

“Rape or Die”: War as Initiation Rite in Chris Abani’s Song for Night

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Abstract: This paper discusses disrupted childhood as a result of war with reference to Chris Abani’s novel, *Song for Night*. The paper analyses how a child’s entry into war acts as his form of initiation rite and development into adulthood, and the way this form of initiation leaves him in a state in between childhood and adulthood, as well as in between life and death. The main argument of the paper is that Abani’s portrayal of his protagonist is a way of constructing war as a wrongful rite of passage which can only take one’s childhood without making him an adult. Thus, the reason why Abani’s protagonist, My Luck is denied entry into his society after his experience as a child soldier is because he went through a form of initiation which leaves him in a liminal state.

Key Words: *Chris Abani, Song for Night, Initiation, disrupted childhood, war, child soldier.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

“I have never been a boy. That was taken away from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am a kind of chimera who knows only the intimacy of killing” (Song for Night 143).

Song for Night (2007), is the fifth novel of the prolific Nigerian author, Chris Abani, a renowned novelist, poet and publisher, who has received several literary distinctions. Abani is noted for his political writing and his interest in the consequences of political power plays in the postcolonial nation of Nigeria is evident in many of his works. The novel tells the story of My Luck, a West African child soldier who has led a platoon of mine diffusers for three years. It begins as My Luck loses his platoon and goes through the war-torn terrain in search of it in a tired fight for survival. In his dreamlike journey through the war-devastated terrain in search of his platoon, he remembers his war time experience and his experience with his family before the war. My Luck reflects upon his life with his family – his Catholic mother and Muslim father as well as his grandfather, the traditionalist, who taught him the values of a human life. He also reflects upon his experiences of war with which he has become inexplicably entangled. He has raped, killed and looted. He is portrayed as a little boy and man and, by his own admission, as neither. The war has taken his childhood innocence away without initiating him into adulthood, leaving him with no sense of belonging. At the battlefield, My Luck and his colleague mine diffusers have their vocal cords cut out so that they cannot scream if any of them steps on a mine and is blown up. Nevertheless, they have devised their own form of sign language with which My Luck narrates his story that acts at chapter headings for the novel. Each of the chapter titles defines a sign, for instance, “Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek”, “Ghosts Are a Gentle Breath over Moving Fingers”, and “Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat.”

In My Luck’s dreamlike journey, he is haunted by the people that he has killed and a woman that he has raped on the battlefield. At one point he encounters a boat, occupied by a skeleton, drifting downriver. My Luck is troubled by such visions to the extent that he wonders whether he is dead. At the end of his journey, he finally catches up with his platoon on the other side of the river, but they cannot hear him as he screams and fires his gun. Finally, My Luck is revealed as a ghost and is reunited with his mother in the afterlife. Liminality thus is the dominant trope of the novel since My Luck is on an endless journey where he is between home and his destination. When he finds what he is questing for, he is “killed” whereupon we discover that he was not ever fully alive in the narrative but a revenant between life and death all along.

Critical reception of the novel has been interesting and insightful. Some critics read the novel as an allegory of the fragility and volatility of postcolonial Africa, others as a novel about trauma, while a cross section of critics analyse the novel as being about a child soldier’s self-discovery and confused identity.

Regarding language and style, the novel has been praised as making use of poetic, lyrical language that gives the narrative its beauty, while others argue that the novel makes use of surrealism as a metaphor for crossing over various zones. Critics who offer allegorical readings of the novel have argued along the lines that the child soldier figure represents postcolonial Africa. However, what these critics have left unexplored is the novel’s representation of how the child’s development through war acts as a form of perverted initiation which leaves him in a confused state between childhood and adulthood as well as between life and death as has been explored in this paper.

II. THE REPRESENTATION OF CHILD-SOCIALISATION IN *SONG FOR NIGHT*

Song for Night gives a detailed and startling contrast between pre-war socialisation and socialisation in the context of war that influences the development of children into adulthood. This requires our understanding of socialisation as the process through which human beings acquire social skills to understand and steer themselves through the social world. It is through this process that they learn to conform to social norms and themselves become “conduits” for transmitting, and also transforming cultures. As a result, children are major figures of social orders even though they are often not seen as active participants “but as beings who have the potential for being slowly brought into contact with human beings” (Ritchie & Kollar qtd in Savahl, 2010) or “something apart from society that must be shaped and guided by external forces in order to become fully functioning member[s]” (Corsaro qtd in Savahl, 2010).

