

Childhoods Dis-ordered: Non-Realist Narrative Modes in Selected Post-2000

West African War Novels

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor Philosophiae in the Department of English, University of the



**UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE**

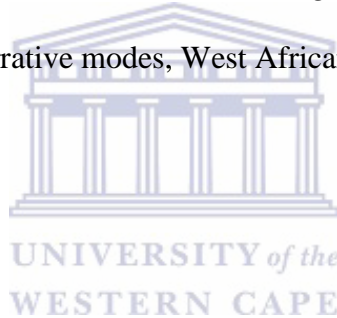
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KEYWORDS: Childhood, Child soldier, Initiation, *Bildungsroman*, Surrealism, Magic Realism, Grotesque, Absurd, Non-realist narrative modes, West African Literature



DECLARATION

I declare that “Childhoods Dis-ordered: Non-Realist Narrative Modes in Selected Post-2000 West African War Novels” is my own work, that is has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university, and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how selected West African war novels employ non-realist narrative modes to portray disruptions in the child's development into adulthood. The novels considered are Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (2006), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005). These novels strain at the conventions of realism as a consequence of the attempt to represent the disruptions in child development as a result of the upheavals of war. A core proposition of the study is to present why the authors in question are obliged to employ non-realist modes in representing disrupted childhoods that reflect the social and cultural disorder attendant upon war. The dissertation also asks pertinent questions regarding the ideological effect of these narrative strategies and the effect of the particular stylistic idiosyncrasies of each of the authors in figuring childhood in postcolonial Africa. The novels in question employ surrealism, the absurd, the grotesque and magical realism, in presenting the first person narratives of children in war situations, or the reflections of adult narrators on children affected by war. This study further analyses the ways the aesthetic modes employed by these authors underscore, in particular, children's experiences of war. Through strategic use of specific literary techniques, these authors highlight questions of vulnerability, powerlessness and violence on children, as a group that has been victimised and co-opted into violence. The study further considers how these narrative transformations in the representations of children in novels, capture transformations in ideas about childhood in postcolonial Africa.

CITATION STYLE: MLA (Gibaldi, 7th ed.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am first of all grateful to Almighty God for the opportunity to gain admission into the PhD programme and the good health and sound mind He granted me during my years of study.

To my supervisor, Dr Fiona Moolla, it has been great working with you. It is the confidence you had that I had found a great researchable topic and that I had the capacity to complete the thesis, that has brought this work this far. I am so grateful to you for the “can do” spirit you put in me. I am again grateful for your direction, patience and encouragement throughout my three years of study. In fact, I have really enjoyed working with you and have learnt so many good things from you which will enhance my career as an academic. To all the lecturers in the English department, your support has been so wonderful and I say God richly bless you all. I am also grateful to Mrs Sandra James, librarian of the faculty of Arts and Helena of inter-library loans, UWC library who made sure I got all the books and articles I needed for my study.

To my family, I say God richly bless you. My dear husband Mr Isaac Addei, you became a mother and a father at the same time to our four little children so that I could have a PhD. You shared in all my moments of frustration and you encouraged me never to give up. May the Almighty God bless you for your sacrifices. And to my lovely children; Yaa, Afia, Kofi and Kwame, it was not easy to live without Mummy but you understood that I needed to add value to myself in my career so you were denied of a mother for three years. You have my sincere gratitude. I am also grateful to my parents and all my brothers and sisters for their prayers, support and words of encouragement.


I am also grateful to the management of University of Mines and Technology, Ghana, for their financial support and the permissions granted me to travel to South Africa to work on the thesis. I am especially indebted to Dr Alexander Kakraba Dakubu, my former head of department

and a good friend (now deceased), without whose support I could not have achieved this. He taught all the courses I was handling together with his own lecture load. May his kind soul rest in perfect peace.

Finally, to the CODESTRA and South African National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), thank you very much for your funding and the mentor you provided to assist in the writing of this thesis.



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INTRODUCTION

The abuse of children in conflict zones around the globe has attracted numerous responses in different art forms such as music, films and novels, especially among African writers. These writers employ diverse narrative modes to portray the suffering and trauma of children affected by war as a way of bringing the plight of the postcolonial African child into the literary public sphere. These novels, albeit about childhood, do not follow the plot of the *Bildungsroman* as this genre has developed in African literature. The *Bildungsroman* in its African form has considered development not only into individual adulthood, but also development into the culture of colonial modernity. In African literature, the *Bildungsroman* focuses on the formation of young protagonists in an uncertain world (Amoko 200). One other characteristic of these “classical” African *Bildungsromane*, is that almost all their protagonists undergo traditional initiation before leaving home. Nevertheless, most protagonists of postcolonial war novels do not undergo initiation and their experience of war seems to be their form of initiation. This study explores selected West African novelists’ representation of disrupted childhoods as a result of war and how these disruptions shift their narratives into non-realist modes.

This study is significant in the sense that while fictional child soldier narratives have become a subject of interest in literary criticism, the attention of most critics has not been drawn to narrative mode and matters of style consequent upon the various kinds of horrific experiences evoked as exemplified in the four texts in this study. The study argues that surrealism in Abani’s *Song for Night*; absurdism in Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated*; the grotesque mode in Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and magical realism in Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me* are narrative perspective effects which are “compelled” by the nature of the child soldier protagonists’ battlefield and wartime experiences depicted in these novels. The central thrust of this study is

how it shows that unlike the “classic” European *Bildungsroman* or its African variant, the four texts that are explored in this study represent a form of “anti-*Bildungsroman*”. For, instead of showing the *Bildung* pattern of personality shaping and growth through experience resulting in the protagonists’ eventual social accommodation, the four protagonists’ experiences are a parody of initiation and its purpose of social inclusion.

In order to make clear the ongoing trends in the African child-soldier narrative, we will have to analyse the concept of childhood globally and across disciplines, narrowing it down to Africa. Other issues to be discussed as part of the introduction include initiation, the *Bildungsroman* and a general overview of the thesis.

The Concept of Childhood

The idea of childhood has attracted significant scholarly debates from historians, social scientists and philosophers. From the historical point of view, one work that has become a reference point for many works on childhood is the book, published in 1960, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, by the French historian Philippe Aries. Aries’ study involved the changes over time in different cultures around the idea of childhood, including the experiences of childhood and adult treatment of children. His study revealed that childhood had a history in different cultures that has changed over time. Aries argues that before the seventeenth century, children were represented as mini adults and until “the eighteenth century, adolescence was confused with childhood” (25).

In medieval England, the family unit drew in the extended family of other children, parents, grandparents, and relatives living in the household. This extended family in the European non-modern era was headed by a patriarch. This is similar to what was practised in Africa and that, in

part, continues to be practised in some parts of Africa. Children were sometimes sent to stay and assist other relatives who needed their help which also acted as a form of apprenticeship training for the children. This has led Aries to the idea that in the Middle Ages, the idea of childhood did not exist, to be contested by scholars like Shulamith Shahar who argues that the Middle Ages were even more progressive and enlightened in their attitude to childhood and treatment of children than in later historical periods. According to Nicholas Orme, in medieval Europe, there existed a model of different stages of life that demarcated when childhood began and ended. Children were regarded as adults for some purposes and as children for other purposes. This resonates with what is seen in the novels considered in this study where children are considered as adults in war situations, but otherwise remain children. James A. Schultz, in a survey of High Middle German texts concluded that there was a concept of childhood in Germany in the Middle Ages. According to Hugh Cunningham, in the “German High Middle Ages, people did not think that the way in which children were treated would affect how they turned out as adults ... they believed rather that a discerning eye could pick out from childish traits what the future adult would be like: childhood was important not in itself but for what it might tell you about the adult to be” (1198 – 1199 *my ellipsis*). In China, Pei-Yi Wu’s analysis of mourning literature from the Tang dynasty to the fifteenth century reveals that “children were more written about in China than in Europe” (Pei-Yi Wu qtd in Cunningham 1199). This shows that like Europe, the Chinese have had a long history of the concept of childhood. Thus, childhood existed in non-modern cultures and children learnt informally from adults and were treated differently from adults even though in some few instances, they were treated like adults.

The creation of modern childhood in Europe and America has largely been associated with the expansion of schools. Thus unlike in non-modern cultures where children stayed at home with

adults and learnt informally, in the modern era, children are grouped together in schools and are given a formal education. According to Aries, formal schooling played an important role in the discovery of childhood since it took children away from adult society and directed adult attention to the specific needs and abilities of children. In Japan, it was during the nineteenth century that schools became very common “with the establishment of over thirty thousand schools between 1830 and 1868” (Platt 967). If we connect this with Aries’ thesis, then the overwhelming expansion of educational institutions suggests that Japan was on its way to the discovery of its own concept of modern childhood independent of Europe and America. This discovery of childhood in Japan saw the shift from large families to smaller nuclear families which helped to create powerful households that led to the decline of the birth rate and infant mortality rate. The importance attached to childhood also saw in the eighteenth century, the emergence of rituals that marked off the child’s development. There was a ritual, the *obiwai*, to publicly announce the pregnancy. The birth of a child was followed by three ceremonies on the third and seventh day of life, as well as a ceremony which signified the child’s first trip out of the house and first visit to the local Buddhist temple (Platt 968). Similar to what pertains in Africa, there was a ceremony to mark a person’s transition to adulthood during which youths from ages twelve to sixteen appeared before the family and community in adult clothes and hairstyles. This shows that childhood was clearly marked and considered very important in Japanese culture. The conclusion drawn from the arguments of these scholars is that childhood is more recognised in modern cultures than in non-modern cultures even though this is not to say that childhood did not exist in non-modern cultures.

Childhood is not a terrain only for historians: sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, demographers and psychoanalysts, all claim to have distinctive approaches to the study of childhood. Despite the diversity of culture, “childhood has in different cultures stood for

innocence, hope, naïveté, incapacity, or evil, or has embodied a nostalgia for times past” (Cunningham 1195). From the sociological point of view, childhood is a vigorously negotiated conventional social relationship, within which we constitute the early years of human life. Even though the immaturity of a child is a biological fact of life, the way in which one understands this immaturity depends on one’s culture. Childhood is a variable of social analysis that cannot be separated from other variables like class, gender or ethnicity. Rather, comparative and cross-cultural analyses reveal a variety of childhoods rather than a single, universal phenomenon (Prout and James 8). For instance, a sixteenth-century experience would be different from a twenty-first century experience, a boy’s experience would be different from that of a girl, and an African child’s experience different from that of an American child. Childhood is thus socially and culturally constructed.

Philosophers have also over the years been interested in childhood studies. For instance, in the 1600s, the philosopher, John Locke, was very influential in projecting children as innocent beings in need of adult protection. His theory of the “tabula rasa” stressed that the child was born with a “blank brain” and that whatever adults “write” on the child’s brain is what he/she will become. This led to a shift in social and philosophical attitudes toward children and the notion of childhood. Jean Jacques Rousseau was also very influential during the European Enlightenment era and the Romantic period. He described childhood as a brief period of sanctuary before people encounter the dangers and hardships of adulthood. “Why rob these innocents of the joy which passes so quickly?” Rousseau pleaded. “Why fill with bitterness the fleeting early days which will no more return for them than for you?” (Cohen 20). Perhaps these are the same questions being asked by the authors of the novels under consideration in this study as they expose the plight of the African child soldier through their writing. Through Rousseau’s effort, education became very

common at this stage and schools were even built for poor children to learn reading and writing.

It is interesting to note that childhood experiences of almost every period have received literary responses. The prevalence of child labour in the West during the late eighteenth century when children were made to work in factories and mines, and as chimney sweepers for long hours with little pay, led to the writing of William Blake's "Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Innocence* and "Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Experience*, among many other poems that address childhood. In the Victorian era when the role of the family and the sanctity of the child were emphasised, child oriented books emerged. Books that appealed to children's imaginations such as Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) were written. Following the Western experience, it is not surprising that novels about children's experience in wars are prevalent in Africa in the first half of the twenty-first century since they are responses to the suffering of children during the wars of the continent in the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In literature, as opposed to sociology, childhood has over the years been a subject of interest worldwide for authors and critics alike. Children have featured fairly prominently in literary works in most cultures over the centuries, but gained special prominence during the European Romantic era. For the Romantic poets, the child became a theme of a certain weight as seen in William Blake's "Songs of Innocence", (1789) William Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807) and "We are Seven" (1798). For Blake, childhood signified innocence and for Wordsworth the child had a natural piety and wisdom. Wordsworth's illustrious "The Child is father of the Man" (1802) became a very popular theme for many authors. This statement shows how crucial childhood is as a foundation and process stage if one is to develop into a fully-realised adult since a man is the product of the habits and behaviours

developed as a child. These ideas, of course, apply equally to the girl child although women have not been a strong focus of Romanticism through the canonised male poets.

Critical studies on the representation of children in literature have also enjoyed a long tradition in Europe, America and elsewhere. Mary Jane Hurst's *The Voice of Childhood in American Literature* (1990), reveals that the critical study of childhood in literature dates as far back as 1895 with Horace Scudder's *Childhood in Literature and Art* which provides a chronological review of selected child characters mostly from Roman, Greek, Hebrew, early Christian and medieval art. Other works on childhood include Peter Covery's *The Image of Childhood* (1967), which concentrates on English literature, dating childhood as a literary theme from the period of the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth. Richard Coe's *When the Grass was Taller* (1984), presents a poetic review of the fictional autobiographies of childhood, drawing mainly on English and Australian writers with some references to African and American literatures. A significant conclusion drawn from all these works is that notions of childhood have kept changing to conform to changes in society, and society's conception of what a child is, and these are reflected in literature, making literature a good source for studying childhood.

Childhood in Africa

African children are often said to face short, difficult and hard lives. They have often been reported in recent news items about wars as brutalised, abandoned, abused and turned to silage by warlords. This picture has overshadowed the important position the child occupies in most African communities. In Africa, the child is accorded a very significant position. This is seen in how the child features in African oral literature, such as folktales and proverbs, which construct the role and identity of the child. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, proverbs such as *akodaa su mpaninsu a wogye no ayieaseka* (if a child sings a dirge like an adult, he/she is made to pay a

funeral contribution) and *aserewa mo tam kesse a etu no hwe* (if the sparrow puts on a loin cloth that is too big for her, it weighs her down) are designed to put the child in his/her rightful position to do what is expected of him/her to guarantee her/his safety. Also in Africa, children who display a sense of wisdom and maturity are respected and treated like adults as seen in this Akan proverb, *akodaa hu ne nsa hohoro a one mpanimfo didi* (if a child learns to wash his/her hands well, he/she can eat in the same bowl with adults) and the Yoruba proverb, *biomode ba mowo we, a ba agbajeun* (if a child learns to wash his/her hands well, he/she can eat in the same bowl with adults), which is also an Igbo proverb alluded to in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. That children are needed for the continuity of the family or the clan is illustrated by the Yoruba proverb, *bi aladi o ba si nile, omo eni ni wo le deni* (when one is not at home, it is the children that will take care of the homestead).

The child features very prominently in many African folktales even though the image of the child differs across cultures. In some cultures, the child has often been portrayed in folktales as an orphan, a wandering child without family or love, sometimes brutalised by a stepmother or a co-spouse of the mother (Cazenave 62). However, in other African cultures such as among the Akans of Ghana, and the Igbos and Yorubas of Nigeria, children are central to the household and form the main theme of most folktales. For instance, there are many tales about the disobedient child being punished while the obedient child is rewarded. Because of the significance attached to children as reflected in these folktales, “[w]omen are constantly shown in their productive roles. They may be pregnant or bearing children or in company of children, or unfulfilled because they have no children of their own” (Opoku-Agyemang 126). Even men are under pressure to have children. For instance, a popular Akan folktale, “How Kwaku Ananse (the spider) Got Aso in Marriage,” has it that;

Aso and her husband Kwasi-the-Jealous-One seem to have adjusted to life without children of their own, although that was a reason they moved away from society. However, even the Sky-God encourages the young men to impregnate Aso because her husband is unable to fulfill the expectation after several years of marriage. It takes Kwaku Ananse who adopts the name “Rise-up-and-make-love-to-Aso” to accomplish the feat. He marries Aso and Akwasi-the-Jealous-One is rejected” (Opoku-Agyemang 126).

This tale illustrates the fact that among the Akans, just like several other ethnic groups in Africa, the primary aim of marriage is for couples to have children. It has even been argued that it is the need for children that gave rise to polygyny. Patriarchs married many wives in order to have more children to expand the labour force on their farms. However, the form of labour they provided is not the type of exploitation of children as chimney sweepers represented in Blake’s “Holy Thursday” poems. Rather, in the African context, children work side by side with their families as part of their socialisation and as a form of informal education for future maturity and independence. This system was common among the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and Ewe of West Africa; the Kongo and Gisu people of Central Africa; the Pondo, Zulu and Sotho chiefdoms of southern Africa and the Somali and Kikuyu Chewa families in eastern Africa. Children engaged in tasks according to gender and age. They formed specially recognised groups within which some young people taught one another about gender and generational roles. An example is found among the Igbos, where boys of the same age and village join “age-sects” to train to be married men. Throughout Africa, boys performed male duties like building fences, carving wood and weaving fishing nets with their brothers. In the same way, girls taught their younger sisters female chores like fetching water and firewood, making fires, thatching huts, making pots and planting crops. This forms part of the

children's socialisation and education outside of a formal schooling system. It is even said that some African chiefs used children to carry out national assignments. For instance, regents of the nineteenth century Zulu kingdom enlisted regiments of boys to haul provisions during military campaigns and used girls to weed the gardens of the royal family. This indicates that gender roles are very active even in childhood. It also indicates that the use of children during wars has a long history even though not as combatants such as represented in the novels for this study.

The child is an important figure in African society as the society is structured around their lives. Across the continent, children represent continuity and there are many rituals and newly-developed contemporary institutions designed to ensure their survival and prosperity, since they are part of the shared wellbeing of the family, where the family provides them with socialisation, security, shelter and sustenance. In almost all African communities, two important rites of passage are done for children. These are a naming ceremony to welcome them, and the initiation ceremony to usher them into adulthood even though these rites may differ from community to community. The significance of these ceremonies cannot be over-emphasised as they have a lasting impact on the individual's life. There is no specific age at which initiation should be done. This is because until 1989, when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by many African nations, bringing the end of childhood to age 18, there was no age attached to childhood in Africa. This led the French historian, Aries to posit that "[t]o the African bush, age is still quite an obscure notion, something which is not so important that one cannot forget it" (1). A child was said to be matured and initiated into adulthood when he/she grows pubic hair and when other physical changes occur such as the development of breasts and menstruation in girls and a deep voice in boys. Maturity was also linked to the individual's ability to conduct him/herself in a mature manner; but across African cultures, there was no specific age measured in years at which a child

had to be initiated.

The significance of the African child in life and in oral literature is also reflected in the written literature of Africa especially in narrative fiction. The need for children features very prominently in several African novels. This is seen in how both male and female African authors treat the theme of barrenness and parenthood in their novels. Novels like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* are but a few examples of African novels which stress the need for children. The prevalence of this subject in African literature establishes Africa as a child-oriented society. The child figure has been used over the years as a metaphor to ponder colonialism and its effects on the African continent. The negritude movement, for instance, used the child figure to present a different understanding of African culture to the colonial culture. According to Uche A. Ogike, "Children characters like the child in Camara Laye's *L'Efant noir*, Nagoa and Noaga in Camara Laye's *Leregard du roi Soudjata* in Djibril Niane's *Soudjataou ou l'Epopée Mandingue*, Mia ma ono in Jean Malonga's *La legend de M'Pfoumou Ma Mazone*, all portray the peace and tranquility of traditional African life, the glories of African life" (113). Child figures in novels like Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Weep not, Child* and *The River Between* and Achebe's *Arrow of God* have been used to speak against colonial oppression.

Children also feature very prominently in postcolonial African literature. Most of these novels portray the violence and suffering in which children are immersed. These authors employ child narrators/protagonists to depict the horrors of social breakdown in war and other forms of violence and suffering, including domestic violence. Novels such as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not Obligated*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of no Nation*, Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny chien méchant (Johnny Mad*

Dog) and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* explore the experiences of the continent's children during wartime. Novels like Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* and Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* explore the sexual violation of children in the domestic space while novels like Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores the effects of abusive parenting on children. Moving to the South of the continent, according to Robert Muponde, there is a "growth of writing in South Africa which concerns itself with critiques of children and childhood in youth literature in and around South Africa" (n.p). The representation of, and especially the suffering of children, can thus be said to have gained much literary attention in Africa during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Of all the above-mentioned images of the child in African novels of the 1990s and 2000s, the most prominent is the image of the child soldier as represented in the novels being considered in this study. These novels have enjoyed significant critical attention due to the issues they raise. Some critics read these novels as symbolic of postcolonial African nations, some are about the abuse of human rights while others read the novels as representing the trauma of the postcolonial African child. Thus, these critics hold the view that, in some ways, the violent child depicted in the African novel is symbolic of Africa itself. However, there are other critics who believe that the novels are ways of calling on readers to ponder children and childhood in the African context. For instance, according to Dosline Kiguru, the violent child narratives deal with new issues such as economic hardships, human rights violations, violence, and the status of the family as a basic unit that are emerging in postcolonial states, and she believes the use of a child narrator is very effective for the task. Catarina Martins also holds the view that the novels and films that feature child soldiers demand "a close examination of the representation of child soldiers as an attempt to clarify the extent to which they correspond to a socially and culturally determined construction and to an ideological production of the concept of childhood" (3). Even though I do not disagree with the

critics who read the representation of children in war times as symbolic of the African continent, I wish to build on the works of the critics who believe that these works are ways of questioning the concept of childhood in postcolonial Africa. My interest in this study is the way, unlike earlier African *Bildungsromane*, the protagonists of most of the child-soldier narratives do not undergo traditional initiation, neither do they experience classical European *Bildungsroman*-type of development. Rather, their war experiences seem to be their form of initiation and the depictions of these disrupted childhoods shift the narratives concerned into non-realist narrative modes. The next section discusses initiation among different ethnic groups to serve as a yardstick against which to measure the forms of “initiation” found in the novels under discussion in this study.

Initiation – Forms of Initiation

The life of every individual in any society consists of a series of passages from one age to another, and from one role to another. In Africa, there are unique rites of passage among age and occupational groups, and development from one group to the next involves special acts which are packaged in ceremonies. This is because African cultures maintain that no act is entirely free of the sacred. Progression from one group to another and from one social situation to the next are seen as an expression of existence, so that a man or woman’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar beginnings and endings: birth, social puberty, marriage, motherhood, fatherhood, advancement to higher class, occupation specialisation and death (Van Gennep 3). There are ceremonies for every one of these events and the purpose of such ceremonies is to enable the person to pass from one distinct position to another equally distinct position. As a result, there are general similarities in the ceremonies of birth, puberty, marriage, initiation into religious societies and funerals. Mircea Eliade defines initiation as a “body of rites and oral

teaching whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated” (x – xi). This signifies that initiation opens one’s eyes to the social and religious life around him or her. Eliade is interested in the religious significance of initiation. He believes that initiation in all cultures, “recapitulates the sacred history of the world. And through this recapitulation, the whole world is sanctified anew; those initiated perceive the world as a sacred work, a creation of God” (qtd in Nwosu 175). Eliade sees the “death” and “rebirth” associated with initiation as crucial to human existence because he believes that, like all things in nature, man himself had to die and be reborn. He states that in many cultures, “when brought to birth, man is not yet completed; he must be born a second time spiritually because birth through the mother into the profane world of nature is considered ‘an imperfect embryonic state’. Men perform sacred rituals to attain ‘a perfect adult state’” (qtd in Dardzinski 10 *original emphasis*). Eliade’s postulation is in line with Christian belief that before anybody can enter the kingdom of God; he/she must be born again (John 3:3). Christian practices like baptism and confirmation have the same purpose as traditional initiation. The similarity between Christian beliefs and traditional initiation has made scholars like Patrick U. Nwosu argue for the incorporation of Igbo initiation into the Catholic Church.

Every rite of passage involves three stages: separation, margin (or limen, signifying threshold) and reaggregation (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94-95). During initiation into adulthood or age group, the second phase is very crucial. This stage is what Van Gennep calls the liminal stage. Victor W. Turner refers to this stage as the stage “betwixt and between”. It is what boys and girls go through during this stage that prepares them for their future roles as adults. Activities at this stage differ from one society to another but they are all aimed at toughening the initiates to face future challenges in life and live as responsible adults. In most cultures, the initiate is

considered to be dead and in so far as “the neophyte is structurally dead, he or she may be treated as a corpse is customarily treated in his or her society. The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of a customary burial” (Turner, “*Betwixt and Between*” 236). The essential feature of this symbolisation is that the initiates are neither living nor dead or in some respects both living and dead. We see a distorted version of this idea in *Song for Night*, to be analyzed in detail in Chapter two, where the war situation has turned the central child character, My Luck, into a literal ghost, existing between the worlds of the living and the dead. The condition of the initiates, like that of the child-soldier figures, is one of ambiguity and paradox. They have “no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position that demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (Turner, “*Betwixt and Between*” 237). It can be said that all male initiations have the following universal characteristics: boys around the age of puberty are first forcibly separated from their mothers by elder men and shamans disguised as ancestral spirits; they are then isolated in the bush by the men in a previously prepared sacred ground where the uninitiated are not allowed; next, the shamans retell mythic legends of the tribe, reveal sacred objects to the boys, and in some cases, perform rituals of scarification to symbolise the death of their previous identities; and finally, the initiates are ceremonially reintegrated into the tribe as newborn men who are now allowed to marry (Frazer referred to in Dardzinski 25). The role of the shaman, resonates with what we witness in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, where a shaman, Bemba G, tries, in the unnatural context in which the child-soldiers find themselves, to reverse the aberrant initiation of former child soldiers and restore them to childhood, rather than facilitating the transition to adulthood. There are different types of initiation. These include initiation into totem groups, initiation into secret societies and initiation into age groups; but for this study, attention is paid to initiation into age group.

Initiation into age groups is very common among many African societies. In most cultures, it marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Boys or girls who attain the initiation age at the same time are brought together for the initiation ceremony. Among the Igbos, during this time, initiates are separated from the rest of the community to live for a period of seclusion by themselves. This practice ensures a form of unity and identification since each initiate identifies himself with other youths with whom he forms a group of initiates. In some cases, the cohort develops into an age grade with political and religious significance. According to Margaret M. Green, Igbo boys' initiation was chiefly for the purpose of acquiring medicine or magic rather than receiving instruction. The medicine was put in the boys' eyes and into cuts in the skin over a period of eight days. The boys were not supposed to cry. It may be said that, through this treatment, resoluteness was inculcated in them (80). During the rite, the boys are made to swear that they would die should they use the medicine wrongfully. This initiation ensures a certain code of morality. In addition, the rite ensures group solidarity as well as giving confidence to the growing boy at the time he needs it most. According to Vincent de Paul U. Mbah, the significance of initiation to the Igbo "stems from the fundamental concepts of the Igbos that life is not a finished product by nature but rather has to be developed, enhanced, fully realised by individuals through personal endeavour" (183). Once initiated, one becomes completely engrafted in the society, acquires new status, shoulders various responsibilities and enjoys new privileges as a true member of the family and community since it is initiation that enables one to be incorporated fully into the social, cultural and religious life of one's people. Mbah argues that birth does not introduce one into all the cultural aspects of life among the Igbo people. One needs to be initiated in order to be incorporated fully into the religious and cultural life of the people (185).

Patrick U. Nwosu's study of Okonko society of Igboland, in Nigeria reveals that Igbo boys

go through Van Gennep, Frazer and Turner's three stages of initiation. Boys are separated from their parents and the community and taken to a sacred place where they are taken through tests of courage and self-purification, partly communicated in coded language. The elders who conduct the initiation mediate the coded and previously unknown knowledge step by step to the initiates (176). During Igbo initiation, the children are taught team work, leadership, moral values, responsibilities, decision making, freedom and valuing their heritage. Instructions on behaviour, tribal customs and religion may go on for years before the arrival of puberty. This is increased and made explicit in initiation ceremonies and without such rites, the young people could not take part in the adult life of the tribe (Mba 184). Initiation awakens the youth to many things. They learn how to endure hardship, how to live together with one another, how to obey, and the secrets of the man/woman relationship (Mbiti referred to in Mbah 184). Brent Bell argues that initiation rites "provide an important solution to society's ills" (42). He states further that it is a physical and cultural process indexing a new role and highlights the responsibilities that go with this change. Thus, it helps children to prepare to take adult responsibilities. Even after initiation, the community exerts pressure on the initiates to accomplish and adopt new roles through expressing social constraints. The new knowledge of the initiates and the social pressure act together to support and sustain the transformation into a new role (Cushing referred to in Bell 43).

Among the Masai of Kenya, initiation takes place at around the age of twelve and the circumcision of boys occurs "as soon as they are sufficiently strong, that is between the ages of twelve and sixteen. It can be done early or delayed depending on the ability of the boy's father to pay the cost of the "passing over the fence" ceremony (Van Gennep 85). This ceremony signifies the boy's acceptance of the status of an "old man" and potentially to be the father of a child. The circumcision for boys and girls takes place every four or five years, and all those who are

circumcised at the same period form an age group and are given a special name by the chief. Although the ceremonies are not based on puberty, they are of a sexual nature, since they integrate the boys and girls into the adult society of the sexes.

Initiation among the Luimbi of Angola is similar to that of the Yao of Malawi and the Bassari of Senegal. Luimbi boys ready to be initiated enter the sacred confines of the camp after the circumcision, where their bodies are smeared from head to toe with white clay. At the camp, they are taken through various teachings, tests, and trials over a period of weeks, or even months. First to be inculcated is the virtue of instant and intelligent obedience. This resonates with the allegiances across age groups and training in the various platoons to which the child soldiers belong in the novels under discussion. The elders of the camp sit outside the confines and “sing songs into which are cunningly mixed and hidden various orders such as: Stand! Sit! Lie down! Get up! Climb up! Get down! The last hidden order is Get out! and corporal punishment is administered to the duller ones who fail in perception and in instant action” (Tucker 57). This is presented in a perverted form in the novels analysed, where the child soldiers are expected to obey every instruction of their commanders and receive punishment when they disobey even though the discipline is a discipline leading to violence rather than social order. In traditional initiation, obedience is meant to instill self-discipline to enrich the child for his future role as adult. This is unlike what we witness in the child-soldier novels being considered in this study where children’s obedience serves the interest of the commanders. The Luimbi believe that when a boy learns this, he becomes free from troubles, which means that he has been possessed by the spirit of discipline and will not find it difficult to go through the other tests. One such is the fire test in which the initiates have to lie close to a long line of fire without wincing. There is also the cold test which requires the initiates to sleep coverless on the bare ground in the cold nights of the Angola

highlands. These ordeals test the strength of the boys and further toughen them to face future challenges in life (Tucker 57 – 58). During the period of initiation, there are elders who are specially chosen to teach the initiates their tribal lore, history, customs, and etiquette in order to make them responsible members of their society.

Likewise, among the Bassari of Senegal and the Yao of Malawi, boys undergoing initiation go through a period of confinement during which they are taken through various tests and instructions. The initiates form a small peer group, and travel and live in the wilderness where they complete many challenges and tasks. They govern themselves, hunt and gather their own food and endure painful physical challenges just as the child soldiers in the novels considered in this study are left alone to fend for themselves. Nevertheless, while in the children represented in these novels, the children's period of confinement is meant to toughen them to commit the most grievous crimes and also to protect themselves and survive the war, this period of confinement during Yao initiation is an occasion to instill rigorous discipline in the initiates to support social life. The initiates spend time receiving instructions in the arts, the making of baskets, mats, traps, in learning the methods of agriculture, in becoming proficient in wrestling and dancing, in being taught native custom as applied to married life and in their relations with their fellows and an exacting code of etiquette to be observed towards their elders, while they are kept up late into the night listening to stories of their tribal history (Stannus and Davey 120). This may be contrasted with what happens at the various camps of the child soldiers in the novels under discussion where "initiates" are taught how to loot, rape, kill and avoid being killed. What the initiates are taken through during these periods of confinement endorses the premium African societies place on bravery, hard work and discipline, but not the power and aggression to harm other people as we see in these child-soldier narratives.

The importance of initiation rites cannot be over emphasised. This is seen in how even churches and formal educators are adopting the model in their programmes. Patrick U. Nwosu compares initiation into Okonko society to the Catholic sacrament as a form of initiation. According to him, like the Okonko initiation, the “Catholic sacrament of initiation is also aimed at producing a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person receiving the sacrament” (184). According to Brent Bell, several outdoor and youth development programmes in North America use the rites of passage as coming-of-age rites with students since a rite of passage can provide a useful model for teaching and facilitating transformation under specific conditions (42). What he sees as a challenge to this model is that, unlike traditional society which accepts the new initiates and recognises their new status as adults, modern society does not accept the new status of the students who return from these outdoor education programmes, and the youth reintegrate into the same role they had had in the community before they left—troubled teenagers (45). The rites of passage model has gained favour among North Americans as a potential answer to the question of how to develop healthy adults. Some educators are interested in the idea of a rite of passage as a teaching tool, while others go so far as to declare “a rite of passage as a significant factor in the development of a stable adult personality” (Delaney 891). Thus, it can be argued that without rite of passage rituals, the youth lose significant opportunities to understand values as they are left alone to find their own markers of adulthood which can sometimes be misleading.

Initiation forms a vital part of most novels of childhood as most novels of formation adopt the male initiation motif of separation, liminality and reintegration. Marianne Hirsch lists “novels of initiation” as one of the possible synonyms of the *Bildungsroman* to indicate how initiation has become synonymous with novels of formation or development. These narratives have mostly employed realist modes of *Bildungsroman* to portray how the youth grow normally into adulthood.

Initiation is also important in the classical African *Bildungsroman* and most African *Bildungsroman* protagonists undergo traditional initiation before they leave their communities. In the section that follows, I discuss the meaning and origins of the *Bildungsroman* and how it has been employed in African literature.

The *Bildungsroman*

The *Bildungsroman*, according to Martin Swales, is “any novel having one central figure whose experiences and whose changing self, occupy a role of structural primacy within the fiction” (14). Both in theory and practice, the *Bildungsroman* is concerned with a much more diffuse and more general process by which the individual grows and advances. As a genre term, the *Bildungsroman* is animated by a concern for the whole man unfolding originally in his complexity and richness. It is concerned with the history of the hero; a history which is enacted within a natural realm of social practicality as well as the finite realm of his inwardness and his human potentiality.

The German word, *Bildungsroman* translates into several English synonyms. These include novel of education, novel of transformation, novel of culture, novel of initiation or coming of age story. Marianne Hirsch prefers the term “novels of formation” to all its other synonyms. She posits that the “novel of formation is a novel that focuses on one central character, a *figurenroman*. It is the story of a representative individual’s growth and development within the context of a defined social order” (Hirsch 295). The term *Bildungsroman* was first introduced into critical vocabulary by Wilhelm Dilthey, a German philosopher and sociologist. The term originates from the two separate strands of thought in the genre, namely the concept of *Bildung* (giving form) and the theory of the novel (*der Roman*). Dilthey first employed the term in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and then popularised it with the success of his 1906 study, *Poetry and Experience* (Boes 231). He argued that in a *Bildungsroman*, we witness a regular development in the life of a

person and each of the stages has its own inherent value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The designation *Bildungsroman* was first used by the critic Karl Morgenstern in his 1820 lectures presented at the University of Dorpat. Morgenstern specified a two-fold purpose of the genre which are to portray “the hero's *Bildung* (formation) as it begins and proceeds to a certain level of perfection,” and to foster “the *Bildung* of the reader to a greater extent than any other type of novel” (Whitaker n.p). As a genre, the *Bildungsroman* traces the development of a young person as he strives to achieve self-understanding and a sense of social responsibility. The protagonist is most often a sensitive and talented young man who encounters series of problems and makes several false starts before accomplishing his goals.

The diverse definitions of the *Bildungsroman* indicate that in the novel of formation, character change and identity formation are essential. Formation of identity presupposes that human beings are not from the outset what they have the capacity to be, but that in order to be able to be themselves, they have to make their identity their own: to become, to choose or to receive themselves. This presumes that a sustained exchange between individualisation and socialisation in the life of the individual is essential. One becomes oneself through the inter-involvement of the individual and the social. It is this inter-involvement that is depicted in the novel of formation that typically shows the process that occurs when the main character (usually a young male intellectual) realises his own inner disposition and gradually brings himself into an appropriate relation to his world. This may involve a painful metamorphosis that brings about disillusionment as the hero's fantasised understanding of himself and his world is modified through experience until it is gradually brought together in the formation of an identity in which individuation and socialisation serve as extreme point of balance (Garff 253). At the end of the narrative, the hero comes to himself and arrives in the world and can look back to get an overview of the plan that governs his life

(Kondrup qtd in Garff 253). This plan may well be presented by means of the phases “home-homeless-home” as in the title of the three part novel of formation by M.A. Goldschmidt (Garff 253) and, as Laerke Hansen remarks, “the fallen Adam becomes Adam restored” (qtd in Garff 253). This is the basic theme in the novel of formation. This home-homeless-home and the fallen Adam becoming restored are what is found in initiation rites as in Van Gennep and Turner’s three stages of separation stage, liminal and incorporation stages. Both initiation and the novel of formation are concerned with development into adulthood but while the *Bildungsroman* is development from youth into adulthood, initiation marks development from childhood into adulthood. In the African *Bildungsroman*, initiation of the protagonist is crucial since almost all the protagonists undergo traditional initiation before they leave home. The connection between the *Bildungsroman* and initiation is what makes Joseph Conrad argue that storytelling or the creative reconstruction of memories based on universal symbols is a modern counterpart to initiation rites and has a potentially regenerative effect on both individual and society (qtd in Dardzinski 14). The *Bildungsroman* pays attention to one central character as he/she undergoes a significant transformation. The structure of the *Bildungsroman* emphasises dialogue over plot development, and thereby keeps the reader's attention squarely on incremental development, on the growth of the hero or heroine's character. The development presented in the *Bildungsroman* differs from initiation even though both forms emphasise the development of the subject. The *Bildungsroman* always represents an autonomous development. One is independently discovering what has always been innate but one is not learning a shared culture as we see in initiation. Also, unlike initiation where one learns through the guidance of experienced adults, in *Bildungsroman* development, the protagonist learns through individual experience. In the *Bildungsroman*, the discords and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way

to maturity and self-realisation.

The *Bildungsroman* became popular among African writers during the twentieth century when writers started using the model, with modifications. Earlier African novels like Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir (African Child)* (1955), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy (Houseboy)* (1966) and Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre christ de Bomba (The Poor Christ of Bomba)* (1971) focused on the development of the youth into adulthood and most of these child protagonists undergo traditional initiation rites to confirm their acceptance into adulthood. According to Appolo Amoko, "The African *Bildungsroman* focuses on formation of young protagonists in an uncertain world" (200) as referred to above. The genre, even though originally European, male and bourgeois, has undergone transformations with radical changes in human society and writers who use the form in different socio-political eras and geographical spaces, manipulate and modify the *Bildungsroman* so as to draw attention to the specific experiences of that particular culture in its historical period. This is noted in the case of the postcolonial African child within the child's particular historical and socio-cultural background (Okuyade¹). These novels, therefore, boldly reveal the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial contexts.

The African *Bildungsroman* as well as development through initiation thus differ from the classical European *Bildungsroman*. While in the European context, the *Bildungsroman* is about the maturing of the youth into adulthood, in the African context, it is about the development of the child into adulthood. While in initiation type of development the child is taken through trial tests and education in the norms of society, *Bildung* type of development is an individual development. The hero develops through rational assessment of his own experiences. He develops in what is always already available. There is no sense of being inducted into the norms of that culture through

outside guidance as occurs during traditional initiation. The guidance is all internal to the hero, shaped by his reason. Besides, most novels of development that follow the classical European Enlightenment model, “construct a world within which the character’s decisions and actions have a logical inevitability which derive from their internal consistency” (Moolla 31).

Childhood narratives are regularly seen as reactive to historical junctures, and as exploring an oppressive situation, or racial, gender, or class discrimination, recalling the drama of early life and character formation. However, there are other important novels which are not constructed around these dominant patterns. Alioune Sow cites *L'enfant noir* and *Aké* as examples of texts that do not follow that pattern. For him, by “their difference, they remind us of the diversity and plurality of African childhood experiences according to societies, places, political contexts, and historical moments. By their structure, they confirm the existence of multiple narrative modalities that have often been overlooked when commenting on African accounts of childhood” (Sow 499). Most novels of childhood expose symbolic moments of childhood linked with family, school and initiation, and this development in the classic European *Bildungsroman* “is presented in linear time and is paradoxically teleological since the origins and trajectory of the life must subtly but clearly foreshadow its conclusion” (Moolla 31). In most African *Bildungsromane*, the protagonists seek formal education. There is also an “embittering loss of innocence” or “traumatic shedding of illusions” even though this is elided in a text like Wole Soyinka’s *Aké* (Moolla 33).

Moreover, African *Bildungsromane* record in chronological order, their protagonists’ early childhood in the family circle, their first days at school, an informative sojourn in a grandparent’s village, and an initiation ceremony, before concluding with their final days at home before departure (Sow 503). Other characteristics of the African *Bildungsroman* include alienation from an embedded identity, nostalgia in exile, and an ironic distance from the process which transforms

the person into the individual, for example Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* where there is ironic reflection on the entry into modernity. In these novels of formation, children's development is linked to the political spirit of that time. In Camara Laye's and Soyinka's final episodes of childhood in *L'enfant noir* and *Aké* for instance, there is a strong sense of political exigency and urgency because of the political situation at the time (Sow 503). Almost all these child characters undergo proper formal education and traditional initiation, a perverted form of which is found in the war novels under discussion in this study, an overview of which is given in the next section.

