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THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD SOLDIERS AS SEEN THROUGH ISHMAEL BEAH'S  
*A LONG WAY GONE*

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ABSTRACT

The present research work aims at examining critically the phenomenon of child soldiers as seen through Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. The issue of child soldiers is a worldwide phenomenon. However, it is more noticeable in developing nations where the lack of adequate social infrastructure and socio-economic programmes threatens the developmental needs of these children. Institutional assistance from governments, international institutions and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in providing some resources for the child soldiers is either inadequate or non-existent. Hence the necessity to carry out this study to make visible and glaring a situation that many people have consciously tried to ignore. The methodological approaches used in this paper are the phenomenological and descriptive approaches. The literary theories applied to the study are psychological and psychoanalytic criticism. Psychological criticism deals with a literary work primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits. The study has found that the phenomenon of child soldiers is deplorable because it has a lot of consequences. The paper recommends and concludes that the phenomenon is extremely bad and needs to be eradicated for children's welfare.

Keywords: child soldiers, institutional assistance, governments, international institutions, NGOs.

Résumé

Le présent travail de recherche vise à examiner de façon critique le phénomène des enfants soldats vu à travers *A Long Way Gone* d'Ishmael Beah. La question des enfants soldats est un phénomène mondial. Toutefois, elle est plus perceptible dans les pays en développement où le manque d'infrastructures sociales adéquates et de programmes socio-économiques menace les besoins de développement de ces enfants. L'aide institutionnelle des gouvernements, des institutions internationales et des Organisations Non-Gouvernementales (ONG) pour la fourniture de certaines ressources aux enfants soldats est insuffisante ou inexistante. D'où la nécessité de mener cette étude pour rendre visible et flagrante une situation que beaucoup de gens ont consciemment essayé d'ignorer. Les approches méthodologiques utilisées dans cet article sont les approches phénoménologiques et descriptives. Les théories littéraires appliquées à l'étude sont la critique psychologique et psychanalytique. La critique psychologique traite une œuvre littéraire principalement comme

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une expression, sous forme fictive, de la personnalité, de l'état d'esprit, des sentiments et des désirs de son auteur. L'hypothèse des critiques psychanalytiques est qu'une œuvre littéraire est en corrélation avec les traits mentaux de son auteur. L'étude a révélé que le phénomène des enfants soldats est déplorable parce qu'il a beaucoup de conséquences. L'article recommande et conclut que le phénomène est extrêmement mauvais et nécessite d'être éradiqué pour le bien-être des enfants.

Mots-clés : enfants soldats, assistance institutionnelle, gouvernements, institutions internationales, ONG.

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## Introduction

Although the phenomenon of child soldiers in Sierra Leone during the civil war is a societal problem, it is accorded little or no attention. Hence the necessity to carry out this study so as to make visible and glaring a situation that many people, including societal institutions and the general public have consciously tried to ignore. The purpose of the research work is to examine critically the phenomenon of child soldiers as seen through Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. The theoretical framework of the study is based on psychological and psychoanalytic criticism. The methodological approaches used in this paper are the phenomenological and descriptive approaches through documentary research which includes internet and library sources. The pertinence of the theory and methods used lies in the fact that they will induce an understanding of the theme under study and a literary appraisal of the phenomenon of child soldiers through a study of the selected novel. This paper is articulated around three sections: the socio-cultural context of child soldiering in Sierra Leone, loss and redemption in the horrors of war, and the reintegration and adoption of child soldiers.

### 1. Socio-cultural Context of Child Soldiering in Sierra Leone

#### 1.1. Cultural Practices in Sierra Leone

This subsection examines the historical perspectives of the child soldiering phenomenon across various cultures, especially within Western culture and African culture. In the context of African culture, the study focusses on the connection between spirituality and children in Sierra Leone. According to A. S. Hornby (1989, p. 1233), 'spirituality' is the 'state or quality of being concerned with spiritual matters; devotion to spiritual things.' So, spirituality involves the feeling or belief that there is something greater than oneself and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature. Spirituality is complex in *A Long Way Gone*. The writer makes several references to Imams who are Muslim religious leaders. They lead prayers, blessings, funerals, and other religious ceremonies. While Islam plays a paramount role in the spirituality of Sierra Leone, tribal traditions are also important. Through prayers and blessings people invoke 'the gods' and the spirits of their ancestors while confronted with any danger in *A Long Way Gone*. However, such practices are not strictly compatible with Islam. Animism, or the belief that elements of nature have souls or spirits, is also mentioned in the work. For example, I. Beah's grandmother says: "The sky speaks to those who look and listen to it" (p. 166). Believing that the sky can speak to people is an instance of superstitious belief which refers to animism.

After the death of a civilian, there is a sorrowful ceremony of funeral as exemplified by the death of Saidu, one of I. Beah's companions, while they were wandering from village to village in search of shelter after many rebel attacks. The author narrates the scene in the following excerpt:

Saidu's body was washed and prepared for burial [...]. He was wrapped in white linen and placed in a wooden coffin [...]. It hit me that he wasn't going to get up only after he was lowered into the hole, just in the shroud, and the diggers started covering him with the earth. What was left of him was only a memory. [...]. The man who had asked earlier if any of us were Saidu's family began to read suras. [...]. The men who had carried Saidu began placing rocks around the grave to hold the mounds of earth. (pp. 85-86)

The excerpt shows that Saidu's death was sudden since he was not ill and Despite their kindness at the onset of the tragedy, I. Beah knows that he and his friends cannot find peace among the villagers. They have grown up too quickly into men who recognise that survival is more important than familial connections.

