

The Representation of Child Soldiers in Contemporary African Fiction

J.A. Kearney

Summary

In the context of international concern about the exploitation of children for military purposes, this study explores the representation of African child soldiers in five contemporary novels by writers from Africa: *Johnny Mad Dog* ([2002]2005) by Emmanuel Dongala; *Allah Is Not Obligated* ([2000]2006) by Ahmadou Kourouma; *Beasts of No Nation* (2006) by Uzodinma Iweala; *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; and *Song for Night* (2007) by Chris Abani. Sociological and autobiographical accounts of actual child soldiers' lives are offered as a comparative basis for discussing their fictional counterparts' experiences, and in order to highlight the unique insights offered by the fiction. Overlapping foci of attention for both the actual and the fictional cases are: notions of childhood in Africa in relation to the child soldiers' particular political situations; the ways in which they became involved in war; the degree of moral corruption in the children and how far this affects their militia relationships; how they cope with their ordeals; what signs of humane impulses remain; to what extent rehabilitation for the children is possible; and to what extent they come to understand the implications of their experiences. More specific foci for the fictional explorations are: the forms of narration and language devices employed by the novelists; to what extent memories of the child soldiers' past provide a contrast to their war experience; how far such memories help in rehabilitation; and devices or strategies used as reminders of the outside world, or to convey less conscious experience.

Opsomming

In die konteks van internasionale besorgdheid oor die uitbuiting van kinders vir militêre doeleindes, ondersoek hierdie studie die voorstelling van Afrika se kindersoldate in vyf kontemporêre romans van skrywers uit Afrika: *Johnny Mad Dog* ([2002]2005) deur Emmanuel Dongala; *Allah Is Not Obligated* ([2000]2006) deur Ahmadou Kourouma; *Beasts of No Nation* (2006) deur Uzodinma Iweala; *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) deur Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; en *Song for Night* (2007) deur Chris Abani. Sosiologiese sowel as autobiografiese beskrywings van die werklike lewens van kindersoldate word aangebied as die basis vir 'n vergelyking met die ervarings van hulle fiktiewe/fiksionele eweknieë en ook om die eiesoortige insigte van die fiksie uit te lig. Oorvleulende fokuspunte vir die reële en fiktiewe werklikhede is: die opvattinge oor kindwees in Afrika in vergelyking met die kindersoldate se

besondere politiese situasies; die maniere waarop hulle by oorlog betrek word; die graad van morele verderf van die kinders sowel as in hoeverre dit hulle verhoudings in die burgermagte beïnvloed; hoe hulle hulle ontberinge die hoof bied; die tekens van menswaardigheid wat by hulle oorbly; tot watter mate rehabilitasie vir dié kinders moontlik is; en ook tot watter mate hulle bewus word van die gevolge van hulle ervarings. Die spesifieke fokus vir die fiktiewe ervarings is: die vorms van vertelling en die taalmiddels wat aangewend word deur die outeurs; die herinneringe van die kindersoldate se verlede en hoe dit kontrasteer met hulle belewing van die oorlog; tot watter mate hierdie herinneringe help met rehabilitasie; en middels en strategië wat dien as herinneringe aan die buitewêreld of om minder bewustelike ervarings oor te dra.

The 2008 Global Report on child soldiers reveals that there has been continued progress towards universal consensus against their use in hostilities. Over three quarters of states have now ratified an Optional Protocol designed for this purpose, which requires state parties to provide a recovery and rehabilitation agenda for former child soldiers. In fact international law prohibits the recruitment and use of under-18s by nonstate armed groups, and criminalises the recruitment and use of under-15s by state and nonstate forces alike.

However, the military recruitment of children under 18 still takes place. Even in the case of states, a small number still persist in recruiting children and exposing them to all the dangers of combat. Nonstate armed groups show little concern for international law and continue with child recruitment on a fairly large scale in 23 countries, 10 of which are in Africa. In Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone the end of conflict has fortunately halted the massive recruitment and use of children by armed groups. In Côte d'Ivoire and Sri Lanka the armed groups have agreed to UN-sponsored action to end the recruitment of child soldiers and effect their demobilisation. On the other hand the LRA in Uganda, after a 22-year-long conflict, has ignored appeals to release children in their ranks.

The public naming of certain armed groups in the UN Security Council's report to the Security Council has encouraged several groups to renounce the practice. Community involvement needs to be encouraged, the report stresses, but some countries (as where Islamist doctrine is strong) may not be opposed to the practice. In the Central African Republic, Chad and Somalia ineffective government, absence of legal protection for children, poverty and lack of access to education create the conditions for recruitment. In some cases a stated intention to recruit only those above the age of 18 is undermined by the absence of measures to determine the age of recruits. Also in some countries low birth registration rates have facilitated forced conscription. There is now also increasing evidence that certain schools are used by armed groups to indoctrinate children. Furthermore, military training is compulsory for school children in some countries, for instance China and the Russian Federation. In many cases such schools fill

gaps in state education. Such early exposure to military life can of course be exploited to facilitate military recruitment.

Prompted by this sobering international report, my study explores the representation of child soldiers in five contemporary African novels by African authors (in chronological order of publication in English): *Johnny Mad Dog* ([2002]2005) by Emmanuel Dongala; *Allah Is Not Obligated* ([2000]2006) by Ahmadou Kourouma; *Beasts of No Nation* (2006) by Uzodinma Iweala; *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; and *Song for Night* (2007) by Chris Abani. However, since these dates are very close, and there is no actual evidence of intertextuality between the novels, I have not attempted to keep to this order in the various stages of my analysis, but have instead used whatever order seemed appropriate for the purposes of comparison or contrast. The settings of these novels are: the Republic of the Congo (Dongala), Liberia as well as Sierra Leone (Kourouma); an unnamed West Africa country (Iweala), and Nigeria (Adichie and Abani).

Two criteria were applied in my selection of these five novels. First, a significant focus throughout each novel needed to be a child's life, even though only part of it might involve the experience of being a child soldier. For this reason I have not included Angelina Sithebe's novel, *Holy Hill* (2007), in which we are informed that the male protagonist was forced to become a child soldier at the age of eleven. His experience as a soldier, however, only serves briefly (eight paragraphs altogether) to indicate his very troubled background when he enters the novel in its final section, and is presumably intended to induce a sympathetic view of his extremely corrupt adult life. Secondly, the wars on which I have chosen to focus, occurred in Africa, not in other parts of the world. Thus I do not include *Burma Boy* (2007) by Biyi Bandele since, although it offers sustained representation of a child soldier's experience, the setting of the novel in Burma at the time of the Second World War renders it unsuitable for comparative purposes.

For contextual information and insight a number of other texts have been used and referred to. In alphabetical order these are: Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007); Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006); Alcinda Honwana & Filip de Boeck (eds), *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (2005); Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (2006); Angela McIntyre, *Invisible Stakeholders: Children and War in Africa* (2005); China Keitetsi, *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2002); Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts* (2005); and Alfred Zack-Williams, "Child Soldiers in the Civil War in Sierra Leone" (Conference paper, 1999). Three of these texts have, for different reasons, presented problems. Doubt has been cast on the veracity of certain elements of Beah's supposedly autobiographical *A Long*

Way Gone, in particular the length of time he spent as a child soldier; any use that I have made of his text is therefore open to question. As China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* is the autobiography of a girl child soldier, it is not entirely relevant in relation to the protagonists of my selected novels who are all male. Moreover, since her extraordinary range of experiences and shifts in status has no match in the fictional characters' lives, its relevance is rather limited for my purposes. Eggers's *What Is the What*, deemed a novel by the author, involves the fictionalised autobiography of one of the Lost Boys of the Sudan, Valentino Achak Deng. The question of whether to regard this work as a novel or not, does not affect my selection of primary texts for discussion as Deng does not at any stage actually become a child soldier. Nevertheless, his awareness of certain aspects of Sudanese child-soldier experience led me to incorporate some of his accounts in my contextual section. In doing so I have had to take the risk of assuming that such accounts are not amongst the passages in the text which Deng himself acknowledges in his Preface as fictional. This risk seemed to me minimal as the relevant passages do not involve directly personal experience.

