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# Struggling the Beast

## Child Soldiers in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*

Ulrich Pallua<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* from 2005 and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* from 2007 both deal with war and the traumatizing experience of child soldiers. Referring to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Stonebridge claims, 'identity begins with a trauma, a wound in the psyche of which we cannot speak, but upon which we nonetheless fixate in our imperfect memories, fictions, repetitions, and compulsions.'<sup>2</sup> In the paper I will analyse how war forces Agu in *Beasts of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah in *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* to leave childhood behind and how violence, killing, and sexual abuse profoundly impact on the boys' rehabilitation process. This process in most cases is a lengthy and challenging struggle to break a vicious circle, that of the bonding with supposed protectors and leaders.

### KEYWORDS:

African Literature, Trauma Studies, Child Soldiers

## Struggling the Beast

Historical studies prove that 'the armies of the West were filled with 'boy soldiers' from at least the Middle Ages through World War I. Their 'nobility' and 'sacrifice' in battle were often publicly celebrated.' It thus shows that 'the chronological boundaries between childhood and youth and youth and adulthood are highly varied and rooted in the historical experience of each society and culture, and that in many instances, childhood and military life are not understood as either incompatible or contradictory.'<sup>3</sup> Based on the 'Straight-18' position concerning the rights of the child, 'childhood begins at birth and ends at age 18. From this perspective, a child soldier is any person below 18 years of age who is recruited or used by an armed force or armed group.'<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this paper is to show how the two main characters in the two novels are forcefully recruited by the armed forces, how they are manipulated and used by their

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<sup>2</sup> Lyndsey Stonebridge: Theories of Trauma, in: Marina MacKay (Ed.): The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II, Cambridge 2009, pp. 194–206, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Rosen: Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood, in: *American Anthropologist, New Series*, vol. 109, 2007, no. 2, pp. 296–306, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Rosen, *Child Soldiers: A Reference Handbook*, Santa Barbara 2012, pp. 14–15.

recruiters, and how their vulnerability is exploited to ‘*compel[ling] new recruits to kill family, friends, or covillagers in macabre ritual acts to ensure that the child is permanently alienated and separated from family, home, and community life.*’<sup>5</sup>

Since Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* is set in an unnamed country<sup>6</sup>, it is crucial to contextualize Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Sierra Leone’s civil war* broke out in March 1991 when the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia.<sup>7</sup> According to Denov, the:

*‘RUF initially claimed to be a political movement promoting ‘liberation’, ‘democracy’, and ‘a new Sierra Leone of freedom, justice and equal opportunities for all’. Despite the revolutionary language, the RUF in reality was a loosely consolidated organization of largely disaffected young people that wreaked murderous havoc on the country.’*<sup>8</sup>

The civil war raged for 11 years and had far-reaching effects on the country, its economy, and most importantly on the population itself. The impact of the war was most traumatic for children under the age of 18 who either joined the *Revolutionary United Front* (RUF) or other groups voluntarily or were recruited by coercion. ‘*The RUF, in particular, was known for forcing children to commit atrocities, including murder, against neighbors and loved ones in order to indoctrinate new recruits and sever community ties.*’<sup>9</sup> According to Tunde Zack-Williams, ‘*between 5,000 and 10,000 children*’<sup>10</sup> fought in the civil war. ‘*Children’s marginalized status made them easy prey for thuggery operations, and eventually for deployment as combatants, labourers, spies. [...] For many children, the power of the gun appeared to be a means to alter the status of perpetual poverty and despair.*’<sup>11</sup> According to Catarina Martins, ‘*intervention in the name of children*’<sup>12</sup> requires two perspectives, that of the North and that of the South. From a northern perspective, that is a Westernized European/American perspective, ‘*the failure of the African states and societies to guarantee a ‘universal right’ of children is presented in such a way that it reinforces the need for paternalist action by the North, which will save the South from itself.*’<sup>13</sup> Viewed from a northern perspective it means that in such accounts children, in most cases first-person narrators, describe how they are forced to join the rebels/army, how according to the northern

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<sup>5</sup> Rosen, *Child Soldiers*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> The title is a reference to Fela Kuti’s song *Beasts of no nation* in which he talks about a ‘craze world’, about Nigeria’s government calling its people ‘useless’, ‘senseless’, and ‘indisciplined’, and the Western United Nations being ‘animals in human skin’.

