

Boko Haram Insurgency and the Kidnap of Chibok Girls: Through the Literary Lenses of Helon Habila

Matthew Abua Ebim^{1*} , Sunday Tasen Okune¹, Offiong Amaku Ene², Osmond Agbor Otor³, Juliet Nkane Ekpang¹

¹Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

²Department of Languages & Linguistics, Arthur Jarvis University, Akpabuyo, Nigeria

³Department of History and International Relations, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

Email: *ebim.abua@unical.edu.ng, *meabua@yahoo.com

How to cite this paper: Ebim, M. A., Okune, S. T., Ene, O. A., Otor, O. A., & Ekpang, J. N. (2023). Boko Haram Insurgency and the Kidnap of Chibok Girls: Through the Literary Lenses of Helon Habila. *Advances in Literary Study*, 11, 25-34.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2023.111003>

Received: December 17, 2022

Accepted: January 17, 2023

Published: January 20, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The abduction of Chibok girls on April 14, 2014, signaled the worse form of attack on any educational facility in Nigeria; an attack which was coordinated and carried out by the Boko Haram sect with the sole aim of instituting an Islamic form of governance in Nigeria. Amidst the outpouring of anguish and condemnation in Nigeria and around the world, the Boko Haram insurgents were quick to claim responsibility by stating “We selected the school for the attack because the government is targeting our families and friends,” “We want them to feel our pain” (THISDAY, April 16, 2014). The attack took a brutish trend from which a growing number of educational institutions have been targeted in terrorist attacks in recent times. Opinion leaders, legal experts, scholars, and other stakeholders reacted to the menace by outrightly condemning it. Helon Habila’s response was the crafting of a literary text title: *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram kidnappings and Islamic Militancy in Nigeria*. This novel is a biting critique of the state of insecurity in Nigeria and a form of expose on the nation’s security apparatus. Therefore, this paper’s focus is to critically examine the novel from the perspective of language use, power play, and ideological projection. To achieve this aim, the research adopts the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis which focuses on the representation of ethnic groups and minorities by integrating general discourse into the discourse of news in the press to authenticate cases of news reports at both the national and international level. Data for the study were elicited from the novel and subjected to a thorough linguistic analysis.

Keywords

Kidnap, Chibok Girls, Litterateur, CDA Helon Habila

1. Introduction

Boko Haram insurgency has continued to ravage the Nigerian society despite the government's efforts to curb the menace through the provision of security and logistics by means of intelligence gathering in the affected areas. Nigerian northeastern region has been under constant attacks from the sect group. The height of the crisis was the attack on the school facility on the 14th of April 2014. The outcry generated by that attack led to the publication of the novel under focus. That novel which captures the events through the lenses of journalistic composition in the form of news reportage is a piece of firsthand information on the circumstances surrounding the brutal attack on the school facility and by extension on the education of the girl-child in Nigerian society. The northern part of the country still views the education of a female child as something of less priority. It rather thrives on the belief that a female child is more of an object of procreation than an instrument of societal development through quality education. It is important to note that to educate a girl child means to train her mind, character, and abilities. Education is a fundamental human right that should be availed to every girl child irrespective of age and nationality. The importance of education in the life of a girl child can never be over-emphasized. In both spiritual and temporal mundane aspects of human existence, education is paramount. It is the light that shows the way by removing the darkness of ignorance; the salt that gives the taste of life; the medicine that cures and the key which opens doors. The greatest favour a girl child can get is "to get an education" and "to give others education". But the plight of the female child in Africa with regards to the acquisition of education is worrisome. *Offorma (2009: p. 27)* observes that:

