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roman?

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Susanne Gehrmann and Charlott Schönwetter: The African child soldier novel: anti- or alternative *bildungsroman*?

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Abstract

African child soldier novels depict children's development from childhood to young adulthood in a violent setting. The protagonists' process of formal education is disrupted and the society in which they grow up is unstable. This paper investigates if these novels can still be read within the paradigm of the *bildungsroman* genre. Through close readings of Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) we analyse portrayals of different forms of learning and un-learning, formal and informal education, and how these relate to the protagonists' subject formation. We argue that these novels highlight different modes of learning as alternative ways of *bildung*, while they also subvert common ideas of becoming in a teleological perspective, thus contradicting the *bildungsroman* paradigm.

Zusammenfassung

Afrikanische Kindersoldatenromane beschreiben die Entwicklung von der Kindheit zum jungen Erwachsenenalter in einem gewaltvollen Kontext. Der formale Bildungsprozess der Protagonisten wird unterbrochen und die Gesellschaft, in welcher diese aufwachsen, ist in hohem Maße instabil. In diesem Aufsatz wird untersucht, ob solche Romane dennoch anhand des Paradigmas des Bildungsromans gelesen werden können. In der Analyse von Chris Abanis *Song for Night* (2007) und Uzodinma Iwealas *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) arbeiten wir die verschiedenen Formen von Lernen und Verlernen, formaler und informeller Bildung heraus und wie diese mit der Subjektbildung der Protagonisten zusammenhängen. In den Romanen werden verschiedene Formen des Lernens als alternative Bildungsformen aufgezeigt, während sie zugleich verbreitete Vorstellungen von Entwicklung in eine teleologische Perspektive subvertieren und somit das Bildungsroman-Paradigma in Frage stellen.

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THE AFRICAN CHILD SOLDIER NOVEL: ANTI- OR ALTERNATIVE *BILDUNGSROMAN*?

During the last decade, the child soldier has become a ubiquitous subject of writing in Africa and its Diasporas. In his *Manifeste pour une nouvelle littérature africaine*, Patrice Nganang classifies the child soldier novel as a sub-genre of what he calls „le genre du roman des détritrus“ (2007: 273), the genre of the novel of detritus, which focuses on outsiders and losers in the portrayed society. Following Nganang’s proposition, novels set in Africa with child soldiers as major characters have become part of a larger transformation process of African literatures.¹ This transformation started with the Rwandan genocide that caused a major epistemological rupture because of the failure of the African intelligentsia during this historical event of 1994. In a nutshell, with the child soldier as a protagonist, who is on the fringes of history, a killer without power and an ambiguous victim, African literature moves away from formerly well established types of protagonists: the dictator figure as an allegory of perverted post-colonial power; the classical postcolonial protagonist torn between Western and African *bildung* who tries to come to terms with his/her hybrid identity; the revolutionary anti-colonial hero or the female allegorical figure of the suffering nation. However, in the context of this article, it will not be our aim to investigate whether the African child soldier novel is a sub-genre of a larger new formation, as Nganang proposes, but rather to discuss how, if at all, it can be read within the paradigm of the *bildungsroman* genre. After a brief introduction to the classical genre and its postcolonial adaptation, we focus on the recurrent motif of *bildung* in some child soldier novels. In particular, we will offer close readings of Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007) and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), which we have selected because the texts illustrate the tensions between learning and unlearning processes in times of war in an impressive way.

1. The *bildungsroman* and its postcolonial development

The genre of the *bildungsroman* was first defined by the German critic Karl Morgenstern at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He understood the *bildungsroman* as a novel, which on the one hand depicted the educational process of its hero and on the other hand contributed to the *bildung* of the reader through this depiction (Berman 2004: 77). In his analysis of classical *bildungsromane*, Martin Swales describes the genre in the following manner:

There are a large number of German novels which concern themselves with the growth and change of a young man through adolescence and which take this period as precisely the one in which decisive intellectual and philosophical issues are embedded in the psychological process of human self-discovery. (1977: 6)

1 Biyi Bandele’s novel *Burma Boy* (2007), respectively *The King’s Rifle* for the American edition (2008), should be mentioned as a case apart here. Bandele opts for a historical novel and features an adolescent Nigerian protagonist who fights for the British troops in the Second World War. So, at the height of the ‘boom’ of child soldier narratives set in Africa between 2000 and 2010, Bandele’s novel serves as a useful reminder of the fact that children used to serve as soldiers in both World Wars and were also part of the colonial troops used on a large scale by Britain and France. Child soldiers are of course not ‘typically African’.

Typically, after a dramatic storyline of ups and downs, times of hardship and crisis, the *bildungsroman* provides a rounded ending with a character who has come to terms with his (and sometimes her) identity process and integrates into the order of a given society.

