"Body of a Lion, Head of a Soldier": The Grotesque in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*

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Abstract

Beasts of No Nation (2005) is a novel that invites attention to the plight of child soldiers. The protagonist of the novel, Agu, enjoyed an ideal life as a child with his family and always wished to go through traditional initiation as well as formal education before he was forcibly enlisted as a child soldier. At the battlefront, Agu engages in different types of violence and suffers various forms of abuse, which do not only cause him to lose his childhood but also his humanity, depictions of which draw the narrative into the mode of the grotesque. This article looks at how Uzodinma Iweala creates the picture of the child soldier through animal and bodily images to bring out the ambivalent nature of the child soldier as one caught between life and death, human and beast as well as between child and adult, through the grotesque, which brings up new concepts that are between life and death, fantasy and reality. The paper argues that the grotesque is of central importance to Iweala's treatment of his central subject, namely, distorted personal development as a result of war. That is, the grotesque is not a chosen mode, but it is the inhuman depiction of the child soldier that draws the narrative into the grotesque mode.

Keywords: grotesque; child soldier; Uzodinma Iweala; *Beasts of No Nation*

Introduction

Beasts of No Nation (2005) is the debut novel of the Nigerian-American writer, Uzodinma Iweala. The novel was published by Harper Collins in 2005 and won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for best work of literature by a young writer. *Beasts of No Nation* tells the story of Agu, a boy who is displaced in a war-torn country and is forced to become a child soldier. The story begins *in medias res* when Agu's father is killed by rebel soldiers who also capture Agu and send him to their camp, but then flashes back

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to give an account of Agu's family life before the war. The flashback reveals Agu as a boy who lived in a Christian home with his father, a schoolteacher, his mother and sister. There is talk of war and the sounds of gunfire, initially only at a distance. As the civil war gets closer, a UN van arrives at the village to take the villagers to safety, but the men stay back and allow the women and children to board the van. Agu's mother and sister board the van but his father insists Agu stays back with the men in the village. In the confusion of a shootout, Agu's father runs to the bush with him but is killed while Agu is captured by the rebel soldiers under a Commandant who asks him to choose between death and becoming a child soldier. Without any proper understanding of what it means to become a child soldier, Agu chooses to become one for fear of being killed. At the battlefront, Agu is initiated into the violence of war and he takes part in the killing of captured soldiers and civilians, rape and looting. As a model child, beloved by his parents and his schoolteacher, Mistress Gloria, Agu is presented in continuous tension between the demands of his child-soldier experience and his life before the war. His desire to leave the army finally comes true when Rambo, one of the child soldiers, leads a successful revolt against the Commandant and is able to kill him. On their way to escape, Agu's best friend, Strika, dies. Agu is found and taken to a rehabilitation camp under the care of an American therapist, Amy, who invites him to share his thoughts and feelings, and as Agu tells her about his experience of war, Amy cannot help crying.

Beasts of No Nation has received much critical attention in the form of articles and book reviews that mostly miss the novel's representation of distorted personal development that pushes the narrative into the mode of the grotesque. Some of these scholars are of the view that the novel is a representation of trauma. Others are interested in its representation of human rights abuses while still others argue that it is a representation of the deformation of the African *bildungsroman* that indexes a loss of humanity. The style of the novel is very striking, and most critics have analysed stylistic elements in the novel as will be outlined below.

Critics have argued that the novel represents the loss not only of childhood, but also humanity. According to Gehrmann (2011, 34), *Beasts of No Nation* presents children "caught between childhood and adulthood and at the same time points to the difficulties of human communication." She believes that the concerns with language and the theme of the loss of humanity through war are major questions in *Beasts of No Nation*. For Allison Mackey (2013), *Beasts of No Nation* is a meditation on the loss of humanity on a local as well as global scale. She argues that Agu's growth has been stunted. He is denied the opportunity to become a man in the cultural ways of his village and has gone from boy to beast instead of from boy to man: "A particularly stark coming-of-age story, *Beasts of No Nation* highlights the oxymoronic nature of the figure of a 'child' who is also a 'soldier'" (Mackey 2013, 109). According to Moynagh (2011), the trope of human personality development is held out largely to be negated by the corrupt world in which child-soldier characters live. To her, in *Beasts of No Nation*, this problem is thematised through Agu's meditations on the fate of his childhood which has been destroyed without making him an adult. Moynagh believes that, in emphasising the interrupted

development of the child soldier, the novel foregrounds the crisis for human personhood that necropolitics (the sovereign power over life and death) represents. For Schultheis (2008), *Beasts of No Nation* shares many features of the novel of individual subject formation and socialisation as it adheres to the expected trajectory of the *bildungsroman*.

