Satirizing the Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa: An Analysis of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sozaboy – a Novel in Rotten English and Uzodinma Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation and the First Half of an Original Novel, Odi’s Odyssey

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Satirizing the Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa: An Analysis of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s
Sozaboy – A Novel in Rotten English and Uzodinma Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation
and the First Half of an Original Novel, Odi’s Odyssey

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Abstract

This essay on satire of war explores how two African writers, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Uzodinma Iweala, deride the use of children as soldiers in their novels, *Sozaboy – A Novel in Rotten English* (1985) and *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), and how these works of fiction have influenced similar satire in my novel, *Odi’s Odyssey*. In satirizing the dehumanization of children fighting in African wars, Saro-Wiwa and Iweala empower their barely-literate protagonists to tell their harrowing stories in the English language, resulting in a pidginized dialectal concoction that humanizes the characters. Likewise, my novel features a semi-educated African boy who recounts his foray into war in pseudo-English. While Saro-Wiwa and Iweala differ in their execution of satire, they both use literary devices such as language, point of view, characterization, foreshadowing, and tragedy, among others, to entice and then shock their readers with the dreadful plight of child soldiers. Notably, Saro-Wiwa blends lighthearted Horatian satire with blistering Juvenalian satire to tell his cautionary tale of a boy who is tempted to willingly become a child soldier for the wrong reasons, meanwhile Iweala stays mainly on the somber side, using Juvenalian satire to paint a haunting portrait of the abuse of the human rights of a child soldier. Equally, my novel uses Juvenalian satire to depict the unintentional involvement of an ordinary African family in a civil war and terrorism, and its destruction by both. By studying how Saro-Wiwa and Iweala lampoon the use of children as soldiers in their novels, the writers’ influences on my work become apparent.
Table of Contents

I. Satirizing the Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa
   
   Ken Saro-Wiwa: Telling a Cautionary Tale ........................................ 1
   
   Uzodinma Iweala: Exposing the Plight of Child Soldiers ...................... 23
   
   Influence & Inspiration: Depicting the Death of Innocence .................. 38
   
   Bibliography ....................................................................................... 46

II. The First Half of an Original Novel
   
   *Odi’s Odyssey* .................................................................................... 48
Ken Saro-Wiwa: Telling a Cautionary Tale

Saro-Wiwa uses language deftly to make his protagonist and narrator, Mene, authentic and believable—and hence likable. This tactic ensures that Saro-Wiwa’s satire resonates with the reader at a deeper level. Saro-Wiwa begins by highlighting the fact that Mene, who is in his early teens, is well-intentioned, but lacks education due to no fault of his own. “…I passed my elementary six with distinction,” Mene states proudly, “In fact, I am very clever boy in school and I like to work hard always” (Saro-Wiwa 11). Mene’s simplistic but earnest language underlies his ambition to become better than his circumstances through education. When Mene’s mother tells him that he can no longer continue school due to lack of funds, the boy is heartbroken. “The thing pained me bad bad because I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and talking big big English” (11). Mene’s low-grade broken English, which literary scholar Marie Leger describes as “a discourse at the crossroads between African and African languages” (Leger 24), seems to be an attempt to hold on to his grand aspirations. By letting Mene plough his way through the English language, Saro-Wiwa reminds the reader of Mene’s inferior socio-economic status, a key factor that pushes children to become soldiers in Africa (Brett/Specht 14). Saro-Wiwa simultaneously showcases Mene’s desire to do and be better by unsuccessfully attempting to speak the language of the learned. In fact, Saro-Wiwa called the language he uses in Sozaboy “rotten English,” describing it as “disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities” (Sozaboy, Author’s Note). Saro-Wiwa therefore uses language to place Mene on the low rungs of the societal ladder. Mene’s language is both raw and honest,
thus alluring the reader to believe his story and empathize with his predicament. He is the motivated, hardworking only son of a struggling single mother born and raised in the obscure and impoverished village of Dukana in a West African country, clearly Nigeria. (In the introduction to Sozaboy, William Boyd states that Saro-Wiwa, who was executed for his political activism by the Nigerian government in 1995, set his novel “during a particular and precise conflict, namely the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970, also known as the Biafran war” (Sozaboy, Introduction). Marie Leger confirms this, stating that Sozaboy “is clearly anchored in the context of the Biafran war…” (Leger 2)). Saro-Wiwa uses Mene’s meek background to endear him to the reader. This likability is crucial if Saro-Wiwa must entice his readers to immerse themselves in Mene’s Candide-like journey until the end, and feel the emotional impact of his cautionary tale.

Saro-Wiwa uses characterization to define Mene as an innocent and amiable albeit naïve boy who is convinced to become a child soldier for superficial reasons. This setup ensures that Mene and the reader will learn a lesson by the end of the story. Mene’s yearning to do better despite his humble roots first leads him to become an apprentice driver, and then a “sozaboy.” The latter step is enhanced by peer pressure, especially from the boy’s shallow girlfriend, Agnes, who tells Mene when they first meet: “When trouble come, I like strong, brave man who can fight and defend me” (19). As this statement kindles the lovelorn boy’s desire to wear the uniform, he is further pushed by his fellow villagers of Dukana, led by the arrogant and loquacious ex-soldier, Zaza, who uses his hyperbolized role in his alleged fight against “Hitla” in Burma, and his purported marriage to a white woman because he was a “soza,” to instigate Mene thus: “Let the
young people like Mene here go and fight… I have killed my own Hitla. Let Mene them
 go and fight” (34). Zaza’s portrait of a soldier as a hero is corroborated by the “very good
 man” (23), Terr Kole, who cautions Mene to be careful, but adds: “…it is a good thing
 that you are going to make soza” (64). This peer pressure has a strong impact on Mene
 who concludes decidedly: “I think it is good thing to fight after all. If person will marry
 better woman after the fight. Oh yes, it must be good thing to fight. And not just fight
 with hand and leg oh, but better fight with gun. And not just for Dukana but for Burma”
 (35). Saro-Wiwa highlights Mene’s naiveté. The boy decides to become a “sozaboy” and
 “fight” without taking a moment to consider the deeper ramifications of such a decision.
 His prime goal is prestige. “I will show Zaza that I am not yekpe man like himself,” he
 says, “I will show that Agnes that I am not a coward man. I can defend her anytime. Oh
 yes. I will show her proper” (38). Saro-Wiwa ridicules both the communities that push
 their children to go to war, and the children themselves who become soldiers for the
 wrong reasons. Mene’s desire to impress his new wife and fellow villagers soon leads to
 his obsession with wearing a soldier’s uniform and carrying a gun. Yet, remarkably,
 Saro-Wiwa never lets Mene, who is a child soldier for over two years, shoot his gun, or
 even attempt to fight with anyone during the war. Not only does Mene discard his
 uniform the first time he is exposed to the carnage of war, when a lethal bomb explodes
 at his camp at the warfront annihilating many lives, including his best friend, he spends
 his entire time as a soldier attempting—always ineflectually—to flee from the battlefield
 and return to his family. The fact that Saro-Wiwa does not let Mene achieve his goal of
 reuniting with his mother and wife at the end of the novel underscores the writer’s satire.
Through the character of Mene, Saro-Wiwa vehemently cautions young Africans against leaving their families to become soldiers without knowing what they are getting themselves into.

Saro-Wiwa uses the first-person narrative to humanize and personalize Mene’s story and give it a sense of proximity and urgency. Oftentimes the writer tethers his satire to Mene’s ingenuousness. Such is the case when the boy wears a uniform for the first time as a newly enlisted soldier. “Oh how I am prouding because of this uniform,” he says, “…In fact, I am thinking as I am wearing that uniform for the first time how Agnes will feel if she sees me inside it. I believe that she will be prouding of me” (72). Mene does not become a soldier because of an interest in committing murder or rape. Having never witnessed murder, he is ignorant about the sheer monstrosity of war. He becomes a soldier in order to make his new wife and the people of his village proud of him. It is this ambition—even if misplaced—that humanizes him. His adulation of guns as stipulated by his “san major” (71), Tan Papa, also highlights his obliviousness. “…I was holding the gun with plenty of respect and love… That day I was prouding plenty because it means that I am now soza proper” (76). Like a blind man Mene heads toward a steep cliff, and the reader, unable to help, feels a mixture of pity, anger and helplessness at the boy’s cluelessness. Mene’s bubble is first burst when he arrives the warfront and is mandated to spend arduous hours awake in a mud-filled pit in the jungle. However, it is when a plane bombs the camp where Mene and his fellow soldiers are residing, that Saro-Wiwa uses the first person narrative to pack a satirical punch. “My dear brother, you have not seen the type of confusion that I see that morning,” Mene says, “…Oh Jesus Christ son of
God, the thing wey I see my mouth no fit talk am. Oh God our father wey dey for up, why you make man wicked like this to his own brother?” (110 – 111) Saro-Wiwa uses Mene’s astonishment at the utter carnage that he observes to warn young African boys about the potential fate of a “soza proper.” By having Mene address his speech to “my dear brother” in this pivotal scene, Saro-Wiwa channels his cautionary tale directly to children who get fooled by the glamorized stories they are told about military life.