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the historical context of the RUF see: Ibrahim Abdualh: *Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone*, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 36, 1998, no. 2, pp. 203–235.

<sup>8</sup> Myriam Denov: *Coping with the trauma of war: Former child soldiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone*, in: *International Social Work*, vol. 53, 2010, no. 6, pp. 791–806, p. 792.

<sup>9</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt/Jessica Agnew-Blais/Stephen E. Gilman/David R. Williams/B. Heidi Ellis: *Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychosocial adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone*, in: *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 70, 2010, no. 1, pp. 17–26, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Tunde Zack-Williams: *When Children Become Killers: Child Soldiers in the Civil War in Sierra Leone*, in: Ciandi Fernando/Michel Ferrari (Eds.), *Handbook of Resilience in Children of War*, New York 2013, pp. 83–94, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Denov, *Coping*, p. 792.

<sup>12</sup> Catarina Martins: *The dangers of the single story: Child-soldiers in literary fiction and film*, in: *Childhood*, vol. 18, 2011, no. 4, pp. 434–446, p. 436.

<sup>13</sup> Martins, *dangers*, pp. 436–437.

perspective ‘barbaric’ and ‘inhumane’ atrocities are committed in the name of war, and that all these ex-child soldiers ‘*want peace and the chance to go back to school or to a ‘lost childhood.’*”<sup>14</sup> The northern position is thus considered the benchmark against which to judge how Africa is inextricably depended on this northern representation and help. The southern perspective – in this case the two novels that are discussed here – challenges such a view by using different techniques in narrating the story and also by the “creation of a particular language by the child” identified as a ‘*language of resistance*’.<sup>15</sup>

Uzodinma Iweala was born in Washington, D.C., in 1982 as the son of Ikemba Iweala, a surgeon, and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, an economist at the World Bank and Nigeria's finance minister for many years. His parents wanted him to embrace both African and American culture; he was thus primarily educated in the United States and graduated from St. Albans School and Harvard University. He returned to Nigeria where he worked as a volunteer in refugee camps and did research on HIV and AIDS. *Beasts on No Nation* was published in 2005 and was inspired by a news magazine article on child soldiers. It is a first-person narration.

The main character of the novel is Agu, a 9-year-old boy, who is forced to become a child soldier. His family lives in a small village and when war approaches, Agu’s mother and sister have to leave while Agu and his father stay. Agu has the chance to flee but his father is killed. He is then found by the rebel army and forced to join. From then on fear and psychological terror take hold of Agu’s young life. As an act of initiation Agu has to kill an unarmed soldier with a machete. This experience turns out to be a turning point in Agu’s life as he loses his innocence and childhood. He loses track of time and goes through different painful and shocking situations dealing with sexual abuse, killing, hunger, violence etc. At the same time, he constantly reminisces about the time when he was loved, appreciated and living in peace with his family. These situations include episodes with his family, at school, with his friends etc. Even though Agu struggles to find a way out of this predicament, his fear and respect for the Commandant frightens him. Agu befriends a mute soldier, also a young boy, called Strika; they are later assigned the important task to work as bodyguards for the Commandant. Agu’s dependency ends when Rambo, one of the soldiers, shoots the Commandant. Strika and Agu join the ex-soldiers’ marching-group in order to find a way back to normal life. Unfortunately, Strika, Agu’s only friend, dies on the way back.

