

# THE MUSLIM WOMAN'S BODY AS A SPEAKERLY TEXT: THE GENDERED EMBODIMENT OF RELIGION, TRAUMA AND SHAME IN ABUBAKAR ADAM IBRAHIM'S SEASON OF CRIMSON BLOSSOMS

by Elizabeth Olaoye and Amanda Zink

Body Studies, vol. 2, no. 5 (2020): 40-52



## Abstract

This paper presents a feminist literary analysis of the gendered embodiment of religion, trauma and shame in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Set in the Northern part of Nigeria known for conservative Islam, the novel depicts female characters who carry marks of religion and trauma, with the attendant shame of transgression, on their bodies. These factors combine to make these women "speakerly texts," who speak against the will of those who embody these conflicting ideologies. The idea of the body as "speakerly texts" is germane here since silenced women's bodies encode and transmit messages that their voices would not. As their voices become hushed, their bodies violently react in a language that is speakerly. Adopting Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s phrase for categorizing certain African American literary texts and juxtaposing it with Michel Foucault's idea of the body as a site of struggle, this paper seeks to examine the Muslim woman's body as both a place of memory and of unconscious resistance in Northern Nigeria. We will demonstrate that religion, trauma and shame are embodied in these characters in a gendered way. By concentrating on the bodies of these characters via a close reading, we show that Ibrahim reveals how a misogynic society forces a woman to internalize several conflicting ideologies at once, creating individuals that are layered both in memory and reality, and whose bodies speak in the language of unconscious desires and repressed memory.



**BODY STUDIES JOURNAL**

A peer-reviewed open access journal for the interdisciplinary field of Body Studies

**BODYSTUDIESJOURNAL.ORG**

Copyright © 2020 Body Studies Journal  
Cabrini University • ISSN-2642-9772

## The African Muslim Woman's Body as a Site of Converging Ideologies that Must Speak

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's novel is a significant addition to the corpus of Nigerian literature and since its publication in 2015, it has been receiving steady, critical, local and international attention. Gwendolin Hilse describes 40-year-old Ibrahim as a northern Nigerian "literary provocateur" because he "speaks openly about female sexuality, broaching a taboo subject in conservative northern Nigeria" (Hilse 2017). Aside from this, Ibrahim's gender as a male author further complicates his engagement with the feminist issues broached in this text. In a tradition that often sees male writers' portrayal of women as ambiguous and phallic (see Bryce 2015, Jegede 2014, and Kolawole 1997), Ibrahim's engagement with feminist issues in this text is a huge departure from the tradition in Northern Nigerian literature. The idea of a literary provocateur is also significant considering the nature of the society that produced Abubakar's narrative. According to Alexandra Alter (2017), "Ibrahim was bracing for a backlash when he published his provocative debut novel, *Season of Crimson Blossoms*" (C15). Because the novel centers on a devout Muslim grandmother's affair with a young rascal and gang leader who is in his 20s and explores unreservedly the sexual awakening of this 55-year old widow, Alter believes that Ibrahim invites backlash since he is willing to discuss issues "like female sexuality, drug use, political corruption and ethnic violence—subjects considered taboo within northern Nigeria's conservative and predominantly Muslim Hausa culture" (C15).

In Ibrahim's debut novel, women's bodies are presented as "speakerly texts." The idea of "speakerly texts" has been used before now in the context of certain African American novels, which have been described as displaying a language that is "speakerly," meaning more than one thing at once. In his seminal essay on signs, Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the speakerly text by riffing elaborating on Ismael Reed's term, "the talking book." A "speakerly text" is one "characterized by operating in the vernacular mode to speak to the reader, thereby deploying hybrid narrative voices that are not exclusively that of the narrator or

the protagonist" (Amjad et al. 42). Although "speakerly" is used in Gates' study to describe texts with hybrid narrative voices, in this paper, we apply the concept to the female bodies in Ibrahim's novel, bodies that often speak against the will of the embodied subject. By adopting Gates' phrase to describe women from the Northern part of Nigeria, we work with two major assumptions: (1) we work with the assumption that bodies are surfaces that can be inscribed upon (See Lingis 1984, Foucault 1977, and Longurst 2001); and, (2) that bodies speak (Walters et al. 2011, Costello 1993, and Roux and Belk 2019). The idea of the body as speakerly text is particularly fascinating in the sense of what speakerly texts do in African American Literature. For Gates, the speakerly text is "[r]epresented . . . in free indirect discourse . . . with shifts in [the] levels of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness" (Gates xxv-xxvi). The hybridity and double-voiced consciousness of the text are attributes that we consider in relation to Muslim women in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Seasons of Crimson Blossoms*.

