

Growing Up through War:

Rites of Passage in Contemporary Young Adult Novels and Memoirs

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by
Irina Dimitrova Kyulanova
School of English
University of Leicester

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Abstract

Irina Dimitrova Kyulanova

My thesis compares the constructions of children's and adolescents' experiences of contemporary wars in two genres published for Western audiences: young adult fiction and childhood and adolescence memoirs. I argue that both genres evoke the pattern of the rite of passage in order to accommodate contradictory perceptions of young people's war involvement: notions of children's innocence and need of protection, but also of children's possession of greater resilience than adults, or ability to perpetrate violence; ideas of the devastating impact of war, but also traditional notions of war as a maturing experience. My comparative approach elucidates the genre specifics in the employment of the rite of passage, conditioned by the different ways in which each genre relates to and participates in the extraliterary "passages" in which its authors and readers are involved. Young adult fiction offers representations of adolescence and war which demonstrate how Western adults understand both phenomena, and what they wish Western adolescents to know about them. As the genre is determined by a power imbalance between its adult creators and its young adult consumers, its use of the rite-of-passage framework acquires particular didactic significance in the context of the diffuse transition to maturity in contemporary Western societies. Childhood war memoirs, in comparison, belong to a referential genre with a special relation to past and present lived reality, and can throw into relief the characteristics of mediation performed by young adult fiction. However, I demonstrate that memoir representations are governed by their own genre- and context-specific rules. They construct subjects in transition, who re-evaluate their war experiences and negotiate a similarly power-imbalanced cultural passage from childhood to adulthood, and from their communities of origin to the Western countries to which they have immigrated.

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Note: With my thesis, I hope to contribute to the understanding of representations of young people's experiences of war. I have aimed to treat the topic with the humility its gravity demands. However, I am aware that I may not always have been able to account for the realities of such experiences. By this note, I would like to offer a preliminary apology for such a circumstance where my academic representation may fail lived reality.

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INTRODUCTION

CHILDHOOD AND WAR: SUBJECT MATTER AS A GENRE- DEFINING FEATURE

My thesis compares how young adult fiction and memoirs tell their versions of an emblematic story of contemporary warfare: the story of the war-affected child. The texts belonging to these two genres share a number of important features, such as the relation of their content to the extra-literary situation of contemporary “new wars,” young adult protagonists, and time and place of publication, which together establish the grounds and parameters of my comparison. Over the second half of the 20th century, the topic of childhood involvement in war has been the object of debate in legal, political, psycho-sociological and educational discourses because it has often been perceived as an unsettling clash of concepts: between the idea of childhood as a prioritised safe period of development and growth, and the practices of involvement of children in conflicts, both as victims and combatants.

A cornerstone in transnational authorities’ policies attempting to establish control over children’s involvement in conflict is Graça Machel’s 1996 UN report *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, which not simply acknowledges the immersion in war of millions of children nowadays (I.A.1), but strongly condemns this practice, concluding that “[t]here are few further depths to which humanity can sink” (I.A.3). Instead, the report imagines an alternative approach to how children should be treated, and at the same time postulates a definition of childhood, which it envisages not so much as a desired ideal, but as an urgent political goal to aspire for on a global level: “Let us claim children as ‘zones of peace.’ In this way, humankind will finally declare that childhood is inviolate and that all children must be spared the pernicious effects of armed conflict” (VII. 318). The ideal of protecting children globally from any participation in war is countered by pervasive practices of children’s war involvement, whether as part of the general population, as deliberate targets, or by forcible or voluntary recruitment. An example of the ideology justifying the recruitment of child-soldiers is voiced in some of the memoirs by Sudanese refugees, where adult rebels refer to child soldiers as “Red Army” and envision them as the future of their freedom movement, hence of their future independent state (for instance, Jal 89). These discordant definitions of childhood correspond to the interests and purposes of the adult

groups producing them and testify to the degree to which children are a contested social group, and the idea of childhood is malleable.

The researched corpus of texts necessarily borrows and reworks concepts from these public discourses. However, these texts also attempt to introduce a new element, which brings the two genres together in a common purpose: to present a personal perspective of young people who experience these conflicts. The degree to which they succeed or, indeed, the very possibility of allowing insider-view of the experiences of children, who are perceived as unable to speak for themselves, is a highly debatable issue. Even more so, when the children in question belong to cultures considered as “other” from the perspective of the books’ primarily Western audience. However, the aim to empower a group of people perceived otherwise as subdued and voiceless has implications for the way the texts are written, which my thesis explores. This aim also explains the selection of the genres of young adult fiction and memoirs as media of representation, because they both typically focus on a personal point of view, constructed by the use of a first-person narrator or third-person focalised narrative.

Alongside these similarities, the two genres are also marked by significant differences, such as the referent of the terms “child” or “young adult” in each case, and the choice of literary type (fiction versus non-fiction). The memoirs create the effect of giving a voice to children who are involved in war, which could be understood as an attempt to make up for the possible disenfranchisement by (adult) human rights discourses that aim to protect them. Fiction aimed at Western children, on the other hand, often dramatises the opposite child-adult relations. Written by adults, it might be read as an attempt to alleviate collective Western guilt over the impossibility to protect children in war zones, and perhaps to make an ideological investment into a different future, by engaging their young and supposedly still receptive audiences. My study of representative examples of the two genres illuminates the distinctions between the genres, but also examines genre assumptions and demonstrates the blurring of these distinctions under certain artistic, ideological or didactic demands. I explore the interrelation between the topic of representation, and the representational mechanisms these two particular genres offer: the way that these genres manipulate, but are also manipulated by, the urgent and contested topic of contemporary war.

My analysis suggests that most of the texts share an underlying narrative pattern which organises young people’s war experiences in a maturing progression, and at the same time leaves space for questioning the maturing effect of war. I argue that this

construction can be productively interpreted by use of the framework of the rite of passage. The rite-of-passage analogy draws together a variety of perhaps seemingly unrelated issues, such as political orientation, family relations, traumatic experiences and violence. Its relevance is strongly determined by the conflation of two separate traditions of its use: a tradition of framing the transition from childhood to adulthood in social practice and in the textual space of young adult literature and autobiography, and a tradition of conceptualising the experience of war. With its transformational function, its associations with extraordinary experiences, and its structure of separation and re-union with family and community, the rite-of-passage structure captures various aspects of war experiences within a common cognitive framework. Its flexibility accommodates both the referent experiences and the specific requirements of the audiences invoked by the two genres.

Introducing the texts

The fact that texts of both genres aim to represent young people's experiences of current or recent military conflicts may seem obvious to the extent of slipping out of the focus of the analysis. However, I argue that subject matter delineates this field of writing, and that it not only justifies the grouping of these texts as a particular object of study, but plays a significant part in determining their narrative strategies, plot development and explicit ideological messages. Both young adult fiction and young adult memoirs emerge in response to the specific nature of contemporary globalised warfare, which is marked by an increasing involvement of young people in conflict in ways which challenge the very idea of protected childhood, as conceptualised and institutionalised in the West, but also as disseminated on a global level via international legal documents, and transnational government and nongovernment activities. I consider the represented conflicts as examples of the protracted and diffuse phenomenon of contemporary warfare as theorised by political scientists such as Mary Kaldor and Tarak Barkawi.

As is characteristic of contemporary global wars, the exact timing of the conflicts depicted in the young adult novels and memoirs is difficult to pinpoint, since their roots lie in complex historical circumstances dating back to at least colonial history and the two world wars, and many of them are as yet unresolved or remain the site of violent political struggle. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, the young adult novels and

childhood/adolescence memoirs I discuss focus on wars from approximately the last 30 years, including but not limited to:

- The civil war, Taliban regime and/or subsequent war in Afghanistan: Latifa's memoir *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story* (2002) and Farah Ahmedi's memoir *The Story of My Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky* (2005); the young adult novels in Deborah Ellis's *Breadwinner* trilogy (2006) and Suzanne Fisher Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree* (2005);
- The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Ibtisam Barakat's memoir *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (2007) (whose time-span stretches back to the Six-Day War of 1967); and young adult novels, such as Elizabeth Laird's *A Little Piece of Ground* (2003) and Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in My Hand* (2002);
- The civil war in Sierra Leone: Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) and Mariatu Kamara's memoir *Bite of the Mango* (2008); as well as Caroline B. Cooney's novel for young adults *Diamonds in the Shadow* (2007);
- The civil war in Sudan: works by members of the group of child refugees who have become known as 'the Lost Boys of Sudan', including Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* (2009), Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng and Benjamin Ajak's *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* (2005), John Bul Dau's *God Grew Tired of Us* (2007), Joseph Akol Makeer's *From Africa to America: The Journey of a Lost Boy of Sudan* (2007), as well as Dave Eggers' *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006), whose autobiographical status I will address further on; and the collection of stories for young adults *Dream Freedom* by Sonia Levitin (2000);
- Political violence and persecution of minorities in Ethiopia: young adult novels such as Jane Kurtz's *The Storyteller's Beads* (1998), Judie Oron's *Cry of the Giraffe* (2010), Sonia Levitin's *The Return* (1987) and Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001).
- Other conflicts represented in young adult novels include internal conflict and political oppression in Nigeria, portrayed in Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* (2000), whose foreword suggests that the narrative "has resonances of

the execution of the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa” (Snow, n.pag.), a human rights and environmental activist; as well as the 1980-s persecution of Kurds in Iraq portrayed in Elizabeth Laird’s *Kiss the Dust* (1991).

Both groups of texts complement the discourses around children’s participation in conflicts by constructing accounts of the personal stories of fictional or biographical protagonists, ostensibly undertaking the task to demonstrate what being involved in war is like for the children who experience it. Judy A. Bernstein, co-author of *They Poured Fire*, explicitly formulates this intention: “In a world where we witness war on television as impersonally as an action movie, personal accounts are necessary reminders that for someone, somewhere, war is all too real” (311). Most of the texts focus on the actions, thoughts and experiences of one central character, a child or adolescent being affected by war. A few feature multiple protagonists, such as the memoir *They Poured Fire* with three authors-autobiographical narrators, or some young adult novels with double plots, for example Bernard Ashley’s *Little Soldier* (1999) and Catherine Stine’s *Refugees* (2005). In young adult novels multiple protagonists often include children and young adults from the West (the USA or Britain), whose representation is a narrative device for mediating the war experience, and associating it with familiar social issues in the West. It serves as a metonymy for the encounter between reader and text, and between different childhoods or young adulthoods, which the characters’ communication enacts. Texts construct the thoughts and perceptions of their protagonists via different stylistic choices: first-person narration both in memoirs and young adult novels, or third-person narration with focalisation through a young adult character in young adult fiction; use of a child narrator describing experiences with greater immediacy, or a more detached adult narrator voicing the character’s thoughts, or commenting on past experiences; various levels of register, dialectal forms and colloquialisms. The variety of effects produced by these narrative devices is addressed in my analysis of the texts, with special attention to the status of the autobiographical “I” in life-writing. What matters at this point, though, is that the texts seem to apply these different resources to a common purpose: to provide readers with the sense of gaining access to an insider view of young adults’ experiences of war.

Political reality as a common source of representations

The claim that the texts share a common source of representation is contentious because they clearly situate themselves in a wide range of specific conflicts, which presupposes

differences in the historical and cultural setting, and in the way that these conflicts might be conceptualised within the affected communities. The same goes for the local notions of childhood and child-appropriate activities. Cultural differences, as well as differences among families, could actually undermine the possibility of correspondence between childhood/adolescence in depicted and recipient societies, on which both types of texts rely. This diversity of individual human experience, however, does not exclude the possibility to find common ground for transmitting or interpreting it. An individualised approach to particular human experiences is in fact often countered by its opposite: a generalised, transnational and transcultural perception of both childhood and war. These generalising modes of thinking of young people and their war experiences work alongside shared genre conventions to bind the texts together in a common group.

Since the appearance of Philippe Ariès' widely celebrated study of the development of childhood as a cultural concept, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), research has focused on acknowledging the particularities of childhood in different historical periods or cultural settings. Works such as Sharon Stephens' edited collection *Children and the Politics of Culture* (1995) have drawn attention to the fact that current perceptions of childhood are just that: a Western concept emerging under specific historical circumstances, often failing to represent the actual childhoods real children experience. While such studies have aimed to counter a totalising essentialist notion of childhood, the view of childhood as a universal category has been and still is a powerful concept. Its assumed transcendental quality has helped envision children not only as one common group, but a group which could unite humanity. This idea is expressed in the status of children postulated by international law. Machel's 1996 report, quoted above, also claims that:

Children can help. In a world of diversity and disparity, children are a unifying force capable of bringing people to common ethical grounds. Children's needs and aspirations cut across all ideologies and cultures. The needs of all children are the same: nutritious food, adequate health care, a decent education, shelter and a secure and loving family. Children are both our reason to struggle to eliminate the worst aspects of warfare, and our best hope for succeeding at it. (I.A.6)

The claim that children have equal needs is rather problematic, because it imposes a common model of treating children regardless of the local context. Yet, the conception of childhood as a transnational category is of great importance for eliminating

commonplace double standards in the treatment of children in armed conflicts based on their geopolitical location. It demonstrates international effort to reach ideological agreement on the boundaries of childhood under the pressure of war. A variant of this point of view is the belief that since childhood is a shared human experience, it can serve as a device to allow access to the experience of another cultural reality. Carlos Eire sees childhood as the only medium through which such access can be granted: to “[h]elp the reader to live as a Cuban in the only way that a non-Cuban could conceivably understand. Turn the reader into a Cuban Boy” (173). The “sameness” of childhood exemplified by both quotations goes beyond the particular age category, to recover a lost experience of common humanity.¹

Even though our concept of war has been said to correspond to a particular type of warfare which emerged between the 15th and 18th century in Europe and was related to the establishment of the modern nation state (Kaldor, *New* 13), war has also been theorised as a transcultural and transhistorical activity. Joshua Goldstein’s research on the interrelationship between the constructions of gender and of war roles views war as a ubiquitous reality or possibility, to which cultures respond by constructing gender as a binary in order to fulfil combative needs. The same unifying tendency about war is evident in various cultural products representing conflicts. Similar motivation seems to be in operation in my literary corpus, where the texts often use the individual example of the traumatising effects of a particular conflict to indict war in general. It is directly expressed by the authors in dedications, such as in Robert Swindells’ *Ruby Tanya*: “To Little Victims Everywhere.” Similarly, in an introductory note to *A Little Piece of Ground*, Elizabeth Laird generalises the experience of Palestinian boys under Israeli occupation: “Theirs is a particular experience, in a particular time and place, but all such occupations are harsh, causing great suffering to the occupied people, and misery to the occupying army” (n. pag.). Less explicitly, some children’s books achieve this effect either by avoiding naming the country they refer to (*Ruby Tanya*) or by setting their plot in a fictional country (Peter Dickinson’s *AK* and Bernard Ashley’s *Little Soldier*).

The universalising concepts of childhood and war provide common ground for analysing the texts in my corpus. However, it is not sufficient for distinguishing them as

¹ The ideology of this notion of childhood as an image of transcendence of inequality and difference has been critiqued by Jacqueline Rose, see Chapter Two.

a particular group within an existing tradition of war writing in both children's literature and memoirs referring to earlier historical conflicts, notably the First and Second World Wars. While many of the texts under discussion do allegorise particular conflicts to make statements about war in general, they are all strongly engaged with the particulars of the political situations they depict or allude to. What allows for such a wide range of conflicts to be brought together, yet distinguished from accounts of earlier historical wars, is not only relative temporal coincidence. As Mary Kaldor convincingly argues, contemporary conflicts which have erupted since the 1980s and 1990s share crucial economic, social, political and technological characteristics, which make them the individual manifestations of a common phenomenon – the “new war.” In the category of “new wars” Kaldor includes conflicts in several regions around the world: the Caucasus – from Chechnya to Western Turkey and Northern Iran; Eastern Europe; the Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia; Sudan; Central Africa: Rwanda, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), Burundi; West Africa: Sierra Leone and Liberia; as well as countries hosting Palestinian refugees (*New* 109). She associates the specific form of these conflicts with various effects of globalisation: the disintegration of the nation state (4); the emergence of a transnational decentralised war economy (83), as well as the unprecedented advancement of new information and data processing technologies (3), and new military techniques and weapons (96).

Politically, the new wars are related to global changes in governance, where, with the weakening of the centralised government, nation states fail to provide unity and security for their normally diverse populations (75). At the same time, they lose their monopoly on legitimised violence, opening room for various political factions to make claims to national power (93-94). Contemporary warfare is no longer based on interstate political conflict, even though violence can easily spill over across state borders. Military activities are related to the thriving of a parallel global war economy, which Kaldor argues is a “product of neo-liberal policies pursued in the 1980s and 1990s” (83). In contrast with the totalised war economy familiar from earlier wars, in which the state-led war effort is funded by massive mobilisation of state resources, new wars rely on “local predation and external support” (90) and are fuelled by illegal activities (83-84), or by diverting humanitarian aid (104). This new kind of warfare provides opportunities for profit for various criminal groups, which use the emergence of conflicts to expand their racketeering activities (83-84).

As Kaldor points out, battles in contemporary warfare are limited, and most of the violence is “directed against civilians” (90), who make up 80 per cent of casualties (100). These military practices violate the principles of international humanitarian law, as postulated in the *Geneva Convention* of 1949. “Essentially,” Kaldor concludes, “what were considered to be undesirable and illegitimate side-effects of old war have become central to the mode of fighting in the new wars” (100). This disregard of traditional military codes includes the involvement of children in armed conflicts in a variety of ways. Kaldor comments that new wars use lighter weapons which can be handled by children (96) and that the use of child soldiers “is not uncommon” (94). Boothby, Strang and Wessells quote a Human Rights Watch survey of 2005, according to which children comprise a significant part of the warring groups in around 36 countries, and go on to point out that child soldiers are only the most visible form of an otherwise pervasive ideological co-option of children by the different sides in a conflict (1-2). A decade earlier, Machel’s UN report expresses moral outrage at the extent of the impact of contemporary wars on children, quoting statistics according to which an estimated two million children were killed in armed conflicts between 1985 and 1995, and three times as many were injured or disabled (I.A.2.). The report enumerates the various forms of children’s victimisation in contemporary wars, including rape, starvation, maiming, diseases, and psychological damage (I.A.3 and II.A.30). Commenting on similar statistics from UNICEF’s report of 2001 *The State of the World’s Children*, Goodenough and Immel conclude that “childhood itself is increasingly under fire as a worldwide demographic, cultural invention, and social institution” (1).

Why does the participation of children in contemporary wars provoke such strong moral reactions? According to humanitarian law, children should enjoy special protection from war, both from recruitment and participation in fighting, and as a special group within the protected civilian population, with further privileges of safety and well-being. These privileges are guaranteed by a number of legal instruments, such as the *Fourth Geneva Convention* (1949), the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (2000). Examples of the special measures envisaged for children under fifteen include provision of free passage of basic foodstuffs in war zones, guaranteeing maintenance for children who have lost their families or become separated from them, and facilitating them in practicing their religion and receiving education (*Geneva Convention*, Art. 23, 24, 50), as well as

prevention from voluntary recruitment into state armies (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Art. 38). Based on the definition of a child in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* further raises the minimum age of voluntary recruitment to eighteen (Art. 3.1.).

The validity of the totalising definition and treatment of children by humanitarian law, and even the historical accuracy of the claim of novelty of their participation in military activities have not gone unquestioned. In *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*, David Rosen argues that humanitarian organisations build their case against child soldiering on the basis of unexamined assumptions of modern societies that “war is evil and should be ended” and that “children are innocent and should be protected” by representing child involvement in wars nowadays as a new phenomenon, the deed of unscrupulous adults, which indicates the especially cruel nature of contemporary military conflicts (1). Rosen not only traces child participation in wars much further back in history, but challenges the usefulness of “the humanitarian narrative,” which is implicitly or explicitly based on Piagetian ideas of universal child development (133), and which thus obliterates the complex cultural circumstances shaping children and adolescents’ lives, including instances of child soldiering that emerge from them (132). He argues that humanitarian organisations’ views of children reinforce ideas of children’s passivity and inherent irrationality: “In humanitarian accounts, child soldiers are either victims or demons, or, better yet, they are demons because they are victims. Neither demons nor victims are rational actors” (134).

Furthermore, Rosen points out that the standards of humanitarian law are often in contradiction with local Western judiciary systems increasingly treating children on a par with adults, such as in USA (136), which exposes the lack of consensus over the definition of childhood amongst legislating parties. While he recognises the detrimental effect of the adult-like legal approach to children, and of extending severe punishments such as life sentences to persons as young as twelve, Rosen also discusses the negative side of protectionism, claiming that it works “in tandem” with suppression and denies children some civil rights enjoyed by adults (136-37). In conclusion, the author claims that the contemporary “crisis” of child soldiering is only partially related to the actual presence of children in war, and that it results largely from “a complex set of interconnections between humanitarian and political drivers,” in which humanitarian and political groups use the same human rights rhetoric to pursue their individual causes

(157). The question of how child soldiers are to be treated remains open, but Rosen calls for a more contextual interpretation of the definitions of childhood. He questions the universal acquittal of all young people perpetrating horrific war crimes, and suggests that perhaps their immunity reveals flaws in an overly harsh punitive military law system, and at the same time does little to restore the symbolic justice which post-conflict trials are meant to achieve (157-58). Similar criticism of the binary approach to discussing the phenomenon of child soldiers is offered by Mark Drumbl. Drumbl argues that international criminal law relies on and thus perpetuates “polarities of guilt/or innocence, capacity/or incapacity, adult/ or child, and victim/ or perpetrator,” which fail to account for the ambiguities which characterise actors in a conflict, who may simultaneously occupy both sides of the binary (214). Both Rosen and Drumbl thus deconstruct the ideology of the narratives of human rights and international law, which are a major framework for contemporary cultural translation.

Time and Place of Publication

An important criterion for the selection and grouping together of these texts is the very fact of their emergence, and the continuing publication of books on contemporary wars in Western English-speaking countries, primarily the United States and Great Britain, but also Canada and Australia. Due to the transnational nature of some of the books, especially the memoirs, I look at texts which have been made available in English, even if they were originally written in another language. However, because of language accessibility and the potential significance of cultural differences, I am not able to include texts published for the Western market which have not been translated in English.

Setting up a time-frame for this contemporary publishing phenomenon is complicated by the fact that texts of both groups fit into pre-existing traditions of writing on war and trauma. Roughly speaking, most of the texts I am researching were written over the past 20 years. Furthermore, it seems that except for a few young adult novels, which were published in the 1990s, the majority of both young adult fiction and memoirs of young adults’ war experiences were published from 2000 onwards, with the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror playing a major role in shaping the conditions of publishing texts about war. Although not specifically related to childhood, Gillian Whitlock has devoted a book-length study to the genre of contemporary autobiography in the context of globalisation and the war on terror, in which she

observes that since 2002 there has been a “proliferation” in the West of mass market life narratives from Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran (7). The content of young adult fiction and the paratexts surrounding it also testify to the significance of the events of September 11, 2001 for the creation and dissemination of these texts. One explicit example is Catherine Stine’s young adult novel *Refugees*, which is about 9/11, and which, according to the prefatory note, is based on the author’s personal experience of witnessing the collapse of the towers. Also, the first novel in the *Breadwinner* series was originally published in Canada in 2000, but the “tragic event” of September 11, author Deborah Ellis explains, speeded up the novel’s publication in England, and boosted its sales (Jenkinson). *Under the Persimmon Tree* was initially written as a short story for the short story collection *911: The Book of Help*, published a little after the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Particularly salient for my study is the fact that, as its author notes on her website, the story is based on interviews she conducted with Afghan refugees during the Soviet War (Staples, “Learn”). This fact serves as evidence that as much as the stories of childhood war experiences may seem transcendently significant, they come into visibility and acquire meanings under specific historical circumstances.

How can these specific historical circumstances be defined, and how do they prompt the production and consumption of childhood war stories? 11 September is an emblematic example of a more general tendency in a political climate conducive to the publication of childhood war narratives in the West. This recently heightened interest is related to globalisation, to the growing awareness of other countries and cultures assisted by mass media, the direct military interventions of Western countries in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the destabilisation of the distinctions between war and peace zones. Maria Tatar has also identified this consequence of the menace of terrorism, and the impossibility of distinguishing between “children . . . on the home front” and “children . . . caught in combat zones” as a contemporary political factor in writing for young people (238-39). According to Kaldor, the pervasiveness of the contemporary ideology of conflict reveals the illusiveness of distinctions between war and peace:

Just as it is difficult to distinguish between the political and the economic, public and private, military and civil, so it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between war and peace. The new war economy could be represented as a continuum, starting with the combination of criminality and racism to be found in the inner cities of Europe and

North America and reaching its most acute manifestation in the areas where the scale of violence is greatest. (*New* 110)

This account of the nature of political conflict which can escalate to violence independent of location accounts for the relevance of contemporary war narratives in the West. Not only are they connected with the increased reporting of affairs in different parts of the world as a result of the development of new technologies, but they seem to be genetically related to local forms of violence which are part of the everyday reality of their Western audiences. Interestingly, both the boom in new technologies and the involvement in gang culture are primarily phenomena of young people's lives. Thus, the representation of war-zone childhoods, especially in young adult fiction, is often characterised by an intention to act as a tool in shaping young readers' attitudes to wars and local social problems, sometimes creating explicit narrative parallels between the two.

The corpus of texts I am studying operate within structures of audience expectations established by the human rights discourse, and are created by authors who are often actively involved in non-government organisations' activities. Examples include both the Western authors of children's books, who participate via activism and fundraising, and authors of memoirs, who have experience at both ends of rights organisations' initiatives: for instance by being rescued from child soldiering or receiving humanitarian aid in refugee camps from UNICEF or the UNHCR, and later by becoming representatives of these organisations and championing the prevention of children's war involvement. Canadian children's author Deborah Ellis, for example, supports Women for Women in Afghanistan, and Street Kids International with the proceeds from the sales of her young adult novels. Memoir authors who work on humanitarian causes include: Ishmael Beah, who is a UNICEF advocate for Children Affected by War, and member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Advisory Committee; Mariatu Kamara is UNICEF Canada's Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflicts, as well as founder of the Mariatu Foundation working with women and children in Sierra Leone; other authors who have established their own organisations include Emmanuel Jal, who is also quoted in an introductory note to his memoir as ambassador for Oxfam, and undertaking work for Amnesty International, Save the Children, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, UNICEF, World Food Programme and Christian Aid. Reciprocally, books of both genres have been endorsed by Amnesty International for their promulgation of a better understanding of

human rights: *A Long Way Gone*, *Kiss the Dust*, the *Breadwinner* Trilogy, *A Little Piece of Ground*, *Refugee Boy*, *Under the Persimmon Tree*, and *The Other Side of Truth*. Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* also promotes the mission of the Refugee Council in the UK.

As with defining the character of contemporary wars, the exact relationship between the processes of globalisation, war, and human rights discourses is important for the representations which the corpus of texts I am studying creates, but establishing it has been the prerogative of other disciplines and stake holders, and lies way beyond the capacity and focus of my research. Nevertheless, it is possible to steal a glimpse into how these texts might fit into current political and cultural debates. A useful insight into their socio-historical milieu is provided by Tarak Barkawi's theorisation of globalisation and war. Barkawi challenges the concept of globalisation as a post-cold war period of "peace built on worldwide free trade and democracy" (x). He draws attention to the fact that while the neoliberal policies underlying globalisation were promoted at the beginning of the 90s as "ostensibly inevitable" and natural processes in the world economy (1), they have actually been imposed via "a *political* project" to secure appropriate legislation and administration of these policies, which required even more coercive state power (3-4) and the refashioning of political regimes worldwide via various measures, including "liberating" "illiberal" forms of government via wars (20). He redefines the opposition between globalisation as a peace-oriented process and war, and demonstrates that the two are not simply interconnected, but war itself serves as a "*globalizing force*" (xii). The peacefulness of Western democracies is thus shown to be a myth based on a definition of democracy as an internal nation-state form of government, which ignores the West's exploitation of the international "divides of wealth and power," as well as the indirect confrontation of Cold War great powers via installing client regimes and becoming involved in "civil" wars in Third World countries (56-57).

Barkawi also quotes the involvement of the International Monetary Fund and non-government organisations in administering neoliberalism worldwide (x-xi), and thus touches on the question of the role of human rights discourse in shaping contemporary politics and culture. The human rights discourse has received criticism for its pretence to universality, while it is in fact based on Western concepts of personhood and individualism. Scheper-Hughes and Sargent summarise critical cautioning about how the "rights rhetoric" could thus be used as a "screen" for Western

neo-colonial cultural and economic domination, in particular in privileging the Western concept of the “rights-bearing” individual over local ideas of more community-dependent personhood in order to serve neoliberal economic practices (7). The language of human rights might also contribute to essentialising social categories such as “woman” or “child” or “adult”, obliterating cultural differences, and creating the impression that political morality is “the result of unconditional moral imperative rather than the result of political discourse, reflection, and compromise” (10). Similar concerns are raised by Nancy Ellen Batty, who criticises the way in which in their appeal for donations, some NGOs and the media decontextualise the image of the starving Third-World child, and thus create an “ahistoric narrative of Third World failure and helplessness,” placing the Western audience in a superior paternalistic position, and at the same time obfuscating the role of the West in Third World economies (18). Along the same lines, contextualising the transition of contemporary life narratives from East to West within the human rights debate, Gillian Whitlock argues that autobiographical writing from the Middle East is made available via a “transit lane” of empathic identification through trauma and “in terms of human rights campaigns for social justice that play to Western traditions of benevolence,” placing intercultural relations on moral grounds which have been formulated from a Western perspective, but made to appear natural and inevitable (13).

Alongside the concerns about the political use of the human rights discourse, however, human rights have also been identified as powerful means for intercultural dialogue, as well as a potential alternative to military solutions. Challenging the division between global human rights and closed local cultures, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent have argued that globalisation has already affected most parts of the world, and the human rights agenda is being adopted and adapted on a grass-root level: “People everywhere, even in the most rural and seemingly isolated settings, have begun to take up the banner of human rights, political and civil liberties, reproductive rights and the rights of the child. It remains to be seen how these discourses will be interpreted, transformed, and applied to communities with very different social, cultural, and historical contexts” (10). This is the context within which the engagement of memoir authors with the communities they originate from via nongovernment organisations and education and post-war reconstruction initiatives could be regarded, and the texts they create can be read as an aspect of their social work. The possibility of networking between transnational NGOs and local organisations with culturally inclusive

orientation in conflict zones has been theorised by Mary Kaldor as a way of resolving contemporary conflicts, not by securing victory for one warring faction over another, but by deconstructing the exclusive and culturally or ethnically purist principles via which these factions secure loyalty (*New* 9-10). In a similar way to Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, Kaldor proposes that civil society, a previously “territorially bound” term with resonances of Western imperialism and Eurocentric domination (*Civil* 38, 44), has had its historical revival in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and can be viewed as a viable alternative to contemporary wars in the framework of global transnational governance with “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” management (110, 142). On a more sceptical note, Whitlock observes that the war on terror has led to intensification of national security, closing of borders, and renewal of national or culturally pure identities, as a result of which “[t]he idea of human rights discourse as a necessary ethical engagement with the other is decidedly passé now” (80).

Discussions of the interconnection between globalisation, war and human rights demonstrate that the studied corpus of texts does not represent a coincidental cross-section of otherwise remotely connected political issues such as wars outside the West, “fashionable” interest in global affairs,² and increased anxiety about the social place of childhood. Instead, both young adult novels and young adult memoirs about war published in the West are a manifestation of the interlinking strands of the same global process, and are necessarily bound by the ideologies and power relations it entails. Due to their time of publication contemporaneously with the conflicts, these texts demonstrate awareness of their potential to make significant immediate contributions to how the conflicts, and children’s involvement in them, are perceived, which can impact on their development. While the application of representations in securing consensus for political action is well known, and the role of the media in particular has been well researched, the two genres of writing I am looking at command special power in this process because of the “young adult” element in them: young adult novels because of their didactic nature and use, young adult memoirs because of their claim to simplicity and authenticity, and both, as I will show, because of the various associations of childhood and young adulthood with hope, change, and peace.

