

## RAPE AS A METAPHOR FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOJI COLE'S *EMBERS*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the menace of sexual violence in Nigeria in relation to the socio-political violence that has plagued the nation. Engaging Fanon's postulations on violence in his postcolonial theory as a framework, the paper examines the multidimensional phases of 'rape', especially rape of human body and socio-political rape in Nigeria as exemplified in Soji Cole's *Embers* (2018). It identifies various socio-cultural and psychological myths surrounding the growing cases of sexual abuse in Nigeria and draws the connection between rape of human body and rape of human rights and its attendant consequences on Nigerian society. Hence, the paper contends that sexual violence as an offshoot of socio-political violence is associated with the contravention of democratic confidence reposed in the people at the helm of affairs by their subjects. While the paper finds infraction of trust in multifarious rape cases, it concludes that radical measures, including breaking of fear and silence, as well as appropriate prosecution of the offenders, should be taken in checkmating the menace and its attendant impact on Nigeria's value system.

**KEYWORDS:** Fanon's postcolonial theory on violence; Rape; Sociopolitical violence; Soji Cole's *Embers*.

### INTRODUCTION

Cases of rape in Nigeria have become alarming in the recent times. The mass media is fraught with myriad of rape cases. Hence, it is not an overstatement that rape has become a social phenomenon growing beyond an epidemic proportion to a pandemic as it has grown beyond an isolated criminal act that affects just a few individuals but the society at large. Sexual violence has now become a common occurrence in Nigeria from underage children of less than five years to adolescent and young adult women, while old women are not exempted (Adesina 2020a).

There are now several nauseating cases of rape in Nigeria, such as teachers raping their students, religious leaders raping their congregants or followers, robbers raping victims, members of the armed forces sexually violating innocent citizens, men raping their sisters-in-law or daughters-in-law and vice versa, uncles raping their nieces, aunts raping their nephews, masters raping their housemaids or house servants, security men raping their masters' wives, bosses raping their staff, doctors raping patients, fathers raping their daughters, young men raping their grandmothers, minors raping fellow minors, traditional rulers sexually assaulting their subjects, and girls of underage being raped by old men among others (Adesina 2020b; Akinfenwa et al. 2020; Musa 2020; News Agency of Nigeria

2020). The sad reality is that many of these people are acquaintances of the victims or those who are entrusted with their security. This shows how sexual violence has become a shocking reality in Nigeria.

Studies and reports have shown that not only females are raped; there are also cases of rape of male counterparts. Chiazor et al. (2016: 7771) report that “a man is allegedly reported to have been raped to death in the early hours of Tuesday, July 17, 2012 by his six wives in Ogbadibo Local Government Area of Benue State”. Chinkin (1994: 326) asserts that “both men and women can be and are raped, causing severe injury for both”, although in terms of numbers, women experience rape more frequently.

The menace has remained unabated because of certain reasons which include unwillingness of victims to report rape cases, largely due to the fear of social stigma that such a step could attract, victimization and threat to the life of victims and their family members for reporting such case, lack of adequate punishments for the offenders, politicization of issues relating to rape, among others. Arguably, the increase rate of sexual violence in Nigeria is stemmed from the gamut of sociopolitical decadences that bedevils the society, including the breach of political trust by the government of the day which has also snowballed into defiance among the citizens. If the politicians could rape the trust reposed in them by the electorate as a result of their politics of exclusion and exploitation, flagrant violation of human rights, and silence to evils being perpetrated by the members of their caucus, the rape of human body will not be an exception. Until justice begins from the leadership, violent acts, including rape, may not abate.

Hence, this study, exploring Cole’s *Embers* (2018), seeks to examine how the playwright has used dramatic elements to enhance the audience’s understanding of rape discourse, with a view to finding possible answers to the questions: why is the menace of rape increasing and has remained uncurbed in Nigeria? What is the relationship between sexual violence and sociopolitical violence in Nigeria? How can the myths surrounding and aiding the recurrence of sexual violence be stopped?

## A DISCOURSE ON RAPE OF HUMAN BODY

Sexual violence is a broad term for all forms nonconsensual sexual activities. It has to do with any nature of physical contact and the amount of force or coercion involved. Rape, a form of sexual assault, is a nonconsensual sexual intercourse or contact. Hence, rape is sex without consent—a sexual robbery. Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s definition of rape is all-encompassing, giving various manner and instances of situation under which the crime of rape can be committed; it defines it as “an unlawful sexual activity, usually sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against a person’s will or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness, or deception”. As a corollary, Amnesty International (2011) states at least four conditions under which, *prima facie*, the exercise of sexual autonomy is presumed to have been compromised, which reflect the elements of crimes definition of rape and sexual violence to include:

- (1) Situations where the perpetrator uses force or threatened to use force;
- (2) The perpetrator used coercion, or where he or she creates fear of violence, applies duress (including detention), psychological oppression, or abuses his or her power;
- (3) Coercive environments, from which a perpetrator takes advantage of a victim;
- or (4) Other conditions, including age, where various forms of natural incapacity or

reduced capacity exist which affect the individual's ability to give genuine consent (Amnesty International 2011: 17–18).

Judging from these conditions, consent—"the freedom and capacity to choose to have sex" (Healicon 2016: 4)—is undermined. Healicon observes that:

The 'victim' is incapacitated and therefore unable to make this choice if there is violence, the threat of violence, if she is unlawfully detained, asleep or unconscious, or was unable to communicate her consent through physical disability or drugs. It is stipulated that under 16s do not have the capacity to consent (Healicon 2016: 4–5).

These conditions present rape as an illegal sexual contact—a violent crime, even when it is carried out during armed conflicts. It is a politics of gaining control over, subjecting, and subjugating the victim.

