

**Child Soldiers' Vulnerability in David Hartness' *Amani's River***

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**Abstract**

The widespread issue of child soldiers in Africa has been a long-standing social problem that often receives inadequate attention. During conflicts, the rights of children and young people are massively violated, making them severe victims of armed strife. Their entitlements to live with dignity, receive support, and be protected from violence, abuse and neglect, as well as their ability to develop to their fullest potential, are usually hindered. Wars have led to the deaths of numerous innocent children, displaced countless families, and adversely affected many children who are active combatants. This study, therefore, explores the vulnerability of child soldiers in David Hartness' *Amani's River*. Utilizing Caruth's Trauma theory, the paper delves into the traumatic experiences of child victims, the impact of such experiences on them, and the coping strategies they adopt. The study discovered variations in the traumatic experiences faced by Aderito and Victoria highlighting the challenges each endures. It was also discovered that severe traumatic events faced by child soldiers can trigger emotional and psychological responses such as hyper-vigilance, jumpiness, intrusive imagery related to the trauma, repeated flashbacks, racing heart and trembling. The study showed that victims of armed conflict, when portrayed as narrators in literary works, can effectively recount the horrors and suffering associated with child soldiering. It is recommended that literary authors use victims to tell their own stories.

**Keywords:** Africa, Armed conflict, Child soldiers, Trauma, Narration, Experience

## Introduction

Children are the bedrock of every society and it is commonly believed that a family is not whole without them, as they are irreplaceable. To this end, in a typical African society, the number of children a marriage produces is often seen as a key indicator of its success. “Family is the central of the society and whatever the family is, that is who its society is” (Njoku, 2004). According to Convention on the Rights of a Child, the family is the central unit of the society and the usual environment for the growth and well-being of its members, particularly children (2005). Childhood can be seen as the most delicate stage of human development, filled with vulnerability. Children rely heavily on others to meet their fundamental needs, which make them especially vulnerable. This dependency is also evident in other life stages. For instance, many elderly individuals are unable to care for themselves at the later stage of their lives,

Kurfi, H.M & Aliyu M.A (2014) opine that matters related to children have been given the most thoughts in all societies and cultures in human history and as such children have become synonymous to family which is the foundation of societies and nations and the emblem of the strength of families, especially in developing societies and countries (1). They also add that in developing countries and societies on the African continent, the births of children are usually heralded with extravagant preparations, cultural and religious rituals and ceremonies often accompanied with gifts presented to such families. They go further that for social science and literature, the word ‘children’ with reference to the global south, resonates with such phenomena as abandoned and neglected children, child abuse, child soldiering, child-trafficking and child labour and that the issue of child labour, continues to be a disturbing phenomenon (2).

Child soldiering refers to the exploitation of children as fighters or helpers in war, carried out by either government or rebel groups. Children can be abducted and coerced into battle in rebel or government armies, and there are instances where entire groups of children have been taken from their schools for this purpose. In some situations, children are convinced to join military groups by their friends or family members who are already participating. In these cases, they may be motivated by religious beliefs, and/or by the hope that their minority ethnic group or impoverished region will one day enjoy political independence and material benefits. Most often, however, the children have been coerced into what is a form of forced labour. The actual work they do can include wielding sophisticated weaponry at a very young age and with little training. They may be forced to commit acts of extreme savagery, often under the influence of drugs to dull their sensitivity and moral conscience—and under pain of their death if they refuse to carry out the order.

According to ILO, tens of thousands of girls and boys find themselves fighting adult wars in at least 17 countries in different regions around the world. Some are used as fighters and take a direct part in hostilities while others are used in supportive roles (e.g. cooks, porters, messengers, or spies) or for sexual purposes. They are abducted, forcefully recruited or personally decide to enroll (for instance for survival, for protection or vengeance).

However, when personal initiatives are analyzed, it becomes clear that they were taken under duress and in ignorance of the consequences. Alfredson posits that children under the age of 18 who serve in armed forces and the armed group around the world are vulnerable to serious physical and psychological violence. She explains further that child soldiers serve within militaries and armed groups in which complete cooperation and obedience are demanded, in con novels where moral and legal safeguards against their abuse may have broken down (2011). The use of children in armed conflict is the worst form of child labour, a violation of human rights and a war crime. ILO Convention No.182 defines forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as the worst form of child labour (vol. 4).

