

**BEYOND INNOCENCE: TRAUMA REPRESENTATION AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN  
AFRICAN ADOLESCENT WAR STORIES**

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**Abstract**

This study, *Beyond Innocence: Trauma Representation and Narrative Technique in African Adolescent War Stories*, interrogates four African and diasporic war narratives: *The Other Side of Truth* by Beverly Naidoo, *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park, *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala, and *The Seine Was Red, Paris, October 1961* by Leïla Sebbar through the combined lenses of trauma theory and Russian Formalism. The study argues that these texts stage trauma not merely as thematic content but also as a formal problem that destabilizes narrative coherence and mimetic representation. Conceptualizing trauma as both a psychic rupture and a narratological crisis, the study foregrounds formal devices such as temporal fragmentation, limited focalization, linguistic defamiliarization, and generic hybridity. It pays particular attention to narrative belatedness, repetition compulsion, syntactic disruption, and the oscillation between silence and expression as structural inscriptions of trauma's resistance to representation. These strategies displace linear temporality and coherent subjectivity, positioning the adolescent figure as a site where epistemological and ethical uncertainties converge. Through comparative analysis, the essay demonstrates how fractured first-person voices, bifurcated temporalities, and testimonial modes function as formal analogues of traumatic experience while simultaneously mediating between individual memory and collective histories of colonial violence, dictatorship, and forced migration. In doing so, these narratives challenge Western universalist models of trauma by foregrounding historically specific configurations of suffering and memory. Ultimately, the study contends that African adolescent war fiction reconfigures the child not as a passive victim but as a witnessing subject and narrative agent. It concludes that trauma is formalized as a recursive, ethically charged disruption that compels innovative narrative strategies and redefines the limits of literary representation.

KEY WORDS- Innocence, Trauma Representation and Narrative Technique

**Introduction**

African adolescent fiction is a fast-growing corpus within contemporary African literature, and it provides a critical intersection that exists across youth studies, postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and cultural historiography. To foreground this body of work is to situate it within the evolving narrative, political, and aesthetic discourses that shape literary production on the continent. African adolescent fiction is not merely a subgenre defined by age-specific protagonists; it is also a literary and cultural field through which the complexities of African modernity, colonial legacies, migration, civil conflict, urban precariousness, and gendered socialization are imaginatively ascertained. To properly understand this development, there is need to trace the historical emergence of adolescent war stories. The post-independence period, marked by political instability and disillusioned nationhood, birthed circumstances in which childhood and adolescence became symbolically loaded categories. Writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, and Camara Laye had earlier foregrounded youthful protagonists as embodiments of communal futures. However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed a tremendous shift in the representation of African youthfulness, driven largely by civil wars in West and Central Africa and intensifying global migration patterns. As T. Obinkaram Echewa and later Chris Abani, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Uzodinma Iweala demonstrate, the adolescent figure became a literary instrument for exposing structural violence and interrogating the fragility of postcolonial nationhood (Boehmer 91).

Equally important is the narrative innovation that defines African adolescent war fiction. The formal qualities of these narratives frequently depart from classical Bildungsroman structures. Rather than linear narration, these texts adopt fragmented, episodic, or cyclical narrative forms that reflect the dissonant realities experienced by young protagonists during war. In *Beasts of No Nation* for instance, Iweala employs linguistic disjunctions and broken syntax to represent the fractured subjectivity of a child soldier (Beast 7). Similarly, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* uses episodic vignettes and a child's observational perspective to

expose socio-political turbulence in Zimbabwe and the disorienting experience of transnational migration. Through such formal strategies, adolescent war narratives challenge canonical assumptions about youth development, identity coherence, and narrative closure.

Another crucial element in this literary category is its engagement with youthful consciousness as political critique. Protagonists, caught between the “unformedness” of youth and the brutal demands of survival, provide a unique vantage point for examining the intersection of trauma, history, identity, and narrative form. African adolescent war stories mobilize youthful voices to interrogate adult-centred systems of authority (colonial, patriarchal, religious, and neo-liberal). As Achille Mbembe notes, the post colony is marked by “rituals of power” that shape everyday life (110). Adolescent war narratives frequently reveal how these rituals infiltrate the psychological spaces of young characters. Just like in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s adolescent awakening becomes an interrogation of patriarchal religious authority, while in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch*, adolescent imagination probes gender hierarchies and cultural obsolescence.

African adolescent war fiction also foregrounds linguistic multiplicity. Many narratives use creolized Englishes, pidgin, or indigenous languages that reflect the pluralistic realities of their protagonists. This linguistic hybridity resonates with Ngũgĩ’s advocacy for indigenous epistemologies. The adolescent voice, fluid and unrestricted by adult linguistic conventions, becomes an effective medium for expressing cultural plurality and resisting hegemonic linguistic standards. Furthermore, African adolescent war fiction holds cultural and pedagogical significance. The African young adult emerges not only as a literary figure but also as a symbolic archive of national tensions, anxieties, and visions. These novels function as repositories of cultural memory, documenting experiences of violence, migration, inequality, education, familial restructuring, and shifting gender roles. As Ato Quayson argues, African literature often functions as a social diagnostic reality, revealing “the fractured and yet resilient textures of everyday life” (39). African adolescent war fiction channels this diagnostic impulse into the emotional and psychological worlds of young protagonists. African adolescent fiction thus reflects aesthetic complexity, historical inclusiveness, and political urgency. Through innovative narrative techniques, multilingual expression, and engagement with socio-political realities, this literary field redefines the African novel and expands global understandings of adolescence. The African adolescent emerges not merely as a literary character but as a symbolic site upon which national histories, cultural anxieties, and political contradictions are inscribed.

