

Narrating Memories: The Non-fictional Context of Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*

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Abstract

Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls* has been assessed in various ways by scholars, but not much of critical thrust has been focused on the novel from the non-fictional context to project the prevalent situation of violence, insecurity and terrorism in postmodern, postcolonial Nigeria. This study examines memories as narrative informant and backdrop to the historical reality in Habila's *The Chibok Girls*. The work thus examines the story from the perspective of form and content as nonfiction account. The paper reveals that Habila is intentional in adopting strategies such as real events, places and people, point of view, dialogues and tone to establish *The Chibok Girls* in the genre of creative nonfiction. The stream of thought of the narrative is interwoven with the portrayed historical reality which is expressed organically and holistically as narrative of a nation that is ill at ease and sorely grappling to realise its true nationhood. The study thus concludes that while history can be fictionalized, memories could be used as the tool for the recalibration of history purposefully intended to constantly remind of the recent past as well as to inform on the direction to a better future for humanity.

Key words: Memories, Chibok Girls, Creative non-fiction, Habila, postcolonial Nigeria

Introduction

The title resonates with memories about the terrorist onslaught which forever changed the trajectory of security in Nigeria. On April 14, 2014 Government Girls Secondary School Chibok, was attacked by terrorists who captured 276 students (Amnesty International 2nd, May 2014). The traumatic events of the abduction, was a rude shock to the entire nation. It came to rude awakening about a kind of terrorism which targeted the most vulnerable members in society. It was an attack which roused worldwide attention. There have been several responses to Habila's rendition of the unfortunate event in Nigeria. Such as, Muobike Ifeoma's assessment of *The Guardian* and *The Nation* newspapers in their evaluation of the report. Their quantitative approach to the abduction, depersonalized the event making it appear as a blame game rather than suggesting a means to solving the problem:

The newspapers framed the problem as insecurity (64.4%)... implying a gross existence of insecurity in the nation. They also believe that the government is part of the problem the nation has. Surprisingly, the media blamed Boko Haram to a very small extent (14.4%) implying that national insecurity could be caused by

anybody and any group if the government does not put measures to control it. The newspapers shifted the responsibility to the actor (the government) whom they believe has the capacity to solve the problem. The problem was framed in a way that drew attention of the government to provide security for the nation which is good. But it did not encourage other actors (individuals and organizations) to support the government on the rescue mission, that is not so good (10).

Onah Chijioko's paper demonstrates how literary narration actively participates in the global activists' movement. Patience Ibrahim and Andreas X. Hoffmann's *A Gift from Darkness: How I Escaped with My Daughter from Boko Haram* (2017) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Vivian Mazza's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2018) were examined as literary components of the #BringBackOurGirls movement. Onah reiterates the power of narrativizing testimony and bearing witness to the reality of an event. Also, the study observed that the processes which turned the Chibok girls' kidnapping into a transnational site of memory is a complex interplay between digital activism, transnational affiliations and the dynamics of remediation. According to him:

Even though these two texts differ in form and style, both texts belong, like the other narrative responses, to the burgeoning sub-genre of testimony. Consequently, their sole responsibility is to bear witness to a traumatic event and act as the guardian of the memory of Boko Haram's violence. Like the paradigmatic witness, these texts adopt different narrative strategies in order to endow their testimonies with credibility and authenticity, thus engaging in constructing what Phillippe Lejeun (1989) has called *le pacte testimonial* (14).

For Onah, the power of narratives to act as literary testimonials, is important in constructing and circulating versions of history across time lines; thus, making it important to explore the role of testimony in the global activism against terrorism. Ologundudu Abraham's paper examines how the #BringBackOurGirls campaign effectively mediated for the release of the abducted Chibok girls through solidarity activism and resource mobilization. He identified the fact that the movement was instrumental in foregrounding the weak response of the local media and the negligence of the government vis-avis Boko Haram (BH) insurgency. This was because local media were barely reporting BH activities. The #BringBackOurGirls protest logic combined offline and online mediation.

Consequently, the main stream media on #BBOG movement influenced the emergence of transnational advocacy networks.

