

Article:

Archives of Troubled Childhoods in Contemporary African Fiction

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In this article, I read three novels that employ a first person child narrator in fictional portrayals of a triad of African troubled childhood experiences.¹ The three novels are Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* ([2000] 2007);² Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2001);³ and Sello K. Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000).⁴ My reading is informed by Wendy Hesford's argument in "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" that narratives create "spaces for survivors to theorise their own experience and talk back" (193).⁵ Consequently, my overarching argument in this article is that fictional depictions using child narrators/protagonists who are simultaneously victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of the traumatic experiences they narrate, allow writers to provide compelling and intimate insights into the lives of children caught up in such traumatic contexts.

This resonates with Linda Alcoff's argument in another context that "there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location" (6-7).⁶ Although Alcoff's argument is about the difficulty of attempting to speak for or on behalf of 'real' marginalised subjects, it can be applied to fictional depictions of war-affected children, child prostitutes and domestically abused children. Because who and where one speaks from determines the veracity of what he or she says, it is plausible to argue that the voice of a child narrator in fictional portrayals of the above-mentioned African troubled childhoods provides compelling and intimate understanding of their experiences. Therefore, fictional archives of African troubled childhoods from the perspective of child narrators/protagonists engage society's ethical and political responsibilities towards the depicted reality.⁷ Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*,⁸ Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*⁹ and Sello K Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*¹⁰ in different ways and using different narrative strategies archive these aspects of African troubled childhoods.

Although I occasionally refer to other scholar's works, this article proceeds mainly under the theoretical influence of Maria Pia Lara.¹¹ Lara recognises the potential of fiction to unearth and archive the silenced and marginalised subjects' experience. I find Lara's argument having resonance with the fictional depiction of troubled African childhoods in the selected texts. Particularly useful in my reading of fictional archiving of African troubled childhoods is Lara's argument that "the effort to communicate something relates necessarily to the question 'who' is speaking".¹² In a sense, it is plausible to argue that fictional depictions of African troubled childhoods give a voice to these 'subalterns' to craft through pain a kind of agency which, according to Homi Bhabha, provides the terrain for the emergence of new strategies of selfhood and identity.¹³ Given that strategies

of selfhood and identity are mapped in language, I take into account Elaine Scarry's argument that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it".¹⁴ As such, the exploration of individual authors' narrative strategies, use of tonal variation and literary tropes as well as the uniqueness of each text in providing a compelling image of African childhood ruptured by war, sexual violation and domestic abuse signal the respective authors' grappling with the task of articulating these horrific experiences in a 'pre-language' of "sounds and cries".¹⁵

Although Spivak in her insightful essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" convincingly argues that "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow", the fictional depiction of troubled childhoods in Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*; Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*; and Sello K. Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* who according to Spivak's theorisation would exist in an even deeper shadow, rise above their shadows to theorise convincingly about their fictionally depicted troubled experiences as victims, witnesses and perpetrators of sexual violation, domestic abuse and war-related violence.¹⁶ This is possible because the three child narrators/protagonists in the selected texts are chroniclers of these experiences.¹⁷ The conventional expectations that the child cannot speak for himself or herself are challenged in the respective fictional portrayals, because according to Richard K. Priebe, the three texts are archives of the unexplainable, which "voice[s] our capacity for gestures that touch the sublime even in the most demonic moment".¹⁸ Cognisant of Martha Nussbaum's argument that "narrative literature does have the potential to make a contribution to public reasoning"¹⁹, my reading will seek to explore how fictional depictions of troubled childhoods in the selected texts archive the problems faced by some children in the post-1990 African context.

Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* is explicitly set in the West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s civil wars. It uses the first person perspective and adventurous quest of a fictional thirteen-year-old child soldier, Birahima, to construct an extensive dossier on war atrocities, victims and warlords. Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* is built on the dual image of the figure "thirteen" to depict how a fictional thirteen-year-old boy survives on the predatory streets of Cape Town. The image of "thirteen" simultaneously gestures to the thirteen cents in Azure's pocket when he returns from the mountain and his age to show how Azure renounces his vulnerability as a child without money. As an adult, Azure can exchange sexual favours for money to survive in a predatory and impersonal city as well as talk about it. Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* is primarily about Mugezi and his life under tyrannical parents in postcolonial Uganda. Although the national dictatorship is comparable to domestic despotism, the text's main focus is on how some African middle class parents' obsession with the notion of a well-behaved child lead to domestic abuse of children. My reading of the archival value of these texts is premised on the triad of experiences and locations of African troubled childhoods.²⁰ These fictional spatial and experiential sites resonate with Alcoff's argument that "rituals of speaking that involve the location of the speaker and listeners affect

whether a claim is taken as a true, well-reasoned, compelling argument or a significant idea”.²¹

The synopses of the three novels above show that the texts grapple with traumatic content which to quote Elaine Scarry “has no voice” because “[pain] takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language”.²² The fictional depictions in the selected texts allow fictional child narrators/protagonists to speak about their traumatic experiences in a manner that arouse readers’ empathy, while providing unique insights into what causes their victimisation in contemporary African contexts. This is possible because the protagonists are portrayed as being “present at the birth of language itself”.²³ Following Scarry, I argue that Birahima, Azure and Mugezi use a ‘new language’ to archive their traumatic experiences.