Adolescent war fiction from the continent frequently embodies what Elleke Boehmer describes as “formation-in-disruption,” where childhood development unfolds within fractured national and familial spaces (89). The adolescent protagonist is often compelled to navigate “premature encounters with violence, dislocation, or ideological rupture” (Nfah-Abbenyi 66). From a postcolonial perspective, African adolescent war stories demonstrate that adolescence in African narratives is rarely insulated from national politics. Rather, it reflects what Homi Bhabha terms the “unhomeliness” of postcolonial existence; where identity, belonging, and home remain unstable (13). This instability shapes the structure of African coming-of-age narratives, replacing linear growth with fragmented and episodic narrative forms. Displacement remains one of the dominant themes in African adolescent war stories. In NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* and Chris Abani’s *GraceLand*, adolescents negotiate fractured identities across borders. In Bulawayo’s narrative, Darling’s adolescence is shaped by tension between imaginative innocence and Zimbabwe’s harsh socio-political conditions. Her migration to the United States introduces another layer of dislocation, generating what critics describe as “split subjectivity” (112).

Closely connected to displacement is the representation of war and its traumatic imprint. Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* portrays adolescents whose initiation into adulthood is forced through violence. The broken and rhythmic narrative voice mirrors the psychic fragmentation of the protagonist, emphasizing how civil war interrupts normal developmental trajectories. As Kali Tal observes, “childhood itself becomes the battlefield upon which historical violence is enacted” (22). Adolescence thus becomes a metaphor for ruptured nations and broken innocence. African adolescent war fiction has emerged as one of the most ethically charged subfields of contemporary African literature. Set against civil wars, insurgencies, genocides, and political crises, these narratives foreground the traumatic experiences of young protagonists whose childhoods are disrupted by conflict. Unlike traditional Bildungsroman narratives, which culminate in maturity and integration, African adolescent war stories depict fragmentation, forced adaptation, moral ambiguity, and psychological dislocation. These narratives provide cultural testimonies of conflict and illuminate how war reshapes both national landscapes and individual consciousness.

The prominence of adolescent characters reflects socio-political realities in which children and adolescents are frequently targeted or mobilized in armed conflicts. African adolescent war narratives move beyond the trope of childhood innocence, portraying adolescence as a liminal stage where childhood is violently interrupted and adulthood prematurely imposed. Trauma becomes both lived experience and narrative structure. Adolescents often participate in violence, witness atrocities, or endure the loss of family members. This forced immersion accelerates psychological aging. Innocence is replaced by numbness, rage, and fractured identity.

Homi Bhabha argues that “the child becomes a site of cultural and political inscription” during national crisis (86). This is evident in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, Linda Sue Park’s *A Long Walk to Water*, Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Beverly Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth*, Leïla Sebbar’s *The Seine Was Red: Paris, October, 1961* and even Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*, where young protagonists negotiate moral ambiguity within collapsing social orders. These narratives shift attention from adult political actors to vulnerable yet agentive youths.

African adolescent war fiction also reflects the evolution of African literary responses to violence. Earlier war narratives often focused on adult protagonists and nationalist struggles. However, Elleke Boehmer notes that the post-Cold War era introduced a “new politics of violence,” characterized by decentralized conflict and child soldiering (102). Modern adolescent war narratives respond by centring youth experiences and exploring psychological fragmentation rather than ideological heroism. Formal innovation remains central to these narratives. Fragmented structures, disjointed syntax, stream-of-consciousness, and linguistic hybridity mirror adolescent disorientation. Iweala’s broken English reflects epistemic violence inflicted on the developing consciousness (Beast 4). Kourouma’s satirical tone and vernacular language highlight the absurdity of war. These strategies align with Cathy Caruth’s concept of trauma as “inexpressibility” and “temporal disruption” (153). Form thus becomes inseparable from content, as fragmented narration embodies fractured identity. African adolescent war fiction also exposes structural conditions that enable youth exploitation. Representations of adolescents as victims, witnesses, or reluctant perpetrators challenge global audiences to confront governance failures and systemic violence. Ato Quayson argues that African literature functions as a “diagnostic of social pathology” (47), and adolescent war fiction extends this function by linking poverty, governance collapse, and militarized exploitation. These narratives raise questions about agency, innocence, complicity, and survival. Beyond psychological trauma, African adolescent war fiction emphasizes corporeal experience. Hunger, scars, exhaustion, and physical brutality inscribe trauma onto the adolescent body. The developing body becomes a battlefield; disciplined, violated, or weaponized. Trauma is thus lived physically and emotionally, shaping identity and relationships. Ultimately, African adolescent war fiction represents a dynamic literary tradition that illuminates youth experiences within contexts of violence and instability. Through narrative experimentation, ethical engagement, and socio-political critique, these texts redefine war literature and emphasize the necessity of centering youth perspectives in African conflict narratives. African adolescent protagonists emerge as symbolic figures whose identities are shaped within chaos, reflecting broader national and historical transformations. To limit the scope of this study therefore, four adolescent war fiction were selected across the four regions of the African Continent. These are: Leïla Sebbar’s *The Seine Was Red: Paris, October, 1961* (1996; Eng. trans. 2008); Beverly Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth* (2000); Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Linda Sue Park’s *A Long Walk to Water* (2010)

