

Article

A Bio-fictional Reading of Adaobi Nwaubani's Trauma Narrative of the Chibok Girls's Kidnap in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative strategy adopted by Adaobi Nwaubani to tell the story of terrorism, abduction, and trauma in her prose text, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, and how effectively she used it. In addition, and as a result of this, the paper attempts a critical diagnostic reading of the text to reveal narrative encoding of trauma symptoms as experienced by victims of the Boko Haram insurgency and documented in the stories of survivors. These include symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other associated mental health disorders. Adaobi Nwaubani adopts a bio-fictional narrative strategy to create a vivid, graphic, traumatic, and realistic narrative of what it was like to be kidnapped and to be in the custody of the dreaded Boko Haram insurgents that terrorize northern Nigeria and particularly the north-eastern part of the country. Using the trauma theory, an exploration of the effectiveness of Adaobi's narrative strategy to encode and depict manifest evidence of traumatic experiences and the psyche of the survivors shows a skillful bio-fictional weaving of facts and fiction, history, and effective imaginative biography. The paper concludes that Adaobi Nwaubani's biographical novel presents an effective awareness of trauma experienced by the victims through the use of symbolism, imagery, and language of trauma. It foregrounds the need for the rehabilitation of survivors of war and terrorism.

Keywords: Bio-fiction, Trauma narrative, Boko Haram, Chibok Girls, Terrorism

Introduction

In Literature, generic classification involves grouping different literary works into distinct genres based on shared characteristics such as form, style, theme, narrative structure, audience, setting, and context. The major literary genres include drama, poetry, and fiction. However, there are subgenres within each category; for instance, the contemporary fiction genre includes: 'flash fiction', 'science fiction', 'autofiction', 'metafiction', 'biofiction', 'auto/biografiction', 'heterobiography', 'biographic metafiction', 'speculative fiction' etc. Specifically, the biographical genre has gained popularity and increased publication from writers and critics in recent times. There have also been various descriptions of and perspectives on the genre of biographical narratives. For instance, Dennis Kersten conceptualizes Biofiction as a "category of life-writing where biographies and novels co-exist" (34), emphasising the hybrid genre's distinctive ability to merge historical fact with creative storytelling. Ina Schabert, in her essay *In Praise of Biographical Fiction* (2010), supports this view, stating that biofiction operates "in the liminal space between biography and novel, producing a narrative that is both anchored in reality and liberated by imagination" (Schabert 65). Schabert's argument stresses the genre's flexibility, allowing authors to explore historical complexities through a combination of factual accuracy with imaginative reconstruction.

The critical debate on biofiction revolves around its ability to humanise historical figures through subjective interpretation. Michael Lackay argues that the emergence of the biographical novel is “an aesthetic and historical necessity because it enabled writers to picture something that the historical novel could not” (34). This perspective reflects biofiction’s resistance to dominant historical narratives and the growing interest in literary experimentation, and narrative subjectivity. For Lackey, biofiction is the “narrative form where authors use imagination to fill in the gaps of history”, suggesting that it provides a means of humanizing historical figures. David Lodge adds to this discourse by describing biofiction as a sub-genre that uses ‘real people’ and their ‘real history’ to represent subjectivity rather than objectivity (Lodge 8). He argues that traditional biographies, which rely heavily on documented facts, often fail to convey the emotional or psychological depth that biofiction can achieve. This highlights biofiction’s role in deepening the reader’s understanding of the historical subject.

Moreover, Lackay emphasises that biographical novelists consume historical elements to give readers certain types of ‘truth’ (Lackey 15). In biofiction, the concept of “truth” is pivotal to its ethical discourse, as it presents history through a fictionalized lens. Chika Unigwe reinforces this view, asserting that “readers don’t come to biographical fiction for truth. They come to biographical fiction for possibilities” (Unigwe, qtd. in Lackey 8). Through this lens, biofiction is a form of storytelling and a vehicle for questioning and challenging established historical narratives. According to Lackey, biofiction is best described as “truthful fiction” wherein authors manipulate documented facts to convey a deeper “symbolic truth” (Lackey 19). He argues that these novelists “do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth” (2019, 8). This manipulation of historical data challenges the perceived reliability of traditional historical accounts. It raises crucial questions about the distortion of historical narratives, leading to essential discussions on the balance between creative freedom and historical integrity.

