



(Re-)Telling the War Story, Healing the Wounds: A Bibliotherapeutic Reading of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*

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Abstract

The devastation associated with both civil conflicts and wars takes physical and emotional efforts to heal. There are works of African literature that have analysed war trauma, testimony and healing of emotional wounds utilising psychoanalytic perspectives. This article attempt to deepen analysis of such works using a bibliotherapeutic reading of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*. This article adopts a psychoanalytic perspective of testimony and memory to analyse reading the war story, its traumatic impact and healing potential. This article fills a gap in the intellectual understanding of the role of literature (i.e., bibliotherapeutic) in healing the wounded souls. We employed a qualitative methodological approach by which a literary analysis of the novel is done. The literary text is complemented with an analysis of secondary materials related to civil war in Africa. *Allah is Not Obligated* testifies about war trauma and healing process among child soldiers through sharing of personal stories and experiences connected to war. The various warring countries captured in the text are a metaphor for his patients – sick bodies in need of medical attention. Sickneses are strong metaphors for social deviations. Additionally, the novel stressed the importance of writing, telling, and language as methods of traumatic flashback and bringing healing to child soldiers. We contend that reading *Allah is Not Obligated* can provide the reader with help in dealing with trauma of war.

Keywords: war, child soldier, trauma, insight therapy, psychoanalysis, healing

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Résumé

La dévastation associée aux conflits civils et aux guerres demande beaucoup d'efforts physiques et émotionnels pour en guérir. Il existe des oeuvres de la littérature africaine qui ont analysé les traumatismes de guerre, le témoignage et la guérison des blessures émotionnelles en utilisant des perspectives psychanalytiques. Cet article tente d'approfondir ces analyses à travers une approche bibliothérapeutique de *Allah is Not Obligated* (Allah n'est pas obligé) d'Ahmadou Kourouma. Cet article adopte une perspective psychanalytique du témoignage et de la mémoire pour analyser la lecture du récit de guerre, son impact traumatique et son potentiel de guérison. Cet article comble une lacune dans la compréhension intellectuelle du rôle de la littérature (c'est-à-dire de la bibliothérapie) dans la guérison des âmes blessées. Nous avons utilisé une approche méthodologique qualitative par laquelle une analyse littéraire du roman est effectuée. Le texte littéraire est complété par une analyse des matériaux secondaires liés à la guerre civile en Afrique. *Allah is Not Obligated* témoigne du traumatisme de la guerre et du processus de guérison chez les enfants soldats à travers le partage d'histoires personnelles et d'expériences liées à la guerre. Les différents pays en guerre évoqués dans le texte sont une métaphore de ses patients : des corps malades qui ont besoin d'une prise en charge médicale. Les maladies sont de fortes métaphores des déviations sociales. En outre, le roman souligne l'importance de l'écriture, de la narration et du langage en tant que méthodes de traitement des flashbacks traumatiques et de guérison des enfants soldats. Nous soutenons que la lecture de *Allah is Not Obligated* peut aider le lecteur à faire face au traumatisme de la guerre.

Mots-clés : guerre, enfant soldat, traumatisme, thérapie comportementale et cognitive, psychanalyse, guérison

Introduction

Destruction, violence, victimisation and suffering are the chief manifestations of war and humans and the environment are both perpetrators and unfortunate victims. From interstate wars, where conventional battle tactics are employed, to intrastate wars, where there are unconventional battle tactics, human suffering and hopelessness characterise the advent and prevalence of armed conflicts. While scholarship on war has paid close attention to the several civil wars that have permeated many states, not many, to the best of our knowledge, have discussed literature from a therapeutic perspective as far as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* is concerned. Therefore, our main task in this article is to examine the effects of a bibliotherapeutic reading on the healing process of the war victims based on the story contained in the novel. To achieve this aim, we have paid serious attention to conceptualising

some of the key concepts employed in the article such as the framework of psychoanalytic theory of testimony and post-war memory. Thereafter, we examine how writing about and telling war stories can provide the necessary tools for healing the trauma of war victims. Finally, we analyse the bibliotherapeutic implications of *Allah is Not Obligated*.