The texts display self-awareness in their ability to engage readers in the issues they address, and this is sometimes expressed directly in the form of appeal for

² As Whitlock observes: “Alterity has been fashionable for some time in Euro-American commodity culture” (55).

involvement in activism. One example is *Dream Freedom*, which is framed by the highly problematic political act of American school-children collecting money to redeem slaves in Sudan. Another straightforward one, this time from the life narrative genre, is *Lost Boy No More*, which enumerates the needs of Sudanese refugees in USA, and gives its readers quite specific advice on how to proceed: “Perhaps you are one who would like to help, but you don’t know how to get started. Use the following three guidelines to determine if this is God’s plan for you” (144), with the recommended steps being prayer to know whether this is the aspiring volunteer’s role, contacting churches and humanitarian organisations in the community, and searching the Internet for organisations which represent the Lost Boys (144-45). Another aspect of the influence of these texts is their financial contribution, with examples including Deborah Ellis’ books mentioned earlier, and the intention for the earnings from *They Poured Fire* to be used to fund their authors’ education (xxi).

Apart from this more direct call for an impact on current affairs, both memoirs and young adult fiction about wars have a much more subtle yet more pervasive ideological influence on how children’s war involvement is perceived, as well as how specific conflicts are viewed in the West by both children and adults. It is worth exploring in particular how these texts engage in the war and human rights debates via the kind of childhood they portray, and the degree of generality or cultural specificity they choose to employ, the relationship between childhood and war they establish, as well as the ways in which they fit into or adapt the existing frameworks of conflict representations created by official government politics, general political climate, media representations and popular culture. This is a process of complex cultural negotiations in which the open self-proclaimed siding of books of both genres with humanitarian organisations with the intention to reveal the evils of the involvement of children in wars, and also to campaign against the suffering brought on by wars, may compete with more or less conscious contradictory messages, such as the reaffirmation of cultural stereotypes and generalisations of age categories, or the reproduction of power dynamics between Western consumers and non-Western subjects of representation, as well as the inflection the constantly mutable political situation might effect. Gillian Whitlock’s discussion of the functions of contemporary autobiography is particularly helpful here, and it is also relevant to a great extent to the corpus of young adult fiction. Among the uses of life narrative identified by Whitlock are its ability to open the space for intercultural dialogue, give voice to unheard suffering (3), and challenge binary

understandings of war as a conflict between civilisations (5), but also its complicity in the endorsement of neoliberal ideology (8), its co-option for the purposes of Western military aggression, as well as its recycling of exotic Orientalist images of the ‘Other’ for the pleasure of a privileged Western implied audience willing to be commercially identified with an interest in and compassion for the Other, and to spread the Western liberal, often feminist, values that these texts appeal to (55, 117).

Thus, textual representations can be motivated by a drive to shape perceptions of conflicts and challenge mainstream media representations and dominant official discourses. An example is Suzanne Fisher Staples’ representation of the bombing of a village from the point of view of an Afghan child on the ground in *Under the Persimmon Tree*. The first-person account of the devastating effects of the air raid, which kills the protagonist’s mother and baby brother, introduces an important exception to the otherwise unilateral first-person narrative of Western media, which according to Butler fails to represent the death and destruction caused by the USA as atrocity, or evoke a sense of responsibility from the audience (6). At the same time, however, as much as these texts are shaped by humanitarian concerns, they are also highly susceptible to historical fluctuations. A case in point here could be Cathryn Clinton’s disclaimer that the events described in *A Stone in My Hand* refer only to the point in history they describe (1988 – 1989), and are not meant to depict the current state of affairs – perhaps expressing sensitivity to historical detail, but also perhaps to the ever-changing political balances. Such a disclaimer could hardly dissociate Clinton’s portrayal of the events of the First Intifada from the experiences of violence children continue to experience today, and Clinton’s original representation of childhood war trauma might transgress the time-limits posed by the disclaimer. The way that textual representations could run against more overt statements of intention testifies to the political charge of these texts, even when they attempt to avert engagement with present politics. At the same time, however, the presence of such a disclaimer draws attention once more to the way that these representations map out a territory of acceptability, and the way it is regulated by current audience and attitudes.³

³ Also relevant here are the negotiations of authenticity and historicity in the forewords of some life narratives, such as *War Child* and *What Is the What*, arguably prompted by Western genre expectations, as well as the possible meaningful gaps in testimonial evidence, which Whitlock alerts to in her discussion of the new post-September 11 discourses of belonging, related to intensified concerns for national security and border control (80).

The time and place of publication of young adult war fiction and memoirs thus emerge as a crucial shared characteristic, which, together with their shared subject matter, defines texts of both genres as an important sign of as well as mechanism in the interrelationship between “source cultures” where the depicted conflicts take place, and “recipient cultures” for whose benefit the representations are created. A question might arise here about the validity of taking the West as a common destination for the texts I am researching. Certainly, there are important differences both in the political context, and the cultural characteristics of the primary intended audiences within the English-speaking West. One such difference with special significance for the representations of childhood and adolescence is the mismatch of legislation regarding the treatment of children in different countries. Despite these differences, however, the West seems to remain a culturally, economically and politically distinct space on the global map, or as Whitlock defines it, “but a locus of symbolic and grounded power relations emanating from the United States and Europe” (7). Political science theorisations of international relations and war continue to employ the West as a concept and actor in global politics, and to identify models of the world in political theory and practice such as the “advanced” North versus “backward” South, the “West versus the rest,” or First versus Third worlds (Barkawi 93). Such models demonstrate the binary divisions that conflict brings about.

Illuminating the role of war as a principal globalising force, however, Barkawi also notes the way that conflicts bind their enemies together in a mutually constitutive relationship (16-17). On the cultural arena, Whitlock also mentions the old “antagonisms” which have been revived in the war on terrorism (5), and brings out the role of autobiography in the process of Euro-American societies’ self-identification as “the West” (7), and the construction of its own implied audience as Western by associating it with particular qualities such as feminist values, or benevolent interest in other cultures. Similar discussions of how children’s literature in English works to construct its implied reader as Western in a postcolonial context are offered by Roderick McGillis’ edited collection *Voices of the Other: Children’s Literature and the Postcolonial Context* (2000). Such interpretations demonstrate the force of the two genres to preserve or challenge the thinking of global divisions and conflicts which they appear to encapsulate in topic and as cultural artefacts.

A major unifying force in the West as a recipient community of young adult memoirs and fiction is the globalising and consolidating publishing market. Despite

being published quite recently, part of the texts I am researching have already undergone a number of reprints and editions, and have been available across the English-speaking markets and beyond via company imprints, multiple places of publication, or re-publication by different companies in different countries. Even less popular texts with a more narrowly specialised implied audience, such as *Lost Boy No More*, have been made available by electronic sales websites such as Amazon, advertised alongside more famous titles on the same topic. The contemporary realities of book publishing and sales which work to dissolve national boundaries for groups of readers with the respective education, technological literacy and economic power also work to shape “the West” as a common destination for these narratives.

To summarise the shared features of the two genres I am discussing, they are both determined by an interrelationship between the contemporary conflicts they represent, the recipient culture they are written for, and the significance of their timing, which is related both to the current political situation in their place of publication, and to the potential more or less direct effect they could have on how the depicted conflicts are understood and treated. Both young adult memoirs and young adult novels perform a complex act of cultural translation conditioned by source and recipient cultural views on childhood and maturity, war, and story-telling. By doing so, these texts seem to be characterised by a sort of double focus. On the one hand, they make a commitment to representing in a truthful and authentic way what is generally accepted as a deeply disturbing, morally problematic, culturally sensitive issue: how children and young adults experience wars. On the other hand, they are shaped by demands to construct this experience in the context of another culture in a meaningful way: so that they are both comprehensible, by overcoming the experiential gaps of growing up in war and the culture-specific ways of attaching meaning to this experience, and significant for their recipient audiences – relevant to their own reality despite its relative detachment from direct combat. Both sides of this meaning-making process are conditioned by the ideological frameworks of global war, peace and human rights that I have outlined above.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the role of the rite of passage for accomplishing the process of cultural translation of childhood war experiences for Western audiences. Chapter One introduces the anthropological concept of the rite of passage, outlines its historical connection with war and with coming of age, and highlights the key characteristics of the rite of passage which make it particularly fitting

for describing contemporary childhood experiences of war. Section A, which includes Chapters Two and Three, discusses the connections and contrast between the two genres from the perspective of the writer-reader relationships which they enact. Chapter Two explores the genre of young adult fiction as an adult tool for describing non-Western wartime childhoods to a Western young adult audience. Chapter Three discusses the genre of the memoirs, focusing on their referential status and the significance of the recipient culture for which immigrant authors recreate their stories. Section B demonstrates how young adult fiction (Chapter Four) and memoirs (Chapter Five) set up the rite of passage as a narrative framework by representing episodes of the intrusion of war in protagonists' lives which terminates childhood and initiates a period of transition. Section C (Chapters Six and Seven) compares the descriptions of protagonists' contradictory experiences of increased agency and vulnerability which are framed as liminal experiences on the path to maturity.

Chapter One

Rites of Passage: War and Coming of Age

Young adult war fiction and memoirs are defined by their topic and context, and their representations of children's experiences of participation in war are underpinned by a humanitarian cultural framework, which sees childhood and war as antithetical, and childhood as entitled to universal protection from the devastating effect of conflicts. Both young adult fiction and memoirs, however, are also engaged in constructing the self in its development towards the state of adulthood, which is not perceived as meriting the same kind of protection from war. My thesis focuses on the intersection between growing up and war, which seems to be the central preoccupation in both young adult novels and memoirs. I argue that in both cases maturation and involvement in war are not merely coincidental, but that war is represented as a coming of age experience, both on the level of content, and implied through plot structure. This representation of war is ethically unsettling as it might suggest a beneficial effect of war on children, which runs contrary to perceptions of children's vulnerability. Yet, as I will show, it proves to be surprisingly accommodating of contemporary notions and accounts of childhood war involvement. I find it particularly useful to analyse war experiences as maturing in the framework of a rite of passage because various elements in the structure, themes and imagery of the narratives I am researching evoke key elements of this interpretive model. The rite-of-passage framework helps us to understand the ambivalences and complexity of depictions of young people's participation in conflict, channelling this phenomenon in a developmental direction, but also providing space for critiquing its practice and interpretation.

The semantic association between war and coming of age

Evidence that war experiences can be interpreted as having a maturing role for the characters involved in them surfaces in open statements in some of the young adult novels in my corpus. In Elizabeth Laird's *Kiss the Dust*, for instance, after protagonist and focaliser Tara's initial experience of violence (a common structural device in many of the young adult novels, which is dealt with in more detail in Chapter Four), her mother's treatment of her is explicitly identified as peer-like, establishing a connection between experience in conflict and maturing: "Teriska Khan had never talked to Tara

quite like this before. She sounded so serious, as if she was talking to another grown-up. Tara was nearly as tall as her mother now. She pulled herself up to her full height” (18). The metaphorical association between physical size and coming of age is also suggested by the characterisation of the protagonist’s brother, when the two reunite after he has spent some time with the Kurdish rebels:

Tara couldn’t take her eyes off him. He looked completely different. For one thing he seemed to have grown at least a couple of inches since she’d last seen him. . . . He looked sort of harder, and more muscular, and years and years older. (85)

Both characters are required by the circumstances to act in roles unusual for their age, yet this seems to naturally correspond to, or even enhance, physical changes associated with growing up. The differences between the two passages alert readers to the significance of gender – a major factor in both concepts of individual development permeating young adult novels, and in the distribution of roles in armed conflict. Although the roles the characters undertake redefine their position in terms of age, challenging expectations of children’s passivity and need of protection, they are quite consistent with traditional gender ideas: Tara is assigned a domestic, caretaking duty (helping look after her wounded uncle), while Tara’s brother is portrayed via the romanticised trope of the warrior who bears the effects of his adventures in the wilderness (Hourihan 9-10). Whether young adult war novels have the potential to question gender roles, or convey a nuanced image of cultural differences is an ongoing concern of my thesis.

Tara and Ashti’s reunion, however, is not an unequivocal celebration of the maturing power of war experiences. Instead, the dialogue between them undermines Tara’s fascination with her brother’s transformation, and points to the ambivalence of the maturing function of war. Tara’s successful manipulation of her older brother into sharing a military secret with her questions his maturing in psychological terms, and constructs him as gullible, a variety of the archetypical child’s attribute of innocence, also confirmed by a reversed appearance back to “the old Ashti” (86). This image is further corroborated by his naively enthusiastic description of a military operation: “Well, if you must know, we’ve ambushed an ammunition convoy. It was fantastic! You should have seen Rostam. He took the most incredible risks. There’s no one like him. He’s a hero!” (86). The association of a glamorising view of war with a young, childlike character, combined with the implied message that he only looks older, brings

into question the character's maturity. At the same time the use of this statement as a characterisation device reinforces its passive ideological charge, because its effectiveness depends on the shared assumption between narrator and implied audience that Ashti's is a naïve portrayal of war.

At the same time, however, the playful exchange between brother and sister contains further layers of ambivalence, because it is cast in another popular trope of young adult novels about war: the teasing and bickering between siblings, which seems to be perceived as a recognisable element of siblings' relations in the West, and is often used in the war novels as a signal of "normal" childhood, with similar examples in many of the young adult novels:

"I shouldn't have said anything to you, even though you're only a girl. It's absolutely top secret. If you talk about it, I'll murder you. Even up here, there are government spies all over the place!"

"Well," said Tara, feeling pleased with herself at having got it all out of him, "I don't know about spies but there are vine leaves all over the place. I'd better pick them up and give them a good wash." (86-87)

The re-situation of participation in war into the discourse of familiar, mundane brother-sister talk, emphasises the ironic gap between Ashti's qualification of the operation as "absolutely top secret" (the teenage jargon subverting the gravity of the context) and the ease with which he reveals information about it, thus working to preclude the interpretation of war in stereotypically heroic terms. At the same time, however, the adaptation of this story within the framework of "normal" sibling relations serves to trivialise the experience of war, and to downplay the real danger to young people that it may present. The references to Ashti's having to "murder" his sister if she betrays him, and his reference to there being "spies all over the place" function as colloquial hyperboles, which seem to override a literal meaning of these phrases pragmatically implied by the situation itself. This interpretation is confirmed by Tara's response, a bathetic transition from spies to vine leaves, which further undermines the seriousness of her brother's activity, his position as an agent, but moreover, subverts the seriousness of the situation altogether, and possibly the function of the text itself. Thus, the humorous undermining of the heroic, possibly a desired pedagogical effect, seems to unwittingly also erase the gravity of the danger of war, demonstrating the way in which the reproduction of the genre conventions clashes with subject matter, and overriding it,

shows the possible limitations of young adult novels in mediating young people's experiences of war.

Similarly to young adult novels, direct associations between involvement in war and growing up are made in life writing texts too. One striking example comes from *They Poured Fire*, when Alepho's elder sister reveals to him the details of a sexual assault on a little girl by enemy soldiers, with the argument, "[y]ou are nearly a man, and this is a time of war, you should understand these things that happen" (97). With the protagonist being only six years old at the time, this episode seems rather ambiguous. It could on the one hand be interpreted in terms of the cultural differences in constructing maturity categories, his sister referring to a forthcoming initiation in a society where transition between social stages is marked by organised rites of passage. However, her statement also openly refers to the extraordinary circumstances of war which require an acceleration of the process of growing up.

Just as war is associated with the acquisition of knowledge, as part of the transition to maturity, the same connection is implied in interpreting perhaps the central characteristic in today's Western concept of childhood, innocence, as a need for protection both from war itself and from knowledge about war. This commonplace association of childhood with innocence and the need for special adult protection from violence is pervasive in official international policies as well as public attitudes, much more so than the association of war experiences with maturity. Examples of the assumption that children are assumed to merit protection or exclusion from the conflict include episodes in the young adult novels where parents attempt to defend their children from enemy soldiers on the basis of age: Karim's mother in *A Little Piece of Ground* lies that he is a year younger than he is to prevent his being searched at a checkpoint (37), and Nur's father in *Under the Persimmon Tree* tries to justify to Taliban soldiers Nur's defiant pose with "He's just a boy" (24). An identical argument is used by Ishmael Beah in his attempt to defend himself against a village chief's suspicions that he is a rebel: "I opened my eyes wide, trying to tell him that I was just a twelve-year-old boy" (65). Texts of both genres also make direct references to adult practices to protect children not just from involvement in war, but from knowledge of it, even when it is an ongoing reality which surrounds them. In *They Poured Fire* Benson reports that adults in his village start giving warnings to children only when attacks seem imminent. His father's direct address to the children frightens Benson more than a graphic story of violence he has accidentally heard his father tell his mother, because of

the contrast with normal adult policy: “Usually adults didn’t mention war in front of the children” (45). The subject is also openly addressed in *Kiss the Dust* where Tara resents her parents’ withholding information about the war from her: “Her parents should have told her more. They shouldn’t have treated her like a little kid. She was a Kurd too. She had a right to know what was going on” (12). The passage, which presents in free indirect discourse Tara’s reconsidering her own position in the conflict, reveals several important assumptions which come together in the representation of war via the medium of the young adult novel. As a genre concerned with growing up, it focuses on a moment which marks the beginning of transition. Tara’s analysis does not challenge, but rather reaffirms the assumption that a “little kid” should naturally be protected from the knowledge of political conflict. Her indignation is associated with a personal awakening into adolescence, which is marked by an identification with her community – being “a Kurd too.” Tara’s ability to reflect on her previous dissociation from her violent environment is only possible in retrospect, after she has left the realm of childhood: “The war had been going on for years but it hadn’t touched her somehow. . . . She’d known all sorts of things were going on. . . . But she’d shut her mind to it all” (12). The violent death she witnesses serves as the trigger of her self-realisation: an abrupt effective divide between a protected but ignorant childhood, and a new stage of growth, action and social awareness, placing war in a rite-of-passage framework. Certainly, it is no logical syllogism that war’s threat to children’s supposed innocence suggests that children’s involvement in war makes them adults. In fact, the association of war activities with a constructive effect on the children involved is anomalous as it goes directly against the most deeply held ideas about childhood, and humanity’s self-perception as “humane.” However, this imperative to protect children against war does imply that war is a legitimate adult activity, and this implication opens space for a potential assumption that involvement in it might also accelerate maturity.

Explicit associations between war and the rite of passage

There are a couple of isolated examples where war is explicitly equated with the particular model of transition to maturity which I have selected to use as my analytical prism: the rite of passage itself. In Sonia Levitin’s short story collection for young readers on civil war and slavery in Sudan, a young Dinka man, a friend of the narrator, is scorned by his peers for missing his initiation. His transgression of traditional social norms is deemed deserving of public shame for two reasons. In personal terms, he has

failed the trials of manhood, which the traditional rite brings about: "This child is beneath their notice; they will not spend the breath to insult him" (33). The second, and apparently more significant, violation, however, is the betrayal of the communal values and identity, as suggested by the song with which they ridicule him: "He has crossed to the other way,/ The non-Dinka way; let him stay apart" (33). This accusation is fuelled by the reason for the boy's failure to attend the ceremony: he is kept late in his job in the city, working for an employer belonging to the dominant Arab community, represented as the oppressor. A violent attack by enemy soldiers takes place shortly after, in which the young man dies. The narrator interprets the event as equivalent to, even surpassing, the traditional maturity rite which he himself and the rest of his friends have undergone: "A Dinka man does not weep, so they say. Perhaps I am not yet a man after all. I sit and weep for my courageous friend, for my friend whose initiation now is complete" (37). This passage demonstrates the ambiguity with which the association between war and coming of age is laden. On the one hand, war functions as a rite of passage, in which the narrator's friend proves his bravery, even though no account of his actual participation in the battle is revealed. The assumption is that his friend has not fled the battlefield, as the narrator himself does. Furthermore, the wound on his neck metaphorically substitutes that of the ritual scarring, and its representation as "a rope of red" (37) might be interpreted as a metaphorical means of reunion with the community from which he has previously been advised to "stay apart."

Certainly, the stage in the narrative where the equation of the young man's martyrdom in war with the rite of passage takes place supports this interpretation. Rather than being represented as a forward-looking general statement on the maturing power of war, the framing of participation, and death, in war as a masculinity initiation rite is made within the context of mourning, and could be interpreted as the narrator's psychological strategy to rehabilitate his friend, make his death meaningful, and thus enable grieving. There are, however, further political implications to this representation. First, the celebration of innocent martyrdom, without any reference to possible perpetration of violence, seems to work to both construct the Dinka as innocent victims of Sudanese Arab violence, and to celebrate them as heroic and courageous, justifying them as worthy objects of intervention by the American child characters in the framing plot, who undertake a mission to collect money to buy off slaves and to urge the American government to intervene. Thus, the desired political message is conveyed without violating the pedagogical restrictions of the young adult literature genre on the

representation of violence as glamorous, which I will discuss in the next chapter. At the same time, however, the fact that participation and self-sacrifice in war can lead to death, rather than maturity, seems to be refigured in terms of the ultimate rite of passage, in front of which other, traditional means of maturation unravel into a game, (evidence of which is the reference to the narrator's inability to hold back his tears, proving the maturity rite ineffective, as well as the contrast of the real battle to the ritual "mock-battles"). The symbolic exaltation of this violent death into a superior rite of passage makes the message about war ambiguous. It precludes the possibility that war-death may be interpreted as futile, and thus possibly satisfies the genre's requirement of sparing the reader.

Perhaps a more straightforwardly evaluative connection between war and the maturational rite of passage is drawn in the memoir *They Poured Fire*, which also depicts a Dinka initiation ceremony. One of its narrators, Benson, recalls his circumcision with a sense of betrayal by his elders, and a lasting feeling of helplessness before seemingly arbitrary violence. The elders, who are usually expected to provide support and guidance, on this occasion withdraw it. When Benson's father comes to collect him from the stable where he and his cousin have been locked up, Benson's expectations of protection are flouted: "Something in his voice told me he wasn't there to rescue me" (8). Although the circumcision is a traditional ceremony and there is no explicit criticism of the ritual itself, the adults' behaviour is described as pitiless: "All the men's eyes were on me like hyenas staring at a lost goat kid" (8-9). This depiction prefigures a theme running throughout the memoir: the vulnerability of children at the hands of adults who, in a war context, are willing to harm rather than protect them. Despite the use of a blunt blade, which inflicts an extraordinary amount of pain, Benson receives no mercy from his parents, with his father urging him not to cry, but to be "strong and brave like my usual son" (8). While both his father and mother insist on the typical masculine qualities of bravery and strength, which the rite of passage tests, and which are traditionally associated with warriors, Benson upholds the association between rite of passage and war experience, but links them both to a sense of arbitrary and meaningless suffering. His conclusion on the effect of his circumcision runs against traditional values of gender roles. Thus when he hears the songs of the village girls taunting uncircumcised boys and so performing a traditional female role of shaming men into living up to their required role of participating in violence and war (Goldstein 272), Benson reflects: "I was happy to have passed the uncircumcised stage, but it

wasn't worth the pain I went through" (9). Refuting the ideological structure implicit in the rite of passage, that going through pain and suffering is a meaningful way of achieving manhood, Benson also challenges the maturing potential of war, as well as the ideology which encourages participation in it: "When I sometimes have nightmares about all the things that happened when our peaceful village life turned to chaos, that feeling of not being able to move during my initiation still overcomes me" (10).

As the examples above demonstrate, texts from both genres overtly posit a connection between coming of age and involvement in war, yet this connection is always marked by a certain ambiguity. These episodes show the pervasiveness of the association, but often seem to invoke it in order to question it, as well as to question the broader conceptual and ideological structures within which perceptions of the relationship between war and adolescence are defined. Common themes thread through the excerpts discussed, giving specific content to the intersection of war and coming of age. Thus, the texts of both genres question the acceptability of involvement for children and young adults in war and violence; its possible benefits in bestowing knowledge and maturity; the significance of gender in framing war experiences, and the potential of war as a topic to challenge assumptions of gender and maturity; the significance of communal identity in wartime, and the relationship between self and "other" which war brings into focus. All these questions are inflected by the conditions of the communicative transaction which the two genres play out between the represented, representors, and readers, which accounts for the differences between the two genres explored in further chapters. All these issues however significantly tie together within the rite-of-passage framework, which is not only suggested on the level of content, but also encoded in story and plot.

War, coming of age and plot development

Although the described conflicts are perceived as self-perpetuating and diffuse, and destructive for "normal" childhood, their narrative shapes have a relatively neat basic pattern, a forward chronological sequence of events (with occasional use of retrospect and prospect), which underpins the progressive development of their central characters from childhood towards adulthood. Compared to the intensive coming-of-age experiences in young adult novels encompassing a few days or months, childhood and adolescence war memoirs normally have a much broader time-span, usually of several years. The following chapters explain in greater detail the significance of genre

conventions for representing war experiences. Due to their referentiality, the structure of the memoirs is more fluid than that of the young adult novels. Yet, both experience itself and its reconstruction in memory and discourse happen in the form of narrative governed by culturally defined rules, cognitive and ideological frameworks, which render the structure of the memoirs roughly similar to young adult novels.

The plots of texts of both genres typically begin with, or purposefully later return to, a relatively stable period prior to involvement in war, where the young characters are enjoying a certain level of protection by adults, in correspondence with the definitions and policies of treating childhood as innocent and vulnerable. This period is most often violently disrupted by a single event which lifts protection from the young characters, and propels them on a journey where they are exposed to the dangers of war, and may personally participate in the conflict. The narratives end with characters regaining relative safety and seeking reintegration in society, their own or one to which they have migrated. At this stage they are represented as having been transformed by their war experiences, often having acquired a degree of uncharacteristic maturity. While death and loss do feature, the young adult protagonists survive in both cases, and their survival is often framed as an extraordinary achievement, which is simultaneously also viewed as just one example of the mythical triumph of the indomitable human spirit. However, the texts are ambiguous about the effects of war which the pattern enables. Their ambiguity lends complexity to the represented experiences, which responds to the contradictory expectations of children's resilience and vulnerability. I argue that both the developmental orientation inherent in the linear narratives and the ambiguity of representations can be productively interpreted by the rite-of-passage framework.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, some young adult novels engaging with current international conflicts feature double plots, one depicting the experiences of characters engaged in a non-Western conflict, and another set in either England or the USA. Still others feature a single plot set in a Western country, but involving characters who are refugees from civil wars (*Ruby Tanya*, *Diamonds in the Shadow*, *The Dark Beneath*), where often it is the Western adolescents who take up the leading roles. In the double plot and primarily Western-plot novels, the shape of the narrative is different, often structured around the encounter and communication between Western adolescents and their Third-World counterparts. Nevertheless, they centre upon a coming-of-age experience, often related to the experience of crisis, in which family relations are

redefined and political views, especially regarding conflict, are revised. This second group of young adult novels, which seem to draw the attention to the parallel with the lives of Western teenagers, elucidate what the first group of texts only imply – that the major concern of young adult war novels is with their Western adolescent audience, for whose understanding and benefit the characters and their experiences are primarily invented. I am mostly interested in the representation of non-Western children's and adolescents' experiences of war, so it is these plotlines that are my priority.

In the following sections of this chapter, I present an overview of the rite of passage and its characteristics as represented in anthropological discourse. Next, I discuss the applicability of the framework to conceptualising and evaluating war experiences in texts of both genres. The next two chapters look at the specific relations of the two genres to the rite-of-passage framework.

The rite-of-passage framework in anthropology

Both the rite of passage itself, and the related idea of liminality have acquired wide currency in the arts and in academic disciplines.⁴ The theorisation of the 'rite of passage' is associated with early 20th-century French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (*Rites de Passage*, 1909)⁵, and the concept is further elaborated over the second half of the century by Victor Turner in his studies of small-scale traditional societies. A rite of passage in anthropological use refers to a ritual which marks the transition of a subject or a group of subjects from one social category into another (van Gennep 2-3; Turner, *Forest* 7). Van Gennep identifies several kinds of rites of passage, including territorial rites, rites accomplishing the crucial transitions between the stages in a person's life cycle, as well as changes in social rank: all akin to each other and to the seasonal rituals organising tribal life (van Gennep 3, 15) and serving "to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth" (Campbell, *Myths* 44). A central rite of passage is the maturational rite which grants its subjects the status of adolescents

⁴ Drawing on Turner's article "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," Ronald Grimes discusses the application of the concepts of ritual and liminality to various fields of contemporary cultural activity: "brain physiology, drama, religion, social processes, art, literature, politics." As Grimes explains, these are areas of manifestation of the sacred, which has become scattered and "contracted" in modern large-scale societies. Instead of clearly defined liminal forms, in secular societies the sacred is contained in "liminoid" forms, which still possess some features of liminality, such as "intense feeling, a dismantling of hierarchy, etc" (145).

⁵ Translated in English in 1960.

or adults. While details of the conditions, time and manner of performance of coming of age rites vary widely across communities, and between the genders, they nevertheless follow the typical tripartite structure: stage of separation; stage of transition; stage of incorporation (van Gennep 11). The first stage of initiation includes ritual actions which divest children from their current childhood state, and often involves a symbolic separation from one or both of their parents (Turner, *Forest* 94). The second stage, also called the liminal stage, comprises the very heart of the ritual. It is a time of transition between fixed states, of “becoming” and “transformation”; where the ritual subjects no longer belong to their previous group, but have not been accepted in the next group. This “interstructural situation” (93) is marked by ambiguity and paradox expressed in “complex and bizarre” symbolism (96). To signify the neophytes’ state as “no longer classified,” ritual symbols and behaviour are usually derived from biological processes and practices related to death and decay: such as lying motionless, being covered in dirt, or in black, and spending time with ritual performers in monstrous masks representing the dead (96). At the same time, in their state of “not yet classified,” liminal subjects are associated with symbols of life and birth, “likened to embryos, newborn infants, or sucklings” (96). Initiates are simultaneously sacred, communing with the transcendent, and ritually polluting and dangerous for the rest of their community (97-98). They are associated with neither gender, so may be characterised with attributes of both genders at once, and may be represented as “either sexless or bisexual” (98). Thus, with its disruption of cultural binaries, liminality is a condition of “confusion of all customary categories.” It is, however, also generative: “a realm of pure possibility” in which ideas and relations can be forged anew (97). The liminal phase can involve various difficulties, trials and suffering of pain and/or abuse at the hands of the elders conducting the ritual. It is also a time of intense learning of the most fundamental principles of the community. The final stage serves to curb the transformations of the liminal stage and enable the initiates to re-enter the community in their new position, attaining “a stable state once more” (94). The texts I am discussing employ plot structures and representational strategies which correlate with the elements of the rite of passage.

One prominent narrative correlative of the experience of the initiation rite, which is both culturally influential and controversial, is the hero’s journey in mythology: the “shape-shifting, yet marvelously constant” common pattern which according to Joseph Campbell underlies myths around the world (*The Hero* 3). This

pattern is significant because it is a textual variant of the transition into adulthood, which continues to be represented in various contemporary cultural forms, including the Bildungsroman, but also children's and adolescents' novels, films, and computer games (Hourihan 2-3, 48). Campbell offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of this pattern, which he refers to as the monomyth (a term borrowed from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939)): a linear sequence of events symbolising the inward journey into the psyche which the maturing individual undertakes, but which is simultaneously a journey into the core cultural and psychological reality of his society, and perhaps of human experience as a whole.⁶ The mythological narratives of this journey include various images and events which are "spontaneous productions of the psyche" (*Hero* 4), akin to Jung's archetypes. Campbell's argument suggests that myths in traditional societies are complementary to rites:

Myths are the mental supports of rites; rites, the physical enactment of myths. By absorbing the myths of his social group and participating in its rites, the youngster is structured to accord with his social as well as natural environment, and turned from an amorphous nature product, prematurely born, into a defined and competent member of some specific, efficiently functioning social order. (*Myths* 45-46).

Thus, the hero myth participates alongside rites of passage to bring about the spiritual and social transformation of the individual from childhood to adulthood. In the language of contemporary psychoanalysis, the hero destroys his infantile anxieties and fantasies, or, as Campbell calls them "the nursery demons of his local culture" (*Hero* 17), via a symbolic identification with impersonal archetypal roles, such as "the warrior, the bride, the widow, the priest, the chieftain" (383), embodying communal culture and identity (17-18)⁷.

