In this presentation, I wish to see writing under threat as part of living under threat. It is the threat of being an intellectual and writer in a culture of violence, in the shadow of terrorist organizations including Boko Haram which stands for the death and destruction of Western education, of Libraries, Museums, and cultural artefacts. It is also writing under threat as a woman, and as an Asian woman in a West African society.

I lived then as I do now in a liminal world, an interstitial space between belonging and displacement, between a secure place called home receding in the distance, and ethnic and religious strife in the city of Jos in Central Nigeria where we lived. I continue to exist as a person of fluid identities in America, exiled on account of circumstances, facing displacement of a different kind, dislocated and seeking security in Cambridge, Massachusetts first, and then in New York City. Right now, in October 2018, an uneasy calm prevails in the city of Jos. Gun shots rend the air periodically, not far from my home in Jos. An entire compound of 13 people was massacred during the night by nomadic Fulani raiders about two weeks back in retaliation for the killing of a Fulani boy. The cycle of violence had begun – yet again.

As a young, Indian woman just completing a PhD from an Australian University, I moved to Nigeria with my African husband in September 1975. The transition from Asia to Africa with cultural accretions gained from Europe and Australia set me on the path to becoming a writer and academic. I saw myself as an insider in Nigerian society but frequently exiled to the outside by cultural alienation. My delicate negotiations with an adopted culture and community gave rise to my collection of short stories, *Soulmates*, published by Penguin in 2011.

On rewind: The year 2001 saw the outbreak of communal violence in the city of Jos in Central Nigeria, where I lived with my family and was professor of English at the university. The results of local government elections threw up deep-seated suspicions of one ethnic group for another. It divided the city and state into indigenous people who claimed ownership of the land and settler communities who could barely remember where they had come from. This soon morphed into a Christian/Muslim war as the indigenous people identified with Christianity and the
settlers were largely Muslim. The war went on, sporadically, for fifteen years before I left the country in 2016 grasping the lifeline extended to me by Harvard University’s Scholars at Risk program.

Like all religious wars, there was confusion surrounding the motive and reason for violence and killing on the streets of Jos. But animosity went unchecked as each group saw the other as the ‘enemy’. Loosely defined as the terms ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’ were, they became convenient labels to identify the foe, the aggressor, the one who did not belong.

My personal safety was at risk. But I identified myself with my Nigerian friends, colleagues, neighbours and students and did not think of escaping to safer places abroad, if the option did exist. I stood out, though, vulnerable, as a woman, an Asian (a foreigner) and a Christian. My movements were restricted. From my living room window I heard shouts and screams, saw smoke rising in the distance as churches and mosques were set on fire. Men strategized and formed vigilante groups as women ran to the army barracks with babies strapped to their backs, children in tow. Muslims fled our neighbourhood, as Christians left other places to move to the area where we lived. We harboured some Muslim friends and workers in our home at great risk. My husband searched out others in the main mosque in town and gave them money for transport in case they decided to leave the city. It was difficult to suddenly see friends and neighbours and employees as ‘enemies’.

Terrorism being what it is, kept evolving as support came in from Boko Haram and terrorist cells across the border from Central Nigeria. What began as machete warfare and arson on the streets of Jos took on new dimensions. The sound of AK47s and other sophisticated weapons of warfare could be heard in our little University town. Churches and mosques became warehouses for storing weapons. Bombings in market places took its toll on the city. Suicide bombers drove into churches in Jos and detonated bombs. Foreigners were being kidnapped for ransom. ‘Happy Survival’ was the ironic and cynical greeting of the day.

At the university, students, Christian and Muslim were suspicious of each other when normalcy returned, from time to time, and we went back to work. A colleague was kidnapped and never found, another lost his daughter in a market bombing, church members lost family in attacks. I was an active member and patron of the Association of Nigerian Authors, a Writing Group that met once a month and mentored young writers. We dodged the bullet and continued to meet in neutral locations whenever possible. A Muslim young man (who later became a prize-
winning novelist) was hesitant about bringing his manuscript to me in a Christian neighbourhood. I had to drive out and meet him in the centre of town where he felt safe.