Critics who analyse the novel's representation of human rights include Hron (2008), Schultheis (2008) and Gehrmann (2011). Hron (2008) argues that the novel poignantly presents the violation of children's rights and the dehumanisation of children from human beings to "animals" and finally to "this thing." According to Schultheis, the novel draws the reader's attention to the "problem" of speaking, of constructing and bridging cultural difference and of speaking on or from the edges of representability. Schultheis further argues that the figure of the child soldier embodies a contradiction—at once vulnerable and violent, victim and perpetrator, innocent and knowing—it appears to call forth the failure of the promise of law and politics. For Gehrmann (2011, 33), the novel represents child soldiers as "victims who become culprits; they are ambivalent, caught in an ambiguous state between innocence and guilt."

There are yet other scholars who argue that the novel is a representation of trauma. These scholars include Nabutanyi (2013), Gehrmann (2011) and West-Pavlov (2012). Nabutanyi (2012) looks at how the novel employs language to represent trauma without exploiting or cheapening the pain of the victim. To him, the continuous present tense and ungrammatical English, the diction and simple structure of Agu's sentences, all contribute to bringing out the protagonist's fear and trauma. Thus, the style of the novel presents Agu as a traumatised child who needs ready sympathy. For Gehrmann (2011), the novel is a successful literary attempt to give voice and a language to trauma, though this is not to say that any fictional account can speak for actual child soldiers or represent their experiences completely. Gehrmann argues that *Beasts of No Nation* is a story about the loss of human language and "the concern with language […] reflects an overall difficulty of finding an adequate form of enunciation for the expression of traumatic war experiences through literature as a space of negotiation" (Gehrmann 2011, 43). For West-Pavlov (2012), in *Beasts of No Nation*, the impossibility of encoding traumatic experiences within memory is dramatised by the use of the continuous present tense in the narrative that preserves an eternal ongoing present for trauma. For West-Pavlov, many of the novel's stylistic devices, alongside the use of the continuous present tense, can be accounted for by the mechanism of traumatic "acting out" that accompanies the experience of something that remains unrepresentable.

On the question of narrative mode, there are a few critics who have commented on the non-realist style of *Beasts of No Nation* and its effect on its theme. Rosen and Rosen (2012, 308) argue that the fact that the story unfolds both everywhere and nowhere, with no history and no reference to any current event, makes it a comic nightmare allegory that does not construct a familiar realist world. According to West-Pavlov (2012), the disrupted narrative style of the novel is a mimetic replication of a child whose abruptly

terminated education gives him a limited purchase upon English. This also acts as a form of postmodern attention to the materiality of language that further points to the fact that the novel is not realist. According to Kearney (2010), Iweala's use of memory and fantasy to convey the effects on Agu of his child-soldier experiences helps to portray Agu in continuous tension between the demands of his sensitive conscience and the corrupting influences of his child-soldier existence. According to Tunca (2014), both *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation* challenge "the conventions of literary realism as their narrative strategy, emphatically spurn[ing] the rules of mimesis." To her, Iweala's most overt challenge to realism "lies in his creation of an invented idiom for his first person narrator." This shows that some critics have identified the novel as non-realist. However, none of these scholars identifies the grotesque mode, which for me is the dominant mode of novel.

Even though *Beasts of No Nation* has received a lot of critical attention in the form of articles and book reviews, these mostly miss the novel's representation of distorted personal development that pushes the narrative into the mode of the grotesque. Also, even though some scholars have discussed the novel's representation of disrupted growth, none of this scholarship has discussed the grotesque as a consequence of the perversion of normal development or *bildung*. The grotesque, I argue, is of central importance to Iweala's treatment of his central subject, namely, distorted personal development as a result of war. In the section that follows, I discuss the grotesque, after which I discuss how Iweala's narration of the child-soldier experience shifts the novel into the mode of the grotesque.

