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Victims of Victims: The Concept of Victimhood in Two War Memoirs of the Sierra Leonean Civil War

Abstract

This research analyzes the portrayal and view of war victimhood in the genre of war stories and remembrance using two firsthand accounts of the Sierra Leonean Civil War.

Keywords

War, Conflict, Memoirs, Victims, War Stories

Disciplines

African History | Modern Literature | Social History

Comments

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Victims of Victims: The Concept of Victimhood in Two War Memoirs of
the Sierra Leonean Civil War

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On 23 March 1991, the small West African nation of Sierra Leone ignited in a brutal civil war. A Sierra Leonean rebel army invaded from Liberia to overthrow the national government.¹ In January 1993, twelve-year-old Ishmael Beah left his village in southwestern Sierra Leone with his older brother and his best friend to participate in a talent show in the neighboring community; he never saw his village again.² After running for their lives from rebel attacks, Beah and his companions were abducted by government forces to become child soldiers in early 1994. Beah had just turned 13 years old.³

Five years later, in 1999, 12-year-old Mariatu Kamara survived a rebel attack, only to be captured by boy soldiers. Before releasing her, they cut off her hands. Kamara then spent the remaining years of the civil war in an amputee camp in the Sierra Leonean capital, Freetown, before emigrating to Canada.⁴ Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* and Kamara's memoir *The Bite of the Mango* detail harrowing war experiences. They reveal two sides of the same civil war: one of a combatant and one of a civilian. The memoirs also complicate the definition and portrayal of victimhood in war literature, culture, and memory. They demonstrate how the line between victim and perpetrator can shift during a conflict and how violence can be perpetuated throughout a war by both belligerents and victims.

The Sierra Leonean Civil War is one of the most violent and bloody conflicts in Africa of the late-20th century. The 11 years of brutality between the Sierra Leonean government forces and the rebel army of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) ravaged the nation. Supported by the Liberian rebel commander Charles Taylor, the RUF marched into Sierra Leone to overthrow

¹ Samuel Momodu, "The Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002)," Global African History, *Blackpast*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/sierra-leone-civil-war-1991-2002/>.

² Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007) 6.

³ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 100.

⁴ Mariatu Kamara and Susan McClelland, *The Bite of the Mango*, (USA: Annick Press, 2008) 39-40.

the tumultuous government of President Joseph Momah in 1991. They accused Momah of corruption and disregard for the nation's citizens. At the beginning of the war, the RUF gained control of the diamond-rich territory in eastern and southern Sierra Leone. Both the Sierra Leonean government and RUF armies financed the civil war using the "blood diamonds" harvested by forced laborers throughout the country.⁵ The African continental community tried to intervene, but its forces could not assuage the massive violence and crimes against humanity. Mass executions, torture, butchering, rapes, and mutilation of civilians were common practices of both belligerents throughout the civil war. These horrendous acts were often perpetrated by soldiers no older than 15 or 16 years old.

The RUF army was the first to utilize child soldiers during the conflict. The governmental forces copied the strategy after a military coup ousted Momah in 1992. While some of the children voluntarily joined the ranks, the vast majority were violently forced to become soldiers. The children were beaten, verbally or sexually abused, and cajoled to kill civilians, including their own families, to prove their loyalty. Beah wrote of a lieutenant's speech to the young boys before they were forced into the ranks:

Some of you are here because they [RUF] have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place. Well, it is not safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe....so we need the help of able boys and men to fight these rebels. This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families.... Tomorrow morning you must all line up here, and we will select people for various tasks that have to be carried out.⁶

The next day, as Beah stood in line, the lieutenant began to indoctrinate the young boys:

They [rebels] have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil.

⁵ Momodu, "The Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002)," <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/sierra-leone-civil-war-1991-2002/>.

⁶ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 106.