Chiazor et al. (2016: 7771–7772) identify five types of rape: date rape, power rape, gang rape, anger or retaliatory rape, and sadistic rape. Nwolise (2020) examines six causal dimensions of rape today, which are physic-rape, political rape, economic rape, hormonal driven rape, ritual rape, and spiritually induced rape. One can also identify other types of rape to include spousal rape, prison rape, and war rape. However, this paper identifies and focuses on two categories of rape: rape of human body or physical rape and socio-political rape. Both categories involve the undermining of human values and have to do with violence in all sense of it. Belonging in the category of rape of human body/physical rape are date rape, spousal rape, gang rape—sometimes, and anger or retaliatory rape, hormonal driven rape, stranger rape, among others, while those of socio-political rape include rape of politics/political rape, economic rape, legal rape, power rape (which often involves physical rape as in the case of prison rape, military/war rape), among other social and political contraventions of the well-being or will of the masses by the 'powerful'.

The vast cases of rape of human body/physical rape are committed by people who are known to the victim. For instance, date rape involves individuals who are on social relationship or have been dating. In other words, it occurs between people who are already acquainted, friends, or people on a date or in an existing romantic relationship where consent for sexual activity is not given or is given under coercion. Another instance of acquaintance rape is spousal rape which involves the victim's spouse, and it often occurs within the context of marriage; hence, it is also called marital rape. In this type of rape, the spouse may use only force—threats and violence—to the degree necessary to coerce sex. This may also involve the combination of beatings and rape, known as battering rape; and it may be obsessive, when the abuser seems obsessed with sex, what Nwolise (2020) typifies as 'hormonal driven rape'. However, in many African countries, including Nigeria, marital rape is not often considered a crime because it occurs in the context of marriage. Another form of familial rape is rape of children by parents and other relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and nephews—which is an incestuous rape. Other instances of acquaintance rape are those committed by other individuals such as religious authorities, schoolteachers, or therapists, among others, on whom the victim is dependent.

Also prevalent in the Nigerian society, like other societies of the world, is gang rape—or group rape. Although unknown individuals often perpetrate this form of rape, it may also be carried out by people known to the victim. This type of rape is far more damaging to the victim as more than one person is involved. Godwin (2020) report an instance where "three male students...gang-raped a female year-one student" in Ajuru University of Education, River State. Similarly, Akpa and Onyenucheya (2020) reports another case where a 20-year-old girl was raped by five men in Ebonyi State. These are among many

other cases of gang rape in the recent times. This is of born out of the expression of hatred and punishment to the victim—as a result of anger or retaliation. There are also cases of sadistic rape which has to do with obsession on the part of the rapist who, as asserted by Chiazor et al. (2016: 7772), “forces the victim to act out a part in some sort of role-play, it could involve mutilation, or torture as a means of getting the rapists excited”.

## SOCIO-POLITICAL RAPE IN NIGERIA

The contravention of the confidence and power that the citizens entrust in the political leaders and their machinery or that members of the society repose in one another is another dimension of rape, which we call socio-political rape. This is a rape of human rights by the government machineries or violation of the rights of members of the society by one another—a dimension of man inhumanity to man. While it may include physical rape or sexual assault, it encompasses all manner of oppression, corruption, subjugation, exploitation, and all forms of violent acts committed against the citizens.

The psychological rape—mental trauma—that citizens are subjected to by government and its apparatuses, in a way, arguably, explains the commonness of physical rape in the country in the recent times. One can state that the rising case of criminal activities in the nation, including sexual violence, is the aftermath of the hopelessness of the people in the government. The idea is that it is not utterly possible to isolate physical rape from leadership delinquencies in Nigeria. Ariole (2020) contends that failure or negligence of government in their duties cannot be exempted from psychological rape of the society that makes a physical rape just a child’s play. Ariole (2020: par. 4) cites an instance of “the current revelation of the embezzlement in the NDDC which greatly impoverishes the masses of that region, and creates frustrations that lead to either alcoholism or deviant behaviours among their populace”—physical rape may not be absolved. This can be considered as just an instance in the many corrupt engagements of the leadership of Nigeria at all strata. In essence, betrayal of the masses by the various agencies of the state is a metaphor for the geometrical rate of cases of physical rape that Nigeria is currently experiencing (in the early 21st century). It can be regarded as the offshoot of the trauma and frustration that people undergo.

In another sense, political rape involves the manipulation of the electorates by the politicians through their politics of exclusion and exploitation. This is contrary to Nwolise’s conception of political rape as that “which involves the humiliation of the race, ethnic group, or nation of the victim” (Nwolise 2020: par. 5). Orunbon (2020) observes that “the average Nigerian politicians have raped and still continue to rape not only their pauperized followers but the entire citizenry on all fronts” (Orunbon 2020: par. 19). For instance, while those who were once in political positions like governor, but are now in National House of Assembly, are being paid pension as well as salaries and monthly allowances, the retired civil servants could not get their gratuity let alone pension. This, apparently, is considered a form of socio-political rape. Political rapists are those who have turned themselves to commercial politicians or ‘professional politicians’ who, as Orunbon (2020: par. 25) observed, “have been in one appointive position or the other since time immemorial...those who have contested for one political office severally but failed and have amassed stupendous wealth from selling out to the opposition”.

The legal system which is supposed to be the last hope of the common man is not exculpated from the cliques of rapists in Nigeria. The perversion of justice as a result of pecuniary advantages among judges manifests a critical case of rape of justices in Nigeria.

The menace is directly proportional to the ascending rate of crimes, among which is the now prevalent sexual assaults and violations; hence, the rape of socio-legal trust. Similar to this is the manner that the governments of Nigeria play politics with the lives of the citizens owing to some narcissistic policies in the health sector. Arguably, the denial of the masses quality and affordable health care services translate to rape of the citizens. When the Nigerian health facilities are not viable enough to take care of the Nigerian officeholders and they prefer to travel abroad for health care services at the expense of the taxpayers' money, then we see a gruesome rape of the citizens.

Furthermore, the manner that government machinery tramples on the well-being of the common people evinces another angle to social-political rape. This cuts across several facets of socio-security spheres, including military, paramilitary, and other agents at the rein of affairs. Any dealing that exhibits abuse of power, including sexual abuse, is a power rape—any activity that intends to capture, conquer, and control the victims. According to Amnesty International, it includes:

situations where the perpetrator is in a position of political, military or other power over the victim. Examples of such an abuse of power include coercion through promises that the victim will receive better treatment and assurances that third parties will be protected from harm in exchange for yielding to the perpetrator (Amnesty International 2011: 23).