Given the contention about the compromise of the integrity of historical narratives, critics argue that biofiction’s emphasis on subjective interpretation can lead to historical inaccuracies and distortions. Lucia Boldrini, in *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* explores voice appropriation, where an author’s creative vision may overshadow the authentic voice of a historical figure, particularly those marginalised. Boldrini cautions that biofiction risks erasing historical accuracy by replacing the true narrative with the author’s fictionalized perspective. She notes that biofiction can give a platform to forgotten or silenced voices, but it also risks “substituting one’s own voice, one’s own narrative reconstruction, for theirs” (Boldrini 21). This perspective stresses the potential for biofiction to undermine the integrity of historical events in pursuit of artistic expression, leading to questions about whether historical authenticity should be sacrificed for narrative creativity. This raises ethical concerns about the boundaries of artistic expression and the responsibilities of authors to historical truth. The tension between creativity and historical fidelity is further explored by Mark Llewellyn, who argues that readers have grown too comfortable with biofiction’s imaginative liberties. The appropriation of genuine historical figures as characters in fiction is an act of imaginative boldness that, through simple attrition, readers of

contemporary fiction have come to take entirely for granted. Then historical fiction in many senses ceases to serve one of its primary functions in re-imagining the past, by obscuring or fabricating evidence rather than providing accountable biographical narratives (Llewellyn 2007: 20). This emphasises the need for a careful balance between creativity and responsibility, questioning whether the pursuit of emotional depth justifies historical inaccuracy.

While the ethical concerns about misrepresentation and appropriation are valid, biofiction offers a unique space for reimagining historical figures, especially those marginalized or silenced. In response to these divergent views, Michael Cunningham, in agreement with Lackey, claims that “there’s no such thing as fiction, not in the absolute sense,” since both fiction and biography are rooted in lived experiences (Lackey 2014:2). Lackey builds on this, arguing that “fact is fiction,” highlighting the blurred line between historical truth and creative narrative in postmodern biofiction (Lackey 2). In this vein, the truth of biofiction lies not in strict factual adherence but in its ability to provide readers with a deeper emotional truth, enabling them to engage with historical figures in ways that biographies may not allow.

This paper examines the quality of Adaobi Nwabani’s *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* as a biofiction and how effectively she deployed the genre to explore and represent the traumatic experiences of the Chibok girls and other survivors of the Boko Haram insurgency and terrorism. It explores how the novel reflects the symptoms of trauma and PTSD as experienced by survivors of the Boko Haram insurgency, how these depictions align with documented symptoms of PTSD and how true to life and historical fact these depictions are. This is done using clinical evidence in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to validate the representations of trauma symptoms as encoded in the text. The paper examines the extent to which Nwabani authentically represents the voices of the actual victims, and/or to what extent these voices were altered for the sake of narrative enhancement. This inquiry leads to the broader question of whether preserving historical integrity outweighs narrative creativity, or whether historical facts should be adjusted to provide a more emotionally engaging or subjective portrayal.

Adaobi Nwabani’s *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* as a Biofiction

In *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, Adaobi Nwabani firmly grounds her narrative in the actual historical events of the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, a town in Northern Nigeria, by the Islamist militant group, Boko Haram, in April 2014. The Afterword to the novel, written by Viviana Mazza, an Italian journalist, is a factual account of the Chibok girl’s abduction, relying heavily on interviews with the parents of the abducted girls and survivors of the Boko Haram Insurgency. Real-life figures, like Rebecca Yishaku, one of the fifty-seven Chibok girls who escaped captivity by jumping off the insurgent’s truck, were consulted to enhance the authenticity of the narration. These personal accounts serve as the foundation for characterisation in the novel, as Nwabani and Mazza sought to humanize the girls and give them voices in the broader global conversation on terrorism and abduction. Mazza notes that they “wanted these girls to be seen not just as numbers

but as the curious, ambitious and lovely daughters [whom their] families wanted to see again" (307).

