
**E-ISSN:** 2706-8927
**P-ISSN:** 2706-8919
www.allstudyjournal.com
IJAAS 2020; 2(3): 253-261
Received: 05-05-2020
Accepted: 07-06-2020

**Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom**
Ph.D. English Department, Faculty of the Humanities, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal, West Africa

**Corresponding Author:**
**Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom**
Ph.D. English Department, Faculty of the Humanities, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal, West Africa

# Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and the battlefield trauma of child soldiers

## Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom

**Abstract**
Using Chris Abani's *Song for Night* as a stepping stone, I set out to tackle in this paper the vexed issue of trauma issue. Trauma as a "*wound to the mind*" is an experience that occurs in different settings, especially in the battlefield. My study shows that the literature on trauma studies has a Eurocentric bent which is a crucial explanatory factor as to why the histories of trauma of non-Western people are given short shrift in trauma research. So called Third World people who have undergone the traumatizing "*sentence of history*" in terms of subjugation and colonization as well as racism deserve, so say pundits on trauma studies whose perspectives make up the literature review, considering as trauma victims or survivors. The paper argues that the field of trauma studies should move away from its Western bias and be more eclectic and all-encompassing. The analysis also brings to light the multifaceted human toll of trauma. The paper posits that trauma encounter in *Song for Night* leaves life-long psychological scars as it addresses widespread phenomenon of child soldiering- the narrator has been conscripted very young, and so exposed to trauma in a war zone. Tapping mainly into psychoanalysis and sociology, I try to tease out and explain how Chris Abani dramatizes the intricate politics of trauma. The psychoanalytic, sociological and psychological perspectives on trauma help get a handle on the meaning of the agency that trauma survivors perform to work through their awful experience.

**Keywords:** trauma, child soldiering, bigotry, remembering, faith, memory

## Introduction
A high-profile novelist, poet, playwright and academic all rolled into one, Chris Abani (1966) was born to a mixed parentage-his father was Nigerian while his mother was of English descent. He made a name for himself during the 1980s and 1990s as an outspokenly diehard critic of the Nigerian government. Chris Abani's merit lay inter alia in his daring call to champion democracy and human rights in a country that lived for a long period of time under the yoke of military dictatorship of the blackest dye. Little wonder that earned him three jail spells. He once cheated death at the hands of the Nigerian government. His fictional and non-fictional opus bears stressing as he has produced since the inception of his literary career a hugely hefty body of novels, plays and essay. He has had quite a number of literary awards conferred upon him in recognition of his invaluable contribution to literature, not the least of which are PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, the 2001 Prince Claus Award. The fifty-four-year-old Nigerian American, who earned a Ph.D. in English, is currently a professor of creative writing at Northwestern University.
Arguably, Song for Night falls under the category of trauma studies [1] as its subject matter

[1] Trauma Studies is a relatively new field in scientific research. Speaking of the temporal inception, and of the scope of trauma studies, Stef Scraps and Gert Buelens write: "Trauma Studies, an area of cultural investigation that came to prominence in the early-to-mid 1990s, prides itself on its explicit commitment to ethics, which sets it apart from the poststructuralist criticism of the 1970s and early 1980s in which it has roots" (1). Since its emergence, the field of trauma theory has grown in significance as well as generating a lot of controversy due in particular to its Eurocentric bias. In Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds, Stef Craps takes aim at trauma studies' deviation from its ethical promise and its crass neglect of histories of trauma of formerly colonized nations, while foregrounding traumatic events that went down in the Western world: "Most attention within trauma theory has been devoted to events that took place in Europe or the United States, especially the Holocaust, more recently, 9/11" (9). The necessity to bring the traumatic experience of colonization within the purview of trauma theory is writ large, the more so since it was a collective trauma induced by the trope of race. Hence Craps and Buelens' call for a rapprochement between trauma studies and postcolonial studies (3). Only by doing this can the highly important field divest itself of its one-sided focus. (We'll come back later and at length on the weaknesses of trauma theory.)

appertains to the psychological toll exacted by a traumatic encounter. First-hand experience of a battlefield landscape or a terror attack have the potential for mediating a kind of suffering whose nightmarish fallout can be both far-reaching and enduring. What is trauma in the first place? How do its multifaceted consequences manifest themselves? What is it about trauma that makes it so vexed an issue? It is my endeavour to tap into literature in order to tease out all these questions. Indeed, explaining the soundness of Freud's resort to literature to get to the bottom of trauma, Cathy Caruth, a leading pundit on trauma, says:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing insect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. [4]