This falls within the ambit of abuse of power. Hence, sex becomes a political power of negotiation and a tool for influencing the allocation of resources—an idea that captures the politics of sexual violence. Similar to this are sexual assaults that are perpetrated in the prison yards, detentions, or asylums. Although this type of rape occurs among the inmates, authorities enforcing detention also engage in this sexual conduct. It is a common occurrence among the Nigerian military and paramilitary personnel to take advantage of the inmates especially females who are in their custody. Akinade et al. (2010: 1761) corroborate this and note that “[T]here have been reported cases of women prisoners, who were not pregnant before their conviction, while serving long terms, giving birth to babies”. This conduct, according to Amnesty International (2011: 20), is a “criminal acts of rape or sexual violence, due to the inherently coercive nature of detention”. In the same vein, soldiers take advantage of the civilians during armed conflicts or inter-community clashes when they are deployed in the area to douse the conflict. This also occurs in the camps created for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as will be discussed subsequently in this paper.

Although, according to Violence Against Person (Prohibition) Act 2015, the law spells out life imprisonment for rapist above 14-year-old and maximum of 14 years and minimum of 12 years for offender who is less than 14-year-old, the enforcement of the law is ineffective; hence, there is no deterrent. ‘Rapists’ appear to go about their activities with impunity because of the laxity of the laws on rape and the process of bringing the offenders to book in the country. Chiazor et al. observe that:

the rigorous requirement involved in producing authentic evidence of rape such as getting a medical report, as well as a police report and within the shortest possible interval of any rape incident in question, seems to trivialize the whole matter (Chiazor et al. 2016: 7773).

This often makes it uneasy for victim to go about seeking justice, and it explains why many victims keep mum and why rapists continue in their wickedness. The law enforcers themselves are also not exonerated in the rape cases; hence, they treat it with levity. Many of them also demand bribe before investigation could be carried out on reported cases of

rape. This amounts to rape of trust by those who are supposed to protect the victims and checkmate the menace.

## RAPE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY OF VIOLENCE

The term postcolonial—and in the sense that it is engaged in this paper—is used to signify a position against subjugation and domination. Specifically, postcolonial criticism focuses on a group of people that has been subjected to the domination of another population. As explained by Tyson (2006: 418), postcolonial criticism, as a theoretical framework, “seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies”. Postcolonial criticism analyses the ideological forces that promote the resistance of the colonized against their oppressors, “a resistance that is as old as colonialism itself” (Tyson 2006: 418). Tyson notes that ‘colonialist’ and ‘anticolonialist’ ideologies can be present in any literary text, as a work does not have to be categorized as postcolonial before postcolonial criticism can be used to analyze it (Tyson 2006: 418).

Fanon’s work centers on colonization and decolonization; his essay, “On violence”, theorizes that colonialism, in all manifestations, is an engagement in violence which is meant to suppress as well as dehumanize the colonized subjects. He postulates that the colonialists’ use of violence inflicts socio-psychological and cultural injuries on the colonized people, the same way ‘rapists’—whether of the human body or of human rights—unleash untold social shame, psychological wounds, and cultural damage on the victims through their exploitative and violent acts. Fanon postulates that the same weapon of violence is a means of liberation from oppressive dominance and exploitation. While identifying violence as a possible means of effecting change in the orders of domination, imperialism, and hegemony, Fanon notes that “the need for this change exists in a raw, repressed, and reckless state in the lives and consciousness of the colonized men and women” (Fanon 1963: 1).

Rape is no doubt an act of violence; it is a dimension of assault—violence against person and personal belonging. Rape, either of the human body or of the human rights, is a form of subjugation, a manifestation of colonization. The assault is always in a Manichaeic divide between the rapist—who subjugates and dominates the victims and robs them of their dignity and virtues—and the victims, the overpowered, the sexually colonized individual. By extension, the binary is also seen in the relationship between the postcolonial Nigerian leadership and the citizens whose trusts, reposed in the leaders, have always been contravened through their state apparatuses as postulated by Althusser (1970). Althusser identifies “the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.” as what constitute the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and highlights the following institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA): the religious ISA, educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communication ISA, and the cultural ISA (Althusser 1970: 143). Fanon expatiates on this binary and the place of these apparatuses in colonization:

The colonized world is a world divided in two. The dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police stations. In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokes—person for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier. In capitalist societies, education...instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases

the task of the agents of law and order. In capitalist countries a multitude of sermonizers, counselors and “confusion-monger” intervene between the exploited and the authorities. In colonial regions, however, the proximity and frequent, direct intervention by the police and the military ensure the colonized are kept under close scrutiny, and contained by rifle butts and napalm. We have seen how the government’s agent uses a language of pure violence. The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcers and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject (Fanon 1963: 3–4).

Like Althusser, Fanon recognizes “the barracks and the police stations”—standing for the soldiers and the police officers—among others like court and prison as the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and “education”, “religions”, among others like family, political parties, trade union, press, literary arts, sports, and films as the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) engaged by the ruling class, the colonizers in all manifestations, to maintain firm control over the masses, the subjugated, colonized in all sense of it. Both Fanon and Althusser are of the position that the repressive state apparatus functions by “pure violence” whereas the ideological state apparatuses function by ideology (Fanon 1963: 4; Althusser 1970: 145).

Fanon’s postulations will be engaged in studying the different dimensions of violent acts, including rape in Cole’s *Embers*. The theory will also guide in examining the manner that the victims express their rage and violence in riding the society of the evil, engaging the same weapon of violence as a means of liberating themselves from oppressive dominance and exploitation. The aim of engaging Fanon’s postulation on violence is to emphasize on the brutality of rape as a portrayal of violent acts of corruption among the Nigerian politicians and their repressive apparatuses, as well as individual members of the society.