While the German origin of the genre is still palpable in the internationally adopted German term, the *bildungsroman* has become a successful international export in writing across cultures and across times, albeit with a rather flexible internal variety of the genre, proving that “[t]his paradigm’s extension only goes to reveal the growth and development are universal human phenomena” (Okuyade 2009: 1). Obviously, the teleological strive for a position of stability at the end of the novel, fulfils a mainly white Western male and bourgeois vision, which is not easily accessible to female and postcolonial subjects. This notwithstanding, early postcolonial novels from different emerging African nations often feature as *bildungsromane*. Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s great classic *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961) is a specific example. Although, as depicted in the novel, the process of double education in the West African Islamic school and in the colonial French system leads to a failed integration in both societies, the African and the European, Samba Diallo, the protagonist, can be perceived as a *bildungsroman* hero, even though a tragic one. With *Nervous Conditions* (1988), the Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga introduces the female *bildungsroman* to African literatures. The formation of the I-narrator Tambu under the peculiar Rhodesian colonial conditions exemplifies the complicated external and internal formation process of postcolonial subjects, which cannot easily flow into the happy ending of a stable identity position, although Tambu’s story is, among other things, a hopeful one for the protagonist.

Linking up with Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World* (2000) which explains the emergence of the European *bildungsroman* as a reaction to crisis, Apollo Amoko transfers the idea to the postcolonial African context when he argues that “[i]n relatively stable societies youth is but the unremarkable and invisible prelude to adulthood. [...] However, in periods of radical transformation and social upheaval, youth takes center stage supplanting adulthood” (2009: 199). Yet unsettled, recently colonized societies have not least to struggle with freshly imposed reference systems of *Bildung* that supplant local ways of transmitting and preserving knowledge. Ogaga Okuyade goes a step further when he argues that not only do postcolonial “African writers [...] adopt and rework the traditional *bildungsroman* form” (2009: 1) but “that most third generation African novels fall within the latitude of the tradition” (2009: 1).²

Where does this contemporary topicality of such a conventional form come from? The collapse of the erstwhile post-colonial world order in 1989 must be mentioned here, as it resulted in harsh economic crisis and devastating wars and genocide on the African continent. These events gave way to a growing number of children being involved in armed and other conflicts, followed by a literary boom of coming of age and child soldier narratives. Given this historic context of “societies in uncertain transition” (Amoko 2009: 207) and the generic framework of the *bildungsroman* as a response to crisis, can the child soldier novel be read as a kind of *bildungsroman*? This question is framed with the thinking that such novels typically feature the development from boyhood (and rarely girlhood) to young adulthood of protagonists who should be in a process of formal education, but have dropped

2 Okuyade obviously refers to a third generation of English language writers from Africa or more narrowly Nigeria and he also embraces the Diasporic writers, see his article “Weaving memoirs of childhood: the new Nigerian novel and the genre of the *bildungsroman*” (2011) in particular.

out because of war. Or could these texts be rather interpreted as anti-*bildungsroman* given the fact that the storylines of such narratives dismiss the intellectual and social formation of the subject due to the horrors of war that the young characters live through? If we understand *bildung* solely as a process linked to institutionalised learning and the integration of a subject into the order of a given society, child soldier novels certainly show us an opposite vision of the world. However, *bildung* in the larger sense of learning and personal growth is not completely absent from child soldier narratives, so could it potentially make sense to speak of an alternative *bildungsroman*? In our understanding, an anti-*bildungsroman* would still be a novel written in conscious dialogue with genre conventions – if only to subvert them or to show the impossibility of the classical pattern to be fulfilled. On the other hand, an alternative *bildungsroman* could introduce us to new, and quite radically different forms of learning and becoming a conscious subject under extreme conditions, in a process which could however still be linked to the functioning of the erstwhile generic paradigm.

2. The struggle for *bildung* in child soldier novels

The majority of the texts of the larger corpus under survey use both experimental language and narrative structures (compare Gehrman 2011a), but still largely rely on a realistic setting of societies at war.³ This does not mean that fiction can speak for ‘real’ child soldiers or even represent their experiences adequately. Rather, through creative imaginations about what could be the inner landscape of war children, fiction attempts to contribute to a better understanding of situations of political and social crisis. Therefore, in our understanding, it is not that fiction should be considered as source material about wars, but rather that fiction can help to rework the violence of war by means of symbolic narrations within which the trauma of individual characters is representative for a collective trauma, especially in the ambivalent figure of the child soldier.