As a writer, I encountered the same threat that my fellow writers faced, threat not on account of our work but fear and insecurity in a lawless environment. I kept a journal which I called ‘Happy Survival’ in which I recorded the unreal events unfolding before our eyes. The details were important – military trucks being burnt by angry mobs, tension in the city centre, tear gas to disperse crowds, stray bullets killing people, tanks rolling down our streets and soldiers in army fatigue but offering little consolation. Trucks drove past our main street to the cemetery carrying the bodies of those killed in the violence. The territory was rich in stories, but it was physically unsafe and not entirely conducive to writing. The Rocks Cry Out was one of the collections of poetry and short stories that were published by the Association of Nigerian Authors during this period. It contains the writing of young people, Christian and Muslim who experienced first-hand the conflicts in Jos.

In the safety and security of Fordham University and Westbeth Artists Housing, I recall the stories of not so long ago. Words are powerful and as writers they are the only weapons in our armoury. Stories have to be told so the world will know the pernicious effects of religious fundamentalism, of narrow allegiances to ethnicities in a country struggling to emerge as a democratic entity. Moreover, as the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe puts it, emphasizing the importance of one’s own narrative perspective: ‘Until the Lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter’.

I called the course I taught in the Spring at Fordham, ‘Creating Dangerously: Writing from Conflict Zones’. The course was intended to bring the students face to face with writing from war zones and areas of religious and other conflict. Injustice and oppression are causes, sometimes by products of such conflicts. Here again, Nigeria is at the forefront of Human Rights abuses. During successive military regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, writers were imprisoned, voices suppressed, the intractable ones among them executed. Ken Saro wiwa, national president of the Association of Nigerian Authors and an environmental activist was executed in prison by General Sani Abacha. Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize-winning author was kept in solitary confinement by yet another Army General. In his prison memoirs, The Man Died, Wole Soyinka says ‘The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny’.
Create dangerously, says Albert Camus, and following in his footsteps, Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian writer. Art is a revolt against silence, according to Camus. The novels of Aminata Forna (Sierra Leone), Nayomi Munaweera (Sri Lanka) and the Biafran war novels of Nigeria draw attention to the repetitive nature of conflict among majority and minority cultures, between settlers and entitled groups, those who claim to have gotten there first.

In my course we looked closely at the language of trauma, the language of the oppressed, the purpose of communicating and voicing the broader narrative. How do you write boldly and fearlessly? What does it take to step up and challenge norms? The students wrote creatively about conflicts closer to home in their own experience.

Amidst my writing and the threats to it, I have been particularly concerned with the threats faced by women. Having been actively involved in the Feminist Movement since the 1970s as a graduate student in Australia, I became interested in the way feminism affected Third World Women and African women. In my research on African women’s writing, I became concerned with the gender constraints and societal limitations women experienced in coming to writing, and in having their voices and views heard.

I would like to conclude with three stories of resistance on the part of women. The Me Too Movement and Solidarity Speak Outs have brought many issues concerning women and their muted voices to a place where they could be heard.

1. African women’s struggle for economic independence and a voice in a largely patriarchal post-colonial society is evident in their writing. There is quiet defiance rather than outright rebellion in the novels of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, an Islamic woman and writer. Yakubu, like her literary sisters who make up the Hausa Market Literature, writes in Hausa, the language of Northern Nigeria. One of them, translated into English and published in 2012 bears the title *Sin is a Puppy that follows you Home*. In the preface to the novel, the author confides in the readers: ‘In this book I tell the story of a type of man found commonly in Nigeria who regards a married woman with children as a sort of slave to be bought or sold in the marketplace.’ The novel ends with the warning: ‘Sin is a puppy, if you stop and play with it, it will follow you home’ (p.122).

2. Women in Nigeria have been involved in social justice issues through active participation and intervention. The Federation of Ogoni Women’s Organization is a women’s movement which, along with other environmental groups, resisted the
adverse effects of oil drilling by multinational companies in the Niger Delta. The women, hundreds in number, took over, occupied and barricaded eight Oil Company facilities in the region. They were rough handled by the military and the Oil Company security services. The women resorted to the ‘Curse of Nakedness’, a cultural act of outrage where mothers and grandmothers threatened the men with public nakedness. In a society where women’s bodies are held in respect, this act of shaming it was believed, would result in insanity and misfortune for the male onlookers. It was the women’s last card.

3. The Bring Back Our Girls Movement has been largely spearheaded by women. The hashtag appeared on social media day after day as a result of the kidnapping of more than 200 school girls in the town of Chibok in north eastern Nigeria in 2014. Women gathered in parks in the capital city, Abuja and held sit-in protests to draw the attention of government to the issue and the plight of the missing girls.

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