An Overview of the Thesis

The thesis comprises an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one presents an overview of war literature worldwide, narrowing it down to African literature and then finally to West African literature. The chapter further discusses the trends in war literature, the importance of studying war through literature and the representations of effects of war on men, women and children, placing special emphasis on West African war novels and their representation of children. Chapter two discusses Chris Abani's *Song for Night* as a representation of socialisation into social disorder which ends at the liminal stage of initiation into adulthood, leaving the protagonist in a form of developmental limbo, as well as a state in-between life and death, and how this abnormal development represented in the novel tips the narrative into surrealism. In chapter three, I look at how in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*, an initiated child's entry into war leaves him in a stuck cycle of personal development without any moral development. The child protagonist's attempt to prove the truthfulness of his unbelievable experience of war, forces the narrative out of realism into the mode of the absurd. Chapter four considers Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*. The chapter explores the representation of a child whose ardent desire to undergo

traditional initiation is not fulfilled since war overtakes his community. Instead, his peace-time initiation is replaced by initiation into war. His experience of war perpetually reminds him of the ideal future he had envisioned for himself which can never be fulfilled. The chapter further explores how the mad violence represented in the novel shifts the narrative into the grotesque. The last of the body chapters, chapter five, examines how the mystery of healing child soldiers moves the narrative of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* into the mode of magical realism. This chapter argues that magical realism embodies the specific narrative capacity to reverse time and allow a re-development and re-education of the "monstrous" child. The concluding chapter summarises the main arguments in the thesis.



CHAPTER ONE

WRITING WAR, WRONGING THE PERSON

Introduction

This chapter presents a survey of literature written in response to wars throughout the world, narrowing it down to Africa and further to West Africa. The chapter argues that plays, poems, memoirs and novels have been written to celebrate combatants as heroes; literature has also been written to overcome the trauma of war while other literature has been written to underscore the effects of war and to speak out against wars. The chapter then moves on to discuss the rationale for studying war through literature and argues that as creative expression, literature allows us, through the imagined world of the author, to identify social trends and structures that shape the world, in particular, the factors that lead to and sustain conflict, as well as experiences of war and its long term individual and general effects. Also, literature's aesthetic quality and its capacity to engage its audience makes it easier to transmit war time experience, and hopefully the wisdom gained from that experience, from one generation to another.

War in World Literature: An Overview.

War has been the subject of numerous literary works. Many novels, plays and poems are based on actual wars that took place in history. Assuming the European origin of the novel, which is sometimes contested, the main roots of war literature can be traced to epic poetry of the classical and medieval periods, especially Homer's *The Iliad*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, the Old English saga *Beowulf*, and different versions of the legends of King Arthur. The purpose of all of these epics was to preserve the history or mythology of conflicts between different societies as well as provide

an accessible narrative that could reinforce the collective memory of a people. In the rest of this section, I explore the relation between literature and war from Greek mythology to literary responses to the two world wars, in which many Africans were enlisted as combatants, as well as literary responses to wars of occupation and various civil wars worldwide, establishing the reasons for these literary responses. The section then concludes with literary responses to wars in Africa which is the main focus of the thesis.

Wars have long been of interest to both writers and readers and have been represented in poetry, prose, drama and other forms of cultural expression. The large corpus of literary works to which great world wars have given birth, confirms a strong relationship between literature and war. The twentieth century, which was arguably the bloodiest in human history, was at the same time one of the most fertile periods in literature. Wars such as World War I and World War II, were enormously destructive and caused many authors to respond to these conflicts. Worldwide, “authors initiated a response to this overwhelming cruelty, turning their thoughts and experiences into a variety of literary forms: poetry, drama, memoirs and especially prose (both fiction and non-fiction) based on the events of twentieth-century conflicts” (Bogdańska 94). Works like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are popular responses to the First World War, all of which express disillusionment about the war.

Traditionally, war literature was written by veterans and a few male civilians who wrote such literature to celebrate heroism, to overcome the trauma of their wartime experiences and to justify war. For instance, a work like Luis Marcelino Gómez’s collection of short stories, explores the author’s personal experiences as an international soldier from the Congo to Bolivia to Angola. Gómez, like many of the authors of works that recall the Angolan conflict as symptomatic of

disappointment, recounts a narrative in which he is conscripted or enlisted in the military (Millar 330). Nevertheless, writers of war literature have increased to include civilian women and young adults. As such, it is clear that some of these writers are involved directly in the various wars as either perpetrators or victims/survivors while others may have been present as witnesses. There are still other categories of writers of war who were not present at the time or place of the war at all. According to Felix Lang, in the case of Lebanon, there is a turn from writers of the first generation, who were mostly veterans, that focused on a radical deconstruction of time, space, and the human body, to a second generation (mostly writers who did not experience the war), who seek archivally to (re)construct a temporal and spatial frame of reference to contain an experience of war that remains essentially inexplicable. For Lang, “this archival turn is the product of the authors negotiating a variety of different demands and structural constraints arising from their socio-economic background, their life trajectories, and their position in the literary field” (488). Several literary works that are written by ex-combatants celebrate the soldier as a warrior hero, whose essential traits were physical strength, courage and aggression, on the one hand, but the works also display a moral dimension that seeks to justify war. According to Cristina Pividori, “the literary construction of the heroic masculine ideal [was what] prevailed in mid to late-nineteenth century Britain and in the years prior to the Great War. The depiction of masculine traits as innate essences, unchanging and ahistorical, derived from an overemphasis on an essentialist view of male roles, the function of which was to divide, separate, and thus manage masculinities based on a binary opposition between the (heroic) self and the (antiheroic) other” (111). Zeroing in on Southern Africa, a number of accounts of the South African border war were written and published by senior South African military figures. These include the ex-Minister of Defence, General Magnus Malan; the ex-Chief of the South African Defence Force, General Jannie Geldenhuys; and the Commander

of the Cassinga Parachute Brigade, Colonel Jan Breytenbach. All of these military figures “use their memoirs to justify their strategies and to argue that the South African Defence Force (SADF), under their leadership, was the real victor in the Border War (Doherty 27). Other war literature which celebrates heroism includes Michael Longley’s poems which are explicitly devoted to the First World War start with an elegy in honour of gunner William Longley, a namesake or a very distant cousin whose grave the poet visited by chance in the Orkneys. This soldier died accidentally on board the HMS Collingwood in 1918 and therefore was not killed in the trenches. His death thus represents a sort of collateral damage (Delattre 79). In her analysis of Graciela Mochkofsky’s *Tío Borís* (2006) and Elsa Osorio’s *Mika* (2012), Mariela Paula Sánchez states that these novels are examples of Argentinean writing in which the repercussions of the Spanish Civil War are readdressed and fictionalised through two Argentinean protagonists and have a tendency to exalt the heroic involvement of noteworthy (but forgotten) Argentineans. The heroism that is constructed at a distance, then, is of two types: the revival of names that have been involved in action on the battlefield (Borís and Mika) in an attempt to use literature to give them the place that they have not been awarded in history; and an apparently more domestic heroism in which the fusion of war and affective bonds (either present or absent) becomes even more obvious (Sánchez 53). In the face of overwhelming inhumanity, it is important to seek to understand how the individual deals with extreme conditions and maintains dignity. In the case of Japan, throughout all of the violence and suffering, wartime death in *hibakusha* literature (written by atomic-bomb survivors) is associated with positive emotions generated by the experience of courage, love and friendship, rather than being associated with fear or anger. Such positive attitudes are a characteristic feature of a corpus of literary works that explore the theme of victimhood (Bogdańska 102). All these analyses show that celebration of heroism in war, whether directly

through apparently justified aggression, or indirectly through the moral bonds forged in conflict situations, is a major focus of war literature.

Significant examples of war literature by ex-combatants and victims/survivors are furthermore written to overcome trauma and to reintegrate soldiers and survivors through artistic expression. According to Mark Williams, for Japanese war authors, “[w]hat we need to recall is that, for the vast majority of these writers, the war remained as a source of trauma” (10). According to Cristo Doherty, later accounts of the South African border war are memoirs written by “English-speaking conscripts who personally experienced aspects of the war on the northern Namibian border with Angola and in Angola itself. These writers seek to use their memoirs to engage with the psychic wounds of the war” (26). Doherty argues that the authors of these border war memoirs “present themselves as haunted by traumatic memories of their wartime experience and as seeking to purge themselves of the effects of these memories through a process of public narration” (26). Mark Williams also argues that those who experience war are “obliged, whether consciously or not, to consider their traumatic experience and the convoluted processes by which survivor-narrators struggle to represent and (re)constitute their experiences” (12). These works call upon the reader to try and grasp their relevance to the present and future. This is because, left “unengaged, unconstituted and un-acted upon, such images—and the historical traumas that they reference—will, whether we realize it or not, continue to disturb us both personally and collectively, like recurrent but unregistered nightmares, haunting the present and threatening the future” (Williams 13). War literature is thus a way by which people affected by wars try to “work through” the trauma of war and get healing from post-traumatic stress disorders since a vast majority of people who experience war whether as combatants or as victim/survivors are traumatised and find writing a way to overcome their trauma.

Other literary works were composed to justify and glamourise the various wars they fictionalise, and to encourage participation in war. As George Orwell has claimed, the eagerness for war that led many of adolescents and young men to be enlisted in the British army between 1914 and 1916 was directly influenced by boyhood reading. The reading materials produced for the generation of boys who were growing up before the First World War was a form of propaganda produced first in expectation of, and then in response to, the need to recruit young men for Lord Kitchener's new army. It can therefore be concluded that most reading materials for boys before and during the First World War were meant to instill a form of patriotic nationalism that was often based on military heroes and British victories. Such stories "were found in publications as diverse as the historical novels of G. A. Henty, the popular press and boys' periodicals and comics" (Reynolds 121). As such, the single message that stories for boys produced at the beginning of the twentieth century and which was understood in the same way by all readers was that "war was an opportunity for adventure, comradeship, duty and service" (Reynolds 123). Likewise, in America, during the First World War, writers expressed opinions about it with the majority of them passionately supporting U.S. intervention on the side of the Allies. Thus, while "opposition to the war did find literary expression, especially during the period of American neutrality, the overwhelming majority of wartime writing supported direct American involvement" (Dayton 31). For instance, the literature of the American Revolution celebrates the glory of the new republic as it develops from the confinement of colonial constraints, and American readers tend to see it as a just and honorable war (Gross 4). This shows that war literature is also a means to declare war as inevitable, and to gather support for wars and the war system as they suggest war as smarter, swifter, nobler than other means to resolve conflict. Thus, writers use war literature to create a situation in which they can share their feelings, and persuade readers to appreciate and perhaps

agree with them.

However, there are other war literatures which are less concerned with the military implications of wars but rather concerned with presenting their authors' anti-heroic individual experiences of the war. This includes literature that grapples with the effects of conflicts on participants and victims/survivors, and a reflection of the views of society on wars in general. This type of literature is multifaceted, offering multiple points of view, including the view of the soldiers at the battlefield, the view of witnesses and civilians, as well as the different views of men and women who carry out various duties in war. The novels being discussed in this study, therefore, fall in this category since they seem to reveal the sufferings of children in war situations as a way of speaking against war. Current writings on wars tend to play up the complex humanity of the leaders and even reveal how flawed they are. War literature is eventually the story of what it means to be human, "and war poetry in particular often demonstrates the sorrow as well as the belief in war as being the right thing to do" (Gross 4). In the literature of World War I, just as in West African war literature, the notion that war is extraordinarily hard on both soldiers and civilians, takes a much bigger place in war literature just as is found in several African child soldier narratives considered in this study. In *Beasts of No Nation* for instance, war is portrayed as so hard on Agu, the protagonist, and his fellow child soldiers that the depiction of it moves the narrative to the grotesque, while in *Allah is Not Obligated*, Birahima's experience of war is unbelievably absurd. For My Luck in *Song for Night* and Citizen in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, their traumatic war experience makes them literally silent. In his analysis of *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, a novel which was published eleven years after the end of the First World War, Gross states that the message of the novel was that the extreme stress of combat and the physical hardships endured by soldiers made it difficult for them to return to their normal way of life. Much

of the literature of this period foregrounds the incredible horror of war. World War I literature thus, tends to show how war degrades both soldier and civilian alike. The literature of World War II, in America on the other hand, is mainly based on the experiences of those who lived through the war. For instance, *The Naked and the Dead* is based on the author, Norman Mailer's experiences in the Philippines during the war, while *The Thin Red Line* and *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones and *The Caine Mutiny: A Novel of World War II* by Herman Wouk, all emphasise at how people who were civilians and did not care about wars, were forever changed by the experience. The literature of Vietnam tends to be more explicit than previous eras as writers like "Tim O'Brien and Walter Dean Myers infuse reality into their narrative to allow the reader to experience the war zone from the perspective of the soldier" (Gross 6). This realism is what is destabilised in all the war novels that are considered in this study since the experiences of the child soldiers narrated in these novels are so dreadfully different from normal social life that the narratives are forced out of realism.

Even though narratives of heroism in wars have mostly been written by men to glorify and expound on male efforts on the battlefield, some female writers have used their narratives to foreground women's contributions in war. For instance, whereas earlier female narratives of the Afghan war focus on the experience of a nurse or wife, later novels highlight the experience of highly trained women soldiers and the contributions and sacrifices they made on the frontlines of the war in Afghanistan. A typical example is Tzemach Lemmon's *Ashley's War*. Similarly, in *Allah is Not Obligated* discussed in chapter three of this study, women are portrayed as warlords some of whom fight to protect children while others use child soldiers to achieve their selfish aims.

Another important function of war literature, especially that written by women, is to speak against war. Some imaginative literature puts its whole wisdom to work against war. Pacifist or

anti-war literature is a big term that includes literature that presents anti-war action, literature that supports anti-war feelings as well as literature that takes positions against war. Literature that represents anti-war action includes poems, plays, songs, memoirs, fictions representing peace marches and protests, the gathering of signatures for anti-war petitions, conscientious objectors, soldiers' refusals to fight, anti-war civil disobedience, attacks on draft boards, the prison experiences of those jailed for anti-war action and self-immolations. Anti-war literature that is meant to support anti-war feelings and actions includes all texts that ever moved a reader, or were intended to move a reader, toward an antiwar feeling or action (Rosenwald 155 - 161). Kabi Hartman argues that most World War I novels by British women were pacifist novels. Women writers like Theodora Wilson Wilson, Rose Allatini, and Rose Macaulay published pacifist propaganda novels during the First World War in which they adopt the figure of the Christ-like and ambiguously gendered man as a vehicle onto which to project their pacifist politics as well as their own struggles as women. According to Hartman, these writers, in their novels, refer to being "born again" after surviving the ordeal of war which they describe the "initiatory rite" or "baptism by fire," and identify themselves and their soldiers with "the Christ who approaches His Crucifixion" (537). This reference to war as "initiatory rite" resonates with what is found in the novels discussed in this study where children's experience of war acts as a form of initiation into adulthood, though a corrupt form of it. When the war broke out, many of these women became vocal pacifists and carried their mode of discourse into their pacifist propaganda writings (Hartman 538). Theodora Wilson Wilson was one of an older generation of women impressed by the idea of sending a troop of unarmed women to the front. She wrote an army of women into the climax of *The Weapon Unsheathed: A Spiritual Adventure*, a fitting dramatic moment for her novel, which championed women's vision and agency. Her two allegorical novels, *The Last Weapon* and *The*

Weapon Unsheathed voiced her pacifism, a pacifism that was so threatening to the British government that copies of *The Last Weapon* were confiscated and burnt during the war. Despite their emphasis on women's potential to bring peace, "Wilson's novels illustrate the plight of conscientious objectors as modern-day Christs and peace pilgrims martyred for their faith" (Hartman 541).

Likewise, in America, not only did the First World War produce massive literature during and after, it also led to a response against the war and the traditions that supported it. "This response to the war contributed significantly to two different outcomes: first, the radicalism of the 1930s, and second, a shift in literature that widened the gap between popular and high literary culture" (Dayton 30). American intervention in the war met with opposition from writers. Oppositional poetry emerged from the Women's Peace Party, organised in early 1915. A poem by WPP member Angela Morgan, "Battle Cry of the Mothers," typifies poems that base their rhetoric on the belief that women must oppose the war (Dayton 30). Socialist and trade union organisations also generated and provided outlets for anti-war poetry. Conversely, novels by African women writers, such as *Moses*, *Citizen and Me*, discussed in chapter five of this study seem to pay more attention to healing of war-affected children than speaking against war. However, one of the main purposes of war literature is to speak against war.

More importantly, war literature records the effects of wars on society and individuals. It records how wars destroy the social, cultural and economic institutions of most countries that have experienced them. The destruction is on such a scale that no one is left untouched and writers of war literature portray these effects through their writing. In America in the early part of the twentieth century, Ernest Hemingway's response to the First World War is recorded in his poem, "Champs d'Honneur", while his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a response to the Spanish civil

war. “Champs d’Honneur” is a short poem, suggesting that there is nothing more to say on the subject and that war is so violent and undignified that the violence and indignity done to the soldiers does not end with their deaths but is carried with them to the afterlife. This is also what we see in *Song for Night* which portrays the child soldier in perpetual suffering even after his death. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway presents the effects of war, including rape during war. In more recent history, according to S. Shahira Banu, looking at the experience in Afghanistan, “modern writings have attempted to bring Afghans closer to understanding the changes associated with the modern world, and especially to comprehend the destruction of their country by war” (Banu 181). This is true of works of a novelist like Khaled Hosseini who shows the economic and political devastations created by the endless conflicts in his native country, Afghanistan. In his novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini traces the history of disaster through the series of wars and bombings, also homelessness, starvation and life-destroying struggles experienced by the people in Afghanistan. Through these novels, Hosseini shows how, for the people of Afghanistan, the political becomes personal and the difference between the “war-front” and the “home-front” becomes blurred. Violence against the people is foregrounded more especially in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and people’s lives are portrayed as undergoing turbulent changes as the country’s atmosphere becomes chaotic.

As can be seen from the discussions above, there are several reasons why writers write about wars. This is seen in the way literature and war have had a strong relationship over the years. In most cases, the rise of wars leads to the rise in literary works about war. Though many politicians and political scientists, historians, economists, journalists, opinion makers, and poll takers may not form their conclusions based on literary works but rather according to some ‘objective’ criteria, literature’s role in chronicling wars worldwide cannot be overemphasised. The advantages of

chronicling wars through literature are outlined and discussed below.

Even though it is mainly the work of historians to chronicle the various wars the world has witnessed, literature has significant roles to play in presenting wars. But the question to be answered is why do war stories matter? Can they be considered as reliable social and political documentation and a source of information? Evelyne Accad in her study “Gender and violence in the Lebanese war novel”, suggests that “fiction is a significant work of social, anthropological and political documents because creative works are more appropriate than other works to be analysed and give us the ‘total’ picture they allow us to enter into the unconscious and imaginary world of the author, with all the implications in hidden meanings and underlying significance, an author reflects his or her own individual vision, which is linked to the collective imaginary” (qtd in Bezhan 312). This means that what the author says is an image of his or her society. The tension between the individual and collective imagination adds complications and details which are not found in more direct scientific documents. Literature thus covers a fuller domain as it can make us grasp the whole picture because it is multidisciplinary and reflects the complexities of a situation (Bezhan 313).

Literature also has the potential to record through the trends and structures presented, apart from its surface realism, the deep factors that lead to and sustain wars, and the effects of wars. According to Aristotle, the supremacy of poetry over history consists in poetry’s higher truth and higher dignity (referred to in Remenyi 137). This is because the ghastliness, sadness and heroism of war are best recorded in novels, plays, and poems that have the literary capacity to distil pain and to make it emotionally legible. According to Joseph Remenyi, the “perplexed, frightened or fearless human spirit, occasionally related to a concept that suggests the perfectibility of man, finds expression in novels written about the first World-War, as, for instance, in Vicente Blasco Ibanez's

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse or in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*" (139). Remenyi further suggests that it is the creative approach to war that makes struggles in a profound psychological sense memorable. According to Susan Andrade, "novels have greater purchase on reality than other discourses including legal or anthropological" discourse (93). The novelist also has the power to focus on individuals' interiority as Abani does in *Song for Night*. This makes the novel more appropriate in the discussion of trauma, since unlike sociological analysis, the novel has no limitation. Some of these authors animate particular archives to give the history of the particular wars they write about.

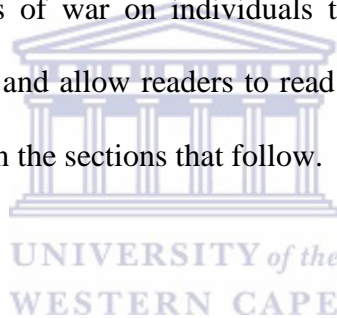
In addition, literature has better potential than scholarly non-fiction to transmit stories of war to future generations. Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman and James Phelan claim in their introduction to the collection of essays, *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, that "the narratives that endure, and that have the greatest chance of transmitting the story to the future generations, all possess a significant aesthetic dimension" (2). This is due to the permanency of literary works. For instance, works of classical or romantic value are still related with man's permanent problems, despite the time-boundedness of their subject matter. There are "examples of unchangeable human traits in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* or in Virgil's *The Aeneid* which expressed in a poetic language, preserved for posterity a feeling of actuality, despite difference in time and space, taste and behaviour, conception of simplicity and complications (Remenyi 140 -141). Even though, throughout the twentieth century, literary critics excluded war narratives from the canon of literature to which aesthetic qualities are assigned, invoking a crude notion of Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", there exists a lot of creativity in war literature that allows it to transmit war time experience from generation to generation. However, what made fictional depictions of war

controversial in the years following wartime experience was the risk of dehumanisation and destruction becoming normalised and justified (Bogdańska 94). In spite of this, literature's aesthetic quality makes it easier to transmit wartime experience from one generation to another.

Literature also has the potential of creating understanding of a situation better than history or sociology since as "... a work of creative expression, literature conveys meaning which pragmatism might exhaust, but vision sustains.... Without this concept of creative function, it would be impossible to understand the clarity or the controlled complexity of great poetic works, thematically related to confusion, bloodshed, barbarism, lamentation, active shrewdness and slyness" (Remenyi 142 *my ellipsis*). There is therefore no doubt that literary works teach a great deal extremely eloquently about war, violence, courage, fear, and human nature. A poet like Yehuda Amichai, one of Israel's most popular poets, for instance was respected by both Palestinians and Israelis, for his discussion of the personal nature of violence. In an interview with Esther Robbins for the Lannan Foundation, Amichai himself says that all poetry is political, even love poetry. So Amichai's poetry provides moving imagery that helps in understanding the intimacy and passion involved in conflicts (Referred to in Vaughn 61). Similarly, the literary language and aesthetics of the child-soldier novels considered in this study create better understanding of the situation of the African child soldier. With the employment in the novels of interesting plots, memorable characters, and striking expressions and imagery, these literary works are able to create better understanding about wars.

More importantly, literature has the ability to handle trauma plausibly. According to John C. Hawley, "narrative fiction may by default have the effective means to digest the poison of the past and to slowly heal from within the damage that has been done" (16). This is seen when fiction employs complex aesthetic techniques to engage the reader imaginatively, emotionally and

intellectually while at the same time communicating important messages. This comes across most clearly in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* where the hilarious humour does not trivialise the horrors of the civil war described, but paradoxically intensifies how appalling the experience is. The patterns for describing mass death are better done through works of aesthetic value in order to work through pain and trauma. These literary descriptions of mass death present the reader with examples of a grotesque world which echoes Wolfgang Kayser's understanding of the grotesque as a representation of a world turned upside down, with "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (183). Thus, literature has the potential to record the effects of war on individuals through artistic means that operate productively with pain and horror and allow readers to read about wars and its effects on men, women and children as discussed in the sections that follow.



Figuring Men in War

War has usually been viewed as a man's business and as the people at the war front, they experience at first hand, the effects of war. (In recent decades this situation has changed with women now accepted as combatants in many national armies.) The effects of war include death, physical deformity and, after the war, the difficulties of living a normal non-military life, all of which are represented in literature. One significant effect of war on men represented in literature is the inability of the ex-soldiers to live normal violence-free lives after their experience as soldiers. In his article, "In War and in Peace: Representations of Men of Violence in Salvadoran Literature" Astvaldur Astvaldsson gives a typical example of such ex-soldiers who find it difficult to live in peace. He considers the example of the protagonist of Castellanos Moya's fourth novel, *La diabla en el espejo* (2000), an ex-soldier turned criminal, given the nickname Robocop by his former

military colleagues. The protagonist finds it impossible to abandon violence and adapt to life as a civilian at the end of the Civil War. Peace makes no sense to him since, basically, all he has been taught is the need to exterminate the terrorists without even understanding the reasons behind the war or of the cause for which he has been fighting. All he knows is how to follow the orders to kill the “enemy”: anyone he is told/hired to kill. As a civilian he is completely dysfunctional and, thus, when dismissed from the army, his only option is to turn to crime. This he does first as a thief who does not hesitate to gun down his victims to protect his identity, then as a hired assassin working for his ex-military commanders, and finally as a mercenary employed by international drug traffickers, who include his former military bosses, politicians and businessmen. He fights variously for opposing groups, even side by side with ex-guerrilla fighters who have turned to crime (Astvaldsson 446 – 449). Thus, since crime is rewarded on the battlefield as the analysis of *Johnny Mad Dog* discussed below indicates, soldiers engage in crime for their actions to be prized. Violence completely engulfs them so that they find it difficult to live violence free lives even after the end of the war.

Apart from crime, death is also a way of achieving masculinity in times of war since death occurring on the battlefield has always been particularly “glorified and given a great position of honor in society” (Moore and Williamson qtd in Bogdańska 96). Writing with reference to Polish and Spanish culture, Olga Bogdańska states that “war-related deaths are denied a peaceful transition to the hereafter”, (96) just as is believed by West Africans and is explored in *Song for Night*. Nevertheless, and, paradoxically, violent and sudden death has been transformed into idealised death, that is, an aesthetic attitude toward battlefield death has developed. This trend goes back to the seventh-century B.C. Spartan poet Tyrtaeus who suggests that “it is a beautiful thing for a man to fall in the front line and die fighting for the country” (qtd in Bogdańska 96 – 97). It is

worth noting that from the earliest times, there has been a clear distinction between those who died on the battlefield and those who died of other causes. Since men are mostly at the battlefield, death is a way of proving they are men. Throughout the world, the battlefield is almost always a way through which men's masculinity is achieved and almost all war literature portrays these masculinist tendencies. The difference between the achievement of glorious masculinity on the battlefield as depicted in other war literature and the masculinity achieved in the child-soldier narratives, is that while in general war literature adult men attain hyper-masculinity through violence, in the child-soldier narratives, children are initiated by war into monstrous masculinities. But the idea of heroism on the battlefield is also undermined. For example, the renowned female African writer, Flora Nwapa, portrays masculine tendencies in her short story "My Soldier Brother", which appears in the collection *This is Lagos*. In this story, Nwapa describes the developing manhood of Adiewere, who becomes a soldier in the Biafran army, and dies at the battlefield. He is explicitly a hero to his brother, who says, "I was so proud of him. I told all my friends about him and they came to see him to touch his uniform and his gun" (p. 132). However, Adiewere's aunt, Monica bursts out: "I am tired of people coming here and talking rubbish. What death is honourable? Death is death. A good intelligent boy died, and old men who should die say he died honourably. The sooner they stop talking of honourable death, the better" (134). The different perceptions of the men and women towards Adiewere's death makes us recall Virginia Woolf's anti-war tract, *Three Guineas*, written before the outbreak of World War II. In this tract, Woolf muses that "patriotism" means different thing to men and women. She asks;

But the educated man's sister - what does "patriotism" mean to her? Has she the same reasons for loving England, for defending England"? Has she been "greatly blessed" in England? History and biography when questioned would seem to show that her

position in the home of freedom has been different from her brother's; and psychology would seem to hint that history is not without its effect upon mind and body. Therefore, her interpretation of the word “patriotic” may well differ from his. (qtd in Bryce 31)

Masculinity is also the driving force for the representation of war time rape in literature. Commenting on the incidence and history of rape in America, Clark Darlene Hine notes that rape is closely associated with economic oppression, racial animosity, class tensions, and male domination (380-382). This view resonates with Hazel V Carby's views that rape “has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack” (39). In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu, who, developing under Odenigbo and Olanna into a responsible man, is enlisted into the army where he dents his image by his involvement in gang rape. He takes part in this gang rape just to prove to his fellow soldiers that he is a man. This is because, in his reluctance, the other soldiers had teased, “Target Destroyer [Ugwu's nickname] is afraid” and “Target Destroyer, aren't you a man?” (458). Ugwu's involvement in this gang rape to prove his masculinity confirms that during war time, soldiers are not in charge of their own lives as they live to please other soldiers. Ugwu's involvement in a gang rape just to prove his manhood shows that he “was not living his life; life was living him” (Adichie 364). Sex here is pictured as empowering, a haven and space for joy in the midst of tragedy (Norridge 28). However, his involvement in rape leaves him traumatised as the image of the bar girl they rape who “stared back at him with a calm hate” (458) keeps worrying him. He thus feels obliged to write about the war in order to “work through” his trauma. In the same way, in Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*, Johnny, a child soldier who proudly takes the name Johnny “Mad Dog”, is pleased with his record as a violent rapist who, together with his militia, has raped many internally displaced people. In some war novels

especially in *Johnny Mad Dog*, rape is raised to the level of an initiation rite and child soldiers' acceptance into the militia is linked to their ability to rape more victims. This makes them engage in substance abuse that will numb their conscience to enable them to rape because as adolescents, they see in rape the opportunity to exhibit their manhood and convince others that they are no longer boys. Since leadership in the adolescent militia groups is given to those who have caused the most violence to victims, these adolescents engage in all forms of violent activities which end up destroying their lives. For instance, it is Johnny's attempt to rape Laokole, the other protagonist of the novel that leads to his death. Thus in wars, it is men's bid to prove their masculinity that leads them to rape women and through this act, most of them end up ruining their lives.

War on Women, Women in War

Traditional accounts of war by soldiers and male civilians have mostly portrayed women as unscathed and untouched by war. For instance, in war novels like Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* which draw directly on the involvement of a male protagonist in the events of the Nigerian/Biafra War, there is an intrinsic and inevitable distancing of women. Novels that represent the suffering of women and children are mostly written by women who seek to highlight the effects of wars on women and emphasise healing for war-affected women. While some women writers depict war through the eyes of men and write about the men who participated, most women portray the effect of war on women. For instance, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Home* deal with the suffering of male warriors. Both *Sula* and *Home* deal with the insanity of the war veterans. In *Sula*, Shadrack returns home to the US, just after World War II while in *Home*, Frank Money returns home from the Korean War both of whom have to cope with disappointment, tribulations and emotional turmoil. Unlike Morrison, Gertrude Stein's major concerns in *Mrs. Reynolds*, her fictionalised experience of World War II, revolved

around domestic needs like foraging for food, rather than securing shelter from aerial bombardments, though Stein was familiar with bomb shelters. For Stein, “war translates into problems for the managers of the home: food scarcity, curfew, and limited luxuries. The quotidian concerns of civilian life in wartime are given primary focus” (Goodspeed 93). Also in Afghanistan, according to Faridullah Bezhan, women writers like Spozhmai Zaryab and Maryam Mahboob wrote fictionalised accounts of what happened in Afghanistan in the past three decades and their stories are strongly grounded in their countrywomen’s experiences. What we read in these “women’s works of fiction are accounts of war, of what was happening or at least of what might have happened. These accounts are not based on political gain or propaganda to please one side of the conflict or the other. They are based on the experiences of ordinary women caught up in the war, the very ones who are victims of the war” (Bezhan 309). These works often use highly literary narrative strategies to communicate the intensity and disruption of the war experience for women even though they may not have been at the battlefield. Zaryab, for example, uses modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness to narrate the story. An example is her novel, ‘Moza-ha dar Hazya n’ in which the whole narrative process unfolds in the mind of a sick woman who was injured in the fighting and burning with fever. Zaryab is able to “show the depth of the tragedy and its wider implications with the help of stream-of-consciousness” (Bezhan 322). Women’s writing on war especially foregrounds issues such as rape, abduction, torture and death. In analyzing the representation of war time violence in Salvadoran literature, Astvaldur Astvaldsson foregrounds Castellanos Moya’s portrayal of violence against women. In *La diabla en el espejo* (2000), referred to above, Robocop ruthlessly guns down an upper-middle-class woman, Olga Mari’a, in front of her two young daughters as they arrive back home, leaving them traumatised (446 – 447). The focus of the novel is on Moya’s violent men’s relationships within the

community, as well as on how they relate to and treat women (Astvaldsson 144- 145). Also, in *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War*, Kaaka, a woman who is helping another woman deliver her baby is shot by soldiers who come to her house demanding “women, food, and money” (*Waiting* 37) for disobeying their orders. This body of literature represents the death and suffering of women in time of war.

In Africa, almost all war novels by women explore women’s experience of war by highlighting their suffering as well as their resilience. A novel like Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War*, referred to above, explores the atrocities that ordinary people experience during wartime by placing emphasis on the private suffering and humiliation inflicted on women in the domestic space of the home. In her article, “Visible Wars and Invisible Women: Interrogating Women’s Roles During Wartime in Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War*,” Lynda Gichanda Spencer argues that “even if women do not actively feature on the battleground, they are still inadvertently drawn into the war, which has an adverse impact on their lives” (109). In *Waiting*, Kyomuhendo portrays issues and concerns that directly affect the women characters. For example, in her depiction of Mother, the mother of Alinda, the thirteen-year-old girl protagonist, she explores some of the difficulties that pregnant women go through in the midst of war. When Mother dies during childbirth, Kyomuhendo illustrates how this traumatic experience affects her daughter, Alinda, who witnesses her death. She also demonstrates how women come together to take care of Mother’s new-born baby and the way they reconstruct the community after the conflict is over.

In his article, “The things they carried: Vietnam War literature by and about women in the secondary classroom”, Francis E. Kazemek, offers a good example of literary representation of women’s experiences in wars. These novels and poems refer to the experiences and after effects

of veteran women reveal that most of the women were so traumatised that they tried “desperately to shut out the world” in a variety of ways while for others it was the world that shut them out making them feel alienated. The novels also reveal that nurses experienced "a level of trauma in Vietnam that nurses had never confronted before in wartime and as one of the nurses in Ellen Emerson White's novel *The Road Home* (1995) tells a new nurse who "looked much too frail and young to be anywhere near a combat zone. ... ‘You get used to it,’ Rebecca said. ‘It doesn't necessarily get better, but it gets—familiar’" (n.p). These horrific experiences of the women made some of them turn to drinking and drugs in order to block out the daily horrors of the war. The after effects of war on women combatants as well as civilians are also represented as very difficult for moments for them. According to Kazemek, the most difficult part of the women's experiences to read about is what happened to many of them on their return to the United States. These women were often scorned, reviled, or simply expected to get on with their lives as if nothing unusual had happened to them. And even when friends tried to help, they often made things worse. The silence was the worst for some of the women. Friends and relatives did not ask about the war, and the women felt that they could not talk about their experiences. What most of these novels reveal is that the women veterans suffer alienation, emptiness, anger, pain, and loss.

Of all the atrocities that women suffer in war situations, rape is arguably the most disturbing. Rape as a dimension of the achievement of masculinity has been discussed in the foregoing section, and here rape will be considered from the vantage point of the woman. Representations of rape in war situations dates as far back as Greek mythology. Even though Greek warriors and medieval knights were perceived as noble, a writer like Stanley John Weyman, for instance, ridicules Olympian heroes for the way they treated women as property or war booty (Tarr 64). In classical war literature, especially in the *Iliad* and other Greek tales, women are seduced,

betrayed, raped, enslaved and made victims of not only mortal men but of gods as well. Examples are the great Greek god, Zeus, who abducts and rapes Europa and Hades who abducts and rapes Persephone. Likewise, in the modern world, war time rape has been recorded throughout history and across the world in historical works, religious texts, literature, and art for different purposes. For instance, during the Sino-Japanese war, fiction writers were asked to write down immediately what really happened, mostly the atrocities committed by the Japanese in China, so as to arouse the Chinese people's consciousness of the crime and mobilise them to resist the Japanese (Qiong 44). As discussed above, rape is a way men try to prove their masculinity and it is represented in literature as a damage beyond redemption, something that is inscribed on the victim's body and can never be washed away. As a result, in the literary works that include images of raped women, these victims are portrayed as being incapable of surviving emotionally after their ordeal. In Luo Feng's *The Bleak Village*, for example, the woman protagonist becomes insane after being raped by a Japanese soldier (Qiong 47). Also, in Zimbabwean Chenjerai Hove's *Bones*, Janifa becomes insane after being raped by Mayepo, a cook to a settler farmer while in compatriot, Yvonne Vera's, *Under the Tongue*, Zizha, who is defiled by her own father, is so shocked by the crime that she remains for a long time an aphasic and a mental patient. Thus rape, which men view as a way of proving their manhood, is one of the most gruesome wartime atrocities recorded and is represented as having a lasting damaging effect on women. According to South African writer, Credo Mutwa, since "African society is basically matriarchal and women are considered to have two souls, one in their head and the other in their womb, the rape of a woman is an attack on her womb and therefore, unforgivable" (qtd in Asaah 346). From prehistoric times to the present Information Age, "soldiers have always seen in women a source of ready booty. That it seems natural for men to believe that war time situations and militarised conditions give them more ground to rape the

weak underscores the basically violent nature of the crime” (Asaah 346). Rape is thus a war on women that is a dimension of the general war. Raped women are then at war with themselves since they carry the children of their enemies; they carry the enemy within which leaves them traumatised. And, as if this is not enough, they are rejected by their communities as dirty people. The experience of raped women is as disturbing as that of the child soldiers considered in this study. While the raped woman is a symbol of the victim carrying her enemy within, the child soldier represents abnormal personal development.

War Literature and the Child

The twenty-first century has continued to see children enmeshed in violence between opposing combatant forces, as victims of terrorist warfare and perhaps, most tragically of all, as victims of civil wars, where conflict in the nation may be read as conflict within the family that is supposed to nurture the child. According to John Pearn, in an African context, “children have also been deliberately targeted victims in genocidal civil wars in Africa in the past decade and hundreds of thousands have been killed and maimed in the context of close quarter, hand-to-hand assaults of great ferocity (166).”

Over the last 500 years, the world has experienced more years of war than of peace in Europe, Africa and Asia: “In the last decade, there have been between 14 and 21 major conflicts each year” (Rieder and Choonara 59). Although this may be a relatively small number in comparison with the number of countries in the world, the impact of war on children is staggering: “It is estimated that more than one billion children were living in areas in conflict or emerging from war in 2006. Three hundred million of these children were under the age of five years” (Rieder and Choonara 60), while an estimated 300 000 children are used as child soldiers

worldwide. These statistics show how war affects children worldwide, hence the numerous literary responses. Novels like Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2000) (Afghanistan), Jonathan Jones' *Beneath the Bamboo: A Vietnam War Story* (2013) (USA), Mitali Perkins' *Bamboo People* (2010) (India), Elizabeth Laird's *Kiss the Dust* (1991) (USA) and Ian Serraillier's *Escape from Warsaw* (1956) (UK) foreground children's experience of war. All these novels are concerned with representing the suffering of war-affected children.

During wars worldwide, children are the worst affected victims. They experience various effects of war which include abandonment, abduction and separation from and loss of parents, health problems, poverty, hunger and trauma. Many of them suffer various forms of permanent disability while others are left homeless and orphans in hostile environments where they become victims of abuse and torture at the hands of the enemy. Apart from physical and psychological victimisation of children during war, another devastating experience for children is when they are forced to fight in wars as child soldiers. These effects of war on children in real life contexts is what is mostly represented in literary works including novels like *The Librarian of Basra*, *Silent Music*, *Nasreen's Secret School*, *The Composition*, *Four Feet Two Sandals* and *Mukhtar and the Camels* discussed below and the selected African examples which are the focus of the rest of this thesis.

Literature mostly represents children in war situations as innocent victims of war, who are traumatised to the extent that they even lack speech with which to narrate their stories. This trauma follows them after their death in some situations. According to John Pizer, Ingeborg Bachmann's early story *Die Karawane und die Auferstehung* takes place in a desert-like realm of the dead. The characters can perceive each other as they wander aimlessly, but cannot speak. Two figures are children: a girl who died of consumption, and a boy who spent his brief life in an orphanage, both

of whom are war-affected children. At the conclusion, ringing bells prompt the boy to attempt telepathically to convey this ringing to the others, who cannot perceive it. This silence reflects an inability to directly articulate war trauma at this time. Such silence can only be transcended metaphysically (Pizer 537). Despite their lack of speech, the characters can recall the circumstances of their deaths without being aware of their exact causes. There are several such novels that portray the war-affected child as traumatised and even continue to suffer after their death since they are not allowed entry into the “after-life” because their death is not a natural death. This silence is found in *Song for Night* discussed in chapter two of this study where My Luck, the protagonist has his vocal cut during his days as a child soldier which leads him and his platoon members to devise their own form of sign language. At the end of the novel, we realize that My Luck is already dead but has become a “neighbourhood” ghost because his mode of death does not allow him entry into the land of the dead.