Etymologically, the word "trauma" in Greek means "wound". The Oxford Advanced Learner's Diction first defines it from a psychological perspective as "a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time" (8th Edition). Cathy Caruth, while regretting the absence of "a firm definition of trauma, which has been given various descriptions at various times and under different names" [117], captures the meaning of the term as follows: "In its general definitions, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearances of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" [11]. But this definition, interesting though it is, is critiqued from a postcolonial perspective. Scholars who pick hole with it foreground its Eurocentric hue as it does not take cognizance of the historical trauma spawned by racism, that is, colonization. If anything, the weakness of the aforementioned definition lies, according to Stef Craps, in its making trauma theory adhere to "an event-based model, according to which trauma results in a single, extraordinary catastrophic event" [31]. Stef Craps recognizes that "The work of Cathy Caruth has been singularly influential in setting the parameters of this new area of scholarship" [9]. Buelens and Scraps lament that the texts that lay the spadework of trauma studies, not the least of which are Cathy Caruth's, "are almost exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences of white Westerners and solely employ critical methodologies emanating from a Euro-American context" [2]. Scraps and other exponents of a thorough overhaul of trauma studies point to the gross neglect of histories of trauma of marginalized people to buttress their indictment of trauma studies. Black Africans have gone through what Homi Bhabha calls the "sentence of history", viz., subjugation, slavery, diaspora, forced migration, political violence, genocide (246)-you name it. Colonialism, it bears testimony, was not an individual but a collective trauma since colonized people across the globe shared the same fate, namely a long history of suffering at the hands of colonizers whose praxis rested on the obnoxious ideology of racism. With colonization, it was African psyche that was broken. Hence, the appositely relevant definition of "collective trauma" provided by Jeoffrey C. Alexander:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. [1]

Actually, there is no denying that the physical and psychological scars left by the colonial enterprise continue bruising to this day African consciousness, and other parts outside of the Dark Continent that went through it. In Alexander's estimation, cultural trauma can be a blessing in disguise as well as an eye opener. Irrespective of the huge human toll that it exacts, Alexander argues, cultural trauma not only awakes its perpetrators to the unimpeachable inscription of suffering in human life, but it also enables them to "'take on board' some significant responsibility for it" [1]. Plainly, the distinctiveness of colonial trauma fits Laura S. Brown's notion of "insidious trauma", which describe "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overt violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the body and the soul" (Qtd. in Caruth 107). Any consideration of trauma studies that disregards the horrors wrought by colonization and slavery is a dead end, to the say the least. The Eurocentric bias that tinges the politics of trauma studies remains correlated to its failure to address the legacy of colonial trauma. Yet Cathy Caruth's submits that "trauma itself may provide the link between cultures not as a simple understanding of the past of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departure we have all taken from ourselves" [11-2]. The potential for trauma to create a bridge between cultures instigates the necessity to put oneself in the skin of a fellow brother who is upon the rack (Alexander 1). The sure-fire way for "societies to expand the circle of the 'we'" is to make the suffering of others our own (Alexander 1). All this goes to show that trauma studies cannot thrive on the neglect of traumatic histories of marginalized groups.

The increasing fictionalization of trauma in present-day African novels bespeaks a postcolonial agency from African writers to foreground the global character of trauma theory. It is also a clarion call that is in synch with Stef Craps and Buelens' plea: "Western traumatic histories must be seen to be tied up with histories of colonized trauma studies to be able to redeem its promise of ethical effectiveness" [3]. The potholes on the road to the mediation of a bridge between trauma histories of western and non- western people are, sad to say, many. The politics of trauma literature in post-colonial African literature indicates an all-out drive to challenge the marginalization or ignoring of traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures as well as rejecting out of hand "the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity" (Craps 2). With any luck, postcolonial writers' well-meaning effort to get the western bias of trauma studies will pay off.

A novel that makes a compelling read, Song for Night came out in 2007. It recounts the harrowing story of a fifteen-year-old boy named My Luck. Against a background of an unspecified Nigerian civil war, he along with other kids make up a platoon of nine child soldiers tasked with the treacherous activity of demining. Their commonality: they all have their vocal cords cut for the sole nefarious purpose of preventing them crying out. My Luck gets separated from his unit when one of the party (gone by the name of Nebuchadnezzar, shortened to Nebu throughout the narrative) steps on a mine and dies instantly. My Luck lives

to tell the tale but he, true to type, sets out to find Nebu's body. He soon realizes that he is on a fool's errand, and contemplates dropping the search because "it is not good to be alone in a war for" and, more to the point, "it radically decreases your chances of survival" [13]. He sets himself another daring aim no less, that is, to find the rest of the platoon. He goes through a spate of traumatic encounters, the most gruesome of which is the killing of his mother before his eyes. This frantic search turns out to be a damp squib and an eye sore as the multifaceted ravages of the war hit home. True to the unconscionable bahaviour of a child soldier, My Luck has a long horrendous record of killing and raping wantonly. In his desperate search for his friends, he has seen inhumanity at close quarters, but, importantly, folks full of the milk of human kindness. There is always a touch of humanity in the cruelty of a battlefield.

Trauma exposure is inscribed in My Luck's battlefield reality. The war setting provides a gruesome outlet for man's bestial instincts to play themselves out. War and the inhumanity inherently in it have the potential for splitting the psyche of any individual who experiences it first-hand. My Luck's repetitive exposure to traumatic encounters as a teenager has broken his psyche out of recognition and shattered his sense of self, so that his acts and his gestures defy logic. His contention that "I was in secondary school when the war started" [20] speaks volumes about the impressionable age at which child soldiers get embroiled into war. When it was broken to him that he "had been selected to be part of an elite team, a team of engineers highly trained in locating and eliminating the threat of clandestine enemy explosives" he "was thrilled" [18]. Too young to get a sense of the madness of war, the likes of My Luck answer the call for conscription like a lamb to the slaughterhouse. The immaturity of the psychology of children factors into making them easy prey for military recruitment. Amongst the reasons why rebels and other likeminded armed groups tap into children to serve as soldiers, feature,

manpower shortage, the alleged stamina and docility of children, the fact that they are seen as manipulable and easily indoctrinated, their tendency to follow orders, the fact that they are viewed as less rational and hence fearless and that they are seen as having a lesser developed sense of self-preservation. (Steinl 18)