In *Song for Night*, Abani presents a complex form of socialisation by juxtaposing pre-war socialisation and socialisation in the context of war through a complex plot that alternates between My Luck’s dreamlike search for his platoon, and the flash back to his days before the war. Through My Luck’s dreamland which takes him through his memories, the reader is made aware that he lived in northern Nigeria with his Muslim father and his Catholic mother, both of whom try to introduce him to their religions. He was made to learn the Muslim call to prayer, yet he hated his father for becoming a Muslim and he feels “a sudden rush of rage for [his] father. What was it about Islam and the prophet and that way of life that made him give up so much for it? He moved into the heart of the place that destroyed us” (109 – 110). His father was an imam and an excisor and, as part of My Luck’s socialisation, he was made to do household chores, one of which was “cleaning and honing [his father’s] knives” (93). His mother also taught him crocheting which he loved greatly. These chores signify his childhood and by his interest in crocheting which is traditionally a craft for women, Abani challenges traditional gender roles. After his father had been brutally murdered during the pogrom preceding the Biafran war, My Luck’s mother married another man, her late husband’s brother. Even when My Luck’s stepfather did not want him to crochet, his mother showed him a place in the ceiling where he could hide and crochet. My Luck’s memories of life with his family are so strong that even at the war front, he feels homesick. This shows that even though child soldiers are portrayed as enjoying the rape, looting and killing, they still mostly prefer the home environment to the battlefield. This resonates with Kearney’s argument that My Luck’s “return home, as part of a death fantasy, insists heart-rendingly on the child soldiers’ burning and unquenchable desire to be once again part of home and family” (Kearney, 2010). My Luck remembers his mother’s love for him and how she named him My Luck, “fourth son after three daughters all of whom died of mysterious sicknesses before they were eight” (80).

In the typical West African setting that the novel presents, a child’s upbringing is the responsibility of the extended family and the community as a whole and not the parents alone. As such, My Luck has good memories of his grandfather and his aunt from whom he learns about the values of the society. Even though My Luck stayed with his father and mother, and later his stepfather, the most influential person in his socialisation is his grandfather. His parents were so preoccupied with their various religions that they did not teach him the values of his society. His grandfather said of his parents that, as believers of Islam and Christianity, they “are like unschooled children holding onto the essence of a truth merely because they have spoken it” (156). My Luck admits that “nothing I know comes from my Catholic mother or my Muslim father. All I know comes from the stories Grandfather told me” (109). This is a way whereby Abani seems to reject an idea of truth based on corporate religious fundamentals, and endorses an idea of literary truths that seem to be better embodied in the grandfather’s stories. It is his grandfather who taught him determination which keeps him going on in his search for his platoon. He does not give up since he remembers what his grandfather said, namely that, “one should never stop searching for the thing we desire most” (21). My Luck has cuts on his body that he uses to remember the dead. This was learnt from his grandfather, a fisherman and storyteller, who had “a long rosary with bones, cowries, pieces of metal, feathers, pebbles, and twigs tied into it that he used to remember our genealogy. Mnemonic devices he called things like this. These crosses are mine” (25 – 26). In his dreamlike search, he comes to a sandbank where he tries to make fire to warm his body and he does it “the way I had seen Grandfather do so many times” (82). Through My Luck’s memory, the reader is taken back to My Luck’s past to compare and contrast his past and his present. It is his grandfather who tells him myths about the Igbo saying, there “are always many tales here, ... Don’t trust all of them, he always cautioned. Trust all of them, he

warned” (70 *my ellipsis*). The paradox in the above quote is the way My Luck’s grandfather warns him not to follow traditional culture blindly but to question it, follow the good ones and reject the bad ones. He tells him about the Cross river which is “older than Job” (71) and My Luck admits that his grandfather might be right, “there is no escaping its flow” (114). He tells him many tales about how the Cross river got its name. One of these tales is that “the Igbos are Hebrews who wandered down to West Africa from Judea and some of them brought Christ’s Cross with them” (70). My Luck’s love and conscious memory of his grandfather’s stories signify his desire to be a child and listen to stories rather than engaging in adult-related violence. The socialisation My Luck gets from his grandfather is presented through the way his present condition intertwines with his memories of his past through Abani’s deft employment of surrealism. My Luck’s grandfather was so important to him that when he died, in order to always remember him, My Luck makes a cross on his body, an act he calls his “personal cemetery”.