I start by reading Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated* as a chronicle that employs an ‘insulated’ child narrator who hides behind a well-constructed mask of a fictional griot—traditional story-teller, oral historian and chronicler—to theorise the nature and impact of war on African children.²⁴ This has resonance with John Walsh’s description of the hypothetical Birahima on the cover of the text as “glar[ing] smugly straight ahead with a confidence that belies his young age. The look in his eyes tells us that he is no stranger to the weapon”.²⁵ Birahima’s glaring smugness underscores his war time experience — an experience which accords him a suitable persona for responding to “an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur”.²⁶ This is highlighted by how his depiction of horrific accounts coheres with his linguistic, performative and masculine-militaristic mask(s) that stem from the dictionaries he inherits. Before he tells his story he goes to great length to explain that Diabate was an intelligent griot who “could understand and speak lots of languages: French, English, pidgin, Krahn, Gio and other Black Nigger African Native savage languages from fucked-up Liberia”.²⁷ Birahima’s underscoring of Diabate’s griot pedigree, intelligence and knowledge of many languages function to validate his (Birahima’s) usurpation of Diabate’s griot credentials as an appropriate mask in the narration of war time atrocities. Furthermore, the mask of a griot allows him to use other narrative techniques such as funeral orations. These techniques allow both Kourouma and Birahima tell the stories of child soldiers in a voice which “take[s] an ache [of child soldering] and bring[s] it under the light, holding it to the light, and seeing it for what it is”.²⁸

Mbembe, in another context, argues that “the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning”.²⁹ Mbembe’s argument resonates with Spivak’s question: “with what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak”.³⁰ I want to argue that Birahima’s masks coupled with the symbolic griot heritage grant his kaleidoscopic insight into the horrors of and the structural weaknesses that encourage civil wars in Africa and his dossier on the two countries’ civil wars a degree of symbolic credibility, which demonstrates the potential of fiction to bypass the traumatic constraints to archive horrific experiences of war. This agency approximates Lara’s argument in *Moral*

Textures that narrative fiction empowers the subaltern classes “by performative effectiveness of their claim to recognition and, in doing so they reverse [their] self-defeating image”.³¹

The linguistic mask allows the ‘unlikely’ Birahima to convincingly chronicle war atrocities. Scarry argues that “extreme pain destroys language itself”.³² Birahima’s use of the dictionaries in *Allah is Not Obligated* acknowledges the destruction of his language by trauma. Birahima uses the dictionaries “to look up swear words, to verify them, and especially to explain them [because his] blablabla is to be read by all sorts of people”.³³ Birahima here underscores the need to translate and archive war time atrocities and show the horror of war. The dictionaries cohere with Kourouma’s technique of inserting into the text a series of funeral orations. Birahima notes that a “funeral oration is a speech in honour of a famous celebrity who’s dead. Child-soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century”.³⁴

Although Birahima’s funeral orations as masks rehabilitate child soldiers and bring their traumatic experiences to public attention, helping us to see them in a new light, they are also significant literary tropes that enable the author chronicle multiple narratives of child soldiers. The funeral orations give Birahima licence to talk about the traumatic experiences of the other child soldiers. At the same time, the funeral orations give Kourouma plausibility to depict the lives and specific experiences of different child soldiers. This is significant in archiving war time atrocities because Kourouma scores the representational advantages of introspective first person narrator and retrospective omniscient narrator which give him the freedom to traverse different contexts and locations in the precarious conditions of war.

The bulk of the funeral orations in *Allah is Not Obligated* are about dead child soldiers, explaining (according to Birahima) “how in this great big fucked-up world they came to be [child soldiers]”.³⁵ His diction, “big fucked-up world,” recovers the child soldiers’ humanity because it implicitly exonerates them from culpability for what they have done. The phrase “big fucked-up world” underlines how other factors are to blame for the trauma to which child soldiers are subjected. Concerning Kik, for example, we are told the story of how one day, he returned home from school to find his family hut on fire and “his father’s throat cut, his brother’s throat cut, his mother and his sister raped and their heads bashed in. All his relatives, close and distant, dead”.³⁶ Birahima’s rhetorical question: “[a]nd when you’ve got no one left on earth, no father, no mother, no brother, no sister, and you’re really young, just a little kid, living in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone’s throat, what do you do,” is a rhetorical question directly addressed to us. It demands that we imagine how fictionally depicted children give us clues about what drives some children into child soldiering, which in turn transforms them into beasts of war.³⁷

