals the girls' trauma, the Nigerian Federal government's denial and inaction, and the broader atmosphere of insecurity and institutional weakness in Nigeria.

Keywords: Victimhood, Chibok girls, politics, kidnapping, trauma, victim feminism

Introduction

Although Helon Habila's journalism background has profound expression in the way and manner he crafted the story of *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*, the book offers more than a journalistic reportage of a tragic event. The book vividly portrays the memory and the politics of suffering and aims to call attention to the broader socio-political structures that sustain such atrocities. In this article, the author attempts to present an analysis of how Habila navigates the intricate politics of victimhood, focusing on the narrative strategies he employs and the ideological implications of those strategies. The analysis is framed on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which is explained in detail below.

Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory (1996)

Using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, we argue in this article that the novel, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* presents the space for the "voice" of trauma to speak. Caruth's thesis in the work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) indicates that trauma is not fully grasped or experienced in the moment of its occurrence but rather returns later through flashbacks, repetition, or haunting memories. Caruth calls these repetitive effects "belatedness" or "deferred action." Helon Habila's portrayal of the haunting memories of the incidence of the girls' abduction, their forced marriage, suffering in the forest with their assailants all present a complex image of victimhood. Furthermore, the Chibok girls are often portrayed as passive subjects of violence, but their abduction is symbolic, signalling a vulnerable group who suffer neglect and always at risk of dehumanizing treatment in hands of men under

the watchful eyes and complicity of state actors and the international community.

The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria is a story of the devastating impact of the Boko Haram insurgency in North-eastern Nigeria. It is both a metaphor and a heart-rending non-fictional account of the gruesome kidnap of 276 schoolgirls of Government Secondary School, Chibok. The 276 schoolgirls are the principal victims. In the book, Helon Habila makes an investigative visit to Chibok, the epicentre of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria with a view to documenting a dependable account of the kidnap incident, which took place on the 14 April 2014. Habila describes Chibok as a town “abounded with stories of violence and assassinations, most of them related to religion or politics.” (p.35).

Before the novel got published, there had been conflicting versions of the incident, which had been reported in print and electronic media locally and internationally. There is no gainsaying the fact that the incident drew widespread international condemnation. Strangely, despite the tensed and harrowing atmosphere the kidnap incident portended, it was unanticipated to hear that the Nigerian Government under the leadership of former President Goodluck Jonathan did not appear “...convinced that a kidnapping had taken place.” (Habila, 74-75). The incident did not affect the concerted preparations that were going on for the World Economic Forum due to take place in Abuja in May of the same year. At the event, “The Jonathan government wanted to showcase Nigeria as an economic success story, and suspected that political opponents concocted the kidnapping story to sabotage the event. Even after the authorities confirmed the kidnapping, the administration did its best to downplay the seriousness of the event” (Habila, 75). Out of the curiosity and patriotic fervour to preserve the historical facts surrounding the kidnapping, Habila set out in the company of Abbas (a taxi driver) and

Michael, a member of the Joint Task Force (JTF) to make visits to Chibok to get first-hand information on the matter. In all, he made two visits to Chibok and through the visits was able to interview community leaders, parents of the kidnap victims, especially Ruth, and three of the 'Chibok girls' simply named Hauwa, Ladi and Juliana. Hauwa, Ladi and Juliana were among the girls that escaped from their abductors after they took "a leap of faith off that truck and into the night, and that had made the difference between them and those who were taken." (Habila,85)

The name 'Chibok girls' as used in the study text does not necessarily mean the girls share a common lineage, but the name came about by the twin-fold circumstances of their being school mates and victims of Boko Haram's terror attack in a town called Chibok. Helon Habila made notes from the interviews he had with the victims of terror attacks. It is on the basis on the notes that Habila can recreate the story of *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. Using his craftsmanship, Habila exudes not only qualities of literary creativity, but also braveness and patriotism. Habila took much risk to visit Chibok town two times despite the security risks with all the attendant consequences. His sense of patriotism lies in his conscious attempt to present an accurate account of the terror attack on the Chibok girls, which has conflicting reports in the media including government-originated reports.

Though the kidnap incident gets the fame it deserves, the recreated story of the Chibok girls is more than what it seems. It contains vivid harrowing images of the violence, social disorder, tragedies and the different shades of humanitarian crises Chibok and environs had faced because of the Islamist militancy steered by Boko Haram, a group that initially called for the overthrow of secular government in Nigeria; a group that considered western education as abhorrent.