The alacrity of child soldiers to carry out orders unquestioningly is bind-blowing. The indoctrination that is hinted at in the foregoing quotation starts during the training period, when children are put in an emotional readiness to kill or rape whomsoever at the behest of their commanders (Abani 19). The latter's wish is the children's command. My Luck captures the impossibility of challenging authority: "…We followed orders, did what we were told, even when the training seemed at odds with what we thought soldiers should know" [21]. Under the supervision of the hard-hearted Major Essien (also known as John Wayne who claims to have been trained at West Point), the child soldiers are both psychologically and physically shanghaied into going by the book of what is called in the jargon "the manual", i.e., "the rules of etiquette for war" [20]. John Wayne's insistence on the rules of engagement being respected carries significance in a war zone. Use of lethal or incapacitating force ought to comply with normative criteria under International law. Since "the use of force is the most powerful instruments of State authority and has the inherent potential of causing death or injury as well as the destruction of property," it is necessary to design "military manuals and instruction cards, in combination with military training programs and drill" in order to "provide invaluable tools for military forces to understand and be able to apply the rules on the use of force which are issued to them…" (Hosang 1-2). Espousal of a code of conduct regarding the use of force is par for the course in a conventional army. However, in Song for Night, an armed group made up of a ragtag of soldiers with no previous spell in a military academy, the ethics of war are often flouted. This is true for the rebellion in Song for Night. The manual whose respect John Wayne imposes on his young men is a manual of sorts, for it is not a book as such. Rather, it is, so to speak, written on John Wayne's forehead. Children who are so bold as to ask to see the manual in question get dressed down. Witness how John Wayne projects a mythical image of himself under the guise of walking kids through the rules of engagement:

You want to see the manual? It is here"-he tapped his forehead-"that way it can never be lost, not we. We can never be lost as long as we follow the manual. ... Follow the protocol I shall show you from it and you will survive. As for seeing it, the only way that can happen is if you split my head open. Do you want to split my head open?

Ijeoma shook her head.

Good. If you don't want me to split your head open, you follow orders! [20-21]

The price to pay in case of any witting or unwitting deviation from the code of conduct is so harsh in terms of physical discipline that there is nothing for it but to toe the line indiscriminately. As mentioned earlier, the vulnerability of kids due to their young age and inchoate mental development makes them fair game in a war zone. Obviously, child soldiers' psyche is bruised big time by the gruesomely wantonness of the cruelty that they carry out, see and experience on a regular basis. My Luck's consciousness of guilt is writ large in his confession that: "I have killed many people during the last three years. Half of those were innocent, half of those were unarmed – and some of those killings have been a pleasure" [60]. In a move calculated to register his sense of despondency over the madness of war, My Luck makes cuts on his arms to symbolize what he calls "my own personal cemetery" [24]. His elaboration upon the said cuts captures the madness of war. The phrase "own personal cemetery" points, indeed, to an indictment of an unjust war which has exacted a heavy toll on his own family:

I touch each cross, one for every loved one lost in this war, although there are a couple from before the war. I cut the first one when my grandfather died; the second I cut when my father died with one of his circumcision knife. My father the imam and circumciser who it was said betrayed his people by becoming a Muslim cleric and moving north to minister. . . the third I cut for my mother who died at the beginning of the troubles that led to the war. The rest I cut during the war: friends, comrades in arms. With the one I cut for Nebu, there are twenty in total. Eighteen are friends or relatives, as I said, but two were strangers. One was for the seven-year-old girl I shot by accident, the other for the baby whose head haunts my dream. [24-25]

The bodily cuts bespeak a broken soul as a result of trauma encounters, which is a key feature of the battlefield: "Living in a war zone would be characterized by cumulative trauma and ongoing strain" (Blum 21). The recklessness attendant

upon the unconscionable job of killing in a war setting trivializes death and, unsurprisingly, registers the failure of what Baumeister and Vohs call "self-regulation" also known as "self-control", which is "a powerful internal antidote to violence" [100]. Interestingly, they qualify their point by positing that "some people use self-control to enable them to act more violently" [99]. Speaking of violence, they contend that it "erupts when self-control stops or breaks down, such as may occur under the influence of alcohol or emotional distress" [100]. Moral imperatives and psychological restraints play second fiddle to the animalization of the enemy in war. Under no other circumstances do the beastly instincts of man raise its ugly head than in a war context. As he reflects on the protocol demand "to count the dead and tally the wounded after each explosion or sweep," My Luck feels that there is more to the counting than meets the eye, thereby adducing the dehumanizing effect of war:

Counting is not just a way to keep track of numbers, ours and the enemy's, but also a way to make sure that the dead are really dead. In training they told us to maximize opportunities such as these to up and kill ratio; for which we would be rewarded with extra food and money we can't spend. [12]

Cold-blooded killings occur in war without soldiers mourning. Yet in Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Judith Butler foregrounds the significance of mourning to opposing violence, writing that "without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense we need in order to oppose violence" (XVIII). She explains that the adoption of a "non-violent ethic" is crucial to understanding and remedying the easiness with which human life is annulled (XII).

