

Child Narration and Trauma in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*

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Abstract

This study examines child narration and trauma in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN). Through the voice of innocence, child narrators serve as powerful literary devices for confronting harsh social realities, while their traumatic experiences, shaped by violence and exploitation, offer a deep exploration of psychological distress. The perceived innocence and vulnerability of children grant them a unique narrative authority, allowing them to expose controversial truths with a degree of immunity. Using trauma theory as an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory, this study draws on the insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Caruth's perspective emphasizes the complex, elusive, and delayed nature of trauma, while Herman highlights the process of healing. The analysis reveals that the child protagonists in both novels endure extreme psychological and physical abuse at the hands of their superiors, making them both victims and witnesses to violence. Their narratives not only reflect personal suffering but also serve as mechanisms for emotional catharsis and societal critique. This research contributes to the broader discourse on child narration and trauma theory, offering fresh critical perspectives on how literature portrays the psychological effects of war and abuse. It underscores the effectiveness of child narration in exposing uncomfortable societal truths and advocates its continued use as a literary tool for social commentary.

Keywords: Child narration, trauma, innocence, immunity, social realities

Introduction

Literary criticism is an evolving discourse, as literary works continually generate new meanings based on readers' interpretations. Once a text is created, the critic functions as an intermediary between the work and its various interpretations. Northrop Frye (1957) highlights this role, asserting that "Literature has been a

marketable product, its producers being the creative writers and its consumers the cultivated readers, with the critics at their head. From this point of view the critic is ... the middleman” (19-20). This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of literary criticism, which enables scholars to analyze texts through different theoretical frameworks. This study examines Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN) through the lens of child narration and trauma theory, addressing a critical gap in scholarly discourse. By exploring the status of the child, the literary technique of child narration, and the psychological concept of trauma, this study demonstrates how both novels depict the exploitation and suffering of children in violent environments.

A child is typically understood as an individual who depends on parents, guardians, or society for survival and well-being. Legally, a child is recognized as a person below the age of majority. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2007) defines a child as "... every human being below the age of 18" (1). This definition situates both Birahima (*Allah is Not Obligated*) and Agu (*Beasts of No Nation*) within the category of childhood, reinforcing their roles as victims of war and social neglect. Childhood is often associated with innocence, honesty, vulnerability, and an unfiltered perception of reality. As noted in UNICEF’s *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (2007), “The child is therefore recognized in his or her fundamental dignity and individuality, with the right to be different and diverge in his or her assessment of reality” (79). Recognizing childhood as a stage of vulnerability justifies global efforts to protect children from harm. Lansdown and Vaghi (2022) emphasize the need for such protections, stating, “... in recognizing that no form of violence against a child is acceptable, and asserting their fundamental human right to protection, these protection rights acknowledge the imperative for respecting the human dignity and integrity of the child” (291). This protective notion extends to literature, where child narrators serve as a means of exposing uncomfortable social realities, while evoking empathy from readers.

Child narration is a deliberate literary technique that employs a child protagonist to tell a story, offering a raw and often unfiltered perspective on complex social realities. African authors frequently use this approach to portray traumatic events with emotional intensity and honesty. Makokha (2019) observes that “Child narrators are an interesting choice because of the degree of emotions they inject in a story, which gives it an earnest tone and makes the reader want to empathize and sympathize with the narrator” (5540). The perceived innocence of child narrators allows them to serve as powerful conduits for examining war, oppression, and trauma. Orhero (2022) argues that “... child narrators are used agentially to represent

subalternity and that the child narrator's conception of reality is an important space for articulating the author's vision and politics" (2-3). This suggests that child narrators not only evoke sympathy, but also serve as significant figures in literary discourse, enabling authors to critique sociopolitical issues, without directly confronting them.

