VIOLENCE, MEMORY AND THERAPEUTIC MEASURES IN SELECTED MEMOIRS OF AFRICAN WAR CHILDREN

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Abstract
Violence as a phenomenon is detrimental to both individual members as well as the given society where it occurs. Its effects are felt physically, socially and psychologically. This paper investigates the effects of violence on victims' memories as portrayed by Emmanuel Jal and Ishmael Beah in War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story and A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier respectively. With the use of trauma and postcolonial theories, the texts are analyzed and through the exploration of the memoirists' experiences, it is discovered that dreams and hallucinations; flashbacks of past events; imaginative images; and antisocial personality disorder are the ways through which the effects of violence on memory are manifested. The experiences of these writers are so presented to equally project the state of many postcolonial and post – independent African nations. This paper advocates for a violent-free society where citizens, especially *children can live peacefully.*

Keywords: violence, memory, memoir, therapeutic measure, war and war children

Introduction

Violence has been part of man's life since time immemorial. Man's experience with violence can be said to be a regular occurrence because it is a form of reaction to certain unpleasant occurrences. Human wants, negative and unacceptable results,

insatiability, jealousy, envy, hatred and other human experiences and vices can trigger violence. It is a multifaceted occurrence that involves abuse, trauma and loss. World Health Organization, (as cited in Dahlberg and Krug, 2006, p. 280), defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maladjustment or deprivation". Going by this definition, the intention of the person or group of persons engaging in the act of violence is very significant for an act or action to be termed violent and the results of this form of action is not just physical but also psychological. The act of violence is also viewed as having intra-personal, inter-personal and collective dimensions.

Many societies in the world have experienced various degrees of violence but this study's preoccupation is on the collective type of violence which presents itself in various forms such as political violence of which war is its notable example. This type of violence has swerved the continent of Africa to a great extent. The Nigeria civil war, the Rwandan genocide, first and second Congo war, Algerian civil war, Sudanese wars, Rhodesian bush war, Kenyan Mau Mau revolt, Zimbabwean *Chimurengas*, among many others are examples of collective violence which have erupted in one period or the other on the African continent. The role of colonial influence; the Cold War; the role of the external actors; the role of identity politics and social manipulation; competition for natural resources in fuelling conflict; and the role of the weak state are listed by Raymond (n.d.) as the causes of war in Africa. He argues that "Europe's disregard for effective capacity building in its colonies left a continent socially and economically unprepared for democracy… [and] this played a significant part in setting the conditions in many postcolonial states for recurrent crises, leading to state collapse and civil war" (p.3). Europeans saw their colonies as assets and so, in their attempt to create certain sociopolitical divisions, African reality was not put into consideration. These divisions brewed ethnicism which some critics see as the cause of some of these conflicts. This is in line with Nwankwo's view that the power basis

in Africa is the root and foundation of all the crises as "war is only a symptom of a general malaise with roots that are most times deeper than the adventitious eruptions associated with ethnic differences" (2008, p.9). Nwankwo also opines that colonialism still plays out in Africa through Africans who have the problem of "identity crises" affirming that wars "came at the heels of colonialism or in some cases with colonialism" (p.2) but while colonialism was quiet, wars were not quiet; the damages associated with it were ruinous.

Aside the role of colonial influence, Cold War played a significant role in enkindling civil war in Africa. It militarized nations that were not able to maintain a monopoly of power and equally undermined the political legitimacy of the various governments in Africa. The civil wars in Angola and Mozambique provide the clearest example of this. Apart from this, the presence of natural resources as well as its absence served as factors that enhanced civil war in Africa. Such countries as Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo are countries where this is evident. Other popular explanations for wars in Africa can be linked to ethnic, geographic or religious divisions such as the case of northern and southern Nigeria; the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Somali clannism, Christians and Muslims, etc. In fact, "War and the threat of war is one thing the huge continent shares without quibble" (Nwankwo, 2008, p.11).

