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**Child Soldiers in the Memoirs of Ex-Combatants: Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000),
Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) and
Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story* (2009)**

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English in Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Master's Degree in Literature

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Abstract

The crisis of child soldiering is considered one of the most serious problems in the world nowadays. It is a result of the effects of globalization and the appearance of new conflict groups, which make the use of weapons easy for children. As the best way to know the real events of war is to listen to true stories narrated by people who own the first-hand experience, this thesis probes into three memoirs written by former child soldiers from different countries and cultural backgrounds: Loung Ung's *First they Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000) from Cambodia, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) from Sierra Leon, and Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story* (2009) from South Sudan. The thesis explores the way the child soldier's identity and ideology are constructed through the theories of the French philosophers Louis Althusser as well as Michel Foucault. In addition, the thesis aims at investigating the trauma of those abused children and its effects on the writing process of the three writers, reaching recovery in the end. This is based on the views of contemporary trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominic Lacapra, and others.

Key words: child soldier- memoir- ideology- power - trauma

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Introduction

It is believed that the experience of war is one of the harshest experiences that Man can face. If war is hard to grownups and adults, it is, of course, harder to children. Throughout history, children are the ones who suffer the most during wartimes. Instead of enjoying the supposedly most peaceful time in one's lifetime, war children have to face and endure horrible situations. Moreover, not only do they have to experience war as receivers of such horror, some of them also take part in it. In other words, they have to act like mature warriors and be bloody soldiers who shoot and kill at a very young age; those children are called "child soldiers".

At this point, it is important to define what a child soldier is. In the pamphlet entitled "Cape town Principles and Best Practices", which was published by the UNICEF in April 1997, a child soldier is defined as "any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members". The definition also includes girls recruited for sexual purposes. Thus, the definition is not restricted to the children who carry arms, nor is it restricted to males.

According to Child Soldiers International (CSI), formerly the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, which is an international coalition of human rights and humanitarian organizations created in 1998 to prevent the use of children in armed conflicts, it is estimated that around 300,000 children under the age of 18 actually serve in government forces or armed militias around the world. Moreover, between April 2004 and October 2007 children were actively involved in armed conflict in government forces or non-state armed groups in 19 countries or territories –half of which were in Africa. Thus, the phenomenon of child soldiering is a mounting political and social global problem.

David M. Rosen, who is an American anthropologist interested in the issue of child soldiering, points out in his book *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (2005) that the recruitment of children in war zones is a disturbing issue as it perplexes two essential and unquestioned assumptions of modern society. The first is that war is evil and should be ended; the second is that children are innocent and should be protected. As a result, the emotional logic of people will tell them that something is evidently and profoundly wrong when children are soldiers (1). In addition, in her book *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front* (2010), Myriam Denov reveals that “the involvement of children in armed conflict is said to be intimately connected to trends associated with the

changing nature of contemporary warfare” (33). In other words, the recruitment of children is one of the characteristics of new wars, which are a notable characteristic of globalization.

In her book *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in Global Era* (1999), Mary Kaldor clarifies the notion of “new wars”; she points out that “during the 1980s and 1990s, a new type of organized violence has developed, especially in Africa and Eastern Europe, which is one aspect of the current globalized era” (7). She describes this kind of violence as “new war”. She adds that “the new wars occur in situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy as well as the spread of criminality, corruption and inefficiency, violence is increasingly privatized both as a result of growing organized crime and the emergence of paramilitary groups, and political legitimacy is disappearing” (7). That is why child soldiers are found more in undeveloped countries in Africa and Asia.

Due to the fact that people are living nowadays in a time of new wars, the significance of the thesis lies in the need to understand the culture of those new wars through approaching true stories. The thesis tackles a growing phenomenon in the other side of the globe, but one that people in the western community are not aware of. Madelaine Hron, an Associate

Professor of English and film studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, states in her article “Ora Na-Azu Nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels” that “one has a better chance of accomplishing this goal if one uses a child’s perspective to talk about circumstances that are foreign to Western readers” (29). Accordingly, writing about children is important in order to seek worldwide attention. In other words, the story is more attractive when it is true and written through the lens of a child.

There is no more perfect way to understand war than listening to the stories of people who were there. That is to say, the ones who own the first-hand experience are the ideal holders of the truth. Accordingly, this thesis will reflect the problem of child soldiering in three countries, which are Cambodia, Sierra Leon, and Sudan, from the point of view of real ex-combatants: Loung Ung, Ishmael Beah, and Emmanuel Jal, respectively. The thesis aims at examining the development of the child soldier’s ideology through analyzing three memoirs of former child soldiers: *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000) by Loung Ung, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) by Ishmael Beah, and *War child: A Child Soldier’s Story* (2009) by Emmanuel Jal. The analysis will be in the light of the French philosopher Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology and Michel Foucault’s theory on power and the subject. In addition, the thesis will probe the trauma of the three ex-combatants and the way it

affects their writing process. The traumatic psychological effects of child recruitment will be discussed through the lens of contemporary trauma theorists such as: Cathy Caruth, Dominick Lacapra, Judith Herman, Michelle Balaev and others.

This study focuses on the memoirs of three writers who emphasize in the preface or the author's note of their memoirs that they are narrating their experience to help fellow child soldiers come to terms with their trauma. For instance, Loung Ung dedicates her memoir to her family members and wrote it "in memory of the two million people who perished under the Khmer Rouge regime". Ishmael Beah also dedicates his memoir "to all the children of Sierra Leone who were robbed of their childhoods". In addition, Emmanuel Jal founded a charity fund named "Gua Africa" that helps children who are affected by war come to terms with their misery and have good education. Thus, writing in their case has a healing effect that not only helps the writer him/herself, but also others who faced the same circumstances.