Given the close link between myth and passage rituals, it is unsurprising that Campbell finds that the monomyth shares, even "magnifies," the structure of the rite of passage of "separation – initiation – return" (30). According to Campbell the plot of the hero's journey provides a narrative underpinning of the ritual structure:

⁶ As Campbell enthuses: "It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (*The Hero* 3). The masculine orientation of Campbell's analysis has come under criticism, but I will have a look at this in a bit.

⁷ Indeed Campbell sees mythology as a whole as a juvenile enterprise, comparing it to a kangaroo pouch for the immature psyche (*Myths* 216).

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

The first stage of the journey is often represented as crossing a magical threshold (77), symbolising the separation from the safety of the familiar ordered world and entry into the zone of “the unknown, and danger,” “beyond the parental watch” for initiates leaving their childhood, and beyond the protection of society for members of the tribe who leave it (77-78). The next phase of initiation has the characteristics of the liminal images with which Turner associates the middle stage of the rite of passage. According to Campbell, “the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials” (97). The successful overcoming of these trials leads to a rebirth, at once closing the cycle with a return to the community, but after an enriching transformation: “We are taken from the mother, chewed into fragments . . . ; but then, miraculously reborn, we are more than we were” (*The Hero* 162). Thus, like in the rite of passage, extraordinary experiences, pain, suffering and metaphorical death are eventually framed as meaningful and beneficial both for the individual, who reaches psychological and social maturity, as well as for the community (193). The hero myth framework, I argue, works as a compelling meaning-making tool in the narratives of my corpus, in variants which articulate both boys’ and girls’ war experiences.

Applicability of the rite of passage to representations of young people’s war experiences

How do Turner’s rite-of-passage construct and Campbell’s hero theory apply to cultural products in modern larger-scale societies, in a globalising world with an increasingly individualistic orientation and a distrust of universal master narratives? And what relevance do they bear to the representations of war experiences, and to children’s war experiences in particular? Answering these questions, I demonstrate in the present section that there is a history across disciplines of associating war with maturation and with rites of passage. I argue that the texts in my corpus adopt this association, but also adapt it to discuss specific ideas relating to the uncomfortable ideological contradiction between childhood and war, and as a model of regaining some control over this troublesome phenomenon, while retaining ambivalences which testify to the

contradictory genre requirements and to the complexity of representing childhood war experiences.

The casting of war as a maturing experience is not new and it is in no way unique to the texts in my corpus. Such an assumption surfaces in a variety of scientific and popular discourses, including psychology, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. Male rites of passage in traditional societies have been linked to preparation for warrior roles: a tradition which, according to Joshua Goldstein has survived although in altered form in modern societies, most evidently in military rituals (264-65). Goldstein claims that “killing in war does not come naturally for either gender” and in order to “overcome soldiers’ reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate ‘manhood’ with toughness under fire” (9). The social need for a segment of the population who could be effective soldiers according to Goldstein affects contemporary child rearing practices where boys are encouraged to suppress their emotions in order to live up to the ideal of masculinity (267-69). The use of rites of passage in readying men for war is described by Joseph Campbell. According to Campbell traditional mythologies are usually mythologies of war because “not only has conflict between groups been normal to human experience, but there is also the cruel fact to be recognized that killing is the precondition of all living whatsoever” (*Myths* 169). Given the fundamental role of conflict in mythology, and mythology’s role in educating young people, a relationship is established between boys’ initiation into adulthood and the acquisition of the ability to fight. In Campbell’s analysis, the disintegration of the traditional symbolic and ritual systems and the dominant ideology of cocooned upbringing for young people nowadays are to blame for the adverse psychological reactions they suffer “when suddenly tapped to play the warrior role,” to which they are unable to “bring their appropriate moral feelings” (*Myths* 172), which should presumably prevent traumatising.

Another scholar interested in the hero story and its ideological implications, Margery Hourihan, also upholds this association between the maturing adventures of the young hero from Western myth, and socialisation to conflict and violence. However, Hourihan’s discussion refutes Campbell’s suggestion that catastrophic mass violence of the first half of the twentieth century, as well as individual problems of adolescent development, can be explained with the collapse of the “timeless universe of symbols” and the inefficiency of the hero myth in helping contemporary youngsters outgrow the “nursery ego” (*Hero* 387-88). On the contrary, Hourihan argues, it is exactly the

continued reiteration in contemporary culture of the hero story of dominance over the “other” that provides the ideology for the various current forms of social suppression, including colonial exploitation, gender inequality and environmental destruction (2-3). Confirming Goldstein’s observations, Hourihan argues that the hero’s quest is based on a conceptualisation of the world as an arena of clashing binary absolutes, which naturalises conflict and defines masculinity in the context of participation in glorified violence (3). According to Hourihan, as well as much of contemporary postmodernist literary criticism (whose engagement with the two genres I discuss in Section A), beginning to redress the conceptual base for inequality is possible via rewriting the hero story while subverting the structural oppositions it is structured around (203).

While Campbell and Hourihan represent contrasting views about the usefulness of the hero story, they both testify to its relevance to the handling of violent conflict, and reinforce the relation between (male) maturation and war. Historian Philippe Ariés also confirms this view: “The schoolboy or scholar or student . . . of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to a long childhood what the conscript of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was to adolescence” (316). Thus, he interprets adolescence as a historically conditioned concept, which is shaped within the context of institutionalised military service for young men. It could be argued that it is this understanding of a maturing function of war which is behind the until-recently fluid age boundaries of recruitment in international humanitarian law, which under certain circumstances allowed involvement in hostilities of children from the age of 15. The association between conflict and maturation surfaces in psychology too. The term “identity crisis,” which Erik Erikson considers definitive to adolescence, is first used to describe war veterans’ experience of a radical fission with their pre-war selves (16-17). Thus, war and adolescence are discursively linked by their common metaphorical identification as a dangerous, transformative threshold stage. Underlying associations with war and maturity also transpire in child psychiatrist Robert Coles’ interpretation of a thirteen-year-old respondent’s reaction when speaking about her enthusiasm for fighting in a political conflict: “Mary seemed about to go through a psychological transformation: from childhood to adulthood in one fell swoop – to become a military leader eager to kill, willing if not eager, one gathered, to lose her own life” (112). Coles seems to identify preparedness for violence as a criterion for adulthood, and mere talk on the topic itself as a potential trigger for an abrupt transformation of the child into an adult. Certainly, this is not an endorsement of the actual potential of war to bring

maturity, just evidence for the underlying perceptions of separate child and adult spheres of activity, where participation in conflict is reserved for adult members, but also conversely members of society involved in war acquire the characteristics of adulthood. As all the examples above testify, whether conscious or latent, the link between initiation into maturity and war seems to be a persistent concept at least in Western consciousness.

This association manifests itself also in relation to specific historical conflicts, for example in processing and re-thinking experiences of both world wars.⁸ Drawing on Graham Dawson's *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (1994) and Michael Paris's *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850 – 2000* (2000), Jessica Meyer makes a reference to the existence during the First World War of a "common contemporary narrative, which cast war as a training ground where boys were turned into men" (2). Scholarly work by Eric Leed and Leonard Smith has focused on an interpretation of accounts of World War I experiences in rite-of-passage terms for the sake of ordering and ascribing meaning to a disorienting reality (Leed x, Smith x). Leed observes that despite their evidently different purposes and characteristics, the metaphoric identification of war and rituals of passage is "so common that its absurdity is scarcely evident" (73). Studying the social responses to war in Germany and Britain, he sees the rite of passage as a fitting model to represent the incommensurability between soldiers' experiences and patterns of meaning before and during the war, which led to their sense of discontinuous identity (2). As Leed demonstrates, the experience of war itself turned out to be profoundly transformative for its subjects (1), in a similar way to that of the liminal stage of a rite of passage, because of the "nonverbal, concrete, multichannel learning experience", and the "disjunctive" knowledge which this stage imparts (74). Similar to the bizarre rearrangements of cultural symbols during the rite of passage, in their period of war involvement combatants experienced the reappearance of the basic social contradictions the war had been hoped to resolve, but "in altered guise, through . . . the fantasies, myths, and psychological pathologies necessitated by the realities of war" (xi). Leed thus identifies an "astonishing congruence of liminal symbols and war experience" (33). The physical

⁸ The rite-of-passage framework, and the idea that war can act as a catalyst to maturity have appeared in other historical circumstances as well. Victoria Ott, for instance, demonstrates how the unsettling of the social principles of gendered and racial roles during the American Civil War played a part in young women's accelerated maturity (1). Eric Tribunella discusses the rite of passage as a model in fiction about the American Revolution (see Section C).

dimensions of fighting in World War I with its trench system also invokes parallels with, but also terrifyingly literalises, Turner's symbolism of initiates as "invisible," covered in mud and "buried," or symbolically sown, underground (17-19): the typical figures of death and gestation in rites of passage. Leonard Smith also discusses the application of the rite of passage, this time in French soldiers' accounts of the Great War, as a strategy to impose structure on fragmentary war experiences. Smith explains the prevalence of the rite-of-passage framework in soldiers' narratives as testimony to their "struggle for coherence" and attempt to create stable narrators "capable of telling the story" (x). Yet, this framework is inadequate (21-22), because of a radical disjuncture not only between lived experience and linear narrative in general (20), but specifically between the beginning of war involvement and combat. While conscription performs a symbolic identification of combatants with a collective idea of nation, aligning masculinity and national belonging and obscuring the prospect of individual death (23-30, also Leed 59), the liminal stage is marked with extraordinary incommunicability and a lack of "discernible end", where a process of individualisation unravels collective identity because of the soldiers' limited viewpoint, and their personal encounters with the enemy (L. Smith 30, 35, 42). Both Leed and Smith accentuate the inadequacy of the third part of the rite of passage, a post-liminal stage supposed to integrate traumatic experiences, and argue against the possibility of closure (L. Smith 22, Leed 32-33), viewing psychological consequences for veterans as examples of an ongoing liminality rather than reintegration (L. Smith 53, Leed xi). Jessica Meyer also discusses the disjointing role of shell-shock in the boys-turned-into-men narrative, but she argues that it represents in fact an inversion of that narrative (2). Shell-shocked soldiers, as Meyer shows, are constructed through discourses of both gender and age, as displaying anomalous feminine as well as childlike behaviour, their "failures" being "as much those of immaturity as of effeminacy" (4).

Participation in the Second World War has also been figured as a maturing experience retrospectively by the subjects themselves, as the titles of a number of contemporary memoirs indicate. Memoirs which explicitly refer to the relationship between war and maturation include: J.E. Bowman's *Three Stripes and a Gun: A Young Man's Journey Towards Maturity* (1987), Louis Harlan's *All at Sea: Coming of Age in World War II* (1996), Peter Russell's *Flying in Defiance of the Reich: a Lancaster Pilot's Rites of Passage* (2007), James Holland's collection of Second World War veterans' memories *Twenty-One: Coming of Age in the Second World War* (2006).

Many of the texts contain characteristics which Eric Leed and Leonard Smith have identified with the framing of war experiences as a rite of passage. One of these characteristics is the sense of difference with those who have not been initiated into battle (Leed 74-75, Bowman 202-204, Harlan 2). Also, memoirs mention the contradictory feelings of a sense of lost childhood or youth, but also of gaining special knowledge. Bowman, for instance, refers to a youth that is gone without him knowing (204), but also to a feeling of special pride, “even conceit” for belonging to a gunners’ regiment (259). Bowman emphasises the maturing effect of war by describing himself upon his return from the war as “just another young man, who had returned from tasting new experiences, fulfilling certain ambitions, who had been a little battered in the process, who had survived, much wiser and more competent” (258).

The same maturing framework and the contradictory interpretations of war experience within it are also invoked by Holland and Harlan. Instead of interpreting war as an enriching experience, however, they apply a loss-of-innocence pattern, which constructs soldiers as innocent and ignorant, exposed to extraordinary violence and prematurely charged with responsibility. In his introduction, Holland refers to the soldiers as “mere boys [who] found themselves facing life-threatening danger” (xi). Harlan depicts his fellow combatants and himself as “babes in the woods, adolescents awkwardly moving toward manhood” (x), but rather than idealising these as images of moral purity, uses them to examine the mistakes they committed by being “self-serving, amateur warriors, and capable of thoughtless cruelty to those not part of our group” (x). The overall effect of war is seen as damaging by Holland: “Youth was sapped as the young men – and women – were forced to grow old before their time” (xi). Yet war experiences are related to positive sensations as well, with never feeling “more intensely alive” (xiii) and experiencing a unique sense of national unity and frontline bonding (xiv) – elements which Leed identifies with Turner’s concept of the conviviality and equality of fellow initiates. Harlan also recognises as a value the youthful optimism with which he applied himself to the war effort, as well as the heroism and self-sacrifice, but his mature retrospective view is the result of disillusionment, because he sees the war he participated in as a part of a string of conflicts, failing to resolve the problems of the First World War, and leading to the “travails and moral jungles of the cold war” (x). Thus, memoirs of the Second World War use the same rite-of-passage pattern, but the variety of meanings of childhood (purity, ignorance, vulnerability) and coming of age (learning, loss of innocence, surviving suffering) allows their authors to

express a range of ideological positions. Whether memoirists portray their personal involvement predominantly in a framework of glorification of war, or of regret for wasted youth and intensified political crisis, their representations are always more layered, demonstrating the value of the concept of liminality as accommodating contradictory attitudes.

As the discussion above demonstrates, the comparison between the rite of passage and experiences of war has been widely spread. There is considerable continuity between this history of representation of adolescence and war and the corpus of texts I am researching: for instance, the structure of the war experience, its middle stage as an extraordinary period of trial, special learning and gender-related coming of age, and transformation of subjects into a different category, and the problematic stage of incorporation back into society. There are, however, some aspects of the model's construction which are very specific both to the theme of child war involvement, and to the texts' genres, in terms of their formal and contextual particularities. The main difference is that the texts of both genres focus on a highly disturbing and controversial phenomenon in contemporary Western society: war involvement as a maturational journey for civilian children, only some of whom are militarised in consequence of their loss of childhood protection. The parameters of the comparison between the rite of passage and war involvement thus go beyond the formal rites of conscription and participation in combat seen in Leonard Smith and Eric Leed's analyses. The texts of both genres frame all children's war experiences along coming-of-age lines, and thus undermine the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, which is blurred in contemporary conflicts. Also, since this structure is applied for both male and female protagonists, I explore its potential to challenge traditional gender divisions, which conflict has been shown to consolidate by aligning male gender with combat roles, and female gender with the idea of the nation which needs protection (Goldstein, L. Smith 26-27, Meyer 4).

The rite of passage might appear controversial in the context of Western audience expectations of childhood as innocent, and it clashes with the often openly professed position of these texts of denouncing children's involvement in war. Also, the rite-of-passage construction can be argued to contain war a little too easily, ordering in a neat, accessible structure extreme life-threatening and disorienting experiences. At the same time, however, it efficiently accommodates key aspects of children's participation in contemporary wars, some of which I outline below.

Involvement in war as the start of the maturational journey

One characteristic of children's exposure to war which can be likened to a rite of passage is that it is an external event, over which subjects have little control, and which, unlike developmental psychology's views of adolescence, is not linked to physical or psychological maturity. Regarding traditional rites of passage van Gennep explains that "physiological puberty and 'social puberty' are essentially different and only rarely converge" (65). Since physical changes vary between individuals, it is not logical that these can be the basis of the initiation rite as an institution (66). The age variation between initiates in a traditional rite of passage corresponds to the wide range of young people who get involved in war. Thus, war is cast as a maturing experience regardless the protagonists' age in both types of texts, albeit with certain differences, to which I return in Sections A and B. It is useful here to adopt Eric Leed's explanation of the individual meaning which war acquires for its subjects, to whom its primary motives and purposes are often unknown or irrelevant: "[L]ike ritual events, the war took on a spectacular objectivity, a programmatic status, that dictated the necessary behavior to participants" (38). Similarly, contemporary conflicts are represented as entering children's lives and creating a quasi-ritual setting. Experiences of witnessing violence, being deprived of parental guidance, or being verbally reassigned into a new category via instructions by parents or inclusion into military groups function as symbolic thresholds into a liminal stage of transformation.

The role of elders

Another element of the rite of passage which resonates with the issue of children's involvement in war, as well as with the specific relations between adults and children which condition the two genres I am comparing, is the role of elders. The traditional rite of passage as defined by van Gennep and Turner includes a redefinition of relationships between initiates and elders, especially parents. Van Gennep explains that the first stage of the initiation involves separation from the "world of women and children," and cutting the relationships with mothers and sisters (74-75). Turner gives examples of both male and female maturity rites which aim to modify the connection between children and parents with a view to the new functions which initiates will need to perform after the ritual is completed (*Forest* 265, *Drums* 232). According to Campbell, rites of passage aim to replace youngsters' psychological reliance on parents for guidance and instruction with taking responsibility for their choices (*Myths* 46).

Despite aiming to create individuals capable of bearing adult social responsibilities, however, rites of passage are often associated with “respect for elders and superiors” and obedience to their ritual instructors (Turner, *Forest* 8, 99-100).

The dramatisation in puberty rituals of the separation from parents resonates with adult concerns about children’s exposure to war. In both genres it works as a structural element in which to explore anxieties of adults’ inability to protect children in conflict: a situation which renders adults helpless, and undermines the very definition of childhood. In the genre of young adult literature, this consequence of war is represented via episodes at the beginning of plots where protagonists’ parents are killed or somehow incapacitated, and children are left to confront the realities of war on their own and in a more direct way. The division in plots between relatively peaceful childhood under parental care, and subsequent direct war involvement could be argued to address and alleviate this anxiety, by regulating childhood experiences of war, ascribing them to a more independent transitory stage in life. Episodes of loss of elders’ protection often propel the plots of memoirs as well, and could be argued to have a similar function. Since in most cases the memoirs address a largely adult audience, their restoration of war-affected childhoods sometimes places readers in quasi-parental roles, for example through identification with Western mentors and sponsors, with the related implications of playing to audience’s self-affirming values of charity and generosity, and eliciting their ideological and sometimes material support.

Liminality

Turner’s concept of liminality, which describes the middle part of the rite of passage, encapsulates its transformative power. In religious terms, liminality characterises the encounter with the sacred; sociologically, it is the stage where social norms are suspended and categories reconfigured. The “otherness” of liminal experiences stems from the perception of a gap, an “incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds” (van Gennep 1). Because of its difference from mundane reality, the ritual is perceived to open a breach in the regular flow of “historical time,” during which the basic principles organising a community are honoured and reflected upon, and “behaviour regarded as appropriate during this timeless time is both formalized and symbolic” (Turner, *Drums* 5).

Because of its potential to contain mutually exclusive characteristics, and its association with transition between ordered states, liminality has become an influential

metaphor for conceptualising various social phenomena characterised by transition and fluidity. It has been enlisted to articulate the cultural experience of diasporas in autobiographical writing (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 144) or the hybrid identity of groups of mixed origin caught up in conflict, for example the Ethiopian-born Eritreans after Eritrea's independence in 1998 (Jennifer Riggan). A layering of different kinds of transitions, such as in representations of the coincidence of personal coming of age and the search for a place in a postcolonial world has been addressed especially productively via liminality. Sophie Mackay, for instance, finds that in the genre of young adult fiction postcolonial positioning and adolescence as liminal states can provide useful perspectives into each other. Representations in Francophone African novels of the negotiation of identity in postcolonial societies have also been linked to liminality. Wangarĩ wa Nyatetũ-Waigwa argues that since the protagonists in three novels she analyses do not reach adulthood, but are suspended in an in-between state, these novels belong to a modified form of the Bildungsroman – the liminal novel (3).

As has become clear from the application of the rite of passage to war experiences, liminality has been used to analyse the profound transformation brought about by war (Leed 1). According to Leed, combatants perceived participation in World War I as discontinuous to the rest of their experience, estranging them from themselves (3-4). Like a rite of passage, war is a “transgression of categories,” a radical change of the familiar established social order: “In providing bridges across the boundaries between . . . the known and the unknown, the human and the inhuman, war offered numerous occasions for the shattering of distinctions that were central to orderly thought, communicable experience, and normal human relations” (Leed 21). While this understanding of liminality helps give an account of the profoundly disorienting effects of war which led to “the effacement of self,” it also allows an expression of the unexpected positive, “intrinsically rewarding elements” of participating in war (24-25).

Conclusion

Contemporary children's and adolescents' involvement in war warrants a convergence of all these discourses of liminality: both by virtue of the richness and flexibility of the term itself, and of the history of its application. War-affected youths are liminal because of their personal status of being in transition towards maturity, and because of the political context in which their maturation takes place, in war-torn societies which are perceived to be at a liminal stage between stable forms of government, and more

broadly as migrants in a liminal global world of paradoxically tightened yet permeable borders. The narratives representing them are also liminal, constructing their protagonists' identities in a negotiation between different cultures and frameworks of meaning, between the order of narrative and the unspeakability and disruptiveness of violence, and between children's and adults' points of view.

SECTION A

YOUNG ADULT FICTION AND MEMOIRS: GENRE AND THE RITE OF PASSAGE

My account so far has presented the relevance of the rite of passage to the description of children's war experiences for texts of both genres due to their shared subject matter and recipient culture, as well as due to the intersection of various discourses constructing war and adolescence. Despite the commonalities, there are significant differences between these two genres and their employment of the rite-of-passage framework. In this section I explore how the two genres are defined by the communicative situation which produces them and the power relations between the groups of participants involved in their creation and consumption. In Chapter Two, I discuss how the power imbalance characteristic of Western young adult fiction accounts for the expediency of representing Third-World children's war experiences in terms of the rite of passage. Chapter Three explores the function of writing autobiographical accounts as a contemporary version of a rite of passage performance, both for their author-protagonists and for the society to which they have relocated. I look at the memoirs in the contexts of theories of life writing as part of the process of constructing and maintaining identity, and of negotiating it according to publicly accepted criteria of genuineness and normalcy.

Chapter Two

Maturing for Western Adolescents: the Genre of Young Adult Fiction

While the depiction of children's and adolescents' war experiences is a shared topic of both genres, the application of the term "children's" or "young adult" to each entails significant differences, which are at the heart of the issue of voicing young people's experiences of war, as well as of the motivation of my comparison between these two types of texts. In the phrase "young adult fiction," "young adult" refers to the age of the genre's implied audience, the term itself bringing to the fore an important power relationship between producers and consumers of this literature. This relationship is based on socially constructed categories of immaturity and maturity and is present in the

texts themselves in a way which makes them a recognisable form of literature. This definition of the genre has been variously theorised, but for now can most usefully be understood within Perry Nodelman's application of Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the field of cultural production, according to which "individual texts must represent and contain the evidence of the positions their producers or purchasers occupy" (*Hidden* 119). A sub-category, or an offshoot, of the genre of children's literature, young adult literature is a culturally and historically specific phenomenon which emerged as a consequence of the establishment of adolescence as a cultural concept in the West.⁹ While the beginnings of adolescence as an idea, just as those of childhood, are a disputed subject, G. Stanley Hall's two-volume study of 1904 is often quoted as a cornerstone in giving adolescence social currency. As Griffin cautions, however, this publication is not to be regarded as some absolute point of origin for adolescence, or a scientific "discovery" of its essential nature, but rather as a crystallisation of "a range of themes, assumptions and arguments in late nineteenth-century western ideologies around education, sexuality, family life and employment" (11-12). Although instances of identifying adolescents' literary needs as distinct from those of adults as well as those of younger children may well predate Hall's work,¹⁰ the beginning of the publication of literature specifically for young adults is related to their identification as a separate group of consumers in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Waller 9).¹¹

Since children's and young adult literature have also been defined as social constructs (Hilton and Nikolajeva 1; James 5; Clark), their relationship to each other as

⁹ Children's literature is generally understood to have evolved as a genre with the emergence of childhood as a protected stage of life in the eighteenth century. The publication of *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744 is often defined as the inaugurating moment for children's literature, as suggested by Hunt among others (*Introduction* 29).

¹⁰ A popular example is Sarah Trimmer's appeal in the *Guardian of Education* in 1802 for separate books for children and young persons (Chambers 85-86).

¹¹ Various events have been associated with the emergence of teenage or young adult literature. Waller marks as starting points the following: the foundation of publishing imprints for the adolescent market by British publishers, such as Penguin Peacock Books, and Macmillan's "Topliners" and Bodley Head's "New Adult" series; the publication of a number of American contenders for a first young adult novel, such as Beverly Cleary's *Fifteen* (1956/1962), S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967/1970), and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968/1969); and the institutional use of the term "young adult" with the establishment of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association in 1957 (Waller 9). Stahl et al. trace the emergence of young adult literature to the 1940s, when a category of children's books dealing with "adolescents in crisis" appeared (xxxix). So does Michael Cart (7-20), who within the American context traces the roots of the phenomenon to domestic and adventure stories in the mid-nineteenth century, with examples including Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and Horatio Alger, Jr.'s *Ragged Dick* (1868) (8). According to Cart, the text most often quoted as the first teenage book, is Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) (11). Hilton and Nikolajeva see the Second World War as a major factor in the historical change from sentimental representations of young people to the production of texts articulating the psychological tensions which have been associated with adolescence since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (6-7).

categories has been evolving together with changes in the mutually dependent concepts of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Perhaps in unison with pedagogical and legal practices of subsuming adolescence within childhood as a transitory period to the attainment of majority at the age of 18, and due to its own relative recentness, young adult literature itself has largely been discussed within the boundaries of children's literature criticism. The independence of the genre, Alison Waller argues, is still viewed with suspicion in academia and education, especially regarding its "intrinsic value," and critics have sought justification for its study via comparisons with adult or children's literature (13-14). Waller, among others, defends the study of young adult literature as a separate genre on the grounds of differences in the discursive links between the concepts of childhood and adolescence, which transpire in textual features such as linear and progressive, rather than circular narrative patterns (29). Peter Hunt also distinguishes between the two, and associates literature for younger children with closure and restoration of security, and literature for older children with transformation and ambivalence (*Criticism* 127-28). Similarly, according to Nodelman, literature for adolescents starts with "the standard polarities of children's fiction but ha[s] the potential, at least, to deconstruct them" (*Hidden* 58). On such arguments, young adult literature is increasingly being addressed on its own terms in recent work by Robyn McCallum, Roberta Seelinger Trites, Alison Waller, Margaret Mackey, Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva, and Michael Cart.

Establishing the position of the group of novels I am researching within the age structure of children's and young adult literature is significant, since one of their remarkable features is the uniformity in their protagonists' age (which in this genre often corresponds to the age of the implied audience). In the majority of cases, characters are between 10 and 14 years old, which is in itself evidence that this is assumed to be a time in life when learning about international conflicts in the way that the books represent them is particularly necessary or relevant. At the same time, however, a strict delineation between children's and young adult literature may not be the most productive approach for my project. I have opted to use "children's fiction" as a blanket term to refer to the texts written for an implied audience that has not attained social maturity according to the institutionalised criteria of its own culture, and I will reserve "young adult fiction" or "adolescent fiction" for texts within the genre of children's fiction, whose implied audience is aged 10/11 or above, thus including what

is generally recognised as teenage or adolescent readers, as well as a slightly younger, pre-adolescent age group.¹²

My decision to consider young adult fiction within the framework of children's fiction is based on pragmatic, theoretical and topic-specific reasons. From a pragmatic standpoint, this allows me to draw on a vast body of relevant academic work on the subject of children's literature, which may not have been concerned with drawing lines between different age groups in young readers. In theoretical terms, I agree with Perry Nodelman's initial premise in the *Hidden Adult* that young adult texts are defined by their immature audience in a similar way to children's literature, and in both cases the implied readers are an adult construct, their characteristics and needs imagined by the books' adult authors, as well as other adult members of its production and consumption system (5-6). In both types of literature, the implied audience is seen as different, or 'other' to its adult producers, and the power imbalance this difference involves makes these texts a mechanism of adult control on how childhood and adolescence are to be thought of, treated and practiced for both adults and children. Finally, by tying war experiences to the attainment of maturity, contemporary young adult war novels problematise the meanings of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. As much as these texts may strive to control and contain war experiences, their representations of children performing 'adult' roles regardless of age under the pressure of war suggest a fluidity of the maturity boundary. Also, the ambiguous re-inclusion of young characters in family structures at the end of their journeys may challenge the distinction between texts for adolescents and texts for younger children. The rest of this chapter elaborates on my last two points, by examining at greater length the implications of theories of young adult literature, and of war as its subject matter in particular, for my study of contemporary war novels for young people.

How the image of childhood envisioned by children's texts is related to what young readers 'really' are like and whether these readers can be said to exist as an objective or knowable entity at all are issues which have been widely debated by children's literature critics. Much of contemporary literary research starts from the theoretical premise that childhood and adolescence are social adult constructs, which contribute to creating the social practices around young people. Such views, which

¹² A similar provisional line has been drawn by Kathryn James, who foregrounds the age of characters as a criterion, seeing adolescent fiction as "books which either feature protagonists of secondary school age (twelve to eighteen years), or, it is reasonable to suppose, would be read by those in this age group" (5).

Alison Waller summarises as constructionist theory (3), have emerged in the context of postmodernist questioning of the epistemological authority of scientific modes of inquiry, and of the educational and literary analyses they have previously legitimised. Both Peter Hunt and Perry Nodelman, for instance, quote research in developmental psychology which challenges the objective existence of the Piagetian developmental stages of childhood, hitherto taken to be natural and all-encompassing. Critiquing Nicholas Tucker's assessment in *The Child and His Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981) of the age-appropriateness of individual children's texts, Hunt says that while there may be a "common sequence" of children's cognitive development, it is questionable whether it can be legitimately organised into recognisable age-based stages (*Criticism* 57). According to Nodelman, current concepts of this branch of psychology acknowledge not only that young people develop at individual rates, but that there may be dissonance in the levels of maturity of different aspects of personality attained by the same individual, "so that any one child (or adult) tends to have a supposedly adult grasp of some things intermixed with an infantile grasp of others" (*Hidden* 307).

This undermining of the unitary concept of the child chimes with constructionist views within children's literature criticism encapsulated in controversial formulations such as Jacqueline Rose's "There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place" (10). More recently, Lesnik-Oberstein adds that the child which children's literary criticism aims to benefit does not exist either (9), since the "facts" provided by other disciplines studying childhood, on which literary scholars' assumptions are based, are actually adults' wishes and beliefs represented as knowledge (7). Conversely, other authors imagine a more interactive model of child-adult relationships in texts for children, where children might be knowable to some degree. David Rudd, for instance, disputes Rose's reading of children's literature as an impossible form of communication between author and addressee. Instead of Rose's perspective of "isolated authors (adults) in 'command,' with passive readers (children) in danger of 'seduction,' and insular texts waiting to trap readers with their baited 'image of the child' (Rose 2)", Rudd suggests a Bakhtinian approach, which envisages children's literature as a space of inevitable dialogue, albeit with uncertain effectiveness, between the two parties (294-95). Perry Nodelman argues the case for the possibility of adults' knowledge of "real children" (rather than the fictional "real child"), and suggests that his critical project would be "pointless without a long-range goal of actually affecting how real people read and think about what they

read – including, eventually, children” (*Hidden* 87). The critical attitudes thus show variance in terms of the way in which they imagine the interaction between language and the “real world,” but on the whole, the recognition of adult dominance in the transactions of children’s literature remains a point of agreement for all these critics.

The same kind of thinking which destabilises the knowledge of childhood produced by the natural and social sciences and education lends authority to fictional and critical representations. Works by Rex and Wendy Stainton-Rogers have been enlisted by both Alison Waller and Perry Nodelman to draw attention to the linguistic nature of discourses concerning childhood and adolescence. Nodelman quotes Stainton-Rogers’ exposure of traditional developmentalism as a cultural construct, which is “no more than a story,” but whose plausibility has assigned it the “seeming status of incontrovertible truth” (*Stories of Childhood: Shifting Agendas of Child Concern* 39-40 qtd. in *Hidden* 307). Waller adopts Stainton-Rogers’ term “word children” (“Word Children” 193 qtd. in Waller 2) to support her arguments for the epistemological equality of textual representations of young people across different disciplinary and creative domains. As Waller explains, adolescence is constructed at the intersection of different discourses (in Foucauldian terms) such as biology, psychology, law, education, as well as “imaginative systems like literature and art” (7), which form a discursive field (6). The seemingly fixed hierarchy of these discourses is in fact subject to constant change, with “official voices” in recent years losing influence to popular discourses such as television, film and music (7). The exchange between the different spheres constructing adolescence results in common “discursive frameworks” through which young adulthood is conceptualised, which include “development, identity, social agency and subjectivity in space” (7).