As the waves of war flooded and flowed on the African continent, Africans have had their fair share of pain which it bred. The events of war are usually agonizing, and experiencing them usually leaves painful traces in the memories of victims particularly children who are, in some occasions, turned into war fighters. This group of persons is more often than not traumatized. Certain occurrences or incidents register in their subconscious minds and, at some point, begin to present themselves in the behaviour of these war children.

In the face of the aforementioned facts, violent actions as well as agitations for war have been on the increase despite the fact that numerous studies have been carried out on violence and its effects on individuals and the African society at large. This becomes a piece of evidence that a good percentage of the African

populace are yet to come to terms with the futility of violence in general and war in particular coupled with its psychological effects which outlive the physical destruction in both the individual and collective memories of victims, leaving them in traumatic conditions. The effects of violence on memory and consequent psychological harm on victims seem to be understudied in African literature and this constitutes a gap in this branch of discipline.

As a result of this, therefore, the problem of this study is to interrogate the evils of violence, particularly, war, its nature, as well as the post-war conditions of the surviving victims, stressing the effects of violence on memory and some therapeutic measures using Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*.

Conceptual Framework The concepts of violence, memory, memoir, therapeutic measure, war, and war children are reviewed under the conceptual framework of this study. Violence, according to Kilby and Ray (2017) "is a complex phenomenon that involves violation, trauma and loss … a negative phenomenon that has no obvious antonym" (p.1). Although violence is a medium used by persons or group of persons to plainly demonstrate their feelings such as anger and dissatisfaction, this phenomenon is usually instigated by oppressors and exploiters who do not recognize others as people. Quoting Freire (1972), Diala-Ogamba (2012) has it that violence is not initiated by "those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized. It is not the unloved who cause disaffection but those who cannot love because they love only themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who with their power create the concrete situation which begets the rejects of life" (p. 62). Violence can also be seen as a deliberate use of threatened or actual physical force against oneself, another person, or against a group of people which results to either or both physical and psychological injury, death, or dispossession.

Memory, on the other hand, is the ability to retain information, or a representation of past experiences. It is at the centre of Freudian conception of human psyche. It is a narrative, much of which invariably is unconscious and is both neurological and repressed. Zlotnik and Vansintjan (2019) see memory as that

which is more of a chemical process between neurons; it is not static. Memory, in its psychic acceptance, implies the presence of a trace – the raw material that constitutes memory. Memoir, a type of writing, depends on memory. A memoir is a record "on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed" (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.26). It involves only some moments of the writer's life which the writer may wish to share and not a full length life report. Asika (2015) notes that this type of writing is believed to be very emotional, and in some cases, sentimental. Writing about memoir, Oriaku (2011) has it that …memoirists are usually public figures…and their self narratives focus on the personages they encountered in their public lives as well as the significant events they were involved in. …Wars and other epochal events by their very nature give rise to a lot of memoir writing. This is because such events produce many significant people who consider themselves worthy subjects of narratives on these events or feel impelled to present the events they were involved in to the public from what they consider the correct perspective. (pp. 36-37) Therapeutic measure, another concept under study, is seen from the perspective of any action intended to assuage or heal a disorder. Cave (2002) puts it that therapy is "a deliberate intervention which aims to treat mental disorder and make it more manageable. A therapy may be an attempt to 'cure' or it may be an attempt to teach the individual how to cope with problem" (p. 9). Some measures, therefore, are said to be therapeutic when they are intended to manage certain mental or psychological problems. These measures are of great importance in the management of victims of violence of which war is one of them. War, which is mentioned by Oriaku as one of the sources of inspiration for memoirists, is an "organized violence to achieve political ends" (Metz and Cuccia, 2011, p.2). It can also be an act carried out with the intention of compelling one group to fulfill the will of the other group. War children as a concept may refer to children soldiers, refugee children, children born during a war, and those born of war, that is children born to local women and foreign soldiers. This study is on memoirs of children soldiers – those persons under the age of eighteen who become part of an armed group in any capacity (Hynd, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on trauma and postcolonial theories. With the use of trauma theory, the traumatic events and their effects on the individual characters are studied. Trauma is the physical or emotional damage, wound or shock caused to the body or mind through violence. As an offshoot of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, trauma studies investigate the disruptive experience of trauma on its victims that affect the mind and the victims' view of the society. Freud's theory further inspires trauma theorists of the 1990s such as Cathy Caruth to develop models of trauma in the study of trauma, memory and identity, through the analysis of emotional suffering, language of loss, disruption and fragmentation in literature. This criticism examines the influence of trauma in literature; it explores the textual representation of events and the function of memory in constructing individual and cultural identities.

