



WAR AND THE NIGERIAN FICTION: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF  
HELON HABILA'S *MEASURING TIME*, *OIL ON WATER* AND *THE CHIBOK GIRLS*

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**Abstract**

This study examines war and Nigerian Fiction with the aim of explicating the varied ramifications of violence as depicted in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, *Oil on Water* and *The Chibok Girls*. War has been a composite source of inspiration for literary expression. It is a social compass which serves as a means of mirroring society. As an ancient subject of representation, it has been explored extensively from different angles. Although war symbolises armed struggle, it is also a psychological displacement which allows the construction of traumatic identity. As a result, this paper, relying on the poetic of psychoanalysis, examines war as a psycho-social response of man to anything that threatens his ego. The paper is premised on the belief that war is an idea that indwells the psyche of man and finds spontaneous expression when the ego is "threatened". Hence, it demonstrates that literature has the ability to penetrate not only society but the psychology of the individuals that make up the society. The study evokes realistic issues that have dominated the social circle. That is, issues of structural and psychological violence and their relevance to literary construction and imagination as articulated within the context of the Nigerian state.

**Keywords:** character formation, personality, psychoanalysis, social construct, representation, society, war

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## Introduction

The study explores the relationship between war and literary creativity in contemporary Nigerian fiction with emphasis on character formation within a social context as depicted in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2006), *Oil on Water* (2010) and *The Chibok Girls* (2016). The study analyses war beyond the rhetoric of culture, politics, economics and environment. It looks at war from a social and psychological perspective focusing on variables that influence and shape man's cognitive processes and responses with one another within a social continuum. The study thus defines war as anything that disrupts the order of things.

War has often played an important role in the representation of society. Historical record shows that humans have been fighting since their existence on earth. Ancient literary and historical accounts have been inspired by and often center on war. According to Heraclitus, war is the "father of all, and king of all". War played a central role in the whole of ancient Western works of literature to the extent that it is considered the single most important topic of the body of literature at that time. Similarly, in the large body of European literature constituted by medieval saga and epics, literary pieces such as the Trojan War and the French Roman *d'alexandre* represent a volcanic phenomenon which threatened the existence of the society. Moreover, much of the oral tradition of the non-Western societies represents tribal and cultural struggles with their neighbours.

It may be argued that the subject of war has a universal space in literary representation. This is because no literary rendering of human experience has perhaps exercised such an extensive influence on human behavior. As a result, any investigation of literature on the subject of war from the Medieval till present would require very lengthy treatment. This is because, the notion of war brings to mind plethora of meanings and definitions to the hearer or reader. This is due to the fact that, the concept itself is ambiguous and can vary when and how it is applied to define a conflict. Advancement in technology and changes in the global system have systematically changed the concept and meaning of war and has equally determined how warfare is waged. Every war has a peculiar dynamics particular to the local context of the war. While these dynamics may condition an understanding of the concept, it is important to note that, in spite of its various nuances, every war is fought to achieve an objective

Thus, the changing perspective of war brings into focus the need to understand how the individual is placed in the social and the social in the individual. Some critics argue that war is a necessary defense against psychotic anxiety as well as the idea that war provides an outlet for repressed impulses. That is, the individual's need to translate internal psychotic anxieties into real external dangers so as to control them. It suggests that culturally, warfare and its most recent manifestation, international terrorism and the so-called "war on terrorism," may be a necessary object for internal aggression. In this light, war could be seen as an attempt at therapy, carried out by individuals or social institutions, which connotes elementary defensive mechanisms of the ego in the schizo-paranoid phase. In other words, the history of war might represent the externalization and articulation of shared unconscious fantasies. This idea would suggest that the culture of war, genocide, and international terrorism provides objects of psychic need.

### Psychoanalysis as a Theoretical Framework

Ever since Freud, Psychoanalyst and Social Theorists have used psychoanalytic ideas to look at the social and structural order and its impact on the individual. Psychoanalysis is a theory, a technique, a language, climate and an ethos (Guilner 5) applied in order to understand human personality traits. Founded in the 1920s by Freud, (although people believe that Josef Breuer is the grandfather of Psychoanalysis), it developed on the basis to understand human cognitive process and behaviour within a social continuum. Freud's Psychoanalytical thought focuses on the inner variables, that is, the subconscious elements that indwell the psyche of the individual which motivate and influence his actions, thoughts and behaviours. The psychoanalytical theory was brought into the criminology (violence) world to help explain criminal behaviour. Freud's approach is purely embedded in the predestined actor model of criminal behaviour (Burke 78).

According to Freud, all psychic energy is generated by libido. Freud suggests that man's mental state is influenced by two competing forces: cathexis and anticathexis, which he describes as, the id and the ego. The id, he says, is the most primitive part of the human personality that is entirely unconscious and serves as the source of all libidinal energy, while the ego is the component of human personality that is charged with dealing with reality and helps ensure that the demands of the id are satisfied in ways that are realistic, safe and socially acceptable. The superego, he opines, is the part of the personality that holds all of the internalised traits from our parents, family and society at large. Thus, Freud argues that, an individual passes through different stages of development such as the Oral stage, Anal stage, the Phallic stage, the Latent stage. And, he opines that the successful completion of these stages, leads to a healthy personality as an adult. However, if a conflict remains unresolved at any particular point of developing, an individual might remain stuck at that particular point of development.