In Song for Night, the child narrator's self-control has been somewhat whittled away as a result of constantly witnessing, and experiencing horror. My Luck views war with its attendant naturalness of death as blurring the human faculty of thinking, morphing the physical actors into beings geared towards animalistic behaviour. He states that "the frenzy of war dulls the senses." In the same breath, he stresses that "With death as our only option, I guess it is easy to believe everything" [99]. The young soldier's advanced state of brutalization finds expression in his sadistic bent. He revels in killing, which, for a fifteen-year-old, beggars belief. His brazen admission that "I have lost my taste for death" [50] says a mouthful; it is suggestive of morbid satiety. Come to think of it, My Luck seeks to mourn his countless losses, i.e., of parents, relatives, and friends through the unwarrantable exaction of violence on others. Unabashedly, he confesses that he purports to display mercy towards the wounded by finishing them off but, at bottom, his grisly agency is underpinned by revenge, and mourning of sorts:

I like to pretend that I do it to ease the suffering of the mutilated but still undead foes, that my bullet to their brain or knife across their throat is mercy; but the truth is, deep down somewhere, I enjoy it, revel in it almost. Not without cause, of course: they did kill my mother in front of me, but still it is for me, not her, this feeling, these acts. [12]

Deep down, he perceives any survivor as a potential threat. There is a method to his madness of finishing off the wounded. My Luck has run the gamut of trauma exposure which has wrapped up deforming his disposition. Seeing one's mother killed at close quarters is a traumatic fate worse than death. Understandably, this rankles with him, and drives his morbid lust for murderous action. Still, in Judith Butler's estimation, the resort to revenge as a form of mourning is a slippery slope. While recognizing that "for some, mourning can only be resolved through violence," The fact remains that "violence only brings on more loss, and the failure to heed the claims of precarious life only leads, again and again, to the dry grief of an endless political rage" (XIX). In fairness to My Luck, though, it should be emphasized that his alteration into a sadistic individual is mediated by trauma exposure. If anything, in the aftermath of a trauma encounter a radical treacherous shift in personality occurs (Blum 19). His self being shattered [2],

[2] In Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman claims that human beings have developed over time a "conceptual system", viz., a set of expectations about themselves and about the outside world (5). The latter, she continues, "are internal representations that reflect or guide our interactions in the world and generally enable us to function effectively" (5). While agreeing that "not everyone holds these basic assumptions," Janoff-Bulman makes it clear that "it appears most people do" (5). A characteristic of these assumptions lies in the fact that they are structured and, most significantly perhaps, stem from people's life experiences. What Janoff-Bulman calls a "conceptual system" is a window into ourselves and the world as well. Janoff-Bulman puts forward basically three fundamental assumptions: "The world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, the self is worthy" (6). The benevolence of the world assumption refers to people's general construction of the world as a good place. Here the word "world" is understood in a broader sense, namely that it comprises both people and events (Janoff-Bulamn 6). Substantiating away the benevolence of the world principle, she is at pains to emphasize its positivity: "When we assume other people are benevolent, we believe that they are basically good, kind, helpful, and caring. In assuming that events are benevolent, we believe in the preponderance of positive outcomes and good fortunes over negative outcomes and misfortune" (6). Despite the bad occurrences that sometimes dot our daily lives, we perceive the world because of our experience of the world which generally points to pleasantness as opposed to unhappiness. Speaking of the second assumption–the meaningfulness of the world–, Janoff-Bulman stresses that "Our fundamental assumption about meaning involves not simply beliefs about why events happen in our world, but, more specifically, why these events happen to particular people" (8). Rather than being flummoxed by the uneven distribution of "good" and "bad", people try to make sense of it. There is an underlying meaning to what befalls people, to what they experience be it a pleasant or unpleasant event: "A meaningful world is one in which a self-outcome contingency is perceived; there is a relationship between a person and what happens to him or her. People are able to make sense of the "selective" incidences" of particular outcomes" (8). As regards the assumption that the self is worthy, it "involves a global evaluation of the self, and, in general, we perceive ourselves as good, capable, and moral individuals" (11). The social psychologist notes that the three assumptions, viz., "we believe we are good people who live in a benevolent, meaningful world" are positive ones that "co-exist at the core of our assumptive world" (12). Equipped with these assumptions, we develop a sense

the survivor cannot help but be psychologically and physically affected. Harold Blum appositely explains that "The traumatized person lives in the three worlds of before, during, and after the trauma or traumatic loss or both" [20]. Noteworthy is the point that the memories of the trauma cum the alteration of the personality colligate (Blum 19). The trauma survivor has difficult in wholly divesting himself of the event that led to the shattering of his self. There is, indeed, a constant re-enactment and reliving of the traumatic situation. Monica Luci argues that

Individuals exposed to trauma over a variety of time spans and developmental periods suffer from a variety of psychological problems not included in the diagnosis of PTSD, including depression, anxiety, self-hatred, dissociation, substance abuse, self-destructive, risk-taking behaviours, re-victimization, problems with interpersonal and intimate relationships (including parenting)… [56]

