



Wars as Postcolonial African Illness in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*

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Abstract

There has always been a war somewhere in the world among *Homo sapiens*, allegedly the most advanced species in the universe. In Africa, right on the heels of colonialism and the celebration of independence loom the devastation and desolation of war. It is not a sweeping statement to conclude that everywhere colonialism has touched in Africa and let go, ruthless tribal wars have followed suit. The thematic preoccupation of the post-war literature is the training of children, mostly boys, to kill, in the form of the phenomenon of the 'child soldier'. This article argues that one of the extreme cases of geopolitical illness that Africa suffers is the prominence of war in the turbulent journeys of her nation-states to nationhood. The article also examines the psychological implications of wars and bloodshed on the lives of children, who ought to be protected, which results in illness behaviours. We explore these themes with close reference to Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*.

Keywords: Africa, *Beasts of No Nation*, child soldiers, despair, illness, Uzodinma Iweala, literature, postcolonialism, war.

Résumé

Quelque part dans le monde, il y a toujours une guerre entre *Homo sapiens*, la soi-disant espèce plus avancée de l'univers. En Afrique, dans la foulée du colonialisme et des indépendances, se profilent la dévastation et la désolation de la guerre. Il n'est pas radical d'en conclure que partout où le colonialisme

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a touché et puis abandonné l’Afrique, d’impitoyables guerres tribales ont pris le pas. La préoccupation thématique de la littérature d’après-guerre est l’entraînement d’enfants, pour la plupart des garçons, à tuer, créant le phénomène d’« enfant-soldat ». Cet article fait valoir que l’une des maladies géopolitiques dont souffre l’Afrique est l’importance de la guerre dans la turbulence de son évolution d’États-nations à nations. Le document examine également les implications psychologiques des guerres et de l’effusion de sang sur la vie des enfants, qui devraient en être protégés, créant des comportements pathologiques. Nous explorons ces thèmes en nous référant de près à l’ouvrage *Beasts of No Nation* d’Uzodinma Iweala.

Mots-clés : Afrique, *Beasts of No Nation*, enfants-soldats, désespoir, maladie, Uzodinma Iweala, littérature, postcolonialisme, guerre

Introduction

There has always been a war somewhere in the world among *Homo sapiens*, allegedly the most advanced species in the universe (Poster 2014). Literature concerning war on the continent of Africa, and its traumatic experience, is a growing field, offering valuable insights concerning war as a postcolonial African illness, the challenges faced by individuals and communities, and the prevalent use of child soldiers to prosecute wars.

War is a uniquely human scourge with complex biological, psychological, social and political determinants (Poster 2014; Gersovitz & Kriger 2013). The continent of Africa is rife with examples of turbulent histories in the majority of her nation-states, which have been captured in historical and literary works. These states include Mali, Libya, Chad, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Nigeria and Sudan, amongst others. Undoubtedly, the Nigerian Civil War and its effects on the Nigerian economy and political landscape remain fresh in the hearts of Nigerians. Its narrative has influenced the politics of the nation and the intellectual visions of several Nigerian writers, especially those who hail from a long line of war victims. For example, Chimalum Nwankwo (2008:3) affirms:

African writers have followed the pulse of the continent and chronicled the historical event and upheaval simply and persistently, quite often with great candour, directness, simplicity, and in many cases an inventiveness which does not lose sight of the prize, to remain, as in much of traditional Africa, the last moral bastion of the people.

Chinyere Nwahunanya (1997), in his *A Harvest From Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature*, argues that writers who have committed their creative artistry to war have, in the process of positioning

literature as that huge reflection of society, crafted their works into ‘... a compass for social re-direction’ (Nwahunanya 1997:14). The aim of such literary works, via the creative realities of death, suffering and trauma, or what aptly can be captured in psychological terms as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, is to help the reader into the realm where she/he critically reconsiders the causes and futility of wars and bloodshed, and then settles down to live in a post-war society.

Literature is an imaginary but plausible narrative which dramatises changes in society, human behaviour and relationships. The materials for literature are drawn from the writer’s experiences and observation of life in a society. The major concern of literature is the condition of people in society and how to re/tell this condition with symbols and language to shape people’s perception of the condition in a way that is meaningful. The book, *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala, is about the history of war in Africa and its psychological and behavioural implications for children involved in conflicts. From the point of view of the author, the impact of war and conflicts go beyond that of the individual soldier at the war front.