In Ethiopia, girls are sometimes abducted for marriage when they are no more than eight years. In West Africa, they are recruited from poor rural families to work as domestic servants in coastal cities or even neighbouring countries. In Nigeria it is very difficult to find a house help today. This is because there is awareness of the values of education, and parents do not give out their children anymore as house helps. In South Africa, a recent report by Human Rights Watch warns that sexual violence and abuse are hampering girls' access to education. In Afghanistan, they have simply been barred from school under the Taliban regime. According to Guttman (a UNESCO course journalist), customs, poverty, fear and violence are the reasons why girls still account for 60% of the estimated 113 million out-of-school children, and majority live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

With the above alarming report and coupled with the daily frightening activities of the Boko Haram in the north, the future of the girl child when it comes to education is hanging on a balance. Despite the efforts of the government at curbing the menace of the sect, there seems to be an increasing number of members and for the fear of being killed or kidnapped, children especially girls

are kept in their houses, and they are prevented from going to school. The memories of the Chibok girls continue to torment the parents and relations of the abducted girls and for others, it is better and safer to be at home than to be kidnapped while in the search for western education which according to the Boko Haram members is “a sin”. The leadership of the Boko Haram sect keeps tormenting the people especially in the Northeastern part of the country as Ebim (2021: p. 112) observes “The Boko Haram sect has constituted a serious menace not only to the Nigerian society, but to the entire West African sub-region. The leadership of the organization ranging from the late Mohammed Yusuf to the “late” Abubakar Shekau has proved to be highly illusive to the Nigerian security network. While it has been proved beyond reasonable doubt that the founder of the Boko Haram sect, Mohammed Yusuf had been captured and killed by the Nigerian security agencies, the second in command who later took over the mantle of leadership from Yusuf has been presented by the media as an immortal being.

2. Literary Journalism: An Overview

In the novel, “The Chibok Girls” the story of the kidnap of the Chibok girls from a school facility is captured in the form of a novel. The journalistic portrayal of this novel looks amazing and sometimes confusing to most readers considering the fact that it deviates from the usual style and form of chapterization of a novel. In this segment of the research, we take a tour into the world of journalistic novels. The aim is to examine what others had done in that area of literary composition and to see how the story of the kidnap of the Chibok girls fits into the novel style of journalistic narrative.

Journalists and journalism have been the source of inspiration for many novelists. Some examine the institution itself, finding compelling narratives in the story of how news is reported. Others reiterate why the fourth estate matters; still others provide cautionary tales for why journalistic excesses can lead to a grim place. And another group finds the power in the lives of writers: how their job affects their home lives, their perceptions of the world, and their ability to function. Here’s a look at a dozen disparate takes on the media, spanning from the 19th century on into the near future.

Katherine Boo’s (2012), *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a depiction of a writer who is found hidden from for more than three years in a makeshift settlement. He x-rayed some of the hidden activities of the Indian lower class. The writer portrays suffering and poverty with empathy by means of dramatic narratives embellished in a poverty-stricken society where people struggle daily to earn a living. Boo achieved his aim through journalistic reportage captured in the form of a novel.

Isabel Wilkerson’s (2010) *The Warmth of Other Suns* is an expose’ of the activities of three individuals through the journalistic lenses of the writer who brings lyrical form of writing and deep reportage to what the author accurately

views as perhaps the biggest underreported story of the 20th century, the great migration.

David Gran's (2017) *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a forensic reportage on the murders of the Osage tribe in Oklahoma in the 1920s at the discovery of oil in the region. The writer conjures both innocent and evil characters based on the vast records and interviews conducted with the surviving members of the family. The novel through journalistic conjecturing reveals graphic details of the activities of the FBI that was deployed to Osage county to investigate mysterious death.

