

Complacency and Resistance of Boko Haram Insurgency: A Canvas of Violence in Aliyu Baba-Ari's *The Paths that Take Us*

By

Abigail Onowosemenmen [Oaikhena](#), PhD
Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7760-4695>
oo.abigail@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

*The rise of insurgency in Africa, especially Nigeria, calls serious concern, as their nefarious activities have created a huge negative impact on lives, properties, investments and the country's economy generally. These have further plunged the citizens into multi-dimensional poverty. However, in spite of the poverty level ravaging the nation, it is perceived that majority of Nigerian politicians, especially those in charge of security agencies, are nonchalant and indifferent towards finding solutions to this ravaging menace. They are instead, implicated as accomplices either providing information to the insurgents or acquiring sophisticated weapons for them in order to protect their political ambitions with the pretext of fighting for Allah. Hence, this contradictory disposition of protecting personal interests under the guise of religion and the government docility towards curtailing Boko Haram insurgency, have raised many unanswered questions about Nigeria as a sovereign nation. So, in exploring Aliyu Baba-Ari's novel, *The Paths that Take Us*, the study interrogates the functionality of the Nigerian Military as well as the government and discusses Islamic religious leaders cum the Boko Haram ideology, within the purview of complacency and resistance as highlighted in the text. The research, employed New Historicism theory, as the novel under study interfaces with many historical texts on Boko Haram insurgency and restiveness to ascertain or validate the true state of the people, activities and the society generally, in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Boko Haram, Politicians, Nigerian Military, Religious, Complacency

Introduction

The proliferation of light weapons in sub-Saharan Africa in the last few decades have engendered the resistive attitude of Boko Haram insurgents in Africa, especially Nigeria. There is a gross abuse of weaponry display and usage by these insurgents, who see these weapons as symbols of power, authority, dominance and superiority. It is this feeling of preeminence that makes them to challenge the government, armed forces and civilians as well. Worthy of note is that, majority of these insurgents are young lads and almajaris (Quran school students), who are quite naïve of the

reality of their indoctrination but only get excited at the sight of guns. Don Micheal Adeniji described the formation of Boko Haram, thus;

A group of radical Islamic youths under the tutelage of an intemperate Islamic scholar, Alhaji Mohammed Ndimi of the Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State in northeastern area of Nigeria formed the core of the Boko Haram sect. Alhaji Ndimi was an apostle of the Mohammed Marwa...zealot Islamic preacher who settled in Kano and preached against the westernisation of Northern Nigerian Elites and its corrupt effects on Islam. (171)

According to Adesoji Abimbola, in *The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria*, “The Boko Haram uprising was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian society” (173). Hence, the recurrence of religious conflict could be traced back to the Maitatsine sect in 1980, an Islamic group that attempted to undermine the Nigerian state and forcefully introduced a religious ideology. Government’s effort to clampdown on the group always resulted in well-known resistance by its members, which led to the death of scores, and damage to properties in several northern parts of the country.

Historically, northern Nigeria has been characterized by periodic instability, conflict, and sectarian violence. According to Oarhe Osumam Jihadists sacked Birnin Ngazargamu in 1808 and invaded and occupied Rabih in 1893. In the early 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood, Shiites a Zaria-based Islamic Movement in Nigeria, was led by Ibrahim El-Zakzakky, an undergraduate at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria in Kaduna State. Similarly, in the early 1980s, the Maitatsine sect rejected symbols of Western capitalism and renounced several Muslim practices, including praying five times a day, triggering an intra-religious conflict between it and the dominant Islamic sects of the time. The Maitatsines also harassed members of the public and became a huge source of social disorder and insecurity until its members clashed with state forces in Kano in December 1980.

Toyin Falola asserts that;

After the Kano clash, members of the sect traveled to other northern cities and continued the revolt, which erupted in Bullum-kutu in October 1982, in Rigassa, Kaduna State in October 1982, and in Jimeta-Yola between February 27 and March 5, 1984.

Maitatsine which is suspected to be the source where Boko Haram sprouts attracted more support from youths and unemployed migrants, who were disenchanted with the unresponsiveness of the government and Islamic hierarchy or the Northern oligarchy to their needs. Despite the ideological and operational similarities between Boko Haram and previous movements, the Executive

Governor of Borno State, Hon. Kashim Shettima, in *Sunday Tribune*, July 17, 2011 noted that the earlier movements were not “as destructive as they did not degenerate to killing of innocent souls and targeting of recreational centres, places of worship in a sustained and protracted manner as the case of Boko Haram” (52).