Literary representations of children in war tend to depict them mostly as innocent victims. Even those texts that feature children who have ostensibly absorbed violent and destructive ideologies, for example, Nazi indoctrination, continue to insist on the Romantic myth of childhood as the embodiment of a prelapsarian past with a redemptive potential for the future. But there are also more complex representations where children are shown as complicit. In her analysis of childhood and youth in Lisa’s *Ist Paul Schuldig*, Debbie Pinfold argues that for a text produced in this early post-World War II period, and from a position in exile, the novel avoids both evasion and excessive condemnation, in that it presents an adolescent protagonist who is old enough to have been implicated in the Nazi regime, yet too young to be held responsible for it. To her, the novel uses images of childhood to enable understanding of and empathy with this representative of the perpetrator nation, but without presenting him as a mere victim. Tetzner’s work does not

shy away from showing the realities of childhood under Nazism. She frequently refers to children much younger playing their part in the war effort, and indeed shows these generally anonymous children as much more fanatical Nazis than Paul himself. Thus, the experiential state of childhood in these novels leaves no room for idealisation. For all the images of childhood that she deploys to suggest Paul's relative youth and vulnerability, Tetzner by no means acquits her protagonist, whose moral guilt is certainly proven, and who, in a final conversation with Sergey and the Jewish boy Lukas, finds the courage to admit that he has been to some extent complicit in his own seduction by the regime (Pinfold 486 - 501). This portrayal of children as agents of violence resonates what is found in *Allah is Not Obligated*, to be analysed in Chapter three where Kourouma does not romanticise Birahima but portrays him as responsible for the atrocities he caused as a child soldier. This shows that not all children are innocent victims of war but may also be portrayed as agents of violence. Nevertheless, in the final analysis they may still be excused as victims of structures bigger than themselves where they do not have the moral experience and power to extricate themselves.

Literature represents children in war situations in three stages: their lives during the war, their lives as refugees and their lives as settlers in different countries. Novels such as *The Librarian of Basra*, *Silent Music*, *Nasreen's Secret School*, *The Composition*, *Four Feet Two Sandals* and *Muktar and the Camels* all represent children in war situations in different political conflicts, including Iraq, Lebanon, Chile and Afghanistan. The protagonists of these stories are children who suffer various atrocities attendant upon war and the different ways through which they manage their personal and social difficulties in these environments. For instance, in *Silent Music*, Ali, the protagonist learns Arabic, in *The Librarian of Basra*, Alia deals with war casualties in Iraq by trying to save books, while in *Nasreen's Secret School* Nasreen also endures her country's war

troubles by focusing her attention on school and learning, which are not allowed for girls in her Afghan culture. These children, although finding themselves in tragic situations, are still portrayed as children who lead typical lives. They play soccer, go to school, and play with friends. This is a way the authors try to show that ordinary children can be empowered to survive wars or conflicts beyond their control and positively impact others around them. Despite the horrific experience of children in war situations represented in the international novels discussed above, the narratives are still realist. However, we see a different trend in the African child-soldier narratives discussed in this study which represent children who are caught up in war situations at the battlefield with little or no power to get out of the situation. The novels portray the war experience as so horrific that the narratives cannot help but shift to non-realist modes. The representations of children in international literature discussed above, together with literary representations of children in Africa, indicate that recent literature is never able to glorify war the same way that traditional war literature featuring men does. Boys may simulate being men but this masculine behaviour is always radically undercut by the narrative.

Literary works that portray children as combatants in various wars are mainly found in Africa, especially in West Africa. These works portray children as soldiers in various wars in which they commit many atrocities as well as suffer abuse at the hands of adult commanders of their armies. Most of these child-soldier narratives represent the child soldier as one who suffers from hunger and substance abuse and who is made to perform atrocities under the influence of drugs. As child soldiers, they are obliged to follow every order of their commanders who take advantage and even, in some cases, sodomise them. An example is Agu, the protagonist of *Beasts of No Nation*, discussed in chapter four of this study who is continually raped by the commandant but has no power to stop him, as any attempt by Agu to stop the commandant will lead to Agu's

death. Representation of children as combatants which is prevalent in African literature may be due to the fact that these novels are literary responses to the wars in Africa: the wars in Uganda, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone which became synonymous with the use of children as combatants. African novels that foreground children's experience as combatants are considered in detail in the next section.

War in African Literature

It is clear that African writers' novelistic vision is to tell the African story including that of war as it has been shaped by African history and experience. Various genres have been employed to tell the story of wars on the African continent, including the novels which have been selected for this study. Africa has for a long time been subject to civil wars, some of them even leading to genocide. These wars are so frequent and so deadly that they have become the subject matter of many postcolonial African writers and scholars. The Nigerian Civil War/Biafran War for instance, in the words of Kole Omotoso, is "the most important theme in Nigerian literature" (McLuckie 550). Memories of past wars have profoundly shaped the political, socioeconomic, and cultural landscapes of post-conflict societies. These memories "offer an opportunity for reflection, but more importantly, provide the basis for ascertaining the well-being of interactions and relationships in these societies" (Onuoha 3). According to Eleni Coundouriotis, because the African "war novel treats with suspicion nationalisms that promote political myths of unity along ethnic lines, it lends support to ideals of democratic and ethnically diverse nation states, imagining the possible reconciliation of the warring parties" (4). As such, almost all the wars in Africa – both anti-colonial wars and civil wars – have received literary responses making African war novels, almost a whole genre unto itself.

African war literature that fictionalises anti-colonial, anti-settler, anti-Apartheid or civil wars include: Mongane Serote's *To Every Bird its Blood*, Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird*, Alexander Kanengoni's *Echoing Silences*, and *Effortless Tears*, Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*, Peter Essex's *The Exile*, Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*, Mari Serebrov's *Mama Namibia*, Dambudzo Marechera's "The Camp" in *Scrapiron Blues*, Stanly Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey*, Bruce Moore-King's *White Man Black War*, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, Edmond Chipamaunga's *A fight for Freedom*, Michael Raeburn's *Black Fire: Accounts of the Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, *Under the Tongue*, and *Without a Name*, Mutasa Garikai's *Contact* and Charles Samupindi's *Pawns*. Others are: Robert Early's *A Time of Madness*, George Harding Raubenheimer's *Crossfire*, Daniel Carney's *The Whispering Death*, Wilbur Smith's *The Sunbird*, and *When the Lion Feeds*, Valentine Isheunesu Mazorodze's *Silent Journey from the East*, Sidney Allinson's *Kruger's Gold*, Stuart Cloete's *Rags of Glory*, Philip Danze's *Conjuring Maud*, Brian Duncan's *The Settler*, Graham Fysh's *Moorosi: A South African King's Battle for Survival* William Boyd's *An Ice-Cream War*, Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga*, Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* and *Shadows*, Robert Zeleza's *Exile*, Elizabeth Combres' *Broken Memory: A novel of Rwanda*, Nadifa Mohammed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier Fighting for my Life*, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire: One Girl's Extraordinary Journey From Child Soldier to Soul Singer*, Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, Dave Edgars' *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*, Joshua Dysart's *Unknown Soldier*, Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny chien méchant (Johnny Mad Dog)*, and Goretti Kyomuhendo's *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda's Hidden War*. This list, that is probably incomplete despite careful research, represents the novels that fictionalise wars in Africa. I have left out the West African war novels that will be

considered in a dedicated section.

There are several African war novels that represent the suffering of children in war situations. These include China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier Fighting for my Life* (Uganda), Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire: One Girl's Extraordinary Journey From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (Eritrea), Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (Congo, Brazzaville, though the locale is not named), Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins, Under the Tongue, and Without a Name* (Zimbabwe), Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (Somalia), Dave Edgars' *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* and Uwem Akpan's *My Parents' Bedroom*. According to Jane Bryce, almost all African war novels are realist following Chidi Amuta's postulation that "critical discourse of modern African literature must delve deeper into the ontological configurations of the very literary works in order to decipher the truth value of the texts as systems of aesthetic signification of meanings that ultimately derive from history" (qtd in Bryce 32). For Bryce, the elements of Amuta's statement: "ontological configurations", "truth value", "aesthetic signification" and "history", "combine to project an assumption of what a war novel is about. Within the social realist genre it espouses, the protagonist assumes a kind of universal representativeness" (Bryce 32). This resonates with Coundouriotis' argument that most African war novels employ naturalism, an extreme form of realism, which "complicates the idea of distance to give an intimate account of the details of the suffering" (4). True to these arguments, several African war novels are realist. Thus realism, or its more intense form naturalism, is the most common aesthetic practice for the representation of war as most of these novels are replete with realistic description of the injured and dying. This makes the novels selected for this study, which, by contrast, shift into non-realist modes, warrant investigation. Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* is analysed in some detail below because it is one of the few African child soldier novel featuring a

child combatant set outside of West Africa, namely central Africa, and, unlike the novels selected for this study, it is realist. But it is a realism that foregrounds itself and strains at the seams, with reviewers identifying it as “gritty” or “visceral”. Nuruddin Farah’s postmodern novel, *Maps*, set in the Horn of Africa, has a child protagonist, but the child is not an active combatant. *Child Soldier Fighting for my Life*, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer*, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* and *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* are all memoirs which do not fit into this study which looks at fiction.

Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* is graphic in its description of wartime atrocities and explores the lives of people who have been largely ignored by the outside world. It is told from the point of view of two teenagers Johnny and Laokole. Laokole is a 16-year-old student whose dreams of becoming an engineer are offset by the reality of keeping her wounded mother and little brother alive since the conflict has claimed her father's life and left her mother crippled. Later, when Laokole's mother dies and her brother vanishes, she ends up in a refugee camp, where her life intersects fatefully with that of Johnny Mad Dog, the teenage commander of a small militia unit obsessed with killing and looting. Laokole is innocent but she is mindful of the threats posed by “freedom fighters” like Johnny Mad Dog who routinely destroy the lives and property they claim to protect. Johnny “Mad Dog” is also a 16-year-old child soldier who desperately wants to prove his manhood, his superiority to others and get the fear and respect of his comrades. He is a violent child soldier without limits, without any sense of what is right or wrong and who convinces himself and others that he is not a murderer, but fights wars and in war, you kill, you burn buildings, you rape women and that does not mean you are a common murderer. In the end, Johnny's need to feel important proves to be his downfall. Laokole is able to kill him and emerges as a survivor even though it is at a terrible cost. Like the novels in this study, *Johnny Mad Dog* foregrounds the

atrocities caused by child soldiers as well the atrocities they cause. Whereas the experience of the child soldiers in the novels in this study tips their narratives into fully non-realist modes, *Johnny Mad Dog* takes realism to its furthest extreme. The above arguments indicate that even though there have been numerous literary responses to wars throughout Africa, West African writers, in particular, have responded to and shaped the figure of the child soldier, given the continuing civil strife in this region of Africa.

The West African Writer and War

Post-independence Africa has witnessed many wars and there seem to be more responses to these wars from West African writers than from other parts of Africa. According to Craig W. McLuckie, the Nigerian civil war alone has attracted 21 poems, 22 novels, 55 general criticisms, 65 criticism on authors, 184 book reviews, 6 Onitsha market pamphlets, 8 plays and 3 collections (513 -514). This list was composed in 1987 after which several other works have been written on these wars. With almost a whole genre of West African war novels, the focus on West-African child-soldier narratives as a sub-genre seemed a natural point of departure for this study. Beside, these West African war novels form a group because almost all the wars that are fictionalised in these novels are civil war novels which emerge largely out of colonial interventions and interference. The region's war literature is studied separately in the sense that its wars are different from the wars of other regions of Africa. Most of the wars that have been fought in East and Southern Africa have been fought to attain independence from colonial rule as a result of the settler colonialism which was practised in these regions. With the exception of Somalia, people from these regions fought mainly to claim their lands which had been taken away by white settlers and for independence from colonial rule. For instance, Dambudzo Marechera's short story, "The

Camp” and Yvonne Vera’s novel, *Under the Tongue* both explore the suffering of children during the often romanticised Zimbabwean war of liberation. “The Camp” explores the trauma of two children, Tonderai and Rudo in a concentration camp while *Under the Tongue* highlights the phenomenon of incestuous rape in the domestic sphere during the war. Thus, most of the wars fictionalised by writers from regions outside of West Africa are wars of independence.

The West African example is different since the region was colonised mainly through indirect rule. The chiefs had control over the lands even during colonial rule. The independence of this region was not gained through guerrilla warfare like the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa. They gained independence through negotiations. What makes the West African wars warrant investigation is how nations that have come together to seek political independence from their colonial masters could turn at each other’s throats after independence which seems on the surface to be the result of tribal and religious differences. Even though religious and tribal differences do play a role in these wars, there is a significant postcolonial dimension to the wars. For instance, the Nigerian civil war was a consequence of colonial borders that put Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba together in one state, with the British privileging the north over the south politically. After independence, these marginalised groups’ attempts to gain independence from the ruling class led to civil wars. Similarly, the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were partly because of the freed slaves who were created as an elite over the natives that played out in various ways politically. As Basil Davidson puts it, the “nation” that follows colonialism is usually not much of a gift; throughout Africa, in fact, it has been more akin to “the black man’s burden,” a problematic assemblage of peoples who frequently enough have little more in common than proximity (Referred to in Hawley 16). The region’s literature is written mainly in French and English depending on the particular country’s colonial masters. Despite the differences, the region’s

literature has shared themes (Newell 98) and can form a unit.

Several West African war novels were reviewed before the selection of the novels for this study. The selection of four novels for this study was based on my interest in fiction over non-fiction and writing that was more consciously literary than writing that was more journalistic or favoured reportage. Eddie Iroh, one of the earlier writers on the Biafran war, for instance, is reported to have commented that writers of his generation, who had lived through the Biafran conflict, were too close to the suffering to write the definitive accounts of the war, and that the task would fall to later generations. True to Iroh's words, the new generation of writers have produced novels that are aesthetically fascinating and which warrant critical attention. For instance, some of the war stories like Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* and Ossie Onuora Eneke's *Come Thunder* are racy accounts that do not probe. Soyinka's *The Man Died* is "a good psychological excursion which is not a confrontation of the war but of the callous excesses of its executor, General Yakubu Gowon" (Nwakwo, 6). The four novels selected for this study suggest the following trend: they are all about child soldiers and the complexity and abnormality of the child-war phenomenon that pushes the narratives out of realism into various non-realist modes.

The West African Child-Soldier Novel

As has been established above, there seem to be more literary responses from West African writers to the wars of the continent than writers of other regions of Africa, just as there are more child soldier novels in West Africa than other regions of the continent. As such, several child-soldier narratives were reviewed before the four were selected. Some of the West African novels that foreground children's experience of war that were reviewed but could not be included in this study include Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005). Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007). Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* explores the effect of the civil war on its protagonist, Mene, an apprentice-driver who joins the army as a way of proving his manhood to his girlfriend, and of clinching a hero's welcome from his community. His dreams are however shattered by the tragic realities of war as he is pushed into a new realisation of his community and of himself. At the end, he is displaced as he is driven out of his hometown because he is considered a neighbourhood ghost who wants to harm his people. The ghost motif is also explored in *Song for Night* which is analysed in chapter two of this study. In Dulue Mbachu's *War Games*, Basil Chekwubechukwu Odukwe (Cheche), is the son of a rich landlord and a devout Catholic. Cheche begins life in a Roman Catholic household in Jos and was considering becoming a priest when things twist quickly downward with the outbreak of war and Cheche's family moves first to Amafor, his grandfather's village, then to Umuahia, and back again to Amafor. Cheche, who is five years old at the beginning of the novel and ten by the end, witnesses so many atrocities that he wonders what he has done as an Igbo boy to deserve the hatred he experiences around him. *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells the story of Ugwu, a village boy who leaves his village to work as a houseboy to Odenigbo and his girlfriend Olanna, both lecturers at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is later enrolled in school but his formal education comes to an end because of the Nigeria/Biafra war. He is later enlisted in the Biafran army where he engages in killing, looting and even gang rape. Similarly, Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* is the story of Mamo and LaMamo, twin children of Lamang, a prosperous cattle merchant widower who is bent on pursuing a prestigious political career. However, Lamang's unloving attitude towards his children makes his energetic son LaMamo leave home to join the army, despite the sorrowful example of his Uncle Haruna's awful experience in the Biafran War, while his twin brother, Mamo, the protagonist, weakened by sickle-cell anemia, stays home and

becomes a history teacher. Throughout the 1970s, infrequent letters from his adventurous brother give Mamo an imaginative connection to the complexities and perils of African nationalism. Later, LaMamo returns home, wounded and disillusioned while Mamo resolves to write the biography of his people, thus celebrating their survival.

Although the novels discussed above are about children's experiences of war, they are not centrally about child combatants like the ones selected for this study. Even though *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Sozaboy* foreground child combatants, they are not moved into non-realist modes like the novels under consideration in this study. It is true that there are magic-realist elements in *Sozaboy* but they are not as strongly developed as the non-realism in the twenty-first century novels in this study. *Half of a Yellow Sun* also shifts into a postmodern non-realist mode, but it is not as strongly non-realist as the novels selected for this study and besides, only a small part of the novel is about Ugwu's war experience. The greater part of the novel focuses on the two sisters, Olanna and Kainene and their various love affairs as well as their experience of war. *War Games* albeit, representing a child's experience of war, is not about child combatants as represented in the novels for this study. It is an account of war time atrocities that the five-year old child witnesses but does not take active part in committing, while *Measuring Time* is about young men, not children who go to war. The focus of *Measuring Time* is not even on the brother who goes to war but on the protagonist who stays home and becomes a historian. These narratives, which are almost all realist could not be included in this study which looks at novels where the child is the focus and it is a child who becomes a fighter, and how the abnormality of the child-soldier experience makes the novels strongly non-realist.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a survey of literature written in response to wars throughout the world and have given further details about war literature in Africa, more specifically, West Africa. I have argued that these plays, poems, memoirs and novels are written to celebrate combatants as heroes. Other works of literature are written to overcome trauma while still others are written to bring out the effects of war and to speak against wars. The effectiveness of studying war through literature has also been outlined thus: as a creative work, literature makes it possible, through the characters, plot and setting for us to embrace the full world of circumstances that create and sustain wars in ways that non-fiction histories and sociologies cannot. Fiction also, through the “lies” of the imagined world, allows us to access the deep trends and structures linked with war. Furthermore, the aesthetic dimensions of war literature make the representation of war fully engaging to the reader, allowing successful transmission of war time experience from one generation to another.

I have also argued that even though there are common effects of war on men, women and children, there are some effects of war that are peculiar to men and unique to women. But these adult experiences may be distinguished from the experiences of children, most strongly when children are combatants. Literary representations of children in war tend to depict them almost exclusively as innocent victims who are traumatised to the extent that they even lack the voice with which to narrate their stories. However, there are literary works that portray children as combatants in various wars. Such child-soldier war literature is mainly found in Africa especially in West Africa. In the chapters that follow, I discuss in detail how selected West African child-soldier novels foreground horrific experiences in war that wreak havoc with normal development from childhood or youth into adulthood. While stages of life and conceptions of childhood, youth

and adulthood vary from culture to culture and change over historical time, every culture and age has an idea of ideal development of the person into maturity. Conceptions of normal development are completely deranged when children go to war, pushing the narratives which describe this experience into highly visible non-realist modes that seem better suited to fictionalise the horrific involvements that de- or unform the children presented. Child-soldier narratives might thus better be described as novels of deformation or unformation, contrasted with the novel of formation as it occurs in classic European *Bildungsromane* or its postcolonial variants.



CHAPTER TWO

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT IN CHRIS ABANI'S *SONG FOR NIGHT*

"I have never been a boy. That was taken away from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am a kind of chimera who knows only the intimacy of killing" (Song 143).

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse how a child's entry into war acts as his form of initiation and development into adulthood, and the way this form of initiation leaves him in a state in between childhood and adulthood, as well as in between life and death as indicated in the epigraph. In this novel, the child's development is terminated since his initiation denies him entry into his society, and leaves him in a liminal state. The novel may be contrasted with *Beasts of No Nation*, discussed in chapter four, where the child's development is perverted, and in *Allah is Not Obligated* in chapter three where an initiated child's experience of war makes him circle back to childhood.

Song for Night (2007), is the fifth novel of the prolific Nigerian author, Chris Abani, a renowned novelist, poet and publisher, who has received several literary distinctions. Abani was born in 1966 in Afikpo, Nigeria, to an English mother, and a Nigerian Igbo father. He is noted for his political writing and his interest in the consequences of political power plays in the postcolonial nation of Nigeria is evident in many of his works. His first novel, *Masters of the Board* (1985), presents and shows the outcome of a coup. These forms of political instability produce the conditions for civil wars into which children eventually are drawn. Abani's interest in the impact of social ills on children, in particular, is clear in *Becoming Abigail* and *Graceland*, where Nigerian

conditions force children to live adult lives. This novel tells the story of a girl whose own relatives force her into prostitution abroad since there is no future for young people in Nigeria. It is clear that the impact of politics and economics on children has been paramount throughout Abani's career and he brings this interest to the fore in the writing of *Song for Night*.

The novel was published by Akashic Books in 2007 and won the PEN/Beyond Margins Award in 2008. It tells the story of My Luck, a West African child soldier who has led a platoon of mine diffusers for three years. It begins as My Luck loses his platoon and goes through the war-torn terrain in search of it in a tired fight for survival. In his dreamlike journey through the war-devastated terrain in search of his platoon, he remembers his war time experience and his experience with his family before the war. My Luck reflects upon his life with his family – his Catholic mother and Muslim father as well as his grandfather, the traditionalist, who taught him the value of a human life. He also reflects upon his experiences of war with which he has become inexplicably entangled. He has raped, killed and looted. He is portrayed as a little boy and man and, by his own admission, as neither. The war has taken his childhood innocence away without initiating him into adulthood, leaving him with no sense of belonging. At the battlefield, My Luck and his colleague mine diffusers have their vocal cords cut out so that they cannot scream if any of them steps on a mine and is blown up. Nevertheless, they have devised their own form of sign language with which My Luck narrates his story that acts at chapter headings for the novel. Each of the chapter titles defines a sign, for instance, “Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek”, “Ghosts Are a Gentle Breath over Moving Fingers”, and “Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat.”

In My Luck's dreamlike journey, he is haunted by the people that he has killed and a woman that he has raped on the battlefield. At one point he encounters a boat, occupied by a skeleton, drifting downriver. My Luck is troubled by such visions to the extent that he wonders whether he

is dead. At the end of his journey, he finally catches up with his platoon on the other side of the river, but they cannot hear him as he screams and fires his gun. Finally, My Luck is revealed as a ghost and is reunited with his mother in the afterlife. Liminality thus is the dominant trope of the novel since My Luck is on an endless journey where he is between home and his destination. When he finds what he is questing for, he is “killed” whereupon we discover that he was not ever fully alive in the narrative but a revenant between life and death all along.

Critical reception of the novel has been interesting and insightful. Some critics read the novel as an allegory of the fragility and volatility of postcolonial Africa, others as a novel about trauma, while a cross section of critics analyse the novel as being about a child soldier’s self-discovery and confused identity. Regarding language and style, the novel has been praised as making use of poetic, lyrical language that gives the narrative its beauty, while others argue that the novel makes use of surrealism as a metaphor for crossing over various zones.

Critics who offer allegorical readings of the novel have argued along the lines that the child soldier figure represents postcolonial Africa. According to Eleni Coundouriotis, *Song for Night*, together with other child soldier narratives, are symptomatic of an arrested historicisation because they become trapped in the rhetorical effort to restore the childhood innocence of their narrators and, as a result, produce a metaphor of African childhood that is politically limiting as a characterisation of the historical agency of the continent’s peoples. Daniel Trilling also sees the image of the child soldier in *Song for Night* as “an emotive way of focusing attention on the viciousness of the conflicts that plague the continent but [it] also resonate[s] with the infantilising colonial perception of Africa as a place populated by innocents who are not responsible for their own destiny” (n.p). These allegorical readings do not encourage these critics to pay much attention to the development of the child as an individual that the novel also represents.

There are other scholars who argue that *Song for Night* is a novel about lost identity, displacement, and epic suffering, a novel about a world in turmoil and how a child manages to survive in such a world. In her review of *Song for Night*, Liana Wood sees My Luck as a person with a confused identity and in search of self-understanding in the midst of war. To her, My Luck's search is a way of looking for answers in a silent world, to things he cannot understand. Wood concludes that in *Song for Night*, "Abani addresses a world too horrific for contemplation. Both compelling and barely readable, this novella depicts events that we may be too ashamed to allow ourselves to believe to be true" (69). According to J.L Power, My Luck's split identity as a Christian and a Muslim is symbolic of his confused identity as neither a child nor adult while Maud Casey is of the view that the novel is about My Luck's search for home.

Other commentators are however interested in the novel's representation of trauma and memory. Hamish Dalley posits that the novel's title foregrounds Abani's concern with memory as My Luck struggles to recall a song taught him by his grandfather which, if sung correctly, would give him access to the realm of ancestral spirits where his suffering could be assuaged. He sees the novel as foregrounding the difficulty of communicating horrific experiences to a culturally and temporally distant implied reader that echoes elements of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. To Dalley, the novel focuses on the child soldier's need to communicate his traumatic experience while calling into doubt his capacity to make his story understood. Like Dalley, Daria Tunca discusses My Luck's experience in *Song for Night* as traumatic. She argues that literature has an important role in addressing the subject of trauma. To her, one of Abani's main pre-occupations in *Song for Night* is to rebuild a language that can be used to approach trauma since art is never about what one writes, but about how he/she writes it. In Hazel Rochman's view, in *Song for Night*, My Luck's travels back in search of his comrades through abandoned villages and rotting

corpses is also a search through his own memories as a form of self-evaluation. Patricia Pak Poy also holds a similar view about *Song for Night*. According to her, the novel is about memories and poetic reflections as Abani forces readers to look at their own “experience and at the current situations of civil strife, of barbarous practices in war situations, of the use of child-soldiers, of desperate situations of poverty and starvation, of conflict arising out of racial and religious differences and the desperation of communities subjected to conflict” (1).

Regarding style, most critics and reviewers have lauded Abani’s language and narrative strategy. Most of these scholars have commented on Abani’s surrealist and dreamlike images. According to J.A. Kearney, the most interesting and memorable aspect of Abani’s novel is his use of the death theme, and the kind of surrealistic imagery he employs. Wellington Darryl Lorenzo discusses the novel as a work of surrealism. To him, *My Luck*’s search is a metaphor for “crossing over” and the way Abani’s narrative makes us ask difficult questions about the reality of the circumstances in which the child soldiers of Africa live: “Would an early death be a tragedy, or would it really be a blessing?” To him, this is one of the complex questions the novel asks. This resonates with Debra Zott’s postulation that *Song for Night* is about a journey and a crossing over while Lee Youyoung sees the novel as taxing but underscoring Abani’s message that some stories are too intense for mere depictive language.

The above arguments about *Song for Night*, though insightful, have left unstudied the novel’s representation of how the child’s development through war leaves him in a confused state between childhood and adulthood as well as between life and death. I argue that it is the aberration of normal maturation and development that shifts the narrative away from realism, a mode that simply cannot suggest the enormity of the experience of the child in war, towards surrealistic modes of expression that begin to encompass the abnormality of the figure of the child soldier.

The Representation of Child-Socialisation in *Song for Night*

Song for Night gives a detailed and startling contrast between pre-war socialisation and socialisation in the context of war that influences the development of children into adulthood. This requires our understanding of socialisation as the process through which human beings acquire social skills to understand and steer themselves through the social world. It is through this process that they learn to conform to social norms and themselves become “conduits” for transmitting, and also transforming cultures. As a result, children are major figures of social orders even though they are often not seen as active participants “but as beings who have the potential for being slowly brought into contact with human beings” (Ritchie & Kollar qtd in Savahl 53) or “something apart from society that must be shaped and guided by external forces in order to become fully functioning member[s]” (Corsaro qtd in Savahl 53).

In *Song for Night*, Abani presents a complex form of socialisation by juxtaposing pre-war socialisation and socialisation in the context of war through a complex plot that alternates between My Luck’s dreamlike search for his platoon, and the flash back to his days before the war. Through My Luck’s dreamland which takes him through his memories, the reader is made aware that he lived in northern Nigeria with his Muslim father and his Catholic mother, both of whom try to introduce him to their religions. He was made to learn the Muslim call to prayer, yet he hated his father for becoming a Muslim and he feels “a sudden rush of rage for [his] father. What was it about Islam and the prophet and that way of life that made him give up so much for it? He moved into the heart of the place that destroyed us” (109 – 110). His father was an imam and an excisor and, as part of My Luck’s socialisation, he was made to do household chores, one of which was “cleaning and honing [his father’s] knives” (93). His mother also taught him crocheting which he loved greatly. These chores signify his childhood and by his interest in crocheting which is traditionally a craft for women, Abani challenges traditional gender roles. After his father had been

brutally murdered during the pogrom preceding the Biafran war, My Luck's mother married another man, her late husband's brother. Even when My Luck's stepfather did not want him to crochet, his mother showed him a place in the ceiling where he could hide and crochet. My Luck's memories of life with his family are so strong that even at the war front, he feels homesick. This shows that even though child soldiers are portrayed as enjoying the rape, looting and killing, they still mostly prefer the home environment to the battlefield. This resonates with Kearney's argument that My Luck's "return home, as part of a death fantasy, insists heart-rendingly on the child soldiers' burning and unquenchable desire to be once again part of home and family" (90). My Luck remembers his mother's love for him and how she named him My Luck, "fourth son after three daughters all of whom died of mysterious sicknesses before they were eight" (80).

In the typical West African setting that the novel presents, a child's upbringing is the responsibility of the extended family and the community as a whole and not the parents alone. As such, My Luck has good memories of his grandfather and his aunt from whom he learns about the values of the society. Even though My Luck stayed with his father and mother, and later his stepfather, the most influential person in his socialisation is his grandfather. His parents were so preoccupied with their various religions that they did not teach him the values of his society. His grandfather said of his parents that, as believers of Islam and Christianity, they "are like unschooled children holding onto the essence of a truth merely because they have spoken it" (156). My Luck admits that "nothing I know comes from my Catholic mother or my Muslim father. All I know comes from the stories Grandfather told me" (109). This is a way whereby Abani seems to reject an idea of truth based on corporate religious fundamentals, and endorses an idea of literary truths that seem to be better embodied in the grandfather's stories. It is his grandfather who taught him determination which keeps him going on in his search for his platoon. He does not give up

since he remembers what his grandfather said, namely that, “one should never stop searching for the thing we desire most” (21). My Luck has cuts on his body that he uses to remember the dead. This was learnt from his grandfather, a fisherman and storyteller, who had “a long rosary with bones, cowries, pieces of metal, feathers, pebbles, and twigs tied into it that he used to remember our genealogy. Mnemonic devices he called things like this. These crosses are mine” (25 – 26). In his dreamlike search, he comes to a sandbank where he tries to make fire to warm his body and he does it “the way I had seen Grandfather do so many times” (82). Through My Luck’s memory, the reader is taken back to My Luck’s past to compare and contrast his past and his present. It is his grandfather who tells him myths about the Igbos saying, there “are always many tales here, ... Don’t trust all of them, he always cautioned. Trust all of them, he warned” (70 *my ellipsis*). The paradox in the above quote is the way My Luck’s grandfather warns him not to follow traditional culture blindly but to question it, follow the good ones and reject the bad ones. He tells him about the Cross river which is “older than Job” (71) and My Luck admits that his grandfather might be right, “there is no escaping its flow” (114). He tells him many tales about how the Cross river got its name. One of these tales is that “the Igbos are Hebrews who wandered down to West Africa from Judea and some of them brought Christ’s Cross with them” (70). My Luck’s love and conscious memory of his grandfather’s stories signify his desire to be a child and listen to stories rather than engaging in adult-related violence. The socialisation My Luck gets from his grandfather is presented through the way his present condition intertwines with his memories of his past through Abani’s deft employment of surrealism. My Luck’s grandfather was so important to him that when he died, in order to always remember him, My Luck makes a cross on his body, an act he calls his “personal cemetery”.

Another interesting agent of socialisation for My Luck is the home and the playground.

Abani's employment of flashback takes the reader through My Luck's socialisation on the playground. In his dreamlike journey, he comes to a place that he believes might have been "the town's stadium. Red circles track the field like the grooves in a tree trunk" (107). Immediately, the metaphorical gives way to the physical as the image of the stadium makes him recall happier days before the war when he used to play football with his friends in a league they made up where "[t]he cup was something fashioned from old wood, tin cans, and foil" (107). After this recollection of his past, the stadium image takes him again to his dreamland where he sees "patches of red earth spill through like giant puddles of blood. It is as though the very earth is peppered with sores. Scattered as far as I can see are corpses. Like a field of cut corn, cropped and lying in untidy rows, drying in the sun" (108). This ghastly image contrasts with the peaceful atmosphere of his childhood to reveal the extent of the damage done to his childhood. He again recalls the "games of cricket and Paul, who could bowl so fast, his main job in the rebel army, if he is still alive, must be lobbing grenades instead of curve balls" (94). Through this statement, Abani suggests that children must be good in other profitable ventures and not in the use of arms. My Luck also remembers the peaceful atmosphere before the war that contributed to his socialisation process. Before the troubles, "the yard echoed with life: children playing in giggling stars, mothers shouting gossip at each other, men sitting on benches playing checkers and drinking beer, music spilling out of rooms mixing with smells from the kitchen giving the courtyard extra spice" (93 – 94). After this description full of yearning for the community before the war, Abani, through My Luck's dream world, creates a sharp contrast with the society during the war. The compound "was deserted. Most of the neighbours were dead or had fled south for safety. Something was rattling in the kitchen; some hungry rats despairing. Cobwebs hung in fine lacy decay from the soot-blackened walls" (94). Through this contrast, Abani depicts the effects of war on society as it takes

away peace and harmony and replaces it with decay.

Abani's employment of the plot structure of the physical which intertwines with the metaphorical helps to contrast pre-war social structures and social breakdown in the context of war. The novel brilliantly portrays the peaceful co-existence in which children are socialised by parents, other adult relatives, and friends. This gives way to violence and malpractice in the context of war where, instead of children pitching "curve balls", they are "lobbing grenades", and instead of eating toffees, are smoking, and instead of playing, are looting, raping and shooting. For instance, smoking has become something My Luck cannot do without, "yet three years ago I didn't smoke. My parents (even my hated stepfather) would have gone berserk if they knew I was smoking" (152). This shows the strong influence parents have on the character formation of their children. During wars, these children are forcibly taken away from their parents and relatives in the society, their socialisation is affected negatively and the values imbibed in them through the social institutions give way to social malpractice.

During My Luck's days as a child soldier, he is given training in how to attack enemies and how to survive the war. When My Luck joins the army at the age of thirteen, his socialisation continues from the battlefield under Major Essien, whom they later nickname, John Wayne. At boot camp, he is given an anomalous form of initiation and training into the violence of war which disturbs his growth and development and he refers to this abnormal, arrested growth on several occasions in the novel. For instance he says "[t]ime is like that here. No gradual change, no softening of the light or gentle graying of the night" (45), "[t]ime is standing still—literally" (53), "I don't know how long I've been stranded on the sandbank having lost track of time" (65) and "My life turns out in a series of minutes" (53) all of which signify that My Luck is not developing normally, signified by the fact that time itself is interrupted.

In My Luck's search, he questions how peaceful co-existence in his village could turn to hatred in a war situation that has distorted his development. He questions, "[i]f we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practise? Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled by orgasm?" (143 *my ellipsis*). These questions closely knit to My Luck's memory of his childhood love, which make him refer to war as a form of hatred that contrasts sharply with love. This memory of My Luck's childhood makes him pity himself for what he has become, and immediately after this recollection, he makes a sad and insightful declaration, captured in the epigraph to this chapter that sums up the plight of the African child soldier: "I have never been a boy. That was taken away from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am a kind of chimera who knows only the intimacy of killing" (143). The fact that he feels sad about his present situation and has good memories of his past before the war shows that he enjoyed being a child more than being a soldier. By this, Abani creates the child soldier as a figure to be pitied and not to be condemned. This resonates with the view of critics like Alexandra Schultheis who gives the child soldier a "victim perpetrator" status. My Luck's wish to develop into a responsible adult in his society is seen in the way he is happy that his pubic hair was beginning to grow. He is excited because that is "how you knew you were a man – pubic hair, then armpit hair, then facial hair" (138). He is excited because the presence of the pubic hair signifies a child's readiness for initiation into adulthood. Thus, like Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, to be studied in chapter four, My Luck wishes to develop into a responsible adult, but this dream does not come to pass because of war. At the battlefield, he is initiated into violence which transforms him into someone who is no longer a child, but, unlike those who have undergone male initiation among the Igbo, this initiation through war does not make him an adult but leaves him in a

perpetual developmental midpoint. In the section that follows, I compare what *My Luck* engages in at the battle front with male initiation among the Igbo.

The Male Initiation Motif in *Song for Night*

Initiation, whether part of a collective practice or a dimension of individual self-realisation, forms a vital part of most novels of childhood as the child characters' development from childhood to adulthood is climaxed through some form of test allowing transition. Marianne Hirsch lists "novels of initiation" as one of the possible synonyms of the *Bildungsroman* to indicate how initiation has become synonymous with novels of formation or development. These narratives have mostly employed realist modes of *Bildungsroman* to portray how children grow normally into adulthood.

The plot of the classical *Bildungsroman* involves three stages. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, usually a young male, moves from his home and community to the outside world, learns wisdom the hard way and returns home as an experienced person. This plan is well illustrated by means of the phases "home-homeless-home" and "the fallen Adam becoming Adam". This home-homeless-home and the fallen Adam being restored are what is found in initiation rites as in Van Gennep and Turner's three stages, namely, the separation, liminal and incorporation stages as elaborated in the introduction. Even though initiation forms an essential part of most classical African *Bildungsromane*, and almost all their protagonists undergo initiation before leaving home, most protagonists of postcolonial war novels do not undergo initiation. Writing with reference to Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* and Bernard Ashley's *Little Soldier*, Irina Kyulanova argues that both memoirs "represent and test a common social assumption that war can serve as a rite of passage to maturity and can accelerate the transition from childhood to

adulthood” (28). This explains to a large extent why in most child-soldier narratives, children are not initiated, yet their involvement in the war makes them behave as adults, leaving them confused in the state between childhood and adulthood. Like most protagonists of child soldier narratives, My Luck is not initiated and, as he enters the war front at the time he was almost ready for initiation, his experience at the war front becomes his form of initiation. In this regard, I seek to compare what My Luck goes through at the war front to what boys go through during traditional initiation by drawing on Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner’s studies of initiation.

During Igbo initiation, the initiates are separated from their society and taken to a sacred place where they are taught the customs and traditions of the land. In some tribes, these initiates are forcibly taken by people disguised as ancestral spirits. After the time of separation, they are reunited with their community and they are no longer considered children. Most novels of formation also adopt this “home-away-home” pattern. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, usually a young male, goes into the world seeking adventure, learns wisdom the hard way and returns home having learnt his lesson. The difference between the novel of formation and traditional initiation, however, is that in traditional initiation, the initiates form part of a group and they are taught during this time of separation by specialised people; while in the novel of education the young person learns to become himself. The above difference notwithstanding, it could be argued that the *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation also makes use of the male initiation motif.

In the rest of this section, I discuss how Abani makes use of the male initiation motif in *Song for Night* and argue that My Luck’s experience at the war front forms his initiation albeit, as Kyulanova puts it, the meaning and function of the elements of rites of passage “are ironically subverted to construct war as a deviant rite of passage, which yanks the protagonists out of their childhood status yet fails to grant them the new status of mature adults and integrate them into a

stable social structure” (29). *Song for Night* draws on Igbo cosmology and beliefs, in which there is a fine balance between masculine and feminine principles as can be seen in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Masculinity is highly regarded in the community and masculine achievements are prerequisite to becoming a man of status. However, in Achebe’s novel, masculinity achieves its apogee only when it respects femininity. However, masculinity is so highly prized that it is easily misunderstood, as it is by the central character, Okonkwo. Okonkwo’s idea of being a man is dominated by the masculine with a devaluation of the feminine. Okonkwo does even what is not required simply to preserve his masculine status. He goes to the extent of killing an “adopted” boy, given to the village as punishment for the misdemeanor of his father for fear of being called “agbala”, (a woman). Male initiation is a very important part of the concept of masculinity. As has been established, female initiation rites are found in those societies in which women make a notable contribution to subsistence activities. In the same way, it could be argued that in a community such as the Igbo that prizes certain masculine qualities, male initiation is very important as it prepares the young man to assume his proper position in the society. Education in the traditions of the society occurs informally even before boys come of age, and this form of education is portrayed positively by Abani through the grandfather figure in the novel. My Luck stays with his parents before the war but he admits he learnt all he knows about the values of life from his grandfather. This knowledge, it could be argued, he acquires during “an informative sojourn in a grandparent’s village”, which according to Alioune Sow, characterises the African *Bildungsroman* (503). Even though he was not initiated before the war, he knew about aspects of Igbo culture through the stories his grandfather told him. With this initial education, My Luck is ready to be initiated into a fully-fledged Igbo man when the war breaks out and he finds himself on the battlefield.

The initiation of Igbo boys, like all rites of passage, is marked by three phases: separation, margin and reintegration phases. Boys are separated from the community and taken to a sacred place. During the separation stage, initiates are taken through activities which are aimed at toughening them to face future challenges in life and live as responsible adults. In *Song for Night*, My Luck is separated from his community after the death of his parents and is taken to the war front which becomes the liminal stage of his initiation. At the beginning of the novel, My Luck has already fought for three years in the rebel army and has lost his platoon. In the search for his platoon, he gives an account of his training in the army and his days as a soldier. He does not undergo the training that an Igbo boy ought to have undergone to be recognised as a true Igbo man. As an Igbo boy, his training during the liminal stage requires that, together with other boys of his age, he is taken through tests of courage and self-purification, partly communicating the coded knowledge of the community. The elders who conduct the initiation mediate the coded and previously unknown knowledge step by step to the initiates (Nwosu 176). However, My Luck's initiation takes place at the battlefield instead of a sacred place. His training and instructions are given by Major Essien, who "was determined to turn [them] into animals" (39) through the instruction he has in his "manual" which "he drummed" into the minds of his "initiates" (23). Major Essien's manual then becomes the "coded" knowledge whose instructions are communicated to My Luck and his colleagues.