It is the highest service you can perform for your country.... We must kill them all. We must make sure they never walk this earth again.⁷

The children immediately began training to carry and fire AK-47s and military drilling. They were also supplied with alcohol and drugs, primarily cocaine, to “boost” their energy and take away moral inhibitions when faced with battle and executing civilians. This method was used by both the RUF and Sierra Leonean governmental forces.⁸ Beah described his first experience in combat:

I have never been so afraid to go anywhere in my life as I was that day... I lay there with my gun pointed in front of me, unable to shoot.....I couldn't think, but I could hear the sounds of the guns far away in the distance and the cries of people dying in pain.....A splash of blood hit my face...I had opened my mouth a bit, so I tasted some blood. As I spat it outI saw the soldier it had come from. Blood poured out of the bullet holes in him like water rushing through newly opened tributaries.....I heard Josiah [a friend] scream.....An RPG had tossed his tiny body off the ground and he had landed on a tree stump. He wiggled his legs as his cry gradually came to an end.....There were tears in [his eyes] and his lips were shaking.....He reached for my shoulder as if he wanted to hold it and pull himself up.... I turned toward the swamp, where there were gunmen running, trying to cross over. My face, my hands, my shirt and gun were covered with blood. I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man.⁹

Beah remained in the government forces looting villages and killing both rebels and civilians until January 1996, when he and the other boys were rescued by a UNICEF rehabilitation organization. Though initially hostile towards the staff, Beah was eventually released from the facility and migrated to the United States, where he became an advocate for former child soldiers and child-victims of war. It is estimated that 15,000 to 20,000 children were violently coerced into the governmental, RUF, or other militia armies during the Sierra Leonean Civil War. The repercussions of these traumatizing war experiences continue to affect the Sierra

⁷ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 108.

⁸ UNICEF. “Children Recruited by Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” Child Protection, December 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>.

⁹ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 117-119.

Leonean youth, as former child soldiers struggle with drug and alcohol addiction, economic instability, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and alienation or condemnation from their communities.¹⁰

Ishmael Beah's memoir demonstrates the unique and harrowing victimhood of child soldiers during the war. However, these victims were responsible for most of the war crimes committed against civilian Sierra Leoneans. Beah's war experiences complicate the traditional definition of victim and perpetrator. Beah and his fellow boy soldiers were victimized perpetrators. Aristotle defined war victims as those "that may have been involved, as either agents or sufferers, in some deed of horror." This would include both the soldiers who carry out the killings and the soldiers or civilians who are the targets of those actions.¹¹ Sierra Leonean civilian and memoirist Mariatu Kamara was an eyewitness and survivor of war victim-perpetrators: the boy soldiers of the RUF army.

In mid-1999, 12-year-old-Kamara and her village, Magborou, experienced numerous attacks by rebel soldiers. A neighborhood guard would alert the 200 residents if the army was spotted, and the villagers would flee to the bushlands surrounding the area. As Kamara and her family camped outside the village after one such raid, she was told to fetch more supplies in Magborou. They believed the RUF traveled to another area.¹² Before Kamara and her siblings reached their town, they were attacked in the neighboring village through which they were passing. The soldiers tied Kamara to a tree for 10 hours while they shot, raped, and tortured the other few citizens in the town and burned down houses:

¹⁰ Theresa S. Betancourt, Stephanie Simmons, Ivelina Borisova, Stephanie E Brewer, Uzo Iweala, and Marie De La Soudière. "High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (2008): 565–87. <https://doi.org/10.1086/591298>.

¹¹ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, (New York: Viking, 1997), 223.

¹²Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 25-27.

Three young rebels, no older than me, were walking alongside [the house], brandishing torches that set the thatched roof on fire. Everyone inside started to scream as the fire became an inferno. A woman with a baby tied on her back managed to punch through the wooden planks blocking one of the windows.....One of the young rebels threw his torch and grabbed the machete slung on his back. In one violent swoop, he chopped off the woman's head. The baby wailed as the woman's body fell back into the house on top of him. Her head rolled onto the road toward me. I started to cry again, and my body convulsed. "Do you want to join them?" the rebel watching over me threatened. Part of me did.¹³

After witnessing hours of terror, Kamara was released from the tree and told to leave the village.

However, one of the older boys stopped her:

"You must choose a punishment before you leave," he said.

"Like what?" I mumbled. Tears I could no longer hold back streamed down my face.

"Which hand do you want to lose first?"

"Please, please, please don't do this to me," I begged one of the boys. "I am the same age as you....."

"We're not friends," the boy scowled, pulling out his machete....

.... "Why do you want to hurt [me]?"

"Because I don't want you to vote," he said....