### **Methodology**

This study employed literary analysis to examine the portrayal of child labour in *Amani's River*. The study adopted a qualitative approach, involving a detailed and close examination of the chosen novel for the study to bring out the factors responsible for child labour, forms, effects and coping strategies exhibited by child labour victims in the novel. Trauma theory elements such as memory, repression, trauma symptoms and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were utilized to examine the traumatic ordeals faced by child soldiers, the frequency of violence against them, and their efforts to cope with and overcome these adverse experiences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the analytical task to achieve its intended purpose, it is essential to have a suitable theoretical framework for analyzing the chosen novel. Therefore, trauma theory is the theory used to create an appropriate model for this analysis. Trauma theory was utilized to assess and explore the traumatic experiences of child soldiers with a focus on repression, memory and post-traumatic stress disorder as key elements in the study's analysis. It also enables comprehension of the behaviours and actions exhibited by the identified child soldiers under scrutiny.

Trauma theory emerged in the 1960s from several areas of social concern: recognition of the prevalence of violence against women and children (rape, battering and incest); identification of the phenomenon of PTSD in (Vietnam) war veterans; and awareness of the psychic scars inflicted by torture and genocide, especially regarding the Holocaust. Trauma theory attempts to understand the different ways by which traumatic occurrences are demonstrated, processed, exposed and repressed throughout a variety of literary and historical novels. Trauma has been perceived and defined in different ways over the years, dependent on the development of knowledge and the understanding of the impact of traumatic experiences on the individual, family, community and society (Van der Kolk, 2014). In recent decades, the definition of trauma has been consistently inclusive of the following elements: (1) an identified event or series of events that is (2) experienced by the individuals as physically or emotionally harmful, threatening or overwhelming and (3) has lasting and holistic effects on the individual's functioning (Herman, 1992;

Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973; Ringel and Brandell, 2012; Substance Abuse and Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 2012; Van der Kolk, 2014).

### **Child Soldiers' Vulnerability in David Hartness'**

#### ***Amani's River***

Aderito's narration reveals the connection between warfare and the vulnerability of child soldiers in *Amani's River*, akin to the depiction in Uzodinma Iweala's novel, *Beast of No Nation*. In *Amani's River*, the narrative unveils the harmful impact of war on children, who constitute the most susceptible group. Through Aderito and Victoria's characters, the author illustrates the ordeals of child soldiers and how these experiences shape their lives, especially highlighting Victoria's daily abuse. The text delves into the harsh conditions faced by child soldiers, the repercussions of such circumstances, and the coping mechanisms they employ. These are revealed in the following:

### **Forms of Child Labour in**

#### ***Amani's River***

### **Children Used for Armed Forces (Aderito and Victoria)**

The prevalent use of children in armed combat is a contemporary manifestation of slavery and a form of human trafficking that is as serious and as lucrative as the international crimes of trafficking in weapons and drugs (Tiefenbrun, 2000). Children involved in armed forces serve as fighters or auxiliary personnel in conflict situations conducted by either government or rebel groups. Often, these young individuals recruited as child soldiers are forcefully taken from their residences, subjected to torture and trained in violent ideologies, coerced into substance abuse and threatened with death. This was evident in the experiences of Aderito and Victoria, who were seized from their homes in Homoine by rebel groups to be enlisted as child soldiers. Aderito narrates their dreadful experiences, including failed attempts to evade abduction, stating:

As we lay, trembling in the tall dead grass, a footstep crept closer. I didn't want to look. Lying with my head lowered, I hoped the impression was off in the distance and prayed that whoever this person was, he came in peace. Someone was staring at me, so I closed my eyes, hoping that the elongated stare went away. Without notice, a sharp kick dug in my side. The sharp pain intensified as a large boot hit my rib with extreme force. I curled my body and gasped for air. I panted, and just when the pain dispersed, a second blow to the same spot landed even harder on my rib cage... (71)