The first section of this article is intended to provide as comprehensive a contextual account of child soldiers in recent African wars as possible. First I consider notions of childhood in Africa with regard to political circumstances. Then the issue of how much actual child soldiers knew about their particular political situations is brought into focus, leading to an exploration of the various ways in which these soldiers became involved in war. That leads to an enquiry about the extent, according to my sociological sources, to which child soldiers' moral boundaries become corrupted; how far this corruption affects their relationships within their own militia; how they cope with the horror, terror and degradation of their lives; and what signs of childlike and humane impulses remain. Finally I consider the evidence of the extent to which rehabilitation for the child soldiers seems possible; if so, how it is made possible; and to what extent they come to understand the implications of their experiences.

The second section of the article is an exploration of the five selected novels, keeping in mind on the one hand, how they relate to the sociological and autobiographical material I have surveyed, and on the other, discerning the unique insights into child soldiers' experience offered by the fictional accounts. The crucial value of the fictional representations, in relation to the sociological accounts, is the opportunity they offer to enter into individual consciousness and to be in touch with a distinct personality. In the case of autobiography – referring here specially to Beah's *A Long Way Gone* since Deng in *What Is the What* was not a child soldier himself – there is of course more contact with an individual child soldier's feelings and views. Nevertheless, I shall show how much more individually resonant and intimate the novels are in this regard. This is largely due to the fictional

strategies used. In this section therefore, in addition to the categories already mentioned, I need to employ additional, specifically literary, categories. Foremost of these are narratological concerns: the form of narration these novelists employ, and the language devices they choose in order to create authentic portrayals of child soldiers' consciousness and speech. Since the fiction enables the reader to enter into individual consciousness in a way that the sociological material is generally unable to achieve, I discuss the extent to which memories of the pre-war past help to provide a contrast to the fictional child soldiers' war involvement in turmoil, violence and horror; and how far such memories help to rehabilitate them if and when they are freed from soldiering. The concern with memory leads me also to investigate what other devices or strategies are employed by the novelists to act as reminders of the world outside that of their child-soldier protagonists, and to what extent these writers use strategies such as dreams or surrealistic kinds of awareness to convey child soldiers' less conscious experience.

1 Contextual Account of Child Soldiers in Recent African Wars

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) defines a child as a person younger than eighteen years of age and does not stipulate a different age for nonparticipation in armed conflict (Honwana 2006: 36). On the other hand, the distinction between childhood and adulthood in African societies is usually less clearcut than in Western societies: from an early age children are regarded as having the responsibility to contribute to the livelihood of their families. Equally crucial to the issue of child soldiers in Africa is the fact that fifty per cent or more of the population in every African country are under the age of 18. The politics of West Africa, the region involved in three of the five selected novels, is "characterized by state weakness and insurgencies, including Liberia (1989-1997; and 2001-), Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Guinea (sporadic), and La Cote d'Ivoire (ongoing since September 2002)", and "none of these conflicts has occurred in isolation from the rest" (McIntyre 2005: 80-81). If one then considers these factors in relation to each other, the scope for the involvement of children in crisis and conflict is manifest. As McIntyre puts it, "[A]s long as weak political and economic structures exist and the continent remains dominated by young people, they will continue to become involved in conflicts" (p. 23). Similarly, Honwana observes: "The collapse of social and economic structures in rural areas and the massive migration of young people to towns in search of employment and livelihoods, often without success, contributed to driving them into soldiering" (2006: 47).

The writers on the West Africa situation all stress the role of alienated youth since for them "combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a

country with high levels of urban unemployment” (McIntyre 2005: 24). Equally important has been the role of the state in these circumstances in exploiting the potential relationship between youth and violence. Honwana clarifies the meaning of the term “child soldier” in these African civil wars as “the type of fighter who often fills the ranks of guerilla and rebel groups, inadequately trained and outfitted, often operating under the influence of drugs. Such soldiers harass, loot, and kill defenseless civilians indiscriminately. Not only do they show their victims no mercy, they may even fail to distinguish between friends and foes, kin and non-kin” (2006: 51). In Eggers’s *What Is the What*, the narrator, Achak Deng, reports that the turmoil stirred up by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) had become a part of the boys’ lives from early on, before they had even started on their long journey of escape from the Sudan. Once settled at Pinyudo camp in Ethiopia they discover that the SPLA camp is only a few miles from their own and it soon becomes clear that the proximity is no accident: the SPLA officers were “tracking each [boy], waiting until [they] were ripe” (p. 50). Although the ex-teacher, Dut, explains many times to Deng that the war is against the Sudanese government, the boy remains understandably confused because “our villages were being attacked by the murahaleen, but the rebels left the villages unattended to fight elsewhere, against the government army” (p. 141). His problem is thus not so much one of ignorance or inadequate understanding, as having to grapple with a very contradictory situation.

Regarding the question of the extent to which the actual child soldiers tried to resist recruitment or otherwise, writers concur that in most cases force was used, but they also emphasise that “in practice, the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment is blurred; in some circumstances, it is entirely absent” (Honwana 2006: 37). One needs to remember that there is not only the factor of intimidation involved, but that many of these children were “in search of physical protection, access to food and shelter, and the possibility of taking revenge against those who had killed their relatives and destroyed their communities” (p. 37). Often, too, parents, teachers and chief felt impotent to prevent such recruitment.

In *What Is the What*, when a much-respected Sudanese leader, Dr John Garong, gives an inspirational address to the refugees at Pinyudo camp. Deng is adamant that he does not wish to train, while, on the other hand, “hundreds of boys immediately departed to begin military training at Bonga [the SPLA training camp]” (p. 291). Furthermore he reveals that “every week, boys willingly left the relative safety and comfort of Pinyudo of their own accord to train at Bonga” (p. 295). Deng regards himself as having been saved from training as a soldier when all 40 000 refugees had to flee from Ethiopia after the toppling of President Mengistu.

Honwana points out that “[o]nce in the militia, boys were initiated into violence through a deliberate process of terror. Terrified themselves, they

were prepared to inflict terror on others” (2006: 50). Beah, however, gives a fuller explanation of how (at least in some cases) this was achieved: his government army lieutenant stressed that the rebels (the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)) “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” (Beah 2007: 108). In a conference paper on the role of the RUF in Sierra Leone, Zack-Williams notes how it started as a millenarian movement, and how its manifesto would have had a distinct appeal to many alienated youth:

We are therefore fighting for democratic empowerment to enable us to reclaim our sense of ourselves as enterprising and industrious Africans, using the history of our glorious past to create a modern society contributing to world peace and stability through advancement in agriculture, architecture, medicine, science and technology, industry, free trade and commerce We are crying out against hunger, disease and deprivation. We are tired of state-sponsored poverty and degradation.

(Zack-Williams 1999: 13)

P. Richards, however, observes that, despite the RUF’s claim to “have ambitions for a more just society”, it “ended up a random and arbitrary killing machine” (2005: 123). From a rather different point of view, Zack-Williams also notes that many children actually liked the kind of life they could have as soldiers. One respondent reported: “I liked it in the army because we could do anything we liked to do. When some civilian had something I liked, I just took it without him doing anything to me. We used to rape women. Anything I wanted to do I did. I was free” (Zack-Williams 1999: 19).

