



## Representations of Child-soldier Trauma in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*

EFETOBORE TOBRISE  
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

**Abstract.** The exploration of child trauma in literature has received robust attention in Africa. Though, this study is focused on the phenomenon of child-soldier trauma narratives in African literature. This study, investigated the representations of traumatised child-soldiers in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007). The selected text was subjected to qualitative, literary analysis, identifying the traumatic experiences suffered by the child-fighters featured in them. The study utilised the tenets of trauma theory to account for the mental state of the characters. The analysis reveals that there are different episodes of trauma like fear, anxiety, aggression, depression, hallucination, manifested by the child-soldiers in the novel. Bandele's *Burma Boy* imaginatively explores how young fighters (Chindits) were traumatised during the Second World War. In the novel, the child-fighters including Ali Banana, became traumatised as a result of their exposure to the devastating experience of war and deaths. The examined novel highlights the traumatic experiences of child soldiers especially Ali Banana thereby resulting in anxiety and depression. It also facilitates psychological health awareness, and this makes the research relevant to fields like clinical psychology and trauma studies.

**Keywords:** Trauma Studies, Child-Soldier, War, Mental Health, Fear.

### 1. Introduction

The exploration of traumatic experiences is a major theme in contemporary African literary works. The field of trauma studies has continued to intersect with literature as an aspect of its social and psychological functions (Buelens and Craps, 2008). Over the years, writers imagine and express different accounts of psychological anguish that are suffered by people. Perderson (2020), in his discussion of cognitive approaches to trauma and literature, reveals that, literary writers address issues of trauma in their works. According to him, in the characterisation of trauma in literature, writers recount the psychological and emotional challenges they suffer, which also apply to

other members of the society. The depiction of traumatic experiences in literature is informed by the quest to facilitate psychological, physical and social health. For instance, Winning (2020) observes that the narration of trauma and illness falls within the domain of the medical humanities. In other words, trauma narratives are relevant to the field of medical humanities (Winning, 2020 and Eaglestone 2020). This shows that writers that focus on issues of trauma in their works do so to create a kind of consciousness towards health and healing. The human mind constitutes the thrust of literary imagination and expression, what is regarded as psychological dimension of reality (Kekeghe, 2017).

This novel examines the representation of child-soldier trauma in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*. It is a fictionalised history of the Second World War, which underscores the trauma of some Nigerian child-soldier recruits. The relationship between trauma and literary studies has proven to be beneficial, especially as it shows the relevance of literature in creating awareness on psychological wellness.

Trauma is a psychological illness that manifests in the form of deep distress (Caruth, 1995). This implies that traumatic experiences affect the mental and emotional states of those exposed to it. As a broad field of study, trauma studies manifests in disciplines like cultural studies, medicine, psychology, sociology and literature. It was formulated by notable scholars who drew their ideas from the psychological studies of Sigmund Freud. Some of such foremost scholars and theoreticians of trauma studies are: Cathy Caruth, Judith Lewis Herman, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LapCapra.

Scholars have examined some of the common triggers of trauma as reflected in literature, which include exposure to war and social violence, death of loved ones, lover's betrayal, loss of job, loss of power, loss of business, sexual violence, gender hostilities, among others (See Caruth 1996; Omobowale & Kekeghe,

2018). That is to say that obvious social factors and experiences provoke traumatic memories.

Existing works on literary representations of child soldier narratives have shown the agonising effects which child-fighters face in war situation. Studies like Vinod (2021) and Hynd (2021) attest to the phenomenon of child soldier narratives and the psychological trauma suffered by child-fighters. Hynd emphasises that “child soldiers have been heavily involved in contemporary African warfare”. It is, however, important to examine how child-soldiers exposed to the devastating experiences of war psychologically respond to such situations as represented in literature.

The portrayal of trauma in literature has attained a significant place in African literary scholarship. Whitehead (2008) examines the literary representation of traumatic episodes in postcolonial Nigeria, drawing examples from the fictional works of Wole Soyinka. In a similar vein, Amy Novak discusses colonial-induced traumas in two Nigerian novels, specifically, Chris Abani’s *Graceland* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Shane Graham’s examination of traumatic memory in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, Laura Murphy’s investigation of trauma in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* and Mairi Emma Neeves’ analysis of post-apartheid trauma in Lisa Fugard’s *Skinner’s Drift* are some worthy contributions to trauma studies in African literature. Whitehead’s research is a major contribution to trauma studies in African literature.