Introducing the authors of the three works in question, Loung Ung (1970) is a Cambodian writer and political activist. In her memoir *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000), she reflects her life between the ages of five and nine. She narrates her experience of

forced child soldiering during the time of the Khmer Rouge regime. Until the age of five, she lived a peaceful life with her family. Her father was a high-ranking government official. Unfortunately, the Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge army invaded their village in 1975 and killed many civilians and forced the remaining families to evacuate. As a result, her family fled and moved from village to village for fear of being killed. Later on, Ung was forced to join the army and trained as a child soldier in a work camp, where she learned how to use guns. When the Vietnamese reached Cambodia and destroyed the Khmer Rouge regime, Ung was reunited with her remaining family members. Ung clarifies at the beginning of her memoir: “[F]rom 1975 to 1979—through execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor—the Khmer Rouge systematically killed an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a fourth of the country’s population.”

Concerning Ishmael Beah, he is a Sierra Leonean writer and human rights activist who was born in 1980. In his memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), he recounts his experience as a former child soldier during the civil war in Sierra Leon in the 1990s. At the age of twelve, he ran away from his village after it was attacked by the rebels. He was separated from his family and wandered with his brother and other friends in the woods in search for food and security. Later, he was kidnapped and forced to join the army where he first knew how to use guns and take

drugs. For four years, he was brainwashed and convinced that killing the rebels is a must to take revenge from those who killed his own family. Consequently, he was transformed into a killing monster that did horrible acts. At the age of sixteen, he left the army and joined a rehabilitation center related to the UNICEF. There, he was able to return to the civilian life and come to terms with his misery. The memoir has been a great success and was at the top of the best seller list since its first publication to the extent that it was sold in Starbucks coffee shops. Since then he has become a UNICEF advocate for war-affected children. Beah describes what happened during the civil war in Sierra Leon as a complete “madness” (2). The writer chooses just one comprehensive word to express the war in a nut shell.

The last writer is Emmanuel Jal (1980). He is a Sudanese artist, poet, and rapper. His memoir *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story* (2009) recounts his years serving in the army as a child soldier during the second Sudanese civil war of the 1990s. The memoir opens in the 1980s as Emmanuel is seven. He was an ordinary Sudanese boy, until the Sudanese civil war moved to his village. As his father was a commander in the Christian Sudanese Liberation Army, Jal joined that army and fought in this civil war for ten years. However, his life changed when he was adopted by a British aid worker and smuggled into Kenya. He then enrolled in school; he also discovered hip hop music. He repented and believed that he was deceived by

false ideas. Now he is a resident in Canada. During the 1990s, about four hundred orphaned Sudanese children tried to flee the war in Sudan, trekking hundreds of miles on foot towards the perceived safety of Ethiopia. The majority died along the way from fighting, exhaustion, animals, sickness, and hunger; Jal is one of only 16 to survive. These boys are internationally known as “The lost boys of Sudan”.

It is important to clarify why children are recruited. In fact, there are many reasons behind child soldiering. The causes of the wars of our times are often political, but they are also fought for economic, social, religious, or even criminal motives. The groups that the children fight within “can be anything from a state army or a terrorist cell to a warlord’s gang or a drug cartel’s paramilitaries” (Singer 9). According to J. Bruner article “Narrative Analysis of Former Child Soldiers’ Traumatic Experiences”,

While some children are abducted by rebel militias and forced to become child soldiers, others voluntarily join armed groups. However, poverty, hunger, a need for protection or a desire to avenge the death(s) of loved ones may influence this decision. A child’s limited ability to assess risks, their feelings of invincibility and the fact that military commanders view them as more malleable, obedient and easier to indoctrinate also makes them more vulnerable to recruitment. (90)

There are other reasons that appear in the memoirs under investigation. For example, in his memoir *War Child*, Emmanuel Jal states that the Sudanese believe that children are better at war than the adults, claiming that “children heal quickly” compared to grown-ups (29). Jal also reflects the idea of recruiting girls for sex purposes by force. He states: “[S]he’d seen many dead people and heard of families crying for boys who’d been taken as slaves on sugar plantations and girls who would be used by the militiamen for *kun ke bom*”, which means sex by force in Sudanese (30). Besides, Loung Ung reveals the role of child soldiers in camps in her memoir: “Depending on their size and age, the children are given different jobs and training. They are put in camps to grow food, make tools, work as porters, and train as soldiers on bases like ours” (135). Of course all of these atrocities affect child soldiers in a horrible way:

In addition to physical injuries and sexual health problems, survivors of war and conflict may also develop specific mental disorders. These include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, loss of trust, excessive guilt, hostility and aggression. Of these disorders, PTSD is the most prevalent (Singer 10-11)

The late Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma summarized the reasons behind recruitment in his novel *Allah is Not Obligated* (2000) saying, “when

one has no one left on the earth, neither father nor mother, neither brother nor sister, and when one is small, a little boy in a damned and barbaric country where everyone slashes each other's throats, what does one do? Of course one becomes a child soldier, a small soldier, to get one's fair share of eating and butchering as well. Only that remains"(17). Kourouma gives the recruitment an emotional justification.

In the 1990s, some books tackled trauma theory from a contemporary perspective. For instance, Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence -from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) draws real life examples of trauma resulting from domestic violence and wars to show that trauma is not an individual's problem. The book focuses on the idea of the collective experience of trauma.

In addition, Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) is dedicated to the students of trauma, literature, and culture. It reflects modern questions around trauma theory that have arisen over the past two decades. Caruth reveals the connection between individual and collective trauma and the importance of the political and ethical dimensions of the theory of trauma. The Thesis reflects this idea as the memoirs tackle a collective experience of trauma from different cultures: Cambodia, Sudan, and Sierra Leon in the light of the political background of the three civil wars.