

الضحايا او الجناة (تجنيد الطفل مسرحيات ما بعد الحداثة)

Victims or Perpetrators: Child Soldiering in Selected Post-Modern Plays

أ.م.د. جنان وحيد جاسم

Asst. Prof. Jinan Waheed Jassim (Ph.D)

الجامعة المستنصرية / كلية الآداب / قسم اللغة الانكليزية وآدابها

Mustansiriyah University College of Arts Department of English Language and Literature

jinanwj@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq

Abstract

Undoubtedly war is the source of all evils, no matter how justified nor how necessary it is. Yet the traditional warfare between two or more armies with adult soldiers is no longer the status quo. New kinds of wars emerged in the last few decades that changed the face of military conflicts and required younger, untrained, and reckless individuals who are brainwashed and rendered ready for dangerous and indescribable tasks and operations.

Hence began the recruiting of children as a new weapon in these wars, where they are either kidnapped, threatened, or intimidated to join the armed forces. Sometimes economic crises play a great role in facilitating this kind of recruitment

exploiting poor families who are willing to give their children away to be killing machines in a very early age and expose them to all sorts of traumas that can scar them forever. The growing phenomenon of child soldiers has become alarming lately and required intervention to stop it or at least to lessen its traumatic impact.

Theatre, as usual, carries out its social mission and treats the subject of child soldiering as a very crucial matter, depicting the dilemma of these victimized children, who are often seen as criminals, and using drama itself as a means of healing them and helping them to overcome their PTSD. Many plays were written about children who have originally been victims of brutal civil and intrastate wars, and one way of their victimization is throwing them in the middle of battle, untrained and uncounted for.

Plays like *Stoning Mary* by Debbie Tucker Green; *Midwinter* by Zinnie Harris, and *Child Soldier* by J. Thalia Cunningham and Mahmood Karimi-Hakak and so many others, tackle the subject of child soldiering, showing the ugly face of war that keeps creating new weapons of destruction by turning innocent children into ruthless monsters.

Key words: war drama, child soldier, strategic recruitment, victims, therapeutic drama.

المستخلص

لا شك أن الحرب، مهما كانت مبررة أو ضرورية، هي مصدر كل شر. ومع ذلك، فإن الحرب التقليدية بين جيشين أو أكثر مع جنود بالغين لم تعد هي الوضع الراهن. ظهرت أنواع جديدة من الحروب في العقود القليلة الماضية والتي غيرت وجه الصراعات العسكرية وتطلبت أفراداً أصغر سناً وغير مدربين ومتهورين يتم غسل أدمغتهم لجعلهم مستعدين لمهام وعمليات خطيرة لا توصف.

ومن هنا بدأ تجنيد الأطفال كسلاح جديد في هذه الحروب، حيث يتعرضون إما للخطف أو التهديد أو الترهيب للانضمام إلى القوات المسلحة. تلعب الأزمات الاقتصادية أحياناً دوراً كبيراً في تسهيل هذا النوع من

التجنيد ، مستغلة الأسر الفقيرة التي ترغب في التخلي عن أطفالها ليكونوا آلات قتل في سن مبكرة جدًا وتعريضهم لجميع أنواع الصدمات التي يمكن أن تخيفهم إلى الأبد. أصبحت ظاهرة الجنود الأطفال المتنامية مقلقة في الآونة الأخيرة وتطلبت التدخل لوقفها أو على الأقل لتقليل أثرها المؤلم.

يقوم المسرح ، كالعادة ، بتنفيذ رسالته الاجتماعية ويتعامل مع موضوع تجنيد الأطفال كمسألة بالغة الأهمية ، ويصور معضلة هؤلاء الأطفال الضحايا ويستخدم الدراما نفسها كوسيلة لعلاجهم ومساعدتهم على التغلب على اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة. تمت كتابة العديد من المسرحيات حول الأطفال الذين وقعوا ضحايا لحروب أهلية وحروب داخل الدول ، ومن طرق إيذائهم إلقاءهم في وسط المعركة ، غير مدربين وغير معدودين.