The Grotesque: Origins and Debates

The word "grotesque" is derived from the Italian *la grottesca* and *grottesco* and refers to a grotto or a cave. The word was coined to designate a certain ornamental style that came to light during the late fifteenth-century excavations of the Domus Aurea of Nero, first in Rome and then in other parts of Italy as well, and which turned out to constitute a hitherto unknown ancient form of ornamental painting (Clayborough 1965; Kayser 1981). The term was first used to describe art and architecture, but later came to be used in literary circles. In literature, its characters are either physically or spiritually deformed, and perform abnormal actions. It exaggerates the inappropriate, degrades objects and the body and focuses on characters, oftentimes physically or spiritually deformed, performing abnormal actions. The Renaissance used the grotesque as something worrying and evil, the face of a world totally different from the familiar, a world in which the realm of inanimate things is not separated from those of plants, animals and human beings. Grotesque ornamentation often features plant-animal-human hybrids.

One extensive meditation on the grotesque is offered by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in his observations on the combination of the comic and tragic spirit in François Rabelais' sixteenth-century French Renaissance novels on medieval folk culture, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. In his analysis of these books, Bakhtin came up with the

characteristics of what he calls the carnivalesque-grotesque in his work *Rabelais and His World* (1984). Bakhtin traces the origin of the grotesque in popular festivities of the carnival from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period that worked temporarily to abandon "the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 1984, 9–10). Thompson (as quoted in Dombrowski 2011), posits that the first literary as opposed to ornamental or sculptural reference to the term "grotesque" was in the sixteenth century when Rabelais used it in connection with the body.

Key thinkers of this mode, apart from Bakhtin, include Arthur Clayborough, Philip Thompson and Wolfgang Kayser, all of whom offer similar as well as different ideas on the grotesque to that of Bakhtin. Even though Kayser is arguably the first person to write extensively on the grotesque, he did not give any clear definition for the term but instead offered several qualities of the mode which overlap with the ideas of Bakhtin (1984), Clayborough (1965) and Thomson (1972).

Like Bakhtin, Kayser sees the grotesque as the fusion of human and non-human elements in the playful destruction of symmetry and in the greater destruction of size. He understands the grotesque as something not only playfully gay and carelessly fantastic but also ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate things is not separated from those of plants, animals and human beings and "where the laws of statistics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid" (Kayser 1981, 21). For Kayser, the grotesque contradicts the very laws that rule our familiar world. As such, several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque. We smile at the deformations but are disgusted by the horrible and monstrous elements. The basic feeling is one of surprise and horror, an agonising fear in the presence of a world that breaks apart and remains inaccessible. Kayser's analyses of the grotesque, though similar to that of Bakhtin, do not dwell so much on body parts as Bakhtin does.

Although the grotesque has undergone several transitions, most of these characteristics in literature have remained unchanged. The key characteristics of the grotesque that almost all these scholars emphasise are that, as a mode, the grotesque combines the comic and the horrific and abounds in sexual overtones as well as vulgarity and bawdy language. Its characters and themes are determined by the ugly, the supernatural and the monstrous. There is great emphasis on body parts and sensual images of the body, references to spirits and ghosts, animal metaphors and images of degradation. The distortion of persons and objects, the fusion of the fearsome and the ludicrous and the amalgamation of incompatibles in the grotesque infuses in the reader a sense of dislocation and insecurity.

Even though the term "grotesque" did not originate in Africa, the concept is not foreign to African cultures. Its elements manifest in folktales where there are references to hybrid monsters as well as the blending of horror and humour. For instance, among the

