

Literary Review

INNOCENCE LOST: FROM CHILD TO PERPETRATOR OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMES

A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier

Ishmael Beah

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Society seems to create a distance between ordinary people and those who perpetrates international crimes. Many people cannot comprehend how someone could commit violent acts against others. Currently, there is an ongoing case at the International Criminal Court (ICC) regarding Dominic Ongwen, a former Ugandan child soldier who was abducted at the tender age of 10 by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the armed rebel group led by the infamous Joseph Kony since 1987. During his time as a soldier, Ongwen rose through the ranks of the LRA, becoming a commander of the Sinia Brigade. In December 2003, Uganda referred the LRA situation to the ICC and Ongwen was charged in 2015. His charges comprise of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the recruitment of child soldiers.¹ In light of this, how should society look at Ongwen: as a person who already had the disposition required to engage in horrendous activities or as a normal member of the society who became a monster, inflicting harm onto others due to circumstance?² Is he truly a perpetrator or simply an ordinary person who became entangled in a situational web and could not escape?

For quite some time, there have been debates on whether people who commit crimes do so because of dispositional reasons or situational factors.² Both the Milgram's study of obedience and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment demonstrated that ordinary people could be transformed into perpetrators of sorts by situational factors. Milgram found that ordinary people inflict pain

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¹ Human Rights Watch. (2016). Questions and Answers on the LRA Commander Dominic Ongwen and the ICC. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/05/questions-and-answers-lra-commander-dominic-ongwen-and-icc#Q2>.

² Browning, C. (1992). *Ordinary men - Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*, New York: Aaron Asher Books. Chapters 7 and 8, p. 55-77; Goldhagen, D.J. (1996). *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. p. 3-14; 239-262.

onto others when ordered to do so by an authority figure.³ Zimbardo's findings explain that when ordinary people internalise their roles in a particular setting, they are capable of partaking in acts they would not usually participate.⁴ According to research completed by Smeulers, the transformation process of ordinary people into perpetrators is possible and amplified in a militaristic context and during times of war.⁵ *A Long Way Gone* chronicles such a transformation. The memoir tells the story of Ishmael Beah, a Sierra Leonean author and human rights activist, who, as a young boy, was engulfed in the Sierra Leonean civil war, becoming a child soldier and transforming into a perpetrator for international crimes.⁶

The civil war in Sierra Leone began in 1991 when Foday Sankoh and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels invaded the country in an attempt to overthrow Joseph Momoh's government. The rebels were provided aid from Charles Taylor, a Liberian rebel leader and National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), whose main goal was to become wealthy from the diamonds in Sierra Leone. During this time, the rebels went to villages, killed civilians and took needed supplies. Both the governmental forces and the rebels failed to differentiate between civilians and combatants; consequently, many civilians suffered from torture, sexual violence.⁷ Among those affected were the children, enveloping in the conflict as child soldiers. The RUF, who extensively used child soldiers throughout the conflict, had over 80 percent of their forces consisted of children ages seven to fourteen. These children would serve in a specific group for child soldiers called the "Small Boys Unit".⁸ The decade long conflict in Sierra Leone resulted in the deaths of up to 300,000 people and became internationally known for the brutality of the atrocities committed.⁹

Once the civil war was over, many child soldiers were displaced with nowhere to go. Their stories often left untold. Only few have illustrated the life of a child soldier and even less from the autobiographical viewpoint. In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah recounts his experiences during the war. Structured as a chronological narrative, the memoir may be divided into different parts based on the major milestones of Beah's life: the struggle for survival following the raid of his home village, life as a child soldier, rehabilitation and reintegration, and escape from Sierra Leone.

In the beginning of the book, Beah is an ordinary 12-year old who enjoys listening to rap music on his walkman and performing choreographed dances to the songs with his friends. Later, his affinity for memorising and reciting Shakespeare comes to light. One day in 1992, Beah and his friends set

³ Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to Authority*. New York: Harper and Row.

⁴ Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer effect - understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

⁵ Smeulers, A. (2004). What transforms ordinary people into gross human rights violators, in: S.C. Carey and S.C. Poe (eds.) *Understanding Human Rights Violations: new systematic studies*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 239-256.

⁶ Beah, I. (2007). *A Long Way Gone - Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. Harper Perennial: London, New York, Toronto, and Sydney.

⁷ Human Rights Watch. (2012). *The Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/11/armed-conflict-sierra-leone>.

⁸ Shepler, S. (2005). The rites of the child: Global discourses of youth and reintegrating child soldiers in Sierra Leone. *Journal of Human Rights*, 4(2), 197-211.