These networks equally advocated for the rescue of the girls and called out the Nigerian government to reinforce efforts in combating insurgency in the region. #BBOG grew on to attract social activists, civil rights groups and students in the United Kingdom, France, South Africa, Canada to mention a few, who contributed to online discourses and organized offline protests... (11)

The assertion above suggests that the #BBOG movement was effective in foregrounding the plight of the abducted Chibok girls, despite the challenges of distracting political debates and allegations that transnational advocacy networks were denying Nigerians agency. It became a success story.

Abdulkarim Zainab's paper is an assessment of Helon Habil's *Chibok Girls* and Edify Yakusak's *After They Left*. The paper focused on the impact of conflict on women, such as displacement, loss of family, loss of livelihood and psychological trauma. She argues that the narrative around women in conflict remains largely inadequate. She identifies impact of conflict on women including gender-based violence/sexual violence, poverty, displacement, exploitation, trafficking, maternal health problems and lack of access to reproductive healthcare. She maintains that despite the overwhelming challenges, women play significant roles in peace building and conflict resolution, acting as mediators, community organizers and activists in the aftermath of conflicts. The critic states thus:

The Chibok Girls presents poignant portraits of everyday Nigerians whose lives have been upended by extremist violence. Habila sheds light on the long legacy of colonialism and exposes the cultural and religious dynamics that have fueled the ongoing conflicts in the region. The journey motif in *The Chibok Girls* illustrates devastating impact of Boko Haram's terror on Nigeria's socio-political landscape, exemplified by the corrupt practices of police officers at roadblocks (50).

Botilca Christina's historical review is about the emergence of a kind of writing which merged nonfiction with the subjective style of narrative writing. The idea had seemed antithetical at first but there has been evidenced engagement with the idea of "literary journalism" (1) which invests humanistic and philosophical ideals into the reportage of socio-historical events. The concept of "New Journalism (10)" is explored citing examples of writers who construct historical events using the narrative tools that fictional writers employ with a caveat that it can be separated at the narrative level. According to Botilca, New Journalism employs a strategy that emphasizes that both social life and report are constructions:

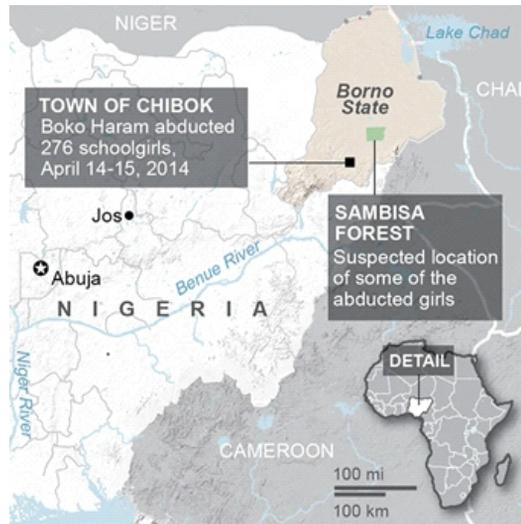
The main difference is between the historian who tries to gather

official versions and put together an objective story, and the ethnographic realist trying to piece through the façade of the events, immersing himself in the reality of the Other. Another essential matter that scholars have been into is the literary component of a nonfiction narrative ...and other representative writers of New Journalism became interested in how we portray reality and realism. (Heyne) argues that literary or creative nonfiction (a descendant of New Journalism) and fiction are highly different and this difference is not always found in writing techniques but in our perception as to the kind of statement intended by the writer as Searle proposes in “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse” (11-12).

Amongst the nonfictional category of writing which includes: travelogues, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, literary journalism, and longreads; it is safe to categorize Habila's *The Chibok Girls* as non-fictional. For example, although the narrator is part of the story, he does not present himself as a fictional character within the story. The narrator is travelling but not to an entirely new terrain where he has never been, therefore; it cannot be described as travelogue. The narrator does not use overtly crafty literary language as embellishment for the pleasure of the reading. They are used sparingly to maintain the tone of the narrative voice. Mostly, the literary devices are used for the clarity of descriptive purpose. It is certainly not an autobiography but leans more to what may be described as a collective biography of the Chibok girls. In this collective biography, only three girls who escaped the abductors were available to give their personal account of what happened to them on that fateful day.

