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## Representations of Trauma, Home and Wars in Rasaan Malik's *No Home in This Land*

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### Abstract

*In Nigerian poetry, there is the employment of emphatic and riling expressions that move the readers to feelings of sensitivity, disillusionment, consciousness, dissatisfaction and sympathy. These feelings are designed to motion in and enforce the country's betterment and development. Nigerian writers have had to contend with the social and political tribulations beleaguering Nigeria's landscape by using poetry as a channel to end its wars and propel the country towards improved and better home and state. The discussion in this paper focuses on how Rasaan Malik, in his poems, perceives the notion of trauma, home and wars in Nigeria. The conceptual framework employed is derived from both the trauma theory and content analysis methods of reading literature. By explicating the trauma theory and content analysis perspectives in Malik's poetry, the goal is to show and examine the waves of the poet's exposition of traumatic experiences and depression regarding Nigeria as a home besieged by wars and, also, those displaced by the wars, and the internal exiles that ensued. The goal extends to what we know of his hopes for a great home and peace that is an important facet of his poetry and the basis for his resistance of the Nigerian social and political instabilities.*

**Keywords:** African Literature, Nigerian Literature, Nigerian Poetry, Trauma, Poetry, Home, Wars, Resistance

## **Introduction**

Rasaan Malik Chapbook, *No Home in this land*, is his first collection. His poems are marked by a declarative and definitive voice that draws attention to the notion of home and wars primarily as they are closely attached to trauma, disrespect of civil rights and liberty, fear, loss, grief and hopes. With the reoccurring events in their various dispositions happening in Nigeria, there is a relationship existing between the affected and the poet advocating for change. In advocating for a better home, change and progress, Malik focuses on the affected people by shifting and distancing his personal political sophistications and background. The poet also directly and indirectly reveals the leadership failures and disrespect for the lives of the led.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Trauma theory majorly framed this paper. Trauma percolates different levels and is a well-established model that found its roots in psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis from indicating “physical injury” to “psychological injury” (Freud, 187-221), an idea that stems from the study of the cause of neurosis in hysterical women in France and the psychological effects of the Holocaust in Germany. Cathy Caruth, who is stirred by Freud’s writings, motioned in modern literary trauma theory and elaborates on the theory of trauma by saying: “If the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized thus engage Freud’s interest, it is because they bear witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” (60). For Caruth, trauma is an experience for survival, rather than a scar. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who are theorists on trauma, elaborate on Caruth’s theory, by

presenting a way to have a *true experience* through their concept of witnessing. They argue that the process of recovering the traumatic experience becomes a testimony in which the witness retells their story, but simultaneously experiences it for the first time. An interesting point that they raise is that witnessing does not stop at the point of impact. As such, the traumatized victim is the witness, but the recipient of the testimonial becomes a secondary witness after the actual event. Witnessing is the central act in Felman and Laub's theory of trauma (qtd in Isaksen & Vejling, 6-10).

This paper is wholly hinged on trauma theory of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. In Rasaq Malik Chapbook, *No Home in this land*, the poet recounts personae, who are witnesses to their traumatic experiences, retell their stories. This idea of witnessing expands on the normal denotation of witnessing as seeing something in real time while it is happening. Laub argues that there are three levels to witnessing. Firstly, the witness can be a "witness to oneself", experiencing the event first hand; secondly, when the first-level witness testifies, that testimony requires an interviewer—or a witness. Lastly, someone can either live—or by watching a taping back—experience the testimony process, thereby becoming a witness of the third level (qtd in Isaksen & Vejling, 6-10).

### **Trauma, Home and Wars in *No Home in This Land***

African writers are deeply engaged in re-directing and re-informing the society socio-politically, economically, historically and otherwise, claims David Carrol. Thus, he explains, "African writers have employed literature in one of its traditional roles to explore and open up new or neglected areas of experience by clearing the ground of prejudice and preconception" (Carrol, 22). Chinua Achebe reiterates this view when he said that "Literature whether handed

down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with the threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves, or in the world around us" (117). Rasaq Malik, by the aforementioned, writes with the apt of a poet seriously propelled and actuated by the impediments and ills in his society. The poetry collection by Rasaq Malik places him in the second and third level of Dori Laub's standpoint on trauma theory as witnessing is its central point. As a recall, Dori Laub argues that there are three levels to witnessing. Firstly, the witness can be a "witness to oneself", experiencing the event first hand; secondly, when the first-level witness testifies, that testimony requires an interviewer—or a witness. Lastly, someone can either live—or by watching a taping back—experience the testimony process, thereby becoming a witness of the third level (qtd in Isaksen & Vejling, 6-10).