However, literature is not produced in a void, but links back to social and political circumstances. Countries at war, in particular civil war, are notably inhabited by disrupted societies. Communities and families are torn apart and state facilities such as schools and universities become largely dysfunctional. Beyond these general difficult conditions for the civil society, for children taken onto the battlefields, schooling and the process of learning through socialisation as part of a family, a neighbourhood or a religious community are even more radically interrupted. In the most concerned age group from approximately ten to fifteen years, basic skills of formal *bildung* such as reading and writing – in the African context in particular the acquisition of the official ex-colonial languages – may have been learned halfway, but are at risk of remaining on a very basic level or even of being forgotten altogether. Instead of an increase of *bildung*, war, under particularly precarious conditions of the abducted child, leads more often than not to a decrease of such cognitive abilities. Not

3 This article draws on research in connection with an on-going research project on “African child soldiers in literature and film: representation, discourse, aesthetics”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In the project, we look at the discursive ensemble (in the Foucauldian sense) of the large body of testimonial, documentary and fictional narratives on and by African child soldiers. In this brief discussion of the *bildungsroman* paradigm, we stick to examples from fiction only, although it could be interesting to investigate in how far testimonial texts also dwell into questions of disrupted and/or alternative education in times of war.

surprisingly, child soldier novels quite often refer to the motif of *bildung* as a problematic category.

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002) introduce protagonists who struggle with forcefully disrupted *bildung*. Dongala's Johnny, who cannot read, sets out to steal as many books as possible during his war exploits. The objects which symbolize education clearly take over a fetish function. Johnny boasts about being a very good student and occasionally challenges his victims with mathematical questions. Ironically, he is killed with a Bible, the 'book of books', at the end of the novel. Kourouma's Birahima, who can neither write nor speak French properly, struggles with four dictionaries which he employs to attempt to construct a comprehensible text. His efforts result in a chaotic narrative language which very much reflects the chaos of the raging war. Interestingly, both protagonists come from a social background that did not allow them access to formal education in a regular sense even before the war began. This reminds us that on a social level after all, a considerable proportion of impoverished African populations has difficulties to pay the school fees for their children and that war does not always disrupt an otherwise straightforward path to education.

Furthermore, the social classes that do not have access to the official language and *habitus* of the postcolonial educational system, which is still largely dominated by Western structures, are more vulnerable to war propaganda. On the meta-reflexive level of literature, this is already reflected in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1986), the novel that may be considered as the founding text of the child soldier novel. The adolescent protagonist Mene doesn't understand the 'Big English' used in politician's talk and war propaganda, but it is precisely because the speech is so impressive in its incomprehensibility that he signs up as a volunteer.

On the other hand, it is not untrue to assume that a war child learns a lot of other abilities that he or she would not have learned in stable and peaceful times: for instance, how to handle a weapon, how to kill, how to find search for food, how to survive under traumatic situations and in a system of not only strict, but potentially murderous hierarchies. In this sense, the fiction under survey here also reflects the growth of survival capacities due to learning under extreme circumstances. Therefore the question of the child soldier novel as anti- or alternative *bildungsroman* is not always a question of "either/or", but often both tendencies can be present in the same text, as, for instance, in Chris Abani's short novel *Song for Night* which we will now analyse.

3. *Song for Night* as anti- and alternative *bildungsroman*

Abani's text is narrated from the perspective of a 15-year-old boy soldier who started fighting at the age of twelve as a volunteer, because "[t]here was a clear enemy, and having lost loved one to them, we all wanted revenge" (Abani 2008: 9).⁴ Given the Igbo cultural background, together with some sparse historical allusions, the setting refers to the Nigeria Biafran war of 1967-1970. With the narrator, My Luck, fighting for the secessionist state of Biafra, the basic plot is constructed around an odyssey of the protagonist-narrator who has lost his military unit during a battle and is searching for his comrades. Indications of the unlearning of a formerly acquired *bildung* are spread throughout the text. For instance when

4 The novel was first published by Akashik Books in New York in 2007. In what follows, we make reference to the 2008 edition issued by Telegram (London/Berkeley/Beirut).

the narrator is looking for cosmic signs to find his way: “I look up, thinking perhaps the stars will guide me, but there are hardly any and I have forgotten the names of the constellations and their relationships anyway” (Abani 2008: 16).

As a member of a special unit of children who were trained to detect landmines, My Luck is literally mute as the dangerous job does not allow the children the right to speak or scream during the process. Therefore, their vocal cords have been severed. This muteness is a striking metaphor for the interruption of a process of identity formation through *bildung* in the conventional sense. Language skills are not supposed to be developed any more, the future of the children as members of a society in which they would participate by word of mouth has simply been sacrificed for the cause of the war. At the same time, the physical muteness is metonymic, given that it is the subordinate position of children in the military hierarchy that, after all, silences their expression of opinions, desires, and emotions even before physical muteness is inflicted on them.