The fact that Agu is represented as an innocent boy who accidentally stumbles across the rebels is corroborated by Iweala’s decision to use the present progressive and no direct speech throughout the novel, which makes the narration more vivid and at the same time focuses on Agu as a young boy drawn into the atrocities of the war. As already mentioned this ‘new’ language created by the child serves the purpose of describing the unimaginable, that is the atrocities of the war, violence, mutilations, killings, and the state of complete alienation/estrangement of a normal life in general including (a) childhood. War is perceived as keeping everything in constant motion, something that makes ‘*it very hard to be fixing anything.*’ (Beast of No Nation, BoNN, p. 18)<sup>16</sup> When asked whether he wants to be a soldier, he thinks of how the uniforms, guns and all the pomp of the soldiers have already fascinated him before the war. ‘*So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier.*’ (BoNN 13) Zack-Williams adds, ‘*[...] life with the army provides some excitement away from the drudgery of life on the street: food is certain and one does not have to hustle all the time for a living the uniform and the gun brought status and power and the opportunity to take revenge against previous*

<sup>14</sup> Martins, dangers, p. 437.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>16</sup> Both novels are here referred to in parenthetical documentation throughout the text with a short title and the page number.

*transgressors.*<sup>17</sup> The reality of war, however, catches up with Agu very quickly when the Commandant orders him to kill an enemy soldier. *'I am not wanting to be killing anybody today. I am not ever wanting to be killing anybody.'* (BoNN 22) Even though the actual act of killing the soldier is first executed by the Commandant helping Agu, he then himself keeps bringing down the machete onto the wounded soldier: *'He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down [...].'* (BoNN 26) Strika also joins him and they keep hitting the victim until there is blood everywhere; this initiation ritual of killing human beings is like *'falling in love'* (BoNN 26) and perfectly illustrates the brainwashing of the child soldiers: *'I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing.'* (BoNN 29) Agu realizes that being a soldier is radically different from what it meant imaging being a soldier in the pre-war school days:

*"[...] thinking that to be a soldier was to be the best thing in the world because gun is looking so powerful and the men in movie are looking so powerful and strong when they are killing people, but I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong, and to have no food to eat and not to eat whatever you want, and also to have people making you do thing that you are not wanting to do and not to be doing whatever you are wanting which is what they are doing in movie."* (BoNN 38)

This actually reflects the fascination of guns for young soldiers and the power that it exercises on their mental instability. The process of integration into the mentality of the war commences with the first killing, and the belief that the actual killing of the enemy is nothing else than taking revenge for what the enemy has done to family and friends; and that is the same on both sides, the RUF and the army. According to Denov, *'[...] violent behaviour gradually assumed a semblance of normality and children reported engaging in extreme forms of violence.'*<sup>18</sup> Moreover, *'[f]or many of these kids, military life empowers them in a society where children's right are non-existent or regularly violated.'*<sup>19</sup> Agu as the voice in the novel soon realizes that being a child soldier means obedience without questioning orders, and that being turned into a child soldier means acting and following orders blindly, *'before the war we are children and now we are not.'* (BoNN 46) The fact that he does not say *'and now we are soldiers'* but *'now we are not [children]'* implies this state of innocence being blinded into a violent life without realizing what is actually going on. This is corroborated by Agu's inability to speak when confronted with the realities of war: *'[B]ut the words are not coming out of my mouth. [...] We are tired of fighting. [...] We will always be fighting war, but sometimes it is nice to be thinking that there is something else for our future.'* (BoNN 47) The strategy of instilling blind obedience into the boy soldiers pays off when Agu is forced to consume drugs and is made to believe that war only revenges what has been done to them: *'Yes it is good to fight. I am liking how the gun is shooting and the knife is chopping. I am liking to see people running from me and people screaming for me when I am killing them and taking their blood. I am liking to kill.'* (BoNN 56) Even if Agu and Strika tell each other that they are not 'bad boys', they continue killing because they have to, but this killing climaxes when Agu, assured that he is only revenging his family, first kills 'the' daughter and then 'the' mother, an indication that out of his senses he only sees what they might have done to his family: *'I am jumping on her chest KPWUD KPWUD and I am jumping on her head, until it is only blood that is coming out of her mouth. [...] I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark.'* (BoNN 63)

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<sup>17</sup> Zack-Williams, *When Children Become Killers*, pp. 86–87.