The discursive perspective on children’s literature emphasises its being an adult domain, and focuses on the purposes it serves for its creators’ social group.¹³ Since adults describe childhood and adolescence from “outside” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 164), and due to the power inequality between those who describe and those who are described, the construction of childhood in children’s literature has been suggestively compared to discourses of “othering” on the basis of gender, class and ethnicity. Perry Nodelman, for instance, builds on Jacqueline Rose’s association of the adult-child

¹³ Indeed, Nodelman suggests that since children’s texts are first read by other adults, such as editors and publishers, whose approval they need to gain in order to reach children, these adults could be considered “their implied audience, instead of or in addition to the children they purport to be addressed to” (*Hidden* 164).

relationship with colonialism to draw parallels between adults' representations of children and Orientalists' approach to the "Oriental mind," as analysed in Edward Said's *Orientalism* ("The Other"; *Hidden* 162-72). Nodelman reasons that if colonialist thinking seeks justification by representing colonised peoples as childlike this reveals an inherent adult colonial attitude to children:

The metaphor of childlikeness applies most immediately to children themselves – and children's literature might be best characterized as that literature that works to colonize children by persuading them that they are as innocent and in need of adult control as adults would like them to believe. (*Hidden* 163)

As with similar metaphorical models of otherness, the Orientalist one also has its limits, and Nodelman makes concessions both regarding the complexity of the specific cultural and historical aspects of Orientalism itself (164), and of counterarguments regarding the disintegration of the colonialist metaphor in children's literature of empire, which, Mavis Reimer argues, socialises its readers as colonisers (Reimer, "Making Princesses, Re-making *A Little Princess*" 111 in *Hidden* 164).¹⁴ The comparison to Orientalism, however, does bear out on several important points. Both Orientalists and children's writers defend the need for their writing with the argument that their objects of description are unable to speak for themselves (*Hidden* 164). The silence of both children and "the other" thus leaves a blank in the centre of their scribes' constructions: an untranscendable unknowability, portrayed by metaphors of mystery and absence, which both perpetuates further attempts to portray them (in the case of children through children's literature, child psychology, education etc.) and opens them as images of their observers' fantasies of otherness, usually reaffirming already existing stereotypes and views of them (164-66).

The representation of "the Orient" as well as children in terms of lack engenders two conflicting attitudes towards them, which Nodelman names the "self-confirming

¹⁴ Nodelman also acknowledges the objection that unlike the objects of other oppressive rhetorical systems, children are "in legitimate need of protection and guidance" (Richardson 31, qtd. in *Hidden* 163). While he accepts this to be the case to a certain extent, he observes that there is a difference between what children need, and what books which target them imply they need: "Children are certainly not as universally uninformed or incapable as texts of children's literature conventionally assume, nor are they always uninformed and incapable exactly in the ways those texts tend so consistently to describe them" (163). This observation of course returns to the debate of the knowability of "real children" and who could know them legitimately, which remains unresolved. Still, I accept his point, though without being able to draw on the same range of experience of children's texts, that a consistent representation of the same kind of "lack" does sound insistent too.

enterprise” and the “evolutionary enterprise” (166). For the purposes of the first, children, like “Orientals,” are represented as the exact opposite to the superior self-image their representors wish to maintain. Rephrasing Said, Nodelman comments: “adults can see themselves as rational, virtuous, mature, and normal exactly because they have irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different children to compare themselves to” (167). Within the self-confirming project, children’s literature has the task of impressing upon children their inferior status, hence their need for adult guidance. Nodelman exemplifies this point with the didacticism of children’s texts, such as Maria Edgeworth’s “The Purple Jar” (1801) where child characters’ desires are portrayed as the product of their ignorance, and are punished by the plot, leading them to submit to adult control (33-37). Similarly, Michael Cart explains, the typical characteristics associated with adolescence from Hall onwards, including “inner turmoil, awkwardness, and vulnerability,” are all qualities which make adult intervention seem necessary, and justify its institutionalisation via schools and youth organisations (4). Although the lack of knowledge might be assumed to be a negative trait, Nodelman argues that its representation always involves a certain ambivalence. The inadequate abilities and irrational impulses of child characters are often presented in a positive and pleasurable light, as an “innocent freedom from depravity” (167-68). This view of childhood has its roots in Rose’s understanding of childhood as a form of a myth of origins (138), which serves the purposes of adults’ identity. As Rose suggests, the fictional child is represented as innocent and universal in order to ward off adult anxieties about the child’s “polymorphous” sexuality (and what normative sexuality might be) (4), as well as social inequalities that exist between children, as well as between them and adults (7). Besides offering a chance for adult indulgence in nostalgic fantasies of a pre-existent Golden Age of unity and purity (Nodelman, *Hidden* 167-68), the pleasingly innocent and incompetent literary child encourages child readers to embrace, or at least pretend to embrace, this model of childlikeness which adults have designed for them (197). Or, as Nodelman summarises the process: “Childhood exists, then, to allow adults to be adults – so children’s literature exists in order to impose childhood on children” (169).

The other impulse towards “Orientals” and children, which stems from their colonisers’ self-presumed status of “superior humanity,” is the urge to help them evolve, and approach the identity of those who write of them. Nodelman summarises the logic of this attitude thus: “The strong must colonize the weak to help them become

stronger, so, in a very basic sense, *Oriental* [and, by Nodelman's metaphor, 'child'] means 'a less evolved being with the potential to become human'" (166). This understanding of children as dynamic, undergoing the process of becoming adult, contradicts the static view of the transcendent, eternal child, and points to the tendency of children's literature to teach children to be like adults, at the same time as it teaches them how to be children (167). This didactic dimension of children's literature is commonly recognised among scholars, who note its role in transmitting communal cultural values (Hunt, *Criticism* 19), and in situating children in the ideological structures of their societies (J. Stephens, *Language and Ideology*). Acknowledging the influence of ideas of both childhood and the function of reading, Nikolajeva observes that these have both "gone hand in hand with pedagogical views of literature as a powerful means of educating children" (*Children's Literature* 3). This aspect of children's literature is particularly significant for my project, as it pays attention to the political attitudes beyond the child-adult theme, which children's texts address. But I will return to this point when I discuss the subject-specific issues around children's literature.

How does this ambivalent attitude to children work on a textual level? According to Nodelman, the contradictory ideas of childhood are played out in children's fiction via specific textual characteristics. One of these characteristics is the text's simplicity of language and style, which make its interpretation possible only by recourse to a wider knowledge of the world beyond the text: "an unspoken and much more complex repertoire that amounts to a second, hidden text" (*Hidden* 8). It is this "hidden text," or "shadow text," which contains all the adult knowledge which adult authors want to remove from children's literature, so that it can promote images of the childlike, and protect child readers' innocence. While this composition of texts for children might suggest that it is only adult readers who have access to the distancing "shadow text," Nodelman argues that the implied child readers are also invited to "both understand how a noninnocent adult outsider might view innocence and yet still be innocent in the terms they [children's texts] describe" (197). Thus, children's fiction demands that children both regret their adult-assumed state of ignorance, without losing it, and celebrate it: "to imagine themselves to be (or, perhaps more exactly, to pretend to imagine themselves to be) innocent in order to please adults" (197). This ambivalence is embedded in the binary structure and themes of children's texts, which are a consequence of the European patriarchal tradition in which children's literature has

emerged (227-32).¹⁵ It is represented by the characters' combining of contradictory features, such as vulnerability and self-reliance, and by plot structures revolving around movement between places endowed with opposite meanings. The ambivalence, however, is never resolved, since "the texts work to make a public declaration of support for one of the settings over the other – almost always the place identified at the end as safely homelike – and imply a less forthrightly spoken espousal of the opposite conclusion" (231). It is this unresolved ambivalence which is employed by the young adult novels of my corpus to convey the complexity of the war experience. It fits particularly well the rite-of-passage structure, especially its middle, liminal stage, as I demonstrate in Chapter Six. However, the absence of final resolution inherent in the genre is magnified by the endings of war novels and thus troubles the rite-of-passage function of accomplishing a full transition to maturity.

Another important contribution to the analysis of children's literature as a site of meaning-making and regulating power within a "child-adult" dichotomy has been made by Maria Nikolajeva's model of children's literature as a discourse of the "other," structured around the conflict between child and adult values. "[N]owhere else are power structures as visible", she claims, "as in children's literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group" (*Power* 8). In order to both allow for children's literature to be discussed on its own terms, without reference to other similar practices of oppression and education, as well as to study its intersection with issues of gender, ethnicity etc., she coins a separate term for the adult as the norm: aetonormativity. Nikolajeva combines ideas from queer theory about questioning the very concept of "norms" based on their contingency (9) with the Bakhtinian model of carnivalesque subversion of social order (10) to explore the possibility for children's literature to empower rather than oppress children. Some texts, she notes, may seem to "substitute child normativity for adult normativity" (9), usually via plot devices such as change of location, being in extraordinary situations, and removal of parental presence. In the majority of cases, however, this empowerment is only temporary, and is followed by a reaffirmation of adult norms (10-11) – a strategy which echoes Nodelman's explanation of the benevolent representation of childhood inadequacy. Thus, the subversive potential of children's literature proves rather limited,

¹⁵ Nodelman's list of binary characteristics includes "innocence and experience or, alternately, ignorance and adult wisdom or, alternately, childlike wisdom and corrupt sophistication; freedom and safety; knowledge and lack of knowledge; text and shadow text; didacticism and utopianism; home and away from home" (230).

and most books seem to ignore the issue of power altogether (203). Nikolajeva argues that since the hierarchy of age is “non-negotiable,” only non-mimetic forms such as fantasy could provide really subversive world-order revisions, but even texts in this genre usually refrain from using this opportunity, and keep to carnivalesque representations instead (203-204). Yet, Nikolajeva suggests that there is still value in representing childhood as the temporary norm, since it can alert child readers to the fact that norms are arbitrary, and not natural, and thus can open the texts for a queer re-reading, according to which power structures can at least be interrogated (9-11).

Both of the above models, just like those of Jacqueline Rose and Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, seem to be bound to what they find is a basic element of children’s literature: the binary child-adult opposition. Emphasising the distinctiveness of adolescence, Alison Waller objects that these theoretical formulations leave no space for an intermediary term. In certain ways, adolescence does compare to childhood. It is “other” to adulthood, which gives grounds for Waller’s study of fictional teenagers as working to “maintain their [adults’] own sense of coherent selfhood, and to manage ambivalent feelings towards the potentially dynamic state of adolescence” (1). However, adolescence is “other” to childhood too: not evoking the same associations with innocence or moral security, more obviously a cultural construct, more fluid as a concept, not so easily accommodating the projection of “a distinct dichotomy of desires or fears” (6). The progressive narrative pattern of the young adult novel, away from the stability of childhood and towards a new stage in life, is seen by Waller as common to discourses of adolescence, being “the dominant model for understanding the concept of youth” (29). Waller links this model to the concept of adolescence in various versions of developmental theory. Works by Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson exemplify 20th-century psychological and sociological assumptions of adolescence as “progress[ion] through a series of stages or tasks that lead towards maturity” (30-31). Importantly for my discussion of rite-of-passage framings of childhood war experiences, Waller includes liminality as a framework for adolescence related to developmentalism (32). She discusses the applicability of liminality to the genre of fantastic realism, where it represents a convergence between the more diffuse, fragmented liminal characteristics of contemporary Western adolescence, and more traditional, ritualistic symbolism (33). Young adult novels portray their protagonists’ direct exposure to war in liminal terms, as I show in Chapter Six.

Perry Nodelman also notes that the textual features of children's literature that he has identified do not quite cover the peculiarities of texts for young adults. Young adult books seem to start with assumptions of the distinctions between childhood and adulthood typical of literature for younger children, but then proceed to destabilise them, showing, for instance, that "mature adult knowledge and experience really offers no more certainty or security than childhood innocence does – that both children and adults have less power to understand and control their worlds than the adults . . . like to imagine" (58-59). As war is often perceived to be "precisely the situation in which even adults lose a sense of agency, becoming as vulnerable and powerless as children" (Tatar 238), the unsettling of the child-adult binary might be exactly what makes young adult novels a particularly suitable medium for representing the topic of war.

In a similar way to literature for younger children, adolescent literature is seen as a means to control and guide its implied readers, who are often culturally constructed as a source of concern. Anthropologists have associated various socio-psychological problems associated with young people with the general contemporary diffusion and individualisation of rites of passage. In modern societies, the otherwise contained liminal stage of ritual has evolved into deviant "liminoid" forms, of which the extended period of adolescence is seen as one. For example, Solon Kimball's introduction to the English-language publication of van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* observes that cases of mental illness could be related to the withdrawal of social support within a shared social system, so that "individuals are forced to accomplish their transitions alone and with private symbols" (xvii-xviii). Kira Krenichyn associates this danger particularly with young people of disadvantaged backgrounds, who, being denied stable rites of passage, may "become lost in the landscape between childhood and adulthood" (43).

As a didactic adult-controlled medium, with its nostalgic representation of nuclear family-bound childhoods and its depiction of war experiences as a rite of passage channelling adolescent explorations towards socially acceptable identities, young adult literature in itself could be regarded as a version of the rite of passage, a tool implemented by adults in an attempt to regain control over contemporary Western adolescents' maturation. The didactic purpose of young adult literature is exemplified by Peter Hollindale's defence of the need for literature of youth¹⁶ as it helps young people grasp the turning points marking their prolonged process of growth and "the

¹⁶ Hollindale understands the "literature of youth" in a broader sense, though, as literature containing "authentic" representations of youth, rather than literature written specifically for young adults.

unspoken goals and values of the culture we inhabit” (119-20). This understanding of the cultural function of literature for young adults is seen by Hollindale as beneficial to both the readers and to society as a whole, because it would prevent “severance” with cultural traditions and “negative demonstrations of self-worth,” such as youth violence and various forms of delinquency (120-21). From the perspective of the colonialist metaphor for child-adult relations, this view appears to endorse adult domination via the medium of children’s literature. Ann Alston is more critical in describing the same process, revealing the role of nuclear family representations for maintaining the social status quo:

if there is really a loss of parental authority in contemporary society, then it is in literature for children that we find the best location to impose family ideology on children, to indoctrinate them with role models and to promulgate the family values which allow society to function in a specific way, in so far as we can in the present context. (11)

How the didactic and socialising role of young adult literature is evaluated appears to be a matter of ideology. Whether positively or negatively characterised in this debate, young adult fiction is comparable to the rite of passage as a tool used by adults/elders to regain a role of responsibility and guidance which is perceived as lost.

The power balance and the mutual definition of adolescence and adulthood have their own specific character in books for adolescents. According to Roberta Trites, it is this contestation of power that is definitive of young adult literature, more so than even the common concept of growth, since growth is conditional on the experience of “gradations between power and powerlessness” (x). Trites argues that while literature for younger children aims to affirm “the child’s sense of Self and her or his personal power,” at least to a certain extent given the child’s status in the age hierarchy, and thus promote his or her feeling of security in their immediate environment, in young adult literature power is seen as external, involving young adult characters in negotiations with a number of social institutions, such as school, family, church, and identity politics (3, 21). Trites links this tendency to preclude adolescents from gaining full adult power to a cultural shift in the postmodern age. The Romantic narrative of achieving an individualistic self-determination encapsulated in the *Bildungsroman* is no longer a suitable way to describe the young adult novel (18-19). Instead, she proposes the term *Entwicklungsroman*, which refers to growth in a more general sense, to suggest that maturing is not related to a straightforward empowerment, but to young people

“reconcil[ing] themselves to the power entailed in the social institutions with which they must interact to survive” (20). In Trites’ view, young adult texts work simultaneously through characterisation, narrative structure, and implied readers’ ideological positioning in order to instruct readers in the “inevitability” of power and repression (55).

Topic-specific functions of young adult fiction

Trites’ emphasis on the significance of the relationship between adolescence and external social forces in young adult literature is particularly relevant for the corpus of texts I am researching, because of their political subject matter. Other researchers offer useful variants of Trites’ analysis of young adult literature’s focus on individual and society. Bradford et al., for instance, observe that children’s literature in general is “a field of cultural production highly responsive to social change and to global politics, and crucially implicated in shaping the values of children and young people” (2). Looking at books for young adults in particular, they suggest its major concern is the formation of subjectivity in a wider social context (17), represented by structuring the development of plot events in terms of narratives of growth (12). Or, as Hilton and Nikolajeva formulate this narrative strategy, “puberty and adolescence have provided the opportunity for many writers to map the interior turmoil of the newly aware teenager onto the essences of political conflict and injustice in their environing contexts” (11). The particular meanings implied in the metaphorical correspondence between the character’s experience of adolescence and the political environment depend on how adolescence is imagined at the given cultural moment. As Hilton and Nikolajeva suggest, contemporary understandings of adolescents’ personal experiences of alienation provide an occasion for young adult books to “bring young readers face to face with different forms of cultural alienation itself: the legacy of colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness, and death” (1). The association of adolescence with development and growth, on the other hand, suggests hope for redressing these social issues with the new generation of adults.

The issue of the images of adolescence as ideological vehicles raises the question of the potential of literature for young people to effect change in public perceptions. Since children’s literature is generally viewed as a conservative genre, carrying in its very structures patriarchal and culturally hegemonic views (Nodelman,

Hidden 178-79; Bradford et al. 184)¹⁷, its attempts to reimagine the power structures in the world are often regarded with suspicion. Researchers often reach the conclusion that even though the content and the more overt messages of the texts might be aiming to revise perspectives, under scrutiny these messages seem to be subverted by generic features. For example, John Stephens argues that the typical plot structure of texts for children (in his words, that of “orientation – complication – resolution”) fails to challenge the cultural model of centre and periphery in multicultural societies, and may “constitute a new kind of center rather than multiple networks” (“Continuity” 56). Similarly, according to Bradford et al., the growth-oriented narrative pattern of utopian texts, and the closure they provide, which seems politically innovative, may affirm traditional notions of subjectivity as a fixed state to be achieved, “rather than a constant process of self-production” (12).

At the same time, however, some texts for young people are considered to have the potential to bring about change. Bradford et al. for instance suggest, in particular about the utopian genre of children’s literature, that ideally texts for children can provide opportunities for “dialogic exchange across age, race, gender, nature, and culture that proffers hope for evolving broad policies and social practices that might avoid the tyranny of the powerful over the impotent and disenfranchised” (183). One innovative method to evaluate this potential is suggested by John Stephens, who borrows from cognitive linguistics the concepts of schema and script as structural units of organising knowledge. He suggests that racial and ethnic stereotypes could be challenged by children’s texts if they evoke and then modify the schemas and scripts “for socially transformative purposes” (“Schemas” 15).

The ideologies of childhood and adolescence, and of social and political issues in children’s texts, acquire a specific inflection in the corpus of texts I am investigating. By representing children’s war experiences in non-Western countries, these fit simultaneously into two subject fields of writing for young people: war fiction, and so-called world literature, in each of which childhood representations are controlled by sets of subject-specific criteria. These criteria might be considered all the more rigid, given

¹⁷ For example, Nodelman suggests: “[Children’s literature’s] ideals of autonomy and equality are contaminated by the need for girls to be girlish and boys to be boyish. Those ideals are also contaminated by its clinging to the ideas of class, race, the possession of property, and many other of the registers of difference that have limited and continue to limit the power of individuals to be individuals in the time children’s literature has existed. If children’s literature works to construct mainstream democratic subjectivities, it does so in the terms of current hegemonic values that limit freedom as well as allow it” (178-79).

that some of these texts are used in formal schooling. For example, the UK school curriculum until recently recommended works by Deborah Ellis for English Key Stage 3, and Beverley Naidoo and Benjamin Zephaniah for both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, in the section “From different cultures and traditions” (“English: Key Stage 3” 71; “English: Key Stage 4” 95). Educators in the USA also stress the importance of teaching some of the novels in my corpus, alongside others set in conflict areas, especially in the post-9/11 context for texts set in predominantly Muslim cultures (Mattis 110, Baer and Glasgow 24, Marston 647). *Under the Persimmon Tree* is given as an example of offering an insight into an “other” culture, helping young people define their own position in the world and promoting multicultural values (Mattis 112, Isaacs 425), and is also listed in YALSA’s list of recommended books for older readers for 2006 (“2006: Best”). Baer and Glasgow offer a list of recommended literature, including both children’s novels (including works from my corpus by Staples, Ellis, Stine, Clinton, Laird) as well as life writing texts, such as *The Story of My Life*, *My Forbidden Face*, and *Tasting the Sky*.

The tradition of war writing for young people reflects changing historical circumstances, for example in global war practices, and public attitudes to war. Thus, in earlier writing aimed at young people, war has often been represented in terms of adventure and entertainment, based on virtues such as patriotism, heroism and manliness. Romanticised images of war are considered to have enticed youths to participate in war for different political purposes, from the defence and expansion of empire to combating “indisputable” evil in “just” world wars. Michael Paris, for instance, points out the influence of the pleasure culture of war, which by the early twentieth century “had imbued the youth of Britain with the martial spirit and convinced them that war was natural, honourable and romantic; that on the battlefield, fighting to further the nation’s cause, they would achieve their destiny” (82). Exploring the gradual shift in attitudes to war in children’s literature from World War I to the year 2000, Geoff Fox confirms this attitude of boys’ storypapers and novels, which at the outbreak of World War I “encouraged boys to fight the good fight on foreign fields when their time came” (8) or during World War II presented them with “exciting stories about war,” which however “did not tie themselves closely to actual events” and sometimes bordered on the fantastic (26). Fox argues that during the evacuation of children from British cities during the Second World War, storypapers functioned as a distraction, “or even a means of coming to terms with the war itself” (22). Villainised,

entirely negative images of the enemy persisted through both world wars. Talking about the images of Germans in storypapers of World War II, Fox says: “In the middle of a war, the storypapers could hardly be faulted for adopting a view of the enemy which came close to caricature” (26). This comment is of particular interest when considering the representation of current conflicts, whose resolution is still unclear and in some of which children are exposed to contact with the enemy on a daily basis.

The Second World War seems to be a turning point in war fiction for young people in several ways. The belief in the power of children’s literature for social reformation frames it as an arena for pacifism, endorsing French author Paul Hazard’s vision of the universal republic of childhood as “the ideal antidote to war, hate and destruction” (O’Sullivan 15). As O’Sullivan remarks, “Children’s literature, and indeed children themselves, become the repository of the means to heal the trauma caused by war” (15). This universalised view of childhood is the foundation of an international movement in children’s literature, accompanied by the establishment of institutions such as the International Youth Library in Munich and the International Board on Books for Young People (17). As O’Sullivan rightly observes, however, the tendency towards internationalism is underpinned by traditional essentialist views of childhood. In the case of war, this construction of children’s literature might be seen as another example of assuaging adult concerns and anxieties: “it is about promises which the adults’ generations could not keep, among them international understanding and world peace” (19). Similar to O’Sullivan’s objection that the universal image of the child erases inequalities in the conditions of childhood across countries and cultures (18), Bradford et al. argue that the promotion of an ideal of “planetary conviviality” in utopian young adult fiction may “den[y] racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences,” and “and surface conviviality may mask fear and insecurity of the ‘other’” (57).

Representations of war in children’s literature are also influenced by the broader change of cultural perceptions of war itself in the aftermath of World War II. Children’s fiction of the last three decades of the 20th century is characterised by “less romanticized and more ambivalent treatment” of the subject (Fox 14), inviting readers to “examine the nature of violence and suffering, persecution and endurance, hatred and loyalty, selfishness and sacrifice” (53). Similarly, Myers draws attention to the increasing number of recent works which transcend “patriotic nationalism”, and discard “naïve notions of what counts as heroism or legitimate authority” (24). Instead of affirming military values, contemporary fiction for adolescents focuses on exposing the “graphic

horrors” of war (Myers 24). The value judgement in both Fox and Myers’s comments thus elucidates the contemporary standards for war literature for children.

The urge to provide an honest and multifaceted representation of war for young people, including by deglamourising war-related violence, clashes with children’s literature’s definitive function to safeguard childhood innocence and safety. This conflict, however, is not at all unusual, but rather a variant, if not a definitive example, of the paradox of its self-confirming and evolutionary enterprises, identified by Nodelman. In Nodelman’s words, children’s literature was created “when adults decided that children were constituted in a way that required adult interference between them and the horrors of the adult world – as a protective act” (*Hidden* 121). Protecting childhood innocence becomes an important psychological project with the developing concepts of transmissible cultural trauma. Hamida Bosmajian and Lydia Kokkola have both devoted book-length studies to how and whether the knowledge of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the social context that made it possible could be represented for children both accurately and safely. According to the evolutionary drive, on the other hand, children’s texts have an obligation “not to shield readers from the heart of darkness” (Goodenough and Immel 4), but to ethical and accurate representation in past and present conflicts. Recognising the relevance of war narratives to maturation, Myers argues that “[w]ar stories provide paradigmatic initiation or coming-of-age stories for both sexes and frequently sidestep gender and class codes normative in peacetime” (24). This comment is particularly significant in the context of contemporary wars, in which civilian children are affected and both girls and boys are recruited. Also, Myers’ description of children’s war books supports my view of this sub-genre as an intersection of rite-of-passage discourses which make it a particularly apt tool for intervention in Western young people’s maturation.

The representation of the historical and cultural context of war in the corpus of texts I am researching is connected to another field of related subjects in children’s literature: that of postcolonialism, multiculturalism and globalisation. Concern for the ethics and accuracy of representation in this field are related to the international social-power structures of Western domination, human rights discourses and global mobility which I have outlined in the introduction. The criteria by which children’s texts are evaluated within this subject field include whether they effectively represent foreign cultures as “other,” without stereotyping them, and whether they provide sufficient background to the historical events they address. For instance, Lydia Kokkola’s theory

about the moral responsibility to represent the Holocaust in a “historically accurate” way (2) is used as a framework for discussing the ethical nature of representations of the contemporary situation in Palestine (Tal 23), with concern for the picture of the world which contemporary Western young adults with relatively little direct experience of war can construct through reading. Another important issue is how different aspects of war representation intersect with multiculturalist concerns, thus regulating for instance the representation of the images of the enemy within reformed attitudes to “other” cultures. Here, as well as at earlier points in this section, different groups of adults might see the performance of this task in different ways. For example, while the human rights framework and the universal image of children may be taken for granted and be considered desirable by some authors, publishers, and educationists, many literary and cultural critics would read in their representation a neo-imperialist potential. As players in the field of children’s literature, however, all their views combine to shape the possibilities and boundaries of writing for young people.

With all generic assumptions and critical criteria for the representation of war for children in mind, I have been interested in whether the realist children’s books I am studying can be considered to perform their self-professed function at all. Children’s literature seems to be a highly contrived genre, which tells specific stories about childhood, is written entirely via a Western adult perspective for a Western audience, with opposing didactic and protective pulls controlling representations, and responding to various adult needs and demands: from wishful thinking about pure safe childhood to critical requirements for the texts’ political sensitivity, historical accuracy and cultural authenticity. My thesis aims to assess the specific ways in which conflicts are mediated for young Western audiences. I compare how their manner of protection tallies with the “realities” of war which young people experience. Of course, there is no way to gauge children’s “real” unmediated war experiences. Besides the theoretical impossibility of gaining access to direct experience, as I have said earlier, children affected by contemporary wars are among the most marginalised and powerless social groups in the contemporary world, and their voices can only be heard after crossing cultural, age and power boundaries. Since my comparison would inevitably have to be to representations of children’s war experiences from other discourses, I have selected contemporary young people’s war memoirs: a narrative form which is minimally different from that of the children’s novels, yet through its genre claims a greater degree of authenticity. By minimally different I mean the similarities in subject matter, common overt ideological

intentions within a human rights framework, and time and place of publication, as well as textual features such as retrospective narration from a personal point of view, and a book-length description of war experiences. This is why I am limiting my focus to memoirs, not including supposedly immediate and fragmentary autobiographical materials, such as diaries and interviews.

I explore what kinds of reconstructions of war-affected childhood the memoirs offer, and how they might be motivated by a greater commitment to the truthfulness of accounts, both for personal reasons and for the benefit of their authors' community of origin. I demonstrate that memoirs share with young adult novels considerable similarities in representing young people's experiences of war, which could be related to their emergence within pre-existent cultural models and regulated life-writing genres of testimony and exotic autobiography, as well as by Western co-authorship. However, these texts are nevertheless crucially different from the entirely fictional representation of young adult novels. An important example of the difference between the two is their protagonists. As I have already mentioned the age of the protagonists in young adult novels is quite consistent, which serves as an indication of the texts' implied audience. The fact that war in English-language young adult novels generally seems to invade children's lives at the age of 11 is contrasted by the range of ages at which memoir authors experience it intensely: from five years old, as in *They Poured Fire*, to sixteen years old in *My Forbidden Face*. While this difference may be seen as uncontroversial and not requiring explanation, I think that it elucidates a couple of significant distinctions between the two genres I am studying. The first is the degree to which the pedagogical concerns of children's literature curtail representations of the arbitrariness of war and violence, for which there might be more room in life-writing. Second, it makes it even more obvious that adolescent protagonists in young adult literature are a genre convention in ways in which memoir protagonists are not. Despite the textuality of the autobiographical "I", the representations in the memoirs acquire their meanings because of a relationship to reality which is different from that of fictional accounts. This is by virtue of the autobiographical pact under which they are constructed, which is addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Territorial and Age Passages in Childhood War Memoirs

This chapter starts with setting the boundaries of childhood or young adulthood memoirs, acknowledging the potential proximity, but eventually distinguishing them from young adult fiction. Next, I discuss the problem of referentiality which defines as much as plagues readings of autobiography. Referentiality is especially significant when life-writing involves categories of authors in unequal power relation to co-writers or readers, and subject, such as trauma or political violence, for which a truthful representation is simultaneously impossible and morally urgent. Finally, I consider how the memoirs fit in a tradition of writing of childhood and crisis, drawing parallels with affiliated genres, and establish what exactly the texts testify to, and what their contribution might be to what childhood and young adulthood are understood to be.

Who is the memoirs' "child"/ "young adult," and where does the boundary between the two genres lie?

The term "young adult memoir" may create ambiguity as to who exactly "young adult" refers to: the author at the time of writing, the adolescent protagonist, recreated by an adult author, or the young audience an author might be addressing. For the purposes of my project, I have opted to use "memoirs of children's/young adult experiences of war," "children's/ young adult war memoirs," "childhood memoir" and "adolescence/young adulthood memoirs" interchangeably to signify the content of the text, regardless of the implied audience, or the age of the author at the time of the writing. By these terms I refer to texts which represent young people's experiences of war, and which in their production feature the active involvement and contribution of an author who coincides with the protagonist of the story. My reference to the protagonists' experiences as those of a "child" or "adolescent"/"young adult" is always somewhat provisional. Even though many of the texts offer clues about the local constructions of age categories, positing equivalences with Western categories of personal development remains problematic. Even when certain similarities seem to justify the use of one term or another, the degree to which these similarities are due to cultural mediation is hard to determine. Indeed, how these categories are textually constructed similarly or differently across cultures represents in many ways the very essence of my thesis, but at

the same time there is no way to go beyond the terms of “child” or “young adult,” both literally, as words we use, and metaphorically, as the parameters of shared understanding that allow for the very existence of those memoirs in the West.