On the other hand, My Luck’s inner language – which constitutes the testimonial text we are offered as readers – is made up of both strong emotions and astonishingly mature philosophical reflections.⁵ This inner voice is subjugated to trauma, which is also reflected through the fragmented structure of the text. Instead of regressing into a less mature state of mind, My Luck seems to become too wise for his age. As a person who bears knowledge about cruelty and power abuse beyond the scope of his age as ‘a school boy’, he thinks about the war as a ‘mental space’: “It is a curious place to live and makes you deep beyond your years” (Abani 2008: 11). Coupled with a permanent menace of death, time becomes dense and measured, a circumstance which works contrary to childlike notion of timelessness and play time: “time here is precious and not to be wasted on peculiarities, only on what is essential” (Abani 2008: 11). Indeed, Abani constructs a narrator who reaches a highly mature consciousness about his own post-traumatic stress disorder. My Luck comments on the pressure of his flashback memories and how they intensify throughout the journey, when he states: “I am mostly moving from one scene of past trauma to another, the distances between them, though vast, have collapsed to the span of a thought” (Abani 2008: 139).⁶

4. Alternative ways of learning: military discipline and survival strategies

Interestingly, the military superiors in *Song for Night* frequently employ a discourse that reaches back to processes of civil learning, thus valorising fighting with a language familiar to and respected by students. The initial military training of the children culminates in

5 Daria Tunca rightly observes that “Indeed, from the very beginning, the book draws attention to its own fictional quality. The powerful opening sentences of the novella are a case in point, as they establish that My Luck is mute, and therefore technically unable to address the reader orally as he does: ‘What you hear is not my voice. I have not spoken in three years’ (19). Readers are asked to believe that the words they are ‘hearing’ are the narrator’s ‘thoughts’, which are further identified as renditions in English of his mental reflections in his Igbo mother tongue: ‘You are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo’ (21). Addressees are thus forced to suspend their disbelief and adhere to a parallel reality that does not obey the laws of the ‘real’ world. The immersion in this alternative universe only reinforces the sense of shock experienced when the reason behind My Luck’s muteness is revealed” (2013: 134).

6 Beyond the focus of this article, *Song for Night* is an impressive trauma narrative. See the analyses of Giommi (2011), Dalley (2013) and Tunca (2013).

“graduation” (Abani 2008: 22), when the recruit is able to use a fire weapon in real war action for the first time. Also, the participation in the mines’ detection team is seductively introduced as privileged access to “an elite team, highly trained in locating and eliminating the threat of clandestine enemy explosives” (Abani 2008: 21). Eager to display their newly acquired skills of warfare discipline, the child soldiers walk “[a]rmed with our knowledge of marching in formation” (Abani 2008: 22). According to the officer who trains them, the instructions given to the young fighters are based on a military manual of the highest international standard. However, the manual is not materially present for the recruits to ever have access to it. The severe rules performed on the children’s body and psyche are imagined by the adult fighter. Although he takes over the role of a teacher, the officer in charge is described by the narrator as “the man who was determined to turn us into animals” (Abani 2008: 29), thus the military learning process does not groom them into human subjectivity, but rather speeds up the destruction of their humanity. Realizing that a radical act of revenge will redeem him of his stolen humanity, My Luck kills the said officer, who had earlier also forced him to become a rapist.

As an alternative way of learning through autonomous creativity in spite of the inflicted disability, the mute children of the special unit invent a complex sign language amongst themselves, which is proof of their high cognitive ability. This language is creative and exemplifies an alternative learning process inside the peer group. On a pragmatic level, the language is linked to sheer survival, while on the level of identity formation it also functions as a process to build a strong collective unity, which protects the children against the horrors of the outside world. Short explanations of gestures from the sign language serve as headings of the many small chapters of the novel. Some examples include “Mercy is Palm Turning Out from the Heart” (75), “Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek” (49) or “Home is a Palm Fisted to the Heart” (158). These non-verbal signs that are transcribed into verbal language and presented as chapter headings that read as poetic verses, also reach a high level of abstraction as they are able to express complex concepts such as mercy, will, and cowardice. The invention and adoption of the sign language as an alternative *bildung* inside the extremely marginalized group of the muted war children contrasts with the authoritarian and coarse language use by the warlords who shout out commands and curses most of the time; a language use that mirrors the overall atmosphere of violence, death, and guilt in the war. As an alternative mode of communication, the sign language opens up spaces of friendship and hope during a merciless war.

With regards to survival techniques, during My Luck’s solitary travel down the river, it is knowledge transmitted by his grandfather who taught him how to fish that helps the boy not to starve (see Abani 2008: 58).⁷ Before the war, the grandfather had also initiated him into Igbo mythology. Beyond formal learning in school, the old man’s use of storytelling to teach has an integrative effect on the protagonist. While being initiated to the founding myths and philosophical worldview of the Igbo community (compare the chapter “The Soul has no Sign”, 61-66), My Luck becomes part of a community and eventually develops his skills in aesthetic and critical thinking. Through the voice of his protagonist, Abani implicitly dismisses the imported religions (another well known source of conflict in Nigeria) and

7 The symbolic river, which is crowded with dead bodies, is reminiscent of the Greek myth of the river Styx which symbolizes the passage to death. Inevitably, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* also comes to mind, even beyond the river motif because Abani frequently makes use of the metaphorical tension between light and darkness as well as between inner and outer darkness.