A striking feature of war in Africa has been the prevalence of child soldiers. This occurrence has been well documented in the literature. In a study on the involvement of child soldiers in conflicts in Africa, Munro (2016:121) argues that the practice ‘damaged masculinities’ and altered the accepted rules of engagement in wars. This view is echoed in contemporary writings about war, as in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), which shed light on troubled masculinity as a central representation of child (especially boy) soldiers (Abani 2007:121-122). Catarina Martins (2013:651-652) captures some of the conditions under which a child soldier operates:

Children involved in armed conflict are frequently killed or injured during combat or while carrying out other tasks. They are forced to engage in hazardous activities such as laying mines or explosives, as well as using weapons. Child soldiers are usually forced to live under harsh conditions with insufficient food and little or no access to healthcare. They are almost always treated brutally, subjected to beatings and humiliating treatment. Punishments for mistakes or desertion are often very severe. Girl soldiers are particularly at risk of rape, sexual harassment and abuse as well as being involved in combat and other tasks! (Martins 2013:652)

Inherent in the above description is the vulnerability, innocence and fragility that are part of the physical and psychological characteristics of children. Because of these, children are supposed to be protected, sheltered

and catered for by their parents in particular and society at large. However, at the outbreak of war, women and children are its first victims. Children are often recruited as combatants, taught to kill and to maim, and quickly assume the characteristics of savagery, barbarism, cruelty and brutality.

According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers' *Child Soldiers: Global Report* (2008:12), 'the military recruitment of children (under 18s) for deployment in hostilities is a much larger phenomenon, that still takes place in one form or another in at least 86 countries and territories worldwide.' Children are recruited into rebel/insurgent groups and armies, used in counter-insurgency operations by governments and employed as spies for intelligence gathering on behalf of governments. Many such children who survive wars are never the same, ever, again. Their psyches have been shattered, and, as a result, they find it difficult reintegrating into society.

In the case of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) as portrayed in *Beasts of No Nation*, Ojukwu, the Biafran hero, enjoyed broad respect, adulation and admiration, which inspired Igbo children and women to support the Biafran side (Onuoha 2014:20). However, the war compromised the sanity of the child soldiers and disrupted their natural development processes (Mastey 2017:39; Balcells & Kalyvas 2014; Cramer 2007). This is the thematic preoccupation of Uzodinma Iweala in his debut novel, *Beasts of No Nation*.

Iweala and other writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Dulue Mbachu have ostensibly responded to the challenge that 'writers, who had lived through the Biafran conflict, were too close to the suffering to write the definitive accounts of the war, and that the task would fall to later generations' who were more or less 'distant' from the event (Hawley 2008:15; De St. Jorre 1972; Denov 2010; Emenyonu 2008; Felman 1982). In *Beasts of No Nation*, a child soldier narrates his harrowing, traumatic story. Set in an unnamed African country, the protagonist, Agu, who has just been initiated into manhood, tells of an impending war. He watches his mother, sister and the entire womenfolk of his village being rescued by the UN while the men are left behind to fight and defend the village. Not long afterwards, the anticipated war comes and Agu would see '... bullet making his father to dance everywhere with his arm raising high to the sky like he is praising God' (Iweala 2006:89). Having witnessed his father dance metaphorically and in actual fact to the cruel rhythm of death, and with nowhere else to go, Agu is forced to join a rebel group as a child soldier. Agu is initially unwilling to join the rebels. However, after his father's death, he has no option but to join; he becomes seized by rage and carries out war atrocities so cruel that even the Greek gods tremble. This is an example of what war does to the human mind.

As a child combatant, Agu is forced to commit gruesome killings under the influence of drugs. He is also sexually abused by his commandant. Time and again, Agu struggles with his shattering psyche as he tries to hold on to his humanity. He suffers painful hallucinations that threaten his sanity. His inner resolve to battle the dark weight of trauma is what pulls him through his experience as a child soldier. In the end, his commander is shot dead and, once again, the path is open for Agu and his fellow child combatant, Strika, to walk into freedom in search of their humanity. Sadly, Strika does not make it through the exodus. His spirit is broken and crushed beyond survival by his excruciating experiences. As both friends walk through to freedom, Strika slumps into his own demise. Only Agu is able to complete this journey. He symbolises the very few child soldiers who manage to survive the horrible ordeals of war. Agu, as the tragic hero, lost so much to the war but he fails to lose his humanity because he consciously holds on to it and life. As the tragic hero, he lives to tell the story of the war because he engages with what psychoanalysis refers to as 'sublimation'.

Literature Review on the Child Soldier Phenomenon in Africa

History and literature are intertwined and can complement each other in understanding of occurrences in society. The child soldier phenomenon in literature is a good example of how writers can interrogate historical or quasi-historical events, shedding light on tragedy, trauma and the possibility for healing in parts of Africa where civil wars have devastated the socio-economic and political spheres of people. Studies have shown that homicide and other crime rates rise during civil wars (Ghobarah, Huth & Russett 2003:192; Kalyvas 2006; Keegan & Bull 2006; Lacina 2006; Pearn 1999; Roessler 2011; Ron 2005; Rosenau 1964). In this connection, child soldier narratives are meant to address the concept of troubled or 'adulterated' childhood in the affected areas (Mastey 2017:39). The Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War), which occurred between 1967 and 1970, involved the use of child soldiers (Stremlau 1977). Indeed, children of various ages fought alongside adults on the battlefield. These children did not have the 'luxury' of being in the classroom since most of the classrooms had been converted into 'war rooms' for the use of soldiers or internally displaced persons. Moreover, most of these child soldiers went through life in the three years that the war lasted not under the supervision of parents, relatives or teachers, but instead under the command of their military leaders on the battlefield. Expectedly, most of the child soldiers faced an uncertain future and their elevation was most times based on their military exploits rather than their age or period of enlistment.