Contextualising Liberia's Civil Conflicts

The civil war in Liberia captured by Kourouma is heavily punctuated with the prevalence of child combatants. Scholars are in perfect consonance that children have long been actors in warscapes (Denov 2010; Eichstaedt 2009; Gates 2011; Podder 2011; Rosen 2005; Zyck 2011). Specifically, the pre-industrial age is fraught with the constant conscription of children into military ranks. Denov (2010:21) argues that the Crusades, Napoleonic Wars, America's war of Independence and Civil War, and even the Children's Crusade in 1212, were fraught with children in armed conflict. Nevertheless, it is arguable that children conscripted into the military during the pre-industrial age evolved into expert combatants because they were allowed to learn the rudiments, rituals and rules of battle. Besides, the battles of the pre-industrial age were governed by well-defined objectives and ideologies. According to Rosen (2005:11), pre-industrial nations went to war for clear political reasons and such battles were spatially and geographically defined. They were fought in specified battlefields, had a form (a beginning and an end), and were fought for clear political ideologies. Rosen (2005:11) termed these pre-industrial battles as 'traditional wars'. On the contrary, wars in modern times have changed the entire scope of battles. In addition, civil wars initially sprouted from a political discontent, dissension and the desire to displace constitutionally elected governments through wanton violence. As these wars stretched on, different political ideologies began to emerge, and warlords began to conscript their own armies until there was no singular reason for the war. Such wars obeyed no conventional battle tactics as they targeted civilians. They became formless and instituted violence as a way of living.

What should be added is that at the core of intrastate wars is the demand for children. Children, more than adults, are the prime targets of such wars because of their enormous potentials in war spaces. In 'Why do children fight? Motivations and mode of recruitment', Gates (2011:29) discusses the 'mechanisms' and the 'noninstrumental factors such as norms and emotions' that superintend the recruitment and retention of children. According to him, child soldiers offer cheap compensation for rebel military. In such wars where there is a prevalence of unconventional battle tactics, children, when recruited as fighters, populate the military and they are cheap to command

given their gullibility. Children also offer 'cheap labour for rebels with limited resources' (Gates 2011:35).

In his introduction to *They Fight Like Soldiers; They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers*, Dallaire (2011) stresses that children are recruited as soldiers because they are regarded by rebel warlords as a viable weapon system. Dallaire was a former commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMR) and a peacekeeper in Rwanda. He witnessed the 1994 genocide in Rwanda where over eight hundred thousand (800,000) persons lost their lives. He also witnessed the armament and militarisation of children. He fiercely contends that because children are accessible, vulnerable, have 'simple sustainable requirement' (Dallaire 2011:10), and an incredible capacity for barbarism, they become prime targets of recruitments in war-torn territories.

Moreover, available evidence indicates that children are recruited not only by armed insurgent groups, but also by governments, especially when such a government runs low on military personnel during civil conflicts. In her introduction 'Child soldiers, iconography, and the (il)logic of extremes', Denov (2010:1–19) contends that the nature of warfare, the prevalence of failed states, the increase in civil conflicts, the proliferation of light weapons and the presence of globalisation and transnational network have greatly contributed to the demand for children as soldiers during wartimes.

The global effort to put an end to the use of children in war began in 1996 when Graça Machel (a former child soldier) presented her report – 'The effect of armed conflict on children' – to the UN's General Assembly. Machel highlighted the causes of most civil unrests, the reality of child soldiers and the need for the UN to make calculated attempts at bringing an end to the recruitment of children as combatants. The report stirred governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and humanitarian organisations to research the prevalence of children in armed conflicts.

Two currents of thought have flanked the debates and continued research of children involved in armed conflicts: that children engaged in armed conflicts are dangerous psychopaths who ought to be prosecuted for their actions; and that children involved in armed conflicts are hapless victims of mindless warlords and broader political contexts who need to be protected. Proponents of the former school contend that children who are active participants in armed conflicts do so wilfully and have lost their part in civility; as such, they pose a grave threat to civil society. It is important at this point to review the argument of Denov in this regard.