مسرحيات مثل (منتصف الشتاء) لزيني هاريس: (رجم ماري) لديبي تاكر جرين ؛ و(الطفل الجندي) بقلم ج. تاليا كينغهام و محمود كريمي حكاك. وغيرها الكثير ، يتناول موضوع تجنيد الأطفال ، ويظهر الوجه القبيح للحرب التي تستمر في صنع أسلحة دمار جديدة من خلال تحويل الأطفال الأبرياء إلى وحوش لا تعرف الرحمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دراما الحرب ، الجندي الطفل ، التجنيد الاستراتيجي ، ضحايا، الدراما العلاجية

“Children, my dear brother, are the best fighters of the century. They have more energy than older people. They resist without feeling physical pain”

Lucien, 12, former child soldier, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Throughout history, children were caught in the middle of armed conflicts, sometimes they have been seen as heroes lauded for their martial bravery shown in the darkness of war time. Lately, however, the participation of children in combat is no longer regarded as just an unpleasant or a desperate last stand but, instead, as a flatly unaccepted and impressible, considering the affected children as afflicted victims, this is due to the shift in global consciousness. The progress of international human rights law, humanitarian law and criminal law, pushes this change further. The link between the child and armed conflict has shifted from one related to ethics, morality, and needs to one governed by rules, law, and public policy. Increasingly “conscription, enlistment or use in hostilities of person under the age of 18 – in

particular by armed groups but also increasingly by armed forces– is seen as unlawful” according to the international community (B., 2019, p. 1).

Child soldiering is one of the devastating outcomes of what is known as the New Wars, following the Cold– War era. The British writer Mary Kaldor coined the term “New Wars” to refer to a new category of war that began in the early 1990s. she wrote a book entitled *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, where she explains that her writings on these new wars were driven by the appearance of a new type of organised violence in Eastern Europe and Africa, she also makes a comparison between these new wars and earlier “old” wars in regard to their goals, the tactics of warfare and their financing (Kaldor, 2012). In addition to ethnic cleansing, systematic rape, civilian casualties, it becomes very notable that the exploitation of children as soldiers has increased in the new wars. Statistics show that “around the world, nearly 250 million children are living in countries affected by conflict and tens of thousands of them have been recruited and used as child soldiers” (Wallström, 2017). And also “fifty countries still allow children to be recruited into armed forces, according to Child Soldiers International. Many non–state armed groups also recruit children (Their World) UNICEF statistics show that: “A number of the world’s child soldiers are actually girls – in some countries up to 40% – and many are as young as seven or eight years old” (Qtd (Brocklehurst, 2007, p. 4). Also, “since 2000, over 115,000 children have been released from armed forces and groups” (Wallström, 2017).

Paris conference, in 2007, defined a child soldier as “any person below 18 years of age or who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only

refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (Qtd (A, 2012, p. 4).

All over the world, children can be recruited by regular armies or by armed forces outside government control. Recruiting children is more likely to be done by Non-governmental armed forces than governments. This increases the intensity of this issue since these forces are harder to negotiate with because they are less visible.

Children are turned into soldiers by different means. Some of them are forcibly recruited, after being threatened, abducted, or coerced into joining, others may join after being enticed with drugs, money or in other ways. In some cases social and/ or economic pressures make children willingly join the armed forces. Sometimes they join to fight supporting a cause that themselves, or their families believe in, frequently with little or no clear understanding of the implications of such a decision.

Poverty, displacement, separation from families or being in a combat zone can lead children particularly to be susceptible to recruitment. Armed groups target children for many reasons. One reason is because younger people are easier to manipulate, and they do not eat much, and mostly because they also lack a distinctly evolved sense of danger.

Frédérique Lecomte explains that child soldiers “are often ordered to kill and perpetrate other atrocities against members of their own family by their recruiters... It’s a weapon of war to oblige the child soldier to kill those they know, because after that they are completely under the control of the soldiers...Afterwards, they are open to kill anybody” (Qtd (O’Byrne, 2019).