While the military use of children in battles is not a common phenomenon in Africa, non-state combatants—such as the Boko Haram of Nigeria, rebels in the DRC, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Biafran forces—often recruited child soldiers for strategic reasons. However, Mastey (2017:39) believes that a few of the child soldier narratives appear to be a ‘sensational depiction’ of the lost childhoods of child soldier characters, thereby obscuring the apparent impact of the historicity of the child soldier phenomenon in African studies.

In the same vein, Munro (2016:122) quoted Eleni Coundouriotis, who argued that the child soldier narrative ‘dehistoricizes the politically lively and locally relevant African war novel in order to cater to the Western markets that have come to dominate African publishing’. He also cited Maureen Moynagh’s argument that the image of the child soldier is ‘designed to encourage the “sympathetic intervention” of the viewer’ (Munro 2016:40). Based on this perspective, Munro (ibid) argues that Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* (2006), Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), Grace Akallo’s *Girl Soldier* (2007), Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog: A Novel* (2005) and Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah is not Obligated* (2007), among others, were ostensibly motivated by the market and taste of the West.

Catarina Martins’ (2013:650, 649) work has demonstrated that since the late 1990s, the issue of children’s participation in armed conflict has attracted increasing attention from scholars and other observers across the world because of its humanitarian implications, and that there is possibly an international and a humanitarian agenda behind the proliferation of child soldier narratives. Martins (2013:650, 671) interrogates the hegemonic and homogenised representations of child soldiers in literary and cinematographic works from the North and calls for a counter-hegemonic discourse in the understanding of the child soldier narrative in African studies, maintaining that the ‘northern construction of Africa and the Africans has replaced Africa and the Africans and made them inexistent on the other side of an invisible abyssal line’.

In all, we must bear in mind that while literary works on child soldiers may expose the effects of wars and conflicts on the childhood of child soldiers, they are not actual historical accounts of everyday life or the conditions in which child soldiers operated during civil wars in Africa. *Beasts of No Nation* serves to illustrate the creative and literary interpretation of the Nigerian Civil War, and is purely an amalgam of fact and creative writing, even though it does show how the wartime experiences of child soldiers can disrupt their natural socio-economic, and psychological processes.

Beasts of no Nation, like the other works mentioned above, may be grouped under the category of ‘new African novels’, which employ a unique methodology that captures the themes of children in war situations, violence, trauma and distress to illustrate the cataclysmic effects of civil wars on state survival in Africa (Adesanmi & Dunton 2008:viii-x; Salehyan 2009; Stremlau 1977; Williams, 2011). Adesanmi and Dunton (2008:x) likened the situation to an ‘obsessive engagement with the nation’, to create ‘the sense of an unfinished nation’ or troubled nation-building efforts. Lastly, they observe that a major characteristic of the new African novelists is the urge to ‘re-narrativize’ civil war events either as witnesses or as secondhand observers, with little regard to historical realities. What should be noted is that the third-generation African writers have benefitted from the antecedence of works such as Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir*, Ferdinand Oyono’s *Une vie de boy* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child*, in which young characters are used to demonstrate acts of resistance in their different societies.

Diagnosing the sick and traumatic nation

In *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala presents to his readers the tragedy of a traumatised nation as narrated in the first person by the protagonist of the novel, Agu. Agu has survived the harrowing experience of war because he unconsciously relates to what Sigmund Freud termed sublimation, in other words a ‘talking cure’. This ‘talking cure’ simply refers to what literature describes as catharsis (as embedded in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy), that is the purgation of emotional tension after an overwhelming experience. The term psychoanalysis also refers to a type of treatment where a psychoanalyst, having listened to the patient, formulates opinions with which they explain the unconscious basis of the patients’ symptoms, health and character problems. The healing process involves the patient telling the psychoanalyst various thoughts and feelings. The psychoanalyst listens carefully, formulates and then intervenes in order to help the analysed develop insight into unconscious factors that cause her/his problems. Psychoanalysis aims to unearth wishes and emotions from prior unresolved conflicts, in order to help the patient and resolve lingering problems.

In the words of Robert Hemmings (2005:109), ‘Psychoanalysis meets psychological pain with narrative. As a discourse, psychoanalysis was itself founded upon narrative.’ Hemmings, in the above statement, corroborates Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer’s position that narrative is a major therapeutic method in the treatment of hysterical suffering based on the catharsis of the ‘talking cure’. The earliest articulation of this, according to Hemmings (2005:109), is presented in the form of ‘case histories about patients written

by physicians'. Freud (1991:58) further stated that hysterical patients 'suffer mainly from reminiscences, very often the reminiscences of traumatic events in the past'. In the same vein, Hemmings (2005:109) claims:

The narrative exchange between patient and physician in the therapeutic models that prevailed in early twentieth-century psychoanalysis was typically mediated by the physician through the case study, over which he had absolute narrative and interpretive control in spite of the patient's resistance.

