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War Narratives, Survivalism and Trauma in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*

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Abstract
In recent history, African writers and literary scholars have become pre-occupied with the discourse of war, violence and trauma in their creative and critical engagements. The themes of violent deaths, social angst and widespread disillusionment that presently characterize African society remain at the front burner of contemporary African discourse. This study, therefore, examines the socio-historical contexts of war narrative, survivalism and trauma in Uzodinma Iweala's Beast of No Nation and Ishmael Beah's A Long Way Gone. Several critics have largely focused on thematic preoccupations such as death, violence, child soldiering, loss of identity, slaughter of innocence and even trauma, but little attention has been paid to the motif of survivalism and trauma in these war narratives, complemented by the exploration of post-traumatic stress techniques. Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma, complemented by Judith Herman's notion of trauma and recovery, serves as theoretical framework of this paper. Using the qualitative research as methodology, the paper critically explores the motif of survivalism vis-à-vis the experiences of victims of war and the postwar realities that these narratives tell, with the view to redefining human perception of war and its aftermaths.

***Key Words**: War Narratives, Survivalism, Trauma, Nigerian novel, Modern African Literature*

Introduction

War and survivalism are critical concepts that have evolved in modern African literature of the twenty-first century. African literary communities resonate these notions, while foregrounding the impact of war on society in African literature and the society at large. With the postcolonial agenda of the mid-twentieth century

evolving into different neo-colonial strains, there has been a constant supply of literary works towards the engagement of the discourses of war vis-à-vis terrorism in African societies. Just like with the study of the African colonial experience, the advent of war and terrorism has left most Africans afflicted with identity crises as well as other thematic concerns such as loss, pain, disenfranchisement, and so on. As long as war and terrorism abound on the African continent, there is consistent need for critical reflections on how contemporary African literatures respond or react to the impact of wars on the human condition in Africa.

Creative writers and historians have been known to bring their imaginative visions and critical skills to bear on the important events in the history of their people in their works. Historians and creative writers of each era base their discourse and postulations on particular wars which deserve more disclosure and circulation than it has so far received. The nature and origin of war; whether war is a product of nature or nurture, remains a point of contention among the literary scholars. Clausewitz posits that "war stems from the historical and social circumstances of the society and these narratives project the vivid accounts of hope, survival, resistance and as well as psycho-traumatic aftermaths."(69) This paper is to foreground the significant roles of these war literatures by critically engaging the tropes of survivalism and trauma as part of the experiences of war victims and the postwar realities that are recreated in Iweala and Beah's novels selected for analysis in this work.

Of Historical Narratives and War in African Literature

Most historical narratives describing Africa before its contact with Europeans depict a continent that was going through substantive progress and development. According to A.G. Hopkins, generations of Africans enjoyed congenial lives in well integrated, smoothly, functioning societies. (10) The means of livelihood came easily to hand as food-stuffs grew wild and in abundance. Kofi Awoonor is also of the view that "Africa's pre-European history provides some evidence of continuity, with occasional catastrophic interruptions, in human activity on the continent." (7) He states further that a continuum exists in the cultures of the African people and that it is this that was the most resilient feature of pre-colonial Africa.

This way, the narratives that emanate from Africa represent Africa in a way that makes it distinctive from every other continent in the world. Different narratives have been used to communicate the ways the Africa people have lived, enjoyed, cried and mourned from the early times to the present age. Akporobaro (2006) is of the view that "narrative produced in Africa and about Africa is an exercise that demands the continuous invention of exciting and highly memorable experiences, situations and characters." (101) Hence, Africans writers must not be timid in replicating these narratives.

The Nigerian civil war tells its own story, too, of the Nigerian tragedy or probably of a tragedy that is still unfolding and as Irele reminds us, "all history begins as story: the narrative element is the point of departure."(157) African writers have followed the rhythm of the continent and chronicled the historical events and disruptionsthat characterize Africa experience. Indeed, wars ravagedseveral Africancountries such as South Africa, Congo, Angola, Algeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Ivory Coast. Nwankwo states, "In Africa, the only thing fixed is its desert of pain and despair and measured by that index, the continent is indeed very small and experientially uniformed. War and the threat of war is one thing the huge continent shares without quibble." (11)