Mene’s first person narrative also describes the butchery he observes in a raw and emotional voice that would elude a more distant third person narrative.

All the camp don broke down well well. Everywhere was full of pit and pit and pit. And inside one pit, you will see the head of soldier, and in another pit, the leg of soza and in another pit, the hand of soza. Everywhere, soso human flesh in small small pieces! Finger, nail, hair, prick, blokkus. Oh, I most begin to cry like woman. Oh, foolish man, na who send me make I go join soza? (111)

Using the first person narrative, Saro-Wiwa makes no attempt to cloak his satire. Having spent the first half of his novel emphasizing Mene’s superficial view of a soldier’s life, he drives his message home mercilessly, opening Mene’s eyes to the harsh realities that exist beyond the boyish fascination for wearing a soldier’s uniform and carrying a gun. Mene’s discovery of his best friend’s corpse provides another tragic first person narration:

So, me and one soza begin pull de hand sotey we pull Bullet from de pit. I see say ’e don die. The bomb just make grave for am one time. So I just cover my friend up. Then I kneel down dere begin cry like woman. I see say my best friend for this war front don die. And I know say my life don begin spoil small small.

Saro-Wiwa captures Mene’s instantaneous loss of innocence with succinctness and originality. Mene’s narration is simultaneously fresh and heartbreaking, honest and
earnest. The boy who not too long ago saw nothing but the fashionable side of being a “sozaboy” suddenly gets introduced to a life of chaos and bloodshed. The scene is Saro-Wiwa’s wakeup call to African children. Do not let them fool you, the writer says, being a soldier is more consequential than wearing a uniform and carrying a gun. No doubt Mene decides to flee, and the first thing Saro-Wiwa makes him do is jettison his uniform, the symbol of prestige he cherished so much not so long ago. Now that he has a better comprehension of what being a “sozaboy” entails, he is instinctively repulsed by it, as Saro-Wiwa hopes all children should be. The first person narrative also allows Mene to confess with unvarnished sincerity. “Before dis time, I no know wetin to die mean,” Mene says, “All my life just sweet dreams. Now, today today, I don see say life no be as I dey see am before…” (112) Mene’s acknowledgement that he has been dreaming resonates with the reader. After all, before this moment all his thoughts about being a soldier were those of an ill-informed child. Saro-Wiwa shocks his protagonist and the African youth into pondering the implications of being soldiers. “Some of us never see dead body before,” Mene admits, “And we no know what is bomb or that aeroplane dey shit bomb wey dey kill. And just that morning we see death. We all confuse. We no know wetin to do” (112). Saro-Wiwa uses the destruction of Mene’s camp and the death of his friends to show the boy’s ignorance stemming naturally from his youth. Saro-Wiwa’s message is simple: a child should not be on the warfront because nothing in the world can prepare a child for the inevitable horrors of war. “I think you understand as that camp dey that day,” Mene says. “The soza captain don die. The san mazor don die. Bullet don die. Many sozamen don die. Na just few of us remain. Young young boys wey no know
anything about war” (112). By letting Mene address the reader directly, Saro-Wiwa tactfully communicates one boy’s experience to other “young young boys” who might be thinking of becoming “sozaboys.” Mene survives the ferocious bomb attack not because he is brave, but possibly because Saro-Wiwa needs him alive to recount his experience and warn other children from following in his footsteps. The fact that he immediately discards his uniform and runs away from the warfront in an attempt to go back to his family corroborates this point. Saro-Wiwa vividly captures Mene’s extreme anxiety as he attempts to escape:

…I run and hide behind tree. I run I no know where I am going… I does not care… I was running until my leg cannot carry me again. And then I just stopped under one big tree and just die. I don’t know how long I die. But I think I die for very very long time (113).

Desperation and collapsing out of exhaustion have never been so thoroughly described with so inadequate a vocabulary. The fact that Mene does not make it out of the forest and undergoes unbearable torture after being rescued by the enemy side serves as an important aspect of Saro-Wiwa’s cautionary tale. Saro-Wiwa uses the first person narrative to caution young Africans thus: do not make a mistake like Mene and become a child soldier. If you do, you will be stuck and you may never see your family again.

Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa uses irony to mock Mene’s myopic pride of being called “Sozaboy.” The prestige of being thought as brave is what drives Mene to become a soldier. The boy is ecstatic when his fellow villagers begin calling him “Sozaboy,” even before he joins the army. “So from that time wherever I go people are calling me ‘Sozaboy,’ ‘Sozaboy,’” Mene says, “Even I am very famous in Dukana sef. All the young
men are saying that I am tough man. Marrying fine Lagos girl, just like that and then preparing to go and join army... Myself, I was prouing plenty” (65). Like most young people, Mene is vain and relishes the notion of being called “Sozaboy” because of the popularity it affords him. He is deceived by the glamour of the military uniform and the assumed chivalry it represents. Saro-Wiwa’s irony comes full circle when none of Mene’s delusions are realized. The writer creates a protagonist who is possibly the worst soldier there ever was. Case in point: Saro-Wiwa never lets Mene fire his gun. Not even once. “I don’t like to kill anybody or anything,” the boy says after surviving the devastative bomb attack, “I have not even shoot gun one day or even one time. At all at all” (117). Although Mene’s disdain for war might seem like cowardice on the surface, Saro-Wiwa seems more intend on pointing out that war is no place for children. Mene is simply neither mentally nor physically ready for the horrendousness of war. After realizing that he has been badly deceived—being a “Sozaboy” is not as glamorous as he was made to believe, Mene spends half of the novel craving for his family and trying to run away from the battlefield. By titling his novel “Sozaboy,” Saro-Wiwa therefore mocks Mene and other shallow children like him who are fooled into believing that being a child soldier is a good thing, contrary to reality. The writer highlights this by making Mene experience what being a “Sozaboy” really entails: massacres, mayhem and death. Saro-Wiwa ensures that Mene expresses his unvarnished opinion about war by letting the desperate boy cry to God for help when he is lost in the forest, battered by the elements: “I tell my God that I do not like this war and if he can stop the rain and help me to go back to Dukana, I will never wear any uniform or carry gun again,” the boy says, “I beg
God to forgive me if I have done some bad thing before. That I will never do such bad thing again” (117). Saro-Wiwa ridicules Mene’s lack of judgement by making him learn the consequences of his bad decision the hard way. Through Mene, Saro-Wiwa speaks directly to the African youth: see the way Mene is suffering as a result of the bad decision he made? If you still think being a “Sozaboy” is such a good thing, go ahead and become a child soldier at your own peril, the writer seems to say. Using irony, Saro-Wiwa mocks the idea of being a “Sozaboy” in order to teach African children a lesson.

Saro-Wiwa uses music to deride governments that mislead children into believing that a soldier’s life is fashionable and that it is valorous for children to fight and die for their country. When Mene goes to the town of Pitakwa to enlist as a soldier the first time and is rejected (because he is unaware that he must bribe the person in charge), he observes newly enlisted young soldiers in the streets marching and singing: “My father don’t you worry / My mother don’t you worry / If I happen to die in the battlefield / Never mind we shall meet again” (53). This event is choreographed for maximum effect to entice young people like Mene to become soldiers. The charade works its magic on Mene, captivating his attention and firing his imagination. Mene, who first hears the voices singing gallantly before seeing the fledgling soldiers marching, describes how he experiences the episode thus:

Then I saw the people who were singing it. Young young boys like myself, all of them with gun and uniform. It is that uniform that I like so much. When I see how they are all marching, prouding and singing, I am very happy. But when I see all their uniform shining and very very nice to see, I cannot tell you how I am feeling. Immediately, I know that this soza is wonderful thing. With gun and uniform and singing. And marching, left,
right, left, right… I was thinking how I will be prouding when I join army like these boys (53).

Saro-Wiwa shows how the military uses music to manipulate young children like Mene by painting a false picture of the life of a child soldier. Watching and listening from the sidelines, there is no way Mene—or any child like him—can fathom what being a soldier actually entails. The jocund marching and singing boys could as well be costumed actors carrying fake guns and performing a publicity stunt. Their enactment is perfected to satisfy every poor but ambitious young man’s fantasy of becoming a dignified professional. Mene continues:

I was still standing there when they finished everything plus saluting, then they all ran away to take their bath. Then they gave them food in better plate. I can see how the boys were eating, prouding, eating from better plate with meat and everything. I was jealousing them (53).

Saro-Wiwa points out that this is clearly a show meant for people to watch. This idealized picture of life as a “sozaboy” seals the deal for Mene who concludes:

I must go to join army immediately. I will wear uniform like those boys. I will sing those fine fine songs. Begin to march up and down, chop better chop. And as I am marching with gun and singing, prouding, all the people will come and look at me. They will say how I am brave man. Very brave man. Then Agnes will like me… And I will wear uniform (54).

