

Narrating Social Depreciation and Psychological Trauma in Rasaq Malik's *No Home in this Land*

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Abstract

The interconnection between dehumanization and psychological trauma is a major theme in contemporary Nigerian poetry, including the poetry genre. Experiences of social violence and terrorism have been regarded as major triggers of trauma, and these have been recounted in recent Nigerian poetry. Poems that explore the interface between social depreciation and trauma are meant to facilitate human and social wellbeing. Rasaq Malik has been discovered as a very committed contemporary Nigerian poet that explores triggers of trauma in his poetry. In *No Home in this Land*, for instance, the poet portrays the various social and human disintegration in Nigeria that continue to engender distressing experiences. Selected poems in the collection are subjected to qualitative literary analysis. The analysis is anchored to Trauma Theory, which is an offshoot of psychoanalysis. It is evident from the analysis that Rasaq Malik is conscious of the devastations and agonies in the Nigerian society, and he is committed to ensuring an improved society.

Keywords: Trauma, Depreciation, Social, violence, poetry,

Introduction

The disturbing socio-political upheavals in Nigeria have engendered different traumatic stance which are represented in poetry. Contemporary Nigerian poetry explores the prevailing disquieting realities in the Nigerian societies. Some of the distresses depicted in poetry are issues of terrorism and social violence (Kekeghe, 2017, Ibitoye-Ayeni, 2022 & Olu-Agbeniga, 2023). Evidently, since the beginning of modern Nigerian literature, the Nigerian poet consistently exhibits social consciousness and commitment. This is why a large

body of modern Nigerian poetry constitutes myriads of socio-political experiences.

As a way of demonstrating social consciousness and commitment to positive social change, literary writers project both agonizing and exhilarating experiences that constitute the fabrics of the human society. By so doing, the writer recreates sociological and psychological dimensions of reality (Kekeghe, 2018, & Ibitoye-Ayeni, 2022). Through the power of imagination, the writer accounts for obvious social factors that trigger traumatic memories. Scholars of literature and trauma studies have accounted for a range social factors that engender traumatic breakdown and depression; such experiences are: death of loved ones, lover's betrayal, loss of job, loss of fortune, exposures to social violence, inter-gender oppression, sexual violence and other experiences that are capable of causing deep distress (Caruth, 1995; Kekeghe, 2018; Omobowale & Kekeghe, 2020; Ibitoye-Ayeni, 2023). The literary recreation of the traumatic outcomes of social events gives credence to the utilitarianism of literary expression.

Poetry has been a very significant literary form in narrating distresses. For instance, William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility, underscores the place of the mind in poetic expression. Writers and scholars of trauma studies recreate the disturbing moments that affect the mind. Through the narration of trauma in despondent rhythm and images, healing is sometimes inspired. Omobowale and Kekeghe (2020) in their study of trauma in Niger Delta poetry, declare that: "The melancholic rhythm deployed by these poets, is theorized here as 'blues,' which is discussed as an effective medium which they (the poets) let out their trauma and derive mental invigoration" (481).

Trauma is a psychological condition that is concerned with moments of deep distress, which is triggered by weary social factors. Traumatic events engender psychological and emotional damages on those that experienced them. Trauma studies evolved in the 1990s through the scholarly works of scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LapCapra (Caruth, 1995, 2003; Brown, 1995 and Buelens and Craps 2008). The field of trauma studies is a multidisciplinary area that bestrides the domains of different disciplines like the humanities, sciences and social sciences, especially medicine and psychology. In the humanities, trauma studies occupy a significant place in contemporary literary discourse. This paper examines the portrayal of social depreciation and trauma in Rasaq Malik's *No Home in this Land*.