Another interesting agent of socialisation for My Luck is the home and the playground. Abani’s employment of flashback takes the reader through My Luck’s socialisation on the playground. In his dreamlike journey, he comes to a place that he believes might have been “the town’s stadium. Red circles track the field like the grooves in a tree trunk” (107). Immediately, the metaphorical gives way to the physical as the image of the stadium makes him recall happier days before the war when he used to play football with his friends in a league they made up where “[t]he cup was something fashioned from old wood, tin cans, and foil” (107). After this recollection of his past, the stadium image takes him again to his dreamland where he sees “patches of red earth spill through like giant puddles of blood. It is as though the very earth is peppered with sores. Scattered as far as I can see are corpses. Like a field of cut corn, cropped and lying in untidy rows, drying in the sun” (108). This ghastly image contrasts with the peaceful atmosphere of his childhood to reveal the extent of the damage done to his childhood. He again recalls the “games of cricket and Paul, who could bowl so fast, his main job in the rebel army, if he is still alive, must be lobbing grenades instead of curve balls” (94). Through this statement, Abani suggests that children must be good in other profitable ventures and not in the use of arms. My Luck also remembers the peaceful atmosphere before the war that contributed to his socialisation process. Before the troubles, “the yard echoed with life: children playing in giggling stars, mothers shouting gossip at each other, men sitting on benches playing checkers and drinking beer, music spilling out of rooms mixing with smells from the kitchen giving the courtyard extra spice” (93 – 94). After this description full of yearning for the community before the war, Abani, through My Luck’s dream world, creates a sharp contrast with the society during the war. The compound “was deserted. Most of the neighbours were dead or had fled south for safety. Something was rattling in the kitchen; some hungry rats despairing. Cobwebs hung in fine lacy decay from the soot-blackened walls” (94). Through this contrast, Abani depicts the effects of war on society as it takes away peace and harmony and replaces it with decay.

Abani’s employment of the plot structure of the physical which intertwines with the metaphorical helps to contrast pre-war social structures and social breakdown in the context of war. The novel brilliantly portrays the peaceful co-existence in which children are socialised by parents, other adult relatives, and friends. This gives way to violence and malpractice in the context of war where, instead of children pitching “curve balls”, they are “lobbing grenades”, and instead of eating toffees, are smoking, and instead of playing, are looting, raping and shooting. For instance, smoking has become something My Luck cannot do without, “yet three years ago I didn’t smoke. My parents (even my hated stepfather) would have gone berserk if they knew I was smoking” (152). This shows the strong influence parents have on the character formation of their children. During wars, these children are forcibly taken away from their parents and relatives in the society, their socialisation is affected negatively and the values imbibed in them through the social institutions give way to social malpractice.

During My Luck’s days as a child soldier, he is given training in how to attack enemies and how to survive the war. When My Luck joins the army at the age of thirteen, his socialisation continues from the battlefield under Major Essien, whom they later nickname, John Wayne. At boot camp, he is given an anomalous form of initiation and training into the violence of war which disturbs his growth and development and he refers to this abnormal, arrested growth on several occasions in the novel. For instance he says “[t]ime is like that here. No gradual change, no softening of the light or gentle graying of the night” (45), “[t]ime is standing still—literally” (53), “I don’t know how long I’ve been stranded on the sandbank having lost track of time” (65) and “My life turns out in a series of minutes” (53) all of which signify that My Luck is not developing normally, signified by the fact that time itself is interrupted.

In My Luck’s search, he questions how peaceful co-existence in his village could turn to hatred in a war situation that has distorted his development. He questions, “[i]f we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practise? ... Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled by orgasm?” (143 *my ellipsis*). These questions closely knit to My Luck’s memory of his childhood love, which make him refer to war as a form of hatred that contrasts sharply with love. This memory of My Luck’s childhood makes him pity himself for what he has become, and immediately after this recollection, he

makes a sad and insightful declaration, captured in the epigraph to this paper that sums up the plight of the African child soldier: “I have never been a boy. That was taken away from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am a kind of chimera who knows only the intimacy of killing” (143). The fact that he feels sad about his present situation and has good memories of his past before the war shows that he enjoyed being a child more than being a soldier. By this, Abani creates the child soldier as a figure to be pitied and not to be condemned. This resonates with the view of critics like Alexandra Schultheis who gives the child soldier a “victim perpetrator” status. My Luck’s wish to develop into a responsible adult in his society is seen in the way he is happy that his pubic hair was beginning to grow. He is excited because that is “how you knew you were a man – pubic hair, then armpit hair, then facial hair” (138). He is excited because the presence of the pubic hair signifies a child’s readiness for initiation into adulthood. Thus, like Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, My Luck wishes to develop into a responsible adult, but this dream does not come to pass because of war. At the battlefield, he is initiated into violence which transforms him into someone who is no longer a child, but, unlike those who have undergone male initiation among the Igbo, this initiation through war does not make him an adult but leaves him in a perpetual developmental midpoint. In the section that follows, I compare what My Luck engages in at the battle front with male initiation among the Igbo.