### Research Questions

This study seeks to interrogate how African adolescent war stories represent, refract, and reconstruct trauma through innovative narrative techniques and regionally distinct historical memories. To guide this inquiry, the following **research questions** structure the analysis:

1. How do African adolescent war narratives conceptualize and articulate trauma through the consciousness of young protagonists, and in what ways does adolescence function as a narrative lens that complicates traditional trauma theory?
2. In what ways do the selected texts (*Beasts of No Nation*, *The Seine Was Red: Paris, October, 1961*, *The Other Side of Truth*, and *A Long Walk to Water*) deploy narrative strategies such as fragmentation, shifting focalization, code-switching, and testimonial layering to embody the disruptions of innocence?
3. How do these narratives, position young protagonists within broader postcolonial histories of structural violence, civil conflict, forced migration, and state oppression?
4. How do the narratives revise or contest Eurocentric trauma paradigms and child-development models by foregrounding African epistemologies of suffering, memory, and recovery?
5. What ethical responsibilities are assigned to adolescent witnesses within these texts, and how do their voices function within broader cultural, historical, and intergenerational memory networks?

### Objectives of The Study

The aim of this study is to investigate how African adolescent war narratives deploy trauma representation and narrative technique to articulate the psychological, historical, and ethical dimensions of violence as experienced by young protagonists. The study positions adolescence not merely as a demographic category but as a dynamic epistemic site through which the complexities of war, memory, identity formation, and postcolonial subjectivity are rendered. To achieve this, the following specific objectives guide the inquiry:

1. To analyze how African adolescent war narratives represent trauma as a multi-layered experience encompassing individual psychological rupture, familial disintegration, communal devastation, and national historical memory.
2. To examine how narrative techniques - fragmentation, nonlinear temporality, shifting focalization, testimonial framing, graphic realism, and multilingual stylistics function as aesthetic embodiments of trauma.
3. To investigate how postcolonial histories of violence, civil wars, colonial massacres, political persecution, ethnic conflict, famine, and forced migration, shape the construction of adolescent subjectivity in the selected texts.
4. To interrogate the ways resilience is conceptualized, dramatized, and problematized in adolescent-centered war stories, paying attention to African epistemologies of survival.
5. To explore how adolescent protagonists serve as ethical witnesses and narrative agents who challenge silenced histories, expose state violence, and expand the political stakes of testimony.

### Review of Scholarship

African adolescent war stories, as a growing corpus in African literary studies, has attracted significant critical attention for its capacity to express the psychological, political, and ethical complexities of childhood under conditions of social disruption. Beverly Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) and Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* (2010) have emerged as central fiction in scholarly conversations on displacement, war trauma, and the shaping of adolescent subjectivity. African critics have been particularly significant in interrogating these texts within broader conversations on postcolonial conflict, child agency, and testimonial story-telling. African scholars emphasize that war literature focused on adolescents provides a special narrative vantage point; one that reflects both vulnerability and resilience. According to Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, African child-centered war narratives usually turn to be "sites of both historical witnessing and symbolic reconstruction of national trauma" (72). This view aligns closely with Naidoo's representation of Sade and Femi, children uprooted by political violence in Nigeria. Naidoo presents the precarity engineered by state-sanctioned silencing as Sade recalls her father's abduction: "I saw them push him into the jeep, and then he was gone" (14). The suddenness of violence echoes Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion that the African child in conflict zones is the first to "interpret terror without the language to name it" (75).

Similarly, in *A Long Walk to Water*, Park's depiction of Salva Dut's desert crossing takes note of the experiential immediacy of war trauma. When it occurs to Salva that he has been dislocated from his family, the narrator paints picture of his interior collapse thus: "Everything was upside down" (21). This psychological disorientation resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's contention that war literatures expose "the psychic dismemberment inflicted upon the colonized child" (112). For Ngũgĩ, such narratives become vital to understanding how violence inscribes itself upon adolescent consciousness. African literary critics have emphasized that dislocation in adolescent war fiction is not only geographical but epistemic. Abiola Irele contends that exile literature in Africa charts "the fractured continuity of identity and belonging" brought about by political crisis (54). Naidoo's narrative directly exemplifies this displacement when Sade speaks of London as alien and disorienting: "Everything felt too bright, too cold, too strange" (*Other Side* 42). Irele's theorization clarifies how the alienation of diaspora shapes the narrative landscape of the African child protagonist. Park's story has also been situated within discourses of forced migration due to Sudan's protracted civil war. Francis Deng, writing particularly on Sudanese dislocation, contends that "the child refugee becomes a carrier of communal memory and a figure through which the loss of home is articulated" (89). Salva's repeated recollection of his family's village. . . "the smell of smoke from his mother's fire" (*Long Walk* 33) demonstrates the mnemonic function Deng identifies.