In a 2011 multidisciplinary study on the embodiment of historical trauma, Karina Walters et. al. describe the possibility of bodies being inscribed upon and speaking back in the language of trauma. According to them, "embodiment acknowledges that while bodies tell histories, they reveal stories that are also not conscious, hidden, forbidden, or even denied by individuals or groups" (184). In other words, bodies tell stories and some of these stories are not consciously told. Some are hidden and forbidden, only spoken via a process that speaks of hybridity and raw body vernacular. In a similar vein, Jessica Murray describes the gendered embodiment of shame in some South African narratives. After her careful examination of selected narratives, Murray concludes that "despite their best efforts to hide it, their female bodies speak the shame" (228). Thus, shame becomes one of the languages that these bodies have been inscribed with and also that with which they speak, against the will of their owners. Interestingly, Islamic knowledge in West Africa



has been described as having strong connections with the body. In his study on the nature and relevance of Western African Muslims to the religion, Rüdiger Seesemann writes that “Muslims in West Africa have played a crucial role in preserving long-standing practices of embodied knowledge transmission that were discontinued or forgotten elsewhere in the Islamic world” (202). For Western African Muslims then, Islam is embodied and lodged deeply in the body consciousness. As a consequence, in Ibrahim’s novel, the African Muslim women’s body becomes speakerly; not just showing the embodiment of religion, shame and trauma, but showing the capacity of the female body to mean multiply at the same time.

Very significant along this line is Shirin Edwin’s revisionist study of African and Islamic feminism. Theorizing existing studies on women in Northern Nigerian Literature in *Privately Empowered*, a seminal work on women writers in Northern part of Nigeria, Edwin suggests that African Muslim women are excluded from the expression of African feminism(s). She posits that being Muslim and being African are not mutually exclusive and shows several points of intersection between African feminist ideologies and Islamic ideologies that African Muslim women embody. Edwin’s study suggests that women in Northern Nigerian Literature are as much part of the African dialogue as their non-Muslim counterparts in what she describes as the “plurality of African women situations” (40). In the same vein, Sian Hawthorne, in a 2014 study of religion and feminism, argues for a systematic consideration of religion in feminist discourses beyond “the apparently inimical nature of the relationship between religion and feminism” that is often staged in feminist discourses (Evans et al. 114). While the awareness of the possibility of religion and feminism co-existing appears progressive, this paper will argue that religion, when embodied alongside other colonial structures, creates ambivalence in the bodies of female characters. For instance, Edwin argues that the plurality in the lives of African Muslim women characters is a signal that they are exposed to several ideologies at once and they can be Muslim as well as feminist at the same time. While this appears plausible, it also presents the bodies of African Muslim women characters as sites of conflicting

ideologies. We interpret African Muslim women’s bodies in *Ibrahim’s Season of Crimson Blossoms* as “speakerly texts” as ambivalent sites where various discourses and ideologies converge and conflict.

### **Embodied Language, Internalized Exile, and Binta’s Body in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*.**

The first set of sentences in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* presents the character Binta with bodily language:

Hajiya Binta Zubairu was finally born at fifty-five when a dark-lipped rogue with short spiky hair, like a field of miniscule anthills, *scaled her fence* and landed, boots and all, in *the puddle that was her heart*. (9, italics mine)

To be born is to become fresh flesh and to make a first appearance. To be “finally” born suggests a delayed attempt at being born, like a child being born to a woman in prolonged labor. These are words that are not neutral in terms of gender, culture, and embodiment. The image of a prolonged labor is invoked here, thus revealing that while the character strives to be born, she remains a perpetual fetus. This echoes the ideas put forth by Ketu Katrak in *The Politics of the Female Body* where she opines that, in most postcolonial texts, “the female body is in a state of exile, including self-exile and self-censorship, outsider-ness, and unbelonging to itself within different cultures and histories” (2). Katrak argues further that in many postcolonial narratives, “female protagonists undergo . . . internalized exile where the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (2). The picture painted here resonates with the description of Binta as someone finally born at age 55. Prior to her birth, her body fits Ketrach’s description as being disconnected from itself though it still manages to encode memories that are buried deep within this same body. As her life prior to this moment gets revealed through flashback, the reader begins to perceive several attempts at ending this internalized exile.

In one of the novel’s early flashbacks, readers learn that Binta gets married off to Zubairu against her will. This



marks the beginning of her exile from her own body. Significantly, her marriage is triggered by her body's first expression of maturity, her body's first communication with the world about her entrance into the space of ripeness. Her intended father-in-law sees her playing with other young girls and immediately forms the impression that she is ripe for marriage:

Binta . . . felt the little buds on her chest jiggle each time they threw her. . . Mallam Dauda, who had been standing at the edge of the field, stroking his greying beard and watching the little jiggles on Binta's chest, asked why they were behaving like tarts. Did they not have things to do at home? (25)

Apparently, Mallam Dauda does not just listen to the songs that the young girls sang. He also listens to their bodies speaking. For Binta, the language of this body is that of "little buds on her chest jiggling" each time she gets thrown. In the social-cultural context of Islamic Hausa, this is a non-verbal cue that a girl is ready to be married off, often against her will. Oblivious of her own body language, and its meaning in her, she begins to experience what Robert Tally (2013) describes as "structures of feelings associated with places and spaces" (86). Because of what adolescence signifies within this culture, young breasts jiggling in public is a language that a misogynist culture waits patiently for every young girl's body to speak. To confirm the power that a girl's body has in estranging her from her self, creating what Katrak refers to as internal exile, we are told that "[t]wo days later, Binta was married off to Zuibaru, Mallam Dauda's son, who was away working with the railway in Jos" (26). So swift are the chains of reactions that follow Dauda's ability to see and perceive what he thinks Binta's body is communicating.