The Afterword also highlights external sources consulted during the writing process, including documentation in media reports, interviews, and coverage from news outlets like the BBC and Channels Television, further emphasizing the effort to present a well-researched narrative. The survivors' testimonies are corroborated by external sources such as diary entries, memoirs, and fictional and non-fictional accounts such as Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls* (2016), John Elnathan's *Born on a Tuesday* (2016), Patience Ibrahim and Andrea Hoffmann's *A Gift from Darkness: How I Escaped with My Daughter from Boko Haram* (2017), and a host of others. Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls* (2016), a non-fiction account published before *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2019), similarly included interviews with survivors of the Boko Haram attack and family members of the abducted Chibok girls, some of whom Nwubani also interviewed, such as Yana Galand and Amina Ali. Mazza's accounts align closely with details already documented in Habila's account. For instance, both accounts highlight the documented controversial events that led to the abduction of the schoolgirls:

According to different survivor's accounts, the men asked where they could find the 'brick-making machine' or 'the engine block'; it appears that their initial purpose was not to kidnap the girls but to steal machinery to use for house building or vehicles that they wrongly thought was kept in the school (BBTBT, 313).

Mazza's reference to 'different survivor's accounts' confirms the use of second-hand accounts. A similar account of events is available in Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls*: "...they asked us for the engine block (brick-making machine). We said there wasn't one, and they said they'd search, and if they found it they'd shoot us. Next, they asked for the admin office. Then they marched us out of the hostel to the gate" (Habila, 107). This corroboration highlights the consistency of common observations across survivor testimonies and confirms that they draw from similar sources.

Mazza openly acknowledged the limitations and ethical dilemmas encountered, such as the contradictory accounts from parents and difficulty accessing remote areas. The author's positionality (a Nigerian and an Italian) brings a dual perspective, enriching the narrative with cultural sensitivity to avoid the pitfalls of cultural misrepresentation or exploitation. Mazza states: "When Adaobi managed to go to Chibok with a group of journalists, we decided that, because the situation was still volatile, I would endanger them because I am white and I would have attracted attention to the group. I had to stay behind" (274). Also, she acknowledges the limitations of writing about an ongoing event: "We didn't know how this story would end" (305). This uncertainty allowed her to weave an open-ended narrative, blending fact and fiction while remaining true to the emotional and psychological experiences of the victims. This highlights the emotional and ethical challenges she faced in crafting a narrative that reflects both the ongoing nature of Boko Haram's terror and the personal traumas of the abducted girls.

According to Pauline Uwakweh, to experience trauma vicariously is to become a secondary victim. The authors had to rely on second-hand accounts and navigate

the emotional toll on the victims' families, which sometimes led to inconsistent or incomplete information. This transparency helps to build the reader's trust and clarifies where factual information ends and fictionalization begins. Mazza notes, "...it could be painful for the parents to talk; sometimes when I called them on the phone, I sensed they had hoped it would be somebody bringing news rather than another journalist asking more questions" (BBTBT: 306). This compounded the trauma of the documentary process; in addition to the trauma experienced by the parents of the victims as they are forced to remember the kidnapping and the absence of their children, the journalist also experienced the trauma vicariously. Therefore, the journalist, the reader, the relatives of the victims, and others indirectly connected to the traumatic events may experience 'secondary traumatization' (23).

By focusing on the traumatic experiences of the protagonist, who is modelled after real victims of the abductions, Nwaubani creates a narrative that vividly captures the thoughts, fears, and psychological struggles faced by those who experienced the terror first-hand. The fictionalized protagonist embodies the collective experiences of these girls, allowing Nwaubani to weave the themes of loss, fear, hope, and resilience from the girls' point of view. Later in the novel, she adopted the name given to the protagonist in the Insurgents camp by the insurgent, 'Salamatu'. Nwaubani meticulously describes the landscape, customs, and challenges of the communities in Borno State, which is directly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. For example, the novel is set in a rural Nigerian village, where education is a privilege, particularly for girls, and where traditional gender roles dominate, resonating with the experiences of communities in Northern Nigeria. Salamatu notes: "Unlike many other girls in our village whose parents do not think that sending a girl to school is important since she will end up getting married and taking all her father's years of investment to another man's house, Papa wants me educated" (8).

