

“I’ll rather die and let my parents bury my corpse than go with the Boko Haram”: Discursive dimensions in the narratives of Boko Haram survivors

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Abstract

Existing studies have explicated the vulnerability of females in wars, insurgencies and displacement, especially in relation to the functionality and objectification of the female bodies in such contexts. This study argues that an examination of the experiential meaning in the stories of female survivors of Boko Haram violence and the displacement that follows after the attacks provides a nuanced understanding of women’s discursive constructions of their experiences in such contexts, and gives insight into what it means to be a female in a crisis area during and after terrorist attacks. Using discourse analysis methods and insights from Halliday and Matthiessen’s *Experiential Meanings* which conceives talk (discourse) as a construction of social experience and reality, this study investigates the discursive dimensions in 15 YouTube videos of the personal narratives of female survivors of Boko Haram attacks and the displacement that follows such attacks. Findings portray that the women discursively construct their experiences using the discourse of trauma, selfhood and personal responsibility, volition, innovation and resignation. Through these discursive constructions, they create their agency. The study concludes that the survival stories provide a glimpse into women’s resilience, which counters the common narratives of women’s vulnerability in violent situations

Keywords: experiential meaning, discourse analysis, discursive dimensions, personal narratives, trauma narratives, Boko Haram survivors

Introduction

The Boko Haram insurgency has resulted to the loss of lives and properties, thereby leaving a lot of people bereaved, homeless, wounded, jobless and mentally traumatized. The Boko Haram insurgency impacts negatively on security generally and women's safety and security in particular. Between 2009-2019, there was a record of about 100 cases of Boko Haram attacked targeted at women, with 45% of the attacks taking place in Nigeria. (Matfess, 2020; Agbaje, 2020). The attacks have further exacerbated the gender inequality and made women suffer more (Ajayi, 2020). Violence that targets women is a distinct form of civilian targeted violence (Matfess, 2020). Boko Haram's violence targeted at women is a collective kind of violence that targets women with the aim of furthering the cause of the group. The violence includes abductions, sexual violence and physical violence. The abductees are forced to convert to the group's interpretation of Islam or threatened to be killed.

The Nigerian media have experienced a spike in the number of reported of abductions and attacks by Boko Haram. Both males and females, as well as children have been victims of these abductions and attacks. Some of the victims who were either released or were able to evade their captors have shared their experiences with Nigerian media houses while others have shared theirs on various online platforms. This study maintains that it is necessary to investigate the narrative so as to provide epistemological backings that though males and females have been victims of Boko Haram insurgency, women who have hitherto been portrayed as helpless victims in violent situations may as well be heroes who went against

all odds to survive. This study not only contributes to the narratives of women in conflict situations but also explicates how women are brave and courageous in such situations. This is hinged on the argument that conflict and displacement sometimes empower women (Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari, 2018). Though conflict marginalize women, they may lead to legacies that empower women as it engenders a shift in gender roles during and after the conflict (Krause, 2019; Luna, et. al, 2017).

Since the narratives are told from memory, my study adopts Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari (2018) perception of memory as “an active process of creation of meanings, a depository of facts”. Thus, the study investigates multiple meanings created in the narratives – their experience before and after the attack, how they reacted, their daily routine as females, etc. Each of the stories is unique as it represents each woman’s experience. The women’s narrative provides perspectives on the lives of women in Boko Haram torn areas in Nigeria. The narrative approach to the study of the effect of terrorism provides a nuanced understanding of terrorism from the perspective of victims. The women’s narrative in this study provides an epistemological stance about women in conflict situations it reveals what it means to be a woman in conflict situations as well as post-conflict situations.

Extant studies on Boko Haram have investigated the cause, evolution, extent and effect of the insurgency. Also, studies on victims of Boko Haram have investigated how victims survive in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp, however, only a few studies have investigated victims’ narratives about how they were able to survive the attack. Using a discourse analytic approach, study examines the narratives of female survivors of Boko Haram attacks as shared on YouTube from a linguistic and gender studies perspective. I argue that their narratives are epistemological stances that provide nuanced understanding of women’s survival strategies

in conflict situations. This study is an attempt to incorporate a new dimension to gender perspective in the discourse of Boko Haram. It contributes to existing studies on personal dimensions and contexts of Boko Haram attacks as told by survivors of the attacks.