While narrative plays a crucial role in restoring total wellbeing, Freud (1971:379) was of the opinion that no matter how 'complete' and 'self-contained' the patient's narrative seemed to be, there must be inevitable 'gaps and imperfections'. These 'lacunas' should be followed deep into this dissociated memory, which is the realm of the repressed traumatic experience (Freud (1971:380). Buttressing this, Hemmings (2005:109) avers: 'Primarily a blank or missing portion of a narrative "lacuna" comes from the Latin word meaning "hole" or "pit" ... associations which inflect the narrative gap with a spatialized dimension consistent with archeological metaphors that characterize Freud's conceptualizing of the psyche.'

It then becomes the responsibility of the psychoanalyst to carefully fill the gaps with supporting interpretations after discovering the patient's lacunas. This will draw up the dissociated memory from the murky depths of the unconscious to the consciousness and to the surface of the narrative. This corresponding case history constructed by the psychoanalyst is what Hemmings (2005:110) termed 'sur-narrative.' He further clarified it thus:

However, there are also cases in twentieth-century modernist literature of patients writing retrospectively of their psychoanalytic encounters to create their own sur-narratives. The sur-narratives of writer-patients often take the form not of case studies per se, but of homages. Lacking the genetic interpretative imperative of the case-study, patient sur-narratives do not so much fill in the gaps or seek to retrieve repressed dissociated memories as cover them over with layers of idealized memories of the physician-therapist, relayers replete with their own imperfections and lacunas.

The sur-narrative is not designed to conduct the reader back into the quagmire of trauma and pain; it is rather directed towards the possibility of spirituality, a purgation of harmful memory and pain.

Following the above, we may view a literary text as, perhaps, above all else, committed to the vision of 'diagnosing' society's social and cultural ills. A large part of African literary output is hinged on trauma—the trauma of colonisation, the trauma of failed independence and the trauma of cultural displacement experienced by Africans living in the diaspora. This depressing

reality is a strong reflection of the continental psyche of Africa (Owonibi 2012; Osinowo, Sunmola & Balogun, 1999; Owolabi & Ojedokun 2017). The testimony of the artist is the voice of the society that is being artistically captured. The continued prominence of civil wars on the continent tends to make one see Africa as a traumatised patient. Kurtz (2014:422), in his essay entitled, 'Literature, Trauma, and the African Moral Imagination', traces the initial testimony of trauma on the African literary canvas to the publication of Chinua Achebe's remarkable *Things Fall Apart*. He describes Achebe's debut novel as the '... story of a community left in fragmented disarray because of an external blow that overwhelms its ability to respond'. It is, in other words, 'a trauma narrative'.

When one reviews the African imaginative canvas, one comes face to face with the trauma of a continent. The African literary artist is unconsciously committed to the social vision of re-telling the traumatic journey of African nation-states from discovery of self to nationhood (Owonibi 2012). A consideration of the titles of African novels speaks volumes about the centrality of trauma to the literary and cultural consciousness of Africa—*Things Fall Apart; Weep Not, Child; Nervous Conditions; The Famished Road; Fragments; God's Bits of Wood*, among many others.

Trauma can roughly be conceived as a 'wound' which depresses the psyche, alters the perception of reality and affects the communication of extreme experiences. This idea was first explored in a literary context in Carthy Caruth's *Unchained Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and Kali Tal's *Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1995). Carthy Caruth's current of thought is rooted in psychoanalysis and aligned with poststructuralism. It submitted that trauma, as a crisis in the unconscious, is manifested by complex contradictions in the communication of experience and language. The victim suffers an inability to communicate extreme experience, whether linguistically or semiotically. Since the inception of Caruth's views on trauma, the phenomenon has evolved into a theory in literary criticism, one that has been heavily shaped by semiotic, rhetorical and social concerns.

In 2001, the historian, Dominick LaCapra, published *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, wherein he attempted to draw up a correlation between history, trauma and writing. In his book, LaCapra posits that a victim of trauma would react to extreme experience by denial, acting out or working through. He describes 'acting-out' as a situation where an individual is hounded by, arrested by and forced to relive the traumatic experiences of the past. When this occurs, the victim is a forcefully dislocated reality and distanced into the past. LaCapra goes further to describe 'working-through'

as an articulatory practice. In this process, the victim oscillates between the past and the present, recalling the memories of the past and attempting to chart the future. This reaction, identified in literature as a stage termed 'denouement', or 'point of resolution', helps the individual to stay afloat of reality and to keep a balance between the past, the present and the future. It is within this frame that this study is ideologically located. It examines the oscillation of Agu between his past, his present and his future as a picture of the traumatic experience of African psyche in space and time.