⁹ Zack-Williams, T. B. (2006). Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone and the problems of demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration into Society: Some Lessons for Social Workers in war-torn societies. *Social Work Education*, 25(2), 119-128.

out from their village of Mogbwemo to the town of Matru Jong to participate in a talent show. While in Matru Jong, they receive word that their village has been attacked by the RUF. Unable to return home, Beah and his friends embark on an aimless journey, moving from village to village in search of food and safety as the rebels follow close behind. During his journey, Beah continuously witnesses the death and destruction in the wake of the war.¹⁰

Finally, Beah is en route to the village where his family has taken refuge. However, before he could arrive, the rebels attack the village. This leaves Beah in the traumatic position of watching them shoot civilians and burn houses. He becomes well aware that his family is falling victim to the RUF as he hears their screams echo from the hillside. Through a series of tribulations, Beah arrives at Yele, a village under the control of the Sierra Leonean Army. As the rebels move in closer and the army continues losing soldiers, the Lieutenant informs all the civilians in the village that they must participate in the army's cause in exchange for food and continued protection. It is here that he is forced to join the war, exactly what he has been running away from and dreading.¹¹

As to symbolise an end to his childhood, Beah's beloved cassette tapes, housed in the pocket of his pants, are destroyed as he is ordered to put on a uniform and his civilian clothes are thrown in the fire. At the commencement of their training, Beah and the other children are provided AK-47s, though some of them are too small to carry or fire them. They are also given "white energy pills" to help them stay awake and energised, succumbing to other drugs, including marijuana and brown-brown, a mixture of cocaine and gun powder. The mantra that promotes the agenda of the army is constantly being instilled into them: "Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you".¹² Initially, Beah is shocked and traumatised by his experience in combat, yet eventually he becomes a lethal soldier who is promoted to Junior Lieutenant for his ability to kill people quickly and efficiently.¹³

After serving as a child soldier for more than two years, Beah is released by his lieutenant to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) workers and placed in a rehabilitation program at Benin House with the purpose of successfully returning to civilian life. His rehabilitation is a long and arduous process during which he is haunted by vivid nightmares of violent scenes. Initially, he rejects the help of the staff, tormenting them and calling them "sissy civilians". Learning about his love for music from a classroom questionnaire, Nurse Esther gifts Beah a walkman and a couple cassette tapes on the condition that she will keep them in her office, forcing Beah to come and talk to her every time he wants to listen to his music. Finally, he confides in Nurse Esther his experiences as a child soldier. The reintroduction of music into Beah's life marks the beginning of the road to normalcy and his acceptance of civilian life.¹⁴

Upon his release from the rehabilitation program, Beah joins his uncle and his family in Freetown, fully reintegrating into civilian life. He is asked by UNICEF to interview for a trip to New York City to speak to the United Nations Economic and Social Council regarding the plight of child

¹⁰ Beah, I. (2007), *supra* note 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Idem*, p. 112.

¹³ Beah, I. (2007), *supra* note 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

soldiers in Sierra Leone. In his speech, he explains the dangerous cycle of violence and revenge, stating how he joined the army to avenge his family's death yet has come to learn that revenge will never end since each person he kills, their family will want revenge as well. Unfortunately, soon after Beah's return, the conflict reaches Freetown. In the middle of the chaos and destruction, Beah makes a choice: instead of taking the risk of becoming once again a part of the armed conflict, he crosses to neighbouring Guinea and flees to the United States, which concludes the book.¹⁵

In his story, Beah focuses mostly around the time before and after he became a child soldier. This could be his way of showing that he is an ordinary person who came to commit horrible acts. Perhaps, he purposely chooses to lessen the soldier part to draw attention to rehabilitation and spread awareness. Although the plot centers around Beah's experiences, this book does more than narrate a child's life during armed conflict; it shows the transformation process of an ordinary person into a perpetrator of international crimes.

Based on Beah's narrative, a particular pattern of behaviour during certain situations is apparent which can be viewed in relation to the situation of Ongwen today. Beah states that killing became a part of daily life. This routinisation only took a few years to fully engrain into his mentality. One could imagine the extent to which violence became routine for Ongwen as well, who served for much longer in the conflict in Uganda. Would it be logical to state that he and Beah were fairly identical in their journey as child soldiers? Beah was gifted the rank of junior lieutenant for his sadistic actions. Ongwen was the commander of his brigade. The roads seemed to only divert once Beah's lieutenant essentially bestows him to UNICEF. If that would have occurred for Ongwen, would his life have turned out differently? Would there be an ongoing case presently at the ICC? These questions are quite difficult to answer; yet it allows the mind to fully analyse all the factors out there, whether dispositional or situational.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*