Freud's concept of the 'id' encapsulates man's sociobiological capability to dominate (Morgenthau 34) by brute force through the exercise of aggressive drives. Similarly, the 'id' describes the tendency for man to satisfy his selfish needs "without regard to the realities of life or to morals of any kind" (Morgan et al, 387). A world dominated by the behaviour described by the 'id' would replicate a chaotic state of nature. The 'id' is envisaged as the 'chaotic' (Badcock 93) dimension of man's psychology i.e. it is devoid of regard for social consensus, seeking only to satisfy ambitions whatever the means. Thus, where there is an excess of this dimension in an individual's personality structure, 'egoistic' satisfaction would be sought at whatever cost to other members of the immediate environment. The realities of a world dominated by this aspect of the Freudian dialectic would be power-driven and dark, a condition which is the contemporary experience of modern society.

As an aspect of human personality, the ego functions to maintain, through careful assessment and monitoring of the individual's internal and external environment, it describes man's will to dominate, even at the expense of others, The 'ego' is a kind of executive which acts as mediator or balancer between the 'id', perceptions from the outside world, and the 'superego'. The 'ego' is placed in a dialectical position where the sociable, moralizing aspects of man are juxtaposed against the egocentric, i.e. Self-centred, aggressive and anti-social dimensions of man.

In threatening situations, the 'ego' reacts with anxiety, which can lead to threats of aggression, while in more congenial circumstances the 'ego' militates against violence and a sociable law-abiding behaviour is followed. The 'superego' could be described as the internalised conscience: it is, in other words, the moralising element. Moreover; psychoanalytic theory subdivides the 'superego' conscience into two parts: the punitive and the 'ego-ideal' aspects (Schwartz 492). The punitive aspect of the 'superego' is believed to develop out of norms within society which prohibit, and provide for the punishment of certain actions which run counter to these social norms. According to Freud, this aspect of the 'superego' develops as a result of punishment or the threat of internal coercion:

It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized; for a special mental agency, man's super-ego takes it over and includes it among its commandments... This is also true of what are known as the *moral* demands of civilization, which likewise apply to everyone. (190-91)

In contrast, the 'ego-ideal' aspect of the 'superego' conscience represents norms, values, or external objects which command the individual's respect and are approved of by one's role models or peers: the identification, emotional attachment, and respect for these social institutions results in the socialisation of the individual into social groupings (Freud 147-161). Thus, beyond the libidinal expression, there seems to be the notion of culture and society as both a developmental and civilizing force. Thus, society is observed as being the product of individual and group action.

Thus, the evolution of the 'superego' facilitates social cohesion. For Freud, actions by an individual or collective action that contrasts with this normative structure are met, at least, with censure, and often with violence; he opines that man and even collective man, i.e. states, could be socialised into conformity with group norms. For example, in Freud's *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, he discusses the prospects for nurturing a collective national conscience thus:

It should not be objected that the state cannot refrain from wrong-doing, since that would place it at a disadvantage. It is no less disadvantageous, as a general rule, for the individual man to conform to the standards of morality and refrain from brutal and arbitrary conduct. Nor should it be a matter for surprise that this relaxation of all the moral ties between the collective individuals of mankind [sic states] should have had repercussions on the morality of individuals; for our conscience is not the inflexible judge that ethical teachers declare it. (qtd. in Douglas 2014)

Accordingly, individual personality, from Freud to Lacan, is a social construct shaped by elements and ethos of society. According to Lacan as cited in Toluhi (5), "Our Language" stands in for objects: all languages are in a way 'metaphorical', in that they substitute themselves for some direct, wordless possession of the object itself. Just as the child is unconsciously learning language, he is also unconsciously learning in the world of sexuality. The child's first discovery of sexual difference occurs at about the same time that he is discovering language itself. Thus, before a formal social contract is formed, human society is 'war-prone'.

On a wholesome perspective, behind the idea of libidinal expression, the dynamic concept of psychoanalysis has been based on the idea of culture as both a

civilising and repressing force. Culture and society are inherently portrayed as products of individual and group actions, both conscious and unconscious. Indeed, it is very much a social psychological theory of society. Society is both a product of individual action and the ordering of such action. Society is essentially an imposition on individual and ultimately selfish interest. Essentially, psychoanalytical concepts mirror a perennial argument within society, and this argument comes from the position that society constructs the individual subject, although, one of the problems of psychoanalysis is that it has been accused of being individualistic and, therefore, promoting the values of individualism over collectivism. Irrespective of such criticism, some of the greatest proponents of psychoanalytical thoughts have come from the position of social and psychological construction of individual personality traits.

Freud formulated a seemingly insoluble dilemma in the very essence of the human psyche: the eternal conflict between the dual instincts of Eros, the civilizing life instinct, and the indomitable death instinct (Thanatos). He also identifies some aspects of the death instinct with superego aggression, suggesting that the superego was the agent of the death instinct in its cruel and aggressive need for punishment and that its operative feeling was frequently a punitive hatred, while other aspects of the superego were protective. As we know, Freud thought the source of the superego was the internalization of the castrating oedipal father. He further theorizes that when diffusion or separations of the dual instincts occur, aspects of aggression frequently dominate and that it was the purpose of the ego to find objects for eros and/or aggression either in fantasy or reality.

Ostensibly, the element of human nature has been a ubiquitous feature, and often a much-derided one, in theories of violence and war between human and society, such as states. It concentrates on human personality as the cause and foundation of war. Critics argue that contemporary war, especially the war in Iran, Afghanistan and the bombing of the Twin Towers in 2001 is not purely economical but purely ideological. Thus, contemporary warfare is not over diamond fields or oil wells; it is all about honour, a sense of fear and a perceived self-interest. This invariably portrays that man's nature and his unquenchable taste for violence is fundamentally ideological as well as the need to preserve his identity.