Akans of Ghana, the monster *Sasabonsam* is a popular character in folktales and is mostly portrayed as punishing disobedient children. Besides the feature of hybrid monsters, the human body also has a great significance in African culture, since it is a prototype of society. Social order is represented symbolically by the body and thus a malfunctioning of the body or parts of the body points to disorder in society (Veit-Wild 2006). Scholars such as Achille Mbembe have written about the grotesque in relation to the power and performance of the elite. According to Mbembe (1992, 6), the grotesque is used as a means of "erecting, ratifying, or deconstructing particular regimes of violence and domination." This means that to Mbembe, the grotesque is an ambiguous concept that can create power as well as deconstruct power, while for Bakhtin, the grotesque is always anti-authority. According to Bakhtin, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that undermine officialdom by exposing its arbitrary and perishable character. For Rita Barnard, "to write about the grotesque in the context of postcolonial Africa is to enter into a lively debate about power, aesthetics, and the circulation of signs" (Barnard 2004, 284). African writers such as Zakes Mda have made use of the mode to compel readers "to contemplate one of the most striking thresholds of recent history—the demise of the apartheid regime" (Barnard 2004, 279). However, in *Beasts of No Nation* the grotesque is not used to question power and performance in the postcolony as found in the African writers discussed in this section. Instead, it is a consequence of the horrible perversion and distortion of personal development through war. This will be discussed in the section below.

Distorted Personal Development and the Grotesque Mode

In this section, I discuss *Beasts of No Nation* as a grotesque novel and how the novel shifts into the mode of the grotesque. I argue that the grotesque mode is the consequence of a macabre reality for which the precepts of formal realism are inappropriate. A major impetus for the shift into the grotesque is the aberrant personal development of the child soldier. The protagonist is taken through an initiation that defies the moral precepts of all cultures in the context of war where he is taught the horrors of perpetrating murder, rape and brutality while he also suffers the abuse of hunger, deprivation and sodomy. The perversity of the initiation of the child produces the stimulus that forces the narrative into the grotesque mode.

The protagonist of the novel, Agu, is portrayed as a child who has an ideal life before he is recruited as a child soldier. Agu is a child who is loved and cared for by his father, a schoolteacher and his mother, a staunch Christian. Agu's life before the war is portrayed to provide a sharp contrast with his life as a child soldier. He is a boy who loves education and is anxious to go to school. At school, Agu was the smartest person in his class. He is so brilliant that he skips one class. He takes all his lessons seriously, to the admiration of his class teacher, Mistress Gloria, who was always telling him, "Agu make sure you study book enh? If you are studying hard you can be going to the university to be Doctor or Engineer" (Iweala 2005, 28). Agu is also admired by his friends because all the other "children were thinking that I am nice boy and also I am

the best at all the games and all the lessons we are learning. So they were liking me and wanting to be my friend" (29). Apart from formal education, Agu also wished to go through the traditional initiation of his village. The ceremony is so colourful that he cannot wait to be of age to go through it. During this traditional initiation, the chief teaches the initiates good moral values that will make them responsible adults in their society.

However, Agu misses both the opportunity to be initiated the traditional way and the opportunity for formal education, as he is enlisted as a child soldier. His experience of war thus becomes his form of initiation and education, though aberrant. Contrary to the traditional initiation in Agu's village, the Commandant, who is the "chief" in the context of war initiation, teaches the "initiates" how to kill. Unlike the chief of Agu's village who teaches the initiates to control violence, the Commandant teaches Agu how to kill a human being. He teaches him how to hold the machete and he "is squeezing my hand around the handle of the machete and I am feeling the wood in my finger and my palm. It is just like killing goat. Just bring this hand up and knock him well well. He is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of enemy's head and I am feeling like electricity is running through my whole body" (2005, 21). While the Commandant, the chief in the context of initiation into war, teaches Agu how to kill, his other "initiates" engage in their maniac laughter, "KEHI KEHI," foregrounding the macabre humour of the grotesque. The village initiation ceremony is aimed at instilling good social and moral values in the initiates in order for them to be responsible in their new status as adults, while formal education is designed to equip the individual with knowledge and skills that will enable him to function well in society. Agu misses both ways of becoming an adult. Instead, he is initiated into the violence of war which is meaningless. Thus, Agu goes through a perverted form of initiation that fails to make him an adult the traditional way or knowledgeable in Western formal education. Instead of going through traditional initiation to be transformed into a man and human, he receives initiation through war that turns him into a "beast." Thus, the war does not only cause Agu to lose his childhood but also his humanity. His experience of war is so appalling that its portrayal causes the narrative to slide into the mode of the grotesque, as will be discussed below.