African feminist critics have highlighted the gendered dimension of adolescent war narratives. Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that African adolescent war literature frequently encodes gendered hierarchies that shape children's experiences differently (63). In *The Other Side of Truth*, Sade's gender informs her experiences in exile; she becomes accountable for doing care work for her younger brother and shows emotional maturity beyond her years. This aligns with Amina Mama's position that African conflict literature frequently places young girls "at the nexus of vulnerability and resilience" (Mama 57). Though *A Long Walk to Water* alternates between a male and female adolescent point of view (Salva and Nya), African feminist scholars argue that Nya's daily struggle to fetch water summarizes the gendered burdens that persist outside direct military conflict. Mama's critique is imperative here: "even in non-combat zones, the African girl child remains tethered to structural violence" (60). Nya's declaration. . . "It took her half the morning just to fetch the water" (*Long Walk* 3), shows structural violence that African gender theorists have long critiqued.

African theorists have also interrogated narrative form in adolescent war fiction. Achille Mbembe asserts that African war narratives employ "fragmented temporality and testimonial immediacy" to mimic the ruptured

realities of conflict (Mbembe 118). Naidoo's use of truncated diary-like reflections, especially when Sade attempts to process her father's arrest, exemplifies this fragmented temporality: "I must not cry. I must not shake. I must be brave" (*Other Side* 16). The compression of emotion into fragmented lines reflects Mbembe's theory of narrative fracture. Similarly, Park's dual timeline structure (Salva in the 1980s and Nya in 2008), exemplifies what Kwame Anthony Appiah describes as the "ethics of interconnected storytelling" in African transnational fiction (134). The convergence of timelines situates individual suffering within a collective humanitarian narrative. Another central theme in African adolescent war stories scholarship is the notion of adolescent agency within oppressive structures. Biodun Jeyifo argues that African conflict narratives often emphasize the "dialectic of victimhood and agency" (93). Sade's decision to reveal the truth to the police in London. . . "We cannot lie anymore" (*Other Side* 181), demonstrates the assertion of moral agency even within vulnerability. Likewise, Salva's transformation from fleeing child to community leader embodies what Tejumola Olaniyan terms the "ethical arc of survival" in African narratives of violence (121). When Salva resolves to walk out of Ethiopia saying: "I must keep walking" (*Long Walk* 79), he exemplifies Olaniyan's emphasis on endurance as a form of political and moral resistance.

The critical conversation around Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Leïla Sebbar's *The Seine Was Red* (1996; Eng. trans. 2008) is anchored on debates over trauma representation, narrative ethics, postcolonial memory, and the politics of witnessing. These texts, even though springing from various linguistic, historical, and geographical backgrounds, share a preoccupation with youth as a site through which armed conflict is retold, argued, and recollected. African critics have been specifically concerned in theorizing the stakes of representing violence inflicted on colonized or militarized bodies, thereby offering critical frameworks that illuminate both texts. The linguistic experimentation, ethical dilemmas, and the representation of child soldiers form the mainstay of *Beasts of No Nation*. Scholars observe that Iweala deploys a fractured linguistic register to mimic trauma's disruption of cognitive and emotional unity. Agu's narration, rendered in a broken phonetic English, functions as what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as "a linguistic performance of memory under duress" (87). In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that colonial violence manifests not only physically but through the "dismembering of language and consciousness" (88), offering a valuable framework for interpreting Agu's halting and traumatized speech.

African critics have also interrogated the ethical hurdles of representing horror. Biodun Jeyifo, in *Perspectives on African Literature*, argues that narratives of violence must "negotiate the boundary between witnessing and spectacle" (42). This concern is directly relevant to Iweala's graphic depictions of brutality. Through Agu's narration: ". . . I am not knowing where my mind is anymore" (*Beasts* 63); the novel stages a limit-case of representability. Critics such as Florence Stratton assert that African war fiction risks becoming "anthropological tourism, if not grounded in structural critique" (113). Iweala avoids this reduction, as several scholars note, by embedding the narrative within systemic militarized exploitation rather than isolated acts of violence. Another relevant area of scholarship examines the universalized setting of the text. Abiola Irele, in *The African Imagination*, contends that African war literature often "derives its power not from geographic precision but from its invocation of the universal predicament of violated humanity" (162). Iweala's refusal to name a specific country aligns with Irele's argument, but has generated debate among scholars concerned about the erasure of local particularity. For instance, Nduka Otiono critiques such universalization, noting that "the risk is that Africa becomes an undifferentiated theatre of chaos" (77).