Furthermore, war has always been linked to the question of ideology and identity. Eagleton describes identity as a "social subjectivity" (qtd. in Nasidi 194); in this sense, identity becomes a social construct assuming a generic sense of classification for individual sensitivity, and a boundary of interlocution regardless of one's socio-economic strand. Similarly, Clinton argues that "identity is the fear of the other" a "form of refuge intended to stave "off the other", a shelter for "crisis" and "alienation" (qtd. in Nasidi 194). Ideology comes in here because it is a domain of social subjectivity; as such, literature and ideology are intertwined because they are both concerned with the social construct.

Given the rhetoric in contemporary society, war is basically not only the expression of violence through the barrel of the gun, but also anything that disrupts the order of things. It could be psychological, economical, instrumental, political, ideological or socio-cultural. However, whichever form it manifests, war entrenches and causes dilapidating pain, anguish and terror in the psyche of the society. Either

way, war creates tension, trauma and displacement in society. Within the framework of this study therefore, war is referred to as a violent phenomenon, conflict or force that disrupts the orderliness of things.

### **War and Personality Formation in *Measuring Time***

Personality Formation refers to a deliberate social and psychological disposition possessed by an individual or individuals in order to attain some levels of recognition or perception in the society. Personality is psychological, but scholarship suggests that it is also influenced by biological processes and needs. Erikson and Mead see Personality Formation as a singular and continuous process of mental and emotional development (65). Erikson avers that personality connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential characters (102). This places emphasis on an individual's unique social experience and social role. Mead writes that Personality Formation results from an individual's interaction with a unique set of experiences sharpened by his "importation of the social process" from society as a whole (qtd. in Douglas 2014). Thus, personality development results from a constant negotiation between social norm, social context, social and psychological structure.

In *Measuring Time*, the paradigm provided by the environment informs the characters' personality. For instance, the fundamental characteristic of the society where citizens are informed of past events and happenings in society helps to sharpen one's cognition, motivation and reaction in a certain situation. Moreover, the nexus of collective selves which surround the individuals equally forms the nucleus by which the individual interprets reality. Hence, man's perception is sharpened and influenced by realities within his immediate environment. The correlative growth in the personality of the twin (Mamo and Lamamo) is sharpened by the information expressed in the song hummed by elders in the society. For instance, the twins first heard about their father's attitude towards their mother even before they were born through a song hummed by older women in the community. The content of the songs states how Lamang (the twin's father) abandoned their mother and went after other women even while she was at the point of death. The song is presented thus:

Mother is singing with longing  
 Daughter is singing with longing  
 Ah, King of women have mercy on us

African cultural practices recreate individual's personality and identity through an imaginative recreation of past events which Brogan describes as "Ghost Narrative" (151). Through retelling individual past deeds, the unconscious elements in the individual psyche regurgitate and hunt the individual and draw him effectively against his will. *Measuring Time* demonstrates the authenticity between reality and human psyche especially in the portrayal of characters and their unconscious as well as their conscious activities. Mamo and Lamamo (The Twins) vow to make life miserable for their father for his culpability in the death of their mother as a result of the information the song divulges. The song, a ballad that grew in detail and complexity with each rendition in the moonlit village square, called Lamang the "King of Women, Owner of ten women in every village from Keti to the state capital" (1). Given this information, therefore, the "ego" of the twins are increasingly threatened,

thus, the only way their psyche finds spontaneous expression is through violence. This perhaps offers insight into how their violent personality is formed.

### **Manifestation of Violence in *Measuring Time***

Violence and all forms of abuse – be it social, psychological or emotional – are often times seen as a means of gaining control over others such as family, friends and society. Arendt states that “violence cannot be derived from power, that in order to understand violence, we must understand its cause and nature. Hence, violence can only be discussed when accompanied by a discussion of power” (qtd. in Douglas 2014). This view indicates that violence is most often employed to address certain imbalances in the human environment or sectors. *Measuring Time*, for instance, depicts various forms of violence ranging from structural, social, psychological, physical to economical, and the nature with which this violence is manifested and projects the imbalances in the society which the characters strive to gain control over or at least to overcome in order to have unity in society.

The text, for instance, analyses its characters within the framework of a familial relationship. The family provides the single most important environmental influence on a child’s potential development. It is within the family that the individual first learns how to relate with others, the sense of trust, love and hate is gained through the family’s consistent responses and behaviours. Thus, the psychological disposition of the individual hinges on the beliefs he internalizes in the family. *Measuring Time* is tightly woven around the relationship between the twins (Mamo and Lamamo) and their father Lamang whose communication with his children lacks every ingredient of a father to children fervour. The nature of the relationship depicted in Lamang’s home is that which psychologically defrauds his children of their privileges. Mamo and Lamamo are twin brothers who live with their domineering and nonchalant father in a small village of Keti. Although born into wealth and affluence, they lack the tenderness and affection of a loving father who does nothing but pursue his desire to become the most prestigious and sought-after businessman in Keti. The text shows that Lamang for his part, never took much interest in his children, “he left them in the care of their aunt Marina who had been staying with him since the breakup of her marriage and the village widows who occasionally drop in to help with the housework and to generally advertise their availability to the once-again eligible Lamang” (16).

The severity of his nonchalant attitude towards his children inevitably had a damaging effect on their cognitive, social and emotional development. His actions thus build the resilient and violent traits witnessed in the lives of his children, Mamo for instance in one of their discussions enthusiastically told his father that Lamamo had travelled to Timbuktu to join the military, although the story turned out to be false, Mamo enjoyed seeing his father boxed in his own frustration. The text relates that “Mamo could see how hard his father was trying not to bang on the table nor to lean on his toes as if ready to pounce, “I don’t know how to get in touch with him”. He said dully” (58), he was thoroughly enjoying the thrust and parry with his father and it was all he could do not to let the triumph show on his face” (58).