The female characters in *Season* are presented corporeally, giving as much voice to their bodies as to their speech. Binta's body is presented at the onset of the narrative as a site of encoded memories, awakened by the encounter with the rogue. It is also a body that continually speaks against her will and against her embodied religion. In the first chapter of the novel, Hajiya Binta is presented as a

long-remembered woman who uses smells to encode and embody her impressions. Smells are a strong language and even a weapon in some feminist discourses. For instance, Liza Costello (1993) makes the point that women use their bodies to signify new modes of femininity, claiming that homeless girls use body odor, distinctive after extended periods on the streets, as another mechanism of survival and as a source of protection from sexual advances from males outside their culture (qtd. in Longhurst 102). In Ibrahim's narrative, however, whenever Binta perceives the smell of cockroaches, she becomes aware that something negative and significant is about to happen to her. This smell, and the evil premonition that comes with it, are deeply embodied by Binta. Throughout this narrative, the olfactory embodiment of impressions features continually in Binta's life. This olfactory premonition of evil is so real to Binta that her life is significantly impacted by it as revealed in the following passage:

She had woken up that morning *assailed by the pungent smell of roaches* and sensed that something inauspicious was about to happen. It was the same feeling she had had long ago, when her father had stormed in to announce that she was going to be married off to a stranger. Or the day that stranger, Zubairu, her husband of many years, had been so brazenly consumed by communal ire when he was set upon by a mob of intoxicated zealots. Or the day her first son Yaro...was shot dead by the police. (9)

Significantly, this catalog of disappointing events gets inscribed on Binta's mind and memory through an olfactory encoding. Foreshadowing inauspicious yet momentous events, Binta's body becomes prophetic when it gives out this smell. The obnoxious smell remains a language that her body speaks against the will of its owner, heralding events that are beyond her control and agency. To further buttress the fact that this is Binta's body speaking against her will, we are told through Binta's niece that there are no roaches in the house because they have all been killed a week earlier. Also, Binta's searches everywhere in the house yield no roaches. So what is this smell of roaches? Binta's signal of an impending misogynist attack on her mind and body? A mental and olfactory reminder and



reenactment of her lack of agency in a culture that prevents her from voicing her disappointments? Very significant in understanding why bodies take over speech in such lives as Binta's is Laurie Penny's ruminations in her 2014 book, *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies, and Revolution*, where she writes about, "those 'unspeakable things' that have long escaped mention in popular media cultures: sexual violence, male privilege and the wreck of neoliberalism – especially their effects on girls and women" (qtd. in Keller et al. 2018). Unspeakable due to societal silencing, bodies react against such silence and begins to speak against all odds. Although forced marriage and these other negative events take Binta's agency away, her body encodes the signals of such events using a multiple voice, and acts as a speakerly text, spontaneously speaking against the lack of agency in her owner. This echoes what Murray (2014) refers to as "a corporeal challenge to silencing" (7).

Binta's silencing is not only evident in her being married off to a total stranger without her consent, it is also evident in a culture that forbids free expression of sexuality and identity. In her premarital counselling, Binta gets a sex education that frames sex as duty. According to the counselor, Binta has no say in this act, she just has to passively receive her husband's seed, emphasizing that sex is solely for procreation. Hence, she tells Binta, "when he's done, always put your legs up so his seed will run into your womb" (49). She also cautions Binta when Binta looks straight into her eyes:

Don't look your husband in the eyes like that, especially when you are doing it. Don't look at him down there. And don't let him look at you there, either, if you don't want to have impious offspring... And don't go throwing yourself at him. You wouldn't want him thinking you are a wanton little devil now, would you? (49)

The quoted passage illustrates an education is self-silencing. Binta is being warned here not to pay any attention to her body, its needs or desires. She is neither expected to know her husband's body nor allow him know hers. The cultural imperative the counselor relays is that bodies must not speak sexuality, but just mechanically perform sex for procreation. In this weird equation, the male body is also

not allowed knowledge of the woman's body because it is a shameful place. The expectation from Binta is to present her body passively to her husband and expect her body to speak only in procreating. Having passively complied in the bearing of the first child, Binta's body suddenly becomes what Murray describes as "a corporeal challenge to silencing." (7) By being presented as "a body for-the-other", which Cammille Nurka (2012) describes as a source of bodily shame, the body begins to protest against this condition that Nurka describes as existence as "the being of a body for-the-other" (318). In this case, Binta's body exists for Zubairu, and by extension for the patriarchal structure he represents. Their sex life automatically follows the prescription of the marriage counselor and can be summarized as mere duty:

He would lift her wrapper, spit in her crotch and mount her. . . . She would count slowly under her breath, her eyes closed, of course . . . he would grunt, empty himself and roll off her until he was ready to go again. (50)

This exercise is presented as a body-erasing exercise. With the bodies of both parties hardly mentioned, there is an attempt to silence the body, to prevent the female body from speaking the language of pleasure. But the narrator tells the reader that Binta wanted it to be different, in fact had always wanted it to be different, so she takes the law into her hands on one occasion. Binta yields to the call of her body and approaches her husband in a different way:

And so when he nudged her that night, instead of rolling on to her back and throwing her legs apart, she rolled into him and reached for his groin. He instinctively groaned when she caressed his hardness. . . . What the hell are you doing? The words, half-barked, half whispered, struck her like a blow. He pinned her down and, without further rituals, lifted her wrapper. She turned her face to the wall and started counting. The tears slipped down the side of her closed eyes before she got to twenty (51).