The effectiveness of child narrators is further supported by their reliability as witnesses to history. Orhero notes, that the child narrator is central to the construction of identity in fiction. Equally, Englund (2021) asserts that "The sheer number of ... novels featuring child narrators suggest that authors have deemed the child protagonist the more effective medium for commenting on and critiquing past and present developments" (890). Moreover, child narration fosters a universal appeal, making these stories accessible across cultures. Maksimovic (2018) explains, "... regardless of current age, gender, nationality, culture, or ideology, everyone was once a child and can, therefore, more easily relate to child narrators" (8). This universal connection strengthens the emotional impact of narratives told through child protagonists.

Additionally, child narration can serve as a strategic device that shields authors from potential backlash. Seraphinoff (2007) notes that "A child can, among other things, create a degree of distance between the adult author and his or her message that serves to lessen hostility to that message" (2). Thus, child narrators function as both emotional and political instruments in literature, providing an alternative lens for societal critique. Therefore, the exploration of child narration in these texts can be analyzed through trauma theory.

Trauma theory provides a crucial framework for analyzing the experiences of child narrators in *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN). Scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Herman have significantly contributed to the understanding of trauma and its lasting psychological effects. Sigmund Freud's work *Studies in Hysteria and Beyond the Pleasure Principle* links trauma to life-threatening events such as war and accidents. He describes traumatic neurosis as "A condition... which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life" (Freud, 1959, 6). Freud emphasizes that traumatic memories persist in the subconscious and manifest through dreams and recurring anxieties. He argues that victims continuously relive their traumatic experiences, making them unable to separate from the horrors of their past. Freud's association of trauma with accidents aligns with Roger Luckhurst's (2008) argument that trauma as a concept emerged with railway expansion in the 1860s, when doctors diagnosed "railway shock" in train crash victims.

Cathy Caruth builds on Freud's ideas, suggesting that trauma is characterized by a paradoxical state of knowing and not knowing. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), she argues that, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event... but rather in the way that it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, 1996, 4). Caruth views trauma as amnesiac and contends that fiction provides an effective means of bearing witness to it. She asserts that trauma victims may initially forget their experiences but later suffer flashbacks and nightmares that force them to relive their past. Cathy Caruth (1996) also emphasizes that "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (58). This stance is critical in understanding how child narrators in war narratives process and recount their experiences. Given their limited understanding of the world, their narratives often mix innocence with brutality, creating an unsettling yet profoundly moving account of trauma.

Judith Herman (1997) expands trauma theory by emphasizing storytelling as a therapeutic tool. She argues that "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (Herman, 1992, 1). Herman suggests that repeated trauma, particularly in childhood, shapes personality and fosters repression. She states, "Repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality" (Herman, 1997, 96). Her concept of "narrative cure" suggests that storytelling helps integrate traumatic experiences, facilitating recovery. She concludes, "The reconstruction of trauma is never completed, but when the 'action of telling a story' has come to its conclusion, the traumatic experience truly belongs to the past" (Herman, 1997, 195). This accentuates the transformative power of narrative in processing and overcoming trauma, reinforcing the significance of storytelling in trauma literature.

The experiences of Agu in *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN) and Birahima in *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) reflect the theories of Caruth and Herman. Both characters endure horrific traumas as child soldiers, witnessing and committing acts of violence beyond their comprehension. Their fragmented recollections and emotional detachment illustrate how trauma disrupts their psychological development.

Significance of Child Narration in *Allah is Not Obligated* and *Beast of No Nation*

The use of child narration has become a prominent narrative strategy in contemporary African literature. However, this technique is not exclusive to African writers. Renowned English and African American novelists such as Charles Dickens and Richard Wright have employed child narrators in *Great Expectations* (1860) and *Black Boy* (1945), respectively. The use of child narration in literature serves a dual