In Nwankwo's view, African writers have been able to keep up practically in lockstep with the fortunes and misfortunes of the continent, particularly on the subject of war. Many writers are either products of the wars which they write about or produce works about Africa's wars. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie similarly reinvents this inher novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by pitching the personal stories of three main characters against the harsh realities of the Biafran war. Thus, she accomplishes the narrative recreation of a set of traumatic effects of war. These effects function as the gears through which the plot moves forward and backward.Historical narratives that describe Africa before its contact with Europeans represent a continent that was going through substantial advancement and development, just as stated below:

> The importance of narrative to the development of any people that triggered the productions of most of the African colonial narratives of the 1950s and 1960s, where Africans were portrayed as inferior, subhuman and people without culture and the counter-hegemonic post-colonial narratives where Africans challenge colonial narratives about Africa (Solomon Awuzie, 3).

Habeeb describes war narratives as a reflection of the traumatizing situation that the omnipresence of war and years of oppression have caused to humanity. (58) Writing about the traumatic experience is an essential way of giving voice to and taking side with the unfortunate victims. An Iraqi American novelist, Sinan Antoon, is a wounded storyteller who is able to give words to the wounds of his homeland. His two novels, *I'jaam: an Iraqi Rhapsody* and *The Corpse Washer,* address the physical and psychological trauma of wars and prolonged years of oppression in Iraq. Therefore, the topic of war in literature has continued to throng the consciousness of writers across the globe, reflecting its horrors and reminding

mankind of the dastardly implications. Iweala and Beah join the fray of these writers

and it is imperative to underscore their respective contributions to the adverse effect of war on humanity.

Reconceptualising Cathy Caruth's Concept of Trauma Theory

The theoretical underpinnings of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma spring from the structure of the experience of an event that comes back to haunt the victim. One of the most frequent of these uncontrolled repetitions is flashbacks, which are intrusive and recurrent re-enactments of the traumatic event. These flashbacks consist of images or sensations that the victim associates with the traumatic event or they can give him or her impression that he or she is experiencing the traumatic event all over again, since flashbacks can take the form of literal visual representations of the event (Caruth, 63).

The danger of flashbacks and nightmares is the destructive potentials inbuilt in the repetition of trauma. Incessant repetition of the traumatic event, even years after the experience, can, as Caruth points out, be "...retraumatizing one's self." (63) This exact visual quality can be related, according to Leys, to "...the cinematic possibility of flashbacks which are experienced by the traumatized individual as exact returns or replays of the traumatic incident." (241) many trauma victims also suffer from traumatic nightmares. Just like flashbacks, these nightmares can repeat themselves and can be experienced as if the traumatic incident is occurring again, and they, in most cases, consist of precise remains of the distressful past. In other words, nightmares and flashbacks can be induced by minute actswhich take place in normal day-to-day life experiences.

Judith Herman's concept of trauma and recovery views narrative as an empowering and effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims. A response to trauma is numbing, which can begin during or after the traumatic event (Caruth, 63). It is, according to Herman, "a state of detached calmness in which pain and terror disappear, but it is not a solution to trauma." (31).

Even though Beah and Iweala use different narrative forms, they both deal with the topic of child soldiers and the traumatic effects of this experience. The two writers also share their desire to draw attention to this problem and to make Western readers understand such experience. According to Hron, "one has a better chance of accomplishing this goal if one uses a child's perspective to talk about circumstances that are foreign to Western readers."(29) And this is what Beah and Iweala do. Beah's protagonist is his younger self and Iweala's is Agu. Both are bright and tender-hearted boys who encounter inhumanity and who are confronted with the difficulties of survival as traumatized victims of war.This paper therefore sets out toexamine the motif of survival and of trauma that are prevalent in the selected texts which depict the circumstances of war in African societies.

Brief Overview of Iweala's *Beast of No Nation*

Beasts of No Nation is a novel written by Iweala, an author who divides his time between America and Nigeria. The novel's protagonist is Agu, a young boy who lives in an unnamed country with his parents and his sister. He has an idyllic childhood until the war comes to his village. His mother and sister are rescued by the U.N. forces, but the men stay behind to defend the village. After seeing his father being killed, Agu is forced to become a child soldier in a rebel group. During his time as a rebel, Agu has to commit various atrocities and he himself is sexually abused by the Commandant. Agu does not want to be a soldier and he constantly struggles with the morality of what he is being forced to do while trying to keep his own humanity.