The story also portrays Nigerian government's seeming insouciance and lack of political will to tackle the uprising headlong. Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and multi-faith nation has been contending with issues that threaten its cohesive existence for long. Some sections of the country keep complaining about unfair allocation of resources, non-inclusion in situation, lack of love and affection for others, and so on. And all successive administrations (both military and politically constituted) have not demonstrated the radical will to tackle this problem headlong. It is not surprising therefore, to see citizens in Nigeria who exhibit apparent lack of unity in their daily conduct. The national patriotism keeps waning. In its place, ethnic hostility, suspicion of one another, and all manner of violence keep soaring.

Before the Chibok schoolgirls abduction, the Boko Haram terrorists had on 25 February 2014 attacked a co-educational secondary school in Buni Yadi, Yobe State; burned down the school and murdered fifty-nine schoolboys in cold blood. This should have been a warning sign to the Nigerian government to ensure the protection of the lives of students subsequently. But no proactive measure was taken. Thus, in quick succession, the terrorists carried out very deadly attacks on churches, mosques, schools, markets, and strategic government buildings unchallenged and in the process many lives and property were lost. The most annoying element of the whole scenario is the continuous taunting and spiteful threats from the leaders of the Boko Haram terrorists to not only the Nigerian government but the western world, the hypothetical world super-powers.

The capability of Boko Haram insurgents to hold unto the remaining Chibok girls unchallenged for ten years appears to be a sign of victory of war. The tirade by Helon Habila on the issue should worry the world. Habila says, "The war against Boko Haram would never be won until the victims were at least accounted for." (Habila, 23). The book, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist*

Militancy in Nigeria serves to painfully remind us of how a day came in Nigeria that innocent schoolgirls became victims of hostage taking by the heavily armed Boko Haram members. The girls were taken away to Sambisa Forest unchallenged. We can imagine how they are raped daily to satisfy their abductors' sexual desiccation.

In Sambisa Forest where they girls were taken; it is a location where girls do not and cannot enjoy good medical attention even in their condition as pregnant or nursing mothers. The girls don't enjoy good meals or shelter. In fact, there is no single indication of cheerfulness on their faces. Imagine the psychic trauma of the girls cohabiting with beastly terrorists whose way of life, religious and ideological beliefs and practices are incompatible with those of the young girls. The abducted chibok girls who are yet to be rescued are inadvertently forced into marriage and are bearing children for the Boko Haram fighters.

Politics of Victimhood in Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*

Victimhood is a commonly researched theme in literary writing in general and vulnerability literature. Victimhood, with focus on women is a common theme in African literary writings and has found reflection in different genres of prose, drama, and poetry. Both male and female African writers have made literary representations of victimhood in the hands of men but "women in the greatest part of their writings deal with victimhood or at least make some allusions to it" (Mbadji, 2000, p.13).

The term, *victim feminism* (Robert Parker, 2015, p.158) could be used to describe women as victims as against women as agents. An active agent or subject refers to the perpetrator of the action. It is usual to consider the agent or subject as guilty of wrongdoing. On the other hand, the victim is the sufferer of the action, and in most cases is the person who has done no wrong and therefore, perceived as innocent

(Edmad Moussa, 2020). This later of view of women as victims is the core of the paper.

From the literature, a large body of evidence exists that many female authored works address the theme of victimhood as perpetrated by patriarchal practices. Rose Sackeyfio examined the portrayal of African women as victims of a complex social matrix of cultural expectations. Using selected works by Ama Ata Aidoo such as *No Sweetness Here*, *Changes* and *Anowa*, Aidoo can project women selfhood and convey feminist consciousness about women as victims of men's patriarchal propensities. Buchi Emecheta in her prose narrative, *second class citizen* condemns female victimization. The woman under this debased portrayal, undergoes experiences of oppression, the instrument of which are marriage and its concomitant obligation of mothering (Mson Tion, 37). In one study, Ashenafi Aboye compared female characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* to reveal how patriarchy is used as a tool to stabilize the discrimination of the feminine gender. Aboye maintained that the two authors' handling of the theme of gender reflects the background of African history taking the form of slavery, racism, and their own personal experiences into account. In Aboye's analysis of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, the female character is a symbol in the on-going struggle to not only resist but reverse patriarchal practices. Aboye avers that: "She rejects social arrangements and implicit dominations in her life. She is always engaged in challenging patriarchy. In most of her conversations with the male characters, she was vocal about her capabilities, leaving not an iota of room for oppression, both in her social and sexual relations." (21)

In *Faceless*, a novel by Amma Darko, the novelist presents another agonizing story of a street girl, Fofu who in her daily search for means of survival is a victim of sexual exploitation by idle youths, who engage in various heinous crimes. Although Fofu survives a rape

attempt on her life, it is by whiskers. This imaginary incident leaves important moral lessons for the patriarchal society. In *Faceless*, the girl child is portrayed as being generally poor, defenceless, and vulnerable. In addition, *Faceless* presents the common causes and consequences of the life of street children. The various images of sexual abuse and men's brutality to women and girls have socio-cultural relevance.