According to Denov (2010:6), proponents of this school consider the child combatant to be fully responsible for their actions. In their discourses of

Africa, Western media and international reporters present the savagery of wars fought on the continent as a site for the breeding of mindless and blood-thirsty children. Civil conflict reports, such as the terrors and the irredeemability of child soldiers, have 'influenced the language and thought of policy makers' in some Western States (Denov, 2010:6). An example is the United States' 10-year detention of the Canadian minor, Omar Ahmed Sayid Khadr, who allegedly threw a grenade that killed a US soldier in Afghanistan. Khadr's trial, conviction, and sentence sparked outrage from civil rights groups and the United Nations Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict.

The second current of thought has been championed by NGOs and humanitarian organisations. These bodies intellectually locate children within broader spaces of undemocratic governments, failed independences and civil unrests. Through scholarship in children's participation in war and powerful iconographies, these bodies have successfully presented children as victims whose innocence has been ruthlessly exploited by mindless warlords and war-torn spaces. They argue that wars have been a constant occurrence throughout history – from organised wars to civil conflicts in many post-colonial states to the global threat of terrorism – and that children have always been helpless and gullible. In *Armies of the Young*, Rosen (2005:20) perfectly aligns with this intellectual current to argue that during the Holocaust, Jewish child soldiers joined armed resistance as a means of protection. Given that such groups were a form of resistance against the genocide they were faced with, getting conscripted became a matter of absolute necessity as salvation lay within the group's ideology and militarisation.

Creative writers are not left out of this intellectual campaign. Through their outputs, they have assumed humanitarian standpoints in their debates against the recruitment of child soldiers. Constructions within their intellectual-cum-creative campaigns portray children as traumatised, weaned off innocence, pitiable and in need of protection.

As in the Sierra Leonean decade-long civil war, issues that contributed to the causation of the Liberian war have appealed to war scholarship and writing. Scholars have approached the Liberian conflict from various angles. Some have adopted the ethnic model, which argues that the Liberian civil conflicts were a direct consequence of ethno-communal disharmony (Rosen 2005:9). Another school of thought has championed a 'greed-and-grievance' (Rosen 2005:9) model to the cause of the armed conflicts. This approach claims that the cause of the Liberian civil conflicts is deeply rooted in the greed for mineral resources like diamonds and oil among the country's political leaders on the one hand, and in the grievance of the Liberian masses over the economic exclusion which they suffered on the other hand.

In 'The Liberian civil war: new war/old war', Bøås (2005) attempts to 'diagnose' the cause of the war much like a physician would diagnose a patient. He adopts an integrative model in his 'diagnoses' of Liberian society. He dismisses the popular 'Charles Taylor approach' – championed by international media and international governments and organisations – which emphasises the role of Charles Taylor in fuelling conflicts in the West African region. According to Bøås (2005), the causations of Liberian civil conflicts initially drew from the nation's turbulent eighteenth century history.

Bøås (2005) cites two important factors that presented themselves as the foundations of the civil conflict: the politics of indigenous exclusion and the prevalent neo-patrimonial system of governance. He traces the beginning of the politics of indigenous exclusion to the period when repatriated freed slaves (Americo-Liberians), with the support of the US, displaced the 16 indigenous peoples and controlled the Liberian economy and administrative systems for over a century. Under a one-party state, every political and economic office was shared between Americo-Liberians and US officials. By the 1920s, Americo-Liberians began to consolidate their political and economic holds of the Liberian nation by widespread practice of patron-client relationships 'that provided social order and stability through the maintenance of a social structure that ensured that Americo-Liberians stayed in power' (Bøås 2005:78). These political situations stirred discontent, distrust and hatred between the indigenous peoples of Liberian and the repatriated free slaves.

By 1979, Liberia had begun to dance to the music of hate and resentment, which the indigenous peoples had for the Americo-Liberians. In April, the nation experienced its first coup d'état as 17 men, led by Samuel Doe of Krahn descent, overthrew the government with a single political ideology that sought to restore political power to native Liberians. At the success of the coup, the majority of the Liberian population heaved a sigh of relief and looked out for a government that would fully represent the 'pulse' of the 16 indigenous groups in Liberia.

Sadly, the reverse was the case as the indigenously led government quickly relapsed into the same patrimonial system of the previous government. Corruption, theft of state resources and abuse of human rights characterised the new government. As a result, ethnic groups became polarised, and this led to a proliferation and patronage of magic and secret societies. Discontent and disillusion with the government loomed large and young people fought unyielding frustrations. It was therefore not a surprise when, on the eve of Christmas in 1989, a small group of rebel army led by Charles Taylor invaded the Liberian border and recruited over four thousand Liberians into

its rank (Bøås 2005:80). The direct consequence of this action was a roller coaster of conflicts that would span over two decades.