III. THE MALE INITIATION MOTIF IN SONG FOR NIGHT

Initiation, whether part of a collective practice or a dimension of individual self-realisation, forms a vital part of most novels of childhood as the child characters’ development from childhood to adulthood is climaxed through some form of test allowing transition. Marianne Hirsch lists “novels of initiation” as one of the possible synonyms of the *Bildungsroman* to indicate how initiation has become synonymous with novels of formation or development (Hirsch, 1979). These narratives have mostly employed realist modes of *Bildungsroman* to portray how children grow normally into adulthood.

The plot of the classical *Bildungsroman* involves three stages. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, usually a young male, moves from his home and community to the outside world, learns wisdom the hard way and returns home as an experienced person. This plan is well illustrated by means of the phases “home-homeless-home” and “the fallen Adam becoming Adam”. This home-homeless-home and the fallen Adam being restored are what is found in initiation rites as in Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner’s three stages, namely, the separation, liminal and reintegration stages (Gennep, 2004; Turner, 1964). Even though initiation forms an essential part of most classical African *Bildungsromane*, and almost all their protagonists undergo initiation before leaving home, most protagonists of postcolonial war novels do not undergo initiation. Writing with reference to Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* and Bernard Ashley’s *Little Soldier*, Irina Kyulanova argues that both memoirs “represent and test a common social assumption that war can serve as a rite of passage to maturity and can accelerate the transition from childhood to adulthood” (Kyulanova, 2010). This explains to a large extent why in most child-soldier narratives, children are not initiated, yet their involvement in the war makes them behave as adults, leaving them confused in the state between childhood and adulthood. Like most protagonists of child soldier narratives, My Luck is not initiated and, as he enters the war front at the time he was almost ready for initiation, his experience at the war front becomes his form of initiation. In this regard, I seek to compare what My Luck goes through at the war front to what boys go through during traditional initiation by drawing on Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner’s studies of initiation.

During Igbo initiation, the initiates are separated from their society and taken to a sacred place where they are taught the customs and traditions of the land. In some tribes, these initiates are forcibly taken by people disguised as ancestral spirits. After the time of separation, they are reunited with their community and they are no longer considered children. Most novels of formation also adopt this “home-away-home” pattern. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, usually a young male, goes into the world seeking adventure, learns wisdom the hard way and returns home having learnt his lesson. The difference between the novel of formation and traditional initiation, however, is that in traditional initiation, the initiates form part of a group and they are taught during this time of separation by specialised people; while in the novel of education the young person learns to become himself. The above difference notwithstanding, it could be argued that the *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation also makes use of the male initiation motif.

In the rest of this section, I discuss how Abani makes use of the male initiation motif in *Song for Night* and argue that My Luck’s experience at the war front forms his initiation albeit, as Kyulanova puts it, the meaning and function of the elements of passage “are ironically subverted to construct war as a deviant rite of passage, which yanks the protagonists out of their childhood status yet fails to grant them the new status of mature adults and integrate them into a stable social structure” (Kyulanova, 2010). *Song for Night* draws on Igbo cosmology and beliefs, in which there is a fine balance between masculine and feminine principles as can be seen in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Masculinity is highly regarded in the community and masculine achievements are prerequisite to becoming a man of status. However, in Achebe’s novel, masculinity achieves

its apogee only when it respects femininity. However, masculinity is so highly prized that it is easily misunderstood, as it is by the central character, Okonkwo. Okonkwo’s idea of being a man is dominated by the masculine with a devaluation of the feminine. Okonkwo does even what is not required simply to preserve his masculine status. He goes to the extent of killing an “adopted” boy, given to the village as punishment for the misdemeanor of his father for fear of being called “agbala”, (a woman) (Achebe, 1958). Male initiation is a very important part of the concept of masculinity. As has been established, female initiation rites are found in those societies in which women make a notable contribution to subsistence activities. In the same way, it could be argued that in a community such as the Igbo that prizes certain masculine qualities, male initiation is very important as it prepares the young man to assume his proper position in the society. Education in the traditions of the society occurs informally even before boys come of age, and this form of education is portrayed positively by Abani through the grandfather figure in the novel. My Luck stays with his parents before the war but he admits he learnt all he knows about the values of life from his grandfather. This knowledge, it could be argued, he acquires during “an informative sojourn in a grandparent’s village”, which according to Alioune Sow, characterises the African *Bildungsroman* (Sow, 2010). Even though he was not initiated before the war, he knew about aspects of Igbo culture through the stories his grandfather told him. With this initial education, My Luck is ready to be initiated into a fully-fledged Igbo man when the war breaks out and he finds himself on the battlefield.