As regards Blum, he cites "flashbacks, daydreams, nightmares, somatic reactions, and conscious preoccupation with elements of the traumatic situation" as being constitutive of the "elements of intrusion" [21]. Unsurprisingly, My Luck goes through many of the aforementioned psychological travails associated with trauma exposure. The brutality that hallmarks his parents' killings coupled with the devastating human toll of the war haunt him in flashbacks. Bereft of a fatherly attachment figure, he has his work cut out coping. His uncle who is supposed to act as his shoulder to cry on turns out, lo and behold, to compound his woes. My Luck is raw as he recounts the suddenness with which his uncle (whom he brands a "distant relative") inherits his mother and turns her into his mistress upon his father's gruesome murder. What sticks in My Luck's gizzard is the un-called for animus that his "father's half-brother" has against him, and his mum's inability to come to his rescue [47-48].

My Luck weaves his traumatic bereavement of his father into a hard-hitting indictment of religious bigotry whose distinctive feature arguably lies in its fanning the flames of hatred. To boot, it is blind to religious or ethnic background, targeting people indiscriminately. Driven by a misbegotten call to impose their warped reading of religious scripture, fundamentalist movements of any ilk are a serious threat to humanity. William Wilberforce's claim that "the religious affections, and the doctrine of divine assistances, have almost at all times been more or less disgraced by the false pretenses and extravagant conduct of wild fanatics and brain-sick enthusiasts" is telling [59-60]. The ravages of religious fanaticism is an insult to God whose bounty is perverted by the depravity of man (Wilberforce 60). As he reels from the traumatizing effects of the senseless murder of his father, My Luck points out that the saintliness of the likes of his dad is a reproach to the sickness of man. The hatred that people have for the saintly, he says, is not so much due to their kindness as to the fact that "their kindness makes us recognize the shits that we are" [89]. A man born to Christian Igbo parents, My Luck's father converted to Islam when he turned fifteen years of age, which made him a foe in the eyes of his community. Even his son can't get his head around his conversion:

It is a terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be a Muslim. I will never know why my father chose that path; one that put him outside his own community, his own people, most of whom are Catholic, and made him a thing that the people who would later become our enemies feared: a hybrid. [73]

Also, My Luck is baffled that "Everyone hated my father" despite the fact that "he was the one they came for arbitration, for help, to borrow money, and to circumcise their sons" [73]. The young soldier cannot fathom out the flimsy grounds on which his dad was killed by the Maitasine fundamentalists-"his wife is a Catholic and his son, undecided"-, people whom "he probably lent money" [89]. He had his piety and dedication to the cause of Islam rewarded with the rank of imam. His sense of tolerance is a foil to the benighted bigotry of the Maitasine fundamentalists, and to the ingrained poisonous sectarian mindset of his community. My Luck's dad's call as a Muslim to take a Christian as a spouse betokens a no-nonsense perception of faith as the cement of a nation as opposed to a recipe for disunity. For all his devotion, charitable action and tolerance, My Luck's father, it bears stressing, was regarded by bigots as a coreligionist of sorts. His son explains, indeed, that "the only mosque they gave him was inside Sabon Gari: the foreigners' ghetto. Everyone hated the mosque, sitting as it did by decree of the Saraduana in the midst of the Christian enclave" [73]. It is an agonizingly traumatic experience for My Luck to lose his father. But what is arguably even more traumatizing is the preposterousness of the murder: his father was wantonly done away with by fellow Muslims. He frames his anguished bewilderment in a quizzical way that captures a sense of stupid loss: "What was it about Islam and the prophet and that way of life that made him give so much for it?" [88]. He feels like his father's deep-seated belief in Islam and sacrifices in terms of hours of devotion have gone down the drain. What escapes My Luck's notice is that faith is what made his father tick. "The Greek definition of "faith" speaks volumes about its potential for defying rationality. From the Greek word (pistis), "Faith" is taken to mean "firm persuasion, the conviction which is based upon hearing, not upon sight, or knowledge; a firmly relying confidence in what we hear from God in His word" (Qtd. in Rolley 8). My Luck's father's decision to convert, thereby hitting a raw nerve with his community, may be astounding. Yet he doubtless saw something about Islam that made him take the plunge and turn Muslim. Surely, My Luck's dad knew deep down that he was a marked man, given the yawning sectarian and religious divide. Notwithstanding, any threats to his life took a backseat to his convictions. The young soldier and narrator recollects his father's prescient words as he walks his way to the train station to catch a train bound for Igbo land: "Walakhi! The fundamentalists will be the end of us all" [77]. It was not for nothing that the imam hated the guts of Sheik Rimi who "was the feared ideological leader of the suicidal jihadic Maitasine sect" [77]. The religious sectarian shows throughout the boy's journey from

---

of invulnerability, safety and protection. The relevance of Janoff-Bulman's theory to my paper is that they provide a basis for better understanding the mindset of trauma victims. Indeed, the positive feelings that are associated with the three assumptions get called into question by the holder when he or she goes through a traumatic event. The victim who used to feel immune to vulnerability and destructiveness has his or her assumptions shattered in the aftermath of a trauma exposure (Janoff-Bulman 120). The chimerical nature of the basic assumptions hit home after a traumatic life-experience.