The deceitful government propaganda finally propels Mene to become a child soldier. Not long after watching the young soldiers singing, he finds himself among a new set of recruits doing the exact same thing—used as a prop by enlistment agents to seduce other young people to become soldiers. Saro-Wiwa reiterates this point when Mene encounters another child soldier when he is imprisoned during war for desertion. When Mene asks
the fellow prisoner why he became a “sojaboy,” the boy replies: “I joined the army because I like as the sozas were marching and singing and wearing fine fine uniform and boot. The one I like the most is the cap. Even for that cap alone, I can join army one hundred times” (163). Saro-Wiwa reminds his readers that Mene is not the only child seduced to become a “sozaboy” by frivolity boosted by the government’s charade. Saro-Wiwa uses music to show how the powers that be intentionally use children for propaganda to attract and entrap other children to become soldiers whom they see as “expendable” and “replaceable” from “the seemingly endless pool of available children” (Dallaire 117). He cautions his readers to beware.

Saro-Wiwa uses contrast to debunk the deceitful lyrics of songs like the one above by taking Mene to the warfront and having him—and the reader—experience the atrocious realities of a soldier’s life firsthand. This reality contrasts starkly with what Mene experienced at the training post in the city where he was fed three sumptuous meals a day and paraded in the streets for all to see. Upon arriving the warfront, Mene is flabbergasted when he and his fellow soldiers go for the first three days with only an infinitesimal amount of food and must stand in mud-filled pits for extended hours. The boy describes the camp where they live on the warfront thus:

…something was very bad for that place, you know. Water to drink no dey. Common well sef, you cannot get. So that all the time, it was the water in the swamp that we were drinking. And that is also the place that we are going to latrine. Na the same water that we are bathing and using to wash some of our cothes. And na the same water we are using for cooking (91).
Using contrast, Saro-Wiwa shows Mene and the reader the glaring disparity between the rumors and propaganda pertaining to the life of a child soldier, and the actual thing itself. When Mene learns—too quickly and yet too late—that a child soldier’s life is deplorable and dehumanizing, it dawns on him that he has been bamboozled. Conflicted and distraught, the boy asks some fundamental questions that are long overdue: “Why are we fighting?” he ponders. “I used to be confused plenty any time I asked that question to myself” (90). This illuminating moment serves as a warning for every child soldier. In essence, Mene wonders why he is a “sozaboy.” The harshness of a child soldier’s life in the forest causes Mene’s fascination for the uniform and the gun to fade, leading him to lament:

The Chief Commander General have not told us why we are fighting. No. Tan Papa (the training sergeant) did not tell us why we are fighting. The soza captain did not tell us why we must go inside the pit. I just carry gun, fight, go inside pit; right turn, left turn, left turn, about turn, udad arms, run, no run, stand still, chop, piss, shit. Every thing they tell me, I must do, no question (114).

Saro-Wiwa forces Mene to realize that he is a clueless puppet dancing to the tune of the puppeteer-masters who deceived him and now own him. Saro-Wiwa makes Mene pay for his superficiality and myopia by putting the boy through hell. But, first, the writer has Mene teach his lesson to other potential child soldiers without mincing words:

…I come say to myself that oh my God, war is very bad thing. War is to drink urine, to die and all that uniform that they are giving us to wear is just to deceive us. And anybody who think that uniform is fine thing is stupid man who does not know what is good or bad or not good at all or very bad at all. All those things that they have been telling us before is just stupid lie (114).
Saro-Wiwa could as well have had Mene sing his cautionary tale to prospective victims of child soldiering all across the world. In order to make his point absolutely clear, Saro-Wiwa converts the staunchest supporter of war, Mene’s fellow villager of Dukana, Zaza the “old soldier,” into an anti-soldier and anti-war advocate. When Mene meets a burnt-out and disillusioned Zaza during the war, Zaza tells him forthrightly: “…all those things you hear in the radio and from the D.O. who have come to Dukana before the war proper start, they are all lies. Many many lies” (146). In a memorable and symbolic moment in the novel, the last thing Zaza ever does the very last time Mene sees him “in this world” (147), is to break Mene’s gun and throw it away in the bush. This gesture by the man who was “prouding” before for fighting against “Hitla” encapsulates Saro-Wiwa’s indictment of the use of children as soldiers. By creating this remarkable turnaround for the warmongering Zaza, Saro-Wiwa says clearly: children do not belong on the battlefield and guns do not belong in the hands of children. Saro-Wiwa uses contrast to show the discrepancy between Mene’s perception of a soldier’s life before he joins the army, and his view of it after he witnesses war. Mene’s awful experience as a soldier ignites his curiosity about his raison d’etre in the army, and thus forces him to admit that he made a fatal mistake to sign up as a “sozaboy.” Saro-Wiwa reminds other African children not to repeat Mene’s mistake. The writer contrasts Zaza’s disdain of war in the latter part of Sozaboy with Zaza’s advocacy for it at the start of the novel in order to reinforce his satire.

Saro-Wiwa uses humor to highlight Mene’s general naïveté and ignorance. This lays the groundwork for Mene’s (and the reader’s) enlightenment in the second half of
the novel. Besides Mene’s overall youthful inexperience in all matters pertaining to the seriousness of becoming a soldier, his outright ridiculous obliviousness when he joins the army both adds levity to the story and serves to portray him as a pun in the hands of powerful forces beyond his control and comprehension. During basic training, Mene barely comprehends what is being said. The training “san major” throws words at him that he haplessly mistranslates: “Tan Papa dere” (72) for “Stand properly there,” “Qua Shun!” (72) for “Squad shun!” or “Attention!” “Ajuwaya!” (72) for “As you were!” and “Hoping udad mas” (72) for “Open order march,” are only a few. Particularly, shortly after basic training, as Mene and his fellow new recruits are being bussed out to the battlefield, Mene says incredulously: “Na one place dem dey call FRONT we dey go. Wetin we dey go do dere? God alone sabi” (81). This preposterous question is tragically funny. The fact that an allegedly trained soldier has no clue what a warfront is, and what a soldier does on the warfront tells the reader exactly the kind of selective indoctrination Mene and his fellow child soldiers have been given. Through humor, Saro-Wiwa showcases Mene’s immaturity and unpreparedness for the bleak journey that he is embarking on as a child soldier. Saro-Wiwa intentionally makes some of Mene’s sentences sound like gibberish to underpin his point. Mene describes a moment during basic training when the “Chief General Commander” pays them a visit thus: “After we have marched small and stood in line, then one big man came and give us command, left right, and solope arms and udad arms and hopen udad mas and qua shun and ajuwaya” (77). Saro-Wiwa uses humor to lampoon Mene’s innocence and cluelessness. Mene is too young and too ignorant to fully comprehend what is going on. He is being
brainwashed and duped into something he has absolutely no idea about. No wonder he later questions why he is fighting in the first place. His thoughts about his goal as a soldier on the warfront corroborate this point. “…I was thinking how I will kill Hitla plenty time and then when I don kill am plenty, I will marry his daughter…” (81). This outrageous statement inspired by Mene’s fellow villager, Zaza, shows that Mene “does not know or understand the reality he… will soon encounter as a child soldier” (Dallaire 127). Not only has Hitler been dead for decades by the time the civil war in Mene’s country takes place, the reader has to wonder: what would “Hitla” be doing in Mene’s West African country in the first place? Hence, Saro-Wiwa uses humor to mock Mene’s intellectual immaturity.

Additionally, Saro-Wiwa uses humor to show how the training officials manipulate the young boys into craving to become killers. At the end of basic training, after giving a grandiloquent and manipulative speech that is intentionally incomprehensible to the new recruits, the highly decorated “Chief Commander General” plays psychological jujitsu with the young “sozas” by deceiving them that “the Enemy is tired for the fight and so therefore all the training… cannot be used at all” (79). Remarkably, the young boys begin to weep because they “cannot get anybody to shoot and kill” (79). Not to be outdone, Mene chimes in: “I think I have to join the boys to cry” (79). As it turns out, the war will not be over for at least another couple of years. The Chief Commander General tricks the boys into heading eagerly to their deaths on the warfront. Saro-Wiwa uses this ludicrous display by the boys to highlight and ridicule their gullibility. They soon find out too late that they have been badly deceived by their
government. Accordingly, Saro-Wiwa uses humor for Horatian satire, to show that children are too innocent and too ignorant to grasp the meaning of soldiering. Saro-Wiwa also uses humor to highlight how warmongers take advantage of children’s immaturity and manipulate them to become war-slaves and killing machines.