highly valorises orality as a medium of knowledge transmission when he has My Luck declare that “I realize that nothing I know of the world comes from my Catholic mother or my Muslim father. All I know comes from the stories Grandfather told me” (Abani 2008: 102). Beyond practical skills such as fishing and hunting, the *bildung* received from his grandfather is a humanist education that aspires to a life in harmony with his people and the natural environment. This harmony is mercilessly disrupted by the war, together with the process of his yet unfinished formal education. Nonetheless, the lessons learned in childhood help My Luck to preserve his human dignity as an individual who respects the human community, which is, for instance, evident in his strong gesture to bury the skeleton of an unknown dead he comes across, just because it “is important [...] that this person be buried. Be mourned. Be remembered. Even for a minute” (Abani 2008: 69). However, in contrast to this respectful gesture towards the dead, the commitment to violence is also a strong feature of My Luck’s story. Tunca points out that

the emphasis on the character’s pleasure during some of his own murderous acts prevents any romanticized interpretation of memory. In other words, My Luck’s “own personal cemetery” (38) is neither exclusively a record of unjust acts committed against innocent human beings by immoral ones, nor a reminder of the triumph of the virtuous over the despicable. By blurring the lines between innocence and guilt, the author rejects any Manichaeian approach to his protagonist’s personality and, by extension, to the Biafran war. (2013: 139)

It is the tension between learning and unlearning, preserving humanity and giving in to beastly acts that characterizes Abani’s text. The human inclination to perpetrate atrocities is inscribed as a riddle into the text: “If we are the great innocents in this war, where did we learn all the evil we practice? [...] Who taught us this? Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled only by an orgasm?” (Abani 2008: 135).

Although a progression towards an integrative social identity formation seems impossible in My Luck’s situation, which qualifies the novel as an anti-*bildungsroman*, the text also offers strong alternative modes of maturing, learning and seeking for post-traumatic survival as an individual and as part of a minority group. However, My Luck’s symbolic journey down the river is a travel towards death, and this journey does not offer optimism. In the last of the many small short subchapters, My Luck reunites with his dead mother. The end can be read as death by exhaustion that materialises into his final reunification with the beloved mother in ‘heaven’. But given that during his travel, people take My Luck for a ghost several times,⁸ it is also possible to read the whole narration as coming from a voice of someone who *is* already dead at the beginning of the novel and floats in an in-between-state, as, for instance, Tunca (2013) and Harrow (2011) do in their reading. In both interpretations – and the ambiguity is deliberate here – the travel is an allegory for the transition from life to death.

In his 2010 article, J.A. Kearney points to this fundamental ambiguity between growth and regression inherent in child soldier novels. With regards to *Song for Night* he resumes:

8 This is also an intertextual link with Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*. Susanne Gehrman has written elsewhere: „*Sozaboy* is not a *Bildungsroman*, at least not in the classical sense of coming to age and identity through education. If the experience of war slowly changes Sozaboy’s naïve, childish attitude, the situation does not allow him to grow into an adult person. On the contrary, at the end of the novel, his very humanity is denied. When he comes back to his destroyed hometown, where his mother and his beloved died, people believe that he is a ghost and chase him away. This pessimistic image of a person whose very humanity is denied to him drastically sums up the effects of war” (2011b: 36).

“My Luck’s complex responses to the situation involve a kind of continual oscillation between human, sympathetic promptings, and relish of the violence available through war” (Kearney 2010: 86). Referring to the protagonist of *Beasts of No Nation*, the novel we will analyse in the next section of our article, Kearney again states that “Iweala offers us a portrayal of Agu in continuous tension between the demands of his sensitive conscience, and the corrupting influences of child soldier experiences” (Kearney 2010: 88).

5. *Beasts of No Nation* and the impossibility of the coherent self

Uzodinma Iweala’s novel *Beasts of No Nation* was published in 2005 and evolves around the protagonist-narrator Agu. The novel is set in an unnamed African country in the middle of a violent conflict.⁹ In the first scene of the narration Agu, a young boy not older than twelve, is abducted from his village by the militia and turned into a child soldier for the armed forces. The narration follows Agu through his war experiences until, in the last part of the novel, the reader is informed that Agu is already in a rehabilitation camp. At this point the entire narration could be understood as part of his therapeutic sessions at the camp. Agu embodies a victim of this war, but at the same time he also perpetrates many acts of violence himself. Throughout the novel he describes a process of dehumanization and when he asserts, that “[e]verybody is looking like one kind of animal, no more human” (Iweala 2005: 45), he echoes Fela Kuti’s sentiment of the “animal in craze-man skin-I” (1989) of the song of the same title as the novel. In spite of the regressive process of developing from a child to an animal to a thing, the novel is sometimes categorized as a *bildungsroman*. Madelaine Hron writes, with reference to *Beasts of No Nation* and other novels: “Recent Nigerian *bildungsromane* manifestly showcase the postcolonial subject’s negotiation of socio-cultural identity, a quest that is inextricably linked to substantial global concerns of the twenty-first century” (Hron 2008: 27). Maureen Moynagh however detects with regards to child soldier novels, that “the trope of human personality development is held out largely to be negated by the corrupt world in which these characters ‘have not [their] being,’ as Ken Saro-Wiwa puts it” (Moynagh 2011: 51).