However, in the present day Nigeria the major insurgent group is Boko Haram which predominately operates in the north eastern part of the country, the *Jamaatul Alissunna lid da a wa wal Jihad*, an Arabic phrase meaning, “people committed to the propagation of the prophet’s teaching and Jihad,” otherwise known as Boko Haram. In 2002, the founder and leader of this group Muhammad Ali, declared Borno State immoral and hopeless, N.I.O and D.L-B (full names withheld) revealed that “Muhammad Ali and co decided to perform the traditional Hijra which is a withdrawal before the jihad. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) withdrew from Mecca to Medina. In his own case, Ali and his followers withdrew from Maiduguri (the Borno State capital) to Kanama in nearby Yobe State.” (9).

However, The Government's failure to genuinely tackle the root causes of political and economic exclusion has not only provided objective conditions for the emergence of militancy, but it also provided conditions for the rise of normlessness – a situation which fosters the emergence of other groups with a subculture of violent tendencies for the pursuit of pecuniary gains. Members' willingness to participate in violent activity, to expect violence, and to be ready to retaliate against the military task force created heroes in the different communities especially among the youths.

In the case of Yusuf, one of the most outstanding and intelligent leaders of the sect, during his execution as seen in Habila’s *The chibok Girls*, one of his followers affirms that before he was killed;

You would think a big party was going on here. The whole area would be lined with exotic cars as very powerful individuals went to see Yusuf. They went in cars with tinted glasses so nobody would be able to see them. That is why many people believe that the man was being sponsored by some very powerful individuals. (62)

On the issue of sponsorship and shady relationship of insurgents with politicians, it is allegedly believed that the former governor of Borno State, Ali Modu Sherrif solicited for the aid of Boko Haram during his re-election as the state governor, “so Boko Haram worked to ensure the governor was returned to office. But after winning the re-election, Sheriff reneged on his promise. The enraged Yusuf began to openly call the governor an infidel” (60). On April 24, 2011, the Boko Haram group issued the following statement in Maiduguri in *Tell*, July 4:

We want to reiterate that we are warriors who are carrying out jihad (religious war) in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the traditions of the Holy Prophet. We would never accept any system of government apart from the one stipulated by Islam because that is the only way that the Muslims could be liberated. (2011: 48)

New Historicism

New Historicism, a literary theory that studies literature alongside with history. New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Jonathan Goldberg, concern themselves with the political functions of literature and the concept of power, the complex means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves.

As for Ann Dobie “the new historic critic works in two directions. She seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context- the anxieties, issues, struggles, politics (and more) of the era in which it was created. She also seeks to understand the culture by looking at its literature” (179). Ukkan reaffirms that the New Historicists contend that “a work is not an autonomous body of fixed meanings, but represents a diversity of dissonant voices and unresolved conflicts in a specific culture” (22-33).

According to Mukesh, New Historicism “reposition[s] the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced” (118). So, to Ukkan, the selected works, fictional and none fictional depict and interact with the prevalent historical antecedents that have engulfed the Nigerian nation, because both are “allowed to work as sources of information and interrogation with each other” (22-33). It is within this purview that a literary work “should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than an isolated creation of a genius” (9) Sharma concludes.

Thus, there is need to investigate the above developments, especially with the high rise of different strands of insurgent groups engulfing the nation state, Nigeria, on daily basis. As earlier mentioned, their activities have seriously affected both human lives and properties, which have a negative impact on the nation’s development. It is hoped that this research will yield materials for publications in reputable journals thereby broadening the spectrum of scholarship on insecurity in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Textual Discourse

In *The Paths that Take Us* Aliyu Baba-Ari carefully captures these experiences through a distraught Abuja family, whose only two children are torn against each other. Isa, the eldest son, in the Nigerian Army fighting the insurgents, while Assim, a supposed undergraduate student of Geology at University of Maiduguri, the younger son, is one of the leaders of Boko Haram (BH) insurgent group. His name is changed from Assim to Amir by Sheikh, their new religious leader in Maiduguri. Through this character, Amir, Baba-Ari traverses the ignorance, propaganda and make-believe views of BH fighters.

At the beginning of the turmoil, in the novel, the young and naive Assim tries to grasp the cause and trajectory of the upheaval. According to him, “he has witnessed and participated in two university riots were usually disgruntled students destroying property without causing any harm, but this mob was out for both blood and destruction” (55). Like Assim, many of these BH fighters try to interrogate and reassess their involvement and the movement of activates but they are swiftly plunged back to action by the preaching of some of their religious leaders.