Children enlisted as child soldiers are typically under the control of adult soldiers who utilize various tactics to manipulate them into compliance. These young recruits are exposed daily to dehumanizing acts of cruelty that toughen them and instill fearlessness. In order to stay alive, these recruits must adapt to becoming true soldiers by engaging in

violence, causing harm, and partaking in immoral behaviours. Aderito, in order to survive and gain favour with the commander whom he regards as a parental figure after being separated from his family for an extended period, learns how to handle firearms. Initially, this seemed awkward and surreal, but with practice, he becomes desensitized to his actions and no longer feels remorse for his actions. A clear illustration of this change in Aderito's mindset can be seen in his statement:

It was my third attempt, my eyes became darker, and a demon consumed my body. I ran up to the dummy and hit it hard with the butt of the gun and then let out a massive scream as I turned my gun around and stabbed the dummy hard in the gut. This was done with such a force that the wooden support beam broke near the bottom, and the dummy toppled to the ground, bouncing first before resting...I let out one mighty scream as if I were a monstrous maniac ready to kill. The surrounding instructors clapped as if I had just performed a miracle...(79)

From the passage, it can be deduced that child soldiers like Aderito are usually brainwashed thoroughly and brutally to the point that their ethics and moral values become so distorted that they believe doing evil is good. Aderito is deceived into thinking the commander is after his wellbeing because the commander usually commends him whenever he kills or exhibits any form of violence. "What you did today was impressive. I think you will be an outstanding fighter and will make me proud" (79). As a result of the commander's immense satisfaction with Aderito's skills, he provides him with drugs that alter his state of mind, causing him to forget the hardships he has endured and the atrocities he has committed. Aderito recounts the incident:

You know, I have something for you." He reached over, grabbed the base of my chair, and pulled it toward him. The commander reached for my hand, took out a large tan rubber tube, and tied it just above my elbow. "This will help you forget about what happened yesterday..." He pressed the syringe, which released the substance into my bloodstream. Within a few seconds, I became relaxed, my body slouched further into the chair, and my head rested on the back...The sensation filled my desire, my worries escaped my thoughts, and my mind and body felt free from any terrible thing that might have happened. (80)

Child soldiers are frequently administered drugs like cocaine and marijuana to lessen their fears and boost their combat skills. However, drug use can hinder a child's holistic development in a healthy and normal way, as well as their ability to experience freedom

and dignity. These children initially trained to be fearless, ultimately transform into terrifying killing machines that others strive to steer clear of:

I was standing in shock as I had done it, killed a man, and now I was part of this movement. My emotions torn between the morals of childhood lessons and the evil that appeared. The devil inside said that this was the right thing to do while the nobility was telling me to run. The demon was taking over, and the voice inside my head teaching me right from wrong was getting quieter. (83)

Child soldiers endure brutal brainwashing and harsh combat training that compel them to follow orders to kill innocent individuals in order to survive, They are coerced into committing acts of extreme violence and barbarism, such as beheadings, amputations, rape, and burning people alive. In some instances, they are even forced to consume human flesh, a practice their commander claim will protect them from their enemies and is integral to their training:

...Today, we will cut up this body and feed you for dinner. This will protect you from FRELIMO troops, the commander said to the crowd of young children. No one even questioned him. We agreed that this must be the best action, not because it was logical but because the commander had said it, he must know what he was doing...Victoria came back a few minutes later, bringing a bowl of stew, with a distinctive human flesh that was to be given to the child soldiers. (85-86)

Similarly, Aderito and other child soldiers are forced to witness and commit acts of violence that no one, especially children, should ever encounter. Aderito's traumatic experiences in the rebel camp persists as he feels compelled to prove himself as a courageous man and honourable warrior to everyone around him, particularly the commander and his fellow soldiers. He engages in further atrocities, which numb his emotions and harden his heart. The overwhelming feelings have engulfed him to the point where he fears the person he has become:

I felt like a man holding a gun, dressed in military attire, but appearing as an innocent boy ready to step outside into the real world and enter the life of a criminal. My clothes were too big, and my gun was difficult to hold. My face wore the ideals of a child, but I didn't dare think the thoughts as the man inside did not wish to hear the innocent thoughts of a boy. (90-91) Child soldiers are often compelled to witness the deaths of their close relatives. Such experiences are highly traumatizing, especially for a young child. A notable example is Aderito, who observed the

brutal killing of his father by the commander of the camp where he was trained as a child soldier. Aderito recounts the disturbing event:

That is the commander. They are probably coming back to find me," I said as I started to shake and pace back and forth, frantic at their presence. My eyes widened, and I couldn't find the strength to blink. I paced up and down the corridor, trying to escape from the threat, but realized that there was nowhere to go... "You guys should stay here. I will go talk with them," my father said as he walked toward the door... I watched my father walk bravely toward the commander with his hands stretched out, signaling his wish for peaceful talks. (191-192)

Children who witness the death of loved ones are prone to experiencing trauma. Witnessing his father's death is a traumatizing experience for Aderito. This is seen in his recollection of the event. He recalls the violent incident which causes his father's death:

The commander turned his back toward my father and then turned around with his fists clenched tight together. With extreme force, his fist landed on my father's stomach. His body lunged forward. His mouth widened, and he gasped for breath. The commander grabbed my father's chin and raised his head, then landed a hard left hook to his face. My father flew backward, and blood flew from his mouth. He landed on his knees with his face in the dirt and his buttocks sticking in the air. (192)

Aderito's vivid description of his father's excruciating pain and death as he struggles with the commander and other soldiers is made bare in his words:

The commander lifted his right foot and placed it on his mouth. He dug deep, pressing hard until he had pried open his mouth. He continued to dig into his mouth, stuffing his boot further down the throat. The commander bit his lip hard as he tried to put strength into his act of brutality... The commander left briefly and went to the truck. He grabbed a gas canister and walked over my father. He raised the canister over my father's head and began to pour... The entire canister emptied on my father, and now he sat covered with gas, wincing in pain and shaking at the thought of what might happen next...(195-196)

This particular incident shatters Aderito's spirit, leaving him to grapple with the trauma for an extended period. His response aligns with what Caruth described as "the reaction

to an unforeseen or overwhelming violent event or events that are not entirely understood at the time they happen..." Aderito conveys his struggle to fully grasp the enormity of what he has witnessed by stating that:

I ran away and into my room. I jumped on my bed, face first, and then covered my eyes with my hand. My chest rapidly rose and fell, and my heart pounded...Tears covered my bare hand. I tried to yell, but when I opened my mouth, gasps of air came out...I tried to talk to God, but I felt that he had left me a long time ago. I breathed sporadically in and out; my stomach was shaking, and one tear after the other came from my eyes...My eyes turned red, and breathing increased to the point that I was hyperventilating...Perhaps it was God who stopped them, or the commander knew that the brutal torture of my father left me weakened...(197-198)

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Aderito endures significant emotional and psychological trauma. Aderito's father, Amani, sacrifices his life to secure his son's freedom. Following his father's death, Aderito continues to suffer from the traumatic experiences he experienced as a child soldier.

### **Domestic Child Servant (Victoria)**

Victoria, a ten-year-old girl abducted alongside Aderito, is forced into servitude in the rebel's camp. Girls taken for this purpose are severely mistreated and enslaved, particularly since they are not allowed to leave or return to their families. Abducted girls have limited chances of becoming child soldiers like the boys; instead, they are primarily used as domestic servants or sex slaves. Victoria is assigned her as the domestic servant as soon as she arrives to the camp. The commander informs the other soldiers of her assigned roles as he says:

The commander looked at Victoria and said, the girl will be a servant. She will not be fighting with the boys. Take her away and make her do womanly work. (77)

Based on the excerpt, one observes that girls unlike boys are used as cooks and sex slaves by soldiers, and may be forced to engage in combat and indirect hostilities as well. These children are usually exposed to injuries and death, even if they survive, they will forever bear the traces of the physical and psychological violence they suffered during their captivity. At the camp, Victoria though a domestic servant also faces sexual exploitations and physical assaults from soldiers.