My focus now turns to Birahima’s militaristic/masculine mask in archiving war-affected children’s experiences. The aliases of child soldiers such as Sekou the Terrible and Sosso the Parricide are similar kinds of masks which gesture to the

terrible conditions of war. Nussbaum argues that honest revelation “promote [s] identification and emotional reaction from readers”.³⁸ The cocky militaristic/masculine mask that Birahima assumes makes his revelations believable and evokes our empathy for children who might find themselves in such conditions as eloquently depicted in text. The militaristic mask is signalled by Birahima’s declaration that he does not “give two fuck about village customs. [I have] been to Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we call it a ‘kalash’) and got fucked-up on kanif and lots of hard drugs”.³⁹ His arrogant swagger is a mask of his scarred personality. Furthermore, his attachment to his gun which he lovingly calls a ‘kalash’ signals the ambivalent transformation of child soldiers. It suggests that the gun is what defines him and ensures his survival in the horrific conditions of war.

The guns and drugs show how child soldiers are forced to fight for powerful warlords who have divided up the country: “all the money, all the land, all the people” and who are ready to do “everything they can to get their hands on more stuff”.⁴⁰ It also reveals the duplicity and cunning of warlords in creating what Dallaire and others have called the conversion of child soldiers into “a new weapon system”.⁴¹ This is because the child soldier is promised notions of manhood and invincibility. They are the ones that spear-head ambushes and because “[g]rown-up soldiers are not given any food or anywhere to sleep and they don’t get any salary at all [...] being a child soldier had its advantages”.⁴² For example, Colonel Papa le Bon “kept all the hash for the child soldiers because it was good for them and made them as strong as real soldiers”.⁴³

Birahima’s sense of invincibility and arrogant swagger opens for him a discursive space in which he can effectively comment on the warlords and their role in the suffering of people during contexts of war. His commentaries on the warlords are imbued with sarcasm and irony in ways that focus attention on the unattractive nature of warlords. It is ironical that Colonel Papa le Bon is ‘good father’; Prince Johnson is ‘a prince’ and El Hadji Koroma is ‘a hajji’, which character traits the warlords do not possess. The irony inherent in the names of warlords allows Birahima build a dossier on their culpability in the horror that their wars bring to society. Birahima’s dossier on warlords derived from Kourouma’s irony and sarcasm underscores how the warlords’ duplicity and cunning circumspectly provides us with unique insights into what fuels civil wars in Africa. Colonel Papa le Bon’s extortion, Rita Baclay’s control of the diamond trade and Prince Johnson’s quest to control the revenue of rich areas of Liberia clearly show that civil wars are started and sustained by the greed of warlords. When Birahima describes Prince Johnson with tongue-in-cheek by saying that he “was a nice warlord because he had principles” he is obviously ironical and this irony extends to other warlords.⁴⁴

I now turn to the chronicling of child prostitution as archived by Sello K. Duiker in *Thirteen Cents*. Azure who assumes a persona of adulthood forged out of his experiences on the harsh and impersonal streets of Cape Town rather than his age “addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.”⁴⁵ Azure’s double persona — an adult and a pederasty

prostitute — gives him the agency to deny his vulnerability as a poor child. It also gives him a voice to provide useful insights into how urban poverty and family disintegration affect children in African cities. Although Robie Macauley and George Lanning argue that “through whose eyes [...] we [access]” a traumatic tale is important, I want to argue that the voice with which it is told is equally significant.⁴⁶ In *Thirteen Cents*, Duiker provides us with both a voice and the eyes of an expert on pederasty paedophilic prostitution to narrate the horrific experiences of a fictional child prostitute in the city of Cape Town. The uncanny conflation of the notions of an adult, expert, commentator, observer and victim of child prostitution in Azure’s persona, enables Duiker disclose the conditions in which children are forced to exist and which enact their exploitation in African urban areas.