<sup>18</sup> Denov, *Coping*, p. 795.

<sup>19</sup> Zack-Williams, *When Children Become Killers*, p. 89.

The flashbacks of his former life with his family are haunting Agu to the point where he wants to scream out loud telling them how war distorts everyday reality: *'I am wanting to open my mouth and scream so that everybody is waking up and listening to all of the trouble this war is bringing, but my mother and my father are keeping quiet so I am keeping quiet also.'* (BoNN 76) Here we can see that the articulation of his voice is once again stifled by the brutalities of war and how war impacts on his life separating him first from his mother and sister and then from his father. The fact that he can't be sad because that would mean not being able to fight intensifies this feeling of being exposed to the violence of war and the disastrous consequences of soldier's behaviour/being brainwashed. The violence also includes the Commandant raping Agu, a clear indication of the situation erupting into violence:

*'But each time he is doing this to me, he is telling me, it is what commanding office is supposed to be doing to his troop. Good soldier is following order anyway and it is order for you to let me touch you like this. I don't want to be good soldier, but I am not saying that. I don't want to be soldier at all. I don't want his finger creeping all over my body. I don't want his tongue to be touching me and feeling like slug should be feeling if it is on your body. [...] And I am thinking it is not good for Commandant to be doing this to me. But I am not saying any of this. I am not saying anything at all.'* (BoNN 103)

Interestingly enough, also the Commandant has the same justification for his deed, *'Agu. I am not bad man.'* (BoNN 108) Their animal-like look and behaviour seems to stem from what war and drugs have turned them into: obedient machines and in Agu's case a voiceless victim. When they reach one of the villages, they do not seem to realize all the dead bodies but only the women it offers: *'I am wanting one, but not like how we are getting them in battle.'* (BoNN 125) When the Lieutenant is stabbed by one of the women/prostitutes, Agu realizes that the only way *'not to be fighting is to die.'* (BoNN 143) Since he does not want to die, he keeps fighting:

*'No matter what, we are always fighting. All the time bullet is just eating everything, leaf, tree, ground, person – eating them – just making person to bleed everywhere and there is much blood flooding all over the bush. [...] Sometimes I am covering my ear so I am not hearing bullet and shouting, and sometimes I am shouting and screaming also so I am not hearing anything but my own voice.'* (BoNN 145–146)

This is actually the first time in the novel, where Agu explicitly refers to his own voice being heard. The realization of his own voice then goes hand in hand with the fate of the Commandant who, after being shot by one of his own soldiers, Rambo, loses his voice. *'Only one shot just right in the chest. [...] with his whole mouth open like he is screaming. But no sound is coming out. He is not saying anything. And then his body is just falling.'* (BoNN 152) Agu, as his bodyguard, does not defend his Commandant after all he has done to him, and is thus complicit in his murder, being representative of Agu's liberation from war and its henchmen. When Agu then also loses his friend Strika to the war the process of finding his voice seems to be complete, *'I am calling his name. Strika, but he is not answering. He is not saying anything. I am saying Strika? Strika? Strika?'* (BoNN 164) The war has taken its toll on Agu and he realizes that he cannot do this anymore:

*'And then I am thinking of all the thing I am doing. If they are ordering me KILL; I am killing, SHOOT, I am shooting, ENTER WOMAN, I am entering woman and not even saying anything even if I am not liking it. I am killing everybody, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, soldier. It is all the same. It is not mattering who it is, just that they are dying. I am thinking thinking. I am thinking that I cannot be doing this anymore.'* (BoNN 168)