Agu is forced to leave his childhood behind; he often reminiscences about the past: his family, his love for reading and school. He befriends a mute boy named Strika, and together they face the crimes and hardships of war; looting, maiming, rape, killing and starvation.Agu's wish to escape the army finally comes through when Rambo leads a successful revolt against the Commandant in a period of agonizing lack of basic necessities. Starved, exhausted and bereaved of his only friend, Strika, he takes a detour and finds his way to a rehabilitation centre. In time, Agu comes under the care of a missionary hospital which is run by a white woman and preacher, Amy. He recuperates there and dreams of being a doctor to save the world. Ultimately, Agu escapes from the war and starts the long process of trying to work through his traumatic experiences.

Survivalism and Trauma as Motifs in *Beast of No Nation*

Agu and the rest of the boys do everything they can for survival. What keeps them going is the subtle hope that it would one day be over. While remaining hopeful, they fend for themselves as best as they can. The narrative builds greatly on the motif of survival/vengeance. As Agu points out, "we will be killing them like they are killing us and we will be stealing from them what they are stealing from us" (*Beast of No Nation*, 43). Agu's life as a child soldier is not an easy one. He has to survive at the warfront and also satisfy his master. The gross violation of human rights during armed conflicts is exponential in the narrative. Agu and the rest of the boys are constantly violated and abused by the Commandant. He compensates the former by "giving me small small favor like more food or protection and other thing like shirt or trouser for doing this thing with him" (*Beast of No Nation*, 83). He detests this act which leaves him hurt and bleeding:

> He is taking off my clothe for me and then he is sitting down next to me and breathing hard, but not like he is running very hard and trying to catch his breath, a different breathing in my ear that I am no liking to listen to at all at all. Then he is beginning to touch me all over with his finger while he is breathing just even harder. (Beast of No Nation, 84).

Trauma greatly influences Agu's bestiality as well as the rest of the boys. The commandant expressly reminds the boys of their separation from their families and loved ones. This fuels the rage of the boys as they sink deeper into the mire of violence. When a woman and her daughter are discovered in hiding, Agu exclaims loudly as Strika and him attempt and even succeed in raping the women. The protagonist mindlessly states: "devil is not blessing me and I am not going to hell. But still I am thinking maybe Devil born me and that is why I am doing all of this" (*Beast of No Nation*, 48). This incident takes place over and over again. It pushes him over the edge psychologically and he narrates this, while stating that, "if I was a brave boy, then I would have been swallowing water or rock or something that would have made me to stop breathing and sink right into the bottom where I would just be staying forever" (*Beast of No Nation*, 86). This spurs his hatred for the Commandant as he is constantly in pain due to this degradation and abuse. He tries to heal from the bleeding but he is again violated. This is one of the tragedies of armed conflicts.

Agu believes that only death can release him from the war but this is fortunately not the case. Rambo, one of the rebels, kills the Commandant and leads the others away from the front lines. "COME ON! COME ON, Rambo shouts to the other rebels after the murder, QUICK QUICK QUICK! MOVE FAST OH! MOVE WITH SPEED! HOME HOME! WE ARE GOING HOME! (*Beast of No Nation*, 153). "Commandant is dead. It was so easy to be killing him. Why we are not doing it before I am not knowing, but I am not wanting to think about that right now. I am tiring too much" (*Beast of No Nation*, 155). After Strika dies, Agu decides to leave the group and he finds shelter in a rehabilitation centre.

In this rehabilitation centre, Agu meets Amy, a white American woman who wants to help him by listening to his story. "She is telling me to speak speak speak," Agu says (*Beast of No Nation* 175). But as a result of his horrendous experience, he does not want to speak and remains silent. Agu does not want to talk to Amy since, as he puts it: "I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is." (*Beast of No Nation*175) He thus feels that she will never understand what he has been through. This is perhaps a common sentiment among combat veterans, as a war veteran is often isolated by his special status as an initiate in the cult of war. Agu believes that no civilian, certainly no woman or child, can comprehend his confrontation with evil and death.(66) Post-traumatic stress disorder is often times the resultant effect of war. In a conversation with Amy, Agu says to her:

> And sometimes I am telling her, I am hearing bullet and scream I my ear and I am wanting to be dying so I am never hearing it again. I am wanting to lie down on the warm ground with my eye closed and

> the smell of mud in my nose, just like Strika. I am wanting to feel how the ground is wet all around my body so that if I am sweating, I am feeling like it is the ground sweating through me. And I am wanting to stay in this place forever, never moving for anything, just waiting until dust is piling on me and grasses is covering me and insect is making their home in the space between my teeth. (Beast of No Nation141)