Of a truth, males are and can also be victims as in the works of Chinua Achebe where a character known as Okonkwo in *Things fall apart (1957)* falls victim in his self-efforts to act upon the gender expectations of the Igbo culture (Tennakoon, 2021).

Apart from the female victim conceived with the baggage of the gender stereotype, traditionally, the role of the victim is ascribed to women (Sabine Binder, 2021).

According to Sabine Binder (2021):

In a society long characterised by violent crime, the need to acknowledge the victim seems crucial, whether this entails a symbolic acknowledgement of those female victims who are dead and can no longer bear witness, or an acknowledgement of those victims who survive to tell their stories. The need to listen to a woman's story of the pain inflicted, to trust its truth value, could be considered a precondition for reconciliation, for reparation as well as for individual healing. (24).

The consciousness about women victimhood stems from patriarchal social hierarchy and results in the depreciation of the females' real value (Aminatu Mbadji, 2000). Awogu-Maduagwu and Funmilayo (2023) critically analysed Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* to reveal the condition of abuse and exploitation of African women as well as the motivations behind sex trafficking in different cultural settings in Africa. Their analyses portray women as disproportionate victims of sex trafficking, abuse, and exploitation.

From the review so far, it can be noted that some sort of differences exist between the view of female victimhood and the same theme in the study text, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. Whereas in the reviewed texts, the writers imaginatively give individual characters pseudo attributes, the actions in *The Chibok Girls* is a non-fictional recreation. The story took place, and the search light beams on the larger human population. The story is both about the kidnapping incident and the agony of the Boko Haram insurgency including its consequences on the Nigerian populace.

As ostensibly seen, events in *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) bear similitude with many of Nigeria's history of violence, civil unrest, and bloodbath as portrayed in Nigeria's Civil War novels. To illustrate, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986), which centres on the mindless massacre of innocent civilians and the rank and file from both the Biafran and Nigerian sides during the corrupt and murderous conflict of between 1967-1970 (Chijioko Uwasomba, 2005) are good examples.

Looking at the events in the larger Nigerian society in view of our present study text, it can be argued that *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) represents Habila's prism on vulnerability and victimhood especially on the girl child and women. The justification for the girls' abduction lies in the following excerpts of the book: "Boko Haram fighters also needed children and older women to cook and clean for them, and the younger women become wives—sex slaves and mothers to the next generation of fighters." (p23). The schoolgirls' forced abduction, which surreptitiously turned into forced marriage to Boko Haram fighters has truncated the girls' dream for western education. After they were taken away first to Sambisa Forest and then to unknown destinations, we can imagine how the young girls are raped daily and rough-handled by the

terrorists. The schoolgirls' door to western education and all the attractive opportunities that accompany it have become permanently closed.

This picture is also painted in Julie Okoh's book with the symbolic title, *Closed Door*. Innocent Uwah (2016) corroborates that *Closed Door* portrays the different strands of broken dreams, rape, trauma, depression, and personal sorrow perpetrated by men. Habila takes a satiric posture in his treatment of the themes of vulnerability and victimhood and is to be commended for showcasing his sensitivity to the goings-on in his society, despite his sojourn for greener pastures in the United States of America as a Professor of creative writing at George Mason University, Virginia.

Incidences of Victimhood in *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016).

After a critical study of the text, the following can be clearly seen:

1. *Heightened State of helplessness*: After reading *The Chibok Girls* (2016), the reader is not in doubt about who the principal victims of Boko Haram insurgency really are—the 276 schoolgirls of Government Secondary school, Chibok, their families, and the host community. Habila wrote: “And so when Boko Haram raided the school in Chibok and took 276 young girls, and when its leader Abubakar Shekau boasted in his propaganda video, ‘I took your girls. I will turn your girls into slaves,’ the parents, descendants of the Middle Belt ‘pagans,’ understood exactly what he was saying (Habila, 55). This goes to show that the state of helplessness is not only suffered by the girls who are the immediate victims alone, but their parents, relatives, and larger society. The larger picture shows that, there are other victims including Leah Sharibu and all the Dapchi schoolgirls in Yobe, the over twenty Federal

University of Gusau students and Corps members abducted on 22 September 2023, the sixty-three train passengers kidnaped in Kaduna on 28th March 2022, and the one hundred and thirty seven pupils and school teacher abducted on 7 March, 2024 in Kuriga community, Kaduna State. It also includes all those who have lost their loved ones and property because of the crises. The helplessness of all the victims could be substantiated with the inability of the Nigerian government to not only forestall the incidence but also its inability to provide succour to assuage the pains associated with it.