The initiation of Igbo boys, like all rites of passage, is marked by three phases: separation, margin and reintegration phases. Boys are separated from the community and taken to a sacred place. During the separation stage, initiates are taken through activities which are aimed at toughening them to face future challenges in life and live as responsible adults. In *Song for Night*, My Luck is separated from his community after the death of his parents and is taken to the war front which becomes the liminal stage of his initiation. At the beginning of the novel, My Luck has already fought for three years in the rebel army and has lost his platoon. In the search for his platoon, he gives an account of his training in the army and his days as a soldier. He does not undergo the training that an Igbo boy ought to have undergone to be recognised as a true Igbo man. As an Igbo boy, his training during the liminal stage requires that, together with other boys of his age, he is taken through tests of courage and self-purification, partly communicating the coded knowledge of the community. The elders who conduct the initiation mediate the coded and previously unknown knowledge step by step to the initiates (Nwosu, 2009). However, My Luck’s initiation takes place at the battlefield instead of a sacred place. His training and instructions are given by Major Essien, who “was determined to turn [them] into animals” (39) through the instruction he has in his “manual” which “he drummed” into the minds of his “initiates” (23). Major Essien’s manual then becomes the “coded” knowledge whose instructions are communicated to My Luck and his colleagues.

During Igbo initiation, the children are taught team work, leadership, moral values, responsibilities, decision making, freedom and valuing their heritage. Nevertheless, My Luck and his team, receive instruction in counting the dead and tallying the wounded after each explosion, how to maximise the opportunity to top up their kill ratio and how to survive. Instead of learning the history and myths of his land to reinforce what his grandfather taught him, he is shown films that offer him ways to protect himself in the event of different kinds of enemy attack, and instead of the songs of his land his grandfather taught him, at the battle front, he sings about war. For instance one of the songs at the war front is that war is only good for American cigarette companies: “I remember a song I heard in boot camp, *War! Huh! What is it good for ...* but instead of saying, *Absolutely nothing*, we’d add a phrase we like. I sing in my head. *War! Huh! What is it good for? American cigarette companies* (152 *original ellipsis and emphasis*). Everything that happens at the war front seems to be a betrayal of the values his grandfather taught him.

At the war front, My Luck and his colleagues’ initial training involved marching and doing drills in the sun and their graduation day was “when a gun could be found for [them]” (31). My Luck is further initiated into an “elite” group of mine diffusers. During this special initiation,

first our eyes were made keen so we could notice any change in the terrain no matter how subtle....any sign of human disturbance to the ground soon became visible to us....Having trained our eyes, they began to train our legs, feet and toes. We learned to balance on one leg for hours at a time, forty pound packs on our backs in so many odd and different positions that we looked like flamingos on drugs, all the while supervised by John Wayne....Whenever we faltered, that whip will snake out like it had a mind of its own, its leather biting deep and pulling skin with it. (33 *my ellipsis*)

The climax of this “elitist” training is when the “initiates” are taken to a doctor. My Luck is excited that they were becoming “bionic men and women” only to realise that their vocal chords were to be severed so that, in case any of them stepped on a mine, they would not disturb the others with their screams. That was how My Luck and his team lost their speech and had to devise their own form of sign language, and like initiation into totem group, he gets a mark that will forever identify him with the group; his “mark” in the upturned world of war is that his vocal chords are severed. This “special initiation” also becomes My Luck’s own form of

initiation into a secret society or, as specific to the Igbo, an extended exposure to the “medicine” applied to cuts in the skin, that tests the fortitude of the initiate.