During Igbo initiation, the children are taught team work, leadership, moral values, responsibilities, decision making, freedom and valuing their heritage. Nevertheless, My Luck and his team, receive instruction in counting the dead and tallying the wounded after each explosion, how to maximise the opportunity to top up their kill ratio and how to survive. Instead of learning the history and myths of his land to reinforce what his grandfather taught him, he is shown films

that offer him ways to protect himself in the event of different kinds of enemy attack, and instead of the songs of his land his grandfather taught him, at the battle front, he sings about war. For instance one of the songs at the war front is that war is only good for American cigarette companies: “I remember a song I heard in boot camp, *War! Huh! What is it good for ...* but instead of saying, *Absolutely nothing*, we’d add a phrase we like. I sing in my head. *War! Huh! What is it good for? American cigarette companies* (152 *original ellipsis and emphasis*). Everything that happens at the war front seems to be a betrayal of the values his grandfather taught him.

At the war front, My Luck and his colleagues’ initial training involved marching and doing drills in the sun and their graduation day was “when a gun could be found for [them]” (31). My Luck is further initiated into an “elite” group of mine diffusers. During this special initiation, first our eyes were made keen so we could notice any change in the terrain no matter how subtle....any sign of human disturbance to the ground soon became visible to us....Having trained our eyes, they began to train our legs, feet and toes. We learned to balance on one leg for hours at a time, forty pound packs on our backs in so many odd and different positions that we looked like flamingos on drugs, all the while supervised by John Wayne....Whenever we faltered, that whip will snake out like it had a mind of its own, its leather biting deep and pulling skin with it. (33 *my ellipsis*)

The climax of this “elitist” training is when the “initiates” are taken to a doctor. My Luck is excited that they were becoming “bionic men and women” only to realise that their vocal chords were to be severed so that, in case any of them stepped on a mine, they would not disturb the others with their screams. That was how My Luck and his team lost their speech and had to devise their own form of sign language, and like initiation into totem group, he gets a mark that will forever identify him with the group; his “mark” in the upturned world of war is that his vocal chords are

severed. This “special initiation” also becomes My Luck’s own form of initiation into a secret society or, as specific to the Igbo, an extended exposure to the “medicine” applied to cuts in the skin, referred to in the introduction that tests the fortitude of the initiate.

Because My Luck goes through a corrupted form of initiation, an initiation that will make him survive in a state of social disorder, he is denied entry into post-war society. Thus his initiation ends at the liminal stage without the final stage of reintegration being fulfilled. It is true My Luck has developed in the novel from a little boy eating toffees, playing football with friends and learning how to crochet, into a serial killer, looter and rapist; but the question is where does he go from here? Will this training allow him to be accepted into the society even though he admits he is tired of war? These are some of the questions with which *Song for Night* and other child-soldier narratives grapple. In *Moses Citizen and Me*, Citizen is rejected because of the ruthless activities he was involved in during the war, even though, like My Luck, he enters the war through no fault of his own.

This wrongful initiation leaves My Luck in a developmental limbo as he is not able to become an adult, neither is he a child as he states in the epigraph. His search in the novel then is symbolic of the search for his own identity as he needs to discover who he really is. He admits that time is literally standing still for him, but also that time is running too fast for him; frustratingly, his watch reveals nothing about time. He admits that “[t]ime is standing still – literally” (53) and that he has “lost track of time” (65). Through this contradiction and irony around time, Abani reveals the confused nature of the child soldier. Time is running fast because his growth into adulthood is violent and sudden; yet the fact that time stands still symbolises his stunted growth into an indeterminate status. These facts and the numerous references to his watch that is not working, his lack of consciousness of the duration of time for which he has been questing for his

platoon, signify his development which has ended at the liminal stage. He even admits that he has a problem with the chronology of his memory and believes that he has lost track of time and has lost his way which is why he has lost his platoon. He is not even aware how many miles he has travelled in search of his platoon that is also his search for identity. His admission that he has much ground to cover to catch up with his platoon, signifies how far he is from self-actualisation.

The corrupt initiation My Luck receives makes him so besmirched that he admits he needs a rebirth, but he realises that “every rebirth requires a death” (90). This resonates with Mircea Eliade’s postulation that every human being needs a rebirth because like all things in nature, man himself had to die and be reborn. Liminality “appears to be the operative force of the rite of passage, which brings about the existential transformation of the subjects, but which, if not contained within the ritual, is also inherently dangerous because of its asocial and subversive nature” (Kyulanova 30). This is why in traditional initiation, the elders offer competent guidance and observe extremely strict structure to ensure that the transformation takes place in a controlled environment. My Luck’s ineligibility for rebirth is because his liminal stage under Major Essien could neither provide him with the guidance nor stable ritual boundaries to restrict the volatile potential of the liminal stage and he engages in all sorts of uncontrolled violence. This makes his rebirth which signifies his reintegration very difficult and he remains in a stage that is neither childhood nor adulthood in a hierarchy of power relations based exclusively on the ability and zeal to kill and exercise violence.

The novel thus defies the plot of the *Bildungsroman* and the purposes of traditional initiation. Unlike the hero of the *Bildungsroman*, My Luck does not have the chance to learn from his mistakes and realise who he is. His search for his platoon which symbolises his search for self-identity is not successful. He is also not reintegrated into society like the initiates of Igbo male

initiation. On his way, darkness covers him and he cannot see the real, and the road in front of him suddenly sheers away ending abruptly in a cliff. He tries “to summon all the light that filled [him] moments ago. Light I need to cross the darkness. Still afraid with no more light, I step over the edge of the cliff” (153). This signifies that his development has ended prematurely. The light which is symbolic of the strength to go ahead in life escapes him suddenly, showing that he has developed into something that will not allow him to be accepted into society and therefore he has to cross the final river to the other world. He remains perpetually in a state in between childhood and adulthood, and a state between the living and the dead. The liminality and fundamental indeterminacy of his position is represented through surrealism. He cannot mature into adulthood, neither can he revert to childhood. This state, according to Turner, occurs because the traditional passage to maturity is irreversible. Even though “war is a gruesome deviation from the rite of passage, it places the boys in situations where they have to fend for themselves, and they survive extreme experiences of which civilian adults are innocent” (Kyulanova 31). The lack of reintegration for My Luck makes him an archetype of the many former child soldiers who are not rehabilitated or who die on the frontlines so that their desire to be children again remains a dream. This condition is symbolised by the surrealistic dreamlike style through which the novel is narrated.

Surrealism: Origin and Debates

Surrealism is a mode that develops as part of twentieth-century European challenges to realism, but which has interesting counterparts in other cultures. I will consider the term’s European origins and development and then look at how it has featured and has been taken up in African contexts. Surrealism is a 20th-century art term describing a work in which an artist or writer combines unrelated images or events in a very strange and dreamlike way. Surrealism as a

20th century style and movement in art and literature which emerged in the 20th century. It is characterised by a style in which images and events that are not connected are put together in a strange or impossible way, like a dream, to try to express what is happening deep in the mind. The Surrealist movement was founded in Paris by a group of writers and artists whose aim was to control the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of the imagination. Surrealism takes its roots from the Dada movement which was formed after the First World War by a group of avant garde artists as a result of their disgust and disillusionment with the misery and chaos brought by the war. Dadaism ended in 1922 as a result of its self-contradictory nature. However, Andre Breton, though not a dadaist himself, thought dada had revealed certain forces which could no longer be overlooked. Breton therefore gathered a few intellectuals around him in Paris and “founded surrealism on the debris of dada” (Clancy 272). Many of the members of dada, especially Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp made substantial contributions to surrealism when it became a movement in the 1920s.

Surrealism was influenced by Sigmund Freud, and disdained rationalism and literary realism, and believed the conscious mind repressed the power of the imagination, weighting it down with taboos. It is the unconscious mind that contains traumatic memories and other “unthinkable” memories – memories that have never really been consciously experienced and are therefore not available to recall. It is the unconscious that can deliver works of beauty, innovation and even discovery – complete and fully formed – as an act of revelation or intuition (Ward n.p).

The surrealists were also influenced by Karl Marx’s idea that the psyche had the power to reveal the contradictions in the everyday world and stimulate revolution. Breton published the first manifesto of Surrealism in 1924 which defined its aim of releasing “the energy that lies deep within us and that alone has value The word itself means above, or beyond realism – beyond ordinary

objective realism and into the human spirit” (Clancy 272 *original ellipsis*). Their primary aim was to locate the point where art and reality merge; and the work of art achieves this moment of surrealist truth when it overflows with life. The surrealist ars poetica therefore “aims at provoking the reader’s own vision of the work of art, his own personal response by generating a visionary quality in the work” (Sackey 149). The surrealists believed that “[i]n the present ‘crisis of consciousness’, human thoughts must be recreated. For this task, human resources must be explored, the process of pure thoughts must be understood. These resources and processes are inhibited by tradition, convention [and] conscious reason” (Breton qtd in Clancy 272). The surrealists had the ultimate goal to produce an extra-literary force which “disrupts a formulaic view of life” (Capples 155). After World War I, artists and intellectuals were looking for an escape from the harshness of reality. They wanted to reform the world their own way, and Freud had provided them a strong influence; by tapping into the unconscious aspect of the brain (Baackmann and Craven ii). As a movement which emerged in reaction to the First World War, the surrealists wanted to get to the heart of men and of things since the war had proved that reason was less reasonable than the dream. Surrealism strives to “liberate man from dictatorships, no matter where they come from, tyrannies of the mind, the body, of man, of money or of steel” (Criel 136) and “an attempt to mobilise art in order to suppress the exploitation of man by man by causing the insurrection *within* thought” (qtd in Oloruntoba 10 *original emphasis*).

Surrealism can thus be thought of as a way an artist tries to tap into what is happening deep in the unconscious mind. It is a disregard of the rational basis of literary realism. It is an attempt by an artist to recreate human thoughts and understand the process of pure thought. Responding to World War I horrors, surrealism is an escape against the harshness of reality which is found by tapping into the unconscious aspect of our brain. The surrealists make use of the images of dream

and death to bring together concepts and events that are not connected, as a way to convey what is happening deep in the mind.

The surrealist movement, even though started in France, embraced artists in the colonies as counterparts from the start, and even affected other writers outside Europe. Writers like the Algerian Henri Krea, the Martiniquais Rene Menil and Aimé Césaire, the Brazilian George de Lima and the Senegalese, Leopold Sedar Senghor, were all surrealists. Most of Senghor's Negritude poems, for instance, were surreal. To Césaire, surrealism was a way of freeing up his poetic language and understanding the liberating impact of the word. Since colonialism controlled the outside world, these artists sought to experience their freedom through inner fantasy, a world which is free from external misery. The Negritudinist theme of nostalgia and cultural nationalism were expressed in the surrealist free verse of Césaire and Senghor's surrealism drew extensively on West African orature (Owusu 547).

Even after independence, postcolonial writers continue to employ surrealism in their works. According to Lorna Burns, "the genesis of postcolonialism can be traced to surrealism's anti-imperialist struggle and refashioning of exoticism" (n.p). Postcolonialism is a struggle for enunciation as it seeks to resist the ideological parameters that keep static the human conceptual apparatus. According to John B. Oloruntoba, postcolonialism is "the struggle for visibility determined less by an ideology of fixed ideas that accompany a category but has more to do with dissolving the conceptual boundaries that contradict, annul, avoid, deny, or make invisible the multidimensionality and shared humanity of those who occupy such categories" (10).

The main contribution of the surrealist movement was the liberation of the mind and a prerequisite to this is absolute freedom of the spirit. Breton in the surrealist manifesto of 1924 states that "[s]ince there is no longer any need to pass judgment on knowledge and the mind has

no function, dream alone leaves humans all their rights to freedom. Thanks to dreams, the meaning of death is no longer shrouded in mystery, and the purpose of life becomes meaningless” (qtd in Ofrat 108 *my ellipsis*). These attitudes of the surrealists are very close to that of the eighteenth century Romantics, as highlighted by Jacobo Sefami who observes that surrealism is “conceived as an attitude, an aesthetics that proclaims love, poetry and freedom as tenets to change the world in its search for the absolute” (9) and as such, they figure death as not just an opposite of life, but as a state and a phase that interconnects with life as a part of cosmic system. This is combined with the surrealist sensibility that connects spatial representations of the physical and the metaphysical to the conscious and the unconscious (Penn 255). This shows how the surrealists juxtapose and correlate opposites. For instance life and death have a mutual relationship and one depends on the other. The physical and the metaphysical depend on each other just as the conscious and unconscious mind are interdependent. These incompatible juxtapositions contained in the surreal help to create a world of in-betweens which blurs the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious, as well as death and life. These ideas are similar to African religious belief in the relationship between the living and the dead. In African traditional religion, death is not the end of human beings and that those who die join the ancestors in the land of the dead waiting to be reborn into the land of the living.

The “surreal” refers to true events that appear fantastic and dreamlike and occasionally, real events that are so incredible that even factual accounts of them cannot help but lapse into depictions of the surreal. The surrealists were interested in fancy and the forbidden. However, according to Ferdinand Alquié, it is not a “flight into the unreal or into dream, but an attempt to penetrate what has more reality” (qtd in Socha 79). This shows that surrealism is not an escape from reality. Rather, it is hyper-reality since it makes use of dreams which characterise a very

particular state of mind when the individual's consciousness is suspended. This does not "make them any less real or less credible in the message they convey but it does make them more difficult to decipher and often harder to accept, taking into account that part of the message of the dream was once conscious but it was repressed, and that the other part never made it into consciousness" (Micus 80). It is this limitless nature of dreams that made the surrealists formulate their first manifesto with reference to dreams. What excited Breton about dreams was the fact that what happens in dreams defies reason and, certainly, common sense.

In the manifesto, Breton described a method of writing that makes the dream accessible to our waking consciousness. This, in effect, is a kind of automatic writing – writing that as far as possible is uncontrolled by our critical faculties. Thus, it is in the world of dream, automatism, chance, distorted time and fantastic region of the marvellous that traditional forms of perception are superseded by a new perspective whose logic is the illogicality of paranoia, infantile perception, mysticism, hypnotism and the general world of the irrational (Sackey 150). Surrealism is "the method through which this absolute or "sur"-reality is made available to us" (Danto 32). It was Breton's preoccupation with dreams that made him refuse to learn English. This is because according to him, "we dream in our own language" (Danto 34). Abani makes use of this language trope in *Song for Night* when his main character says the reader has gained access to his thoughts in Igbo, his original language. This is an aspect of hyperreality pointing to the authenticity of the message he conveys. By fictionally allowing the reader into the mind of the narrator in his original language, Abani seeks to forestall any form of distortion which brings his narrative very close to the experience of the child soldier without compromising the aesthetic quality of the novel.

Surrealism in *Song for Night*

Surrealist techniques involve representing dream realities, the conflation of opposites,

especially life and death, and the transformations of language at the level of the sentence. Abani's novel, as we shall see, makes use of many of these techniques. *Song for Night* makes effective use of dreamlike images as the narrative alternates between the conscious and unconscious mind. Abani concentrates on the inner thoughts of his protagonist, My Luck, who has lost his speech. As he searches for his platoon, his memories of the past are revealed to the reader. The novel begins with, "[w]hat you hear is not my voice. I have not spoken for three years: not since I left boot camp" (19). This gives the signal that the events of the novel defy objective realism and that the events of the novel are not that which could be analysed through objective reason. This is because a voiceless narrator is unrealistic and gives a signal that the events to be narrated defy any objective reason. As the narrative progresses, the narrator reveals, "if you are hearing any of this at all, it's because you've gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo" (21). This is in line with Breton's assertion that one dreams in his/her own language for which reason Breton refused to learn English. The reference to inner thought is an element of dream which deals with the unconscious mind and by this technique, the reader gains limitless information from the protagonist/narrator's thoughts.

The novel presents the narrator in a state of a dream, making the novel abound in dreamlike images. Sometimes, it seems My Luck is aware of his dreamlike state, while most of the time, he is not aware. He says, "even in daylight, even in these siestas, I am plagued by vivid nightmares. I always wake up sweating, the dream leaving a tangy bitter aftertaste for hours" (66). Soon after this observation, he gives a description which is very surreal;

I stretch and head for water, distracting myself by trying to fish without a line,

...Soon, the catfish beneath me slows to a halt, whiskers reading the water for the intruder. Half hypnotised, it just floats there, senses deflected from the shadow above. My hand snakes out with the speed of a cobra and catches the fat catfish behind its head. I pull it out and slam it on the bank once. It dies (66-67 *my ellipsis*).

The dreamlike images of the hand snaking out with speed of a cobra and the fish which has been hypnotised are elements that point to the fact that the protagonist/narrator is in a dreamland. These dreamlike images Abani employs puts his narrative into the surrealistic realm. This gives his narrator the freedom to express his experience without being held responsible for any inconsistency or incredibility. This is because what happens in dreams defies reason just the way the child soldier experience that Abani narrates defies reason and common sense, and thus leads his narrative into surrealism since it is dreams which can contain these experiences. This resonates with Breton's observation that what happens in dreams defies reason and certainly common sense. Freud also notes that, dreams are at one and the same time "alien to us" and "products of our own mental activity", a tension that normally encourages dreamers to disavow any "responsibility" for their dream-thoughts (*SE IV 48*).

Abani's employment of surrealism allows him to blur the gap between life and death in the novel. The surrealists figure death as not just an opposite of life but as a state and phase that interconnects with life. In *Song for Night*, Abani obfuscates the difference between death and life since the narrative combines the physical and the metaphysical. This is in line with the surrealist search for a certain point in the mind, "the sublime point" at which life and death, the real and the imagined, communicable and uncommunicable, high and low cease to be perceived as contradictions. The novel makes use of several ghastly images like an eaglet landing nearby and studying My Luck with curious eyes, a skeleton piloting a canoe, and a cobweb between the bony

arm and empty chest of the skeleton, all of which are symbolic of the living-dead situation of the child soldier. At one point, My Luck encounters corpses who “like a reluctant company of dancers, bump into each other as they hit the sudden swerve of the water” (79). My Luck sees these corpses as mocking him. “They seem to say, *Don’t worry, you’ll be one of us soon, you’ll join us in this slow dance*” (79 original italics). On another occasion, he sees phantom soldiers walking with their heads bent and rifles across their backs. These ghosts “are firing at each other – the rebels on one side and the federal troops on the other” (108). These death images ensure a link between life and death which the surrealists seek to achieve in their work. The phantom soldiers with bent heads signify a sense of shame and disgust even after death, for fighting wars whose causes some of them did not even know while their ghosts shooting each other signifies that even in death, the child soldier is not at peace; he is in a continuous state of warfare.

The surrealist technique of blurring the line between the dead and the living enables the author to represent the African belief in life after death, thus blurring the line between oral tradition and literature like magic realism does. It is a popular belief among Africans especially West Africans that death is not the end of life, but a transition from this world to the land of the spirits. Death is considered to be a journey from the physical world to the spiritual world and the whole point of going on this last journey is to become one of the ancestors (Wiredu 78, Asuquo 173). In West Africa, indeed, living a full and meaningful life is a condition for becoming an ancestor. That is why those who die “bad deaths” and those who do not live exemplary lives cannot become ancestors, but are regarded as evil ghosts. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, people whose lives are cut short by accidents, suicides or “unclean” diseases or any other untoward circumstance do not gain immediate access to the country of the dead; but become neighbourhood ghosts, an occasional source of frightening apparitions, until they come back to be born again to try to work

out a complete life. This means that people who die young cannot be considered ancestors. Abani captures this belief beautifully in *Song for Night* through his employment of surrealism. At the beginning of the novel, My Luck has just gained consciousness after an explosion and he is trying to find his platoon. As he embarks on his search journey, he sees so many things that look like apparitions that even make him doubt whether he is still alive. My Luck recalls a conversation he had with his grandfather, his grandfather commented that “the ancestors are concerned with the living, angels with the running of the universe, and neither elementals nor men can be trusted” (73). When he comes across a skeleton, he tries to bury it.

Leaving it for a while, I dig a shallow grave in the shifting sand, knowing it will wash away in next year’s flood. But that is unimportant. What is important is that this person be buried. Be mourned. Be remembered. Even for a minute.... I lift the skeleton with ease, careful not to shake any bone loose. To come back complete, it is important that one leaves complete. (76 – 77)

My Luck believes that, that person must be buried as a complete person so that when he/she is born the next time, he will come back as a complete person. This buttresses the African belief in reincarnation.

Surrealism also gives the reader insight into what happens to the child soldier after his/her death. It is clear that while My Luck is thinking about proper burial for other dead people, we realise that he himself is a neighbourhood ghost even though he does not seem to be aware of his state. Nevertheless, other people recognise him as a ghost making them shy away from him. For instance, when My Luck tries to talk to a woman who thinks he is a ghost, she “hesitates, then spits, almost shouting, ‘Tufia!’ the old word for banishing spirits or bad things” (84). In another instance, he meets a man who introduces himself as Peter who was helping souls to find their

bodies. He tells My Luck that the “spirits here are lucky. At least they are closer to their bodies. Sometimes an explosion blows the spirit miles away from its body. Imagine how confusing it is” (111). Suspecting that My Luck is a ghost, Peter draws a sign in the dirt and says, “[i]f you are a ghost, if you are dead, you cannot step over this sign.” It is an invitation, a command almost. I smile and think this is mumbo jumbo, but as hard as I try, I can’t move”. However, when Peter draws another one and asks him, “If you are a demon or mean me harm, you cannot cross this one” (112), he is able to cross. Peter asks him to follow him but Peter does not touch him. This points the reader to the fact that My Luck did not survive the explosion that separated him from his platoon and that he may be a ghost. He meets a woman who is carrying a coffin. She says “I have carried this coffin for so long; for such a long time. You see, we are nothing if we don’t know how to die right. That sums us up as a people. Not the manner we come into the world but the manner in which we leave” (161). Through these deathly and ghostly images, Abani questions what happens to the child soldier after death, given the circumstances surrounding their deaths. They die at the battlefield through unnatural circumstances like being blown up by explosions without proper burial and funeral rites. Since they cannot be allowed entry into the land of the ancestors, their spirits become restless and hover around scaring innocent people. This signifies that the child soldier’s problem does not end after his death and that after death, his spirit becomes restless as he is denied entry into the land of the ancestors. Thus, through surrealism Abani calls on the reader to ponder what happens to the child soldier after death. Surrealism thus helps Abani to represent the child soldier as a figure who is cursed in life as well as in the spirit world.

The surrealist language employed in the novel helps to express the intensity of the here and now of the protagonist’s experience of war as well as the eternal liminal state of the protagonist. There is an ongoing use of the present tense in the novel which is a common element of surrealism.

This is because the surrealist use of language is “in the present tense, to express the intensity of the here and now and to underline the process (poesy) not the end result (poetry): in other words, to capture the poetic process as it overflows into the living and thereby demonstrate the effect of art on life” (Sackey 149). The novel makes use of the present tense to capture the on-going process of the child soldier experience which needs immediate attention. For instance, in the extract below, the use of present tense presents the child soldier experience as an on-going and horrible one which calls for instant attention.

A dark shadow, a cloud, hangs over the whole field. I stop and squint. The cloud is local and too dark for the sun to steal through. It is alive; moving; seething; humming. With a gasp I realise that it is a cloud of flies. The cloud heads towards me, then rears up taking on a form, a huge back-winged angel. I rub my eyes. (108)

In another instance, he narrates:

I search through the cabs and backs of the trucks for any kind of bag. It seems like a good idea to pack some food for the road – and maybe some loot I can trade for favors. There is nothing. I leave the armored vehicles for last, afraid to jump into their dark bellies. I feel like the pygmy on the elephant hunt who has to cut into the beast and push past organs to cut out its heart, thereby declaring it an open feast. (61)

A presentation such as the above makes the situation being narrated alive and progressive representing the suffering of the child soldier as something ongoing which needs to be solved urgently. The use of the present tense again signifies My Luck’s liminal state between childhood and adulthood as well as life and death. The present being a time in-between the past and the future, enables Abani to capture the state of ancestral spirits in West African cosmology as beings who are eternally present.

The surrealistic sentence structure also makes the novel overcome any language barrier in representing the experience of the child soldier. The language Abani employs in the novel underscores the fact that the child soldier story is too intense for mere language and uses surrealism which breaks language barriers. The surrealist use of automatic language seems to remove all the barriers imposed on language. To the surrealist, “[l]anguage, ossified by the upper classes and imposed on all throughout history, needed to be liberated by ‘pure psychic automatism’” (Pangburn n.p). This means that to them, the raw material of the human mind is rendered by the symbolic aspect of language which is not easy to escape from; “unless one takes psychedelics, descends into madness, attains a heightened non-symbolic spiritual state, or disrupts the historical, psychological superstructure of language” (Pangburn n.p). To this end, Breton and the other surrealists realised that language, its traditional structure of syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology needed to be destroyed to some extent and be rebuilt. Through automatic writing, the surrealists were able to strike a blow to the politics of language that is, the inherited system of thought and communication. Surrealism therefore provides Abani the freedom to construct sentences and paragraphs and choose his words without kowtowing to any established norm of language. Most of the scenes Abani creates defy all personal history of language as the reader grasps for meaning making his narrative surreal such as in the extract below:

About a click outside of town, to my right, a steep bank of hills in green drama. Stunted trees struggle to hold onto the sheer faces. Creatures, maybe mountain goats, romp fearlessly at near ninety-degree angles. To my left the earth disappears into a deep ravine. Looking over the edge, I can make out a body of water. There is a scent in the air, a mixture of coriander, jasmine and nutmeg that I know well: the smell of the savannah. (107)

The above extract is a form of poetic writing that involves careful combination of words to achieve beauty. Phrases like “green drama”, and “the earth disappears into a deep ravine” seem to be a mere combination of words like the surrealist collage but its beauty lies in the fact that the reader is left to decipher meaning and point to the situation being narrated as beyond ordinary objective realism. This is in line with Peter Stockwell’s observation that “[u]nusual collocations of words, phrases, registers or textual layout were all examples of the collage technique in the service of objective chance. The surrealists’ commitment to the literal in their conception of objective chance encompassed both their stylistic experiments and their perception of reality” (n.p).

Thus, while the language of the realist novel makes use of the inherited system of thought and communication, *Song for Night* being a surreal novel abounds in this form of poetic writing. The surrealists’ commitment to the literal in their conception of objective chance encompassed both their stylistic experiments and their perception of reality. Surrealism then is the depiction of thought rather than the communication of thoughts, albeit readers find it almost impossible not to treat the language we encounter as communicative (Stockwell n.p). The language of *Song for Night*, even though it seeks to depict thought by its dreamlike nature, does not cease to be communicative. Surrealism, therefore grants Abani the freedom to use any form of language to represent the horrors of the child soldier experience since traditional narrative structures are incapable of handling the complexity of ideas it presents.

By employing surrealistic dreamlike images, Abani is able to point to the unconscious to achieve a deeper reality in *Song for Night*. Psychoanalysis sees the dream world in the light of symbolism and metaphor, an abstract but deeply evocative language (Micus 83). This means that through surrealism, Abani is able to tap the unconscious mind of the child soldier to bring the child soldier experience closer to reality. Since it is in dreams that the unrepresentable functions, by

presenting the child soldier in a dreamlike situation, Abani is able to represent the unrepresentable. Something like this can best be understood to be a dream and is therefore represented through surrealism. The dream functions as a regulator of emotional release that allows one to express and experience emotions and certain morally and socially prohibited desires, with the specific distortions. As a result, the dream has a significant role in the economy of an individual's affective experiences. Psychoanalyst Ella Freeman Sharpe addresses the topic of dream mechanisms in her writings from the point of view of the poetic language it uses, a language favourable to expressing emotions, affects and feelings (Micus 86). The story of *My Luck*, being a mixture of different feelings and emotions is appropriately narrated through surrealism.

Surrealism also allows Abani special licence to represent the complexity of inner thoughts. The child soldier experience is so traumatic that it is difficult to believe it to be true unless one is allowed into the inner thoughts of the child soldier and this can be done through surrealism – the unconscious. According to Freud and others, it is the unconscious mind that contains traumatic memories and other “unthinkable” memories – memories that have never been consciously experienced and therefore accessible to recall and which are not easily available to the conscious mind. The unconscious mind gives revelation about reality and can deliver works of beauty, innovation and even discovery. Without any method of reality checking, the finding of truths from within the unconscious is open-ended (Ward n.p). According to Lacan, just as in language the tropes of metaphor and metonymy serve to “present” ideas in forms greatly different from their original content, in the psychic realm they offer the same function, thus rendering certain “objects” of the mind (thoughts, feelings, signifiers, etc.) unrecognisable to “consciousness” (Rahimi n.p). By tapping the unconscious, Abani is able to use linguistic images to achieve beauty in the novel as well as reveal the reality of the child soldier situation.

Thus, through surrealism, Abani is able to reach the unconscious mind of the voiceless narrator. This technique of the voiceless narrator in this novel is unique among all the child soldier narratives studied in this thesis and, through surrealism, Abani gives voice to the voiceless. By employing surrealistic dreamlike images, Abani is able to point to the unconscious to achieve a deeper reality in *Song for Night*. He seems to be responding to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" And since, as Spivak convincingly argues, "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (28), s/he must speak with his/her body. The child soldier as an "Other" in society has been silenced, yet his story must be told. Through surrealism, the reader is able to enter the unconscious mind to understand the child soldier's thoughts as well as his body language. Body language is thus established as the language of the silenced, the subaltern in society but, as seen in the sign language such as presented in the chapter titles, they speak with their bodies. These are the body-signs through which the child soldier narrates his horrific experience at the battlefield. The use of body language contributes to the authenticity that Abani wants to achieve in his narrative, since body language mostly carries a visceral truth. According to Julie-Ann Amos, "body language is such an innate part of communication that you have to make a concerted effort to use it in a way that goes against your natural tendencies" (n.p). This shows that body language is believed to carry truth better than words. It is even believed that in some circumstances, body language speaks better than words. Amos further states that there are times when words simply cannot communicate properly in a personal interaction. For instance, when one is comforting a grieving friend, the simple non-verbal act of putting an arm around his or her shoulder is far more powerful than any words you might say. As has been argued, surrealism allows Abani special licence to represent the complexity of inner thoughts, it makes the novel overcome language barriers, helps to express the intensity of the here and now of the protagonist's

experience of war as well as the eternal liminal state of the protagonist, and gives the reader insight into what happens to the child soldier after his/her death.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Abani's *Song for Night* is a representation of socialisation into social disorder which ends at the liminal stage of initiation into adulthood, leaving the protagonist in a form of developmental limbo as well as a state in-between life and death. This is a complex form of development that tips the narrative into surrealism since traditional narrative structures are inadequate in representing the abnormality of the child-soldier experience represented in the novel. The employment of dreamlike images allows the author the freedom to represent the rational "unthinkability" of the child soldier experience since dreams liberate the mind from any control. Surrealism thus allows Abani to convey to the reader the events and the abuse of children in war situations, an excess which defies the language of realist representation. Surrealism also allows Abani to break all language barriers to address events that are too horrific for contemplation and therefore break the boundaries of the rational novel, challenging enlightenment stories of modernity and development.

The perverted socialisation we witness in this chapter which shifts the narrative into surrealism, leads us to the next chapter where we are presented with a child who undergoes proper traditional initiation but whose experience of war reverses all the values his society expects from an initiated child. In the next chapter, we will see that the child's experience of war is so unbelievable that his attempt to prove that it is the truth moves the narrative into the absurd.

CHAPTER THREE
VALIDATING THE TRUTH OF THE ABSURD IN AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S *ALLAH*
IS NOT OBLIGED

In the Petit Robert it says 're-education' means the act of re-educating, in other words, 're-education'. Walahé! Even the Petit Robert sometimes takes the piss (Allah is Not Obligated 64).

Introduction

In Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (2006), we are presented with a ten-year-old child soldier who narrates the horrors he experiences at the battlefield. His experiences are unbelievable but he tries his best to validate the truthfulness of his story by appealing to God, *Walahé* (I swear by Allah), as the guarantor of all truth, and by the appeal to the wisdom in folk culture; and, curiously, dictionaries, that constitute his final proof. He has a regular swear word, *faforo* (a father's cock) and which he uses after narrating every horrific incident to vouch for the truthfulness of the story he narrates. He also has in his possession four dictionaries that he uses to try to explain words as literally as possible for his readers both to understand and to vouch for the truth of what he says. The dictionaries are: the *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* for looking up and checking and explaining French words, the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* for explaining African words and the *Harrap's* for explaining pidgin words. (All these dictionaries, except the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* actually exist.). However, even with all the tools available to him to validate the truthfulness of his story, he gets frustrated because his experience is so absurd that the more he tries to prove that it is the truth, the

more absurd it becomes.

This chapter is a development on the first chapter as it analyses the way the child soldier's experience on the battlefield has left him in a developmental 'limbo'. However, the chapter differs from chapter two as it presents a child who has gone through traditional initiation into manhood, but who nevertheless enters into war without any moral development as a consequence of his initiation. His development is thus stymied as he is left in a stuck cycle of personal development. This is because the pre-war society is not ideal as it was in *Song for Night*. In *Allah is Not Obligated*, the war and pre-war society are parodied and Birahima, the protagonist, is a spoilt child, even before he becomes a child soldier. For me, this novel is about validating the child's war-time experience using folk wisdom, religion, and the philosophy represented by the dictionary of literal validation based upon definition and classification, most strongly linked with European enlightenment systematisation of reason, highlighted similarly by the project of the French *Encyclopédistes*. As is suggested by Joseph Minga, "Kourouma's Birahima moves through the forests in quest of truth about wars, a truth which Africa without doubt needs, and out of which is born deception, and less hope" (235).

Allah is Not Obligated is the last novel of the renowned Ivorian writer, Ahmadou Kourouma, who is noted in literary circles for his politically inspired writing. His first novel, *The Suns of Independence* (1970), is a critical treatment of postcolonial governments in Africa. His second novel *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990), which translates as "*Monnè Insults and Challenges*", where "monnè" is a Malinke word meaning "contempt", is a history of a century of colonialism. In 1998, Kourouma published yet another political novel, *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, a satire of postcolonial Africa, which recounts the story of a tribal hunter's transformation into a dictator. Apart from his fiction, Kourouma is also noted for speaking out against dictatorial rulers and wars

in Africa that sometimes led to his imprisonment and exile. In 2002, he became the target of scathing editorials in Côte d'Ivoire when, in a published interview, he called for an end to ethnic fighting and an election in that country. In *Allah is Not Obligated*, Kourouma brings his experience in political writing and his disgust at wars into the open when he satirises African dictators, international aid, peace organisations, warlords and religious figures for the way they propagate and prolong wars that send children to the battlefield. As someone who had military experience during his youth, he understands the practical realities of war as highlighted by Stephen Gray who says about Kourouma that he “certainly understood the effectiveness of those rifles in the frontline, not to mention on the population at large during any civil upheaval” (Gray 153). *Allah is Not Obligated* was first published in French in 2000 as *Allah n'est pas obligé*, and was translated into English by Frank Wynne in 2003, the year Kourouma died. Even though Kourouma is noted for political satirical writing and a focus on civil conflict, it is in *Allah is Not Obligated* that he for the first time focuses mainly on the use of children as combatants in African wars in a strongly investigative fashion: “Accordingly, reviewers were inclined to stress that the work apparently represented a rupture in his oeuvre, away from the epic allegories of his previous three novels to a type of ‘docu-roman’ (real characters named, actual historical events, coverage as in a journalistic report)” (Gray 154). However, as noted above, Kourouma’s writing about war is not a personal departure since he had some military experience of his own, when during his youth in the colonial period, he had participated in a French military operation in the then Indo-China.

Allah is Not Obligated is a novel that fictionalises wars in a part of West Africa. It employs the point of view of Birahima, a literalist picaro, who hides behind well-constructed masks of polemic to chronicle war atrocities that he is unwilling to face up to and is incapable of confronting. The novel is set in the West African countries of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The narrative begins when, after his mother's death, Birahima is entrusted into the care of a false Muslim, a self-proclaimed sorcerer or *grigriman* (magician) called Yacouba, who claims to know where in Liberia Birahima's Aunt Mahan lives and promises to take him to her. Before they leave, Yacouba prepares the boy's mind in terms of what to expect in Liberia and promises to take him to a place where children are made into soldiers and given a lot of money which makes Birahima eager to become a "small soldier", as the novel refers to the child soldier. Crossing the border into Liberia, they are arrested by a rebel force at a roadblock. After child soldiers stop them and other passengers, since child soldiers are used as "border" guards, they are robbed on the grounds that one of the passengers killed a child soldier named Captain Kid. Without being forced into military service, Birahima willingly offers to become a small soldier, while Yacouba offers himself as a *grigriman* in order to survive. Birahima thus becomes a child soldier in NPFL military faction, under the rebel ruler Colonel Papa Le Bon.

At Papa Le Bon's camp, Birahima experiences and witnesses horrific experiences that are so unbelievable that he has to swear by God and appeal to dictionaries to vouch for the truthfulness of the horror he narrates. Papa Le Bon uses child soldiers to mount roadblocks so that they can loot passengers and bring the spoils to him. Birahima recounts Papa Le Bon's hypocrisy, captured in the irony of his name which means "good father". He has a guest house where he performs ritual magic for women, that is just a ruse for sexual exploitation: "Some people said during the rituals, Colonel Papa Le Bon took off his clothes and so did the women. *Walahé*" (65). Here, Birahima thinks he has to swear before anyone could believe that a priest could sleep with other people's wives. Papa Le Bon has different categories of prisoners, including the husbands of women that he "has decided to love" (64). After working as a child soldier for Papa Le Bon for some time, Birahima is influenced by another child soldier, Tête Brulée, who had already served as a child

soldier in the ULIMO military faction, to rebel against Papa Le Bon because he is not looking after them well. Tête Brulée succeeds in killing Papa Le Bon and takes weapons and a group of child soldiers back to ULIMO, a faction led by a woman soldier named, Générale Onika Baclay.

As part of the ULIMO faction, Birahima again experiences and witnesses many horrific incidents. General Onika uses the child soldiers to mount attacks where many child soldiers die, but she wildly rejoices over her victories in spite of the number of young human lives lost. The sight of the dead in Onika's camp is so overwhelming to Birahima that one could only believe if one had witnessed the atrocity: "You should have seen it! It was a terrible sight. There were corpses everywhere, soldiers and child soldiers dead, safes empty and two bossmen missing" (107). The number of deaths of child soldiers is so unbelievable that Birahima thinks he has to swear by God before anybody would believe it. For instance, during an attack on Onika's camp, he narrates that there, "was lots of furious gunfire and consequences: bodies, lots of dead bodies. *Walahé!* Five child soldiers and three real soldiers got massacred" (106).

After Onika's defeat, Birahima and Yacouba, his "guardian", head for the south since "[t]hat's the way [his] aunt went" (124). After walking for a few hours, they come to a camp controlled by Prince Johnson, one of the important warlords in Liberia, who receives Yacouba as a *grigriman* and Birahima as a child soldier. Birahima's stay at Johnson's camp enables him to recount some of the worst atrocities of the war. Johnson is revealed as a ruthless warlord who will do anything no matter how cruel, in order to get money for his exploits, but loudly proclaims to be fighting under the instruction of God to kill the devil's children. At Johnson's camp Birahima witnesses even worse atrocities of the war, chief among them being the torture and killing of Samuel Doe, the dictator of Liberia by Prince Johnson.

True to the picaresque nature of the narrative, Birahima and Yacouba again leave Johnson's

camp based on the news that Mahan has fled Liberia in search of her brother in Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, Birahima and Yacouba are captured by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) freedom fighters under General Tieffi at a town called Mile-Thirty-Eight. Here too, Yacouba joins the *grigrimen* while Birahima joins the child soldiers. At the RUF camp, Birahima wants to join the young lycaeons, a special unit of child soldiers who are given the most inhuman jobs, but he is disqualified because he has no living parents to kill in order to qualify. Birahima and Yacouba leave the RUF camp after the Kamajors, the association of traditional hunters, take over Mile-Thirty-Eight. They hear that Mahan is at a refugee camp at Worosso but they arrive too late when she is already dead. Thus even the quest in the narrative is as futile as the attempt to validate the truth of the implausibility of the child-soldier experience. Returning to Côte d'Ivoire in his cousin Dr. Mamadou Doumbia's car after visiting the mass grave where his aunt's body was deposited, Mamadou asks Birahima to tell him about his experiences of war. His cousin, Dr Mamadou, also gives him the four dictionaries he has acquired from Varrassouba Diabate, the traditional griot who also acted as translator who has died. The semi-literate Birahima demands that his oral story be noted in writing by his cousin, in an attempt to give his unbelievable tale a permanence that will survive time. In these ways the novel makes a break with the significance of the oral tradition that may be able to represent and allow the history of the child-soldier to endure. But it also sends up and undermines the literate culture it enters since at the end the narrative returns to the beginning word for word in its repetition of the stuck cycle of Birahima's "bullshit" story that dramatises the stuck cycle of his personal development as indicated in the way the story begins and ends with the same sentence as indicated below:

The full, final and completely complete title of my bullshit story is: *Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth.* Okay. Right. I better start

explaining some stuff. (1 *original emphasis*)

Thus, Birahima's search for his Aunt Mahan takes him through the camps of various warlords that are versions of the same horror, which enables him to give an account of what happens at the camps of the warring factions. The construction of the novel around the quest allows Birahima to report the atrocities of the war that are so absurd that, in fact, the imperative of the narrative is the validation of the truth of the account. Birahima seeks different ways to prove that his absurd story is real. As noted above, he appeals to God as the ultimate guarantor of truth, to the truth that resides in folk wisdom, and most significantly, since it is the most emphatic, he appeals to the truth that resides in the authority of print culture with its specific logic and systems of classification. The centrality of the appeals to the forms of truth of the culture represented by the dictionaries is apparent from the fact that words are defined from the dictionaries two to three times in the novel, while the appeals to God and folk wisdom are slowly abandoned. But, paradoxically, the more Birahima tries to be truthful, the more absurd his story becomes.