Rasaq Malik's aim is obvious as he establishes a voice against the crumbling home, north-eastern Nigeria, which is affected by wars caused by Boko Haram's heart wrenching deeds and insurgencies. Boko Haram is a jihadist terrorist sect based in northeastern Nigeria.

In the poetry collection, *No Home in This Land*, the poet is mindful of home as a concept and what it means, and how wars have displaced people and ignite in them traumatic experiences. The perception of home is regarded as a very complicated conception, and by this Yusof et al, from their point of view, argue that the concept of home is essential to an individual's identity. To lose it to another, for any reason, can cause suffering (anxiety and trauma);

for it to happen to a child as a consequence of war and violence is an experience that is distressing (3). Malik, in agreement with Yusuf et al, says in one of his poems titled “We don’t know where we belong” that “we do not know where we belong because in Borno, everybody knows how to narrate the grim stories of war” (10-11). As homes are lost to Boko Haram in Borno State, Nigeria, individuals are deeply affected in the aspect of traumatic experiences. In grandeur, gothic and descriptive manner, the poet expresses the loss of homes to Boko Haram:

There is no home in this country because war is  
the only song we have whenever people hide  
under their cupboards, in their bathrooms,  
under their beds. There is no home in this  
country because whether death comes or not, my  
children will still ask me when we will pack  
our luggage and say, thank you,  
city of smoke and bones. (20-28)

Malik further describes home as a place of unrest, untimely death of the young, unaccountability for missing people, bomb blasts and devastations in “Leaving Home”. In “Leaving Home”, he involves the idea of internal exile (a situation where a person leaves an unsafe area for safer place within a geopolitical defined place) when the inhabitants needed safety and solace from the traumatic experiences brought to them by the Boko Haram. This is evident in the poem’s last stanza:

In the streets there are orphans who scout for meals  
in the bellies of bins, children who search for love  
in the sad eyes of people who search for their

relatives beneath debris, people who wait in the cold  
to receive the remains of their dead, people who pray  
as they remember the losses after every blast...  
on the train we say goodbye to our moribund homeland,  
to friends who don't know how to end grief, to friends who  
search  
for what remains of everything that is no longer home. (17-  
27)

Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf have remarked that “traditionally, a home is conceptualized as a stable, physical center of a person’s private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved. Yet, both the garment that keeps the body private and the home that keeps one safe no longer protect the individual” (4). This is applicable in Malik’s context of home in north-eastern Nigeria. In his poem “At Dalori Camp”, he depicts how people no longer feel belonged, peaceful, stable and loved living in Maiduguri, Borno. This is due to the Boko Haram insurgencies. By this, the survivors are forced to live in camps and one of them is Dalori camp stationed in Maiduguri. The poem begins by depicting the awful dispositions of the people plagued by anxiety, hopelessness, depression and trauma living in Dalori camp:

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.  
(1-7)

In the poem, the poet also tells how the internally displaced people are continually abused and raped in the camps by soldiers who are meant to protect them. This sad reality shows the extent of unkindness and cruelty on the survivors of the Boko Haram insurgencies; and also shows that in running from home, there is no safety still:

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 (8-11).