Leïla Sebbar's *The Seine Was Red: Paris, October, 1961* has received significant critical attention for its literary representation of the October 17, 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris. African and North African critics emphasize the novel's intervention in a long history of French state silencing. As Assia Djebar notes in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, colonial histories persist through "intermittent silences and forbidden memories" (44). Sebbar's polyphonic narrative directly accosts this silencing by bringing together testimonies, archival traces, and intergenerational conversation. Mildred Mortimer notes that Sebbar's reliance on pieced testimony mirrors the "archival fracture characteristic of postcolonial historical recovery" (91). Africanist theorist Achille Mbembe's discussion of colonial violence is also illuminating here. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe writes that the postcolonial subject navigates "a landscape littered with the ruins of unacknowledged violence" (27). Sebbar's Paris, haunted by the unsaid, foregrounds this psychic landscape. The repeated return to the scene of violence (the River Seine) illuminates Mbembe's perception that colonial terror is "inscribed on the city as much as on the body" (34). The novel's intergenerational preoccupation has welcomed comparisons with African memory studies more broadly. African historian Marnia Lazreg stresses that Algerian memory is shaped by "intergenerational trauma produced by disappearance, denial, and state repression" (131). Sebbar's protagonist Joëlle Faure, seeking suppressed family narratives, exemplifies these dynamics of inherited memory and political erasure.

Both Iweala and Sebbar present young protagonists as witnesses to political violence, though their contexts largely differ. Scholars argue that this narrative strategy allows each text to explore the vulnerability and moral complexity of the adolescent consciousness as it confronts systemic brutality. Ngũgĩ's theorization of the

“colonial wound”; the psychic damage inflicted through domination and violent suppression (72); applies to both Agu and the young heirs of Algerian memory in Sebbar’s novel. The child-soldier’s wound is direct and corporeal; the Parisian adolescents inherit a wound mediated through silence and historical distortion. This comparative framework resonates with Tejumola Olaniyan’s concept of the “afterlives of violence,” wherein trauma persists through social structures and cultural narratives long after overt conflict ends (59). Formal strategies also converge. Both novels use fragmentation to dramatize the incompleteness of traumatic memory. Sebbar achieves this through alternating testimonies and incomplete archival documents; Iweala achieves it through linguistic disruption and episodic violence. As Ato Quayson argues in *Calibrations*, literature of trauma often “inhabits the interstices between memory and its failure” (148). Both novels exemplify this formal poetics of fracture. Ethically, scholars note that both works refuse closure. *Beasts of No Nation* ends without redemption or easy rehabilitation, while *The Seine Was Red* concludes with the recognition that memory work remains incomplete. This aligns with Mbembe’s claim that postcolonial memory demands “perpetual engagement, not catharsis” (102).

African adolescent war fiction stands at the intersection of personal narrative and national history. Its protagonists bear the burdens of precarious socio-political environments while negotiating their own emerging identities. Through innovative narrative techniques and thematic depth, authors capture the multifaceted realities of youth experiences across the continent. As a literary category, African adolescent war fiction not only extends the parameters of the Bildungsroman but also reimagines the cultural, political, and psychological contours of growing up within African societies.

### **Critical Analysis of Trauma Representation and Narrative Technique in *The Other Side of Truth* and *A Long Walk to Water***

Trauma reshapes narrative form by disturbing linearity, coherence, and the reliability of memory. Beverley Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth* (2010) and Linda Sue Park’s *A Long Walk to Water* (2010) are exemplary trauma narratives in which violence and displacement fracture childhood innocence and generate new modes of storytelling. Through trauma theory and formalism, this essay shows how both writers deploy fragmentation, sensory overload, temporal distortion, and stylistic compression to represent adolescents’ psychological rupture and their struggle toward ethical reconstitution.

Both novels begin with catastrophic events that permanently break the protagonists’ innocence and sense of safety. Rather than presenting trauma as a fully narratable incident, both texts depict it as an overwhelming sensory and emotional rupture. Sade’s world is broken, the moment her mother is assassinated. Instead of offering explicit graphic detail, Naidoo frames the violence through Sade’s stunned perception as captured in what she says as she narrates thus: . . . “The shot split the quiet morning with a violence that seemed to stop time”. Sade remembered seeing her mother . . . “turn, confusion stirring at the edge of her expression before her body dropped heavily to the ground. The sound did not end with the moment; it echoed inside Sade long after the scene dissolved around her, becoming a hollow ringing that followed her into every breath” (*The Other Side* 3). This excerpt above captures the overwhelming echo of the moment; and that is what Caruth calls the “incomprehensible nature of traumatic experience,” which cannot be fully integrated into consciousness (4).

Likewise, Park portrays the eruption of civil war through Salva’s terror as gunfire interrupts his classroom. The narration achieves immediacy through sensory compression; the narrator recounts: “The classroom seemed to shrink as the first cracks of gunfire snapped in the air. Salva could not tell whether the walls trembled or if it was his body shaking, only that the teacher’s shout; urgent, breaking, sent the children running for the bush. He felt the weight of fear pressing against his chest, forcing him forward even before he understood what danger was upon them” (*A Long Walk* 6). Here, the child’s innocence collapses in the sudden need to flee, demonstrating trauma’s power to distort perception and bodily awareness. Trauma manifests in narrative fragmentation: intrusive recollections, non-linear time, and dislocated focalization. Both novels embed trauma within the formal structure of storytelling.

