

# A Polyvagal Reading of Ishmael Beah's *Memoir, A Long Way Gone: Memoir of a Boy Soldier*

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## Abstract

War narratives claim that the sufferings of the individuals are significantly different based on the unique context and scales of conflicts. The context of vulnerability and stigmatization makes it difficult for the children involved in crimes during war to reintegrate back into the society. The scenario of the victims becomes worse when trauma endured by them are left unaddressed. The study gives a comprehensive idea on how trauma impacts an individual's nervous system which hinders them from attaining resilience. An interdisciplinary approach of intersecting neuroscience and literature authenticates how healing can be processed by understanding the body's autonomic state. With the premise of child soldier narratives in war literature the paper employs a qualitative analysis of *Long Way Gone* (2007) by Ishmael Beah. The analysis employs *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation* (2018) by Deb Dana to examine Beah's autonomic responses. In doing so, the paper elaborates on the identification and regulation of the neural circuit which advocates healing from trauma.

**Keywords:** Child Soldiers; Polyvagal; PTSD; Social Engagement System; Survival; War.

War affects people's physical and psychological well-being, especially children, and results in long-term repercussions. The paper stems from the undeniable assertion that children are the most vulnerable and highly exploited population during times of war. The article deals with one such exploitation, which is recruiting children as soldiers. According to the UNICEF report, "more than 105,000 children" ("Children Recruited by Armed Force or Armed Groups") were deployed between 2005 and

2022. Extensive research claims that, across the globe, warfare has drawn in people who were young and strong, often because they were perceived to handle both physical and psychological demands of combat. This demographic has historically been targeted due to their potential endurance and adaptability to the rigors of military life. While tracing history, one may learn that the Native American boys joined war parties at fourteen or fifteen years of age, during the nineteenth century and in many places of East Africa adolescent boys were provided the status of warrior and the female warriors of Dahomey were between nine and fifteen. Further, it is reviewed that the United States Civil War is the “war of boy soldiers” (Rogen 4) and numerous examples abound. Though war-bred trauma narratives are documented in different literary genres, the ordeal of the child soldiers emerged as a prime concern only when the West considered it a crime against the rights of the child. Humanitarian organizations, thus, used a powerful image of a young child wearing a tee shirt and shorts, holding AK 47 to argue that the adults who recruit them are responsible for war crime, not children. The image has sensitized even the ordinary man and has helped him examine, the reason for child deployment and stimulate necessary measures to help them rehabilitate and not execute.

Within the premise of child soldier narrative in war literature, the research paper reads the memoir *A Long Way Gone* through the Polyvagal lens, the new “science of safety” (Dana 10), which heals trauma through awareness. Deb Dana elaborates on three neural circuit or the pathways that dictates human behaviour at times of crisis. In doing so, the paper highlights the scientific way of attaining resilience and healing by understanding cues of safety from the environment.

### **Literature-review**

*Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah is marked as a significant child-soldier narrative representing war literature and has been subjected to various critical study. The research article titled “Chasing Ishmael- Truth, Racism, the US media and Blockbuster Publishing” (2008) by Shelley Gare questions the inconsistency and veracity of the memoir. As an Anthropological study by Irina Kyulanova the article “ From Soldiers to Children: Undoing the Rite to Passage in Ishamel Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* and Bernard Asley’s *Little Soldier*” (2010), underscores the difficulty in transition from child soldier to construct a new life due to liminality in the social framework. Francis Naghoba Smart (2017) analyses the narration between fact and form in the work “Truth and Fiction: or, orature in Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*”. A critical ground is identified around trauma healing. As

the victims find it difficult to reestablish themselves back into the society due to traumatic situations. An understanding of the polyvagal systems helps one identify the role of vagus nerve in relation to stress response. Thus, by integrating neuroscience and literary studies the article extends the scope of the genre by reflecting on the neurobiological behaviour of the victims in response to trauma.