At the outset it must be emphasised that it was extremely difficult for child soldiers *not* to become corrupted through their experiences. Honwana’s findings are that “[t]he conditions of civil war generated a destructive, and problematic form of masculinity that was not aligned with civil society in peacetime” (2006: 53), and she notes the comment of a particular researcher: “A soldier must learn to dehumanize other people and make them into targets, and to cut himself off from his own feelings of caring and connectedness to the community. His survival and competence as a soldier depend on this process” (p. 58). Amongst the many intense feelings experienced by child soldiers, fear was the most pervasive, and indeed “the relationship between boy soldiers and their commanders was founded in terror” (p. 64). In the Mozambican and Angolan military camps which Honwana studied, she concluded that marijuana and bullet-powder were used to induce forgetting and fearlessness. If child soldiers responded emotionally to deaths observed in battle, they were liable for execution. Similarly the penalty for

failed escape attempts was execution. The inducement to suppress natural emotion was thus virtually unavoidable.

Beah reports several atrocious strategies used to suppress inhibitions towards violence in child soldiers. In one instance he refers to a visit to a nearby banana farm

where we practiced stabbing the banana trees with bayonets. “Visualize the banana tree as the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you,” the corporal screamed. “Is that how you stab someone who had killed your family?” he asked. “This is how I would do it.” He took out his bayonet and started shouting and stabbing the banana tree. “I first stab him in the stomach, then the neck, then his heart, and I will cut it out, show it to him, and then pluck his eyes out. Remember, he probably killed your parents worse.”

(Beah 2007: 112)

Prisoners were mercilessly killed:

We were supposed to slice their throats on the corporal’s command. The person whose prisoner died quickest would win the contest. We had our bayonets out and were supposed to look in the faces of the prisoners as we took them out of this world I didn’t feel a thing for him, didn’t think that much about what I was doing.

(p. 124)

Similarly Keitetsi, the girl child soldier, reports the macabre fate of prisoners at one of her camps:

the prisoners were ordered to dig their own graves and some of our officers told us to spit in their eyes After the men had finished digging they were ordered to stand next to their graves. They were hit on their foreheads and on the back of their heads until they dropped into the graves and died.

(p. 101)

It will be seen how vivid Beah’s and Keitetsi’s accounts of such horrific situations are. What is missing, as I shall demonstrate in relation to the selected novels, is an adequate awareness of the individuality of the child soldiers themselves. Beah can report that, in his subjective awareness: “I didn’t feel a thing for him, didn’t think that much about what I was doing”, yet there is no sense here of an unmistakably individual voice.

Honwana places much emphasis on the “profound disruption of social order and ... violation of moral norms” (2006: 45) caused by the involvement of children in war. They were unable to undergo the requisite initiation rituals and preparation for adulthood prescribed by their societies. Furthermore because they are believed to have been contaminated by the spirits of

the dead, it is hard for them to be accepted back into society. Those who were able to return home (and many were not) were therefore required to be “purged of the contamination of war and death, as well as of sin and guilt” (p. 110) through purification rituals, attended by their families and the broader community as well.

At the Lhanguene Rehabilitation Centre in Maputo, Honwana’s research team observed a great range of behaviours in the forty-six boy soldiers living there:

Some appeared listless and numbed, unable or unwilling to talk or to engage in organized activities. Others were talkative, anxious, and active. A number of younger boys interacted with the center’s adult caregivers; many older ones avoided contact or communication with them altogether. Some did not interact with peers; others engaged openly with one another; a few older boys bullied younger ones; and some engaged in fights and high-risk behavior.

(Honwana 2006: 138)

She noted also that most of the children seemed unwilling to verbalise their feelings with the psychologists employed to counsel them, and concluded that the Western mode of individual therapy was not suitable for the African context.

Direct rehabilitation in families was difficult to achieve for several reasons. Generally, in societies affected by civil war “no home was untouched by conflict and no life resumed normally” (Honwana 2006: 152). In some cases close relatives had been killed, homes and institutions destroyed. The communities themselves were considered to be in need of cleansing and reconciliation. Furthermore the strategies of “indirection and deception, including lying about their own identities” (p. 141) which the boys had learned in the militia, made the process of reintegration into family life difficult.

Ishmael Beah gives a vivid account of his life in a rehabilitation compound. Even if one is entitled to wonder to what extent the account is actually personal, the wealth of detail seems to authenticate the experiences as being those of one or more former child soldiers. I shall in any case simply assume in what follows that the experiences are those of Beah himself. He reports that, soon after his arrival, violent fighting broke out between the government army boys like himself, and those from the RUF. They would fight for hours and in the process “destroyed most of the furniture and threw the mattresses out in the yard” (p. 139). They would even sometimes “ambush the staff members, tie them up, and interrogate them” (p. 145). School supplies for the boys’ classes were regularly seized upon by the ex-soldiers and used for campfires. One of Beah’s nightmares reveals how intensely his soldier experiences continued to haunt his consciousness:

I was alone and it was dark, I searched for a lamp and found it, but I was afraid I lit the lamp, and as soon as the room was bright, I saw men standing all around. They had circled me in the dark. I could see their bodies – except for their faces, which were darker, as if they were headless walking beings. They began to shoot, stab, and slice each other’s throats. But they would rise and then get killed again. Their blood began to fill the room, its tide quickly rising.

(Beah 2007: 164)

Exploration of the Five Selected Novels

Four of the five novels in my study involve first-person narrators. Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the exception: as he is not the chief protagonist, and as Adichie does not employ a Faulknerian kind of approach involving several first-person narrators, it would not be appropriate for him to be singled out for such an opportunity. As servant, Ugwu says little but thinks a lot. Adichie does not use any special devices in terms of the language he uses in speech except to keep his sentences relatively short and straightforward, and his replies to his employers, the university lecturers and lovers, Oleanna and Odenigbo, always reveal formal respect. In his thoughts, however, Adichie allows him as much imaginative and perceptive scope as any of the other characters.

Birahima, the child soldier in *Allah Is Not Obligated*, is altogether too knowing. Kourouma is intent on providing full historical and sociological context, so via Birohima he informs the reader about each of the Liberian warlords and their contributions to the conflict. Through Birahima’s adult friend, Sekou, Kourouma offers the report that the UN requested CDEAO (alternatively CEDEAO) (Communauté Économique des États de l’Afrique de l’Ouest) to intervene, which led this agency to request Nigeria to undertake humanitarian peacekeeping. Birahima, however, is somehow sufficiently in touch with events to know that ECOMOG (the Ceasefire Monitoring Group of the Economic Community of West African States) betrayed their peacekeeping mission (Kourouma [2000]2006 139-141). He is fully aware of each development in the conflict between the two warlords, Taylor and Samuel Doe. Most astonishing and unconvincing of all is that he is able to offer the history of Sierra Leone in an uninterrupted fifteen pages (pp. 157-172) in the course of which Kourouma entirely loses touch with Birahima’s characteristic voice.

Kourouma in *Allah Is Not Obligated* unfortunately proves unable to sustain the mode of first-person narration. His wish to give full historical and sociological explanations interferes with this strategy more and more as the novel comes to an end. Birahima’s speech and thought is mainly marked by the use of three sets of swear words as explained by the character himself at the very beginning of the novel: “I use Malinké swear words like *Faforo!*

(my father's cock – or your father's or somebody's father's), *gnamakodé* (bastard), *walahé* (I swear by Allah)" (p. 2). These are often very effective, coming as climactic exclamations to an expressed point of view, and allowing him to give the impression (carefully self-constructed) of being rather cocky, and geared to handle any kind of situation. Nothing as individual or idiosyncratic can be found in Beah's or Keitetsi's reports of their actions and feelings. Another of Kourouma's strategies is to use the dictionary explanations offered by Birohima, not only to support the idea of the boy's concern to be concise and accurate but to provide Birohima with an extensive vocabulary. As I have already indicated, however, when Kourouma becomes immersed in historical or sociological commentary, he tends to abandon all attempts to convey a child's use of language.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* Adichie creates an image of the young male servant, Ugwu, as likeable and keen to please Odenigbo and Oleana but not in a servile fashion. He has a good deal of awareness mainly through the information he receives directly from them, and through overhearing many of Odenigbo's conversations with friends. In her convincing presentation, however, Adichie leaves us in no doubt, though, that he struggles to understand what is happening, and that Odenigbo and Oleana do not initially believe that war would ever come to Biafra. However, when crucial news of the large-scale killings that have commenced in Kano does come to Odenigbo, Ugwu is fully alert to the possibility of their having to flee, and we have been given sufficient previous signs of his quick thinking to find his awareness credible.

