

Corruption Of Innocence: War Memory, Trauma And Violence In Beasts Of No Nation.

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ABSTRACT

Being in control for most of the 1990s, the count of civil wars has tripled in the past decade. Dating from 2011 to this day, an approximation of six fold swelling in battle deaths have been listed since the end of cold war. The dreadful practise during the war period is the inhumane use of child soldiers and exposing them to the terrifying phase of violence. The military use of children carves in them intense scars, both physically and psychologically, which remains unhealed in utmost cases.

This paper is targeted to the psychological pressures of being a child soldier - the traumatic injury to the human capital. The analysis of the study is drawn from the movie '*Beasts of No Nation*'(2015) -the story of the evolution of a boy sheltered from war into a child soldier executing war, by Cary Joji Fukunaga. This movie reflects on the pitiful recruitment of child soldiers and how they are corrupted, persecuted and transformed from a sufferer of civil war to a destructive beast. The traumatic influences have been viewed from Cathy Caruth's perspective of trauma highlighted in '*Unclaimed Experience*'.

KEYWORDS: War, Memory, Psychological Trauma, Childhood Trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Children, historically, have been densely included in war either as sufferers or offenders. A child soldier is any child, girl or boy, under the age of 18 whom armed groups use in multiple capacities. Children are forcefully or willingly recruited worldwide by rebel groups or armed forces outside the government authority. Estimated count points that there are nearly 250,000 child soldiers in 20 countries, wherein 40% are girl soldiers used as sex slaves and wives to the male soldiers. Non-state armed groups are more into committing this dreadful crime, and tackling this issue becomes more complex as these groups are primarily invisible and harder to settle with. Armed forces game children for many reasons. They are an easy prey with increased vulnerability to influence. They don't require much food and won't possess a thoroughly developed sense of danger.

Other than the forced recruitments, some voluntarily join up to break out of poverty. Some sign up with the immature thought of military life as a passage to maturity, whereas some enroll to gain personal justice through vengeance or as the only chance of survival. While some children are trained extensively to take part in the conflict, others play a supporting role as cooks, ammunition carriers, looters, spies, messengers and as sexual slaves. However, in every case, none of them gains access to any formal education. The "name and shame"

2017 list of the UN secretary general's annual pointed out the armed groups of Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen who use child soldiers for the conflict. The report highlighted the fact that there was a minimum of 40,000 confirmed violations by government forces and about 11,500 violations by non-state armed forces. The UK government estimated that around 10,000 children are made to be child soldiers. Around 7,740 children, many as young as six, were recruited and abused as child soldiers in 2019 alone. Recruitment of children in conflicts, especially armed conflicts, is a violation of international law and is categorised as a crime at the domestic, regional and international level. In the past few decades, hundreds and thousands of children have been released due to action plans initiated by the UN national council. The campaign 'Children, not Soldiers', launched in March 2014, aims to prevent the recruitment of children as

soldiers by national forces in conflict. Various organisations such as War Child and Child Soldiers International came up to tackle the issue by spreading awareness and campaigning and freeing and rehabilitating child soldiers.

Trauma is mainly expounded as the reaction to an unexpected, overwhelming event that prevents proper empirical understanding during the event. Since the event is not fully registered or experienced by the victim, it repeatedly returns in through nightmares, recurrent hallucination and fragmented memories. Thus, the individual is possessed by traumatic events and its belated repetitions resist being integrated into their consciousness. (Caruth, *Trauma* 4-5). Direct participation in armed violence, extensive mental and physical manipulations, sexual abuse, extensive use of drug sweep every particle of innocence from a child and mature his thoughts and actions in negative dimensions—traumatic experiences undergone by the victim last longer with more profound impacts. Returning to everyday life would be a question with a most unsure answer. Studies suggest that the victims are most likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorders, major depressions, and memories become the most toxic poison to life. In the long run, this would affect the country's economic growth as rising generations contribute to a country's economic, technological, and scientific growth.