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's (2003) *Random Family* shows the author as one spending over a decade with two women and their families who were struggling to survive in the Bronx. The author creates a panoramic portrait of city life at the turn of the century. Robert Caro's (2012) *The Passage of Power* captures the story of the assassination of the former U.S president J.F Kennedy and the ascension of LBJ to the presidency. Being a journalist of over 45 years, Caro tracked down the details by relocating from New York to Washington. The result is the journalistic masterpiece in the form of a novel. The author renewed the story of the Kennedy's assassination in the novel.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2015) *Between the World and Me* is an epistolary novel blended with personal history and the history of America in form of a reportage. The book reframes the experiences of the blacks in the American society. Lawrence Wright's (2013) *Going Clear* is a combination of entertainment reportage and a scientific experimentation. It is an expose' of scientology and its firm grip on Hollywood. Emmanuel Carrère's (2000) *The Adversary* is a crime and forensic reportage in a novel form. It accounts for the double lifestyles of a French man who loves under deceit and when his lies crumbled on him, he ended up killing his family members.

Patrick Radden Keefe's (2018) *Say Nothing* through journalistic reportage captures the happenings in Northern Ireland. It traces the unresolved mysteries of the disappearances and suspected murders in the area. The story is built around the fascinating character portraits of IRA members. The novel is a murder mystery. Jill Leovy's (2015) *Ghetto side* investigates the murders of black men in the city of Los Angeles and the role of Los Angeles Police Department LAPD in resolving such. Robert Kolker's (2020) *Hidden Valley Road* is a scientific expose on the mystery of schizophrenia. The novelist through journalistic endeavour did a historical assessment of the disorder by using a family that has been worse hit by the ailment.

Barbara Demick's (2009) *Nothing to Envy* chronicles the account of the lives of six North Korean citizens focusing on a period of 15 years. It covers the era of the death of Kim-Il Sung and the rise to power of Kim-Jong Il. The central thematic preoccupation of the novel is forbidden love-a romance that reveals how tyranny can hardly squelch the emotions of human beings. In *The Future is History* by Masha Geshen (2018) the writer through journalistic approach presents a chilling story of the incursion of totalitarianism into the Russian society. The writer achieved through the extensive reportage of the lives of four young

men who were born the supposed dawn of democracy but who rather found themselves in a society that prefers the old order and gradually falls back on the status quo ante.

Under the Banner of Heaven by John Krakauer (2003) intertwines the story of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Utah. It is a chilling journalistic revelation of the murder perpetrated by two fundamentalists Mormons in the name of God. In *How the World Is Passed* by Clint Smith (2021), the author through journalistic, essayistic tour the writer examines the ills of black maltreatment in America. The writer was obsessed with the story of slavery in his neighbourhood and decided to take up the challenge. He investigated the way in which echoes of slavery are being reckoned in the present American society. The novel is a journalistic travelogue and a blend of fresh reportage and lyrical meditation.

2.1. Helon Habila's the Chibok Girls as a Journalistic Novel

The novel reads more like a faction—a genre of literature that shares close characteristics with the autobiography where facts and life issues are presented candidly rather than from the writer's imagination. Ernest Emenyonu defines faction, a sub-genre of non-fictional prose as “the art of juxtaposing facts, real and identifiable, with fiction” (133). Completely devoid of the rosy-coloured lenses of the fictive genre, Faction depends on the facts of life which links it to historical antecedents.

The very title of the novel *The Chibok Girls* is a bold and globally recognized reminder of the horrors of the Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria in the year 2014 when 276 female students of Government Girls Secondary school were carted away by the deadly Boko Haram terrorists in the small town of Chibok, Maiduguri, Nigeria. Thus, *The Chibok Girls* can rightly be classified as historical prose, as the incidents and places mentioned bear historical authenticity to the socio-political setting under which it was written.

Writing from an eyewitness point of view, Habila, a seasoned journalist, and an acclaimed novelist grants his readers first-hand insights into the dangerously uncertain landscape of Chibok which hitherto had been ravaged by Boko Haram terrorists. Habila's melancholic description of the city, its traumatized villagers and the bleak aura that grips it points at a situation in dire need of drastic measures. Unquestionably therefore, Habila's ultimate purpose is to communicate to the world, Nigeria's feeble attempt at combating the terrorist movement whilst at the same time sharing the stories of three Chibok escapees and the despair and misery of the Chibok villagers. As such, it is through this backdrop that the paper engages Habila's narrative in the light of insurgency, the challenges of insecurity and religious extremism.

