

COMBATANT CHILDREN: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED AFRICAN NOVELS

Ijeoma Eucharia Ugwuanyi

English Department, FCE (T) Umunze, Anambra State

Email: ijeomaugwuanyi2013@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigated combatant children of war in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of no Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. It examined the ways the authors have portrayed children as combatants of war, the authors' use of grotesque features, and the consequences of war on the lives of the children. A content analysis of the works was examined employing the post-colonial theory. It exposed the new wave of exploitation of children who have been a signifier not only of war and lawlessness, but also of a marginally alienated African people. Through the evaluation of the characters as children and soldiers, as innocent and guilty, and as protectors and destroyers, it becomes clear that the children need to be protected from any form of violence. Psychoanalytic theory was also adopted as the children suffer disorder that cause them to lose contact with reality and their behavior become bizarre. At the end of the study, it was discovered that combatant children were exposed to dangerous acts of militancy at the expense of their basic needs of life. This paper advocates for children's rights and protection, and putting to an end the use of children to commit all sorts of crimes, including employing them as soldiers.

Keywords: Children, African Novels, Psychoanalytic theory

Introduction

There are unique features of legends or epics which establish some links with *Beasts of no Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah; except for pre-colonial novel of Thomas Mfolo's *Chaka* which used magic. Chaka is inoculated by a magician, sorcerer and a priest with medicine of blood: "Your sole purpose should be to kill without mercy and thus, clear the path that leads to the glory of your kingship" (17). Chaka turns to a killing machine like a child soldier today. Chaka is eventually consumed by the violence that made him king and he lives out the rest of his days in what can be described as schizophrenia. Both during and before Chaka's time, children were not warriors. According to Ocaya-Lakidi, Dent, "The standing army was made up of young bachelors in their warrior age grade. It was young men in their twenties who saw actions" (12). Studies do show that African society is structured in age-grades and age sets which have some connections with war. Although age grades and age sets are closely connected with war and the formation of armies, age sets are created for socio-cultural matters such as marriage.

Uzodinma Iweala and Ishmael Beah's novels about children who engaged in war use their grotesque imagery to offer a new representation of children's marginalization as a result of war. This paper takes into account not only the tragic, ugly or grotesque deviance and inversion through which combatant children are portrayed, but also the meaningful patterns that lie hidden in these features and make the issue of using children to fight war understandable. This issue of children engaging in war is prominent after the end of colonial rule. The post-colonial theory offers a new perspective on how post-colonial children are both victims and agents of violence. This paper examines the ways the authors have portrayed the children as combatants in

war, the stylistic features found in the works and the consequences of war on the psyche of the children.

Children as Combatants in War

Children are uniquely vulnerable to military recruitment and manipulations into violence because they are innocent and impressionable. They are forced or enticed to join armed groups. Agu, a twelve-year old child soldier in *Beasts of no Nation*, having witnessed the killing of his father by enemy soldier hides because he thinks he will be safe after being separated from his mother and only sister. He is given the choice of joining the army or being killed. As part of his initiation, and to prove that he is not a spy, Agu is given a machete and he is ordered to hack a man (an enemy soldier) to death. The Commandant assures Agu; “It’s just like killing a goat. Just bring this hand up and knock him well” (21). With this last order, the Commandant closes his hand over Agu’s as the boy holds the machete, and brings it down on the enemy’s head. Agu, in this justifies his action saying:

I am not bad boy. How can I be bad boy?
Somebody who is having life like I am
having and fearing God the whole time...I
am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is
killing, so if I am killing them, I am only
doing what is right. (23-24)

Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* explains the tactics of manipulations used to obtain and brain wash children, turning them into killing machines which, ultimately made it extremely difficult for them to leave and reintegrate into the society. The protagonist, Ishmael and his brother Junior, together with his friends, Mohammed and Talloi are stripped of their homes, and the family fear and uncertainty as they search for parts of their country that have not been

affected by war in order to seek refuge. They are accosted by Charles Taylors and a few mercenaries from Burkina Faso. They join the group. Ishmael started fighting from ten years old “His teen years are killing field”. He attests that: “My squad is my family, my gun is my provider and protector and my rule is to kill or be killed” (126).