Women and Boko Haram Insurgency

Existing studies on Boko Haram have investigated the reason for its existence, (Hansen, 2015); its effect on children (Onapajo, 2020); frames used by Boko Haram insurgents to frame their activities (Oriola & Akinola, 2017); victims' experience of kidnap by Boko Haram (Tade et al, 2019); etc. Findings from Hansen's (2015) investigation of the reason for the existence of Boko haram indicate that it is a reaction to the corruption and poverty evident in Nigeria. Chilwa and Odebunmi (2016) examines the linguistic tools constructions of Boko Haram in Nigerian online spaces and the study argues that such constructions worsen religious and ethnic divide in Nigeria.

Research on firsthand accounts of female victims of Boko Haram abound; most of them have portrayed women's lived realities in conflict as that of helpless victims. For instance, Tade and Onwunaegbule's (2020) investigation of personal accounts of Igbo female victims of Boko Haram accounts after they resettled in their homeland demonstrates the various survival strategies the women adopt in order to cope with their new life. Botha's (2021) study focuses on the Nigerian government's response to the plight of females associated with Boko Haram. The study evinces that the government only addresses the case of females only as an afterthought.

The inclusion of women in Boko Haram's activity started before 2014 with a handful of attacks targeted at females. The abduction of the Chibok girls is the most popular of Boko Haram's violence against women. The Chibok girls' attack however increased the

global visibility of the group and made the world to give them attention, thereby revealing to the group the advantage of targeting women in their violence. Since then, there has been increase in Boko Haram's violence generally and violence targeted at women in particular (Agbaje, 2020, 5; Matfess, 2020, 8).

Matfess(2020) presents a two-fold explanation for Boko Haram's violence against women – Instrumentalist and Ideological. The instrumentalist explanation considers violence against women as an act aimed at advancing the group; women are targets of violence as a result of gender norms that depict them as weak and needing male protection and guidance. Thus, the violence is geared at controlling women's behavior as a way of strengthening the group's hold, a way of forcefully recruiting women into the group (Matfess, 2020, P. 4). The ideological explanation on the other hand, considers violence against women as a representation of the group's plan for the society; violence against women by the terrorist group is influenced by the group's construction of gender roles. Thus, it is the group's strategy of solidifying their claim to manhood both within their group and the society at large (Matfess, 2020, 3). Boko Haram's violence against women is therefore ideological as it emphasizes the role of women in the home as well as supporters of the group. By abducting women, the group increases its members and gets access to women as care givers.

Terrorism affects every gender differently, but women are most vulnerable. Gender is on the intersection of security and conflict as it features in terrorist incursions; women's lived experiences during these incursions are different from men (Singh, 2017, p. 150). One noticeable trend of Boko Haram is the exploitation of the female body to further their nefarious activities. The objectification of the female body thrives on gender inequality in Nigerian societies, especially in Northern Nigeria. The objectification of women regards and treats women as low-class humans that do not have the

capacity to respond, giving little or no credence to their dignity or feelings. It equates women with their sexual or procreation functions (Agbaje, 2020, 5). It is this poor perception of women that informs the abduction of women by the Boko Haram to further their terrorist activities.

Literature on gender perspective in Boko Haram has argued that the utilization of the female body by Boko Haram is a form of subjugation, victimization and objectification (Oriola, 2016; Agbaje, 2020, Okoli & Azom, 2019; Okolie-Osemene & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Matfess, 2020; Oluwaniyi, 2021; Galehan, 2021). Agbaje (2020) for instance examines the ways the female body has been objectified and the sociocultural factors that fuel their actions towards females in North Eastern Nigeria. Findings from the study reveal that women are used by them for the purpose of procreation, sexual gratification, profile enhancement, gate-keeping, suicide bombing, etc. The Boko Haram use women as instruments of insurgency to strategically increase their population and carry out attacks (Agbaje, 2020, 10). Okoli and Azom (2019) utilized a contextual analysis of library sources and documentary to investigate the weaponization of women's body by Boko Haram. They posit that Boko Haram use women as weapons of terrors – bomb carriers and human shield. This is in addition to being very vulnerable members of the insurgent group. Oluwaniyi (2021) investigates the factors that shape women's role as perpetrators of violence in the Boko Haram insurgency and argues that it is a form of gender subjugation that considers women as properties of men; this argument is also evident in an earlier study by Oriola (2016) in his investigation of the use of sexual violence against women by Boko Haram. Galehan (2021) examines the role that women place in Boko Haram's bomb attacks. Findings indicate that female bombers have successfully infiltrated their targets with high casualties. Matfess (2020) explores political violence against

