

**A CHILD'S NARRATION OF WAR AS DEPICTED IN AHMADOU**

**KOUROUMA'S "ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED."**

**BY**

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## DECLARATION

This project is my original work and, has not been presented for a degree in any other University.

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This project has been submitted for examination with our approval as university supervisors.

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## **DEDICATION**

This project work is dedicated to my loving parents Bainito and Lunyachi, my wife Rebecca Libese and children ;Ian and Celestine, Shirley and Lesley .

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood is normally treated as a period of crucial values in ones stage of growth. Maintaining these values in children helps to preserve the future generation's societal aspirations. However during times of war, there are different forms of violations children are exposed to. This study unearths these violations and vulnerability as narrated by the child himself in Kourouma's text Allah is Not Obligated and goes further to show how through narration in fictional texts children are able to call for our attention.

The study has used theoretical framework such as; new historicism, sociological literary theory and stylistics theory. New historicism theory helped to explain how history itself has been re-told since this is a historical text. Sociological literary theory casts light on how social situations have pushed children into war and in turn the impact on the society. The literary feature of style has been explored using the stylistic theory.

The study followed a close textual analysis approach of the primary text Allah is Not Obligated. I also read the author's other works in order to establish his general world view. Creative works by other writers and critics on the same topic were also read so as to illuminate on the study. The investigation has brought into focus, the various violations meted out to children during times of war. This has a lasting traumatic effect on them. By the author using a child narrator who is a victim and witness of war he accords him room to put forward his own experience. Thus, the use of children in war disregards childhood as a space characterized by innocence. Kourouma in his own way uses literature to reveal to the world the plight of such children in Africa.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

Ahmadou Kourouma's novel Allah is Not Obligated and published in 2000, is set in the West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s a period marked by political unrests and civil wars. Importantly, Sierra Leone and Liberia have had disrupted history and cultures. The author being a member of this society feels compelled to add his voice to these upheavals bedeviling his society. He borrows from these scenes in creating the historical text. Skillfully, he manages to transform the historical facts into fiction.

Literature as a mirror of the society, engages in pertinent issues affecting a society. It reveals the people's feelings towards particular issue(s) and more so how they see the world. Writers then draw from such experiences from the societies in which they live. Their works therefore reflect their personal experiences and that of their societies. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in Homecoming says:

A writer responds, with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varied degrees of accuracy and success, the conflict and tensions in his changing society...For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by, history (47).

Ngugi implies that a writers' art is shaped by the experience of his society. The cultural and political environment of an artist influences his portrayal of specific social realities. These sentiments can be used to interrogate the extent to which the author under study is influenced by his Malinke society and how he portrays it to the reader.



While a number of West African countries were going through crises of civil wars in the 90's, many writers around the time were writing and reflecting on the plight of children in their fiction. Arguably, children are an important resource of any community since they embody hopes for posterity. The numerous challenges they face in such times calls for their preservation as they grow. They need to be separated from harsh realities of the world. According to the United Nations (UNICEF) records, an estimated 120,000 children under 18 years of age are currently participating in war in Africa. The way in which these children are enlisted to participate in war remains a matter of concern. Significantly, their use in war curtails them from experiencing their childhood (UN, 2008). Children growing up in such war zones, suffer from a deadly combination of poverty, hunger attack, sexual assault, abduction, orphaned, displacement, and trauma. This negates the fact that childhood should constitute a carefree, secure and happy phase of human experience. This worrying practice has caused alarm to international bodies such as the United Nations Conventions for Children's Rights and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) who have ceaselessly tried to intervene with very minimal success. Such is the main preoccupation of Kourouma in Allah is Not Obligated. He does add his voice to the issue of child soldier, a vice that has threatened to destroy his society. The author does this by employing a child narrator who has also been a participant in the war. Hence a study of these factors in the text helps in understanding this process of change in the growth of children.

There is a considerable size of literature that deals with this issue of witnesses involved in recent wars that has engulfed Africa. A notable fact about this literature is how the authors use a narrator to recount their experiences. In some instances, the authors use narrators who give accounts of their own or other's involvement in the past experiences. By so doing, they help the

reader to understand the nature of the experience from their perspectives (narrators). The narrator(s) try to appeal to the sensibilities of the reader by giving a picture of the suffering. This is backed by an argument, which presupposes an interdependent relationship between narrator and the story in the narrative development (Muchiri, 2003).

The narrator's rendition helps us to interrogate his and the author's view. In the words of Jennifer Muchiri in The Child Narrator, "The narrator's perspective determines who and what readers look at in a story, how they look at it and what details they focus on."<sup>2</sup> Therefore this study finds it apt to investigate how well this significant aspect of Kourouma's novel Allah is not Obligated plays out and how it helps to reveal to the reader the pertinent issues in the war torn region.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

Ahmadou Kourouma's entry into the literary scene marked a new dawn for the West African literary studies. He brought in themes and style that are quite significant through a child narrative voice. Incidentally, it is through a child narrative voice that we can enter a child's sensibilities and depict insights into how they experience and make sense of various awful experiences they are faced with during times of war; including sexual and drug abuses, being orphaned, their involvement in war and how they adapt to these painful experiences. It is in view of this, that I seek to examine how effectively Kourouma attempts to use the child narrator in Allah is not Obligated to portray the violent nature of the use of children in situations of war and thereby negating their pleasurable moments.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives;

- i) To determine the main themes espoused by the child narrator in the narrative.
- ii) To analyze the stylistic devices used to further the discussion on child soldiers.
- iii) To examine the realism of the narrative as a historical account.

### **1.4 Hypothesis of the study**

The study was guided by the assumption that:

- i) A child narrator depicts intimate insights into the lives of children embroiled in war.
- ii) The child narrative voice gives a better understanding of children narratives.
- iii) The author has used factual historical accounts to create the narrative.

### **1.5 Justification**

This study investigates the extent of involvement of children into circumstances of war that has become a common phenomenon in West African states and sub-Saharan countries of Africa. This is appropriately supported by my choice of the text Allah is Not Obligated which has a regional setting covering a number of countries in the west.

It is worth noting that war experiences cause suffering to people, young and old. Interestingly, the children who are the bearers of the future generation are the most vulnerable members of any society in times of such crises. Particularly, there are various violations meted out to them. This

has a lasting traumatic impact on their lives. Furthermore, the use of children in war negates the ideal construction of childhood as a space characterized by innocence and naivety.

Such events have attracted many authors who wish to explore the social evil. Scholars and critics alike have ventured into investigating this phenomenon in texts that employ an adult perspective. However, I view an adult's imagination as lacking a deeper access into a child's consciousness appropriately because the experiences of childhood are lost to him. Instructively, my choice of Kourouma's text Allah is Not Obligated appears suitable since it is told from a child's perspective. More so, the child narrator has lived the war and serves as a representative of West African children who find themselves in the mix yet they are innocent. Thus, the narrative being a testimony of war, I see it bearing some element of truth (Wasena 2010). This makes me find it rational to argue that the voice of a child narrator in a work provides a better understanding of his experiences.

Noticeably, Kourouma's works has attracted much critical attention. Surprisingly, his style of narration in the text under study has not received the much needed attention. Yet, it is through the style that we can unearth the interactions between fiction and reality. Fiction does not only reconfigure life out of daily experiences, but also provides profound insights into the experiences so portrayed.

Lastly, the study will help inform the history of the West Africans now and in future, this is because it highlights the experiences of children in times of war while placing it in the context of historical highlight. The study therefore helps to organize facts and make them quite

comprehensible. In this way it will help in defining of a people's history. It will also help to reveal the importance of having a record of child soldier in the entire continent of Africa.

## **1.6 Literature Review**

The narrator and narrative voice are critical to any work of fiction. It is the narrative voice that guides the reader through the story. Narrators present their own perspectives upon which they interpret the material in a narrative. Narrators according to Roberts Edgar and Henry Jacobs can be viewed as "the story's focus, the angle of vision from which things are seen, reported and judged".<sup>60</sup> It is on this background that this study gets its direction.

Firstly, I consider it imperative to look at the existing views on children and the society's expectation of them. Secondly, I look at the deviations exhibited by children in the society today so as to comprehend any abnormal changes they may exhibit. Thirdly, I look at the place of children in the literary circles so as to understand their representation in fiction. I also discuss the issue of child soldier, reasons of conflicts, language as media of fictional representation, and finally the relationship between fiction and history.

In many societies a child is defined as any person under the age of eighteen. A number of factors are responsible for one's growth into adulthood: this include biological, environmental and social. Some view holds that one's behavior is genetically determined. Dietche, views childhood as a stage characterized by biological growth and maturity.<sup>17</sup> Jean piaget's views on cognitive development informs this study in the sense of his argument that, the normal development of children follow certain identifiable stages (Hoffman et.al 38). Musonye notes that this theoretical

perspective and adults general assumptions about children, results in children being subjected to the “tyranny of the norm.” Children who are different from this norm are seen as deviant or deficiency. On the other hand behaviorists see the environment as more influential to the development of the child than the biological traits. Myers agrees with this view when he asserts that: “the final form of a child’s character is determined by the instinctive equipment with which it is born and the influences which bear on it from the external world” (11).

The importance of the environment in which children grow bears some influence on their final behavior. It ultimately determines their perceptions and readiness to acquire habits. They can easily be influenced to copy and try out new ideas all out of the need to satisfy their curiosity. If they are taught the right societal values, they grow up as morally correct persons. The opposite is unspeakable of them. Therefore it is advisable to protect them from any unaccepted behavior that may confuse them.(Musonye 2010) It is perhaps in this view that children become targeted by warring factions who exploit their readiness to indoctrination [including experimentation with the AK 47] and the use of drugs.

In many societies, childhood has several meanings. Some argument is that child development takes a natural and universal phase of human existence influenced by biological and psychological considerations than by social factors; some behaviorists content that “the children behaviors can be explained by examining socially constructed ideas attached to the notion of childhood and adulthood”(Mbembe,1992). Aries says “the idea of childhood corresponds to an awareness of a particular nature of childhood, which distinguishes the child from the adult.”<sup>43</sup>He sees childhood as a reflection of the adults who construct this idea through different means, than

it is of children. Musonye explains this by asserting that since it is an adult's creation of them they only "pretend to be" or learn to be child like.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Wagg avers that "Children in any given society are what society has helped make them".<sup>15</sup> This socially constructed awareness reflects some of the differences in treatment of children that we see today in our society between children and adults. I would be tempted to conclude that the degradation in societal values is as a result of children coping the teachings and behavior of adults.

Childhood has always been viewed as a stage of innocence and vulnerability. In "Childhood and Adolescence" from Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction, John Merriman and Jay Winter write that children represent an "innocence that is assumed to be lost in the course of maturation".<sup>566</sup> However, in the study, I see Kourouma depicting the present day children operating in more of adult worlds, in which they learn to get their identities and try to understand their surroundings.

Jenks, C, in Childhood, writes that;

Certain behavioral propensities, including the capacity for aggression, are common to virtually all humans. This does not only mean that they are genetically determined ...humans have a capacity to be both aggressive and altruistic...the behavior shown depends on a host of developmental, experiential, social and circumstantial factors.<sup>29</sup>

In this regard children are born with some amount of cruelty and goodness that can be awakened when the environment allows. This ability in children is exploited by warlords to cause violence. In the accounts of Postman child recruits are taken as merciless killers "whose innocence is exploited" in the war to win support for the cause of warring factions (23-7).

Castaneda in Figurations notes that the child in literature, is not only “an entity in the making”, but plays an important role in the making of worlds of human nature and human culture.<sup>1</sup> Julia Macted in exploring African children’s agency notes that;

in traditional social settings children together with women, have been denied a political voice and have limited bargaining power [...] since they increasingly assume a central importance in the African social landscape their agency should be recognized.<sup>69</sup>

In this regard Claudia Castaneda calls for “adequate representations and understandings of childhood and children's experience”.<sup>1</sup> It is in this lack of representation from children that Kourouma like many adults is able to control, manipulate, and convey his own message using children and literature.

In her article, Forming Identities: Conception of Pain and Children’s Expression of it in Southern Africa, Pamela Reynolds notes that “children in [Africa] often live on the edge of dreadful things including community violence, state oppression, warfare, family disintegration and extreme poverty” (83). Her observation is applicable to this study since the author is concerned with some of these conditions that have faced many children in West Africa countries from the 90’s. He endeavors to point them out so that the public can ponder over them and have a calm society for everyone.

Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck in Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa argue that “children constitute the majority of Africa’s population, and their lived experience of terrible conditions constitutes a crisis worth writing about”.<sup>115</sup> It is in line with this thought that Kourouma like many other writers on the continent reflects on in his



fiction. The challenges particularly war related, are threatening to tear apart the society. Particularly, the involvement of children in war contravenes the conventional standards of war.

Eldred D. Jones in "Childhood in African Literature" highlights the treatment of children in some African societies. He argues that African authors use child narrators to disclose the "grim reality of cruelty, harshness and the vulnerable child's experiences".<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, Kourouma employs a child narrator to reveal violations and abuses inflicted to the children during the war period in Sierra Leone and Liberia of the 90s. It is worth noting that the child narrator used by Kourouma has been involved in the war as a victim, participant and witness of the horrors indiscriminately meted out to people. Thus he is likely to be a reliable narrator.

Alcinda Honwana in Child Soldiers in Africa observes:

Children have in most cases not been listened to, and when their voices are not silenced, their talk is never unconstrained [...] children's voices reach a broader platform only in rare, and sometimes tragic, cases, but even then these subaltern voices are often immediately recovered, transformed, and inserted into different narratives and agendas set by other interest groups. (2)

From the above it can be argued that it is in fiction that children are allowed a space to discuss problems affecting them. This is confirmed by the text's treatment of their vulnerability and innocence hence the free flow of facts from Birahima.

Additionally, in Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature, Elizabeth Goodenough and Mark A. Heberle notes of "the child's lack of voice" and observes that it is in children's literature that adults "recapture their own experiences or create stories about what it is like to see as a child does".<sup>276</sup> In view of this, I see Kourouma giving the young child a voice to speak

about its experiences as a child soldier in the situation of war that engulfed West Africa in the 90's. Additionally, the author has used a knowing child narrator to register his dissatisfaction with political leadership in the post colonial states of Africa.

In Decolonizing the Mind, Ngugi analyses the problem faced by children in post colonial African nations. Though he centers on the influence of colonial schools to the child, it is relevant to this study as in it, he looks at the role of language as a means of subjugation.<sup>6</sup> To escape from the subjugation he calls for a complete rejection of European language as a mode of expression. In contrast to Ngugi, I hope to ascertain Kourouma's view on the language of use in writing fiction in Africa.

Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth just like Ngugi articulates the psychoanalytic implications of the language legacy of colonialism. He views language as one of the key factors in the process of alienation that takes place in the colonized subject. Further, he analyses the process of colonization as: "a negation of humanity so violent that after a century of colonial domination we can only find a culture which is rigid in the extreme, the remains of culture as it were, its mineral strata". This observation helps to understand some of the causes of war that occur in Liberia and Sierra Leone as pointed out by the author. More so, it helps us understand the inability of the narrator to communicate in proper French the language of former colonizer.