Njabulo Ndebele in another context argues that South African social formation has led to “the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation”.⁴⁷ Duiker’s thirteen-year-old protagonist’s narration of his commodification on the streets of Cape Town populated with all kinds of predators adheres to the exhibitionist framework of the South African social critique. This is shown by Azure’s declaration that he lives alone, the streets of Sea Point are his home and at nearly thirteen he is a man and can take care of himself.⁴⁸ Azure’s self-description as an adult who can engage in pederasty prostitution and eloquently talk about it creates a profound archive that echoes Ndebele’s concept of an “overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation” depicted in a “highly dramatic and demonstrative” literary text.⁴⁹ Azure is aware of his commodification and exploitation because the loss of his parents means he has to take care of himself.⁵⁰

There are several textual markers that signal Azure’s acceptance of the fact that his body and sexuality are a currency for his survival because he lacks a family. The matter-of-fact tone of his diction in the opening passage such as “that was three years”, “that was the last time”, “I cried and then it was”, “the day they killed” signals an adult person’s register that he assumes in talking about his experiences in a predatory city. Although the subject he is discussing is traumatic, he uses simple, mundane, and banal vocabulary to justify his persona as an adult who can engage in the selling of his body for sex and eloquently talk about it. The case in point is the diction he uses to describe the state in which he finds his parents’ bodies such as “in a pool of blood” or “Papa was bad with money”, “got Mama in trouble” or “I saw my dead parents and didn’t freak out”.

Duiker’s archive of pederasty prostitution is highlighted by his protagonist’s craftiness with which he buys protection from Allen and negotiates the price of his sexual encounters with men. Here, his commodification resonates with Mbembe’s argument in another context that “[b]ecause the slave’s life is like a “thing”, possessed by another person, the slave existence appears as a perfect figure of a shadow”.⁵¹ This is given credence by Gerald’s declaration that “so now I own you. Understand. ‘Everybody has a job here. So go and do whatever it is that you do but just be back at five”.⁵² The simple sentences used in the passage above have the illocutionary force to “produce new meaning into the

public sphere” about individuals and institutions that enact and uphold child prostitution in African cities.⁵³

The unearthing of how extreme urban poverty in the underbelly of a pristine city enacts pederasty transactional sex trade is underlined by Azure’s declaration that he is “nearly thirteen years old. That means I know where to find food that hasn’t seen too many ants and flies in Camps Bay and Clifton [...] but like I said I’m almost a man. I can take care of myself”.⁵⁴ The survival Azure boasts off is achieved through pederasty prostitution. He informs us that he walks “further along the beach till I come to the moffie part of the beach. I sit on a bench and wait for a trick [...] soon I’m walking back with a white man to his flat. I know the routine [...] with a wallet in his hands we go to the kitchen. ‘You did good’ he says and hands me a twenty-rand note”.⁵⁵

Lara argues in another context that narratives create new meanings for marginalised groups and individuals. Lara’s argument is applicable to fictional portrayals because the transformation of Azure into a sexual commodity in *Thirteen Cents* archives how extreme urban poverty and family disintegration erase the personality and childhood of children who exist in such environments. This is through what Lara calls “storytelling that imaginatively develops new ways of understanding [children]”.⁵⁶ The economic matter-of-fact prose signalled by phrases like “Sea Point is my home”; “I can take care of myself”; “I know the routine” and “wallet in hand” belie the pain of commodification. This is because suffering and survival are mechanically reduced to a business transaction of payment for a service symbolised by the wallet, even when that service is performed by a child and involves the exploitation of a child’s body and childhood.

Although the phrases show child prostitution as something which Azure is used to, one cannot fail to notice the pleading in the phrases “I’m almost a man”, “I’m nearly thirteen”. If indeed Azure is mature and capable of taking care of himself, why does he need to draw attention to these facts? By accentuating Azure’s purported maturity, Duiker underscores how the new post-apartheid South African dispensation forces children into prostitution to survive. When one reads his age alongside the symbolism inherent in the “moffie part of the beach” and the synecdochean significance of “Camps Bay”, a connection is established between the sex trade involving minors and the South African post-apartheid socio-economic reality. The existence of specially designed areas for transactional sex shows that for some children in African cities exchanging sexual favours for money is an accepted reality.

Sam Raditlhalo argues that “in the years of democracy, there is nothing to celebrate if the family unit is no more an integral part of the social fabric”.⁵⁷ Duiker represents Cape Town as symbolic of the family and the nation in which a child is a commodity for sale.⁵⁸ Contrary to Strauss’s argument that “Azure’s personal survival depends on his adeptness at reading the ‘racial’, class, gender, and sexual codes that every moment of interpersonal interaction subtly hints at”, the novel archives how the disintegration of the family and extreme urban

poverty make the body of a child a commercial object.⁵⁹ In such contexts, it does not matter whether Azure is demonstrably adept and resourceful on the impersonal streets of Cape Town. What matters is his resignation to the fact that his body is a currency in demand by himself to survive, Gerald and other gangsters to make money and paedophiles like Lebowitz to derive sexual pleasure.