Here, we see Binta's body's first attempt to speak against the status quo represented by the words of the marriage counselor. Refuting the counselor's prescription, her body asks for more than a perfunctory reception of fertilizing



seeds. This body reflects what Bibi Bakare Yusuf describes as “incarnated intentionality.” For Yusuf, the idea of incarnated intentionality is reference to the body’s capacities to act in the world prior to conscious or reflective thinking according to the demands of a situation (148). In relation to Binta, eventually, even this “incarnated intentionality” is threatened by a repressive patriarchal ideology. Turning to the passage again, we see this intentionality reflected in Binta’s set of actions. First, she rolled into him, allowing her body agency to speak into his world for the first time. Rolling into him, she suggests oneness, equality and realization that her body is a gift to him. Taking her agency further, she attempts to pleasure him by grabbing his penis, rather than being a passive container of his seed. Significantly, he responds in pleasure, until a certain realization dawns and he reacts violently, allowing misogynist dictates of religion and culture to censure his pleasure. This scene makes it necessary to recount Katrak’s observation that “in cultures where any talk of female sexuality is repressed or silenced, we need to look more carefully for the relationship between “sexual desire” and “political power” (14). Significantly, Binta’s body in Abubakar’s novel is presented as a powerless site when it comes to sexual desire. Sexual language silenced, the body reverts back to docility, which is another way that the body’s silence is encoded. Binta’s docile body thus echoes Foucault’s designation of the everyday as an expression of a larger site of social struggle. Foucault’s assertion that “the body is . . . directly involved in a political field” and that “power relations have an immediate hold upon it” (45) are very relevant in relation to Binta’s body. Although many feminist scholars take issue with Foucault’s disinterest in sexual difference as well as with his approach to analysis of power relations (See Hartsock 1990 and Fraser 1989), many others see a productive tension in his work about power and sexuality (see Butler 1990 and 2002, McNay 1992 and 2000). Beyond normalization and control of gender, these feminists see Foucauldian study as providing a framework for a more robust “analysis of sedimented and embodied practices without relying on essentialist elements; it allows, concretely, attention to the historical processes that produce such ontologies” (Amigot and Pujal 651). For these feminist scholars, Foucault’s emphasis on the everyday practices through which power relations are reproduced

has converged with the feminist project of analyzing the politics of personal relations and altering gendered power relations at the most intimate levels of experience “in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in the ‘private’ relations between the sexes and in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women’s relationships to themselves and their bodies” (Sawicki 160). In this context, Binta’s docile body is an expression of a larger project female subjugation already existing in the patriarchal culture she exists in. Though it is her personal space, it is also a patriarchal political space.

Binta’s body, however, refuses to stay repressed. Becoming “speakerly” after her encounter with Reza, the gang leader who is young enough to be her son, Binta’s body begins to speak multiple encoded ideologies ranging from embodied Islam to “incarnated intentionality” of her sexuality. This time, it is not just her sexuality that gets expressed, it is equally her religious ethos, etched deeply on her flesh and consciousness. Shortly before Binta is shown to be in contact with Reza, the rascal she falls in love with, we see a woman who embodies and projects Islamic ideologies. Presented as an icon of Islamic ideology, she is shown as devout and hijabed, conforming to the strict dictates of a religious ethos. Throughout the narrative, as her body begins to respond to the young Reza in what appears at first as a reenactment of the Oedipal drama, the religious ethos etched on her body speaks both in feelings of shame and of an imagined odor of fornication. The repressed sexual desire first expresses itself in her second encounter with Reza after he attempts to rob her. The description of their act is so bodily that it contrasts sharply with the encounters with her dead husband:

And because they were alone in the house, because she had always wanted to, because she could not stop herself, she moaned. With his tongue, he unlocked something deep within her. She soared with tears streaming down her face. (56)

### The Gendered Embodiment of Shame in Binta

To examine Binta in this novel in terms of her body and agency, two possible readings emerge. With her deceased husband, we see a body forced into exile from itself as



she forces her body to comply with patriarchal dictates, self-silencing desires that cannot be fulfilled within strict religious and cultural prescriptions. This contrasts sharply with her awakening with Reza, a character that represents societal definition of rascality. Returning from the exile occasioned by conformity, Binta throws aside for a while her position within this strict patriarchal structure, allowing her body agency, and allowing it to become speakerly after being repressed for so long.