2.2. Issues of Insurgence, Insecurity and Religious Extremism

Between July 2009 and present, the Nigerian nation has been rocked with the

nightmarish tensions and violent seizures of most of its Northern territories by Boko Haram insurgents. Denounced for its notoriety in suicide bombings, pillage and bloodshed and pinned as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S State Department, the group “Boko Haram” is aptly named and driven by an irrational ideology which is abhorrent of western education and western ways of life; hence, its deadly attacks on Western institutions. From churches to schools, hospitals, farmlands, homesteads, and market squares no part of the Nigerian society seems to have been spared its heinous attacks. Its pool of recruits; shiftless Almajiri boys (Koranic students) and other cranks function as suicide bombers for the sect.

The Boko Haram group is believed to have close links with ISIS, AQUIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Nigerian Taliban amongst others. Sponsored by terrorist organizations and individuals, the group not only raises funds through ransom payments but as Habila (2016: p. 21) records, by raiding banks “mostly in rural areas, hauling away millions of naira, which they use to sponsor their insurgency”. As such, they are well financed to purchase and equip their men with sophisticated ammunition, explosives and an intelligence network that makes mockery of the Nigerian Police Force and the military’s security systems. In Chapter one entitled “Professor Americana,” Habila stresses this point as the Nigerian Police Head Quarters is bombed by Boko Haram member, Mohammed Manga Habila (2016: p. 20). The stark implication here is that Habila brings to our notice the paralyzing deterioration of the country’s security outfit.

Tunji Adegboyega’s article in *The Nation* (2016: p. 11) daily reports that “Nigeria has committed too many resources to fight insecurity without significant result.” Undoubtedly, its either Nigeria’s security institutions are purchasing outdated arsenals that can by no means measure up to the sophisticated weaponry the insurgents wield; or a case of diversion of funds; hence, the protracted battle with the scourge. It appears therefore, that the rise in insurgency can be attributed to Nigeria’s rife culture of corruption and mismanagement of public funds. Habila recalls that:

National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki is currently on trial for allegedly misappropriating billions of dollars budgeted for purchasing weapons and helicopters for the fight against terror” (2016: p. 75).

Clearly, this is a setback that appears to have retarded the sporadic progress of the troops who significantly have tried to recapture several Boko haram territories. Their frustration with the present government’s insensitivity is captured succinctly in the following dialogue between the writer and a livid soldier:

“You people think say we are here to play? I dey here for this bush fighting Boko Haram for two years now. Two years I no see my family... four months we have been here without salary, our friends are killed by Boko Haram, and I am sick. Four months no pay...” (2016: p. 15).

Clearly, this dialogue is an eloquent pointer to the inefficiencies plaguing the

Nigerian system and portrays the government's lackadaisical attitude in the fight against Boko Haram. Habila is quick to also notice the lack of development in the region as an impediment to winning the war; "...the lack of good roads in Borno state made it hard to fight Boko Haram, as almost all of them were un-tarred and impassable... the militants could traverse freely on foot or on their motor bikes" (2016: p. 46); despite the curfew and the patrolling troops. Obviously, the many checkpoints in Chibok testify to military presence which gives out hope of stability and a false sense of peace, however, Habila informs, that there is an uneasy calm that broods over the town knowing that right on its fringes lie the Sambisa forest - the hideout of the Boko Haram rebels.