Real Events, Places and People

It has been established that the Chibok girls are real people who schooled at Government Girls Secondary School Chibok, Borno state Nigeria. This event is verifiable just as the location which is shown on the map below. According to *Legit News*, 11 years after their abduction, 90 girls are still unaccounted for. Their names have been hinted at by Habila in his novel and at the same time canonized as document of history and are widely captured in verifiable documents as archival resource. (<https://www.legit.ng/nigeria/1682079-full-list-names-90-chibok-girls-captivity-11-years-abduction/>)



(Source: fox news.com)

Narrative and Point of View

In literature, point of view is an important aspect of the narrative. It is the vantage point with which the narrative is being presented. The writer throws-in the voice. It is not the same as the writer's actual voice. The writer uses the voice like a ventriloquist. This is not the case with Habila's *The Chibok Girls*. Habila expresses his thoughts in a factual manner. The book reads as a report that is timely and also historical in nature. Habila makes many references to historical figures and personalities to give a wholesome account of the background in which Chibok and its people are located. According to Galia Hirsh, in fictional narratives; the employment of the plural first person stance in Ne'eman Yael's *Hayinu He'atid* [we were the future] (2011), Nesbit, Tara Shea's *The wives of Los Alamos*, (2014) and Butler Nickolas' *Shotgun Lovesongs* (2014), operates thus:

The first personal pronoun may describe different sized groups, and their composition may often vary during the course of the fiction (Richardson, 2006:38). In the cases analyzed here, the tightness of the communities coincides with the use of “we” form. It is conceivable that the first person plural is utilized to a lesser extent in *Shotgun Lovesongs*. It seems to tally with the fact that the characters used to share similar fates and surroundings, but have already parted ways when the main event of the plot occurs (5).

The implied author in *The Chibok Girls* uses the plural pronoun form to express a collective identity for his group of travelling companions into Chibok town. The examples given by Galia come from fictional narratives, therefore, some of the hypotheses presented by Galia do not apply to *The Chibok Girls*. The use of

plural pronouns in America fiction has also been studied by Maxey Ruth, who concludes that:

I have argued that modern American “we” fictions, both short stories and novels, share a number of common characteristics. Such works are often relatively brief. They deploy pronominal shifts—with “I” almost always absent—and polyphony; they are often recursive in structure; and they face a particular challenge in how to conclude. Narratives told in this difficult, risky voice often contain thematic material which is subversive, dangerous or taboo. This is especially true of US short stories. In novels and short fiction alike, however, the small town is a favored setting to explore the moral implications of the “we” voice. This may be because its diminutive scale intensifies the disturbing notion of people spying on and speculating about one another. The small town also represents the wider community—it can be read as society in miniature—and in the case of the short story/short story cycle, this idea is further highlighted by the narrow parameters and narrative efficiency of the short fiction form itself (np).

Maxey's close analysis of American fiction gives reasons for the adoption of the plural pronoun in narratives.

Habila's adoption of the “we” pronoun in *The Chibok Girls* performs a different function. It is successful in enhancing a sense of urgency and directing focus to the group of people performing the action. Unlike in many fictitious stories, the beginning of the narrative does not make a priority to build-in a profile of the setting. Habila gradually gives the details about the North eastern cities after the destination has been reached. It appears to the reader, that describing the setting is not as urgent as finding out what happened in Chibok. The movement appears too urgent for the narrator to give much thought to the setting. The plural pronoun is used in the first chapter to designate the group of travellers as the authentic first-hand witnesses to the horrific event that had taken place in Chibok. They are there to verify and testify to the claim of truth, which is even more convincing when there is more than one person to testify to its veracity. Thereafter, the remainder of the narrative shifts between the first-person narration. Habila gives more information about the handling of the kidnapping by the government, the international responses, the local responses and the political responses. The first-person narrator often discloses the psychological impact of his role as witness to the relics of war in a corner of the vast land called Nigeria. More disturbing is the negative change that he has noticed because of heightened religious and ideologically differences that separate the people, and ignite conflict in a once peaceful region. He is personally affected because he grew up in this region as a child (*The Chibok Girls* 57).