Beasts of No Nation is an example of what Flora Veit-Wild has called "writing madness in the post-colony" (Veit-Wild 2006, 88). This madness, according to Veit-Wild, "expresses itself frequently through images of the grotesque body; carnivalesque parody and travesty serve to mock, contort and subvert figurations of colonial or postcolonial violence. Mad writing cannot be anything but violent writing" (Veit-Wild 2006, 4). Iweala does this through the obscene speech of the grotesque body and the comic distortion of reality. The novel is replete with acts of violence against children and violence perpetrated by children to an extent that defies any objective realism. To the protagonist, the grotesque manifests in the appearance of the characters who contribute to the destruction of his dreams and in his own acts of violence. According to Quayson (2001, 192), "the African postcolony, especially under the violent condition of its birth,

often produced multiple narratives, some of which were not amenable to any simple explanation." Tunca (2014, 146) is therefore right when she argues that *Beasts of No Nation* deploys "stylistic strategies that overtly challenge the conventions of realism" as it wrestles "with the conundrum of how to put into words experiences that can hardly be described or grasped in any human language" (2014, 150). For Harrow (2013, 4), the novel questions the possibility of "conveying to the reader an event whose excessiveness defies the language of representation." The grotesque is a concept that allows the representation of the culturally unimaginable, in the case of *Beasts of No Nation*, the aberrant development of the child, not into adulthood, but into a monster.

Beasts of No Nation depicts the social reality of the child soldier using satire, the amalgamation of the horrific and the comic, sexual overtones, vulgarity and bawdy language, all of which are stylistic elements suggestive of the grotesque. Its characters and themes are determined by the ugly, the supernatural and the monstrous. There is great emphasis on body parts and sensual images of the body, references to spirits and ghosts, animal metaphors and images of degradation. There is also the merging of the fearsome and the comic that produces a sense of disorder and anxiety in the reader. The reader is fascinated by the bizarre and changing images but is at the same time disgusted by them.

Foregrounding the body is a significant dimension of the grotesque that highlights the materiality of existence and undoes the Enlightenment binary that places the mind above the body. In the opening paragraphs of *Beasts of No Nation*, the central character senses his own experiences and knows himself through his body, albeit a body that is made to suffer. If, as according to Agu's Christian upbringing, "in the beginning was the word," in the war-time experience, in the beginning is the body in discomfort and the body in pain: "It is starting like this" (Iweala 2005, 1). Agu goes on to describe his sensations through a detailed indexing of the parts of his body. He feels a crawling on his "skin" and on his "head," a tingling between his "eye[s]" and an itching in his "nose" (1). His existence is made up of a collection of body parts that are troubled. However, it is not only his own experience that is presented through the body. He represents his fellow child soldiers and his oppressive commanders through body images also. Strika, the child soldier who finds Agu and brings him to the camp, has a "yellow eye," a "short dark body with one big belly and leg thin like spider's own" and "his neck is just struggling too much to hold up his big head that is always moving one way or another" (2). This description shows a child who has suffered hunger and degradation for a long time. Thus, right from the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the grotesque body that is in pain.

The body in pain is juxtaposed with the body that causes pain, portrayed in the description of the Commandant to show how warlords abuse children in times of war for their own selfish gains. The Commandant, Agu's oppressor, "is just very big even though this war is coming to make most men small children and children small like baby. He is so tall that looking at him is like climbing tree, so big that if he is standing

next to you, then his shadow is blocking the sun" (33). Other bodily descriptions of the Commandant, however, show him as a monster. His yellow teeth are not well arranged in his mouth "with gap[s] here and there. His gum is black and his eye is red. His nose is coming out into a very round bulb at the tip which is sticking over his fat brown lip" (7). His forehead is described as shiny; his big nose covers his whole face and even his top lip is covered with a mustache and he has a big black beard. This description of the Commandant is reminiscent of descriptions of monsters in folktales, as are his actions in the novel. If the body in grotesque literature generally reverses or undoes the Enlightenment mind/body dichotomy, in *Beasts of No Nation* we see that the war context reduces people to mere bodies, bodies in pain and bodies that cause pain.