Nwaubani takes creative liberties by shifting certain factual elements. For instance, in reality, the Chibok girls were abducted from their dormitories while preparing for their final exams, a point corroborated by several reports and survivors' testimonies. However, in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, the protagonist and other girls are abducted from their homes during an insurgent invasion of their village. This artistic shift helps to broaden the narrative scope, allowing Nwaubani to explore the impact of Boko Haram on rural communities and not limit her portrayal to just the Chibok school abduction. Another fictionalized element is the protagonist's backstory; she is portrayed as the first girl from her village to win the prestigious Borno State scholarship to attend a special boarding school in Maiduguri. This is not based on any specific factual account but symbolizes the hopes and dreams of the young girls whom Boko Haram abducted. The protagonist's aspirations reflect the lost potential of these girls, many of whom shared similar dreams of education and a better future before Boko Haram violently disrupted their lives. Although Nwaubani introduces fictionalized elements to enhance engagement, these adjustments support rather than overshadow the historical realities, underscoring biofiction's power to convey both factual and emotional truths about trauma. Through this approach, Nwaubani demonstrates how biofiction can preserve the integrity of real-life experiences while providing a

deeper, empathetic understanding of the Chibok girls' ordeal. While the novel does not claim to be a direct representation of one of the girl's experiences, it reflects the broader truths about life in Boko Haram's captivity, including forced conversion to Islam, forced marriages, indoctrination, and the severe psychological trauma faced by the abducted girls. Thus, Nwaubani uses fiction to weave together factual elements to highlight the emotional and psychological depth of the actual events.

A Bio-fictional Exploration of Terrorism, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

Originally, trauma refers to a 'wound or body injury' but has evolved to mean a psychological wound that affects an individual's memory. "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) is a trauma and stressor-related disorder that is very central to trauma theory; it was coined from Freud's "traumatic neurosis" by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. The World Health Organization estimated that in situations of war and armed conflict throughout the world, "10% of the people who experience traumatic events will have serious mental health problems, and another 10% will develop behaviour that will hinder their ability to function effectively" (WHO, 2001). According to recent studies, PTSD is frequently reported among survivors of the Boko Haram insurgency (Vandi Luka, 2023), school children in Northern Nigeria (Bakar Abu and Darma Rabi, 2018), and internally displaced victims of Boko Haram terrorism (Maigari Taru et al, 2018), which has submitted that there is a need for effective intervention and management of survivors.

According to Criterion A in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), individuals can experience trauma from direct exposure to life-threatening situations, such as witnessing the death or serious injury of others and being subjected to sexual violence. In the novel, the protagonist Salamatu and the other abducted girls witness horrifying acts of violence, such as the beheading of a soldier as a warning and the killing of their fellow captives who resist conversion to Islam:

In his right hand, he waves a curved knife with a pointed blade that reflects the rays from the sun. In his left hand, he drags an elderly man dressed in a green Nigerian army uniform, whose wrists and ankles are bound with rope. 'you do not want to convert to Islam?' the leader says. As quick as lightning, the deed is done. I clap my palms over my eyes and scream. 'We will kill all of you the same way if you refuse to convert' the leader says (123).

This is a precise instance of direct exposure to death, and the vividness of Salamatu's reaction, covering her eyes, screaming, and her internal struggle to preserve her life mirror the real-life psychological responses to trauma. The leader of the insurgents used the execution of the soldier as a brutal display of power, emphasizing that anyone who refused to convert would face a similar fate. This act of violence was intended to instill fear in the girls, forcing them to submit to the insurgents' demands, including religious conversion, as a means of survival.