## A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT SOJI COLE

A playwright and author, Soji Cole is a Nigerian academic. He is an instructor in Playwriting and Theatre Sociology in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His research areas are on drama therapy, trauma studies, and cross-cultural performance. Born on December 27, 1976, Olusoji Henry Cole grew up in Mushin Oloosa, Lagos, Nigeria. Cole, an alumnus of University of Ibadan, was a Fulbright Fellow in 2014/2015 and a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Research and Creative Exchange, University of Roehampton, UK. He was one of the judging panels for the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize (NSPP) of the Poet in Nigeria (PIN) in 2018.

As a writer, Cole has written for stage and screen and has directed a couple of films. He has won various awards like the International Federation for Theatre Research New Scholar Prize in 2013 and the African Theatre Association (AfTA) Emerging Scholars Prize in 2011 (Braide 2018). He has also won the Association of Nigerian Authors’ Playwriting Prize in 2014 with his work *Maybe Tomorrow*, and “has been longlisted for the BBC World Radio Play Competition, the Wole Soyinka Prize for African Literature and the Nigerian NLNG Prize for Literature” (Cole 2018: blurb). His works include *My Little Stream* (2010), *Maybe Tomorrow* (2013), *Bambo Bambo* (2014a), *Ghost* (2014b), *War Zone* (2017), and *Embers* (2018). His play, *Embers*, won him the Nigerian Prize for Literature in 2018.

## THE SYNOPSIS OF SOJI COLE'S *EMBERS*

*Embers* (Cole 2018) is a drama of revolution that focuses on multifarious sociopolitical decadences, including sexual violence, betrayal of trusts, human rights violation, politics of misappropriation, homelessness, gender inequality, anger, and violence. The play presents the experience of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), mostly females who are victims of the Boko Haram terrorists' attacks. It captures their traumatic experiences in the hands of the Boko Haram boys, the soldiers who are supposed to protect them, and the pain that the society at large inflicts on them. The play presents how the 'women' are violated sexually and exploited materially.

The play is set in northern part of Nigeria, in the early 21st century, in a makeshift camp — “previously an elementary school which has been shut down and improvised to house the victims of displaced communities following the Boko Haram mayhem” (Cole 2018: 1). The camp is provided for them by the government after being displaced by the terrorists. The play opens with Talatu, an elderly woman, who engages three girls: Atai, Memunah, and Idayat in storytelling of her life experiences, starting from her childhood when her father abandoned her mother with three children—herself and two brothers—up to the time she finds herself in the IDPs camp years after the demise of her mother. They have been in the camp for six months and the girls only enjoy listening to Talatu's stories.

Talatu recounts how her father deserted her mother, “starting new families wherever he found himself. After three or four children by a woman, father would abandon the family and move to another city to start another generation” (Cole 2018: 6). It was her mother who struggled to keep the family until she died when Talatu was 13 years old. She was not enrolled in school because her mother—she calls Nana—could not afford it. It was her uncle who adopted her, but he subjected her to servitude and sexual exploitation together with his first son (Cole 2018: 8). She ran away to Kano at the advice of one of her uncle's wives. For three days, she scavenged the township streets of Sabo-Gari in Kano, without bathing and eating sufficient food. The food seller, who took her in, gave her the name Talatu but engaged her in prostitution. She later met a man who wanted her to start a life with him; she conceived for him and when the man discovered that the child was a girl, he ran away because he wanted a boy. She had to return to Bama, her village, to her uncle who was by now bedridden before the attack by the Boko Haram which eventually lands her in the IDPs camp.

Now in the camp, she recounts how soldiers, particularly Bayero sexually assaults her; Bayero came to her tent one night to fondle and rape her. The girls also recount their experiences before they came to the camp and in the hands of the soldiers and camp officers after they came to the camp. Idayat recalls how her arithmetic teacher in primary school, Mallam Bideen, raped and shattered her hymen right in the school and had to conceal it for the fear of stigmatization (Cole 2018: 48).

Atai also narrates her experience in the Sambisa Forest after they were abducted from their schools. She was assigned as wife to one of the Boko Haram boys, who already had six women with him; she was the number four and was given the name 'Utuba' (Cole 2018: 56). She recalls how she escaped from the forest and how the soldiers, who were stationed to watch over the ruins of her village, Gali, made her to stay with them for five days before taking her to the camp. The soldiers were angry and killed men who were returning to Gali after escaping from the Boko Haram boys; they drove back the women but only kept the young girls to themselves (Cole 2018: 58).

Rather than ensuring that the Boko Haram terrorists are eradicated, the government officials and the soldiers' activities worsen the situation. In the camp, the camp officials



deprived the IDPs of the relief materials brought to them. The girls contend that life in the forest is even better than that in the camp: “those soldiers; every night they go into the tents to rape the girls. The camp officials also rape us. They threatened us with foods and other supplies if we don't have sex with them” (Cole 2018: 60). Hence, the girls prefer to be in the Sambisa Forest with the terrorists than to be in the camp.

In the final act, the girls, embittered by the atrocities committed by the politicians and government officials and various acts of corruption being perpetrated in the society, resort to complete annihilation of the system which gives so much room for man inhumanity to man so as to pave way for “a fresh generation” (Cole 2018: 93). So, when the politicians arrive for their ‘visitation of exploitation’, the girls, who now turn out to have connived with some Boko Haram boys, and are now their agents, blow up the camp, turning it to “a complete spectacle of desolation” (Cole 2018: 96).

### *EMBERS: THE BOKO HARAM OF NIGERIA, THE SAMBISA FOREST, AND THE PLIGHT OF IDPS*

As evident from the foregoing, *Embers* beams its light on the pernicious activities of Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria which have left thousands of people dead with millions of people rendered homeless, thereby making them forced occupants of the various Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in various parts of the country. The Boko Haram, founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 and has since 2009 been led by Abubakar Shekau, is officially known as *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād*, meaning ‘Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad’ and *Wilāyat Garb Ifrīqīyā*, meaning ‘West African Province’, although the name ‘Boko Haram’ is usually translated as Western education is forbidden. As Adesoji (2010: 100) explains, ‘Boko Haram’ is derived from a combination of the Hausa word *boko* meaning ‘book’ and the Arabic word *haram* which is something forbidden, ungodly, or sinful. Literally, it means ‘book is sinful’, but its deeper meaning is that Western education is sinful, sacrilegious, or ungodly, and should therefore be forbidden. Adesoji notes:

Characteristically, the sect not only opposed but outrightly (*sic*) rejected Western education, Western culture and modern science. Alternatively, it embraced and advocated the propagation of and strict adherence to Islam by all and sundry regardless of anyone's personal wishes (Adesoji 2010: 100).