Children who are recruited into fighting wars are turned into killers through a brutal initiation process in “A Long Way Gone”. New recruits are often forced to kill the escapees or even the members of their family to prove they are worthy of recruitment. If they refuse or try to decline, they will also be killed. They force recruits to eat or drink the blood of their freshly killed victims with the explanation that the initial RUF (Revolutionary Volunteer Front), are carved wherever it pleases the rebels, with a hot bayonet. This not only means that you are scared for life but that you cannot escape from them.

Children who fight war are victims whose participation in conflict bears serious implications for their physical and emotional well-being. They are commonly subjected to abuse and most of them witness death, killing and sexual violence. Mary Hugas in her report for UNICEF in 2007 observed that it was estimated that approximately 35,000 children were being used for military purposes in African’s most intense conflicts in North Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Nigeria. Hugas maintained that some African leaders recruited them because they have claimed that children, despite their underdevelopment, brought their own quality as combatants to a fighting unit, being often remarkably fearless, agile and hardy. These children face harrowing experiences of pain in war and injuries to their young bodies. They are forced by hardship into manhood.

In recruiting the children as soldiers, they are forbidden to use their birth names, traditional names or any other names related to their past experiences with their families. They are instead given war names that identify them with their roles in the war. In the *Beasts of no Nation* some of the boys are given names as Rambo, Strika, Preacher, Griot etc. This is intended to sever their links with their people, eliminate their desire to escape and rejoin their families, and accept their new world and roles. They are indoctrinated into believing untrue things and that the so called enemies killed their parents and took away their loved ones, and therefore, must die. Thus, anybody the boys come across, man or woman is an enemy. To make them stronger, braver, and forget their families, they are shown war movies and they are given hard drugs. These take away their humanities.

Agu in *Beasts of no Nation* is enticed by the Commandant's uniform and shiny sword, holding gun as the Commandant is shouting: "Left, Right", Left, Right". The Conductor tells Agu that being a soldier is like "falling in love". Agu believes him so much that he joins the military. While the war rages, he becomes increasingly divorced from the life he has known before the conflict started – a life of school friends; church services, and time with his family are no longer intact. As he recalls these "sunnier times", his daily reality continues to spin further downward into inexplicable brutality, primal fear, and loss of selfhood.

In *A Long Way Gone*, military commanders, often times, force children to take drugs like amphetamines, crack cocaine, palm wine, brown and brown (cocaine mixed with gun powder), marijuana and tranquilizers in order to disengage the child's action from reality. According to Ishmael in *A Long Way Gone*, "Taking the drugs made it easier for them to kill because it numbed them of any emotion" (95). Once the children are

addicted to drugs, they will do just about anything that is ordered. They now evolve from boys into soldiers. This creates loss of identity for both the rebels and the boys. They are handed over AK – 47 and then, drugs become part of their world. Ishmael Beah recounts walking through villages killing everyone in sight. He is now quite different from the boy who loved hip-hop and danced around to the music. The war has taken many parts of his spirit. He does not know fear because he is filled with drugs which bring a false sense of power.

Agu, in *Beasts of no Nation* confesses, “gun-juice” (drug) makes one stronger and braver to kill. “Everybody is always wanting gun juice because it is drug and it makes life easy... It tastes like licking sweet (55). Drug makes the boys not to feel hungry when they are fighting: “Everybody is looking like one kind of animal and smelling like chicken or goat, or cow” (58).

After taking drugs, the protagonists and other combatant children indulge in sexual exploitation. The soldiers turn the children into sex machines; Agu describes what happens after the commandant has told him to remove his cloth.