As a result of his war experiences, Agu thinks of himself as an old man and he claims at several points in the text that the war destroyed his childhood: "All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not" (*Beast of No Nation*, 46). Agu says, "I do not know if I am believing him, but I am liking to hear it (*Beast of No Nation*, 174-175). And the Bible, which used to be his favourite book, "the one that is holding all of the other book up" (*Beast of No Nation*, 31), "is now being used to be holding my drawing down on my desk so the fan is not throwing them everywhere" (*Beast of No Nation*,174). Despite his terrible past, Agu believes that he will have a positive future. He wants to go to university and become a doctor or engineer. Even when he was still in the rebel group, Agu affirmed that he had a future and that he wanted to be a doctor "because then I will be able to be helping people instead of killing them and then maybe I will be forgiven for all my sin". (*Beast of No Nation* 94) The novel's conclusion questions whether these former child soldiers can be reformed and whether rehabilitation is possible. The book makes one doubt if Agu really can work through his trauma since it is so enormous: "I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men" (*Beast of No Nation*, 176). Agu also believes that due to these atrocities." He has grown beyond the world of adulthood, and entered into the realm of the monstrous" (Hron, 43). Agu no longer refers to himself as human, but that he calls himself some sort of beast or devil or this thing. He thus sees himself as an animal or an object, but will he ever be able to turn back into a human being? Iweala already gives an answer to this question by "incorporating the myth of the Dance of the Ox and Leopard in his novel" (Hron, 43).

Post-Traumatic Techniques in *Beast of No Nation*

Iweala has never experienced civil war himself and he therefore turns to trauma fiction to discuss the topic of child soldiers. The fact that Iweala has not been a child soldier does not hinder his attempt to write about this traumatic experience.Evi, while quoting Geier,believes that fiction is more appropriate to define this precise traumatic experience since "the tools of nonfiction are frankly inadequate to convey the enormity and moral complexity of a life like Agu's." (68) He thus sees fiction as a viable narrative form in which one can deal with such an enormous topic.

Iweala's *Beasts of no Nation* does not clearly state any country. The novel does not

give any direct clue as to which country it takes place in, and it remains undisclosed. The book is overtly notable for its confrontational, immersive first-person narrative technique. However, it can be inferred that the narrative centres round an African country as reflected by the name of the character, Agu, an Igbo name as well as the author's own background, Nigeria. Iweala's unwillingness to stick to the constraints of nonfiction is also apparent in his choice of an unnamed country as the setting of his novel.

Having the book set in an unspecified place and historical period, the author says, "...allowed me a lot more leeway and freedom to explore" (*Beast of No Nation*, 27).

According to Main, "this indeterminacy increases the horror of the book because *Beasts of No Nation* equates to beasts of allnations." (67) Agu and his fellow soldiers as a result symbolize all child soldiers that were or are part of a war. The fact that Agu is symbolized as an innocent boy who accidentally stumbles acrossthe rebels is confirmed by Iweala's decision to use no directspeech throughout the novel, which makes the narration more vivid and at the same timefocuses on Agu as a young boy drawn into the mayhem of the war. As Ulrich rightly avers, "thisnew language created by Agu serves the purpose of describing the unimaginable, that isthe atrocities of the war, violence, mutilations, killings, and the state of complete alienation and estrangement from a normal life in general including one's childhood." (141)

War is perceivedas keeping everything in constant motion, something that makes 'it very hard to be fixing anything" (*Beast of No Nation*,18). When asked whether he wants to be a soldier,he thinks of how the uniforms, guns and all the pomp of the soldiers have already fascinated him before the war:"So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier" (*Beast of No Nation*,13). This narrative presents a story which is entirely told through the voice of a child. Iweala uses some post-traumatic techniques in his novel to partly mimic the effects of trauma. The language, a unique style the author adopts foregrounds the gravity and nature of the story. The beginning is thus quite confusing for the reader who is also not yet adapted to the particular language Iweala uses as the narrator:

> I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin, and then my head is just starting to tingle right between my eye, and then I am wanting to sneeze because my nose is itching, and then air is just blowing into my ear and I am hearing so many thing: the clicking of insect, the sound of truck grumblinglike one kind of animal, and then the sound of somebody shouting, TAKE YOU POSITON RIGHT NOW! QUICK! QUICK QUICK! MOVE WITH SPEED! MOVE FAST OH! In voice that is just touching my body like knife. (Beast of No Nation, 1

The above except sets the pace for the narration. A child who has hitherto been living in a village of loving and peaceful people finds himself uprooted from his innocence and childhood. For the reasons of survival, he is ignorantly and forcefully turned to a soldier. The war situation is an interruption which distorts normal society construct; hence boys are immediately believed to turn to men and girls to women, when they kill their first victims. The protagonistexperienced this despicable transition, when he makes his first kill, as the head of this rebel unit, Commandant urges him to take this test of being a man.