The poet, out of dejection, disheartenment and dispiritedness, questions the meaning of home. The questions about the meaning of home are burdens the poet needs to sort out. Wole Soyinka puts it explicitly as ability of the poet to appropriate “the voice of the people and the full burden of their memory” (21). Malik puts these questions in the mouths of the survivors so it can be felt first hand:

The women watch their children lie on the mats,  
as another night begins with people searching  
for the meaning of home in the sadness of a woman washing  
the blood-soaked dress of her daughter, in the silence  
of a man returning home to meet the dismembered  
bodies of his wife and children... The women search for the  
meaning  
of home whenever they wake up to see bullet holes on the  
walls,

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whenever the pieces of their beloveds fill the streets... (17-25)

Malik collection is also filled with trauma and losses. And with trauma and losses come grief. The poet keeps asking for the meaning of losing a beloved one, waking up to the bodies blasted by bombs, living in a country filled with wars and attending the burial of a relative killed by the Boko Haram. Mitchell and Anderson, in their view, agree that *all* losses of important attachments can and *should* be grieved (36–46). In the poem “Grief”, the poet says:

My mother waits in the cold all night  
as my father's absence becomes a photograph  
she caresses whenever she remembers  
what it means to lose a beloved to blasts;  
what it means to wake up to meet an empty bed;  
what it means to attend the burial of a relative;  
what it means to pine for someone that will not arrive.  
A woman sieves a pile of corpses to discover her husband's  
body...  
I have inherited a house where the cobwebbed frames  
hanging  
on the walls bear the photographs of the dead, where each  
moment  
melts into memories of blighted dreams, moribund hopes...  
This is not the country in which I want my children to live;  
this is not a home to inherit; this is not the paradise we pray  
for. (1-19)

War is a dangerous thing to a home. Chidi Amuta remarks that war “puts the greatest pressure on human nature, relationships and

institutions, it becomes also a fertile ground for the literary imagination” (86). Malik in his collection narrates how the human nature suffers, relationships are downplayed on and institutions are bombed down. His poems cry out against these ugly experiences that in “In Another World” he wishes for otherwise in the next life:

In another world I want to be a father without  
passing through the eternal insanity of mourning  
my children, without experiencing the ritual  
of watching my children return home as bodies  
folded like a prayer mat...

In another world I want my children to tame grasshoppers  
In the field, to play with their dolls in the living room,  
To inhale the fragrance of flowers waving as wind blows,  
To see the birds measure the sky with their wings (1-17).

Malik’s poems exemplify his sense of connection and bond with home throughout his collection. This connection brings to mind Mahmoud Darwish who dedicated himself to his homeland and defined his poetic work as one of writing about home. He once wrote “I learned all the words and how to take them apart so I can form one word, homeland” (5). The meaning of homeland is defined in Malik’s poem “Home Is”:

Home is my father opening his arms to  
embrace strangers, to welcome them to  
our room without scanning their faces  
and luggage to know if they are terrorists  
or not, to know if they are thieves or smugglers.  
Home is Rahaman sleeping in his room without  
having to gaze through the window to see children

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crippled by war, maimed by a tornado; mangled bodies waiting to be buried, wounded bodies waiting for first aid. Home is you bereft of grief, spared by trauma, absent from refugee camps where bokoharam victims bear the agony of searching for an identity, for where they belong, for how to survive. (6-18).

Despite the gory scenes, traumatic experiences and sufferings and losses, the poet gives light and hopes. His desires for a better home— a home bereft of wars and Boko Haram's insurgencies are made evident. In this view, Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes in her book on how poems end, "The point is not that a poem allows us the momentary entertainment... but that it allows us to know what we know, including our illusions and desires, by giving us a language in which to acknowledge it" (154). In "Grateful", the poet makes his desires, illusions and hopes in the form of light and gratefulness known:

Grateful for life after 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 things that shape us into better things, things that  
lift our hands  
when we fill the night with cries, things that unchain our  
passion for bliss.

Grateful for husbands that return home safely to meet their  
wives and children  
waiting for them at doorsteps, for northerners whose  
children remember...  
Grateful for those who, in spite of their sad  
Hearts, offer us every bright thing in the world. (1-26)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Rasaq Malik's *No Home in This Land* accomplishes the duty of drawing attention to the harsh realities of life in the north-eastern Nigeria, which is affected by wars caused by Boko Haram's heart wrenching deeds and insurgencies. He portrays the circumstances of people living in such a society where trauma, wars, losses, disrespect of civil liberties, fear and grief intersect. The poet accounts lucidly and compellingly the disrespect of civil rights and liberties and life in the north-eastern Nigeria. Despite the aforesaid horrible affairs and conditions, Malik presents an account full of inner strength and hopes and need of a peaceful home.

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