Literature and history are complementary in fictional texts. Hayden White in his study of The Link between History and Fiction contends that, what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is their content, rather than their form. He goes on to assert that the content of historical

stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events. This implies that the form in which historical events are presented is found rather than constructed.<sup>17</sup> White's views resonate with Kourouma's novel which is inspired by recent historical events in West Africa countries.

Frank Faulkner in Kindergarten Killers; Morality, Murder and Child-Soldier Problem, assesses, historically, the manner and reasons of children involvement in civil conflicts as soldiers. Emanating from his study is that their role can be summed up as victims, perpetrators and agents of violence.<sup>49</sup> The argument is apt in interrogating Kourouma's child characters whose agency is triple faced. This further helped to ascertain the character's culpability or still to exonerate them from blame.

Kearney Jack, in The Representation of Child Soldiers in Contemporary African Fiction, argues that the interests of elite are at times opposed to those of the people. He conceives that policies of power elite may result in "increased escalation of conflict, production of weapons of mass destruction and possible annihilation of the human race."<sup>74</sup> In Allah is Not Obligated the author explains some reasons why the Warlords and ethnic communities in the text are embroiled in rivalry. Those in power are to be interrogated for the role they play in escalating the conflicts in the society portrayed in the novel.

The process of decolonization marks the beginning of a new culture. According to Fanon, the struggle does not give people their culture back, complete with their former values and shapes. It doesn't leave intact either the form or the content of a people's culture. The significance of

tradition changes and there follows a renewing of forms of expressions and the “rebirth of imagination” (187-191). These sentiments are in tandem with the West African situation where the native culture was altered after colonization and because of this they are embroiled in struggles laid down by the colonial master.

In his thesis of Authenticity in Witness Literature, where he is preoccupied by the element of truth in war narratives told from an adult’s perspective, Wasena notes that such narratives give the reader an account of one’s involvement in a past experience. He argues that the stories are a way of coming to terms with the painful war experience. The reader of such a text is thus persuaded to understand the historical tragic experience from the perspective of the narrator. Considering that the person who experienced the profound torment is the most suitable person to talk about it, the element of truth is enhanced.<sup>5</sup> Kourouma’s choice of Birahima as the narrator is thus in line with Wasena’s views. He pertains to depict the real life situation in his society (Sierra Leone and Liberia of the 90s) as much as possible. Consequently, he gives an impression of penning a true historical account.

From the literature review, it is clear that a study of the thematic concerns of the text involving the use of child soldier requires to be given much attention for the proper understanding of child abuse during war. This calls for an investigation into those literary devices that account to the totality of a work. Of significance to this study is the analysis of how Kourouma presents the themes, narrative voice, and language through a child narrator. Thus, the study seeks to establish the inevitable link between the author’s artistic style of child recounting and how it illuminates on the themes in the novel.

## **1.7 Theoretical Framework**

The study has used the following theoretical frame works namely; New Historicism, stylistics approaches and sociological literary theory.

New Historicism is a relevant theory to this study. It is a theory that developed through the works of Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980's. It aims at understanding a work of art through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through which literature documents the new discipline of history of ideas. New Historicism addresses the idea that the lowest common denominator for human action is power. Power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain.

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. It also acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices. Guided by the theory, I have explored what historical factors are captured by the author that may have influenced his search for the raw materials forming the basis of the text. Again, how the child narrator is able to capture and relay these facts to us is crucial for the study apart from revealing to us the authors feelings towards the ideas so presented in the work.

Michael Foucault's ideas also inform the new Historicism theory. He views history as a succession of episteme or structures of thought that shape everyone and everything within a culture (Meyers 1989). Tyson in explaining the theory asserts that "it's the retelling of history itself". The main concerns are "How has the event been interpreted" and "What interpretations

tell us about the interpreters (278) "...They resist the notion that "...history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship. New Historicists interpret events as products of our time and culture and that "...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of such facts mean ... is ... strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact'(279). Moreover, New Historicism is anchored on the fact that all interpretation is subjectively filtered through one's own set of conditioned viewpoints and that the text cannot be known separate from its historical context. In this regard, I have found the theory useful in establishing the extent to which the author picks the right facts from historical events. In addition, this has helped me to interrogate the level of truth in the historical facts so presented. The narrator's way of revealing the truth to the readers, accounts to the acceptability of the narrative as a true historical account.

New historicists hold Jacques Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text in the special sense and that everything about the past is only available to us in form. The aim of new historicism is therefore not to present the past as it really was but to present a new reality by re-situating that past. Since Kourouma's text Allah is Not Obligated delves in historical figures and historical events of a certain problematic period of West Africa, New historicism is quite appropriate since it helps to understand, interpret and appreciate the circumstances of his writing.

An important feature in a literary work with regard to the communication between the writer and his audience is how creatively the artist uses language – as in the use of figurative language, symbolism, metaphors and other unconventional use of it to realize the form. This constitutes to the literary style. To investigate into this sphere of the literary work, stylistic theory became useful in articulating the actions, motivations, responses or even consequences that make up the

lives of characters in this fictional text. Furthermore, the theory is appropriate for the study since it addresses effectiveness of the linguistic peculiarities Kourouma employs in Allah is Not Obligated. Instructively it is at the level of style that we can discover the interactions between fiction and reality. It is at the level of style that the historical events can be brought to life, recreated. Peter Barry in Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory says;

Stylisticians suggest new interpretations of literary works based on linguistic evidence. Stylistics brings a special expertise to bear on the linguistic features of a text, and therefore sees a dimension of the material which the ordinary reader would be unaware of, 211.

I have also been informed by Emmanuel Ngara's views. In his book Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel (1982) he notes that in stylistic approach, the critic identifies the distinctive features and other stylistic peculiarity the author employs and tries to account for the choice of the features. The critic goes further and tries to assess the effect these features have on the work as a communicative utterance. (14) Instructively, I have analyzed the author's style in Allah is Not Obligated in the context of how it promotes or hinders the communicative objective. Thus, stylistic theory has been used as an important tool for assessing the level of effectiveness in Kourouma's narrative. The effectiveness of the narrator's language as used in passing his story to the reader is well measured in the study.

The study is also informed by the sociological literary theory. Sociological literary theory is based on social construct. It focuses on how social phenomena or objects of consciousness develop within social contexts. According to Terry Eagleton, literature is a strategic naming of situation that allow the reader to better understand and gain a sort of control over societal

happenings in the work of Art, 542. Thus, sociological literary theory looks at the relationship between literature and society. This is on the premise that literature emanates from society and that it stores, interprets and transmits social values.

The sociological perspective shades light into the aspects of the society that affects the child and how the child is oriented to be subservient. The study emanates from a stand point that literature is a product of society and at the same time, a mirror of society. Kourouma being a member of the Malinke society he is better placed since he is informed of its fears, aspirations and hopes. Additionally, as a writer he has the big role of pointing out the ills of the society in order for the society to enhance social values. The theory helped to explain how social situations have affected the people, even pushing children into war and in turn impacting on the society. On the other hand it helps to understand how effective the child narrator is positioned to reveal these issues to us. This is perhaps to help in shaping the society for the survival of the most vulnerable.

Summarily, it is worth noting that children have their own view of the world and are able to make their own choices in some crucial matters regardless of the rationale or moral standing of the society. They therefore must be guided in an admirable way. It is against this position that Kourouma uses a child narrator who is influenced by the society he comes into contact with to illuminate on the social vice that threatens peace.

### **1.8 Scope and limitations**

While this study takes cognizance of the fact that there are numerous texts that debates the post independence menace of child soldier in Africa, the text under investigation is based on a West African text that has a regional setting in countries such as Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. It's



further limited to children of age 9 –12years who are used in the civil war and narrating their ordeal at the hands of different war Lords. It majorly focuses on analyzing of Amhadou Kourouma's text, Allah is not Obliged.

### **1.9 Methodology**

I have used a number of strategies in this study. Firstly, I followed a close textual reading and analysis approach of the prime text Allah is Not Obliged by Ahmadou Kourouma. A text, with a broader setting and which employs a child narrator/protagonist to reflect on the problem of child soldiering in West Africa. I also read the author's other works in order to establish the author's general world view. Creative works by other writers and critics on the same topic were also read and used to illuminate on the study.

In addition, the study involved library research where I looked at some relevant secondary texts, articles, journals and conference reports amongst others. The library reading of historical texts informed me of the West African situations as pertains to frequent waves of civil wars in the . The internet became handy in supplementing valuable information for the study. Furthermore, an analysis of critical works helped to establish the appropriate theoretical framework to be used in the study apart from aiding to put issues in perspective.

Following theories of stylistics, Sociological and new historicism expounded by various scholars, I proceeded to identify and analyze themes running through the primary text as espoused by the child narrator. The main purpose was to identify various aspects that constitute an understanding of Child soldier phenomenon. Arguably, this was achieved through a close examination of setting, plot, and characterization, their relationships, interaction, identity, and

expression of power. Still, I looked at the stylistic devices the author has adopted to further his imaginations. The reading of the work and the subsequent evaluation of the author's main concerns as portrayed in the text was guided by some selected questions as indicated in the appendix 1.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the background to the study. It has tried to anchor the basis of the study by introducing the reader to the statement of the problem. Further, I have stated the aim and objectives of the study and the hypothesis. I have tried to justify the research and gone ahead to give the reasons to the choice of Ahmadou Kourouma's Allah is Not Obligated as the object of study.

In addition, the section has looked at some earlier works by scholars and critics so as to find a gap for my study. Theoretical frameworks to assist in the study have been identified as new historicism, stylistics, and sociological literary theory. The chapter also explains a number of strategies to be used in this study. This includes a close textual reading and analyzing of the prime text Allah is Not Obligated by Ahmadou Kourouma, library research, to assist in reading of journals, thesis and some secondary texts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEMATIC CONCERNS

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the various concerns raised by the author through a child narrator. Importantly, it explores the various ways in which children become involved in war; how their morals become corrupted and how at some point they manage to cope with the horrible situations. The various violations meted out on them in such times of civil strife are interrogated. Further, I give attention to the cultural, historical and political situations that fuel the environment in which children find themselves in.

#### 2.2 Overview

Many West African writers have represented the child and violence in their works. The notable feature of some of their texts is the use of the child character, or child voice in narration of violence. Examples of works by writers who have used such portrayal in their work includes, Emmanuel Dongala's, Johnny Mad Dog, (2005); Uzodinma Iweala's, Beasts of No Nation, (2006); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun (2007) and Chris Abani's Song for Night (2007). These child narratives embody the presence of violence and serve as a reflection on history and on the link between memory and history. The preoccupations of these texts, informs the reading of Kourouma's Allah is not obliged.

The authors of the above texts make use of child narrative voice/protagonists to tell stories about their different experiences of violence in different parts of West Africa in the post colonial times. In the works, the protagonists depend on their memory to reflect on the history of the region that is marked by endless civil wars. The child narrators are perhaps preferred because they are

assumed to have the ability to relay things seen as they are or were. They innocently give their accounts while at the same time remain naively critical. Hence the accounts bear some degree of truth.

Similarly, Ahmadou Kourouma's in Allah Is Not Obligated, makes use of a first person child narrator to give a record of experiences of the wars which engulfed Liberia in the 90's. The narrator gives his account as a child soldier who "served" in the armed conflict as many children in Africa and to whom Kourouma dedicates his tale in the epigraph, "*For children of Djibouti; it is at your request that I write this book*". This indicates how the problem is widespread on the African continent and how the author empathizes with their situation. While he dedicates the text to children of Djibouti, his setting is a number of West African countries specifically Sierra Leone and Liberia. Viewed in this manner, one is tempted to conclude that the idea of child soldier is universal. Still, it indicates how the situation calls for our attention.

The narrative is rendered from the perspective of suffering and witnessing by the child himself. Mineke Schipper's in her text, "Who Am I? Fact and Fiction in African First Person Narratives", points out that:

First person narrators take different positions with regards to the narrated event: first, they can tell a story in which they are or have been the hero/heroine; second, they can tell a story in which they mainly figure as observers; or third, they can tell a story which has been transmitted to them by someone else. (348)

It is instructive to note that Kourouma uses a first person narrator / perspective to construct a record of these war atrocities. The narrator fits the description of a victim and at the same time participates in meting out horror while serving under the different warlords. Additionally, some

of the issues the narrator raises, he opines, were told him by other characters in the text. Thus his role as a narrator fits in Schipper's definition.

In building his hero, Kourouma uses his own identity to create the basics of the narrator. For instance, he makes use of his own birth place Togobala and Malinke language to be that of his narrator. He also borrows from his life experiences to build the novel; including criticizing the post independence political leaders. This makes the novel appear to be like a semi autobiography. Despite these views, however, there isn't much evidence that makes it look like a true autobiography. Moreover, the facts used in the text are not the usual ones we expect from any child. Therefore, the text can better be understood as a mere fictional account of a troubled childhood of the narrator during the turbulent times of war; a microcosm of Africa. According to Ouedraogo in Research in African Literature; "Kourouma's criticism of the government resulted into President Felix Houphouet Boigny to deliberately give him assignments that kept him away from Ivory Coast perhaps as a way of minimizing criticism".<sup>2</sup> I suppose criticism of the political leadership and their regimes sounded reactionary at the time. His experiences in exile to the neighboring countries, does contribute to the raw material of the text. Living in 'exile' made him feel a sense of not belonging and drove him into writing fiction. It may be argued that his writing is a compensatory move after he is ostracized. It is probably from this vantage point of exile that he dares the political leaders. Describing the situation further, Ouedraogo comments:

Without status, Kourouma had no ties anywhere; he had to invent a status and class position for himself, even if only in his imagination...Literature thus gives him the means for this re-classing: social degradation is thus seen to be compensatory by symbolic reclassifying.<sup>2</sup>

The above quote helps us to put in perspective why the author's works are considered both fictional as well as documentary.

### **2.3 Childhood Tribulations**

Allah Is Not Obligated starts with an introduction of the narrator, a ten year old boy child called Birahima, who tells his story. He begins by asserting that: "The full, final and complete title of [his] bullshit story is: "*Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth.* Okay. Right. I better start explaining some stuff."(1) in so doing the narrator declares his standpoint on which his story spins. Additionally, he reveals to us his point of view, the first person narration as evidenced by the pronoun "I" just at the onset. Somehow the narrator can be seen as predominantly giving accounts of his own life.