So I was removing them. And then, after making me touching his soldier and that entire thing with my hand and with my tongue and lip, he was telling me to kneel and then he was entering inside of me.... (85)

Through sexual exploitation and general act of brutality associated with the war, the boys lose their faith and innocence. Quoting Molarah Wood in his review of *Beasts of no Nation*, “Agu, is not only aroused by acts of violence, penises are soldiers’ standing at attention, and the abusive Commandant

gives the boy special favours because, as the child says: ‘I am saluting his soldier for him’ (147). Agu’s rape of a woman keeps haunting him and he continually wrestles with the thought of whether he is a devil or not. Ishmael Beah’s memoirs of the people he has raped and killed caused him migraine, sleeplessness and sadness in *A Long Way Gone*.

Grotesquery as a Stylistic Feature Employed By the Authors

There are many stylistic features employed by Uzodinma Iweala in *Beasts of no Nation* and Ishmael Beah in *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of Boy Soldier*, such as Journey motif, memoir, grotesquery among others, but this paper focuses on grotesquery. Anything grotesque, according to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary is “strange, bizarre, ugly and unnatural so as to cause fear” (525). It focuses on human body and all the ways that it can be distorted. However, as a stylistic form, it presents many difficulties. It intersects with many other stylistic variations, such as comedy, parody, caricature, horror, bizarre, tragedy, and the absurd. The first impressions of child soldiers’ human behavior are often confusing, making it difficult to speak of these actions without wishing to classify them as grotesque. According to Harpharm, Galt in his work, *The Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, the word designates “a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language” (3-4). In this case, it accommodates the things left over, when the categories of language is exhausted. It is a defense against silence when other words have failed.

In art, some objects or things are presented to us as grotesque or monstrous, but as Harpham explains, “hideous dragons” and “terrible beasts” are not necessarily grotesque. Those creatures, simultaneously, invoke and repudiate our conventional language based categories. The grotesque is understood by most critics as a mingling of human with animal features or mechanical

elements, the monstrous, the mishaps, which Sachs Gysin in *The Grotesque in American Negro fiction*, simply refers to as “the inverse of the ideal” (31). It is evil or absurdity portrayed in incongruously compounded human and non-human images that are in various degrees both disturbing and abstract. In her study of *Child soldiers in Africa*, Alvinda, Honwana describes child soldiers as “those who find themselves in an ambiguous position that defies dichotomies between civilians and combatants, victims and perpetrators, initiated and initiators, protected and protectors, and as others argue, even human and non-human” (7). Agu and Ishmael Beah, the protagonists in *Beasts of no Nation* and *A Long Way Gone* can be described as beasts, the equivalent of animals. They are a combination of humans and beasts. They lack a socially defined place. They create a world that remains incomprehensible because, while childhood is associated with innocence, weakness, and dependence upon adult guidance and care, children who are engaged in war by contrast, are associated with strength, aggression, and the responsible maturity of adulthood.

The paradoxical combination of childhood and combatant becomes unsettling because children at war find themselves in an unsanctioned position between childhood and adulthood. “Before the war we are children but now we are not” (*Beasts of no Nation* 46). Ishmael Beah and other children who engage in war, as well as Agu and Strika are simultaneously producers and products of violence on the one hand; they are initiators and responsible for actions of violence while on the other hand they are subject beings. They respond positively to the needs of those they are loyal to. In the role of soldiers, they are put in a position of domination, while as children; they are unambiguous victims of abduction.

If Agu and Ishmael seem grotesque, it is not necessarily because of their odd appearance, but because, as individuals, they represent a corrupt or alienation of familiar forms. Taken as symbols of life and death, the child and the gun are two elements that fuse two opposites into one, although the gun the boy holds up (as soldiers do in time of war) is for self-protection and therefore, life saving. Agu, Ishmael and his friends are threatened by their identities on one hand, and those imposed on them by dominant elements of society which refer to them as outlaws, outcasts or public dangers on the other hand. It is the prevailing grotesque images of these combatant children as seen through the distorting lens of the society that is part of the appeal of this paper aimed at protecting the children fighting wars; preventing them from doing what adults do.