Following the advent of civil violence and armed conflicts in Liberia, several international and national bodies, engaged in the quest for peace in Liberia, became major actors of the war. The immediate interventions of Nigeria and the Economic Community of West African States, the indirect involvement of the US and the UK, plus their indictment of Charles Taylor as a major supporter of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF – Sierra Leone's largest rebel group) and his trade in Sierra Leonean 'blood diamonds', and the stiff sanctions on Charles Taylor by the United Nations (UN) contributed to further conflagration of the Liberian civil conflict that saw the recruitment of children into rebel groups.

Psychoanalytic Theory of Testimony and Traumatic Memory: Defining the Framework

Reading literature as testimony is predicated on the psychotherapeutic practice between psychoanalyst and client, symbolising the relationship between author and reader. Freud's (2010) psychoanalysis from the psychoanalytic theory helps to explain trauma and testimony of war, which are, of course, integral issues in healing emotional wounds. Psychoanalysis is an insight therapy that emphasises the recovery of unconscious conflicts, motives and defences through techniques such as free association and transference. According to Freud, most psychological trauma are traceable to the effect of some particularly disturbing event (e.g., war). And by means of psychoanalysis techniques (e.g., hypnosis or free association), the psychoanalyst is able to promote insight into the root of the patient's trauma. In particular, unconscious conflicts are brought into consciousness so they can be integrated with the needs and motives the patient is aware of. In psychoanalysis, the analyst attempts to probe the murky depths of the unconscious to discover the unresolved conflicts causing the patient's trauma.

In Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*, Birahima, the protagonist and narrator (i.e., the psychoanalyst) functions as a therapist attempting to release the traumatised patients (readers) from the disturbing events of war and help them to escape from trauma. Birahima offers a Freudian therapy based on the articulation and narration of the past (i.e., testimony about Liberian civil conflicts), a 'talking cure' that will aid the readers to deal with and to challenge their trauma. Liberian civil conflict victims and readers continue to live with war experiences that could not and did not advance through its completion, have no ending, achieved no closure and hence, as far as they are concerned, continued into the present. The narration (testimony) of

the Liberian civil conflicts gives it a beginning and closure, and thus allows victims and readers to achieve a sense of closure. In psychoanalysis, two people, the analyst (i.e., author) and the patient (e.g., war victim or reader), are trying to understand the traumatic experience of one individual, the patient (e.g., victim or reader). Usually, the author of a war story perceives unresolved conflicts in the war victims before they do, and then the author tries to explain them to the victims/readers in the form of an interpretation (testimony/narration). Interpretation refers to the analyst's (i.e., author) attempt to explain (testify/narrate) the inner significance of the patient's (e.g., war victim/reader) thoughts, feelings, memories (e.g., war memories) and behaviours (Weiten 2004:612). Because the author communicated the traumatic experience of traumatised victims (which they are unwilling to tell) to a wider audience, the narration of the past war memory then becomes a testimony to serve as a traumatic flashback and to disseminate historical awareness among spectators and readers.

In *Allah is Not Obligated*, the protagonist and narrator Birahima is also the author who testify to the repulsions that war victims have experienced, and thus helps them to transform their non-verbal memory of the war into narrative memory. The process of reading *Allah is Not Obligated* is tortuous and challenging; having readers psychologically relive their traumatic experiences through reading is likely to result in strong emotions. This release of tension is what Freud called 'catharsis' and it is frequently associated with healing and recovery.

It is worthwhile to question how Freud would understand the child soldiers in *Allah is Not Obligated*, and whether healing can be achieved through its reading. The dreams of child soldiers, for instance, owing to their experiences, are saturated with frightening symbols and actions that represent powerful impulses that have overpowered psychical censorship. Such dreams are governed by the principle of repetition compulsion, which permits the forceful replaying of harrowing experiences that aim to eventually mount overpowering tension on conscious somatic processes. The constant attack of the unconscious on the conscious, even years after the sufferer may be said to have moved on, can induce emotional wounds, neurosis or even physical illness on the sufferer.