Unfortunately for the boys, their losses to date have hardened them into people who exist only to keep existing. People handle death and grief in a similar way as in Western civilisation. They bury the dead people in the ground, as shown through the death of Saidu and I. Beah's uncle. There are emotional events, where people express grief through tears. Funeral services include the reciting of suras or passages from the Koran. There seems to be a cultural acceptance of death. People describe death as the end of human beings' temporary journey in this world and their crossing into the spirit world.

According to A. S. Hornby (1989, p. 195), a 'child' is a 'young human being below the age of puberty.' As such, a child is a person below the legal age of majority. Adults expect children to respect them. They see them as innocent people who need to behave well in society. I. Beah corroborates that idea when he writes: "We grew up in a culture that demanded good behavior from everyone, and especially from the young. Young people were required to respect their elders and everyone in the community" (p. 33). Men, women, and children have roles to play within the community. Young people give the elders the highest level of respect, and the elders in turn often share their wisdom with the others. When refugees pass through I. Beah's village at the beginning of the work, they speak with the village elders. Sierra Leone is a patriarchal society in which men assume positions of leadership in the community and within families. During religious ceremonies and blessings, men are put in positions of honour. Men and boys eat meals before women, and people recruit only male children and men as soldiers. Men often assign domestic tasks, such as cooking and caring for children, to women. Child labour is existent in Sierra Leone. A. Khakshaour et al. (2015, p. 476) evoke it as follows:

Child labour refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend school regularly, and that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. When the economy was more agriculturally based, men who could afford it would have large families in order to have a large workforce.

The above quotation shows that children should not normally do any work that may interfere with their school attendance. Unfortunately, adults who should normally protect them exploit them physically and economically. Hence people consider the fact of having as many children as possible as a blessing. That is why some men marry several wives who bear them as many children as possible. That fact still remains in Africa today. Certainly, polygamy is still practised in Sierra Leone where there is still a cultural bias towards having a large number of children. In addition to this factor, the pattern of housing members of the extended family and others is part and parcel of the culture. However, people do not condemn polygamy in Sierra Leone. It triggers up a misunderstanding among family members. It sometimes destroys happiness in a family as it appears in the following excerpt:

That morning my father smiled at me as he came up the steps. He examined my face, and his lips were about to utter something, when my step mother came out. He looked away, then at my step mother, who pretend not to see me. They quietly went to the parlor. I held back my tears and left the veranda to meet with junior at the junction where we waited for the lorry. (p. 10)

The foregoing excerpt shows how there is a lack of communication between children and their father in a polygamous family. There is no care deserved by these children from their father because he does not want to provoke the anger of stepmothers. This happens everywhere in Africa and the problem is worse when a child is living in his or her father's compound without his or her mother. What I. Beah's mother says to him and his younger brother, Ibrahim, in this quotation is an illustration of this fact: "Your father is a good man and he loves you very much. He just seems to attract the wrong stepmothers for you boys" (p. 11). She has understood that I. Beah's stepmothers provoke all the bad attitudes (refusing to pay school fees, lack of communication and carelessness) that his father has towards him. So, he cannot blame his father for all his misdeeds.

Child labour almost defines childhood in Sierra Leone where a child who does not work is a bad one. A child might have to sweep the house and compound, get water for the household morning baths, fetch firewood in the forest and bring it home, maybe go to school, then work on the farm or garden, or help the adults with whatever work they are doing. I. Beah, the author of these horrifying yet vitally important memoirs, used to be

one of them. Reverting yet readable, unimaginable yet unforgettable, *A Long Way Gone* is sure to become a classic – unique memoirs about the civil war in Sierra Leone, as recorded by someone who took up an AK-47 at the age of twelve.

I. Beah is both eloquent and perceptive in his account of fleeing attacking rebels, searching for his lost relatives, seeking out food and shelter in the bush, and wandering in a land rendered unrecognisable by brutality and violence. Yet, once he has been picked up and recruited by the government army, I. Beah, a gentle boy at heart, finds that he, too, is capable of truly terrible actions. Through the military training, he has learnt how to fight and kill without having a bad consciousness. Actually, he is not so much recruited as threatened with death if he will not serve. Thanks to guns, drugs, and brainwashing by his commanding officers, I. Beah is transformed into a lean, mean, ruthless killing machine. He is brutally honest about the killing and mutilation he did in the conflict. When he is rescued from the frontlines by UNICEF, he is left to reflect on his experience. He does not have much time to worry about the politics on either side of the civil war. He has just tried to come to terms with the murderous things he has seen and done as a soldier. His whole childhood has been stolen from him, and he is angry and traumatised. Thanks to I. Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, we know what children face during civil wars in Africa and how some of them overcome that horrible situation.

### 1.2. *Initiation, Model Attitudes and Stigmatisation*

Children's socialisation primarily takes place in the family. In normal cases, children are brought up by their parents, grandparents and older relatives. In this home environment, they acquire the main rules of the social contract and cohabitation, and the behavioural norms of a given culture. War, as opposed to the normal state of the society, can be considered as a pathological setting. It is a factor which affects the individual's development: it reshapes the individual's life and environment. War easily causes children to be soldiers through the disintegration of their families and their becoming orphans after their parents' death. Man as a social being, particularly in early childhood, can only live in his family and in the community at large. The background which provides physical safety, care, and an affectionate atmosphere ceases to exist after the disintegration of families. The various groupings may serve as a substitute for this. Children who have lost their families may think of the army as a new family which substitutes the original one. The army takes up the role of child soldiers' families after a certain time. I. Beah corroborates this fact by saying: "My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed" (p. 126).