The memoirists whose works are under study here presents characters whose life are coloured with pain, hatred, emotional wound or trauma as a result of violence. In the words of Heidarizadeh (2015), Psychoanalysis trauma are caused by catastrophic events, war, treachery, betray[sic] and sexual abuse. However, the main point is that different people will react differently to similar events. In other words, not all people who experience the same traumatic events will become psychoanalysis[sic] traumatized. (p.789)

This is to say, therefore, that reactions to ugly incidents has a relationship with individual differences as portrayed by Jal and Beah in their memoirs.

Postcolonial literary criticism, on the other hand, investigates literary works on the basis of the means by which Europeans brought and upheld colonial domination of a great percentage of the world population. Using this literary theory, a critic investigates the ways in which a text either supports or resists the principles and practices of colonialism. It is, therefore, pertinent to assert here that war in Africa "came at the heels of colonialism or in some cases with colonialism" (Nwankwo, 2008, p.2). Even in the midst of these conflicts, the western world still wields their power in many ways. Other problems which emanated from the

independence of many African countries are also explored in this research. The use of postcolonial theory in this research is necessary as it investigates those ways Africans have been treated as the 'other' as well as the multifaceted dimensions taken by corruption since the independence of many African countries.

Violence and Memory in the Memoirs

Jal and Beah present their experiences as a result of violence in their memoirs: *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* respectively. Emmanuel Jal was recruited into the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). He survived life in Pinyudu refugee camp and several military engagements before being taken to Nairobi, Kenya by a kind English woman, Emma. Ishmael Beah, on the other hand, was taken by force into the Sierra Leonean army during the civil war, and was later demobilized into the UNICEF rehabilitation centre in Freetown before relocating to America. The ability of these writers to record these experiences of theirs is largely dependent on their ability to recall certain significant events that have taken place in their lives. They also, in their works, depicted various ways their violent experiences affected memory in the course of their narratives. Such ways include horrible dreams and hallucinations; flashback of traumatic events in the memory; imaginative images; and antisocial personality disorder.

In the memoirs, Jal and Beah tell their stories as soldier boys in a war fought in the Northern African country of Sudan which lasted between 1983 and 2005 and that which broke out in 1991 in the Western African country of Sierra Leone respectively. They narrate their ordeals and, the much they can, those of their families and friends and the effects of these awful experiences of theirs are obviously deduced from their stories. Dreams and nightmares are construed as a typical manifestation of the effect of violence on memory. Walter, Leiβner, Jerg-Bretzke, Hrabal and Traue (2010) put it that "as memory consolidation takes place during sleep, memory contents are unpredictably activated, triggering nightmares" (p.466). The memoirists, all through their stories, bring up series of dreams which they had due to violent experiences which they encountered in the course of the wars. Jal

(2008), at a point in his work, simply put it thus: "Night after night, I fell into a sleep from which only dreams of war could wake me" (p.71) while Beah (2007) has it that "the nightmares about what had happened continued to torment me" (p.140).