The narrator goes on to depict how Victoria faces sexual and physical abuses. He narrates: I looked up as Victoria was being dragged by Zeilo. She was kicking, screaming, and yelling for me to help. They entered a room that was

vacant and shut the door...I walked toward the casement. Zelio had pinned her to the bed. Victoria shook, trying to avoid his kisses. He punched her hard several times in the face. This stunned and calmed her. Zelio kissed her neck hard and then worked his way to her navel... He took her shirt as she struggled more. He slapped her across the face... (146-147)

As it can be inferred from the extract, Victoria is abused physically and sexually by Zeilo, one of the soldiers in the camp who thinks that girls are bitches and should be used as such. He says “Tough. You didn’t use her like a man. Consider that a lesson. That is how you use your bitches.” (147). Girls used as domestic servants in the soldiers’ camp are usually at the receiving end of abuse.

### **Effects of Child Labour on Child Labour Victims in *Amani’s River***

The experience of being a child soldier profoundly affects the behaviour and emotions of the victims. The novel emphasizes its devastating consequences, such as enforced premature adulthood, psychological trauma, and even death.

#### **Premature Adulthood**

Aderito, Victoria and other child soldiers, because of their early exposure to violence, are compelled to adopt adult behaviours and witness experiences meant only for adults. To gain the favour of the commander and other soldiers, Aderito learns to kill, with the commander asserting that, “Aderito has proven that he is a man and is ready to show us his loyalty.”(82). The innocence Aderito brought to the camp is stripped away as he is trained to become a beast. The adults forced him to commit terrible acts, things that no child should ever have to do or experience. Aderito acknowledges this:

An older man saw that I was a child and tried to stop me. He yelled several times, but I was unaware of his attempt. The old man tried to scold me as if I were his son, but what he didn’t know was that my new father praised me for my actions...I approached the man, and when I was a few inches from the stick, I flipped the gun and knocked his hand hard, forcing him to release the cane back to the ground...”Why does an innocent boy look and act so evil?” he said as a single tear rolled from his lower eyelid, shaken by the sight of me. “I look at your face, and I see such sweetness, but there is something about you that shows destruction. Why, my son? What did they do to you?. (99)

Aderito adapts to the harsh lifestyle of the brutal soldiers as a result of the negative experiences he encounters at the camp. Aderito who used to uphold his values and good upbringing now displays no conscience or remorse for killing, a change noted by Victoria as she tries to reason with him. This shift in mindset is evident in the conversation that ensues between Victoria and Aderito:

The adults have made you do terrible things, but somewhere, that sweet boy whom I first met is still there... Someday you will remember how to feel, how to cry and understand morals again.”...I began to cry, which turned into a flowing stream of tears. This was the first time I remembered crying. I pictured the men and children whom I learned to beat and kill...I am not sure that I should be called a boy again; my childhood had long since passed, and I was a man who killed and, for a strange sick reason, enjoyed the brutality of my actions. (108)

### **Psycholoic Trauma**

In her insightful book, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Herman argues that psychological trauma involves witnessing horrific events (7). She further contends that it is morally impossible to remain neutral, compelling bystanders to choose sides. Similarly, Knapp posits that when we view the world through the suffering of children, we cannot help feel guilt about the world we have created (13). Aderito experiences depression and trauma as a child soldier in the rebel camp. He longs for the life he had before arriving at the camp, and the thoughts of leaving his parents and home behind deepen his depression. This episode leads to a series of emotional and psychological traumas, which Caruth describes as “repeated flashbacks, nightmares and repetitive phenomena” (1996). Aderito recounts that:

Many nights since being crowned a man and hailed by my peers as a strong and noble warrior I spent alone in the darkness, weeping under the thin blanket, feeling nothing but an inner child escaping the darkness of the man. I longed for the days spent by the river and wished they could come back to me and allow the youthful behavior to flood and show through the darkened and closing walls...The walls depressed me, but there wasn't a single person that could help through the depressed state.”(90)

Victoria also endures harrowing experiences at the camp, significantly impacting her psyche and self-image. She suffers assaults and rape from soldiers old enough to be her father. Additionally, becoming a mother at a tender age, without the means to cater for her child further contributes to her traumatic experience. The difficulties of childbirth were especially arduous for Victoria, given her age, as evidenced by the complications she faced during delivery. Aderito narrates that:

I went to Victoria and dropped to my knees at her side, grabbing a towel on the floor and wiping her forehead clean. I grabbed her hand and kneeled on the ground, wiping more sweat from her head. Sweat drenched her clothes and softened her hair...She pushed hard and gripped my hand. It felt as if she were trying to break me as she squeezed

harder with every push and contraction. My face winced in pain, and my body tightened as I tried to resist the bone-crushing trauma. She got tired, let go, and rested, panting stiffly. (151)

Another instance of Victoria's experience of trauma is depicted when she was raped again after the birth of her baby. She recounts her ordeal to Aderito when she says:

I was raped again. They threw my baby aside. She began to weep and cry into her hands. They raped me in front of my baby, she said with her mouth opened wide as the words screeched out, echoing through the small room. The sounds of the words were deep and hurting to her. Her chin shook, and her head and neck lowered, shrinking into her shoulders, which moved, as she couldn't stop crying... (160)

Aderito who is also deeply traumatized provides various illustrations of flashbacks from his life before he gained freedom. During his stay in Homoine, Aderito's behaviours align with the symptoms of PTSD, manifesting as hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks. He describes his experiences:

When I slept, images flashed through my head that brought the past, crashing me back into reality. Images of Victoria being shot, the old man begging for his life before being killed, and men, women, children dying because of my actions... (186)

These words highlight the profound impact of his trauma, illustrating how deeply embedded his experiences are within his psyche. Aderito's bottled emotions unfold through tears, driven by his feelings of guilt and regret. This phase of his life, described by Caruth as traumatic memory- an event too immediate for the conscious to record, but which resurfaces later as belated and repetitive images (Felman 8) - highlights the vivid, terrifying and haunting nature of Aderito's experiences. These traumatic memories manifest as nightmares, flashbacks and overwhelming, all of which severely undermine his emotional stability and prolong his recovery. Aderito's psychological trauma is compounded by the horrific event of witnessing his father being brutally killed by the camp commander. His father in a desperate attempt to save Aderito confronts the commander and paid the ultimate price. Aderito witnessed his father being burned to death, an image that left an indelible mark on his psyche. This is poignantly illustrated in Aderito's detailed narration of the traumatic experience:

I rushed back to the casement. The commander was standing just to the right. My father was on his knees, shaking. He dialed in, looked through the window, and saw a few eyes looking back...As he did this, the commander lit the match and dropped it toward my father's head...The flames grew longer, and the match appeared to land on my dad's head.

Flames spread from his head all the way to his ankles...He kept screaming as the flames cut through his flesh and headed down toward his bones. He fell to the ground and rolled several times, took one last scream-and then silence. The body lay on the ground, continuing to burn the flesh, bones, and clothes... (197).

These words convey the depth of Aderito's trauma, evidencing how witnessing such brutality has profoundly affected his emotional and psychological wellbeing.

### **Findings**

The study discovered distinct variations in the traumatic experiences faced by Aderito and Victoria, highlighting the unique challenges each endures. Despite these differences, a common thread emerges: the experiences of child soldiers, irrespective of gender, are overwhelmingly traumatic. The study identifies several core elements of this trauma which include rape, intoxication, psychological trauma, battering, hunger and death. For Victoria, her traumatic experiences are compounded by the assaults and rape perpetrated by soldiers who are much older than her, as well as the significant emotional and physical strain of becoming a mother at an exceptionally young age. Aderito, on the other hand, endures severe psychological trauma marked by symptoms of PTSD such as hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks. His trauma is rooted in harrowing events like witnessing the brutal killing of his father, a scene that replays in his mind, instilling immense guilt and sorrow.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that through literary portrayals of child labourers like Aderito and Victoria, the novel effectively highlights the difficulties faced by young victims and educates readers of all ages on preventing and addressing child labour. By focusing on children aged 6-14, the study explores how the wellbeing of these individuals can shape future societies. Ultimately, the novel seeks to increase awareness and discourage the perpetuation of child labour.

### **Recommendations**

Literary artists and playwrights are advised to centre their works on the narratives of child labour victims, allowing these individuals to share their own experiences. Further research should explore the impact of child labour experiences, particularly from the perspective of the victims themselves. Additionally, it is recommended that literary artists present a wider range of coping and survival mechanisms that can be utilized by children who find themselves in situations of child labour.

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