an unnamed ancient city (where he gets a train ride) to Igbo territory. But the earth-watering scale of the horrors of sectarian violence didn't hit home until the train reached its destination, and its cargo exposed:

The tarp had been rolled back to expose the cargo: dead bodies, hundreds of Igbo corpses, the harvest of a few weeks of carnage. Some of the bodies had started to decompose, filling the air with their rankness. Many were mutilated – vaginas, penises, mouths, noses, ears, hands, and feet were cut off or out. Even pregnant mothers hadn't been spared; their fetuses cut out and draped over them. I turned away, retching. [78, 9]

This traumatic sight whetted people's desire for revenge. The Fulani driver of the train who "stood in their midst trying not to look scared, but his eyes gave him away" was beaten to death in retaliation. Mistaken for an Igbo, My Luck came near to being mobbed to death. His scream "I am Igbo!" as folks marched on him, saved his skin [79]. The havoc wrought by sectarian violence is a measure of the treacherousness of identity construction based on ethnicity or religion.

The difficulty of coming to terms with the traumatic loss of his dad stems from My Luck's inability to make sense of it. Thus, he is constantly overwhelmed with painful memories, not the least of which are the circumcision knives and the Fulani robe he finds in the imam's closet. These are somewhat memorabilia that My Luck treasures up big time as they keep him connected to a wistful past. The Fulani robe, he says, symbolizes his father's office. He is moved to tears while mulling over the whiff of incongruity and melancholy that the said robe carries: "I felt the tears coming as I pressed my face into it and pretended I could still smell on it, even though my uncle must have worn it last" [75]. As regards the circumcision knives, they compound his trauma as they epitomize inter alia the tools with which his dad was killed. After he finds the bundle of knives rolled up and "hidden in a small latch space behind the headboard of my parents' bed," My Luck takes pains to clean and sharpen them. Then he spins a yarn about their purport, and how they will stand him in good stead, going forward:

Small curved blades that cut through flesh with a whisper of effort. I grew to love them, played with them, spoke to them. They in turn spoke of the blood-spattered hysteria of the younger boys and the grim, tight-lipped grunting and moaning of the older boys and the honest wails of babies. . . . When some of the other boys in school started bullying me, I took to carrying one of the knives hidden in my dashiki. [75]

Throughout the narrative, My Luck revisits in various forms the scenes and events that triggered his traumatic encounters. Building on Freud's work, Cathy Caruth emphasizes in Unclaimed Experience the way that "the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" [2]. Indeed, the survivor's proclivity for repetition compulsion is not conscious. Rather, "the unwitting reenactments of traumatic events that one cannot simply leave behind" [2] point to the hassles of drawing a line under a trauma exposure. Caruth sees eye to eye with Freud and understands trauma "as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" [3]. What she calls the "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" marks trauma off from a wound upon the body, which is "a simple and healable event" [4]. The suddenness of a traumatic exposure factors in its repetition in manifold forms. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma as an infliction of a wound upon the mind is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" [4]. Hence her use of the term "belatedness" [3] to describe the phenomenon of the trauma event (s) returning to haunt the survivor. Caruth, in Trauma: Explorations in Memory is at pains to point out that the victim of trauma exposure is not aware of the atrocity he undergoes while it is occurring: "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it." [4, 5]. As a child soldier, My Luck is truly a case in point. Having suffered multiple injuries to his psyche owing to the ambient war, he compulsively casts his mind back to his traumatic encounters as if acting out his bewilderment at the "incomprehensible". In his frenzied search for his platoon, he happens upon a woman carrying "a long pole with a makeshift metal hook on the end" [64]. The bank is replete with bodies in the backwash of the war. He notices that "she uses the hook to pull bodies onto the shore and robs them of their valuables," which strikes him as an eye sore [64]. Claiming the moral high ground, My Luck thinks to himself, "At least, when I rob, I rob the living. . . But if she is ashamed by her profession, nothing in her face reveals it" [65]. The relevance of this scene to the awful consequences of My Luck's trauma exposure is the harrowing memories that the sight of the woman conjures up. He recounts that the look,

brings back memories of the first woman I raped, a woman, her age, and I stumble back confused, wondering if she is real or if she is a ghost, an apparition drawn by the river goddess mamiwata from my guilt; to punish me. As I stagger back from her, my mind staggers back in time, but fragments are all I stumble over. [65]

From the fag end of the foregoing quotation, we can rightly infer that traumatic recall is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a given for a trauma survivor. In Caruth's estimation, the difficulty of remembering distinctly a traumatic encounter stems from the way in which the memory presents itself (TEM viii). She argues that some victims do not recall a traumatic experience in the form of flashbacks or simple memories (as is often the case) but in more subtle kinds of behaviour. The recollection or re-enactment of a traumatic event is defined by the fact that it "pushes memory away" (viii). It needs stressing that My Luck does not suffer altogether from memory impairment to the point that he does not feel equal to recollecting anything of his manifold traumatic exposures. Speaking of the history