In *Song for Night* (Abani 2007), the other novel about the Nigerian civil war, My Luck, the ironically-named protagonist and first-person narrator, is very clear about the change in his attitudes towards the war. When he joined up at the age of twelve he informs us, "We all wanted to join then: to fight. There was a clear enemy, and having lost loved ones to them, we all wanted revenge" (Abani 2007: 19). However, after three years of fighting, he regards the war as "senseless" and confesses that "[w]e are simply fighting to survive the war" (p. 19). In particular, through his role as landmine defuser, he has become aware of the tragically ironic situation whereby "[s]ince landmines are banned in civilized warfare, the west practically gives them away at cost and in this way they are cheaper than bullets and other arms" (p. 47). Johnny Mad Dog in the novel of the same name has some awareness of the political issues, but in the conversation with his erstwhile friend Giap (later to become Johnny's leader in the militia), when he attempts to convert him, Dongala reveals Giap's better grasp. When they discuss whether they have any just cause to fight the Mayi-Dogos as they are being persuaded to do, Giap is given the opportunity to perceive Johnny's readiness to fudge issues opportunistically. His girlfriend, Lovelita, who is a Mayi-Dogo, must be excluded from any violence:

“You leave Lovelita out of this!” I warned. Nobody’s asking us to kill all the Mayi-Dogos. We’re only being asked to fight some of them – the ones who blindly follow the current president just because he’s from their ethnic group. That’s called tribalism, and we should resist tribalism because it’s bad for our country.

(pp. 92-93)

On the other hand, when a command leader comes to incite the people to vengeance against the Mayi-Dogos, Johnny is forced to admit to himself

that ... I didn’t believe what he was saying ... until that day, until the very moment he’d shown up to tell us these things, we’d never had any problem with the Mayi-Dogos. Moreover, among the young people our age, no one even knew who was a Mayi-Dogo and who wasn’t.

(pp. 85-86).

Dongala’s concern is clearly to highlight, through Johnny’s contradictory attitudes, the hypocrisy and doubletalk of the leaders. Furthermore Dongala allows Johnny, while celebrating the benefits of looting, to voice a major private cynical attack on the claims of the militia leaders:

[I]t was the main reason we were fighting. To line our pockets. To become adults. To have all the women we wanted. To wield the power of a gun. To be the rulers of the world. Yeah, all of these things at the same time. But our leaders and our president had ordered us not to say this. They insisted that when people asked us questions we should say that we were fighting for freedom and democracy. By saying this, we’d win the sympathy of the outside world.

(Abani 2007: 64)

Having accepted this hypocritical viewpoint, Johnny has no further political qualms; as long as he can be with a group that is able to loot, he is satisfied. In his representation of Johnny, therefore, Dongala manages to convey his sardonic criticism of the prevalent political hypocrisy.

The device of first-person narration works well for Johnny Mad Dog. In general, we are thereby able to register his excited, vengeful passion; his hatred of being made to seem inferior or inadequate; and his relish of merciless action. Johnny is preposterously vain and full of contempt for others if they do not fit in with his plans. Dongala, in representing these qualities, is masterful in giving Johnny all kinds of self-praising, self-justifying, self-pitying, self-deluding tactics, using a smart, quasi-intellectual vocabulary laden with curses, as in the following passage evoking his furious rejection of the name “Turf” he had previously called himself:

It was the fault of that idiot Giap, who in front of everyone had called me Turf, harmless grass, when my real name was Matiti Mabé: evil, poisonous,

deadly weed; the mushroom that kills, that sends you *ad patres*, to the land of your ancestors; the cannabis whose smoke makes your head explode into a thousand psychedelic pieces; the beautiful, mysterious, yet carnivorous flower that feeds on live animals ... but since my brain was capable of doing more than one thing at a time – talking and thinking simultaneously, for example – I said to myself that maybe it was a bad idea for a military leader to adopt a name like that.

After all, a plant, even a poisonous one, won't scare the shit out of an enemy. With a pair of good boots, you can safely walk on it, trample it. Even piss on it. Cat piss, sheep piss. Bush-pig dung, dog shit. No, it was a stupid name – I had to change it.

(Abani 2007: 97-98)

In Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, even at times of great stress in his experiences as child soldier, there is nothing to match the lexical and metaphorical power of Johnny's compellingly individual response. Here, for comparison, is Beah's response to a forest attack in which several of his friends are killed:

My face, my hands, my shirt and gun were covered with blood. 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. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two young lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people.

(Beah 2007: 119)

There is also a second first-person narrator in *Johnny Mad Dog* (Dongala [2002]2005) who alternates with Johnny; a young woman called Laokolé, who is clearly intended by the author to be Johnny's opposite in terms of morals and values. Through the kind of language Dongala uses to evoke her thoughts, we are made intimately aware of her deep but practical compassion; her unconventional interests, and her horror of violence and atrocity. The sustained contrast between the two characters enables Dongala to emphasise what Johnny has lost, in relation to Laokolé's moral fortitude. Furthermore the regular shifts to Laokolé's experience as a refugee keeps the actual plight of the suffering victims of people like Johnny at the forefront of our awareness.

Agu, the child soldier in *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2006), is the least politically aware of all those in my study. Nevertheless he is an observer and thinker, one who notes his Commandant's private doubts and uncertainties about their enterprise, and is able to take up a questioning stance: "[H]ow can we be real soldier [sic]?" (p. 44). To his friend Strika he offers reassurance, but to himself he confesses the opposite: "[W]e will always be fighting war" (p. 47), a gloomy prediction through which Iweala possibly hints at the continued use of child soldiers in several African countries.

When Agu's group attacks a village, he seems to realise that the motive of revenge they have been given is fabricated, and when he finally escapes with the older soldier called Rambo, he knows that his gun is more important to Rambo than to himself. The difference between the kind of friendly reassurance Agu offers Strika and his own private thoughts and perceptions, is just one of the many ways in which such fictional representations enable us to move beyond sociological-type data, and begin to grasp what the intimate awareness of particular child soldiers is likely to have been.

Iweala uses a striking language strategy in Agu's first-person narrative to convey his protagonist's feelings and shifting states of mind. From the beginning to the end of the novel we are confronted by nonstandard English. We grow to understand the particularity of Agu's consciousness through use of the present continuous tense; lack of concord, omission of the articles; incorrect plurals such as "clothe", "womens"; invented verbs, e.g. "is hungrying", "angrying", "paining"; and the use of "to" after "make". The device is well sustained, creating an inimitable impression, and Iweala's imaginative power is such as to offset any possible irritation over the recurrent linguistic errors.