The question of the validation of the truth of the absurdity of Kourouma's child-soldier narrative that moves the novel into forms of postmodern textuality have not really been considered in scholarship to date. Critical studies on *Allah is Not Obligated* have largely focused on the novel's representation of African social, religious and political realities, its deformation of the African *Bildungsroman*, and the language and style of the novel; while others have hailed *Allah is Not Obligated* as Kourouma's entry into the sub-genre of the child-soldier narrative.

Critics who focus on the novel's representation of African social, religious and political conditions have argued along the lines that the novel represents the failure of social values through its representation of putting children on the battle front. It shows the failure of religion and different cultural systems to save its adherents in the wars generated by the delineation of national borders

and the political situations created in postcolonial Africa. They analyse how the novel portrays religious practitioners as selfish hypocrites and people whose activities leave their followers helpless and confused. Nelly Lecomte analyses the figure of magicians and sorcerers in the novel and comments on the novel's representation of how war propagates superstitions and how sorcerers cash in on war as people allow the omnipotence of religion to reign. According to Kofi Darko Ankra, the novel represents the conflict between Islam and the socio-economic and political forces depicted in *Allah is Not Obligated*. Ankra observes that Kourouma portrays Islam as succumbing to material realities and concludes that Kourouma sets his novel in a turbulent war situation to portray the extent to which Muslims compromise their beliefs and how Allah in the painful world of the text, does not respond to their problems. Christopher Cox widens the lens, and suggests that the novel abounds with characters who strictly define and divide themselves as Muslim, Christian, or animist but everyone is equally corrupt, violent, and power-hungry. Commenting on the novel's representation of West African politics, Augustine Asaah argues that Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* highlights through cross-border movements and conflicts between the West African countries of Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the national problems and strife of those nations. The context of genocidal warfare, tribal politics, anarchy, and political manipulation provides Kourouma with the chance to chronicle and abhor the failures of the African nation state, the bad faith of West African peace keepers, and the ill-disposition of African leaders towards Pan-Africanism. In Aminata Forna's analysis, the lunacy of creating these artificial nation states during the "scramble for Africa" becomes evident, as does the reason why the violence in Liberia spread so rapidly outwards, like sparks from a bush fire.

Other critics have analysed how the novel represents African social conditions that continue to change and how childhood is changing with it. According to John Walsh, in *Allah is*

Not Obligated, “Kourouma writes about a generation that has lost hope in the common humanity of French-African culture” (186). The degradation of the social conditions in Africa has gone hand in hand with the deformation of the African *Bildungsroman*, first engaged in Camara laye’s *L’enfant noir* such that the “conflict is no longer between French colonialism and African tradition, no longer about the possibility of a boy’s formation; rather it is the story of a boy who lives an unspeakable, “damned life”.... Birahima educates the reader by recounting a story of a childhood so violent and depraved as to become not a life but a ‘blablabla’ ” (187 *original emphasis, my ellipsis*), in the French, translated in English as a “bullshit” story. Patrick Corcoran also views *Allah is Not Obligated* to be the antithesis of a *Bildungsroman*. According to Corcoran, Birahima’s experiences cannot be formative because they cannot be inserted within a developmental framework. For Louis P. Yapo, Kourouma moves away from the African *Bildungsroman* found in novels like *Houseboy* and *L’enfant noir* to create a character who displays educational and social deficiencies. The character of Birahima is the author’s way of focusing on the ongoing degradation of Africa’s social, cultural, economic and political environment.

Some commentators have however hailed *Allah is Not Obligated* as a novel that dared to speak the unspeakable. According to Stephen Gray, the reception given *Allah is Not Obligated* was markedly positive since it is a breakthrough work that dared to speak boldly of the scandal of underage recruitment, which only then was becoming a media issue: “The news of the establishment of the International Criminal Court, effective since 2002 and intent on prosecuting warlords for crimes against humanity, and the United Nations Security Council resolution adopted in 2005 against the victimization of young people in warzones and the exploitation of children below the age of fifteen as combatants served to highlight the issue that Kourouma had brought to the attention of his public” (Gray 154). For Edgar Fred Nabutanyi, Kourouma in *Allah is Not*

Obliged “use[s] narrative to offer empathetic archive[s] of the experiences of war-affected children” (50). This means that Kourouma reveals these atrocities and creates a record in the public sphere as testimony and warning of what war can do to children (Nabutanyi 77).

On the question of style, commentators have been interested in Kourouma’s idiosyncratic use of language, dark humour and narrative voice. According to Danny Yee, *Allah is Not Obligated* represents a brutal story, which is told in a matter of fact way from the perspective of a child full of dark humour. For Adrian Igonibo Barrett, what shines brightest in this novel is the voice: “Ribald yet naive, contemplative and at the same time chatty, the voice of Birahima is a narrative delight. Bitter laughter many times; also sweet pangs of sadness, pity, regret; and always, at the end of each rereading, a sour aftertaste at the facts of history woven into the fiction” (n.p).

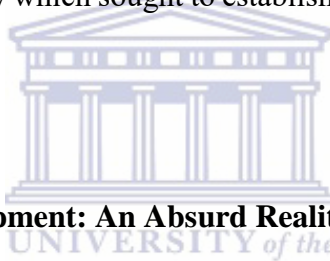
According to Hawa Allan, Ahmadou Kourouma takes a more confrontational approach to the matter of voice in *Allah is Not Obligated* when Kourouma very quickly, and repeatedly, disabuses the reader of any sentimental notions when it comes to his protagonist, whose story is not only personal but also political. Philip Amukoya Bainito’s study establishes the link between Kourouma’s artistic style of a child recounting and how it illuminates the themes in the novel. He sees Kourouma’s use of language, notably the use of Malinké words, phrases and proverbs as demonstrating the French language’s inability to portray indigenous African experiences. According to John Walsh, a comparison of the novel with *L’enfant noir* serves as a point of departure for a closer analysis of the roles of language and education in *Allah is Not Obligated*. The ability to take refuge in language—even, perhaps, to make a home in language—is a central theme for Walsh. Louis P. Yapo also stresses that Birahima’s dreadful situation and vulgar language as a narrator gives Kourouma a solid excuse to free himself from any constraints in order to exercise his will to subvert French, and also the tradition of well-behaved youth narrators in African novels.

For Patrick Corcoran, the patently superficial way that Birahima deals with language as a material to be manipulated is highly significant. The surface semantics of so many of the glosses suggests that language is being used, at the very least, as a screen which can be interposed between himself and the unacceptable nature of the reality it is supposed to express.

In his article, “Satire, Children, and Traumatic Violence: The Case of Ahmadou Kourouma and Uwem Akpan”, Isaac Ndlovu discusses the novel’s representation of violence and abnormal development in tandem with a short story by Uwem Akpan that will not be considered here. He posits that *Allah is Not Obligated* raises questions about the role of fiction in cases of extreme violence. To him, if realism is something that Kourouma actively sought to achieve in his narrative, then it can be argued that it is a realism of an unsettling kind: “The satirical quality of these narratives [Kourouma and Akpan] suggests that their authors are not necessarily interested in mimetic realism but in a satirical exposé of the devastating effects of greed, religious credulity, human hypocrisy, and stupidity, and the consequences of tribally motivated civil wars upon children, the most vulnerable members of any society” (74). To him, the lack of concern for Birahima’s rehabilitation and the cyclical nature of the narrative form part of Kourouma’s satirical package aimed at all social behaviour that fails to combat violence on and by children. The novel’s structure and Birahima’s portrayal are deliberate satirical subversions of the notion of *Bildung* that forms an integral part of the novel tradition. He concludes that *Allah is Not Obligated*’s narrative structure and its irreverent stylistic strategies suggest that the extraordinary African conditions it depicts make it impossible to write a traditional novel with its normalising tendencies.

The above arguments about *Allah is Not Obligated*, though insightful, have not clearly articulated the overlap of *Bildung*-type development and initiation in the novel and the parody of both. An initiated child’s entry into war reveals the inefficacy of initiation in a society that is

already unsettled and upended, leaving the child in an absurd cyclical “limbo”. His attempt to prove the truthfulness of his absurd life makes his narrative even more absurd. Even though Ndlovu’s study is insightful in the way it argues that the novel suggests it is impossible to represent extraordinary experiences with traditional novelistic techniques and establishes that the novel is not realist, he fails to recognise the point made above, namely that the absurdity of the experiences of the child soldier that violate everything cultures universally consider normal in the development of the person, leads to a frustrated attempt to prove the veracity of experience that paradoxically leads to a move away from realism to postmodern metatextuality. This chapter thus can be viewed as a development on Ndlovu’s study which sought to establish a general link between violence and non-realist narration.



Frustrated Initiation and Development: An Absurd Reality

During those two months, they taught us things, lots of things that we were obliged never to reveal to anyone ever. That’s why it is called initiation. I would never talk to anyone who was not initiated about the things I learned during initiation. One day we left the sacred forest, we ate a lot and danced a lot, and we weren’t bilakoros [uncircumcised children] any more: we had been initiated so now we were men (Not Obligated 29 – 30).

Almost every rite of passage has three stages: the separation stage, the liminal stage and the reintegration. Among the Malinké, initiation is:

... designed to snatch the human from the animal in order to raise him or her to the dignity of a person fulfilled in and by the knowledge of God and consists of gradual instruction in inwardness. The human being starts by becoming more familiar with

the significance of his own body, then experiences symbolic death and rebirth and lastly builds a physical foundation, a moral, intellectual, political and spiritual character Social ethics and morals, physical education, civic and religious education are all brought to bear in the edification of humankind, the globe and the cosmos. (Memel-Fotê 54 *my ellipsis*)

In the rest of the section, I analyse how as an initiated Malinké boy, Birahima fails to fulfill what his society expects from him after his initiation. I argue that Birahima is frustrated because although he is initiated, he does not develop into a full adult, neither does he develop morally, intellectually, and spiritually as his initiation expects of him. This is because his reintegration stage takes place in the context of war with Yacouba, the fraudulent money multiplier as his mentor. His reintegration into a corrupt social environment, therefore, leaves him in a state in-between all aspects of his life. Birahima goes through formal Malinké initiation which according to him takes two months. However, his behaviour throughout the novel shows that he is not developed, intellectually, morally and spiritually in the way his society expects of him after initiation. Intellectually and behaviourally, he clearly does not fully develop into adulthood since he continues to behave childishly after initiation. Some time after his initiation ceremony, Yacouba tells him about child soldiers in Liberia and how they get everything they want. Birahima's infantile response to Yacouba underscores the fact that the Malinké initiation in its contemporary corrupt context does not achieve its aim. Birahima shouts: "I want to be a child soldier, a small soldier ... In bed when I did pooh-pooh or pee-pee, I shouted out small-soldier, child-soldier, soldier-child" (37 *my ellipsis*). As can be seen, after Birahima's initiation, he still is a bed-wetter, signifying that he is still a child. When the vehicle in which he is travelling with Yacouba is attacked by child soldiers, he shouts "I want to be a soldier-child, small soldier, small-soldier,

child-soldier, I want my auntie, I want my auntie in Niambo!” (52). Birahima’s childishness is also revealed in the way he impersonally and unemotionally narrates the horrific activities of warlords and the deplorable conditions under which child soldiers operate as though they were just a game. He does not offer any moral comment on them. A typical example is the way he narrates the horrific incident involving Captain Kik without any moral comment. Kik is a child soldier who had stepped on a mine and had one of legs amputated. He screamed, “but the nurse cut off his leg anyway, right at the knee. He threw the leg to a passing dog” (87). The amputated boy was left at the “mercy of humans in the village the way [we] left Sara to the mercy of animals and insects. Which of them was better off? Definitely not Kik. That’s wars for you. Animals have more mercy for the wounded than humans” (89). This is a very pathetic way for a child to end his life but Birahima narrates it without any moral comment. Unlike My Luck in *Song for Night*, analysed in chapter two, and Mene in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, that is not considered in this thesis, Birahima does not even ask any questions. He simply comforts himself with his repetitive comment which echoes the full version of the title of the novel, “Allah is not obliged to be fair about all that he does here on earth” and his other swear words, “*Walahé*”, “*Faforo*” and “*Gnamokodé*.” This childish behaviour is an indication that even though Birahima is initiated, he is not yet an adult.

Similarly, Birahima does not develop his religion and his knowledge of God the way his initiation expects him to develop. In spite of the fact that Birahima’s initiation is designed to make him a dignified person fulfilled in and by the knowledge of God, his experience of war makes him lose hope in all religions, not only his own religion of Islam. The adherents of all West African religions, including Islam, Christianity and African traditional religions, are presented as corrupt, confused and confusing. In his time in the first rebel camp, Birahima says that Papa Le Bon’s mass was called a “papal mass” only for the fact that he used the pope’s staff. This signifies how hollow

his religion is to Birahima, since the only thing that makes him a priest is the pope's staff. He does not treat the child soldiers well. Birahima says "we slept on grass mats right on the floor. And we ate whatever we could, wherever we could" (65 – 66) and while Papa Le Bon never smoked hash, he gave the child soldiers hash to smoke: "The hash was reserved for the child soldiers on account of it made them strong as real soldiers" (71, 79). Meanwhile, "Papa Le Bon with his papal staff is righteousness itself" (76). Nuns, like all other women, shockingly, "made love" (74). What confuses Birahima about religion even more is the behaviour of Yacouba, Birahima's guardian who is portrayed in the novel as a businessman who takes advantage of people's belief in Islam to make money. Throughout the novel, Birahima is presented as cynical about religion. Even though he boasts of being a Malinké, a proper Muslim who prays five times a day and does not eat pork, he does not behave as a proper Muslim. He does not develop in the ways of his religion because he is confused by the behaviour of other adherents of the religion.

Morally, Birahima does not develop the way his society expects him to develop and behave. At the battle front, Birahima engages in violence: he kills, loots and smokes hash which are all negative social values which his initiation was supposed to guard against. He is taught how to use the AK47 which, according to him, "was dead easy, you just pressed the trigger and it went tat-tat-tat and keep killing and killing and people will be dropping like flies" (67). He says, "I don't give a shit about modesty, I'm street kid... I don't give a fuck about moral standards" (50 *my ellipsis*). His situation is worsened by the war after which he says, "I don't give two fucks about village customs any more 'cos I've been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we called it 'kalash') and got fucked-up on kanif and lots of hard drug" (3). He smokes hard drugs to make him numb in order to carry out these activities and without hash, the child soldiers "were as floppy as worms, weak on account of we needed hash" (108). This shows that Birahima cannot

perform his gruesome acts in his right senses as a *compos mentis* human being, but only under the influence of drugs. Birahima is so corrupt morally that he nearly loses his humanity, just the opposite of what his initiation is supposed to achieve. The most significant signpost of Birahima's loss of humanity is his willingness to join the young lycaeons. This shows that he was willing to kill one of his own parents and eat their flesh were they alive, for special favours to survive the war. His regret that he has no living parent to kill in order for him to join this group is an indication of how far he has gone from being human; a development into something opposite to what an initiated Malinké boy is supposed to be. Birahima thus develops away from the moral values his society expects of him after going through initiation.

In spite of the fact that Birahima's initiation is meant to make him develop intellectually, morally and religiously, he does not show any significant transformation as a consequence of traditional initiation in all these aspects of his life. Instead, he is trapped in a vicious cycle, because his reintegration stage takes place in a corrupt social environment. This signifies that the traditional order as presented in the novel does not have any significant purchase in Birahima's context, exacerbated by the inversions, disturbances and destruction of war.

The degradation of social conditions in Africa has impacted on the African *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman*, as discussed in the introductory chapter, is a German term for "novel of education" which originally was the genre of the European bourgeois male. In *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti, contends that, the youth's growth must be a succession of trials in which he engages, in order to form his subjectivity and shape his conformity to the demands of socialisation. For Moretti, the classical *Bildungsroman* or novel of education, describes a route to self-development which depends on the cohesiveness of the society in which the young hero lives. This idea is repeated by John Walsh who suggests about

the novel of development that: “The harmony that is the objective of such a narrative assumes a set of values with which the hero comes to terms; indeed, the hero generally adapts to society such that its legitimacy rests intact” (Walsh 188). Thus at the end of development, one is supposed to be presented with a coherent hero who fits into a coherent society. When it was introduced into African literature, the genre was used to examine the conflict of cultures in which a young person undergoing colonial education struggles to achieve a balance between western educational values and the traditions of his forefathers: “The narratives of writers who grew up under conditions of colonial and postcolonial dominance offer another perspective that complicates the linear maturity inherent to *Bildung*. In these narratives growing up also means certain alienation, due to the cultural and linguistic separation wrought by a colonial education” (Walsh 188). In these earlier African *Bildungsromane*, the protagonists seek formal education which normally takes them from their community. These characters are initiated before they leave home. However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *Bildungsroman* has undergone transformation adapting to the radical changes in society. In most post-2000 child-soldier narratives, the protagonist develops in the context of war and instead of education, it is war which takes them away from their communities without undergoing traditional initiation. For instance, in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night*, which are discussed in other chapters of this study, the protagonists are in school before war takes them from school to the battlefield. These characters are not initiated and their experiences of war seem to be their initiation since the training they get at the warfront is what enables them to survive in the environment of social disorder. However, unlike other war *Bildungsroman* protagonists, Birahima is initiated before he becomes a child soldier; albeit he behaves contrary to what his initiation is supposed to teach him.

Despite the fact that Birahima’s initiation puts him on par with the protagonists of earlier

African *Bildungsromane*, his experiences contrast with the classical African *Bildungsroman*. Unlike the earlier African *Bildungsroman* protagonists who seek formal education, in *Allah is Not Obligated*, Birahima, the protagonist, is already a school drop-out before he is recruited as a child soldier. His father dies early leaving him with a sick mother and an aged grandmother. When his mother is branded a witch and accused of devouring her own ulcer at night, Birahima abandons her, leaves home and becomes a street child: “A proper street kid that sleeps with the goats and nicks stuff to eat from fields and concessions” (20). Having rejected his mother who dies in pain, Birahima sees himself as cursed. This is an indication of a child who has already resigned himself to a destiny that is imposed on him, giving him a low estimation of himself.

When he leaves his native Togobala in search of his aunt in Liberia, he becomes a child soldier in the armies of various warring factions in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Thus, when Birahima leaves home, he does not pursue education but engages in war and its attendant violence. The acts of killing, looting and raping that he engages in at the battlefield do not make him develop and become autonomous but only heighten the condemned state he finds himself in at the beginning of the novel. Like Birahima, most of the child soldiers he eulogises in the course of the narrative do not develop but have their lives cut short by war. Their “journeys” into becoming child soldiers are not journeys of development as their “passages” are mostly short. Most of the children are forced by circumstances to become child soldiers, as a consequence of which they die young. Thus, in *Allah is Not Obligated*, the notion of *Bildung* is frustrated because Birahima’s experience is so absurd that it cannot fit into the developmental ideas inherent in either customary Malinké development or *Bildung*-type development.

Finding Meaning in a Life: Birahima's Paradoxes of the Absurd

The word “absurd” as an adjective, is associated with a sense of disharmony, of being out of tune, the idea of the irrational, lack of purpose or even silliness, and this is exactly the sense taken in absurdist fiction. In a philosophical context, the idea of the absurd was explored by Albert Camus in 1942, through the figure of Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is represented as a paradoxical, double-natured archetype of profound boredom, whose contempt of the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life, won him an unspeakable penalty in which his whole life is exerted toward achieving nothing. The artistic development of the concept of the absurd is an illustration of how an idea of philosophical scepticism was transferred and reworked in and through the realms of literature. The latter, in turn, seems to provide thought with a mode of language in which the unspeakable nothingness, paradoxically enough, may be communicated (Rin角度 42). Literature of the Absurd originates with the Theatre of the Absurd which followed the first and second world wars as a result of disillusionment with rationalism, which attempted to justify the exploitation of the working class and poor, the affluence of the rich, the cruel yet overlooked destructiveness of the two world wars, and the unquestioned belief in evolution and progress.

The genre was made famous by Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Kurt Vonnegut, and Paul Auster, who focus on experiences of characters who are unable to find intrinsic purpose in life and represent them through meaningless actions and events. The absurd “arises from the clash between reasoning, finite man, on the one hand, striving for order, unity and happiness, and, on the other, the silent, unreasonable world offering no response to his persistent demands” (McMurray 31). The absurd experience resides in the perception that reality constantly overflows man's efforts to encompass it in rational systems of thought since things are wholly without explanation and hence

man's attempt to make sense of things is a joke. The term thus, indicates the essential disharmony between man and the world he must live in.

The Literature of the Absurd attempts to paint a ludicrous caricature of our world as a world without faith, meaning, direction or freedom. Human life is more and more removed from the natural, and human beings are alienated from the earth and each other. Human behaviour is more conditioned and psychologically manipulated so that it is no longer governed by logic or the rational. This meaninglessness and hopelessness of life is depicted in the incoherent, often chaotic structure of the works of absurdist literature. Nothing is chronological and nothing follows from that which went before. The Literature of the Absurd portrays the world as an unintelligible place.

Absurdist literature defies the traditional conventions of literature and reflects the changes in mankind's philosophical perception of our place in the universe. Traditional literature is based on the convention that life has meaning, a goal and order or structure. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle laid down the guidelines for the order and structure of literature. Realist literature tends to reinforce this by being coherent, linear in structure and aiming for order and unity. The absurd on the other hand, as that which has no meaning, purpose or goal, does not follow standard structure or order. There are distortions in both time and place. Nothing about this genre is standard as the "moral" of the story is not explicit. The author often rejects standard morality completely and the structure of stories differs from traditional story structure. Thus, writers have great freedom to create unique works of art.

Linked to distorted structure in the absurd is the portrayal of language as that which has failed to say what needs to be said. The absurd thus "poses a serious rhetorical challenge. A man has at his disposal only words, yet his experience tells him that these poor tokens of reason cannot say what needs to be said.... The writer tries to say what is fundamentally unsayable. In the

process, language ‘goes on holiday’” (Halloran 98). One possible response to the view that language cannot say what needs to be said is to retreat into silence and fall back on purely visual means of communication like movement, gesture, and visual metaphor, as some of the absurdists did as a means of articulating their experiences. The language that does appear in the Theatre of the Absurd is often a language that has become disengaged from reality. Language is used to satirise language, “to show the hopelessness of using language to deal with serious human problems. In the process, words are liberated from the rules that are supposed to govern their use and keep them firmly attached to reality, and the spirit of pure play takes over. Language satire becomes verbal farce” (Halloran 99).

Some of the common elements in absurdist fiction are satire, dark humour, incongruity, the elimination of reason, and argument regarding the philosophical condition of being “nothing”. Absurdist fiction is mostly humorous or irrational in nature but the mark of the genre is neither comedy nor nonsense. Rather, it is the study of human behaviour under realistic or fantastical circumstances that appear to be meaningless. Absurdist fiction proposes little judgment about characters or their actions as that task is left to the reader. Also, the “moral” of the story is generally not explicit, and the themes or characters’ realisations are often ambiguous in nature.

The absurd means different things in a European context compared with the African, postcolonial context. Whereas the European absurd writers raise the rhetorical question, “if life has lost all its meaning and has exposed all its ugliness, why should man not consider suicide?”, in African literature, the absurd developed as a reaction to general world disorder and the absurd conditions of modern Africa: “Dissatisfaction with local and foreign policies, countries racing to possess weapons with over-kill capacities, a state of debilitating poverty leading to starvation and misery, and above all else the replacement of colonial governments by dictatorial regimes

practising all forms of oppression on their people, all generated the same mood of depression and despair” (Noureiddin 243). According to Odun Balogun, the European tradition is characterised by “extreme forms of illogic, inconsistency, nightmarish fantasy,” abandonment of “usual or rational devices and the use of nonrealistic form” in the effort to create an “anti-style” so that absurdity is reflected in absurd style while African absurdist literature does not aim at creating an “anti-style” to make absurd form reflect absurd content. Rather, modern African absurdist writers use normal, rational and realistic devices combined with hyperbole, irony and satire to convey the absurd with a basic use of fantasy, to introduce suspension of disbelief to bring out the absurd (Balogun 44). The language of narration in the African absurd literature is realistic even though it is heightened by exaggeration and satiric irony. Thus, while the European absurd emerges out of the loss of meaning in the world, the African absurd, especially as described in child-soldier narratives, is an absurd reality created by postcolonial histories that are hard to believe. However, there are certain features about the human experience such as those related to desolation, spiritual barrenness, and the feeling of the futility of existence, which are universally recurrent regardless of place and time, and writers’ reaction to these experiences might display many similarities in their depiction of the absurd (Noureiddin 255).

Thus, whereas the European absurdist sees life as being absurd and meaningless, so absurd and meaningless, in fact, that he contemplates suicide as a solution, the African absurdist writer does not believe that life in itself is absurd or meaningless: “As a matter of fact, life to him is very meaningful; what can be absurd and meaningless are individuals and situations. The conditions, the instances, the personalities, and the attitudes that deprive life of this meaning which he values so much are the things he ridicules in his works by exposing the absurdity inherent in them” (Balogun 46). The absurd for the African writer, can thus be said to fulfill the same purpose as

satire, a way of correction since the African absurdist may have a pessimistic cynical vision, but has not yet given up. Hence, the absurd in *Allah is Not Obligated* does not portray life as meaningless but rather, the reality portrayed is so unbelievable that one is inclined to read the narrative in the mode of the absurd. In *Allah is Not Obligated*, Kourouma adopts a style of writing that is capable of expressing the nightmarish African situation. The Euro-American absurdist's anti-theatre declares the deconstruction of all conventional concepts of character and language, realistic setting, and plot development, being revolutionary in technical representation, thus making the philosophy of the futility of existence, reflect in the style. In *Allah is Not Obligated*, the absurd exists at the level of subject matter but does not create anti-style. The style of representation is not absurd, rather, the situation being narrated is what is absurd.

In the rest of the section, I trace Kourouma's unique formula of representing children in war situations which is at once realistic and absurd. I argue that the reality Kourouma portrays has many of the characteristic features of the absurdist tradition, though from an African perspective. *Allah is Not Obligated*, portrays the life of human beings in war situations as one without any logical explanation for what happens. Children who are supposed to be in schools are enlisted in the armies of various warring factions as child soldiers fighting in wars whose causes they do not even know. Religion is presented as a set of hollow rituals. Morality is portrayed as downgraded as parents have become irresponsible leading their children to become street children, truants and liars. Birahima, the protagonist is already a school drop-out before he is recruited as a child soldier. The Activities of international organisations and regional peacekeeping agencies like the UN, IMF, ECOWAS and ECOMOG do not benefit anybody.

The reality the novel represents is absurd since there is a form of moral frustration and lack of correspondence between the mind's need for coherence and the incoherence the mind

experiences. The reality portrayed is difficult to be synthesised by the mind because the world presented has lost touch with all known realities. Childhood no longer signifies innocence but rather, the status of childhood is linked with being a soldier and a killer. Children have become “bastards, druggies, criminals and liars. They were cursed” (144). Instead of being given formal education, children are taught how to shoot, loot and smoke hash on the battlefield. They are given AK-47s and drugs which make them insensitive in carrying out any gruesome act. Even though Birahima is corrupted before he becomes a child soldier, his situation is made worse by his experience as a child soldier. He does not “give a shit about modesty” (50). His situation is worsened by the war after which he says he does not care about village customs because he killed a lot of people under the influence of drugs. This shows a child who is so damaged that it is difficult to explain the extent of harm caused to his life by the war experience which portrays the absurdity of his situation. Birahima narrates how child soldiers line up at Captain Kid’s funeral and fire their kalashes: “That is all they’re good at. Firing guns (59) and later “[t]hat’s all the child soldiers do, they just shoot and shoot” (106). Children are also initiated into special groups such as the young lycaons and made to engage in acts which are unthinkable. They are made to kill one of their parents and eat human flesh, as has been mentioned above.

The characters of the religious practitioners who are the symbol of immorality and hypocrisy also present a level of absurdity in the novel. The novel represents religion as nothing but hollow rituals. Nuns, instead of being the virginal brides of God, like all other women, “made love” (74). Papa Le Bon, a priest, officiates funeral vigils with “his colonel’s stripes, his grigris under his clothes, his kalash and the papal staff” (74) and when he sits to settle cases, he wears “his soutane with all the medals, with the Bible and his Qur’an on hand” (75). In some ways, Papa Le Bon is an African reincarnation of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu in *Ubu Roi*. The biblical commandment

against stealing is also twisted to suit people's personal interest: "Pilfering food isn't stealing because Allah, Allah in his inordinate goodness, never intended to leave empty for two whole days a mouth he created. *Walahé!*" (129). Similarly, the precepts of religion are turned on their head in the absurd postcolonial African context: "Prince Johnson, was a man of the Church, a man who had become involved in tribal wars at God's command. God had commanded that he, Prince Johnson, wage tribal war. Wage tribal war to kill the devil's men. The devil's men who had so gravely wronged the people of Liberia" (131). Johnson commits numerous gruesome acts in the name of Christianity, as does Mother Superior Marie Beatrice another of the religious figures whose portrayal is absurd. She is a saint "who made love like every woman in the universe" (134). She is, "a saint with a cornet and an AK-47!" (137). When enemies come to her convent, she machine-guns them herself: "She machine-gunned hard and long and relentlessly and inflicted heavy losses on the attackers" (145). Another female figure in the novel is also satirised: "Sister Hadja Gabriel Aminata was one-third Muslim, one-third Catholic and one-third Animist. She was a colonel on account of she had lots of experience with young girls because over twenty years she'd excised nearly a thousand girls" (180). She wears hajj dress and "carrie[s] her kalash under the frills of her skirt" (182). The portrayal of religious representatives is thus a source of absurdism in the novel.

The character of Yacouba, the symbol of corruption in the name of religion, presents yet another deeper level of absurdity provoked by the feeling of uncertainty and the belief in superstition. While people are dying in the war, he takes advantage of the superstitious beliefs of the people and presents himself to various warlords as being able to produce protective amulets, *grigris*, which can make them win their battles without any casualties on their side. The novel portrays Yacouba as nothing but a businessman who takes advantage of the ancient beliefs of his

people and who makes money by exploiting the warriors' gullibility. While people are dying, Yacouba lives well as a sorcerer. He decorates himself with fetishes, like green fangs, to impress people around him who will employ him in order for him to make money. He is satirised as taking advantage of the war to become rich in gold and diamonds that he has stored in his underpants, making him "look like he had massive hernia. That's how many purses he had round his waist and the fold of his trousers" (187 – 188). The characterisation of Yacouba also contributes to the absurd in the novel.

The novel also portrays extreme moral degradation by representing parents as irresponsible and children as street children, truants and liars in both the pre-war and war context. Even before Birahima becomes a child soldier, he is already a social outcast. He has dropped out of school to become a street child. Also, most of the child soldiers have their education disrupted before they enter the war as child soldiers. These children's deprivation, among other things, is as a result of bad parenting, poverty and irresponsible teacher behaviour, while some children become orphans as a result of war. The irresponsibility of both parents and children is so horrific that narration of it is nothing but absurd. Such irresponsible behaviour is revealed through the funeral orations of the dead child soldiers. For instance, Sarah, a girl soldier whom Birahima eulogises is abandoned by her father making her become a house help of the wicked Madam Kokui, who maltreats her till she runs away from her and becomes a victim of rape and later a prostitute and finally ends up as a child soldier. Sekou, is also one of the child soldiers who die at the battle front and is eulogised by Birahima. He becomes a child soldier due to his father's inability to pay his fees.

Another child soldier, Siponni, is said to be a number one truant. Having repeated the third year twice, he decides one day to sell all his books, pencils and school bag and buys bananas with the money. Afraid of being beaten, he decides not to go home and in his wandering, comes across

a Lebanese merchant. Siponni introduces himself to the man as a child with no relative who is looking for a job. The Lebanese is happy because he has got cheap labour. After working with the man for some time, Siponni steals his money and together with a crook, Tedjan Toure, who introduces himself as Siponni's mother's brother, they run away with the money. Tedjan tells Siponni that the money has been stolen. Not convinced, Siponni goes to the nearest police station to denounce himself a thief and grassed up Tedjan for receiving stolen goods. Tedjan is put in the adult prison while Siponni is taken to the juvenile prison. In the prison, Siponni meets Jacques who is so enthusiastic to become a child soldier that he passes this enthusiasm to Siponni. One day when their prison team goes to play with a parish team, they take the opportunity to escape to Liberia where they meet the guerrillas who accept them, give them guns and lessons in how to use the kalash. There and then, they became child soldiers. These and several other forms of irresponsible behaviour are so unthinkable that their narration is appropriately absurd.

The activities of international organisations and regional peacekeeping agencies like the UN, IMF, ECOWAS and ECOMOG are portrayed as meaningless and farcical since they fail to live up to expectation. ECOWAS, in resolving the crisis in Sierra Leone, calls for more sanctions when Sierra Leone is starving without fuel and food. ECOMOG continues bombing raids that are even more damaging than the war itself. The strict patrolling of territorial waters makes it impossible for boats, trawlers and fishing boats to ply their trade. ECOMOG troops that are deployed to save the people “were shelling the whole fucking mess” so indiscriminately that it led to another coup d’etat, “the bloodiest – in the history of Sierra Leone, a fucked-up country that had seen lots of *coups*” (191 *original emphasis*). This shows the inefficiency of these international bodies. That is why Birahima refers to the ECOMOG as “the peacekeeping forces who never keep the peace” (176). Kourouma condemns ECOMOG’s unreliability in the way he portrays them as

acting too late and killing innocent victims. For instance, Johnson's attack of the gold and diamond mines controlled by the ULIMO, is said to have "lasted so many days that there was even time to alert the ECOMOG peacekeeping forces and there was even time for them to get there" (139). This shows that they always arrived late and when they arrived at the battlefield, they were not effective, "they fired shells at the people attacking and the people being attacked" (141). The absurdity of ECOMOG's activities is also seen in the way they bomb innocent victims and in a single day, "produced loads of innocent victims than a whole week of rival factions just fighting with each other" (139). No wonder Birahima defines Humanitarian Peacekeeping as "when one country is allowed to send soldiers into another country to kill innocent victims in their own country, in their own villages, in their own huts, sitting on their own mats" (126) and UN's negotiations in times of war as "a change to the changes that doesn't change anything" or "a huge change to the changes that amounts to no change at all" (171).

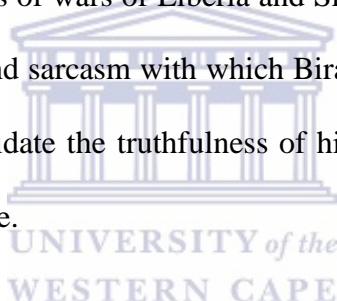
The absurdity of the war represented in the novel is enacted through upside-down definitions where words and ideas come to mean their opposite. The case of the peacekeeping forces who destroy the peace has already been referred to above. Similarly, women's rights are defined as follows: "[t]he woman is always wrong. That's what they call women's rights" (26). Also human rights violations are presented as morally right: "Torture is corporal punishment that is enforced by justice" (133). But perhaps most to the point is the inversion of the concept of childhood in the novel where the child, at the start of life, achieves greatness through death, inverting the natural progression of the human being in all cultures across history. Birahima explains about the eulogies he presents for fallen comrades in arms: "funeral oration is a speech in honour of a famous celebrity who's dead. Child soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century so whenever a child soldier dies, we must say a funeral oration. That means we

have to recount how in this great fucked up world they became a child soldier” (83). All these satirical upside-down definitions underscore Birahima’s world as irrational and absurd.

The novel, even though it portrays a hopeless situation, does so through irony, hyperbole and excessive humour. Horrific and serious events are narrated through excessive humour. For instance, when the vehicle in which Birahima and Yacouba are travelling to Liberia is attacked by child soldiers, the passengers who are not killed are stripped naked. The child soldiers subsequently report to Papa Le Bon that they killed some of the passengers, “but seeing as God says thou shalt not kill too much or at least thou shalt kill less, we stopped killing and left the others just the way they came to the world. We left them naked” (57). People’s poor conduct is also made to appear funny. For instance, Sosso, one of the child soldiers has a father who is said to be so drunk that “he couldn’t tell his wife from his son. ... he couldn’t tell a bull from a billy-goat” (114*my ellipsis*). One evening, when Sosso and his mother heard him coming home amidst singing and blaspheming, they went into hiding. When the man came home and there was no sign of his wife and child, he got angrier and started smashing everything. When Sosso’s mother came out to beg him to stop, he throws a cooking pot at her and she starts bleeding: “In tears, Sosso grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed his father who howled like a hyena and died” (114), leaving Sosso with no option than to become a child soldier. Rita Baclay, General Onika Baclay’s daughter-in-law, who is in charge of child soldiers has a way of harassing Birahima sexually which is also narrated in humorous way. She entices Birahima with food and plays with his sex organ. Rita Baclay would kiss his “*bangala* over and over and then she’ll swallow it like a snake swallowing a rat. She used my *bangala* like a little toothpick” (104). Thus, in the novel, almost all disheartening situations are narrated through humour.

The numerous features of the absurd in the novel notwithstanding, *Allah is Not Obligated*

cannot totally be said to be absurdist fiction. It is a satire and the absurd is used to heighten the satire. This is because satire can use the absurd as one of its methods but that which is satirised is not necessarily absurd. Objects of satire are generally human weaknesses and social imperfections whereas in the literature of the absurd, that which is depicted is always wholly absurd (Balogun 46, Hanfiu 28). It is clear that in *Allah is Not Obligated*, the world is not depicted as wholly absurd but rather it is war and its attendant institutions that put children at the warfront and deprive them of their childhood, which is absurd. At the same time, Kourouma presents the events with disturbing casualness and dispassion. With his curious choice of narrative mode, Kourouma instills Birahima's account of the atrocities of wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone with a heightened sense of horror. The clear indifference and sarcasm with which Birahima pervades his rendering of the events and the way he tries to validate the truthfulness of his absurd war experience, gives the account an even greater shock value.



Validating the Absurd: Religion and Folk Wisdom

Proving that the absurd is true is at the core of Birahima's narrative throughout *Allah is Not Obligated*, and it is this "mission" that ultimately shifts the narrative into a postmodern metatextual mode that is quite similar to the use of the absurd in the European context where it highlighted the farcical way in which language generates more language in its pursuit of truth. Throughout the narrative, Birahima finds various ways to vouch for the truthfulness of his story, one of which is appealing to God and the wisdom in folk culture. Birahima's interest in the truth is seen in the way he despises people who tell lies. He despised Tête Brûlée because of lies. "Commander Tête Brûlée was a fabulist. He'd done everything and everything. And seen everything" (72). Equally disliked is Birahima's cousin Saydou Toure. Birahima says he is "the

biggest bawler, the biggest liar, the biggest drinker in all the north-west of Côte d'Ivoire" (202). Unlike Tête Brûlée and Saydou who are story tellers, Birahima is a teller of truth, even though he calls his story a "bullshit" story. He tries to assert the truth through appeals to God as the guarantor of all truth, *walahé* (I swear by Allah). He swears by Allah, about fifty-one times in the narrative and sometimes after swearing, he adds "it's the truth". For instance, after describing the situation in Liberia, he has to swear that his aunt lives in such a country and that is where he is also going to live: "And that's where my aunt lived! *Walahe!* It's the truth!" (44). The death rate of child soldiers is so unbelievable that Birahima thinks he has to swear before anybody could believe it. During an attack on Onika's camp, there "was lots of furious gunfire and consequences: bodies, lots of dead bodies. *Walahe!* Five child soldiers and three real soldiers got massacred" (106). Birahima thinks he has to swear before anybody could believe death has become so common that human skulls are used for decoration in the camps of warlords. The compound of El Hadji Koroma "had human skulls on stakes all around the boundary like all tribal war camps in Liberia and Sierra Leone. *Walahe!* That's tribal wars" (206). Thus, Birahima's commitment in proving that the absurd is the truth makes him appeal to God as the source of all truth but the more he tries to prove the truthfulness of his story, the more absurd it becomes.

Birahima also appeals to the truth of folk wisdom by referring to proverbs. An example is, "[f]or as long as long as there's head on your shoulders, you don't put your headdress on your knee" (3). This proverb means one does not do the wrong thing when he/she knows the right thing. Another proverb he resorts to in his narrative is the "grandmother's fart" which means something which does not worth much. For instance, he explains that he dropped out of school because education was not "worth a grandmother's fart" (2) since it was not a guarantee for any job. Even though he appeals to the truth of these and many other proverbs, there are no proverbs that can

explain or make sense of the child-soldier reality. In general, in this novel, oral culture cannot make sense of the new world.

Validating the Absurd: The Failure of Orality

Kourouma is noted for his oralisation of written literature as his novels are replete with many of the lexical and syntactic features identified by various scholars and Kourouma himself as being characteristic of oral narrative. Like most of Kourouma's novels even though not as much as Kourouma's first three novels, *Allah is Not Obligated* abounds in the markers of oral narration. These markers include direct interaction with the reader, exclamations, ideophones, proverbs, refrains, parallelism and repetition (Batchelor 192). While Kathryn Batchelor sees these markers of orality in the novel as an indication of the novel's representation of trauma, I argue that the orality is a way Birahima tries to validate the truth of his story. In the rest of this section, I discuss direct interaction with the reader, the use of ideophones, refrains and repetition as markers of oral narration that are meant to validate the truth of the absurdity Birahima narrates. This resonates with Kourouma's postulation that the use of the oral style allows him to be authentically African and to translate the prevailing situation better (Ouédraogo and Kourouma 1339).