The rebellious Boko Haram group has proven to have a legendary record of always resurrecting after crushing defeats in least expected places. In the first chapter, "Professor Americana" Habila lists out an array of despicable crimes after crimes committed by the group. One such, is the murder of fifty-nine schoolboys in FGC Bundi, Yadi, Yobe state, just before the Chibok kidnap. Like the Chibok kidnapping, "they came in pick-up trucks at around 9:00 at night and threw explosives into the boys' dorm rooms, then shot and stabbed the boys as they tried to escape" (2016: p. 22). Abubakkar Shekau, its infamous leader was professed to have said in a 2012 video that; "I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill, the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams" (2016: p. 20).

Shekau's statements are understandably driven by not only ethnic discrimination fueled by a jihadist determination to eliminate infidels (non-Muslim) but also an anticolonial fanaticism to rid Nigeria's North of British institutions and Judeo-Christian presence and introduce the Sharia law. At present, the Sharia justice system is fully operational in twelve northern states, and this has spawned antagonism between the Christians and Muslims in the North.

Consequently, the spate of violence and deaths have so increased in the North, that almost every resident has been dealt a cruel blow by the insurgents. Their tragic stories of loss and death dot chapter two of Habila's narrative. The author's conversations with the villagers in this chapter aptly titled "The Day They Took the Girls" consistently sustain that tone of sadness, pity and fear. Listen in on how the kidnap of the Chibok girls led to gruesome deaths and harrowing conditions of broken parents:

"...How are they coping?" He sighed and shook his head. "It is sad. A few of them have died. They developed high blood pressure and all sorts of ailments". (2016: p. 28)

Assaulted by psychological afflictions; "...another father had disappeared and couldn't be found for days. He was discovered wandering in the hills, shouting his daughter's name...He had lost his mind...if you saw some of the parents walking in the village, it was as if there was no blood in their body (2016: p. 74).

The Moslems have also not escaped the horrors of the Boko Haram menace as Mallam Kyari, a chief Imam shares his agony with Habila; "They now even kill Muslims, they throw bombs in mosques while people are praying" (2016: p. 43).

Boko Haram's unbroken history of savagery in the Northern region is graphically detailed on every page of the novel and captured in language that is conversational which shows Habila's directness of purpose. In construction and discourse style, Habila resorts to dialogues, particularly the interview mode which allows his readers direct access to the participants involved. It is through the interview mode, therefore, that we can empathize with the victims and their families. Notice how, by engaging Rev. Philip Madu, Habila presents a grim frankness on what transpired the night the Chibok girls were kidnapped. Hear him:

“Before that night, these things have been happening in neighbouring villages, kidnappings and killings. In Kwaga close by, in one Sunday, they killed over fifty Christians. In other neighbouring villages as well. They burned down houses and killed people. Until it got to the fourteenth of April 2014... We heard the gun shots going on and on...What happened affected me directly. They took two of my brother's daughters. My brother – same father, same mother. Up to now we haven't received any news of them” (2016: p. 26).

It is also through Habila's interrogation of the girls (Hauwa, Ladi and Juliana) that we can imaginatively replay the actual events of April 14, 2014 and how the trio escaped that night:

“Did they talk to you in the truck?” “No, they kept calling us infidels, that's all” “We jumped down and started running into the bush. We ran for hours.” Ladi reports (2016: p. 83).

Not only does the interview technique advance the plot of the novel, it sells Habila's message from a convincing angle which rightly authenticates the events of that day as it was then believed to have been a hoax. Thus, Habila's novel brings to our notice the magnitude of evil the group has wreaked on the country's northern region. It raises salient questions about the hope for future development and the stability of the north as the Boko Haram scourge continues to hound the region, further plunging it into a state of stagnation.

As such disturbing issues like insecurity, religious extremism, deprivation, forced marriage, unemployment, vandalism, economic stagnation, displacement, kidnapping, and deaths are projected by the writer in a way to provoke deep thinking.