Theory of Testimony and Post-war Memory: Writing, Telling and Language as a Strategy for Healing War Trauma

Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* engages war scholarship through the eyes and sensibilities of a child. The novel theorises the implications of socio-political unrests on the sanity and sanctity of children. Through its protagonist and

narrator, Kourouma assumes the role of a physician who examines the socio-political 'pulse' of warring groups and its impact on the lives of children. The various warring countries captured in the text are a metaphor for his patients – sick bodies in need of medical attention. Sicknesses are strong metaphors for social deviations. Consequently, there is need for physicians who are skilled in the restoration of health through scientific procedures like medical histories and diagnosis. We must acknowledge that the deliberate re-casting of historical effects that culminate in civil conflicts is akin to the medical history that is collected and documented during medical diagnosis. Such a medical narrative helps the physician to correctly diagnose the cause of an illness.

Allah is Not Obligated tells the story of child combatants. In a broader context, the text is committed to an intellectual campaign that seeks to end the recruitment and use of children as weapons of war in civil conflicts. Precisely, the text examines the vulnerability of children in war-torn spaces and how violence compromises their innocence. Birahima's narration is fraught with childhood memories and reflections that play a foremost intellectual role in Kourouma's campaign to end the use of child soldiers.

Interestingly, third generation writers are beginning to explore childhood narration in their works. Prominent examples of works that are shaped by this style include Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2005), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), among others. We must acknowledge, at this point, that child narration plays a crucial role in its ability to convey emotions that are untainted by bias or ideology. Bainto (2011:27) contends that child narratives 'embody the presence of violence and serve as a reflection of history and on the link between memory and history'. Through Birahima's narration, the reader gleans that he is unsure of his age, 'didn't get very far at school' (1), 'has killed lots of guys with AK-47' (3) and is traumatised by the spirits of the innocent people he has killed at his tender age.

The story is set in a village that is located somewhere on the Guinean/Ivorian border, in war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone. The second half of the novel's opening sentence is worth contemplating over: 'Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth' (1). This statement forms the crux of Birahima's narration and depicts how a child considers tragic situations that surround life in a war-torn society, how easy it is for a child to conclude that the vicissitudes of civil life is solely the design of the Great God. Birahima portrays his life as 'pretty fucked up' (5). Somewhere between the ages of 10 and 12, Birahima's mother, who has been severely sick, eventually dies from the pains and torture resulting from a botched circumcision procedure.

Kourouma masterfully reveals the inherent gullibility and vulnerability of children in the novel. Birahima is the object of a creative campaign against the innocence of children that are caught up in armed conflict. From the opening of the story, the reader is brought to terms with the subtle manipulation of Birahima's memory and mind. First, the young boy is made to believe that his mother's suffering is a direct result of her sorcery. The gullibility of children is exemplified herein when Birahima hates his own mother after hearing rumours of her sorcery. As a result of his reactionary and intense emotion, Birahima suffers a psychological shock that sickens him and drives him into becoming a street kid – 'a proper street kid that sleeps with goats, and nicks stuff to eat from fields and concessions' (Kourouma 2006:20). This is his first experience of an emotional tussle that scars his mind – and by extension, Kourouma's first creative hypothesis that the inherent gullibility of children makes them easy pawns in the hands of manipulative situations and individuals. Although Kourouma's hypothesis was that war can compromise the mind of children, this would be a simplistic approach unless we consider that children are entirely under the influence of their social environment without any cognitive capacity to process information from their immediate environment.

Following the death of Birahima's mother, his extended family holds a congress where Mahan, Birahima's aunt, is voted as his new caretaker. Birahima subsequently leaves his hometown with Yacouba – a money doubler, fortune-teller and sorcerer – in search of his other aunt who lives in Liberia. The travails of the duo – their inevitable experience of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars; their conscriptions into, and dismemberments from, various armed groups; their acculturation into hard drugs and violence as ways of living; and their resilience throughout their long search – are firm attestations to the vulnerability and the violation of innocence that children experience during civil warfare.