The effects of violence on the characters' memory are also seen through flashback of past events and imaginative images. Victims remember their experiences but are unable to fully recognize it as memory and not something that is happening in the present time. They often imagine horrible scenes as their past experiences quickly speed across memory. This is what Patiño-Lakatos (2019) referred to as traces. According to him, trace as a word "has a double meaning: it is both physical and psychic. In its psychic acceptation, the term refers to the raw material that constitutes memory, inasmuch as the former is integrated, transformed, and completed in the latter. The psychic trace is often characterized by its fragmentary and often haunting character" (p. 47). This has a relationship with repression. The repressed memory begins to intrude into the victim's consciousness. Beah "sees" blood gushing out from water tap whenever he turns the tap on. He "would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower" (p.110). Some victims of war who lost their family members, sometimes, sit by the rocks weeping and telling people that the rocks were their dead families. Bushes begin to remind Beah of the war experiences as "standing next to a tree with red frozen sap on its bark would bring flashbacks of the many times we executed prisoners by tying them to trees and shooting them" (p.148). He also has a case of hearing imaginative sounds; sounds of cries and pains from other war victims. One of such sounds, he narrates, echoes in his head as if it had taken on a life of its own inside him.

Jal, in his work, presents similar experiences. Even when he has been taken away from the war area, he still sees images from war scenes. He narrates: "I could see it even though it wasn't there – the barrel black, the brown handle, a small box of spare bullets in a bag tied to my waist. I crawled silently forward until I reached the bushes… I didn't understand this world and I never would" (p.158). Similarly, seeing a young girl being dragged into a bush gives him a picture of his aunt's rape scene by a soldier.

Antisocial personality disorder is another effect of violence on victims. A defining trait of this type of harm is a lack of empathy and a disregard for others, generally. Victims of this disorder have little concern for others and are willing to violate their rights. Some victims of war exhibit certain behaviours which are socially unacceptable because their memories have been tainted by violent experiences. In *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story*, Jal recounts certain behaviours of his which depict antisocial personality disorder. He tells of his loss of sense of remorse even after hurting other people's feelings. Examples of such behaviours which he displayed during the cause of his rehabilitation include: cutting the hair of Sally's cat; intentionally pressing a security button wrongly; leaving Emma's friend's house without her knowledge; and going back to the Game Boy even after he has been put into bed. Beah, in *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, narrates how he, together with his friends, forcefully snatches two boiled ears of corn from a little boy and even when the boy's mother gives them an ear each of boiled corn, "there wasn't much time for remorse" (p.20).

The study of these memoirs, as is seen, shows the relationship between trauma, memory and identity as posited by trauma theorists. The emotional suffering, loss, and disruption which the characters face in war scenes and times have huge effects on their memories. Inasmuch as these writers portray these pitiable conditions, they also present some therapeutic measures by vividly painting the picture of the processes they pass through so as to live their normal lives. Writing and publishing their memoirs are major ways of letting out their feelings, and so could be described as being therapeutic. Both memoirists agree with psychoanalysts that speaking and writing out one's experiences are ways through which healing can be achieved. The writers, Jal and Beah, take to writing of songs in which their experiences form the lyrics. Jal narrates that "from the moment I started writing songs, the feeling they gave me was like nothing I'd ever had before… my nightly dreams diminished and the feeling of frustration inside me started to weaken… I have learnt that this is music therapy" (p.182). Beah also confirms that "memorizing lyrics left me little time to think about what had happened in the war" (p.126).

Supports from individuals and organizations and social acceptance equally contribute positively to the healing processes of the war victims as seen in the memoirs. Beah and some other victims of violence mentioned in his memoir are supported by UNICEF in their rehabilitation process. They are provided a therapeutic community which Cave (2002) defines as the "attempts to create alternative, more liberal environments where patients can learn to develop more adaptive ways of functioning through participation in community life" (p. 159). Beah was given a platform through which he advocates for peace and children's rights and that way, he expresses himself, thereby attaining progress in his healing process. His personal contact with Esther also makes great impact in his life. Similarly, Jal's support from Emma, a white woman whose husband heads a camp where humanitarian services are given to war victims, is the foundation for his survival. The support he gets from his music fans caps it up.