Nwaubani uses symbolism and imagery to convey the emotional depth of the protagonist's experiences. Nwaubani sheds light on the importance of the baobab tree and how the invasion by the Boko Haram insurgent turned the 'tree of life' into

a 'tree of death', underscoring the profound loss of peace and security in their lives. The *Baobab tree* in the title, initially a symbol of communal life and hope, becomes a symbol of death as it is revealed that the insurgents use it as a graveyard for their victims. This shift not only signifies the physical destruction caused by Boko Haram but also reflects the mental and emotional toll on the girls, whose lives are forever changed by violence and terror. Salamatu says:

Zainab and I hurry toward the Tree of Life, soon we notice the smell. The nearer we go, the stronger the stench. Like the smell of a rat that has succumbed to Mama's Super Kill Action-laced crayfish...and then I see it. A vast hole beneath the baobab tree, a cloud of flies swimming above. I now know what became of Magdalene, and the girl who slumped during Quranic class (158).

Nwaubani's portrayal of Salamatu's gradual emotional breakdown as she succumbs to the pressure of survival illustrates the long-term psychological effects of captivity. Salamatu's forced conversion to Islam, along with witnessing brutal killings, results in emotional numbness, an initial reaction to trauma, and a coping mechanism that PTSD survivors often develop to manage trauma. She describes her desire to live despite witnessing the horrors around her:

In the past twenty-four hours, I have seen more blood and bodies to feed my nightmares for the next two thousand years. I have wished that death had taken me along with Papa and my brothers. But the sight of that soldier's gray head resting a few inches from his bare feet, with the eyes and mouth frozen open, gives me a fresh desire to preserve my life. 'I want to be a Muslim! I cry. (p. 124).

The prevalence of sexual violence is another direct exposure to trauma for the girls in the Boko Haram camp. Nwaubani portrays Mallam Adamu, a religious instructor, as a complex figure who imposes strict discipline during the day, using physical punishment such as slaps, and cane 'koboko' to ensure that none of the girls violates Islamic practices. However, at night, his behaviour contrasts sharply as he preys on vulnerable women and girls. Salamatu describes how Malam Adamu selects women for exploitation: "tiptoes into our sleeping area after dark, noiseless as a shadow, taps a woman or two, and beckons her to follow him out quietly" (p. 148). This nightly ritual creates a pervasive sense of fear and helplessness among the girls, who silently pray to avoid being chosen but are too afraid to intervene or speak out. The trauma intensifies as even pregnant women like Aisha are subjected to assault, highlighting the brutal reality of life in the camp. Aisha's desperate pleas emphasize the profound sense of helplessness and violation:

'No! No! No! Please!'... "I am a married woman! I am expecting a child!". Aisha's wailing gets louder and louder. Al-Buura does not take her revolt lightly. A dull sound. A muffled cry. The end of Aisha's resistance. "shut up or I will kill you," he says (p. 162).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by several diagnostic Criteria including intrusive symptoms (Criterion B1-4), avoidance symptoms (Criterion C1-

2), alterations in mood and cognition (Criterion D1-7), alteration in arousal and reactivity (Criterion E1-6). In *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, Nwaubani effectively illustrates the development of PTSD in the abducted girls, mainly through Salamatu's experiences, which reflect the psychological impact of her trauma. The narrative reveals how unresolved trauma manifests in intrusive symptoms such as flashbacks, distressing dreams, and heightened psychological distress. Salamatu repeatedly relives the attack on her village and the loss of her family, demonstrating the persistent, involuntary re-experiencing of the traumatic event. She recalls the haunting reminder of her loss: "The ugly truth finally sinks into my head. Papa and his repertoire of tales, stories of his childhood, of ghosts and witches, of hyenas and hares that could speak fluent Hausa like the rest of us... All dead, slaughtered, gone forever, never to materialize again" (p. 115)