purpose: first, it provides an intimate and unfiltered on events, and second, it presents these events with an authenticity that an adult narrator might compromise. Since children are often perceived as naïve, innocent, honest, and impartial, their accounts are imbued with a sense of credibility and emotional weight. This shows that the authorial use of child narrators/protagonists offers an intimate understanding of children's experiences in contexts of socio-political crisis. This standpoint aligns with the portrayal of child protagonists in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, (BONN) where child narrators vividly recount their traumatic experiences. This also portrays that African authors use child narrators to disclose the grim reality of cruelty, harshness, parental (particularly paternal) egocentrism and extraordinary bruising of the vulnerable child's experiences. This claim is reflected in the narratives of Birahima and Agu, who provide firsthand testimonies of the brutality and exploitation they endure. Thus, the function of child narrators in *Allah is Not Obligated* and *Beasts of No Nation* extends beyond storytelling; they serve as vessels for articulating collective trauma, allowing the reader to witness the psychological and emotional impact of war on the most vulnerable members of society.

One key characteristic of child narration is the display of innocence and inexperience. Child narrators often lack the refined perspectives of adults, leading to an unconventional and sometimes crude storytelling style. In *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO), Birahima uses multiple dictionaries to explain words, assuming that his readers may be just as unsophisticated as he perceives himself to be:

To make sure I tell you the life story of my fucked-up life in proper French, I've got four different dictionaries so I don't get confused with big words. First off, I've got the Larousse and the Petit Robert, then, second off, I've got the Glossary of the French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa, and, third off, I've got the Harrap's. The dictionaries are for looking up big words and checking big words and particularly for explaining big words. I need to explain stuff because I want all sorts of different people to read my bullshit: colonial toubabs, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French. (AINO, 2000, 2).

Similarly, in *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN), Agu feels the need to clarify the meaning of certain expressions he learns from the rebel soldiers. His explanation of the phrase "zero zero one" illustrates his attempt to make sense of his surroundings, "We are waking up and walking around stretching our arm and leg, and we are all hungry. Nobody is eating. Everyone is doing zero zero one. I am not knowing what this is meaning before I am soldier, but now I am knowing that it means no breakfast, no lunch, only dinner" (BONN, 2005, 90). This limited linguistic sophistication

reinforces the authenticity of child narration, as the narrators struggle to comprehend and communicate the horrors of their reality.

Another significant feature of child narration is the moral struggle that young protagonists experience. Unlike adults, who might justify or rationalize their actions, child narrators often wrestle with ethical dilemmas in a way that highlights their innocence. In *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN), Agu is coerced into committing murder, yet his conscience torments him. Thus, he says:

I am starting to crying and I am starting to shaking. And in my head I am shouting NO! NO! NO! but my mouth is not moving and I am not saying anything. And I am thinking, if I am killing killing, then I am going to hell so I am smelling fire and smoke and it is harding to breath, so I am just standing there crying crying, shaking shaking, looking looking” (BONN, 2005, 18).

His fear of divine punishment reflects his moral consciousness, reinforcing his portrayal as an untainted victim of war. Similarly, Birahima’s candid admission of his own ignorance highlights his childlike innocence “I suppose I should apologise for talking right at you like this, on account of how I’m only a kid. I’m maybe ten, maybe twelve (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, Maman said I was ten) and I talk too much” (AINO, 2000, 2).

Child narrators often provide an unfiltered perspective, revealing truths without reservation. Their bluntness and lack of emotional restraint make them effective literary tools for exposing harsh realities. Birahima, for example, does not attempt to shield Yacouba and Sekou from scrutiny despite their role in his survival:

I was sitting in the back of the four-by-four, squeezed between Yacouba and Sekou. The big-time criminals were very happy. The folds of their trousers were heavy with purses full of gold and diamonds and the doctor had promised to help them in Boundiali so they could get their birth certificates changed. They could get new identity cards so they could openly practise their trade as money multipliers in Abidjan. Walahé! (AINO, 2000, 161).

This blunt assessment reinforces the child narrator’s role as an impartial observer, presenting events without attempting to soften or justify them.