When he is finally rescued, it is Amy, *'the white woman from America'* (BoNN 175), who makes him speak; this process of speaking and remembering also makes him realize that by doing so, the rehabilitation process is under way: *'So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am some sort of beast or devil [...] I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.'* (BoNN 176–177)

The second novel is *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah. He was born in Sierra Leone in 1980. He moved to the United States in 1998 and finished his last two years of high school at the United Nations International School in New York. In 2004 he graduated from Oberlin College with a B. A. in political science. He is a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee and has spoken before the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, and many other NGO panels on children affected by the war.

*'At the age of twelve, he flees attacking rebels and wanders a land rendered unrecognizable by violence. By thirteen, he is picked up by the government army, and Beah finds that he is capable of truly terrible acts. Eventually released by the army and sent to a UNICEF rehabilitation centre, he struggles to regain his humanity and to re-enter the world of civilians, who view him with fear and suspicion.'*<sup>20</sup>

The story commences with Ishmael's world being turned upside down, when war breaks out in 1993 with his hometown Mogbwemo being attacked. The reader is immediately thrown into the chaos of war and witnesses people getting shot: *'The bullets could be seen sticking out just a little bit in the baby's body and she was swelling. The mother clung to her child and rocked her. She was in too much pain and shock to shed tears.'* (A Long Way Gone, ALWG, p. 13) The group of friends is still convinced that *'[...] the war was just a passing phase that wouldn't last over three months.'* (ALWG 15) The technique the author devises in this book consists of foreshadowing and flashbacks, depending on how you interpret them, which creates an atmosphere of switching between what he himself describes as a *'dreamworld'* (ALWG 19), that is his later life, and the atrocities of the war continually haunting him. In one of these flashbacks he tells us, *'we took their ammunition, sat on their bodies, and started eating the cooked food they had been carrying.'* (ALWG 19) The apparent easiness with which he describes these dead bodies is indicative of a different *'dream world'* the child soldiers find themselves in: Pumped with chemicals the trauma of killing RUF rebels is temporarily suspended. Before Ishmael is recruited and before being given drugs, he is confronted with the violence of the war, when he witnesses mutilated bodies: *'There was a bullet hole in his forehead, and underneath the stoop lay the bodies of two men whose genitals, limbs, and hands had been chopped off by a machete that was on the ground next to their piled body parts. I vomited and immediately felt feverish.'* (ALWG 27) The group of boys is continually stepping in and out of these dream worlds whenever they come into contact with the rebels or war in general. That is also the reason why Ishmael comments on the fact that respecting the elder in African tradition is temporarily suspended when an old man is shot. Any laws of reason are suspended in this traumatic experience of fighting against the enemy within: *'People stopped trusting each other, and every stranger became an enemy.'* (ALWG 37) The only people Ishmael can trust is his family, from whom he has been separated and will never see again, and his friends. According to Myriam Denov, child soldiers face a *'[...] profound sense of loss, anxiety, and sadness as a result of not knowing*

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<sup>20</sup> Ishmael Beah: *A long way gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, from: <http://www.alongwaygone.com>, retrieved on 02. 11. 2016.

*whether their families were living.*<sup>21</sup> He then also asserts that “even a twelve-year-old couldn’t be trusted anymore. [...] Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters.” (ALWG 48, 55)