Since some of the memoirs, such as *Bite of the Mango* and *Tasting the Sky*, are published for a young audience, and some of the young adult novels are based on “real” stories, how to define the boundary between the two genres? A comparative reading always emphasises individual researchers’ approaches and specific purposes. Further, genres are constantly under revision, both in the way that individual texts reinforce and challenge conventions, and in the way that reading practices and theoretical positions about these genres change. This is especially true for the hybrid multidisciplinary genre of life writing, with its notoriously fluid boundaries. For instance, the lines of autobiographical writing of childhood and of war have previously been stretched to include certain fictional texts as well. Richard Coe finds Lejeune’s autobiographical pact too restrictive for a definition of childhood autobiographies (4). He starts from the theoretical understanding of childhood as a “*qualitatively* different” experience, which mandates its own literary form and defies the expected factual accuracy of “standard” autobiography. It requires instead the creation of an “*alternative* world” (1), which re-evokes its “inner, symbolic truth” (2). Access to the “truth” of childhood, however, is lost to the adult writer, and the only way to represent it is “through art in a new form, conjured up by way of symbols, images, and impressions, and endowed retrospectively with a pattern and a significance which it can rarely, if ever, have possessed at the time” (3). Thus, Coe includes in the genre of “the Childhood” texts which blur the distinction between factual writing and poetry/fiction, as long as the action and the psychological development are drawn from the author’s experience (4-8). For Gillian Lathey, the choice between autobiography and fiction in writing personal experiences of wartime childhoods depends on the authors’ motivation and on historical circumstances. She brings together a set of German, Jewish and British books for children under the denominator of “autobiographical children’s literature,” evoking a communicative situation in which authors who have experienced childhood under the Third Reich and during the Second World War engage in recreating it for the generation of their children. This double criterion of authorship and audience demonstrates how the fact/fiction line can be manipulated depending on the ideological climate within different national traditions to create (or withhold) autobiographical truth. For example, German memoirs, infused both by the sense of historical guilt and an awareness of their

openness to criticism, are characterised by a pedagogical urgency and a more rigorous referential insistence on exploring the historical situation from which the child's self is seen as inextricable (167-69). By contrast, with the victory in the Second World War in Britain, British children's books involving autobiographical content seem freer from the obligation of historical accuracy, and more commonly use biographical experiences "as a starting point . . . for fiction" (169). In both cases, however, the "dominant" impulse of autobiographical writing is the author's personal need, which results in creating uncertainty about the implied audience's age for some of the texts (241).

Gillian Lathey's analysis is instructive for understanding the correlation between generic form and writer-implied reader relationship, as it demonstrates how the same extraliterary events and circumstances can find their contingently truthful representations via texts of different referential statuses. Both Lathey and Coe's work, however, points more to the fluidity of genres and their position in a continuum, than helps with drawing lines between them. My own choice in establishing the war childhood memoir category is to focus on texts which present themselves as a form of life writing – usually "memoir" or "true story," attributing less importance on the apparent age group of the intended audience. First, concurring with Lathey, I believe that it is the authors' personal motives, and their commitment to a truthful representation, rather than the audience's age, which is the more significant genre-defining feature of the memoirs. For the purposes of my project, it is exactly these texts' testimonial potential that makes them distinct from the didactic young adult novels I discussed in the previous chapter. Second, the majority of the memoirs are not published for an age-specific audience. Among the few which are classified as non-fiction for young readers, I will consider one example where paratextual material reveals hesitance regarding the implied audience. *Bite of the Mango* was published as young adult non-fiction in Canada and the USA by Annick Press, Allen and Unwin and Paw Prints, publishers and imprints specialising in children's and adolescents' literature. It has also won numerous national and international book awards in the young adult writing category, including by IBBY, the International Youth Library in Munich and YALSA. The intended audience is also identified as young adult by co-author Susan McClelland's podcast for Annick Press. However, rather than emphasise her intended audience as distinct on the basis of age, McClelland quotes her own knowledge of adolescents to justify not withholding anything from the readers, on the premise that "they can handle it" ("Bite"). The trend to generalise the implied audience

is present in the British edition of the memoir by Bloomsbury, which bears no age indications, and is published under the Bloomsbury Publishing and Bloomsbury Paperback imprints, although Bloomsbury does have a children's imprint. This example may testify to a mobility of the memoirs, which could be interpreted either as the result of an inclusive and accessible writing style and fundamentally significant subject matter, or as product adaptability serving commercial interests. Alternatively, however, these signs could be attributed to the troubled uncertainty regarding the implied audience, which Gillian Lathey discovers in some of the World War II memoirs, or to the uncertain character of contemporary childhood and adolescence themselves.

Since the age of the intended audience is not of paramount significance for the childhood war memoirs, they are a particularly suitable candidate for comparison with young adult fiction. As the previous chapter shows, at least theoretically, young adult fiction constructs childhood war experiences in the ways that Western adults wish Western children to know about them. Although it might be based on knowledge of children experiencing war, for example on the basis of interviews, the authors of the young adult novels I am considering do not refer to their own childhoods, nor could they claim to have an insider view of the cultures they depict. By contrast, the childhood memoirs necessarily have an author or a co-author, usually accorded a primary position of authorship, who addresses his/her personal memories. Yet, wartime childhood memoirs are also determined by the received notions and frameworks of reference of the target audience, in particular the framework of "universal" human rights articulated in Western-initiated legal documents and transgovernmental organisations. Comparing representations of children's war experiences in these two genres, I establish the cross-genre similarities, but I also explore the potential of the war memoir genre as a counterdiscourse to that of children's fiction. I investigate whether, as a genre free from "child-sparing" considerations, but governed by its own specific reference-related conventions, the memoirs may provide a sort of "corrective" to the predetermined depiction of adult-imagined children's experiences from young adult novels.

One genre defined by the same subject matter remains out of the scope of my study: fiction for adults about children's war experiences.¹⁸ Within the framework of my project, adult fiction seems to be farther removed from the two genres I am

¹⁸ I do not attempt to outline the field, but novels in particular about child soldiers, which have gained popularity and some critical attention, include: Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (2000, English translation 2006).

comparing, because it operates on the least number of restrictions. Without the particular politics of pedagogical/colonising impulses, or autobiographical pacts, which determine children's fiction and childhood memoirs, I expect that the fiction on this subject written for an adult audience will enjoy greater stylistic as well as ideological variety. My hypothesis is partially confirmed by Maureen Moynagh's formal comparison between African child soldiers' memoirs and "memoir-like novels." Moynagh observes that the very figure of the child soldier and the human rights paradox it creates elicits common formal approaches, which "cut across genre . . . and present a productive way of thinking about the significance of these narratives" (40). These common formal responses include sentimentality, *Bildung* and the picaresque (40), of which the memoirs more often employ, but also challenge, the form of *Bildung* (49-50), while works of fiction share greater similarities with the immoral world of the picaresque novel (51-54). In this thesis I have chosen to focus on young adult fiction and memoirs only, because I find them particularly amenable to comparative study through their genre characteristics. They are both generically determined by relationships between social categories of producers and consumers and, as a result by systems of genre rules, which can be seen as mutually opposing. Fiction for adolescents is meant to mediate representations according to assumptions of age-appropriateness, and even its decisions to reveal the "full" truth are pedagogical acts. Autobiographical texts, on the other hand, while also involving mediation, are preoccupied with the self-referential representation of experience and in the context of war derive their significance from the testifying to otherwise obliterated suffering.

This three-genre classification system is challenged by texts such as Judie Oron's *Cry of the Giraffe* and Dave Eggers' *What Is the What*. Like the memoirs, *Cry of the Giraffe* is the product of collaboration between a Western journalist and the person whose experiences are portrayed. However, the text is only "based" on a true story, and the "source" of the story is not acknowledged as a co-author on the cover page. The purposeful self-identification of the book as young adult fiction makes it a hybrid text located on the borderline between young adult novel and memoir. A similar but more self-aware middle ground between genres, this time between a memoir and a novel for adults, is claimed by the self-contradictory full title of *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*. Affirming the implications of the title, the subject of the text, Valentino Achak Deng himself, also seems to foreground the fictional pact over the autobiographical one (both Lejeune's terms, see next section).

At the same time, however, the reasons he gives for the choice of fiction over life-writing question the very possibility of writing autobiographically, and simultaneously make a claim on truthfulness which is typically associated with life-writing:

It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel. I could not, for example, recount some conversations that took place seventeen years ago. However it should be noted that all of the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages. (xiv)

The contradiction between referentiality and fiction in this passage and in the title addresses the suspicion which childhood war memoirs face. It could be read as either a precaution for the sake of honesty and accuracy, or as a reinforcement of conservative genre distinctions, which block access to autobiographical expression for certain subjects, such as war-affected children. I interpret this form of genre self-identification as a version and an inversion of faulty memory disclaimers and authenticity credentials usually established in paratexts in this genre. The text's instruction that it be read as fiction simultaneously invites the reader to question the expectations which might deny the text its autobiographical status. This is just one of the genre conventions which Eggers and Deng's text plays with in order to dramatise the conditions of production, circulation and reception of childhood war memoirs. Other examples would include the selection of only Eggers as the author of the text, in contrast to other memoirs which predominantly accord primary authorship to the author-protagonist, even when they are not the actual writer (as, for example, is the case with *Bite of the Mango*).

Thus, *What Is the What* consistently constructs itself in a discursive relation to other life-narratives of Sudanese refugees, and its reading may influence how these texts are read. Its own self-aware confession to using fictionalised elements brings forth some of the most pertinent questions about the possibilities of war childhood memoirs as testimonial narratives, in particular the use of stereotypical images and stories to intrigue or please the audience: "the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. Everyone's account includes attacks by lions, hyenas, crocodiles. . . . My own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot criticize the accounts of others" (Eggers 21). While this kind of self-critical writing earns credibility for the particular text itself, it might also be read as a discreditation of the

autobiographical status of other Lost Boys' memoirs. In my opinion, however, such an interpretation would miss the point of the cultural significance of *What Is the What*. I read *What Is the What* as a meta-memoir, which encourages a critical evaluation of the conundrum of power and disempowerment that the memoir medium provides, explained by Moynagh in terms of the "responsiveness of storytellers to sympathetic auditors in a 'division of literary labor' that is enabling and constraining at once" (47). It is also, importantly, an insistence on readers' self-examination: of the significance of readers' expectations in shaping the narratives, and of the ethics of stock emotional responses (Moynagh 42-43) by what Whitlock calls a "primed audience".

The autobiographical commitment to truth and the possibility of self-reference

I have suggested that childhood war memoirs could be a potential counterdiscourse to children's fiction on the basis of their referentiality, but the referential status of memoirs is a problematic issue which needs discussion. I use 'reference' and 'truthfulness' in light of the linguistics-based communicative frameworks of autobiographical writing offered in the 1970s by Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune. Bruss and Lejeune's theories create the base for a dialogue between children's fiction and autobiography, because, in a similar way to the children's literature criticism discussed in Chapter Two, they premise the definition of autobiography on the relationship between the actors involved in the communicative situation implied by the genre. Treating texts as speech acts between authors and readers, Bruss finds that the role of genre is to instruct readers about how the information which a text provides should be taken (4). This, in turn, is determined by the context of the communication exchange, where "the nature of . . . the roles of the participants affects the status of the information contained in the text" (4-5)¹⁹. For a text to fulfil the conditions for autobiography, it needs to comply with three rules in particular. First, the autobiographer should be the source of subject matter and the structure of the text (10). Second, the represented information and events "are asserted to have been, to be, or to have potential for being the case," thereby making a claim for the truth-value of autobiography (11). Finally, "[w]hether or not what is

¹⁹ Bruss's approach however does not ignore textuality, nor does it theorise autobiography from an extraliterary point of view. On the contrary, she claims that autobiography as a genre evolves in relation to other genres, and its conventions can only be understood relationally: "Autobiography thus acquires its meaning by participating in symbolic systems making up literature and culture. Like other genres, it is defined only within and by means of these systems, in terms of the way it resembles or departs from other potential acts" (6).

reported can be discredited . . . the autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts” (11).

Like Bruss, Lejeune understands autobiography in terms of the relation between producers and consumers of the text, where autobiography realises its effects by the force of a “contract” it offers its readers (“Pact” 29). Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” is distinguished from other forms of pacts which texts may offer (such as the “referential” or “fictional” ones) by its pledge for an identity between author, protagonist and narrator (5, 13-14).²⁰ The pact is “signed” by the author’s placing his or her proper name on the title page (5), and supported by other more or less explicit devices, which “demonstrate their [the texts’] intention to honor his/her *signature*” (14). On a textual level, this identity is realised by the reference of the usually first-person pronoun in its double role as “subject of the enunciation” standing for the figure of the narrator, and as “subject of the utterance,” standing for the figure of the protagonist, to the author’s proper name (21), which always refers to “a *real person*” outside the text (11). Thus, Lejeune pre-empts the anti-reference argument about the primacy of subjectivity or language by placing the point of convergence of text and extratextual world in the proper name itself (11), which is in itself “both textual and unquestionably referential” (21). For precision, Lejeune adds a fourth member to the author-narrator-protagonist triad: the “prototype,” or “model”, which refers to the living person as he experienced the events recounted in the autobiography (22). The relationship of identity proposed by the autobiographical pact means that the narrator of the autobiography relates to its protagonist in the same way in which the author relates to the “model”. This qualification is needed both in order to make room for temporal development of the individual, hence for the double focus of narration on the past as might have been experienced at the time, and on what it appears to be at the point of writing (“Pact” 25), but also in order to explain the dissimilarities between model and protagonist, despite autobiography’s claim to identity.

The concepts of contract and rules endow the reader with certain power over the classification of the autobiographical text: an insight which, in the case of the corpus of memoirs I am researching, reaches beyond the original implications of Lejeune’s and Bruss’s theories. According to Bruss, the truthfulness claim of autobiography entitles readers to a number of rights, which include “check[ing] up on” and “attempt[ing] to

²⁰ Lejeune defines identity as an “all or nothing” condition for autobiography initially. In his review of “The Autobiographical Pact,” he admits to the possibility of degrees of identity (“Bis” 125).

discredit” the autobiographical accounts (11). In Lejeune’s words, the text’s self-presentation as autobiography in itself may incite the reader to look for “breaches of contract” (14), and as a referential text, the autobiography “submit[s] to a test of *verification*” (22). Yet Lejeune’s formulation allows the reader little ground for verification. While autobiography, like biography, involves a “referential pact” which promises resemblance to the world beyond the text, or in the case of autobiography, of the protagonist to the model, the referential pact in autobiography is only supplementary to the “autobiographical pact,” and can be “badly kept” by the readers’ standards (23). Thus, what might appear to be “distortions” of the “truth,” memory lapses, and inaccuracies, do not detract from the referentiality of the text, but are aspects of the narrative’s authentic enunciation (22-23).²¹

Lejeune’s distinction between accuracy and authenticity opens space for the construction of narratives of trauma and childhood, written not only in retrospect, but after what is perceived by their authors as a significant transformation which makes the past self more than ordinarily elusive. However, the indeterminacy of the referential pact has come under criticism because, as Philip Baruth notes, “the ‘resemblance’ to the objective world *is* an essential part of the pact” (182), and “readers (and listeners) grant a peculiar lease on factuality to the autobiographer, one more tenacious than Lejeune is willing to admit” (183). Baruth’s remark points to two conclusions to be drawn from Lejeune’s and Bruss’s theories, which are significant for the war childhood memoirs in my corpus: that they belong to a referential genre which implies a negotiable relation of truthfulness to a subjective experience of a world beyond the text; and that readers are to a certain extent implicated in co-defining the truthfulness of the autobiographical account (even though Lejeune suggests that authenticity is inherent in the text)²². The contractual relations proposed by Bruss and Lejeune seem to be based on an implicit equality between the parties involved, as well as on a shared understanding of what truthfulness means, perhaps as defined by common cultural assumptions. The construction of “truth” and “reference” standards becomes both epistemologically and ethically more complex in the case of narratives that seek to restore pasts set in a

²¹ Bruss offers a similar “loophole”. While her first rule of autobiography implies the nature of the author, the narrator’s voice and the character’s features need to “coalesce” into a “personality, a self, an identity,” they may do so even by contradicting each other (12).

²² Regarding the reader’s role in establishing the genre of autobiography, Paul John Eakin comments: “There seems to be no doubt that readers do read autobiographies differently from other kinds of texts, especially from works they take to be ‘fictions.’ All who have studied the reading of autobiography agree that reference lies at the heart of this felt difference” (*Touching* 29).

different cultural environment and marked by violence. Delegating power to the reader, however, appears to be an inevitable part of how testimonial accounts reach their audiences. As James Dawes observes in regard to genocide testimony, “[t]his is a key problematic for both the witness and the survivor as categories: to control how the story is told, you must surrender your rights to control the story” (48). I will return to this point in my discussion of the status of the memoirs as “as-told-to” narratives.

What does it mean for a text to be referential in a poststructural age characterised by an ongoing referentiality crisis? Indeed, Lejeune believes that an understanding of the human subject as existing outside language, and imitated or recreated within the text, is dubitable for even the most “naïve” reader (9). The anti-reference argument suggests that the subject is constructed through language. It is often supported by recourse to Barthes’ autobiography, and more specifically his claim of the lack of referent to the subject of autobiographical discourse (Lejeune, “Bis” 131; Eakin, *Touching* 3, *Living* 65). In Barthes’ understanding, as Eakin explains, the protagonist of the autobiographical text, and the author’s “self,” to which it supposedly refers, are both only effects of language, and “any relation between them would be necessarily arbitrary and unstable” (*Living* 65). The subversion of reference in autobiography calls into question the distinctiveness as a genre altogether, its inability to refer to anything beyond the textual equating it with fictional texts.²³ A prominent advocate of this view, Paul de Man inverts the traditional assumption of “life” generating and determining autobiographical representation, and suggests that the construction of lived experience in autobiography is determined by the tropes which the medium of representation provides (920).

Returning to the questions of ideology and reference, Lejeune admits to holding two contradictory views: a belief in the autonomous existence of an “I,” which can commit to telling the truth, and an agreement with theory regarding the linguistic nature of the subject. Or, as he puts it, while both readers and writers are aware of the impossibility of the genre of autobiography, that does not “prevent[. . .] it from existing or functioning (“Bis” 131-32). This line of thinking is extended by Paul John Eakin, who sets out to redeem the notion of autobiographical reference, while situating autobiography among various discourses of the self, such as cultural criticism,

²³ Other scholars whom Paul John Eakin quotes as exponents of the poststructuralist (Lacanian) split subject and “reject[ing] the fully constituted self of so-called classical autobiography” include Michael Sprinker (“Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography” (1980)) and Candace Lang (“Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism” (1982)) (*Touching* 187).

sociology, anthropology, and neuroscience. Eakin claims that if there is any value in autobiographical writing, it lies in its referentiality, “for autobiography is nothing if not a referential art, and the self or subject is its principal referent” (*Touching* 3). He disagrees with interpreting the resistance to the poststructuralist reading of autobiography as a sign of “critical naïveté,” but regards it as “a response to . . . a kind of existential imperative, a will to believe that is, finally, impervious to theory’s deconstruction of reference” (*Touching* 30). Despite theoretical objections, according to Eakin, the “truth-value” of autobiography remains for readers “experientially essential” (30), in that it responds to a deeper need to “assert the distinctiveness and the continuity of one’s subjectivity” (52). Claims to the referential status of autobiography, however, Eakin argues, do not have to conflict with poststructuralist revisions of “the traditional beliefs about self, language, and literary form” (30). Thus, for instance, Eakin’s interpretation of reference does not imply a transparency of autobiographical discourse which can be contrasted to fiction. On the contrary, autobiography is recognised as “also and always a kind of fiction,” characterised by the “presence of an antimimetic impulse at the heart of what is ostensibly a mimetic aesthetic” all in service of “the pursuit of biographical truth” (*Touching* 31).

Eakin’s understanding of the concepts of self and autobiography evolves with time, and seems to gravitate away from the arbitrariness of autobiographical models and narrative devices, and towards their (necessarily metaphorical) correspondence to lived experience. Eakin’s argument draws on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s hypothesis in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) that metaphor exceeds its traditionally assumed function as a literary trope and is part of the very form of human thought processes (*Touching* 181). Similarly, rather than considering literary form an imposition on a chaotic experience of everyday life, Eakin finds correspondences between autobiographical conventions, such as the use of the first person and chronological representation, and the embodied and culturally conditioned experience of subjectivity. Eakin thus explores the potential of autobiographical constructs of self and story as themselves tools with which we experience reality, or as “primary structures that shape the living of a life” (*Touching* 182). Focusing in a later work on narrative in particular, Eakin pushes his argument further to theorise that narrative is not just an external accommodating receptacle for containing lived experience (*Living* 2), but that “self inheres in a narrative of some kind” (*Living* xii): narrative is a point of convergence of the physical and the cultural, with published autobiographies being just a variant of the

stories that we tell about ourselves on an everyday basis, stories which constitute the very essence of our necessarily plural and fluid identity (*Living* ix-x, 4). In Eakin's words, "our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us, at least insofar as we are players in the narrative identity system that structures our current social arrangements" (*Living* x).²⁴

Discussing the connection between culture, the self, and autobiography, Eakin enlists the anthropological perspectives offered by Clifford Geertz and Marianne Gullestad. According to Geertz, evidence from informants can yield the frameworks, or tools which mediate their perception of reality (Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" 224, in Eakin *Touching* 95): the "symbolic forms," which encode a culture's organizing conceptions, among which the self holds a central place (Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures* 89, in Eakin *Touching* 95). Gullestad proposes that models of self are encoded in social moral values maintained by institutions such as family, school and church (Gullestad 20 in Eakin *Living* 109). In this process the individual needs to master the culture-defined rules of self-referential narratives (*Living* 16-17), which serve to construct his or her social identity. As he concludes, while culture seems to predetermine identity, at the same time the individual has a degree of freedom through autobiography, which "is an art of the future, and . . . always an act of self-determination no matter what the circumstances" (*Living* 148).

What are the implications of Eakin's theory for the childhood/adolescence war memoirs? First, it confirms my sense of a connection of autobiographical writing to the experience of subjectivity, and its construction, which is different from what fiction offers. Second, Eakin's recourse to anthropology demonstrates how autobiographical writing can reveal the mechanisms or patterns which structure experiences of wartime childhoods. As I argue, one such pattern is the rite of passage, which seems to be particularly culturally influential and effective in rehearsing the controversies around children's and adolescents' involvement in war. Third, highlighting the identity-building purposes of life-writing and their social aspect, Eakin's theory places the individual texts within the context of the living of a life, and draws attention to the vital

²⁴ Eakin completes this sentence with the phrase "in the United States at any rate" (*Living* x), drawing attention to the cultural specificity of his argument, largely on the basis of the sources he uses to construct it. Indeed, as anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Paul Heelas have found, concepts of the self, and other conceptual structures related to it, vary across cultures (Eakin, *Touching* 95).

issues at stake in this process: “when we talk or write about ourselves, we participate in a rule-governed discourse that establishes us as normal individuals in the minds of others” (*Living x*). In the case of the memoirs, the representations offered by the text construct identities for their authors which would be expected to answer to the recipient society’s criteria of normalcy and social accountability. This proposition in particular counters cynical reproaches of the commercial self-interest in pandering to audience expectations, pointing out that identity-construction is a social business, and negotiating the audience’s terms of normal, acceptable childhoods and selfhoods is in fact an essential purpose of any life-narrative. It also, however, invites an examination of readers’ expectations to prevent misreadings of alternative representations of selfhood due to cultural difference as abnormal or lacking. Placed in the contexts of the memoirists’ lives, the autobiographical narratives can justifiably be viewed as part of the authors’ broader public activity, alongside other forms of self-expression such as public speeches, artistic performances and charity involvement. From this perspective, autobiographical texts of wartime childhoods perform one more function identified by Eakin: they articulate the individuals’ experience of being part of larger historical events, as well as work as an “instrument” in “coming-to-terms with history” (*Touching* 144). Thus the memoirs can be viewed as a platform for engaging in a new way with the historical events in which their authors took part as children, and which might still be ongoing, or whose aftermath can be felt in their communities of origin. Crucially, these same events can be re-invoked and brought to new relevance in accordance with their authors’ new cultural environment.

The recreation of the past for the purposes of the present and future through memoirs has implications for the world outside the text on a larger scale. This function of life-writing is doubly reinforced by the particular subject matter of wartime childhood memoirs, for which, as I argued, the topic of representation functions as an additional genre-shaping factor. Their representation of political injustice, violence and genocide classifies them as members of the genre of testimonio, but can also turn them into the double-edged “soft weapons” endorsing a human rights framework accompanied by neo-colonial cooption.²⁵ A testimonial function has also come to be associated with the genre of childhood life writing, whose consumption, Kate Douglas explains, is regarded as an act “of social activism”: “In consuming childhood

²⁵ Whitlock’s argument for autobiographies from the Middle East in *Soft Weapons*. In the context of African child soldier war memoirs, see Moynagh 39-42; Coundouriotis 193.

autobiographies, readers are able to align themselves with the lives they consume, particularly to offer ideological support to the autobiographical subject and designate their own ideological or political stance” (61). Based on the theoretical discussion by Lejeune and Bruss, Eakin, Whitlock and Douglas, the memoir genre can be seen as involving a complex negotiation of the construction of experiential reality, which then seeks to further mould the world beyond the text, both for the actors generating the autobiographical discourse, and at a larger scale for their communities of origin and resettlement. How this transaction shapes textual representations, and how the genre of childhood war memoirs is inscribed by traditions of childhood autobiography, transcultural life-writing, and war writing is the focus of the next sections.

Subject-specific problems of authenticity

Following Lejeune and Eakin’s theorisation of autobiography as a genre with reference to the present moment of writing this study entertains no illusion that the childhood war memoirs could be a child-led genre, or could represent childhood experiences in any immediate way. The author-protagonists who create the texts are themselves no longer children, no longer inhabit the culture they refer to, and have been engaged in the activities as well as the human rights discourse of Western-led nongovernment and transnational organisations. Additionally, these texts are produced in collaboration with Western adults, who are knowledgeable of the recipient culture’s concepts of childhood, the literary possibilities and cultural functions of the memoir. Thus, while an expectation that memoirs could give direct access to what being a child in war is like would be a misunderstanding of what the memoir genre does, the writing of a past stage of life set in a different culture raises understandable questions about authenticity. These questions range from less well-meaning suspicion of fraud and manipulation to ensure support²⁶ to supposedly more benevolent critical concerns about a potential abuse of power relations, in which the personal story can be overwritten by the recipient culture’s textual modes, and hijacked to local political purposes. These topic-specific problems of authenticity go beyond the general possibility of reference and need to be considered in greater detail.

²⁶ This suspicion is implied in the controversy around Beah’s memoir. It is also addressed in Dave Eggers’ comment on the use of stories of lion attacks to “garner sympathy from our sponsors and our adopted country in general” (30).

One such issue is that the memoirs aim to represent the experience of subjects who are ‘other’ via a Western literary form, which, since its origin in the 18th century, has been traditionally associated with giving a voice to, and promoting the Western autonomous self as the normative model, and thus maintaining the dominance of the white male middle-class European subject. As a result, according to Julia Swindells, those who are denied power, such as women, can only enter the tradition as “interlopers,” who “start from a position of incoherent subjecthood, in which subjectivity cannot be subsumed in and stand in for the surrounding ideological world” (5). Such ideological charge against autobiography as being a “stale exercise in a discredited bourgeois mythology” (Eakin, *Touching* 78) comes in the context of a major shift in both criticism and the range of publications of self-referential writings by those who are ‘other’ since the 1990s. This shift has been marked by offering alternative models of “noncanonical selves drawn from the ranks of the oppressed – whether of class, gender, or racial group” (Eakin, *Touching* 78); and, as Susanna Egan proposes, making room for dialogue in the text “between cultural and political margins and centers . . . [w]ith the result that the center, as center, ceases to be a fixed or stable point of reference” (*Mirror Talk* 13). No theoretical consensus exists as to how inclusion of ‘other’ selves is achieved in life writing, which is exactly what makes the field of contemporary life-writing a fertile ground for varied approaches, experimentation and innovative rereading of older material. The practice of challenging the established norms and adopting the means of life writing especially by marginalised individuals has resulted in a diversification of the modes of life-writing, in which Smith and Watson distinguish 60 sub-genres (*Reading* 253-87). It is within this multitude of revised possibilities for self-narration that the childhood war memoirs find their place: as giving voice to the silenced child caught up in a war, but also to the immigrant hailing from another culture, in both cases seeking recognition from a disempowered, outsider position.

The emergence of the childhood war memoir as a subgenre is defined by the convergence of several thematic strands, which have a longer history, but which coincidentally gather force and relevance in what is commonly referred to as the recent memoir boom: the trauma memoir, the childhood memoir, and diasporic and immigrant autobiographical writing. As William Zinsser a touch ironically formulates the memoir phenomenon of the last decade of the twentieth century: “This is the age of the memoir. Never have personal narratives gushed so profusely from the American soil as in the

closing decade of the twentieth century. Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it” (3). The confessional orientation of many contemporary memoirs is linked to the popularity of television talkshows (Zinsser 5, Luckhurst 120) in a culture marked by a “national appetite for true confession” (Zinsser 5). This cultural environment is connected to the thriving of the trauma memoir, which becomes both a sign of and a vehicle for the cultural pervasiveness of trauma, leading Leigh Gilmore to suggest a coincidence between the age of memoir and the age of trauma (16, qtd Luckhurst 117). Parallel to the trauma trend, there has been a surge in the publication of life-narratives focusing on childhood and adolescence. This genre is very often traced back to Rousseau (Coe 1), and sometimes even Augustine (Douglas 8, Lathey 20), but has been reinvigorated by a recent political and social anxiety and re-examination of childhood (Douglas 3-4).²⁷ The fusion of the cultural preoccupations of trauma and childhood is visible in what Kate Douglas calls the “most notable and perhaps most infamous publishing trend of the 1990s”: the traumatic autobiography of childhood, as defined by authors such as Mary Karr, Frank McCourt, and James McBride, and “characterized by abuse, poverty, discrimination, and identity struggles” (1). Jeffrey Long sees the same period as the time of proliferation of troubled coming-of-age memoirs, referring to McCourt, and also to Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (xvii). It is the same late twentieth-century scene that produces an interest in children’s perspectives from the past and thus enables the appearance of memoirs of Second World War childhoods (Lathey 23). The memoirs in my corpus fit in this contemporary context of writing childhood, but they also inherit the conventions of the traditional autobiography, whose structure, according to Egan, corresponds to the rite-of-passage-based narrative models of folktales and myths identified by Campbell and Vladimir Propp (*Patterns* 21). According to these models, childhood is seen as a “mov[ing] from innocence to experience,” whereas youth is metaphorically represented as a journey, which in religion corresponds to the pilgrimage, and in epic – to the quest (7). As I demonstrate in Chapters Five and Seven, author-protagonists mobilise this pattern to organise their experience of war. Thus, the rite of passage is affirmed as an interdiscursive structure of conceptualising childhood and youth, which inheres in discourses of age and war, as

²⁷ Douglas explains that the cultural setting for these autobiographies is defined by the Convention for the Rights of the Child (3), as well as by increased media and scholarly attention to various ‘crises’ of childhood, including anxieties about children’s and adolescents’ sexuality (6), and perpetration of violence (5).

well as in children's literature, as the previous chapter showed, and in the self-referential writing mode.

The rite of passage applies to childhood war memoirs in one more way, because their depiction of their authors' migration to a Western country adds another context of transition to the overcoming of war experiences and coming of age. The memoirists' physical movement into a new country of residence recalls van Gennep's categorisation of territorial rites of passage as a framework of all other passage rites, which very often involve symbolic movement through space (15, 192). Van Gennep explains the liminal status of the person who traverses territorial boundaries thus: "Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds" (18). Special rituals are necessary in traditional societies in order to make the stranger safe and to admit them to the community (20). My thesis explores how memoirists engage the genre to perform a symbolic rite of passage into their new communities, reflecting their position of in-betweenness, and negotiating the process of cultural transition. This aspect situates the memoirs in a pre-existing tradition of diasporic and immigrant writing. William Boelhower, for instance, observes that early twentieth-century immigrant autobiographers "quickly learned how to read the blueprint of this official version [of the American self of the time]" (125). He compares the autobiography to an initiation rite involving relinquishing the immigrant's "'old' self" (125). "Ethnic" autobiographies dramatise the tensions of cultural transition via two opposing strategies: of "consent," or acceptance of the received codes of behaviour and self-expression, and "descent," conveying cultural otherness, and sometimes used to express political protest (133). Contemporary diasporic life-writers are dubbed by Susanna Egan "the quintessential autobiographers of the late twentieth century" for their ability to constantly revise their identities and for their lack of the traditional migrant "homing instinct for assimilation" and preference for "position[ing] themselves in transition, on borders, and in process" (*Mirror Talk* 122). Further chapters demonstrate how wartime childhood memoirists inscribe their perception of past experiences of suffering and involvement in violence through frameworks of meaning belonging to or compatible with the recipient society, providing them simultaneously with an authentic account of a disturbing social event, but also with a reassuring self-image as new members of society.