Saro-Wiwa uses foreshadowing to sharpen his satire by forewarning Mene and other potential “Sozaboys” about the calamity that could befall them and their families if they become child soldiers. While Mene is still contemplating about becoming a soldier, he has a nightmare that he is brutally hunted and almost conscripted into war by soldiers carrying guns and singing a patriotic song. He flees through a forest and swims across a river, then rushes to his mother’s house only to find that it has disappeared. When Mene tells his mother about his nightmare, she responds that she too had a bad dream that bombs were dropped on their village of Dukana by “aeroplanes” and that she screamed for Mene’s help but Mene was nowhere to be seen. Mene’s mother pleads with him not to join the army, reminding him that he is her only child. “I want you to live and bury me when I die,” she says, “I don’t want to die like chicken, no burial… Don’t go and think of foolish thing… this soza business is foolish nonsense (56). Saro-Wiwa presents Mene’s mother as the voice of reason in Sozaboy. Her plea for Mene to put his family first seems to be Saro-Wiwa’s message to the children of Africa to put their families first rather than waste their lives fighting wars. The following fervent plea by Mene’s mother to Mene underlines Saro-Wiwa’s message: “…all this die die die, I don’t like it. God make us to live…. Young young people dying. And if that porson who dies is your only son, it is not a good thing, oh God” (67). Mene’s mother could as well be the spokesperson of an anti-
child soldier movement. Just as Saro-Wiwa sets up Mene to represent every child, he sets up Mene’s mother to represent the parent of every child soldier. After Mene’s mother’s nightmare, she reiterates to Mene how wars massacre Africa’s children. Yet, her plea falls on deaf ears. The fact that Saro-Wiwa makes all of Mene’s mother’s fears and premonitions become a reality by the end of the novel shows that the writer speaks through the character of Mene’s mother. Mene voluntarily enlists into the army and not only finds himself singing the same patriotic song that was sung by his chasers in his nightmare, he also spends the second half of the novel fleeing away from the army just as he had done in his nightmare. More strikingly, when Mene eventually returns home after the war, he finds no trace of his childhood home where it used to be—also as in his nightmare. Moreover, Mene’s mother’s bad dream materializes. When the war finally reaches Dukana, an air plane drops a bomb that kills Mene’s mother and wife. As foreshadowed, Mene’s mother dies “like chicken” with “no burial,” blown to smithereens by bombs dropped by “aeroplanes” while her son is far away languishing in mud-filled pits on the warfront, engaged in a “foolish thing.” Consequently, Mene is not present when his mother dies, also as foreshadowed. Mene spends his entire time as a soldier thinking about his mother and his wife and searching for them. He even deserts the army and heads back to Dukana (in the middle of the war) to see his family, but is informed that his mother is still alive by people who know too well that his mother is indeed dead. Mene treks long distances, from one town to another, and “from one refugee camp to another” (147), searching for his mother and wife whom he has not seen in two years—all the while meeting knowledgeable villagers who hide the fact that his mother was
brutally killed. Thus, Saro-Wiwa makes Mene pay for his stubbornness and disobedience. First the writer uses foreshadowing to warn Mene about the perils of war. Then, he punishes Mene for not listening to the voice of reason: his mother. Hence, Saro-Wiwa teaches the boy—and the reader—a lesson.

The extermination of Mene’s family by bombs is an example of how Saro-Wiwa uses tragedy to accentuate Juvenalian satire. Mene becomes a “sozaboy” because he wants his wife and the people of his village to be “prouding” of him. Sadly, though, upon his return to Dukana at the end of the war, he experiences the exact opposite. In the most unforgettable scene in the novel, Mene learns the fate of his mother and wife from his fellow villager, Duzia, who also explains why the villagers are shunning Mene like a plague. Duzia begins the dialogue:

“They are saying that though you have died, you turn to ghost and begin to worry everybody.”

“Why?”

“Because you love your mother and your wife Agnes who were killed by bomb and since they have dead, you said that everybody in Dukana must die too.”

“So my mama and my young wife Agnes were killed by bomb, is it?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“That time that bomb fell on Dukana the third time. They are the only people who were killed by bomb” (178 – 179).

The revelation—three pages to the end of Sozaboy—that Mene’s mother and wife were brutally killed at the start of the war in Dukana is the most heartbreaking moment in the entire novel. To Mene’s dismay, he learns that he spent years and went through hell searching for his family in vain. He is also shocked to find out that not only are the
people of Dukana who encouraged him to go to war not “prouding” of him as he had always imagined, they see him as a curse and want to murder him as a sacrifice to the gods because they believe—erroneously—that he was killed by the bomb that destroyed his camp during the war. Saro-Wiwa uses the tragedy of Mene’s mother and wife to impress upon Mene and other young Africans the importance of family. By having the people of Dukana reject Mene at the end of the novel, Saro-Wiwa cautions young people not to fall prey to peer pressure and frivolously seek happiness by attempting to please the public because public opinion is fickle. Had Mene listened to the sound advice given to him by his mother, his fate, and that of his family, might have been different, Saro-Wiwa insinuates. By making Mene pay a price for not listening to his mother, Saro-Wiwa warns other young people to beware of the damage they cause themselves and their loved ones when they willingly choose child soldiering over their families.

Although the death of Mene’s mother and wife is the acme of his personal tragedy, Saro-Wiwa packs his harshest satirical punch by ensuring that Mene’s cumulative debacle as a child soldier is one ghastly nightmare. The writer accomplishes this by depicting Mene’s victimization and dehumanization during the war in vivid detail. Mene’s troubles begin when he and his fellow soldiers are locked up in “Kampala prison” when they get drunk while on duty at the warfront. Mene and his friends are tortured and starved mercilessly in a cell where the floor is both the latrine and the bed. Distressingly, this punishment pales in comparison to what awaits Mene after he absconds his post and gets stranded in the rain-soaked forest. First, he is captured by the enemy side and treated in the hospital. Then, upon his full recovery, he is punished inhumanely by the same man
who saved his life, an impersonation of the ruthlessness of war called Manmuswak.

When Manmuswak’s captain orders him to punish the terror-stricken Mene for lying that he is not a soldier because he does not want to be sent back to the warfront, Manmuswak dehumanizes Mene with passion. Mene describes the episode as follows:

> By the time he finished flogging me with horsewhip or koboko, my body was covered with blood. I begin to pray to die. I think it is better to die than to stay alive and suffer as I was suffering that day. Then they shaved all my hair and then they locked me inside one small hut…All the time we were inside, they did not bring us any food. Only small water. And you cannot even go out to piss and shit. We all piss and shit in that small useless prison. I begin ask myself why I disobeyed my mama and went to join the army (124).

Nothing in the world could have prepared Mene for such agony. Saro-Wiwa magnifies the plight of the child soldier during war in order to dispel any and all illusions about the glamor of child soldiering. Mene also endures unconscionable psychological torture when he is promised that his tongue would be cut out because he has told a lie. “As fear did not kill me that week, I know that fear cannot kill me again for the rest of my life,” he says, “I am telling you the fear of punishment worwor pass the punishment’” (124). Once signed up as a child soldier, Mene finds out that he cannot lie his way out of his predicament. Once again, Saro-Wiwa cautions young people not to sign up to be “Sozaboys” in the first place, because once in there is no way out. The author reemphasizes this point when Mene is captured after running away from the enemy army camp to search for his mother and wife at the refugee camps. He is beaten cruelly with a stick, tied to the back of a vehicle, and dragged along while the vehicle is moving at full
speed. This vicious treatment of a child is tragic. Mene’s description of it is almost unbearable for the reader:

The motor was going and I was following. Inside hole, on bad road, on coal tar, on dirty road, I was following the rope that was tied behind the car, running and running and running. And I was tired, oh God. And I could not even talk or cry. After some time, I will fall and roll on the ground. But the land rover will not slow down. I will just roll on the ground and follow like dog that have already dead. And the land rover will be speeding proper proper. I said to myself, ‘Sozaboy, you don die well well today’ (159).

Saro-Wiwa uses this callous punishment of a harmless child—who never lifts a finger against anyone or anything during the entire war—to shock his reader into comprehending the nightmarishness of a child soldier’s life. The pain is so excruciating that Mene prays for death:

…all my body was full of wound and my belly was turning and turning and turning. Even I cannot cry sef. And I just think I must die, die one time. Because it is better to die and buried than to live like maggot as I am living now. I was asking God to take my life one time (160).

Saro-Wiwa paints this detailed picture of a child soldier’s suffering to give his reader—and other potential child soldiers—a taste of the fate that awaits the child soldier when he or she is caught reneging on his or her commitment. Again, the writer raises awareness about the plight of child soldiers while warning young people against falling in the same trap. Mene is thrown into a dungeon where he is starved for many days. As the war draws to an end, instead of being set free, he is lined up with other “Sozaboys” and almost shot to death. As Mene stands in line, waiting for his turn to be executed at point blank, by the same Manmuswak, (who fights with equal devotion on both sides of the war), all Mene
can think about is his family. “I close my eye and pray to God that he will take care of my mama and my young wife Agnes,” Mene says, “As for myself, well, it is sozaman life to die anytime” (167). These words gain new meaning when the reader soon learns that Mene’s mother and wife have been dead all along. After the harrowing emotional torture of watching other prisoners being killed, Mene only survives because Manmuswak runs out of bullets. Through Mene’s physical and mental chastisement, Saro-Wiwa terrifies any young person who wants to become a child soldier to think hard about the consequences of their actions. At the end of the novel Saro-Wiwa does not mince words about his message. He lets Mene spell it out as he runs for his life away from his village:

…as I was going, I was thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessed many people, killed many others, killed my mama and my wife, Agnes, my beautiful young wife with J.J.C. and now it have made me like porson wey get leprosy because I have no town again.

And I was thinking how I was prouding before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely (181).