...It took the boy two attempts to cut off my right hand. The first swipe didn't get through the bones...He brought the machete down again..... my hand flew from the rock onto the ground.....It took three attempts to cut off my left hand.....I didn't feel any pain.....I sank to the ground as the boy wiped the blood off the machete and walked away..."¹⁴

Kamara survived the mutilation and made her way to an amputee camp in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The camp's conditions were poor. Many refugees died from malnutrition, infection, and disease. Doctors and medical supplies were greatly limited or nonexistent. Kamara and the other amputee children resorted to street begging outside the camp. A few years later, her plight caught the attention of Western European and North American journalists, enabling Kamara to emigrate first to England, and then Canada. In Toronto, she attended college and became a UNICEF Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict.¹⁵

¹³ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 31-32.

¹⁴ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 39-40.

¹⁵ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 210.

Though the civil war ended with a signed peace agreement in 2002, Sierra Leone was decimated. It is estimated that 2.6 million civilians were displaced in a population of 4 million inhabitants. The death toll ranges from 50,000 to 75,000, with approximately 20,000 civilians suffering from physical mutilations.¹⁶ Sierra Leone devolved into a nation of traumatized citizens.

The aftermaths of wars are characterized by the selection of the hero and the villain. Often, who is assigned what role evolves over time or is affected by the nation or community remembering the war. The American Civil War became synonymous with the pursuit of freedom and steadfast union. After the First World War, France and the other Western nations cast their victory as the molding of the world into a democratic haven. The Second World War, the “Good War,” proved that the blessed liberalism of the United States and Western Europe could triumph over German fascism and Japanese imperialism. The war stories that emerged after the Sierra Leonean Civil War had no such ideal or heroic trope to share with the world.

Throughout their memoirs, neither Beah nor Kamara discuss why the war was waged or the vision of the new society the combatants hoped to shape. Beah’s memoir ends with his journey to Guinea to board a plane bound for the United States. Kamara concludes her story bemoaning the state of survivors wallowing in displaced persons camps or tent villages in Sierra Leone. Both memoirs present an image of a war with no purpose or winners, but with copious victims. The RUF, while claiming to fight for the new generation of Sierra Leoneans, was the first to utilize child soldiers and commit widespread atrocities. The governmental forces, while countering the RUF, also used boy soldiers, committed war crimes, and supported a corrupt

¹⁶ Leboeuf Aline, “Sierra Leone: List of Extremely Event Perpetrated During the War, 1991-2002,” Mass Violence and Resistance-Research Network, SciencesPo, March 5, 2008, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/sierra-leone-list-extremely-violent-events-perpetrated-during-war-1991-2002.html>.

regime that denied education to impoverished children. It is much harder to cast the civil war into black and white features. This dilemma makes the war memoirs of Beah and Kamara vital to the genre of war literature and memoirs.

War is often oversimplified by the categories of ally or enemy, and perpetrator or victim. Once a person or cause is placed in one category, it is hard to remove. But if the main perpetrators, except the high-ranking military officers, are also victims, the understanding of armed conflict becomes muddled. Which side matches to what definition? Can a war truly be waged by victims who, by definition, are powerless?¹⁷ The experiences of Beah and Kamara prove that war can be perpetuated by the victims.

Beah's war experience demonstrated that conflict can indeed be waged by the powerless. However, the victimization of boy soldiers begs for a nuanced definition of victimhood. When the boys were coerced or brainwashed into combat participation for either the RUF or governmental forces, they had no power. The combatants targeted children who were destitute, homeless, or orphaned refugees. The grown soldiers held the power and used it to mold their child armies. They plied the children with drugs, alcohol, and indoctrinated them with graphic war films. However, when the children were trained and engaged in combat, particularly against civilians, they carried the power. The unarmed men, women, and children had no way to defend themselves from the child soldiers, as seen in Kamara's experience. This does not mean that the boys had the capability to resist orders from their commanders. Yet, the child soldiers still had more power than the targeted civilians. Beah's memoir challenges the binary view of victim and perpetrator. Beah was a perpetrator because he perpetuated violent crimes, but he was also a victim because he was forced to commit those acts when he was an underaged boy.

¹⁷ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 223.

Kamara's story is the more traditional representation of victimization during armed conflict. She was an innocent bystander who was brutalized for no other reason than she was in the wrong village at the wrong time. Hynes wrote that "war runs on power, and when power confronts powerless, atrocities are possible."¹⁸ The boy soldiers, though victims, held more power than Kamara and the other villagers during the attack. They were the perpetrators committing heinous crimes. Kamara's memoir complicates the image presented in Ishmael Beah's war story. Though Beah recounts his violence against rebels and civilians, Kamara is representing the civilian victims of boy soldiers. These memoirs, analyzed together, erase the line between victim and perpetrator. In her memoir, Kamara recalled being scared to meet Beah when she was considering writing and publishing her war story. She wrote, "I thought of the boy soldiers who had cut off my hands."¹⁹ Though Kamara later recognized the victimization of child soldiers, she viscerally identified Beah as a representation of the perpetrators who made her a victim.