These bodily depictions of violence and deprivation are juxtaposed with bodily descriptions of love and care when the novel flashes back to Agu's life before the war. Agu describes the love between himself and his mother using bodily images. "In the evening, I am always sitting on the floor just watching her with her *buttom* sticking high into the air and her *breast* touching her *knee* while she is working to make the kitchen so clean and not even fruit fly is wanting to put its egg inside" (24). The references to buttocks and breasts signify fertility and productivity in times of peace as opposed to the violence of war. As a child who likes reading, Agu is always sitting on his mother's lap on their favourite chair as she opens the pages of books. When she reads, Agu senses her physical presence: "over my shoulder and I am feeling her lip moving in my ear as she was saying each word" (25). Here, the lap symbolises protection, while reading over Agu's shoulder and her lip moving in his ear signify companionship. This pre-war body language is starkly different from the grotesque body language of the war situation. For instance, Agu's mother's body language sharply contrasts with the Commandant's closeness to Agu during the Commandant's acts of sodomy that signify Agu's slavery and the abuse of power on the part of the Commandant. Agu does not "want his finger creeping all over my body. I don't want his tongue to be touching me and feeling like slug should be feeling if it is on your body" (84). Thus, the novel employs images of the body to depict Agu's experience of adults in parental or pseudo-parental roles: the caring mother he had before the war, and the abusive surrogate father in the person of the Commandant. Highlighting the physicality of existence is associated with the grotesque and is exemplified in Iweala's method of presenting disorder and distortion in times of war, which takes away children's childhood and humanity.

Apart from the grotesque body in pain discussed above, the novel abounds in grotesque descriptions of the deformed body that signify how human beings are reduced to the monstrous in the context of war. Human beings are killed and their bodies deformed beyond description. Agu's first victim is, for instance, described as "having deep red cut everywhere and his forehead is looking just crushed so his whole face is not even looking like face because his head is broken everywhere and there is just blood, blood, blood" (21). The body of one soldier whom the Commandant kills for annoying him is also left "on the roadside with one big hole in his head and his eye wide open" (33). There is no respect for dead human beings as they are left to lie uncared for like dead

animals. The body of Luftenant, the soldier who is killed by a prostitute, is dumped into the gutter and the soldiers "are leaving his body for the cat and dog and maggot and worm to eat" (116). When the Commandant who has disturbed the child soldiers for a long time is killed, his body is "looking down to his chest with his whole mouth open like he is screaming" (123). One child soldier also remembers his mother's body blown apart like "meats" hanging from a tree while Strika, Agu's friend, remembers his parents' headless bodies. These and many other references to the mutilated body evoke suffering and deprivation that further heighten the degrading experience of the child soldier as one who has seen, experienced and perpetrated violence. The physical distortion is that of a caricature that confounds the reader's sense of reality and the deformed bodies appear devoid of their humanity. The grotesque style thus heightens the degradation Iweala portrays in the novel.

The degraded body is further portrayed in the novel through scatological images. Davidson (2008) argues that in the grotesque, bodily processes are connected with the intake and output of food, especially urination and defecation. The numerous references to defecation, urinating and vomiting suggest a breakdown of the social order. People ease themselves and vomit both out of pleasure and out of fear. Luftenant is portrayed as "going to toilet" anywhere for pleasure while Agu is so afraid that, "I am wanting to cry and I am feeling I am having to go to toilet" (2005, 9). Again, when he is made to kill his first victim to prove that he is not a spy, his fear makes him feel that he needs to "be going to toilet" (15). The Commandant's acts of violence against his victims are also depicted as making them vomit. He kicks an "enemy man in the stomach very hard and the man is just dropping unto his knee and vomiting all over the ground" (18). When Agu is asked to kill his first victim, he is so afraid that he says, "I am shaking and holding my thing. I am wanting to vomit" (19). While the other victims are lying on the ground in fear and "going to toilet and making the whole air to stink," Agu spits "because there is too much saliva in my mouth" (20). When he is finally able to kill his first victim, he begins "vomiting everywhere. I cannot be stopping myself" (21). In European culture, the manifestation of the body through images and themes related to eating, defecation, death, sex, and drinking were key to the culture's emphasis on equivocal laughter as a means of organising social criticism of institutional doctrines. However, in *Beasts of No Nation*, these images are a result of the violence against children that reduces their bodies to bodies of disgrace and dishonour. The picture of the child soldier that Iweala creates through bodily images brings out the ambivalent nature of the child soldier as one caught between life and death, human and beast as well as between child and adult through the grotesque, which brings up new concepts that are between life and death, fantasy and reality.