Saro-Wiwa makes Mene learn the hard way how to hate war and child soldiering. The physically and mentally broken boy at the end of the story is a far cry from the enthusiastic fellow Saro-Wiwa introduced at the beginning. In the end, Saro-Wiwa ensures that Mene loses everything: the place of his birth, his family, and more importantly his humanity. Thus, Saro-Wiwa forces young Africans to think hard before deciding to become child soldiers.
Uzodinma Iweala: Exposing the Plight of Child Soldiers

Like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Uzodinma Iweala uses language to make his protagonist and narrator, Agu, a boy about nine years old, authentic and believable. Although Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* has been called “the ancestor of Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*” (Tunca 153), Iweala deviates from Saro-Wiwa by predominantly eschewing outright Pidgin English, preferring to Anglicize all of Agu’s narration into a poetic and easily comprehensible pseudo-English language. Despite this, his ultimate goal seems to be the same as Saro-Wiwa’s: to satirize child soldiering by giving his readers an unvarnished firsthand experience of the shocking life of a child soldier. Hence, Iweala attempts to translate how a hardly-learned African boy would tell his story in the English language, resulting in “a kind of lexical blizzard,” an “idiosyncratic style” (Baker 1).

Iweala combines this characteristic language with the first person narrative to depict Agu’s victimization and dehumanization right from the first lines of his novel. “It is starting like this,” Agu narrates, “I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin… and then the sound of somebody shouting, TAKE YOUR POSITION RIGHT NOW! QUICK! QUICK QUICK! …MOVE FAST OH!” (Iweala 1) Iweala uses Agu’s forceful first person narrative, underscored by his unique language, to place the reader right beside the destitute boy, and force the reader to share in his predicament. Unlike Saro-Wiwa’s protagonist, Mene, who first experiences war half-way through *Sozaboy*, Iweala’s Agu begins his story by dropping the reader right into the chaos of the war that is engulfing him. From the first page, Agu is hiding, terrified, “crunched up like one small mouse in the corner” (Iweala 1) as ruthless rebels close in on him. Iweala uses
capitalization to situate his readers psychologically, by making them hear the rebels’ thunderous voices roar the same way they penetrate Agu’s ears and petrify him. Consequently, the reader is as helpless as Agu when the rebels finally find him, and one of them, a smaller boy named Strika, beats Agu pitilessly. “Again and again he is hitting me and each blow from his hand is feeling on my skin like the flat side of machete,” Agu says, “I am trying to scream, but he is knocking the air from my chest and then slapping my mouth. I am tasting blood” (Iweala 3). Iweala uses language and the first person narrative to show the victimization of Agu while using the present continuous tense to force the reader to experience the boy’s helplessness and desperation in real time. “I am lying here,” continues Agu, “even if I am wanting to get up because my body is just paining me and I am fearing that if I am moving, somebody will be doing something very bad to me” (4). The simplicity and forthrightness of Agu’s voice amplifies his hopelessness. Unlike Saro-Wiwa’s Mene, (who voluntarily becomes a soldier), Iweala’s Agu is forced to become a child soldier against his will. Agu is still in a state of petrification when Commandant, the leader of the rebels, asks him: “Do you want to be soldier… Do you know what that is meaning?” (11). Iweala taunts both Agu and the reader with the pertinent rhetorical question that underscores his satire: what does it mean to be a child soldier? Also, Iweala uses Agu’s precarious situation to raise another question: what choice does the boy have? “I am seeing all of the soldier with gun and knife and I am thinking about my father just dancing like that because of bullet,” Agu says. “What am I supposed to be doing? So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier” (11). Iweala uses Agu’s father’s brutal murder to induce the reader’s sympathy and accentuate
Agu’s powerlessness. Agu’s victimization is aggravated by the fact that his family and the life he once knew have been utterly destroyed by the war. As the boy states simply, “…war is taking everything away from us” (69). Even his mother and sister, who could still be alive, have been displaced by war. “I am thinking of my mother and my sister who are running away,” Agu says, “I am not knowing if they are dead or alive or if I can even be knowing what they are looking like if I am seeing them today” (35). Iweala shows how war ravages families and entire communities, leaving boys like Agu vulnerable to predators like Commandant. Bereft of the safety net of his family and friends, and with no one to protect him, Agu becomes a helpless piece of flotsam jostled hither and thither by the tsunami of war. Through unembellished language and a direct first person narrative, Iweala successfully shows how his protagonist was forced to become a child soldier.

Iweala also combines distinctive language and the first person narrative with maximum effect to highlight Agu’s dehumanization when the boy is forced to kill a human being for the first time and when he is raped by Commandant. Before becoming a child soldier, Agu is an innocent boy who has never held a gun before. No doubt he is initially terrified of taking a human life. However, he is forced to do so both by the other rebels—mostly child soldiers—who mock and laugh at him, and—especially—by Commandant, who bullies and physically forces him to commit the act. “Come here and bring that machete” (18), Commandant orders Agu, who does not budge. Agu narrates: “Commandant is stepping to me and grabbing my neck. You idiot, he is shouting… Come here right now! He is dragging me to the enemy soldier. Do you see this dog!
shouting. You want to be a soldier enh? Well—kill him. KILL HIM NOW!” (18) Iweala presents the complex dilemma of the newly dragooned child soldier without obfuscation. The writer forces the reader to think: what would you do if you were in the boy’s position? Agu reacts the only way most children would react: panic and cry. “…in my head I am shouting NO! NO! NO!” the boy says, “but my mouth is not moving and I am not saying anything” (18). Agu has two choices: he can either obey Commandant and commit brutal murder, or disobey and get killed. “If you are not killing him enh,” Agu quotes Commandant, “Luftenant will be thinking you are a spy. And who can know if he won’t just be killing you” (20). Not content with merely having Commandant cajole the innocent boy to take a human life, Iweala goes a step further by having Commandant assist Agu in killing for the first time. “He is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of the enemy’s head,” Agu says, “…his head is cracking and the blood is spilling out like milk from coconut…” (21). Iweala shocks his reader by using simplistic vocabulary to describe unfathomable insanity. Agu’s first experience with spilling human blood reminds him of that most basic sustainer of life: milk. Yet, it is the sheer incongruity of juxtaposing milk with blood that adds to the unnaturalness of the act of a child hacking a human being to bits. Iweala uses Agu’s helplessness to manipulate the reader’s feelings and blame Commandant for Agu’s first murder.

Iweala further portrays Commandant as the lead agent of Agu’s dehumanization by having the rebel leader literally rape the boy. The fact that Iweala recounts this horrific action in detailed straight-forward language tips Iweala’s hand. Agu describes the episode thus:
...after making me be touching his soldier and all of that thing with my hand and with my tongue and lip, he was telling me to kneel and then he was entering inside of me... I was not struggling because I am knowing that he will be killing me if I am struggling and since I am not wanting to die, I just let him to be moving back and forward even though it is hurting me so so much (85).

Using a strong first person point of view to personalize a child’s story of abuse, Iweala holds the reader captive, forcing him or her to bear witness to the monstrosity that befalls children during war. Just as there is no escape for Agu, there is none for the reader. Critic Ali Smith must have been referring to this hostage-taking of the reader by Iweala when she described *Beasts of No Nation* as “a novel so scorched by loss and anger that it's hard to hold and so gripping in its sheer hopeless lifeforce that it's hard to put down” (Smith 1). Agu’s rape by the Commandant, the apex of the boy’s victimization and dehumanization, is rightfully meant to anger and frustrate the reader. In a bid to further shock his readers into attentiveness, Iweala chronicles Agu’s torture in detail, even describing the boy’s attempt to assuage his pain by dowsing his “buttom” in a stream (86). Ultimately, by letting Agu tell his story in a language that represents his own authentic voice, Iweala shrewdly mandates his reader to witness the rape of the innocence of the child soldier firsthand, and the victim’s utter defenselessness in the process. Agu’s helplessness is essential—even mandatory—for the reader to empathize with his plight. And empathy is necessary if the reader must abhor the horrors of war that will befall Agu as the story unfolds. As such, the reader becomes emotionally invested in the story and is outraged when the war (impersonated in part by Commandant) turns Agu into a rapist and murderer. Thus, Iweala uses language and the first person narrative to depict the
victimization and dehumanization involved in the making of a child soldier.