BH Ideology in the novel

In the novel, the Sheikh, Muhammad Yusuf, seems to know when and how to get the rebels into action. He appeals to their conscience, making them highly sentimental about everything in his personal religious dogma without necessarily observing what the religion truly stipulates. In one the scenarios, the Sheikh asserts that:

It is better for the world to go to chaos than for the blood of a single Muslim to be spilled! He continued, frothing at the mouth of intense fury.... It is better to live in abominable chaos under the flag of Islam than to live in stability under the order of disbelief (53&55)

With these words, the young minds aggressively pick up arms against the state and individuals who do not toil their path, as they keep chanting “*Allahu Akbar*” (55). As for them, “the Sheikh has spoken the truth” (54), he has given a directive that is expected of all ‘lovers of Allah’ to observe against all odds. Thus, their true ideology about Islam has gradually and subtly shifted from being peaceful believers to intolerant and aggressive fighters of Allah. Sheikh’s indoctrination gradually sinks into them as they are ready and excited in picking up weapons against the ‘infidels’. As for Assim, Baba-Ari narrates that;

He was looking at weapons he recognised from video games. Musa took out a pistol from the boot and casually handed it to Assim like it was a biscuit.

Assim smiled and grabbed it. He observed it closely, feeling its weight and running his hands over its grooves and ridges. Without asking, Sakhr took an AK-47 from the boot. He expertly took out its magazine, inspected it, and placed it back. For the first time...he broke into smile.... Assim was scared, so he held his gun properly, ready to respond as quick as possible to anything, not that he knew how. (64-65)

Having these arms, they are eager to unleash their mayhem up the society without considering the consequences. They are made to believe that if they die while fighting for Allah, they will gain paradise. So, these young minds out of excitement and youthful exuberance indulge themselves in all kinds of inhuman activities, as directed by their Sheikh. Some volunteer to be suicide bombers while others are into capturing and slaughtering of humans, whom their leader had labelled infidels. The Sheikh further admonishes them, “do not go into battle with fear, for you won when you picked up Allah’s weapon. You will either triumph over them or die as martyrs” (213).

They are highly convinced of a better life in the world after, if they should die while fighting for Allah. Majority of these young minds have joined in the campaign, aggressively demanding for Islamic state, while ignorantly castigating the constituted government. They are ready to sacrifice their lives for a cause they do not understand, that is why the programmed suicide bomber, Bashir asks “why are we even doing this?” (104). But in the next twist of event, after been brainwashed by Musa, the same Bashir speaks;

I send this message of good tidings to the Muslem of the world.... I ask you, o brothers, to pick up arms against the infidels wherever you find them. Victory is nigh. It has already been promised to us by The Creator. We are simply the means to an inevitable end. Join us, brothers! I swear, I am filled with honour to give my life for this cause. If I had another life, I would gladly give it because I am certain that what is waiting for me at the other side is greater than anything that could be offered to me by any son of Adam in this realm (105)

Ironically, in search for the supposed promised paradise through Islam, they are frantically searching for the best western weapons (which they preach against), that will easily eliminate their targets. Hence, turning into monsters, who constantly are searching for human blood. They do not think for themselves but strictly adhering to their leader’s instructions with the hope gaining paradise. They only admire and even envious of their members who are ignorantly or coercively engaging in suicide bombing as an act of martyrdom. As for Camisi’s case, the adopted young school girl, Amir’s wife whose is been addressed as Umm Isa, is coerced into suicide bombing mission by her BH husband, as he asks;

Are you afraid to die? Amir asked, his tone was condescending. Yes! Yes, I'm afraid! Camsi cried, her legs shaking.... There is nothing to be afraid of. You are not going to feel to anything. All you have to do is press this button and you will find yourself in heaven....I really envy you, Umm Isa, Amir said.... She will reach paradise before us! Sakhr said, smiling at her through the mirror, showing the impossible white teeth that had no business being on the face (237-8)

Historically, after the death of Muhammad Yusuf, Abubakar Shekua, resumed as the new leader of Boko Haram sect in Nigeria. His ideologies are more vicious and hostile compared to that of his predecessors. He believes that his immediate predecessor was deceived by the government after a bargain. So, he usually come out to vent his anger, while challenging the United States of America and French President claiming that they are not his equals. In one of his speeches, according to Simon Richard, he warned, saying;

Let the world know that we have been enjoined by Allah to kill the unbelievers just like how we were enjoined to slaughter rams during Eidel Kabir. And we shall continue to kill those who strive to stand against the will of Allah by opposing Sharia. We don't mind if we die doing this because it is even a blessing for us to die in cause and gain paradise. So we are winning on either side. So it is never too late for you to repent and join us on the path of righteousness. (17)

Since after his speeches, this Jihadist group has continued to perpetrate violence using guerrilla warfare in many parts of Nigeria, especially in north east Nigeria, where they mostly operate. In spite of the efforts of the Nigerian government and its allies to eradicate the Boko Haram insurgents, the group still poses a grave threat to the sovereignty of Nigeria and its neighbors in the region. According to Celestine Muonwe, the historical Yusuf, "felt that the British colonialism and the creation of Nigeria had imposed an un-Islamic way of life on Muslims through all the various layers of a modern State-Western schools, a Western legal system, Western democracy, and so on" (196). Thus, his main concern is to change these narratives, as he wishes for the country to be govern by Islamic principles.