[3] In my paper "The Myth of the 'Rainbow Nation': Xenophobia, Sexual Violence, and Racial Tensions in Period Pain by Kopano Matlwa" published in International Journal of English, Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS), I slightly touch on trauma as I analyze the gruesome experience of gang-rape that Machechaba (the lead character) has been subjected to by a group of black youngsters in retaliation for her support of migrant workers. In the paper, I mention the expert perspective of Cathy Caruth on trauma, especially the belatedness that characterizes it.

of trauma, Ruth Leys state that it "is marked by an alternation between episodes of forgetting and remembering" [15]. At several points in the narrative, the child soldier's mind flashes back to the past as he tries to take in the sheer devastation of the war. The phrase "Before the war" starts (and occurs repeatedly in) any of his wistful comment on how things were prior to the war vis-à-vis the present destruction. Cities and villages that used to be bustling with activity are no more than shadows of their former selves. Witness how he remembers the pleasantness of life in an ancient city:

Before the troubles, the yard echoed with life: children playing in giggling starts, mothers shouting gossip at each other, men sitting on benches playing checkers and drinking beer, music spilling out of rooms mixing with smells from the kitchens, giving the courtyard extra spice. . . . It was deserted. Most of the neighbors were dead or fled south to safety. [74-5]

The pattern of remembering, in addition to adding to the acuteness of My Luck's trauma encounters, betokens the psychological miseries of a man bending beneath the yoke of a gruesomely weighty past. Interestingly, he enacts what Pierre Janet calls "narrative memory" as against "traumatic memory". According to the psychiatrist "narrative memory" consists in narrating the past as past whereas "traumatic memory" points to the conscious, and unconscious repeating of the past (Qtd. in Leys 105). In the case of My Muck, there is a distressing pattern of reliving in memory a few episodes of traumatic scenes and personal trauma exposure. Recollections of antebellum life (which is remote in time) allows him to get a sense of the staggeringly trail of devastation left by the troubles as well as pointing to the impossibility of closure. Importantly, the youngster experiences a seesaw of unpleasant and happy memories: "Before the hate, before the war, I was in love with a little girl on my street, Aminatu, who gave me toffees from the jar on the counter in her mother's shop" [117]. Through My Luck's remembering, we learn that losses incurred as a result of the madness of war may prove to be somewhat beyond repair. At one time in the story, he feels empty as he despondently reflects on what the battlefield has made of him. He laments: "I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful of killing. If it would help, I would cry, but tears are useless" [117-118]. My Luck's distressing reflections on the toll that war has exacted on him sit with Cathy Caruth's point that trauma brings on life-long impact: "The story of trauma, then as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from-the escape from death, or from telling of an escape from its referential-rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (UC, 7). By the same token, Michael Humphrey's description of the far-reaching ravages of war says a mouthful:

War involves the destruction of people and their worlds. It involves laying waste life and property. And when the war is over its legacies live on in personal memories, bodily scars and destroyed cultural landscapes. People and landscapes remain contaminated by war for the long term" [49].

Harking back to the meaning of remembering trauma, Judith Hermann makes great play of its healing properties. She contends that telling the story of one's trauma is crucial to morphing "traumatic memory" into "narrative memory": "The survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. The work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (Qtd. in Leys 105). My Luck revisits every step of the way the earth-watering events that triggered the wounding of his psyche. The memories of man-made madness that he witnessed resist being pent-up.

Much as the child soldier suffers no end the dehumanizing effects of war, he is bloody resourceful. The experience of war, traumatic though it was, gave him a strong character steeped in courage and self-reliance. His rock-solid fighting spirit means that he does not allow himself to wallow in self-pity. The litany of raw deals from life does not get him down. Rather, he always manages to pick himself up from the floor and move on. His bouncebackability and resourcefulness shine through the coping strategies he devises to keep a threat (real or perceived) at bay. The battlefield has decidedly taught him a lesson. On at least two occasions he, indeed, displayed a remarkable sense of self-possession and pluck in the face of danger so as to escape undue harm. He gives the reader cast-iron proof of his military maturity cum credentials when he, unemotionally, recounts how he was able to get the upper hand over a man who had a mind to stage an attempt on his life [76]. He showed a similar bold precautionary step to disarm a man with ill intent [102]. That war has the potential for fashioning a child soldier into developing an adult's mindset is par for the course. In David B. Pillemer's judgment, children's active involvement in an armed conflict is in some regards formative. And trauma recall can be a blessing in disguise:

The memory of a life-threatening encounter can serve a directive function: it captures in vivid detail what is safe and what is to be avoided in the future. . . . It would be understandable for a child who was abducted at a young age to deliberately take precautions, rational or extreme, to secure his own safety and, much later in life, the safety of his own children. These precautionary activities may be triggered by conscious, detailed recollections of the past trauma; what sort of current situation will trigger a precautionary response may be determined in part by its surface similarity to the circumstances of the original trauma. [18]

To be sure, the fallout from trauma exposure is manifold and far-reaching. By the same token, there is many a way to work through it. A victim of a traumatic encounter-whether it be a child or an adult- always looks over his shoulder. The survivor's astounding inability to concentrate on the here and now resides in memory. The past informs the thinking and behaviour of the trauma survivor. The trauma is all the more searing as he oftentimes finds it way difficult to put his gruesome experience into words. My Luck keeps giving pointers to the impossibility of language to articulate personal experience. One case in point is the scene where he describes his sense of cowardice in hiding in a ceiling while his mother is being killed below. The following belies the supposed power of language to help voice a lived experience:

I watch what happens below me and I am grateful that I can smell, smell my smell and live while below me it happens, it happens that night bright as day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched, and I cannot speak something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it […] [29]

Arguably, My Luck suffers a double wound, that is, traumatic and moral. The moral dimension of his travails resides in him not feeling equal to narrating it, therein also lies the injustice that he is on the receiving end of in the first place. Indeed, twentieth-century French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard frames injustice in terms of silence. Wrong is meted out to anyone who for one reason or another is reduced to speechlessness:

This is what a wrong (tort) would be: a damage (dommage) accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his liberties or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify to the damage or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority. [5]

Lyotard's submission that "Every injustice must be able to be phrased" [17] is qualified by his consciousness about the incommensurability of language when it comes to bearing witness to trauma:

In the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human being who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanied silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom) that what remains to be phrased, exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not exist yet. [13]

Chris Abani's artistry in Song for Night lies in his graphic portrayal of the madness of war, with all its attendant psychic wounds; at the same time, he posits that war is not altogether devoid of a scrap of love. My Luck's functionality despite what he underwent in terms of physical and psychological suffering betokens the sense of resilience of child soldiers and, more significantly, perhaps, their enactment of agency in the face of adversity. My Luck's feeling of kinship and, ultimately, sexual entanglement with Ijeoma is revealing. He uses Ijeoma as a shoulder to cry on, as a kind of protective gear against adversity. He says with a hint of sadness that he had sexual experience prior to encountering Ijeoma. In the same breath, he dismisses this casual sex as inconsequential, for he raped his partner at the behest of John Wayne. Conversely, his sexual encounter with Ijeoma was true love as it was consensual [44]. At the end of the story, My Luck is reunited with his mother in an afterlife–"My Luck, My Luck […] you are home" [137]–, which points to the dismissal of the boy's frantic search for his platoon as a fool's errand. Also, this scene coincides with the protagonist's retrieval of the power of speech, "'Mother,'" I say, and my voice has returned" [137]. While it may be beyond my ken to read something clear-cut into the reunion, this much is certain-the mother's rise from the dead is a deus ex makina. If anything, it makes up for My Luck's deuced failure in his all-out attempt to find his fellow soldiers. Child soldiers subsume their identity in the maelstrom of war.

In the final analysis, A Song for Night is a primer on the working of trauma exposure as an inherent offshoot of the battlefield. Chris Abani delivers a withering indictment of the multifaceted toll exacted by war. War is a most cruel juggernaut that de-socializes and dehumanizes, and, more significantly perhaps, the resultant trauma has the potential for leaving actors scarred for life. Life-long trauma and irretrievable loss of identity go with the territory of war. The young narrator's experience on the front line brings into bold relief the harrowing lot of child soldiers whose conscription into armed conflict defies logic. The complexity of working through trauma stands out in clear relief in the child narrator's woes. By allowing the reader access into the wounded psyche of My Luck as a child soldier, Chris Abani foregrounds the inhumanity of war, and the outright rejection of the activity of child soldiering as agonizingly unconscionable. The consequences of a child leaving the family cocoon to enter war (whether willingly or by forcibly) are inscribed on the body in pain of a child soldier.

## References


1. Abani, Chris. Song for Night. London: Telegram, 2016 (new ed.).
2. Alexander Jeffrey C. *et al*. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2004.
3. Baumeister F, Kathleen D Vohs. "Four Roots of Evil" in Miller, Arthur G. (ed.) The Social Psychology of Good and Evil. New York: The Guilford Press, 2004.
4. Blum Harold P. "Psychic Trauma and Traumatic Object Loss". Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association. 51/2:415-431.
5. Brown Laura S. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspectives on Psyche Trauma". Trauma: Explorations in Memory.
6. Butler Judith. Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence. London: Verso, 2004.
7. Caruth Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
8. Trauma: Explorations in Memory. [ed. With introduction by Cathy Caruth]. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
9. Craps Stef, Gert Buelens. "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels". Studies in the Novel. 2008; 40(1/2):1-12.
10. Craps Stef. Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds. England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.
11. Homi Bhabha. The Location of Culture. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2004.
12. Hosang JFR. Boddens. Rules of Engagement and the International Law of Military Operations. Oxford, Londond: Oxford University Press, 2020.
13. Humphrey Michael. The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From Terror to Trauma. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
14. Janoff-Bulman Ronnie. Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
15. Leys Ruth. Trauma: A Genealogy. Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2000.
16. Luci Monica. Torture, Psychoanalysis and Human Rights. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.
17. Pillemer David B. Momentous Events, Vivid Memories: How unforgettable moments help us understand the meaning of our lives. Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 2000 (new edition)
18. Rolley John AG. A Basic and Scriptural study on Faith. Australia: Traillblazer Ministries, 1983.

19. Steinl Leonie. Child Soldiers as Agents of War and Peace: A Restorative Transitional Justice Approach TO Accountability for Crimes Under International Law. The Hague, Netherlands: Asser Press, 2017.
20. Wilberforce, William. A Practical View of Humanity. [Intr. By Charles Colson]. Massachussets: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996