The values and norms which the community creates and accepts are extremely strong. Leaving the community is almost impossible as neither the fear of the anger of the community nor the assimilation with the newly acquired values let it happen. Stigmatisation and denunciation may be very effective in most cases. Stereotypes may make someone misbehave with the denounced people in a way that may fulfil his expectations. In the work, this explicitly appears as the author writes: "People were terrified of boys of our age. Some had heard rumours about young boys being forced by rebels to kill their families and burn their villages. These children now patrolled in special units, killing and maiming civilians" (p. 37). The use of child soldiers to terrorise and terrify people is extremely bad. So, the stigmatised people will start behaving in a way that is expected from them. A. Royall-Kahin (2010, p. 15) corroborates the idea in the following quotation:

Sites like [www.child-soldiers.org](http://www.child-soldiers.org), created by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers have become more frequent and are dedicated to showing the existence of the problem, the numbers, and the ways that people can support the Coalition's mission and their work. According to their site, "The problem is most critical in Africa, where children as young as nine have been involved in armed conflicts" ("Child Soldiers"). The interest in the subject of child soldiers may lie in its image: a child with a gun, new life holding something that could easily take life away. The visual oxymoron is a phenomenon that Western citizens find horrifying and at the same time intriguing.

The above quotation guarantees institutional care and support for children who lack access to their familial environment for any reason. At the onset of the work, when I. Beah, Junior, Talloi, and Mohamed miss their parents' care, they have started singing and dancing rap music in a band formed when I. Beah was twelve years old. The rap music has defined how I. Beah and his group dress and use slang. Rap music thus represents

his way into the modern world. Its power has mesmerised I. Beah and his friends so much so that they wholeheartedly adopt rap musician's ways of speaking, dressing and behaving. Rap becomes a way for them to express themselves through writing their own lyrics. They carry notebooks of songs and cassette tapes of their favourite groups so that they can always work together on their music. They even memorise lyrics so as to forget the horrors of the civil war as they have lived them. As the author puts it, "Memorizing lyrics left me little time to think about what had happened in the war" (p. 163).

## 2. Loss and Redemption in the Horrors of War

### 2.1. Recruitment of Children as Soldiers

Children and the youth represent the majority of the population in most countries where there are armed conflicts which disproportionately affect them. Their suffering bears many faces: they are recruited as child soldiers, deprived of education and health care, and separated from their families. A child soldier is regarded as a person, under the age of 18 who is either directly or indirectly participating in armed groups or forces during armed conflicts. Direct participation consists of wielding armaments, assault rifles, machetes or grenades on the front line of conflicts. It is the case of the author of this literary work, I. Beah, whose involvement in the civil war in Sierra Leone is very telling. Indirect participation, on the other hand, consists of combat support as spies and messengers, mine cleaners, porters, cooks and sexual slaves. He has witnessed the horrors of the civil war. He refers to one scene in these terms:

A group of men and women who had been pierced by stray bullets came running next. The skin that hung down from their bodies still contained fresh blood. Some of them didn't notice that they were wounded until they stopped and people pointed to their wounds. Some fainted or vomited. I felt nauseated, and my head was spinning. I felt the ground moving, and people's voices seemed to be far removed from where I stood trembling. (p. 13)

The above-mentioned excerpt shows that I. Beah, the author of these horrifying yet vitally important memoirs, has been greatly moved by the scene he has witnessed. It is clear that the rebels and government fighters shoot human beings as if they were animals. The atrocities of the civil war are thus beyond understanding. The plight of the fleeing victims described above is pitiful. I. Beah further describes another horrifying scene as follows:

The last casualty that we saw that evening was a woman who carried her baby on her back. Blood was running down her dress and dripping behind her, making a trail. Her child had been shot dead as she ran for her life. Luckily for her, the bullet didn't go through the baby's body. When she stopped at where we stood, she sat on the ground and removed her child. It was a girl, and her eyes were still open with an interrupted innocent smile on her face. The bullet could be seen striking 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. (p. 13)

The casualty depicted in the above-mentioned quotation is striking as it specially has to do with an innocent woman with a child on her back. Through her plight, the author denounces the fact that even women whom men should protect are cold bloodedly shot by those very men during civil wars. He thus reveals the evidence that nobody is safe during a civil war because the fighting factions are blinded by it.

One of the most deplorable developments in recent years is the increasing use of young children as soldiers. The choice of children as fighters during the Sierra Leone armed conflict is justified by the fact that they are easily controllable and not afraid of death. So, they are considered as being capable of inhuman acts. S. Shepler (2006, p. 30) corroborates this idea when he writes the speech of his friends, who are villagers from Sierra Leone, in these terms:

If an old person went to go join the rebels (perhaps seeing all the loot they were getting) the rebels would feel his chin to see if he had any beard. If so, they would send him away saying: 'We don't want you old man.' The rebels only want young boys and girls because they are more easily controlled. If you

tell them to kill, they will. A big man, 'no get da maind de' (isn't brave enough). 'Pikin no get frehd dai' (A child doesn't have a wife; he doesn't have children. Rebels can't be afraid to die).