Cary Joji Fukunaga's *'Beasts of No Nation'* nudges harsh realities of war to the surface. The movie, an adaptation of the book *'Beasts of No Nation'* by Uzodinma Iweala, is a journey of a young boy, Agu, whose ill-fortune made him a child soldier. Agu was once a 'good boy from a good family', but war shattered his family and thereby his happiness. He was forced to join the army by conditioning his mind to accept war as his responsibility, to seek justice for his father and brother who has been killed by the government and as his only hope to find his mother and sister who was moved to the capital during the war. Agu, under his strict commander and many men around him, loses his childhood to mould a beast in him. This movie shows how it feels at war, how to live and kill as a child soldier, and how hurt it is to lose family, spiritual values, and the human self. Apart from the traumatism, the movie also describes the effect of manipulative adults on immature, unadulterated minds.

OBJECTIVE

This paper endeavours to study the psychological pressures of being a child soldier - the traumatic harm to the human capital and their emotional and physical response to it in the light of the crucial question raised by Cathy Caruth in *'Unclaimed Experience'*: "Is trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it ?"(7). The analysis of the study is drawn from the movie *'Beasts of No Nation'*(2015) -the story of the evolution of a boy sheltered from war into a child soldier executing war, by Cary Joji Fukunaga.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

'*Unclaimed Experience*' by Cathy Caruth provides an immense support structure for reading and understanding the descriptions of traumatic experience through psychoanalytic and literary theory. Her philosophical question for traumatism paused in the introduction: "Is trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7) acts as the basis of this study. Caruth sides with this query by analysing the "double telling", a fluctuation among "crisis of death" and "the correlative crisis of life" (7). Caruth claims that trauma is that suspended occurrence which returns recurrently to unnerve the survivor. This unconscious repetition happens because the traumatic experience occurred at the most unexpected time or phase and the victim faces a crack in perception. This cracking or fragmented experience then repeats as night terrors or traumatizing memories. Caruth claims that a crisis is noted not just by "a simple knowledge but the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness"(5). This theory is applied to the character Agu from the movie '*Beasts of no Nation*', who underwent traumatic experiences at the most unexpected phase of his life. His sudden loss of family, least prepared transformation as a child soldier, slipping of spiritual and cultural values, and direct exposure and experience in armed conflicts made him a victim of post-traumatic disorders.

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The movie *Beasts Of No Nation* by Cary Joji Fukunaga is an adaptation of *Beasts Of No Nation* written by Uzodinma Iweala. The movie received Film Independent Spirit Awards, NAACP Image Awards and British Academy Film Awards. The movie refers to all countries that have been into civil war and have sacrificed their children to become child soldiers. The terrors shown in the movie *Beasts of No Nation* equates to *Beasts of All Nations*. The movie's narrative is drawn from Agu's memory and said in broken sentences fluctuating between different tenses. Movie semiotics play a significant role in expressing the intensity of the situation. Agu, the protagonist, recollects his entire life, differentiating it as pre-war and post-war. The movie opens with the scene of a war-torn village where war has not directly affected the protagonist's survival or his happiness yet warns the audience about the impending danger. The boy imparted strong religious values and social morals from his family. "Treat your neighbour as your brother, market vendor as your mother or older sister" said church and his mother always said "If you do not know what to be doing, you can always be asking God for the answer". These words were the moral basis of his life. The unexpected entrance of NRC to the buffer zone marks the beginning of Agu's disaster. His family gets separated as his mother and sister flees to the capital, and father decides to stay back in their homeland as he felt it was his responsibility to fight for his homeland both as the chief of the community and as a male citizen of his land. "You can find the ground washing away beneath your feet" said by Agu represents the feeling of every citizen of his homeland whose sense of duty to protect the homeland becomes a threat to survival. Agu due to the innocence of his age connects it to his religious learnings and accepts what his father says "whatever is happening, its god testing us." The village turns chaotic, soldiers walk around with rifles, shooting all strangers with body and blood everywhere. Agu's family is killed and he escapes to the bush. Then he comes upon some armed boys who are either of his age or slightly older.

The commandant uses Agu's internal fire from the past as his thread to manipulate. He says, "You have something that stands for you -that is your defense, that is your family's blood". The commandant is a frightening and evil fusion of coach, battlefield leader, drillmaster, and the patriarch that either boys recently lost due to revolution or never had. The children end up adoring the commandant thinking that his training is to make them real men, instead he was training them to become killers, heartless rapists and looters who cover up their bloodlust and materialistic dissatisfaction in ideology that is vague and senseless.