He begins by explaining to us situations in his past life. He narrates the numerous problems he experienced early in life, which I find not offering him any comfort later in life. This is illustrated when we see him acknowledging his perverted self by asserting that, "I don't give two fucks about village customs anymore, because I've been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 and got fucked-up on kniff and lots of hard drugs"<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, he acknowledges being pursued by the evil spirits of the innocent victims. This in my opinion is a fact of hopelessness being displayed by the narrator. He is conscious of his fate, which has been decided by events in his early childhood and as by now, has already ruined his life. This may be viewed as his way of not allowing the reader to question what he says, what this events and actions are, and finally establish a kind of a protection for himself in the rest of the novel. On the other hand, this move helps the reader to imagine and visualize the effects and state in which the narrator and

by large children in Africa face in the circumstances of war. One may conclude that what the narrator remembers and the way he presents it to us, has been influenced by social circumstances and his constructed worldview.

The force behind some of the events in his childhood can be read from a cultural point of view. For instance, the narrator makes reference to the Malinke and Bambara beliefs concerning witchcraft. One such example is seen in circumstances that surrounds his mother-Maman's sickness. She was accused by her community of being the leader of a group of witches involved in ritual killings; "they believed that Maman was the most powerful sorceress in the whole country...that's how disgusting I thought she was."<sup>19</sup> The knowledge of this led Birahima to repulse and reject the mother causing an estrangement that lasted until her death. Only then did he realize that the accusations were false but the damage had already been done. He had presumably been cursed.

It is interesting to note how the people in this society attribute anything they do not understand (incident or occurrence they cannot explain in life) to witchcraft. All this is aimed at filling the void created by fear and ignorance. By the author invoking witchcraft in his text he helps to show how most people still have a strong hold on this irrational belief and bad practices. It is instructive to note how, millions of people have continued to suffer and die due to witchcraft and related injustices. In most cases it is the most vulnerable members of the population who are accused and persecuted. For Kourouma it is pertinent to tackle and eradicate the problems associated with this irrational belief.

Birahima's rejection of the mother can be seen as a strong emotional force that leads him to all sorts of defensive behavior in the text. He avers: "That's why I'm cursed and the curse goes

with me wherever I go”.<sup>25</sup> It may be argued that the narrator’s confessions make him feel the worst has already happened and his moves involving to becoming a child soldier is a way of accepting this fate. However, at some point he is remorseful of this act and this helps him regain his humanity in the eyes of the readers.

Further, the narrator indicates how the mother was a victim of a badly executed female genital circumcision that left her crippled. In this regard, the narrator shows how some cultural practices are dangerous and by extension how the African society deprived her of her right as a child and as a woman. I deduce this from his description of her as narrated to him by the grandmother. “...before her circumcision she sang and danced and walked when she was a young virgin before her excision”.<sup>11</sup> Implicitly the author castigates such retrogressive cultural practices. Owing to this event the child narrator shows how the mother’s life changed and ended up in pain and suffering. He describes maman’s agony as; “...the corners of her eyes were always full of tears and her throat was full of sobs suffocating her”.<sup>9</sup> Since most of her time was spend in pain, the narrator in his formative years, is likely to have had less joyful moments with her. This in my view may have hampered his psychological growth as a child and eventually led to his state of despair and arrogance in his future endeavors.

Despite her long-suffering, Birahima reveals to us an incident that shows a strong emotional connection with her. He reveals how he got the scar resulting from a fire burn. By narrating the story which he loathes most, it shows how Maman’s handicap could not allow her to fulfill the natural role of providing security as a mother; “...I don’t like to tell everyone about it. Because it is a secret, [and] when I tell the story, I tremble from the pain. I was running around on all fours and Maman was chasing me. I was moving faster than she...I was trying not to be caught.”<sup>6</sup>



Apparently, this childhood memory shows the height of trauma the narrator undergoes. He lives with this scar as a reminder of the bitter memories of the handicapped loving mother Bafitini. He avers, "...the day my arm got grilled, Maman cried and cried and her throat and chest were all swollen with sobs."<sup>10</sup> Against these odds, the narrator is nostalgic of the few memorable instances he had with the loving mother. This can be further interpreted from his quest to trace the aunt deep into the war torn Liberia perhaps to fill up the longing for the mother figure.

Another notable feature in the narrator's childhood is the absence of the father figure. The narrator notes how life had changed after his death.<sup>24</sup> Balla, the loathed stepfather whose teachings Birahima's grandmother detested, remained the narrator's only role model. He, unlike his father, never supplied enough for the family. Conspicuously, apart from the providence the father gave, not much relationship with him is hinted at in the text. Consequently, I see the narrator being brought up in appalling conditions. The lack of providence for him was likely to weigh heavily on his later choices in life. On his grandmother's counsel to live with the aunt in Liberia he says; "I was happy to be leaving (Togobala) because I wanted to eat lots of rice with *sauce graine. Walahe!*.

The narrator also portrays the socioeconomic environment in which he grew up that perhaps had an influence on his later life. He presents his mother's hut; what he also refers to as his 'natural habitat', in the following words: "The hut was full of all kinds of stink. Farts, shit, piss, the infected ulcer, the bitter smoke, and the smell of Balla the healer."<sup>(10)</sup> Having no otherwise he resolves to abide with the situation. Thus he declares:

But I didn't even smell them, so they didn't make me puke. Maman's stink and Balla's stink smelled good to me. I was used to them. It was surrounded by these smells that I ate

and slept best. It's called a natural habitat and every animal has one; maman's hut with her smells was my natural habitat.10-11

It is evident that the narrator became so vulnerable to any manipulation because of a lack in his childhood. Poverty had a great influence in shaping his future move. There being no means of escaping the situation the narrator resolves to accept it. This may further imply the decayed political environment that predisposes him and other children to child soldier.

It's also worth noting how Birahima like many other children in post colonial states lacked education. He cites his own lack of education to the failure of the current problems of nations and their causes stemming from colonialism. He notes; "I didn't get very far in school...I chucked it because everyone says education [doesn't matter]..."<sup>2</sup> He further says, "I was always skipping classes to be a street kid or go hunting in the forests with Balla". The narrator seems to be expressing his disillusionment and state of hopelessness in the current form of government that has not made effort in building enough schools to increase accessibility. The result is the high rate of uneducated people who live on the margins of development. Seen in this light, Kourouma lends a voice to uneducated people, that is, those who did not have any or enough exposure to the official foreign language. Partly, it explains why Birahima uses sub-standard linguistic competence in French. All in all, Birahima's ability to recall his childhood accords the novel some degree of reality since it is borrowed from lived experiences hence confirming the fact that literature draws from the society.

## **2.4 Identity**

Another major subject matter that preoccupies the author in the text is the issue of identity. Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates in their text on Identities highlight that:

ethnic and national identities operate in the lives of individuals by connecting them with some people, dividing them from others. Such identities are often deeply integral to a person's sense of self, defining an "I" by placing it against a background "we".<sup>3</sup>

This argument is relevant in the reading of the narrative as regards identities. The life of the narrator is linked to that of others. He presents to us scenarios through which people in the region try to connect with some or distance themselves from others. The people define their identity in terms of family, ethnic, national, religion and class identities. The narrator further shows us how politics in the area shapes the various identities.

According to Torres (1996), "a sense of ethnic identity is developed from a shared culture, religion, geography, and language of individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship as well as proximity." The author through the protagonist brings to light identities in the novel. For instance, the protagonist introduces himself as "a little nigger" this is not because he is young nor black but because he cannot speak French correctly.<sup>1</sup> What one deduces from this statement is the way in which language is used as an important means of classifying people. Still it suggests that the narrator may have given himself up to a lesser identity in comparison to the colonial masters' language. In a country that was colonized by the French masters, the indigenes who could not cope with the policy of assimilation were treated with contempt. The narrator is probably attributing his current situation to the persisting effects of colonization.

According to Daniel Bell (1975), "Ethnicity, is a means (now) for disadvantaged groups to claim a set of civil rights and privileges which the existing power structures have denied them".<sup>174</sup> The statement partially explains the situation in West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone that have been struggling with ethnic supremacy issues. These are some of the

predisposing factors we get to know from the narrator that are the oasis for the chaos in the region where there is rivalry between some communities that believe others have “eaten” or are doing so than the others. Of particular interest is how they struggle to eliminate others or ascend to power so that they can also have a turn at the national resource. The narrator reveals this to us when he says: “That was why the indigenous people revolted and it was why two indigenous people [Krahn and Gio] plotted an indigenous conspiracy against the arrogant colonials and the Afro-American colonialist”.<sup>93</sup>

Birahima informs us that in the recent years, however, the dominant ethnic groups in the region have been on the forefront in retaining and fighting for political power. This situation has resulted in the smaller communities revolting. Because of the ethnic competition for the scarce economic resources and political power, each ethnic group has tended to fight to have a president from their group. For them, the presidency appears to be a hope for the community’s prosperity albeit looting the state. This in other words, shows that the president is not for the state but for his ethnic group.

Commenting on the situation in Sierra Leone, the narrator reveals to us how Milton Martagai being the only educated and estranged person [by marrying a European], was elected the first president. Nonetheless he favoured members of his own ethnic group the Mendes.<sup>159</sup> This is portrayed in a proverb: “that was normal; one follows an elephant in the bush in order not to be wetted by the dew” <sup>20</sup>. This helps us to visualize how favoritism is common in some post colonial regimes. However, the practice is retrogressive and a recipe for chaos from the marginalized communities as evident in the text.

Still, the narrator gives an example of the rivalry for the presidency between two competitors, “Samuel Doe was happy and triumphant, the one leader, surrounded only by officer’s from his own tribe, Krahn officers. The republic of Liberia became a Krahn state, a hundred percent Krahn state.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the competition for the limited resources within the state today, to a certain extent, has changed the meaning of ethnic identities.

Also identity can be considered a social construct (Waters, 1990). It is viewed as an individual’s identification with “a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (Yinger, 1976, p. 200). Ethnic identity seems most often to be a frame in which individuals identify consciously or unconsciously with those with whom they feel a common bond because of similar traditions, behaviors, values, and beliefs (Ott, 1989). Arguably, these points of connection and relations allow individuals to make sense of the world around them and to find pride in whom they are. The narrator, Yacuoba and other characters (child soldiers) in the narrative, have to declare their ethnic identity when faced with danger so that they can be accepted in the enemy’s camp on the basis of their similarity in culture and taboo. However, this way of identity is not water tight since we see people in the narrative feigning identities.

In the novel we see Birahima stating his identity: “Malinke is the name of the tribe I belong to.”<sup>2</sup> this is also noticed in the text from the way he uses words from his native Malinke origin. The assertions indicate how ethnicity is an important aspect of classifying people in the region. He goes on to name the things that differentiate the people in the region. These ethnic markers may

be taken to show a view that is held with the culture of the ethnic group which he belongs to. Ultimately, it may be argued that the form of one's ethnic consciousness is the genuine association of one's personal identification with a communal one.

The spread of the Malinke people across the countries can be seen as a way the narrator uses to praise its importance and superiority in the West African. Thus he avers:

They're Black Nigger African savages and there's lot of us in the north of Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, and there's even Malinke in other corrupt fucked-up banana republics like Gambia, Sierra Leone and up in Senegal. 2-3

This depicting the spread of the Malinke tribe across borders is a way in which the author is denouncing the creation, division of nation states and ethnic grouping into different countries by colonial powers. This process has divided people from the same language group and same family into different countries, bearing different nationalities, across Africa. In this vein, the civil unrest in West Africa can be said to be closely interrelated since the people are straddled across the boundaries and have so much in common—language and culture hence the escalation of the unrest.

The narrator also reveals his Islamic identity to the readers. He explains the way people differentiate and discriminate between each other based on religion. I find this to be consistent with the writings of the sociologist, Fredrik Barth (1969), who argued that [ethnic] identity is a means to create boundaries that enable a group/a person to distance themselves/himself from one another. He strongly maintains that ethnic boundaries define a group and not the “cultural stuff that encloses it”. Read in this light, Islamic religion is viewed as a boundary used to differentiate

others. Birahima certainly praises his Islamic religion over the non Muslims. It is regrettable to see how religion has curtailed people's interactions in this society.<sup>16</sup> For instance Birahima informs how Maman could not marry the infidel sorceress' son because religious difference made them incompatible spouses and people. Surprisingly, the practices differentiating them are not visible in the skin, but are issues of mere beliefs, taboos, and culture. The narrator, however, dismisses this form of identity of the malinke. He observes that though "the Malinkes look like they're kind and friendly, they are really racist bastards".<sup>54</sup> the narrator and the author have no faith in such forms of segregation that is not very relevant in the modern world of interactions.

The narrator also points at how the life of people in the region, revolves around superstitions regardless of whether they are Christians or Muslims. He shows how these beliefs and practices have mixed through interactions. He notes that though Balla was an "outsider" to be shunned for his "otherness", "at night everyone went to his hut"<sup>8</sup> for his magical services. Supposedly his expertise in charms earned him a position in maman's [marriage] life despite the cultural reservations. I interpret the narrator's sentiments as to be questioning the basis of separatism deepened by colonialism. He indicates that though they may have some small differences in culture they are united by the same language and geographical boundaries.

Birahima, Yacouba, and others constantly find themselves having to define their identity, or to have it defined for them by others who attempt to erase their identity. The child narrator brings this out when he gets in Colonel le Bon's camp. He avers, "They explained to me who I was".<sup>71</sup> In addition, his quest for the aunt leads him to Niangbo, where he learns of the death of his aunt's husband from one of the residents:

Krahns did this, he said. They don't like the Mandingos. They don't want Mandingos here in Liberia...They smashed his head; they ripped out his tongue and cut off his cock. His tongue and prick, to make their grigris stronger.<sup>122</sup>

The beastly act exhibited in the quote shows the extreme to which identities can delve.

The identity is made clearer when Birahima rejoices of being a Malinke in Colonel Papa's camp. "Thanks he wasn't a Krahn or Guere because Colonel never liked them and put them to death".<sup>71</sup> This means that in order to survive the turmoil, Birahima and Yacouba have to always identify themselves with the ethnic group that has power at any specific time. They are also forced to define their identities at each border crossing and in the hands of enemy soldiers. In this circumstance nationality becomes less important than ethnicity.

Peter Weinreich (1986) asserts that, "different social contexts will influence the identity state and one's actions. Moreover, [he] maintains that ethnic self-identity is not a static process but one that changes and varies according to particular contexts".<sup>18</sup> Interpreted in this manner then one clearly understands why Birahima and other child soldiers change loyalty to various warlords they come into contact with and justify their actions.

Birahima explains how the majority of the child-soldiers had to change their names to match a certain ethnic group at different times but he remarks; "I didn't have to change my name, [because] I was Malinke..."<sup>81</sup> Probably the Malinke are accepted because of their willingness to fight for any cause, which the narrator sees as a virtue. Moreover those considered as "other" had to invent ways of surviving including the changing of their identities. In support of this view, Peter Weinreich notes that "individuals, for example, may avoid situations where their identity is challenged, threatened, humiliated, and castigated; and seek out and sustain whenever possible



settings that favor the identity state.” This view resonates with the narrator and other child soldiers who do not hold so much on their ethnic identity and would do whatever is possible for them when faced with a threatening situation. This at times, included going under cover for the sake of survival.