Graça Machel, a former Minister of Education of Mozambique, and an expert in the United Nations, in 1996, presented a report, entitled the “*Promotion and*

Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children". In this report, she called for the encompassing of the issue of child–recruitment in the international agenda as a crucial matter:

It is unconscionable that we so clearly and consistently see children’s rights attacked and that we fail to defend them. It is unforgivable that children are assaulted, violated, murdered and yet our conscience is not revolted nor our sense of dignity challenged. This represents a fundamental crisis of our civilization ... Each one of us, each individual, each institution, each country, must initiate and support global action to protect children. (G., 1996)

According to Machel, vulnerability is a vital characteristic of child–soldiers, once they become dependent, powerless, and therefore exploited. To make child–soldiering an international issue and deal with the emergency it imposes, a high investment in the construction of international laws and standards is done, aiming to build an invincible barrier between the child and the soldier, making the children recruitment an international crime (Tabak, 2020)

Child soldiers, who are victims of wars and economy are sometimes considered criminals, in this regard, M. S. Denov maintains that “while these children are frequently constructed through the logic of extremes (as either extreme victims, extreme perpetrators or extreme heroes), in reality, the lives, experiences and identities of these children fall within the messy, ambiguous and paradoxical zones of all three” (Denov, 2010).

War, in all its atrocities, haunts the New War plays, the same way death haunts the Morality Play. Yet in contemporary plays, war is presented as an unlisted character, sometimes manifesting itself in specific roles like the child soldier. Theatre is the medium which exposes the New Wars as palimpsests of old wars by means of

blending the spatial and the temporal, as well as textually and visually combining historical, political, and cultural references .

In many plays, war is presented as an invisible force that may be impersonated in the character of the child soldier. In this shape, the civil wars come home to the Western Fortresses (which are in reality far away from those wars) as well, and not only on the theatrical stage.

Stoning Mary by Debbie Tucker Green (2005) is an exemplary play about the crime of exploiting children in wars. Set in the country where it is performed, with a cast of Caucasian actors, the play tells three different stories, which at the beginning seem disconnected. The first story is about a husband and wife with AIDS who fight for the only prescription they could afford; the second portrays the parents of a teenage soldier disputing about their son; while the third one depicts a woman visiting her younger imprisoned sister, Mary, who is condemned to be stoned for murdering the boy who assaulted her parents. With the alternation in the narrative among the stories, it is found that the couple with Aids are Mary's parents who are killed by a child soldier, who himself turns to be the son of the second couple. The following scene is when Mary's sister and her boyfriend narrate Mary's parents' fight over the prescription, right before Mary's execution. The last scene combines all stories, and the play ends with the first stone picked up by the mother of the child soldier intending to stone Mary.

In this play a child is turned into a cruel ruthless killer:

Older Sister: You killed a man. ...

Younger Sister: And I'm gonna be stoned down for it. ...

Older Sister: You killed a man who was a boy.

Younger Sister: ... That *boy* was a soldier.

Beat.

Older Sister: That soldier was a child –

Younger Sister: That *child* killed my parents. *Our* parents, *ourn*.

... I done somethin. Least I done somethin. I done somethin – I did.

I did. I did – I done somethin. (Green, 2005) 63–64)

As she revenges from the child who has murdered her parents, Mary, in turn, is stoned to death by communal revenge as well, yet her planned execution at the end of the play, gratifies nothing, as the conflict and perpetual violence will keep spreading, when the community is confined in a circle of mutual violence, as “the mimetic character of violence is so intense that once violence is installed in a community, it cannot burn itself out” (Girard, 2005, p. 86). Girard refers to the surrogate victim, who serves as the scapegoat for a community which is convinced that one of its members is solely responsible for the violence initiated in it; when this community sees this member as an enemy who is harming the rest, then the belief turns into a reality, hence the circle of violence keeps going on. In destroying this surrogate victim, in this case Mary, the community believes that it is ending some present ill.