Birahima gets his first conscription into the fighting squad of Colonel Papa le Bon as an 'ambush kid' (71) where he was given an old AK-47. His duties, with other child soldiers, 'were to stand in the middle of the road and signal for trucks and convoys to stop' (71.). Given this situation, it is easy to attest that child soldiers, in the hands of warlords, are recruited as weapons of war. Their facelessness and cheap availability, together with the possibility of their death at the war front, does not diminish the military resources of the group. To ambush efficiently, Birahima has to smoke hard drugs to douse his fears and to embolden him in the face of death. Of course, rebel groups have squads of child fighters and Birahima realises that many such children, like him, are in search of their parents and loved ones.

Relevant to this article, close attention shall be paid to the funeral orations that Birahima writes for children who lose their lives to civil wars. Through these funeral orations, Kourouma conveys his thesis over the state of children who are involved in armed conflicts. Birahima regards fallen child-fighters as heroes who deserve a funeral oration on account of how they hazard their lives in armed conflicts. Concerning children that die in battle, he writes:

Child-soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century, so whenever a child-soldier dies, we have to say a funeral oration. This means that we have to recount how in this great big fucked-up world they came to be a child-soldier (Kourouma 2006:83).

Birahima's first funeral oration is said for Sarah, a girl soldier who is shot in the leg and left to die in the jungle. According to Birahima, Sarah's earlier life was heavily punctuated with neglect. As an orphan, Sarah is forced to live in an orphanage where the Liberian civil war meets her. With four nuns of the orphanage dead, and with nowhere else to go, Sarah has no other choice but to join the child soldiers of Colonel Papa le Bon's army. A close consideration of Sarah's story validates humanitarian and civil organisation's claims that children are sometimes forced to fight because rebel groups offer them protection from other rebel group or from starvation or from death. Of course, for Sarah, refusal to join Colonel Papa le Bon's army means death. Furthermore, even if she manages to escape being killed by a stroke of luck, Sarah has nowhere else to return to – no family, no home, no orphanage. The only choice left to her is to join the rebel group 'family'.

Kik suffers a fate that is similar to Sarah's experience. Like the central character, Agu, in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), his village comes under rebel attack while he is at school. Houses are razed down, throats are brutally slit and people are raped and maimed. All the members of Kik's family are killed. The narrator paints a strong picture of the hopelessness that surrounds children whose parents are killed in civil conflict:

And when you've got no one left on earth, no father, no mother, no brother, no sister, and you're really young, just a little kid, living in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone's throat, what do you do? You become a child-soldier of course, a small-soldier, a child-soldier so you can have lots to eat and cut some throats yourself; that's all your only option (Kourouma 2006:90).

Children who are suddenly orphaned or are left without a place to call home have no choice but to seek refuge in the open arms of rebel groups. The fighting groups, on the other hand, conscript such children freely and offer

them protection. In most cases, child soldiers get better privileges than adult soldiers. In fact, some rebel groups, like the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), treat their child soldiers so well that they get 'lots to eat and you could even make money' (Kourouma 2006:100). With such rewards beckoning at children who are trapped in the 'valley of starvation and hopelessness' (2006-100), children have no choice but to give up their innocence and civilities in exchange for life of violence.

Apart from the militarisation that children are forcefully put through in rebel groups, new conscripts are also initiated into savagery and barbarism as a way of living. Birahima makes mention of a special fighting squad in the RUF called the lycaeons. These were child soldiers who were 'given the most inhuman jobs...like putting a bee into someone's eyes' (174). Conscriptation requirements into the lycaeons demand a show of patricide and cannibalism as proof of bravery and worthiness. Birahima recounts, in his funeral oration for Siponni, similar initiation conditions that willing children have to satisfy in order to be recruited into Johnny Koroma's (another rebel warlord in Sierra Leone) army.

Birahima submits a very strong theoretical insight into the philosophy that governs the initiation demands. Through parricide, he narrates, children are able to prove that 'they'd given up everything, that they didn't have any ties on earth, any other home except Johnny Koroma's family' (199). The fulfilment of such a condition was a way of securing the loyalty of child soldiers and a way of creating a bond between the rebel group and individual soldiers. Of course, the child combatant who successfully attains such a rank in the rebel group commands lots of respects, wields lots of privileges and is undoubtedly loyal to the group even in death.