The current study examines the representations of Child-Soldier Trauma in Bandele’s *Burma Boy*. The essence of this study is to ascertain the interplay of war and violence on the psychological make-up of children. The study will adopt Trauma Theory. The study is significant because it will help create mental health awareness on trauma and recovery. The characterisation of traumatised child-soldiers in the novel is a conscious effort by the writer to expose the negative effects of war and violence on the mindscape of children. That way, they stimulate consciousness on mental health, from the angle of children. Its findings will create awareness on some of the social triggers of trauma that manifest in people, specifically trauma caused by war and violent situations that manifest in children. This may foster better mental health awareness and management in Africa and elsewhere. The study will be anchored to the literary and analytical method of research, which is a qualitative method of research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Trauma theory which is an offshoot of psychoanalysis, to account for the psychological distress suffered by the child-soldiers in Bandele’s *Burma Boy*. Trauma theory was developed in Euro-America in the 1980s and it has since become a contemporary multidisciplinary area of studies that cuts across different disciplines like literature, psychology, medicine, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. The adoption of Trauma theory, as critical framework in the humanities, especially literature, witnessed an upsurge in the 1990s, (Felman and Laub, 1992; Antze and Lambek, 1996; Radstone, 2007). Though the application of Trauma theory to literary studies is relatively recent, it has, for decades, been prominently incorporated into film and media studies. Either in the written word or motion image, the use of trauma theory in literary scholarship is to engage a robust discussion of traumatic episodes, using the tools of psychoanalysis. This multidisciplinary branching, has, over the years, enabled a fuller explication of devastating effects of wars and other calamitous events, capable of causing emotional anguish. In trauma studies, literary images and media objects explore individual’s mental processes in relation to traumatic memories.

Pioneering and background studies on trauma theory have mainly examined the Holocaust of World War II. The Holocaust, as different trauma theorists have highlighted, has been significantly germane for trauma theory. Antze’s and Lambek’s study, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, is an interdisciplinary volume of essays that conceptualise and problematize trauma as a theory of the mind, which can be adopted by varying disciplines of human endeavour. Similarly, Radstone’s essay, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” offers a deep critique of trauma theory, highlighting its applicability as well as challenges of its suppression by more sophisticated theoretical approaches, which have been previously established in different humanistic discourses. Studies like Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, and Hirsch’s *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory*, have concentrated on the representation of trauma through literature, film, and photography. Also significant, are studies like Felman and Laub (1992), LaCapra (1994) and Leys (2000), which highlight both theoretical and clinical aspects of psychoanalysis and how they inform our contemporary understanding of individual and collective psychological damage.

The essence of this discussion is to highlight the tenets of the trauma model like repression, fragmented language, incoherent thoughts, unconscious instincts, aggressive instinct, as foregrounded in the works of Freud and Caruth and apply them to the text. Trauma theory is suitable in examining traumatic experiences manifested by the child-soldiers in the novel studied in this study. It will enable a close investigation of war-induced traumatised child-characters in the novel under study; this is because the study is focused on the representations of the Second World War and psychological responses of the characters in relation to the distressing moments of war and violence. Through a close application of the tenets of Trauma theory, the researcher will be able to account for the mental state of the characters as well as the social factors that triggered their mental distress. This will be done through a close reading of the characters and events in the novel.

### 3. Child-Soldier Trauma in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*

*Burma Boy* by Biyi Bandele is a fictionalised history of the Second World War, which underscores the trauma of some Nigerian child-soldier recruits. The novel explores the devastating episodes of the 2nd World War on the psyches of such children fighters recruited by the British to fight the Japanese at the Burma Jungle. Historical accounts show that during the Second World War, thousands of Africans, mostly Nigerians, were recruited by the British to fight against the Japanese. In this novel, Bandele recreates the traumatic effects of the war on the young Nigerian fighters especially, the protagonist, Ali Banana. The novel gives a vivid account of how child-soldiers get traumatised due to their exposure to episodes of social violence.

The novel explores the psychological state of Ali Banana, and other young Nigerian fighters recruited by the British to fight the Japanese at the Burmese jungle. The trauma of the young fighters is as a result of their exposure to different episodes of social violence and war. The fourteen-year-old Ali Banana, who underestimates the destructive consequences of war, lies about his age so that he will be recruited into the army. Ali Banana was dissatisfied by his initial engagement as a muleteer, driver of the fighters. After expressing his resentment, he was engaged as fighter under platoon D-Section, which is commanded by Sergeant Damisa (Samanja). Out of naivety, Ali Banana craves war and he is ignorant of its devastating consequences on the mind.