One key element of the novel is the stylistic construction of the narrative voice that begins right from the very first sentence of the novel: “It is starting like this” (Iweala 2005: 1): Agu’s narration includes an abundance of present participle forms. Furthermore plural and singular forms are mixed, there are many exclamation marks, sometimes adjectives are turned into verbs and onomatopoeia is employed, especially when Agu recalls fighting and killing scenes. The repeated use of gerundial forms, present continuous/present participle forms and repetitions creates a sense of immediacy and urgency (Gehrmann 2011a: 17). This style often reads ambiguously childlike and reflective of the trauma experienced. In his

9 Though there are allusions to specific regional settings and the novel is often read in connection with other Biafran war inspired literature. But Hawley rightly remarks: “Iweala is writing something ‘more’ than a Biafra novel, in the sense that he is really writing an (one might say Biafran) account of child soldiering. [...]. The ‘no nation’ of the title (hardly the ‘no place’ of More’s Utopia) suggests that Iweala offers the best Biafran war novel to date by raising the war above the specifics of the historical setting his family knows best, and implicitly comparing it to wars that have passed and that are ongoing, that share in common a brutalization of the young” (Hawley 2008: 22).

narration Agu also depicts situations in which he is lost for words and utterance is almost foreign to him:

Commandant is turning to me. Do you want some water, he is saying softly, but I am not answering because I am floating on top of my body and just watching. The world is changing into many color around me and I am hearing the people speaking, but it is like different language. [...] Then Commandant is saying to me, are you hungry? Are you thirsty? [...] Are you hearing me? I am nodding to him again, but word is not able to be coming from my mouth. (Iweala 2005: 8)

Hron reads that scene as reflecting Agu's infans state, alluding to both meanings of the term: his speechlessness and his position as a child. She notes further that "Agu's inability to speak or define himself, however, is less reflective of his lack of knowledge and rather more a result of the violence he suffers" (Hron 2008: 40). The employed language mirrors, again, Agu's trauma. Besides the frequent inability to speak reflected in the short sentences, the syntax and the repetitions indicate the interrupted educational process of the protagonist-narrator.¹⁰

Furthermore, the story is narrated in a non-linear way. Flashbacks are an important backdrop to the brutal images of warfare. In these, Agu remembers his childhood upbringing, life in his own village, the family dynamics and the events leading to his abduction. Three adult characters, namely his father, his mother and his primary school teacher, feature prominently in Agu's memories and all of them are characterized by their educational level and how they are connected to Agu's own education, his will to learn and the pride he takes in educational achievements.

Regarding his mother, a devout Christian, Agu remarks that she did not go "to school for long enough" (Iweala 2005: 25). Yet it is her who teaches him how to read even before he starts school, using the only book she is able to read: the Bible. Agu rejoices every day when she picks the Holy book. While she reads "very very slowly" (Iweala 2005: 25), Agu points at words for her to repeat in order for him to learn. After a while he is able to read by himself. He likes to read so much that his mother starts to call him "professor" (Iweala 2005: 24). During the short recalling of this episode, Agu repeatedly compares his mother to his father. And even though she is the one who enables him to read, while his father is fast asleep, Agu stresses that his mother is uneducated and slow in comparison to his father, who is a school teacher.¹¹ His father is his childhood role model and the one he wants to impress through his achievements:

I was sitting with [my father] and not my mother and I would be reading to him what I am teaching myself from The Bible. I was wanting to show him that I am big enough to be going to school so I can be learning everything that he is knowing that is making everybody in the village to like him so much. I was always asking him every day, tomorrow can I be going to school? (Iweala 2005: 26)

To Agu education is linked to respect and appreciation by others. He wants to achieve the status which he sees embodied by his father. Therefore, Agu's urgent wish is to go to school

10 This inability to speak is even more prevalent in Agu's child soldier friend Strika, who is rendered mute by the war trauma and only in his last moments alive finds his voice, when he pleads with Agu: "Please Agu. Don't just be leaving me" (Iweala 2005: 131).

11 This contradiction between Agu's descriptions of events and his assessment of his parents becomes even more virulent when he recalls that his mother wants the whole family to flee, but his father, who argues with certain ideals of masculinity decides for him and Agu to stay in the village in order to defend it and thus also carries a responsibility for Agu's fate as a child soldier.

at an early age, given that for him, formal education is the key element to become as accomplished as his father. When finally his father attests that Agu is big enough, measured by his ability to cross his right arm over his head and touch his left ear, he, Agu, brags that he is the smartest child for he is already able to read and will just need to learn how to write. Throughout Agu's reflections, being able to read and write is seen as the equivalent of education and smartness, both posing as a key to unlock further knowledge. Conversely, the aforementioned grammatically incorrect narrative style that Agu employs stands in a stark contrast to Agu's self-assessed abilities.