The collaborative author and the relationship between truthfulness and power

The broadened possibilities of contemporary life-writing offer an auspicious environment for the publication of the memoirs of non-Western war-affected childhoods, but the issues of their expressive capabilities and authenticity are nevertheless enmeshed in a power imbalance which reflects the inequalities of globalisation outlined in the Introduction. For what happens to the criterion of truthfulness in works performing the transaction between two cultures, whose perceptions and means of expression differ in often unarticulated ways? And how does the trajectory of this cultural transaction, with its inherent necessity to take into account the recipient audience's conceptual schemes and the writers' newcomer status, affect the authenticity the texts claim? These anxieties about power and potential misrepresentation are often projected on the figure of the collaborative author – the one who does the writing, compiling or editing of material, but may also be involved in how the story is elicited.

Indeed, the memoirs I am researching vary in their modes of collaboration and disclosure of the writing process. By this criterion, they could be placed on a continuum, from apparent non-involvement of other authors to cases where the collaborative author openly takes the position of narrator. Thus, one end of the continuum would be occupied by texts such as Ibtisam Barakat's *Tasting the Sky*, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* and China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier*, which feature single authors. Keitetsi's work explicitly claims full responsibility for the narration of the text, which is presented in a Publisher's Note as "told entirely in her own idiom." This can be considered an explanation of Keitetsi's idiosyncratic use of language, which might breach the genre expectation for codified language variety, but it is equally a political statement of authenticity. Next come texts involving a degree of collaboration, such as *They Poured Fire*. Its introduction, authored by the collaborative contributor, makes reference to the narrator-protagonists' drafting of their stories in a progress framework:

Their telling comes to me randomly, but from the threads and pieces, an amazing story emerges. . . . In the beginning, their accounts came on pale green composition book pages produced folded or crumpled from their pockets. But crisp white computer paper and Internet files soon replaced those first precious pieces. (xxi)

Judy Bernstein's narrative testifies to both the genuineness of the writers' "voices," and to their increasing competence. This pattern of development repeats the success life-stories that the memoirs phrase, and can be read in rite-of-passage terms as a mastering of the recipient society's technology of cultural production. Bernstein downplays her contribution, securing the text's authenticity. Yet, she presents herself as an amateur writer like the author-protagonists, since it is in her imagination as reader of their first drafts that the story comes together, and the book is conceived: "I begin to dream that if we can weave their stories into a tapestry . . . the resulting book might pay for some tuition and they can fulfill their dreams of getting an education" (xxi). Writing is thus ascribed to a plural first-person collective of agents, and presented as a process of shared dreaming, the compiler's dream being the fulfillment of the authors' dreams. The introduction and epilogue seek to balance the relationship between the two parties, justifying both the genuineness of culturally "other" narratives, and the need for a mediator.

Yet other memoirs are written on the basis of extended interviews, such as *Bite of the Mango* and Deng and Eggers' experimental autobiography. Both are first-person narratives where narrator and protagonist coincide, and the role of the Western author is all but elided from the text. This approach is typical of the as-told-to narratives Lejeune talks about, posing questions about who the words, the voice, and hence the story, actually belong to. Both memoirs pre-empt potential challenging of their authenticity by emphasising the closeness of collaboration. Finally, the other end of the collaboration continuum is occupied by two texts where Western authors speak on their own behalf. In *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children*, the collaborator is given first position as author, and her chapters offer a more generalised, quasi-historical narration, which places the fragmented narrative of the protagonist within a history of Christian persecution. *Lost Boy No More* takes this trend even further, and might be more precisely identified as a biography. It is narrated in the third person by the Western author, and the person whose story is told is allowed to speak only via direct speech in quotation marks, and complemented by contributions of other former "lost boys." In both *Lost Boy No More* and *Girl Soldier* the narratives of the American collaborators adopt a tone of historical objectivity which is intended to function in contrast to the limited personal point of view of the protagonist's direct contributions. This strategy simultaneously asserts the collaborator's authority and conceals the strong ideological inflection of the texts.

What to make of this scale of collaborative involvement? Since the interference of the collaborative narrator evokes suspicion and anxiety, this may be reason enough to consider the texts with least Western adult involvement the most authentic ones: the definitive specimens of the genre. Such a perception is grounded on an awareness of the power imbalance and mediation characterising the creative relationship between authors of different cultural and socio-political backgrounds. Contemporary criticism casts this process in a scenario of precarious communication, in which the interaction between unequal subjects (“informant” and collaborative writer) should be scrutinised, as it might seek or claim to empower the subordinated subject, while in fact assimilating the experience of ‘otherness’ in the discourse and perceptions of the dominant group represented by the educated collaborator. Thus, memoir writing may be argued to be an act of further “re-colonisation” instead of liberation, both in cultural and political terms. Smith and Watson, for instance, warn that “despite assurances of coproduction, power relations between the teller and recorder/editor are often asymmetrical, with the literarily skilled editor controlling the disposition of the informant’s narrative material” (*Reading* 265). Eakin similarly calls the power relationship “distinctly lopsided” in what he refers to as “literature of the oppressed,” such as slave or indigenous American narratives, for the same reason as Smith and Watson: because “the informant . . . is empowered to speak only by submitting to the terms set forth by the white member of the pair” (*American Autobiography* 8).

The collaborator in this representation comes across as the figure invested with the power to define the rules of the narrative game, and to contribute significantly to the way the story is structured. In their discussion of the collaborator, Smith and Watson quote Ken Plummer’s term for that role – the “coaxer/coercer”: a person, institution or a “set of cultural imperatives” (*Reading* 64), who or which predetermines the way a story is narrated. Examples include moulding the story in the form of confession “commodified in daytime talk shows” (65), or placing it within the framework of a particular idea or theme, where “a coaxer can subordinate the narrator’s modes and choices of storytelling to another idea of how a life story should read and how its subject should speak appropriately” (68). An instance of the latter kind of coaxing could be the binary of trials and triumph which frames the plots of many of the memoirs, and which takes various guises in the marketing material on their covers. A blurb on the cover of Emmanuel Jal’s memoir presents it as a “story of survival and triumph”; Latifa’s experience is identified with that of her people “caught up in a terrible tragedy,”

but she herself is said to be “determined to survive – and live in freedom and hope.” *God Grew Tired* is advertised as a “Heartbreaking, Inspiring Journey” on the front cover, and the back alliteratively describes it in categories of “terror and triumph, horror and humor.” The back-cover blurb of Mariatu Kamara’s narrative juxtaposes her “broken life” to “astonishing courage, resilience and hope.” Farah Ahmedi’s memoir particularly vividly illustrates this prescriptiveness in publishing via a narrative about the inception of the book as a response to a television show’s writing contest. I discuss further the implications of these circumstances of production of this memoir in Chapter Seven.

Such portrayal of young people’s experiences of violence and abuse in terms of resilience and resolution is such a common trope in childhood trauma memoirs in the West that Kate Douglas finds it likely that readers see them as “broadly representative” rather than recognise them as the “idealized templates that prescribe the ways in which traumatic childhood can be recalled and written about” (74). Adapting the narratives of differently difficult childhoods from other cultures to the expected standards of the target culture, more precisely in the specific sub-field of popular literature, is inevitably a significant, and often ethically problematic, factor in their production. The same narrative direction towards positive resolution is reinforced by the popular cultural attitudes to processing representations of atrocity. As Anne Cubilié observes, survivors of violence are perceived to be “uncomfortable signifiers” because they are “excessive to structures of normality that privilege forgetting, getting over and getting on with things” (xii). Thus their inclusion in discursive practices is usually performed via compensatory strategies, such as heroisation. Collecting testimony from survivors, Cubilié observes that they are clearly aware that “in order to ‘pass’ for one of us, they must learn that we do not really want to hear their stories . . . or, at best, that we only want to hear ‘stock’ stories, which are familiar and therefore already known” (xii). This observation reminds of Eakin’s identification of the use of life narratives to meet communal expectations of normalcy. Thus, the reproduction of linear narratives of successful overcoming of trauma can be viewed as the result of a complex negotiation of the needs and interests of the audience on the one hand and of the indigenous authors seeking social acceptance of their stories, in which elements of the experience which are incompatible with these purposes may be elided.

How these expectations condition the writing of the memoirs however is almost never openly addressed in the texts themselves, the ready product concealing the

negotiations that have fed into it. One model for understanding the relationship between authors in “as-told-to” type of memoirs in particular could be Lejeune’s discussion of the collaborator as observer, and the “informant” as an exotic object of observation, the major difference between the two parties being that of education and possession of the means of written expression and cultural authority. The informant in Lejeune’s model is controlled by the more educated writer’s gaze (“Those Who Do Not” 210), and the informant’s story acquires its meaning only in the process of being written by someone who belongs to the ruling class (196). By moving from its narrator to its audience thus, the story of the model:

becomes in fact the field of study or the product of consumption (of delight) for someone else, the person who has the power to write and to read. At the same time that it is a form of rescue or help, intervention is an act of violation or voyeurism, a form of abuse of power. (210)

This problem of commodification is quite unsettling in the context of narratives of injustice and abuse among which wartime childhood memoirs belong, as it undermines their intention of promoting awareness and redressing inequalities. This is especially the case for the category of subjects which G. Thomas Couser defines as “vulnerable”: “persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else” (*Vulnerable* xii). The conditions which according to Couser determine the status of vulnerability include age, medical conditions, such as disabilities, or belonging to “socially or culturally disadvantaged minorities” (xii). The dangers they might be exposed to because of their status include both misrepresentation and being used for someone else’s economic profit (*Memoir* 98). As young victims of wars, belonging to the margin because of their social position as refugees, the memoirs’ authors may easily be classified as vulnerable subjects. However, this would be better judged on an individual basis, and would often require additional research, because the published version of the memoirs may be said to both reveal certain aspects of their vulnerability, for example by evoking the narrators’ childhood in war, and conceal or downplay others, such as their difficulties as refugees.

The power asymmetry in the collaboration is further complicated in many memoirs in my corpus because of the collaborative writer’s concomitant role of a mentor in the new country. Farah Ahmedi describes nightmares in which she is

abandoned by her mentor and collaborator Alyce. In her dream, Alyce refuses to talk to her and has befriended Ahmedi's cousin instead. Ahmedi explains further that "in real life my poor cousin isn't even in America. She's stuck back there in dire straits, and yet in my dreams I curse her" (10-11). This poignant episode evokes the profound sense of insecurity, which characterises the author's situation: the horror of the past experience combining with the uncertainty and dependence on others in the present. A similar though comic episode of strained power dynamics occurs in *What Is the What*, where the narrator together with a group of fellow Lost Boys experiences what appears to Western readers to be a disproportionate amount of anxiety at a mentor's seemingly straightforward request for traditional Sudanese proverbs. While the host remains oblivious of the confusion his request provokes in his mentee, the narrator explains the Lost Boys' reaction thus: "We thought our whole world might hinge on every question, every answer. It seemed possible to us both that if we didn't please Phil here, he might change his mind about me, and refuse to help me at all" (176). The contrast between the light-heartedness with which the host makes the request as part of after-dinner small-talk, and the terrifying effect it has on his mentees, illuminates the issues around truthful representation within the communicative setting of the memoirs. Mentors and collaborators, and by extension the reader community they represent, often occupy a position of power and security through their nationality and their comfortable distance from the events described. For them the memoir can remain a product of the entertainment industry over which they have consumer rights, but which, despite its testimonial role, can easily remain on the level of small-talk. For the authors-protagonists, however, the episode above articulates an emotional dimension of the ethical position of "vulnerable subjects," in particular their experience of the precariousness of their citizenship status, and of their material and social survival in their new country of residence. These unstable circumstances impact the way in which identity narratives are constructed and shed light on the actual relativity and negotiability of the concept of truthfulness by which the texts are generically defined, and which may otherwise be taken for granted.

The protagonists' anxiety described in *What Is the What* highlights a perception that their position in the new society is directly dependent on the self-referential narrative they construct. This episode thus makes a metaphorical connection between the communicative situations of the memoirs and that of official occasions where a subject's status (and fate) is decided on the basis of their self-referential narrative. One

such occasion is the asylum seeker's interview, which, outlined very schematically, confronts an applicant from a different culture and often with traumatic background with a government official who represents the community where the applicant seeks entry. This entry is granted on the basis of a narrative elicited from the applicant in a one-way questioning session, which needs to satisfy non-negotiable institutionally defined truthfulness criteria. Since the consequences of applicant's narrative performance are in many cases a matter of life and death, the very truth value of a text recreating traumatic evidence acquires a different meaning.

Institutional influence on shaping survivors' testimony is examined by James Dawes, who compares the methods of "humanitarian inquisitors" (77) such as the UNHCR, ICRC and Human Rights Association (HRA), from the perspective of the question: "How are the words of the survivor translated into the officially sanctioned vocabulary of the institution?" (80). Dawes discovers a gradation between them, with the UNHCR at one end, because, having the strictest rules about what counts as true, it is also the one with the highest legislative power (109). In this institutional setting the power to determine the legitimacy of the narrative belongs entirely to the "audience": the organisation's representatives charged with conducting the interview process. So, paradoxically, it appears that there is some predetermined version of a narrative of the self which should by definition be only available to the subject experiencing it, and to which the applicant needs to conform in order to be found to deserve a refugee status. One example from the texts in my corpus confirms the parallels between the citizen status-determining interview, and the function of cultural negotiation of the memoir. The narrator in *Lost Boy No More* provides a sample of questions from a similar institutional event – interviews by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service. The questions listed address events which later become key structuring elements of the Lost Boys' memoirs: for example, the walk to Ethiopia, life in the camp, and the role of the UN there, and the events at the Gilo River (76). Contrary to the intended purpose of this detail in the memoir as a guarantee for authenticity, it can be interpreted instead as an example of prescribing life narratives, an interference of the recipient culture's ideas of narrative rules and values, corresponding to the publishing templates mentioned above, and resulting in the unification of the stories observed by Eggers (21).

The gravity and the power mismatch built into the structure of the interview situation also leave their mark on the elicited narratives. Dawes's conversation with one UNHCR employee, Larry Bottinick, elucidates the various applicants' responses under

such conditions, including silence because of shame or prior experiences of torture during interrogation (84), or recourse to lying in order to meet presumed institutional criteria of what counts as a valid refugee narrative: “Even those who truly merit refugee status will lie if they believe another story will be more likely to succeed” (83). This occurrence of the lie in the narrative thus does not necessarily misrepresent the applicant’s identity as a persecuted or abused individual, nor does it confine the responsibility for the narrative to the individual himself or herself. Rather, it shows both the contingency of the distinction between truth and lie, and the (in certain ways violent) implication of the recipient society in their construction. This is confirmed by the different narratives which emerge in the institutional setting of the HRA. While it has “neither official internal legitimacy nor normative weight” (110), the HRA applies the most compassionate approach, by accepting the refugee’s language as “a fact to which people must adapt” (103). Mapping this model onto the memoirs, it could be argued that this is the situation underlying China Keitetsi’s work, asking readers to adjust to her “idiom,” rather than having it rewritten by a mediating collaborator. Applying the model of humanitarian organisations’ interviews to the communicative situation of the memoirs, which they inevitably partially condition, it appears that the character of the resulting narratives is largely dependent on the conditions and requirements of the communicative situation itself, on the details of the collaborative process and on the power distribution between the collaborators. The truthfulness of these narratives is a variable quantity reflecting the degree to which the pre-existing audience expectations are transmitted into the narrative.

Is it possible to ameliorate the power-imbalance situation?

The discussion above seems to justify the anxieties about authenticity and justice with which the figure of the collaborator is associated. But is this always the case? And do the memoirists have a way of ameliorating the power imbalance, or regaining some agency in the process of collaboration?

One solution, offered by G. Thomas Couser, is for the collaborators to reveal in paratextual material the “behind-the-scene details” of their work, providing a “‘fair-trade’ pledge for collaborative memoirs.” This, according to Couser would address both ends of the communicative exchange, urging producers to face and resolve ethical issues, and thus reassuring readers as ethical consumers (*Memoir* 99). Another suggestion is made by Lejeune, for whom the “ethnological gap” can only be overcome

if the distribution of the roles of observer and observed are undermined. It would not be sufficient in this case for the author-protagonist to take full control of the writing process, because in this way he or she still “perpetuates the system of observation . . . and continues to define himself as model” (“Those Who Do Not” 214). Instead, a genuinely transformative approach, according to Lejeune, would be for the informant to return the gaze, to become in his or her turn an observer of the world of the recipient society (214). Such a move does take place in some of the memoirs, in direct descriptions of the relationships with sponsors and mentors (*Bite of the Mango*), or of the process of refugee selection (*The Story of My Life*), which could present a challenge to the official narratives of benevolence and generosity Western societies use to construct their own identities. Other examples of this possibility of the inversion of the lens could be for the author-protagonists to adopt the role of educators for their audiences by supplying first-hand information about under-reported events, realities and life-styles from their places of origin, thus also reversing the colonial distribution of competence and authority. While the relationship between the two parties is usually seen in terms of inherent tension, as well as of unidirectional flow of power, Carole Boyce Davies offers an alternative to this model. Davies argues that in some cases the text could present a genuine act of activism in which the writers are united by a common cause (5). Davies criticises Lejeune’s model of collaboration in which the writer is the one who takes full responsibility of the story. Instead, she believes that the person who is a source of the story could actually have direct control over it, especially if critically perceived as a storyteller, whose stories are multiple and malleable depending on the occasion (7-8). This is a suitable model for some of the memoirists, who recreate their personal narratives on multiple occasions, such as public talks, school visits, or on behalf of the humanitarian organisations they represent. The debate regarding power and narrative control in particular texts is linked to larger questions about the dynamics of cultural influence. In this context, caution is advised also in assuming a unilateral cultural exchange. As Susanna Egan’s above-quoted position suggests, the appearance of contemporary life-narratives can play a role in destabilising categories of centre and periphery. Similarly, Eakin lauds Boelhower’s discussion of the interaction of ethnic and mainstream cultures via the medium of the autobiography as “a salutary corrective to any simplistic, one-way construing of cultural influence that

‘mainstream-marginal’ and similar formulations might seem to promote” (*American Autobiography* 9).²⁸

The overview of theories of the collaborative relationship offered above seems to focus on the figure of the collaborative author: the one who either upsets, or might preserve and treat delicately the power balance in the process of eliciting life stories about wartime childhoods. The parallels between prescriptive publishing practices and immigration interviews, however, have suggested that the figure of the collaborator is only the overt sign of an inherently present audience. The relationship between indigenous subjects and their collaborators replicate that between the indigenous subjects and the recipient society. Thus, while texts written without collaboration might appear to be the most authentic ones, as Smith and Watson have shown, the powers of “coaxing” can be “more broadly diffused throughout a culture,” prompting waves of immigrants in the United States “to affirm for other Americans their legitimate membership in the nation by telling stories of assimilation” (*Reading* 66). Unpacking the anxieties around the discovery of ghost-writers, Lejeune argues that when “someone yells ‘scandal’” (“Those Who Do Not” 186), the real reason is that joint authorship of autobiographies reveals the division of roles (of author and model) which is customary for the writing process, but is normally functionally hidden (188). Thus the presence of the ghost-writer in narratives shakes the very foundations of the myth of the unified subject, otherwise guaranteed by the single figure of the author, whose pursuit is one of the main drives for reading autobiographies in the first place (188-92). Giving a slightly different inflection to Lejeune’s definition of the audience as ultimately the “real author . . . whose desire and obliging credulity . . . give all these books the weight (the *authority*) that they would perhaps otherwise lack” (194), the context of the childhood war memoirs defines the collaborative writer as a similar figure of scandal, who channels the audience’s anxieties, and perhaps serves to spare readers from a sense of communal implication in the situation of power and representation abuse. Thus, even the most “independent” memoirs occupy only available publicly acceptable positions in

²⁸ Philip Holden makes a case for dismantling the distinctions between Western autobiographies and autobiographies from the Third World altogether, because such categories promote critical practices focusing on the differences between an “essentialized West” (38) associated with modernity, and non-Western autobiography which is the “West’s Other” (22). Instead, Holden argues for looking for “both the commonalities and the differences of their circumstances of production in hybrid colonial and postcolonial worlds” (38).

market niches. From this perspective, it might be argued that, on the contrary, the greatest degree of authenticity lies at the other end of the collaboration spectrum, where the Western narrator's voice openly guides the narrative.

For the purposes of my discussion, however, I prefer to remove this gradation of authenticity. I believe that all texts are authentic in their own right in as much as they testify as life narratives to the moment and the specific conditions in which they are produced. No clear-cut boundaries of Western involvement can be drawn between the texts, and the differences between them are only a matter of degree. Furthermore, it is indeed crucial to be aware of the presence of power imbalances, and of the specific ways in which they might slant representations and impose narrative rules. However, it is equally important not to deny the memoirs their authenticity status and thus reproduce a neo-colonial process of abuse and denial of opportunities of empowerment, as limited as they might be, under the pretext of liberation. Reading the texts critically, it is also important to avoid displacing the focus from the narratives themselves, and repeating the circle of Western self-indulgent soul-searching, referred to by Dawes in a comment regarding Western auto-criticism about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994:

The world's failure to recognize the genocide, . . . has, if anything, become a more potent and vivid story in the West than the genocide itself ever could be. . . . it feels good to be culpable. It assures us that we are good people, because we are the kind of people who feel bad about these sorts of things. (21)

It is indeed impossible to step out of all systems of cultural values, and these systems inevitably interfere with each other, most likely on unequal terms. The memoirs can thus be read together as a varied corpus of documents individually playing out the autobiographical transaction between non-Western subjects and the Western audience, bringing to light the details of interaction between these cultures, and as a collective enabling a contextualised communication which could undermine received stereotypes and certainties of identity, without undermining the visibility the memoirists may gain.

Conclusion

The authenticity of the memoirs as a referential genre lies not in their ability to offer a window into experiences of war childhoods, but in their ability to testify to the process in which this childhood can be mediated and recreated for a Western audience, while still maintaining its referential significance for the memoirists. Furthermore, as identity

narratives, the memoirs function as a means of self-knowledge and of gaining membership in a new society, while at the same time engaging that society politically in the represented events which have determined the subjects' identity.

In this and the previous sections I have been moving towards contrasting young adult fiction and young adult memoirs: considering young adult literature as a genre which is predetermined, contrived, and adult-controlled, and regarding life narratives as possessing greater testimonial potential of how childhood is represented. However, the discussion above has also shown that Western adult ideas of childhood and human rights frameworks may play a major part in how the memoirs are constructed. While I maintain the hypothesis of genre difference based on referentiality, I also avoid drawing firm boundaries between the two genres, as their common mobilisation of similar discourses show that the difference between the two genres are far from absolute.

Furthermore, I refrain from identifying the supposedly unified human rights discourse with either genre as an assumed touchstone of westernisation, unification, and ultimately inauthenticity. By freeing the texts from value-judgements privileging rebelliousness against the humanitarian discourse, I instead observe how both texts may engage it in different ways, and what variety the two corpuses of texts may offer in their constructions of childhoods. Without foreclosing the discussion, I would yet use the memoirs as a contrasting genre for their purpose to recreate personal experience of individual people, without claiming that they can do so in a state of unlimited ideological freedom. Their direct engagement with a world beyond the text, however, while similar to children's literature's educational and sometimes openly political goal, could provide a different, personally sourced and motivated view of childhood experiences of war.

SECTION B

INAUGURATING THE RITE OF PASSAGE: THE CONSTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTION OF “OTHER” CHILDHOODS

In the present section I argue that both young adult novels and memoirs use an initial moment of crisis in which war invades the personal life of a young protagonist as a narrative device in setting up war as a maturational rite of passage. This initial episode of crisis in both cases corresponds to the separation stage of coming of age rituals, which puts an end to childhood and inaugurates a transitional stage of non-childlike war experiences, setting the young person on a symbolic journey towards maturity.

Comparing the manifestations of the same structural element in the two genres provides a useful insight into the remarkable similarities between them, which are due both to the topic-related discourses in which texts of both genres participate, and to coincidences in the specific genre-related conventions of representing childhood and adolescence. In texts of both genres, the inaugurating episode of crisis performs a double function. First, it defines the temporally preceding descriptions of protagonists' lives as “normative childhoods” within the narrative worlds of the texts, against which subsequent war experiences are evaluated. I will demonstrate how in both cases, texts construct non-Western childhoods in accordance with the universalising concepts of childhood known from human rights discourse and from its traditional cultural association with innocence, defined especially in terms of need for adult protection. Texts of both genres, however, also aim to contextualise childhoods within their specific cultural environments, and often in the circumstances of an ongoing conflict. The representation of childhoods as also threatened or already tainted by war even more poignantly affirms them as a value: a fragile ideal state which is later destroyed by war.

The second function of the separation rite is forward-looking. The events which constitute the protagonists' involvement in war become symbolic acts which trigger a restructuring of relations to other family members, and a search for a new social position within the larger community. The purpose of learning in rites of passage in traditional societies is not individualistic, but serves to identify the initiate with the community. As Campbell argues, “[r]ites of initiation and installation, then, teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group” (*The Hero* 384). Van

Gennep sees ritual mutilation practices as a visible sign on the body of “incorporation” into society (72) – a procedure which at once makes the initiands “forever identical” with adult members of the tribe (75), and distinguishes them from other tribes (74). The war experience usually begins with an experience of violence which is often framed in traumatic terms, but also similar to the rite of passage is an opportunity for a new agency and growth.

Apart from the similarities in young adult novels and memoirs’ constructions of war experiences, however, there are significant differences between the two. As a referential genre, memoirs display a much greater variety of culturally-determined family structures, which contrast the relatively more homogeneous representations in children’s literature. Also, the employment of the same trope of a division between pre-crisis childhood and a supposedly maturing war experience performs different functions in the two genres. In young adult fiction it is an adult creation setting up a developmental model for the implied reader. The plot structure provides an opportunity for exploring attitudes to war, but it also dramatises genre-related coming of age issues, such as the child-adult power conflict, and gender and national identity, through which adult writers perceive and construct adolescence for their readers. In the memoirs, the boundary between childhood and involvement in war creates a narrative space for recovering and preserving the autobiographers’ childhood worlds and identities. In their function as communal as well as personal testimony, accounts of pre-crisis experiences in memoirs may serve to memorialise social structures and experiences which would otherwise be lost in the destructive historical events which displace the war-affected communities’ representatives. While in children’s fiction the implied audience’s perspective is conventionally aligned with that of the protagonist, memoirs offer a greater variety of audience positioning. A commonly used technique is to construct a child’s voice and character which place the reader in the role of the responsible adult to whom the plight of the vulnerable child is addressed, indicting the corrupting role of war by recreating a moment of past innocence, and possibly affirming age hierarchies and transnational power relations

Finally, there are also memoirs which have the potential to challenge the pattern of peaceful childhood and violent incursion of war which sets the protagonist on the track to albeit warped maturation, whose reproduction may obliterate the complexity of children’s war experiences. Instead, the protagonists’ experiences of gradual or diluted initiation into war activities, or escape to war from a violent childhood help create

diversity in the representations of war experiences, and might also work to erode the binaries of the age hierarchy and cultural dominance. The evocation and reworking of the same structural element in these texts draws attention to its conventionality, to the resistance of lived war experiences to narrative patterning, and to the value of context-specific representations, where received notions of childhood and safety, or of the significance of war activities in young people's lives may need to be revised.

Chapter Four

Separation Rites in Young Adult Novels

In contemporary young adult fiction about war the initiating moment of crisis is usually represented as a scene of violence against a parent figure, which undermines parental authority and protection, and opens children to a more direct involvement in conflict. I will focus my discussion on a couple of examples of the representation of the initiating moment of crisis to demonstrate how it functions as a separation rite, removing young characters from their child position, and placing them in a new, intensely transformative stage of life, where normative relations are suspended, and traditional roles and categories are recombined simultaneously in a family and a broader social context.

In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the episode of the initial invasion of war in the protagonist's private life takes place against the backdrop of a relatively peaceful life in an Afghan village shortly before the beginning of USA-led war on Afghanistan. The event – a confrontation with Taliban soldiers which ends with the protagonist's father and brother being forcefully recruited by the Taliban – is depicted in a first-person account by the young narrator Najmah in the present tense. This mode of narration collapses the distance between reader and character and invites the reader to experience events synchronically with the character. Najmah's voice as an insider, who is familiar with the local culture, guides young adult readers through the breaches of politeness norms in the exchange between her father and the Talib soldier, revealing their clashing political views and thus introducing readers to an aspect of the ideological context of the conflict (23-24). As Najmah explains, her father's clothing – particularly the traditional embroidered cap he wears, marks him as respectful of local culture, but

distinguishes him from extremist ideologies which are associated with the Taliban turban (23). Furthermore, his use of a formal religious greeting represents him as religious, but his preference in using it instead of the friendlier local greeting transforms it into a means of opposition to the Taliban (23). Najmah's father's stance and demeanour thus portray him as a holder of "politically correct views" according to current pedagogical demands with regard to the genre's implied audience: patriotic yet moderate; characterised as belonging to a different culture, thus local, yet not as completely "other" as the Taliban are constructed to be by this and other young adult novels; defiant in his political views against oppression, yet refraining from the use of violence. However, Najmah's father's freedom to express his opinions is curtailed by the soldiers' guns, signs of their military power, against which argument, the implicitly recommended method of conflict resolution in contemporary young adult novels, fails. Najmah's father's choice of non-resistance in order to protect his family ironically leads to disempowerment and failure of his functions as provider and protector: his family's food supplies are robbed by the soldiers, and the family itself is broken up since both he and his son are forced to join the Taliban.

Despite his impending loss of power, Najmah's father gives Najmah individual instructions, which can be interpreted as a ritual act symbolically redefining her child status in the family. As Najmah arrives on the scene, her father directs her to the house, telling her "Take care of your mother" (23). By Najmah's admission, she fails to understand the exact meaning of his words, but obeys out of respect for her elders, which has been fostered in the traditional patriarchal family environment prior to the attack. On the one hand, Najmah's father's directions can be interpreted as a euphemistic way of directing her to her own safety and her mother's care, while making Najmah believe that she is the one in control in a dangerous and disorienting situation. His instruction would thus represent only a metaphorical inversion of parent-child roles, with actual control remaining with the parents. However, Najmah's inability to understand or accept such a meaning points to another interpretation, which is at this moment unavailable, because it will be revealed with the development of the plot: that her father knowingly or unknowingly directs his daughter to take control over a prolonged situation of crisis which overwhelms her elders. The second interpretation is supported by the immediate development of the onset of crisis, when she needs to stop her mother from protesting against her father and brother's forceful recruitment: "This time it's my turn to hold on to Mada-jan with all my strength as she struggles to run to

him” (26). While Najmah intervenes and overrides her mother’s authority in order to protect her and prevent further risk to her brother and father, Najmah’s mother loses her position as an elder in the family structure, and symbolically slips into the role of being protected, usually occupied by children. This reversal of roles signified by the physical overpowering of the mother by the daughter is further confirmed by the comparison of the mother to a child: “She curls onto her side like an infant, and tucks her head under her wrists and stays that way” (27-8). The placement of Najmah in the uncharacteristic position of an elder represents an abrupt suspension of the normal relation between children and parents which separation rites aim to perform, and the initiation of a liminal stage of inversion of the normative social hierarchy which is a typical part of a rite of passage.