Matured innocence: The struggle within

David Rosen (2005:3) submits that 'war is a constant companion in human life'. Indeed, societies have frequently plotted systematic war strategies against one another. In the bigger perspective, wars have erupted within and among communities so often that one can say that the end of wars among the human race is almost impossible (Osiki 2016:290; Osiki 2014: 212-226; Osiki 2021:88-99). Although the utopian vision of the UN and world leaders is the actualisation of a peaceful and warless world, and laws that criminalise and punish war crimes have been drawn up and enforced, the active pursuit of peace has yielded an almost insufficient progress and humanitarian organisations have argued that the prevalence of child soldiers in war situations has contributed largely to the slow realisation of the UN's utopian anticipation for the world. They have sought to press home various significations of children at war. Besides, humanitarian struggles against the reality of child soldiers rest on the fact that war, especially modern warfare, is gruesome and that vulnerable children fall prey to unmerciful adults who recruit them as soldiers. Indeed, the young and strong are usually the centre of attraction during warfare recruitment. Very young people in pre-industrial and postcolonial societies are known to have entered into the rituals, actions and dramas of war in childhood.

Following the advent of twentieth-century humanitarian organisations, the iconography of children wielding guns in war times has been used to fuel debates and campaigns against the use of children in war. Children are obviously seen as innocent and vulnerable, and, as such, should be protected from becoming victims of the atrocities of war. Another representation is the threat that children involved in wars pose to civilised societies. It is argued that when children are exposed to or engaged in wars, they become dangerous sociopaths who are capable of unleashing intentional and untold terror on civilians. Proponents who champion this trajectory argue that children do not willingly participate in war. Like the case of the Jewish Child Partisans, children become soldiers as a matter of absolute necessity. Either they allow

themselves to be recruited in order to save their lives or they remain as civilians and die. Upon their conscription, they become victims of circumstance. As Myriam Denov (2010:8) puts it, ‘within this construction, children associated with fighting forces have been depicted as the pawns of deceitful yet powerful warlords, as well as broader undemocratic regimes and social forces.’

It is within this trajectory that Agu, the protagonist of *Beasts of No Nation*, locates himself. Having experienced the cruel death of his father by the merciless bullets of rebels, fear cripples him in the dark place where he hides to save himself from terror. Unfortunately, the rebels discover him. First, they accuse him of being a spy. Agu knows what the consequence of being a spy is and so he denies being one. Next, they ask him if he wants to be a soldier. In Agu’s own words, he has no reason not to be a soldier since he could be severely punished by the commandant for refusing to be enlisted. Second, the other child soldiers around him would put their eyes on him and send negative reports about him to the commandant and there would be no hiding place for him. Third, he wants to be seen as a brave boy like the other child soldiers around him. That is the reason he tries so hard not to cry because that would portray weakness. Fourth, he needs the material and psychological benefits associated with being a soldier, such as being provided with shelter and a brand new military uniform like the other boys. Agu speaks of the commandant asking him, again:

Do you want to be soldier, he is asking me in soft voice. Do you know what that is meaning? I am thinking of before war when I am in the town with my mother and I am seeing men walking with brand-new uniform and shiny sword holding gun and shouting left right, left right, behind trumpet and drum, like how they are doing on parade. (Iweala 2006:12-3)

He answers yes and is immediately enlisted into the rebel army.

As Myriam Denov submits, children who become child soldiers are pawns of powerful warlords. They become soldiers because they have no choice. Most times, they are deceived into believing that becoming a soldier remains the only way of avenging the death of their loved ones who have died in the war. The vulnerability, innocence and ignorance of children make it easier for them to be recruited as soldiers. Herein is the first geopolitical illness of Uzodinma’s fictional society—its inability to protect the lives of its citizens.

In medical parlance, when the body is biologically ‘disequilibriumed’, it is unable to protect itself and its internal organs from the attack of sickness. Sociologists like Talcott Parsons advocated that sick individuals are usually unable to help, protect and provide for themselves. Like a disease, war conquers and crushes the defences of Agu’s society. The rebels come to his village and they wipe out the men who should defend the place. Agu narrates ‘... I am

seeing arm and leg everywhere ... I am seeing men lying everywhere with gun lying next to them' (Iweala 2006:89). It is obvious that war destroys Agu's society, leaving him as the only surviving and vulnerable child. He has no choice but to join the rebel group and make them his new family. The rebel group leader promises to fight the enemy that killed his father and this consoles Agu a little. But young Agu is ignorant of the fact that it is these same people who killed his father and wiped out the men of his village. Left with no defence and remembering his father's 'dance' under the murderous stings of bullets, it is easy for rage to build up in Agu and even simpler for him to say 'yes' to the rebels. Therefore, he succumbs to the illness that destroys his society.