Essentially, Boko Haram is a jihadist terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria, specifically in the Sambisa Forest, although it is also active in Chad, Niger, and northern Cameroon. Their base, Sambisa Forest, is located at the northeastern tip of the west Sudanian Savanna and the southern boundary of the Sahel Acacia Savanna about 60 km south east of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. The forest occupies parts of Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Bauchi States, along the corridor Darazo, Jigawa, and some parts of Kano State farther north (Bodunrin 2014). The Sambisa Forest had been marked out by the colonial government as a game reserve during the colonial period. Now, the forest, especially the mountainous region of Gwoza near the Cameroon border, shelters the jihadist Boko Haram group and is believed to be where they keep the hostages.

The group has been known for its brutality, and since its insurgency in 2009, Boko Haram has killed thousands of people, including the massacre of over 59 boys at the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Yobe State in February 2014; it has displaced millions of people from their homes, and has been rated the world's deadliest terror group since 2015

(Global Terrorism Index 2015: 22). As of May 2020, “their rebellion has now claimed more than 20,000 lives and left more than 7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance” (The Indian Express 2020: n.p.). Their activities have been characterized by armed violence, suicide attacks, abductions, and sexual violence. Among the mass abductions carried out by the group are the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, Borno State on April 14, 2014, kidnapping of 110 schoolgirls from the Government Technical Girls College in Dapchi, Yobe State, on February 19, 2018, kidnapping of more than 330 students from the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara, Katsina State, after gunmen with assault rifles attacked the school on December 11, 2020, and kidnapping of 40 loggers in the Wolgo forest near the town of Gamboru in Borno on December 24, 2020. Many of those abducted were killed while some released on huge ransoms.

People that have been displaced are currently living in the various Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps, especially in the north. Perhaps, because many of the activities of the Boko Haram are carried out in the north and because many of the IDPs camps are situated in the north, Cole sets *Embers* in an IDPs camp in the north, most probably in Borno State. Bilak (2019) reports that as of 2019, there are 32 official, Government-run camps for Internally Displaced Persons in Borno, 16 of which were located in Maiduguri, while 16 were in local government areas. *Embers* captures the harrowing experience of these people in the hands Boko Haram while they were in the Sambisa Forest and after they have escaped and now in the IDSs camp. Ndahi (2016) reports the protest by the IDPs in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. The protest bothers on lack of quality food and denial of the same by the ‘Central Feeding Committee’ in charge of food administration in their camps which had led to hunger and malnutrition. Ndahi further reports the increasing sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution, and other diseases in most of the IDPs camps across Borno, and the prevalent issue of rape. It is against this backdrop that Cole artistically sets *Embers*.

## RAPE OF HUMAN BODY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOJI COLE’S *EMBERS*

One common plight of the women characters in the play is sexual assault. Starting from Talatu, a fellow victim, who has become a trusted counsellor and mother figure for the young girls in the camp, we see a common manifestation of sexual abuse in the society—rape by members of the victims’ family. Talatu recounts how she is raped by her uncle and his first son after the death of her mother:

My mother’s brother came to take me away to his home and that was where the life of slavery began. (*Briefs silence.*) He used me. He used my body too. His first son also raped me. I was battered. And at such a young age too (Cole 2018: 8).

The above instance is a case of acquaintance rape, which is also incestuous. Talatu’s uncle and cousin, who are supposed to protect an underage girl and orphan, are the ones who despoil her. By extension, Talatu’s confidence in her uncle and cousin is raped—a case of ‘social rape’ of confidence and security. Apart from subjecting her to slavery, they ‘battered’ her sexually. Talatu presents the idea of sexual exploitations she experienced in the hands of her uncle through the use of extended metaphor—“He used me. He used my body too.” She is not only assaulted by her uncle, but her cousin also takes advantage of her vulnerability by raping her. Talatu’s case can be considered a microcosm of the diverse traumatic acts of rape that many underprivileged females experience in many households in Nigeria and many other parts of the world, beside constant rape of housemaids and

servants—majority of whom are in their young age just like Talatu—by their masters.

Rape phenomenon continues to skyrocket because of some myths that surround it. For instance, many rape cases that are perpetrated by the relatives of the victims are kept secret. The myth is that it will tarnish the image of the family—the reason why one of Talatu's uncle's wives tells her to leave the home instead. On the one hand, Talatu is 'weak' and ignorant and lack the wherewithal to report the case, and on the other hand, her uncle's wife who knows about it wants to save her family of bad name, forgetting that she is also a woman. Arguably, this is considered a rape of social trust on her part. Until people learn to expose the crime, irrespective of the individual involved, the phenomenon will keep recurring.

Woman's exploitation of fellow woman is another instance of rape of social trust. After Talatu flees the village to Kano city, she meets with a woman, a "food seller", who changes her name from Khadija to Talatu and engages her in prostitution. Talatu recounts, "I didn't know she was preparing me for other trade" (Cole 2018: 39). The "other trade" here is a euphemistic presentation of prostitution. This is a woman who is supposed to protect her fellow 'woman' from sexual slavery. Ironically, she becomes an accomplice in Talatu's slavery and subjugation in the hands of 'men-sexual-colonizers' whose urge she is obliged to satisfy. This, again, is an archetype of sexual slavery that pervades many African societies—people take advantage of the less privileged to exploit them sexually and materially.