The forced absence of the father and brother and the mother’s incapacitation change the circumstances of gendered and age-defined work within the family in the immediate aftermath of the attack, and construct Najmah as a liminal subject who performs both child and adult, male and female roles. Najmah’s care for her grieving mother in the days after the abduction comes as a literal accomplishment of her father’s order, and her physical nurturing of her mother is a continuation of the reversal of child and adult roles. Yet Najmah’s status of being in-between categories is signalled by her paradoxical reverting to the role of the child in order to emotionally revive her mother and awaken her to her parental responsibility: “You may choose not to live, but the baby and I need you. . . . I don’t want to die” (47). In terms of gender, alongside her nurturing of her mother, Najmah is forced to symbolically adopt her father and brother’s personas by performing their duties, which have previously been considered unsuitable for her (46). Her success in completing traditionally masculine tasks, such as bringing “the same load that Nur always carries . . . without spilling a drop” (47), and replacing her father in defending the family home, being prepared to repel potential attackers by using the grass-cutting knife, which she repeatedly refers to as “Baba-jan’s knife” (66, 68), resonates with the effects of the transition into the liminal stage of transformation in the rite of passage. The interplay between child and adult roles portrays the young character in contradictory terms, which match the conflicting attitudes on children’s war involvement which the texts suggest. On the one hand, Najmah’s ability to withstand dangerous situations, in which adults prove more vulnerable, employs the idea of young people as more adaptable and resilient than adults. The possibility of a constructive effect of war on young people in a general antimilitaristic climate in the field of

children's literature might be interpreted as a strategy for "sparing" the child reader (as well as concerned adults involved in the children's literature world) from war's devastating effects. On the other hand, through Najmah's involvement in activities beyond her gender and age, the text grounds issues of gender identity and maturity in the situation of war as an extreme, adverse situation which deviates from the norm. Thus, the interpretation that war provides Najmah with an increased independence and an extended field of activity is qualified by her own revaluation of the past:

I have forgotten my childish quarrels with Nur – I am no longer angry with him for scaring me about the leopard, and for saying I can't carry water as far as he can. It's as if these things never happened, and all I want is to see the top of his head and Baba-jan's as they trudge up the hill, carrying water from the Baba Darya. (46)

Najmah's revaluation of her quarrels with her brother Nur as "childish" suggest a self-aware departure from her child status towards maturity, which recalls protagonist Tara's reflexive political awakening in *Kiss the Dust*. Proving that she is equal to her brother's abilities might be expected to give Najmah a sense of accomplishment, especially as it had been her wish to prove herself (17). However, these changes are not appreciated positively by the character, and only lead her to yearning for a restoration of the order that has been upset by the invasion of war.

Similar scenes of reappraisal of earlier impulses for freedom from predefined child roles occur also in *The Breadwinner* and *A Little Piece of Ground*. While accompanying her father to work in the market, Parvana for example thinks she is capable of doing his job as well as he can, but the fulfilment of her wish is only possible after her father's arrest, which leaves her missing him. In *A Little Piece of Ground*, Karim's wish list for his future among other things includes a greater independence from elders (1). Because of the restrictive effect of the curfews, Karim is often represented as restless and eager to escape "his whole unbearable family" (9). Both wishes get partially fulfilled in undesirable circumstances when he is trapped outside during curfew and has to survive in hiding for two days, which makes him crave his home. The recurrence of this narrative strategy may thus amount to a consistently ambiguous employment of a common genre convention of children's literature related to the dynamics of knowledge and desire. As I mentioned earlier, Perry Nodelman suggests that in didactic texts for children young characters' misguided desires are granted within the text only for the young character to realise his or her own inability to

make appropriate decisions, and to affirm the adult's superior rationality (*Hidden* 33-37). This strategy according to Nodelman is part of the complex ambivalence of children's literature regarding childhood: it is affirmed both as an unchanging subordinate state (the child character realises their own lack of judgement and accepts adult authority) and a stage of change (the child character has gained knowledge of the danger of desire). In the context of the young adult war novels, however, the satisfaction of children's striving for experimenting with new roles resists an interpretation as punishment for unreasonable desires. Rather, the characters' wishes to explore roles which challenge gender and age regimes construct them as children who are on the brink of adolescence: to a certain extent they are ready to depart from childhood, and their successful performance of these roles mark the texts as belonging to the sub-genre of young adult literature, which focuses on the characters' transition from childhood towards maturity. This convention in the context of war thus indirectly constructs war experiences as a catalyst for maturing. The protagonists' disappointment, however, serves to question the positive effect of war, and to indict it as distorting the normative process of growth. Thus, in contemporary young adult war fiction this convention is engaged to serve a different, although still didactic purpose. Its ambiguous use reflects the older age of the implied audience, for whom texts move beyond the static binaries of childhood and adulthood. However it is also a demonstration of how the subject matter of war as an extreme situation impacts the meaning generated through inherited genre conventions.²⁹

The representation of the beginning of crisis through similar scenes of separation from parents is pervasive in young adult war novels, and stands out as a sign of the termination of childhood. It is achieved via a variety of plot elements: a physical removal of parents through arrest, recruitment, or children's displacement (*The Breadwinner*, *Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Other Side of Truth*, *The Return*, *The Storyteller's Beads*), psychological incapacitation (especially of mothers, in the *Under*

²⁹ Although not as common, a similar situation where the topic of war impacts the treatment of children's desires occurs in some of the memoirs, in particular where children are attracted to the possibility of becoming soldiers. In *They Poured Fire*, Benson is scolded for playing war by his mother, and later, after the attack on his village, regrets his war games, after experiencing first-hand the violence of war: "I hated the day I fooled around by putting the stick on my shoulder. My mother was right when she told me it was bad luck pretending to be a soldier" (60). Again, rather than interpreting this episode as an example of the destructive force of children's desires, it is an occasion to pass a moral judgment on the destructive power of war. The text evokes an implied reader who knows more than the innocent child, and who can thus realise the invasion of war in the child's life is due to greater external forces, and the child's repentance suggests an unrealistic feeling of responsibility which only confirms his innocence and childlike position.

the Persimmon Tree and *The Breadwinner*) or moral discrediting because of the inability to live up to children's expectations (Karim's strained relationship with his father in *A Little Piece of Ground*), or in the most extreme form experiencing parents' death (*Little Soldier*, *A Stone in My Hand*, *The Other Side of Truth*, *The Storyteller's Beads*). The young adult protagonists' experience of violence on their families breaches the protective shield their parents have until that point striven to surround them with. The suspension of adult responsibility outlines the developmental tasks which young adult characters are expected to accomplish through the rite of passage, in which the personal and the communal aspects are tied together just as they have been in the disempowered figure of the attacked parent.

In *Under the Persimmon Tree* Najmah's initial undertaking of a traditional male role, such as protecting the home from her uncle, has a symbolic political aspect as well through which the narrative performs the blending of the tasks of personal and the communal self-identification characteristic of maturing rites of passage. From a political point of view, Najmah's uncle represents the enemy because of his alignment with what the text constructs as the wrong side of the conflict, i.e. the Taliban, whose protection he is implied to have (Bradford 56).³⁰ In opposing her uncle, Najmah decodes and fulfils the other part of her father's message upon their separation: "Suddenly I realize what Baba-jan meant when he told my mother to stay here until he comes back. He worries that Uncle will steal our land. Perhaps he is more worried about Uncle than he is about the Taliban" (43). Since the novel foregrounds the private family sphere rather than the public sphere of conflict, Najmah's uncle's greater transgression is his disrespect towards his elders. He is portrayed as having left Najmah's grandfather when he needed his help, and his unexplained disappearance is said to have caused his mother's death (42). The uncle's return "only to claim his part of the land after Grandfather's death" (42) represents a betrayal of the value of family, and an interest in the land only as a means of material gain through what the rest of the family consider an immoral trade. The uncle's attitude is juxtaposed to the intimate sense of belonging and the spiritual relation Najmah's family has with their place of origin, as expressed in the

³⁰ The novel has come under criticism regarding its historical accuracy because of this plot detail. Bradford argues that Najmah's uncle's opium growing and his Taliban sympathies work to affirm the prevalent simplistic post-9/11 view of Afghan politics in the West, attaching all negative attributes to the Taliban, and portraying the mujahideen in entirely heroic terms, despite evidence that heroin production was carried out in mujahideen-held territories, or that some mujahideen were also associated with extremist gender politics (56, 61) – the latter view also upheld by Afghan politician and activist Malalai Joya (*Raising My Voice: The Extraordinary Story of the Afghan Woman Who Dares to Speak Out* (2009)).

animate names used by Najmah and her family for their native scenery: “Koh-i-Dil” meaning “Heart Mountain” (42) and “Baba Darya” translated by Najmah as “Old Man River” (13). Thus, *Under the Persimmon Tree* exemplifies a common strategy in young adult fiction to bind the young character’s repositioning within the family to acquiring a communal identity. For Najmah, the events of the initial period of loss of parental care and guidance predefine the metaphorical significance of her journey as a refugee into Pakistan which culminates in the choice she needs to make on whether to migrate to the USA in pursuit of education, or to undertake the same passage back to Afghanistan in order to resume ownership over her ancestral land.

In the example above, as well as in other young adult novels including *The Breadwinner*, *Kiss the Dust* and *A Little Piece of Ground*, the episodes relating the initial exposure to violence draw the line between childhood and liminal war experiences by portraying how young adult characters take on more active or independent roles than their previous child-related ones. Their entry into a new liminal world is signalled in various ways, for example by the display of both childlike and adult-like behaviours, a mutability in terms of the performance of gender roles, or by fluctuation between contradictory emotional states. Yet, all of these examples reveal an emphasis on children’s heightened agency in times of adversity. Such agency in itself could be considered a liminal feature because of its extraordinariness within a social reality which incapacitates adults. Another form which the initiation of the liminal stage takes in young adult novels is through the description of traumatic events, where witnessing the violent death of a parent overwhelms and disempowers young characters (for instance in *A Stone in My Hand*, *The Other Side of Truth*, the second traumatising even in *Under the Persimmon Tree*). I will take as an example the plot-initiating moment of *The Other Side of Truth* to demonstrate how it is used to inaugurate a traumatising experience which contrasts the agency-conferring portrayal above and seeks to convey to young adult readers the devastating emotional effects of war on children. However, I will also argue that the poetic devices used to construct traumatising experience also lend themselves to a reading in liminal terms: how the loss of parent performs a similar inversion of the protagonist’s reality, destabilising familiar categories and relations.

In *The Other Side of Truth*, which is initially set in Nigeria, the narrative is focalised through young adult protagonist Sade, defining her as the centre of consciousness, and signalling the interest of the text in the psychological impact of

parental loss on young adults. The description of Sade's mother's murder contains markers associated with characteristics of traumatic experiences recurring in contemporary trauma studies: the failure to grasp the event at the moment of its occurrence, the experience of a breach in the perception of time, and inability to contain the experience in language, and its return in traumatic flashbacks³¹. An italic font separates graphically the opening lines which describe the event of the murder from the rest of the text, and they employ the present tense, in contrast with the following past tense paragraphs. These graphic and grammatical features construct the event as a deviation from the natural flow of reality, an occurrence which cannot be processed and integrated as a regular memory, but which, rather like Turner's ritual, happens in a 'time out of time.' The effect of immediacy created by the present tense in the murder scene is complemented by the use of progressive participles and the detailed description of minor actions, which seem to unnaturally slow down the narrative pace, reconstructing the moment of the experience of loss as an event which distorts the experience of time for the young adult character:

Sade is slipping her English book into her schoolbag when Mama screams. Two sharp cracks splinter the air. She hears her father's fierce cry, rising, falling.
'No! No!'
The revving of a car and skidding of tyres smother his voice.
Her bag topples from the bed, spilling books, pen and pencil on to the floor. (1)

In contrast to the slowed down, prolonged duration of the action, the space in which it is related is rather short. This mismatch between length and duration enact Sade's impression of the paradoxical temporality of the traumatising experience: "*A few seconds, that is all. Later, it will always seem much longer*" (1). Sade's observation echoes Cathy Caruth's description of trauma as eluding consciousness because of occurring too quickly (62), which also explains the traumatic flashbacks Sade alludes to with the adverb "always." While "always" literally refers to the repetition of the memory, together with the other temporal adjunct, "later," it may also point to the perception of the event as initiating a new stage in the protagonist's life, a "later" which is dominated by the traumatic event which grows to unnatural proportions.

³¹ These will be discussed in greater detail in Section C.

Another device through which the traumatic event alters reality, transforming the familiar into an unfamiliar state, is the emphasis on the visual in describing experiences. Sade's experience of her mother's death is represented chiefly through sensorial impressions, with little reference to thoughts or emotions. Her perception of the event is highly reliant on colour, which is used to both show death as a violation of physical reality, and yet contains elements of beatification: "*His [Sade's father's] strong hands grip her, trying to halt the growing scarlet monster. But it has already spread down her bright white nurse's uniform. It stains the earth around them*" (1). The use of the metaphor "scarlet monster" contrasts with the symbolic white purity of her mother's clothes, while the verb "stain" signifies with both its literal and metaphorical meanings, as it both changes the colour, and defiles the ground. The incongruence between the event of death and the surrounding material environment is referred to in the persistence of the white colour, which remains unchanged and inadequate to the violent story it seems to cover up: the mother's body is carried away under a "blinding-white sheet" in a "sleek white ambulance" (4). The poeticised language of the description of the body, including the use of the adjectives "crimson" and "scarlet," as well as the reference to the embroidered bedspread create an image of beauty that sacralises the mother's death, transferring it to the realm of the intangible and the sacred, recalling the communion with the sacred which lies at the heart of ritual (2). Visual elements, in particular the use of colour, play a role in the young protagonist's own response and transformation by this radical experience. Similarly to the inadequate unblemished whiteness described earlier, Sade's own clothes remain without a "speck" or a "stain" (5). Her impulse to remove her uniform and wear a black dress instead demonstrates her need of a symbolic colour change, through which to fit into the altered reality which the rupturing experience of her mother's death has brought about.

The prevalence of the visual in the description of the murder is at the expense of the verbal, which from the perspective of the traumatised character defies expression in words. The multiplicity of "fragments of the story" which Sade hears from other mourners does not help her comprehend or accept it. On the contrary, Sade feels "[s]uffocated by arms and voices" and is still haunted by the sounds of the attack "with the echo of the gunshots still in her head" (3). In a stark contrast to the effect of initial acts of violence in novels such as *Under the Persimmon Tree* and *The Breadwinner*, the murder of the mother in *The Other Side of Truth* paralyses the young adult character, and denies her agency, because of the irreversibility of her mother's murder: "Sade's

own voice was lost somewhere deep inside her. She wanted to rush across, grab hold of Mama, squeeze breath back into her – before it was too late – but she could not move” (2). Sade’s physical inability to move and the impossibility to counteract or oppose the violent occurrence are complemented by her inability to verbalise her feelings and mourn. Unable to join the others’ stories and tears, Sade remains isolated from the communal mourning, numbed by the “horror” of her loss, which she cannot access or share.

In accordance with postcolonial and gender discourses of power, voice in this and other novels (*Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Storyteller’s Beads*, *A Stone in My Hand*) is a symbol of agency in both personal and public terms. The metaphorical meaning of the voice is initially constructed in the novel through the figure of Sade’s father, whose work for the aptly named newspaper *Speak* is the occasion for the assassination of his wife. The murder of his wife leaves the father “mute” (7), in contrast to his previous description as “the most outspoken journalist” of his magazine (3). In this context, the literal meaning of one of the sentences describing the attack “*The revving of a car and skidding of tyres smother his voice*” (1) acquires a figurative meaning as well, challenging Sade’s father’s ability to stand by his political ideals. Sade’s experience of trauma parallels that of her father. She mistakenly takes a call by the perpetrators of her mother’s murder, who give her a message addressed to her father: “‘if we get the family first, what does it matter?’” (4). The message encapsulates the moral dilemma which Sade herself has to face on her own later in the course of the novel. Its introduction through the initial attack on the mother, and the subsequent separation from the father, places the responsibility for finding a morally and emotionally satisfying resolution on the young adult protagonist. As the text uses loss of voice as a device referring to both the experience of deep personal grief caused by family loss, and to political overpowering, Sade’s success in resolving the narrative conflict relies on her ability to speak out and find a way for her words to be heard.

Since the cause for the traumatic experience has its roots in the larger political and communal domain, the young adult characters in war novels that deal with trauma are not in a position to succumb to the paralysing effects of the traumatic experience. Sade’s wish to retreat into her room and escape the invasive reality outside is precluded by the urgency to take action about the phone call, because in the circumstances of conflict new instances of violence continually intrude on and reactivate the characters’ traumatic experience. Thus, the possibility for psychological healing is conditioned on

finding a resolution to the political conflict which has caused the parents' death. This plot set-up corresponds to the genre convention of death representation for young people, which Roberta Trites interprets as a metaphor for the separation from parents in the process of maturing (*Disturbing* 118-19). This convention is engaged with in the novels in order to frame the emotionally harmful effects of war on children in a developmental framework, which I discuss in Chapter Six.

Since the episodes of initiation of crisis in young adult fiction mark the beginning of the maturing experience, they also identify the pre-crisis stage with normative "childhood." As the invasion of war destroys the hierarchical relations in which children are cared for and protected by parents within the family unit, this representation also works "retroactively" to affirm precisely these characteristics as the definitive conditions of what being a child means. In the following section of this chapter, I will consider how young adult novels construct non-Western pre-crisis childhoods as both recognisable for Western readers and "other" because of their cultural setting and because in many cases they have already been affected by war. I will focus on the texts' employment of the concept of the nuclear family both as an ideal and as a nostalgic sign to place readers in a recognisable situation which can mediate for a Western young adult audience versions of childhood which lie beyond their experiential reality. I will explore the ideological implications of contrasting this nostalgic depiction of family life both to the devastating war experiences which occur in young non-Western protagonists' lives, and to the dysfunctional family relations in the depictions of the West-centred plots.

Childhood, Peace and the Nuclear Family

The pre-crisis situation serves to establish childhood norms as they are understood within the represented society: a baseline structure which the liminal stage of the rite of passage destabilises and rearranges. An overview of the Third-World families in contemporary young adult war novels shows a conservative distribution of roles within a nuclear family composed of two parents and a number of children, where behaviour is guided by strict gender- and age-defined rules. Fathers across the young adult novels are represented as breadwinners, protectors, providers of moral guidance and practical advice, as well as a source of national and cultural identity. In *A Stone in My Hand*, for instance, which makes references to pre-crisis life only retrospectively after the initiation of crisis, the figure of the father is often invoked as a symbol of safety in

contrast to the dangers of war to which the young protagonist Malaak is exposed in his absence. In one episode, Malaak's accidental bumping into an Israeli soldier in the street triggers a memory of soldiers attacking members of the *shabab*, the Palestinian youths involved in the intifada, in which her father shields her both physically by standing in front of her (29), and emotionally, by instructing her to close her eyes not to witness the young men being shot (30). After the loss of her father, Malaak recalls the comfort his presence had provided, which is reflected in the syntax of the short sentences replicating the reassuring rhythm of the rocking motion of her father's walk: "He carried me like a tiny baby. I was deep in his arms. Rocking in his steps. Safe" (30). The protagonist's nostalgic craving for adult protection reaffirms the idea of childhood as a vulnerable stage of dependence on adults. At the same time, the comparison to a baby infantilises the young character, reversing the desired direction of development, and suitably for the genre signalling a potential danger in over-reliance on parents, which is dramatised in the construction of the trauma experience.

The scene of Malaak's father blocking off the reality of conflict from the young protagonist also has a political significance. In the pre-crisis situation it is usually parents who mediate the politics of the conflict for their children. This representation reaffirms an aspect of adults' view of children's innocence: that they are not political and their regular sphere of action is restricted to family rather than public life. Yet, while preserving children's innocence and protecting them from immediate immersion in conflict, the family, often particularly through the figure of the father, is represented as also performing the key role of conveying cultural values. In *The Breadwinner*, for instance, Parvana's father narrates to his daughters stories from Afghan history in order to impart to them a sense of national pride and resilience. One story in particular, about a young national heroine Malali (or Malalai) who leads demoralised troops in battle during the Second Anglo-Afghan war, is recontextualised by the father as an alternative model of behaviour to that imposed by the official Taliban policy (24-25). Similarly, in *Under the Persimmon Tree*, it is the father who teaches the protagonist and her brother how to read the stars: "As long as you know the stars, you will never be lost. . . . From them you can tell time and distance and you can find your way home" (19). While this is a practical skill necessary for their work as shepherds, their father's instruction implies that "home" is their natural destination, drafting the direction of their maturing journey.

Similar to the political position taken by Najmah's father, whose characterisation I discussed earlier, fathers, and occasionally other male figures in the family usually practice and promote a non-violent response to the conflicts, liberal (arguably westernised) social values, and cultural and ethnic tolerance. Such political positions are in harmony with dominant human rights discourses and the desirable inclusive identity politics identified by Kaldor as a means of conflict resolution, as well as being in conjunction with peace and multiculturalism educational agendas. Thus, for example, Parvana's father is arrested by the Taliban because of his Western education, which according to the Taliban soldiers makes him an agent of Western ideas and values (Ellis 26-27). By the same strategy of division between the sides of conflict in *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the soldiers' accusations, coupled with their use of violence, are contrasted to the father's and thus constructed as inherently wrong, reaffirming the image of the Taliban as backward, ignorant and intolerant of otherness. Parents in *A Stone in My Hand* take an explicit position against terrorism, which protagonist Malaak's father describes as "a wild dog" which "only breeds violence" (45), giving an alternative example to Malaak from his earlier life in a village where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together peacefully (24). In *A Little Piece of Ground* Karim's uncle upholds the idea of the shared humanity of Jews and Arabs, explaining violence with power (56), and Karim's father sees the way to resist conflict in endurance and standing by moral principles in everyday life (58). Thus, in the pre-war situation, political involvement is restricted by the presence of parents, and at the same time it serves as a model and a source of political identity for characters during the following liminal stage, in the majority of cases playing a decisive role in the ideological culmination of the novels.

As far as age-based roles are concerned, on the whole, parents are in control and hold the responsibility in the pre-crisis stage. Protagonists within the represented nuclear family structures are obedient, follow their parents' instructions, and perform their traditional domestic and subsistence-related duties according to gender. Importantly for how young adult fiction constructs images of childhood, war is usually represented as an ongoing reality, which in many cases has begun before and lasted throughout the protagonists' lifetimes (*Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Breadwinner*, *A Little Piece of Ground*, *A Stone in My Hand*). It has often already affected the families' lives. Perhaps the most prominent example is *The Breadwinner*, where the family has lost one son to an explosion, Parvana's father has been disabled and needs Parvana's

support to do his job, and the whole family relies on her for supplying water. Parvana's reluctance to help with the cleaning evokes a recognisable situation for the implied Western young adult readers:

Mother and Nooria were always cleaning something. Since they couldn't work or go to school, they didn't have much else to do. "The Taliban have said we must stay inside, but that doesn't mean we have to live in filth," Mother was fond of saying.

Parvana hated all that cleaning. It used up all the water she had to haul. The only thing worse was for Nooria to wash her hair. (17-18)

A conventional reading of Parvana's resentment constructs her behaviour as that of the recalcitrant self-centred adolescent: reluctant to obey her elders' requests or to help in the household, jealous of her elder sister, whose hair is more beautiful, and unable to appreciate the moral significance of the act of cleaning as a form of resistance for otherwise disenfranchised female subjects, as suggested by Parvana's mother's interpretation. Conventionally, a young adult character's resentment in such a case would be read as a negative characteristic to be overcome in the process of maturing, or within Trites' model about power relations in adolescent literature, as part of coming to terms with the limitations of power which young people encounter. The harsh, threatening context of Parvana's performance of her chores subverts this convention. Parvana is asked to help with the cleaning after accompanying her father for work in the market, and after six trips to the communal tap to bring water. Furthermore, despite her protests, she already possesses an awareness of the vital significance of bringing the water, since there is no other family member who is able to do it: "Sometimes this made her resentful. Sometimes it made her proud. One thing she knew – it didn't matter how she felt. Good mood or bad, the water had to be fetched, and she had to fetch it" (17). The extraordinary situation of war has in fact already impacted relations within the family in ways which resemble the swapping of roles characteristic of the liminal stage, since Parvana is represented as having acquired a responsibility for the survival of her family which, according to traditional age categories, is associated with adulthood. By contrast, deprived of the possibility of a public life, the elder female members are also denied the chance to perform their adult responsibilities. Instead, they are restricted within an entirely private environment, where their actions have little pragmatic consequence. Unlike the typical situation where the teenager's complaint works through exaggeration and is represented as illegitimate, Parvana's protest, "You cleaned out the

cupboard three days ago!” (17), sounds to a certain degree justified. It places her in the role of the reasonable adult, displacing her elders in a quasi-childlike position. Like Parvana, although for reasons not related specifically to war, Najmah of *Under the Persimmon Tree* is also asked to perform difficult or frightening duties during the pre-crisis period because of her mother’s pregnancy, such as bringing firewood and tending goats on her own. However, the difference with the extraordinarily arduous duties after the beginning of the crisis period lies in the amount of support and encouragement she receives from her parents (15, 17). Parental guidance and support are related to obedience, but are also represented as nurturing, as the normative way of overcoming childhood fears, and contrasted by her disappointment in her loss of childhood after exposure to violence. In both novels the protagonists encounter hardships, but the plot, and the characters’ growth, begins only after the removal of parents. This plot device thus suggests that in much of young adult war literature it is the presence of parents which is the decisive element in defining childhood.

This narrative structure, which is characteristic of the genre of young adult literature, occasions an intersection of various ideological conceptions related to childhood, war and cultural otherness, where ideas of childhood innocence and vulnerability, adolescent development, war as a transformative yet destructive situation, and issues of cultural specificity and universality, combine to construct young people’s experience of conflict. One effect of this representation of the ideal family as the nuclear one is that traditional ideas of the innocent child in need of adult guidance and protection are reaffirmed as part of the ideological indoctrination of the young adult audience. To a large extent this representation then corresponds to the function of reiterating the nuclear family ideal in children’s literature identified by Ann Alston. Tracing back the history of the nuclear family, she argues that it emerges simultaneously with and under the same social circumstances as the modern concept of the child, and co-exists with it as a “fixed” ideal which permeates children’s literature, despite the emergence of different family models in contemporary society (1-2). The novels’ portrayals of the pre-crisis period are associated with the “normative” family structure in a mutually validating manner: child characters are safe because they are included in nuclear families, and nuclear families are normative because they protect children from war. These representations are contrasted to depictions of families in the West-based plotlines. With the exception of Shauzia’s family in *The Breadwinner*, dysfunctional family relations, lack of communication between parents and children,

parents' loss of authority, neglect, abandoning and mistreatment of children are all reserved for the depictions of families in the West, while positive representations of Western families on the whole are missing. Novels which include Western plots, such as *Refugees*, *Peace Weavers*, *Little Soldier*, *The Other Side of Truth*, establish metaphorical comparisons between children's experiences of the social effects of war in a non-Western setting to the disintegration of family and wider age hierarchies, which for example in *Little Soldier* result in young people's lives being dominated by gang violence against which adults are powerless. Thus, Western young adult protagonists are represented as deprived of childhood, possessing the liminal characteristics of the crisis stage of the war plots. They are already immersed in a chaotic world of ongoing crisis, whose narrative resolution is often dependent on remedying broken family relations. The contrast works to promote the cohesive nuclear family nurturing and protecting the child from various forms of social adversity because it accommodates simultaneously the aspirations encoded in humanitarian and international law discourses, and the didactic purposes of young adult literature.

A contradiction may seem to arise here: Western readers are supposed to recognise the nuclear family as the default framework for constituting childhood, yet the novels' description of family life in the West excludes the nuclear family from their experiential "reality". However, this is exactly where a lot of the allure and desirability of the nuclear family derives from. The idealised image of harmoniously hierarchical intergenerational relations is a nostalgic construct (Alston 5, 136), addressing the same adult anxieties that surround the "childhood under fire" debate.³² The narratives of happy pre-war childhoods are constructed only to be brutally destroyed by war, which also annihilates the sense of safety the unchanging image of the nuclear family supposedly holds. Thus, young adult implied readers are invited to empathise with young adult protagonists over the irretrievable loss of a familial paradise. The image of the family constructed either retrospectively after being shattered by the invasion, or bearing the signs of impending violence has a particularly strong ideological potential. It fits into Alston's interpretation of the constructions of the nuclear family ideal as a Foucauldian "disciplinary discourse" (5), exemplifying how the "ideology of family triumphs, in fictional form, over the reality" (59), and serves the "self-confirming enterprise" identified by Nodelman as part of adults' colonising project. Or in other

³² Goodenough and Immel's phrase (1).

words, it could be seen to contribute to the metaphorical role of young adult novels as regaining ideological control over young people's lives where normative rites of passage are lost in the blurring of social structure categories.

The use of the nuclear family is also ideologically problematic in terms of young adult war fiction's engagement with cultural translation. Both applying the nuclear family model (like childhood, a historically specific Western concept) in constructing non-Western family settings and defining it as a desirable ideal because of its impending loss propagate a discourse of sameness which erases cultural differences between represented and recipient societies. One example of such criticism is Bradford's critique of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, where the experience of war-related grief supposedly shared by the young adult protagonist Najmah and the Western adult protagonist Nusrat "elide[s] the differentials of access to resources, family support, and political stability available to Najmah and to Nusrat, producing a sense of a universalized female subject" (57). Similarly, the nuclear family "myth" is employed to create the recognisable image of the universal child: a technique which is often embraced by educationalists. A representative position regarding literature about the Middle East (in this case including life-writing and poetry alongside fiction) states:

The authors of these poems, short stories, novels, and memoirs show that Middle Eastern young people are not as different as some young people in the United States may think. While clothing, customs, and beliefs may be different, they have similar desires, feelings, needs, and determination. . . . Literature about Middle Eastern young people deserves to be integrated into secondary curricula for the obvious reason that each work can be adapted to the lives of teens no matter what the ethnic background and because each work speaks to an adolescent's identity development. (Mattis 113)

The unconditional celebration of this kind of essentialist similarity in which cultural differences are only surface elements, is indicative of the degree to which its reproduction in young adult literature exists as a more or less implicit genre requirement in the field. My studies of memoirs have demonstrated however that they reveal a much greater variety of family structures and relations, drawing attention to the homogenising effects of young adult novels. I will explore the potential of life-writing as a genre to provide alternative constructions of childhood in the next chapter.

The construction of the nuclear family as the norm in “other” cultures and its juxtaposition to dysfunctional Western families also performs the opposite ideological function of retaining and solidifying the cultural boundaries between East and West, which are fundamental constructs in contemporary global warfare. Despite according a more positive image to non-Western cultures because they are portrayed as realising the ideal family, this distribution of family models nevertheless preserves binary divisions, and also works to construct Third-World cultures as stereotypically non-modern. In many cases, the depicted conservative values, especially in gender terms, contradict a young adult novels’ didactic orientation towards promoting gender equality and women’s rights. However, the structural approach of dividing pre-crisis peaceful childhood and crisis war experiences with few exceptions precludes an in-depth engagement with clashing values, in the mutually defining way described by Barkawi, which could play a role in altering mutual perspectives and potentially resolving conflict. Rather, limiting the fixed gender and labour relations to the pre-crisis period serves to acknowledge assumed cultural difference, and temporarily legitimise views about gender which may be contentious by Western didactic standards, but supposedly promote sensitivity to the “other”. The rupturing of gender and age hierarchies inaugurated by the rite of passage thus uses the event of war to introduce the preferred Euro/US-centric ideological stance of gender fluidity and performativity empowering female characters and offering boys alternatives to hegemonic masculinity: all possible in a situation of social crisis, whose extremity suspends and interrogates social norms. This strategy seems to accommodate the conflicting pedagogical purposes of young adult fiction, simultaneously preserving the positive image of the pre-crisis order through its nostalgic construction, and celebrating its deconstruction in the liminal stage. However, it also deproblematizes cultural differences and evades the issue of the potential conflicting values and worldviews which emerges in the process of cultural translation. This narrative device draws attention to the degree to which realistic representations of other cultures in young adult literature are the product of a balancing act between different pedagogical concerns rather than an engagement with the social reality they aim to represent.