This action illuminates Johnson and Erikson’s view that children whose families are characterised by interpersonal violence including psychological aggression and verbal aggression may exhibit a range of serious disorder such as

anxiety and anger. Similarly, Buka et al state that it is increasingly evident that Mamo uses a tool to gain control over his father (x), whom the narrative reveals hardly takes note of his children and even when he does, merely looks at Mamo but brags about Lamamo whom he says took after him in strength and agility, therefore, inflicting more pain on his (Mamo) already wounded psychology. Lamang is thus portrayed as a character who, though he did not physically abuse his children, defrauds them emotionally. This aligns with Webber's view that "violence is the rule of man over men" (237). Habila's exploration of the nature of the relationship in the Lamang's family reflects a lacuna within the circles of the family. The following lines capture this lacuna:

We have everything, Mamo felt like answering, except your [Lamang's] love... From very early Mamo had learned to keep his sick and awkward body in the background, learned to observe from the sidelines...to confess would be to forgo his position of superiority by sharing his knowledge with his father. He didn't want to put his father's mind at rest; what would be the point of that? For once he wanted to be the torturer, his father the tortured. After all, he was sure his father was not concerned about his son's [Lamamo, the other twin] fate in faraway Timbuktu, only with what people would say about his son running away... (58-59)

This reflects the instance of anger, violence and trauma built within the psychology of the individual. Mamo is presented as a character that embodies every traumatic pain. Mamo and his twin brother (Lamamo) often withdraw to an isolated field away from the glare of their family where they engage in different pranks, reading the tale-telling, sometimes, they would imagine themselves up there surfing the clouds on their way to some faraway interesting place, famous without a care in the world (21). This suggests that in order to survive, the twins had to develop a psychological immunity that could initiate their adaptation and protection from any psychological disorderliness in their home. Hence, this psychological adaptation includes their constant withdrawal to the woods where they engage in plane spotting (21). Through the desire to desperately get an identity; they take to playing spot while waiting for the right time when they will solve the riddle of getting famous (21).

Subsequently, this attitude of cocooning into their inner minds explains the plight the twins are in; it further projects their emotional conflict, fragmentation and melancholy. Withdrawal is thus a technique employed in order to repress the unpleasant experiences in their home; given the lack of connectivity between them and their father. Unfortunately, they could not repress their feelings because their violent personality is expressed in the manner they killed the old woman's dog out of the need and curiosity to connect with their dead mother whom Mamo had constantly seen in his dream. This search for redemption led them to poison Duna the Old witch's dog in order to get its rheum which they believe when applied to their eyes will enable them see the dead. Unfortunately, the rheum turns out to be a disappointment, instead of seeing their mother, they see a demented Duna and the old witch tapping at their window raging with anger and revenge, chasing them in their dream; although they see their late mother in their dream they cannot comprehend her words because the deluge drowns the words she tries to say to them. This attitude reveals sophisticated neurotic individuals who shed their violent garbs on an innocent dog.

In essence, *Measuring Time* presents characters who show a dispositional response to a defective family system where parental love and the cordial relationship is lacking. Thus the family becomes the borderline for narcissistic development of a grandiose self which facilitates individuals who are arrogant, selfish and sociopathic. Sublimating the relationships within the family with that of the society, the text projects psychically disintegrated and estranged personality encumbered with new values of the world and selves. This explains why their entire childhood is driven by the slogan, "CHEAT DEATH AND BE FAMOUS".

The narrative equally juxtaposes the predicament of Zara with that of the twins. Zara is depicted as a character who maintains a strong belief that women should never be a shadow of men's success. In a bid to denounce what the system has prescribed for her, she struggles to liberate herself from the grip of despondency in order to achieve inner peace. Brutalized, debased and abandoned by her husband, Captain George, Zara resolves to leave the marriage against the will of her mother and sister. The act of leaving her home and going against her family somewhat aligns with the view of Arendt, who states that "violence is never possible without instrumentation" (238). Thus, in this instance, the instrument of oppression needs to be challenged in order to have sanity in the system. To this end, Zara develops an attitude contrary to that subscribed for a woman especially by her family members who insist she endures depressing, dispassionate and despicable treatment from her husband.

Through this character, the text projects a relational disablement and trauma in the family capable of creating a personality disposed to violence. Zara's philandering and flirtatious attitude is a way of asserting her freedom from oppression and psychological mistreatment. Thus, her decline to insanity is a response to such violation of family responsibility. It explores the individual extroversion continuum, which has been a hidden agenda behind incessant protests against psychological oppression in the society. Zara's experience with her first husband had a damaging effect on her psychological makeup, thus, such impulses repressed in her subconscious mind resurface and plunge her into being a recluse. Freud, for instance, states that when anger is internalised and driven deep into the unconscious, contaminated by unresolved pain which becomes problematic. This explains why Zara descends into insanity.