The novel begins with the rebel attack, and the author employs the use of flashback while describing Agu's war experiences. These flashbacks sometimes pop up without warning but they are also often announced by Agu who states that these memories come back to him when he closes his eyes: "Behind my eye I am seeing how one day, the younger children began to be growing thinner (*Beast of No Nation*, 75). Agu also suffers from hallucinations in which he sometimes conflates memories of his life before the war with memories of the atrocities he committed. The abandoned school they are using as a shelter thus triggers in Agu a memory of the school he went to before the war and a memory of one of his killings. Another post-traumatic experience used as technique is repetition (Whitehead, 2004). Words and phrases are often repeated in the text as "there is just blood, blood, blood" (*Beast of No Nation*, 26). There is the use of dialogues which are often not clearly separated from the portrayal of a particular situation. This can confuse the reader because it heightens the pace of reading in such a way that the reader sometimes has to stop and reread a passage in order to fully grasp what is going on in that particular passage.

The most striking feature of Iweala's narrative is the language, which is his own adaptation of the Pidgin English that is widely used in Nigeria. This particular language causes some difficulties for the reader the first few pages, but he or she quickly adapts to it and realizes that this is the only way Agu can speak. In the most traumatic and violent moments, the protagonist is unable to speak because he is so distressed and petrified. When Agu first encounters the rebels, he is attacked by Strika in such a way that he cannot even scream: "I am trying to scream, but he is knocking the air from my chest and then slapping my mouth" (*Beast of No Nation,* 3). In the same scene, the Commandant asks him his name, but Agu is so terrorized that he is unable to speak: "I am nodding to him again but word is not able to be coming from my mouth" (*Beast of No Nation,* 9).Agu's silence is a result of the traumatic experiences he is confronted with and it can be argued that extreme pain destroys language itself.

In other traumatic moments,Agu remains silent. The first one is when he has to commit his first murder. He states that "in my head I am shouting NO! NO! NO! But my mouth is not moving and I am not saying anything" (*Beast of No Nation,*23). The

sexual abuse by the Commandant is the second instance in which Agu is not saying anything at all (*Beast of No Nation*,103). The symbol of the lack of language due to trauma, however, is Strika, Agu's best friend in the rebel group. Having gone through a traumatic experience, Strika is always completely silent (Hron, 2008). Since he cannot talk about his trauma, Strika draws a picture in the sand so that Agu knows what has happened to him:

> Over and over again he is drawing the same picture of man and woman with no head because their head is rolling away on the ground. Strika, I am calling to him, and he is looking up at me. No noise from him. He is not saying anything, I am telling myself. Since I am becoming soldier, I am never hearing the sound of his voice, but now, I am knowing now what is his problem. His picture is telling me that he is not making one noise since they are killing his parent. (*Beast of No Nation,*46).

A Brief Overview of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*

A Long Way Gone is a memoir written by former child soldier, Ishmael Beah. In this memoir, Beah describes the civil war that destroyed his mother country Sierra Leone and how it affected his life in various ways. Beah's story begins with the attack of the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front on his village Mogbwemo which leads to the separation from his family and causes a twelve-year old Beah to wander, with a group of boys, around the countryside for months. Their day-to-day existence is a struggle of survival and the boys find themselves committing acts they would never have believed themselves capable of, such as stealing food from children.

After learning that his family has been killed by the rebels, Beah decides to join the government army at the age of 13 in search of protection and food. In the army, he transforms into a ruthless and drug-addicted child soldier who has perpetrated and witnessed a great deal of violence. The army becomes his family and he is made to believe that each rebel's death may avenge his own family's slaughter. Beah leaves the army two years later when he is placed in the rehabilitation program. In this centre, Beah slowly learns how to work through his trauma and how to come to terms with his past.