Additionally, Iweala combines language and first person narrative to humanize and personalize Agu and make him a likable and relatable character. Agu’s likability lays the groundwork for Iweala’s satire as it further ensures that the reader either consciously or inadvertently becomes emotionally invested in the boy’s story. Iweala begins by making Agu a harmless, obedient, book-loving, God-fearing boy who loves—and is loved by—everyone. Indeed, Agu seems to be the best at everything he does. “I was the smartest person in my class,” the boy says, “so smart that the only thing that I am having to learn is writing” (27). Although Agu’s school was closed due to war, he still harbors the hope of becoming a learned professional someday. Iweala not only makes Agu an ideal child, he seems to build the character as a representative of the average child soldier in Africa and possibly around the world. For this reason, just as Agu’s country remains nameless, Iweala does not specify the boy’s age in the novel. Iweala gives Agu grand ambitions, some of which the innocent-boy-turned-murderous-child-soldier renders with heartbreaking simplicity: “I want to be Doctor because then I will be able to be helping people instead of killing them and then maybe I will be forgiven for all my sin” (76). Agu’s desire to compensate for his malicious actions is believable—and hence admirable—because it is spoken in a genuine voice. The fact that Iweala gives Agu a childish—albeit authentic—sense of humor also adds to the child soldier’s likability. While languishing in hunger on the battlefield, Agu hopes to be a “big man” someday. He wants to be “fat because big men are always fat; they are always having so much to eat” (77). Agu’s sense of humor endears him to the reader and makes the reader
empathize with him. The boy’s simple and straightforward voice contributes to his congeniality because it seems honest. Consequently, the reader buys into Iweala’s satire by joining the author in deploping the quandary of the child soldier.

Furthermore, Agu’s reflections, rendered in the first person narrative, humanize his character and ingratiate him to the reader. Iweala imbues his young protagonist with a profound sense of regret, albeit cloaked in innocence. This is evident when Agu rationalizes his actions as a murderer: “I am not a bad boy. I am not a bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing. I am telling this to myself because soldier is supposed to be killing, killing, killing” (23). A major part of Iweala’s satire is to shock his readers with the absolute inappropriateness of such depraved words uttered with stark simplicity by a child no older than twelve. Yet, Iweala does not let mayhem dull Agu’s reasoning. Agu retains his sense of right and wrong even as he inevitably becomes a part of the evil that envelopes him. Agu attempts to assuage his guilt by justifying his horrendous deeds with a memorized song: “Soldier Soldier / Kill Kill Kill. / That is how you live. / That is how you die” (23). Iweala’s satire lies in the contradiction implicit in Agu’s faulty rationalization. Iweala’s message seems clear: a child should not be a soldier, and a child should not kill; a child should enjoy his or her childhood and not have to think of death. Agu’s forthright utterings are therefore meant to both disturb and disgust the reader. Iweala lets Agu retain his rationality in order to create a connection—albeit a subliminal one—between his protagonist and his reader. No matter how deep Agu sinks into evil, Iweala ensures that the boy retains his sanity. “I am knowing that I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child thing… I
am not happying anymore. I am not happying ever again” (95), Agu states. By making Agu render his contrition forthrightly in the first person point of view, Iweala entices the reader to feel sorry for the child soldier despite the ghastliness of his deeds. The reader appreciates the fact that Agu is tormented by the atrocities he has committed. This means the boy still has a conscience. “We are all lying down to sleep, but I am not sleeping. I cannot be sleeping. I can never be sleeping” (78). Agu’s remorsefulness is obvious through the tumultuousness that rages in his mind. After partaking in unspeakable acts including murder and rape, he imagines himself back in his classroom, in his village, where someone who resembles his former teacher, Mistress Gloria, but “is having the face of that woman I am killing with blood everywhere on her face and in her eye” (105), is writing on the board: “I will not kill, I will not kill. I will not kill” (105). The repetition of these words implies that Agu is wrestling with the beast within him. He does not want to kill, but as a child soldier he must if he wants to live. The fact that he is haunted by his actions shows that he disdains the person he has become. So, he longs for normalcy: “I am thinking of home. How many time am I thinking of my home when we are in the bush?” (127) Agu’s craving for a normal life is a feeling the reader can understand. Iweala knows intuitively that the reader would wish that for the boy too. Children should be at home with their families, Iweala implies, not committing massacres on the battlefield. The writer blames the war for destroying the boy’s home and ripping his life to shreds, converting him into a monster against his will. Disgusted by what he has become, Agu wishes to run “away, far far away to where no one can be finding me or seeing me and I will be staying there to the end of time when God is coming to judge the
dead and the living” (133). Agu’s Christianity gives him a moral compass. Unfortunately, not even this compass can point him away from the horrors that suffocate him. Despite his disdain for his situation he finds himself trapped. “…how can I be running if I am not knowing the way to be taking me away from the war” (134), the boy says. Iweala paints a portrait of a helpless child stuck in a hellish wilderness and pleading for rescue. If the Christian boy’s reflections are a confession, then the reader finds himself or herself in the priest’s chair having unrestricted access to a child soldier’s darkest secrets:

…I am thinking of all the thing I am doing. If they are ordering me KILL, I am killing, SHOOT, I am shooting, ENTER WOMAN, I am entering woman and not even saying anything even if I am not liking it. I am killing everybody, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, soldier. It is all the same. It is not mattering who it is, just that they are dying. I am thinking thinking. I am thinking that I cannot be doing this anymore (135).

Iweala makes Agu’s contrition sincere by having him speak directly to the reader. The boy’s conscientiousness and remorsefulness are gateways to his humanity. His straightforward acknowledgment of his culpability makes him potentially pardonable. By using the first person perspective, Iweala gives the reader direct access to the boy’s thoughts, candid experiences and raw feelings, un tarnished by the potential adornments of a third person narration. As a result, Iweala deliberately subjects the reader through Agu’s torture, making the reader feel the child soldier’s pain, anger, lust, despair and shame. The writer intentionally shocks his reader by unflinchingly depicting the psychological agony of the child soldier.

Iweala uses Agu’s personal tragedy to underscore Juvenalian satire. The writer vividly describes the atrocities that lead to Agu’s afore-described psychological turmoil
in order to make the reader experience—and better comprehend—the unfathomable horrors of child soldiering. The most symbolic of such horrors is the process of initiating a child into the ranks of murderers. After telling Agu that killing “is like falling in love” (12), Commandant forces Agu to brutally kill a human being for the first time. Iweala gives his reader direct access to Agu’s mind as the intimidated child soldier engages in his first dehumanizing act:

It is like the world is moving slowly and I am seeing each drop of blood and each drop of sweat flying here and there. I am hearing the bird flapping their wing as they are leaving all the tree. It is sounding like thunder. I am hearing the mosquito buzzing in my ear so loud and I am feeling how the blood is just wetting on my leg and my face. The enemy’s body is having deep red cut everywhere and his forehead is looking just crushed so his whole face is not even looking like face because his head is broken everywhere and there is just blood, blood, blood… I am hearing hammer knocking in my head and chest. My nose and mouth is itching. I am seeing all the color everywhere and my belly is feeling empty. I am growing hard between my legs. Is this like falling in love? Then I am falling down on the road and just watching as they are killing everybody… (21 – 22).

Within minutes, Agu goes from disdaining murder to getting an erection while brutally taking a human life. Iweala forces his reader to witness the death of a child and the birth of a killer.

Iweala further uses tragedy to highlight how children are dehumanized with drugs and transformed into monsters. Once initiated into the ranks of butchers, Commandant constantly drugs Agu and forces him to commit unconscionable acts. The newly initiated child soldier soon relies on “gun juice” to numb his conscience before he indulges in massacre. “I am just waiting for gun juice to start to working so I am not having to think
as much anymore” (45), Agu says. When the drug takes control of Agu’s mind, the innocent boy’s humanity is expunged, and an angry executioner emerges. “I am wanting to kill,” he says, “I don’t know why. I am just wanting to kill. I am seeing animal and I am wanting to kill it… I am wanting to kill. We are all wanting to kill” (46 – 47). Iweala emphasizes that this is not the blameless boy who was abducted not too long ago. This is a victim of circumstances who has been shanghaied to become a killing machine. High on drugs, Agu sees everyone as an enemy, even an innocent woman hiding under a bed with her child. After assisting in the rape of the woman, Agu cruelly kills her:

I am jumping on her chest KPWUD KPWUD and I am jumping on her head, KPWUD, until it is only blood that is coming out of her mouth.

I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feets. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark (51).

Iweala satirizes the use of children as soldiers in Africa by letting Agu, who has a mother and younger sister—whom he loves and misses—to mercilessly murder an innocent woman and her daughter who have done him no wrong, because Commandant tells him that the woman is his enemy. “Commandant is saying that she is… stealing my food, and killing my family because she is enemy” (51), Agu says. Iweala shows how war turns children into beasts. As critic Noah Deutsch states: “It is horrible to read about such a profound disintegration of society, where children must become warriors and killers of the innocent, and not feel a hopelessness knowing that the story has played out in real life many times before” (Deutsch 1). It is precisely for this reason that Iweala painstakingly shows what it is really like to be a child soldier: to remind his readers of the tragedy of
child soldiering in Africa and around the world. By simply shining a light on the situation and displaying the dehumanizing effects of war on the child soldier, Iweala disparages perpetrators of war such as Commandant who abuse children for their selfish purposes. He also points a finger at societies that allow such abominations to take place.

Iweala uses characterization to satirize the use of children as soldiers in Africa through the depiction of the ruthless and abusive Commandant. As the rebel leader who dragoons Agu into war, rapes him, and tutors him on how to commit atrocities, Commandant is an embodiment of the evil forces that dehumanize child soldiers by transforming them from innocent and ignorant children into drugged up brutes. Not having a specific mission or plan, Commandant’s mandate is as chaotic as the war itself. He leaves a trail of blood as he flounders around a frenzied battlefield fighting against the oblique “government” and massacring defenseless civilians he brands “the enemy” (51).