Testimonial

There are some first-hand testimonials about the kidnapping that happened April 14, 2014. Rifkatu's mother gives an account reminiscent of a twist of fate. Rifkatu had been home because she had an appendicectomy done for her and was recuperating. She wanted to return to the girl's hostel so that their companionship would spur her academically. That decision became unfortunate. Her mother's physiological response after the villagers had run for safety, is seen when she experienced sudden weakness and frequent urges to defecate. After she heard that the girls had been taken away, she screamed and ran towards the school to bear witness. For two weeks, she neither ate nor slept. Afterwards, she could no longer defecate. According to Hope Gillette,

Your gastrointestinal system and your brain are linked by a communication pathway known as the “gut brain axis” through this neural network, which includes the vagus nerve, your brain helps regulate gastrointestinal functions such as digestion speed and blood flow. Your gut also helps produce transmitters and chemicals involved in mood and cognitive function... your stress response also affects the gut brain axis. When your brain perceives a stressor it kicks off multitude of physiological responses to help you overcome the present challenge (np).

To some, this testimony might sound frivolous or even vulgar but it is an important sign for the psychologist.

The testimony of the three girls who escaped from the forest is another incident. These girls had taken a decision: “Four of them decided to run. They said they'd rather die trying to escape and be eaten by animals than stay with these men (Habila 42).” Being in a weaker position, the girls employed cunning and some interpersonal skills to manoeuvre their way out of the forest, they sat on the ground even though they were given mats. Seemingly feeling helpless and dejected, then they asked to be excused so as to urinate. Their request was refused but they pressed on, saying it is against their tradition to urinate in front of a man and they stroked his ego by calling him “*Allahngubro*” meaning sir. But the fourth didn't go with them. The three girls kept on walking on and on cautiously, avoiding other Boko Haram members that they stumbled upon, while walking away, until they met a kind Fulani woman who fed them, clothe them, led them out of the forest. One wonders why the fourth girl did not take the chance like the other three. All the girls were in vulnerable conditions but these girls decided to do something about it. Wechsler Ralph explains that:

One way to view what is gotten at in a notion of “vulnerability” is a probabilistic continuum of sorts. It is probabilistic in the sense that there can be no absolute certainty about who gets traumatized and

who does not. According to the research, two factors seem to make a difference, however. They are (a) the degree of control the person experienced over the event and (b) the amount of social support available to the person at the time of the event, subsequently, in examining who gets traumatized and who does not, you get much more mileage from looking at how bad the trauma was than at what were the individual's pre-morbid personality characteristics (173).

The third testimony is from a person called Foni. He always repeats the phrase "don't rush (Habla 44)." His account is about politically motivated killings. His older brother had been a business man and politician. He was shot dead in his own house while his brothers were in a separate room. One of the brothers was also shot in the stomach, but he survived. Another account was of the killing of a government appointed local government chairman. He was shot in the presence of his wife and daughter. Foni explained that when the terrorists meet a locked residence, they blow it up with a rocket launcher. It was fortunate that they had ran out without locking any doors. These accounts show a pattern with the Boko Haram members, they usually invade the villages and announce their presence with rapid gunshots to terrify the residents, before they loot and capture.

The Chief Imam of Chibok, Mallam Kyari, lost his father to high blood pressure after an attack by Boko Haram. The residents had scampered for safety before they began searching for their relatives. The trauma was too much for the Imam's father who fell down while fleeing. He died, and his son who succeeded him, Mallam Kyari" explains that:

The only thing it is okay to kill are animals, and only for food. If you are not going to eat it, don't kill it. How then can you kill a man, who is just like you, with hands and feet and life just like yours, who has done nothing to you, you never knew him or met him before, how can you question his existence, and even kill him? In Islam, any man who kills another man, with no just cause, he should also be killed. They now even kill other Muslims, they throw bombs in mosques while people are praying. Islam doesn't sanction that (Habla 56).

His account underscores the fact that Boko Haram is a sect in Islam which attack other Muslims that do not conform to its teachings. The Sanctity of life is not upheld by them.

Reverend Philip Madu's testimony is a combination of what happened on April 14, 2014 and another attack in Chibok November 13, 2014. They were attacked once again, and people ran in different directions. Families went different directions until they heard that soldiers had successfully beaten back the insurgents. The reverend returned again, while others returned and left to different locations.

The authorial testimony is also a powerful means through which the narrative gains credibility, it is successful in painting the aura of militancy in Chibok and the general outlook of the Boko Haram insurgents. The descriptions are vivid and aggressive: below are some excerpts from *The Chibok Girls*:

“Burned tanks and military trucks stood at the roadsides, rusting away. There were houses with caved-in roofs and walls pockmarked by bullet holes. There was a destroyed bridge around which we had to detour” (16).