women by Boko Haram and Alshabaab with a view to comparing their distinct nature of violence; she posits that violence against women by terrorist groups take different forms – sexual, physical and non-sexual. However, literature has been silent about how women perceive and construct their experiences as survivors of Boko Haram attack. As much as literature on the intersection of gender and conflict have portrayed women as victims and perpetrators of violence during insurgencies abound, this present study deviates from them by explicating how women navigate violent spaces during insurgent attacks by investigating the tactics employed by the female survivors to resist and overcome their attackers as explicated in the linguistic resources used to narrate their experience.

Studies (Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari, 2018; Jacob, et al, 2016; Ramos, 2020; Prashizky & Remennick, 2021) on the stories of survivors of conflict have revealed interesting findings. Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari (2018) in their study analyze the narratives of women displaced in Turkey during the ethnic conflict of 1950-1974 and posit that conflict empower women. Jacob et al (2016) examines the discursive meanings in the personal stories of internally displaced persons who are survivors of Boko Haram attacks. The study maintains that the personal framing of their experience illuminates the impact of Boko Haram on victims and reflect the victims' common yearning for restoration and normalcy. Prashizky and Remennick (2021) investigate autobiographies of women who migrated from USSR; their study portrays that such stories form a collective narrative that are sometimes therapeutic of their dimensions of the attack.

Through the construction of narratives, humans interpret their reality and find the relationship between a set of events that lead to a common outcome (Josselson & Hopkins, 2015;). In narratives, individuals construct their existence by deciding what to include or

exclude in ways that align with their sense of personal identity (Buchbinder and Sinay, 2020). The construction of self-narrative is a meaning-making strategy used productively in the production of selfhood and self-interpretation based on certain circumstances (Schechtman, 2011). A narrative analysis of victims' experience is relevant in conflict and post conflict situations as a result of the fact that through narratives, people reflect on their experiences and construct identities for themselves. Narrative analysis focuses on how events can be construed as shaping one's actions, revealing the extant identities represented in the stories people tell about themselves (McLeod, 2013; Wibben, 2011 Ramos, 2020). By carrying out a narrative analysis, this study attempts to explicate the impact of insurgencies on women's lives after the attacks. Thus, the study not only discuss the ways females talk about their security in conflict situations, but also explore the gender dimensions in navigating such situations. Women's narrative about their experience in conflict situations provide significant data as they create knowledge that provide perspectives about women's agency in conflict situations.

Materials and Methods

The data for this qualitative study are 10¹ video recordings of survivors' narratives uploaded on YouTube by the survivors and

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ujsr9zm1ukE&t=62s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7zVjj9D-ts>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ujsr9zm1ukE&t=62s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSZSwow6xoc>

media houses. YouTube videos are used because they not only contain visual and audio cues, but also reliable for the nature of this research. The videos were purposively selected and downloaded. They were then watched and transcribed by the researcher.

The transcribed text was read and the recurrent themes evident in the discursive representation of their experiences in all the narratives were identified and categorized as discourses. Each discourse is then selected as a unit of analysis in the analysis section and excerpts from the transcribed stories are used as extracts in the analysis section. Since the narratives are actualized with the use of language, the linguistic cues that portray the discursive constructions of the victims' experience were analysed using insights Halliday's Experiential Meaning that considers linguistic expressions as the representation of social realities.

Halliday's Experiential Meaning

Halliday perceives language as a social semantic resource used to express various kinds of meanings in particular contexts. Experiential meanings are meanings about how reality is represented

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwiQnfm6S84&t=79s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMJS4G1Lxu4&t=11s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuncDN60mqc&t=41s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMwIYdsVMvo&t=20s>

via the use of language. They are linguistic representations of people's perception of their reality; they express meanings about reality. Language is used to conceptualize and describe these experiences, made possible through the use of verbs (Downing & Locke, 2006, 123). The verbs used to conceptualize and describe these experiences are categorized into processes: Material Process, Mental Process, Verbal Process and Behavioral Process. This study is interested in Mental Process and Material process as a result of the fact with material processes, the women's action can be adequately investigated while with mental processes, the reactions and feelings associated with their experiences and actions can be properly examined and accounted for.