The silence that seems to dominate Ishmael’s story is also a silence that prevents the child soldiers from crying out loud and, and it is also a silence that will never leave them again, a silent trauma that will dictate their future life and relationships. When the village, where his parents and brother are said to have taken shelter, is finally attacked with Ishmael reaching it too late, he ‘*screamed at the top of [his] lungs and began to cry as loudly as I could, punching and kicking with all my might into the weak walls that continued to burn.*’ (ALWG 95) When Ishmael is then finally “recruited” by the army, the brainwashing process consists of making the child soldiers realize that they are only going to kill the rebels that have ‘*forced sons to have intercourse with their mothers, hacked newly born babies in half because they cried too much, cut open pregnant women’s stomachs, took the babies out, and killed them [...].*’ (ALWG 108) The fact that ‘*they have lost everything that makes them human*’ (ALWG 108) is instrumentalized to make the soldiers hate the rebels: ‘*Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.*’ (ALWG 112) When two of his friends are killed, the corporal’s justification to hate the rebels takes effect and Ishmael kills a man: ‘*I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. I shot everything that moved, until we were ordered to retreat because we needed another strategy.*’ (ALWG 119) In combination with the drugs ‘*marijuana, brown brown, cocaine mixed with gunpowder*’ (ALWG 121)] Ishmael’s transformation into a child soldier seems to be undergoing a profound change since from then on ‘*[I] had no problem shooting my gun*’ and ‘*killing had become as easy as drinking water.*’ (ALWG 120, 122) The newly created reality is the only reality the child soldiers accept: ‘*I [...] felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore [...] it was as if nothing else existed outside of our reality.*’ (ALWG 124) This reality does away with empathy or pity for other soldiers as the decisions are not taken by Ishmael himself any longer but by the corporal and the lieutenant. This is also the reason why children were mostly recruited for this war since:

*‘[c]hildren with their ability to obey orders without question are said to make good soldiers [...] ready to please adults in order to gain their approval [...] as a group with no formal dependence or responsibilities, they are seen as dispensable, hence can be dispatched to undertake risky and dangerous tasks [...] their unsuspecting persona renders them less visible to the enemy.’*<sup>22</sup>

In January 1996 everything changes when Ishmael is chosen by his lieutenant to be taken out of the combat zone and to a rehabilitation centre. The fact that Ishmael has to part with his gun and his new reality as a soldier makes him ‘*angry*’ and ‘*anxious*’ (ALWG 130), which then at the rehabilitation centre in Freetown results in a bitter fight between the RUF boys and Ishmael and his friends. ‘*It hadn’t crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn’t immediately make us normal boys; we were dangerous, and brainwashed to kill [...] I missed my squad and needed more violence.*’ (ALWG 135, 140) These ‘*post-conflict coping strategies*’ take a long time to take effect, as in Ishmael’s case: ‘*[d]espite formal demobilization processes, reintegration programmes, and sensitization programmes, within their everyday lives children appeared to be constantly reminded of their former status as combatants.*’<sup>23</sup> What is more, Beah and the other ex-soldiers are constantly told that ‘*it is not their fault*’; nevertheless, ‘*day-to-day interactions of these youth with others in their*

<sup>21</sup> Denov, Coping, p. 797.

<sup>22</sup> Zack-Williams, When Children Become Killers, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Denov, Coping, p. 800.

*community reminded them that all was not forgotten.*<sup>24</sup> Rather late in the narrative Ishmael for the first time talks about how the abstinence from drugs impacts on his coming to terms with his past as a soldier: *'But we were still traumatized, and now that we had time to think, the fastened mantle of our war memories slowly began to open.'* (ALWG 145) Images from the past keep haunting the soldiers, *'[b]ut at night some of us would wake up from nightmares, sweating, screaming, and punching our own heads to drive out the images that continued to torment us even when we were no longer asleep.'* (ALWG 148) The nightmares keep coming back to Ishmael and the challenge that he has to face is to break down *'the barrier [...] in order to think about any moment in my life before the war.'* (ALWG 149) Under the influence of drugs it had not occurred to the child soldier that the actual killing was not a routine that could be easily switched off; so the trauma of the aftermath is specifically about the realization that not being part of a family anymore, the soldiers, means coming to terms with the *'business of killing.'* (ALWG 149)