All child soldiers, upon their recruitment, begin a journey from innocence to brutality in their wartime experiences. This is an integral part of the iconography of child soldiers and, perhaps, of Iweala's social vision for his work. Innocent children are conscripted into fighting squads where they are educated about the cause they are fighting for. Usually, these children are deluded by false justifications for war and the thirst for bloodshed. Interestingly, Africa is rife with historical examples where many children have been recruited into armed groups. With protracted wars having broken out in countries like Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Chad, Burundi, Somalia, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo, children have been recruited either voluntarily or forcefully.

Agu is made to believe that he is fighting the enemy who killed his father with bullets. He therefore vents his anger on his victims. On one occasion, he and Strika come across a mother and her daughter who were not fortunate enough to have been evacuated by the UN. In the midst of the torture of their victims, Agu remembers his mother and his sister. He narrates his resistance to the thoughts of pity and mercy that sneak into his mind: 'I am standing outside myself. I am grabbing this woman and her daughter. They are not my mother and my sister. I am telling them, it is enough. This is the end,' (Iweala 2006:60). His rage is let loose when 'Commandant is saying that she is enemy, she is stealing our food, and killing my family because she is enemy.' The result is tragic and immediate.

It appears that one of the most potent ways by which warlords win the confidence and trust of child soldiers is the expert use of brainwashing. Child combatants are made to believe that violence is the only way to reclaim what has been lost to 'enemies' and as such, they must be willing to lay down their lives for justice. They come to believe they have the licence to maim, kill and commit unimaginable atrocities against fellow children, women and grown-up men (Iweala 2006:63).

The brainwashing takes on a political dimension, too. Young LaMamo is recruited by an armed group in Libya as a mercenary. He informs his brother of the political classes they attend at night. Sometimes these are held by important people, such as Charles Taylor of Liberia and Gaddafi of Libya, who brainwash them into believing that their struggles as child soldiers will help to liberate Africa from internal colonialism orchestrated by bad leaders, unbridled capitalism operated by the ruling elite and poor governance promoted by visionless political leaders (Iweala 2006:67). It is important to acknowledge the role of Charles Taylor in the Liberian crisis and especially the terrorist groups that Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi trained in Chad.

The plight of children and their experience of the atrocities of war, whether as participants or supporters, are what inform the title of *Uzodinma*. Iweala's novel and which he manifests in the characters of Agu and Strika. In earnest, Agu learns the life of a soldier. He begins to develop an affinity for the regimented moves of older soldiers. They educate him on how to kill without compassion as represented by the advice given by 'Luftenant', who has advised them not to think twice before maiming and killing people they consider their enemies. Indeed, 'Luftenant' instructs the child soldiers not to give a second thought to their murderous mission as that will make them weak and 'unsoldier-like' (Iweala 2006:15).

Very soon Agu experiences the killing of an enemy. He experiences the trauma of torture right before his eyes. He witnesses the commandant kick and piss over the enemy. Commandant says to Agu, '... see how we are dealing with this enemy' (Iweala 2006:24). The continued torturing of the enemy is an example of the hardened and remorseless life of soldiers, and witnessing it is a form of indoctrination. Such training techniques, according to Myriam Denov (2010:102), serve to '... minimise resistance by instilling compliance without question'. Agu is transmogrified when he is told to kill the enemy. Terror grips him but he has to do it. Commandant says to him: 'You want to be a soldier eh? Well—kill him. KILL HIM NOW!' (Iweala 2006:23).

Agu refuses and Commandant '... is simply taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of the enemy's head and I am feeling like electricity is running through my whole body' (Iweala 2006:25). Like a drugged soldier, Agu embraces the brutality and he begins to cut the enemy with his sharp machete while the other soldiers stand back laughing. He is joined by his fellow child soldier, Strika, and together '... we are just beating him and cutting him while everybody is laughing ... the enemy's body is having deep red cut everywhere and his forehead is looking just crushed so his whole face is not even looking like face because his head is broken everywhere and there is just blood, blood, blood' (Iweala 2006:26).

The psychological impact on young Agu is enormous. This singular act is powerful enough to smash his psyche, but it is held together by his inner desire to retain his humanity. He says he wants to stop hurting people as the thought of it makes him vomit uncontrollably and feels like someone is using a hammer to hit his head. Yet, Commandant reminds him that maiming and killing people is like falling in love and the moment you are into it, it becomes difficult to quit. However, Agu is not sure the feeling he has within him amounts to falling in love because he is not really sure of the emptiness he feels within him (Iweala 2006:26).

Violence in war situations can be compared to the dynamics of illnesses. Victims of violence, like patients, enter into roles that they do not negotiate. Their behaviour during the violence of war is in stark contrast to their civility. After the killing, Agu takes time to convince himself that he is not a bad boy, that he is doing what is right because soldiers are meant to kill enemies. He constantly battles with the condemnation that stems from within him, struggling on all counts not to let that condemnation overpower him.