Abani's strategy in *My Luck*'s first-person strategy is perhaps the most unusual of all in relation to the five selected novels. At the outset *My Luck* informs us that "[w]hat you hear is not my voice" (p. 19) since all the landmine diffusers had their vocal cords severed to prevent them screaming and thereby distracting their fellows, if they step on a mine. The diffusers rely instead on their own kind of sign language. Abani uses the actual gestures required for these signs as his chapter headings, a device which creates a sustained impression of a private communication between character and reader. It also enables him to write in a sophisticated prose that one would not expect from an adolescent but which gives us access to the narrator's "interior monologue" (p. 21). *My Luck*'s own explanation ("my inner speech is not in English", p. 21) is a clever ploy on Abani's part to equip him with a special licence for representing the complexity of inner thoughts. The lyrical quality of many of *My Luck*'s perceptions and descriptions is especially memorable. Corpses in the river, for example, are described as a "macabre regatta", and their attendant vultures are "riding them like barges, and breakfasting at the same time" (p. 45). When the desperately hungry boy opens a tin of stale sardines he observes that "my knife [is] still embedded in the smile of the woman on the tin" (p. 57) so that even the act of tin-opening creates an image of warlike violence.

The selected five writers reveal a good deal of variety in the circumstances that lead to their protagonists becoming child soldiers, enabling us to gain vivid impressions of the kind of lives that result in sociologists' conclusions. Three of the characters, Birahima, Johnny Mad Dog and *My Luck*, enter more or less voluntarily into recruitment while the other two, Ugwu and Agu, are forced. Birahima suffered a miserable childhood with a severe-

ly crippled mother and no father figure. When she dies, he is meant to go and stay with his aunt Mahan in Liberia, escorted by a “grigriman” (maker of magical protective devices) called Yacouba. However, when the truck in which they are travelling is apprehended by the child soldiers of the warlord, Colonel Papa le Bon, Birahima and Yacouba both readily seize the opportunity presented to save themselves by joining Le Bon’s forces. As Birahima later puts it: “Being a child-soldier is for kids who got fuck all left on earth or Allah’s heaven” (p. 114), an aptly crude but compellingly individual version of what writers such as Honwana reveal. Johnny Mad Dog does not seem to have resisted at all when recruiters for the rebel forces come to his district. He was a gutter cleaner previously, and has a grievance against those who are well off. Joining the militia gives him an easy means of getting rich quickly. It also helps feed his related obsession with being an intellectual. There is clearly no millenarian motive in his case, but he fits the category of “alienated youth” described by McIntyre. What is interesting in Dongala’s representation of Johnny, however, is that, although the writer allows him this degree of justification for joining the militia, he is morally doomed in Dongala’s eyes and the novel moves inexorably to retribution by Laokolé, the alternate protagonist. In the case of Abani’s character, My Luck, he is thrilled after three weeks of general training, to be informed that he has been “selected to be part of an elite team, a team of engineers highly trained in locating and eliminating the threat of clandestine enemy explosives” (p. 31). At this preliminary stage, however, he has no idea what “clandestine enemy explosives” are, nor what his very intensive and bizarre training will involve, and least of all that he will have to lose his voice to perform his mission. Here Abani’s use of My Luck’s sign language as markers in the unfolding of the plot helps to enact his sense of gradual alienation from war. His loss of the normal human means of communication, his literal speechlessness, marks him out as an alienated figure. This condition is further emphasised by the process of the novel, involving his desperate and ultimately fruitless wanderings in seeking to regain contact with his unit.

Although Oleana in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2007) tries to prevent Ugwu from being conscripted, and is ready even to bribe the Kill and Go unit to release him, she is not present when he is snatched by soldiers during a risky walk away from home. Ugwu had revealed no inclination to join the Biafran army, yet when made a soldier, Adichie shows him as filled with excitement about the next operation of his unit, and about fighting for the cause of an independent Biafra. The second cause of his excitement is the closest that any of the characters in the five novels selected for discussion comes to sharing a millenarian consciousness (My Luck in *Song for Night* does not refer to the issue of Biafran independence at all). The mixture of motives fits in convincingly with his age and gender, and also with the way he has been influenced by people with responsible and humane political

views. Agu in *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2006) is discovered hiding where his father took him after their village had been taken over by rebels, and he is induced to join the Commandant's militia by his rather cunning persuasion that Agu will be able to kill his parents' enemies. Agu is in a vulnerable situation: his father is dead, and he has been separated from his mother and sister, so he agrees. Ironically, though, we are informed that as a child his relish of the David and Goliath story led to his wish to be a warrior; and in his childhood games he had "fancied that to be a soldier was to be the best thing in the world" (p. 38). He immediately admits, though, that "I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong" (p. 38). The irony in his being afforded the opportunity to become what he had in fact once wanted to be, is one of the ways which enable Iweala to penetrate the complexity of an individual child soldier's involvement in war.

Johnny Mad Dog is by far the most corrupted of all the fictional child soldiers in my selection. Indeed he is represented as corrupt from the start through his intense bitterness and jealousy. He persistently shows a lack of moral scruple and a total absence of compassionate or generous impulses. One of his first actions as child soldier is to rape the TV star, Tanya Toyo (previously admired from afar), and then to spare one of the TV journalists in the studio so that there will be a survivor witness of his macho achievement! The only morality he ever applies is a sense of how he is hard done by; he is outraged, for example, by having medical tasks to perform. He seems to become more and more heartless and perverted, as shown in his killing of the harmless fruit-seller boy despite the child's pathetic pleading, and in his readiness simply to toss a grenade into a crowd of fleeing refugees to force them out of his way. In his merciless treatment of the refugees outside the UN compound he has no moments of insight into the way he is prepared to violate every decent humane principle. His sadistic treatment of the wealthy married couple, the Ibaras, reveals how consumed he is with ruthless vengefulness against the affluent. Through this accumulation of grossly inhuman actions, Dongala prepares us steadily for an ending in which the only solution for Johnny's evil is to destroy him.

Such a stark formulation, however, does not do justice to the ways in which Dongala prevents us from perceiving Johnny merely in stereotype fashion as a depraved monster. There are many glimpses of more human (if not humane) feeling in Johnny. He is very jealous of Giap, and critical of him for killing Gator, who has been a friend. He proves unable to deal with a defiant rap dancer amongst fleeing refugees, and feels his skin burning from the gazes of hatred and fear shown by these refugees later in the UN compound. Dongala represents him as experiencing ordinary human suffering such as nausea and humiliation. His frequent experiences of exhaustion or headache also offer significant hints that his unconscious mind is in rebellion against him. Recourse to smoking a "joint" and heavy bouts of

drinking “cham-cham” are further indications of his need for escape strategies. He feels frequent anxiety about his role as leader, and even uncertainty about his mission. The closest he comes to genuinely humane feeling, though, is his grief over the death of his girlfriend Lovelita, although it was his own promiscuous behaviour that led to her fate. Ironically he is only too capable of moral criticism against others (e.g. against the child who tries to eat up all the broken biscuits after the ceremony for the new president and his wife, contrived to deceive the world about what was being done to aid refugees). In the culminating episode of the novel he cannot bring himself to rape the girl, Laokolé (of whom more below), because her mockery and contempt disempower him completely. In all these ways, then, Dongala enables us to respond with a degree of understanding to Johnny, and thus not to dismiss him as too reprehensible for empathy.

It must not be forgotten, however, that Dongala has ensured that a greater degree of sympathy will be evoked by the alternating first-person narrator, Laokolé, who is used by Dongala as a persistent reminder of humane impulses. Every violation by Johnny is contrasted by her loving concern for her mother, brother, and friend Melissa, and also, at the end, for a severely abused refugee mother and daughter. In Laokolé’s eventual escape journey after her mother’s death, she plays like a sister with the girl, Asjha, in her forest village, the kind of innocent activity of which Johnny seems entirely incapable.