Again, one does not fail to see how the narrator chased after the aunt across the West Africa countries. He notes that every time he came closer to getting her, something just happened pushing her away from him. Towards the end, Birahima is pleased to hear that his aunt is in the same Malinke refugee camp as he. Sadly, she arrived in this camp sick, and does not survive. Incidentally, this is where he meets Doctor Mamadou his cousin, who is also looking for her [the mother], and luckily, finds Birahima to take him back home to their village. Birahima’s search for the aunt can be explained as a quest for an identity (belonging) among the people in the region which has for a long time remained elusive. Additionally, the loss of his mother and aunt indicates a disorder for the young man.

The child narrator also observes that the warring factions in the various conflicts at times became suspicious of those who were foreigners. He avers;

After all our stories, the guerrillas started answering our Malinke greetings. They wished us welcome. From the way we talked, they knew we were Malinke and not Gios or Krahns who had come to spy. So we could make ourselves at home, we were welcome in Worosso [...] we were patriots. (208)

What is interesting in this case is that the Malinke ethnicity is seen as inferior to other forms of identity. It is the faction one is fighting for that really matter and not his ethnic identity.

Given the many identities in the novel that are likely to leave one in a dilemma, Birahima seems to find a way to fit in and establish an identity and a role for himself no matter what ethnic, religious or national realities that exist on the ground for him. In the same way, I see the author probably recognizing the fact that traditional forms of belonging are no longer sufficient for his and others continued survival in the present circumstances. The people need to redefine and relinquish the hard stands of their identities so that they can accommodate or find a point of intersection in some matters so as to remain relevant in the modern society.

## **2.5 The Narrator's Testimony as a Child Soldier**

Birahima's narrative enlightens us on the phenomenon of child soldiers. He terms them as "*the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century.*"<sup>83</sup> One clearly reads irony in this statement. Considering how child soldiers lash out atrocities on societies, it is doubtful that they are a fancied lot. He highlights how it has become an important factor in the recent history of West African states. The author borrows from these experiences to build up his war narrative.

In her definition of the term "child soldier" in the African civil wars, Honwana clarifies the meaning 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 51.

From the above description, a child soldier can be said to be an innocent, vulnerable individual, who cannot be able to make sound decisions of his own. Therefore, engaging them in war is a total disregard of their tender stage and a manifestation of the warlord's greed. This kind of

employment contravenes the UN labour laws and therefore can be aptly categorized as child labour. In contrast, Honwana, associates soldiers with strength, aggression and responsible maturity of adulthood.<sup>89</sup> They are adequately developed for deployment since they can make a choice for their life.

The protagonist as a “child” soldier provides us with a personal account of his experiences of war in the several countries he travels through. Through his travels he is able to give a first-hand story of the lives of child soldiers; give an account of historical characters and historical events. “He tells us that he has killed a lot of people in Liberia and Sierra Leone where he was a child soldier”<sup>3</sup> among many other atrocities he has committed. Following this, he bears a feeling of being followed by the ghosts “*gnamas*” of his many victims. This shows his awareness of the horrible deeds committed by the young soldiers. In this way the narrator shows how he and other children have been turned into critical agents in the civil wars in the region.

The author reveals a number of situations that led to the protagonist and other children becoming child soldiers. The character, Birahima, like many other children entered more or less voluntarily into recruitment, while the other child soldier characters were forced by circumstances. For Birahima it happened when the truck they were travelling in got seized by the child soldiers of the warlord, Colonel Papa le Bon. Birahima and Yacouba both used this opportunity to save themselves by joining Le Bon's forces. Birahima justifies his joining the army as the best option at his disposal, “being a child-soldier is for kids who’ve got fuck all left on earth”.<sup>(114)</sup> The sentiments reveal how vulnerable the children are in times of war hence become targets for deployment by the warlords. In addition the narrator seem to be saying that when children are faced with all the odds, their choice of a sound decision becomes limited and therefore any other

desperate act or decision is good for them. The statement further requires us to be in their shoes and understand them for it is not by choice that they act so but forced by circumstances created by the society, political leaders and to crown it all, fate.

Again, Birahima informs us how some children were recruited forcefully. This is seen in the enlistment of Kik; where external forces contributed to his enlisting. He narrates how one day bandits came to Kik's village while he and other children were at school. On arriving home Kik found:

His father's throat cut, his brother's throat cut, his mother and sister raped and their heads bashed in. All [...] relatives, close and distant, dead. And when you have got no one left on earth...what do you do? You become a child-soldier of course, a small soldier, a child-soldier so you can have lots to eat and cut some throats yourself; that's all your only option.<sup>90</sup>

Here we get informed of some reasons that push some children into child soldiering and eventual transformation into beasts of war apart from on some occasion being a yearn for revenge.<sup>37</sup> The quote also gives a description of the horror of war and shows how such children caught up in similar situations fail to lead normal lives. This is gestured to by Birahima's words: "I cried for their mothers. I cried for all the life they never lived".<sup>110</sup> These sentiments show that at some point he and other child soldiers are not completely corrupted by the war situations. At least they still possess core feelings of humanity towards their folk and other citizens.

According to Honwana (2006), the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment is small; in some circumstances, "it is entirely absent".<sup>37</sup> Though Birahima's enlisting may appear as forced, one observes his happiness when earlier, Yacouba ignites the fire in him by narrating to him stories about the good things enjoyed by the Small soldiers in Liberia. His response to the

enticements was, “Walahe! Walahe! ...I want to be a child soldier now. Right now this minute”.<sup>37</sup> I see this response as emanating from the inherent quality of children to perpetrate violence; hence Birahima’s involvement. He is therefore culpable for his actions in the war.

Civil wars can disrupt the societal peace in which families can be able to provide for their children. Children get separated from their parents during times of war and helplessly look for them everywhere including joining camps with a hope of reuniting. At times this does not bear fruit, but instead leaves the children susceptible to predators. The narrator informs us that, “Commander Tete Brulee was [from] ULIMO...He came to our camp because someone told him his mother and father were hiding in Zorzor, but he didn’t find them there because it wasn’t true.”<sup>72</sup> The quote indicates desperation of children caught up in the mix of war. The narrator shows the anxiety that engulf the children when they have to frantically look for their families in turbulent times.

Although children face emotional as well as physical helplessness once in the trap of exploitation to some, joining military offers them the only path to wages to support themselves or their families when everything is at odds. Tete Brulee convinces the other child soldiers that by shifting alliance to ULIMO, “[they] could eat like a horse and [have] leftovers. You could sleep the whole day and every month they give you a salary”.<sup>72</sup> One wonders this change of mind after he had abandoned the camp long ago. These frequent movements perhaps indicated that the children get to the camps from desperation and from a hope of pulling themselves out of their problems. Hence, they fight for no ideological reasons, but self preservation.

Other children such as Sarah, were forced to enlist in the war because she had become orphans.<sup>86</sup> Sekou also a child victim according to the narrator, was “thrown into the jaws of the alligator” because he lacked school fees. This led the boy into wandering from Abidjan to Burkina Faso and ended up being an arms trafficker for Taylor’s faction.<sup>113</sup> In another incidence, a child called Sossio, angered by the frequent domestic violence involving his parents, stabbed his father to death and turned to be a child soldier.<sup>112</sup> One may argue that while it may be beyond the control of some children to become child soldiers, the likes of Sossio have violence weaved into them from observing the parents fighting so often. This explains the critical role of the environment in influencing children’s growth. The cruelty in them can easily be triggered depending on the predisposing factor. All in all, one needs to remember that there is not only the factor of intimidation involved in children recruitment, but that many of these children happen to be 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.

The author discloses how governments were also responsible for the recruitment of child soldiers so as to add up to their armies. Unfortunately once recruited they were abandoned with no supplies. Strangely, the starving kids became soldiers by day and rebels who looted by night for the sake of survival. This necessitates Birahima and others to switch alliance between factions with a hope of better treatment. Moreover, the children are less aware of reasons they fight for and that they serve a government that is not responsible for their well being. In my view this negates the conventional definition of a soldier and labor laws. My understanding of a soldier apart from possessing strength and being able to manipulate weapons, calls for a “sense of

responsibility of, right and wrong, of good and bad war practices.<sup>37</sup> This then raises the question of exploitation of minors.

The narrator, like many of the child soldiers received military training after recruitment. According to Birahima, the training involved, apart from the manipulation of firearms (AK 47) some religious teaching. He cites how le Bon taught that “If you truly loved the Lord God and Jesus Christ, bullets wouldn’t hit you... they would kill other people instead because it’s God alone who kills the bad guys, the sinners and the damned”.<sup>70</sup> This is wrong teaching to innocent children. I find it aimed at only hoodwinking children who are naive to join the faction. At times new comers had to undergo exorcism of demons before admission.<sup>128</sup> Some conduct was to be adhered to by the child soldiers. For instance, compulsory prayers and punishment (execution) for those who attempted to escape as in le Bon’s camp. This shows the crude arm of force used by the warlords to maintain loyalty in their camps. Besides, they were given ranks such as captain (for a child called Kid), commander, colonel or lieutenant (for Birahima) all with a hope of pleasing them. Children were sometimes given new names such as, Sosso [The Panther], Jean Bazon [Johnny Thunder Bolt], Sekou [The Terrible] among others. Interestingly, these names are associated to some form of feared imagery. It also defines some of their character traits as evidenced in Sosso’s other nickname-The Parricide. I argue that these new names were a strategy aimed at alienating the children from their people and eventually making them pick the cruel habits. It perhaps made it easier for a child soldier to commit the murderous deeds without the fear of being identified.

The narrator also shows several strategies used by warlords to isolate and alienate the child recruits. It at times included forcing them to eliminate their own relatives. Cock (1991) asserts that, “a child soldier learnt to dehumanize other people and make them into targets, he cut himself from his own feelings of caring and connectedness to the community.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Honwana (2005) asserts that “the initiation into violence of child soldiers was designed to cut off their links with society, family, friends and community at large. Intense psychological pressure was placed on them to re-mould their identities”.<sup>73</sup> Birahima testifies to this fact by citing the beastly behaviour in the Johnny Koroma’s army. He opines that “They had to kill their parents to get initiated. They proved by this act that they had given up everything, that they didn’t have any ties, any other home except Johnny Koroma’s army”.<sup>199</sup> The narrator regrets not being able to join these elite soldiers. He longs and would be willing to kill his parents had they been alive so as to gain entry into the camp. This shows the extent to which Birahima’s morality is destroyed. It is surprising to see children rejoicing at the destruction of humanity something that is respected in any society. However, one needs to look deeper to realize that the children are blameless. They are only victims of circumstances.

On the contrary, he accuses the child soldiers for the dehumanizing activities they mete out to people. He cites the scenario at the roadblock where the prisoners/passengers from the seized truck, regardless of sex or age are stripped naked by the child soldiers. The narrator continues to say that all embarrassed naked passengers uncomfortably tried to cover their “bangala” for men and “gnoussou-gnoussou” for women with their hands but the child soldiers could not let them.<sup>50-51</sup> It further shows the extent to which children can degenerate. They carry out inhuman acts to innocent people unashamedly. Their role as perpetrators of violence is pronounced leaving readers guessing whether the children are not culpable.



The participation of children in war situations is also stimulated by the security and power emanating from possession of a gun. Birahima narrates the power of the gun as told him by Yacouba:

Small soldiers had every-fucking thing. They had AK-47s...With the AK-47s the small soldiers got everything. They had money...they had shoes and stripes and radios and helmets and even had cars that they call four by fours.<sup>37</sup>

The child narrator also narrates how child soldiers take up arms just for fun and adventure. He tells us that at the road block the child soldiers emerged “showing off their kalashes, their AK47’s”.<sup>46</sup> Later at Captain Kids funeral, “... [they] fired their kalashes. That’s all they’re good at. Firing guns”.<sup>59</sup> The author seem to be disapproving the power the children derive from owning a gun. They crave to explore regardless of the dangers they are exposed to or the harm they cause to others. The guns give them a sense of manhood and power that enables them to commit atrocities besides being assured of their survival in the conditions of war. Somehow, the author calls on the political leaders to be careful not to place deadly weapons in the hands of irrational beings.

Still, the child soldiers were made fearless and courageous to perform horrible deeds through provision of drugs. Birahima brings this to our attention when he states that child soldiers in Colonel Papa le Bon’s army had advantages as compared to adult soldiers.<sup>76</sup> He notes that “all the hash [was kept] for the child soldiers because it was good for them and made them as strong as real soldiers”<sup>79</sup>. Thus, I see the use of drugs by the warlords as helping in their mechanization and thereby underscoring their vulnerability and exploitation of children and by extension child soldiers. Even if they carry guns and kill like adult soldiers, they are children whose strength

cannot be compared to adults. This serves to reveal the dishonesty and cunningness of warlords in creating a cheap fighting force.

The author ridicules the use of magical beliefs in war. This is exposed in the narrator's highlight of the treachery that prevails in such times. When the protective "gri gris" created by Yacouba fail to protect the fighters in General Onika's camp from injury and even death, he blames it on them, "user error"; on account of smoking hash at the wrong time. Therefore to correct the mess according to Yacouba is that, "the gri gris of the child soldiers needed to be re-energised".<sup>115</sup> During the re-energizing ritual, Birahima and the other child soldiers are able to see the trick. The narrator says; "we were laughing up our sleeves the whole time".<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless when Tete Brulee, singly takes over Niangabo after the cleansing ritual the narrator is left wondering: "I couldn't make head or tail of people or society...was this gri-gri bullshit true or not? Maybe [it's] true or a lie, a scam, a con that runs the whole length and breadth of Africa".<sup>118</sup> in this way the child narrator proves that despite their young age, children are observant and are capable of making critical judgment of circumstances they find themselves in even if they won't be able to voice this out in most cases.

## **2.6 Historical Aspect of the Novel**

A lot of authorial intrusion is evident in the text when one considers the highlights on some true important political characters and events in the West African region. Through the child narrator, the author reveals to us the leaders who took part in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. For example, he mentions Charles Taylor president of Liberia who was responsible in many ways for some of the atrocities committed in the country's civil war, Doe, Johnson, El Hadji Koroma, Foday Sankoh as well as a bunch of small bandits".<sup>43</sup> The author in this regard uses

true historical figures in creating his fiction. He historicizes his narrative thus giving it some reality.

According to Paschal B. Kyiiripuo Kyoore (2004:1), “Kourouma makes use of historical “causality” the same way a historian does in a historical work.” Further he contends that “history is not merely about the distant past. Rather, history continues to manifest itself in the present as we see in the novel.” It is in this regard that he suggests that “... Kourouma evokes historical personalities in order to ridicule, and to critique dictatorship and those responsible for the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively.” I attribute this to the author writing from exile where he has advanced in age and no longer fears for his life. Apparently in his country and given the unchallengeable position of the dictators this would not happen. Perhaps it is due to his falling out of favor with powers that be, that we are able to see his glaring presence in the text.