Acts of violence, if not properly curtailed could lead to severe psychological damage. Zara was psychologically destroyed in spite of getting sexual gratification from Mamo. According to Freud, unsocialised and selfish libidinal impulses (the id) are repressed and kept in check by norms internalized from our society (the superego), but from time to time and in strange and peculiar ways, repressed impulses surface (x). In this case, the self-emerges and is shaped by social interaction, this explains Zara's state of insanity and the twins' attitude towards their father--- the twins for instance constantly place scorpions in their father's shoes in order to punish and make him suffer and pay for his offence against their mother. This act of violence illuminates the level of anger felt by the twins and the extent to which that anger has affected their behaviour. The twins attain a process of individuation when they realise how tenuous their position in the heart of their father is. Mamo, for instance, begins to view life differently when he discovers that the deadly sickness he is afflicted with always secludes him from others:

Immediately he discovered how different he was from his brother and from everyone else around and how tenuous his hold on life was, Mamo began to see things in a new way. Life gained more urgency driven by a hot but sometimes purposeless rage, he began to learn the act of prioritising. To help himself focus he began keeping an imaginary diary the content of which only his own brother could fathom and in it, in bold letters he wrote his first priority HATE THY FATHER, MAKE HIM PAY... (20)

This indicates a correlative growth in his personality and recognition of his (Mamo) social and psychological position. Recognizing the position his sickness or physical appearances place him in the heart of other family members for instance; helps sharpen his identity. In essence, Mamo begin to weave his priorities coherently in order to add depth and clarity to his goal of hating his father, as such, he employs a number of strategies to define and keep track of this goal.

According to Ibitokun, "everybody needs a point of reference to maintain his psychological equilibrium and identity" (7), the twins find their own equilibrium and identity from hating their father and the need to avenge their mother's death. Just like Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they are entangled in a cultural situation where certain laws and norms are prescribed; unlike Hamlet whose penchant for revenge is checked by the code of morality--- defined by the society which informs his resistance and delays in his mission to avenge his father's death at the hands of his uncle Claudius, the twins could not be checked by the norms of the society. This is because the societal ethos does not allow for rationality. Thus, their excesses and penchant for violence reached an optimum when they kill the old woman's dog (Duna) in spite of the sound moral training they received from Aunty Marina. The following lines state thus:

This was the year they killed the dog their restlessness had led them up a mango grove behind their compound. School had closed early that day because a new Mai was being installed...it was the loud barking that gave Mamo the idea they were high up in the crooks of the topmost branches, their legs dangling in the air, their mouths yellow with mango. He stopped gnawing on a mango seed and said, "You know dogs can see spirits and ghost..." let get Duna" he suggested...the twins continued on a debate the best way to kill Duna. Halfway home Mamo hit on a solution. "Batteries!" "What batteries?" Lamamo asked puzzled. "We poisoned it...with the black stuff in radio batteries." (22)

The internal dynamic depicted in the killing of the dog illustrates an intolerable build-up of anxiety within the individual which needed to be dealt with. The dog, therefore, becomes the object used in externalising their conflict as a way of masking the anger they have been harbouring.

### **War and the Dynamics of Group Mind in Habila's *Oil on Water***

Society exists because individuals feel a sense of belonging and this sense of belonging is what fosters the communal or collective consciousness of the people. In Irikefe community, for instance, an organic solidarity emerged due to the mutual reliance individuals hold on the secularity of their land and religion. Although individuals live and die, however, their connectivity is cemented in their religious beliefs. The narrator captures this connectedness when he records the following;

...I opened my book but as I bent my head to read I noticed a white shape in the distance, many white shapes, a procession coming out of the line of trees on the path that circled the hillock, leading to the sea. They were each holding a staff, and toward the middle two men were bearing what looked like a body covered in a white sheet on a stretcher. I thought I was about to witness some kind of burial, and I debated whether to dash back to the hut to get my camera. But I decided against it; I didn't want to miss anything. A low chanting reached me faintly where I sat. When they got to the edge of the water, they put down the stretcher and then the corpse threw aside the white sheet, miraculously sat up and started to crawl on all fours, its robe dragging in the wet sand, till its knees and arms were in the waves, and then it sat in the water. The others gave out a loud sigh and joined the sitting figure, forming a semicircle behind it, their backs to me, facing the huge dying sun, their arms outstretched, supplicatory, and their sighs suddenly turned into loud wails. They went on like this for a long time, swaying rhythmically, imitating the movement of the waves, and then one by one they came out of the water and headed back to the huts ... They believe in the healing power of the sea. (118-119)

The linkage between the people, their religious practices and community explains the central elements that shape their consciousness or identity. In this light, it provides a significant understanding on the outcome of their personality, Irikefe, a microcosm of the Niger Delta region, a 'public space', "distinct and independent of routine state system, a means of economic production. Okaba became a centre of transitional violence through which the warlords voluntarily represent themselves in ideological and political debacle (22). Irekefe Island, before the war, plays a multifaceted essence; not just of a religious essence but social, ideological and political. In view of this, the need to have control over the Island by different interest groups predisposes the land as a source of constant confrontation; this is because land is tied up with the peoples' cultural beliefs and practices. Thus, interaction with society is mediated through the informational structure of the mind. It is this informational structure and connectivity with the land that spurred up the violence to the level where man becomes 'the beast of war'.

The discomfort caused by oil exploration and its destruction to the ecosystem is intrinsically captured in Okaba (30). He submits that "wide-ranging and often environmental changes emanating from the oil/gas business and industrialization particularly, oil spill and gas flares have destroyed the natural resource base crucial to sustaining independent indigenous livelihood". Etekpe is of the opinion that violence in the region is due to the unfair trade practised, and marginalisation of the people (86). Thus, environmental degradation and pollution have caused nothing but pain and untold hardship for the people who have to live out a miserable life from their polluted river. Irikefe Island exudes the rhetoric of the multifaceted violence in the Delta. It explores the paradoxes and fissures of identity within 'human' and 'the environment and the implication of the resistance to the larger ecology of the Niger Delta region.