Fear is the decisive force in the plays whose setting is outside the war zone, fear of the unknown and fear of the drastic consequences of the war on the lives of people. In the armed conflict, there is a conscious loss, the immediate loss of the lives of soldiers as well as the loss of the belief in the cause. *Stoning Mary* gains a universal tone as it “is set in the country it is performed in. All characters are White”

(Green, 2005, p. 2) . Green states that, "I write black characters. That is part of my landscape. But with *Stoning Mary* I was interested in questioning what we don't see and hear. The stories of people who would be in the headlines every day if what was happening to them was happening to white people. It happens all the time" (**Gardner, 2005**). Green's intention is to shock the audience by creating a sense of dislocation when she transfers issues more familiar in a Third World setting to an unfamiliar setting in any other far away countries.

The technique is simple and effective, a story of a child soldier is related to an obviously Western audience. In contemporary plays, war deforms the distinctive identities of the characters. Since those plays internalise the state of constant conflict, they do not present any critical point of view to judge the circumstances and politics of that conflict. *Stoning Mary* portrays the child soldier as he breaks into the couple's home and refuses everything they offer him, he even asks them to "beg" for their lives, that he then takes nonetheless (Green, 2005, p. 41). The issue becomes so drastic to the extent that the mother of this returned child soldier says: "I can't sleep with him back in the house" (Green, 2005, p. 52), the war, manifesting itself in the shape of a child, haunts the community as a living atrocity.

British playwright Zinnie Harris says about her war plays (*Solstice* (2004), *Midwinter* (2005), *Fall* (2008) : "I'm not sure that they're all necessarily about the same war, or even set in the same country... what links them is the idea that war has cycles like the seasons, from the tiny events that spark conflict, to the awful, horrendous loss of life" (Qtd. (Innes, 2002, p. 20) . These cycles of wars generate all kinds of victims/criminals including child soldiers.

Solstice, a prequel of *Midwinter*, is set ten years before the latter play, and depicts a community on the edge of a civil war. Two neighbouring communities are divided by a bridge. As the older generation begins cutting ties with the community on

the opposite side of the bridge, the younger generation gets involved in retaliatory violence: a young man participates in committing a terrorist act that renders a lot of people dead and injured.

The constantly recreated “ideology of antagonism”, recognized by anthropologists Ingo W. Schroeder and Schmidt Bettina E. as one of the reasons to escalate the cycle of retaliatory violence becomes self–continuing in an environment loaded with ethnic–cultural tension (Bettina E. Schmidt, 2001, p. 15). *Solstice* is set in this point presenting little initial skirmishes that lead to a full–scale civil war. The younger generation, represented by Adie and Sita, engages in retaliatory violence:

Adie: They are going to piss all over us Dad

Michel: that may be so

Adie: all my friends and their parents are leaving. There are all

these rumours about what is coming in on the airfield.

I don't know what we can do

Michel: we leave it up to the politicians

there have been crises like this before it blows over

Adie: they hate us over there

Michel: if we don't fight we don't lose

Adie: it isn't about winning or losing they will win anyway

it is just about not turning over and letting them. ((Harris, 2004, p. 77)

Midwinter is set during the short truce between continuous battles in a never ending war. With no specific place or time, the play begins with a conventional image of the effects of a lengthy and debilitating war with a huge lack of provisions: a middle aged woman (Maud) eating the meat of a dead horse. Starving Leonard and his grandson Sirin approach her, drawn to the smell of the meat. She makes a deal with the grandfather to feed the boy, but in return, she will keep him as a substitution for her dead son. Maud's husband, Grenville, who is a soldier returns that same night from the war. Maud introduces the boy as their child. She learns from him that all the returned soldiers are infected with a mysterious parasite which causes blindness. At the end of the play the news comes that the war has begun again – even without any soldiers (who have all gone blind). Consequently, Maud denies the existence of war, and decides that her own house is exclusively a peaceful zone.

German professor and political scientist Herfried Münkler asserts, in his book *The New Wars*, that the distinction between combatants and non-combatants has become blurry and that therefore, most of the fighters are untrained and undrilled (Münkler, 2005, p. 61), here he focuses on the figure of the child soldier who has turned into an integral part of the New Wars. Early in Harris' s *Midwinter*, the fate of child soldiers is shown:

Maud: He won't starve for long. They'll decide they need him soon.