In his bid to validate his absurd experience, Birahima tries all he can to present the events with as much immediacy as possible by "talking directly to the reader" – in fact, we discover at the end of the novel that he is addressing his cousin, Dr Mamadou, whom he asks to write down his story. At the beginning of the novel, he addresses his audience: "The full, final and completely complete title of my bullshit story is: *Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth*. Okay. Right. I better start explaining some stuff (1 *original emphasis*) as referred to earlier on. Shortly after starting his story, he tells his cousin to sit "down and listen. And write

everything down” (5), and in the course of the narration, he says “that’s all I’ve got to say for today. I’m fed up talking so I’m going to sleep” (42). All these are Birahima’s way of addressing his cousin and, in fact, talking to the reader in order to make his absurd story believable. Sometimes, he gets tired of trying to validate his absurd story and in his frustration, tells the reader to “fuck off!” because he is not obliged to tell his “dog’s-life-story, wading through dictionary after dictionary” (91). By drawing the reader along as he tells his story, Birahima calls on the audience to be a witness because of his fear of being disbelieved, but his frustration signifies that his story cannot be believed no matter how hard he tries. This traditional folklore style of audience participation is one of the ways Birahima tries to validate the truthfulness of the absurd story he narrates even though it does not help him to achieve his aim.

Refrains are other oral narrative strategy employed by Birahima to validate the truthfulness of his story. The incidents he witnesses are so unbelievably absurd that he would wish the reader were there to witness it him or herself. This makes him continually use phrases like, “you should have seen it”, “you should have heard it” and “I bet you won’t believe it” after narrating most of the horrific incidents. He is surprised at the inhumanity of people who could rape and murder a seven-year-old orphan. The experience is so bad that even Papa Le Bon, who has killed so many people cried his heart out and Birahima sees it as “such an agonising sight that Papa Le Bon cried his heart out. You should have seen it – Colonel Papa Le Bon, a complete *ouya-ouya*, crying his heart out.... It was worth seeing” (74 *my ellipsis*). For Birahima, one needs to be there to believe an experience which is so unthinkable that even an *ouya-ouya* (good for nothing) like Papa Le Bon could cry his heart out. Birahima also thinks the reader should be present before he or she can believe the hypocrisy of the warlords. When Papa Le Bon cries and sings at the funeral of Captain Kid, one of his child soldiers who gets killed while mounting a road block, Birahima thinks one

“should have heard it. They sounded like a bunch of retards ... Crowds and crowds came past every second, all of them bending over the body and acting all sad as if people didn’t go round slaughtering innocents and children every day in Liberia” (55). Also, when General Onika rejoices at her triumph over Niambo which comes at the cost of so many child soldiers, Birahima reports: “You should have seen that bitch Onika play the liberator. It was worth the trip You should have seen that asshole Onika jumping around like a street kid in her general’s stripes” (119 *my ellipsis*). Sometimes, the death rates are so overwhelming that one needs to be present in order to believe it. For instance, the consequences of the attack on Onika’s camp are so unbelievable that to Birahima, one could only believe it if he or she sees it. He wishes the reader had “seen it! It was a terrible sight. There were corpses everywhere, soldiers and child soldiers dead, safes empty and two bossmen missing” (107). Later when the female warlord arrives at the scene of the massacre Birahima says: “Onika Baclay arrived at the crime scene where everything happened. She couldn’t hold back her tears. You should have seen it. It was worth the trip. A bitch like Onika crying over dead people. Crocodile tears! She wasn’t crying over the corpses, she was crying over everything she had to lose” (107). However, when Onika is finally defeated by the NPFL, everyone started sobbing, and Birahima comments, “[t]here we were, a bunch of criminals, crooks of the worse kind, crying like babies. You should have seen it, it was worth the trip” (123). Some of the war lords have some principles that are so absurd that he thinks the reader will find it difficult to believe. He particularly finds Prince Johnson’s principle that a soldier does not loot, does not steal, but asks local people for food to eat, as, the “craziest thing (I bet you won’t believe this!)” (129). There are so many instances in the novel where Birahima tries to use this feature of oral narrative to vouch for the truthfulness of the absurdity he narrates; yet he remains unpersuaded throughout that he will be believed.

Birahima's attempt at presenting objective truth leads him to employ yet another oral narrative technique, namely, ideophones, which enable him to match language with sounds to describe what actually happens. An example of this is where he matches his being locked up in prison with the sound, "Krik-krak" (99) and Foday Sanko, the difficult warlord who was making peace almost impossible in Sierra Leone is also "[l]ocked up – *click!* double-locked" (170 my emphasis) in prison on his arrival at Lagos. These are invented words which attempt very realistically to match language with what actually happens. In some instances, the narrator even makes a sign as if the reader were watching. For instance, Birahima describes child soldiers as "Kids about *this* tall ... as tall as an officer's cane" (46 my emphasis, original ellipsis). The use of the demonstrative pronoun and the three dots make it look as if the narrator were showing something in the air and three dots are to make up for the sign he makes to show the height of the child soldier. We see that Birahima tries all he can to be truthful, leading him to invent his own words to match certain sounds, yet he remains worried that he is unconvincing.

The most significant feature of oral narrative employed in *Allah is Not Obligated* is repetition. Like the others, this feature is meant through iteration to persuade the reader that the absurd reality is the truth in the novel. As Kourouma himself asserts, repetition is part of oral narrative and is meant to achieve clarity of meaning. In an interview with Jean Ouédraogo, he states that when "we talk, in an oral setting, we use a lot of gestures, and repeat ourselves twice or three times for fear of not being understood the first time around. One often illustrates the whole with proverbs to enrich the meaning" (1339). The repeated words and phrases that abound in the novel are thus ways of validating the truth of the absurdity of Birahima's war experience. The full title of the novel, "Allah is not obliged to be fair about all that he does here on earth" and its adjunct sentence, "Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created" are repeated continually in the novel.

Even though the repetition has been reduced in the English version of the novel for the sake of rationalisation (43, Batchelor 119), there still exists many repeated words and phrases. The full title of the novel and its adjunct alone are repeated about thirteen times in the novel. The phrase “that’s tribal war for you” is repeated about four times, “it’s the truth” is repeated about three times after narrating some of the most gruesome acts. Birahima repeats these words and phrases for fear of not being believed because he lives in a world where people substitute “invented stories for real life” (203) but despite the repetition, his story is still unbelievable because his experiences are so absurd that they cannot be accepted as truth.

Even though Birahima tries to validate his war experience by appealing to the techniques of authentication of the oral folktale, his story is still unbelievably absurd. This signifies that even oral narrative and the wisdom inherent in it are not adequate to prove the truth of absurd child-soldier experience that violates all norms. Birahima thus tells his cousin, Dr Mamadou Doumbia, who is educated and fully literate to write down his story. This way, the novel enacts the shift from oral to written, with the dictionaries as proof of the truth of the written story. Thus the novel finally abandons the possibility of persuading the reader of the truthfulness of Birahima’s life narrative through the techniques of the oral tradition, and as a last resort appeals to the authority of print culture.

Validating the Absurd: Dictionaries and Reason

At the beginning of the novel, Birahima informs the reader that he has four dictionaries with which he presents his story because he wants all sorts of different people to read his “bullshit”: “colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French. He uses the *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* to look up and check and explain French words so I can explain

them to Black African Natives. The *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* is for explaining African words to the French *toubabs* from France. The *Harrap's* is for explaining pidgin words to French people who don't know shit about pidgin" (3-4). The use of *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* which are very authoritative French dictionaries shows how authentic Birahima wants to be in narrating his story. However, from the outset we see that his story cannot be believed because his use of the *Harrap's* is wrong. It is a French/English dictionary but he uses it to explain pidgin words while the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* does not exist in reality.

The dictionaries were inherited from Varrasouba Diabate, a reputable traditional *griot*, who also acted as translator for the colonial masters. The griots were very important figures in African societies during the colonial era because of their roles as interpreters and intermediaries between the white man and the black man. Birahima's use of dictionaries from such a person shows his bid to prove the authenticity of his story. In order to prove truth he is going to refer to the authority of the dictionaries, and thus endorses a completely literal thinking. To be literal means "representing the very words of the original, verbally exact, exactly copied, true to life and realistic" (*Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*). Thus, the absurd reality of the child-soldier experience seems so fictional that he cannot use figurative or metaphorical language. Only the literal truth will be believed by the reader. But with this form of validation, words refer to more words, and ironically sometimes they refer to exactly the same words, as the epigraph that begins this chapter humorously shows: "In the *Petit Robert* it says 're-education' means the act of re-educating, in other words 're-education'. Walahé! Even the *Petit Robert* sometimes takes the piss" (64), which indicates how frustrating it is to define words as words fail to achieve the truth they are meant to achieve.

In a world turned upside down, Birahima still wants to prove the truthfulness of his story. With the help of these dictionaries, Birahima defines as many as two hundred and fifty-four words in the narrative. In most cases, he indicates which dictionary a particular definition is from, while in some instances, he just defines without indicating which dictionary he uses. For example, it is according to the *Larousse* that he knows that “ecumenical mass” means “where there is Jesus Christ and Mohammed and Buddha” (47). Also, “according to the glossary, *bilakoro* is an uncircumcised boy” (5) and “‘perjury’ according to my *Larousse* means ‘the deliberate, willful giving of false testimony under oath’ (127). He chooses to explain some words twice or even thrice, especially the African words and expressions. He defines the words *gnama* twice (pages 4 and 89), *doni doni* twice (pages 77 and 144), *gnona gnona* twice (pages 84 and 149), *bilakoro* twice (pages 5 and 28), *makou* thrice (pages 50, 146 and 236), while he defines the expressions “foot to the road” twice (pages 39 and 53) and “fitting sacrifice” also twice (pages 35 and 93). Looking at the page intervals between the definitions, it could be argued that Birahima may think his readers might have forgotten the meanings of these words and expressions, hence their redefinition which shows his commitment at proving the truthfulness of his story. Nevertheless, the choice of words he decides to define has nothing to do with the difficulty level of the word. For instance, he defines the words “sacrifice”, “journey”, “gradually” and “inhumanity” while he refuses to define words like “catacomb”, “decapitated”, “outrageousness” and “hullabaloo”. This shows that Birahima’s commitment is to make his absurd story believable so he explains words which will validate his experience which is unbelievably absurd, rather than words the reader may not be familiar with.

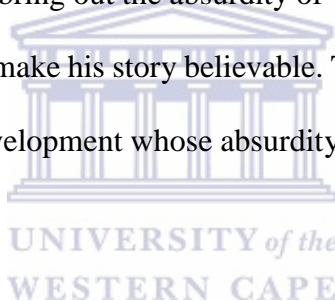
Even though Birahima seeks different ways to validate the absurdity of his war story, by appealing to God as guarantor of truth and the wisdom in folklore, the dictionaries are the final

evidentiary support of the truth he wants to establish. This is because dictionaries have been proven to be very authoritative guides to language since they are resources for finding word meanings, parts of speech, word origins as well as synonyms and antonyms. As language evolves, lexicographers are also committed to keeping up to date with the changing needs of its users. *The Larousse* for instance is designed to make access to appropriate translation as straight forward as possible as it provides a practical guide to everyday language usage. Like the *Larousse*, *The Harrap's* is an English-French or French-English dictionary that provides an authoritative guide to the language in key areas such as technology, business and finance. Its inclusion of colloquialism from both languages makes it a practical guide to conversation while the *Petit Robert* is a single volume French dictionary which is meant to explain French words as thoroughly as possible. With the qualities of dictionaries and particularly the dictionaries Birahima uses to tell his story, it is no doubt that the dictionaries are his most authoritative form of validation.

Nevertheless, even though the dictionaries seem to have more authority, they are not able to prove the truth of Birahima's absurd story. As mentioned earlier, his use of some dictionaries are not what they are meant for. More importantly, the dictionaries only prove the truth through language which also appeals for truth through more language. Thus we see Birahima using more words to explain single words yet not achieving the reality he wants to achieve. This is due to the fact that language cannot let the actual reality reveal itself so we see at the end of the novel that the reader is taken back to the beginning with Birahima, unable to validate his absurd story and the reader not making any progress. Birahima will tell us his story again to prove its truthfulness and when we reach the end we will again go back to the beginning in an infinite and eternal circle that imitates the fact that there is no escape from language into truth. Birahima's inability to prove the truthfulness of his story using dictionaries is in consonance with Jacques Derrida's idea that

language produces meaning only with reference to other meanings against which it takes on its own significance (Agger 143). This means that one can never establish stable meanings by attempting correspondence between language and the world addressed by language. Every definition and clarification has to be defined and clarified in turn; leaving us in a circle like Birahima's story. Birahima can never get out of the prison house of language. Language thus fails to validate Birahima's absurd experience despite its authenticity.

Using dictionaries to tell an oral story using features of the oral tradition, Birahima combines the wisdom in books and the wisdom of traditional folklore making the novel an oral tale morphed with script culture to bring out the absurdity of war. Yet, neither traditional wisdom nor the wisdom in books is able to make his story believable. The novel therefore establishes wars which create child-soldiers as a development whose absurdity cannot be validated.



Conclusion

Allah is Not Obligated is about validating the truth of the absurd experience of its protagonist whose experience of war reverses all the values his society expects him to acquire after his initiation. Birahima tries to prove the truthfulness of his experience through the use of folk wisdom, appealing to God and finally to dictionaries as his ultimate evidence. However, the more he uses language to validate the truthfulness of his story, the more absurd it becomes. At the end of the novel the reader is taken back to the beginning and realises that no progress has been made. Birahima will tell us his story again to prove its truthfulness and when we reach the end we will again be back at the beginning in an infinite and eternal circle that imitates the fact that there is no escape from language into truth. Thus, Birahima's attempt to validate his experience comes to nothing just as his personal development is arrested after formal initiation with no maturation,

social development or reintegration into society. It can therefore be concluded that it is the unnatural condition of the child-soldier experience that forces the novel out of realism into the absurd.



CHAPTER FOUR

PERVERTED INITIATION AND EDUCATION IN UZODINMA IWEALA'S *BEASTS OF NO NATION*

I am jumping on her chest KPWUD KPWUD and I am jumping on her head, KPWUD, until it is only blood that is coming out of her mouth. ... I am liking the sound of the knife chopping KPWUDA KPWUDA on her head and how blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feet. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark. (Beasts 51)



Introduction

Beasts of No Nation is another novel that invites attention to the plight of child soldiers. In this novel, unlike *Allah is Not Obligated*, the protagonist is not initiated before he enters into war, and war seems to be his form of initiation, albeit an aberrant initiation. Like *Song for Night* discussed in Chapter Two, in *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), it is the protagonist's experience of war that acts as his form of initiation. However, unlike *Song for Night* where the protagonist is drawn into the war without being forced, in *Beasts of No Nation*, the protagonist, Agu, had always wished to go through traditional initiation when he is forcibly enlisted as a child soldier. At the battlefield, Agu engages in different types of violence and suffers various forms of abuse, depictions of which draw the narrative into the modes of the grotesque, as the cartoon-like impact of the epigraph horrifically captures the comic-grotesque. But Agu cannot be totally corrupted by his experiences of war because of the ideal past he enjoyed with his family before the war.

Beasts of No Nation is the debut novel of the Nigerian-American writer, Uzodinma Iweala.

Iweala was born in 1982 in Washington DC to Nigerian parents. He graduated from Harvard University where he won various awards including the Eager Prize, the Horman Prize, the Le Baron Briggs Prize, and the Hoopes Prize. The writing of *Beasts of No Nation* was inspired by an article he read about the Sierra Leonean war while he was in high school. During his university days at Harvard, he became the president of the African Students Society during which time he invited a Ugandan former child soldier to speak at the university. Iweala's interest in the issue of child soldiers led him to read autobiographies of other child soldiers, study reports of Amnesty International and the UN, and interview people who had been through the Nigerian civil war of the 1960s, after which he wrote *Beasts of No Nation*. The novel was published by Harper Collins Publishers in 2005 and won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize for best work of literature by a young writer. *Beasts of No Nation* was also influenced by Iweala's volunteer work for a refugee office in Bauchi State, Nigeria. Iweala has also been involved in public health organisations in Africa and has worked as executive editor of *Farafina*, a magazine based in Nigeria. Other works by Iweala include *Our Kind of People: A Continent's Challenge, A Country's Hope* (Harper Collins 2012), a nonfiction book about Nigeria's HIV/AIDS crisis. Currently, he is working on his next novel, set in Washington DC in the months leading up to a terrorist attack, and on two multimedia projects, one about Timbuktu and the other about narratives of violence in post-conflict African countries.

Beasts of No Nation tells the story of Agu, a boy who is displaced in a war-torn country and is forced to become a child soldier. The story begins *in medias in res* when Agu's father is killed by rebel soldiers who also capture Agu and send him to their camp, but then flashes back to give an account of Agu's family life before the war. The flashback reveals Agu as a boy who lives in a Christian home with his father, a schoolteacher, his mother and sister. There is talk of war and the

sounds of gunfire, initially only at a distance. As the civil war gets closer, a UN van arrives at the village to take the villagers to safety, but the men stay back and allow the women and children to board the van. Agu's mother and sister board the van but his father insists Agu stay back with the men in the village. Here, Agu is considered a "man" even though he is not initiated. This is because as a male child, he is expected to possess qualities such as boldness and courage even before he is officially initiated. However, these manly qualities could not stand the heat of the war. In the confusion of a shootout, Agu's father runs to the bush with him but his father is killed while Agu is captured by the rebel soldiers under a Commandant who asks him to choose between death and becoming a child soldier. Without any proper understanding of what it means to become a child soldier, Agu chooses to become one for fear of being killed. At the battlefield, Agu is initiated into the violence of war and he takes part in the killing of captured soldiers and civilians, rape and looting. As a model child and beloved of his parents and his schoolteacher, Mistress Gloria, Agu is presented in continuous tension between the demands of his child soldier experience and his life before the war. His desire to leave the army finally comes true when Rambo, one of the child soldiers, leads a successful revolt against the Commandant and is able to kill him. On their way to escape, Agu's best friend, Strika dies. Agu is found and taken to a rehabilitation camp under the care of an American therapist, Amy, who invites him to share his thoughts and feelings, and as Agu tells her about his experience of war, Amy cannot help crying.

Beasts of No Nation has received a lot of critical attention in the form of articles and book reviews which mostly miss the novel's representation of distorted personal development that pushes the narrative into the mode of the grotesque. Some of these scholars are of the view that the novel is a representation of trauma. Others are interested in its representation of human rights abuses while still others argue that it is a representation of the deformation of the African

Bildungsroman that indexes a loss of humanity. The style of the novel is very striking and most critics have analyzed stylistic elements in the novel as will be outlined below.

Critics have argued that the novel represents the loss not only of childhood, but also humanity. According to Suzan Gehrman, *Beasts of No Nation* represents children “caught between childhood and adulthood and at the same time points to the difficulties of human communication” (34). She believes that the concerns with language and the theme of the loss of humanity through war are major questions in *Beasts of No Nation*. For Allison Mackey, *Beasts of No Nation* is a meditation on the loss of humanity on a local as well as global scale. She argues that Agu’s growth has been stunted. He is denied the opportunity to become a man in the cultural ways of his village and has gone from boy to beast instead of from boy to man: “A particularly stark coming-of-age story, *Beasts of No Nation* highlights the oxymoronic nature of the figure of a ‘child’ who is also a ‘soldier’” (Mackey 109). For Deirdre Donahue, the most impressive aspect of *Beasts of No Nation* is the compelling transformation of the narrator, Agu, a dutiful and well-behaved child into a desperate creature trying to survive physically and spiritually in an unspeakably brutal world. According to Maureen Moynagh, the trope of human personality development is held out largely to be negated by the corrupt world in which child-soldier characters live. To her, in *Beasts of No Nation*, this problem is thematised through Agu’s meditations on the fate of his childhood which has been destroyed without making him an adult. Moynagh believes that, in emphasising the interrupted development of the child soldier, the novel foregrounds the crisis for human personhood that necropolitics (the sovereign power over life and death) represent. For Alexandra W. Schultheis, *Beasts of No Nation* shares many features of the novel of individual subject formation and socialisation as it adheres to the expected trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*.

Critics who analyse the novel’s representation of human rights include Madelaine Hron,

Schultheis and Gehrman. Hron argues that the novel poignantly presents the violation of children's rights and the dehumanisation of children, from human beings to "animals" to finally, "this thing". According to Schultheis, the novel draws the reader's attention to the "problem" of speaking, of constructing and bridging cultural difference and of speaking on or from the edges of representability. Schultheis further argues that the figure of the child soldier embodies a contradiction - at once vulnerable and violent, victim and perpetrator, innocent and knowing - it appears to call forth a promise of the failure of law and politics. For Gehrman, the novel represents child soldiers as "victims who become culprits; they are ambivalent, caught in an ambiguous state between innocence and guilt" (33).

There are yet other scholars who argue that the novel is a representation of trauma. These scholars include Edgar Fred Nabutanyi, Gehrman and Russel West-Pavlov. Nabutanyi looks at how the novel employs language to represent trauma without exploiting or cheapening the pain of the victim. To him, the continuous present tense and ungrammatical English, the diction and simple structure of Agu's sentences all contribute in bringing out the protagonist's fear and trauma. Thus the style of the novel presents Agu as a traumatised child who needs ready sympathy. For Gehrman, the novel is a successful literary attempt to give voice and a language to trauma, though not to say that any fictional account can speak for actual child soldiers or even represent their experiences completely. Gehrman argues that *Beasts of No Nation* is a story about the loss of human language and "the concern with language ... reflects an overall difficulty of finding an adequate form of enunciation for the expression of traumatic war experiences through literature as a space of negotiation" (43 *my ellipsis*). For West-Pavlov, in *Beasts of No Nation*, the impossibility of encoding traumatic experiences within memory is dramatised by the use of the continuous present tense in the narrative that preserves an eternal ongoing present for trauma. For West-

Pavlov, many of the novel's stylistic devices, alongside the use of the continuous present tense, can be accounted for by the mechanism of traumatic "acting out" which accompanies the experience of something that remains unrepresentable. This contrasts with the use of simple present tense in *Song for Night* which is an element of surrealism which also signifies the eternal liminal state of the protagonist. However, the use of the simple present in *Song for Night* and the present continuous in *Beasts of No Nation* help to express the intensity of the here and now of the protagonists' experience of war which needs immediate attention.

On the question of narrative mode, there are a few critics who have commented on the non-realist style of *Beasts of No Nation* and its effect on the theme. Sarah Maya Rosen and David M. Rosen argue that the fact that the story unfolds both everywhere and nowhere, with no history and no reference to any current event, makes it a comic nightmare allegory that does not construct a familiar realist world. According to West-Pavlov, the disrupted narrative style of the novel is a mimetic replication of a child whose abruptly terminated education gives him a limited purchase upon English. This also acts as a form of postmodern attention to the materiality of language that further points to the fact that the novel is not realist. According to J.A Kearney, Iweala's use of memory and fantasy to convey the effects on Agu of his child-soldier experiences helps to portray Agu in continuous tension between the demands of his sensitive conscience and the corrupting influences of his child-soldier existence. To Daria Tunca, both *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation* challenge "the conventions of literary realism as their narrative strategy, emphatically spurn[ing] the rules of mimesis" (150). To her, Iweala's most overt challenge to realism, "lies in his creation of an invented idiom for his first person narrator" (150). Even though many critics pick up on the non-realist features of the novel, none identifies the grotesque which for me is the dominant mode of *Beasts of No Nation*. Also, even though some scholars have discussed the

novel's representation of disrupted growth, none of this scholarship has discussed the grotesque as consequence of the perversion of normal *Bildung* or initiation. The grotesque, I argue, is of central importance to Iweala's treatment of his central subject, namely, distorted personal development as a result of war.

The Grotesque in World Literature

The word "grotesque" is derived from the Italian, *la grottesca* and *grottesco* and refers to a grotto or a cave. The word was coined to designate a certain ornamental style which came to light during the late fifteenth century excavations of the Domus Aurea of Nero, first in Rome and then in other parts of Italy as well, and which turned out to constitute a hitherto unknown ancient form of ornamental painting (Kayser 19, Clayborough 2). The term was first used to describe art and architecture, but later came to be used in literary circles. The Renaissance used the word "grottesco" and understood it not only as something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also as something worrying and evil, the face of a world totally different from the familiar, a world in which the realm of inanimate things is not separated from those of plants, animals and human beings. Grotesque ornamentation often features plant-animal-human hybrids. The word grotesque and its earliest meaning, thus often refer to monsters and monstrosities, like the grotesque figures on Gothic cathedrals. During the sixteenth century, the word and its usage spread to other parts of Europe. The first instance of its use in Germany highlights the fusion of human and nonhuman elements as the most typical feature of the grotesque style. One extensive mediation on the grotesque is offered by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin with his observation of the combination of the comic and tragic spirit in François Rabelais' sixteenth-century French Renaissance novels on medieval folk culture, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. In his analysis of these books, Bakhtin came up

with the characteristics of what he calls the carnivalesque-grotesque in his work, *Rabelais and His World* (1965, 1968). Bakhtin traces the origin of the grotesque in popular festivities of carnival from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period that worked temporarily to abandon “the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 9 – 10). According to Philip Thompson, the first literary, as opposed to ornamental or sculptural reference to the term “grotesque”, was in the 16th century when Rabelais used it in connection with the body (qtd in Dombrowski 6). Eighteenth-century scholars who studied the grotesque saw it as nothing more than humour. In an eighteenth-century French dictionary, the grotesque is defined as that which is “odd, unnatural, bizarre, strange, funny, ridiculous, caricatural, etc.” (Davidson n.p). The grotesque was humorous, even as it mocked and derided the establishment through exaggeration, hyperbole, and excessiveness (Singer 137). In literature, its characters are “either physically or spiritually deformed, and perform abnormal actions” (Harmon and Holman 257). It exaggerates the inappropriate, degrades objects and the body and focuses on characters oftentimes physically or spiritually deformed, performing abnormal actions. Nevertheless, the term began to gain currency as a literary term at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of the influence of the authors who analyzed and used its themes and techniques. In 1885, John Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* identified two forms of the grotesque – the noble and ignoble. The ignoble form is a primarily playful unsophisticated treatment of the body and other images, while the noble form has implications beyond the obvious as it explores the tragic pathos of man. By focusing attention on matters of the tragic man instead of humorous man, the concept of the grotesque slowly built a reputation in the literary community (Dombrowski 7).

Key thinkers of this mode, apart from Bakhtin, include Arthur Clayborough, Philip Thompson and Wolfgang Kayser all of whom offer similar as well as different ideas on the

grotesque to that of Bakhtin. Even though Kayser is arguably the first person to write extensively on the grotesque, he did not give any clear definition for the term but instead offered several qualities of the mode which overlap with the ideas of Bakhtin, Clayborough and Thomson.

Like Bakhtin, Kayser sees the grotesque as the fusion of human and non-human elements in the playful destruction of symmetry and in the greater destruction of size. He understands the grotesque as something not only playfully gay and carelessly fantastic but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one; a world in which the realm of inanimate things is not separated from those of plants, animals and human beings and “where the laws of statistics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid (21). For Kayser, the grotesque contradicts the very laws which rule our familiar world. As such, several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque. We smile at the deformations but are disgusted by the horrible and monstrous elements. The basic feeling is one of surprise and horror, an agonising fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible. Kayser’s analyses of the grotesque, though similar to that of Bakhtin, do not dwell so much on body parts as Bakhtin does. Kayser’s main argument about the grotesque is that it is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, in which the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange and this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both.

Both Clayborough’s and Thompson’s works on the grotesque are developments of Kayser’s work from which they quote extensively. Like Kayser, Clayborough’s analysis does not focus on corporeality as Bakhtin does but places emphasis on distortion, reference to spirits and ghosts as well as a combination of horror and humour. According to Clayborough, the grotesque refers to “whatever is incongruous with accepted norms, in life or art” (16). To him, the grotesque is any style of art which deviates from conventional patterns. Thus, to Clayborough, the grotesque

style of art and literature is characterised by extravagance, fantasy, individual taste and the rejection of conventions. Like Bakhtin, Clayborough sees the grotesque as ridicule and rejection of authority as the style is employed to castigate the socially reprehensible, the excessive and the preposterous. He sees grotesque literature as highly fanciful, fantastic and exceedingly strange and akin to the ugly or at least to the deformed monstrous. It reveals the presence of the spiritual as it is produced by a profound dissatisfaction with natural forms. Thus, the grotesque is that which is not congruous with ordinary experience as seen in *Beasts of No Nation*.

According to Thompson, the grotesque is a fundamentally ambivalent thing, a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence. Thus, as a literary mode, the grotesque tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation. It is a style of combining human, animal and vegetable elements, intricately interwoven, in one painting, in the context of visual art. The main characteristic of this style, according to Thompson, is the confusion of heterogeneous elements, the interweaving of plant, animal and human forms, the fusion of both the monstrous and the ludicrous, as well as the disgusting and the horrifying. Thompson sees the grotesque as outrageous for the principle of mimesis or realistic reproduction of the familiar world, and transgresses the laws of nature and proportion. Thus, to Thompson, the grotesque is essentially “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” and secondarily “the ambivalently abnormal” (27).

Although the grotesque has undergone several transitions, most of these characteristics in literature have remained unchanged. The key characteristics of the grotesque which almost all these scholars emphasise are that, as a mode, the grotesque combines the comic and the horrific, and abounds in sexual overtones as well as vulgarity and bawdy language. Its characters and

themes are determined by the ugly, the supernatural and the monstrous. There is great emphasis on body parts and sensual images of the body, references to spirits and ghosts, animal metaphors and images of degradation. The distortion of persons and objects, the fusion of the fearsome and the ludicrous and the amalgamation of incompatibles in the grotesque, infuses in the reader a sense of dislocation and insecurity. The characteristics of the grotesque are discussed below.

One very important characteristic of the grotesque is its juxtaposition of opposites. Writers who engage in this mode often touch on topics which deal with extremes on the thin line between death and life, sanity and insanity, reality and dream as well as tragedy and comedy making many grotesque novels a combination of genres. Both Bakhtin and Kayser, arguably the most influential modern theorists of the grotesque, “recognise the fundamental ambiguity of the grotesque – its uneasy mixture of light and dark, good and evil, comedy and tragedy – and yet, both are uncomfortable with the ambiguity and strive to eliminate it” (Anspaugh qtd in Dombrosky 129). This concept of ambivalence is very important in the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque image is something that represents an unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, of growth and becoming. It is frightening and at the same time humorous, between reality and imagination. The grotesque is also viewed as incomplete, and this aspect challenges Renaissance perception of body. This ambiguous nature of the grotesque makes it seem to resist enlightenment views of the world.

The grotesque also places emphasis on body parts, especially the deformed body. Since the grotesque by definition blends the comical with the tragic, ridiculing the human body becomes effective in bringing out humour and shame. The human body is not viewed as a separate entity but in constant interaction with its surroundings. As the body is in constant interaction with the world, the means through which the body interacts becomes a focus in the grotesque. Thus, the

openings that allow this interaction – the mouth, the nose and the genitals are highlighted. Since all human beings have bodies, focusing on the bodies of the living world accentuates a universal concept. The grotesque body is shown as incessantly going through changes, being taken apart or being reproduced. Nothing is permanent and this dismemberment, according to Bakhtin, is an indication that what is inside or hidden is brought outside. The mutated body depicts suffering and deprivation. The grotesque perceives the human body as in a permanent state of flux, as over- or undersized, and as incomplete. The grotesque body is marked by its apertures and orifices (mouth, genitals and anus) and protruding lower region (belly, legs, buttocks and penis) which are given priority over its upper regions as the seat of reason and spirit (Veit-Wild 4).

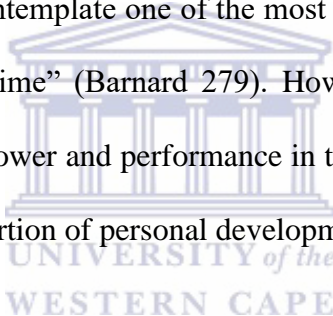
Along with the exaggerated body with its openings and protuberances, the grotesque is associated with the degraded body. The grotesque body is presented as having been degraded from the abstract or spiritual to the earthly, material human life. This coming down to earth of human life is portrayed through degraded aspects of the human body such as sex, defecation and abnormalities. Materialisation of “the body through images and themes related to eating, defecation, death, sex, and drinking were primary to the culture’s emphasis on ambivalent laughter as a mode of organising social criticism of institutional dogmas” (Singer 137). These images represent unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, of growth and becoming. Thus, the grotesque presents new concepts that are between life and death, actuality and art. By portraying the human condition as one which is characterised by the constant need to satisfy primal urges, sex, eating, drinking, defecating and urinating, the grotesque becomes a way of celebrating human existence by dismissing highbrow abstract conjecture, and espousing the everyday world of bodily pleasure.

The grotesque has been employed in other parts of the world apart from Europe and

America. Most folk cultures employ elements of the grotesque. Most oral tales have human-animal hybrids and monsters. Folk stories in China, for instance, employ the grotesque mode to depict violent society. According to Bonnie S. McDougall, although the prevalence of violent crime, drug addiction, abduction of women and children, prostitution and official corruption was a common topic of discussion in China in the 1990s, works written in the 1990s but set in earlier periods both before and after 1949, when crime is supposed not to have been as serious, employ the grotesque mode to depict an equally chaotic and violent society (730). In Malaysia, the grotesque mode has been used for instance to depict the oppressed female body in some Malaysian poems (DMani 307).

Even though the term “grotesque” did not originate in Africa, the concept is not foreign to African cultures. Its elements manifest in folktales where there are references to hybrid monsters as well as the blending of horror and humour. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, the monster, *Sasabonsam*, is a popular character in folktales and is mostly portrayed as punishing disobedient children. A popular Akan folktale has it that when a girl called Boatemaa was of age to marry, she was not pleased with any man who asked for her hand in marriage. She disobeyed her parents by deciding to choose her own husband. Because she rejected many men who came her way, “the monster turned himself into a very handsome man and proposed to her. Because he was very handsome, she agreed to marry him. This lover of hers took her to a very far away town which later turned to be a thick forest where he revealed his real identity as the monster and devoured her” (Addei and Addei 3). Besides the feature of hybrid monsters, the human body also has a great significance in African culture, since it is a prototype of society. Social order is represented symbolically by the body and thus, a malfunctioning of the body or parts of the body points to disorder in society (Veit-Wild 3). Scholars like Achille Mbembe have written about the

grotesque in relation to the power and performance of the elite. According to Mbembe, the grotesque is used as a means of “erecting, ratifying, or deconstructing particular regimes of violence and domination” (6). This means that to Mbembe, the grotesque is an ambiguous concept which can create power as well as deconstruct power while for Bakhtin, the grotesque is always anti-authority. According to Bakhtin, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that undermine officialdom by exposing its arbitrary and perishable character. For Rita Barnard, “to write about the grotesque in the context of postcolonial Africa is to enter into a lively debate about power, aesthetics, and the circulation of signs” (284). African writers like Zakes Mda have made use of the mode to compel readers “to contemplate one of the most striking thresholds of recent history – the demise of the apartheid regime” (Barnard 279). However, in *Beasts of No Nation*, the grotesque is not used to question power and performance in the postcolony but as a consequence of the horrible perversion and distortion of personal development through war.



***Beasts of No Nation* as a Grotesque Novel**

Beasts of No Nation is an example of what Flora Veit-Wild has called “writing madness in the post-colony” (88). This madness, according to Veit-Wild, “expresses itself frequently through images of the grotesque body; carnivalesque parody and travesty serve to mock, contort and subvert figurations of colonial or postcolonial violence. Mad writing cannot be anything but violent writing” (4). Iweala does this through the obscene speech of the grotesque body and the comic distortion of reality. The novel is replete with acts of violence against children and violence perpetrated by children to an extent that defies any objective realism. To the protagonist, the grotesque manifests itself in the appearance of the characters who contribute to the destruction of his dreams and in his own acts of violence. According to Ato Quayson, “the African postcolony,

especially under the violent condition of its birth, often produced multiple narratives, some of which were not amenable to any simple explanation” (Symbolization Compulsion 192). Tunca is therefore right when she argues that *Beasts of No Nation* deploys “stylistic strategies that overtly challenge the conventions of realism” (146) as it wrestles “with the conundrum of how to put into words experiences that can hardly be described or grasped in any human language” (150). For Kenneth Harrow, the novel questions the possibility of “conveying to the reader an event whose excessiveness defies the language of representation” (4). The grotesque provides a technique that allows the representation of the culturally unimaginable, in the case of *Beasts of No Nation*, the aberrant development of the child, not into adulthood, but into a monster.

Beasts of No Nation depicts the social reality of the child soldier using satire, the amalgamation of the horrific and the comic, sexual overtones, vulgarity and bawdy language, all of which are stylistic elements suggestive of the grotesque. Its characters and themes are determined by the ugly, the supernatural and the monstrous. There is great emphasis on body parts and sensual images of the body, references to spirits and ghosts, animal metaphors and images of degradation. There is also the merging of the fearsome and the comic that produces a sense of disorder and anxiety in the reader. The reader is fascinated by the bizarre and changing images but is at the same time disgusted by them.

Foregrounding of the body is a significant dimension of the grotesque that highlights the materiality of existence that undoes the enlightenment binary that places the mind over the body. Right from the opening paragraphs of *Beasts of No Nation*, the central character senses his own experiences and knows himself through his body, albeit a body that is made to suffer. If, according to Agu’s Christian upbringing, “in the beginning was the word ...”, in the war-time experience, in the beginning is the body in discomfort and the body in pain: “It is starting like this” (p1). Agu

goes on to describe his sensations through a detailed indexing of the parts of his body. He feels a crawling on his “skin” and on his “head”, a tingling between his “eye[s]” and an itching in his “nose”. His existence is made up of a collection of body parts that are troubled. However, it is not only his own experience that is presented through the body. He represents his fellow child soldiers and his oppressive commanders through body images also. Strika, the child soldier who found Agu and brought him to the camp, has a “yellow eye”, a “short dark body with one big belly and leg thin like spider’s own” and “his neck is just struggling too much to hold up his big head that is always moving one way or another” (2). This description shows a child who has suffered hunger and degradation for a long time to make him retarded in growth. Thus, right from the beginning, of novel, the reader is introduced to the grotesque body that exemplifies pain.

The body in pain is juxtaposed with the body that causes pain, portrayed in the description of the Commandant to show how warlords abuse children in times of war for their own selfish gain. The Commandant, Agu’s oppressor, “is just very big even though this war is coming to make most men small children and children small like baby. He is so tall that looking at him is like climbing tree, so big that if he is standing next to you, then his shadow is blocking the sun” (33). Other bodily descriptions of the Commandant, however show him as a monster. His yellow teeth are just anyhow in his mouth “with gap[s] here and there. His gum is black and his eye is red. His nose is coming out into a very round bulb at the tip which is sticking over his fat brown lip” (7). His forehead is described as shiny, his big nose is covering his whole face and even his top lip is covered with a mustache and he has a big black beard. This description of the commandant is reminiscent of descriptions of monsters in folktales, as do his actions in the novel. If the body in grotesque literature generally reverses or undoes the enlightenment mind-body dichotomy, in *Beasts of No Nation*, we see that the war context reduces people to mere bodies, bodies in pain and

bodies that cause pain.

These bodily depictions of violence and deprivation are juxtaposed with bodily descriptions of love and care when the novel flashes back to Agu's life before the war. Agu describes the love between himself and his mother using bodily images. "In the evening, I am always sitting on the floor just watching her with her *buttom* sticking high into the air and her *breast* touching her *knee* while she is working to make the kitchen so clean and not even fruit fly is wanting to put its egg inside" (24 *my emphases*). The reference to buttocks and breasts signify fertility and productivity in times of peace as opposed to the violence of war. As a child who liked reading, Agu was always sitting on his mother's lap on their favourite chair as she opened the pages of books. When she reads, Agu senses her physical presence: "over my shoulder and I am feeling her lip moving in my ear as she was saying each word" (25). Here, the lap symbolises protection, while reading over Agu's shoulder and her lip moving in his ear signifies companionship. This pre-war body language is starkly different from grotesque body language of the war situation. For instance, Agu's mother's body language sharply contrasts with the Commandant's closeness to Agu during the Commandant's acts of sodomy that signify Agu's slavery and the abuse of power on the part of the Commandant. Agu does not "want his finger creeping all over my body. I don't want his tongue to be touching me and feeling like slug should be feeling if it is on your body" (84). Thus, the novel employs images of the body to depict Agu's experience of adults in parental or pseudo-parental roles: the caring mother he had before the war, and the abusive surrogate father in the person of the Commandant. Highlighting the physicality of existence is associated with the grotesque and is exemplified in Iweala's method of presenting disorder and distortion in times of war.

Apart from the grotesque body in pain discussed above, the novel abounds in grotesque

description of the deformed body that signifies how human beings are reduced to the monstrous in the context of war. Human beings are killed and their bodies deformed beyond description. Agu's first victim is, for instance, described as "having deep red cut everywhere and his forehead is looking just crushed so his whole face is not even looking like face because his head is broken everywhere and there is just blood, blood, blood" (21). The body of one soldier whom Commandant kills for annoying him is also left "on the roadside with one big hole in his head and his eye wide open" (33). There is no respect for dead human beings as they are left to lie just like dead animals. The body of Luftenant, the soldier who is killed by a prostitute, is dumped into the gutter and the soldiers "are leaving his body for the cat and dog and maggot and worm to eat" (116). When Commandant who has been a thorn in the flesh of the child soldiers for a long time is killed, his body was "looking down to his chest with his whole mouth open like he is screaming" (123). One child soldier also remembers his mother's body, blown apart like "meats" hanging from a tree while Strika, Agu's friend remembers his parents' headless bodies. These, and many other references to the mutilated body evoke suffering and deprivation which further heighten the degrading experience of the child soldier as one who has seen, experienced and perpetrated violence. The physical distortion is that of a caricature that confounds the reader's sense of reality and the deformed bodies appear devoid of their humanity. The grotesque style thus heightens the degradation Iweala portrays in the novel.