By not concerning himself with the geopolitics of the civil war unfolding in the unnamed West African country where the story takes place, Iweala shrewdly hone in solely on the inhumanity and senselessness of the war itself. Therefore, the anonymity of the setting lends Iweala’s story universality. The writer builds the tyrannical Commandant as an incarnation of the bedlam that ravages a child soldier’s life. A “demented guerrilla leader” (Tiefenbrun 442) and a rapacious bully who boasts of “eating people” (81), Commandant is more than a deplorable role model. He physically and psychologically abuses the child soldiers he kidnaps and indoctrinates to kill for him. His brutal sodomizing of Agu is one of the most dehumanizing acts in Iweala’s novel. Iweala depicts Commandant’s inhumane victimization of the protagonist in graphic detail in
order to lampoon society for standing by while such predators wreak havoc on the lives of children. Under Commandant’s tutelage, Agu can no longer distinguish between human beings and other lesser animals. “We are finding farmer and his goat on the road and we are killing him,” Agu says, “Now I am not knowing what is farmer and what is goat” (78). Commandant leads Agu through so much “bombing bombing, killing killing, and dying dying” that the boy wishes he is an ant because “only ant is still making and living” (119) during the war. Iweala deplores the fact that Commandant and the pointless war he represents rob children like Agu of their childhood. Commandant leads Agu on a killing spree mission that is incomprehensible to everyone, including himself. An exasperated Agu explains:

…all the time we are fighting. No matter what we are always fighting. All the time bullet is just eating everything, leaf, tree, ground, person—eating them—just making person to bleed everywhere and there is so much blood flooding all over the bush. The bleeding is making people to be screaming and shouting all the time, shouting to father and to mother, shouting to God or to Devil… Sometimes I am wanting to cry very loud, but nobody is crying in this place (117).

Iweala portrays Agu as a lost and starving soul held captive in the wilderness by Commandant and his perilous war and unable to scream for help. In *Beasts of No Nation*, Iweala gives Agu a voice and lets the boy scream out loud. As Susan W. Tiefenbrun states: “Iweala portrays… Agu, who tells his tragic tale in pidgin English bristling with repetition, adjectival verbs, metaphors, similes, capitalized exclamations that reveal his youth and the depth and intensity of his pleas for help from the international community” (Tiefenbrun 442). In essence, Iweala’s satire is Agu’s scream. This is how people like Commandant are treating helpless children like me, Iweala lets Agu say. Through the
character of Commandant, Iweala lampoons agents of war who violate the human rights of children by coercing them to become slave-soldiers.

Besides Agu, another degraded character in *Beasts of No Nation* is Agu’s battle-buddy, Strika, the boy Commandant uses to force Agu to become a child soldier. Strika is so overwhelmed by the tragedy the war has inflicted on him and his family that he is literally dumbstruck throughout the novel. Iweala highlights Strika’s psychological malaise when Agu first attempts to befriend him:

> So I am asking him…are you Strika, and he is nodding yes. Are you having parent, and he is shaking his head no. Are you liking plantain? Nodding yes. Fish? Yes. Pear? Yes. Are you stupid? No. Why are you not talking talking? No answer. What is it like to be killing somebody? No answer… (13).

Strika’s tragic story is similar to Agu’s in many ways. Both boys are “survivors of family massacres,” a key ingredient that P.W. Singer says drives children into child soldiering (Singer 64). Also, like Agu, Strika is intimidated into becoming a child soldier after the brutal murder of his family by Commandant who converts him—through brainwashing and indoctrination—into a heartless, robotic killer whom Iweala shows raping an innocent woman and hacking an infant to pieces. Yet, somewhere within Strika exists a stifled child able to connect with Agu at a human level. Iweala showcases Strika’s inner turmoil after Agu is sodomized by Commandant for the first time. “I was asking Strika whether his own was hurting so much the first time,” Agu says, “and he was drawing me picture in the mud of man bending down with his hand on the ground and gun and bullet shooting up his buttom” (85). Strika’s opinion of sodomy is cryptic but revealing. Iweala uses the image of a bullet being shot up a child’s anus to shock his readers into
comprehending the traumatizing effects of Commandant’s callous actions on Strika. Being sodomized is tantamount to being shut up the “buttom,” the boy seems to imply. Or, perhaps that is what he would rather happen to him. Either way, Iweala lets Strika’s condemnatory drawing speak for itself. Just like Agu, Strika is a helpless, dehumanized victim at the mercy of circumstances beyond his control. Despite his seeming cold-bloodedness, Strika is just another lost child soldier at heart. Iweala reveals a gentler side of Strika when the boy pleads for Agu’s help toward the end of the novel—and the culmination of his life. “Don’t leave me,” Strika begs Agu, as sickness renders him catatonic by the roadside, “…don’t leave me. Please Agu. Don’t just be leaving me” (131). The one and only time Strika speaks in Iweala’s novel, it is to plead for help. His demise is so distressing an episode that Agu does not know how to react to it. “I am trying to be crying,” Agu says about Strika’s predicament, “but no tear is coming out from my eye… Strika is my brother and my family and the only person I can be talking to even if he is never talking back until now” (131). Even though Iweala does not give the reader direct access to Strika’s thoughts and feelings (as he does Agu’s), the writer accomplishes a herculean feat by making his readers understand and (somewhat) empathize with a character who commits massacre and rape with impunity. In the end, Iweala’s satire is pointed at Commandant and the war, the architects of Agu’s and Strika’s victimization and dehumanization. Like Agu, Strika’s childhood was stolen from him. And like most child soldiers, he had no choice but to succumb to the gruesome demands of his enslavement.
Influence & Inspiration: Depicting the Death of Innocence

In *Sozaboy* and *Beasts of No Nation*, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Uzodinma Iweala use two different strategies to satirize the use of children as soldiers in Africa. While Saro-Wiwa accomplishes his goal by telling the story of an ordinary African boy who guilelessly signs up to become a child soldier without considering the deeper implications of his decision and learns the hard way that he made a fatal and irreversible mistake, Iweala achieves his objective of satire by telling the story of another African child whose human rights are violated after he is forced to become a soldier. Indeed, describing *Beasts of No Nation*, Susan W. Tiefenbrun states that Iweala “enables his readers to observe with disbelief the human rights violations and horrifying experiences Agu is forced to endure: rape, the denial of education, utter despair…” (Tiefenbrun 443). The same could be said of my novel, *Odi’s Odyssey*, which follows a dissimilar path (in terms of characterization, plot structure, and narrative perspective), but arrives the same destination of satire. Unlike Saro-Wiwa’s and Iweala’s tales, my protagonist, thirteen-year-old Odi, is not a child soldier. However, as he journeys across a war-torn country in search of his abducted sister, Odi encounters many child soldiers and gets to know some personally. His interactions with—and observations of—these young killers form the chassis of my satire. Using techniques gleaned in part from Saro-Wiwa and Iweala, I depict the manipulation, victimization and dehumanization of my characters in order to highlight their predicament and draw attention to the plight of child soldiers.
Like the main characters of *Sozaboy* and *Beasts of No Nation*, Odi tells his story in a blend of English and Pidgin English. My goal is to make Odi’s tale authentic and believable, and thus draw the reader to partake in his experience. I let Odi recount his transformation from an innocent boy to a daring hero in a straight-forward voice in order to make him seem honest and likable:

“Me, I did not go to school even though I was thirteen. I used to like school very much. I never liked reading at all, but always I was the best in Arithmetic—from the time I was in Class One until when I left school in Class Six. I can solve any Arithmetic problem that my teachers were giving” (Thesis 55).

Like Saro-Wiwa’s Mene, Odi is a school-loving, ambitious child who is forced to leave school against his will. Despite being the son of the “Ajaa,” the king, Odi is bullied and humiliated by his peers because he comes from a ‘low-born’ mother. Like Iweala’s Agu, Odi’s family is torn apart when rebels attack his village. Odi is harvesting corn with his mother and younger sister, Maru, one ordinary day when terrorists emerge from the forest and hold him and his family captive at gun point. In the following passage, Odi recounts what goes through his mind during his devastating encounter with “Mowa Litou” rebels:

The boy touched Mama’s breast with his finger.
The old man said, Touch ‘am, fine fine. Hold ‘am.
The boy put his hand on Mama’s breast.
I closed my eyes not to see this. How can a boy be putting his hand on my mama? How can God be letting this happen? I was saying a prayer again and again and again inside of me, Dear Jesus Christ save us! Please Jesus Christ save us! Oh Jesus Christ save us! ...Oh, I was feeling so angry now. I was thinking that I can beat this boy. I can beat this boy and I can beat this old man. I can be jamming this boy and this old man in the face with my hands many many times (Thesis 70).

The reader is transported into Odi’s psyche thanks to the first person narration and his personalized language. The reader therefore shares in the boy’s fear and helplessness.
Unlike Iweala, I predominantly use the past tense, rather than the present continuous tense. This creates a sense of realism, depicting events that seem to have truly happened and thus subliminally mandating the reader to make connections with comparable happenings they might have experienced or heard of in real life.