“Now the checkpoints were guarded by scowling, uncommunicative soldiers in full war gear” (19).

“In a move clearly calculated to undermine the government's claim, Boko Haram launched a series of spectacular attacks a few days later. Two suicide bombers struck a market in the town of Madagali in Adamawa state, killing more than twenty-five people and injured over a hundred” (23).

The leadership simply went underground in various Salafi jihadist camps in Somalia, Sudan, Mali and even as far away as Afghanistan, learning valuable terror techniques (including bomb making) which it would put to use a year later when Boko Haram reemerged under its new leader, Abubakar Shekau (24).

“In June 2011, Boko Haram turned to suicide bombings, first targeting the Nigeria Police Force Headquarters in Abuja” (25).

To raise funds, they raided banks, mostly in rural areas, hauling away millions of naira, which they used to sponsor their insurgency (27).

“At the height of its power, Boko Haram controlled over 70% of Borno State and many other areas in neighbouring states. With the annexing of towns and villages, the group's ambition had expanded; it was now intent on establishing a Caliphate, ISIS style (27)”.

They came in pickup trucks at around 9:00 at night, threw explosives in the boys' dorm rooms, then shot and stabbed the boys as they tried to escape. Meanwhile, they rounded up the girls, lectured them on “the evils of Western education,” ordered them to get married, burned down the school building, then left. They didn't touch the girls, but fifty-nine boys were murdered in cold blood [Buni Yadi, Yobe State] (28).

“Boko Haram fighters also needed children and older women to cook and clean for them, and the younger women became “wives” – sex slaves and mothers to the next generation of fighters. Men who were too old to be conscripted were simply lined up against the wall and shot (29)”.

“The war against Boko Haram would never be won until the victims were at least accounted for” (29).

“Scattered by the sides of the road were black, cylindrical objects that I first mistook for chips of wood, or stones. They were shell casings, which lined the sides of the road like giant bird droppings all the way to Damboa” (92).

In terms of the tone in the novel, the first two chapters in *The Chibok Girls* is grave. There is a controlled sense of mission needing to be accomplished in an aura of uncertainty and fear. The mission is to enter Chibok, find information without being attacked or sent back. The traffic into Chibok is controlled and every traveller must state their mission. Inside Chibok, there is caution about what is being said and who is being spoken to. Movement is safer in the company of the local vigilante members. There is a curfew in place, therefore, any vehicular movement at night is made without headlamps, so as not to invite the attention of the soldiers camping in the hills.

The next chapters begin to follow the accounts about the day of the abduction. The horror of the unexpected events is told. The dominant tone is fear, consternation and confusion. Stories about the unleashing of terror and some targeted assassinations.

The third, fourth and fifth chapter carries the tone of an expository documentary. It begins from a historical background before returning to an attempt to interview one of the vice-principals of the Secondary School. The perspective of school officials about the kidnapping was cut short by bureaucratic hinderances from the government, instructing them not to talk to reporters and backed by persons such as an ex-police officer in Chibok. An omniscient point of view is activated and it is successful in giving an authoritative voice to the narrative. The information about the history of the Nigerian state and the region in particular is expository in style. There is a switch to third person narration only when the author is reporting the actions or speech of specific individuals in the book. By and large, the speaking style of these chapters is journalistic.

In chapter six and seven Habila documents his return to Chibok after two months, the voice begins with the third person narration but now, it is reflective. There were some reports about the psychological trauma which caused the death of some parents, and a failed attempt for a deal to release 60 girls, while some other girls were taken to America under guardianship. Finally, he meets three girls face to face who described how they leaped off the truck or hung on tree branches to run back home. “Like most things in life, it all came down to chance, opportunity and desperation. There was no single explanation (110)”

Conclusion

This paper has places focus on the strategies that Helon Habila adopted to write *The Chibok Girls* as a nonfiction narrative. It identified real people, events and places;

#BringBackOurGirls Movement in the Rescuing of the Abducted Chibok (Nigeria) Girls” *Critical Perspectives on Development, Media and Social Change*

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[Timeline: Nigeria's kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls | Fox News](#)

[Full List: Names of All 90 Chibok Girls Still in Captivity 11 Years After Their Abduction - Legit.ng](#)