The narrator is surprised at the names carried by the warlords. Colonel Papa le Bon is called “good father”; Prince Johnson is “a prince” meaning that he was a nice warlord because he had principles and El Hadji Koroma is “a hajji”; these names somehow denote admirable behavior which incidentally the warlords do not exhibit in practice. The the names allows the narrator to comment on their role in the horror that their wars bring to society. Their true character is evident when one juxtaposes their names and the actions revealed in the narrative. The narrator disapproves their deeds and hypocrisy by retorting in reference to Johnson’s; “the craziest thing is that he even put his [lopsided] principles to practice”.<sup>127</sup>

Again, Birahima draws our attention to how the warlords deceive and fuel civil wars in Africa. He particularly points out their roles as; extortion by Colonel Papa le Bon, 47 Baclay controlled

the diamond trade and Prince Johnson controlled the revenue of rich areas of Liberia. Strangely, all this was at an unreasonable cost to the lives of child soldiers and the whole innocent society.<sup>126</sup> The warlord El Hadji Koroma's system was founded on exploiting refugees, to extract money from NGOs. Birahima notes that every time an NGO showed up with food and medicines, "the poor well-trained refugees would be lined up at the gate to deliver the same speech in favour of the warlords army thus, [...] everything you give to them, they give to us".<sup>209</sup> The quote casts doubt on the truth it is intended to create. It only proves a mere conditioning in times of war to suit a particular interest.

Further, the narrator gives details on the various factions and groupings fighting each other in the West African states. These are the "National Patriotic Front of Liberia"<sup>48</sup> a movement of the bandit Taylor who cause terror in the region and "ULIMO" (United Liberian Movement) a political outfit associated with its leader Samuel Doe. Through the recounting of the recent history, the child narrator depicts an example of the level of bestiality in Prince Johnson. He explains how Samuel Doe was persecuted under the instruction of Prince Johnson. These are inhumane acts the child soldiers witness as they are transformed into killers uncharacteristic of a traditional child in the African contest.

The author exactly borrows from the death of president Doe to expose his suffering at the hands of Prince Johnson. He uses this to emphasize the senselessness and the inhumanity of dictatorship and consequences that arise out of it. The capturing of this historical incidence in a way, serves as criticism of the regime that replaced him. It also serves to show how most African countries need political reforms so badly. Neither was Samuel Doe's dictatorial regime nor those

who overthrew his government have any political or moral authority to rule over Liberians. By employing this history, the author questions the causes of some acts in the recent wars in the region. I also find these facts in resonance with Hayden White's theorization that "a story told in a historical narrative is an imitation of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is considered a truthful account thereof."<sup>27</sup> In view of this, I see the fiction as an imitation of the story lived in the West African region. Hence the text can be relied upon as a historical document of the West Africa.

In addition, the author portrays how Doe like many other dictators made jokes of democracy. In his view of democracy, he quit the army to be elected as a civilian President in unequal field for his competitor Thomas Quionkpa. The author without being serious says: "...and the constitution was approved one Sunday morning by a vote of 99.99%. A 99.99% vote because 100% did not look very serious. It was *ouyaouya*".<sup>96</sup> He suggests how democracy was inverted so as to suit the powers that be. The event however fuelled the attempted coup by Thomas Quionkpa and the assassination of almost all the Gios including innocent wives and children. Kourouma seemingly refutes such practices and warns of its repercussions.

Birahima also explains the different forms of ethnic violence in the West African states. He singles out Samuel Doe who is a Krahn, and Thomas Quionkpa, a Gyo as belonging to the largest ethnic groups that killed all the Afro-American senators and then massacred their family members.<sup>93</sup> This also shows how identity in the region is defined by ethnicity and class. It at times involved the suppressing of identities of others, as seen in the killing of the creoles. He accuses the colonial administration for setting up the ground for the present day problems owing

to the skewed policies that privileged the Creoles over the natives. By writing on the issue the narrator seems to condemn ethnicity and politics for fueling violence in the region.

Kourouma is very critical of the international community too. This is particularly seen in his description of how Doe was killed at a time ECOMOG seemed to be in control of the Liberian capital.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, he accuses the U.N. Peacekeepers (as always serving the interests of European colonialists) and the Nigerian ECOMOG army for not doing their prime duty of safeguarding life (especially when international military forces are to enforce a truce between hostile groups). He shows how disinterested they are while on their missions;

The peacekeeping forces didn't keep the peace they didn't take any unnecessary risks. They weren't bothered about details they just fired shells at random. They fired shells at the people doing the attacking and at the people being attacked. They bombed every part of the town...slaughtering innocent civilians and massacring people, all in the name of humanitarian peacekeeping.<sup>139-141</sup>

Betrayal is also seen by the way some heads of state led by President Houphouet Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire (as a mediator in the crisis) arbitrated in situations in the region. The narrator censures these dictators who were out to destroy any form of democracy in the region. He reveals how in most occasions they supported military activities of rebels to destabilize their countries. The author notes them as Qaddafi of Libya, Compaore of Burkina Faso, Abacha of Nigeria, and Eyadema of Togo. They were the major political players in the politics of the region whose role in the conflicts remains questionable.

Interestingly, I see the chaos in Liberia and Sierra Leone as interconnected. This is explained by the way the narrator takes us across the borders to highlight the situations. The narrator describes the situation in Sierra Leone as a "bloody hell, Yes, the squared bloody hell. We say that a

country is simply the bloody hell when you get warlords dividing it up between them like in Liberia.”<sup>157</sup> According to the author the people of Sierra Leone just like in Liberia, are defined by those who have power. We get to know this through the narrator who notes that; “In Sierra Leone the people are classified as, the hunters association [the Kamajor], and the democrat [Kabbah], as well as the bandits Foday Sankoh, Johnny Koroma, and certain small fry bandits being in the dance.”<sup>157</sup>

## **2.7 Forms of Violence**

In narrating examples of cruelty witnessed during the civil war, Birahima recalls how victims’ arms were cut off. He alludes to this calamity when he recounts how Tieffi “wanted to send [them] to the slaughterhouse. That was where they cut the hands and the arms of Sierra Leonean citizens in order to prevent them from voting”.<sup>172</sup> The child narrator is surprised by these horrors of war. In addition, he reveals the cruelty of Sierra Leone’s leader of the rebels, Foday Sankoh, and his unique solution to stop elections that might vote him out. Birahima notes that:

All [he] had to do was cut off the arms of as many people, as many of the citizens of Sierra Leone as possible. If a woman showed up with a baby on her back, the woman’s hands were amputated and the baby’s hands too ... because they’ll be voters someday. (165)

Furthermore, the narrator exposes the extent of this problem of amputation. He notes that, every Sierra Leone prisoner had his hands cut off before being sent back into the territory occupied by government forces. This inhuman act was only a way of scaring the people into accepting a government imposed on them. It was aimed at denying the people the will to exercise their democratic rights. This is the far African leaders have degenerated to bestiality in their quest for power. More so, it helps to show how members of society have somehow lost their values and are capable of committing terrible atrocities for their selfish gain.

In his account of what happened to their convoy to Liberia in the hands of child-soldiers, the child narrator makes reference to sexual act to reveal his worry and fear in the faces of the child-soldiers: “[...] So I shut up. I was trembling, trembling like the hindquarters of a nanny-goat waiting for a billy-goat. (‘hindquarters’ means ‘arse, bum’)” 50-51 He also presents a poor nursing mother who lost her little baby in the attack as follows: “She was all filthy and she wasn’t wearing her Pagne anymore and her underwear didn’t really cover her *gnoussou-gnoussou*. She had a sensual charm, she had a voluptuous sex-appeal, (sex-appeal means that she made you want make love).<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Birahima continues to show how the woman, just like other women were vulnerable to sexual abuse by the likes of warlord Colonel le Bon in the name of exorcism. During the ritual he avers “the women were locked up naked one on one with Colonel Papa le Bon. That was the rules of the tribal wars”.<sup>67</sup> In my opinion this is how bad war can delve; it offers no room for modesty. I view this acts as a form of violence meted out on the innocent. This subverts the morals which children should bear in any civilized society. In this regard the author through his mouth piece calls on the society to reconsider their decisions.

The narrator reveals forms of domestic violence meted out on women in our societies. Critically and humorously he reveals how the aunt escaped to Liberia before being caught by her rough husband yearning for her blood. Her escape denotes some means through which women as a vulnerable group seek liberation. The narrator seems to be saying, that even when justice is sought by women they are at times frustrated by the very organs that are supposed to secure them. Lamenting on the convoluted justice, Birahima opines, “on account of women’s rights [his aunt’s] two children were taken from [her] and given to the father regardless of their age.” Poking



irony at such prejudiced law, the narrator notes that “everywhere in the world a woman isn’t supposed to leave her husband’s bed even if that husband curses her and punches her and threatens her. “The woman is always wrong. That’s what they call human rights.” 26 Apparently, it is the aunts escape to Liberia that sets Birahima’s quest and eventual turn point to a mercenary.

Birahima informs the readers on how the society’s cultural practices affect the girl child and women. He reveals how woman inheritance is carried out as layed out in the Islamic religious beliefs. Issa, Birahima’s step father who has enough problems of provision with his first marriage, is seen to be out to marry maman to add to his list of wives. However, as a break from this tradition, maman rejects him and chooses to marry Balla whom she loves though an “outsider”. This forced marriage can be interpreted as violence towards women because they are meant to be subservient. In this way, maman gives the women a voice of liberation from the enslaving beliefs of wife inheritance.

The narrator also exposes sexual violence meted out on children in the contexts of war and mass iolence. He too is exposed to a wrong and negative sexual experience. He narrates his experience in one of the camps to the readers. He avers that, “the wife responsible for the child-soldiers was called Rita Baclay. Rita Baclay loved me like it’s not allowed.”<sup>103</sup> It appears Birahima is boastful and proud of the interest that Rita Baclay shows in him. Nevertheless, this kind of relationship is unacceptable. Through this description, he exposes his vulnerability to this improper sex.

Conversely, by Birahima explaining his abuse by Rita Baclay he suggests his participation. He says that;

Whenever Colonel Baclay was away, Rita Baclay would take him to her hut where she would coddle [him] with little meals and after eating she would kiss his bangala over and over and then she'd swallow it like a snake swallowing a rat. She used my bangala like a toothpick...I left her house whistling, proud and happy *gnamakonde!*" .103-4

Superficially, this gives the impression that he is happy with the acts. However, the narrator has some moral consciousness seen when he asks Rita about being caught by the Captain [husband]. He is not to be solely blamed because Rita Baclay enticed him with food. Here Kourouma notes some of the means used by predators to lure innocent and vulnerable children into sex. When Birahima says his penis is used as a little toothpick, it can be interpreted to mean he is not old enough to have sex with her. I interpret this act as a form of exploitation of the boy child.

Additionally, the narrator does also give the experiences of other children as victims of and witnesses to sexual violence. Through four funeral orations he reports the sexual violation of girl children. These are the funeral orations of Sarah, the little girl who is raped in Zorzor, Sita and Mirta. It is worth noticing when the rape incidences occur; besides Sarah whose rape and sexual violation takes place before the war, the remaining three girls are raped in the wake of war. This proves that it is war that makes it possible to have such a magnitude of rape cases. The examples indicate the trauma the girl children are exposed to in times of war.

The narrator makes us understand how girls and women such as Sarah are raped. He points out that a man who pretend to help her, took her to a remote place and "[forced] her on the ground and raped her. He was so vicious that he left Sarah for dead."85-6.And for the murder of Fati the

girl of Zorzor, Birahima observes that; “one morning, one of the girls was found raped and murdered on the edge of the track that led to the river. A little seven-year-old girl raped and murdered. It was such an agonizing thing that Colonel Papa le Bon cried his heart out” 74. This horrifying image is typical of the kind of violence the girl child is predisposed to in times of war.

Similarly, Birahima narrates the rape and murder of Sita. He also reports that, “one day a young girl was found raped and her head cut off between three labourers’ camps. Eventually they found out the poor girl was called Sita and she was eight years old. Sita had been horribly killed in a way you wouldn’t want to see”<sup>181</sup>. Furthermore, Birahima reports the rape and murder of Mirta by the Kamojor Warriors at Mile Thirty-Eight. He tells us that one day a girl is “hunted down by the lecherous hunters who caught her and took her to a cacao plantation [where] they raped her, gang-raped her. Sister Aminata found the girl lying in her own blood”.<sup>183</sup> I view these suffering and deaths as violations of the bodies of children and the understanding of childhood as a space characterized by innocence. It is saddening to see the society (adults) who should be the care givers, turn against the naive and defenseless children.

Strangely, it is only the girls that are raped and murdered. By narrating this, Birahima points at how rape is used as a weapon against girls and women during war. Additionally, he hints at measures that can be taken to protect them during times of war like this. One such way is portrayed by taking revenge against the perpetrators who cause the distasteful acts. This can be illustrated by Colonel Papa le Bon or Sister Aminata who take a step to apprehend the alleged culprits. In one incident, the narrator explains that after an elaborate ritual Colonel le Bon is able to identify Tete as a culprit and metes out punishment thus; “... Next was the ordeal. A knife was

put into a fire of glowing coals until the blade was white-hot, then each defendant opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue...the white blade [was] run over it.”<sup>75</sup> Although this kind of justice looks crude and whether the right person is punished or not justice is seen as being done. The onus is on the reader to fight the vice in whatever manner so as to guarantee the girl child some safety.

Besides, Sister Aminata, Colonel Papa le Bon, and Mother Marie Beatrice construct orphanages in which they keep girls away from the predators so as to ensure their safety.

Colonel Papa le Bon, in his goodness, built an orphanage school for girls. It was for girls who had lost their parents in the tribal wars and it was only for girls younger than seven. Little girls who had nothing to eat and not enough breasts to get a husband or be a child soldier [were taken care by nuns who] taught the girls writing, reading, and religion.<sup>73</sup>

This in some way suggests a moral obligation to everyone to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the vulnerable girl-child during contexts of war and mass violence.

In exploiting the issues of sexual abuse, the narrator stresses some aspects. Firstly, he names each of the girls affected and identifies their ages as between seven and twelve. This is a very vulnerable age where the children are depended on adults for guidance and protection. Secondly, he uses suggestive language in the description of their abuses. For example he notes that Sarah was viciously raped and left for dead, and Mirta was left in her own blood. And in all the cases he identifies men as the culprits and by so doing showing how they double as victims as well as perpetrators of atrocities.

### **2.8.1 The Narrator's Ambivalence**

Apart from narrating the atrocities meted out on children during times of war, the narrator at different stages reveals a divided position of participation and ambivalence. He shows a kind of knowing, rough behavior, and yet, at the same time, he creates a moral establishment for himself. In this way Kourouma shows us the undecided manner of an innocent child, who I would say still has some level of moral sensibility despite all the effort made to corrupt him.