The transformation of a child soldier into a cruel being may or may not be descriptively convincing. His body is a reflection of a decadent post-colonial world. By aligning tropes (which is a deviation from literal convention or proper language use, swerves in location sanctioned neither by custom nor logic) like madness, obscene, violence, and so on, and with these grotesque analysis like distortion, animation, and so on, it shows that the tropes are devices provided by language which we can use to identify problematic areas of Ishmael and Agu's cognitive experiences. Hence, "the power of words is injected into language from outside, that is, from the institutions which delegate authority to the speaker" (Thompson John, 69).

Uzodinma Iweala and Ishmael Beah employ their grotesque imagery to offer a new representation of children's marginalization as a result of war. This paper takes into account, not only the tragic, ugly, or grotesque deviance and inversion through which combatant children of war are portrayed, but also the meaningful patterns that lie hidden in these features and

make the issue understandable. Their harrowing experiences of pain in war should not be praised; instead, we make a spotlight to show how combatant children have been forced into manhood by hardship. Grotesquery is a useful technique employed by the authors to show a decadent post-colonial society. It is a symbol of culture which has failed, on one hand, to control the passions of the younger ones, and on the other hand, to improve the conditions of children that drive them into violence. The war in Sierra Leone is taken to the climax by rebel leaders such as Foday Sankoh. The actions of people like Samuel Doe, Charles Taylor, Johnson, Sir Leaf and so on, are far more violent, grotesque and terrifying.

Consequences of War on the Psyche of Children as Characters

Many of the children who engage in war have extreme cases of bitter experiences which lead to emotional problems. Their dreams to become useful in life are aborted by engaging in war. They are hunted by people they killed during the war. Ishmael Beah's memoir takes one through his suffering, survival and an endless struggle against the seemingly impossible. As a former boy soldier, he tells his High School friends his encounters during the war as a warning for others not to venture into such act.

Agu and Ishmael in *Beasts of no Nation* and *A Long Way Gone* respectively, experience loss of identity, and loss of their family members who are slain in the war. They also experience the loss of their innocence. Horror, fear and danger follow them to both unconscious thought, leaving them in a world where day and night are the same. They help in the destruction of their villages. Adults and most respected members of African society begin to fear their own children, as they kill and set villages on fire. They now behave like beasts which have no nation. The variables that

“pull” children towards violence are parallel to the “push” factors. Because of their age, immaturity, curiosity, and love for adventure, children are susceptible to temptation of becoming combatants. The fact that the children try to justify themselves by giving reasons for becoming soldiers is what Ogunmola, Kasimo calls “push” as opposed to “pull” factors. By “push,” it means that there are factors which give children no choice but to get involved in violence while “pull” refers to those which slowly attract them and encourage them into violence. Trauma, brutalization, deprivation and other socio cultural related issues are among those push factors which drive children into violence.

Conclusion

Uzodinma Iweala and Ishmael Beah, as the authors have given a voice in their stories. The voice as narrators, although given expression through the gunshots, is a metaphor of the deconstruction of society. These children remind us of their pain, sadness and death which some of them survived while others did not. Recruiting children for military purposes is harmful for a number of reasons. Children’s development, health and well being are disrupted when they are drawn into military organizations. They suffer a severe disorder that causes them to lose contact with reality. Their thoughts, perceptions and emotion become distorted and their behavior may be bizarre. Children engaging in war have lingering effect of exploitation in a post-colonial contest. It continues to haunt the African continent. The children are now exposed to dangerous act of military. This paper advocates protecting them and putting to an end the use of African children to commit all sorts of crimes, including employing them as soldiers.

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