Although the reality of war can be conceptualised as an absolutely social and geopolitical phenomenon that is manifest in the 'disequilibriumed' pulse of societies, the prevalence of violence, of brutality and of dehumanisation are personal phenomena which are induced by such societies. The effect of war is shattering for the tender psyches of children. Usually, for successful indoctrination into the culture of violence and rage, child soldiers are made to use drugs. Myriam Denov (2010:100), in *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, submits that '... there is evidence that the RUF strategically incorporated drug use into children's preparation for combat, particularly alcohol, the injection of cocaine, and the ingestion of gun powder.' In support of her view, she cites her interview with a forty-one-year-old former RUF commander during the course of her research. The commander explains the rationale and effects of the use of drugs among child combatants:

'We were very much aware of the effects of drugs on children ... Drugs and alcohol were prevalent and served as [a] prerequisite for combat activities. Fighting with a gun is not an easy task because it puts so much pressure on the mind. So we needed to free the mind by taking drugs, and it worked.'
(Former adult male RUF commander) (Denov 2010:100)

As Agu and Strika travel from innocence to brutality, they are introduced to the ingestion of gunpowder as a means of desensitisation, of easing their minds from the pressures and traumas of violence. Agu narrates how every one of them is encouraged to consume 'gun juice', a kind of hard drug that 'tastes like bullet, rock, pencil, sweet and sugar cane combined' and makes the child soldiers feel stronger, braver and easily lose their sense of humanity and compassion for

people. Under the influence of this substance the throats, foreheads and hands of the child soldiers burn like the 'fire of gun' and it makes them stop at nothing to maim and kill once they are given the command to do so (Iweala 2006:55-6).

Agu and Strika, under the influence of gunpowder, kill and maim gleefully. There is an inner urge in them that only the flow of blood can satisfy. Agu admits that he has perfected the art of slitting open pregnant women '... to be seeing who is a girl and who is a boy' (Iweala 2006:59). Under the influence of gunpowder, Strika rapes a woman who is old enough to be his mother: 'Strika is pulling down his short and showing that he is man to this woman while I am holding her one leg and another soldier is holding the other. She is screaming' (Iweala 2006:60). He then brutally amputates the arm of his victim's daughter. She dies immediately. Agu then indiscriminately uses his machete on the woman's body after he is told that she is the enemy who killed his father. The effects of drugs on child soldiers during war times can be conceptualised as another manifestation of illness behaviour.

Child soldiers also suffer victimisation at the hands of their warlords. Agu and Strika's victimisation takes the form of sexual abuse. They are frequently abused by their commander. Agu narrates his ordeal, especially how they are forced to take off their clothes and are subjected to different kinds of sexual molestations by Commandant and the unit leaders. On their part, the commander and other rebel leaders brainwash the child soldiers to believe that rendering sexual services is part of their duties and responsibilities to their military leaders because they are supposed to 'obey the last order' (Iweala 2006:103).

Sexual victimisation amounts to rape; Agu and Strika's victimisation is sodomy. Although the reader is not let into details of the psychological trauma that accompanies the violation of Agu's and Strika's sexual integrity, it is clear that the children detest the act but have to submit because of the insecurity of their lives. There is evidence that they could be killed if they refuse to submit their bodies. The first time he is assaulted by his commander, Agu narrates that he was helpless and could not struggle, knowing that otherwise he would be killed by the rebels, even though the act hurt him physically and psychologically. On one occasion, the commander put palm oil all over Agu to make the process easier, though it made him feel that 'his bottom is burning like it has fire in it' (Iweala 2006:104).

Strika is not left out of the abuse. He scribbles on the floor: 'God will punish him' (Iweala 2006:106). The fear of death keeps the young boys from resisting the sexual abuse. There is also evidence that the commander coerces the children to participate actively in their own sexual assault. This sort of participation acts on the psyche to break down their resistance and to transform them into lovers and perpetrators of such acts. Agu reports that

Commandant is forcing him to touch him sexually especially in sensitive places with his 'hand, tongue and lip' even though he is not interested nor in the mood for such behaviour (Iweala 2006:103-4).

Wartime denies children the opportunity to live in a healthy environment. Rather, children make their livelihoods in circumstances of stark poverty, despair and victimisation. As a result, many child soldiers never make it to the end of the war. The prevalence of war means the presence of geopolitical disequilibrium. War is also a social, political and cultural illness. Its rippling effects are manifest in the behavioural deviance of its victims.

Between shattered psyches and sane minds: Resilient hope, redemption anticipated

In the fourth chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, entitled 'Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders', Frantz Fanon (1995:252) examines the effects of colonial war on Algerians. He argues that the urge to repress unpleasant events in the memory is no match for the powerful attack of such events on mental processes. Consequently, these memories, having been denied access to the conscious, interrupt the mental coordination of the victim and produce disorders. These disorders, in their wake, do not hesitate to attack the ego '... practically always leaving as their sequel a weakness which is almost visible to the naked eyes'. To cure such victims, Fanon tried to get them to talk about the experiences that torment them. This is a strategy to let out unpleasant memories which, once expressed, bring mental calm to the victim, an indication that some sort of healing has begun. This is Agu's strategy to keep hope alive and anticipate redemption.