The Bibliotherapeutic Implications of *Allah is Not Obligated*

The anguish of human beings, the fragmentation of self, anxiety, pain and trauma that Terry Eagleton (2010) believes to exist throughout the recorded history of humankind is examined in *Allah is Not Obligated* by adopting the psychoanalysis perspective.

Like a disease, civil conflicts conquer communities and ravage the sanity of children who are caught within it. Characterised by socio-economic disintegration and a break-down of cultural beliefs and norms, war spaces are also governed by a culture of savagery, wanton carnage and a culture of violence. Rebel groups are the drivers of such war-torn spaces. Under the leadership of warlords or organised sponsors, these groups are usually in a quest to cease power and gain territorial control. To do so, they need soldiers, and children prove to be a veritable source of cheap manpower and unreserved loyalty.

Beyond demobilisation, disarmament and re-integration into civil life, child soldiers are in desperate need of somatic healing, which would permit the discharge of the unpleasant energies that constantly launch lethal attacks on their awareness. Birahima initiates a healing process when he reaches a decision to 'write down [his] adventures from A to Z. To recount them in clever French words from *toubab*, colonial, racist, colonising French and big Black Nigger African Native words, and bastard nigger pidgin words' (214). Birahima's decision to write down everything he has previously experienced in the on-going armed conflict is a powerful therapy for his wounded psyche and this demands deliberate recalling and retelling of his unpleasant experiences. In the process of recalling, Birahima actively engages his memory and allows the repressed thoughts, actions and wishes that have been stored in his preconscious to find expression.

Although Birahima is caught up in a web of horrendous socio-political events that violates his innocence, moral sanity and religious piety, he is quick to embrace his new life as a child soldier and gladly accepts violence as a way of living. However, there is a sustaining anchor to which his humanity clings: it is the hope that he would one day find his aunt. Hope is also a representation of his resilience. Pressing through the horrors of war without a clear sense of purpose would have been extremely fatal on his psyche. As Birahima journeys along, his sanity, his logic and his redemption are fastened on to an unshakeable hope that one day he would reunite with his aunt. He even saves money and buys gifts that he intends to give his aunt when he would finally find her. Of this hope, Birahima narrates:

I wanted to save some money; I didn't want to piss away everything I earned on drugs, like other child soldiers. With my savings, I bought gold and I kept the gold in one of the grigris that I wore. I wanted something to give my aunt when I finally got to meet her. *Faforo!* (Kourouma 2006:100).

Unlike Birahima, many other child soldiers who joined and considered these rebel groups as 'family' eventually died in war. The ability to keep hope alive in the midst of tough psychological distress is a potent strategy to heal the wounds that scar the ego.

When Birahima discovers that his aunt is dead, he cries his 'heart out' (211) because his endurance of previous harrowing experiences has been in vain. His hope and spirit are quashed by the news as there is no longer reason to stay as a recruit of the rebel group, no more reason for fighting. His predicament deserves to be pitiable because dismemberment from rebel groups does not spell freedom from the war. Psychologically, there is a greater war that stirs. For at the heels of dismemberment, disarmament and re-integration lies the dragon monster of post-traumatic stress. Victims of

post-traumatic stress battle a new kind of trauma that disorders their mental processes by a forceful replay of their actions of savagery through means as dreams, hallucinations, hysteria, and the like. Luckily for Birahima, his cousin, who is a doctor, offers him a path out of the war and out of his emotional trauma when he asks that Birahima tell him ‘everything... everything...seen and done...how all this happened’ (214–15). Birahima thus enters into a therapy process that initiates his own healing.

Another strategy of healing that Birahima adopts is his language. Rebel groups are a site for the transmogrification of children into wretched sociopaths. Upon conscription, child soldiers enter into militarised spaces where their sanities are violated and where they are indoctrinated into a culture of violence and carnage. Such practices shatter the psyches of children and heighten somatic processes through a suspension of their reasoning and morality faculties. Through language, Birahima manages to put his mind at ease in order to tell a truthful and compelling story. In an introduction of himself, he said that ‘I don’t give two fucks about village customs anymore, ’cos I’ve been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we called it a “kalash”) and got fucked-up on knaif and lots of hard drugs’ (3).