3. Findings and Conclusions

The story reveals that the anti-education members of the Boko Haram propelled the sect members to kidnap the schoolgirls. The writer who grew up in a Christian dominated family recalls that Islam is a tolerant faith capable of accommodating other faiths. According to him, members of the Boko Haram sect constitute a radical sect that has the intention of Islamizing the Nigerian state. He gives a graphical illustration of his findings in the reportage as captured in the text below:

“As Habila moves to the affected areas by Boko Haram, he would often pause and give some background history of the dreaded sect, their early beginnings, who they are, what they supposedly stand for and the beginning of their terrorist activities. The early introduction does not only tell us who they are, but places the group in their exact geographical locations, an information not known to many Nigerians, not even to those living in the areas. Habila also pauses in his movements to narrate events one would have heard in the media briefly. Events that had happened before the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, but which had not attracted that much public, or media attention, for instance, the invasion of a Federal Government College in the town of Buni Yadi, in Yobe State, February 25, 2014, where 59 boys were murdered in cold blood. It was an event that happened two months before the kidnap of the Chibok girls” (2016: p. 96).

As the narration progresses, the writer tries to recontextualize the political narrative of his country by showcasing the various societal ills such as: criminality, robberies, religious intolerance, and kidnapping. As someone who is adequately armed with the knowledge of the prevalent bad behaviours of the people in his society, Habila recounts the ills of his country in a grimed atmosphere. For instance, the death of a Chief Imam and the subsequent ascension of his young son into that position is a metaphoric depiction of the deadly situation that the Boko Haram sect has plunged to the country. It is also a clear indication that the crises generated by the Boko Haram sect are not a religious one but rather projection of a certain ideology by members of the sect. There is an Islamic belief that anyone who commits murder should face the same penalty, but the Boko Haram sect members seem to have jettisoned this belief with the incessant killings of fellow Muslims.

The narrative of escapism in the novel is a closed up shot of some sort to the Boko Haram kidnap and escape of some of the Chibok girls. The *mystificatory* nature of the narrative is enveloped in the selective persona that the author chose to interact with in the text. The horror of the narrative of the experience of the escaped girls and their parents remains a realistic depiction of the entire scenario involved in the kidnap saga. The novel remains a narrative that engages the reader and carries him/her on a tortuous journey. The reader is made to share in the pain of the kidnapped girls and by extension the pains of the parents and their family members. The consciousness of the reader is awakened considering the grievous nature of the pains experienced by the victims of the kidnap.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Boo, K. (2012). *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Un-*

- dercity*. Random House.
- Caro, R. A. (2012). *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (752 p.). Alfred A. Knopf Inc.
- Carrère, E. (2000). *The Adversary: A True Story of Monstrous Deception*. Picador.
- Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau.
- Demick, B. (2009). *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. Spiegel & Grau. I
- Ebim, M. A. (2021). Discourses of Shekau's Illusiveness and Boko Haram Leadership as a Semiosis. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 18, 111-126
- Geshen, M. (2018). *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. Riverhead Books.
- Gran, D. (2017). *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Doubleday.
- Habila, H. (2016). *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. Columbia Global Reports.
- Keefe, P. R. (2018). *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*. William Collins.
- Kolker, R. (2020). *Hidden Valley Road: Inside the Mind of an American Family*. Oprah Books.
- Krakauer, J. (2003). *Under the Banner of Heaven*. Random House.
- LeBlanc, A. N. (2003). *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx*. Scribner.
- Leovy, J. (2015). *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*. Penguin Random House
- Offorma, G. C. (2009). *Girl-Child Education in Africa*. A Keynote Address Presented at the Conference of the Federation of the University Women of Africa Held In Lagos-Nigeria.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280554452_GIRL-CHILD_EDUCATION_IN_AFRICA
- Smith, C. (2021). *How the World Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*. Barnes and Nobles Books.
- The Nation (2021). *Attack on NDA: If Gold Rusts, What Will Iron Do?* (p. 11). Tunji Adegboyega.
- Wilkerson, I. (2010). *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Random House.
- Wright, L. (2013). *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*. Alfred A. Knopf Inc.