AWAKENING OF BEASTS:

The commandant stands as the trigger in awakening the sleeping beast. He says “ it has awakened a giant, it has put the weapons of this war back in the hands of you, the young therefore powerful”. He comes up with an unholy brand of training, rituals and attitudes for these children. Except for Agu, all other soldiers are named after the roles that they play in the war. For example, Strika is named because he is the best striker, Two-I-C is the name of a position. This naming system shows that soldiers are counted as parts or machines for war rather than as humans. The slogans they shout out are justifications for the terrific violence they commit. Agu is forced to kill a suspected NDF man, and with that, we see the growth of Agu as a beast. The little boy who once believed in loving other men as a brother turns to saying, “God, I have killed a man, it is the worst sin, but I am knowing too, it is the right thing to be doing”. Agu sees himself as someone new, finds himself as an animal who now knows the smell of dead which he says is “ sweet like sugarcane and rotten like palm wine”. Killing soon turns out to be an effortless regular activity to Agu. He led violence without registering what was happening with him or around him. To ease pain and fear, he like other child soldiers of his group, took drugs. He also became a victim to sexual abuse at an age where he couldn't comprehend or express right. Agu experiences a sudden shift from a highly childish and pampered boy to a beast exposed to violence, drugs and abuse in shock and least cognitive registration. The time he started realising his actions, he began to experience trauma.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA:

Agu's victimization, remorse and search for humanity.

In the final sections of the movie, we find Agu undergoing psychological trauma. With many incidents, he realises that all that he has done, all that he was told and everybody he believed in was not right. He loses hope in finding his mother and sister after witnessing the limits of the Commandant and his power. Joining the rebel group was what Lawrence Langer calls Agu,s “choiceless choice” but later he attains a state where the only way to be not fighting is dying. He feels so tired that words stopped coming out of his mind. He searched for religious help but his guilt never found peace with God. He asks God if he is watching what they are doing and in his imaginary conversation with his mother he says “mother I can only talk to you now because God is not listening”. This reveals his realisation that he has been doing wrong, and his guilt makes him believe that God has stopped listening to him. His psychological state is seen in his statement, “If this war is ever ending, I cannot be going back to doing child things”.

As Caruth stated, Agu's suspended traumatic effects return to him haunting his survival and dragging him to face an existential crisis. Crisis of survival explained by Caruth becomes the state of Agu. Everyone around him died, his best friend Stika was killed, he lost his family, he killed many and living up with all these became difficult to this young boy. He repeatedly expresses his desire to escape from all this forever. He says “Sun, why are you shining on this world ? I am wanting to catch you in my hand and squeeze you until you cannot shine no more.”, “I am wanting to lie down on the warm ground with my eyes closed and the smell of mud in my nose”. Towards the finish, Agu and his co-soldiers get rescued. Despite many efforts to bring back Agu from this trauma, they fail. This is where Caruth's most resonant question in *Unclaimed Experience* becomes relevant in his life: “Is trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it ?” (7). Agu relives in most of the horrific incidents of his past through hallucinations or nightmares. He recurrently experiences physical pains due to the drugs he used to intake. He never found words to speak. While the counsellor asks Agu to speak up about himself or whatever that is suffocating him, Agu denies it. He finds himself an old man in front of the lady, because he fought in the war, and she doesn't even know what the real war is. He says to her “I saw terrible things and I did terrible things. So if I am telling you it will make me sad and it will make you too sad. In this life I just want to be happy. If I am telling you, you will think I am some sort of beast or devil. I am all of these thing but I also having mother, father, brother, sister once, they loved me”.

CONCLUSION

Recruiting children into armed forces and exposing them to intense violence and abuse is an offensive act, yet armed groups, mainly non-state groups abduct children or manipulate them to join their groups. Children after

being into these terrible things undergo traumatic experiences both physically and mentally. Escaping from these unhealthy mental conditions is very difficult and in most cases impossible. The traumatic events they undergo stays in them and repeatedly haunts them through nightmares, hallucinations and incurable memories. Psychological trauma would ruin their life forever as leading a regular life would be difficult. Studies have revealed that, despite all laws and actions taken to protect and prevent the recruitment of children as soldiers, this heinous practice still prevails. Nation loses their most valuable capital by sacrificing these children to war and thereby destroying its own future. It is all nations responsibility to protect their laughter and innocence.

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