### **A Polyvagal Reading**

The obstinate problems of war like scarcity of food, limited education opportunities, and a lack of secure homes and communities transformed children into soldiers. The rebel groups promise the children a false sense of belonging and inveigle them to join groups to take revenge. This new community demands violence as “the way of showing loyalty” (“A Long Journey: The Story of Ishmael Beah”). The young minds end up doing hideous crimes because substances like drugs, alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine are available in surplus and due course, the children deployed get addicted and eventually follow orders without question. The new community and addiction have instilled a sense of power to loot, kill and scramble after limited resources and predominantly they feel that they are in charge of their life. The children deployed not only kill and dehumanize others but in reverse they dehumanize themselves and eventually, they experience post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is dangerous because the mind becomes the worst enemy as they have stopped fighting. Formerly, memories and activities of the past take hold of them but acceptance and reassurance from the social environment help them recuperate from trauma. Beah says that it was very difficult to start a new life “being in the war I got used to it because in there are no distractions, you don’t allow your mind to take over” (The Moth 25:04) because the soldiers take drugs and keep moving and fighting.

The polyvagal theory explains the connectedness of the nervous system to emotional responses because the nervous system processes everything right from noticing a small action to taking important decisions. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is part of the nervous system and is formed by the sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions. The divisions signal an individual to respond to stress and survival behaviours because the sympathetic nervous system carries signals that alert the human body and on the other hand parasympathetic division relaxes the system. It is crucial to comprehend how trauma impacts an individual’s nervous system since the ANS, when impacted by trauma, can no longer distinguish between a dangerous past and a secure present. The research article on

Polyvagal theory by Stephen Porges, American psychologist, was initially discovered to treat obstetrics and neonatology but it was Deb Dana, a consultant specialized in complex trauma, who integrated polyvagal theory into treating trauma. Traumatic experiences compromise one's ability to engage with others for connectedness and Dana signifies that if the situation persists "the adaptive survival responses become habitual autonomic pattern" (Dana 10) which subsequently sidetracks resilience.

Dana explains that The ANS has three basic states: dorsal vagal, sympathetic, and ventral vagal. These work like a ladder and one can move up or down only in sequence by scanning the environment. She says that by understanding the function of the neural circuit one can decipher emotions and behaviours of the victims and help them heal from trauma. This is evident in Dana's experiment in treating trauma with her clients. She concluded that Polyvagal therapy helps the survivors reframe their narratives by helping them feel heroic rather than victims. The research has adapted the same model in identifying the three basic states the victim experience and how he attains resilience and post-traumatic growth when the ventral vagal state activates.

### **Dorsal Vagal and Sympathetic Activation: Cue of Threat and Danger**

The dorsal vagal state or the freeze state: This is the oldest subdivision, which is positioned at the bottom of the ladder and belongs to the parasympathetic nervous system. It responds to the cues of danger and signals an individual to shut down when overwhelmed by any dangerous situation. Experiences such as, "abuse, sexual trauma, medical procedures, illness and injury could trigger a dorsal vagal response" (Dana 31). This may lead to psychological discomforts like depression and dissociation. Beah states that every day he became frustrated with living in fear and felt that he "was always waiting for death to come" (46), suggesting "a unique physiological state that is potentially lethal" (Porges 51). The body chooses immobilization as a defence mechanism to respond to threats.

The dorsal vagal state can be exemplified while analysing the situation, wherein Beah and his companions, after their long journey, reached a mud hut near the Atlantic Ocean. The host, who was a fisherman welcomed them but the villagers proclaimed them evil and undressed them. The physical abuse endured by them was unbearable to which Saidu, one of Beah's companions declared that "every time people come at us with the intention of killing us I close my eyes and for death—even though still alive, I feel each time I accept death, part of me dies" (70). Saidu is also

portrayed as a silent child because he is depressed after witnessing the rebels rape his sister. Porges records that “it is very difficult to reorganize to become “normal again” (Porges 56), which is the case for many trauma survivors. Another instance narrates how the rebel army demanded the civilians to dig their own grave and they were dumped into the pit. The civilians screamed and tried to climb up the pit but the victims voluntarily laid back as they were threatened by guns. Here, the victims chose to surrender rather than fight/flight. They preferred to fight only “under the soil with all their might. I heard them groan underneath as they fought for air, gradually they gave up, and we walked away.” (Beah 151). The mentioned emotional and physical abuse elaborates that the victims remained immobilized to escape or physically defend themselves. The article further elaborates on the sympathetic state Ishmael Beah later climbs to ascend the unpredicted chaotic situation.