The constant reliving of these events traps Salamatu in a cycle of fear and hopelessness. Salamatu's intrusive memories of her village and the violent abduction of her family emerge as flashbacks, disrupting her focus and amplifying her sense of loss. Her vivid recollection of her mother's imagined reaction to the village's destruction reflects an ongoing confrontation with her grief. Nwaubani's portrayal of these scenes through rhetorical questions: "What if Boko Haram attacked Mama on her way to or from Jalingo? What if Mama is also dead?" (p. 177), conveys Salamatu's continuous cycle of reliving and attempting to process her trauma. The description of her mother's imagined scream reflects the overwhelming grief felt by survivors and families, while the charred buildings symbolize the irreversible damage inflicted on the community:

Returning from Jalingo to find that all the houses are carcasses, charred blocks, and blackened metal. Passing building after building in horror, wondering how many lightning bolts could have struck the village...the first scream that comes rolling out from deep inside her intestines, a sound that travels all the way across the village. Eyes expand in shock as the surviving villagers relay their version of events, those lucky to have fled to the hills. If only I were there to remind Mama to always remain thankful, no matter in what situation she finds herself. If only she were here to hold me tight, assure me that there is a reason for everything (p.128).

Additionally, as described by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, dissociation disconnects intense emotional experiences from social domains like language and memory. Salamatu's dissociative reactions, particularly her recurring thoughts about her brother Jacob, further reinforce the fragmented, intrusive nature of trauma. Her mind frequently drifts away from her present reality, often recalling past moments with her brother as a coping mechanism. These disjointed memories illustrate how survivors' consciousness is overwhelmed by the trauma they have experienced, making it challenging to stay grounded in the present (139). This mental detachment Criterion B symptoms, particularly flashbacks, disrupt survivors' daily lives. Despite her brother's absence, she wonders "where the truck has taken Jacob, my one and only brother, to" (p. 139). She expresses the fear that "we could be here until Jacob no longer remembers who I am" (p. 178). Also, Salamatu recalls a time when her brother caught "a lizard" in the backyard and imprisoned it inside a transparent plastic bag, "then shackled the bag to Jacob's

wrist with twine. As Jacob dragged the twine about, the lizard wriggled and writhed, while Isaac and Jacob applauded and laughed". This highlights Salamatu's attempt to dissociate from the immediate terror by anchoring herself in safer memories. The recurring, distressing memories of Jacob reflect how trauma invades the protagonist's consciousness. Similarly, Salamatu's memory of her brother trapping a lizard mirrors her own captivity under Boko Haram, reflecting the forced confinement and loss of freedom endured by the abducted girls. This imagery symbolizes the helplessness Salamatu and her peers experience, symbolizing the trauma and loss of autonomy forced upon them.

Avoidance, another significant symptom of PTSD, is evident in Salamatu's attempts to block out the painful memories of the attack and her experience in the Sambisa forest. She consciously avoids confronting her trauma, expressing this through metaphors of locking away her memories: "I keep shoving it out of my mind. I keep shutting my eyes to make it disappear. At last, I force the memory into a cage and bolt it with a metal padlock, then fling the key deep into Lake Chad" (p. 204). This metaphoric imagery reflects her desire to distance herself from the trauma. Also, Salamatu demonstrates negative alterations in mood and cognition (Criterion D), evident in her feelings of emotional numbness and hopelessness. Her feeling of isolation and detachment illustrates her persistent negative emotional state as she notes: "I arise each morning with no strength to think of tomorrow morning or the morning after tomorrow. I retire at night with no courage to think of tomorrow night or the night after tomorrow." (p. 178). The protagonist, Salamatu, is burdened by survivor's guilt after witnessing the insurgents kill her friend Magdalene, who refuses to abandon her Christian faith despite threats of death. When she expresses her helplessness, "I wish I were bold enough to scream at her, to beg her to stop resisting and just survive like the rest of us," her words reveal a tortured regret, underlining how far she wishes she could have gone to prevent her friend's death. This exemplifies Criterion D of PTSD, particularly in persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs about oneself and distorted blame of oneself or others.