Material process is the process of doing – taking concrete actions. They answer the question “what did they do?” In material process, the process or acting is done by a human participant called the ‘Actor’ while ‘Goal’ is used to categorize the recipient of the action of the “Actor”. The Actor has volition, energy and intention, and has the ability to initiate and control actions.

Mental processes are linguistic resources used to describe what is thought is felt. It is a form of mental reaction to a phenomenon (Downing & Locke, 2006, 139). They are represented by verbs of cognition, perception affectivity and desideration.

Experiential meanings have been applied to the analysis of literary and non-literary texts. Matinex (2001) examined process types in academic writings and demonstrates that process types in academic writings are used to develop interpersonal stance in writing. Dadjo (2018) investigated experiential meanings in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* and argues that women are verbally expressive in the text and mentally involved in any issue that concerns them. Damanik (2017) portrays in his investigation of experiential meaning in selected William Wordsworth's poems that the poet uses experiential meanings to build imagery. Jegede (2017)

asserts that experiential meanings in editorials of some Nigerian newspapers do not only tell what has happened in Nigeria, but also reveals the state of the country and how things should be.

By using Halliday's Experiential Meaning, this study evinces how through their narratives, the survivors construct their experience as sequentially connected using linguistic devices and discursive practices. These linguistic devices and discursive practices would provide a window into their experience.

Results and Discussion

With the survival stories, the women attempt to on the one hand, portray how much the experience has impacted their lives and on the other hand, they attempt to evade societal notions of female vulnerability and victimhood despite being at a disadvantage. However, the experience gives them agency, showing how in situations where they were obviously victims, they decide to reject victimhood. Their stories, beyond being traumatic, are also tales of hope and survival, and women's strength and courage in conflict situations.

Discourse of Trauma

Analysis of the survivor's narratives portrays that they find their experiences traumatic and unbearable. This is expected considering the nature of Boko Haram insurgency. A range of discursive devices reveal the despair embedded in their narrative, popular of which is the graphic description of death as well as the emotional pain that accompanied the experience. Consider the extracts below.

Extract 1: On December 22nd 2011, my father and brother were killed by Boko Haram ... They pulled my Dad out of the bathroom and told him to deny his faith. He refused ... they told him they would give

him a second chance and then he refused again. Then they shot him three times on his chest. My Dad was about to die when my brother asked them “what did my father do to you? why did you kill him?” They told my brother to keep quiet. My brother tried to keep quiet but couldn’t hold it. One of them said they should kill my brother but the other said not to. But then the last one said if they didn’t kill my brother, he would grow up to be a Pastor just like my Dad. The others agreed and they shot him and killed him. They told me they didn’t shoot me because they don’t kill women, they kill only the males in the house. I was devastated, I didn’t know what to do, I just prayed for God to bring them back. The following day, the soldiers came and took me and my brother and Dad’s corpse to the hospital.

Extract 2: We all know how pervasive fear can be. I’ve experienced how absolutely debilitating it can be physically and mentally. My encounter with fear started one night in February when Boko Haram attacked Maiduguri where I live. I was asleep when it occurred. As soon as I woke, I was gripped by paralyzing fear. Looking back, I couldn’t do any of the things I think I should have done to keep my family safe...I didn’t make sane decisions because my whole being was overcome by fear, fear that took away my ability to make sensible decision.

Extract 3: It’s been six years but it feels like yesterday. How did I survive? ... it is so distressing to think to we sat and waited for someone to save

us.... So many people died... it was too much to take,
I prayed to God every day to take my life. I wanted
to die

The expression “I was devastated” in Extract 1 is a mental process that describes the survivor’s mental state and feeling about the death of both her father and brother, indicating the deep psychological effect of the incidence; it constructs the image of fear, shock and confusion which the survivor could only react to physically by invoking the help of the Supernatural. By invoking the supernatural, the survivor expresses a state of despair and helplessness. In Extract 3 the expressions “I wanted to die” is a mental process that connotes a state of desire for relief from pain and trauma. In the expression “I prayed to God...” in Extract 3, the survivor utilizes material process as a desperate action to invoke the intervention of the supernatural, indicating that the situation was beyond the purview of humans – only the supernatural can be strong enough to ameliorate the pain and suffering

In Extract 2, the survivor owns up to making irrational decisions as a result of the mental trauma and fear that arises during crisis. The expression “I was gripped by fear” is a material process that portrayed her state of helplessness during the attack. The survivor portrays herself as lacking volition as a result of fear.