The aforementioned quotation shows that child soldiers do not fear death and think that they have nothing to lose even if they die. Therefore, some commanders actively seek out children in preference to adults because they view them as obedient, highly motivated, and dedicated. They actively take part in civil wars as it is the case in Sierra Leone. I. Beah highlights the horrors of the civil war in Sierra Leone in the quotation below:

I am pushing a rusty wheelbarrow in a town where the air smells of blood and burnt flesh. The breeze brings the faint cries of those whose arms and legs are missing; their intestines spill out through the bullet holes in their stomachs; brain matter comes out of their noses and ears. The flies are so excited and intoxicated that they fall on the pools of blood and die. The eyes of the nearly dead are redder than the blood that comes out of them, and it seems that their bones will tear through the skin of their taut faces at any minute. I turn my face to the ground to look at my feet. My tattered *crapes* are soaked with blood, which seems to be running down my army shorts. I feel no physical pain, so I am not sure whether I've been wounded. I can feel the warmth of my AK-47's barrel on my back; I don't remember when I last fired it. It feels as if needles have been hammered into my brain, and it is hard to be sure whether it is day or night. (p. 18)

The above quotation clearly shows that blood is everywhere in the area because of the atrocities of the civil war. The author speaks of 'pools of blood' to emphasise the extent of the damage that the war has caused. He thus deplores the bloodshed resulting from the war and testifies to the fact that it was a very bad experience. He goes on to say:

[...]. The wheelbarrow in front of me contains a dead body wrapped in white bedsheets. I do not know why I am asking this particular body to the cemetery.

When I arrived at the cemetery, I struggled to lift it from the wheelbarrow; it feels as if the body is resisting. I carry it in my arms, looking for a suitable place to lay it to rest. My body begins to ache and I can't lift a foot without feeling a rush of pain from my toes to my spine. I collapse on the ground and hold the body in my arms. Blood spots begin to emerge on the white bedsheets covering it. Setting the body on the ground, I start to unwrap it, beginning at the feet. All the way up to the neck, there are bullet holes. One bullet has crashed the Adam's apple and sent the remains of it to the back of the throat. I lift the cloth from the body's face. [...]. (pp. 18-19)

In the foregoing excerpt, the author shows how he himself has suffered while trying to bury a corpse at the cemetery. Once more, he lays the emphasis on 'blood' spots on the body as a result of the bullets shot on the deceased person. The writer thus shows how children have suffered during the civil war in Sierra Leone not only through fighting, but also through transporting and burying corpses. Even after the war, the writer is obsessed by the horrors he had previously lived. As he is endeavouring to think about his new life in New York City, where he had been living for over a month, another scene of horror flashes to his mind:

I saw myself holding an AK-47 and walking through a coffee farm with a squad that consisted of many boys and a few adults. We were on our way to attack a small town that had ammunition and food. As soon as we left the coffee farm, we unexpectedly ran into another armed group at a soccer field adjoining the ruins of what had once been a village. We opened fire until the last living being in the other group fell to the ground. We walked toward the dead bodies, giving each other high fives. The group had also consisted of young boys like us, but we didn't care about them. We took their ammunition, sat on their bodies, and started eating the cooked food they had been carrying. All around us, fresh blood leaked from the bullet holes in their bodies. (p. 19)

The above-mentioned quotation reveals that the fighters attack innocent people if they have ammunition and food. Instead of asking for what they want peacefully and let the innocent people live, they use violence by shooting them dead. Children take part in civil wars either voluntarily or involuntarily. Children's voluntary joining in armed groups is explained by the fact that they find themselves unable to survive in their

own community unless they join armed forces during armed conflicts. They think that they will be well-protected and well-fed in armed groups. It is also a chance for them to revenge the death of their parents and relatives lost in the war. That is the reason why the lieutenant tells I. Beah and his friends: "This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families" (p. 106). Voluntary recruitment is also explained in term of poverty, despair, and separation from the family as it can be seen in I. Beah's story.

I. Beah and his fellows feel safe in a village called Yele where they voluntarily join the government army after wandering for days trying to survive and grieving for the loss of their friends. After choosing to fight, they witness prisoners being lined up and shot on their heads. The recruited children are trained in such a way that they are believed to be the defenders of villages. The lieutenant is showing the children the necessity to fight the rebels voluntarily by saying: "Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place to be. Well, it is not that safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe" (p. 106). While at first I. Beah and a few others are disgusted by this action, they soon take part in deciding whether or not someone will live or die. What the lieutenant has said in the quote is a mere propaganda to get young boys to join in the fight against rebels.

Involuntary or forced joining, on the other hand, consists in catching children by force and in making them join the rank of soldiers in order to increase the number of soldiers in an armed group. This stratagem is, most of the time, adopted by rebel groups. M. Denov (2010, p. 96) gives an example of forced recruitment in the short story of one boy. The story is as follows:

The rebels attacked my village and I was separated from my parents... They threatened to kill me if I made any attempt to run away. I didn't want to die so I joined them. I was afraid of being around these dangerous men with all kinds of weapons... I had no mom, no dad, no sister or brother... I was alone for the first time in my life.

The quotation reveals that children do not always willingly join rebels' army; once they come across rebel groups, they are likely to be recruited by force. It is also known that the proliferation of small arms has largely contributed to the increased recruitment and use of children by armed groups for direct participation in hostilities. Unlike old weapons which are heavy, cumbersome and difficult to handle, very young children can easily use the small arms currently circulating and therefore contribute effectively to a fighting force. Another instance of involuntary joining is provided in Saidu's case as revealed in the excerpt below:

Saidu's family is unable to leave town during the attack. Along with his parents and three sisters [...], he hid under the bed during the night. In the morning the rebels broke into the house and found his parents and three sisters. Saidu had climbed to the attic to bring down the remaining rice for their journey, when the rebels stormed in. Saidu sat in the attic, holding his breath and listening to the wailing of his sisters as the rebels raped them. His father shouted at them to stop, and one of the rebels hit him with the butt of his gun. Saidu's mother cried and apologized to her daughters for having brought them into this world to be victims of such madness. After the rebels has raped the sisters over and over, they bundled the family's property and made the father and mother carry it. They took the three girls with them. (pp. 79-80)

The above excerpt reveals that the rebels had taken Saidu's parents and three sisters after they had savagely raped his sisters. Saidu was safe because he had hidden in the attic. Since he was alone, he had no alternative left but join the fighters as a child soldier. Through the quotation, the writer unveils the havoc that rebels generally cause to families by raping girls, and by robbing and deporting whole families.