This can be gleaned from the longest passage which is dedicated to Azure's sexual encounter with Mr Lebowitz. The importance of this episode is in the latent anger and disgust that permeates it. When Lebowitz picks up Azure, Azure has the temerity to ask "[d]oes your wife know you do this [...] well, take off your ring. I don't want to see it".⁶⁰ When they get to Lebowitz's flat, Azure notes that everything in the flat is almost white and that Lebowitz's manners are "sickening. They are perfect and make you feel a little strange, like you're a dog with flea".⁶¹ One is drawn to the contrasting symbolism and irony of an almost 'white' house and an extremely 'polite' host, who at the same time sexually exploits children. Later in the episode Azure says that he "know[s] how to please a man. I know these bastards. I've done this a thousand times. They all like it if you play with the part between their balls and asshole".⁶² He also observes that the bathroom "has white tiles on the floor that show off your reflection. And there is a large mirror on one wall. You can see your whole body when you get naked".⁶³

The above passage(s) are significant because of Azure's reflection in the large mirror in Lebowitz's bathroom. Azure's image, if read as a form of representation coheres with the secret cameras in the house to provide a snapshot of child prostitution. In an intimate space—the bathroom—Azure's naked body is an inscription of sexual commodification. Given that "slavery dictate that we recognise the anti-discursive and extra linguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts", it is conceivable to argue that the image in the mirror is a discursive arena of Azure's enslavement and prostitution.⁶⁴ Using Azure's nakedness — he had "never seen [himself like that ...] before"— and the broken leg, Duiker scripts not only a maimed childhood and subjectivity, but also an understanding of African urban children as objects whose value lies in making money for gangsters and sexual gratification for paedophiles.⁶⁵

The image of a naked and injured body of a child prostitute⁶⁶ carries illocutionary force to "[reconstruct and recover] the exceptional role [...] played in expanding the universal" understanding of sexual commodification of children in some African cities.⁶⁷ Although *Thirteen Cents* is situated in the spatiality of the local post-apartheid poetics, Lara's argument is useful because it gestures to the reconstruction and recovery of a commodified subject. Duiker narrates this recovery and reconstruction through the insouciance mask that Azure assumes when he questions Lebowitz about his ring and whether his wife knows that he engages in pederasty prostitution. The simple question and command "well, take off your ring" are imbued with anger. The anger which captures Azure's agency is further elaborated in the symbolism of the sad music that Lebowitz plays. Azure notes that Lebowitz played "the saddest music [he had] ever heard".⁶⁸ The

sad music symbolises the melancholic abjectness of the dehumanising nature of child prostitution. This reaffirms Jean Meiring's assertion that post-apartheid fiction debunks the concept of the new democratic South Africa as an Eden because it is populated with victims who are "caught in a maelstrom of a vicious circle of degeneration of neither their making nor choosing".⁶⁹

I now consider how Isegawa's fictional archive of the connection between African middle class' obsession with material possession, authoritarian parenting and domestic abuse of children in *Abyssinian Chronicles*.⁷⁰ Isegawa's archive is scripted explicitly as a form of chronicling using an arrogantly ingenious first person child narrator. Richard Walsh argues in another context that "[t]he function of the narrator is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction".⁷¹ Walsh's binaries of "known rather than imagined" and "reported as fact rather than told as fiction" are mapped in Isegawa's text. The near-rhyming of Mugezi's name with the Luganda/Ugandan slang term *lugezigezi*—which is loosely translated as wiseacre or haughtiness resonates with Lara's argument that "the effort to communicate something relates necessarily to the question 'who' is speaking".⁷² Although Lara's argument is about the primacy of women in writing about women issues, her postulation is comparable to Isegawa's focaliser in *Abyssinian Chronicles*, who as a 'know-it-all' naughty wiseacre not only provokes his parents' violence towards him because they read his actions as deliberate disobedience, but also as one who assumes an appropriate persona for chronicling domestic abuse in this particular African middle class family.

The notion of reading *Abyssinian Chronicles* as a fictional archive of domestic abuse is signalled by Serenity's (Mugezi's father) declaration that "Uganda was a land of false bottoms where under every abyss there was another one waiting to ensnare people, [the] historians made a mistake: Abyssinia is not the ancient land of Ethiopia, but modern Uganda".⁷³ Isegawa reconfigures the notion of an abyss to symbolise how this African middle class family's authoritarian parenting practice leads to domestic abuse of its child(ren). Isegawa's reconfiguration of the abyss to symbolise domestic abuse is fashioned in a humorous and sarcastic register which echoes Lara's argument that "no solidarity is possible if the discourse does not form a bridge to the other's understanding of what are considered to be worth features and needs of human beings".⁷⁴ Mugezi narration "forms a bridge" in fiction that allows for a compelling and intimate understanding of domestic abuse because he falls under Henrik Skov Nielsen's category of impersonal narrators, who often narrate what "the narrating I, *cannot* possibly know".⁷⁵ It is his use of a spectacular mode of narration (conflating the omniscient with the first person perspective) that allows him decipher how this particular middle class family's notion of a well-behaved child — one who does as s/he is told and does not question the parents' authority — leads to the often hidden domestic abuse of children in such homes.