So many innocent young children have been raped by their teachers, even in their primary schools. This is the case of Idayat, one of the girls in the IDPs camp. She confesses that "some of us were defiled before we were ever abducted by the Boko boys..." (Cole 2018: 46). She recounts how she lost her virginity when she was in her last year in primary school:

It was Mallam Bideen who did it to me. He was the Arithmetic teacher when I was in Primary Six. He would encourage me and tell me that I was good in Arithmetic. He said I was going to be the first woman medical doctor in the whole city if I got more serious with my books. I never know he had another plan for me. That day..., he told me to stay over after school for an extra coaching in Arithmetic.... He called me into the staff room after school. The other teachers had left and the place was growing dark.... As soon as he saw me enter the staff room, he told me he wanted to make me a woman. He removed my hijab and started to fondle my tiny breasts.... He reached down and forced himself into me. He shattered my hymen that cold afternoon... (Cole 2018: 46–47).

The above experience by Idayat is a *locus classicus* of cases of students/pupils being raped by their teachers and vice versa. It represents another dimension of acquaintance rape, different from the one perpetrated by the victim's relatives as earlier examined.

Apart from the myth that reporting a rape case will tarnish family image, as identified earlier, one other myth abetting the rising cases of rape, especially for young girls or boys, is the belief that once a rape case is reported, it becomes known to people and the victim will never find someone to marry. This represents the belief of Idayat's mother. When Atai asks her whether she reported the incident of her rape to the school authority, Idayat says her mother told her never to tell anyone:

Mother said that I would never find a husband once the news got out that another man had defiled me. She said that the whole community would look down on me. She said I would be called names that would bring shame to me... (Cole 2018: 48).

The above constitutes the belief of many people who have experienced rape. This belief holds more in the hinterlands where superstitions hold sway. Idayat comes from a village in the northern part of Nigeria where people know one another and where sexual sanctity is appreciated before marriage. This is, in fact, the practice in many African communities.

As observed in Idayat's rape case above, the fear of stigmatization is another myth that sustains the increased acts of rape perpetration in Nigeria. Just like Idayat's mother said, the victims are afraid of being called shameful names if the case is reported and it becomes known. That is why many victims and their parents keep the matter to themselves, keeping it a top secret and suffer in silence, and consequently give the offenders free confidence to continue in the violent act, like Mallam Bideem. Talatu says: "He would walk around free and force his wretched penis inside another innocent girl!" (Cole 2018: 48).

The prevalence of rape/sexual violence is not limited to homes and schools as identified and discussed in the foregoing; cases of rape also abound in the various Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in Nigeria. The impunity with which the military and paramilitary men perpetrate sexual assaults on women in the various IDPs camp in Nigeria is also portrayed in *Embers*. Talatu recounts her experiences of sexual molestations by the soldiers who are given charge to secure the displaced persons in their camps:

I have suffered more indignity from him (Bayero, a soldier in the camp) than you can imagine.... Can you believe it...hmm—he came one day...the bugle had sounded and everyone had gone into their tents.... He came into my tent that night. I had not noticed him come in.... Then, he hugged me without asking.... I could see the bulge from his khaki trouser. His eyes were becoming dilated. He was high on some drugs before he came to me. He started fondling my breasts.... He took my breast out and slipped it into his mouth.... (Cole 2018: 17–19).

Bayero, without the consent of Talatu, sexually assaults her. This captures another instance of rape of socio-security trust vested in the military, as those capable of securing the victims.

We see another instance of this in the stage direction of the play: "*The figure of BAYERO can be seen a few feet away; in an obscure corner, fondling a girl in the near darkness*" (Cole 2018: 29). This is not without the knowledge and support of other soldiers in the camp, including a female counterpart, Soldier 2, Corporal Regina. Corporal Regina is the only female soldier in the play. She is presented as one of those soldiers who came to soldiery as a result of unemployment; hence, she demonstrates cowardice when Bayero orders her to take surveillance of the camp when they sense some strange movement at night. She says: "I have very serious menstrual cramp now. My period just started without warning" (Cole 2018: 29). Soldier 1, Okon, is also present, playing a game of cards on the sandbag with Corporal Regina. He is another sissy soldier who claims to be gallant even though he avoided going for *Operation Kanako*; he claims that he was dropped because he was sick by that time. In fact, it is after he avoided taking the surveillance of the camp that Bayero orders Corporal Regina to do so. It is evident that both of them (Okon and Corporal Regina) abet this act of sexual molestation by Bayero; Okon calls out to Bayero: "When you finish, Bayero, make you come back to your game make I beat you again" (Cole 2018: 29). The implication is that many of them do the same; it has become their practice and impunity; they see no crime in it again and their handler, the government, has failed to do anything about it.

Atai suffers a more horrible experience in the hands of their commander after she escapes from the forest where the Boko Haram boys ravished them. She recounts how she suffers serial rape from the soldiers:

They first took me to their commander. He had many women with him. And changed them as new ones came. After three days, he got tired of me too. He gave me to another soldier. It was horror. They threatened to kill me if I mentioned a word to the people outside when I leave (Cole 2018: 58).

It is evident from the above excerpt that Atai is not the only person that suffers rape at the instance; the soldiers, particularly, their commander “had many women with him” that he violates, especially the young girls. Atai reports that “the soldiers...kept the young girls to themselves” (Cole 2018: 58).

One common instrument that the perpetrators use in concealing their crime is threat. Many victims believe that they could be killed if they report. This is another myth—myth of silence—which stems from the threats by the criminals. The soldiers employ threats as a means to covering up their criminal acts. Atai, in the above excerpt, is threatened by the soldiers never to tell anyone about it:

ATAI: [...] They threatened to kill me if I ever mentioned a word to the people outside when I leave.

TALATU: And you didn't?

ATAI: I kept my pain. When you have the gift of life in the midst of chaos, all other things seem not to matter (Cole 2018: 58–59).

The above scenario explains why the incidents of rape keep increasing in Nigeria. Many victims are threatened to keep silence about their experience, even the ones perpetrated by relatives and *in loco parentis*. The question is, if members of the Nigerian armed forces, especially the police, could engage in this crime, who then should be trusted in the society? How are they expected to bring to account other perpetrators? How do we expect sincerity and commitment in their handling of rape cases? The many problems of Nigeria, including the prevalence of rape and other sexual assaults and all manner of corrupt acts, begin and end with the politicians, the security personnel and other state apparatuses.