The methods of military training which are used in the training of child soldiers can be tracked through I. Beah's memoirs as a boy soldier. Improving the stamina, movements and acts used in battles are primarily the basis of the training. Once the rebels recruit children, they treat them in the same way as adults. They begin with induction ceremonies which include the killing and burial of imprisoned rebels. The induction is

meant to make them brave, loosen their relational ties with their families and communities and instill fearlessness and loyalty into the commanders. Through the training, the commissar succeeds in making the novices shoot the enemy without thinking and in getting the inner aggression of the children released. The feeling of pity is defeated through awakening the feelings of anger, hatred and aggression. For instance, the commissar says: "Visualise the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you" (p. 112). Legitimizing and supporting the fury of the natural feelings of aggression is an effective mind-forming method. The training for discipline and swiftness is important as I. Beah puts it: "The Corporal gave us one minute to get the food and eat it. Whatever we hadn't eaten was taken away at the end of sixty seconds" (p. 111). Acquiring the basic strategies of survival in practice is also part of the training. The lieutenant reveals it in these terms: "Ignore the safety pin, they said, it will only slow you down" (p. 112). The rebels also teach child soldiers the most basic knowledge about carrying arms as illustrated in the following quotation: "That evening, we learned to fire our guns, aiming at ply-wood boards mounted in the branches of tiny trees at the edge of the forest" (p. 112).

Children gradually get used to the sight of blood and death; and after some time, such things become natural for them. In various cases, the rebels force the novices to watch their close relatives' execution. For example, the commissar says: "We are going to initiate all of you by killing these people in front of you. We have to do this to show you blood and make you strong" (p. 34). The rebels create the feeling of aggression in the daily lives of child soldiers. An example of aggression pointed out by I. Beah is: "The five men were lined up in front of us on the training ground with their hands tied. We were supposed to slice their throats on the corporal's command" (p. 124). Executing prisoners is the proof that child soldiers handle their guns very well, and it makes them clap their hands to express their happiness.

Most living creatures do not want to destroy their fellow creatures. Killing is fundamentally hard for humans too, especially when neither the wish for revenge nor anything else inspires them to indulge in it. However, if the enemy is someone different or a bad person, it is much easier to stand against him. Therefore, in this case, the enemy is named 'dog' or something inhuman, or a negative religious element like 'devil' during the training. As these creatures are no longer humans, their destruction is much easier. This can be seen in the following declaration of the commissar: "They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country" (p. 108). Contrasting 'good' and 'bad' has a similar effect with a difference that a warm feeling of doing well accompanies it. In addition, killing leads to a catharsis, as the thought that 'destroying what is bad is a good thing'. Thus, killing is definitely a positive and almost a noble action. In the same vein, the lieutenant says: "We are not like the rebels, those riffraffs who kill people for no reason. We kill them for the good and betterment of this country" (p. 123). Abiding by the lieutenant's stand in the quotation, the child soldiers ruthlessly kill innocent people as revealed in the quotation below:

We began exchanging fire. [...]. We went to work, killing everyone in sight. We didn't waste a single bullet. We had all gotten better at shooting, and our size gave us an advantage, because we could hide under the tiniest bushes and kill men who wondered where the bullets were coming from. To gain complete control of the village, Alhaji and I shot the remaining RPGs before we descended on it.

We walked around the village and shot everyone who came out the houses and huts. Afterwards, we realized that there was no one to carry the loads. We had killed everyone. (pp. 143-144)

Through the above quotation, one wonders whether the child soldiers kill people, namely innocent villagers, for any sound reason. Contrary to what the lieutenant has said, it seems that they too kill for no reason like the rebels insofar as they kill the very people they should protect from the rebels' wrath. Ideology is always a soothing thing to lean on when it comes to doing things which one would otherwise not do. Children get new names during the training and this changes their whole lives. The new name means a new identity for which each of them tries to identify. That is what I. Beah means in this excerpt:



Because of this raid, Alhaji acquired the name 'Little Rambo,' and he did all he could in other raids to live up to that name. My nickname was 'Green Snake,' because I would situate myself in the most advantageous and sneaky position and would take out a whole village from under the tiniest shrub without being noticed. The lieutenant gave me the name. he said: 'You don't look dangerous, but you are, and you blend with nature like a green snake, deceptive and deadly when you want to be.' I was happy with my name, and on every raid, I made sure I did as my name required. (p. 144)

In the foregoing excerpt, I. Beah implies that in the battlefield, nicknames are not given by chance. Each soldier deserves his nickname and he should struggle in order to honour it. In the excerpt, the author says that he made sure he did as his nickname which is Green Snake required. The theories applied to the study, that is psychological and psychoanalytic criticism, are proved here. Their relevance lies in the fact that the literary work under study is primarily dealt with as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. In addition, the work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits.

During wars, soldiers use different mind-altering chemical substances. Of course, such substances are forbidden in professional armies, but it is known that there is a very small number of official and professional armies in the world. Besides alcohol, various types of drugs are becoming more and more widespread, particularly in Africa where the story of these memoirs also takes place. Amphetamines like ecstasy cause a feeling of power and quickness. Heroin and psychoactive substances like cannabis and marijuana have a calming effect just like alcohol and give a feeling of floating. Thanks to amphetamines, soldiers are able to march for days without the slightest signs of exhaustion. They can suppress their physical pains by taking heroin or cocaine. Drugs, of course cause physical and mental addiction; and as a consequence, soldiers are ready to do anything to get drugs. I. Beah voices this fact in these terms: "The combination of these drugs gave us a lot of energy and made us fierce" (p. 122). Furthermore, the alteration of soldiers' mental state and the observation of reality make them do what they should not normally do. To sum up, child soldiers do not feel the pangs of conscience. They think that whatever they do is up to the norm and their memories from the past mingle and then slowly fade away.