The presentation of an ambiguous delineation of victim and perpetrator has been written in the war stories of World War I veterans and Holocaust survivors. Author Jay Winter defined this as the "memory boom" of the 20th century.²⁰ The shocking bloodshed of the Great War provoked a shift in the way both civilians and combatants shared and shaped their war memories. The war novels and memoirs published after the First World War, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, detailed an alternate view of the soldiers' perspective of the enemy. They described the man on the other side of no-man's-land with humanity or a "we are in the same boat" relationship with the villainous Huns or imperialist British. The enemy

¹⁸ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 224.

¹⁹ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 197.

²⁰ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the 20th Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-2.

usually does not live up to the inhumane expectation of government propaganda or rumors. Thirty years later, Holocaust survivors, such as writer Primo Levi, tackled the concept of Jews who collaborated with the Nazis to deport their fellow citizens to the eastern death camps.²¹ Those Jews were perpetrators, yet they often committed those acts under extreme pressure and threat in much the same way child soldiers were imbued or forced to commit war crimes. Many of the collaborative Jews would too be executed during the Final Solution, making them both victims and perpetrators.

The genre of trauma literature is not new to the war stories field. It became very popular after World War II, with stories detailing the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust, prisoners of war in Nazi and Japanese camps, and political prisoners of the Soviet Gulag system gaining much attention. Trauma literature forges a link between the war itself and its destruction. Author and World War II veteran, Samuel Hynes, defined these stories as the “sufferers’ tale.”²² In African literature, war victims’ stories play a very important role in the interpretation of African history and the evolution of African society. Anthropologist Chinyere Nwahunanaya wrote about sufferer narratives of the Nigerian Civil War, “A didactic function emerges in the process, especially in the portrayal of death, destruction, avoidable mistakes [,]and suffering engendered by war. The ultimate intention...is to see whether these records of a sour historical moment will enable the modern African to see the futility of wars as a solution to national problems which could be solved without the recourse of war, carnage, and bloodshed.”²³

²¹ Nandita Dinesh, “Who,” In *Theatre and War: Notes from the Field*, 1st ed., 85, Open Book Publishers, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1fzhh7c.6>.

²² Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, 223.

²³ Ernest N. Emenyau, “War in African Literature: Literary Harvests, Human Tragedies,” *ALT 26 War in African Literature Today*, xi–xiv, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1bh2m0v.4>.

The victims' story has become a central part of war studies and war literature in the modern era. From the First World War onward, more histories, memoirs, and stories tried to capture the consequences of wars and combat in conjunction with military maneuvers or political developments.²⁴ Despite their growing inclusion in war stories throughout the decades, the victim's narrative is the central concern of Beah's and Kamara's war experiences. They barely mention dates, policies, political ideologies, or politicians in their war stories. Many modern African writers who publish stories about war or ethnic conflict tell the stories of the ordinary citizens with the military movements and socio-political motives as a backdrop. They share the "traumatic memory" of war victims and witnesses to an unaffected audience.²⁵ The loss of innocent men, women, and children is the main motif throughout Kamara's and Beah's memoirs. By excluding the political underpinnings of the Sierra Leonean war, the authors demonstrate the unjustifiability of the war crimes without explicitly writing down their personal views. The victimization of civilians, whether by the government or the RUF, cannot be excused by the minutiae of the war's socio-political debates.

When the RUF boy soldiers mutilated Kamara to send a message to the Sierra Leonean president, Kamara wondered, "What is a president?"²⁶ Both Beah and Kamara had never been to the capital city of Freetown until the end of the civil war. Their villages were their country; they were removed and unaware of the wider implications of the war. In many instances, villagers did not encounter war violence until a few years into the conflict. Unlike the soldiers or civilians of the World Wars or the American Civil War, the majority of Sierra Leoneans lived in rural

²⁴ Winter, *Remembering War*, 6-8.

²⁵ Winter, *Remembering War*, 5.