Birahima’s disregard for village customs represents his social and cultural deviance. Of course, his deviance is a manifestation of the altered topography of his mental process. Pressed with enormous energy from hard drugs, his super-ego, which is the seat of acceptable morality and language etiquette, is kept on freeze. As such, his actions are characterised by deviations. Many children who are trapped in this situation enter an emotional crisis state where they become slaves to their trauma and finally succumb to it. But Birahima negotiates his path out of his internal trauma via an adoption of his linguistic activity as an outlet for the traumatic energies from his unconscious. Following the breakdown of the superego and ego, obscene words that carry intense energy from his unconscious dominate his linguistic activity. Such words are raw and offensive and are symbols of his unconscious wishes.

In ‘Swearing: a biopsychosocial perspective’, Vingerhoets, Byslma and De Vlam (2013:2) argue that swearing is associated with neurological and psychological disorders. According to them, swear words are means through which intense emotions are let out. Birahima recounts that he is ‘disrespectful’, ‘rude as a goat’s beard’, and ‘swear[s] like a bastard’. Furthermore, the researchers contend that swearers who use taboo words present with serious emotional problems that are beyond them. Birahima, and indeed the other child soldiers whose stories he tells, are caught in the same emotional trajectory.

But Biharima’s salvation from the ‘devils of his unconscious’(122) is expression through his linguistic activity. He admits that he does not swear

like civilised persons, because swearing among civilised persons has its forms and serves some social, interpersonal and civil functions. On the contrary, swearing among emotionally disordered persons, like child soldiers, pays no homage to civility but rather serves to inhibit pain and lessen emotional tension. Little wonder his story is heavily punctuated with swear words that carry scatological, malevolent and sexual implications – words like ‘*faforo!* (my father’s cock)’, ‘*gnamokode* (bastard)’. Although Birahima’s use of swear words represents the wounds of his mind and embodies his somatic distortions, which are realities of his militarised experience, they serve as a veritable source of emotional escape and pain inhibition.

Conclusion

Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated* is a strong creative treatise that presents a detailed account of how immediate and remote political factors contribute to the vulnerability of children in a war situation. Using the psychoanalytic theory of testimony and post-war memory in the analysis of the novel, the study underscores the implications of reading, listening and writing in the healing of war wounds and trauma. Indeed, our discussion of the major issues in the novel emphasised children’s gullibility in war times, the violation of their innocence and the need for their protection. Second, we also observed that the recipe for civil conflict, especially in Africa, is deeply etched in the political encroachment that many African states suffered at the hands of Europeans and that the broader contexts of international politics, directly or indirectly, fuel conflicts that are characterised with the militarisation of children. In this connection, Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated* represents a classical example of a war novel that is imbued with cross-disciplinary strengths and lessons that can facilitate healing and reintegration. In fact, the novel encompasses political, historical, philosophical, sociological, anthropological and literary studies. Third, we argued that reading and writing about conflicts and wars have the potency to heal psychological wounds and the trauma associated with them. Indeed, through reading, writing and listening to stories related to wars and violence, especially their consequences in society, former child soldiers and combatants can reinvigorate their hope for a new beginning in life and initiate a therapy of self-healing. Fourthly, we observe that former child soldiers and combatants who were hitherto initiated into the culture of violence can be given an opportunity to discharge the lethal impulses that had been repressed in their unconsciousness and facilitate healing of trauma through the free flow of thoughts, ideas and emotions.

On the basis of the aforementioned observations, we recommend the following. First, there is the need for former child soldiers and combatants

to be reintegrated into the society through the process of bibliotherapeutic reading of war novels that would assist them through the healing process. Second, since some civil wars in Africa have their roots in colonialism, we recommend that former child soldiers and combatants in particular and other Africans in general will benefit a lot from reading about the different strategies employed by former colonial administrators to instigate conflicts and wars in the continent. Third, since literature can mirror the past, we recommend that former child soldiers and combatants be exposed to quality literature that would provide healing for their trauma and emotion. Fourth, since healing can assist former child soldiers and combatants to discharge their bottled-up anger, fear, emotion and tendency for violence, we recommend traumatised persons be encouraged to embrace reading and writing as part of their healing process. Lastly, our major contribution to knowledge lies in our understanding that bibliotherapeutic plans are a veritable part of post-war strategies of rehabilitation and reintegration and that reading and writing about wars facilitate healings for traumatised victims of war and violence.

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