2. *Heightened State of hopelessness:* Notwithstanding its international connection, high security apparatuses and personnel at its disposal, the Nigerian government is yet to rescue the remaining 93 schoolgirls ten years after their abduction. This speaks to the state of hopelessness in which the Nigerians are amid plenty.
3. *Social precarity:* The security of the Nigerian state cannot be predicted given the chain of events happening in the country. Using the Chibok community as a case in point, it can be said that the Nigerian state is precarious. There are recorded incidences of bomb blasts in high profile places like the Nigerian Police Headquarters, Nyanya Motor Park, and the United Nations House all in Abuja in 2011. This simply means, no place is entirely safe.
4. *Various degrees of depression and anxiety:* the sexual violence coupled with deaths of the innocent ones leaves various degrees of depression and anxiety on the citizens.
5. *Untimely deaths:* At the UN House, Abuja, Nyanya Motor Park also in Abuja, and other places where Boko Haram insurgents carried out bombings, scores of lives were lost. It has been reported that 23 UN workers were killed on 26 August 2011

in Abuja in the Boko Haram bomb incident involving the UN House. This means that the casualty is not only Nigerian nationals.

6. *Social stigma*: The high prevalent rate of victims of forced marriages leaves a social stigma on women and girls who are victims. For example, many of the rescued Chibok girls who were forcefully married to Boko Haram terrorists may not go back to school nor remarry.

The Politics of Victimhood

The article situates the Chibok girls within a larger tradition of African literary victimhood narratives, particularly focusing on women as passive victims of patriarchal structures. This article contrasts fictional portrayals of female victimhood (e.g., works by Buchi Emecheta, Amma Darko, Ama Ata Aidoo) with the real-life suffering documented in *The Chibok Girls*. It emphasizes that the narrative underscores the long-standing marginalization of Nigerian citizens by the state and highlights the symbolic role of the Chibok girls as representative of national helplessness. Through the lens of the book, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram kidnappings and Islamist militancy in Nigeria*, Helon Habila portray the Nigerian citizens as people without protection both in their private lives and in their years of pursuit of western education in government-owned institutions. The Government, which has all the instruments of security at its disposal is as helpless as the victims. But is it not ironical that Government is as helpless as the citizens it is supposed to protect? With all the nation's wealth at its disposal, the Nigerian Government cannot gather intelligence, leverage international cooperation, buy arms, and ammunition, and train its personnel to fight and defeat external and internal aggressors! Instead, government has engaged in blame game and buck passing.

In *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*, the Nigerian government officials told the world that in one instance that it has engaged the “Chadian President Idriss Deby in the negotiating for the release of the Chibok girls”(Habila,76) and in another instance that it has engaged a retired Australian clergy man, Stephen Davis, who made contacts with a Boko Haram faction and were willing to release the girls “in exchange for compensation for widows of slain Boko Haram fighters and job opportunities for their members if they surrendered” (Habila,76), but the negotiations were futile after he (Davis) arrived late. There is high incidence of official corruption and lack of transparency in handling the issue of the Chibok girls.

In consequence, the non-state actors who come by different names—militants, bandits, kidnappers, terrorists, unknown-gun men, men of the underworld are daily gaining the upper hand in the war against terrorism. If the reign of terror in Nigeria still subsists till date, we do not have any option but believe that these non-state actors have superior war strategies than the Nigerian military.

Conclusion

The article has analysed how Helon Habila has used the Chibok girls to expose issues of citizen’s vulnerability and victimhood. The literary portrayal of these themes in *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* is revealed in six major incidences of victimhood in Habila's narrative. These include helplessness, hopelessness, social precarity, psychological trauma, death, and social stigma. It critiques the government's incompetence in the wake of preponderance of non-state actors who operate with impunity. The literary portrayal of these themes in *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* has achieved the objective of raising awareness among the Nigerian populace about not only individual-own but also community vulnerabilities to group

kidnapping, organized armed violence. The book is a compelling ethical engagement, reawakening our consciousness to reconsider how the Nigerian society and indeed the African society represent, understand, and respond to victimhood in a globalized world.

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