²⁶ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 40.

villages, lacked formal education, or were illiterate.²⁷ Therefore, when many witnessed or directly suffered from the war violence, they were taken by surprise or were confused about why the RUF, or the national troops, were attacking their homes. This cultivates the theme of the loss of innocence that is synonymous with war victims' stories or memoirs.

Though *The Bite of the Mango* and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* include some of the identifiable traits of various war stories, such as loss of innocence, they are extremely unique because of the conflict they discuss. The Sierra Leonean Civil War is not well known or studied by international audiences. Global organizations like the United Nations did not intervene in the conflict until the last two years of the war. It was described as a "tribal war" or "regional tension" in the Western European and American media.²⁸ The international community did not fully intercede until the humanitarian tragedy became evident through the documentations of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other aid organizations.

However, the victimization of the Sierra Leone Civil War was not reported or represented. For this reason, Beah's and Kamara's memoirs were written to provide a voice for their fellow survivors and those who perished. Kamara wrote, "I will speak for all the people of Sierra Leone who are not being heard. Something in me had changed. I knew now that I could look forward *and* back---without any regrets---at the same time."²⁹ Beah dedicated his book to his murdered relatives and "to all the children of Sierra Leone."³⁰ Their memoirs have a broader mission than just remembrance of a specific event or military action. They seek to provide a

²⁷ Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leone Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190241582.001.0001/acprof-9780190241582>.

²⁸ Danny Hoffman, "The Civilian Target in Sierra Leone and Liberia: Political Power, Military Strategy, and Humanitarian Intervention." *African Affairs* 103, no. 411 (2004): 211–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518609>.

²⁹ Kamara, *The Bite of the Mango*, 212.

³⁰ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, i.

voice for the disadvantaged Sierra Leoneans who were not given the chance to tell their own war stories. This wider pursuit is seen in the memoirs or novels of Holocaust survivors or other witnesses of mass atrocities. Though war veterans write of their experiences to memorialize their lost comrades or explain their impressions of war, victims often write with a universal urgency aimed at stopping similar genocides or crimes against humanity from occurring in the future. Slogans like “Never Again” coined after the discovery of the Nazis’ Final Solution and “Never Forget” following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 exemplify the desire to remember innocent victims of conflict.

Victimization during open combat is not always noticed or advertised while the violence is occurring. The fog of war can shield the mistreatment, murder, or rape of civilians, which was the issue during the Sierra Leonean war. Both armies used the conflict to explain the mass killings and mutilations as the crimes of the other side or as propaganda for the war’s continuation. These manipulations make the victims’ stories even more urgent after a war is ended. The purpose of Beah’s and Kamara’s war memoirs is to bear witness to war victimization. It gives meaning to mass death and “to warn; and, even through the warning, to promote peace.”³¹ Holocaust survivor, Eli Wiesel, summarized the purpose of the war victim’s story. He said, “I decided to devote my life to telling the story because I felt that having survived, I owe something to the dead and anyone who does not remember betrays them again.”³²

Sierra Leone is still recovering, both physically and psychologically, from the devastation of the civil war. Ishmael Beah’s and Mariatu Kamara’s war memoirs express the agonizing

³¹ Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from Iliad to Iraq*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

³² Elie Wiesel, “Elie Wiesel Quotes,” Authors, <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/elie-wiesel-quotes>.

existence of Sierra Leonean civilians, particularly for children. Kamara and Beah were quite literally stolen from their innocence and thrust into a world of mutilation, death, and indescribable suffering. However, despite the horror, their memoirs portray the complex definitions of victimhood in the recollection of wars.

The stories of boy soldiers forced into the role of perpetrators shakes the foundation on which conflict is divided between good and evil, criminal and victim: victims committed grievous crimes against victims. British author Aldous Huxley wrote, “The most shocking fact about war is that its victims and its instruments are individual human beings, and that these individual beings are condemned by the monstrous conventions of politics to murder or be murdered in quarrels not their own.”³³ The war memoirs *A Long Way Gone: A Memoir of a Boy Soldier* and *The Bite of the Mango* show that war’s participants and witnesses are not always easily categorized. War spasmodically changes the way humans view each other and themselves. It forces witnesses to question their role: are they a victim or perpetrator? There is not always a clear answer.

³³ Aldous Huxley, *Complete Essays: Volume IV: 1936-1938*, e.d. Robert S. Baker and James Sexton, (I.R. Dee, 2001).

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