Agu's ability to negotiate his humanity brings him through the harrowing experiences of war; it is also what keeps him at an advantage, unlike his friend, Strika. On several occasions, Agu notes that Strika is always quiet. In fact, throughout Agu's narration, Strika speaks just once. Strika's parents were killed before his very eyes and he was conscripted into the fighting squad to save his life. He was disoriented by the emotional trauma of seeing his parents die and the brutalities of war. Agu narrates that as a soldier who maims and kills recklessly, he realises the trauma his own father would have gone through in the hands of his killers. He says the picture of his father's painful death that appears to him is that of a man who is not given the chance to cry or make any noise or sound before he eventually dies. When Agu asks Strika about the murder of his parents, Strika is mute but punches the air above his head to indicate that he wishes the war had never started (Iweala 2006:46-7).

Strika's silence is a testament to his shattered psyche, as is his brutality. His urge to vent his anger forces him to rape a woman who is old enough to be his mother. He has no friend in the camp except Agu, and both friends communicate with their eyes only. But Agu appears to be more skilled at managing his emotions. When things go awry and the hope of surviving dwindles, he says, 'When it is so, we are really all just waiting to die, I am still sadding too much. I am not liking to be sad because being sad is what happens to you before you are becoming mad' (Iweala 2006:93). When the sickening thoughts of his continued service to his commandant as a sex object flood his mind, he begins '... thinking as many good things I can think because if you are thinking good thing, nothing bad is happening to you' (Iweala 2006:100). He uses thoughts of his past life to balance his present predicament. He holds on to his dreams for a positive future after the war. He dialogues with his almost defeated mind and arms it with positive possibilities. He is filled with the thought of what to do if he survives the war. He plans to go to university to study a course that will make him useful to his society. This includes the possibility of becoming an engineer because he likes how their mechanics fixed their military trucks. At the same time, he wants to be a medical doctor because he wants to have the opportunity to help and save lives instead of ending them so that he can be forgiven for all his atrocities as a child soldier (Iweala 2006:94).

At the rehabilitation centre, Agu is taken through a procedure that encourages him to keep talking about his experiences, to keep letting out the repressed monstrous thoughts that are capable of destabilising him further. This talking-cure therapy leads to 'sublimation'. Healing is embedded in the talking process. Agu realises that things have somewhat changed—Commandant is dead, and there is no more shooting and fighting, only calm. But then, the memory of his best friend, Strika, hounds him and he regrets the events leading to the death of Strika whom he considered a close ally who protected him from 'all the thing trying to kill him' just as he also protected him (Iweala 2006:174).

In the midst of his hallucinations, Agu clings to the strength of love to pull him through. Although war makes him lose his moral sanity and religious piety, Agu is still clear about the past, before the war began and the future. He is still clear about the love that existed in his family and in his village. He knows that a normal society is governed by love, that killing and maiming are not normal. His hope for ultimate redemption survives the war unbroken; it is captured in the closing part of his narration when he relates that the doctor at the rehabilitation centre allows him to tell her his feelings and his thoughts about his future, especially his dream to go to university. He also tells her of his wish for oblivion in the face of his

recurring war memory, and how he plans to overcome it. Lastly, he tells her how he wishes to forget his past and live in the present so that he can be happy once more in his life (Iweala 2006:175-7).

Conclusion

This article, under the literary gaze, discusses how the concept of illness can be applied to the results of devastating socio-economic and political realities that shatter the psyches of individuals. It explores how physical illnesses and behaviours that can be considered forms of social deviation are induced more by issues of socio-political significance. Such behaviours may turn out to be threats to nationhood, freedom and order.

Using Iweala's social vision, one realises that the prevalence of civil wars in Africa continues to boost behavioural deviation and deny national order and true nationhood. Iweala tries to capture the conscience of his characters as he sets out the conflicts in his story, which he sustains with an engaging use of suspense. He uses this literary technique in order to drive home the message of his story (Hawley 2008:22). The prevalence of civil war shatters Commandant's superego, that 'awesome, punitive voice of conscience' (Eagleton 2010:136), as he remorselessly recruits, trains and rapes his child combatants, Agu and Strika. Under such socio-political circumstances, all traits of morality, conscience, law and religious belief evaporate from the souls of individuals. Agu and Strika come to be acquainted with the horrors of violence and bloodshed. They brutally kill, maim and rape. They are evidence that illness behaviours are strong manifestations of socio-political chaos and vice versa. Using the device of narration, in the application of the psychoanalytic talking cure, the traumatised is able to access healing as he re/tells his story. This aligns with Hawley's (2008:16) submission that fiction or literature generally, similar to time and art, may by default become 'the only effective means to digest the poison of the past, and to slowly heal from within the damage that has been done.' In conclusion, it is true that Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* glorifies the virtues of the war hero, but the book may be read as an anti-war story, with a message for people in all times.

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