These novels under study, therefore, have the potentials of having some therapeutic effects on people traumatized by war. There is, essentially, a meeting point between literature and medicine as the novels are permeated with cross-disciplinary strengths and examples that can facilitate healing and reintegration. In fact, the novels cover political, historical, sociological, psychological, and literary studies. Through reading, writing and listening to stories related to wars, especially their consequences in society, without a doubt, victims of war can revive their hope for a new beginning in life and begin a process of self-healing. In other words, aside writing and telling of war experiences, a reintegration of war victims into the society can be done through the process of bibliotherapy which, according to American Library Association in McCulliss (2012:23) is "the use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuncts in medicine and psychiatry; also, guidance in the solution of personal problems through direct reading". War victims who are previously initiated into the culture of violence can, as well, be given an opportunity to discharge the toxic impulses that are repressed in their unconsciousness and facilitate healing of trauma through the free flow of thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

Reading the memoirs from a postcolonial perspective portrays two African nations affected by colonialism. The inclusion of the north and South Sudan as a country and the domineering character of the northerners in the country who are mostly Arabs and Muslims forced the southerners, mostly sub-Saharan Africans and Christians, to fight for resistance as seen in Jal's memoir. The Sudanese war is an outcome of the ethnic fusion and differences, as well as that of religion and ownership of natural resources. He writes: The war, which was to bleed the heart of my country for decades, wasn't purely tribal or religious. At its heart was money – in particular the oil that lay hidden beneath the lands of the south and from which the northern government wanted to profit. Dollars were the prize, and the best way to get them was to drive those who claimed the land from their homes. Sharia law was introduced, and the government armed one tribe against another. (Jal, 2008, pp.13 – 14). The southerners, therefore, fight to protect their land and culture which the Arabs are trying to take away from them. For Beah and the Sierra Leonean war, it "was a revolutionary war, a liberation of the people from corrupt government" (p.8). The memoirist tells about the return of Siaka Stevens in 1968 and his declaration of a one-party state in the country. He describes it as the beginning of "rotten politics" (p.8). While Jal resists the principles and practices of colonialism in his memoir, Beah condemns corruption and poor leadership in Africa in his.

Styles and Techniques

Both Jal and Beah have their childhood wartime experiences narrated through their new perspectives as young adults. Clifford (2017), writing about these memoirs, has it that life-cycles are imperative in the framing of traumatic memories, and these memoirs are very much youth narratives, written by young adults who are seeking to establish their identities, their social status, and to maintain a position of power from which their voices can be heard and acknowledged. Being memoirs, the works are presented in retrospective narrations. Stories are told as they happened in the past, but then the writers reflect on those experiences from their present point of view.

Storytelling is another technique used by both memoirists in their works. Jal uses the story of the fox and the dog told by his mother to point to the enmity which brewed between two groups of people who once lived peacefully. He also uses the story of a man in love with a girl living in a compound guarded by lions to extol the power of music in times of pain. Beah, on his own part, uses the story of the hunter and the monkey to teach the importance of making sacrifices for the good of others.

Furthermore, Jal exploits the stream of consciousness technique in his memoir. The use of one-word and two-word sentences such as "Picture. Pictures. In my head" (Jal, 2008, pp.136 -137); "My village, my family, my country…" (p.174), represent the course and rhythm of consciousness precisely as they occur in his mind. There are some uses of metaphoric expressions which bring out the horrific experiences of war victims in the memoir. One of such is the commander's advice to the soldier boys on their training ground, "Always remember: the gun is your mother and father now" (p.83). It is pertinent to assert that journey motif which always feature in war literature are also present in the memoirs under study. The characters, especially the protagonists tour the length and breadth of their country and even beyond as the wars rage.

Conclusion

Violence and memory in selected memoirs of African war children are the major concerns of this paper. With the use of qualitative research method, this paper limits its study to Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. It examines the effects of violence on memory of victims of war as well as the possible healing processes advocated by the authors. Dreams and hallucinations; flashbacks of past events; imaginative images; and antisocial personality disorder are identified as those effects. Though writing and telling of their stories; support from individuals and organizations; as well as social acceptance are presented as the possible healing routes for the victims. This paper advocates for a violent-free society where citizens, especially children can peacefully live their lives.

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