The centrality of the violence in the Niger Delta as expressed in the narrative is the disruption of the cultural milieu of the people; their rivers and shrines which serve as a source of healing for their community by the soldiers who fight to maintain the hegemony of the island. The following lines capture this:

The major waved his hand toward the approaching shoreline, but his voice was drowned out by the noise from the helicopter that suddenly appeared above us, like a bird of ill omen. The Major looked up then he took out his radio and put it to his ear. When he finished speaking his face had a satisfied grin – Be prepared for what you are about to see, Irikefe is now mostly ashes and rubble, bombed by gun helicopter over there. Not a hut is left standing...what about the people?- most of them will still be there, I suppose. But expect a lot of casualties, unavoidable of course, this is a war zone... (157)

The environment is depicted as a system of a normative construct, which allows the development of the psychological personalities of individuals in relation to their culture. Using the images of dead fish, decomposing chickens with maggots trafficking beneath the feathers, flourishing mosquito larvae, deserted households, and punctured zinc roof, the narrative depicts the extent to which the environment has been “disvirgined”. It depicts a society whose cultural and spiritual mixing is undermined; hence, the cultural and spiritual dislocation fosters a negative response from the inhabitants who fight to salvage their environment from extinction. According to Okaba:

Poor local service delivery, economic exploitation, social marginalisation, political exclusion, infrastructural neglect and environmental degradation have transformed the Niger Delta into a zone of frustrated expectations, dashed ambitions and unprecedented restiveness. A beleaguered mentality and psychology of deep seated distrust and animosity against the state and oil companies. (30)

Correspondingly, when an individual cannot make meaning out of life, he becomes neurotic thus; in the process of violent struggle against the oppressor, they experience a psychological rebirth. Chief Kabiri for instance, did not speak a word in defence of himself; he willingly gave in to the soldiers who came to arrest him for fraternizing with the militant whom Zag avers comes from villages like this and how can one stop them from fraternizing with them (13). Hence, given the insensitivity of the soldiers, he overthrows his fear of death and suddenly realises more deeply than ever before the sense of selfhood and consciousness of freedom that the love of his land fosters. Thus, when Rufus asks, “Is he guilty?” Zag looks at him sternly and says, “Guilty for what, Innocent of what” (13). This expresses the view that violence is a signifier of multifaceted variables which lie beyond what it signifies.

The land is a major factor in the development of the mind; man finds essence, healing and aura while connected to his environment: “We believe that the sun rising brings a renewal. All of creation is born anew” (85). Land, to the Niger Deltans, typifies fecundity, rebirth, healing and essence. It is a means of communication with their ancestors; Boma gets psychological and emotional healing when she joins the worshipers in Irikefe. Rufus reveals that his sister “looked well” (237). At the climax of the narrative, Rufus concludes, as he watches his sister Boma from a distance that “She’d be happy here, I was sure. This was a place of healing and soon she’d forget John, her scars would recede to the back of her mind and one day she’d look in the mirror and see they were gone” (239). In this scene, cultural and spiritual mixing transcends physical realities. It enables a sense of rejuvenation, identity and meaning. Values and beliefs are based on the understanding of the world that integrates man’s

spiritual and material essence. Hence, the worshippers' placing themselves in the water underscores their connection to the environment.

*Oil on Water* portrays psycho-pathological characters at war with the state. Characters haunted by sorrow, pain, poverty, and the need to deal with living in an environment with immense human right abuses, characters that foster an identity and come to a self-realization due to incessant emotional, physical and psychological torture. Through the narrative voice, the text offers a panoramic view of brutality, physical and psychological torture and the resolute stance adopted by the inhabitants in response to such threat.

Consequently, the novel elaborates on the danger of continued exploitation, brutality and marginalisation. Karibi's attitude, while being arrested by soldiers, may seem deranged; however, it is a conscious response to a system which undermines the dignity and values of human life. Chief Malabo, for instance, is arrested and killed in prison because he refuses to concede his land to the government and oil companies for oil exploration. Hence, to compensate for a feeling of hopelessness, the individual emphasizes his dignity by using violence as a mode of expression. This view is expressed in Salomon's discussion with Rufus: "the Oga has insulted me badly, he'd taken away my pride, my dignity, my manhood and all the time I was serving him honestly, diligently, I trusted him..." (210). Salomon's involvement in the kidnapping of Isabel Flood is premised on the need to deal with his traumatic emotional experience. Koko, his erstwhile fiancé was taken away from him by his boss James Flood, consequently, the traumatic effect of his loss is further compounded by Koko's insult; hence his involvement is an acknowledgement and display of power, strength and dignity.

According to Gotang, violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that actual somatic and mental realisation is below their potential realization (160). The text represents the quest for survival and self-actualization. The collective loss of their environment and brutality by government forces foster these self-determined individuals, deviants and stoics even at the face of impending danger. Hence, the activities of the militants are sharpened by the realization of their deplorable situation which impedes their collective progress in spite of their cumulative natural resources. The text presents a scenario where the hegemony of the government and the activity of the Multinational Corporations provide the individuals with a language with which to express their collective grievance. Thus, the narrative stresses how psychological exploitation produces self-determined individuals whose fights are targeted toward liberating themselves from the grip of traumatic bouts.

Irikefe Island offers a fictional retrospection of violence and environmental degradation by the indigenes who see themselves as freedom fighters and government military forces fighting for the liberation and protection of their collective inheritance. It projects a period of intense war for hegemony between the Militants, Oil Corporations, and Military forces; the novel presents Irikefe as an Island on the verge of extinction. Before the fighting between the militants and the soldiers who triggered the disruption in the communal life of the people, Irikefe is projected as a harmonious community whose dwellers relate closely with one another, a community devoid of violence and death, and free from pollution, a people watching their

children growing up before them happy. Zag, one of the journalists declares "I like the air here, it's pure and who knows, I might even get some sort of religion" (38, 85). Ironically, Zag dies of dengue fever; a disease caused by environmental pollution. Zag's death symbolizes the disorderliness and disablement in the environment, which thus forces the people to look for an alternative environment where they can, at least, get some measure of serenity.