At the rehabilitation centre, he struggles to understand his past and imagine a future. The love and compassion he finds at the center from a nurse named Esther opens up an understanding and forgiveness within him. Beah even finds an uncle whom he had never seen before and he goes to live with him and his family in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, the war catches up with Beah as rebels and soldiers enter Freetown in 1997 and overthrow the President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

For Beah, this situation was beginning to be too familiar. Realizing his limited options, Beah decides to flee to New York: "I had to leave, because I was afraid that if I stayed in Freetown any longer, I was going to end up being a soldier again or my former army friends would kill me if I refused" (*A Long Way Gone*, 209). He succeeds in executing his plan and finds a new mother in Laura Simms, a professional storyteller whom he met during a U.N. conference about child soldiers in 1996. *A Long Way Gone* essentially deals with the protagonist's trauma and his attempts to work through it and this text is therefore a good representation of trauma in war narratives.

Survivalism and Trauma as Motifs in Beah's *A Long Way Gone*

In some of the world's notable violent wars, the exploitation of children by armed groups has increased over the years. Children involved with armed groups are prone to risk in mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The protagonist of this story develops post-traumatic stress disorder during his time in the war; this disorder can have many symptoms like nightmares, flashbacks, hostility, outbreaks of violence and severe anxiety,the narrator frequently has nightmares about death and his family of which he would constantly dream of a faceless gunman who had tied him up and begun to slit his throat with the zigzag edge of his bayonet. He would feel the pain that the knife inflicted on him as the man sawed his neck, waking up sweating profusely and throwing punches in the air (*A Long Way Gone*, 181).

Talloi, Gibrilla, Koloko and Khalilou are junior and Ishmael's friends whom they were to meet at Mattrujung to participate in their friend's talent show. The news of war shatters the show as well as the kids' lives. This describes the first eruption of war and how succeeding events would be determined by this occurrence. Family dissolution first hits Talloi, Ishmael and Junior after hearing comments from people and decided to go to Mogwemo in search of their families. The excerpt below pontificates thus:

> We started walking and a woman carrying her flip-flops on her head spoke without looking at us; too much blood has been spilled where you are going. Even the good spirits have fled from that place, she walked past us (*A Long Way Gone*, 23).

Children exposed to conflicts within their communities are left with emotions of hopelessness, insecurity and doubt. In Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, he narrates the story by telling his own involvement in the War as a young boy and the many issues he faces while living in horror. The text opens with the description of psychological trauma that the war makes its victims go through. The narrator echoes this in the statement below:

> The children of these families wouldn't look at us, and they jumped at the sound of chopping wood or as stones landed on the tin roofs flung by children hunting birds with slingshots. The adults among these children from the war zones would be lost in their thoughts during conversations with the elders of my town. Apart from their fatigue and malnourishment, it was evident they had seen something that plagued their minds, something that we would refuse to accept if they told us all of it. (*A Long Way Gone*, 1)

The above excerpt describes how chronic warfare, lived and experienced, creates not only psychosocial distress but also medically well-defined psychiatric syndromes such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression which causes them to be withdrawn, moody and do not have the self-esteem to look others in the face. They are often lost in their thoughts and the slightest sound jerks them back to life from their unconscious state. War has created a considerable incidence of mental distress in communities in Africa and in other war-ravaged nations around the world. The text pontificates on this, stating thus:

> According to the teachers, the rebels had attacked the mining areas in the afternoon. The sudden outburst of gunfire had caused people to run for their lives in different directions. Fathers had come running from their workplaces, only to stand in front of their empty houses with no indication of where their families had gone. Mothers wept as they ran toward schools, rivers, and water taps to look for their children. Children ran home to look for parents who were wandering the streets in search of them. And as the gunfire intensified, people gave up looking for their loved ones and ran out of town (*A Long Way Gone*, 15).

A Long Way Gone is divided into three major periods; the period before the war, Ishmael's experience as a boy soldier as well as the rehabilitation process. The protagonist's sojourn as a boy soldier begins when the group of boys meets some soldiers who take them to Yele. For the first time in the boys' journey, they come across a village that is safe and calm. They experience the life as teenagers, but occasionally this moment of tranquility is interrupted by the horrors which their hearts or eyes have seen. The calmness is short lived when the soldiers couldn't handle the rebels anymore. Hence, there is the need for recruits, which is insinuated below.

> Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place to be. Well it is not that

> safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe (*A Long Way Gone*, 134).