The first meeting with the enemy is always a crucial moment for the soldiers. I. Beah narrates his first meeting with the rebels as follows: "I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, all the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head" (p. 119). In the constant fights, the souls of the children get tough and are transformed into something that is not child-like anymore. Aggression, which becomes a daily practice, is referred to in the following quotation:

[...]. 'Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies. Very soon I will completely die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you. It will be quieter than I am.' (p. 70)

In the aforementioned quotation, I. Beah explains that at a certain point of instability, he does not think to survive till the end of the conflict. He feels close to death although he is too young. Their childish spirit slowly disappears as fights fill out their days. Once more, the theories applied to the study, that is psychological and psychoanalytic criticism, are proved.

Many of them are tormented by bad dreams not only because of the constant stress, but also because of the drugs and their consciousness. Killing becomes an ordinary activity for them. I. Beah demonstrates it through this quotation: "We went out two more times that week and I had no problem shooting my gun" (p. 120). With their guns in their hands, their fear also switches off and their moves and actions become monotonous. I. Beah refers to his own experience in these terms: "The idea of death didn't cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water. My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed" (p. 122). So, killing has become an easy task or rather a game for the writer.

Modern armies are endeavouring to protect civilians and keep the civilian victims' number down on a minimum. The constant development of precision firearms serves the same purposes. Those militant groups and armed forces which take up arms because of the so-called chances of free looting and robbery, however, represent a fundamentally different notion. In states where child soldiers exist, it can be said that the military culture does not stand on the high standard of the professional military culture. Intentional and cruel actions against the enemy soldiers are frequent as they are neglecting the United Nations' conventions – both those which are related to adults and those which concern children. For example, I. Beah says, "The lieutenant's words still echoed in my head. From now on, we kill any rebel we see, no prisoners" (p. 137). He goes on and laments: "So we gave them shovels and demanded, at gunpoint, that they dig their own graves" (p. 151). Child soldiers permanently practise killing on captives, which makes their aggression level higher. Thus, the execution of the enemy turns into a children's game.

M. Denov (2010, p. 21) rightly declares: "Violence and armed conflict are commonplace in the everyday lives of many of the world's children." She denounces the fact that in countries around the globe, children have been first-hand victims and witnesses of war and the atrocities that invariably accompany armed aggression. Violence has serious a negative impact on children during the conflicts, and also after the conflicts have ceased. In the same vein, G. Machel (1996) as quoted by L. Glanville (2018, p. 10) posits:

It is unconscionable that we so clearly and consistently see children's rights attacked and that we fail to defend them. It is unforgivable that children are assaulted, violated, murdered and yet our conscience is not revolted nor our sense of dignity challenged. This represents a fundamental crisis of our civilization. The impact of armed conflict on children must be everyone's concern and is everyone's responsibility; Governments, international organizations and every element of civil society. Each one of us, each individual, each institution, each country, must initiate and support global action to protect children. Local and national strategies must strengthen and be strengthened through international mobilization.

The above excerpt reveals and deplores the fact that people do not feel concerned about the impact of armed conflict on children. Children's material and emotional needs are often not met and armed conflicts undermine the foundation of their lives in many aspects. The traumatic experiences may have long-lasting effects on the lives of children and their physical, emotional, intellectual, social as well as spiritual wellbeing is under a great risk. A resulting impact of armed conflicts can often lie in manipulation and generally poor health for the children and an increase in diseases. Children may get lost from their parents, or lose them permanently in conflict. Armed groups purposely target schools and children's education is often perturbed during conflict situations. This story of one boy in M. Denov's (2010, p. 97) book may serve as a proof: "I was attacked at school and forced to join the movement. I wanted to say no but they shot me in the leg and I had no options. The day I was abducted at school, it was as if death had come to collect me." Through this quotation, it is clear that the educational system is destroyed during wars. Moreover, many children remain permanently disabled. Owing to the curious and playful nature of children, they are at a high risk of being injured and killed by landmines and unexploded ordnance. Moreover, children die due to the poor living conditions that their country faces when an armed conflict breaks out. During armed conflicts, rebels sometimes destroy the food systems inadvertently, but they may also damage them on purpose. Food is used as a weapon of war and starvation occurs among the populations due to the destruction of their food reserves. The unavailability of food and its uneven distribution are common during persistent violent conflicts, thus causing malnutrition among the poorest populations. Armed forces seek out political pressure and cause suffering to communities as it can be seen in the following quotation:

By early afternoon the central prison had been opened and the prisoners set free. The new government handed them guns as they got out. Some went straight to the houses of the judges and lawyers who had sentenced them, killing them and their families or burning their houses if they were not around. Others joined the soldiers who had started looting shops. (pp. 202-203)

The foregoing quotation shows that judges and lawyers, as well as their families, are not in security. It is well known that politicians are sometimes the first authors of instability in a country for political or economic purposes. The participation of children in a war does not only affect them, but it also affects humanity because it encourages the violation of the international laws which prohibit the use of children in wars. T. Oyewole (2018, p. 20) posits: “[...] the breakdown of formal child protection systems facilitated by both government and opposition forces, in the conflict, led to the weakening of legal blueprint of child protection systems, thereby resulting in a number of children ending up participating in armed conflict.” This quotation clearly shows that formal child protection systems have become weak owing to the destructive action of both the government and opposition forces. This situation fosters children’s vulnerability and dangerously exposes them to the phenomenon of child soldiering.