The discourse of trauma and victimhood cannot be totally jettisoned as its existence in the narratives helps to understand the complexity and effect of terrorism. However, the discourse of trauma only reflects in the survivor’s narrative when they are narrating their experience during the attack, after the attack they move on with their lives, showing they are strong and resilient. The attacks are characterized by traumatic experiences that the victims have learnt to live and cope with. Despite the physical and psychological trauma, they have been able to adapt to a “new

normal”. Through the discourse of trauma, the victims agree that they were at a disadvantage during the attack; they agree that the situation appears gloomy and may not be able to move away from it. They may have to live with it for the rest of their lives. The survivors who construct their narrative using this discourse do not distance themselves from the situation nor provide positive perspective about it. The discourse is therefore a representation of bravery and resilience

Discourse of Indignity and Humiliation

Related to the discourse of trauma is the discourse of humiliation and indignity where survivors explicate the social stigma they face from society as a result of their traumatic experience. Humiliation also arises by having to rely on people for subsistence living after the attack.

Extract 3b: I told them I will not marry them even if they kill me... but they abducted me and ... I was locked up for a month and they told me that whether I like or not, they have already married me. Since I have been rescued by soldiers, the women here abuse me ...they can't understand what happened to me... they call me Boko Haram wife... someday I wake up with sadness and some days, I wake up happy... they don't abuse me a lot like before but it still happens. I pray to God that one day I will see my parents again...

It is evident from the extract above that while trying to recover from the traumatic experience of being forced to marry her abductors, the survivor has to live with daily humiliation from other women. The stigma associated with being a “Boko Haram wife” portrays the

indignity she has to contend with after her traumatic experience, further exacerbating the trauma of the loss of her family and self-esteem. The discourse of indignity and humiliation is reflected in the survivor's utilization of material processes "told", "locked up", "wake up", "abuse", etc., demonstrating the intentional action of her abductors and women within the camp, and the effect on these actions on her state of mind. The discourse of indignity and humiliation is also reflected in the extract below.

Extract 4: When they started to shoot, everyone dispersed, the men ran, People told us to run because they were targeting men. My husband ran to the hills and left me with our children. All the women and children were caught and locked up in a big house. We were there for three months. We were cooking for them and taking care of the camp. After we were rescued, my husband never came to check on me or the children. I went to him and he said he can no longer be with me and asked me to go back to Boko Haram because as far as he is concerned, I am now a Boko Haram wife. Back home, I used to sew traditional caps before we got kidnapped and displaced. Since I got here, I started doing the same thing. My brother bought me a sewing machine and since then, I have been sewing.

The survivor in the extract above also has to contend with the humiliation of being rejected by her husband, further exacerbating the trauma of the experience. But unlike the survivor in Extract 3, she moves on from it by running her business. Though the narrative contains the discourse of humiliation and indignity, the survivor does not dwell on it, she rather channels her hurt and pain into

making a sustainable source of income for herself and her children who are dependent on her for survival. Jacob et al (2016, p. 178) opines that such humiliation and indignity ‘interferes with mourning process’.

The Discourse of Resignation

In the survivor’s narratives are embedded the discourse of resignation where they become stoic, learning to adjust to life after the life-changing encounter with Boko Haram. The discourse of resignation is embedded in mental processes with which the women explicate the state of their mental health while living with their abductors and also coping with other people after they have been freed from their abductors and integrated into the society. The mental processes evident in the discourse of resignation demonstrates the extent to which the attack and/or abduction has, which demonstrates the coping strategy the women use to overcome the effect of the attack. Consider the extracts below.

Extract 5: He would lock me up during the day and rape me at night. He would go on operations to kill people and then come home and force me to be with him. I was eventually rescued by the military. I am not enjoying that I have a baby by a Boko Haram, but I am resigned to being a mother to her. She is a daily reminded of a cruel and unfair shame.

Extract 6: I manage with the best I can with my children. Before the attack, I was a successful business woman selling fabrics and perfume. After the attack, my house were burnt to the ground and my brothers were killed. I had to start from the scratch and it has been difficult. When we first came back,

we were scared but now, we are used to the neighborhood. It is heartbreaking because I have nothing to do, although recently, I got a job sweeping the street. I am barely able to feed myself and the children. Now that I have a house, I would love to have a shop of my own and get back to business like before, but I know that as far as there is no peace, this is wishful thinking. For now I am limited to jobs with few prospects.