The sympathetic nervous system or the fight and flight state: Ishmael Beah assumed the role of a child soldier to survive the conflict. The sympathetic nervous system takes hold of his actions. The state senses that “no place is safe” (Dana 21) and sets an individual in motion because it releases stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. The state is like a “home security system maintaining a range of responses and armed to react at any emergencies” – triggers an immediate response and return to standby” (Dana 23). Initially, during the war, Beah embraced the flight mode because even his shadow scared him and narrated that he walked for two days straight without rest. Later, he and his companions were deployed by the rebel group and killing became their daily activity. Here, Beah assumes the fight state because every survival made him brave and conferred him the courage to fight. The training was so intense that initially, Beah felt nauseated at the sight of smashed heads but later, Beah claims, “I felt pity for none” (Beah 126).

Beah, recounts a circumstance where they opened fire with another armed group until the last one was dead, mostly young children and they reluctantly “walked toward the dead bodies, giving each other high fives” (19). They were in constant movement or either were indulged in drugs because they were afraid of silence, which might awaken their memories. Beah journals that “we were afraid of silence, we began cleaning the blood off our guns and the ones we had brought with us, cleaning and oiling the chambers” (120). Beah feared not death as experienced in the previous state rather “killing has become easy as drinking water” (122), which affirms that the sympathetic state was in action. They had been assigned with the murderous havoc for two years and while serving at the

new base at Bauya, the members of UNICEF interrupted and expected the Lieutenant to relieve the children deployed. The Lieutenant released Beah and Alhaji along with thirteen other children.

The new environment, Benin home, infuriated them as they had to follow the civilian's instructions. The frequent medical checkups and one-to-one counselling sessions exasperated the children and they threw "bowls, spoons, food, and benches at them" (Beah 138). The children felt insecure without guns and drugs because they were constantly scanning the environment for threats and risks. They broke into hospitals and stole pain relievers to use as drugs but were of no effect as a result they resorted to more violence. Beah records that even after one month at the centre "there were still instances of vomiting and collapsing at unexpected moments" (145), indicating the difficult phase of transition. Beah elaborates on instances where the children woke up screaming, punching, and choking other children, which demonstrates the subconscious mind is still surveilling the environment for threats. In the sympathetic state stillness is no longer a survival response. The individual is "in search of safety" and they either fight or flee and remain "cut off from others" (Dana 32). People at the rehabilitation center often assured the children that it was not their fault, which only enraged them because it takes PTSD sufferers longer to build confidence in others. At this stage, the victims tend to "misread cues" (Dana 32) and fail to get associated. Despite Beah's opinion "that people befriend only to exploit one another" (Beah15), Esther, the nurse, empathised with him and urged him to recount his horrific experiences. Now, Beah slowly climbs the ladder and attains a sense of safety available around him.

### **The Ventral Vagal Activation: Cue of Safety and Social Engagement.**

The ventral vagus or the rest and digest state: It belongs to the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps an individual respond to cues of safety detected in the social environment. Beah receives proper care at the rehabilitation center and his interactions with Esther, reflects the activation of ventral vagal system. Though Beah was arrogant towards adapting new life without weapons and drugs. He, eventually realised "that this meant to have another life besides war which I come to believe that was the entirety of my life" (The Moth 24:26). Esther, slowly, won his trust by presenting him with a walkman and cassette, which triggered his fondness for rap music. He confided about the havoc he had created during the war. "Esther was the first adult I started to trust after the war" (The Moth 31:13) he began to trust and learned to get connected. An individual

trusts and stays connected only when he/ she tops up the ladder forming a neurobiological foundation for health, growth, and restoration. However, if the victims fail to regulate their physiological state by not adapting the vagal circuit, they eventually turn into defensive machines.