Then they'll feed him. Feed him up. Oh, there is food. Didn't you

know that? We may be under siege but food does get in.

After all they need food to feed the ten-year-olds they call the men.

Leonard: He's eight.

Maud: So they'll let him starve for another two years yet. (Green, 2005, pp. 6–7)

Münkler explains the reasons behind the recruitment of children, by armed forces, stating that since younger people's self-preservation instinct is less evolved than that of adults, they show such a “remarkable insouciance in the face of danger”, they also show little to no inhibition in using violence; they do not take defenceless people into consideration and also show a peculiar cruelty and brutality, all that make them “the most feared participants in the new wars” (Münkler, 2005, p. 80). He adds that “these adolescents, for their part, often consider a gun as the only means of getting food and clothing, or as the simplest way of acquiring desirable consumption goods and status symbols” (Münkler, 2005, p. 18), all that makes them a more suitable target for the armed forces that can be easily exploited and manipulated.

In *Cruel and Tender* (2004) by Martin Crimp, although the child carrying a weapon remains offstage, he faces a trial in the aftermath of war crimes, and the main character, the General, who is used to fighting child soldiers is questioned about ripping off the heart of a boy in front of a crowd. The recruited child occupies centre stage in *Cockroach* (2008), written by Sam Holcroft. In this play, public school children, in a biology class, are taught by their brave teacher that, like the cockroach, “survival is for the fittest”, afterwards they are taken from the school grounds to directly join the army. *Dunsinane* (2010), by David Greig, is a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, whose events narrative begins after the defeat of [Macbeth](#). The armed children also appear in this play, on one hand as members of the “regular” invading army and, on the other hand, as members of the guerrilla forces of Gruach (Lady Macbeth), the besieged Queen.

Child Soldier based on a true story, is a collaborative play written by J. Thalia Cunningham and professor Mahmood Karimi-Hakak. The play is concerned with the life of a former female soldier, Destiny, who comes to the United States as undocumented refugee. Now a high school student, she is agonized by her previous engagement as a child soldier in Liberia when she “tortured and brutalized villagers who did not support the rebels” (Grondahl, 2014). Not only she faces racial discrimination at school, but also she is pressured by a former leader of a rebel’s militia who is now a pimp, tries to entice her by promising to help her to get a green card if she accepts to be one of his prostitutes. Destiny is haunted by the spirits of her family, who revive her memories of her former life.

DESTINY: Ya. My brother Matthew first. He was my best friend as well as my brother. ... The rebels attacked our village. One of them tied a rope around my mamma, my younger brothers and sisters, and me. It bit into our flesh. Then the kerosene. They held a gun to Matthew’s head and told him to light the match. His eyes met mine, looking at me as a big brother should look at his little sister.

Gentle. Protective. His hand shook as he tried to light the match. Then, suddenly, he threw the flame at the rebel who held the gun, while lunging at the knot in the ropes to free us. It was over in seconds. I felt the shot, rather than hearing it. The back of Matthew’s dear head exploded, and my lap became warm and sticky, as his blood and brain matter flew around us. ... I was the next oldest. As they pried me out and re-tightened the rope, Mama squeezed my hand. It was the last time I ever felt her touch or heard her sweet voice. She whispered one last thing to me. Then the rebels gave me the same chance they gave Matthew. What could I do? I was warned not to cry. (crying) Oh, mama! I ll hear all your screams in the flames for the rest of my life. (she stifles her crying) Please! Don t tell General Machete Mouth. I m sorry, I m sorry. Mama told me, You re my strong, smart girl. Make us proud. Such love in her

voice. (crying again) Papa was out in the bush. I prayed they d take me and leave, but they waited for his return. ...Then they handed me a machete. Like butchering a goat. Papa! Please forgive me! (49)

Destiny is a living proof that although war is over, the internal battle keeps going for a child soldier. Karimi–Hakak, the co–author, director, and producer of the play affirms that: “Destiny’s story is not only the story of an individual, it is the story of many child soldiers all over the world ... What happens to Destiny is really what happens to a generation. Not only in one place, not only in one class, but generations of people. It is often a matter of militarization being put over education” (Davis, 2014).