The degraded body is further portrayed in the novel through scatological images. Davidson argues that in the grotesque, bodily processes are connected with the intake and output of food, especially urination and defecation (n.p). The numerous references to defecation, urinating and vomiting suggest a breakdown of the social order. People ease themselves and vomit both out of pleasure and out of fear. Luftenant is portrayed as "going to toilet" anywhere for pleasure while

Agu is so much afraid that, “I am wanting to cry and I am feeling I am having to go to toilet” (9). Again when he is made to kill his first victim to prove that he is not a spy, his fear makes him feel that he needs to “be going to toilet” (15). The Commandant’s acts of violence against his victims are also depicted as making them vomit. He kicks an “enemy man in the stomach very hard and the man is just dropping unto his knee and vomiting all over the ground” (18). When Agu is asked to kill his first victim, he is so afraid that he says, “I am shaking and holding my thing. I am wanting to vomit” (19) while the other victims are lying on the ground in fear and “going to toilet and making the whole air to stink”, Agu spits “because there is too much saliva in my mouth” (20). When he is finally able to kill his first victim, he begins “vomiting everywhere. I cannot be stopping myself” (21). In European culture, the manifestation of the body through images and themes related to eating, defecation, death, sex, and drinking were primary to the culture’s emphasis on ambivalent laughter as a mode of organising social criticism of institutional dogmas. However, in *Beasts of No Nation*, these images are as a result of the violence on children that reduces their bodies to bodies of disgrace and dishonour. The picture of the child soldier that Iweala creates through bodily images brings out the ambivalent nature of the child soldier as one caught between life and death, human and beast as well as between child and adult through the grotesque which brings up new concepts that are between life and death, fantasy and reality.

The degraded body is further dehumanised by its resemblance to animals, especially nocturnal and creeping animals as Kayser has argued. This blending of human and animal images has for long been a characteristic of the grotesque. In *Beasts of No Nation*, this feature is used to depict the extent to which children have been reduced to ontological ambivalence in the context of war since war makes a child develop into a beast instead of developing into an adult. There are references to insects especially mosquitoes disturbing the narrator and his fellow child soldiers.

Agu fears when he is first captured by the rebels, his fear makes his “body crunch up like one small mouse in the corner when the light is coming on” (1). The Commandant’s disrespect for human life is portrayed in the way he looks at him like he is an “ant or some insect like that” (5) and how the Commandant refers to him like one “dead rat” (10). Some of the children are so deformed by the violence and abuse that they do not only look like madmen “but mad horse[s]” (13). The numerous references to mosquitoes in the novel indicate the disturbed nature of the child soldier as well as heighten the degradation the novel portrays. Mosquitoes are nocturnal insects who breed in filth and disturb people’s sleep. Iweala’s continuous reference to them portrays the extent of degradation of the society which produces child soldiers and portrays the child soldier as one who is constantly disturbed. Throughout the novel, Agu talks about mosquitoes disturbing him. He sees mosquitoes everywhere moving around in circle “like they are also waiting for something. If they are coming near to me, then I am beating them with my hand, but it is not doing anything. There are so many” (14 - 15). The frequency of the references to nocturnal and creeping animals is therefore symbolic of the disturbed nature of the child soldier.

Animal metaphors are also employed by Iweala to depict how violence dehumanises both the victims and the perpetrators. This blending of human and non-human forms has for long been a recognised characteristic of grotesque art. In *Beasts of No Nation*, human beings are portrayed as dying like animals and killing a human being is compared to killing an animal. The Commandant for instance does not see any difference between killing a human being and killing a dog. He asks Agu, “[d]o you see this dog! he is shouting. You want to be a soldier eh? Well – kill him” (18) and according to him, killing a human being “is just like killing a goat” (21) while he refers to his enemies also as dogs. These animal metaphors are employed to depict how the child soldiers’ grotesque acts of violence make them lose their humanity. Under the influence of

drugs and in the heat of their violent activities, they see each other as animals, since their physical abnormality makes them appear devoid of humanity. For example, on one of their raids, Agu nearly shoots his friend Strika because he “is looking like dog to me” (47). He also admits that his acts of violence make him look like an animal but he thinks that if he decides to run away from the war, the type of animal that will chase him will be “having the body of lion and the head of soldier with helmet and eye that are looking like bullet and teeth that are looking like knife to be chewing me up. Its tail is like gun and its breath like fire that is cooking me well well before it is sitting down to be eating all of the burning part of my body” (128). This wild animal is symbolic of the war which seems to have become impossible to run away from. The regular reference to human beings as animals indicates the extent to which Agu has lost not only his childhood but also his humanity. Thus the grotesque element of blending human and animal qualities is employed in the novel to show how war can reduce the human being to a monster. This blending of the human and the animal contributes to degradation since human beings are brought down to the level of animals by mingling with them or presenting behaviours that make them look like animals. In *Beasts of No Nation*, these animal images drawing on the grotesque are symbolic of the primal and violent behaviours of the characters.

Like most grotesque novels, *Beasts of No Nation* combines tragedy and comedy but with an emphasis on tragedy. The reader observes these characters with a complex feeling of disgust and sympathy. The child soldiers are portrayed as suffering hunger and deprivation with no adequate clothing and shelter. They suffer from the constant rape of the Commandant and live in perpetual fear of being killed by him. The novel presents the horror of the child soldier’s experience in a “piled up” manner that is deadening. Agu’s friend Strika is so hungry that “he is writing HUNGRY” and Agu wants to say he is hungry too but he is too weak to speak. Strika is

so hungry that he licks his cracking lips till they become red as if he has swallowed “red paint” (37) while Agu’s own hunger is an attack. “Hunger is attacking me because I am not eating anything since so long. ...sleep is attacking me and I am beginning to think of my village” (40). These ugly experiences together with the violence in which the child soldiers engage and the abuse they suffer make the novel seem tragic

However, in the midst of the tragic events, the mode of narration, nevertheless, makes the novel appear comic, which is the distinction of the grotesque. There are a few incidents and descriptions in the novel that evoke laughter in the midst of the horror. Some of the descriptions are pure giveaways, Agu says “[i]t is funny to be watching (Commandant) moving also because he is walking like his leg is a wooden pole that is not bending for anything” (33). Some descriptions Agu gives are just for fun. “[i]f you just see woman here, before you are even knowing, your soldier is standing at full tension. They are having breast big like pillow and so nice that their clothe is even rejoicing to be holding them. And they are having buttom that is just rounding so nice that any time they are sitting down, chair is also rejoicing” (95). Even the gravest acts of violence are accompanied by onomatopoeia and similes that slot humour into the tragic events being narrated. Machetes slashing into human flesh comes with the “KWUDA KWUDA” sound, followed by the child soldiers’ maniac laughter, “kehi kehi”. Agu’s killing of his victim is also accompanied by “KPWUD KPWUD” and “KPWUDA KPWUDA” as stated in the epigraph. A serious act like sodomy is also narrated as “entering inside of me the way the man goat is sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman and going inside of them” (85). Strika also demonstrates the Commandant’s act of sodomy by drawing a “picture in the mud of man bending down with his hand on the ground and gun and bullet shooting up his buttom” (85). *Beasts of No Nation* can thus be said to be comic nightmare allegory as some critics have established. The

portrayal of the Commandant with all the qualities of a comic book villain who is not interested in power, money, or land but kills for the sake of killing, and for his own lust and amusement, heightens the comic aspect of the novel. But his acts also appear tragic highlighting the ambiguity of the grotesque. Thus Iweala's creation of scenes that seem tragic but laughable in effect is to make the reader laugh in the midst of the horror. The grotesque style thus reduces the tension on the reader as he/she reads the horrific, often unimaginable, child-soldier story.

References to spirits or ghosts in grotesque novels are signs of spiritual deformity or even madness. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque presents a degrading from the abstract or spiritual to the earthly, material human life. It “involves taking that which is sublime, spiritual, noble, honourable, etc, and undermining it in such a way as to make it appear revolting degraded, and disgusting” (19-20). And the motion of the action is always downwards, going from good to bad, to worse, to worst (Davidson n.p). In the novel, human beings are degraded to animals, beasts and “things”. In *Beasts of Nation*, these images of spirits and madness are employed to show the degradation of the notion of childhood which is characterised by innocence, to that of abuse, violence and deprivation. Agu's friend Strika is so engulfed in the violence that he is “looking like spirit or demon. His skin is looking somehow like burned-up wood or charcoal and it is sticking tight to his face so his whole cheek is sticking out sharp sharp” (80). For Agu, his experiences make him spiritually deformed in a way that is only comparable to madness as he sees dead bodies everywhere. The violence that the child soldiers are involved in under the influence of drugs makes their heads feel as if they are “turning to the inside of rotten fruit” (12). The image of childhood is degraded from happiness and innocence to violence and rejection while the image of the soldier is degraded from pride to shame. Agu's memory of soldiers in his village marching in their beautiful uniforms is degraded to that of soldiers without any proper uniforms and engaging in forms of

unthinkable violence. The grotesque is thus a way of portraying the degradation of human values in times of war.

As has been discussed in this section, the grotesque in European context, is an effort to subdue demonic aspects of the world and as a result has a liberating effect. The grotesque, as has been employed in other parts of the world, assumes different meanings and significances from that of Europe and America. While the European grotesque seems to be liberatory, anti-hierarchical, anti-oppressive, challenging borders and boundaries, the non-modern European grotesque and the African grotesque in folklore seem to fulfill a different role. The African grotesque in folklore attests the fluid line between humans, animals and the spirit world. The shift between animal and human occurs often to teach humans a lesson in good conduct.

However, the grotesque in *Beasts of No Nation* does not do any of the above. In *Beasts of No Nation*, the grotesque is not a chosen mode but rather, a mode into which the narrative is forced since the experiences described are unspeakable, unimaginable and unthinkable. Moments of macabre humour occur to give the reader some relief, but otherwise, the grotesque is a mode forced by inconceivable realities. It is not about challenge, overturning of hierarchies or resisting enlightenment binaries as in Bakhtin. It is not about the open border between the human, the animal and the spirit world as in African cultures, but it is instead a mode the narrative is forced into by the unimaginable reality of the child-war phenomenon. The key dimension of this inconceivable reality is the way it distorts normal human development as seen in the way the child does not develop into an adult, but develops into a kind of “beast”.

Initiation, Personal development and Education in *Beasts of No Nation*

In *Beasts of No Nation*, the grotesque mode is the consequence of a macabre reality for

which the precepts of formal realism are inappropriate. A major impetus for the shift into the grotesque is the aberrant personal development of the child soldier. The protagonist is taken through an initiation that defies the moral precepts of all cultures in the context of war where he is taught the horrors of perpetrating murder, rape and brutality while he also suffers the abuse of hunger, deprivation and sodomy. The perversity of the initiation of the child, produces the stimulus that forces the narrative into the grotesque mode.

The protagonist of the novel, Agu, is portrayed as a child who has an ideal life before he is recruited as a child soldier. Unlike Birahima in *Allah is Not Obligated*, who is a street child before becoming a child soldier, Agu is a child who is loved and cared for by his father, a school teacher and his mother, a staunch Christian. Agu's life before the war is portrayed to provide a sharp contrast with his life as a child soldier. He is a boy who loves education and is anxious to go to school. His love for reading at a very tender age makes his mother call him "Professor" as he is always hounding his mother to read stories to him. His interest in these stories especially the Bible stories makes him curious to learn reading, encouraging him to learn to read even before he starts schooling. His desire for education makes him try to prove to his father that he is old enough to go to school. "I was always asking him every day, tomorrow can I be going to school, and he was always saying to me, Agu just wait" (26). Agu's strong desire for education comes from his admiration of his father, the school teacher, and he wants to go to school so that he "can be learning everything he is knowing that is making everybody in the village to like him so much" (26). His mother, though not as well educated as his father, is happy that she can read the Bible, "the only book that is mattering. This is why Pastor is liking her so much" (25). Agu's love for the Bible and Christian values comes from the stories his mother tells him from the Bible. At home, she tells him stories from the Bible and when she takes him to church Agu attends Sunday school to listen

to “more stories from The Bible about Jesus and Joseph and Mary and telling us that we should watch out so that we are taking the hard road and not the easy road ... They are always telling us that God is liking children so much that he is always watching us” (29). At school, Agu, was the smartest person in his class. He is so brilliant that he skips one class. He takes all his lessons seriously, to the admiration of his class teacher, Mistress Gloria, who was always telling him, “Agu make sure you study book enh? If you are studying hard you can be going to the university to be Doctor or Engineer” (28). Agu is also admired by his friends because all the other “children were thinking that I am nice boy and also I am the best at all the games and all the lessons we are learning. So they were liking me and wanting to be my friend” (29). As a cherished child of his parents and beloved student of his school teacher, Agu is in continuous tension between the demands of his child soldier experience and his life before the war. He always remembers the Bible stories his mother told him especially the story of David and Goliath, his love for reading and his desire to be a doctor or an engineer. Through Agu’s memory, Iweala creates Agu’s life before the war so vividly that he wins the sympathy of the reader as a boy with promise whose life has been destroyed by war and whose dreams are shattered. Agu’s life before the war is narrated through realism and not the grotesque style of his present life as a child soldier. This part is written in the form of flash backs without the horrors of the bodily images and the images of abasement that produce the grotesque.

Before Agu becomes a child soldier, he was almost of age to go through traditional initiation into adulthood. The novel presents his fascination with traditional initiation to contrast it with war initiation. Agu is portrayed as always having had a strong desire to go through traditional initiation; albeit that he comes from a Christian background. Yet he is not initiated and always wishes he had gone through the initiation ceremony of his village which was dramatic to watch.

His mother, despite the fact that she does not believe in the ceremony, is not strong enough to reject it so she joins the women in preparing for the ceremony. She believes that “it is not good to be celebrating any spirit but God because He is jealous and will be punishing you” (53). His father, on the other hand, believes that “God is knowing that we are only worshipping Him truly, but there are other spirits that we must also be saying hello to” (53). With these beliefs of his parents, it could be argued that he would have been allowed to go through the traditional initiation.

As the title of the novel, *Beasts of No Nation*, suggests through the fact that the locale is not indicated, the setting of the novel is not clear and thus the initiation ceremony is a general one for any West African setting and not specific to any ethnic group. However, it can be argued that the setting is Nigeria since the author is a Nigerian and the term “beast/s of no nation” is a common insult in Nigeria, a remark that, if applied to another person, implies that he/she is lacking in the connections and moral containment that ties us into a moral community and makes us human. The colourful initiation ceremony at Agu’s village begins with the members of the village coming to stand at the village square in their white clothes amidst drumming and dancing. The initiates engage in the Dancing of Warriors, with their faces painted, wearing bells and carrying machetes made of wood. They also wear grass hats that fly in the air as they pretend to be fighting. After the dance of the warriors, there is feasting before the Dance of the Goddess. There is no drumming during this dance but only singing by women of the village. This is also followed by feasting on pounded yam and soup with goat meat and oxtail. The next dance is the Dance of the Ox and Leopard. During this dance, the initiates wear ox-head masks with sharp red and white horns and also leopard masks with sharp teeth coloured red and white that make them look like spirits. The “ox” and “leopard” then run after each other and fall back, and snap their arm and their leg, throwing their heads from side to side until the end of the dance. As with the war initiation, we see

the boundary between the human and the animal world disappearing and the boys in their masks are hybrid creatures. But, unlike the war experience, the peacetime initiation does not lapse into the mode of the grotesque.

The climax of the ceremony takes place in the night at the riverside where the whole village watches as the initiates dance in the shallow waters of the river. The head boy goes to kneel before the village chief while the other initiates are still dancing around him. The chief gives him a real machete and says something into his ears. The head boy then cuts the head of a real ox and he and his other initiates smear the blood on their bodies. At the sound of a drum, all the initiates remove their masks and all “the spirit are dying and all the boy are becoming men” (56).

This traditional initiation is very significant as it has a lot to offer the individual as well as the community. As a shared event, the initiation ceremony strengthens kinship ties and brings togetherness in the community and minimises conflicts. The occasion is also used to offer prayers for the wellbeing of the initiates and the whole community. The drumming and dancing, apart from giving pleasure, also teach moral lessons. The dance warriors use fake machetes, thus controlling violence. At the climax of the ceremony where there is a ritual killing, it is an ox that is killed by the head boy that is consumed for food and not the purposeless killing of another living creature. This signifies that they should not shed the blood of any creature for no good reason. They smear the blood on their bodies to signify that they are strong men and warriors in the society. In this traditional initiation ceremony, violence is controlled and directed onto a single ritual animal rather than snowballing into the uncontrolled meaningless violence of war. Agu dreams of his own initiation but it never comes because of the war. At the war front, he is subjected to a perverted form of initiation – initiation into violence, killing and mad slaughter which contrasts sharply with traditional initiation. Even though violence is an inevitable part of life that every man needs to

face, in traditional initiation, it is ritually controlled unlike the war front where there is indiscriminate killing and brutality.

Also, whereas traditional initiation is characterised by a collective, corporate spirit, at the battlefield, it is “kill or be killed”, where every person is seen as an enemy. Traditional initiation involves the whole village coming together to help in the preparation of the ceremony. Even Agu’s mother whose Christian values make her uncomfortable in participating in the ceremony cannot help but take part. All the initiates dance the various dances together while the other members of the village cheer them. At the war front, everybody is seen as an enemy and people are portrayed as dying for nothing. The Commandant does not belong to any faction and he simply takes delight in killing indiscriminately, including the violation and murder of the child soldiers under him. He also trains the child soldiers to kill, rape and loot and engage in other forms of brutality.

In traditional initiation, the chief teaches the initiates good moral values that will make them responsible adults in their society. By contrast, the Commandant, who is the chief in the context of war initiation, teaches the initiates how to kill. Unlike the chief of Agu’s village who teaches the initiates to control violence, Commandant teaches Agu how to kill a human being. He teaches him how to hold the machete and he “is squeezing my hand around the handle of the machete and I am feeling the wood in my finger and my palm. It is just like killing goat. Just bring this hand up and knock him well well. He is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of enemy’s head and I am feeling like electricity is running through my whole body” (21). While the Commandant, the chief in the context of initiation into war, teaches Agu how to kill, his other “initiates” engage in their maniac laughter, “KEHI KEHI”, foregrounding the macabre humour of the grotesque.

Unlike the village initiation ceremony that is aimed at instilling good social and moral

values in the initiates in order for them to be responsible in their new status as adults, the violence of war is meaningless. The boys fight just for the sake of fighting, as fighting has become a daily means of survival and the violence is directed at anybody. The novel portrays war as meaningless as people die for nothing. The gap between the sort of initiation ceremony Agu envisioned for himself and the perverted initiation he gets in the context of war is so wide that Agu can never forget the initiation at his village. At the war front, the mere sight of someone dancing or singing to release the tension of war makes Agu remember the initiation ceremony at his village.

Even though Agu wants to go through traditional initiation, he cannot go through it since his experience of war acts as his own form of initiation to adulthood, albeit a corrupt form of adulthood. The war has exposed him to many things that a child should not know and this makes him no longer a child but also not an adult because he knows nothing about proper adult responsibilities but rather the corrupt form of adulthood involving rape, killing and looting as well as constantly being raped by the Commandant. Agu's dream of being initiated into adulthood makes him always remember his time in school and the initiation ceremonies in his village. These memories, juxtaposed between his experiences at the battlefield make him question his very humanity. This makes him keep questioning why he cannot stop fighting even though he does not want to fight. Even though initiation is supposed to distinguish him as human in relation to animals, and develop him as an adult from a child he goes through a perverted form of initiation which fails to do this. Thus, instead of going through traditional initiation to be transformed into a man and human, he receives initiation through war that turns him into a "beast". His experience of war is so appalling that its portrayal makes the narrative slide into the mode of the grotesque.

Conclusion

In *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala represents the experience of the African child soldier whose childhood has been destroyed through war. Through excessive use of bodily images, Iweala presents the violence against, and by the African child soldier as one caught between innocence and guilt. The novel is thus a story of perverted initiation and education since both concepts are frustrated in the novel. Traditional initiation is designed to move the child into adulthood and to distinguish the man from the “beast”, while formal education is designed to equip the individual with knowledge and skills that will enable him to function well in society. However, the debauched initiation and education through war that Agu receives, make him develop into a “beast”. This is captured through the metaphors of animals like dogs, horses and insects discussed above. These grotesque elements in the narrative capture this perversion of norms.

Despite the disgusting side of life illustrated in child brutality, the distinctive vitality of the never-ending grotesque body also implies there is hope for change, renewal and improvement for the social body as well. This resonates with Bakhtin’s argument that the degradation in the grotesque often leads to a rebirth. Agu believes that “one day, there will be no more war and we can be living together in a house and be eating all the food we are wanting to eat ... sometimes it is nice to think that there is something else for our future” (37 *my ellipsis*). As he fights to survive the war, he hopes that one day the war will end so that he can go back to school and to church to “church to ask God for forgiveness everyday” (77). At the end of the novel, he is seen undergoing rehabilitation at a camp under the care of Amy, an American therapist. Even though he is still not united with his family, there is hope for rebirth for him. Through the grotesque, *Beasts of No Nation* raises issues about disrupted childhood and personal development which have no easy answers or explanations.

The unspeakability of childhood dis-orders witnessed in the three chapters leads us to the next chapter which focuses on restoring the child soldiers whose childhoods have been destroyed by war to childhood. The next chapter discusses how through magical realism, Delia Jarrett-Macauley imagines reverse development of the “adult/child” back to childhood.



CHAPTER FIVE

REVERSE-DEVELOPMENT: MAGICAL REALISM IN DELIA JARRETT- MACAULEY'S *MOSES, CITIZEN AND ME*

Introduction

In this chapter, I turn from the child soldier's experience on the battlefield and how this experience has left the child soldier in a developmental limbo, to focus on reimagining the developmental process of the child soldier, though in a sense, turning back the clock of personal development. In particular, I consider how the attention of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel, *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005), is directed at restoring the childhood of the child soldier. The novel achieves this aim through employing creative narrative techniques to take the monstrous adult that the child has become, through a reverse-development, back to childhood from which the child may be re-educated and re-formed. The connection between this chapter and the previous chapters is that they all represent the abnormal development of children as a result of war. Another thing that links this novel to the novels that have been discussed in the previous chapters is the fact that in all the novels, the representation of the horror children experience in war shifts the narrative away from realism to narrative modes that seem better to represent the distorted experience of the child soldier. However, while in the novels discussed in the previous chapters, it is the abnormal development of children that shifts the narrative into non-realist modes, in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, it is the reversal and reimagining of childhood that moves the narrative into the mode of magical realism. Thus, while in *Song for Night, Allah is Not Obligated* and *Beasts of No Nation* the focus is on how children have become "monsters", *Moses, Citizen and Me*, represents how the "monster" may be restored to humanity. Magical realism in this novel thus encompasses a therapeutic

tendency that represents a form of healing for child soldiers. However, magical realism encompasses another potential also. *Moses, Citizen and Me* is highly concerned with the ethical dilemmas of representing child-soldier experience. As we shall see below, the narrative mode of magical realism also allows the author to overcome some of the moral problems of representing experience that violates the norms of all cultures. The possibilities provided by magical realism help the narrative to avoid voyeuristic sensationalism and allow representation of the child-soldier experience without self-interested exploitation of and “profiting” from that experience.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley, a Briton born to Sierra Leonean parents, was drawn to write about child soldiers through her work experience in war-torn Central and Eastern Europe, and through a documentary about the civil war in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, she brings her career background as writer, broadcaster and academic to the novel, *Moses, Citizen and Me*, as can be seen from the specific approaches and experiences represented in the novel. Her academic writing includes *Reconstructing Womanhood*, *Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women* (1996) and writing for a more general audience, the biography, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65* (1998), a life-narrative of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s first black programme-maker. Jarrett-Macauley worked in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s during the inter-ethnic conflict in that region. She was able to draw on that experience since the war in Sierra Leone also was inter-ethnic. In April 2001, she went to Paris to see the premiere of the film, *Nouvel Ordre Mondiale* by Phillippe Diaz, and to talk to people at Monde Contre Faim, a global humanitarian organisation committed to ending world hunger, who had been working in Sierra Leone. Distressed by the brilliant and graphic depiction of the atrocities of the civil conflict, a man who had attended the premiere encouraged Jarrett-Macauley to write something bearable, something that would enable readers to see the truth of the conflict, without just being shocked. His thoughtful words stayed

with Jarrett-Macauley who had already been inspired by a BBC report about a child soldier, Citizen, who had been compelled to execute his parents. She was moved to write about this child's experience, and the name "Citizen" stayed with her. War is a frequent theme in many works of art throughout the ages and in many cultures. But when the perpetrator is a child, the writer is pushed into considering the toughest emotional and moral questions imaginable. Jarrett-Macauley took up this challenge through focusing on her parents' country of birth where children were instrumental in the civil conflict. Furthermore, she does not view the issues abstractly, but considers the questions through the framework of the family and tries to imagine what a family's response to that tragedy might be. Through focusing on personal healing and reconstruction of inter-personal relationships, the novel is pushed into magical realist modes that, in the context, seem to allow the reversal of time and the reversal of abnormal development.

Moses, Citizen and Me, Jarrett-Macauley's debut novel that won the Orwell prize for political writing in 2006, is strongly shaped by the author's personal experience in addition to her professional experience. While not endorsing the fallacy of reading fiction as autobiography, there are overlaps in the life and concerns of the author and the narrator. The novel begins when Julia, a British citizen with Sierra Leonean parents arrives in Sierra Leone after the end of the civil war that lasted for about ten years. Julia had been called by Anita, the neighbour of her maternal uncle Moses, to come to Sierra Leone to comfort her bereaved uncle. Moses' beloved wife, Adele, was killed during the war. Julia finds Citizen, the eight-year-old orphaned son of her cousin, rejected and dejected. Citizen is a former child soldier who refuses to speak. She discovers, as Moses had, that Citizen, under instruction from "the big soldier man" (2), had killed his own grandmother, Adele. Anita encourages Julia to help both her uncle Moses and her cousin's son, Citizen

In spite of the fact that most people feel child soldiers cannot be redeemed, Julia feels

obliged to restore Citizen to normal childhood. According to their neighbour, Anita, most people will not even let a child like Citizen near their houses after what he has done because they believe they are little devils. Yet Julia is committed to helping Citizen return to normal childhood and to reconciling him with his grandfather. Julia's commitment to restoring Citizen to normalcy leads her to visit Doria camp, a rehabilitation camp for former child soldiers where Citizen was found by Elizabeth, Anita's daughter, who brought him home. At Doria camp, Julia meets Sally, a girl soldier who was taken into the war when her hand slipped out of the hand of her mother who was fleeing Freetown. Sally tells her how she and Citizen had escaped from the war front to the rehabilitation centre. At the rehabilitation centre, Julia finds several other former child-soldiers undergoing rehabilitation under an Irish priest, some mutilated and some drug addicts.

Inspired by this visit, Julia imagines bringing the child-soldiers back to normal development and normal relations with their families. She resolves to return to the camp and is not in the least surprised when she returns instead through a magical experience that superimposes the female socialisation activity of hair braiding onto the restorative return. One day, as Anita, the neighbour, plaits her hair, Julia observes strange scenes she has not observed before. She is taken into the dream world of Gola Forest where she meets the child-soldiers of the "number-one-burn-house unit" under their leader, the twenty-year old Lieutenant Ibrahim. After a seven-days' march in the bush, they are made to sit down and listen to a lecture about why they need to fight for their rights; but the children are shocked and ask what rights are. Here the children's experiences of war are revealed to Julia in personalised detail. She learns that they are given drugs to enable them undertake their gruesome acts, that they are frequently beaten and that the weaker ones are killed by their leader, Lieutenant Ibrahim.

The Gola forest sequences allow Julia to be informed about the personal histories of

individual child soldiers through which she is able to piece together Citizen's story. They also present a zone of experience outside of realist time and space where the work of healing and reintegration may be done. It is a space where there is a reversal of development back to childhood, allowing the children to be re-educated in a more positive way. Central to this development is the shaman, Bemba G, who combines elements of non-modern wisdom of the elder and modern forms of therapy. Bemba G is well versed in traditional magic and wisdom and, it would appear, in trauma therapy techniques. He teaches the children the story-telling technique of beginning, middle and end (BME). He also gives them exercises in Mathematics. Both Bemba G and Julia help the children to rehearse and stage Thomas Decker's *Juliohs Siza*, the Krio version of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which they finally perform to the surprise of their audience. The novel ends when some of the former child soldiers have been trained as auto mechanics and are reintegrated into the society while Citizen has also reconciled with his grandfather. As Julia returns from the mechanics' shop, Moses meets Citizen, who previously was cut off from every aspect of his grandfather's life, helping him to fix a curtain. Julia is surprised since not for a moment had she "thought this would happen" (225).

Moses, Citizen and Me has received a fair amount of critical attention that mainly focuses on the novel as one example of a child-soldier narrative that for the most part misses the specificities of the question of restoration and redemption highlighted through the Gola forest sequences summarised above. Some of these scholars argue that Jarrett-Macauley, creates Citizen as an innocent victim of war just like much other child soldier fiction and human rights discourses. According to Stefanie De Rouck, Jarrett-Macauley presents the child soldiers as being under the control of adults' decisions, thus undermining Citizen's agency and humanity. Sarah Maya Rosen and David M. Rosen also argue that the novel, like much contemporary literature and film,

represents child soldiers as abused victims of war. These critics' concerns have been on how the novel creates the child soldier as innocent and without making him responsible for his war-time atrocities.

For some commentators, the novel represents a way of restoring the former child soldier to his state of innocence and vulnerability. Caroline Argyropulo-Palmer analyses the novel as a narrative about the child soldier's journey back to childhood. Ken Junior Lipenga argues that the novel is an exploration of the narrator's attempts to heal the emotional wounds of both Moses and his grandson, Citizen. To him, the novel's aim is precisely to salvage Citizen's humanity, to lead him back across the "bridge to normal childhood" and it does succeed "in redeeming the figure of the child soldier from the stereotype of 'monstrosity'" (13). I find Joana Spooner's reading of the novel only as national allegory especially problematic. For Spooner, the novel is about the disrupted nation and the child, Citizen, is represented solely as a metaphor of the nation. This allegorical reading fails to consider the powerful ways in which the child-soldier, Citizen, is foregrounded as a rounded character and the novel's imperative in seeing the child soldier reconciled to society.

Coming to the question of narrative mode, there are a few articles that foreground the novel's partial magical realist form, as well its representation of abnormal development. However, none of these analyses explains the full significance of magical realism in terms of its potential in narrative form to reverse the abnormal development of the child soldier. For instance, Allison Mackey describes these child-soldier narratives as "tragic coming-of-age narratives" (100) that encourage the reader to consider what happens to child soldiers after the dehumanising experiences of war. She sees Citizen's refusal to speak, despite Julia's insistence that he does so, as highlighting the need to recognise alternative ways of working through trauma by creatively shaping one's

experiences. Mackey's reading constructs war as a "wrong" rite of passage that leaves child soldiers traumatised and calls for alternative ways of healing and restoring them to childhood. However, she does not consider restoration in relation to narrative mode. Like Mackey, Anne Whitehead's study focuses on the novel's representation of restoring former child soldiers to childhood. However, she sees the novel as representing the rehabilitation of child soldiers through indigenous culture. Even though Whitehead argues that the novel is magical realist, she regards magical realism in the novel as representing an "ambitious attempt by Jarrett-Macauley to envision a mode of recovery for the former child soldiers of Sierra Leone that draws inventively on local custom and tradition" (251-252), alongside other therapeutic modes. Scholarship that does focus on magical realism in *Moses, Citizen and Me* thus fails to identify the ways in which magical realism allows more than just an "African" authenticity. It also embodies the specific narrative capacity to reverse time and allow a re-development and re-education of the "monstrous" child. A factor that has not been considered at all is magical realism's significance in presenting a more ethical technique for conveying traumatic experience that could be sensationalised and turned into voyeuristic spectacle.

Magical Realism: Debates and Departures

Magical realism is a mode of representation that combines realism and fantasy in such a way that neither of the modes is privileged over the other. In an artistic context, the concept of magical realism develops in the early twentieth century in Europe and is catapulted onto the literary scene through the Latin-American "boom" writers of the mid-to late twentieth century. The debates around magical realism are many. In the context of this chapter the idea of the autochthony of magical realism in African modes of representation will be considered, as well as the related

idea that all writing from the “third world” must be magical realist. More specifically, however, the chapter will focus on how Jarrett-Macauley in *Moses, Citizen and Me* sidesteps all of these debates and initiates a departure where magical realism is a therapeutic storytelling mode that allows a reversal of development and re-education, and allows a more ethical form of representation.

As a mode, magical realism challenges the Western tradition of realism, positing instead an alternative universe in which fantastical elements are placed side by side with the real in the process of establishing equivalence between them. The term was first coined by the German art historian and philosopher, Franz Roh, in 1925 initially to apply to German post-Expressionist painters of the 1920s but later became accepted in the art circles of Italy and South America. Since the 1960s, magical realism has become more generally accepted in Europe and the Americas and has been applied to literature, first by Angel Flores to describe the fiction of Latin American writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortazar, Miguel Ángel Asturias and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In recent times, the mode has become no longer a Latin American monopoly and now is very much active in other postcolonial contexts. Maggie Ann Bowers has even argued that to suggest that magical realist writing can be found only in particular “locations” would be misleading. It is after all a narrative mode, or a way of thinking in its most expansive form, and those concepts cannot be “kept” in a geographic location (31). Magical realism’s popularity in postcolonial literary criticism has made Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin name it as the most important literary mode of the twentieth century (122). By the 1990s, in the words of Homi Bhabha, magical realism had become “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (qtd in Hart 1).

Key scholars of the mode include Wendy B. Faris, Maggie Ann Bowers, Amaryll Chanady, Ato Quayson and Brenda Cooper who have made various attempts to define and analyze how the

mode works. According to Faris, magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow originally out of the reality portrayed (163). For Bowers, since in magical realism the magical is presented as a part of ordinary reality, “the distinction between what is magical and what is real is eroded” (63). Amaryll Chanady states that magical realism is an “amalgamation of a rational and an irrational world view” (21). According to Christopher Warnes, a basic definition of magical realism, “sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality” (3). Magical realism can therefore be said to be the combination of the real and supernatural in a narrative in a way that none of them is privileged over the other.

In Africa, writers who have employed this mode include Ben Okri, Syl Cheney-Coker, B. Koko Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Yvonne Vera, Pepetela and Zakes Mda who are said to have been influenced by the Latin American writers. However, this claim has been contested by African magical realist writers. The Nigerian, Molaro Wood, author of *Indigo*, a collection of short stories in an interview asserts that the Latin Americans:

... were writing about New World societies that had a lot of African influences through slavery for example, in their language, myths, ways of seeing, religious beliefs and so on. So I'm saying of course that Africa is the original “lo real maravilloso”. Look at newspaper pages and tell me whether some things reported even in this day and age are not magically real. You have news items that ask you to believe that a thief turned into a goat; goats get arrested as do masquerades; or that some woman gave birth to a horse. I find it interesting that many people recount these with straight faces and

listeners often take them as so. (allafrica.com)

Zakes Mda, the South African novelist, similarly denies that his work is influenced by Latin America:

Some critics have called my work magic realism. They say it was influenced by Latin-Americans. But I must tell you that the Latin-Americans have nothing to do with my work. First of all they did not invent the mode of magic realism. They merely popularized it. Secondly, I had been writing in this mode long before I heard of the Latin-Americans . . . In magic realism the supernatural is not presented as problematic, or as contradicting our laws of reason . . . It happens and is accepted by other characters and by the reader as an event. I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting . . . The unreal happens as part of reality . . . A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernization. (qtd in Barker 9, *original ellipsis*)

These arguments show that even though the mode first became widely known through fiction from Latin America, African magical realism cannot be said to be the product of a Latin American influence but rather, as a vision and mode of telling born out of Africa's own belief in the reality of the supernatural. This claim is especially justified if one considers the nature of African folktales. In most folktales, supernatural occurrences are recounted in a matter of fact manner and listeners take them as real. One popular folktale in West Africa is recounted as follows:

A great warrior did not return from the hunt. His family gave him up for dead, all except his youngest child who each day would ask, "Where is my father? Where is my father?" The child's older brothers, who were magicians, finally went forth to find him.

They came upon his broken spear and a pile of bones. The first son assembled the bones into a skeleton; the second son put flesh upon the bones; the third son breathed life into the flesh. The warrior arose and walked into the village where there was great celebration. He said, "I will give a fine gift to the one who has brought me back to life". Each one of his sons cried out, "Give it to me, for I have done the most". "I will give the gift to my youngest child", said the warrior. "For it is this child who saved my life. A man is never truly dead until he is forgotten!" (AfricanFolktales.html)

In the folktale above, a dead man's coming back to life is recounted in a matter of fact manner as part of everyday reality. Several other such folktales abound especially in West Africa. Addei and Addei also recount a folktale in which the thigh of an antelope, which a hunter had dried and hung in his kitchen, used to turn into a beautiful woman who cooked and cleaned the hunter's hut whenever the hunter left the hut. When she is caught by the hunter one day, she sings a magic song which changes the hunter's hut into a big city and the hunter a great king but when the king is not able to keep her secret, she sings the same song and the king becomes a poor hunter again (Addei and Addei 10-11). Several such stories in which supernatural occurrences are recounted with a straight face support the claim that African magical realism is not a Latin American influence but borne out of African belief systems. This resonates with Ann Bowers' argument that in West Africa, magical realism often incorporates local influences to produce a cross cultural literature that emulates the situation of many West Africans today (53). Quayson has also argued that, "African writing takes inspiration from the resources of orality in order to establish a distinctive account of the African world...In traditional African oral contexts, the dominant narrative genres that circulate have an element of the magical and the supernatural in them" (*Magical Realism and the African Novel* 159, *my ellipsis*). Magical realism can then be said to be

the result of a unique amalgamation of the beliefs and superstitions of different cultural groups. This shows that while some international writers used the mode to challenge Western realism, Africans use it as an influence of their culture. Also while some international writers use the mode as metaphorical, for Africans, it is part of their belief system. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, suggests: “For Okri, in a curious way, the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday” (Appiah 147). The magical realism used in *Moses, Citizen and Me* could thus be said to have been influenced by West African cultures rather than as influenced by Latin America. The other side of the coin is the fact that many publishers in the western world have preferred writers in the third world to write in the magical realist mode, and especially to present Africa as a place of irrationality. However, the magical realism in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, does not endorse the idea of Africa as a place of irrationality, the supernatural and witchcraft. The bizarre occurrences that one sees in the civil war is a violence born more out of the pitfalls of the progress and development of the colonially forged nation than a consequence of African primitiveness. Neither is the novel particularly concerned with a literary challenge to the formal realism Ian Watt sees emerging out of eighteenth-century Europe. Instead, magical realism is a form of therapy that enables a reversal of time and the abnormal development of the child-soldier that is a product of the violence that has ensued as a consequence of the arbitrary, colonially convenient borders of postcolonial nations. Magic realism also allows a less fraught representation of the child-soldier’s experience that could so easily be sensationalised, as will be discussed below.

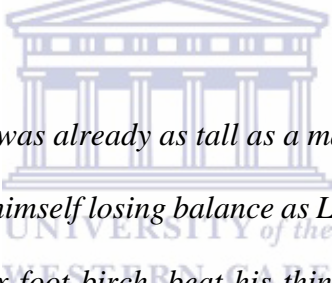
Moses, Citizen and Me has many magical realist features that will be outlined and discussed hereafter. The novel contains real historical events as well as fantastical elements. It alternates between the real world of Julia, the narrator, her uncle Moses, her cousin Citizen and their

neighbour, Anita, and the supernatural world of the Gola forest with Bemba G and the child soldiers. The first time the narrative moves to the supernatural world of Gola forest is when Anita makes Julia's hair into big African cornrows that act as pathways into the magical, liminal realm of Gola forest: "Her big plaits were a trap, a device for opening up spaces in my head that hadn't been tampered with since I was a girl. She was using her hairdressing ritual to push African 'bush' rituals into those spaces" (51). Here, hair braiding, which is a typical social activity of African women, introduces African modes of narration into the novel. At first Gola forest appears as if it is in Julia's dream world but her subsequent visits to the place make it part of the reality presented in the novel. The novel from that point alternates between the supernatural world and the physical world without any of the worlds being privileged over the other. This resonates with Ato Quayson's postulation that configurations of elements in magical realist texts differ from writer to writer and from text to text. In some, it is a character or characters who possess magical powers, as in Kojo Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. In some cases, it is events which are unusual or magical fused with everyday realities as in Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*, while in others, the narrative alternates between the magical and the real worlds as in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (175). Like *The Famished Road*, *Moses, Citizen and Me* alternates between the real world and the supernatural world. There are magical effects merged with everyday reality but these are recounted without any surprise. In the novel, wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, "accepted – presumably as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection; they thus achieve a kind of defamiliarisation that appears to be natural or artless" (Faris 177). Gola forest and its activities are presented in the novel as part of the reality as there is a thin line between the natural world and the supernatural world in the novel. Julia is able to enter the forest subsequently to see the child soldiers. On her second visit to the

Gola forest, for instance, she cannot remember anything between leaving Uncle Moses' house and arriving at Gola forest.

But, these effects aside, more significantly and more uniquely, *Moses, Citizen and Me* shifts into the mode of magical realism since it allows a form of representation of the child-soldier experience that avoids some of the ethical dilemmas of speaking for traumatised others who cannot speak. Magical realism also serves as a therapeutic means to shift back time and re-write the life of the child soldiers. These ideas will be analysed in relation to the novel below.

Voiceovers of Trauma, Snapshots of Progress: The Potential of the Magical in Narrative and Photography



Almost twelve years old, Abu was already as tall as a man, but the softness of his skin betrayed his true age. He felt himself losing balance as Lieutenant Ibrahim yanked him to his feet and, wielding a six-foot birch, beat his thin black legs, which shook like leaves in a breeze. Urine soaked his black cotton shorts. He held his head and felt ashamed. At this, the smallest soldiers scattered more tears on the ground. So this was it, the day childhood finished (Moses 52).