By resigning themselves to the fate, they accept the experience as the new normal they have to live with. This is in itself a mark of bravery as they do not let the experience cause them despair. I argue here in line with the arguments of Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari (2018) that the discourse of resignation could be considered a form of pragmatic fatalism where the survivors couch the traumatic experience as predestined. Thus, even though they initially consider it as unfair, they eventually see it as a part of the course their life has to take, a new normal in their existence as humans. It is a form of pragmatic action that helps them to realize some things are beyond their control and they just have to look at the brighter side of things and make the best use of their situation. The discourse of resignation is also a strategy through which the women make sense of their post-trauma life, a construction of hope. This aligns with Buchbinder and Sinay's (2020, 807) assertion that through narratives, victims of trauma demonstrate their desire to life actively in the present reality.

In some of the narratives as explicated above, the victims agree that they were at a disadvantage. They acquiesced that the situation appeared gloomy and they have barely been trying to survive; they may have to live with the result for the rest of their lives. They openly express regret about the situation and wish it did not happen. Thus, through the discourse of resignation, the survivors do not

distance themselves from the situation, rather they attempt to provide a positive perspective about it. This is in itself a courageous act as it makes them face their fears while trying to avoid depression.

The Discourse of Selfhood and Personal Responsibility

The discourse of selfhood and personal responsibility is constructed with the use of both material and mental processes. With this construction, the survivors explicate the action(s) they have had to take during and after the attack in order to survive. Their ability to be proactive makes them share their experience confidently. The women exude a strong sense of confidence while sharing their narrative, though it may be argued that they may have been coached or that media presence contributed to their confidence. The confidence as portrayed in their stance arises from the realization that they were able to emerge from a near-death or slavery situation either intentionally or by rescue, thereby making them brave and heroic.

Extract 7: The truck started moving and I thought ‘is this the end of all my struggling in school dreaming of becoming a doctor? Is this where it is going to end? ... I gave up like if this is what God wants, then it is okay. But at the end, I prayed to God to please save me, to please let me see my family again as I do not want to go with these people. To my surprise, something got into my head and said to jump out...I convinced my friend and we jumped.

The mental process evident in “thought”, “gave up” in the extract above reveals the speaker’s state of mind which led to her eventual action evident in the material process “prayed” and “jumped out”. The mental and material processes which are used to construct the

discourse of selfhood and personal responsibility give credence to Buchbinder and Sinay's (2020) assertion that through selfhood, victims of traumatic situations create alternative interpretations of their traumatic experiences. Through this discourse, they demonstrate a strong sense of self and independence as seen in the extract above. Their stories are characterized by individual agency and a highly individuated selfhood and intentional choice of behavior reflected in their actions. With the discourse of selfhood and personal responsibility, the survivors deliberately take actions to either evade the attack, or rise above the situation. To do this, they draw strength from within themselves or take recourse in the supernatural. From the extracts above, it is obvious that the notion of victimhood – being weak, passive, unable to react in situations, etc. is jettisoned for self-responsibility. Through the discourse of personal responsibility, the survivors hold themselves accountable for their actions during their traumatic experiences. Through this discourse, though they consider themselves as unfairly treated and being at a disadvantaged position, they refuse to play the victim card by not resulting to self-pity. They rather lay emphasis on their agency and self determination to survive the experience. They are active creators and active agents in the construction of events that will resonate throughout their lives.

The Discourse of Volition

Through this discourse, the survivors portray themselves as volitional – active subjects in their own stories. This is configured using material processes that represent tangible actions taken by them, thereby making them solely responsible for the outcome of their experience. This is exemplified in the extract below.

Extract 8: ... they killed many soldiers and civilians
... they killed my husband while he was on his way

from the market. While we were making plans on how to run from the village, they came again and started throwing bombs. I was there in the midst of it all but they didn't touch me and other women because they were focused on the soldiers and men... When the soldiers all ran away, all of us women still alive started throwing our children across the wall so that they will survive even if we didn't survive

The expression "...started throwing our children across the wall" consist of the material process of volition and intention which portrays how women are able to intentionally control their actions even during conflict situations. They are caregivers even during crisis such that they place the safety of their children above theirs – they have to think of the safety of their children even before theirs, thereby presenting themselves first as mothers before anything else. The discourse of volition is also portrayed in post-attack survival strategies where the survivors are intentional about moving on after the attack.