The authors note that:

in the past 25 years, an estimated 11,000 children have fought in two civil wars in Liberia. These children are recruited at a very young age. They are often forced to use drugs and commit acts of torture and murder. For young girls, being child soldiers often means suffering horrific sexual abuse. Destiny’s story is an example of how those memories of war and forced violence leave traumatic scars on their lives forever. (Davis, 2014).

Paul [Grondahl](#) confirms that “the play is graphic in its imagery and its descriptions of the violence carried out at the hands of Liberia's child soldiers, both male and female” (Grondahl, 2014).

In a heart– breaking monologue, Destiny describes her painful experience with recruitment at an early age, and recollects the very brutal way they killed her own baby girl in front of her moments before taking her and other children to fight again, leaving the slaughtered baby behind:

You were only a few months old. But already such a bright little girl! Laughing and chattering such pretty sounds. How I loved you!

I would have gladly given my life for you, but it wouldn't have helped. It was time to go out fighting again.

They gave us drugs, slitting our foreheads with razors so cocaine would go directly into the bloodstream. Then they performed the ritual to make us brave.

There you were, the next one to be sacrificed. He picked you up. I screamed and cried, but he held his knife to my throat and said he'd kill me, too, if I made one more sound.

He slit your throat, a flash of unbearable pain, while a soldier about my age held a cup to collect your blood.

My own flesh was on fire. The cup was passed around for all of us to drink. I drank without thinking. My eyes were only on you,

as you slowly stopped crying and wiggling and breathing, the last drops of blood dripping out your chubby little neck like water from a leaky tap.

Then you were still, so still. Your blood ringed my lips as I rushed forth to gather you in my arms, but they wouldn't even let me hold you once more.

His knife was in my back as we carried our guns out into the bush. I turned back to look at your little body, a naked scrap of promise lying in the dust.

He prodded me, forcing me to turn around, mixing your blood with mine. The scar is all I have left of you.

How I long to hug you, kiss you. It hurts. It hurts so much. (27)

Creativity of Karimi-Hakak is shown through the unique presentation of the play, building four stages in a circle, making the audience in the centre obliged to swivel to choose the next scene to watch. This movement is deliberately added to the performance to create the illusion of the passage of time. Also large screens are put in the background to produce the setting showing images from the bloody civil war in Liberia (from 1999 to 2003), and “the stage orientation leads to a dynamic and immersive performance that is at once emotional and graphically shocking” (Davis, 2014).

Before becoming a playwright, Cunningham was a travel writer and an emergency physician. In her travels to 150 countries, including some in Africa, she witnessed many crises, and in her play, she wants the audience to share her experience, she states that: "I'm an emergency physician and I'm not squeamish ... I hope the audience is not either. I'm after the truth. I want the audience to know the grim reality of these wars and the terrible things done to, and by, child soldiers" (Grondahl, 2014).

Portraying the dilemma and traumas of child soldiers is not the only goal of theatre, but also it seeks to use its therapeutic quality utilized in helping people with different illnesses and difficulties to heal. In the case of child soldiers, theatre is a means to help them reintegrate into society, and overcome the traumas they faced during their time of recruitment.

Belgian theatre director, Frédérique Lecomte, believes in the therapeutic power of drama, she uses it to help child soldiers, and other victims and perpetrators in zones of conflict. He founded a theatre group, “Theatre and Reconciliation”, which has worked under charged conditions for over 15 years. She states that “I specialised

in doing theatre with people who are in conflict: perpetrators and victims of torture, child soldiers and victims of rape, or warring ethnic groups” (O’Byrne, 2019).