Throughout Naidoo’s novel, Sade’s memories intrude unpredictably, breaking the present’s coherence. During an interrogation at the immigration center, a memory breaches her consciousness as captured in this excerpt: “As the officials pressed their questions, Sade’s thoughts splintered away from the room. The terrible crack of the gunshot rose again, sharp and unstoppable, filling her mind until the officers’ voices faded like distant murmurs. She felt as though she were watching herself from outside her body, unable to pull the memory back into silence” (*The Other Side* 11). This quotation reflects van der Kolk’s assertion that trauma resurfaces through involuntary sensory flashbacks rather than controlled recollection (172). Park uses alternating chapters between Salva and Nya to represent trauma’s long reach across generations. Salva’s memories often emerge as somatic reactions: Here the narrator says about Salva: . . . “Years after the attack, a single burst of gunfire could make his heart clench as though he were still that frightened boy running from the village. The sound would strip away the years, leaving him suspended between past and present, caught again in the moment when he was separated

from everything he loved. The past refused to release him fully” (*A Long Walk* 34). By this, Park transforms memory into a bodily experience, illustrating the persistence of trauma.

### **The Aesthetics of Scarcity: Minimalism and Symbolic Density**

The stylistic differences between Naidoo and Park illuminate two divergent but equally powerful modes of portraying trauma. Park’s prose mirrors the scarcity of the Sudanese environment and the emotional economy of survival. When Salva realizes he is alone, the spare narrative reflects his psychic desolation: “Standing on the path, Salva felt the world go hollow around him. The others had vanished into the bush, leaving only silence and dust where his family should have been. He tried to call out, but the words stuck like stones in his throat, swallowed by the emptiness stretching in every direction” (*A Long Walk* 9). The minimalism enacts trauma’s flattening of language and affect.

Also, Naidoo uses imagery and metaphor to depict Sade’s internal struggle with fear and voice. When she attempts to write again: . . . “The notebook lay open before her, but the words would not settle. They flickered inside her mind like frightened birds, fluttering too frantically to land. Every time she tried to steady them, another memory surged up, her mother’s fall, her father’s warnings, driving the words back into fearful silence” (*The Other Side* 46). Symbolism becomes the vessel through which trauma’s internal tensions are articulated. Both novels portray recovery not as a return to innocence, but as the forging of a new ethical identity. Sade’s father’s insistence on truth foregrounds her eventual emergence as a witness: “She remembered her father’s voice, calm even in danger, reminding her that truth was the only ground that could not be taken from her. Though fear pressed heavily on her, she felt that holding back her story would mean letting violence win. Speaking became a way to honour what had been stolen” (*The Other Side* 58). This moment echoes LaCapra’s idea of “working through” trauma to achieve ethical agency (144). Park frames Salva’s humanitarian work as the culmination of his traumatic journey: “Looking back on the long trek across desert and swamp, Salva understood that each hardship had carved something into him. The pain, the hunger, the loneliness, they had become the foundation for his determination to return and help others survive what he once endured” (*A Long Walk* 89).

Trauma has become a catalyst for empathy and communal responsibility. Both *The Other Side of Truth* and *A Long Walk to Water* reveal that childhood innocence cannot survive the violent ruptures of displacement and war. Through fragmented structure, sensory intensification, minimalist or metaphor-rich style, and the ethical arc toward testimony, the novels portray trauma as a force that reshapes identity rather than merely wounds it. Their narrative techniques, echoing flashbacks, split timelines, compressed diction, symbolic imagery; constitute formal trauma grammar. What emerges from these narratives is not a sentimental restoration of childhood but a powerful insight into how young protagonists forge themselves for survival, thereby questioning the childhood innocence, in the harsh light of traumatic experience.

### **Critical Analysis of Trauma Representation and Narrative Technique in Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Sebbar’s *The Seine Was Red***

War stories often fractures narrative stability, disrupt temporal coherence, and destabilizes voice. Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Leïla Sebbar’s *The Seine Was Red* stand as powerful interventions in the global literary articulation of violence, political brutality, and the psychic shattering of childhood innocence. Both texts represent trauma not merely as subject matter but as a formal principle: in that, their narrative structures, styles, and voices are deformed by the very violence they attempt to articulate. Through trauma theory and formalism, this essay argues that the two novels portray the collapse of innocence through fragmented temporality, linguistic rupture, recursive memory, and polyphonic narration techniques that embody the impossibility of rendering traumatic experience through conventional storytelling.

In *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu’s childhood innocence is annihilated the moment the militia captures him. Trauma theorists like Caruth note that overwhelming violence suspends ordinary perception and disrupts the subject’s cognitive stability (4). Iweala formalizes this disruption through Agu’s disjointed grammar, broken syntax, and oscillation between first-person immediacy and dissociative distance. An excerpt representation of Agu’s initiation into violence reads: “. . . The world around Agu seems to collapse into noise and flashing movement: men shouting, bodies running, and the thick smell of smoke pressing against his face. He tries to remember how the day began, his mother’s voice, the quiet of their village, but the memories scatter like leaves in a storm. Everything familiar slips away as he is dragged into the forest” (*Beast* 14).