The ill-treatment of children by any person or group of people in armed conflicts is known as the violation of international laws, namely of children’s rights, or a crime against humanity. A civil war also breaks down civilisation in the sense that during the war, rebels and soldiers respect no one whereas in African society a child should respect his or her elders. It leads to chaos and mistrust at both personal and community levels. Because of this, when I. Beah and his friends reached one village in their trip in search of a safe environment, the villagers assumed that they were devils. People did not trust them; as a result, they sometimes punished them because they supposed that they were spies. The pain I. Beah and his people experienced goes far beyond physical pain. Fear often arises from speculation. There are too many ‘what if’ questions to be asked during a war. There are too many assumptions to make; there are so many unknown parameters. Yet, I. Beah and others like him cannot free themselves from their imaginations and assumptions. He explains this fact in the following quotation: “Sometimes I closed my eyes hard to avoid thinking, but the eye of my mind refused to be closed and continued to plague me with images. My body twitched with fear, and I became dizzy. I could see the leaves on the trees swaying, but I couldn’t feel the wind” (p. 49). So, the writer is sometimes overwhelmed or dominated by fear.

People make speculations on I. Beah and his friends by saying that they are just children. However, during a war, even children may be dangerous. People speculate on what will happen to them if they leave. So, they stay in their homes, fearing and venturing away from their loved ones. During the war, such fears impact nearly everyone, halting progress and movement. I. Beah refers his meeting with an old man who has told him: “Years ago, you would have been heartily welcomed in this village. I hope that you boys can find safety before this untrustworthiness and fear cause someone to harm you” (p. 56). So, fear has transformed and overwhelmed the populations of the country. People desert the towns or hide in their homes because they are afraid of strangers.

The experiences that children face during wars in their communities and countries are traumatic and long lasting. They do not only alter their childhood perspectives, but they also change their reaction to violence overnight. Children begin to play a major role in wars involving death and separation. A. Bainomugisha (2010, pp. 27-28) describes the effect of war on children and on the whole society in these terms:

Other children suffer the effects of sexual violence and the multiple deprivations of armed conflicts that expose them to hunger or disease. The Machel report further observes that during the 1990’s more than 2 million children died as a result of armed conflicts and most times these children were deliberately targeted and murdered. The report describes the callousness of modern warfare resulting from the breakdown of traditional societies, brought about by globalisation and social revolutions. The societal breakdown has led to [the] loss of distinction between combatants and civilians, horrible levels of brutality including systematic rape, scorched-earth policies and ethnic cleansing.

The foregoing quotation shows that violence through armed conflicts seriously affects a lot of children. The sexual and physical violence inflicted to children during armed conflicts as described in the quotation is horrible. Children whose parents serve in the military forces are left to deal with issues of separation and fear. The fear of not knowing when their parents are coming home, and if they will come back safely. A former child soldier in Sierra Leone with RUF refers to the aftermath of the civil war in these terms:

When the war ended, people said we should come out of the bush. But I was not going to come out with no shirt on my back and people looking down on me because I have no shoes... If there was no job and no money, no way would we come out... we would go back to the bush and fight again. (M. G. Wessells, 2004, p. 185; quoted by A. Bainomugisha, 2010, p. 95)

The aforementioned quotation shows that the child soldiers in Sierra Leone fight almost naked and wander in the bush without shoes. The boy who has spoken in the quotation says that they would go back to the bush and fight again if there is no job and no money for them. This poses the problem of unemployment after the disarmament.

### 3. Reintegration and Adoption of Child Soldiers

Providing meaningful and sustainable reintegration services to children formerly associated with armed forces and groups remains one of the most pressing challenges. According to J. Spear (2002, p. 142) as quoted by A. Bainomugisha (2010, p. 98):

There are two types of disarmament: cooperative and coercive disarmament. Coercive disarmament is the form commonly practised by the victor or the intervention forces. Examples of coercive disarmament include India in Sri Lanka and the US forces intervention in Iraq. Cooperative disarmament on the other hand is commonly associated with peace agreements where there has not been a clear winner of the war.

Reintegrating child soldiers back to society is a difficult task. The most important problem is that these children do not choose and do not want reintegration; so, they are forced to it. Many of them have smaller units to lead; so, they find it difficult to understand why they have to give up that life. After being recruited as soldiers, children get in touch with all the members of the camp who replace their family members. They adapt to violence which becomes for them a difficult task to get rid of. This clearly appears in the following thought of the author when UNICEF agents arrive in the camp and negotiate with the lieutenant the reintegration and education of the children used in the army: "We thought that we were part of the war until the end. The squad had been our family. Now we were being taken away, just like that, without any explanation" (p. 126). Former child soldiers show their disagreement in the disarmament process because they feel that they are being weakened and separated from their new family. Child soldiers look down on those who try to reintegrate them; they despise and disobey them. Many children escape back to their squad at the first opportunity. The reasons behind this are the absence of the 'family' that the camp is for them, the lack of respect, the opportunity of looting, and the knowledge which can only be useful on the battleground.

Reintegration is an extremely slow process. The inadequately handled trauma continues to exist and destroys the lives of many child soldiers, even though they live in a peaceful environment. A vast majority of them have serious drug problems which also contribute to raise their degree of aggression. When giving up drugs, they have huge physical pains, but this state does not last longer than a month. I. Beah proves this fact in the following quotation: "It had been more than a month and some of us had almost gone through the withdrawal stage, even though there were still instances of vomiting and collapsing at unexpected moments" (p. 145). As long as the withdrawal symptoms exist, it is impossible for a drug addict to concentrate on anything else. I. Beah corroborates the idea when he declares: "We had bread and tea for breakfast, rice and soup for both lunch and dinner. The assortment of soups consisted of cassava leaves, potato leaves, okra, and so forth. We were unhappy because we needed our guns and drugs" (p. 138).