Leisle, a field worker for Children Associated with War (CWA), finds Beah's uncle Tommy with whom he moves after his brief stay at the rehabilitation center. Later, Mr Kamara, the director of Benin Home, invited Beah to speak about the children affected by the war at the conference held in New York City, USA. It is at this conference that Beah meets Laura Simms, a storyteller, who later became his foster mother. Fifty-seven children from twenty-three countries participated to begin the United Nations First International Children's Parliament. The children took turns and spoke about their difficult childhood experiences. During Beah's speech, he reiterated that he joined the army due to "loss of family and starvation" (199). He has been rehabilitated and asks them not to fear as "I am a child. We are all brothers and sisters. What I have learned from the experience is that revenge is not good" (199). The children attending the conference narrated their traumatic incidents and were aware that, after the conference, they had to move back to the same place of conflict. They, now, return with the hope that even if they get killed, a part of their memory will be alive in some part of the world.

Beah's return to Sierra Leone was heart-wrenching because the country was still engaged in unceasing war. On May 25, 1997, the war intensified after a brief respite, which turned crucial for existence. Prisoners were relieved and the new government handed them guns and they killed judges and lawyers who had sentenced them to imprisonment. The Armed Revolutionary Council (ARFC) headed by Johnny Paul Koroma occupied schools, and universities and looted shops and markets. Beah was indignant about the new situation but he could not express his disagreement as a civilian. Beah, now, chose to leave Freetown and move towards New York to live with his foster mother, instead of joining the ARFC army, unlike other children. The situation accentuates the fact that Beah is in the Ventral Vagus state looking for cues of safety and connectedness, while the rest of the children are still in the sympathetic state listening to cues of danger and remain disconnected. Polyvagal healing promotes feelings of safety and social connection and assists in co-regulation. The individual, thus, remains attuned to their body and the present moment, various therapeutic modalities like narrative therapy, somatic experiencing, yoga, and dance therapy, amongst many, may be used to heal trauma.

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## Conclusion

The study focuses on the idea that there is a connection between trauma and the response of the autonomic nervous system. As it is hard to define the exact amount of trauma and exploitation endured by child soldiers, polyvagal reading aids an individual's understanding of the state in which the victims are at present and helps them heal trauma. The theory further zeros in on the survivor's opportunity to co-regulate and engage with cues available in the environment. Ishmael Beah's memoir records his experience as a soldier under the tutelage of rebel groups and the difficulty he endured in regulating himself while experiencing post-traumatic disorder (PTSD). Eventually, Beah tops up the ladder by sensing the cue of safety and gets connected with Esther, Tommy, Laura Simms and many others in his process of recovery. Further, Beah shares his experience among other fellow members at the conference and hope arises in the "social engagement system" (Dana 34). He currently holds the esteemed position of UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, providing hope to young children in need, An example from the ongoing Russia - Ukraine war aids the article in assessing the cue of safety through social engagement. UNICEF's Spilno Meeting Points are spots allotted to support children and their families who have been displaced by war. It is reported that "children are finding joy through play every day, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine" ("New Start and New Friends for Children at Spilno Spot").

The article does not, invariably overlook other traumatic therapies. It rather hypothetically contends that stress and trauma significantly affect the response of the autonomic nervous system and it can be regulated by understanding the function of the neural circuit. The paper also suggest a few potential areas for future research; a comparative study of other child soldier memoirs from different regions and explore the cultural differences involved in the process of recovery from trauma, a quantitative study can be carried out by understanding how trauma narratives affect young readers of Beah's age and establishing empathetic perspective among the readers, and an interdisciplinary approach by analysing the narratives of Beah through Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) or Eye Movement and Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) shall widen the literary perspective.



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