Because My Luck goes through a corrupted form of initiation, an initiation that will make him survive in a state of social disorder, he is denied entry into post-war society. Thus his initiation ends at the liminal stage without the final stage of reintegration being fulfilled. It is true My Luck has developed in the novel from a little boy eating toffees, playing football with friends and learning how to crochet, into a serial killer, looter and rapist; but the question is where does he go from here? Will this training allow him to be accepted into the society even though he admits he is tired of war? These are some of the questions with which *Song for Night* and other child-soldier narratives grapple. For instance in Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses Citizen and Me*, the central character, Citizen, is rejected because of the ruthless activities he was involved in during the war (Jarrett-Macauley, 2006), even though, like My Luck, he enters the war through no fault of his own.

This wrongful initiation leaves My Luck in a developmental limbo as he is not able to become an adult, neither is he a child as he states in the epigraph. His search in the novel then is symbolic of the search for his own identity as he needs to discover who he really is. He admits that time is literally standing still for him, but also that time is running too fast for him; frustratingly, his watch reveals nothing about time. He admits that “[t]ime is standing still – literally” (53) and that he has “lost track of time” (65). Through this contradiction and irony around time, Abani reveals the confused nature of the child soldier. Time is running fast because his growth into adulthood is violent and sudden; yet the fact that time stands still symbolises his stunted growth into an indeterminate status. These facts and the numerous references to his watch that is not working, his lack of consciousness of the duration of time for which he has been queuing for his platoon, signify his development which has ended at the liminal stage. He even admits that he has a problem with the chronology of his memory and believes that he has lost track of time and has lost his way which is why he has lost his platoon. He is not even aware how many miles he has travelled in search of his platoon that is also his search for identity. His admission that he has much ground to cover to catch up with his platoon, signifies how far he is from self-actualisation.

The corrupt initiation My Luck receives makes him so besmirched that he admits he needs a rebirth, but he realises that “every rebirth requires a death” (90). This resonates with Mircea Eliade’s postulation that every human being needs a rebirth because like all things in nature, man himself had to die and be reborn. Liminality “appears to be the operative force of the rite of passage, which brings about the existential transformation of the subjects, but which, if not contained within the ritual, is also inherently dangerous because of its asocial and subversive nature” (Kyulanova 2010). This is why in traditional initiation, the elders offer competent guidance and observe extremely strict structure to ensure that the transformation takes place in a controlled environment. My Luck’s ineligibility for rebirth is because his liminal stage under Major Essien could neither provide him with the guidance nor stable ritual boundaries to restrict the volatile potential of the liminal stage and he engages in all sorts of uncontrolled violence. This makes his rebirth which signifies his reintegration very difficult and he remains in a stage that is neither childhood nor adulthood in a hierarchy of power relations based exclusively on the ability and zeal to kill and exercise violence.

The novel thus defies the plot of the *Bildungsroman* and the purposes of traditional initiation. Unlike the hero of the *Bildungsroman*, My Luck does not have the chance to learn from his mistakes and realise who he is. His search for his platoon which symbolises his search for self-identity is not successful. He is also not reintegrated into society like the initiates of Igbo male initiation. On his way, darkness covers him and he cannot see the real, and the road in front of him suddenly sheers away ending abruptly in a cliff. He tries “to summon all the light that filled [him] moments ago. Light I need to cross the darkness. Still afraid with no more light, I step over the edge of the cliff” (153). This signifies that his development has ended prematurely. The light which is symbolic of the strength to go ahead in life escapes him suddenly, showing that he has developed into something that will not allow him to be accepted into society and therefore he has to cross the final river to the other world. He remains perpetually in a state inbetween childhood and adulthood, and a state between the living and the dead. The liminality and fundamental indeterminacy of his position is represented through surrealism. He cannot mature into adulthood, neither can he revert to childhood. This state, according to Turner, occurs because the traditional passage to maturity is irreversible. Even though “war is a gruesome deviation from the rite of passage, it places the boys in situations where they have to fend for themselves, and they survive extreme experiences of which civilian adults are innocent” (Kyulanova 2010). The lack of reintegration for My Luck makes him an archetype of the many former child soldiers who are not rehabilitated or who die on the frontlines so that their desire to be children again remains a dream. This condition is symbolised by the surrealistic dreamlike style through which the novel is narrated.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that Abani in *Song for Night* juxtaposes pre-war socialisation of children and that of socialisation through war. While during times of peace, children are socialized into a state of social order, socialisation through war leads into a state of social disorder which ends at the liminal stage of initiation into adulthood, leaving the protagonist in a form of developmental limbo as well as a state in-between life and death. Thus, the novel represents war as a perverted form of initiation which takes away one’s childhood without making him an adult as indicated in the epigraph.

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