As the narrative progresses, it is learnt that the stormy and horrible experiences of the war affect Banana's psyche and he begins to manifest traumatic memories. As Ali Banana and his colleagues (the Chindits), embark on a long-distance march in the Burma jungle, his interest in the war begin to wane. At this point, the stern violence and the gory sight of death leave him traumatised. From the beginning of the narrative, Ali Banana had underestimated the consequences of war. Gradually, he is exposed to the dehumanising and devastating atmosphere of war. For instance, when Ali Banana realises that the British soldiers that collapse in the jungle gets no assistance from their team members, he starts expressing regret over his conscription into the army. The narrator reveals that Banana is shocked that his teammate, Bloken, 'had fallen and there was nothing anyone could do for him. Only Bloken could save himself' (80). This realisation attests to the tense nature of the atmosphere of war which he had voluntarily joined out of infantile thoughts. From this moment, it begins to dawn on Ali Banana that war is destructive but he can no longer retreat. He had urged to be recruited based on his childish emotions based on his admiration of soldiers' boots. That is the trivial infantile sentiment that informed his negotiation into the battle field. When the child-soldiers (Chindits) approach the Japanese, Ali Banana's apprehension becomes very glaring. The passage below underscores Ali Banana's psychological and emotional response to the violence in the battlefield of Burma:

The fire which earlier had frightened Banana and made him nearly flee had ceased to trouble him. That fire, which wasn't fire at all, but a million fireflies fused together into one giant piercing flame, had long ago disappeared. But the fear had not left him. He no longer remembered the excitement he'd felt only three days earlier. That feeling was gone, replaced by this numbing, if not disabling anxiety (p.81).

Bandele exposes the precarious nature of war, and shows that it is dangerous for children to be exposed to the atmosphere of violence engendered by war. For example, as the British army confronts the Japanese fighters in the novel, Ali Banana who is recruited to fight on the side of the British, manifests intense fears and apprehension. He nurses the terror of being killed by the Japanese fighters. He begins to manifest intense anxiety of fear. It becomes obvious that Ali Banana could not mentally withstand episodes of violence. His infant mind of fear comes to bear, and his initial naive urge to join the army disappears. The narrator says: Farabiti Banana wiped his face with the back of his hand and realized he was trembling. His head felt heavy and his mouth tasted of bile. He was no stranger to fear but as he stood on that mountain track in the

wildest reaches of the Burmese jungle...Ali Banana knew he was about to die and a great terror took hold of his mind (p.27-28).

The terror and tension faced by Ali Banana as a child-soldier is evident in the excerpt above, and it shows signs of trauma. This is the same tension faced by the other young fighters at the Burmese jungle. As conveyed in the excerpt above, Ali Banana is seen, showing symptoms of trauma that manifest in the form of extreme anxiety and fear. The other child-soldiers, like Banana, also manifest traumatic memories, arising from the tension and devastation caused by the war at the Burmese jungle. This display of terror is at the very first instance of the child-soldiers (Chindits) meeting with their enemies, the Japanese soldiers, in the novel. Guntu, one of the Chindits, is psychologically affected. For example, in some instances, he would see Japs turn into his own shadow, and in other cases, he sees them turn into trees. This is as a result of the mental burden the Chindits bear as a result of the terrifying experiences of war. The Janar had told the Chindits that the Japanese would come to kill them, and he admonished them to always resist them by fighting back. The words of the Chindits leave serious fear in the mind of the child-soldiers.

Guntu, one of the child-soldiers is mentally devastated as a result of the experiences of the social violence. What engenders such reaction is the trauma provoked by the war. Guntu's psychological trauma is elicited by the unpleasant experiences of war and violence, especially the gory sight of dead and decomposing Japanese that litter the entire Burma jungle. The reader is made to understand that the "bloating corpses" of the Japs have flooded the Muddy River where the Chindits, including Guntu, regularly frequent to wash themselves. It is therefore, not surprising that the war affects their mental state. Giving the gory sights and the fear of getting killed by their enemies, the Chindits, especially Banana, pray for the war to end. The Chindits engage in the consumption of weeds and other drugs to transcend the reality of the war. The narrator recounts the dehumanisation and gory images which the child-soldiers are exposed to in the Burmese jungle:

The smell emanated not only from the men who had ceased washing themselves since Muddy River became a floating morgue; it came not only from the dead mules scattered all over the block; it came not just from the epidemic of flatulence that had worked its way through every second man in the block; it came most of all and with pungent, unrelenting force from the decomposing bodies of nearly two thousand Japs strung in an endless array of morbid contortions on the concertina wire encircling the stronghold (p.178-179).