Birahima in *Allah Is Not Obligated*, has a pervasive sense of cynicism, characterised by his regular assertions – basis of the novel’s title – that “Allah is not obliged to be fair about everything he does” (Kourouma [2000[2006: 5), and his sense of a “cursed, fucked-up life” (p. 5). However, he does suffer from feelings of guilt: he feels haunted by the spirits of his victims; and because he had unintentionally hurt his mother, he feels that he is cursed and damned, a state which “burns his heart” (p. 24), suggesting intense and damaging emotional suffering. His attitude to the excesses and atrocities of the warlords whom he serves at different stages reveals connivance and ambivalence; he tries to sustain a knowing, worldly-wise attitude, and yet, at the same time, to construct a kind of moral framework for himself. Through this precarious and deeply confused framework, Kourouma succeeds in bringing us close to the intensely ambivalent mindset of an extremely deprived and neglected child, who nevertheless has developed a certain degree of moral sensibility. Thus Birahima is shown as noting vestiges of compassion in Papa Le Bon; he regards General Oniko Doe as impartial; and credits Prince Johnson as a warlord with principles. When Le Bon is assassinated, Birahima feels sick. Ambivalence is also revealed in his attitude towards the cruel child soldier called Tête Brulée, and towards Brulée’s seriously injured and then wretchedly discarded girlfriend, Sarah. He relishes being sexually abused by Rita Baclay, one of General Onika Doe’s daughter-in-laws and the commander in charge of child soldiers.

Birahima wishes to give funeral orations for some of his dead fellow child soldiers. However, very little attention is given to his actual relationships with these boys. He cries for the deaths of the child soldiers aptly named Sekou the Terrible and Sosso the Parricide, and in his proposed oration for Siponni the Viper, Birahima reveals admiration for the boy's treachery. Because there is evidence of actual caring in the ferocious Mother Marie Beatrice's treatment of the girls in her charge, Birahima regards her as a saint, a significant example of how he distorts and exaggerates his latent moral values to find a way of interpreting his grotesque situation. Other evidence of a certain degree of moral awareness appears in his occasional signs of suppressed feeling ("I don't have to talk", p. 91), and in his admission that in Kourouma's army the leaders and child soldiers were becoming crueller and crueller. Amongst the final signs of his incompletely corrupted nature is the way he is touched by the news that his Aunt Mahan's last words were for him.

As Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2007) is only a child soldier for a few months, there is limited opportunity for him to become corrupted. Nevertheless Adichie reveals how his fear of participation in battle was "mixed with excitement at the thought that he was a soldier fighting for Biafra" (p. 359). Success with his high-impact landmine (*obunigwe*) leads to his being congratulated as "target-destroyer" (p. 362), and one can understand how such praise for an adolescent would enable him to feel "high up above the ground" (p. 363). When Ugwu participates in the rape of the bar-girl, the aspect of boyish vanity is again involved: he is incited to do so as a means of affirming this new nickname. Later too we see how keen he is to impress Captain Ohaeto with his operation of landmines. The dangerous implications of his susceptibility to admiration are suggested by Adichie through his friendly relationship with Hi-Tech, the child soldier who recklessly tears pages off Ugwu's precious copy of *Don Quixote*, and who initiates the bar-girl rape.

Adichie's major concern in her representation of Ugwu, however, is to provide convincing evidence of his capacity to rise above the "target-destroyer" image of himself. Before Ugwu becomes a child soldier we see how his relationship with Odenigbo and Oleana has benefited him, enabling him to have an unusually broad perspective. His activities as their intermediary have helped to mature him (especially with regard to Odenigbo's interfering mother). He shows much practical wisdom in assisting with their rapid preparation for departure from their university hometown, Nsukka, and in his commitment to protecting Odenigbo's infant. Ugwu even joins Oleana as a teacher when the school in the village to which they have fled becomes a refugee camp. Adichie's most effective stroke is to show how he becomes caught up in his employers' personal tensions, especially through the aftermath of Odenigbo's fornication with Amala (the young woman whom his mother brings with her on her visit for the deliberate purpose of

damaging his relationship with Oleana). Later he goes so far as even to beg Oleana to forgive his master. In this kind of role he reveals very different qualities from those that were evident during his war experience. Adichie prepares us for her most daring claim for Ugwu by revealing that the proposed title of the book about the Biafran war by the settler Englishman, Richard Churchill (“The World Was Silent When We Died”), haunts Ugwu and fills him with shame. So great is his shame indeed that it induces him to grapple with the recollection of the bar-girl’s hatred. Thus the combination of his mature qualities, and his cause for shame, are used by Adichie to make it credible that Ugwu could in fact go on to write the book when Richard gives up the idea. The achievement becomes, not only his form of rehabilitation, but his *rite de passage* to adulthood. Such a possibility opens up the world of child soldiers in a way that is not possible through the information provided by sociologists.

Of the four fictional child soldiers who are involved in this activity over a long period, Agu in *Beasts of No Nation* and My Luck in *Song for Night* are probably the ones who are most morally tormented, and least ultimately corrupted. Through Agu, Iweala is able to represent the possibility of extreme ambivalence towards the role of being a child soldier. From the start, thoughts of his family make him sad. When his first opportunity to kill comes, he feels ready but very nervous. However, although Agu shouts “NO! NO! NO!” (Iweala 2006: 23) in his head when ordered to kill the truck leader, the boy is represented as becoming consumed with a violent rage once forced to use his machete on the man. Corruption, Iweala indicates, is thus certainly possible for him. A significant sign of the underlying moral fibre Iweala envisages in him, however, is that he keeps trying to persuade himself that he is not a bad boy, yet ends up always feeling guilty. Humane feelings are revealed in his sympathy for his friend, Strika, who was so devastated by the beheadings of his parents that he has ceased to speak. Iweala’s touch of humour in Agu’s admission that Strika is “[his] friend even if he is looking ugly” (p. 149) helps to avoid what might otherwise have seemed sentimental.

The intimate awareness of a boy’s mind which Iweala offers us through Agu, and Abani through My Luck, is not available in any of the contextual material, and extends even the insights offered by Beah in what purports to be an autobiographical account. Agu is disinclined to fight till he remembers how they were all made to jump on the chest of a refuser till the boy died. Although his use of the drug called “gun juice” creates contradictory urges, he craves for it, and it makes him feel stronger and braver. Under its influence, Agu goes into a state of dissociation, a world of illusions in which people seem like animals. Then he feels it is good to fight and he becomes consumed with a desire to kill. He and Strika, during the attack on a village, discover a woman and her daughter hiding in the main house. Having decided in this state that the mother and daughter are their enemies, the boys

proceed to kill both of them mercilessly. Later, however, Agu asks himself how he can understand what is happening to him. As Agu began his cruel onslaught he had the sensation that he was “standing outside of [himself]” (Iweala 2006: 60). This kind of vividly intimate revelation of a state of mind is perhaps only available through the kind of imaginative sympathy possible in fiction, and a writer like Beah – even if he experienced what he claims – does not achieve it, as indicated by the following sample passage:

My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed.

The extent of my thoughts didn't go much beyond that. We had been fighting for over two years, and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen.

(Beah 2007: 126)

Soon after this brutal episode, Agu has vivid memories of celebratory dances in his own home village in which the ritualised conflict and killing situations enable Iweala to cast ironic light on the boy's present immersion in slaughter. Such rituals, which seem to represent the successful resolution of ancient conflicts amongst his people, have provided a society such as Agu's with a way of containing and restraining feelings of murderous violence. The suggestion is that these civilising restraints have been damaged, if not broken, through his child-soldier involvement. These memories also serve to heighten our awareness of how radically the present murderous savagery of the civil war has disrupted and possibly destroyed a skilfully developed civilisation.