The degraded body is further dehumanised by its resemblance to animals, especially nocturnal and creeping animals, as Kayser (1981) has argued. In *Beasts of No Nation*, this is used to depict the extent to which children have been reduced to ontological ambivalence in the context of war since war makes a child develop into a beast instead of developing into an adult. There are references to insects, especially mosquitoes,

disturbing the narrator and his fellow child soldiers. Agu's fears when he is first captured by the rebels make his "body crunch up like one small mouse in the corner when the light is coming on" (Iweala 2005, 1). The Commandant's disrespect for human life is portrayed in the way he looks at him like he is an "ant or some insect like that" (5) and how the Commandant refers to him as one "dead rat" (10). Some of the children are so deformed by the violence and abuse that they do not only look like madmen "but mad horse[s]" (13). The numerous references to mosquitoes in the novel indicate the disturbed nature of the child soldier as well as heighten the degradation the novel portrays. Mosquitoes are nocturnal insects that breed in filth and disturb people's sleep. Iweala's continuous references to them portray the extent of degradation of the society that produces child soldiers and portray the child soldier as one who is constantly disturbed. Throughout the novel, Agu talks about mosquitoes disturbing him. He sees mosquitoes everywhere moving around in circles "like they are also waiting for something. If they are coming near to me, then I am beating them with my hand, but it is not doing anything. There are so many" (14–15). The frequency of the references to nocturnal and creeping animals is therefore symbolic of the disturbed nature of the child soldier while the protagonist's inability to beat away endless mosquitoes is symbolic of the helplessness of the child soldier.

Animal metaphors are also employed by Iweala to depict how violence dehumanises both the victims and the perpetrators. The blending of human and non-human forms has long been a recognised characteristic of grotesque art. In *Beasts of No Nation*, human beings are portrayed as dying like animals and killing a human being is compared to killing an animal. The Commandant for instance does not see any difference between killing a human being and killing a dog. He asks Agu, "[d]o you see this dog! he is shouting. You want to be a soldier enh? Well—kill him" (18). According to him, killing a human being "is just like killing a goat" (21); he also refers to his enemies as dogs. These animal metaphors are employed to depict how the child soldiers' grotesque acts of violence make them lose their humanity. Under the influence of drugs and in the heat of their violent activities, they see each other as animals, since their physical abnormality makes them appear devoid of humanity. For example, on one of their raids, Agu nearly shoots his friend Strika because he "is looking like dog to me" (47). He also admits that his acts of violence make him look like an animal, but he thinks that if he decides to run away from the war, the type of animal that will chase him will be "having the body of lion and the head of soldier" (128), as noted in the title of this paper. He continues to narrate that the animal will be "with helmet and eye that are looking like bullet and teeths that are looking like knife to be chewing me up. Its tail is like gun and its breath like fire that is cooking me well well before it is sitting down to be eating all of the burning part of my body" (128). This wild animal is symbolic of the war, which seems to have become impossible to run away from. The regular references to human beings as animals indicate the extent to which Agu has lost not only his childhood but also his humanity. Thus, the grotesque element of blending human and animal qualities is employed in the novel to show how war can reduce the human being to a monster. This blending of the human and the animal contributes to degradation since human

beings are brought down to the level of animals by mingling with them or presenting behaviours that make them look like animals. In *Beasts of No Nation*, these animal images drawing on the grotesque are symbolic of the primal and violent behaviours of the characters.

Like most grotesque novels, *Beasts of No Nation* combines tragedy and comedy, but with an emphasis on tragedy. The reader observes these characters with a complex feeling of disgust and sympathy. The child soldiers are portrayed as suffering hunger and deprivation, with no adequate clothing and shelter. They suffer from the constant rape by the Commandant and live in perpetual fear of being killed by him. The novel presents the horror of the child soldier's experience vividly to bring out their plight. Agu's friend Strika is so hungry that "he is writing HUNGRY" and Agu wants to say he is hungry too, but he is too weak to speak. Strika is so hungry that he licks his cracking lips till they become red as if he has swallowed "red paint" (37), while Agu's own hunger is an attack: "Hunger is attacking me because I am not eating anything since so long. … sleep is attacking me and I am beginning to think of my village" (40). These ugly experiences together with the violence in which the child soldiers engage and the abuse they suffer make the novel tragic.