In primary school Agu encounters Mrs. Gloria, his teacher, for whom he harbors happy memories as well. But during the course of the war these memories fade into dreamlike landscapes. In one of his memories Agu recalls how Mrs. Gloria encouraged him to study and offered him future perspectives such as going to university and becoming a doctor or an engineer: perceptions which Agu carries with him throughout the whole novel.

6. Becoming a child soldier as un/learning process

The narrative of *Beast of No Nation* starts at the point when Agu's former life and his education process are brutally disrupted by war. His father gets killed and he is forced to join the rebel forces. Hron states that

Beasts of No Nation is also a *bildungsroman*, and showcases a child's entry into the adult world and the social order. Yet in this case, the social order is that of war, and Agu not only transforms into an adult, but into a serial killer. In so doing, the spaces of both childhood and adulthood are severely distorted, if not perverted. (Hron 2008: 42)

Even though Hron points out the particularity of the social structure Agu is initiated into, she maintains the label of the *bildungsroman* for the novel. But what kind of formation process can take place in the violent and gruesome setting of war and which kind of *bildung* can be gained?

With regards to Agu, the reader can follow two parallel, yet conflicting processes. The novel portrays how hard he has to fight to maintain some of the abilities, mores and ideas he had acquired in pre-war times. There is a constant tension between his descriptions of himself as an animal, a beast, and a thing and his frequent flashback memories into his pre-war childhood. The latter serves as a re-assurance of his upbringing and his human identity. The flashbacks which reveal his educational process at home and in school also fulfil this reassuring role. Agu's retelling of how he learned to read with the Bible is introduced through his confirmation of the Christian faith: "So I am thinking, how can I be bad boy? Me, bad boy-somebody who is having life like I am having and fearing God the whole time" (Iweala 2005a: 24). The preceding episode illustrates how Agu attempts to restore confidence in his inherent goodness. The prospect of becoming a doctor or an engineer, as instilled in him by Mrs. Gloria, encourages him to to plan a future beyond the war that he is participating in:

I am thinking to myself of all the thing that I will do when the war is over and I am alive. And I am thinking that when it is over, I can be going to university to study. I think I am wanting to be Engineer because I like how mechanic is always doing thing to the truck and I like to be watching even though there is no chance for me to try what they are doing. And sometimes I am thinking that I want to be Doctor because then I will be able to be helping people instead of killing them and

then maybe I will be forgiven for all my sin. I am thinking that if I am both Doctor or Engineer, these people are the one who are the big men. (Iweala 2005: 74)

While perpetuating violent acts and falling prey to violence himself, Agu tries to make sense of the situation. Therefore he clings onto the subject position he had formed already. However, the boy he once was is almost gone because his childhood is deeply disrupted by war. Indeed, when Agu realizes that he is no longer the child he once was in his village, he nevertheless still holds onto the same future plans: "I am knowing I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child thing. No. I will be going back to be teaching or farming, or Doctor or Engineer [...]" (Iweala 2005a: 93). Obviously, the school education that he would need to fulfil these plans remains a missing link between the current reality of war and his future dream of having a profession.

While he tries to preserve his past "I", Agu experiences life with the rebels, a situation in which he acquires a very specific set of skills. He learns how to survive in this hostile environment, and subsequently how to fight and to kill. Hron sums up Agu's new skills as follows:

In his development into a serial rapist and killer, Agu gains knowledge that is beyond most adults' comprehension. For instance, he is well acquainted with the appearance of unborn babies, because he himself has ripped fetuses from mothers' wombs (48). At several points, Agu stresses that he is no longer a child, that he is not "playing a game" (122), and cannot even remember the last time he played a game. As he bluntly sums up, "All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not" (36). (Hron 2008: 42)

Moynagh describes Agu's state as a "kind of developmental limbo" (2011: 51). In terms of his age, Agu is clearly still a child, but his war experiences go beyond the usual knowledge of an individual of his age. Beyond his horrific mastery of warfare, the most important thing that Agu learns, though, as the plot of the novel evolves is to emancipate himself from the rebel stronghold into which he is embroiled.

Although he, initially, did not join the armed forces voluntarily, Agu's attitude towards the rebels and becoming a soldier is not entirely negative. Rather he admits that "I am liking how it [the machete] is feeling in my hand, like it is almost part of my body" (Iweala 2005: 15). The weapon as part of his body is first of all a boost of power. One of his flashbacks – the description of a soldier parade he had witnessed in his village – explains the partly positive perception of the rebels and especially the figure of the commandant. But as the war rages on, Agu's stance changes dramatically. He realizes that real war is neither comparable with child's play nor with the glorious depictions of wars and fighting in movies on which the playful interpretations of the boy soldiers were first based. But he also notes that his knowledge is rooted in his distinct experiences:

So we were playing all this game then and thinking that to be a soldier was to be the best thing in the world because gun is looking so powerful and the men in movie are looking so powerful and strong when they are killing people, but I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong, and to have no food to eat and not to eat whatever you want, and also to have people making you do thing that you are not wanting to do and not to be doing whatever you are wanting which is what they are doing in movie. But I am only knowing this now because I am soldier now. (Iweala 2005: 31)

Between arriving at this conclusion and his final desertion of the rebel ranks, more time passes. It is only when Strika, a fellow child soldier and his closest friend, dies that Agu

finally abandons his gun and escapes. The weapon no longer symbolizes power, but instead he describes the immense physical pain it inflicts cutting into his flesh.