Extract 9: For the past six years, I have been traumatized by the fear and uncertainty of another attack. It has kept me unproductive, leading to depression. Everyday, I tell myself I will eat healthy, start a business but only after things get back to normal. All I had to do was to be honest with myself and I saw that nothing was holding me back... so I had to come face to face with my fear... I pulled myself up, found a hobby and started a visual story telling as photography as counter narration. I knew I was afraid for a reason so I tried to use my fear to my

advantage. I tried to use myself to control myself and others. Fear could no longer control me...

The discourse of volition as exemplified in the extract above demonstrates the positive outcome of the traumatic situation they found themselves in. This strategy in Baker's (2010) opinion is a neoliberal post-feminist ethos utilized by women to minimize the extent and magnitude of their difficulty, distancing themselves from being classified as being at a disadvantage. With this strategy, the women present a positive outlook the actions taken by the survivors. In creating the discourse of volition the participants project a tale of optimism that does not match the disadvantaged position they find themselves in. Embedded in their narrative is the possibility of a positive transformation of self-improvement that gives them hope. This is seen in Extract 9 above, where setting up a business in photograph proved a positive outcome of fear "I used my fear to my advantage" contains a material process connoting intentionality, through which the circumstance is portrayed as not being entirely negative. Through this discursive strategy, the women try to distance themselves from negative interpretation of their experience by appraising it positively. They avoid appearing too vulnerable by deliberately portraying themselves as being resourceful and tactical. Their stories have features of "Aspirational affirmations" which Baker (2010) describes as "demonstrations of the quest for a better life".

With the discourse of volition, the survivors reinterpret their experience as being a blessing in disguise, making them realize their potentials. Though a discursive strategy, it is also a method of self-reflexivity, a positive account of overcoming difficulty. The construction of reflexive meaning portrays the women as intentional in their quest to move on from the crisis, thereby giving them agency in the context of armed conflicts.

The Discourse of Innovation

Related to the discourse of volition is the discourse of innovation with which the survivors construct the experience as a wake-up call to learn and do something new, an opportunity of a lifetime they never considered before the attack.

Extract 10: I really want my friends and colleagues to come back. I am lucky to come here to the United States to continue my studies while my colleagues are still in captivity

Extract 11: ... I said I wanted to become a doctor and save lives, if I continue to live in fear of Boko Haram finding me and I do not continue my education, that would not be possible. So I made up mind to continue my studies in the US. When I got accepted into...University in the US, I decided I would go to school no matter what.

Though at a disadvantage circumstance, it provided them the earlier inconceivable opportunity to having a lifestyle they never imagined, providing a platform for self-development. Though a form of volition, it exposes how opportunities are embedded in different circumstance.

Conclusion

The application of Halliday's experiential meanings to the discourse analysis of the narratives of female survivors of Boko Haram attacks has portrayed that language is not only a viable tool for depicting reality, it also provides the tools with which to construct people's perception of their reality. Findings from the investigation of the

discursive construction of the experiences of female survivors of Boko Haram attacks evince that in their narratives, the women frame their experiences using the discourse of trauma, selfhood and personal responsibility, volition, innovation and resignation. Through these discourses, the women create their agency. Women's agency as represented in this study, transcends their victimization and vulnerability – their agency is not dependent on it. Rather, it is linked with their ability to on the one hand escape, and on the other hand, capitalize on their experience to create a better life for themselves in order to ameliorate the trauma associated with Boko Haram attacks. Their experience, though horrible, does not trap them within the sphere of victimhood as they continue to live their lives after.

The Boko Haram attacks have indeed exacerbated gender inequality in Nigeria and as a result, women suffer bereavement, sexual violence and physical violence. Thus, they have learnt to take initiatives in their families by catering and providing for their children as making decisions on behalf of this family; this is in consonance with Aliefendioglu and Behcetogullari (2018) assertion that during conflict, women are empowered to some extent.

Also constructed in the narrative is how impossible it is for women to escape notions of being a female – wifehood, motherhood, care-giver, etc. The discursive constructions of their experiences also demonstrate the extent to which women refuse to be victims in terrorist incursions, explicating how women's narratives about their survival experience reveals their ability to partake in post-conflict reconstructive acts.

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