Moses, Citizen and Me begins when the war has ended and Citizen, who has fought as a child soldier, has returned to his grandfather's house after being found by a neighbour at a rehabilitation camp. The novel therefore flouts the rules of the classical realist *Bildungsroman* which follows its protagonist as he develops from youth to adulthood. The archetypal *Bildungsroman* traces the progress of a young person as he or she works towards self-understanding and a sense of social responsibility. As stated in the introductory chapter, the

Bildungsroman focuses on one central character who undergoes an important transformation. Thus, in the classic novel of development, a youth is slightly at odds with his family and society, strikes out on his own and learns independently through life experiences. However, in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, we are presented with a child who is forcibly taken from his family, goes on a journey as a child soldier, and is forced to do adult things but lacks the capacity to learn from experience and is left a ruined boy. Unlike the *Bildungsroman* that follows the protagonist as he develops, *Moses, Citizen and Me* presents Citizen as a ruined boy before taking the reader through how he has become who he is and his journey back to normalcy. Thus, the novel shifts to the magical realist mode to take advantage of magical realism's fluidity of time to represent this reverse development.

Citizen's description at the beginning of the novel shows he is devastated. He is perched "high on the balustrade, arms akimbo, he was munching on some tobacco like a Cuban plantation worker more than twice his age. He looked more burnt and more punished than any plantation worker ever did. His eyes were red. His short hair was unclean; his cheekbones stood out prominently and suggested poise" (7). Thus we see that Citizen has aged abnormally and that he is physically stressed. The simile that compares Citizen with a Cuban plantation worker implicitly connects the strife of the current civil war with the history of slavery that began the implosion of West African societies. We know that the grandfather, Moses, had been compassionate towards him initially since when they are first reunited, "water fell from his eyes" (19). But, as the realisation of Citizen's unnatural crime impacts on him, and as citizen's abnormal behaviour makes itself felt, Moses emotionally abandons the child, allowing him simply to come and go as he pleases without any interaction. This is because :

It is too much for him. Most people will not even let a child like Citizen near their

house after what he's done. They cannot stand the sight of them. They believe they are little devils. Bad bush ... Who wants a child who only knows how to kill? What kind of nightmare is that? If they keep these children here, is like keeping something bad in the blood. Something rotten, isn't it? (19-20)

Moses is thus psychologically ill-equipped to deal with Citizen and for him, Citizen lies outside the normal order of things with which he can cope. Citizen is unnatural, abnormal and rejected as the unspeakable and unnameable. Julia cannot get "Uncle Moses to say anything about him, not even to mention his name" (15). Other people also "talked about how devious and cruel [child soldiers] were. How they killed without thought, without pity for human life. People said child-soldiers were the most destructive elements in the society and yet they are getting everything far beyond what victims of the war were getting. People said throw these devils into a crypt where skeletons go to live" (78). This explains why the novel is about, Moses, Citizen and Julia. Julia helps Moses to be psychologically well equipped to accept Citizen. Citizen is led through a journey back to childhood, and Julia's encounter with the child soldiers helps her to develop out of some of the psychological blockages she encountered in her own family relations. Citizen himself has withdrawn from society: "More than a year since he had been rescued, he is still 'the silent boy'. But the urge to speak must have been there" (42). But he had earlier on told his story into a tape recorder at the rehabilitation camp. Citizen is eight years old when we first meet him in the novel but his description shows someone who is no longer a child. His experience makes him no longer a child but a "corrupt adult" who needs to be helped to cross the bridge back to childhood. He is not under the care of any adult: "He came and went as he pleased, like an independent adult" (15) and can even choose not to sleep in the house without anybody looking for him. He has become "no one's child now" (81).

Even though Citizen lives an independent life like an adult, he nevertheless behaves like a child. He rams himself against the plane tree marking it with a twig to indicate his current height to see if he had grown beyond the other markings. Like a child, Citizen falls asleep in the yard and is carried by Anita: “The concerned mother held him close, rubbed his hands and carried him to bed. ... Citizen was in deep sleep, the cool white sheet rubbed around his tiny body” (18-19 *my ellipsis*). He allows Julia also to put him to bed: “Citizen lay in bed, staring straight ahead. He seemed calm and sleepy” (47). This childish activity indicates he is still a child. He also plays in the mud with Sara, Anita’s daughter: “Citizen had responded to Sara’s new gardening with an enthusiasm that took us all by surprise” (45) and allows Julia to bathe him like a child, “paddling in the water with the exuberance of a duckling” (46) as he played with Julia’s nail brush which is in the shape of a hippopotamus. This shows how Citizen has developed abnormally, existing as a man and child at the same time; but not actually embodying either of them. He is “a ruined boy ... damaged by all this ... and ... lost, very lost” (16 *my ellipsis*), some kind of monster, who has chosen to be silent.

Silence has become a common motif in most child-soldier fiction where authors use it to explore various themes. In *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation*, discussed in different chapters of this study, silence has been variously employed. In *Song for Night*, the narrator and the members of his platoon have their vocal chords severed so that when a member of their unit steps on a mine and screams, he/she will not disturb the others. This silence imposed by rebel leaders as a coping mechanism resonates with Suzan J. Song and Joop de Jong’s findings on the role of silence in the lives of Burundian former child soldiers. According to Song and De Jong, silence was a way the leaders of the army controlled the child soldiers and a means of survival in the army. During the war, silence was used as a power tool to manipulate children into becoming soldiers in order to

make them willing instruments of war. Rebel leaders silenced the child soldiers, to ensure compliance and obedience (Song and Jong 93). The child soldiers were thus threatened with death or severe physical beatings should they disclose any information about their war experience. Silence was thus a safety mechanism due to the potential consequences of talking about war experiences. In *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu's friend Strika has never talked since he witnessed his parents being killed. His silence, like Citizen's is a result of trauma. Trauma has in most cases been associated with silence as most trauma victims are not able to tell their stories "given that trauma destroys their language" (Nabutanyi 52). When Citizen is first found by Elizabeth, Anita's daughter, the boy "looked at everyone and everything with suspicion; so almost everyone avoided looking at him. He had changed" (79). He had earlier audio-recorded his story but later lapses into silence. This could be due to the kind of response he receives at the time he tells his story. Trauma victims need sympathetic listeners in order to tell their stories and Citizen might not have received such a response; hence his resolve to remain silent. His silence could also be as a result of his mistrust of everybody around him. Suzan J. Song and Joop de Jong cite mistrust as one of the reasons for silence among former child soldiers in Burundi (91). They suggest that silence was also a "protective factor in the post-reintegration period, as it was incorporated into matters of isolation and distrust, in part due to the stigma that many child soldiers faced upon reintegration and in part as a response to experiencing trauma" (93). Citizen's silence can be an attempt to cover up his contribution to the horror of war around him or as a result of mistrust for the people around him. His silence is also a result of his inability to understand and narrate the horror he has been through as the horrors are outside the scope of his register since he is too young to find a vocabulary that will describe his experience. More importantly, Citizen is silent because the horrific nature of his experience renders him speechless since his language has been taken away by trauma. Trauma

is mostly characterised in trauma studies by its inexpressibility, unrepresentability and inability to be integrated into narrative.

By creating Citizen as silent, Jarrett-Macauley shows sensitivity to Citizen as his silence portrays him to be vulnerable but, she finds a way around Citizen's loss of language through the use of Julia's first person narration and the magical realist mode which gives Julia access to Citizen's past. Given the horrors Citizen has suffered, the use of magical realism brings sensitivity in its depiction and avoids voyeuristic exploitation of the suffering the former child soldier has gone through. According to Alexandra Schultheis, there has been a growing market for the stories of child soldiers in literature and film. These stories while focusing on the needed attention to the conditions of the estimated 300 000 child soldiers worldwide, also seem to profit in terms of literary celebrity and financially from the suffering of the war affected child as well as simplifying a complex reality (Schultheis 31). As Edgar Nabutanyi has rightly argued, given that "horror is part and parcel of war narratives, the challenge is how to represent such trauma without exploiting or cheapening the pain of the victim" (52). If care is not taken, such narration can be insensitive to the pain of the victims who most of the time are not able to tell their stories because of trauma.

As a traumatised child, Citizen is not able to tell his own story but magical realism allows his story to be heard without being impervious to his pain. For instance the magical realist episode in the novel where Julia enters Citizen's dreams and sees his room on fire but "there was no crackle of burning wood, no sign of ash, no hissing of fire. The fire made no impact in the room" (49). Julia's vision indicates her sensed awareness that Citizen is "burning" with shame, guilt, terror and fury – the intense and confused emotional responses of a child soldier who has been returned to a family home with his terrible experiences still emotionally unresolved. This episode reveals Citizen's vulnerability and Julia prays to God to "forgive him and bring him peace, thinking of

him as a small terrified boy and not as one who terrifies” (49). As Julia understands Citizen as a terrified boy rather than one who terrifies, she feels the urge to help him back to normal childhood but he needs to understand his past before she can do this. Julia is able to do this because of magical realism’s fluidity of treatment of time that allows her to enter the world of the child soldiers to relate their stories, and relate with their stories.

Thus, through the magical realist mode, the novel takes the reader through Citizen’s life as a child soldier. In the supernatural world of Gola forest, we meet Citizen with his colleague child soldier under their Lieutenant Ibrahim, who was always “with them, his unit, the number-one-burning-houses unit. They were his troops and they listened to his every word. They had to. Their lives depended on it” (53). Citizen and his fellow child soldiers under Lieutenant Ibrahim are revealed as abused but they cannot complain since the more they cry, the more they are beaten. Twelve year old Abu is beaten mercilessly till urine “soaks his black cotton shorts” (52) while Citizen is also beaten fifty lashes for failing to execute a boy. Abu’s sick brother, Masu is also shot by the lieutenant because he finds Masu, “good for nothing bastard!” (64). The magical realist Gola forest thus reveals Citizen as an abuser as well as abused. As a spy in his unit, he is given cigarettes to sell in villages in order to report back for his unit to take up their burning houses project. He has killed many people at the battlefield including his own grandmother. He has used hard drugs under the influence of which he has caused serious harm to people. Under the influence of drugs, even little “Citizen looked unperturbed. He rubbed his stomach. Fear had deserted him. The drug had seen to that” (59). Victor, another child soldier, also talks about how he had killed so many people under the influence of drugs: “Then when the drink finished in me, I felt bad. I know I am bad. I killed people” (126). Citizen, like most of his colleague child soldiers has experienced too much horror to still be called children and even physically, look older than their

ages. Citizen's experience, just like the other child soldiers, signifies that he knows too much still to be called a child. However, his loss of childhood does not mean entry to adulthood. The adult life he tasted in fighting wars was a corrupt form of adult world while he lacks even the capacity to learn from this experience, leaving him a traumatised boy who needs to be assisted to revert back to childhood and the prewar state of innocence, revealed through Moses' family photographs.

Magical realism and photography combine to make us understand Citizen's life. While the magical realist mode gives us access to his life as a child soldier, Moses' photographs give information about his life before the war as well as Free Town and its activities before the war. Citizen's life before he is forcibly enlisted as a child soldier revealed through Uncle Moses' pictures, offers an understanding of the extent of the damage that has been done to the boy in order to understand how he can be restored to childhood. Unlike Birahima in *Allah is Not Obligated* who has no strong family ties before he becomes a child soldier, Citizen, like Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, had a good family life with well-to-do parents. In one of the photographs, "Citizen dressed in an African suit in burnt sienna, stood between his parents, looking up to his father, Kole. His features, in every way down to the tiniest detail, were the image of his father. ... Agnes had a broad smile on her face. 'That was his first day at school'" (99 *my ellipsis*). This is an image of a boy who enjoyed comfort and security that has been destroyed by war. However, some of these photographs in the novel do not always represent the reality they are supposed to represent.

Photographs are supposed represent reality more than any other art form but they are also highly subjective. Photography took over from mimetic realism in narrative and, as Roland Barthes refers to photographs in his book *The Pencil of Nature*, photographs are "impressed by nature's hand" (3). Susan Sontag has also argued that "any photograph – seems to have a more innocent and therefore more accurate relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects" (175).

However, Sontag is quick to add that even “when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience” (175). This means that certain factors come into play which make photographs not represent the reality they are supposed to capture because the camera does not capture the world without offering itself to be used through human agency. In the analogue technique of photography, dark room manipulations can take place during the printing so that it is not always the inverted image in the negative that is printed. With the digital technique, applications such as Photoshop come with tools and filters that offer the possibilities of manipulating the image in a myriad of ways.

In *Moses, Citizen and Me*, photographs are part of a strategy of documenting and classifying in a way that continues a colonial project in a postcolonial context. The independent nation state of Sierra Leone documents “progress and development” through photographs and Moses is part of this project. Moses, the grandfather, is enlisted by the authorities shortly after independence to document the progress made by the new Sierra Leonean nation. But the photographs, like narratives that try to repress, expose what the modern nation-state wants to hide. Moses takes a picture at a rally of the new president of Sierra Leone, but the photograph reveals a shadow near the president’s head that Moses cannot explain. The collapse of the modern Sierra Leonean nation into civil war is foreshadowed in the uncanny image of a shadow that looks like a child with a gun near the president’s head, predicting the downfall that will result from corruption, poor governance and power plays in the new nation. Thus, in the novel, even a photograph which is supposed to capture reality ends up being magically real. Photos are also magical in that they project people as they may want to be and not as they really are. Moses’ portraits of “African ladies in bustles, leaning against Grecian urns” (44) do not portray the reality of the chaotic Free Town in the pre-independence era. Moses allows his photographs to capture ordinary people not the way

they are, but the way they want to be in their dreams. Thus even documentary photographs that are supposed to be the most realistic of representational forms, are shown in the novel to have a magical potential. The magical potential of photographs, as opposed to narrative in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, is a means of foreshadowing the future in the past, while magical realism in narrative allows a therapeutic and corrective return.

Magical realism and photography combine to reveal Citizen's journey of miseducation. Nevertheless, the novel portrays Citizen as someone capable of being restored since he has not totally lost his humanity. He behaves as a child who allows himself to be bathed and put to sleep; he also plays in mud like a child. He even, at the beginning of the novel, shows compassion to a dead bird in the way he cradles it in his hands and buries it under a tree. If a boy who has killed human beings before could be so compassionate towards a dead bird, then there is hope that his humanity could be restored; hence the novel's justification in the representation of reverse development through magical realist mode.

Reverse Development and Re-education: Magical Realism as Therapy

Getting closer to Citizen had so far proved impossible. Without much knowledge of what he had been through, I saw this wretched child soldier as confused and confusing. Was there any bridge back to normal childhood? (Moses 15)

Restoring former child soldiers to normalcy is at the core of *Moses, Citizen and Me*. Julia's desire to help Citizen to heal from the psychological wounds of his war-time experience and restore him to a state of innocence and vulnerability leads her to visit Doria camp to know more about

Citizen's past. This leads to her imaginative journeys into the world of child soldiers where she sees the abuse they suffer and the harm they cause, thus gaining insight into how they can be helped.

Moses, Citizen and Me comprises formal realism as well as fantastical elements. It alternates between the real world of Julia, the narrator, her uncle Moses and her cousin Citizen and their neighbour, Anita, and her family, and the supernatural world of the Gola forest with Bemba G and the child soldiers. Citizen and Julia live in both the real world and the supernatural world of Gola forest, and it is in the supernatural world of Gola forest that the re-education and reverse-development for child soldiers takes place. This reverse education defies the rules of critical realism because it lacks the logical cause and effect that realism aims to represent but is made possible through magical realism's potential which allows it to represent the rationally and logically impossible. It is a mode of representation that makes the magically imagined become real. As a narrative mode, magical realism has proved to be effective in handling bizarre experiences such as the ones represented in *Moses, Citizen and Me* because of its special potential. These qualities include its timeless fluidity, its merger of non-modern and modern, its hopefulness and its transgression of boundaries in representing human experiences making it overcome ethical problems of representation.

Since development has mostly been represented as a movement from childhood through youth to adulthood as portrayed in the realist *Bildungsroman*, reverse development would have been very difficult to represent but it is made possible through magical realism. In the *Bildungsroman* development, a young adult leaves his native home, enters a world of the unknown, learns his lesson the hard way, and returns home having developed through his experience. This is realist since the experience can be explained through logical cause and effect. However, reversing

the development of an individual who has developed abnormally is not logical and is impossible in realism. Magical realism allows this because its combination of the real and fantastic makes it overcome any limitations in representing human experiences. It is the magical realist Gola forest which makes it possible for children who have formerly engaged in adult violence to allow themselves to be told stories, obey instructions from adult civilians and play games like children.

As a mode in which time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity, magical realism allows playing around with time and space by allowing the past to be linked with the present and the future and the supernatural world to link with the real world. Thus, through magical realism, Julia is able to enter the past with the child soldiers to understand their past experience and how they can be helped. The magic realist world of Gola Forest makes it possible for Julia to see the conditions under which child soldiers operate. At Gola forest, we are confronted with Citizen's unit and their leader Lieutenant Ibrahim, who beat them and even kills the weaker ones. The children under him suffer hunger and abuse while they are given drugs to make them fearless as they carry out their gruesome acts. Gola forest is thus a site where one can freely imagine what the child soldier has gone through in order to imagine recuperative methods which are not limited to ordinary realities but transcend what is seen. Julia meets Citizen when the war has ended so, for her to help bring him back to normalcy, there is the need to understand his past experience and this can better be achieved by taking an imaginative journey into his past which is made possible through magical realism which is not limited by time and space. This is not possible through realism since it is not logical to reverse time. Magical realism thus, helps Jarrett-Macauley to overcome representational problems of the novel being only realist.

Also, magical realism brings together the non-modern and modern in the way it syncretises the natural and the supernatural in a matter of fact manner. It allows the combination of modern

and non-modern ideas in reversing the abnormal development of the former child soldier. Even though Gola forest is a rainforest of spirits, Bemba G combines traditional and modern methods in healing the child soldiers. He tells the children of the need for them to be educated: “He went up to the towering silk-cotton tree and pulled from the centre of it a board on which were scribbled numbers, equations and signs. His fingers approached the board and extracted the square root sign” (89). The teaching of mathematics which is a science is blended with the supernatural since the board on which the exercises are written appears through magic. “Like all forests, the Gola has an intoxicating magical order: scrupulously structured and tinged with babble, unreliable clocks and tracks” (93) yet that is where, *Julius Caesar*, a play is staged and mathematics is taught: “Mathematics roots you to the ground; mathematics, the place where magic is infinitesimal and mayhem self-induced” (92). But at the Gola forest, mathematics is blended with magic. Bemba G also “told of trees that talked in the night, men who became spiders; he told forest stories that amused the eager listeners and reminded them not to fight over narrative lines” (134). More radically, these magical realist episodes in Gola forest operate to break down the border between “science” and “magic”, showing how the one is interfused with the other.

More importantly, magical realism is always hopeful in its representation since its preoccupation with how our ways of being in the world often challenge the rigid logic of reason, allows it to represent everything as possible. The representation of the supernatural in the novel as a space where there is no limit to what happens, provides hope that the child soldiers can be restored back to childhood. At Gola forest, Bemba G is able to tug a chunk of wild bark and disappears into the thick forest. He is able to give the children food which he commands from nowhere: “Bemba G laid before them steaming mounds of cassava, black-eyed beans in palm oil served hot from big metal pots, a bowl of greens flavoured with herbs and topped with nuts” (128).

He is also able to play music from an old woodwind instrument for the children to dance to the “Ode to pepper soup”. When the child soldiers express fear at meeting the crowd who will witness their performance of *Juliohs Siza*, Bemba G again gives them a concoction of water and some brownish powder for them to drink for it to calm them down and take away their fear. He called it a rainforest drink. The portrayal of Bemba G and the supernatural world of Gola forest where there are no limitations to what can be done, suggests that there is hope for the restoration and reconciliation of the child soldier. This hope cannot be achieved through realism because it cannot be logically explained, but the transformation magically captured has the potential to become real.

The reverse-development in the novel follows the pattern of Victor Turner’s three main stages of traditional initiation: separation, liminal stage and reintegration stage, or the home – away – home pattern of the realist *Bildungsroman*. However, unlike traditional initiation and the *Bildungsroman* where there is development from youth to adulthood, in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, there is a representation of a journey back to childhood. This journey back to childhood takes the form of re-education and redevelopment which is made possible through magical realism. The basic framework is one of traditional initiation where children of age are taken out of their homes into a liminal space where they are educated by elders in the lore of their people after which they are transformed from children to men. Like the rite of passage into adulthood, the reversed “rite of passage” for actual child soldiers involves three stages. The separation stage is where child soldiers are taken from the war front, from their leaders and their units. The liminal stage is where they are taken to rehabilitation camps which aims to change their war-related violent behaviour and bring them back to a pre-war state of innocence, vulnerability and need for guidance, while the reintegration stage is where they are sent to surviving members of their families or foster families. In the next section I am going to focus on the nature of the “reverse-initiation” experienced by the

child soldiers in Gola forest.

Mathematics seems to be central to the re-education of child soldiers in *Moses, Citizen and Me*. The lesson in mathematics which the former child soldiers receive under Bemba G at Gola forest signifies a re-education into the life of order and prevention of chaos. Mathematics has been defined as a way of applying ideas in a methodical way that encourages one to become systematic. In the same way, Bemba G's lessons in mathematics keep the children busy and calm, and reawaken their interest in a delightfully modest world of sums. By introducing mathematics to the former child soldiers at this stage of their re-education back into childhood, qualities such as critical thinking, creativity, abstract or special thinking as well as problem-solving abilities are instilled in them at a time they need them most because these are the qualities that will help them reorganise their lives. But the science of mathematics is infused by magic in Gola forest. On the board which the exercises are written, exercises in square roots, appear through magic. Bemba G "went up to the towering silk-cotton tree and pulled from the centre of it a board on which were scribbled numbers, equations and signs. His fingers approached the board and extracted the square root sign" (89). "Mathematics roots you to the ground; mathematics, the place where magic is infinitesimal and mayhem self-induced" (92), but in Gola forest, mathematics is blended with magic to signify the need for the combination of logical reasoning and the belief in the hope embodied in magic in restoring child soldiers to their prewar state of innocence, a task that ordinarily would seem to defy the realms of the possible.

The storytelling lessons at the Gola forest are meant to help the children work through their trauma, teach them good morals, divert their attention from the tough realities of life, give their lives meaning and to shape their future. Storytelling has been established in trauma studies as one of the most important strategies of working through trauma. However, most trauma victims are

not able to tell their own stories. This is seen in the way the children are not able to tell their stories when Bemba G asks them to do so. He teaches them the difference between a true story and a made up story and also the storytelling technique of “[b]eginning, middle and end!” (150). Bemba G’s insistence on teaching the children to be able to tell their stories signifies the significance of storytelling in working through their trauma and need for their stories to be told for future generations to learn lessons from them; while the traditional stories Bemba G tells them are meant to teach them moral lessons and also to entertain them. Bemba G highlights the significance and structure of the beginning, middle and end of narratives, to enable the child soldiers to distinguish the end of the war-time story from the beginning of the new story that begins in Gola forest. When Bemba G decides to tell them stories, the eagerness with which they listen to these stories shows their willingness to be children rather than engage in adult activities of war and violence: “He told of trees that talked in the night, men who became spiders; he told forest stories that amused the eager listeners” (134). Bemba G’s stories teach them good moral lessons and help divert their attention from their past lives and the hard truths of their lives as former child soldiers. It also signifies the need to give meaning to their lives and to shape their future.

The re-education of former child soldiers in the liminal zone of Gola forest also involves lessons in dramatic performance. Bemba G helps the children to rehearse and perform *Juliohs Siza*, the Krio version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in the Gola Forest. Every child soldier is involved in one way or another: acting, singing, drumming and dancing. This helps the children to understand the ideals that they are being taught. As the Chinese proverb suggests, “tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand”, the staging of *Juliohs Siza*, is meant to make the children understand ideas like republican democracy, civic responsibility and freedom which Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* alludes to, as well as the specific

motivation behind Thomas Decker's Krio version, *Juliohs Siza*, when it was written at the time of Sierra Leone's independence. Revisiting Thomas Decker after Sierra Leone's civil war and introducing his ideas is very significant because of what he stood for. Thomas Decker was a Sierra Leonean who held matters of national interest and unity close at heart and contributed significantly to the movement that won independence for Sierra Leone in 1961. Decker's translation of *Julius Caesar* was "an attempt to deliver an important political message to the new nation on the subject of governance through the example and representation of a once noble servant of the Roman people turned hubristic emperor" (Caulker 209). The performance of *Juliohs Siza* by former child soldiers is significant since they need to be educated in the message the play conveyed when it was written at the time of Sierra Leone's independence.

Bemba G's lessons in dramatic performance also signify the need for the children to imbibe qualities such as self-control, discipline, understanding of interpersonal relationships and confidence which drama teaches. As the children rehearse in their groups, they learn team work and respect for each other's opinions and how to negotiate power. When Citizen is not prepared to talk, Hinga, a fellow child soldier says, "We must not press Citizen to say 'yes' if he wants time to think. I apologize. Let us give him time to think" (179). When they realise that Citizen is "afraid of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, tempting blame and condemnation" (181), they agree that if he has music to offer, that will be more than enough. This shows how the children have internalised democracy through their encounter with *Juliohs Siza*. On the final day of rehearsal, Hinga and Peter stand behind Citizen to encourage him to break the silence even if it meant only a song: "Peter parted Citizen on the back: 'Can talk now, eh, Citizen, no worries" (186). This group solidarity among child soldiers presented through magic realism gives a more secure purchase on the possible recuperation of child soldiers than conventional realist techniques would allow. At the

final performance of *Juliohs Siza* in the Gola forest, “[t]he audience was a mixed bunch, a medley of ages, nationalities and types: British and American soldiers in uniform, village people from across the river, some of the Freetown elites with their own kerosene lamps in hand, and more child soldiers walking barefoot” (201). The diversity of the audience signifies the need to involve all parties in the healing of child soldiers and the importance of spreading the news of their ability to be reintegrated. The Krio version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “with intercessions of drumming, dancing and mime” (203) signifies the localisation of foreign ideas. Western forms of healing and reintegrating child soldiers must be administered in accordance with the way of life and beliefs of the people involved. Citizen, playing Brutus’ servant, is able to sing, “his flute voice filling our ears” (206). After the show, everybody seems to be surprised at the ability of the child soldiers. A German director who attends the performance asks, “[d]o you mean child soldiers are capable of this?” (209). This signifies that everything is possible since there is no limit to what happens in the world of magic. At the end, Citizen receives his healing as he dreams about his grandmother who has totally forgiven him and is praying for him. Magical realism signifies that everything is possible, including the forgiveness, total healing and reintegration of former child soldiers.

Games and sports are also part of the re-education programme at the Gola forest. Bemba G introduces the children to some games which they eagerly play offering relief from their past trauma. There were also activities in swimming which the children enjoyed together as a group. “‘Dive him, dive him,’ they shouted whenever another boy jumped in and those already in the water swooped upon the new comer attempting to knock him off-balance” (161). This group sporting activity brings togetherness and engages the children, taking their minds from the battlefield and acting as a symbolic washing away of their guilt. For Citizen, the swimming activity

brought out his strength. “He was a strong swimmer” (161). It also acted as a turning point for him. Inside the water, he experienced “metamorphosis, he became a ruddy brown butterfly boy, his arms circling the air in rapid motion” (161), thus becoming as fragile as a boy and as graceful as a flying creature.

Unlike the classical *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist after leaving the home, experiences hardships which helps him mature into adulthood, the reverse development through magic realism in *Moses, Citizen and Me* allows the former child-soldiers to be taken through education in mathematics, narrative and performance as well as games and sports, activities typical of children, thus, helping them to overcome their “adult” past and restoring their innocence and reliance on adults. Thus, while the experience of the *Bildungsroman* protagonist outside his home makes him develop into adulthood, the education and games at Gola forest symbolise a journey back to childhood.

The magical Gola forest also allows the former child soldiers to leave the independent adult lives they lived in the army for a childhood life of dependency. At Gola forest, the children no longer fend for themselves but depend on Bemba G for their food, shelter and protection. Under Bemba G, they eat to their fill after which they throw their dishes up in the air and catch them “in appreciation for good food freely given” (129). This act of throwing dishes also symbolises childish behaviour at the liminal stage of the reverse development. This total dependency on adults among former child soldiers is not easily achieved in realism as suggested by Kyulanova’s study in which the boys undergoing rehabilitation cannot depend on the adults at the rehabilitation centre “because they have become sensitive to the logical gaps and insincerity in their elders behavior” (Kyulanova 31).

Magical realism thus makes it possible to reimagine reverse development which is not

possible with the classical *Bildungsroman*. This is because the classical *Bildungsroman*'s mode of development is only ever forward and the narrator can only ever comment with sadness or disappointment at opportunities lost but can do nothing about the past. Magical realism gives narrative form to the possibility of going back and changing. Thus, the narrative therapy in *Moses, Citizen and Me* portrays former child soldiers as potentially functional, people who with a little support, can successfully transform their existences into meaningful civilian lives.

Since the end of the war in Sierra Leone, there have been several attempts to heal former child soldiers of their trauma and reintegrate them into society. There were various short-term education and training programmes which operated in the immediate postwar period. These reintegration programmes were organised and implemented by international organisations and the national government to ensure effective re-integration of former child soldiers. Several attempts have also been made to enable former child soldiers to overcome post-traumatic stress disorders. These include Narrative Exposure Therapy, an individual treatment which is based on the principles of cognitive-behaviour therapy, exposure therapy and testimony therapy (McMullen et al 1232). Others are group based therapies like the group trauma-focused cognitive-behaviour therapy which is aimed at ensuring that former child soldiers are brought together in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. These group therapies have been said to be more effective than the individual therapies because working as a group reduced the risk of stigma and promoted understanding and normalisation of symptoms (McMullen et al 1238). In *Moses, Citizen and Me*, we see the integration of actual therapies used in rehabilitation camps, as well as therapies that derive from Jarrett-Macauley's faith in the power of imaginative stories to heal. As with the group therapies used in actual rehabilitation, we see Julia in *Moses, Citizen and Me* including other child soldiers in Citizen's reverse development.

Reverse development in the novel involves three stages: separation from the real world where they suffer rejection, rehabilitation in the supernatural world of Gola forest under Bemba G and reintegration into the real world. The separation stage is where Citizen is taken from the real world of his grandfather, Moses, where he has become “unspeakable”, unnamable and under nobody’s care, to the supernatural world of Gola forest under Bemba G. The liminal stage of this reverse development involves the activities in Gola forest where Citizen, together with other child-soldiers, undergoes rehabilitation. Bemba G combines indigenous and modern methods to rehabilitate child soldiers. In the liminal zone of Gola forest, Citizen, together with the other child soldiers, receives education in mathematics, narrative techniques and stage performance that are all interspersed with magic.



Magical Realism and Realism: Confounding Borders

Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s employment of magical realism in reimagining the re-education and reintegration of former child soldiers has resonance with as well as represents a departure from actual reintegration programmes for former child soldiers in Sierra Leone that will be discussed in this section. Many of the reintegration programmes in Sierra Leone were organised and implemented by international organisations and the national government, while ignoring the input of the local community. However, in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, magical realism allows for the combination of local and modern methods in reversing the abnormal development of former child soldiers. In the few communities in Sierra Leone where traditional healing was adopted, reintegration processes for former child soldiers involved the community chiefs requesting the consent of the community or disputants as to whether reconciliation was actually desirable. Ceremonies to “cool the hearts” of child ex-combatants, on returning to their home communities

were, therefore, carried out by the broader community. After the perpetrators acknowledged their wrongdoing and sought forgiveness, cleansing rituals were carried out to cleanse the community of the atrocities. These traditional reconciliation process impacted more people in Sierra Leone than even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is in this light, that it was suggested that more communities around the world should invest in the promotion of both traditional models that promote accelerated bonding of former enemies and participatory development projects in post conflict communities (Babatunde 383).

In addition, both the narrative and actual reintegration programmes emphasise re-education. Programmes such as the Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) and Rapid Response Education Programme (RREP) attempted to meet the needs of over-aged youth after the war. Several NGOs and community-based organisations provided aid to former child soldiers who were still within the school going age to be enrolled in regular schools and to facilitate their school attendance. UNICEF's Community Education Investment Programme (CEIP), for instance, offered school fee waivers, uniforms, books, and supplies to former child soldiers (Betancourt et al 567). In *Moses, Citizen and Me*, re-education and reintegration of former child soldiers are emphasised. The children receive education in mathematics, narrative techniques and performing arts which teaches them qualities that will allow them to survive in their civilian life. The most significant departure of *Moses, Citizen and Me* from the other novels studied in previous chapters is the way in which the shift from realist to non-realist narrative modes allows a magical reverse development. The reverse development of magical realism loops back in time and plots a new, normal personal formation for the "monstrous" child soldier who with the innocence of the child commits the atrocities of a degenerate adult.

Conclusion

Moses, Citizen and Me is Jarrett-Macauley's debut novel that tells the story of Julia who feels obliged to restore Citizen, a former child soldier to normal childhood. In order to do this, she visits Doria camp, a rehabilitation centre for former child soldiers, where Citizen was first found after the end of the war to get a fair idea of Citizen's experience as a child soldier. Subsequently, Julia takes an imaginative journey to Gola forest to get more information about child soldiers. These imaginative journeys shifts the narrative to magical realism, a mode of representation that combines realism and fantasy in such a way that neither of the modes is privileged over the other. Magical realism is important in the novel in so many ways. Firstly, it brings sensitivity in its depiction and avoids voyeuristic exploitation of the suffering the former child soldier has gone through. Secondly, it allows the story of the traumatised child to be heard without being impervious to his pain. It allows playing around with time and space by allowing the past to be linked with the present and the future, the non-modern and modern and the supernatural world to link with the real world. Lastly, magical realism in the novel allows the representation of reverse-development.

CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the representation of childhood in selected West African war novels. It has looked at the way the idea of childhood is mutated in these war novels based on their representation of the experiences of children used as combatants in the various wars of post-independence West Africa. The study started with the hypothesis that these experiences are so unthinkable that their depictions in novels cannot help but force the narrative away from realism. These war novels defy conceptions of non-modern initiation and the plot of the “classical” African *Bildungsroman* as their protagonists’ war experiences seem to represent their development, although an aberrant one. The primary approach to this study was to analyse the depiction of children’s experience of war against traditional initiation, and to a lesser extent *Bildungsroman*-style development, to see how malformation through war destroys all the social values that are meant to be instilled in children through traditional initiation or theories of autonomous formation.

The introductory chapter looked at the concept of childhood globally and in Africa, as well as across disciplines, and established that childhood is a major area of study for historians, social scientists and philosophers and literary scholars. Historians are interested in the changes over the years and in different cultures around the idea of childhood, the experiences of childhood and adult treatment of children. In philosophy, children have always been projected as innocent beings in need of adult protection while to sociologists, childhood is a variable of social analysis which cannot be detached from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. To them, a comparative and cross-cultural analysis would rather reveal a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon. The study further established that even though there are different cultures, childhood has mostly stood for innocence, hope, naïveté and incapacity for evil. It was also

established that in Africa in particular, children are of great importance as seen through African oral literature and thus making the abuse of children in African wars as represented in the novels under consideration, warrant investigation. The section concluded that childhood experiences of almost every period have received literary responses, hence the numerous responses to the war-affected child in almost all genres of literature and criticism.

The concept of the *Bildungsroman* was also analysed in the introductory chapter, concluding that the novels under study, albeit about childhood, do not follow the plot of the *Bildungsroman* the way the genre has developed in African literature. In African literature, the *Bildungsroman* focuses on formation of young protagonists in an ambiguous world and almost all their protagonists undergo traditional initiation before leaving home. However, the protagonists of selected war novels do not undergo traditional initiation but are given “initiation” through war. A thorough study of initiation was also done across cultures in order to compare what is performed during initiation and the significance of initiation. It was concluded that while traditional initiation helps one develop a stable adult personality that becomes completely engrafted in the society, and allows the initiate to acquire new status and shoulder various responsibilities and enjoy new privileges as a true member of the family and community, initiation through war, leaves the initiate in a form of developmental “limbo”.

In chapter one, I presented a survey of literature written in response to wars throughout the world and gave further details about war literature in Africa, more specifically, West Africa. The chapter argued that some plays, poems, memoirs and novels have been written to celebrate the combatants as heroes, while others have been written to help people affected by war overcome trauma. There is also a corpus of literature written to bring out the effects of war and to speak out against wars. It is productive to study war through literature since as a creative work, fiction creates

imagined scenarios that intimate the patterns and structures that lead to wars and the effect of wars on individuals and communities, regardless of its closeness to mimetic realism. Literature also has the potential to record the truth because of its complex closeness to reality. Because of its aesthetic techniques, it also effectively transmits war time experience from one generation to another and has the potential of creating understanding of a situation better than history or sociology. The chapter also argued that even though there are common effects of war on men, women and children, some consequences of war are peculiar to men and some unique to women. Since men are seen at the battle front more often than women, they are often portrayed in literature as suffering from physical mutilation, death and if they return home, difficulty in living normal non-military life. While all war literature highlights the hardship of war, most classical war literature also glorifies war. Women's experiences of war are mostly written by women themselves who tackle issues such as rape, abduction, torture and death. In Africa, almost all war novels by women explore women's experience of war by highlighting their suffering as well as their resilience. Of all the atrocities that women suffer in war situations, rape is arguable the most disturbing.

The chapter also argued that children tend to be the most grievously affected victims of war, suffering ordeals such as abandonment, abduction and separation from and loss of parents, health problems, poverty, hunger and trauma while many are left with permanent disabilities. Literary representations of children in war tended formerly to depict them exclusively as innocent victims who are traumatised to the extent that they even lack speech with which to narrate their stories. However, there are literary works that portray children as combatants in various wars. Such war literature is mainly found in Africa especially in West Africa such as the ones which are discussed fully in the four body chapters of this thesis.

Chapter two argued that Abani's *Song for Night* is a representation of socialisation into

social disorder which ends at the liminal stage of initiation into adulthood. This perverted socialisation leaves the central character in a form of developmental midpoint, as well as a state in between life and death. It is this process of violent malformation of children through the use of terror tactics and drugs that tilts the narrative into surrealism, since traditional narrative structures are insufficient in representing the abnormality of the child-soldier experience represented in the novel. The employment of bizarre images allows the author the freedom to portray the excessiveness of the child-soldier experience since dreams liberate the mind from any control. Thus, the novel is forced into the mode of surrealism in order to convey to the reader, an excessiveness which flouts the language of representation.

In chapter three, I established that *Allah is Not Obligated* is a novel about validating the truth of the absurd experience of Birahima, its protagonist, who becomes a child soldier after going through traditional initiation. His experience of war unbelievably destroys all the values his society expects him to acquire after his initiation but he tries in frustration to prove the truthfulness of his experience through the use of folk wisdom, appealing to God and finally to dictionaries as his final evidence. The chapter argues that the more he uses language to validate the truthfulness of his story, the more absurd the story becomes. This shows that the truthfulness of the child-soldier experience cannot easily be established as seen in the frustrating cyclical nature of the narrative. Birahima's attempt comes to nothing when we realise at the end of the novel that no progress has been made and that the reader is back to the beginning, where the story started. The chapter concluded that it is the unnatural circumstance of the child-soldier experience and the protagonist's attempt at validating the truth of that experience which force the novel out of realism into the absurd, a mode which represents the hopelessness of some human conditions.

Chapter four argued that in *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala represents the plight of the African

child soldier whose childhood has been destroyed by war. The novel is a story of perverted initiation and education since both concepts are frustrated in the novel and replaced by the debauched initiation and education through war that makes the protagonist, Agu develop into a “beast”. This perverse development is captured through grotesque images of animals and bodily images which capture the perversion of norms. The chapter concludes that the grotesque in the novel is not the non-modern European grotesque or the African grotesque in folklore, both of which seem to be positive in their effect. The European grotesque seems to be liberatory, anti-hierarchical, anti-oppressive, challenging borders and boundaries while the African grotesque in folklore attests the fluid line between humans, animals and the spirit world. The shift between animal and human occurs to teach humans a lesson in good conduct. The grotesque in *Beasts of No Nation* is neither liberatory like the European grotesque, nor does it teach lessons as seen in the African grotesque. In *Beasts of No Nation*, the grotesque is not a chosen mode. It is a mode into which the narrative is forced since the experiences described are unspeakable, unimaginable, and unthinkable.

Chapter five emphasised the imaginative activity of bringing former child soldiers back to childhood as represented in *Moses, Citizen and Me*. In order to do this, the narrator takes an imaginative journey to Gola forest to get more information about child soldiers. These imaginative journeys shift the narrative to magical realism, a mode of representation that combines realism and fantasy in such a way that neither of the modes is privileged over the other. Magical realism is important in the novel in so many ways. Firstly, it brings sensitivity in its depiction and avoids voyeuristic exploitation of the suffering the former child soldier has gone through. Secondly, it allows the story of the traumatised child to be heard without being impervious to his pain. Thirdly, it allows playing around with time and space by allowing the past to be linked with the present and

the future, the non-modern and modern and the supernatural world to link with the real world. Lastly, magical realism in the novel allows the representation of therapeutic reverse development.

The main argument of the thesis is that the abnormal experience of children who are used as child soldiers in the various West African wars leads to their abnormal development as represented in the novels discussed in this study. This abnormal development in turn affects the narrative modes since traditional realist modes cannot represent these abnormal experiences and kinds of personal development. Thus the novels are forced into the mode of surrealism, the absurd, the grotesque and magical realism, which prove to be more effective in portraying these unthinkable experiences, and imagining their reversal or partial undoing.



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