Garbarino recognises the effects of wars and how such violence is something that sticks on children and remains constant in their everyday lives. (64) These experiences not only alter their perspectives as children, but it also changes their reactions to violence over time. As a refugee, Ishmael is unable to forget the sights he witnessed as these scenes keep coming back as flashbacks and nightmares that torment him over and over again. He is unable to fight off the memories attached to the scenes he has witnessed; he tries to close his eyes to avoid ruminating on the events but fails. The text reveals:

> I had seen heads cut off by machetes, smashed by cement bricks, and rivers filled with so much blood that the water had ceased flowing. Each time my mind replayed these scenes, I increased my pace. Sometimes I closed my eyes hard to avoid thinking, but the eye of my mind refused to be closed and continued to plague me with images. (*A Long Way Gone*, 49)

Soon enough the boys learn how to make use of the fighting weapons. All sorts of defense and tactics are learnt. In a few months, the boys especially Ishmael becomes professionals in the act. Ishmael gets to own his own weapons. "Visualize the enemy who killed your parents, your family and those who are responsible for everything that has happened" (*A Long Way Gone*,138). The above becomes the motive which motivates the young soldiers into attacking their enemies. "A splash of blood hit my face. In my reverie, I had opened my mouth a bit, so I tasted some of the blood…" (*A Long Way Gone*,144). This occurs at the scene of Ishmael's first experience in the battlefield. He is scared and hesitates to shoot. At the same time, Josiah who shares the same tent with Ishmael and Sheku, is shot dead. This act unleashes the survival instinct in Ishmael that is to kill or be killed, as indicated in the novel;

> I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, all the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two young lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people (*A Long Way Gone*, 145).

The lasting effects these children have as a result of their experiences, both visually and participating in, are overwhelming and disturbing. In order to stop thinking about these traumatic scenes Ishmael busies himself with other things and resists

even the slightest urge to fall asleep because he fears that "my suppressed thoughts would appear in my dreams" (*A Long Way Gone*, 52). In his attempts to control his flashbacks and nightmares, trauma comes in a form of severe migraine which makes him recount all the horrible scenes he has seen and encountered. The narrative reads further:

> I quietly sat in the corner of the room clenching my teeth, as I didn't want to show my friends the pain I felt from my headache. In my mind's eye, I would see sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head. I cried quietly as my head beat like the clapper of a bell. Sometimes after the migraine had stopped, I was able to fall asleep briefly, only to be awoken by nightmares. One night I dreamt that I was shot in the head. I was lying in my blood as people hurriedly walked past me. A dog came by and began licking my blood ferociously. The dog bared its teeth as my blood sweetened its mouth. I wanted to scare it away, but I was unable to move. (*A Long Way Gone*, 112).

There is a necessity for an empathic listener who hears the trauma survivor's testimony to protect it and guide the trauma victim through it. By being so involved in the testimony, the listener even partially experiences the trauma of the victim. Most trauma survivors turn to autobiography and memoir to describe their personal traumatic experiences because they want to testify about it in a way that is understandable to their readers or listeners. Trauma survivors often feel excessive guilt and she therefore stresses the need for a listener who can help to reduce this guilt by simply listening to the survivor without blaming him or her for the occurrence of a traumatic experience.

A stage of psychological trauma that Ishmael goes through is what LaCapra calls the stage of denial. (21)It is a state in which the victim has no vision of the objectivity in relating to his or her respective realities. In relation to the text of study, the victim cum protagonist is recruited into the army to the view to fighting against the rebels. The protagonist seems to deny the traumatic effect of the war and how this has caused physical and mental changes. The most traumatic experience of his two years as a child soldier is his first contact with actual combat. During this scene, the protagonist unconsciously turns to numbness as a defense mechanism, as he describes his first mission and the way it affects him in the following passage:

> I lay there with my gun pointed in front of me, unable to shoot. My index finger had become numb. The forest had begun to spin. I felt as if the ground had turned upside down and I was going to fall off,

> so I clutched the base of a tree with one hand... The gunshots faded in my head, and it was as if my heart had stopped and the whole world had come to a standstill. I covered Josiah's eyes with my fingers and pulled him from the tree stump. His backbone had been shattered. I placed him flat on the ground and picked up my gun... (*Long Way Gone*, 144-145).