What the ex-soldiers are basically left with is *'[...] the reality of reconstructing new personal identities that depended not on skills of military prowess and courage under fire, but on extraneous factors such as access to education, remunerative work, and family and/or community support.'*<sup>25</sup> The moment Ishmael starts talking to the nurse Esther at the rehabilitation centre, the reader is presented with the flashbacks from the war in which Ishmael is haunted once again by his numbness of being a soldier: *'I shot them on their feet and watched them suffer for an entire day before finally shooting them in the head so that they would stop crying. Before I shot each man, I looked at him and saw how his eyes gave up hope and steadied before I pulled the trigger. I found their sober eyes irritating.'* (ALWG 159) When Ishmael is given the chance to talk about child soldiering, he claims that *'we can be rehabilitated. [...] I would always tell people that I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance.'* (ALWG 169) Part of the rehabilitation process is also being *'repatriated'* (ALWG 179), in Ishmael's case the family of his father's brother. Very slowly he starts feeling at home; eventually he is sent to the United Nations in New York where he is given the chance to exchange war experiences. Once back in Freetown, the fighting continues and the reader is once again confronted with the atrocities of the war, this time with Ishmael who finds himself in the middle of this horror. *'I was getting furious, but I tried to contain myself, because I knew I couldn't afford to lose my temper. The result would be death, since I was now a civilian; I knew that.'* (ALWG 205) In October 1997 Ishmael finally leaves Sierra Leone and flees to Guinea. *'I was happy to have made it out of Freetown, to have escaped the possibility of becoming a soldier again.'* (ALWG 217) Being an ex-soldier and facing a sense of loss and a sense of not belonging to the community that attempts to re-integrate the child soldiers is representative of the war that *'created a loss generation of young people, deprived of protection from the state and their community, who also lost educational opportunities in order to prepare them for adult life.'*<sup>26</sup>

The whole discussion of the credibility of Beah's account with the allegations that Mattru Jong was not invaded in 1993 but in 1995, that Beah therefore had not been a child soldier for two years but two months and 10 months a refugee, that the killing of the six boys at the camp in Freetown never happened, and that the whole account had been 'embellished' is certainly something that has to be taken into account. Nevertheless, I reckon it is difficult to investigate the case in detail, to find out the whole truth about his life as a child soldier; whether this story is a 100% authentic or contains vestiges of fiction in it seems not that important. The crucial question is how Beah's account helps us understand the trauma the

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<sup>24</sup> Betancourt, e. a., Past horrors, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Denov, Coping, p. 803.

<sup>26</sup> Zack-Williams, When Children Become Killers, p. 90.

country and its population suffered, what the civil war did to its already traumatized citizens, in particular children, and how it has affected the way we see and perceive children who were either forced to join the war or decided to join voluntarily because guns and uniforms raised expectations they thought might be helpful in starting a new life or just in revenging what had happened to their family and friends.

Summing up, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* both deal with the traumatic experience of the child soldiers Agu and Ishmael who are coerced into joining the army troops in order to fight against rebels, in Ishmael's case in Sierra Leone. The approach the two authors chose is to a certain extent different as the reader is confronted with Agu being forced to kill from the very beginning; the way his story is narrated (present progressive) and the way his voice is silenced by the war adds to his traumatized state of mind and his continuous striving to remember a happier past. Agu's story, after having lost Strika, ends with his rehabilitation process where he struggles with his memories and his voice being heard; this process, however, is not paid too much attention as it is relatively short. In contrast, *A Long Way Gone* focuses on Ishmael's pre- and post-war experiences and story; the reader is carefully prepared for the war by being told how the group of friends finally ends up being recruited, what they experience as part of the troops and then how his rehabilitation/reintegration process impacts on his coming to terms with the atrocities of the war. These two phases seem to be more important than the actual time as a soldier, a fact that might corroborate the accusations levelled at the story and its authenticity. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the post-war traumatic events is a decisive step to come to terms with an identity that under the influence of the war has been severely affected by the violent conflict, an identity that has to be rediscovered and rehabilitated.

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