However, in the midst of the tragic events, the mode of narration nevertheless makes the novel appear comic, which is the distinction of the grotesque. There are a few incidents and descriptions in the novel that evoke laughter in the midst of the horror. Some of the descriptions are very humorous: Agu says "[i]t is funny to be watching [Commandant] moving also because he is walking like his leg is a wooden pole that is not bending for anything" (33). Even the gravest acts of violence are accompanied by onomatopoeia and similes that bring humour into the tragic events being narrated. Machetes slashing into human flesh come with the "KWUDA KWUDA" sound, followed by the child soldiers' maniacal laughter, "kehi kehi." Agu's killing of his victim is also accompanied by "KPWUD KPWUD" and "KPWUDA KPWUDA." A serious act like sodomy is also narrated as "entering inside of me the way the man goat is sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman and going inside of them" (85). Strika also demonstrates the Commandant's act of sodomy by drawing a "picture in the mud of man bending down with his hand on the ground and gun and bullet shooting up his buttom" (85). *Beasts of No Nation* can thus be said to be a comic nightmare allegory, as has been established by Rosen and Rosen (2012) discussed above. The portrayal of the Commandant, with all the qualities of a comic book villain who is not interested in power, money, or land but kills for the sake of killing and for his own lust and amusement, heightens the comic aspect of the novel. But his acts also appear tragic, highlighting the ambiguity of the grotesque. Thus, Iweala's creation of scenes that seem tragic but laughable in effect is to give a comic relief to the reader in the midst of the horror. The grotesque style thus reduces the tension of the reader as he/she reads the horrific, often unimaginable, child-soldier story.

References to spirits or ghosts in grotesque novels are signs of spiritual deformity or even madness. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque presents a degrading from the abstract or spiritual to the earthly, material human life. It "involves taking that which is sublime, spiritual, noble, honourable, etc, and undermining it in such a way as to make it appear revolting, degraded, and disgusting" (1984, 19–20). And the motion of the action is always downwards, going from good to bad, to worse, to worst (Davidson 2008). In the novel, human beings are degraded to animals, beasts and finally "things." In *Beasts of Nation*, these images of spirits and madness are employed to show the degradation of the notion of childhood, which is characterised by innocence, to that of abuse, violence and deprivation. Agu's friend Strika is so engulfed in the violence that he is "looking like spirit or demon. His skin is looking somehow like burned-up wood or charcoal and it is sticking tight to his face so his whole cheek is sticking out sharp sharp" (2005, 80). For Agu, his experiences make him spiritually deformed in a way that is only comparable to madness, as he sees dead bodies everywhere. The image of childhood is degraded from one of happiness and innocence to one of violence and rejection while the image of the soldier is degraded from pride to shame. Agu's memory of soldiers in his village marching in their beautiful uniforms is degraded to that of soldiers without any proper uniforms engaging in forms of unthinkable violence. The grotesque is thus a way of portraying the degradation of human values in times of war.

Conclusion

In *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala represents the experience of the African child soldier whose childhood has been destroyed through war. Through excessive use of bodily images, Iweala presents the violence perpetrated against and by the African child soldier, who is caught between innocence and guilt. The novel is thus a story of perverted initiation and education since both concepts are frustrated in the novel. Traditional initiation is designed to move the child into adulthood and to distinguish the man from the "beast," while formal education is designed to equip the individual with knowledge and skills that will enable him to function well in society. However, the debauched initiation and education through war that Agu receives cause him to develop into a "beast." This is captured through the metaphors of animals such as dogs, horses and insects, discussed above. These grotesque elements in the narrative capture the perversion of norms. I have argued that in *Beasts of No Nation* the grotesque is not a chosen mode, but rather a mode into which the narrative is forced. It is the depictions of the unspeakable, unimaginable and unthinkable war-time violence, which causes the child soldiers to lose not only their childhood but their humanity, that shifts the narrative into the non-realist narrative mode of the grotesque.

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