The formal fragmentation mirrors the psychic fragmentation of the child who cannot process trauma as a coherent narrative. In *The Seine Was Red*, the violence of the 1961 Paris massacre emerges not through a single traumatic rupture but through the gradual excavation of silenced memory. Sebbar’s characters, especially the daughter-narrator and the Algerian witnesses, encounter trauma as a collective absence, an event deliberately erased by national forgetting. This can be seen when the narrator witnesses thus: “One witness speaks as though searching through shadow: images rising and falling, never settling. He recalls bodies falling into the Seine, the

cold water swallowing cries, and the streets smothered by silence. His voice breaks as he tries to name the terror, but each attempt falters, as if language itself recoils from the memory” (*Siene* 47).

Unlike Agu’s raw immediacy, Sebbar’s trauma is mediated through distance, censorship, and intergenerational memory. Iweala’s choice to write using stylized, nonstandard English constitutes a formal embodiment of trauma. The fragmented grammar enacts the destabilization of Agu’s consciousness. As van der Kolk argues, trauma disrupts linguistic ordering and forces memory into sensory fragments rather than structured narrative (172). This is echoed in passages where Agu’s narration devolves into impulsive, compulsive rhythms: . . . “Agu recounts the violence in quick, breathless phrases, words tumbling without pause. Sentences break off in the middle as if he cannot let himself dwell on what he has seen. His voice shifts between admitting guilt and insisting he is not the person doing these things, revealing a mind splintered by unbearable experience” (*Beast* 53).

Form becomes a psychological map of trauma’s invasive force. Sebbar structures her novel around multiple voices, archival fragments, testimonies, memories, and intergenerational dialogues. The collage-like structure reflects the impossibility of a single, authoritative narrative about the massacre. An echo of this polyphonic narration is as thus: “The daughter listens to accounts that overlap and contradict: one witness insists the police beat people relentlessly; another speaks of bodies swept downstream at night; others remember only fear, not faces. Each voice adds to a mosaic of truth that can never fully cohere. The massacre survives only in these fractured recollections” (*Siene*72). The narrative fragmentation becomes an ethical critique of state violence and erasure. Agu repeatedly returns to certain traumatic moments, killing, hunger, sexual assault, and narrates them with obsessive detail or abrupt silence. The recursive structure demonstrates Freud’s concept of repetition compulsion, where the survivor unconsciously relives trauma in an attempt to master the unmasterable” (32). One such moment might be seen in this excerpt: . . . ”Agu tries to sleep, but the scenes return: the man’s face, the Commandant’s hand forcing him forward, the feel of the weapon shaking in his arms. He tells himself he had no choice, yet the memory loops endlessly, each time sharper, each time harder to escape” (*Beast* 68).

Time in the novel is not linear but circular, defined by traumatic return. In *The Seine Was Red*, trauma is temporalized through absence rather than recurrence. Because the massacre was erased from public narrative, the younger generation encounters trauma as an unexplained void: the daughter narrator depicts it thus: “The daughter walks through Paris knowing the city hides something. Streets appear ordinary, yet she senses a history pressed beneath the pavement. As elders recount the violence, she feels the past bleeding into the present, reshaping her understanding of the city she thought she knew” (*Siene* 104). Here trauma is not a memory but a revelation; it is a confrontation with what has been deliberately silenced. Both novels reject sentimental narratives of childhood. Innocence is not restored; it is irrevocably transformed.

Agu is forced into acts that violate moral boundaries and innocence. His attempts to justify, deny, or explain his actions reveal an ethical subject wounded beyond repair: “Agu insists he is still a good boy, trying to remember how his mother said a good son behaves. Yet each time he tries to define himself, the images of what he has done rise before him. The distance between who he was and who he has become grows unbearable. He no longer knows which version of himself is real” (*Beast*109). Trauma’s ethical dimension emerges through this fractured self-recognition. Sebbar’s novel insists that acknowledging historical trauma is a moral obligation. The younger generation becomes responsible for restoring suppressed memory: “The daughter feels the weight of stories untold. Each testimony she hears becomes a call to witness a demand that she refuses the silence that protected the perpetrators. In learning the truth, she inherits the responsibility of remembrance” (*Siene*138). Here trauma becomes a political and intergenerational ethical task. *Beasts of No Nation* and *The Seine Was Red* both depict trauma as a force that distorts narrative structure, ruptures language, and fractures personal and collective identity. Through formal techniques, fragmented syntax in Iweala, polyphonic narration in Sebbar, each novel embodies the shattering of innocence and the lingering violence of memory. Trauma, in these works, is not simply represented; it shapes the very grammar of the narrative. By refusing closure or re-stabilization, both texts demonstrate that the aftermath of violence is not resolution but transformation, compelling readers to confront the enduring scars of war, colonialism, and historical erasure.

### Conclusion and Discoveries

War stories focused on adolescents and civilians depend not only on historical content but more critically on narrative style to illustrate violence, dislocation, and survival. Russian Formalist critics such as Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson are of the view that literature obtains meaning by its devices, rather than thematic or moral instruction. In war fiction, these techniques whittle down violence from normal perspective, forcing the reader to experience war as shock rather than as conversant spectacle.

It was discovered in this study that:

1. Through first-person account, restricted third-person view, alternating dual narration, syntactic distortion, repetition, fragmentation, and silence, these novels tactically encode the experience of war and displacement.