Ishmael develops post-traumatic stress disorder during his time in the war, which is often described as a brain disorder that is caused by a traumatic event. The author states thus: "...The sharp aches in my head or what I later came to know as migraines, stopped as my daily activities were replaced with more soldierly things" (*Long Way Gone*, 148). War-affected children often face hardships such as forced family separation, no access to school and healthcare, no access to food and shelter, and displacement from their homes and communities as seen in the narrative when the Rebels attacked the villages:

Post-conflict coping strategies take a long time to take effect on young soldiers, as in Ishmael's case: despite formal demobilization processes, reintegration programmes, and sensitization programmes, their everyday lives still appear to be constantly reminded of their former status as combatants. The day after the fight marks the beginning of Ishmael's transformation from a traumatized state of denial of a child who once felt affected by the horrible scenes and atrocities caused by the war into a vicious child soldier. This change and transformation are also evident in the fact that, after joining the army, he no longer feels the nightmares, headaches, and migraines he feels as a result of his emotional trauma, seeing horrible dead bodies and blood. The novel reads:

> I was not afraid of these lifeless bodies. I despised them and kicked them to flip them... I went for supper that night but was unable to eat. I only drank water and felt nothing. As I walked back to my tent, I stumbled into a cement wall. My knee bled, but I didn't feel a thing... (*Long Way Gone*, 145-146).

A Long Way Gone reveals the three symptoms of psychological trauma described by Herman (1992) namely hyper arousal that is the persistent expectation of danger, intrusion which has to do with when traumatic events are relived as if they were occurring in the present through flashbacks, hallucinations, and dreams and the third constriction characterized by withdrawal, indifference and emotional detachment. The relationship between hyper arousal, intrusion and constriction is also characterized by the war itself. The long journey through forests and abandoned villages was a form of absolute withdrawal from society, so the most crucial traumatic period in Beah's life occurred during his soldiering days:

> The silence that seems to dominate Ishmael's story is also a silence that prevents the child soldiers from crying out loud and, and it is also a silence that will never leave them again, a silent trauma that will dictate their future life and relationships. The kind of silence that leads a person to becoming a ruthless killing machine during these years; a journey which he claims is easy in comparison to the rehabilitation process. When he gets to the village, where his parents and brother are said to have taken shelter, Ishmael reaches too late because it has been late, and he screamed loudly in utter horror. (*Long Way Gone*, 95).

Child soldiers face anintense sense of loss, anxiety, and grief as a result of not knowing whether their families still exist.On many occasions, trauma survivors testify about their involvements and actions because they believe it is for that very reason that they are allowed to survive. The newly created reality is the only reality the child accepts and this reality does not go away with empathy or pity for other soldiers as the decisions are not taken by Ishmael himself any longer but by the corporal and the lieutenant even as seen in the text:

> It hadn't crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn't immediately make us normal boys; we were dangerous, and brainwashed to kill … I missed my squad and needed more violence. (*Long Way Gone*, 135, 140).

When Ishmael is given the chance to talk about child soldiering, he states:"we can be rehabilitated… I would always tell people that I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance." (*Long Way Gone*, 169). Part of the rehabilitation process is also being repatriated after the sensitization and reintegration processes. A trauma victim acts out his or her trauma when he or she suffers from vivid and compulsive flashbacks and nightmares because the traumatic experience has not yet been integrated into his or her life (LaCapra, 2004). During his months as a refugee, the child soldier narrator is stuck in this stage of acting-out. His trauma also manifests itself in his severe migraines. During these headaches, he sees in his mind's eye "…sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head" (*Long Way Gone*, 103). Ishmael again continues his sojourn. He battles with hunger during the day and is plagued with dreams at night. At this junction, it is seen that these victims of war struggle with their personal traumatic experiences, living each day at the brink of disillusionment, with feeble hope for survival.

Conclusion

A Long Way Gone by Beah and *Beasts of No Nation* by Iweala have been critically analysed in relation to war, trauma and survival as motifs in these selected texts. It is revealed that through their works which vividly capture the distressful effects of war on children, readers would recognize the need for social reflection and develop the impetus towards change. Child soldiers are still being recruited in many countries, and Beah and Iweala have made this traumatic experiencesevident and concrete. Nonetheless, the notion of survival transcends avoidance of death for these unfortunate victims but a necessity for individual and, by extension, social transformation. In the end, these texts serve as a tool to examining the motifs of trauma and survivalism and also reflect how the recurring problems of war in African states affect the psychological disposition of innocent children, who remain consequential victims of this societal menace.

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