Although Mugezi narrates various cases when he is beaten by his parents because his actions are read as inconsistent with those of a well-behaved child,

the episode that stands out because of the maniac-like beating he receives from Padlock and Serenity is when he defaces the headboard of a second hand bed that Serenity buys from the ousted Indians. He informs us that Padlock snapped and “something like a tree trunk split in two by lightning flew sideways and hit [him] with such force that the lights went out. Hours later I woke up with a bad headache and a swollen eye”.⁷⁶ Mugezi in a matter-of-fact tone informs us that Serenity rarely subjected him to physical abuse, because of the artifice of dictators necessitated the delegation of disciplining of children to Padlock. However, on this particular occasion, Serenity strikes with the

Bare-clawed fury of a leopard at the end of a long antelope-stalking session [...] Serenity was all over me with his suede shoes. For a moment, I was too overwhelmed to do anything about those scalding blows with cooked rubber. Up and down, left and right it went, guttural groans of you-saw-it-coming issuing from his twitching mouth. With the first pain barrier cleared, I thought I was going to die. I was not afraid to die, because Grandma was over the other side waiting for me. In fact, I was terribly afraid of not dying and remaining a cripple with an arm broken beyond repair, or my head messed up like poor Santo’s or my spine damaged like the catechist who fell from the pulpit.⁷⁷

The beating described in the above passages is an imaginative way of showing the ugly side of this particular African middle class family’s reaction to what it reads as actions of a disobedient child. If the defacing of the headboard symbolised the unmasking of the Ugandan middle class’ obsession with material things, the beating in the above passage exposes how angry parents’ response not only to a ‘disobedient’ child, but also to one who they think deliberately damages an expensive, albeit fetishised household item.

Mugezi’s incorrigible and ingenious persona allows him to detect and reject his parents’ abusive child-rearing ethos. This is signalled by his disclaimer that in the village “Grandma or Grandpa would have told [him] straight away that the glittering thing was just a bloody headboard for a bloody bed, wooden, veneered, period”.⁷⁸ Mugezi’s vote of confidence in his grandparents’ parenting practices is based on his recognition that the grandparents’ child rearing ethos are based on indulging the child’s curiosity and treating him like an equal or one whose curiosity must be entertained by explanations rather than beatings. This because this particular beating highlights how the authoritarian parenting practice of this African middle class family misinterprets Mugezi’s extrovert nature, curiosity and inquisitiveness as signs of disrespect, rudeness or indiscipline.

Heather Montgomery argues that communities “recognise a distinction between discipline and abuse and will intervene to protect the child who they feel is being maltreated”.⁷⁹ David Gough argues similarly (in another context) that child abuse is “a social problem rather than an evil found in only certain families”.⁸⁰ The two scholars’ arguments remind us of the rhetorical question of Mugezi’s fictional lover and neighbour in Kampala, Lusanani: “she is not your real mother, is

she”?⁸¹ Lusanani’s rhetorical question does not only criticise Padlock’s parenting style in its astonishment, but also evokes our empathy for Mugezi. This is because her question suggests that Padlock’s ‘disciplining’ is unacceptable and illegitimate by this society’s standards.

Scarry argues that “to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt”.⁸² Although we cannot feel Mugezi’s pain when battered by his parents, his register shows us a powerful adult inflicting as much pain as s/he can onto the vulnerable child in contravention of what Montgomery avers as acceptable forms of disciplining.⁸³ The paradoxical irony of inflicting pain to reform the child or ostensibly in the best interest of the child is captured by Mugezi’s diction in the two passages quoted above. The expressions “struck with bare-clawed fury of a leopard” and “hit me with such force that the lights went out” attributed to Serenity and Padlock respectively, underscore the intensity of the pain inflicted. Serenity’s and Padlock’s near-maniac states characterised by their beating of Mugezi in the above passages depict parental loss of control because of their interpretation of their child’s actions as signals of deliberate disrespect and disobedience. It is worth noting that to some extent, the parents’ paranoia is validated because Mugezi’s actions symbolise his rejection of his parents’ legitimacy and control over them.