Lecomte’s most recent work in the Republic of Congo is called *War is not a Children’s Game*. It was inspired by a scenario that she has encountered there and, for her, encapsulates the therapeutic power of the work in “Theatre and Reconciliation”. In this improvised drama with a group of former child soldiers, an ex-child soldier, Ushindi, was enacting a painful scenario that resonates his own life, “the other performers all started shouting, ‘Don’t shoot me, Ushindi! Ushindi, I am your school mate, I am your brother, don’t kill me!’ And then the commandant ordered him to kill them, so he did.” (O’Byrne, 2019)

The therapeutic power of this play is manifested when Ushindi agreed to join Lecomte, playing the same role, in the tour of the play that she was organising, he says: “it’s hard for me, but I can do it because it’s theatre...After the scene, we talked about it, and I said, ‘I know most of you were made to do these things and that you weren’t responsible for what you did. It was the adults who made you do it that were responsible.’” Lecomte affirms that: “through repeating the scene, I’m sure it was therapeutic not only for him, but for the audience” (O’Byrne, 2019).

Congolese journalist and activist Joseph Tsongo, supported the idea of Lecomte to “rehabilitate these children with a soft weapon that is participatory forum theater” (Qtd (Skilton, 2019)). The first step was in 2016 when he started a drama workshop in the local language, a program called “*Amani Kwetu*”, which means “peace in our country”. Tsongo explains that his program “was born from the idea of promoting the social inclusion of former child soldiers ...Because we live here in a context of conflicts and wars where children have only the destiny to take up arms and will be forcefully enlisted in the armed militias raging in the region” (Skilton, 2019). He continues:

Generally, we organize theater workshops and shows every month where the former child soldiers first express their emotions (fear, sorrow, joy, worry, anger...) and little by little, we build a stage by offering to these young people to share and then to play what they experienced during the war, how they joined the armed groups, what happened in the bush. (Skilton, 2019)

The stage is not just a platform where the children can express themselves but also it provides a safety net for those emotions, Tsongo argues that:

the idea is that with the theater, these children relax and express themselves in a relaxed atmosphere... Another important thing is that this kind of theater is a little tragic and real, it leads people to do introspection to recover. The participatory forum theater also facilitates the interaction between these former child soldiers and members of the local community including people they knew from before. (Skilton, 2019)

Tsongo's goal from these drama workshops is to reintegrate the children into their communities and readjust them to public life; and for the audience (members of the community). Children are often encouraged to participate by narrating their stories at the end of each performance as a therapeutic procedure and to make people “overcome their stereotypes and prejudices and learn to accept the children back into their society” (Skilton, 2019)

The members of audience are usually very affected by the performance. They begin to realize that those young people are forced to join the armed groups and that makes them victims of war as much as everyone else, as a woman told Tsongo after one of the performances, “I thought that they were savages, but now I understand that they were manipulated” (Lauvergnier, 2018). The young actors say that “theatre has helped them to change, to realise that there’s a life outside of the armed groups.

It brings them closer to their families, and they feel more loved and integrated in their community” (*Ibid*). In this way theatre fulfill its therapeutic mission in society.

Conclusion

Child soldiering have become a very urgent issue lately due to the work of human right agencies and activists and the issuing of laws that incriminate actions related to abusing children in any capacity, whether in direct combats or in other related war missions.

That new shift in dealing with this sensitive and crucial matter led playwrights to carry on their artistic mission in using theatre as a means of reform and tackle this issue not just to raise awareness of people but also to find solutions to the problem.

Those children are seen in different perspectives by people around them. While they are considered heroes by the armed forces that recruit them and some of their families, they are considered criminals by people suffering from the atrocities they commit, while others regard them mere defendless victims. One of the solutions theatre aims to reach is trying to help former child soldiers to reintegrate into society by changing the perspectives of people who see them as perpetrators. Instead showing them as victimized individuals who are taken from the safety of their homes, and the warmth of their families to be forced to join militias and armed forces, and giving them a second chance to relive a normal peaceful life.

Theatre, as a therapeutical means, also provides safe environments for those children to express their feelings within arranged theatrical performances to help them recover from traumas they went through while participating in devastating untraditional wars. Hence theatre fulfill its social mission as well as its artistic one.

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