Political influence on BH in the text

However, some Nigerian politicians have seized this opportunity, by using these confused young rebels against their oppositions, instead of working towards the development of these youths and the country at large. They became veritable tools in the hands of these politicians, as they rely on them for financial support. In the text, there is Alhaji Murtala Modu, the writer narrates thus;

he was actually the prominent Yobe politician.... During the day, he was always on television or radio, criticising the government for lack of a heavy-handed approach to the insurgency. At night, he came with information about what was going on and what moves the government was making. He was one of those 'old money' billionaires whose only known occupation was being rich (103)

Insurgency has become a source of generating income for the rebels, as they have formed themselves into different factions, ravaging the nation state, Nigeria. These corrupt politicians, finance the insurgents' weapons and bankroll them as long they do their biddings. They support terrorists at the detriment of the citizens they vow to serve in their oath of office. They consciously purchase unsophisticated weapons for the Nigerian army while building a world class armory for insurgents, using public funds. These young excited insurgents keep testing these ammunitions with human lives in order to validates their authenticity. They build structures for arms around the country as they are made to prepare for jihad.

Syphoning of public fund by some government executives to sponsor insurgents has been a major problem in Nigeria. The terrorists' weapons in the text are more sophisticated than that of the Nigerian army. According the narrator, "Assim could not believe the sophisticated weapons they had in their possession. They were equipped to face whoever was to come" (213) unfortunately, these boys are jobless, with no tangible source of income, hence cannot fend for themselves, living in poverty and squalor but are been handed expensive arms to disrupt the ruling government.

Again, it is evident that some corrupt Nigerian politicians use these boys to stall up their looted cash, which they do not want to get involved with or getting embarrassed by the judiciary. Out of greed, they make these rebels to keep having easy access to funds for their nefarious activities instead of engaging in social and societal development. the narrator reveals thus;

the small shed was packed to the ceiling with all sorts of guns and rockets. It made sense to Camsi how these men had become such a formidable force. There were sacks filled with wads of cash, which Camsi couldn't take her eyes off.... He knocked a sack of money over, sending crips one thousand naira bundles on the floor. Camsi's eyes bulged as he stepped on the notes like they were worthless pieces of papers. She had never seen so much money in one place (236)

Government's Complacency in Curbing BH insurgency in novel

However, the government response to this brewing evil is below expectation, as the Nigerian Army's weapon seems not equate that of their assailants. Baba-Ari vividly explores the state of

affairs of the Nigerian Army in midst of Insurgency attacks. That soldiers are been given counted bullets with less sophisticated weapons to counter BH in the North Eastern Nigeria. This attitude has rendered many efforts of the Nigerian Army futile in trying to curb the rebels' activities. One of Isa's friends, Moses laments thus:

What do you have? only AK-47s and Berettas are been handed out, the man behind the desk said, Only one magazine? Na fight we dey go fight. No be training o, Moses yelled. Everybody is getting thirty bullets. That is the order, the man replied, matching Moses' tone. (67)

So, the nonchalant attitude and unintentional mode of handling these insurgents have a huge negative affect on the country. Despite the low-quality ammunition of the Army, the porosity of security checks is another aspect the writer depicts. The writer captures the incident at the airport, of how Assim and his friends are given a pass with their fake identity cards, when the young security officer tells them, "you can go" (100). This shows that some of these security officers are incompetent or not serious with their duties. As for Assim, he gushes over this scenario as he teases; "see that scanner. I wonder what the government paid for that junk device. Scanner *ko dai* scammer! He said giggling clearly proud of the joke he had just told" (100).

Another aspect of government's failure in tackling insurgency in Nigeria, is the politicking of BH activities within the country. Down playing all their horrible, gory and terrible activities, and engagements with the Nigerian army by some high raking Army officers. In the novel, it disgusts Major Isa of how officer Chicharito plays politics with Lieutenant Tonie's death and other air force officers who were murdered at Joza, in search of the kidnapped school girls. BH insurgents attack their craft and brings it down before slaughtering some of the officers. Instead of officer Chicharito to be vicious and drastic in his action about this insult on the Nigerian military, he is more concerned on deceiving the public about his gallantry, as one of the best commanders in the army. As for Isa, "he hated the fact that everything had to be politicised, even the death of his brothers. It was political desperation that led to their doom in the first place. They were not closer to finding the girls, and now they had lost five good men" (199).