Some instances that attest to this situation can be seen when he notes remains of compassion in Papa Le Bon. When Le Bon is assassinated, Birahima observes that; “when I saw Colonel Papa le Bon dead it made me feel sick because I thought he was immortal...he had been good to me”.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, the narrator shows some human feelings towards Tete Brulee, and his injured girlfriend, Sarah. The narrator notes that in her last moments, “Tete Brulee went over to her and kissed her and started crying. We left them their kissing...”<sup>83</sup> In the funeral orations for a number of dead fellow child soldiers, he cries for their deaths thus revealing his emotions. And in his oration for Siponni the Viper, Birahima reveals a liking for the boy's treachery. In Mother Marie Beatrice's treatment of the girls in her charge, Birahima regards her as a saint.

Other evidence of moral awareness is seen in the narrator's occasional cover up of feelings. He reverts to; “I don't have to talk I'm not obliged to tell my dog's-life-story,”<sup>91</sup> and in his admission that in Korouma's army the leaders and child soldiers were becoming crueler and crueler. This shows his sound ability to assess the situation and pass a judgment. 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 “She was really worried to what would happen to

me”.<sup>211</sup> At the point where he comes into contact with Mamadou and begins to narrate his story, he indicates some form of redemption [talking is healing].

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the way childhood is depicted throughout the text in the wake of violence and sexual abuse during war. I have been able to see an abuse in the way children are expected to experience their childhood and what they actually deal with. I have looked at the reasons of war and what pushes children into child soldiering as narrated by a child. Generally, I have examined the cultural, economic and political factors surrounding the children’s involvement in war and any hope of his redemption.

Looking at Kourouma’s Allah is Not Obligated, one is tempted to say that his choice of Birahima as narrator is apt since he reveals the challenges children face in the wake of civil war. The narrator preoccupies himself with the issues of child soldier and its impacts to the child and the whole society, thereby revealing the various forms of child violations

Still, the narrator has been able to castigate the some cultural and religious practices such as female genital mutilation that seem to be making the people of his society to trail behind in the wake of new technological advancement and new unity brought about by new idea of the nation state. The selfish, greedy, and irrational political leaders have not been spared either. The narrator seems to have put them on notice. Instructively, the narrator seem to be silently saying that such people have no business being in power for their loss of touch with the needs of the common people who otherwise look up to them for exemplary leadership.

Birahima informs us of the happenings in the region, he questions happenings, people, their motives and emotions in order to get their fullest interpretation. I see his naivety as a child an important tool permitting him to look at the things from an unusual angle. Additionally, he is at times seen to be rude and in some situations full of prejudices—the hatred and biases against “others”. All this, allows him to traverse the region and narrate to us issues beyond what a normal child of his age can achieve without contradictions. His innocence gives him the strength to raise doubts and ask questions which cannot be answered or asked by any grown-up. He is able to reach at his conclusions because of his camouflage.

Birahima also reveals some social economic problems that affected his childhood and that of other children. These experiences compel him to define his own position in the society, forcing him to recognize and adapt to his own weirdness. He also becomes aware of his religious and ethnic related identities—his consciousness of these forms of existence becomes a pivotal point in his initiation into child soldier. But his moral consciousness is not completely lost despite his involvement.

Lastly, the child’s voice has generated an authentic documentation of the horrors of war. The innocence of the narrator’s childhood days is seen to be snatched from him when he witnesses growing communal hatred and open gestures of violence.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **NARRATIVE STRATEGIES**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Having looked at the subject matter in the previous chapter, I proceed to look at the author's style of presenting the subject matter. It is through the form that a writer is able to render his message. I attempt to illustrate the narrative strategies that Kourouma employs in constructing his narrative. The author apart from employing the first person strategy, he appreciates its inadequacy and thereby invents other strategies to complement it in addressing pertinent issues. These are among others the use of third person narrator, the use of dictionaries, several funeral orations, proverbs and un-standard language. I also try to see how language has been used by the narrator to express the truth beyond mere fiction in this novel.

#### **3.2 Critical views on language**

There can be no literary text without the use of language. O. W Holmes opines that "language is a solemn thing. It grows out of life...out of its agonies and ecstasies, its weariness. Every language is a temple in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined". Hardy Barbara stresses this fact by positing that;

Language is the amber in which a thousand precious thoughts have safely been embedded and preserved. It has arrested lightning flashes of genius which, unless thus fixed and arrested, might have been as bright but would have also been quickly passing and perishing as lightning.<sup>5-6</sup>

This implies that for compactness, aesthetics and mastery of a text, an artist should put figures of speech in the first place of language. Again, one must show his peculiar and unique skills in expressing his message. This is defined by Adewoye as "verbal dressing or coating of one's thoughts, ideas and feelings in a method that is peculiar or unique to a particular author". These



sentiments are well understood by Kouruma in his effort to construct his text. He lives to the fact of addressing his audience in a special way regardless of the conventional rules of grammar and form in the foreign languages.

Hayden White in his study of narrative, similarly argues that “the functional model of discourse relegates different kinds of discourse to the status of “codes” in which different kinds of “messages” can be cast and transmitted with a communicative, expressive, or connotative aim in view” (26). Understandably the novel under study is embedded with “codes” which have ideological “messages.” I see the language the author employs as attempting to interpret the messages and also to explain the importance of this language in the political circumstances he creates.

The author’s work is in tandem with Jose Ortega’s assertion that “to write well, is continual attack into grammar, into established usage, and into accepted linguistic norms. Likewise Achebe claims, “I have been given the language (English) and I intend to stretch it to accommodate my African thoughts”. (348) Ngugi also points out that, “the new generation of African writers will not only continue to use the European languages, they will also subvert, appropriate and decolonize them to express their African experiences and worldview”. Understandably, I view these assertions as providing Kourouma and other African writers with a freedom to write as they would wish and not being limited by the rules governing the European languages.

Osundare, however, is more cautious when he says that:

no matter what the extent of the African writer's proverbialization of a European language, no matter how much stylistic acrobatics he employs in an attempt to bend the borrowed language, there are innumerable aspects of African experience that defy rendering in a foreign medium (60).

This arguments, explains the persisting problems in Kourouma's text during its translation from French to English language whereby some African words appear to defy translation hence their prominence in the text and perhaps necessitating the narrator's use of dictionaries for comprehension by his readers.

Some critics, notably Moradewun Adejunmobi (1998) and Kaku Gyasi (2006) have argued that Kourouma's use of French in his text, "constitutes a creative process that leads to a new text, a text that conveys new African realities through the development of an authentic African discourse".<sup>106</sup> And in what Chantal Zabus in The African Palimpsest terms as relexification, he notes that, "the author writing in the language of his ex-colonizer and infusing innovative features in the text is a non conformity; a strategy of subversion and decolonization". <sup>107</sup>

Nevertheless, Ashroft et al (2006) asserts that the refusal of imperial culture, its aesthetics, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, is to permit true self expression as an African author.<sup>37</sup> The observation is supported by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who asserts that, "the choice of language and the use to which [it] is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe." (4) In offering a solution to the problem, he suggests a complete rejection of European languages as a mode of expression. However, many authors such as Kourouma, though partially in agreement

with Ngugi, contend that intellectual liberation can be achieved by writing in the colonial language whilst continuing to think in ones Mother Tongue. This means that his writing amounts to sub standard language and I would say, it achieves true freedom not only for himself but also for all African writers. Killan and Rowe in support of this point of view argue that the “Africanizing” of the French language is actually one of the strengths and aspect of Kourouma’s creativity.<sup>128</sup>

### **3.3 Diction**

Language is important in historical as well as fictional narrative. According to White, “a narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory. [Therefore] to leave this figurative element out of consideration in the analysis of a narrative is to miss not only its aspect as allegory but also the performance in language by which a chronicle is transformed into a narrative.”<sup>27</sup>

The novel employs a first person narrator who narrates the problems he and other children suffer and witness in times of war. He does not seem to be competent in the language he uses to construct his narrative. This is because he is a class three drop-out and therefore never got enough of the language of the colonial master which is a fashionable way of standard communication. This explains why he says of himself: “little nigger boy because I speak French badly”.<sup>31</sup> Consequently this affects the style of the narrative and accounts for many of the features in the text.

Because of his handicap in the language, the child narrator mixes Malinke [African language] words and French language together; a characteristic of the author's other works. Notably, through the use of Malinke words, phrases and proverbs he demonstrates how the French language cannot portray indigenous African language. He gets rid of the rules governing the language. Perhaps the motivation for this move lies in his answer during one of the interviews in 1999 that, "My characters must be credible and to be credible they must speak in the novel as they speak in their own language..." (Ouedraogo, J. 2007: 77-84). The implication is that when a Malinke is speaking, he follows his own sense, his own way of handling reality. Again, I see Kourouma's position as perhaps owed to the fact that he is not a literary specialist since he comes from a background of financial affairs. He thus finds recourse in his assertion:

I did not have the same respect for French that those with a classical education hold. [.. .] This led me to strive for the structure of the Malinke language, to reproduce its oral dimension, to attempt to assimilate the procedures of Malinke thought in its mode of portrayal lived experience. (Chemla, 51)

These are the underlining factors which define his usage of the French language in this peculiar manner in the novel. The intrusion is similar to an act of literary violence that contributes to a fictional innovation. This attests to the assertions by the critics I have quoted earlier. All in all, it is a strategy aimed at deconstructing the French language.

The author uses some informal words in his novel perhaps to help entrench the story in figurative and informal terms. Additionally, the narrator's point of view that is the first person narration is made known to us by the glaring presence of the pronoun "I" at the start of the story in the first chapter of the novel. Its role in my view apart from revealing a kind of conversation, it gives the narrative qualities of an autobiography.

Besides, the narrator uses some indication of suspense and elision right from the beginning; this is a characteristic of unofficial language use. He uses the marks (...) to stand in for some words left out for the reader to fill up for himself (Kodiah 4 ). This is witnessed through-out the narrative giving an indication of a child narrator who is linguistically handicap due to the limited exposure he had with the language in his school days and perhaps to suggest the damaging effects of war. The narrator uses a lot of elisions in the text. One such distinct area is when he uses the first person pronoun “I” to provide his identification. “First off, Number one...My name is Birahima and I’m a little nigger. Not ‘cos I’m black and I’m a kid. I’m a little nigger because I can’t talk French for shit”.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.4 Narration and descriptions**

The author uses a number of narration techniques to present the narrative to us. In this section, I attempt to identify and give meaning to some of this strategies he employs. In particular, I discuss proverbs, use of sarcasm and humour, use of parenthesis, funeral orations, dictionary, and a griot status among others.

A proverb is a simple and concrete saying popularly known sentence of the the folk and that it expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. By nature, proverbs are storerooms of wisdom. They are concentrated in form, with few words but have deeper meanings. They are also universal and timeless in nature. (Mieder 1994;24). In many African societies the usage of proverbs is seen generally as a marker of wisdom and knowledge related with adults. It is therefore unusual for children to use proverbs in their speech.

However, Kourouma's child-narrator uses proverbs on many occasions in telling us his narrative. This is contrary to his presumed-naivety as a ten year old child. These proverbs can be classified into three major groups on the basis of their functions. He has used them to either, admonish, or teach us. For instance, he remembers the way Balla used to rebuke and confine him, as a child, to put up with the horrible smell of his mother as a way of honoring her. He recalls: "Balla used to say no kid ever leaves his mother's hut because of her farts stink." 10.

Birahima's use of the device is either meant for creating an African style in the narrative or the author has used them just for portraying his characters. He also describes the personality of some of them and the history they contribute in forming. An example is seen when the narrator goes on to tell us how Milton Martagai during his presidency was inclined to members of his own ethnic group the Mendes.<sup>159</sup> This is captured in a proverb: "that was normal; one follows an elephant in the bush in order not to be wetted by the dew".<sup>20</sup> This helps us to visualize how favoritism is common in some post colonial regimes. Normally people would want to associate with one of their own, a practice that is likely to brew discontent in those who are isolated. In such circumstances proverbs have been used as a subversive strategy besides being used to create humor and sarcasm effectively than what the ordinary language would have done.

Kourouma also uses humour and sarcasm in the construction of his narrative. Bousefield describes sarcasm as:

The use of strategies which, on the surface appear to be appropriate to the situation, but are meant to be taken as meaning the opposite in terms of face management. That is, the utterance which appears, on the surface, to maintain or enhance the face of the recipient actually attacks and damages the face of the recipient. ...sarcasm is an insincere form of politeness which is used to offend one's interlocutor.<sup>213</sup>

The narrator uses this strategy in his narrative perhaps to critique the dictatorial regimes in the West African region. For example, to explain why he should be grateful to Bella the leader, the narrator says that, “you must always thank the shea-tree under which you have picked a lot of good fruits in the good season”.<sup>28</sup> This means one ought to be grateful to those from whom he has benefited under their leadership even if it’s through corruption or favoritism. In castigating the deceitful Muslims, the narrator says “the nurse was a Muslim and could not lie”.<sup>29</sup> Using irony the narrator says of the man who takes away the children from his aunt: “because of the rights of women, the two children were seized from their mother and given to their father”.<sup>30</sup> We realize the role mothers play in caring for young children which fathers are unlikely to be comfortable with. Yet giving them the role of looking after children is a laughable matter.

In the same vein we see Birahima making an attack of religion in the region through sarcasm. He portrays how most of the men that he employed to fight under pretend to be men of great faith, yet, only use religion as a scapegoat upon whatever actions they wish to commit. He narrates how one commander of a troop of child soldiers in Liberia puts it; “God says thou shalt not kill too much, or at least thou shalt kill less.” Further, he sarcastically depicts Prince Johnson as a “man of God who had become mixed up in tribal wars at the command of God...to kill the devil’s men”<sup>131</sup> This is a negation of God’s teaching which has great reverence for life. It is only him who holds the onus of judgment for people’s sins. In this case, religion is only a mask for their murderous deeds. At most it is only a way of convenience.

In his characteristic repetitive language, Birahima draws our attention to a variety of issues. For example, he repeatedly uses the word “lots” in the passage below to denounce the irresponsible behaviour of his grandfather as a crooked businessman and womanizer. He says;

Grandfather was a big gold trader. Like all the other filthy rich traffickers, he bought himself lots of women and horses and cows ... The women had lots of babies and the cows had lots of calves.[...] so he bought lots of houses and lots of concessions, and when he couldn't buy more, he built more.(12).

Also, repetition is used to criticize some retrogressive religious beliefs and outdated socio-cultural practices. One such incidence is seen in the way, Birahima explains the circumstances under which her sick mother was born to justify her current state in the following words:

On the night maman was born, grandmother was too busy on account of the bad omens that were happening all over the universe. There were lots and lots of bad omens in heaven and on earth that night–hyenas howling in the mountains, owls crying on the roofs of the huts. The omens signified that maman would have a life that was tremendously and catastrophically catastrophic. A life of shit and suffering and damnation, etc. (13)

I find the repetition of the word Birahima's disapproval to the reasons given for the present state of his mother. This helps us to cast doubt on the truthfulness of some of the traditional beliefs used in explaining the causes of some natural inhuman phenomena. Actually, it is difficult to establish a link between the crying of hyenas and owls and the destiny of human beings. I would say the usage of these words, brings to light the author's criticism of unreasonable religious practices which somehow estrange people from the divine creator instead of drawing them nearer.