These gory images create tension and revulsion in the minds of the child-soldiers in the novel, and they begin to manifest traumatic episodes. As shown above, the entire environment looks tense and horrible. The Chindits are exposed to the shocks of war and its devastating effects, which further affect their mind. At this stage, the Chindits begin to regret their decision to adventure for a combatant mission and the Burmese jungle. They had underestimated the consequence of war. After the amputation of Pash's leg due to a snake bite in the jungle, the Chindits, especially Ali Banana, begin to manifest episodes of severe trauma. The killing of their colleague, Dogo, by the Japanese intensifies their psychological trauma. Every moment, Banana sees himself as the next to die. Banana manifests his inner burden by lamenting. For instance, "to think of Pash with a wooden leg" (187), leaves Ali Banana heart-broken. All of these episodes are deployed by Bandlele to make a statement on the devastating effects of war on the mind of young fighters.

Ali Banana appears to have received the fiercest traumatic torture in the novel. Damisa's death completely alters Banana mind. After being gunned down by the Japanese, half-dead Damisa pleads with Banana to help end his breath for fear of being further dehumanised by the Japanese and wild creatures in the Burmese jungle: "You know what the Japs do when they come upon our wounded. They cut off their limbs and rip open their stomachs. It's either Jap or the leopards and tigers if you leave me here" (200). After much plea, Banana helps to facilitate Damisa's final death. This experience plunges Banana to extreme display of trauma. The excerpt below conveys Banana's mental state:

He was alive. Damisa was alive. Such was the sheer relief that he forgot the torrential downpour. He forgot his terror of the trees swaying like drunken evil spirits everywhere he looked. He forgot the roaring forest around him and the fearsome beasts prowling in the dark. He sat there in a crouch, rocking back and forth, vaguely wondering where he was, how he got there and what had happened to Damisa (p.195).

Banana manifests intense trauma each time he thinks about the death of the other child-soldiers (Chindits) he had witnessed, especially Damisa's death which he facilitated. Though Ali Banana is subjected to treatment at the end of the novel, the reader is exposed to the extent in which the episodes of war ravage his mind. His traumatic state is engendered by the devastating effects of war and violence.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study reveals instances of child-soldier trauma in Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*. It also reveals that there are obvious social factors like war and social violence that engender traumatic breakdown of child-soldiers, as evident in the novel under study. As the study highlights, human beings respond to varying socioeconomic and political pressures in their environment which impact negatively on their mental wellness.

#### References

- Antze, P. and Lambek, M. eds. (1996) *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. New York: Routledge.
- Bandeled, B. (2007). *Burma Boy*. London: Vintage Books.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eaglestone, R. (2020). "Trauma and Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Eds. Colins Davis & Hanna Meretoja. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. Michigan: Basic Books.
- Hynd, S. (2021). "Trauma, Violence and Memory in African Child Soldier Memoirs." *Cult Med Psychiatry* 45 (1): 74-96.
- Kekeghe, S. E. (2018) "Psychiatric Conditions in Selected Nigerian Literary Texts". PhD Thesis. Dept. of English, University of Ibadan.
- Kekeghe, S. E. (2017) "Creativity and the Burden of Thoughts: Deconstructing Melancholia in Wumi Raji's *Rolling Dreams*". In *Matatu*, 49. 2. 293-306.
- LaCapra, D. (1994). *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Leys, R. (2000). *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Omobowale, E. B and Kekeghe, S. E. (2018). 'Greed and Ambition-Induced Psychiatric Features in Femi Osofisan's *A Restless Run of Locust and Muyiwa Ojo's Memoirs of a Lunatic*' in *Gender Folklore and Cultural Dialectics in African Literature: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Asabe Kabir Usman*. Kano: Bayero University Press.
- Pederson, J. (2020). "Cognitive Approaches to Trauma and Literature." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Eds. Colins Davis & Hanna Meretoja. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Vinod, K. V. & Goyathri, S. (2021). "The Silence of Compliance: Child Soldier Trauma in Contemporary African War Novel." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 11 (12): 1540-1547.
- Winning, J. O. (2020). "Trauma, Illness and Narrative in the Medical Humanities". *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Eds. Colins Davis & Hanna Meretoja. London: Taylor and Francis.