When, on a later occasion, Agu enters the school in the semi-deserted so-called “Town of Abundant Resources”, Iweala shows him as having a fantasy of his own former school. In this surreal state his former teacher, Mistress Gloria, looks like the woman he killed, while all the children have the daughter's face. His underlying feelings of guilt are brought out still more forcefully by the realisation that the teacher is writing, “I will not kill, I will not kill, I will not kill” on the board (p. 130). In this skilful way Iweala integrates the forces of moral guilt and constructive past experience to suggest how Agu will ultimately prove victorious over the dehumanising effects of his soldier activities.

My Luck's complex responses to his situation involve a kind of continual oscillation between human, sympathetic promptings, and relish of the violence available through war. Even before he was enlisted, he killed the man who tried to seize him after he had fled from his empty home (p. 95). He admits that he enjoys the act of killing which for him is equivalent to an orgasm (p. 22). Yet the sight of a group of women having a cannibalistic meal, feeding on the body of a dead baby, is unbearable, and he is haunted afterward by the sight of the child's head (pp. 27-28). When forced to rape a

woman found hiding under her bed, he has no difficulty in achieving an erection but sobs during the act as she gazes at him with tender eyes (p. 85). His girlfriend, Ijeoma, offers him a form of salvation by allowing him to make love to her after the rape, thus making him aware of the crucial difference between love and rape (p. 86). When he becomes aware that his commander, nicknamed John Wayne, intends to rape a seven-year-old girl, he is so repelled that he shoots him but unfortunately in the process also kills the girl (p. 41). The fact that his unit then bestows Wayne's insignia on My Luck brings out the full ambivalence of his situation. Looting and stashing along the way do not seem to disturb his moral conscience to any great extent, and he shows contempt for ordinary villagers and what he refers to as "bush shit". He is immensely grieved when forced to shoot the rebel minister for propaganda on Wayne's orders, and ends up killing the man's youngest wife who throws herself in front of her husband to protect him (p. 103). Cuts on his arm, which he refers to as his "personal cemetery" (p. 38) reveal his potential for mourning the loss of friends and relatives (cf. Birahima's wish to give funeral orations in *Allah Is Not Obligated*). Most devastating of all to him is the death of Ijeoma, and one of the most moving episodes in the book is when she, torn apart by a landmine, offers him her St Christopher medal, but he has personally to remove it since she has lost both arms in the explosion (p. 41). After he has witnessed the heroic dancing of a disabled girl with one leg, My Luck is full of admiration for the fire of "life and hope" burning within her, and he is forced to admit that the very different fire burning within him is "shame; shame and fear" (p. 51).

In *Beasts of No Nation* Iweala makes maximum use of memory and fantasy to convey the effects on Agu of his child-soldier experiences. He has memories of his mother reading from the Bible; of his village school and his teacher, Mistress Gloria's, encouraging advice to him to become a doctor or engineer. He remembers Sunday school, going to church, and games with friends, all of which enable him to feel that he cannot be a bad boy. Central in his recollections of his mother is her recourse to prayer (especially when his father seemed desperate about their future), and her reassurance about the Lord's protection. I have already mentioned how, after taking "gun juice", Agu goes into a world of illusions where people behave like animals, and he thereby becomes consumed with a desire to kill. This kind of fantasy, however, is strongly offset by the later one of a teacher resembling Mistress Gloria, suggesting that Agu's basically moral nature will ultimately prove superior.

In no way, however, does Iweala allow these surrealistic moments to reduce the intensity of Agu's ambivalent responses to his immediate experience. Later, in the town brothel, there are further hints of corruption in Agu when he hears sounds of sexual activity. He begins to feel erotic arousal and tries to command one of the prostitutes rather arrogantly to bring him food. On the other hand, he has a frequent urge to resist being sexually abused by

Commandant. He feels anger and sadness about his exploitation, and wants to vomit when asked to touch Commandant's penis, yet he admits to liking the privileged jobs and transport comforts which his pet status affords him. Even so, these aspects do not reconcile him to the abuse. In general then, Iweala offers us a portrayal of Agu in continuous tension between the demands of his sensitive conscience, and the corrupting influences of child-soldier existence.

In *Song for Night*, Abani interweaves My Luck's memories of his recent child-soldier experiences with memories of the further past. The crosses on his arm, and his watch, "his most treasured possession" (2007: 54) as a precious gift from his father (even though it no longer functions properly), give the aspect of memory a concrete kind of quality. One of his childhood memories makes him unique amongst the fictional child soldiers: he loved doing crochet which he had learnt from his mother, and although his father did not mind, he had to hide this activity from his cruel, chauvinist uncle who became his stepfather. The most important of all his recollections concern his grandfather: "[A]ll I know comes from the stories Grandfather told me" (p. 109). Most prominent of these stories is the one about the "lake in the middle of the world" (p. 69). This lake Grandfather tells him, is "the heart of our people", and it is moreover "love". When he asks where to find it, he is told "It is at the center of you, because you are the world" (p. 73). On a particular trip with Grandfather down the delta to the sea mouth, a dolphin tries to play with My Luck, and Grandfather interprets this to mean that the creature has taken the boy's soul for safekeeping" (p. 72). My Luck remembers the night his Aunt Gladys came to visit after marital abuse, and how he had clung to her back as a form of comfort (p. 81). Most distressing of his memories is the time his mother prayed all day and into the night for her Imam husband (p. 156). It turns out that she has prophetic awareness because that night the father is murdered in his mosque, an event that marks the beginning of My Luck's awareness of the impending civil war. Everything that happens from then on, including the cruel treatment by his uncle-stepfather, but with the exception of Ijeoma's love, turns out to be a betrayal of the values taught him by his grandfather. Yet the central belief in love, and each individual's capacity for it, which Grandfather has given My Luck, seem to be crucial in saving him from betraying himself ultimately.

Ugwu's child-soldier experiences occupy only nine pages of the novel and in these Adichie focuses entirely on the boy's immediate experiences. In *Allah Is Not Obligated* Birahima recalls his past only at the beginning of the novel as part of his chronological account of his life, and does not refer to it again. His multiple early miseries would, in any case, not be likely to offer him any consolation or comfort. Kourouma does not make use of dreams as a strategy for delving deeper into Birahima's consciousness. In the case of Johnny Mad Dog brief memories of his past are merely used by Dongala to suggest what fuels his present vengefulness, lust and greed. However, one

needs to acknowledge that, in terms of the way they are represented, neither Birahima nor Johnny, unlike Agu, has a past worth remembering.

Dongala's chief device for providing reminders of the world outside that of the child soldier's is through the alternating Laokolé chapters which include not only the girl's humane impulses and aspirations but her mother's deep humanity; the compassion together with a sense of outrage shown by the women officials at the UN compound; Aunt Tamila's kindness and the friendly hospitality shown by the forest-village woman and her daughter to Laokolé. Important too in Dongala's representation of these children is Laokolé's inability to understand Johnny's cruelty, and her questioning how it is that good still exists ([2002]2005: 156-157). Perhaps Dongala's most masterful and surprising stroke in this novel is to allow Laokolé, in self-defence, to kill Johnny with the same kind of violence he was only too prone to use on others. Furthermore, Dongala's engagement with both child soldiers and the refugees they persecute offers unique access to this split world.