Analysis and Discussion

Rasaq Malik's poetry collection, *No Home in this Land*, features a good number of poems that narrate different moments of agony in Nigeria and Africa. The rhythm and images of the poems in the collection convey the texture of anguish that manifest in the Nigerian society. A close reading of Malik's poems shows that he is anguished by the distressing realities in his environment, especially the disturbing experiences of terrorism and reckless killings in Nigeria. The following poetic lines underscore the experiences of social and human depreciation that provoke the psychological trauma:

Inside my father's suitcase lives the only picture of
my dead brother, his clothes smeared by dust, his
letter from Kano months before they sent his
corpse to us like mail, like the remains of those
who found no peace in their homelands; people
who fell like trees trapped by a gale, people who

died in their sleep, their hearts laden with fear, their mouths full of strange languages. Inside my mother's bag lies the last letter by my uncle. Abdullah, his wife, the widow that stands at our doorstep every morning, her mind remembering war, remembering the calm face of her husband, dreading the memory of their son that wakes up every day to ask about his father (*No Home in this Land*, 10).

Malik uses narratological features to convey his mood, which is a reflection of the Nigerian experience. In "Leaving Home", a representative poem in Malik's *No Home in this Land*, the reader comes across images of social and human displacement which engender traumatic memories. In the poem, the poetic persona recounts how his brother was killed in Kano and how others were also killed in that atmosphere of chaos and groans. He also recounts the demise of his uncle whose bereaved wife and ignorant son continue to get tortured by his death and absence. In "We Don't Know Where we Belong" Malik laments the incongruities which exist between the current state of the society and the past when there was consistent peace and marital bliss. The poetic lines below are redolent of the poet's distressing mood:

We do not know where we belong because home is no longer the tender skin of an infant, the kohl on the face of a bride, the smooth texture of a stone beneath a sea, the indelible memories of a lover's touch, the pristine laughter of a child enveloped by his mother's arms, the peace we seek as we wake up every day to hear gunfire in the air, to see ambulances racing to the scenes of bomb blasts, police cars swarming the streets like insects lured by the magic of light. (*No Home in this Land*, 11).

As evident in the excerpt above, the poet laments experiences of social and human depreciation. The issues of violence and terrorism breed suspicion and bigotry, thereby destroying innocence and communalism. The poet laments the social displacement that manifests in human communities. According to him, “We do not know where we belong because/ home is no longer the tender skin of an infant,/the kohl on the face of a bride, the smooth texture” (11). As the poem progresses, the poet details the various social violence and terrorist manifestations that continue to breed agonies in the society. He recounts:

We do not know where we belong because in
Borno everybody knows how to narrate the grim
stories of war, how to describe the head of a man
blown by bombs how to pick the fragments of
broken walls, how to grieve whenever war
disperses people to refugee camps, how to mourn
the young bashed by rifles, carted as spoils of war;
how to survive the repetitive sound of grenades,
how to outlive the thick fragrance of smoke, how
to pray with tears gathering in our eyes. (*No Home
in this Land*, 11).

The activities of terrorist in different parts of the country are captured in the extract above. The implication is that the different terrorist groups and their devastating activities engender traumatic breakdown. For instance, in the poem, “At Dalori Camp,” Rasak Malik laments the dehumanization and displacement caused by the different social upheavals. He recounts experiences of displaced Nigerians whom have been compelled to maroon their homes and live in in search of safety in a society where safety is not promised. He says that while in the camps, the displaced individual engagement in a commemorative exercise which breeds their pains as they

remember family members who were not "fortunate" to be in refugee camps. He also channels his attention to the promiscuous, insensitive soldiers who rape the helpless victims:

The women stretch their legs as their malnourished infants suck disease-infected breasts, as another day begins with fear lurking in their eyes, as they remember their relatives at home, their families waiting at the doorsteps every night, their beloveds searching for them every day, their dreams dismantled by war, their hope the frail light in the lantern they carry every night to search for the bodies of the dead. (*No Home in this Land*, 12).

The agonies of the displaced person, especially women and children, is depicted by the poet. The reader can feel the anguish reflected in the poetic lines above. Again, the poetic persona laments:

The women weep as they see their children hold the dusty photographs of their fathers, as they remember the soldiers raping them every night, the soldiers littering their bodies with scars nothing can erase. They remember the corpses paving the streets, bodies wrapped and disposed like waste beside desolate houses. The women wake up every day to see rooms filled with new refugees, trucks filled with few relief materials for the displaced.

(*No Home in this Land*, 12)

The poet laments the killing of loved ones and the anguish caused to families. For instance, as reflected in the excerpt above, "The women weep as they see their children hold/the dusty photographs of their fathers, as they remember/the soldiers raping them every night..." (12). The trauma of the displaced person is demonstrated clearly through the use of concrete images.