When referring to the reintegration of child soldiers, it is necessary to take into consideration the side on which they had fought. This will help to prevent conflicts within the reintegration institution because at first, children miss their guns. More importantly, the children's age may vary although they may have the same level of education. In a group where there are children with different ages, it is evident that different educational methods have to be used, which is an additional difficulty. In the hierarchy, the most basic needs are at the bottom: hunger, thirst, etc. Without the fulfilment of these needs, no one is able to survive. For many child soldiers, the army becomes appealing because it can provide solutions to their

needs. They think that the army is the orphans' last hope for survival. The wish for security and the safety of the family can also be found in the army. A child soldier who belongs to the army is in a much more secure position than his contemporaries (this being naturally true in a given place where there is war). The squad thus fulfils his psychological need of belonging somewhere, which is an extremely strong motivation. As P. W. Singer (2006, p. 97; quoted by A. Bainomugisha, 2010, p. 95) points out, in case of reintegration:

Reunifications with families often face the challenge of acceptance and willingness even after completing the hardest task of tracing and relocation. Rehabilitation of child soldiers is a difficult process due to the added psychological and physical scars that these children carry. Yet empirical evidence shows that without effective RR, former child soldiers could pose a security risk of more and longer wars since they can be re-recruited to fight fresh rebellions.

The quotation clearly shows that reintegration is difficult even if the child soldiers are relocated. The most important thing to do before any possible rehabilitation is therefore to heal the psychological and physical scars that they carry. There are many international institutions and Non-Governmental Organisations which struggle for the welfare of children and condemn all kinds of violation of children's rights worldwide. These institutions and organisations have agents from different regions of the world. This can be seen in the author's portrayal of UNICEF agents in this excerpt:

[...] a truck came to the village. Four men dressed in clean blue jeans and white T-shirts that said UNICEF on them in big letters jumped out. One of them was a white man and another was also light-skinned, maybe Lebanese. The other two were nationals, one with tribal marks on his cheeks, the other with marks on his hands just like the one my grandfather gave me to protect me from snakebite. (p. 128)

The foregoing excerpt shows that these institutions work in such a way that people can trust them and realise that they are working for peace in the world. UNICEF has the mission to save children serving as soldiers by providing them with shelter and comfortable education. It is well known that the transfer of children from the military camping to the Benin Home is not an easy task because violence has become their everyday work and they do not want to be handled like children. When I. Beah and his friends were serving in military camping, they had been removed by UNICEF through negotiation with their lieutenant to join Benin Home. In that place, the child soldiers are not only well-fed and educated, but they also get the opportunity to meet their real family members. So, thanks to the institution, Uncle Tommy adopts I. Beah in the city and settles down with him and his family on the outskirts of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone.

It is true that the armed conflict in Sierra Leone has had drawbacks on children. However, it has given a new chance to some of the victims. M. Denov (2010, p. 9) sustains that idea when she talks about "the media's depiction of Beah and his constructed transformation from unknown African child soldier to global hero stature as a result of their journeys out of wartime violence." So, although, I. Beah has undoubtedly been instrumented in increasing public knowledge and awareness of the realities of child soldiers, there are inevitable implications to such portrayals.

The image of child soldiers as heroic figures is not particularly new. It is a way of showing that after having met many problems due to the war situation, certain victims also gain from their former state as soldiers. The media publish their deeds as child soldiers and portray them as the heroes of the civil war in Sierra Leone. After investigations over the civil war for example, the former child soldiers are called in the United States to talk about the event. I. Beah is chosen to speak to the United Nations (UN) in New York City about his experiences as a child soldier and the other problems plaguing his country. While at the UN meeting, he meets several other children who are also experiencing problems in their countries. There were 57 children present at the meeting, and each of them told his or her story to the UN. The Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted on September 26th, 1924 by the League of Nations is meant to care for and to protect children. L. Hughes (2000, p. 400) refers to it in these terms:

The 1924 Declaration for the Rights of the Child, drafted by the League of Nations, enshrined general principles for the universal care and protection of children. Furthermore, the "inalienable right" to the

components of a secure and healthy upbringing was recognised. At that time the need to protect children stemmed from increasing political incentives to ban child labour. On a more general note, due to a changing perception childhood from the psychological perspective ideas emerged to focus even more on the protection of children by means of law.

The quotation implies that children should have access to universal care and protection. In the process, child labour should first be banned through political incentives in every State even if it is anchored in African societies where most children are economically exploited even by their own parents.

### Conclusion

The purpose of the research work has been to examine critically the phenomenon of child soldiers as seen through Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. The paper has dealt with three sections which include the socio-cultural context of child soldiering in Sierra Leone, loss and redemption in the horrors of war, and the reintegration and adoption of child soldiers. It has touched on social, cultural, and historical factors that help explain the use of child soldiers during the civil war in Sierra Leone. To understand childhood in Sierra Leone, one could start with UNICEF data which paint a picture of a childhood of deprivation as opposed to the ideal western childhood. The author has used many literary techniques, including flashbacks to convey his message. He has succeeded in impacting his readership by drawing his readers' attention to the dangers inherent in the phenomenon of child soldiers which has a lot of setbacks. The findings of the study clearly show that the phenomenon of child soldiers is deplorable and needs to be eradicate for children's welfare.

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