Child narrators in *Allah is Not Obligated* and *Beasts of No Nation* frequently use crude language and explicit descriptions, particularly in discussions of violence and sexual exploitation. These elements serve to highlight the vulnerability of children in war-torn environments. Birahima’s encounter with sexual abuse, for instance, is described with striking bluntness:

I’d eat my fill and while I was eating she’d be saying stuff like 'Little Birahima, you’re handsome, so beautiful. Do you know you’re beautiful?

Do you know you're handsome?' And after I finished eating, she always asked me to take off my clothes. And I would. She would stroke my bangala gently, gently, and I'd get a hard-on like a donkey" (AINO, 2000, 79).

Likewise, Agu's exposure to sexual exploitation is narrated in an unembellished manner, "I am hearing these thing and it is making my soldier [penis] to become very hard and I am not knowing what to be doing" (BONN, 2005, 113).

These narratives provide an unflinching look at the sexual abuse of male children, a subject often overlooked in discussions of wartime violence. Through the voices of Agu and Birahima, *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN) and *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) provide raw, unfiltered accounts of trauma and survival. The use of child narration allows the authors to critique war and societal neglect while maintaining emotional authenticity. As Seraphinoff (2007) suggests, "... adults are even more tolerant when the child gives voice to certain uncomfortable or controversial truths" (1). Thus, child narrators serve as potent instruments for storytelling, exposing the brutal realities of conflict through an innocent yet powerful lens.

Social Realities that Orchestrated the Traumatic Experiences of the Protagonists in Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* and Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*

Trauma manifests in different forms depending on its source and impact, often leaving long-lasting effects on children. Childhood trauma, in particular, disrupts emotional and physical development, leading to long-term psychological distress. As Judith Herman (1997) observes, "... repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation" (96). This observation is relevant to the experiences of Birahima and Agu, the protagonists in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (BONN), respectively. Their traumatic journeys are shaped by war, physical assault, child abuse, sexual exploitation, and drug addiction. These factors transform them into child soldiers, forcing them into roles of violence, destruction, and moral decay. Their suffering aligns with Van der Kolk's (2014) assertion that, "... trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body" (22).

For Birahima, trauma begins in early childhood, even before he is forcibly recruited as a child soldier. His suffering starts with a severe burn accident and his mother's prolonged illness, which deeply affect him. He admits "I still have the scar, on my arm, in my head, in my belly, like the black Africans say, and in my heart. It is still there in my heart, in my whole being, like the smell of my mother" (AINO, 2000,

5). Agu, on the other hand, experiences his first significant trauma when war disrupts his education. The closure of his school marks the end of his structured childhood and the beginning of chaos:

They are telling me not to be coming anymore. There is no more school, he is saying through his shirt he is holding up to his mouth. I am wanting to cry for him because I am knowing that he is never crying himself. I am wanting to open my mouth and scream so that everybody is waking up and listening to all of the trouble this war is bringing, but my mother and my father are keeping quiet so I am keeping quiet also” (BONN, 2005, 62).

Agu’s traumatic journey escalates when he is captured by rebel fighters. His first experience of physical assault is terrifying, “Again and again he is hitting me and each blow from his hand is feeling on my skin like the flat side of machete. I am trying to scream, but he is knocking the air from my chest and then slapping my mouth. I am tasting blood. I am feeling like vomiting. The whole place around me is shaking ...” (BONN, 2005, 3). This moment marks his brutal transition from an innocent child to a conscripted soldier.

Both Birahima and Agu are forcibly recruited into rebel factions, exposing them to intense violence and moral corruption. Birahima quickly adapts to a world of brutality, substance abuse, and loss of innocence. Similarly, Agu is forced to commit murder under the orders of his captors, an act that leaves him deeply disturbed:

It is like the world is moving slowly and I am seeing each drop of blood and each drop of sweat flying here and there. I am hearing the bird flapping their wings as they are leaving all the tree. It is sounding like thunder. I am hearing the mosquito buzzing in my ear so loud and I am feeling how the blood is just wetting on my leg and my face” (BONN, 2005, 21).