Again, in the text, Government's effort to abates the terrorists' punishment suggests government complicity. It is a known fact that these insurgents are against government, because they believe that "this kingdom was brought by Islam, but democracy [western opinion] came and tainted it!" (152). They carry out inhuman and heinous crime against the state and individuals in the guise of religion but government seems to be comfortable with their actions. In the novel, after the death

on Lieutenant Tonie and others by BH, many of these insurgents were arrested but an order came from Abuja to the military. General Chicharito laments;

Order came from Abuja. We are supposed to hand over all prisoners [the apprehended Boko Haram insurgents] to the police or let them go, Chicharito said, visibly upset as he read the words from the letter on his table. Sir? Release them? Isa asked.... Read the letter yourself! Chicharito said.... Isa picked up the letter and skimmed the words. His mouth was wide open.... (226)

Abuja is the capital of Nigeria; it is where the power of the country is situated. An order from Abuja is the final order in all the government parastatal around the country. Unfortunately, there is an unhealthy romance between these insurgents and Nigerian government as they being treated with kids gloves, as seen in the text. The writer depicts this act, as the government not acting as expected against these terrorists but being more accommodative, tolerant and merciful towards them. N.I.O and D.L-B maintained that;

One of the most tragic things about the soap opera of Nigerian politics is the insincerity and the hypocrisy of Nigeria's political leaders. This terrible thing is evident all over the country. If a political leader recognizes a group of people as a danger to the society, the right thing to do would be to nip the problem in the bud. This is probably what politicians in Europe and America will do. In Nigeria, the political leader in question will try to use that dangerous group to further his or her own political gains. (18)

In Nigeria, under the pretext of promoting a pure form of Islam, Boko Haram has been carrying out its radicalisation activities without interruption for years now. The group have isolated itself from the Muslim population, who did not share their ideology.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, through the tripod discourse or message in the novel, - Boko Haram ideology, political influences and the role of Nigerian government towards curbing this societal menace, the writer, Baba-Ari, tries to identify the cause of the problem. It is obvious, that possible solution can be achieved, if the cause of the uprising is properly handled. He depicts those grey and raveled areas that have long been seeking for answers by the Nigerian populace, as insurgents keep proving insurmountable in Nigeria. Again, in the text, it is evident that these insurgents only listen to their religious leaders, there by disobeying the government authority. So, Nigerian government feigning ignorance about the insurgents' mission and pardoning them, is another aspect the write tries to prove absurd and unreasonable.

Hence, it is expected of their religious leaders to change their divisive mode and content of preaching for the better, in order to properly reorientate these insurgents about the message of peace in Islam. The Nigerian government is also expected to expedite action and judgement towards insurgents and terrorism when necessary, as it will help to deter further insurgents' recruitment and negative influences upon the youths in the country.

Works Cited

- Adeniji, Don Michael. *Boko Haram: Designing Effective Counter Terrorism Programme*. Abuja: Lightening Source. 2014
- Baba-Ari, Aliyu. *The Part that Takes Us*. Lagos: Quramo Publishing. 2021
- Dobie, Ann. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Wadsworth: Centage Learning. Third Edition. 2021
- Falola, Toyin. *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*. New York: University of Rochester Press. 1998
- Habila, Helon. *Chibok Girls*. Columbia Global Reports. 2016.
- Mukesh W. 'New historicism and Literary Studies.' *Journal of General Studies*, No. 1, Vol. 27, February, 2003.
- Muonwe, Celestine. *Islamic Beyond Extremism: A Perspective*. Awka: Fab Anieh Nig. Ltd. 2017
- N.I.O and D.L-B. *Boko Haram: Between Myth and Reality*. Retrieved 27th May 2019. (online) 2019
- Osumah, Oarhe. "Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria and the vicious cycle of internal Insecurity". *Small Wars and Insurgencies*. London: Howick Place. 2013. (online)
- Richard, Simons. *Boko Haram and the Agenda of a Fail Nigeria State*. Marston Gate: Amazon. Co. UK.2015
- Sharma, Ray. 'New Historicism: An Intensive Analysis and Appraisal,' In *Indian Review of World Literature in English*,10(2). 2014
- Ukkan, R. P. "Approaching New Historicism." In Avadhesh Kumar Singh (Ed.), *Critical Practice: Journal of Critical and Literary Studies*,11(1) 2004