However, Mugezi hides his vulnerability behind the cheekiness and playfulness of his description. The imagery of “bare-clawed fury of a leopard” and the metaphor “lights went out” show a cavalier hero who gives the impression that he is not scared of or does not feel the pain. Because traumatic experiences can only be narrated in a language that is literary, the imagery in the above passages exposes the intensity of the abuse and makes it possible to characterise Padlock and Serenity as abusive and sadistic parents.⁸⁴ Mugezi’s register in his vivid descriptions make readers imagine and symbolically share his pain. The hyperbolic descriptive expressions such as “guttural groans”, “hitting him up and down, left and right”, “the first pain barrier”, “trunk split by lightning”, “knocks him out and leaves him with a swollen eye and a bad headache” enhance cumulatively excessive pain inflicted on an innocent child.

As a literary archive of domestic abuse in some African middle class families, *Abyssinian Chronicle* depicts the psychic impact of such abuse on the child. Mugezi’s revenge taken upon his tormentors such as the stealing of Padlock’s bobbin, the defacing Father Legeau’s boat or the smearing of faeces in Father Mindi’s car disingenuously targets what Brenda Cooper calls the tormentors’ object “turned fetish”.⁸⁵ Cognisant of Cooper’s unease in her argument that “[d]ictators beget dictators and Padlock’s beating” transform Mugezi into a “monstrous [subject]”, I argue that through Mugezi’s revenge, Isegawa places in the public sphere an archive of the unexploited potential of Ugandan middle class children living in contexts of parental cruelty.⁸⁶ Mugezi’s talent, demonstrated in his role as a midwife’s assistant in the village, is wasted in the city because of his parents’ authoritarian parenting that discourage creativity, curiosity and innovation. However, Mugezi’s creative truancy also highlights

how the unintended consequences of authoritarian parenting can turn these children into “monsters” that Cooper insightfully alludes to in the above passage.

In conclusion, cognisant of Cathy Caruth’s argument that trauma oscillates between becoming a text or the wound becoming a voice, I find it plausible to argue that Duiker, Kourouma and Isegawa use their first person child narrators as chroniclers to archive in fiction African troubled childhoods. By making these contributions towards new archives of childhood trauma in Africa through fiction, I aver that these texts constitute literary activism and advocacy geared towards engaging with the abuse and traumatising of children in Africa. The child narrators in the selected texts through affective and implicitly analytic voices allow us to imagine the pain of African children in contexts of war, child prostitution and domestic abuse that are never prioritised in contemporary discourses about Africa. Whereas discourses on war, urban poverty and the complicated African middle class from male and adult perspectives proliferate in the public sphere, there is a near exclusion of similar narratives from the perspectives of minorities such as children. The selected texts make it possible to archive the experiences of an ignored stratum of society.

Notes

¹ I use the term troubled childhoods to refer to the representations through fiction of a category of children who are exposed to different forms of traumatic experiences. These traumatic experiences are, but not limited to sexual violation, embroilment in war as child soldiers or war-affected children and domestic violence. My point of departure is that the disintegration of the family in Africa because of war and structural adjustment policies after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the loss of Africa’s strategic importance in geopolitical calculation in the west has had a profound impact on children.

² Kourouma, Ahmadou. *Allah is Not Obligated*. [Allah n'est pas obligé] Trans Frank Wayne. London: Vintage, [2000] 2007.

³ Isegawa, Moses. *Abyssinian Chronicles*. New York: Vintage, 2001.

⁴ Duiker, K. Sello. *Thirteen Cents*. Cape Town: Ink Inc, 2000.

⁵ Hesford, Wendy. S. “Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation”. *College English* 62.2 (1999) p. 192.

⁶ Alcoff, Linda. “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-2) p. 5.

⁷ I use the term literary archive to mean the body of nuanced and implied knowledge that literary texts capture which is different from socio-political production of knowledge because it merges imagination with affect in documenting the phenomenon of traumatic experiences of children in the post-1990 African context.

⁸ [2000; 2007

⁹ 2001

¹⁰ 2000

¹¹ Lara, Maria Pia. *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

¹² Lara, p. 68.

¹³ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

¹⁴ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 4.

¹⁵ Scarry, p. 4.

¹⁶ Spivak, Chakravorty Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary, Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. (London: Macmillan, 1998) p. 28.

¹⁷ My use of the term “chronicler” is informed by the OED. In this article it refers to the first person child narrators as people who record the important accounts of either their personal or societal trauma in the texts. In this sense, when Azure talks about paedophilia in Cape Town or Birahima about child soldiers and warlords or Mugezi about domestic abuse in certain African middle class families, they each in their different ways are providing a record of these forms of trauma in the public sphere.

¹⁸ Priebe, Richard K. “Literature, Community, and Violence: Reading African Literature in the West Post-9/11.” *Research in African Literatures* 36. 2 (2005) p. 56

¹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) p. Xv.

²⁰ The fulcrum of my reading is the triad of location and experience. By this I gesture to the fact that the setting of texts in context of war, sexual exploitation or domestic abuse reflects a specific archive of African troubled childhood. Equally important is the fact that although there are many accounts about African conflicts, the middle class and urban poverty from an adult and male perspective, little exist that examines how children are affected by these realities.