More so, cases of bosses or employers raping the would-be employees or applicants before they are given job appointments are also not uncommon in Nigeria. There are many cases of this form of sexual assault in the society today which is a manifestation of rape of innocent people's virtues—another dimension of sexual valence, a social decadence in Nigerian society. There is a reference to this in Cole's *Ember*. Soldier 2, Corporal Regina, reports the case of the General Officer Commanding (GOC) raping “a new female recruit” before being recruited (Cole 2018: 75). This is what Fanon refers to as a display of oppression with “clear conscience” (Fanon 1963: 4).

Again, for the military and paramilitary, rape has become a torturing strategy for investigating crimes and an instrument for punishing ‘criminals’ or suspects for an alleged crime. An instance of this is seen when Memunah is arrested by the Camp Officer for masterminding the entry of two Boko Haram boys into the camp. Mumunah lets them in because she and some other people in the camp are there for a mission, merely disguising as displaced people. Idayat reveals: “We are actually emissaries working with Boko Haram. Memunah was part of us” (Cole 2018: 92). In other words, the two boys disguise as beggars to gain entrance into the camp. After Mumunah has been apprehended, Idayat reports how soldiers use rape as a means of torturing her:

Memunah was locked in a room and raped by the Camp Commandant. After he was done, he asked that she be thrown into the guard room. There, one by one the soldiers raped her too. And then they passed her to the cleaners. They wanted her to confess

everything and the only way to do that was to rape her. The Camp Commandant gave the order that she shouldn't be given respite until she confessed. They raped her to death. The newspaper this morning mentioned that she died of cholera... (Cole 2018: 88).

Although rape as a method of torture is “prohibited under general international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (‘ICCPR’), and each of the major regional human rights treaties” (Goetz & Ferstman 2013: 5, 22), the impunity still continues among the Nigerian armed forces, especially the police and military personnel. The Amnesty International has noted that torture, including sexual violence, has become integral part of policing in Nigeria and among Nigeria's military. It observes that “torture happens on this scale partly because no one, including in the chain of command, is being held accountable” (Amnesty International 2014: n.p.). The case of Mumunah's death is never investigated but swept under the carpet. All these are postcolonial representations of violence in Nigerian society as seen in Cole's *Embers* (2018).

Evident from the foregoing, the idea of rape transcends that of human body; it translates into all forms of corruption in the security system, and social and political distrusts and exploitations. That is why Idayat, one of the camp girls, argues that:

The real Boko Haram is here, not in the forest of Sambisa. They are here with us every day. They live with you and me! The Boko Harams are those Government people who brought ten bags of rice to the camp and announced in the news that they came with hundred. The Boko Harams are those Camp Officers who steal seven out of ten bags of rice and leave us with three to share for food. The Boko Harams are those in uniforms whose job is to keep us safe here but drag out the girls every night to have a fill of their lusty... (Cole 2018: 19–20).

The above excerpt conveys various corrupt activities of the government officials—the politicians, Camp Officers, and soldiers. Government officials engage in deception about the quantity and quality of welfare packages/materials brought to the IDPs in their various camps; Camp Officers are also not absolved as they steal substantial part of the few relief materials that are brought; and worst still, the security personnel sexually violate the females in the camp. These are a set of people entrusted with the wellbeing of the citizens, but they prove otherwise. They do not only despoil the victims materially, but they also assault them sexually. The crime of sexual violence is not only committed by the soldiers, but camp officials too are also guilty of it. Mumunah reveals:

Look at those soldiers; every night they go into the tents to rape the girls. The camp officials also rape us. They threatened us with foods and other supplies if we don't have sex with them (Cole 2018: 60).

The above exemplifies threat that characterizes subjugation. Threat, as Fanon posits, typifies an instance of the government's agent's use of “a language of pure violence” (Fanon 1963: 3). “Foods and other supplies” then become tools of colonization in the hand of these agents; hence, we see colonization as a manipulative control of others by a group of people—the manipulation that is forceful and coercive. This is the experience of the Internally Displaced Persons in the play. The camp officials threaten to deny the girls of foods and other welfare supplies if they refuse their sexual advances. This is what Amnesty International identifies as ‘power rape’ which occurs when the perpetrator intends to capture, conquer, and control their victims, especially when the perpetrator is

in a position of political, military, or other power over the victim. This form of abuse of power involves “coercion through promises that the victim will receive better treatment...in exchange for yielding to the perpetrator” (Amnesty International 2011: 23).

Memunah laments: “I feel more like a captive here than in the forest of Sambisa!” (Cole 2018: 60). The reason is that they are despoiled of the provisions that are being made available for them: “trucks full of goods...the foods, the water, the drugs, and even the mosquito nets disappear immediately their pictures have been taken” by the government and camp officials (Cole 2018: 60). Most of the pictures of the IDPs that are seen in the newspapers are arguably make-beliefs. The officials engage the communications ISA (Ideological State Apparatuses) of TV, press, and radio to envelope their deceptions and exploitations. Memunah laments that “the newspaper will show our pictures smiling like we have been instructed to do by the camp officers when pictures were being taken” (Cole 2018: 60). This is another instance of manipulation that can be considered an internal colonialism or imperialism; hence, a rape of social-political trust.

Consequently, the victims alternatively resort to “...revolution. A sweeping revolution!” (Cole 2018: 90) as a means to liberating themselves from the oppressive activities and hegemony of the Nigerian politicians, the internal colonialists. This is what Fanon theorizes as decolonization which cannot ordinarily “be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman’s agreement” but by “a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists”: the oppressors and the oppressed (Fanon 1963: 2–3). Absolutely, violence provokes violence. Given the level of violence by “our leaders [who] continue to RAPE US” (Cole 2018: 94, emphasis mine), the girls opt for utter destruction of the corrupt space and those who live on it. Cole seems to be operating on Fanon’s principle of decolonization through counter-violence as has been mentioned above.