Man's struggle for identity and recognition and the disorderliness of things are the contradictions raised in *Oil on Water*. It depicts a situation in which a community is thrown into crisis as a result of addressing their unbearable conditions. Man's thought is shaped by how he transcends the relationships in his immediate environment. Man is unequivocally attached to his environment. Thus, any separation and interruption with the serenity he enjoys in his land spells doom not for the individual alone but for the entire community. This is the import of the priest's statement to Zag when he and Rufus dig up the grave in the middle of the night in search of the kidnapped Isabel's dead body which the assistant priest - Naman-alleges had died and been buried in a grave shown to them, "our chief priest died this morning, and we cannot bury her because your activity last night has disrupted the balance of things. A purification ceremony has to be carried out" (165). This shows man's indelible attachment to his environment.

### **"Chibok" The Dawn of An Era: An Examination of War and Society in Habila's *The Chibok Girls***

The *Chibok Girls* (2016) narrates the experience of the civilians in Chibok during the Boko Haram uprising. The novel is structured in three parts with each part metaphorically depicting the level of transformation and reconstruction of the peoples' identity and the historical perspective of the society. In its representation of pervasive violence and terrorism, and the accumulation of death and destruction of properties, it expresses a loss of a previous life, home and country:

That was their third coming. They came around 3:47pm. I remembered the exact time because we had just finish praying in the mosque at the time. My father, the chief Imam was alive, my father went home and I remained behind, the noise of their shooting was everywhere and I thought to myself, these people are here and when they take over a town they don't just leave immediately, they stay for months and even years. (41)

These lines express the extensiveness of war and violence in the collective consciousness of a people and the transformation of a social and democratic order marked by the process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Through the dramatic change in the order of the society, war assumes ritualistic dimensions in the sense of an identity transformation which passes from the society to the individual.

Psychoanalysts reference the overwhelming influence of a group behavior over the thought and characteristics of another group. Nigeria, being an entity with diverse religious beliefs and a shared space of cohabitation, including shared language(s), education, culture and social values, shaped by her interior socio-political dynamics has been thrown into chaos by individuals' wasps in their effort to institutionalise their own version of religion and beliefs on the society. It is a story of bloodbath, sorrow, death and displacement. In the novel, traumatic occurrences which include death, pain, tension frustration and hopelessness run through the pages of the novel

thus relating the radical inhibition or breakdown of the social system as well as placing a traumatic marker on the characters. Yana Galang for instance, relates that each time she hears the sounds of gunshots, her stomach would turn and that she would have to go into the bush to defecate (29). This captures an essential aspect of violence where individuals are constantly under tension, as well as the fact that within the prism of war or violence, the individual is thrown into a prison of contradictory paradoxes. It is these paradoxes that the characters in *The Chibok Girls* reflect. Through their narratives, the text brings into perspective the characters' social and cultural context within which their traumatic experiences symbolised by a loss of their identity is dramatised. *The Chibok Girls* uses the narrative of characters' past to investigate the construction and performances of their identity within a larger prism of life. The narrative tells the story of individuals caught in the war between two worlds; that of the state and of terrorists who view themselves as 'Islamic Jihadists'.

While the historical events mark the structural framework of the novel, the story is composed of a simple narrative web presenting the dialogues between the journalist and the victims of the terrorist attack. This central web of characters' stories is overlaid by a backdrop of psychological and social unrest. Ruth tells the narrator the story of a depressed father who had come to her home and told that he simply could not continue to live knowing that his daughter was a Boko Haram prisoner in the forest and that soon after that his heart gave out and he died. Also, another father had disappeared and couldn't be found for days but was later discovered wandering in the hills shouting his daughter's name. Similarly, Nana Galang in her narrative explains that she often experiences discomfort in her stomach whenever she hears the sound of a gun, invariably, this expresses the radical transformation both on the psychical and physical structure of the society. Caruth (1995) observes that trauma is a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. In this light, Individual trauma communicates a deeper dimension of social life; this is because there is a constant and distinct interaction between the individual and the social system.

Pickering and Keighley aver that trauma is the difficulty of reconciling with a shocking and painful event or an enduring series of such events in an individual's experience (2). Thus, the constant rumbling in her stomach whenever she hears the sound of guns reveals the conflict which characters face internally and externally. At the beginning of the novel, the disposition and narrative of Galang when she is asked to recount the events of the girls kidnap, gives a clear picture of her traumatic state. The journalist narrator observes that as she spoke, it struck him that she had repeated this story many times before – to the media, NGO, Nigerian security agents and many more, and that he wonders, if the word carried the same weight and pain each time she repeated them. It seems cruel he says, to be asking her to relive that day (30). Thus, the journalist is able to relate through her pain, and the traumatic disposition and transformation in the identity and personality of the individual. However, her readiness to always recount the story of the kidnapping can be attributed to what psychologists call "the talking cure" which temporarily relieves the victims of depression.