The influence of Iweala’s narrative style on my writing can be discerned in my portrayal of dialogue. I borrow his technique of eschewing quotation marks in all conversations to show that my protagonist is using his own voice to paraphrase everything he heard. The result is that the reader begins to follow Odi on his psychological journey toward self-empowerment. I take the reader deep into Odi’s mind when he is knocked unconscious by the rebels while attempting to protect his family:

My head was feeling heavy like a big stone. At the same time it was like there was fire and pepper inside of it. I tried to move but I cannot move. There was something heavy on me. This thing was pressing me down. It was like there was thick warm mud running from my head into my ear and to all over my face. Something was smelling right inside my nose, like the blood of a dead chicken when its neck is cut off. I was hearing many voices shouting and I was trying to remember where I was. I tried to open my eyes, but it was like the mud was flowing over my face. I was smelling mud and rotten grass and maize leaves and dead chicken blood all at the same time. I tried to move my hands, but they cannot move. I tried to move my legs, but they also cannot move. It was like my brain cannot talk to my body anymore (Thesis 79).

By using Odi’s voice, I am able to let the reader experience his incapacity. When Odi regains consciousness, he learns that his mother was raped and killed, and that his sister was first raped, then kidnapped. The reader joins Odi in being shocked at this horrific news. Although Odi blames himself for being a “weak, weak, weak boy” (Thesis 85), the reader knows that there is nothing the thirteen-year-old could have done to prevent the situation.
After witnessing the destruction of Odi’s family from Odi’s subjective and vulnerable position, the reader is able to empathize with Odi’s situation and accompany him on his mission to find his captured sister. Like Mene, Odi wanders far and near in search of his family. Odi shows bravery in risking his life to save his sister’s in a daunting quest that adds suspense to my novel and gives it the forward-thrust of a thriller. Will Odi find Maru, or will he not? Will he metamorphose into a vengeful murderer, or will he remain kind and compassionate despite his agony and rage? Worth noticing is the fact that I deliberately make Odi’s language less pidginized than Mene’s, and less sophisticated than Agu’s. My hope is that this linguistic simplicity imbues my story with an airiness and universality. By combining plainspoken English language and first person narration, I am able to paint a detailed portrait of a boy’s psychological and physical transformation from innocence to maturity. Also, by letting a semi-literate African boy tell his tale in the English language, I am able to both personalize Odi’s story and humanize his character. The reader connects with him at a deeper level and my satire is more impactful.

Regarding the use of point of view, my novel is influenced not only by the strengths of Saro-Wiwa’s and Iweala’s books, but also by their shortcomings. Although the first person narrative employed by both authors has its merits, it generally lacks the advantage of objective storytelling. The technique is clearly limited, inherently manipulative, and deprives the reader of a richer experience. This is even more conspicuous in stories narrated entirely by naïve protagonists who are seeming puns in the hands of authors. To remedy this, I use poetry, supposedly created by Odi’s abducted
sister, Maru, to add multidimensionality to my story. For instance, Maru’s first poem gives us a sense of Odi’s physique and personality before we meet him:

My brother Odi / is thin and tall
like a young plantain tree / growing up in a hurry
His arms and legs / are small but strong
like an antelope / he cannot stand still... (Thesis 50)

The image of Odi created by Maru subtly brings Odi alive as a character and begins to give the reader a sense of the relationship between the two siblings. Additionally, Maru’s poetry is used for satire, as illustrated by the following verse:

leave me alone, Bad Stranger / I want to live in peace
keep your noise away / the loud coughing of your guns
keep your wounds away / the sharp cutting of your knives
keep your screams away / the deep piercing of your spears
don't bring your vultures this way / don't turn songs of weddings and childbirth / into hymns of mourning and heartache
don't turn fresh rain / into thick blood
and precious lives / into bones and red mud...
leave me alone, Bad Stranger / I want to grow old (Thesis 137)

Maru’s words do not only lambaste war from a child’s viewpoint, they underscore the girl’s plight when she is captured by “bad strangers”—the Mowa Litou terrorist group. Since my goal is to entice my reader to follow Odi on his quest to find Maru, Maru’s perspective humanizes her and keeps her alive in the mind of the reader. Additionally, it fills in the gaps left by Odi’s subjective narration, thus adding suspense to the plot and clarifying Odi’s storytelling. The reader gets another honest angle of the story because Maru’s poetry is a representation of her true feelings about her life and that of her family. This inventive technique serves several purposes: it augments the “roundness” of my characters, enriches my novel stylistically and adds to its originality, and magnifies my
satire by enhancing the reader’s emotional connection to my material.

Furthermore, I use the technique of stream of consciousness in *Odi’s Odyssey*—influenced in part by the first person narrative employed by Saro-Wiwa and Iweala—to place the reader directly inside the mind of my protagonist. In the following example, Odi ‘thinks aloud’ while fleeing from bullets:

There was a Jeep hiding in a corner, carrying three or four rebels. I ran by this without even seeing it. Odi, jump quick quick behind a wall! The man’s gun coughed again, PAOW, PAOW! Bullets jammed the corner of the wall tearing it into pieces. I heard footsteps running in my direction. I continued running ahead down a small path filled with dirty water. PAOW! To your left, Odi! Over a cypress fence. Into a backyard with many broken cane chairs. PAOW! To your right now, Odi! Over another cypress fence. Between two mud brick walls standing very close together. Sideways, sideways, sideways… Around a tight corner into a small motor road. PAOW, PAOW! Dive! Crawl! Stand and run! Behind an old burned family house made of cement bricks. Fast fast! Zig zag, Odi! After sometime the shooting stopped (Thesis 174).

The technique of stream of consciousness takes the reader deeper into the mind of a character than the straightforward first person narrative. Since the reader witnesses Odi’s raw, honest, and unfiltered thoughts in real time as they emanate haphazardly in his mind, he or she gains a better understanding of Odi’s thinking process and character. Like Maru’s innocent poetry, Odi’s streaming thoughts give the reader unfettered access to the psyche of a distressed child.

Besides language and narrative perspective, *Odi’s Odyssey* is also influenced by Saro-Wiwa’s and Iweala’s use of characterization to heighten satire. While Odi’s plotline is the spine of my story, I position other minor characters such as The Old Man and The Half-Nose Man—both reminiscent of Saro-Wiwa’s Manmuswak and Iweala’s Commandant—as personifications of the dreadfulness of war. These masters of mayhem
lead the child soldiers to commit unfathomable atrocities and therefore bear the brunt of the blame for the manipulation, victimization, and dehumanization of child soldiers in my novel. Such is the case when The Old Man and The Half-Nose Man lead a rag-tag army of hoodlums into Paruwa Valley to massacre families—including Odi’s—and to pillage crops. Particularly, The Half-Nose Man is the embodiment of inhumanity that normalizes carnage in the eyes of child soldiers. The Half-Nose Man extinguishes the lives of whole families with his pistol without any forethought, while The Old Man relishes defiling women—like Odi’s mother—in front of child soldiers. For instance, in the following exchange, The Old Man instigates a frail child soldier named Zaba to sexually abuse Odi’s mother:

The old man said to the boy, This one na real woman, hmm. Real woman! No be that nonsense wey we meetam yesterday. You want taste real woman, Zaba? The boy did not say anything. He was just shaking his head up and down saying yes. The old man said, I CANNOT HEAR YOU, ZABA! The boy said, Yes, I want taste real woman. The old man said, Good! Today na ya lucky day! (Thesis 71)

It is apparent that The Old Man thinks he is doing Zaba a favor by encouraging the boy to commit rape. While Odi is the moral center of my novel, Zaba represents the manipulated, dehumanized child. Having been dragooned from his village by rebels and forced to become a killer and rapist, he is barely human when we first meet him. Starved and drugged constantly, Zaba plunders and murders as a way of life. Our introduction to his character foreshadows other vile child soldiers, such as Victorine’s rebels, who tear out a man’s heart and intestines just for the fun of it. By making characters such as The
Half-Nose Man, The Old Man, Zaba, and the other child soldiers both real and repulsive, I hope to nauseate the reader into contemplating the plight of children who either knowingly or inadvertently become killing machines.

Ultimately, it is the use of tragedy gleaned in part from Saro-Wiwa and Iweala that gives my story its Juvenalian sting. In Odi’s Odyssey, I feature the destruction of a family by war, detailing rape, kidnapping and death. Like Saro-Wiwa and Iweala, I catalogue scenes of chaos and massacre involving children. Most chapters of my novel are replete with the stench of death, disgusting the reader and mandating him or her to take notice of the intolerable calamity of child soldiering that has ravaged Africa for decades. Like Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation, I set my story in a nameless African country, which represents every part of Africa and the world where children are forced or lured to become soldiers. Although my story deviates from Saro-Wiwa’s and Iweala’s in many ways, in the end my goal is the same: to highlight the inhumanity of child soldiering in order to shock readers into outrage and jolt them from ignorance to awareness and from indifference to action.
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