Possibly the most interesting and memorable aspect of Abani's novel is his use of the death theme, and the kind of surrealistic imagery he employs. In the brief late chapter when the voiceless My Luck asks what it is that leads him to enjoy killing, he also makes the moving declaration: "I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man – not this way" (Abani 2007: 143). To highlight this sobering and disturbing truth Abani has made sustained use of death imagery from the time when My Luck is haunted by the face of the dead, half-eaten child. Worried about being apprehended by a boat he has seen patrolling the river, he gets underneath a passing cadaver and floats downstream with it in order to reach safety (p. 64). In his dreams he hears his "dead comrades and relatives calling in the distance just out of reach" (p. 66). Later he actually comes upon a skeleton piloting a canoe (p. 76)! This uncanny encounter acts as a prelude for the way the imagery thereafter becomes increasingly surrealistic and associated with the Greek Styx mythology, gradually evoking suggestions of the boy's own movement towards death, and then, in the final chapter, leaving us to conclude that My Luck is indeed dead. At an advanced stage of his journey he comes upon a church catechist called Peter who informs him that his "friends are not far", and that the river is called the Cross because "we all have to cross it someday" (p. 113). When he lights a cigarette, it appears to come from a "never-ending pack" (p. 117), and sleep at this stage comes "easier and easier" (p. 121) to him. He feasts on antelope with a man who plays World War Two songs from a gramophone, and then plays a strange instrument which he digs up specially from the ground (pp. 126-127). In a dream when he and Ijeoma are saying the Angelus on the battlefield, she aims her rifle at him (p. 145), while after what seems to have been an actual train journey, My Luck notices later that the train has rusted over, and the station fallen into ruin (p. 149). More weirdly still, his road then leads to a dead end at a cliff edge (p. 152), and he

proceeds simply to step over that edge, only to find himself back on the road (p. 153). Most surrealistic of all is his being given water by a woman called “Grace” whom he meets on the road, and who keeps all her goods and food in a coffin carried on her head. Shortly afterwards, he finds himself waking up in that same bizarre container (p. 160). At the point of this realisation he seems to see his long-lost platoon on the other side of the river, and decides that “[t]here is nothing else to do but cross the river” (p. 162). No reunion occurs, however, as the coffin-canoë keeps spinning round when only midway across the river, and he watches in desolation as his platoon gets up and heads off. By this stage we are more or less ready for the culminating chapter in which he seems to have come home to a “young and smiling and happy” mother. When he greets her as mother, he finds that his voice has returned! This scene, and all the prelude moments of close symbolic contact with death, are surely Abani’s way of heightening our awareness of the death-in-life situation of child soldiers. His return home, as part of a death fantasy, insists heart-rendingly on the child-soldier’s burning and unquenchable desire to be once again part of home and family. This concluding section of the novel replaces what might otherwise lead to representation of a rehabilitation period for the protagonist, and the substitution reinforces what I assume to be Abani’s profound sense that any kind of adequate rehabilitation is actually impossible when childhood has been so radically interfered with, and virtually destroyed.

In Kourouma’s novel there is no evidence of adequate rehabilitation in Birahima’s case, nor does Kourouma seem especially concerned with this aspect of the boy’s situation. The telling of his story, however, may be considered to have a kind of redemptive aspect. For Johnny Mad Dog there is no rehabilitation, nor any opportunity for it since he is killed by Laokolé finally. His increasing tendency to more and more heartless activities indicates that Dongala did not envisage any chance of reform for him, and part of his purpose in using Laokolé is clearly to ensure that Johnny’s evil is destroyed. Ugwu in Adichie’s novel can be rehabilitated fairly easily as he had not been a child soldier for very long, and was able to return to his safe and congenial employment. His devotion to, and involvement with, Odenigbo and Oleanna, are also helpful factors in his later post-soldier life. The effectiveness of his rehabilitation is implicit in his achievement in successfully taking over the book that Richard decided not to write. It is significant that both Kourouma and Adichie give explicit attention to the idea of their protagonists eventually witnessing in written form to their activities, as if to hint at an indispensable form of rehabilitation, quite apart from the issue of the benefits of institutional centres for this purpose.

Agu in *Beasts of No Nation* is the fictional child soldier to whose rehabilitation most attention is given in the four selected texts. On his attempted return home he already decides that he cannot do such things any longer, and accordingly abandons his gun. In the rehabilitation centre Iweala

reveals Agu's sense of relief at not having to worry about the army any longer. However, there is no attempt to try to sentimentalise Agu's new situation. He likes the visiting priest's words but is unsure whether to believe him. Most striking at this stage of the novel is the way Agu regards the therapist as a small girl because his horrific experiences have made him feel like an old man. In his discussions with her he focuses mainly on his future, but sometimes refers to the noise of bullets and screams that he hears. In general, though, he actually reveals little to her because of his knowledge of too many terrible things, an approach which seems to confirm Honwana's point of view about the inadequacy of individual therapy in an African context. Touchingly, Agu thinks of consoling the therapist with the thought that, although he has been involved in atrocities, he also once had a loving mother. In these ways the writer enables us to get convincingly close to the likelihood of surprising and complex responses in an individual ex-child-soldier. Iweala's narration also allows direct access to the mind of a particular child in a rehabilitation centre, thus enlarging our imaginative grasp of the kind of situation exposed by Honwana as in the quotation given on page 75. Even Beah's description of his time in Benin Home, the rehabilitation centre east of Freetown in Sierra Leone, has a detached, generalising quality compared with Agu's intimate revelations, as indicated by the following passage from *A Long Way Gone*:

We would fight for hours in between meals, for no reason at all. During these fights, we destroyed most of the furniture and threw the mattresses out in the yard. We would stop to wipe the blood off our lips, arms, and legs only when the bell rang for mealtime. At night, after we had exhausted fighting, we would bring our mattresses outside in the yard and sit on them quietly until morning arrived.

(Beah 2007: 139)

Compelling and fascinating as are sections of Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, he seems more concerned ultimately with narrating the history of the recent civil wars in West Africa during the nineties. If Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* were the only novel in which child soldiers were represented in contemporary African fiction, one's knowledge of their experience would not be greatly extended. What is important in that novel, however, is her very sensitive handling of the boy Ugwu's experience in general, especially in relation to his employers. His child-soldier period is just another way of bringing out his development together with the implications of the Biafran war of independence. Although it is in any case possible that Adichie's knowledge of child soldiers was limited, this is not a significant factor in terms of the novel's overall concerns which involve so many other facets of the war period. Dongala's enterprise in representing both child-soldier and civilian-refugee life is in many ways a triumph of imaginative engagement. However, the implicit moral division of his structure along gender lines

perhaps implies an unwillingness on his part to empathise adequately with disenchanted and alienated youth. The latent acknowledgement of legitimate grievance on Johnny's part becomes swallowed up by the writer's urge to ensure that the boy's evil is destroyed. In my view, *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* emerge as the most empathetically sustained fictional ventures into the life of an African child soldier. Iweala's and Abani's very distinct strategies of language, recollection and surrealism all serve to keep us at every point intensely and convincingly involved with a particular boy, riven with ambivalent feelings about his role. Although Johnny Mad Dog and My Luck both die at the end of their respective novels, the killing of Johnny is seen as the appropriate penalty for his ruthless inhumanity, while I would argue that My Luck's fate offers a more profound realisation of the vicious inhumanity which leads a child into becoming a soldier in the first place. Abani's unique narrative strategy not only heightens our awareness of the voicelessness of child soldiers in terms of their vulnerability, but also of the potency of fiction to promote unhindered access to individual consciousness.

Central to my concern in this study has been the need to foster awareness of the plight of child soldiers, through a focus on African conflicts. In exploring the fiction, I have sought to clarify how an imaginative entry into a child soldier's consciousness illuminates and deepens the insights that can be gained through access to sociological or autobiographical accounts. However much writers such as Honwana and Beah can increase our knowledge of the child-soldier experience, they cannot leave us with the kind of compellingly intimate realisation of what it is like to be torn with ambivalent feelings as in the case of Birahima, Agu or My Luck, to be driven by a frenzy of greed and lust as in the case of Johnny Mad Dog, or to discover the evil that lurks even in the breast of a kind and responsible child like Ugwu when exposed to the vicious opportunities of a soldier's life.

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J.A. Kearney

Department of English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal
KEARNEY@ukzn.ac.za