²¹ Alcoff, p. 13.

²² Scarry, p. 3.

²³ Scarry, p. 5-6.

²⁴ I use chronicling to refer to first person narrators’ recording of the different forms of abuse, and archiving as the authors’ total body of experiences of troubled African childhoods.

²⁵ Walsh, John. “Coming of Age with an AK-47: Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas Oblige*”.” *Research in African Literatures* 39.1 (2008): 185-197.

²⁶ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p. 91

²⁷ Kourouma, p. 211-212.

²⁸ Mengel, Ewald. “Introduction.” *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*. Special Issue of *Matatu* (2010) p. ix.

²⁹ Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003) p. 13.

³⁰ Spivak, p.27.

³¹ Lara, p. 77.

³² Scarry, p. 54

³³ Kourouma, p.54

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 83.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 83.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 90.

³⁸ Nussbaum, p. 6.

³⁹ Kourouma, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 90.

⁴¹ Dallaire, Romeo. *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*. (London: Hutchinson, 2010) p. 105.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.76-79.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 126.

⁴⁵ Caruth, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Macauley, Robie and Lanning George. *Technique in Fiction*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p.99.

⁴⁷ Ndebele, Njabulo. S. “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa”. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12. 2 (1986) p. 143.

⁴⁸ Duiker, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ndebele, p. 143.

⁵⁰ Duiker, p. 1-2.

⁵¹ Mbembe, p. 22.

⁵² Gerald who is to be Azure’s ‘pimp’ implicitly underscores the fact that since he owns Azure, Azure must do whatever he does to bring back money every evening. This coheres with Mbembe’s theorisation that a slave is a thing that is used by its own in the ways he wants. This provides new insights into child prostitution. The matter of fact economic prose, symbolism and

setting reverberate in Duiker's chronicling of child prostitution as a new form of slavery in postcolonial African cities.

⁵³ Lara, p. 68.

⁵⁴ Duiker, p. 1-2.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 9-10.

⁵⁶ Lara, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Raditlhalo, Sam. "A Victory of Sorts: All Thirteen Cents and Bitter Too." *The Family in Contemporary Postcolonial Literature in English Conference*. University of Groningen, 2004) p. 79.

⁵⁸ The family, city and nation have been taken over and subverted by gangsters and paedophiles such that a monetary value is adduced on the body and life of a child. In this sense, although the explicit construction of a child's body as a commercial commodity provokes our anger and outrage against the conditions and individuals that drive children into homosexual prostitution, it is the nuanced and sensitive theorisation that makes *Thirteen Cents* an important cultural product about African troubled childhoods

⁵⁹ Strauss, Helene. "Living the Pain of Creolisation: Shifting Contexts of Subject Formation in K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and Lueen Conning's *A Coloured Place*." *Under Construction: 'race' and identity in South Africa today*. Ed. N. Distiller and M. Steyn. (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 2004) p.32.

⁶⁰ Duiker, p. 81.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 82.

⁶² Ibid, p. 84.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 85.

⁶⁴ Mbembe, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Duiker, p. 85.

⁶⁶ Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France (1978-1979)* (eds) Michel Sinellart (trans) Graham Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶⁷ Lara, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Duiker, p. 94.

⁶⁹ Jean Meiring, "The Sweet Fruit of Literary Success", *Thisday*. (21 Oct, 2004) p. 6.

⁷⁰ Heather Hewett in her reading of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* notes the catastrophic interconnection between "Christianity and patriarchy" (80). Hewett's postulation is also revealed in Moses Isegawa *Abyssinian Chronicles* which archives the conflation of patriarchy and Christianity into domestic abuse of children in elite African middle class families.

⁷¹ Walsh, Richard. "Who Is the Narrator?" *Poetics Today* 18.4 (1997) p. 499.

⁷² Lara, p. 68.

⁷³ Isegawa, p. 469.

⁷⁴ Lara, p. 157.

⁷⁵ Skov, Neilsen Henrik. "The Impersonal Voice in the First Person Narrative Fiction." *Narrative* 12.2 (2004) p.133.

⁷⁶ Isegawa, p. 106

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 141.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 137.

⁷⁹ Montgomery, Heather. *An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children's Lives*. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) p. 176.

⁸⁰ Gough, David. "The Case for and against Prevention". *Child Abuse and Child Abusers*. Eds. Lorraine Waterhouse. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1993) p. 209.

⁸¹ Isegawa, p. 97.

⁸² Scarry, p. 7.

⁸³ Montgomery, p. 173.

⁸⁴ Caruth 1996.

⁸⁵ Cooper, Brenda. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008) p.93.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 87-88.