A noticeable feature in the narrator's way of rendering the story can be openly seen in his use of the dictionaries. A dictionary according Nielson (2008), may be regarded as a lexicographical product that is characterized by three significant features: it has been prepared for one or more functions; it contains data that have been selected for the purpose of fulfilling those functions; and its lexicographic structures link and establish relationships between the data so that they can meet the needs of users and fulfill the functions of the dictionary. The narrator's use of the



dictionaries reveals his preoccupation with the language as a medium of communication. Considering that the child is naive and a victim of war, I am persuaded to think he lacks a developed language to render his narrative effectively in light of the subject matter. In addition, his lack of education poses some hindrance to his use of a refined language so as to be understood by a vast audience. The dictionaries thus become handy in his endeavor of effectively communicating his story. The dictionaries are *Larousse*, and *le Petit Robert* presumably for explaining French to less educated Africans, and *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* and a *Harrap* for pidgin. He explains the function of each for the different types of audience who are to read his narrative. This is supported by his assertion that he needs them “to look up swear words, to verify them, and to explain some stuff because he wants all sorts of different people” 33 to read [his] bullshit; colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French”.<sup>3</sup> He uses them to tell readers definitions of words from French, pidgin and African languages. This idea can be seen as an attempt by the author to make the narrator accurate apart from providing him with plenty of vocabulary that can explain and record atrocities and show the horrors of war to the whole world since the idea of child soldier is not tied to West Africa and Africa alone.

Still, I find the dictionaries important in the realization of truth in the story. They give credence to the mixed nature of the languages in the text since they are explained by the narrator. He in some instances has used them to serve as a device for creating humor and playing down the importance of an episode. Still, it has been used perhaps to mark a change in the intended audience. However, I see a misgiving for his frequent reference to the French dictionaries. This is because the French are a literate audience and that they can have means for interpreting the

used French vocabulary. Maybe Kourouma's intention is to ridicule the West's preoccupation with language authority and purity.

At the end of the novel, the narrator informs us on how he inherited the dictionaries from Varrasouba Diabate; (of the griot caste). He explains that Diabate was employed as an interpreter for the High Commission for Refugees because he knew a lot of languages. In addition, he was a Malinke:

Varrasouba was intelligent like all the people of his caste. He understood and spoke several languages: French, English, Pidgin, Krahn, Gyo, and other languages of the savage indigenous nigger blacks of this damned country, Liberia.<sup>212</sup>

When Varrasouba died, Sidiki inherited the dictionaries and didn't know what to do with them. So when he meets Birahima, he gives them to him, and thereby assumes the same status. In the traditional West African societies, a *griot's* role was to manipulate and control dialogue at the time he or she performed in public. Apart from making praises, he could also criticize directly or use very ironical and satirical language to criticize the people he is singing about. According to Paul Oliver in his book Savannah Syncopators An analysis of Birahima's role in the novel resembles that of a griot; hence his ability to narrate to us the details of his terrible war story.

Interestingly, Birahima's griot status begins at the moment he is going through the four dictionaries and on his cousin's Dr. Mamadou (who is travelling with him in the same car to Abidjan) prompt; "little Birahima, tell me everything; tell me everything you saw and did; tell me how it all happened,"<sup>33</sup>. It is on this prompting, that Birahima's past experiences come to the fore and this serves as the first step towards his healing. This is in line with Amos Goldberg's postulations that:

the stories that are told by traumatized victims often bear consequential, or at times even therapeutic, relations: a traumatic experience produces an immediate need to tell a story and to reformulate one's life story...is essential step towards recovery, or at least working through trauma.<sup>1</sup>

One other key feature that is seen in the text is the use of parenthetical sentences and phrases. These are explanations, definitions or ironic or humorous comments seen after main statements made by Birahima. They are used to explain the meaning of some words or create ironic and humorous comments to the audience. They in some instances involving explanations of words some readers already know. Though the narrator's effort and the author's intent is to have them as informative, they hinder free flow of the narrative more than if some other device had been used. The presence of dashes, add to the miserable situation as in: "You might be ... Chinese, or white, or Russian—or even American—if you talk bad French, it's called "little nigger talking" so that makes you a little nigger too."<sup>1</sup>

Time and again we see Birahima falling back to the use of ridicule and obscene words. He achieves this through the use of phrases in parenthesis of indigenious words and phrases referring directly or indirectly to sexual organs or sexual acts such as "*fafaro*," "*bilakoro*"; *bangala*; and *gnoussou-gnoussou*, "*gnamokode*," coated with "*walahe!*"<sup>49</sup> This adds up to the imagery the author uses in portraying the bad state of affairs in the text. Incidentally, it is this cruelty that the narrator falls back to as a weapon when he wants his way. He has lost all decorum and civility in him. I contend that such a language only befits a child addicted to drugs and used to killings in this war without rules. Again, this confirms the fact that traumatic situations have an ability to damage the language of the victim; particularly children who have participated in war. The deployment of the child narrator is in some way a strategy by Kourouma

to seek sympathy to the children who have suffered due to adult's irresponsibility and perhaps bring out his bitterness and there try to equal the scores with the political power.

Unfortunately, I see Birahima as not interested in being understood by all his readers. He is also not interested in the opinion(s) of others on a number of occasions. Neither does he stop to think over some of the claims he makes. I see this in some way, to be his means of trying to curtail the reader into getting into the minds of other characters. Hence we don't get into engagement with them and consequently, handing Birahima the monopoly to narrate his story as to when, why and how he wishes. All in all, this doesn't water down the role he plays as a narrator and character in the narrative. Considering all that he has gone through, he is inculpable of the rude way he addresses his readers. To exonerate himself from blame he takes recourse in:

Allah is not obliged to be fair about everything, about all his creations, about all his actions here on earth. The same goes for me. I don't have to talk. I'm not obliged to tell my dog's-life-story, wading through dictionary after dictionary. I'm fed up talking today, so I'm going to stop for today. You can all fuck.<sup>91</sup>

A further example of his freedom is seen for instance when he states that, "I'm a street kid and I can do what I like, I don't give a fuck about anyone. But I will tell you about the Bossman..."<sup>104</sup>. Kourouma seems to draw a parallel between Birahima's view on the right to behave as he likes and that of Allah doing as he pleases, even to the extent of allowing terrible injustice and suffering to be visited upon his people. I would therefore argue that the narrator believes that what goes for Allah also goes for him and others hence a strategy of camouflage.

The author also employs the use of imagery in his narration. Particularly, he uses words or phrases to describe items or situations associated with bad smell or odour. For instance, while

explaining the reasons why he dropped out of school, Birahima indicates that everybody says education is no more of any value, and cannot even be compared to “the fart of an old grandmother”.<sup>2</sup> His use of the word “fart” brings memories of foul scent, associated with dirty, decaying or rotting mass. Apparently, this image of foul smell runs through the entire story, perhaps Kourouma uses it in reference to the smell of spilt human blood and decomposed human bodies that have been caused by the violence of civil wars which serves as raw material for this narrative.

There is authorial intrusion especially in the commentary on the civil wars in the region. The narrator uses specific names of persons, places, events and dates; something that cannot be done by a young boy of his age. In this regard, I view the author as probably losing faith in the persona offered by his narrator, a child, in relaying such truth. On the other hand, in narrating his story, Birahima tries to convince his audience about the causes and effects of war in the story. He is the narrative voice through which Kourouma conceals behind so as to speak about the historical happenings in West Africa. The author uses this voice to point out the ills in the political set up. These situations make his narrator an omniscient narrator, and through his eyes, Kourouma makes a connection between politics and the disasters in West Africa region.

The child narrator uses humour to comment on the war events that is espoused by the novel's title “*Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth*”.<sup>1</sup> He repeatedly uses the phrase in the novel, suggestively attributing the painful situation of war to the mysteries of God. I view his use of this phrase as perhaps a response to all his horrific experiences besides disclosing his vulnerability and helplessness. The author uses this title to indicate a sign of

resignation or surrender to the prevailing political situations which perhaps he has no power to control. Because of this subjugation he reverts to a child status so as to talk to them through the child's voice. In this argument, God has given man the will to make a choice between what is good and what is evil. The author perhaps implies that whatever the choice, man is to be solely responsible. For Birahima, the irresponsible actions of destruction by leaders in West Africa and by extension the whole continent is regrettable.

Still, he uses the narrative device probably to stress the importance of religion. However, when one looks at reasons that make him swear by Allah, he realizes that he defames the name of Allah instead of exalting his greatness. Particularly, he belittles the Islamic belief in Allah by describing the retrogressive religious norms and practices in the region. This comes out clearly when one juxtaposes the deeds of characters such as Prince John and Yacouba in relation to their faith.

Through the use of irony, Birahima makes fun at the hypocrites of Christianity. He shows how a convent is turned into an environment for sexual use by the commanders. He describes the Mother Superior Marie-Beatrice as "a saint who made love like every woman in the universe."<sup>134</sup> This is a character we don't expect in a pious person like her. The narrator does not imagine her making love to Prince Johnson because of her looks and manners that don't appear feminine. At one point the narrator equates her physique to that of Prince Johnson. However, Mother Superior Marie-Beatrice is one of the tough fighters.<sup>144</sup> She portrays the role of women in times of conflict. She turns out to be a hero by solely protecting girls in the convent school: She keeps Prince Johnson's bandits away from the camp. Her prowess may be emanating from her non feminine appearance. Additionally, it portrays an example of how Johnson and

other African politicians are corrupt spiritually and morally. There are only a few genuine religious people in the region. However, majority of the people are pretenders who only use it as a cover for their selfish interests.

According to Roberts and Jacobs in their edition Literature: An introduction to Reading and Writing, “the omniscient narrator sees all, reports all, and knows and explains, when necessary, the inner workings of the minds of any or all characters”.<sup>203</sup> This is the device at Kourouma’s disposal in this narrative. He has used it in order to give the reader more information. Concurring with these two writers, Scholes and Kellog asserts:

The histor has been concerned to establish himself with the reader as repository of fact, a tireless investigator and sorter, a sober and impartial judge—a man, in short, of authority, who is entitled not only to present facts as he has established them but to comment them, to draw parallels, to moralize, to generalize, to tell the reader what to think and even to suggest what he should do.<sup>266</sup>

I look at Kourouma as being informed by the above quote when at times he employs an omniscient narrator who is able to rove through places including getting into the minds of other characters. He imbues him with this privilege to pass to the reader the several thematic concerns in the West African region.

Although the narrative can be viewed as a one man show, at times the narrator introduces another narrative voice by suggesting that what he recounts was told him by the other characters. In such cases his role as an omniscient narrator becomes limited. It suggests that the narrative

may be biased and so its validity questionable. Nonetheless, the all-knowing narrator controls the narrative. He controls and manipulates the pace of the narrative, and its truth. Incidentally, the other narrative voices do not address the reader directly as he does; this gives Birahima all the powers to narrate what he deems fit to us. I find this to be very much like the language of the historical leaders who control power, speech, and freedom in the history that add up to this novel.

Funeral Orations is another of the devices used by the narrator in rendering his narrative. They are all about dead child soldiers, explaining according to Birahima, “how in this great big fucked-up world they came to be [child soldiers]”.<sup>35</sup> The phrase seems to clear child soldiers from blame and instead highlight how other factors are to blame for their problems.

The use of funeral oration device by the author is very significant in the text with the prime aim of recording war time violence. Birahima selectively decides whose funeral oration to tell and what to say about any particular child soldier. He succeeds in relating the different experiences of child soldiers without any challenges as to the authenticity of his narration. Unfortunately, this strategy limits our interactions with other characters for the better understanding of their feelings and views in different situations. However, through the device the narrator gives a voice to the dead child soldiers and at the same time call on us to be concerned with the experiences and ideas presented.



Also, the author makes use of imagery and symbolism in the narrative. This can particularly be seen in the way the narrator describes the conditions girls live in under the supervision of Colonel Hadja Gabrielle Aminata. I suppose this kind of environment indicates the physical and mental condition of the characters. The compound walls are surrounded with the human corpses (skull). This is may be a way the colonel instills discipline in her camp. She makes the girls an example of what war has done to the inhabitants of the region, especially children and women.

Some of the female characters play a role that is not in conformity with reality. For example the narrator states that in Colonel's camp, "there [were] genuine girls...with real AK 47s showing off. But there [weren't] too many of [them]. Only the cruel ones: only the one's who'd stick a live bee right in your eye".<sup>47</sup> In this way, the narrator shows how women have been marginalized in society. The words "only the cruel ones" demean the women's ability. Moreover, in times of civil war, they are often the great sufferers. Rape is sometimes used as a weapon against them yet they are not the initiators of the conflicts.

There is also a prevalent use of non linguistic communication like rites, rituals, Holy Mass, and burial ceremony in the text. In most of these rites women's voices are notable as they provide the back-up choir; the author tries in this way, to sell the wealth of African traditions and civilization. The songs are used to mourn the dead persons. The narrator describes one of the situations as:

Walahe! Colonel papa le Bon was sensationally dressed (...) Colonel papa le Bon has first the stripes of colonel ... Colonel papa held a bible in his left hand. To cap it all, to complete the picture colonel papa le bon carried a kalash on his white - across his back... Suddenly, colonel papa stopped the car, He alighted from the car. Everyone alighted from

the car. Colonel papa in a very high melodious voice intoned a song. The song was reverberated by its echo of the forest. It is the song of the dead in Gyo...the armed child soldiers took up the song. It was very, very melodious, it made me shade tears like it was the first time I had ever seen something terrible.53-4

Through the effect of the song, the author makes us able to see the emotional status of the narrator that redeems him from participation in the mayhem.

### **3.4.1 Validation of truth in the narrative**

Kourouma in his construction of the novel Allah is Not Obligated, has tried to blend West African history with fiction by using certain narrative techniques (such as humor, proverbs, flash-backs, and sarcasm ) and in documenting the civil wars that have compromised the lives and destiny of millions of innocent children in Sierra Leone and Liberia. He uses Birahima as the surviving voice of these innocent victims. Using the advantage of historical reality over mere fiction, he contributes to a considerable truthfulness of this narration.

Another convincing item in the text is seen in the portrayal of the narrator's tribal or ethnic identity. The narrator makes his identity known through the use of words from his native Malinke origin. His insulting and swearing are also done in Malinke words. Additionally, several words he uses in the novel apart from revealing his self identity are linked to his religious connection. Significantly, some words used such as "walahe" and his name "Birahima", help in enhancing the truth objective in the narrative.