After his first kill, Agu becomes desensitized to violence, even finding pleasure in it, “I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feet” (BONN, 2005, 51). This aligns with Herman’s (1992) assertion that childhood trauma can result in both adaptive and destructive coping mechanisms, “The pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive” (96).

Sexual Exploitation and the Trauma of Sodomy

Both novels explore the sexual abuse of child soldiers, a subject often neglected in discussions of war trauma. Birahima recounts the predatory behaviour of Colonel Baclay’s wife, Rita Baclay, and the rape and murder of young Fati. Similarly, in

Beasts of No Nation (BONN), Agu and Strika endure repeated sexual abuse from their Commandant. Agu vividly describes the horror of his first rape:

... after making me be touching his soldier and all of that thing with my hand and with my tongue and lip, he was telling me to kneel and he was entering inside of me the way the man goat is sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman goat and going inside of them. I was not struggling because I am knowing that he will be killing me if I am struggling and since I am wanting to die, I just let him to be moving back and forward even though it is burning me so much" (BONN, 2005, 85).

This abuse leaves Agu emotionally shattered, contemplating suicide but refraining due to cultural fears of being rejected by his ancestors. Both Agu and Birahima turn to drugs to numb their pain and sustain their ability to commit acts of violence. Birahima recalls his first experience with hash, "I was the ambush kid, so I got lots to eat and sometimes I got given hash for free, gratis. The first time I smoked hash, I puked like a sick dog, but after a while I got used to it and soon it made me strong as a grown-up" (AINO, 2000, 55). Equally, Agu relies on "gun juice" to detach from his reality, "Everybody is always wanting gun juice because it is drug and making life easy easy. Gun juice is making you to be stronger and braver. It is making your head to hurt and it is tasting like bullet and sugarcane" (BONN, 2005, 43-44). The widespread use of drugs among child soldiers further entrenches them in cycles of violence and psychological detachment.

Beyond physical and psychological abuse, Birahima and Agu endure severe hunger and exposure to the elements. Survival becomes their primary concern. Birahima describes how child soldiers sustain themselves, "In tribal wars and even in Liberia, the child-soldiers, the small soldiers, don't get paid. They just kill people and steal everything worth stealing. ... So as they have enough to eat and all the other stuff they need ..." (AINO, 2000, 33). Agu also narrates the difficulty of finding shelter, "... all of the insect is coming up to us in the night" (BONN, 2005, 78). These hardships further dehumanize the child soldiers, stripping them of any remaining innocence. The traumatic experiences of Birahima and Agu stem from war, exploitation, and systemic neglect, forcing them into cycles of survival and violence. Their narratives illustrate how trauma shapes identity, reinforcing Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma is not just about destruction but also about survival, "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (58).

Through these characters, Kourouma and Iweala expose the horrors of child soldiering and the long-term psychological consequences of war. Their stories

emphasize the urgency of intervention and rehabilitation for children affected by armed conflict.

Conclusion

This study has explored the significance of child narration and the traumatic experiences of child soldiers in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (AINO) and *Uzodinma Iweala's Beasts of No Nation* (BONN). The analysis demonstrates that child narration serves as a powerful literary technique, allowing authors to expose controversial social realities with a sense of innocence and authenticity. Unlike adult narrators, children can cross boundaries of confidentiality and taboo without immediate suspicion or consequence, granting their accounts a raw honesty that challenges readers' perceptions. The study also examined the socio-political conditions that contribute to the protagonists' trauma, revealing that Birahima, Agu, and their fellow child soldiers are victims of violent and unstable societies. The wars and insurgencies in their environments rob them of their childhood, forcing them into cycles of violence, abuse, and psychological suffering. Their forced conscription into rebel factions exacerbates their already fragile emotional states, making survival an ongoing battle.

Finally, the narratives, told from the perspectives of the child protagonists, provide a harrowing yet insightful look into the lived experiences of children in war-torn societies. By centering on their voices, these texts not only highlight the psychological and physical scars left by war but also emphasize the urgent need for intervention and rehabilitation for child victims of conflict.

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