In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, Binta's taboo relationship with Reza eventually gets known and becomes an occasion for a gendered embodiment of shame. The relationship is taboo by Binta's society for social-religious reasons. First, Hajiya Binta is initially depicted as an embodiment of religious purity, a voice of religious education to her grandchildren and younger nieces, as well as an embodiment of religious education. Not only does she study the Quran religiously, she also shows her love for the religion in her engagement with such books as *The Major Sins*. Her engagement with Islam is also evident in her embracing the Hijab, which is prescribed in Islam specifically for the covering of shame (Fayyaz and Kamal 88). This is significant because at this point in the narrative, Binta is presented as a woman who has "her shame," which is almost synonymous with her gender, adequately covered. This stance in her initial portrayal gives her the platform to instruct her wards and to associate freely with other women who go to Ustaz Nura for Quranic education. Binta, at this point, conforms to the rumination of pro-Islamic feminists like Edwin who argues in her analysis of three African novels where the hijab is prominent that most times, the hijab in virtuous characters represents "religious embodiment of modesty, reserve and sobriety in clothing and behaviour" (212).

However, the body behind the veil is a body that has a voice apart from the veil. Speakerly after it has been unveiled by the rascal called Reza, this body attempts to continue to speak the religious puritanical language but the shame of transgression is invoked by the societal reaction to her body's awakening. As Mary Ann Huckabay argues, gender is intricately intertwined with shame, as it is "primarily through the experience of shame and the process of shaming that societies construct and control the distri-

bution of differentiated values, roles, affective domains, and points of view to men and to women" (qtd. in Murray 216-217). In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, societal attitudes towards women based on an Islamic ethos is mostly felt in Binta's embodiment of shame. At first, she feels unbearably shamed when she attempts to re-enter the space of religious and age leadership after her seeming transgression. Her presence—her body—is rejected by other women who can no longer bear this new language that her body speaks against the culture and religion of Northern Nigeria. As she attempts to pray among other women for someone's newborn child, they hurl sarcastic remarks about her transgression at her:

"The sin of some people is enough to provoke Allah's wrath and He will smite the earth overnight. ... Imagine all these shameless sugar mommies running after young boys, taking them to hotels and doing iskanci with them." (232)

Binta's reaction to this insult is a confirmation of her body's language to her earlier when she imagines that her association with Reza smells on her body. Deliberately inserting "shameless" here is Ibrahim's revelation of the other women's belief that such a relationship should birth shame as part of having made a choice to go against societal norms. At this point, Binta's body reacts in shame, a shame that is apparently not extended to Reza, whom the other women disparage as the "bloody junkie":

Binta bowed her head. She placed a hand over her chest, feeling her pulse race. She closed her eyes and hoped when she opened them again, she would discover it has all been a dream, a really bad one. When she opened her eyes, the challenge became how to walk out of the room as the women looked at her and saw her for what she was – a fornicator. (232)

Binta's shame is expressed in her body language. Her head bowed, her pulse raced and her eyes closed as if to escape the scene. Her shaming is reflected in a body language that seeks to escape the scene of shaming. This echoes Elspeth Probyn's (2000) description of "shame as very bodily affect" which "is located in, and in relation to, the body"



and Elina Reenkola's (2005) attestation that "shame touches the entire self and is manifested as bodily reactions" (qtd. in Murray 217). Later in the narrative, when Binta is among her own family, she also experiences this shame that now controls her body, taking away the language of bodily awakening and joy (agency) once afforded by her sexual relationship with Reza. The description of her walk home from the scene of her shaming is quite revealing:

The walk home, though not long, seemed interminable. Her eyes were blurred with tears and the task of putting one foot in front of the other proved daunting. The only thing she was certain about was her earnest desire not to run into anyone she knew, so she kept her head down, dabbing her tears with her rose-coloured veil. (233)

Significantly, the rose-colored veil, once part of Binta's identity as a virtuous Islamic woman who is well respected in the society is now what she uses to clean the evidence of her shame: her tears. That walk home is symptomatic of Binta's new status in shame and the attendant low self-esteem. At home, the overpowering emotions of shame persists, even as she has to deal with her daughter Hureira's anger with her husband who has just taken a new wife. We are told that, "she had been unable to lock eyes with anyone since her return and there was nothing she wanted more than to bury herself in a cave and die" (233) This is shame in its most devastating form. Although some scholars (Hadar and Ben-Ari 2012 and Davidoff 2002) have argued that radical shame can be used for a positive reconstruction of identity, shame as revealed in the character of Binta can be seen as what Davidoff (2002) has to say about shame. Though he recognizes that shame is a factor in motivating moral behavior, he also states that "shame is so devastating because it goes right to the core of a person's identity, making them feel exposed, inferior, degraded; it leads to avoidance, to silence" (623). Hence, beyond managing the healthcare of such persons affected by shame, Davidoff advocates attending to the shame, which he describes as the elephant in the room, first. For Binta, whatever liberty her sexual awakening affords her is swallowed up by this elephant in the room of her mind and body. Ibrahim's contemplation of this shame in his interview with Africa Book

Link is significant. Comparing Binta with a woman shamed in Nigeria for befriending a younger man in 2017, Ibrahim notes:

I don't think this woman was shamed for indiscretion. That was only an excuse. That woman was shamed for being old and for being poor. If she had been wealthy, that wouldn't have happened. If she had been male, that wouldn't have happened. What this shows, for me, is that people are often their worst enemies, and that society that shamed, the individual members of that community that participated in this primitive melodrama, are not without their own indiscretion. (Olaoye)

What Ibrahim's words suggest is that shaming is a weapon used in maintaining patriarchal and religious oppression. This is significant when one considers Edwin's rumination on the space of power afforded women within Islamic structures. It is through religious compliance that women like Binta are privately empowered and when such structures are tampered with, through their own transgression, they become voiceless and privately disempowered.