The infancy of the child-narrator also helps to enhance the objectivity in the narrative. In this respect, Birahima a ten year old boy is a protagonist as well as an active participant-eye-witness in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. I equate his role to the testimonial or attestation function of a literary discourse (Genette, 1980). His language too, helps in an objective revelation of a human society embroiled in self-destructive violence. Through his narration he helps us as readers to get a picture of the socioeconomic and political problems of this society which has led to an increase of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Again, Birahima as a child speaks his mind freely and frankly without any reservations. Indeed, he is a symbol of innocence, naivety and objectivity. Being a child his language is free of mischievousness and unreliability which can be associated with that of adults who in most cases have predetermined world views. He is so frank and motivated by the use of dictionaries to allow for a wider readership. This universal appeal for readers to understand, in my assessment, is an effort to strike out prejudice. Hence the narrative bears a high level of objectivity and credibility.

Significantly, Birahima's account of the human atrocities which characterized the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 90's is a record of factual historical events in the form of fiction. His is a call seeking our attention on the plight of women and children in war-torn countries across the continent of Africa, and by extension the world.

Moreover, I see Kourouma being concerned with the truth about religious absurdity being recounted through the voice of a child narrator. He is the means through which the author uses to expose the peoples belief in traditional spirits and ghosts that characterize their lives. However he points the out with a lot of humor which is more than the logic of a child.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the chapter indicates that Birahima as the first person narrator is the kingpin and solid tactic of narration in the novel. The narrative revolves around his experiences and we aren't given an extensive chance to interrogate the other characters present in the text. This enables him to narrate the harrowing experiences children are faced with in the war torn region of West Africa comfortably without obstruction.

Additionally, the author takes cognizance of the fact that children are naive and their role as a first person narrator can be curtailed. Therefore, the author equips him with the dictionary and other narrative strategies to aid him in making us posted on the major issues in the narrative. The presence of these strategies does not reduce the importance of his role as narrator and character in the novel but only helps to fill up the voids so created.

The narrative seems to both exploit while at the same time reflect a sense of truth into the child character and his world. Although exaggerated, the child narrator in a first person narrative voice and as participant has reflected a sense of historical reality in a situation where the children have to deal with issues of violence in Africa today and subsequently how this is represented in fiction where they have to live in more adult worlds.

While a child narrator may be dismissed as undeveloped and unreliable, Kourouma's child narrator demonstrates that the child narrator is not totally naive he is capable of criticizing what he observes. In addition, by Kourouma bestowing on him a first person narration status, he

makes the narrative a kind of testimony since Birahima talks about his own and other children experiences. This technique provides the narration with authority, originality and credibility.

Finally, the device of the child narrator has been very successfully used by Kourouma in the narrative. The use of a child as a narrator in the novel has enabled him to present a critique of several issues from multiple angles. Birahima's narrative voice is thus not unidirectional the very ambivalence of his narration enriches the readers' understanding of the presence of multi-layered meanings in the text.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the discussion by highlighting how the aims and objectives of the study have been explored in the previous chapters. I also give a summary of the background of the study that contains the aim, objectives, hypothesis, theories used and the methodology. In addition, I proceed to give the research findings and my final conclusion. Thus, pointing out how African children are under challenge in the new dispensation.

#### 4.2 Summary

My overall aim of the study was to examine the use of a child narrator as depicted in situations of war in Ahmadou Kourouma's text Allah is Not Obligated. Specifically, I have tried to explore how the author presents the state of childhood in the war torn West Africa region through a child's perspective. The specific objectives of the study were to examine various elements that would constitute to an in-depth understanding of child soldier phenomenon and its representation in literature and how the novel fits in the canon as a historical narrative.

The study was guided by the assumption that a child narrator in his characteristic naive and innocent voice depicts intimate insights into the lives of children caught up in the context of war hence giving a better understanding of children narratives. I also hoped that the author had used factual historical accounts to create the narrative.

My literary inquiry was motivated by the understanding that although much scholarly work has been done on Kourouma's novels, there was need for an inquiry into issues under this

investigation. The thesis also analyzed how some various scholars and critics have postulated on the various issues of children in the circumstances under study, that is, themes and style.

This study was appropriate because the novel has a regional setting that covers a number of countries, namely Sierra Leone and Liberia; therefore it has a good representation of the West Africa situation. Still, war experiences cause suffering to children (the most vulnerable members) who are incidentally the bearers of the future generation. The idea of using children in war negates the ideal construction of childhood as a space characterized by innocence. It also gets credence because the narrative is told from a child's perspective and that being naive their accounts are believed to be credible. The study is also justified since the narrator has lived the war and therefore has first-hand experience. Lastly, the study hopes to inform the history of the West Africans. It's aimed at supplementing the historical records on the issue of child soldier; a prevalent phenomenon in the region and the continent.

In the study, I followed a close textual analysis of the main text Allah is Not Obligated and carried out library research involving reading of other relevant resourceful materials. Then following theories of stylistics, Sociological and new historicism, expounded by various scholars, I proceeded to identify and analyze themes and style running through the primary text as espoused by the child narrator.

### **4.3 Research Findings**

This sub section looks at the outcomes of my study based on the set out objectives. To begin with, I have found out that the child narrator-Birahima is made by Kourouma so as to reveal to

us the diverse ways of people's identity in the region. The varied markers of identity are namely religion, political, cultural and tribal markers. Identity in the region is seen as a factor for differentiation among the people. The author exposes how it has greatly contributed to the civil wars in the region; causing a lot of suffering to the most vulnerable groups like women and children.

Political leaders have manipulated the issue of identity to their advantage which has eventually brewed mayhem. The narrator and many other characters (mostly) children have continuously been enlisted in the various camps of warlords to fight for them because of varied reasons. I have noted how the children constantly kept on shifting their identity in order to survive from one camp to another. The author notes that some of the upheld markers of identity are not relevant in the present times given the rapid technological changes and globalization of various issues of life. As for the borders, they are perforated and cannot be used to define a people straddled on both sides. Yet these people have a lot to share culturally, politically and economically. This calls for full integration of the people in the region for their mutual benefit.

Kourouma has critically dealt with the role of religion in his Malinke society. He has gone ahead to indicate how this factor has helped in keeping unity of some of the people while at the same time revealed how it is (has been) used as a differentiation tool. He suggestively advocates for inclusivity on all aspects as there are more beneficial interactions beyond the boundaries of religion. This is the way forward for the prosperity of this community.



Another important issue raised by the author concerns the people's belief in the mystifying powers of mythology. The narrator has pointed out at how the life of people in the region revolves around superstitions regardless of whether they are Christians or Muslims. Ironically, the author has revealed how some of these beliefs are outdated and cannot be used to explain some phenomena in life today. Interestingly, these beliefs and cultural practices have mixed through interactions of people. Hence, there is need for a change in the standard way of thinking and acting.

Kourouma also picks issue with the present effects of colonialism. Through the protagonist, he condemns the colonial legacy of education in the region. It's worth noting how Birahima the narrator, like many other children in post colonial states did not access education. He cites his own lack of education to rampant corruption in the whole civil service. The child narrator therefore serves as Kourouma's mouth piece in registering his disappointment and state of hopelessness in the current form of government. Seen in this light, Kourouma lends a voice to the uneducated people who did not have any or enough exposure to language of colonial masters. In this regard I see Kourouma appealing to governments of the day to endeavor in increasing accessibility to education for the many yearning children of Africa.

The author has also looked at the new issue of child soldiering in the West African region. Through his child narrator's memory as a fictional participant of the recent civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990's, Kourouma has allowed readers to imagine the pain of African children in the context of war. He has explored the experiences of children during times of war and their response to the prevailing political situations. Significantly in the study, I have

examined the different child backgrounds and interrogated how they impact on their readiness to cause violence. The results are shocking because there is an inversion of the standard idea of childhood as a happy age of pleasure. Despite children being infused in more adult worlds, they are still as dependent on adults as ever. They still long for the acceptance from the adults around them and depend on adults to take care of them in order to survive. The knowledge about this reality that the text produces resonates with readers and I suppose it creates a sense of need in the plight of such children.

Apart from the text revealing the participation of children in war, it also succeeds in making the violence of tribal war appear to be understandable. The elements of violence meted out to innocent children and other persons have been fore-grounded. Sexual abuse is used as a weapon against defenseless children. Unfortunately, a number of these ugly incidences go unpunished in most societies engulfed in war since the judicial systems are broken down or are complaisant. The author therefore calls for ways of protecting the vulnerable groups from the predators in the society. Kourouma through his mode of narration in this fiction creates an inverted childhood and thereby calling for our reflection.

I have seen how Kourouma uses the child narrator to show how the child's power becomes important through the way it changes to fit the needs of the adults. I have seen how this power of the child is brought into play in their being used as agents of messages, social, cultural and political. It is from this use of the child to convey the messages of an adult that I see a disclosure of the child being more involved in the adult's world and the distinction between child and adult diminishing.

Kourouma's child narrator demonstrates that the child narrator is not totally naive he is capable of criticizing what he observes. This technique provides the narration with authority, originality and makes it credible. More so, the child narrator's bold step of narrating to us can be interpreted as a first step towards his healing as a victim reeling from the horrors of war that he has witnessed and participated in.

The language used by the author to construct Birahima's narrative is remarkable stylistically; because it is suitable for a child narrator of his age and the circumstances at hand. The narrator's character too matches his language. The arrogant language he portrays befits a child who has seen enough suffering of the war committed to him and others. He especially employs specific linguistic and stylistic approaches to address his subject-matter. The author writes in a language which is infused with Malinke his mother tongue. This originality and distinctiveness of the novel is so great that make an additional contribution to the author's richness. This goes a long way in cutting out a niche for the author in the literary cycles. He seems to be skillful in the rebellion against the colonial language. His manipulation of the French language makes his fiction innovative. The end result is a language that shows forms of particular violence. It is also symbolic of the historical violence of political control and the emerging cultural destruction of a similar people in the region. In so doing, Kourouma joins his East African counterparts, the likes of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Okot P'Bitek who reject the colonizer's language and advocate for African writers to the return to their vernacular as an appropriate means of communication. This also illustrates the concept that English or French cannot express African thought and experience adequately. I therefore suggest the need of mixing foreign languages with the local African languages for proper comprehension by the intended audience in post modern narratives.

The research has also looked at the ways in which Kourouma addresses his themes. This involves the use of a naive child narrator whom he imbues with the first person voice to comment on the vulnerability of children. The narrator as a participant in the war can thus be taken as representative of the turmoil in Africa. Kourouma thus lends the narrator a voice to speak on the unspeakable for the speechless lot. His objectivity in portraying the truth in this quest can thus be celebrated. He thus calls on us readers to consider his and other children's plight in a similar situation in Africa today.

Further, he delves into a historical inclination, recounting factual detail of events distinctly. The author has made use of the rich history and past events. Notably, he has used names of important previous and present political leaders in the region pointing out their involvement in the events that took place in West Africa history. In so doing, he historicizes his narrative and places it in a historical setting rather than giving a version of historical events. This makes it become a simple story and with ordinary characters that appeal to the readers. By so doing the author is alive to the fact that literature and history are complementary in fictional texts.

By hiding himself behind the child narrator the author is able to castigate the regional leaders who owing to their greed and craving for political power have contributed to the historic turmoil of the West African countries. The author has made use of these historical figures in order to criticize them, to make them an object of mockery, and emphasize the human consequences of their irresponsible acts and that of other politicians. Thus, Kourouma as a writer of fiction has taken the advantage of manipulating history and subsequently representing it in fiction in a clever literary way.

Finally, Kourouma as a creative writer dealing with historical characters and events in the time past, has chosen a convenient way of arranging certain ideas and more significantly reconstructing them through the manipulation of language apart from employing various narrative strategies including the use of a dictionary, funeral orations and a third persons narrative voice. His use of the third person voice (of an adult) has aided the child narrator to speak about the political events and leaders. This is because the subject matter appears too heavy for a child narrator to render. The complexity of language has been addressed by the use of the three dictionaries. While funeral orations have helped the narrator to comment on the misery of children caught up in situations of war. Among the numerous stylistic devices he employs to mould the narrative are proverbs, sarcasm, irony, and symbolism. All in all, the fiction innovations in language and subversions he has shown through this work indicate a great link between form and content.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The investigation has brought into focus, the numerous horrors children in Africa go through during times of war. This has a lasting traumatic effect on them. Although the narrative appears exaggerated, I find it somehow reflecting a sense of reality. The events portrayed by the author in the text show an inversion in the way children are expected to experience their childhood and what they actually deal with.

By the author using Birahima as a child narrator who is a victim and witness of war he gives him the room as a survivor to put forward his own experience and talk back. This gets credence because the child-protagonist functions to validate points about the tragedies of war that, if made

by an adult observer, might have been less convincing, or of ideological biases. Despite his naivety and innocence, the child narrator has a critical observation and commentary of the situation at hand. Thus, the child narrator stands out as an important literary device for a writer's manipulation since it has immensely contributed to the historical fiction. Kourouma in his own special way (language) has used literature as a medium to proclaim to the world the plight of such children in postcolonial Africa. This evokes the role of literature as a mirror of society. That is to say, to strive and point out ills in society and to some degree give probable solutions.

On the other hand, the narrative has failed to offer tangible solutions to the problems revealed in the novel. It therefore implies that the narrator and his fellow child-soldiers shouldn't be judged as harshly. Despite the cruelty displayed, they cannot be excluded from humanity and branded as inhuman criminals. Readers need to understand how they have become embroiled in such horrors. The narrator and his kind are only victims worthy of pity rather than condemnation. Rehabilitation of any form; including writing a narrative based on their experience is welcome.

#### **4.5 Recommendations and suggestions**

Since the phenomenon of a child soldier has taken precedence in Africa, it would be interesting to have a comprehensive study in a similar text from other regions of Africa. Additionally this may involve considering texts that have a girl child narrator since this study has been preoccupied by views of a boy child narrator. It would be enriching to get the views and experiences of both genders on the subject matter. This will give an in-depth revelation of the plight of innocent children caught up in conflict situations as both vulnerable actors and victims.

Further, it would be informative to look at the gender of the author since they are likely to carry different consciousness on various issues. Still, an author who has lived the war may have a tale with minimal degree of subjectivity (no prejudices) as compared to one writing from a vantage point. The depiction of these horrors in a fiction is a creative way of chronicling a catastrophe, in a dependable and appealing way to the reader. Thus, the text makes it possible to record the experiences of an ignored portion of society-the child and child narrator.

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## APPENDIX 1

To guide my reading of the work and subsequent evaluation of the author's main concerns as portrayed in the text I was guided by some questions as indicated below:

1. What are the key concerns of the writer in the text?
2. What are some of the authorial intrusion on the subject matter?
3. How are the characters developed throughout the story?
4. How are the various characters portrayed?
5. What are the views of the protagonist and other characters?
6. What is the relationship of the protagonist with other characters in the story?
7. What are some of the images of violations depicted in the text?
8. What are some of the narrative strategies used by Kourouma in the text?
9. To what extent are the strategies appropriate in relaying the authors concerns?
10. What is the style of language used by the author and its suitability in passing his message text?

The answers to the above questions were collated and correlated under the following guidelines:

1. The author's preference for a certain character.
2. Presentation of themes fore-grounded by the author`
3. Identifying violations and abuses meted out
4. Identifying writer's narration strategies.