According to Freud and Breuer, the "Talking Cure" is a process which involves recalling, recollecting and reliving traumatic memories in the presence of an attentive

listener (qtd. in Toluhi 39). Thus, recounting this narrative over and over frees her (Galang) from her traumatic thought such as the thought of her sick daughter in the enclave of the terrorist. Rifkatu; Galang's daughter had earlier come home due to ill health, however, because of the National examination, she had to go back to the hostel in order to study with her mates in preparation for the examination, it was the night she went back to school that they were kidnapped. This incidence triggers an emotional bout which she manifests by running the distance between her home and the college, not minding the distance. She says:

I started screaming, and I felt as if my life would come out. I called to their father who was sleeping inside the house. I started running toward the school, screaming and running. I felt as if my world had ended. They found me on the way and took me on a bike to the school that was it. The girls were gone...two weeks after, I couldn't eat or sleep. I'd put food in my mouth and then throw it out again. I would go to the toilet but nothing would come out. I would walk up and down, thinking. Two weeks, I couldn't sleep. But...only God knows what will happen. Our trust is in God. (32)

On a national level, this transformation through deconstruction and reconstruction opens up a space for the erection of new meanings through rewriting and symbolic reconfiguration. The writer for instance has the right to give meanings to the violence in the society in order to create history. This restrictive vision often elicits the creation of alternative representations that attempt to open up a space for recuperating that which is omitted in the process of narrativisation. Often, what is left out is the dynamics of the individual involvement, their perceptions and conformity, as well as the implicated transformation they undergo as they lose their previous lives.

Metaphorical images are used in the text to illustrate the people's collective loss and vulnerability as they succumb to violent degradation and death. The imam who appears to be both a secular and religious figure dies on the way while fleeing from the insurgents and his inability to receive proper burial rites connotes how violence has pushed the city to infernal depths. Thus, the society is treated as a collective whole, condemned to self-destruction. The open battlefield implies a wider disintegration of a collective social order and the collapse of the government. In the text, the characters voice their concern about the inability of the government and the school to stop the kidnapping from happening. One of the characters allege that months before the kidnap, the insurgents had written to the town that they were coming and in spite of the warnings that the school should not be open for the examination, the school authority flaunted the warnings, as such, demonstrating the understanding that the government is completely lost in handling the crisis.

Habila's personal narrative of his growing up years in the North Eastern part of Nigeria, largely shapes the narrative and equally reveals the dialectics of a failed social system. Habila questions both the ideologies of the terrorist and the role of the government for not meeting up to the needs of the people. The Boko Haram Uprising appears as an aggressive force that implicates the government in the spread as well as a force that pushes characters through psychological hardships which ultimately transform them. Indicatively, the characters' psychological conditions inform the readers of a world operating with a dissenting template of social and moral degeneration, a world whose past system of meaning has been eroded without being replaced by equivalent frameworks, and a world where ideas and beliefs lack

compelling social force. Overwhelmed by too much meaninglessness, the parents of the kidnapped school girls struggle to understand such contemporary framework of moral degeneration.

*The Chibok Girls* presents a scenario of social, secular and mental disorder. It records the crushed hope of Nigerians. Maier asserts that "Nigeria has proved to be by far the most confounding, and at the same time engaging place I have ever visited. It simply overwhelms the senses' (xxvi). Ostensibly, contemporary issues in Nigeria have overwhelmed all forms of logic, it has become a "historical nightmare from which one is trying to wake up" (Williams 1). Society provides meaning and source materials for which such meaning is best expressed and understood. Terrorism in recent times has redefined the identity of the society, thus, it has become an element or component of Nigerian history. In the context of literature and the process of the development of the Nigerian state, terrorism and its defining motifs have turned out to be the crucial aspect of various thematic concerns. Habila's *The Chibok Girls* explores varied dimensions of Boko Haram terrorism ranging from political, social, and moral dehumanization, the devaluation of human life amongst others. To this effect, the writer seems to be creating or preserving the history of society for future generation. By doing this, he relies on historical facts or could be called a copycat of history who rigorously and imaginatively transforms history into an imaginative art. Therefore, the writer critically transposes the social, ideological and political consciousness of his/her society into an art. Corroborating this assertion, Nnolim avers that:

It is now commonplace knowledge that contemporary African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but must rather be viewed as part of the totality of human experience. As a literature of a people, it cannot be fully understood by the simple separation of form and content, for literature is part of a social situation and must be approached primarily as a mode of collective belief and action... (1)

It is in this light that *The Chibok Girls* explores and articulates the dynamics and conflicting nature of societal consciousness. It penetrates the arteries of the society and projects the indices currently seen to be the heart of contemporary literary scholarship. Terrorism (War) in recent times has laid the foundation for the articulation and expression of the marginalized segment of the society. It has allowed a significant shift in the scope of contemporary literary conception.

## Conclusion

Literature is a social institution which uses language to communicate. Literature in general and the novel in particular, is an integral part of the society. It reflects its contention and political controversies; it is an expression of society, its contestation, progress and development. Habila's novels are creative works that depict tension, war and terror. Metaphorically, war and conflict ostensibly project societal ills. *Oil on Water*, tackles the huge chasm between the people and their leaders; it explores the unending conflict between Federal forces and the dwellers in an oil-rich community of the Niger Delta. The novel focuses on characters that see themselves as custodians of their collective consciousness or shared values. Hence, their resolve to fight for what belongs to them. While *The Chibok Girls* examines the impact of war on the society. *Measuring Times* is a symbol of personality development, a symbol of an era of war, a process which defines a writer's interest in the individual

pursuit of personal goals and fulfilment within the context of the methodological problems of defining identity. The narrative, therefore, shows the definability of identity through resistance. Personality as a psychological construct is presented as a result of involvement in the creation of new rules, as a product of social influences. The texts present individuals who attempt to renegotiate a distinct identity and personalities for themselves as a result of interaction, perceptions and interpretation of social variables and signifiers within the society.

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