In addition to these cognitive symptoms, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* vividly portrays alterations in arousal and reactivity (Criterion E), mainly through Salamatu's experiences of hyper-vigilance and disturbed sleep. The recurring nightmares, such as evident in the following quote: "He leaps after me with a dagger gleaming in his right hand. 'I am going to slice off your head!' he howls. Faster and faster, I flee, the sound of his feet getting closer by the second. Almost out of breath, I notice a dense hedge up ahead (p. 133)", which is indicative of her heightened arousal and the trauma-induced sleep disturbances that plague her. It is characterized by the sudden waking up from sleep with a scream, indicating a terrified state. These intrusive nightmares disrupt her ability to process her trauma and contribute to her ongoing psychological distress. It reflects the conflict between remembering and repression of traumatic events, between present and future. The image of a 'dagger' associated with death, violence, and fear remains the constant feature of Salamatu's nightmare. It presents the reality of being repressed. The traumatic memories absorb the fragmented narrative through different disturbing and repetitive nightmares. This disrupts the dialogue, causing unexpected intrusion from the traumatic past into the present, resulting in a disorienting narrative. Through the novel's structure, it becomes evident that Salamatu is reliving these

events and cannot escape or recover from her trauma, buttressing Caruth's observation that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 4-5). This means that the trauma victim relives the event over and over again, whether through nightmares, flashbacks, or compulsive tendencies. The traumatic experiences of the girls lead to sleep disturbances.

According to Caruth, trauma demands a mode of representation that textually performs trauma and its incomprehensibility through the use of gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding (155). Trauma manifests in different ways in literary representation; such as fear, incoherence, memory issues, and identity crises amongst others. Through Nwaubani's creative use of symbolic pauses, accompanied by an ellipsis, the traumatic experiences of the abducted girls by the Boko Haram insurgents are presented. It illustrates the fragmentation of the character's thoughts as if the trauma has permanently damaged them. The shortness of the chapters and the disjointed paragraphs illustrate the overwhelming impact of trauma on perception and memory. The novel's structure represents Salamatu's memory gaps; while these gaps result from trauma, the gaps are also a way to narrate the unnarratable.

The novel features paragraphs ending with dashes. In the novel, dashes frequently interrupt Salamatu's thoughts, leaving sentences unfinished, a narrative tool symbolizing her inner fragmentation. Phrases like: "Are you trying to tell me that Allah would rather have these children fighting than being in school and learning new things every day? Does it mean that..." (p. 245) or after intentional pauses, "Allah can't possibly..." or after setting an expectation, "Please, don't go! Please! You won't..." (p. 273), leaving the reader to wonder what the protagonist will say and the reason for the pause. This representation of narrative fragmentation allows readers to perceive Salamatu's psychological struggles as both a witness to and a survivor of traumatic events, resonating with the fractured, ongoing nature of PTSD. The dashes signify the unwillingness of the character to continue with the discussion due to the haunting effect of such memories and realizations.

Nwaubani presents Salamatu's silent, inward struggle with unprocessed events. The silent moment serves as a reflection period on collective memory, forgetting and remembering, coping and healing. However, despite being afraid, Salamatu finds comfort in the company of her best friend, Sarah, whose new name is Zainab. She adds, "Holding hands with our fingers intertwined tight and lying side by side with her breath cooling my neck". Resting my head on her shoulder with her arm around my waist" (p. 135). Hence, despite being afraid, they are not alone in the Sambisa forest. The painful past may cause the failure to articulate the unspeakable resulting in silence. These characters have been silenced, and their power of expression has been undermined by forces that tear them in contradictory directions. It is, therefore, implied that they resort to bodily expression not because they are incapable of speaking but because they cannot articulate their needs and fears.

Nwaubani intricately captures the pervasive effects of trauma on Boko Haram's victims, by portraying the ongoing struggle survivors face even after physical liberation. Through Salamatu's character, the narrative portrays the complexities of reintegration, as she finds herself haunted by survivor's guilt, fragmented

memories, and an unyielding sense of alienation. Despite her release, Salamatu remains psychologically captive to her traumatic experiences, as evidenced by flashbacks and intrusive memories: She feels unsafe as the voice of her *rijale* husband keeps playing in her head saying: "Salamatu! Salamatu! You can never run away from me! Wherever you go, I will come and find you!" (p. 285). These repeated recollections vividly illustrate McNally's concept of "reliving trauma," where traumatic events continuously invade present consciousness, underscoring the relentless impact of psychological shock and the struggles inherent in reconnecting with daily life.