It must be noted that the concept of ‘rape’ as Cole uses it in the above quote transcends forceful sexual contact; it covers all forms of impunity that are symptomatic of Nigerian state. It is used as a metaphor for breach of socio-political trust in Nigeria. The Nigerian political system has become depraved and the people in it perpetrate and perpetuate all forms of violence against one another. Hence, the girls contend that “A system that gives so much room for us to be inhuman to each other has to self-destruct to give way to a fresh generation” (Cole 2018: 93); thus, the girls, in collaborations with the two Boko Haram boys, set the ‘nation’ ablaze with multiple bomb explosions and spirals of gunshots, bringing an end to the old dispensation for a new one to emerge. This is an engagement in violence; and “As we have seen, the colonized masses intuitively believe that their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force” (Fanon 1963: 33).

Evident from Cole’s *Embers*, the representations of ‘rape’ is to expose the degeneracy of the governmental regime and to authorize political rebellion, as also contended by Airey (2012: 12) in *The Politics of Rape*. In consonance with Airey, acts of sexual violence, as portrayed in Cole’s *Embers*, catalyze reactions from victims with attendant undermining of socio-political power structures and disturbance to the political realm. These acts stimulate the clamor for a general civic change.

Thus, acts of rape in the play present the female body—specifically, as instances of sexual assaults in the play are mainly on the females—as a symbol of the suffering nation, a physical representation of the horrific consequences of the moral, ethical, and in general, socio-political degeneration of the Nigerian state. They also portray the gamut of socio-political upheavals in the 21st century Nigerian state.

Although it is apparent that Nigerian socio-political system—judging by the actions and inactions of the Nigerian leaderships, and as has been examined so far in the play—emergently needs transformation or change if the nation must move forward and experience

peace and progress in all areas, Cole's presentation of violence as an option to pave way for reformation or instituting sanity in Nigeria appears too expensive and defective. The playwright could have possibly browsed for a peaceful and ideology-based social revolution—or other possible options—that exalt non-violence reciprocity on the part of the victims above total annihilation as represented in the play. He could have advocated reorientation of the populace on positive national values, strengthening of the judiciary system, restructuring of the military and paramilitary, due punishment for culprits, the need for the various organs of governance to be true to their calling, observation of the rule of law and protection of fundamental human rights of all citizens, among others.

However, one thing that we need to take cognizance of is that Cole seems to be expressing in his play that the Boko Harams have gone far than we could imagine. It shows that the Boko Harams now have their representatives in almost everywhere, including the IDPs camps, among IDPs, among military and paramilitary, even among government officials. The playwright reveals this through Idayat:

There are so many things that you don't understand. Some of us came into the camp for a mission, disguising as displaced people. [...] There are still others in this camp yet unknown to many. Even some soldiers in the camp are part of us... (Cole 2018: 92).

Evident from the above excerpt, it is what many people do not 'understand' that Cole tries to demonstrate in the play. By implication, the 'Boko Harams' in Cole's play are a set of angry people, frustrated by the Establishment that makes them who they are. A close reading of the play reveals that they are once 'ordinary people', who become angered by various acts of denial, oppression, deprivation, violation of rights etc., hence hopeless. They have become so much depraved. One would hardly expect such a set of people to think of a non-violence or diplomatic means to achieve liberation—being already pessimistic in the system.

*Ceteris paribus*, the point remains that Cole could have sought alternative means of achieving the transformative quest of his characters as we have earlier highlighted. Besides, the transformation could have started with the characters instead of making them more decadent. Although the play is arguably 'anticolonialist', the resistance could have been ideological and reformatory rather than deformatory. Unequivocally, Cole's representation of complete hopelessness in the system which brings about its utter ruination through repayment of violence with violence is considered deficient.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have been able to examine various dimensions of 'rape' in Nigeria's sociopolitical system, using Soji Cole's *Embers* (2018) as a case study. And we have been able to examine why the menace of rape keeps increasing and has remained uncurbed in Nigeria. Drawing the connection between sexual violence and different manifestations of sociopolitical violence in Nigeria, the paper has demonstrated that sexual violence is an offshoot of sociopolitical violence which is associated with the violation of various human values and virtues by the people at the helm of affairs and members of the society in general.

Among other findings and recommendations, the study proposes that radical measures, including breaking of fear and silence on the part of the victims must be taken. Also, appropriate execution of the offenders should be done to checkmate the menace of



sociopolitical rape and its attendant impact on Nigeria's value system. Nigeria must come to a state where no case of 'rape' is concealed no matter who is involved. Until this level is attained, the monster will remain wild. Hence, parents and all social institutions, including religious bodies, civil societies, NGOs, and government agencies, should as a matter of necessity and urgency provide qualitative sex education and guidance to the Nigerian youths and encourage victims to speak up and break the myths of silence associated with rape in Nigeria. To that effect, members of the society must be ready to provide strong security for victims who speak out to seek justice against rapists.

Again, Nigerians must arise to stop 'rape' in all its dimensions. This calls for self-examination and self-exorcism to transform from depravity that is emblematic of the nation to sanity. It is also recommended that to nip the prevalence of rape in Nigerian society, there must first be overhauling of the Nigerian political and security systems, especially the Nigerian armed forces. In consonance with the Amnesty International, 'Nigeria needs a radical change of approach, to suspend all officers against whom there are credible allegations of torture' including rape. Perpetrators and abettors of 'rape' and all forms of corruption in the nation should be brought to book and punished appropriately. Police must be monitored to expose the offenders and ensure appropriate prosecution. The judiciary, as the last hope of the common man, should be true to their calling and ensure justice against 'rape'.

While reciprocity of violence with violence may be too costly as has been examined, we recommend that Cole could advocate reorientation of the populace on positive national values, strengthening of the judiciary system, restructuring of the military and paramilitary, due punishment for culprits, the need for the various organs of governance to be true to their calling, observation of the rule of law, and protection of fundamental human rights of all citizens, among others.

Ultimately, one effective means of sensitization and enlightenment is literary works and literary criticisms such as this. Writers, scholars, and critics like other members of civil societies and social activists should intensify efforts on 'conscientizing' the masses on steps to take to nix the menace of 'rape' and to ensure justice, peace, and progress in the nation. Government should access, assess, and implement the recommendations proposed in literary works and critical articles on sociopolitical issues.

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