The narration potentially could have ended at this point; instead, the reader learns that Agu is in a rehabilitation camp. Allison Mackey interprets the ending as a form of reintegration into society, even if only in an uncertain way. She reads “[the] possibility of Agu’s return to the social world [...] in light of Slaughter’s analysis of the incorporative function of the *bildungsroman* as a process of development into social citizenship” (Mackey 2013: 111). In our opinion, a close reading of the last chapter rather shows that the possibility of reintegration is more called into question than it is realized. Neither the priest nor Amy, the American therapist, who both try to communicate with Agu are particularly helpful. Furthermore, the text clearly depicts how the violence of war disrupts usual hierarchies of knowledge provided by age and access to education. Agu argues that

[Amy] is telling me to speak speak speak and thinking that my not speaking is because I am like baby. If she is thinking I am baby, then I am not speaking because baby is not knowing how to speak. But every time I am sitting with her I am thinking I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is. [...] I am saying to her sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. (Iweala 2005: 140)

Agu’s speechlessness in the rehabilitation camp is complex. As Hron remarks, he seems to “regress back to an infans stage”, but “Agu intimates that this regression is deceptive; rather, he chooses not to speak to the aid worker” (Hron 2008: 42). At the end of the novel, Agu knows more and at the same time less than the adults around him. The communication is disrupted, he cannot speak, but Amy also seems unable to listen to his eloquent silence.

Even though *Beasts of No Nation* is often categorized as a *bildungsroman*, our analysis shows that this novel does not fit neatly into the paradigm. While some alternative modes of learning are portrayed in *Beasts of No Nation*, especially the ending points more towards an anti-*bildungsroman* than an alternative *bildungsroman*. The open ending and Agu’s position of ‘in-betweenness’ – neither adult nor child, knowing and un-knowing – shows the impossibilities of the formation of a coherent self in a war setting and leaves the reader with more uncertainties than certainties about the future of the protagonist.

7. Conclusion

In his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, Amoko asserts that

Bildungsromane have provided important avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. By telling stories of individual passages from childhood into adulthood, the authors critique the past and present and offer alternative futures. (2009: 197)

Indeed, as our analysis has shown, the process of coming of age is central to child soldier narratives as well, despite disruptive processes of *bildung* and the critique of violent pasts and presents. However, the question of alternative futures is more complicated than in the classical *bildungsroman*. Both *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* present protagonist-narrators, whose education in the safety spaces of family and school is interrupted and

replaced by military discipline and traumatising war hardships.¹² Both narrators are haunted by guilt and during their voyage through war memories of their own violent acts get mixed up with childhood memories and traumatic flashbacks. The narratives certainly offer different perspectives on the concept of *bildung*, but the features of alternative learning processes presented more often than not as survival strategies are always due to extreme circumstances of violence or otherwise belong to the remembered childhood days of an erstwhile familial or school education endowed with values which get lost during the war. The endings of the two novels that we have analysed here are tragic: trauma is not resolved and death is lurking in the corner. A future as an integrated subject of a community seems impossible for both protagonists. As we have pointed out, the contradiction between unlearning of educational values and the attempt to remain within the framework of these values is crucial in both texts.

Even though some alternative modes of learning are portrayed in *Beasts of No Nation*, we read the novel as anti-*bildungsroman*, as it clearly shows the impossibilities of the formation of a coherent self in a war setting. The ending of the novel questions Agu's future prospects and leaves the reader uncertain about the possible outcomes. While *Song for Night* is even more ambiguous, in so far as the maturation process of the protagonist during the war and throughout his travel between life and death points to strong alternative forms of learning, the ending does not open up a future that would allow an integrative process of *bildung* to be actualised.

To conclude, it is important to note that in child soldiers novels, the efforts of children/adolescents to learn and to become growing, self-confident subjects in spite of the horrors of war value them as human beings and construct them beyond a position of sheer victimhood. As anti-*bildungsromane*, in dialogue with and as subversions of the classical pattern of the Western and even the now classical postcolonial *bildungsroman*, the novels succeed to convey a better understanding of the heavy consequences of violence and trauma in wartimes, as exemplified in the fragile figure of the child soldier.

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12 This is not to say that family and school are per se safe spaces, but in Abani's and Iweala's novels they are presented as such, in particular in order to construct a contrast with the violent spaces of war. A completely different example is the situation in Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*, as the family presented in this novel cannot provide security and *bildung* to its son.

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