Salamatu's fears for her future, her anxieties about the child she now carries from her forced "*rijale*" marriage, and her feelings of inadequacy further amplify the theme of enduring trauma. Nwaubani highlights the social and personal stigmas survivors often encounter:

How will the mother of a child with bad blood lift her head high among human beings? Life in the forest might have been better for me. I hope my baby will be a girl. I do not want a boy who will grow up to be a *rijale* like his father, or a child who will look like him instead of like me (292).

The rescue scene, where Salamatu hesitates to share her ordeal with humanitarian workers, exemplifies Herman's concept of Scripto-therapy:

It's important that you tell her your story,' the man says. 'You have to tell her everything that happened. That is the only way the world can know so that they can continue to look for the other stolen girls and rescue them from Boko Haram. You have to tell her everything. Everything. That's the only way the world can know (p. 299).

As they encourage her to narrate her experiences, Salamatu faces the daunting task of articulating her pain, a step vital for her healing, as Herman suggests in *Trauma and Recovery*. This interaction underscores the significance of storytelling in trauma recovery, both as a therapeutic release for the victim and as an informative tool for the global community to understand the insurgency's impact.

Furthermore, Nwaubani illustrates the necessity for trauma-informed reintegration programs, showing how survivors like Salamatu require sustained support to reconnect with society meaningfully. Salamatu's journey back to her aspirations, particularly her desire to return to school, symbolizes resilience and growth potential. Nwaubani's portrayal of Salamatu and other survivors highlights the varied reactions to reintegration, as some girls willingly return to insurgent-influenced relationships. In contrast, others, like Salamatu, aim to reclaim a future disrupted by violence. Thus, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* serves as a profound reflection on trauma and an advocacy for holistic rehabilitation measures that address survivors' complex psychological and emotional needs, promoting resilience and the restoration of agency.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far on the genre of biofiction, the status of Nwaubani's novel as a biofiction, and the effectiveness of her narrative strategy to portray the traumatic experiences of the Chibok girls and other victims/survivors of terrorist attacks by the Boko Haram insurgents, it can be concluded that *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* by Adaobi Nwaubani effectively demonstrates biofiction's unique power to represent trauma by blending historical truth with creative narrative techniques. Facts about the effects of the insurgency on the girls emerged in various forms, such as disruption of education, forced marriage and abuse, loss of family and friends, psychological trauma, and stigmatization. By portraying the devastating impact of Boko Haram's insurgency through Salamatu's journey, Nwaubani authentically captures PTSD symptoms as outlined in DSM-V, such as distressing flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional detachment, which underscore the enduring psychological impact of trauma. Using symbolism, imagery, the language of trauma, and a first-person narrative, Nwaubani creates a space for readers to engage with the psychological fragmentation experienced by the survivors intimately.

While Nwaubani takes some creative liberties, such as the over-dramatization of violence and its optimistic conclusion of support, healing, and recovery, these choices enhance the narrative's emotional depth without compromising historical integrity. Notably, she neither glorifies nor lessens the survivor's trauma; instead, she portrays them as individuals shaped by, yet distinct from, their suffering. This delicate balance, along with her inclusion of interviews and real accounts, aligns her work with Lackey's assertion that biographical novelists consume historical elements to give readers certain types of 'truth' (15) by manipulating documented evidence (19) and by deliberately filling in the historical gaps with speculative narrative elements. Nwaubani's approach does not diminish historical authenticity; instead, it enriches the portrayal by emphasizing the resilience and suffering of the girls, achieving a balance between historical integrity and narrative creativity. The fact that the fiction ends on an optimistic note about the possibility of achieving reintegration for victimized survivors is speculative rather than authentic historical or biographical fact. However, Nwaubani did not portray the recovery stories of the girls which rein in the speculative license of the writer and give the narrative some form of credibility and believability.

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