The people are therefore left to reflect on their losses. In “Counting her Losses,” the poetic persona narrates how his mother counted the losses caused by the violence and social terrorism. The social upheavals trigger traumatic experiences which are captured by the poem as reflected by the poetic persona:

My mother begins with the night we waited for a bus to ferry us to the refugee camp, the number of children orphaned by war, their mothers widowed by the blast, the people abandoned to carry the agony of homelessness like a cross. My mother begins with the scarred bodies of women mourning their dead children, the women carrying the trauma of war in their hearts, the women bearing the scars of exile like an emblem, the women tending their wounds in the dark. (*No Home in this Land*, 14)

These unhealthy sights and news forces everyone to live without much optimism to see the next second. Survival is by chance. This realization is what prompts the poet to recall how his mother used to pray for his safety. The intercessory content of the prayer further reveals the nightmarish encounters they had. She says, “May bombs never meet you on the road/May the road never thirst for blood today” (21). As he mourns colossal losses and hopes to evade unforeseen tragedies, he realizes the imperativeness of acknowledging the therapeutic benefits he extracted from the the empathy of visitors whose presence, together with other soothing experiences, triggered psychological regeneration. He does this in “Grateful”:

For life after the bombings, for the love that cradles us in spite of the war that wrecks our land, for joy in the cries of infants in their mother’s arms. Grateful for little things, for my son’s dream

of building the world, for people waking up every day to marvel at the birds that fill the sky. Grateful for friends that visit us, relatives that send letters to us, people that open their doors for us when war looms in the sky. Grateful for the rivers that become a confluence, fields that house our children when they gather to explore childhood moments. Grateful for answered questions, for the walls that bear the frames of our pictures, for the windows that usher in air. (*No Home in this Land*, 15)

The news of the death of Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Abu Ali, said to be the most gallant commander and efficient fighter in the Nigerian Army's battle to crush the members of the dreaded Boko Haram sect, was received with pang of shock, tears, anguish and lamentations by Nigerians. It was really shocking to hear that the young gallant soldier, who has been celebrated for his wonderful contributions to the successes so far recorded in the decimation of Boko Haram militants, was killed by the same deadly terrorists even after they are said to have been technically defeated. The late Abu Ali, an indigene of Kogi State and recipient of the Chief of Army Staff Award for exceptional bravery and excellence, led the army units that recovered Gamboru-Ngala, Baga and a number of communities from the heartless and ruthless insurgents in the North East. According to military authorities, he died during an encounter with suspected Boko Haram extremists that attacked 119 Battalion, Nigerian Army location at Mallam Fatori in Borno State. Malik, like other Nigerians, acknowledges the rare gallantry of the soldier in "Elegy for Abu Ali":

Your country will remember you as a young Nigerian man, a father of a girl who will one day crave to see the tomb of her father, the

breadwinner of a family who will not find peace in your tragic departure. Your country will remember you as a veteran soldier mowed by the rapid bokoharam bombs, as one out of countless soldiers who trudged the hazy paths of war, who rode on the back of a fickle hope as they fought for a country, who, at the end, will deck their tombs with a garland of wilted wreaths. (*No Home in this Land*, 22).

The anguish narrated by Rasaq Malik attests to the devastations and recklessness in the Nigerian society. The different experiences of terrorism and social violence continue to affect the people psychologically. This is evident in the poems that make-up the collection. Distressing experiences like book haram and herdsmen terrorism affect the society severely. These issues are depicted in the poem above. In a way, the poet holds the irresponsible politicians liable for the various forms of terrorist manifestations and social depreciations experienced in the society.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows that poetry is capable of transmitting traumatic experiences to the public. Rasaq Malik's poetry, especially *No Home in this Land*, has been evaluated as a representation of different engendering experiences that provoke trauma in the Nigerian society. The entire collection reads like a lamentation. The reader comes across the texture of anguish which runs through all the poems featured in the collection. That way, Malik is seen as a poet lamenting the agonies in Nigeria. Experiences of terrorism and different forms of social violence are represented as the major causes of social depreciation that engender traumatic memories in the Nigerian society.

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