### **The Gendered Embodiment of Trauma by Faiza in *Season of Crimson Blossoms***

Another character's whose body is presented as a "speaking text" in this narrative is Faiza, Hajia Binta's niece. Her body can also be perceived as a testament of the past, or, to borrow Pierre Nora's term, a "site of memory" (qtd. in Hue-Tam 996). One underlying event in the collective memory of the characters in this novel is a displacement engendered by the religiously motivated riot in the Northern part of Nigeria in the 1990s. Although the novel puts the date of the riot for 2008, the writer could have been referencing any of the many mayhems that have engulfed the city of Jos in the past. The Jos riots of 2001, 2002 and 2008 are few of several mayhems and genocidal conflicts in the Nigerian North. Writing on the 2001 Jos Crisis, Kingsley Madueke (2018) notes that "overnight, it seemed, neighbourhoods that were once scenes of convivial coexistence became fierce battlegrounds of ethnic cleansing between Christians and Muslims" (87).



Madueke also notes that “[a]lthough the conflict is about indigeneity and ownership of the city, the violence took on a religious colouration. Residents were maimed and killed, not because they were indigenes or Hausa, but because they were Christian or Muslim” (88). At the end of the six-day clashes, more than one thousand lives were lost. Fa’iza is presented as a troubled teenager whose personal experience of the Jos killings is permanently etched on her body and her memory. Because she sees her brother’s head cut in half during the ethnic cleansing, the memory is expressed in her body as the sight of blood or meat sparks hysteria in her young mind and makes her convulse. This is a bodily expression of the trauma she experiences as a child.

Faiza, as a character, is significant in this narrative, for her body presents a layer of reality that underlies the sombre mood of not just Ibrahim’s novel, but of the Northern Nigerian populace as a whole. She is a personified history of the Jos mayhem that deployed thousands of women to new destinations in the country. She is also the one who helps the reader understand the meaning of “season of crimson blossoms.” As a character who embodies trauma, she seems to personify the spirit of Northern Nigeria with its attendant fear of possible violence and massacres. In her study on trauma in literature, Christa Schönfelder notes that literary texts that represent trauma are significant because they “serve important socio-cultural and political functions” (29). Quoting Victroy, Schönfelder notes that these texts do not only “mak[e] terrifying, alien experiences more understandable and accessible” (222), but also provide a means of “witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people” (29). She also notes, quoting Whitehead, that trauma fiction often thematizes “the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (29).

In this connection, Ibrahim uses Faiza’s body as a canvas for displaying the presence of a forgotten war in the present. In a nation where monuments are seldom erected to mourn those who died in such ethnic/religious cleansings, Ibrahim presents the teenage body as a site of such memories and pre-empts the re-enactment of such brutal killings in the future. By using a body that is just com-

ing to maturity, a budding adolescent body, a vulnerable body, Ibrahim seems to warn that the war is not completely over. Where do look for the vestiges of the war? He seems to ask. Look into the bodies of women, look at those that are just coming of age: the trauma is lodged deep in their bodies, presented as djinns and demons that must be exorcized. The war is budding in unlikely places, in female bodies, in adolescent memories. This is so significant when one considers that in the years after the first Boko Haram terrorist attacks in Nigeria, female suicide bombers became rampant in the Northern part of Nigeria. This, according to Aisha Balarabe Bawa, is due to the “increasing feminisation of terror by Boko Haram” (82). The group has abducted at least 2,000 women and girls in north-eastern Nigeria since 2009. Faiza’s body thus enacts the presence of war and terror in Nigerian society through her embodiment of trauma. We first perceive Faiza’s trauma when she reacts violently to blood from her friend’s small cut on an index finger:

Faiza’s eyes widened and curiously her lips started trembling. And then her entire body, as if determined to be outdone, caught on . . . Abida reached out to touch her. Fa’iza screamed like a vexed djinn in the profundity of night. (Ibrahim 72)

This passage presents a bodily expression of trauma triggered by the sight of blood. In Schönfelder’s analysis of trauma narratives, she hints that “trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of verbalizing the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible” (30). In this case, what Ibrahim achieves in this scene is allowing Faiza’s body to become speakerly, speaking the encoded and unspeakable aspects of her existence. When Faiza witnesses the death of her father and others, there is no record that she is given any chance or opportunity to speak about this experience. The narrator only relays “the thunderous silence of disbelief that follows” (Ibrahim 76). This silence echoes Caruth’s claim that trauma demands a mode of representation that textually performs trauma and its incomprehensibility through, for example, gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding (qtd. in Schönfelder 31). This performativ-



ity of trauma is shown in scenes where Faiza encounters blood or the color red and begins to manifest the encoded unspeakable scenes. The description of the gory scene is the only aspect of this gruesome memory that the reader is introduced to. The following description shows that at the time of witnessing this event, the color of blood as well as its feel on her body was part of what she used in encoding the event in her mind:

Faiza stepped forward and saw the face of Jacob James, her maths teacher . . . his face made fierce by the war paint, glistened with sweat and opium as he raised his machete and brought it down. Bright red blood, warm and sticky, splashed across Fa'iza's face and dotted, in a fine spray, the shell pink nightdress that her father had bought her. (76)

This is a memory that is etched on Faiza's body. The memory of her father's blood on her face and the memory of its warm and sticky feel remain permanently inscribed on her memory and are triggered by the sight of blood or anything with the crimson color. And in her dreams, she is often submerged in a "stream of reddish brown" (76). In her dream, when the blood spurted and flowed, "it would always be in astonishing red" (76). Surprisingly, Faiza is not the only character who has this memory. Binta who also witnessed the Jos Mayhem in 2001 and lost her husband to it: "She still thought about it, about how they

said Zubairu's corpse was butchered and burnt in the streets" (77). However, when prodded by the young Faiza on whether she remembers, she denies the memory, saying, "Not anymore child. Life is too short to dwell on things that have already happened" (77). This intentional amnesia is willed into existence to enter a societal prescribed role of a grand-mother, who must not dwell on the past. While the post-traumatic experience for Faiza consists of nightmares, bodily affects and inability to stand blood, for Binta it is manifests in a wilful amnesia. In spite of her attempt to banish these traumatic events from her mind, they reappear with the obnoxious smell, her body announcing tragedies that her mind struggles to forget.

### Conclusion

The Muslim woman's body in Ibrahim's novel is, thus, a site of competing ideologies and polyvocality. Like African American texts that display what Gates refers to as the "play of voices at work in the use of free indirect discourse," these bodies act as texts with multiple voices, speaking both patriarchal ideologies and unconscious repressed emotions (256). Because the women also embody Western education and traditional values, several possibilities collide in their worlds creating hybrid characters whose bodies are speakerly, voicing the double consciousness of their existence even when their mouths are silenced.

### About the Authors

**Elizabeth Olaoye** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Philosophy of Idaho State University. She conducts research in postcolonial literature with emphasis on African Literature and Gender Studies.

**Dr. Amanda Zink** is Associate Professor of English at Idaho State University where she teaches courses in ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality, gender, and intersectionality in literature. Her research and teaching focuses on American literatures from the margins, with particular emphasis on American Indian literature from the late-19th century to the present. Her first monograph came out in 2018 from the University of New Mexico Press and is titled *Fictions of Western American Domesticity: Indian, Mexican, and Anglo Women in Print Culture, 1850-1950*. She is currently compiling an anthology of literature written by students at the Indian boarding schools in Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.



**BODY STUDIES JOURNAL**

A peer-reviewed open access journal for the interdisciplinary field of Body Studies

**BODYSTUDIESJOURNAL.ORG**

Copyright © 2020 Body Studies Journal  
Cabrini University • ISSN-2642-9772

## REFERENCES

- Alter, Alexandra. "Nigeria's Literary New Wave." *The New York Times*, vol. 167, no. 57791, 23 Nov. 2017, pp. C15 and C21. Accessed 8 January 2020.
- Amigot, Patricia and Margot Pujal. "On Power, Freedom, and Gender: A Fruitful Tension between Foucault and Feminism." *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 19, issue 5, 2015, pp. 646-669.
- Amjad, Fazel Asadi et al. "Lorraine Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* in the Light of Henry Louis Gates' Notion of Signifyin(G)." *IUP Journal of English Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 42-52. EBSCOhost. Accessed 24 December 2019.
- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. "Rethinking Diasporicity: Embodiment, Emotion, and the Displaced Origin." *African & Black Diaspora*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 147-158. EBSCOhost. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528630802224056>
- Balarabe Bawa, Aisha. "Women as Victims of Insurgency: A Study of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria." *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Volume 06, Issue 02, 2017, pp. 81-89.
- Bryce, Jane. "'Half and Half Children': Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel." *Research in African Literatures*, no. 2, 2008, pp. 49-67.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- . "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue." *The Political: Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy*, edited by David Ingram, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 212-228.
- Camille Nurka. "Feminine Shame/Masculine Disgrace: A Literary Excursion through Gender and Embodied Emotion." *Cultural Studies Review*, no. 3, 2012, pp. 310-333. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5130/csr.v18i3.2482.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts." *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Jan. 1986, pp. 1-19.
- EBSCOhost, search.[ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=119668677&site=eds-live&scope=site](https://www.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=119668677&site=eds-live&scope=site).
- Davidoff, Frank. "Shame: The Elephant In The Room: Managing Shame Is Important For Improving Health Care." *British Medical Journal*, vol. 324, no. 7338, 2002, pp. 623-624.
- Edwin, Shirin. *Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction*. Northwestern UP, 2016.
- . "Veiling the Obvious: African Feminist Theory and the Hijab in the African Novel." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, Feb. 2008, pp. 199-214. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/01436590701726624.
- Fayyaz, Waseem, and Anila Kamal. "Psychosocial Factors Related to Practicing Hijab Among Muslim Women in Pakistan." *Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 27, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 80-101. EBSCOhost, doi 10.1080/01436590701726624.



- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Allen Lane, 1977.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Polity Press, 1989.
- Ervin, Hazel Arnett. "Signifying/Signification." *Handbook of African American Literature*, edited by Hazel Arnett Ervin, 2004, pp. 156-158.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- and K. A. Appiah, eds. "Their Eyes Were Watching God: Hurston and the Speakerly Text." *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Amistad Literary Series, 1993, pp. 154-203.
- Hadar Behrendt, and Rachel Ben-Ari. "The Positive Side of Negative Emotion: The Role of Guilt and Shame in Coping with Interpersonal Conflict." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 6, 2012, pp. 1116-1138.
- Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda Nicholson, Routledge, 1990, pp. 157-175.
- Hawthorne, Sian. "Religion and the Obligation to Alterity." *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Mary Evans et al., Sage, 2014, pp. 114-130.
- Hilse, Gwendolin. "Abubakar Adam Ibrahim: Northern Nigeria's 'Literary Provocateur.'" *DW*, 16 February 2017. <https://p.dw.com/p/2Xahe>. Accessed 8 January 2020.
- Hue-Tam Ho Tai. "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory." *The American Historical Review*, Volume 106, Issue 3, June 2001, pp. 906-922. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/106.3.906>
- Ibrahim, Abubakar Adam. *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Cassava Republic, 2016.
- Jegede, O. "Gender Conflict in African Literature." *Gender Issues in African Literature*, edited by Ce Chin and Charles Smith, Handel Books, 2014, pp. 30-42.
- Keller, Jessalynn et al. "Speaking 'Unspeakable Things': Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 22-36. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511.
- Ketu, Katrak. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women and the World*. Rutgers UP, 2006.
- Kolawole, Mary Egun Modupe. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Africa World Press, 1997.
- Lingis, Alphonso. *Excesses: Eros and Culture*. State University of New York P, 1984.
- Longhurst, Robyn. *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. Routledge, 2001.
- Lorde, Audrey. *La hermana, la extranjera [The sister, the foreign]*. Horas y horas, 2003.
- Madueke, Kingsley L. "From Neighbours to Deadly Enemies: Excavating Landscapes of Territoriality and Ethnic Violence in Jos, Nigeria." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 87-102. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/02589001.2017.1410529.



- McNay, Lois. *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Polity, 1992.
- . *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Polity, 2000.  
 “Michel Foucault: Feminism” in Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/foucfem/#H3>  
 Accessed 24 December 2019.
- Moi, Tori. “Power, sex and subjectivity: Feminist reflections on Foucault. Paragraph”. *Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group*, 8(5), 1985, pp. 95-102.
- Murray, Jessica. “‘It Left Shame in Me, Lodged in My Body’: Representations of Shame, Gender, and Female Bodies in Selected Contemporary South African Short Stories.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 50, no. 2, June 2015, pp. 216–230. doi:10.1177/0021989414538868.
- Olaoye, Elizabeth. “An Interview with Abubakar Adam Ibrahim” in *Africa Book Link*. Available online via <http://africabooklink.com/an-interview-with-abubakar-adam-ibrahim-by-elizabeth-olaoye/>  
 Accessed 8 January 2020.
- Qur’an, Hadith and Scholars: Hijab. [https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Qur%27an,\\_Hadith\\_and\\_Scholars:Hijab](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Qur%27an,_Hadith_and_Scholars:Hijab)  
 Accessed 27 December 2019.
- Roux, Dominique, and Russell Belk. “The Body as (Another) Place: Producing Embodied Heterotopias Through Tattooing.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 46, no. 3, Oct. 2019, pp. 483–507. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1093/jcr/ucy081.
- Sawacki, Jana. “Feminism, Foucault, and “Subjects” of Power and Freedom.” *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan Hekman, Susan, Pennsylvania State UP, 1996, pp. 159-178.
- Schönfelder, Christa. “Theorizing Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds.” *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*, Transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 27–86. JSTOR: [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxrhq.5](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxrhq.5) Accessed 18 December 2019.
- . The ‘Wounded Mind’: Feminism, Trauma, and Self-Narration in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*.” *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*, Transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 87–126. JSTOR: [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxrhq.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxrhq.6)
- Seeseman, Rüdiger. “Embodied Knowledge and The Walking Qur’an.” *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 201-209.
- Tally, Robert. *Spaciality*. Routeledge, 2013.
- Walters, Karina L. et al. “Bodies Don’t Just Tell Stories, They Tell Histories: Embodiment of Historical Trauma among American Indians and Alaska Natives.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2011, pp. 179–189. doi:10.1017/S1742058X1100018X.