2. Meaning, therefore, emerges from how these stories are told rather than from what they share. Russian Formalism sees literature as a system of devices that change ordinary language into mimetic expression. Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization holds that art ruptures habitual understanding so as to renew human consciousness. Jakobson further stresses that the poetic function of language lies in its presenting of form. Devices such as repetition, syntactic deviation, fragmentation, and structural parallelism are therefore not for decoration but meaning generating.

3. Within this concourse, point of view serves as a formal device rather than a neutral narrative channel. First-person narration intensifies immediacy and privacy, while third person limited restricts knowledge and heightens uncertainty, while shifting perspectives fracture and narrative authority. Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* is told through a first-person child-soldier point of view. The homodiegetic narrator, Agu, tells his experiences from within the war, sidelining authorial intervention and birthing direct immediacy in the narration. Time itself turns to be unsteady within this framework as can be seen when he intones- "Time is passing. Time is not passing. Day is changing to night. Night is changing today. How can I know what is happening?" (*Beast*53). From a formalist point of view, the repetition of short clauses and binary contradictions distorts linear temporality and enables disorientation through structure instead of explanation.

4. One of the novel's most unique narrative techniques is its intentional violation of Standard English grammar; for instance: . . . "I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing" (*Beast* 24). The omission of the indefinite article "a" and the circular repetition are formalist techniques of linguistic foregrounding. Moral logic is not in question but disrupted through syntax itself. For instance Iweala writes-. . . "The girl is having no more hand. . . I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA KPWUDA on her head" (*Beast* 51). In this context, violence is foregrounded not through visual realism but through onomatopoeia, replacing representation with acoustic shock. The form of language itself becomes the medium of terror as seen in this statement- . . . "Sometimes I am seeing thing that I am knowing is coming from before the war, but I am seeing it like they are coming right now" (*Beast* 53). Past and present collapse into a single verbal field, showing how narrative time becomes structurally disfigured.

5. In Leïla Sebbar's *The Seine Was Red* deploys a shifting third-person limited point of view. It moves across multiple witnesses and observers of the 1961 Paris massacre. This fragmented view denies centralized narration and yields meaning through structural multiplicity. "Our militant brothers were executed by bullets or knives just like the fanatics who are killing their own people today" (*Siene* 50). The sentence formally collapses historical events into a single utterance, producing semantics through temporal juxtaposition. "It's the first time I saw or heard anything about October 17, 1961" (*Siene* 50). Ignorance is seen as a formal method. The massacre enters the text through absence and belated discovery, making silence itself a narrative technique. The use of symbolism and visual form is equally strategic in the narration: "Three other giant women are seated at her feet. . . displaying the fruits of the fertile earth in the folds of her robe" (*Siene*50). The monumental statue creates symbolic contrast with erased violence. Meaning arises through visual opposition rather than comment.

6. Beverly Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* plunges the reader first into Sade's young world, letting one experience everything through her innocent, yet increasingly aware, eyes. The brutal reality of political violence is not just laid out for readers; it's a palpable ache, a fear that grips one as one sees it reflected in Sade's understanding. When Naidoo writes: ". . . Sade had never seen her father look so afraid before" (*The Other Side*21), one feels that chilling dread right alongside her. Naidoo possesses a masterful touch, never bombarding readers with every grim detail. Instead, she offers the reader a powerful form of emotional minimalism, a quiet restraint that speaks volumes. The reader is left in the dark, just as Sade and her brother are: ". . . They were not told where they were going or when they would see their mother again" (*The Other Side*21) This deliberate withholding of information amplifies the gut-wrenching feeling of exile, making it feel utterly alien and deeply unsettling. Forced migration is not merely a plot point here; it's a structural choice that creates a profound, gnawing sense of uncertainty.

7. Linda Sue Park, in *A Long Walk to Water*, offers us two distinct voices; Salva's and Nya's – weaving their stories together in an alternating dance. This is not just a clever stylistic flourish; it is a potent method for forging meaning through both stark contrast and unexpected connection. When one reads, "Salva walked and walked and walked until his feet were numb," the repetition is not just a description; it becomes the very embodiment of his soul-crushing, relentless endurance. And the simple, heartbreaking fact that Nya had to trek to the pond twice a day is not just a detail; it's a stark, painful echo of the displacement and hardship which Salva endures. The relentless daily grind mirrors the devastating turmoil of war, generating meaning through the very fabric of the narrative, not just explicit pronouncements.

In conclusion, an examination of these four novels reveals that the impact of war is not simply conveyed through themes; rather, it is deeply experienced through the very manner in which the narratives unfold. In *Beasts of No Nation*, the language itself appears fractured, mirroring the terrifying disintegration of morality. *The Seine Was Red*, Paris, October 1961 fragments history into testimonies and poignant silences. *The Other Side of Truth* transforms the horrors of political violence into an intensely personal experience through its restrained narration and carefully controlled revelations. Similarly, *A Long Walk to Water* converts the struggle for survival into the steady, persistent rhythm of the narrative itself.

Together, these novels illuminate a crucial insight: form is not merely a vessel for meaning but the very mechanism through which meaning is produced. War is not simply represented in these texts; it is rendered vivid and visceral through the authors' deliberate choices of technique, structure, and narrative voice.

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