Alongside all the complex ideological implications of the representation of the nuclear family, its vulnerability and the vulnerability of childhood itself are open to another interpretation in a war context. The construction of the experience of family life as happy, harmonious and loving may be read not just as part of the representation of

“baited” images of childhood,³³ which children’s literature appears to be universally guilty of. It could also represent an occasion of re-appraisal of values in an extreme situation, which exceeds the young adult audience’s frames of reference, despite efforts to draw parallels with more familiar social problems. Reading the descriptions of family life only as a discourse which obliterates cultural difference and aims to restore an ever-eroding adult authority in the West might obscure what some of the representations manage to achieve. Young adult novels create an ideologically controversial, perhaps exoticised universe, which nevertheless may be useful in promoting an alternative image of war-torn countries. For example, the representation of happy domestic shepherd life in Afghanistan constructed through the first-person narration of the protagonist Najmah works as a corrective to the Western messianic approach of American protagonist Nusrat, who wishes to provide a different development opportunity for Najmah in the United States.

Najmah’s account of the morning of the day of crisis encapsulates her family’s cyclical routine, representing a coincidence of life close to nature and of the non-narrative state of childhood before the rite of passage. “The day begins like every day in the Kunduz Hills, following the rhythms of the sun and moon” (11). This way of life is represented as full of hard work in obedience to elders, yet relationships are seen and narrated by Najmah not as rigid, but loving and playful, as exemplified by the morning scene where mutually dependent duties are cheerfully performed. Adults and children work together, and children are thus included in the labour and provision system alongside adults, rather than in formal education. The benefit and pleasures of this kind of lifestyle, implied in Najmah’s brother’s humming, and her father’s whistling while performing their duties (14, 15) is a counterpoint to categorisations of rural non-technological lifestyles as backward and requiring modernisation (which would serve a Western neoliberal economic framework), as well as to the interpretation of children’s inclusion in work as a form of child abuse, as universalising rights discourses might suggest. While this description of family life does also resonate with Western fantasies of Third-World primitivism, its artistic choice of constructing a child narrator, who is an insider to the represented culture, and occasionally uses a limited number of Dari words for greetings, forms of address to family and elders, and traditional items of furniture or food also performs an important contextualisation of the experience of a different

³³ David Rudd’s description, which I referred to in Chapter Two.

childhood as a value: “We live simply but we have plenty to eat: apples, nuts, apricots, pomegranates, and persimmons from the orchard, vegetables from the garden plot, wheat for bread, eggs, goat’s milk – and honey, too” (18). The inclusion of such an openly didactic remark, also echoed by the final sentences of the novel which justifies the young characters’ decision to return and resume their traditional lives, may be read as another expression of Western neo-colonial attitudes, placing readers in the position of arbiters, whose approval other cultures need in order to legitimise their existence. However, the very directness of this remark testifies to a state of global affairs where the right to existence of some of the communities represented in the novels is threatened not only by subtler rhetoric which underpins Western domination. They are often also in immediate danger of mass destruction by military force, legitimated by an ideological climate where, as Whitlock argues, the human rights discourse has lost its authority as a platform for “ethical engagement with the other” (Whitlock 80).

Chapter Five

Initiating the Rite of Passage in Memoirs

The narrative structure of many of the childhood war memoirs follows the same pattern as young adult literature: a description of a relatively peaceful childhood, which is violently interrupted by a sudden incursion of war forcefully bringing child protagonists in direct contact with its realities. Also, as in young adult fiction, the placing of direct experiences of conflict at the core of the narrative constructs war both as a breach of the static non-narrative state of childhood, and as a transformative event from which the young protagonists derive their identity, evoking parallels between the war experience and the rite of passage. The representation of a pre-war stage of relatively stable social relations plays an important role in the genre of life-writing, because it can introduce local understandings and practices around childhood, against which the effect of war can be measured, and provide a corrective to the family model which defines the state of childhood in Western-authored fiction for adolescents. Alongside the emphasis on culture-specific features of childhood, however, the image of the innocent, apolitical and vulnerable child who needs adult protection appears too. Like young adult fiction, this image provides a counterpoint to, and thus indicts, the destructive force of war on children's lives, but also serves as a vantage point from which the maturity which narrator-protagonists acquire through war can be evaluated. In this chapter, I discuss how both portrayals which resonate with Western visions of childhood, and images which emphasise cultural differences play an important part in the memoirs' complex work of personal identity construction, testimony and cultural transmission. I also look at some memoirs which undermine the rite-of-passage framework, with its alignment of childhood with peace and adult protection, and of the exposure to war with a stage of liminal transformation towards maturity. I explore how these alternative structures draw attention to the rite of passage as a convention in representing the relationship between childhood and war.

Memoirs which employ the device of the invasion of war as a divisive moment between a relatively safe childhood and ambivalent stage of suffering, trials and maturing include: Latifa's *My Forbidden Face*, Farah Ahmedi's *The Story of My Life*, John Bul Dau's *God Grew Tired of Us*, B. Deng, A. Deng and Ajak's *They Poured Fire* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. These texts enact a typical pattern, which seems

to be the equivalent of Campbell's monomyth in Western autobiography: the convention of the loss of the childhood paradise and the maturing journey, which Susanna Egan identifies as a prominent cultural fiction for depicting the lived experience of growth (*Patterns* 21). Although they occasionally feature nuclear families, representations of familial structures generally exhibit greater diversity. The accounts of pre-war family life are written with an awareness that what is represented might be less familiar to the implied audience. In young adult fiction child protagonists do not dwell on discussions of family arrangements, even though the texts sometimes make tacit comments on other cultural issues. By contrast, memoirs explicitly draw attention to the social practices around childhood which might appear unfamiliar, and provide a wide variety of family structures which circumscribe it. Memoirs set in Sudan, for instance, depict rural life in polygamous families. In *They Poured Fire*, the brothers Benson and Alepho describe their life in their mother's household, and provide explanations about her rank among other women in the family. Further, they both narrate their extended stays with their elder sister after her marriage because she needs their help. In his memoir about Sierra Leone, Ishmael Beah describes the effect that his parents' separation and the appearance of a stepmother have on his life (10-11). Mariatu Kamara constructs her baseline childhood under her aunt and uncle's care. She provides information on the particular reason for this arrangement, her father's elder wife's jealousy (17-18), but she also explains that living with relatives is a "common" occurrence in her culture (13): a difference with Western concepts which the author makes sure is not misconstrued as a deviation. The memoirs related to the Middle East portray a more urban way of life, in which the family structure is closer to the nuclear family. Nevertheless, Farah Ahmedi makes a specific reference to how the living arrangements for her family are a result of the change in traditions, and of her father's wish to be independent, thus constructing the nuclear family as a modern trend which requires special reference (25).

The contrast of family and childhood representations between the two genres is significant, but this does not mean that individual young adult novels are guilty of inaccuracy. Their predominantly urban settings, with parents who have received formal education, make the represented family arrangements plausible. However, the comparison between the two corpuses of texts shows a contrast between the multiplicity of family models in the memoirs and a largely monolithic representation in young adult novels which serves to reinforce the nuclear family as a transnational norm. This

contrast testifies to the didactic orientation of young adult fiction, but it also points to the limits within which individual fictional texts imagine childhood, suggesting that perhaps fiction represents the generic, and the genre of life-writing is a more suited medium for individualising experiences.

My discussion, however, does not focus on an analysis of family models in the memoirs, because such a task might more properly fit into the discipline of ethnography or anthropology. Rather, I will use a couple of examples to demonstrate how in each individual case narrators create normative childhood/adolescence for their Western readers, and how they distinguish these normative experiences from the subsequent war representations. I will show how they both construct childhood through the perspective of nostalgia, and portray the invasion of war as an “apocalyptic” event which destroys the pillars of their familiar world. Importantly, some of the familiar tropes of children’s literature also emerge, for example, the loss of parental authority bringing about a recognisable change of status in the age hierarchy.

In Latifa’s *My Forbidden Face*, the historical event of the Taliban conquest of Kabul in 1996 is selected as the watershed moment between what the text constructs as a pre-crisis normative adolescence and a liminal crisis experience. The significance of the event as a rupture of familiar reality is conveyed through the temporal framework of the episode. By using the present tense, and setting the beginning of her narrative on the morning after the Taliban takeover, the narrator situates herself at the very moment of loss. Usual activities in her daily life are abruptly delegated to the past, through the anaphoric use of “yesterday”: “Yesterday life was still ‘normal’ in Kabul Yesterday, I went to the dressmaker’s with my sister to try on the dresses we were to wear at a wedding that was to take place today” (4). Activities of the past are contrasted with the threatening immediate consequences of the Taliban regime on herself and her family, which are temporally located by the recurrent use of present adjuncts such as “now”, “today” (“But today feels different” (1)), and through the parallel anaphoric phrase “this morning”: “This morning my father and I won’t go jogging. . . . This morning, Father’s asking himself a thousand silent questions” (6). The “yesterday-today” binary thus portrays the event as a metaphorical separation rite, which annihilates the narrator’s previous way of life. Identifying trauma and nostalgia as the two dominant modes of representing contemporary childhoods, Kate Douglas says: “while nostalgic autobiographies commonly relate childhoods lost through the passage of time, traumatic autobiographies relate childhoods that are stolen or lost through

trauma— particularly abuse” (85). For Douglas the two modes however are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, the opening episode of *My Forbidden Face* presents a peculiar merger of the traumatic and the nostalgic. Placing herself at the threshold of war’s violent invasion, Latifa portrays the events of “yesterday” in a strikingly nostalgic light in view of their temporal proximity. Her traumatic-nostalgic representation thus creates the illusion of immediate access to the narrator’s experience of irretrievable loss of something which yet feels palpably close. The sense of finality is further implied in her mental list of the activities which she is suddenly deprived of: “last ever walk in freedom” and “last day as a student” (19), as well as in her emotional exclamation: “Life can’t just stop like this on 27 September 1996!” (4). Her narrative repeatedly evaluates the situation through “apocalyptic” metaphors, as in her comments: “Dawn . . . brings with it a sense of annihilation” (26), and a few days later: “Everything has changed. The world has turned upside down” (35). Thus, similar to the separation stage of the rite of passage, the initial episode of war’s incursion into the protagonist’s life upsets the world-order that the initiate has known so far.

The analogy with the rite of passage is further established by Latifa’s description of her ritualistic parting with the objects related to her adolescent lifestyle. Belongings which identify her as sharing in a globalised (westernised) youth culture, such as posters of Brooke Shields and Elvis Presley and “stacks of cassettes” of rock music, acquire a symbolic status, as according to newly introduced Taliban rules they are forbidden and need to be put away (33). Their symbolic significance is based on the sense of identity which the young protagonist derives from them, as well as on their future resignification as a form of underground resistance, as, for instance, in the illicit viewing of Hollywood film *Titanic*, and Latifa and her friends’ inclusion of a Leonardo Di Caprio poster in their secret homemade magazine. Thus, the particular requirements of the Taliban regime strip Latifa from the insignia of her previous social self, and transform her into a liminal subject denied categorisation. Her confinement to the house because of the risks involved in going out corresponds to another element of the separation stage, the initiands’ isolation from the community.

The parallel between Latifa’s self-conscious separation from her past life and the rite of passage is constructed not only through the symbols of disintegration of the previous state of a “spoiled” teenager (9), but also by the erasure of her future plans. Her passing of an exam to study journalism on the day before the Taliban come into power signifies the normative, desirable passage to adulthood within the specific

context of her personal circumstances and her cultural environment. Receiving an education and supporting herself with work is the model of transition to adulthood which Latifa has imagined for herself and which has been approved by her family (7). Another object symbolically associated with the normative passage rituals in Latifa's society is the dress for the wedding which she and her sister had been supposed to attend on the day of the invasion. Although criticised as a sign of superficiality by Latifa's mother (9), for Latifa the dress is a symbol of her previous freedom, her self-expression as a young woman, and in the context of the wedding (a major transition ritual on which social structures depend) might be interpreted as a sign of her potential future social role. Her dress is replaced by the burqa, which is imposed as compulsory wear for women in public. Latifa contextualises the function and social meanings of the burqa as traditional attire in some areas of the country, or as a means of disguise during the mujahideen fight against the Soviets, but she herself perceives wearing it as a form of imprisonment, which denies her any agency in the social world (39-41).³⁴ The contrast between the regular transition rituals and the invasion of war creates a symbolic link between the two. War thus is represented as supplanting the traditional rite of passage and becoming its inverse image. War is regarded as both a deviation from normative adolescence, and a potential rite of passage in its own right, which brings destruction of the previous self, but leaves the possibilities for the future blank. Like the typical representation of the moment of war's intrusion in young adult literature, the symbolism of this structural element also hints at the future path of the protagonist and her need to resituate herself in an adult position in response to changed circumstances.

As in young adult novels, in *My Forbidden Face* and other memoirs which follow the same pattern, what war destroys is affirmed, partially through nostalgic remembering, as the desired form of childhood or adolescence. In Latifa's case, baseline adolescence is defined in terms recognisable for Western urban culture. Latifa's worldview and interests are the hybrid product of globalisation, resonating with a Western version of adolescence which is modern as well as multicultural, and which is represented as under immediate threat by the Taliban regime, which is in turn contrasted as exclusive and monocultural. The familiar trappings of adolescence, as well as the use

³⁴ The topic of the burqa, and Muslim women's veiling in general, has become an emblem of the political and cultural clashes in the West-East communication exchanges. It has been and continues to be placed at the centre of arguments relating to Western countries' foreign policies, various strands of women's rights activism and literary and media representations. It has already prompted its own corpus of research and polemics, which I will leave out of my discussion because of space limitations. For a detailed discussion of the veil in *My Forbidden Face* and other veiled autobiographies, see Whitlock's *Soft Weapons*.

of rhetorical questions, invite readers to recognise and care for the figure of an implicitly universal teenager: “Does one grow a beard when one’s a sixteen-year-old in jeans and trainers? A sixteen-year-old, . . . who listens to rock and dreams along to the sentimental Indian love stories we like to read” (5). The inherent answer assumes and thus affirms the notion of a shared value system with that of the implied audience, to whom the described model of adolescence would appear natural. Establishing such a point of sameness of adolescence may be productive for bringing across cultural divides the devastating effect of war experiences on young people, in the political context of *My Forbidden Face*, those of the Taliban regime. However, this representation raises the same homogenising concerns which inhere in both children’s literature, and in Western-mediated life-writing. Although the implied audience is not strictly positioned to identify with the protagonist, it is encouraged to perceive her experience through the assumption of the cultural identicalness of adolescence. This recognition might justify potential action, also because of repeated complaints in the memoir about the world’s indifference to the situation in Afghanistan: action in defence of values favoured in the West, but represented as universal. This stance as Gillian Whitlock has noted, may also have political consequences, including the promotion of Western forms of feminism or building public support for the war on terror.

The effect of the familiarity of Latifa’s represented childhood is, however, qualified by her provision in the later chapters of her memoir of a specific historical account of the cultural interactions which have conditioned her experience, thus challenging its potential ahistorical reading as the default form of young adulthood. Also, Latifa diversifies her portrayal of adolescence with alternative models from more rural areas of the country. Her graphic depiction of the abuse suffered by a group of her peers from the countryside who are secretly operated on by Latifa’s mother, portrays the oppressive regime as devastating for young women regardless of their backgrounds. It precludes the potential interpretation of the Taliban rule as installing traditional, “indigenous” values, which appear repulsive only to a westernised “foreign” culture.

Another element of contextualisation which complicates the notion of sameness is Latifa’s account of how war has already affected her previous experience. From this perspective, the contrast Latifa draws between “pre-crisis” and “crisis” is a tenuous one. Latifa addresses the potential expectations of her audience on the basis of the international image of Afghanistan:

You'd think that in Kabul we'd have grown used to being rocket targets. I'm sixteen and I'm convinced I've always heard them. The city's been encircled for so very long. It's been attacked and bombarded and attacked again. . . . One more night of upheaval should be just part of the routine. (1)

The almost blithe tone in which she depicts exposure to military violence not as an extraordinary deviation as it might be perceived in Western culture, but as the only reality she has known speaks of a certain limit of translatability of Latifa's experience. Her repeated references to the impact of ongoing civil war on her community's mentality and way of life suggest a degree of difference in the assumptions of normality which is encoded in the inverted commas of the phrase "'normal' in Kabul" (4). Latifa explains the internalisation of the experience of war in her family and society, through which the restraint of emotions has become part of their cultural background: "This is a particularly Afghan way of proceeding. It entails a certain dignity and a modesty of emotion in all circumstances. . . . The civil war has, I think, increased this dignity and this muteness" (17). In the course of her narrative Latifa includes accounts of political violence and atrocities from all political periods of her lifetime, and depicts the way they have affected her family members, friends and other people from the larger community: her father losing and restarting his business, the discrimination her mother experiences at work during the Soviet occupation, her elder brother's imprisonment, and the rockets falling on Kabul during her sister's wedding. This representation of war as scarring her family and community subverts the myth of peaceful childhood. Yet, Latifa's wistful reconstruction of her pre-crisis experiences as a "normal" and "free" yesterday (4, 6) uses the paradisaical childhood convention of autobiography identified by Susanna Egan to generate a particular political and personal meaning. First, it makes the effect of the Taliban rule even more horrendous when contrasted to a previous experience described as: "[w]ar, fighting, that's all I've known, really, since my birth" (6). Second, perhaps inadvertently, it draws attention to the constructedness of the otherwise genre-characteristic transparency of the memoir's plot, elucidating the fact that what constitutes a beginning and what the main part of the story is the result of its author's creative decisions.

The selected narrative structure of *My Forbidden Face* thus simultaneously represents a political statement and testimony, but also an identity narrative of politicisation, through which the young narrator frames her search for identity as an

Afghan and a woman. The same significance of the war experience for identity formation is implied in the narrative structures of many other memoirs. It is also often explicitly addressed, for example in Mariatu Kamara's outlining of the boundaries of her memoir: "My name is Mariatu, and this is my story. It begins the year I was 11, living with my aunt and uncle and cousins in a small village in Sierra Leone" (13). The phrase "my story" is ambiguous. It has the deictic function of introducing her autobiographical work, but it also has the meaning of an identity narrative in Eakin's terms, part of her self-production. In this sense her selection of a beginning of the narrative which coincides with her personal experience of the Sierra Leonian civil war constructs war as a definitive event for her identity. A similar meaning can be found in the introductory lines of two other memoirs. Ésaïe Toïngar presents himself as "a child of Chad, an African country that has known internal and external war for years since its theoretical independence from France in 1960" (1). Emmanuel Jal constructs his self-presentation in similar terms: "I was a child of war, born in a land without books and writing, . . . a land swallowed up by war even as I uttered my first cry" (Foreword n.pag.). A comparison between these opening lines demonstrates the variety of ways in which the authors position themselves towards the conflict. Toïngar's memoir foregrounds the details of the military and political aspect of the war in which he is involved, while Jal and Kamara place a greater emphasis on the destructive effect of war on childhood innocence. These, however, are different paths within a common narrative framework in which the passage through war shapes the authors' selves.

While Latifa's memoir seeks to connect with the implied audience by establishing apparent cultural similarity, other memoirs, while still complying with the structural model of the rite of passage, construct childhoods which are markedly different because of their different cultural setting. Models focusing on cultural difference appear, for instance, via the sub-genre of the Lost Boys' memoirs, which depict rural lives in communities largely preserved from the forces of globalisation. I will examine the portrayals of these versions of childhood in *They Poured Fire* with some references to *War Child*, to explore the ways in which otherness is constructed in relation to the implied audience's expectations, and how these representations also invoke a transcultural image of childhood in the process of cultural translation.

Benson Deng's description of village life in the first chapter of *They Poured Fire* focuses on explaining the familial and the larger social structure, including the distribution of roles on the basis of age and gender. He creates an image of a childhood

universe whose order is maintained by the routines of repetitive activities. On the level of family this order is maintained by the fixed obligations of his father's and his mother's work: "My father was usually away attending court because he was an important member of society who helped in difficult decisions" (4) and his mother's tasks: "My mother did the housework"; "She made beautiful pots from clay" (5). On a community level, Benson describes the activities which constitute his society's cyclical way of life:

The life of the Dinka changed according to the seasons. We harvested in the autumn and planted at the end of summer or the middle of spring.

When heavy rains came, the brooks filled with water, and the young men took the cattle to graze at the cattle camp (6)

The following paragraphs continue the same temporal structure by initiating the sentences with adjuncts of time: "When the sun shone again"; "When spring planting began . . . "; "In the afternoons"; "At night" (6), portraying family life as being in immutable unity with communal life, which in turn is synchronised with the rhythms of nature. The rural idyll contributes to the construction of a childhood as a "pre-narrative" state (composed of circular routines), which is natural and desirable. The child-narrator describes himself as partaking in the communal activities under the guidance of elders:

I worked a lot, but at night we rested and the elders told us Dinka folktales and described how life was before we were born. . . . It was on these nights with my family when I learned the most about my ancestors and the Dinka people and how we were supposed to live. (6)

The three authors of *They Poured Fire* produce the image of their culture by repeated references to the respect for elders as a source of knowledge, and construct themselves as children through their reception of elders' stories. The same note is made in other Lost Boys' accounts, including Alepho's in the same memoir (33), and Emmanuel Jal's in *War Child*, which includes an episode of his father instructing him about the conflict (21-22). While protection and guidance by elders is part of the normative, familiar definition of childhood, many of the memoirs also place an emphasis on differences in the local practices around the early years of life, for instance, by depicting a more communal way of bringing up children. In *They Poured Fire* Benjamin mentions the tradition of groups of boys having their meals together, with adult responsibility extending to other families' children too: "Parents always knew that if a boy wasn't home, someone would bring him home" (23). The same purpose of highlighting the

specificity of the childhood experience is performed by the details of children's duties, including tending goats and protecting them from hyenas since the age of four, guarding crops from pests, as well as participating in local traditional games, such as making cow figurines of clay, or undergoing passage rituals such as "cattle camp". The portrayal of what would appear to a Western audience as unusual responsibilities for young children is combined with natural details and names of unfamiliar animal and plant species, all working to re-create the circumstances of a place- and culture-specific childhood, which is different from its Western imagined counterpart.

The idyllic representations of childhood, however, are also in some way threatened by war, similar to earlier examples both in young adult literature and in Latifa's memoir, and with similar effects. One function of this representation is that it qualifies the experience and contextualises it, contributing to the representation of a non-generic, specific childhood determined by particular historical events. Another function is that it generates a sense of fragility, and awareness of the impending loss of childhood on the level of the narrative, which reflects the retrospective position of narration when childhood has already been lost. Some texts weave the signs of approaching war within the story itself, in premonitions and folk forecasts (for example Benson's mother's interpretation of the portent of the "dying sun" (48)), in encounters with refugees and hearing others' testimonies, all of which undermine the experience of childhood safety. An example of the purposeful contrast between the idyllic experience of childhood close to nature and the forthcoming technological military violence which is represented as alien to the community is offered by Emmanuel Jal. Two adjacent paragraphs are used to create the contrast. The first one, in a similar manner to Benson's account from *They Poured Fire*, depicts ordinary routines of daily life in a relatively peaceful village, which is temporarily secured by the SPLA:

When the moon came out, we would sit and watch the older children play *nurei* – singing and dancing in front of each other to try to prove who was best. We also swam in the huge river beside the town and fished with hooks in its clear water or hunted for mangoes in the trees and filled ourselves with the juicy flesh. (12)

Jal creates an image of carefree childhood close to nature as well as bound by the traditions of his Nuer culture. The representation of nature as unspoilt and nurturing, with the images of wild food and clear waters, invokes an association of childhood with edenic bliss. It is this ideal state against which war's trials of physical starvation and

cultural disintegration are contrasted during the liminal stage. The fragility of this image is emphasised in the immediate context of the next paragraph:

‘T-t-t-t-t-t’ went the guns in the distance.

‘Boooooom’ went the big bombs.

‘Grrrrrrrrrr’ went the tanks as they circled the horizon. (12)

Onomatopoeia is used to create the effect of the child’s voice, which adds to the sense of vulnerability, at once threatened, and naïve about what is going to follow.

The sense of impending loss within the story is supplemented by another strategy: the direct reference to the construction of childhood as a result of remembering after loss. This strategy explicitly places the narrative of childhood itself in a nostalgic situation of evoking a past which has been destroyed by a traumatic event. Benson’s description of pre-crisis childhood, for instance, is introduced from a present point in time referring to the moment of writing: “Since my wandering began, there hasn’t been a day or night that I do not think back to my family, our people and lovely Dinkaland” (3). The description that follows then can be interpreted as a memorialisation of the past, which is simultaneously lost yet is constantly present for the narrator. Its re-creation through the memoir is part of an identity narrative serving a private purpose and coloured by idealising nostalgia. The frame is closed by the final sentence of the chapter, which refers to the destruction of the safe idyllic life of childhood: “When I sometimes have nightmares about all the things that happened when our peaceful village life turned to chaos, that feeling of not being able to move during my initiation still overcomes me” (10). I referred earlier to the association this comment makes between the traditional rite of passage and war in order to both acknowledge a similarity between them, and question it. In the context of constructing lost childhood, this comment also points to another important theme: the effect of traumatic “nightmares” which taint and obfuscate the memory of the pre-war past. With this in mind, the process of writing war childhood is a counter-action against war. The text itself represents an implicit attempt to oppose the forced sense of helplessness and passivity which a larger historical event has imposed on the child of the past. I will discuss further the potential of life-writing not only for restoring what is lost in war, but also for restaging liminal war experiences as part of the search for the self in Chapter Seven.

The representation of “other” African childhoods as part of a cyclical and pristine universe which seems out of history, controlled by nature and filled with exotic animals, might be read as fitting into Western colonial constructions of the primitive

indigenous other. This problem has been eloquently articulated by Michelle Peek, who explains that despite the diversity of the Lost Boys' experiences, accounts of their journeys to America seem to follow and thus promote, albeit unintentionally, "a teleological line" from a pre-migration locus "*outside* of modern industrial time" towards "a modern, industrial space, rife with hardship, but also rich with opportunity" (121). Peek argues that by focusing on the sensational details of the young people's experiences, "[t]he social imaginary of humanitarian narrative situates the Sudanese as primitive subjects in need of rescue from a state of underdevelopment, illustrating the persistence of colonial scripts in humanitarian work" (121-22). Peek mentions in particular the episodes of attacks by wild animals, and the reworking of this convention of Lost Boys' narratives in *What Is the What*. In Deng and Eggers' text the story of the lions is addressed as a central issue in the homogenisation of the Lost Boys' narratives, and is accorded an ambiguous status. On the one hand, it is cited as an artistic device to satisfy a particular audience expectation, to provoke sympathy and ensure support (21, 30). On the other, it is also used to challenge cynical questioning of the credibility of these narratives: "the strangest thing about these accounts is that they were in most cases true" (30). *What Is the What* remains ambivalent about its own use of this narrative element (21) and destabilises the genre distinctions between fiction and life-writing, undermining both stock images in these accounts and the audience's stock responses.

Memoirs about locations which have traditionally been represented through frameworks of exoticism are bound to be prone to re-activating stereotypical readings. What I find important in childhood war memoirs is that even where such exoticisation occurs, it is in itself both a testimony and an act of self-construction. The appearance of these images testifies to the complex conditions in which the texts are produced, to the ways that they respond to primed audience's expectations within a largely entertainment-oriented mass market, and under the impact of the power imbalances encoded in the processes of writing and publication and in the authors' refugee experiences. However, since these representations involve the active participation of the author-protagonists, they are also equally part of their identity construction, and reading them only as a repetition of an imposed Western framework might further disenfranchise these authors and the communities they represent. In this case, the referential status of the texts is significant, because it gives a particular legitimacy to the representation of this experience in service of the author's public self-creation. While

they may not always contribute to creating a diverse view of a general representation of Africa, for example, this is hardly the memoirs' primary task. As I argued in Chapter Three, the complexity of the process of their creation undermines hard and fast criteria for authenticity, truthfulness and individuality. The referentiality of the texts might question a critical stance which accords value to texts based on a degree of originality, understood as providing alternative ideological views, or artistic innovations.

Furthermore, even though the images may be generic or over-used, they always appear on individual terms in life-writing texts. I will consider the representation of the story about lions in *They Poured Fire* to demonstrate how the story evokes and contextualises this common image to legitimise a certain representation of their culture. One of the narrators, Benson, tells of "a traditional belief" in his family about a pact his great-grandfather made with a sick lion whom the great-grandfather rescued from hyenas and who in return repaid the family by hunting a gazelle for them in a time of famine (27-28). As Benson explains, "Our family lineage honored this partnership. The lion would not harm any of our herds; instead, he protected them and the family members gave the lion an animal to eat as a reward" (28). Benson's story continues in his own lifetime when a lion starts attacking his father's animals. The suspected breach of the pact is confirmed by a procedure of leaving a sacrificial goat in the jungle for the lion, which the lion does not kill for three days:

Day and night, everybody in the village heard the goat crying. But the lion would not take the offering. Other predators – like hyenas, leopards, pythons and cheetahs – knew that according to the rituals the goat was a gift for the lion and that the lion was around protecting the goat from being eaten. (28)

The relationship to nature which this story exemplifies clashes with the dominant rational mentality with which Western audiences self-identify, according to which such animal agency is not plausible. Certainly, the alignment of a child's perspective with animistic traditional beliefs might open the text to a stereotypical reading of African subjects as irrational and immature. However, I believe that Benson's narrative in fact makes an equally important contribution to the "otherness" debate as the subversive discussion of the image of lions in *What Is the What*. The matter-of-fact tone in which the story is told and the confirmation through plot development of the villagers' perception of causal relations in the story authorise this different mode of perceiving reality.

The authority accorded to this narrative stands out when compared to the ironic restoration of childhood views employed in Emmanuel Jal's memoir. In the early stages of the narrative Jal makes comments which evaluate the child's point of view as imaginative but lacking in knowledge: "We had to go slowly in case we were attacked by the Sudan People's Liberation Army – rebels who ate people and stole children" (4). Later on, he portrays himself as accepting his mother's reassurance about people whose murder he had witnessed: "I hadn't known before that the people I saw were just asleep. I felt happier now" (27). Jal's ironic representation of the child's views constructs readers as knowing adults, able to recognise the protagonist's childlikeness in terms of innocence as well as ignorance. Not so in *They Poured Fire*, where the validity of the lion narrative is sustained, and it is used as part of the protagonist's learning about familial, in particular patrilineal, identity: "You are my own warm blood and every creature knows that. I will always be here to protect you from anything. Even the small crawling ant will not dare to offend you while I'm around" (39). The lack of irony despite the author's changed social and cultural situation lends a particularly legitimacy to a way of seeing and interacting with the world which is different than the dominant Western discourses which objectify nature.

While focusing on cultural specificity, however, many of the memoirs also employ the trope of childhood as a universal experience in order to mediate the effects of war on young people, for example, *They Poured Fire*, *A Long Way Gone*, *Bite of the Mango*, and *War Child* (as has been suggested by Emmanuel Jal's construction of the young narrator's voice above). While Latifa's memoir evokes the globally known teenager, whose dreams are suddenly shattered, in *They Poured Fire* the protagonists are involved in war at a very young age, and so the memoir's evocation of the image of the child focuses on qualities such as vulnerability and need for protection. This image emerges in the prefatory material and dedications, which instruct the implied audience to take the position of the adult witnessing children's suffering. Such stance is introduced, for instance, in the dedication:

Dedicated to Monyde
and all of the children throughout time
who've been caught up in adult wars

Monyde is a very young boy to whom Benson's narrative devotes a chapter, who, despite his courage and determination, does not survive the walk to Ethiopia. The inclusion of Monyde's story in the memoir performs the role of testimony to his life and

death, a commemoration to a victim who would otherwise have remained part of the nameless and uncountable thousands who have lost their lives during the Lost Boys' migrations. At the same time the child Monyde becomes a symbol, equated with the group named in the next line of the dedication: "all of the children throughout time." The line break in the dedication allows for this phrase to be read independently from its qualifier in the next line, and thus constructs all children who have ever existed as a common entity, a totality of childhood contrasted to adulthood. The dedication then contributes to the transhistorical image of children who share a common essence, which renders them vulnerable to wars controlled by adults. Children themselves, in accordance with the common humanitarian distribution of agency and responsibility, are exempt from guilt or fault, "caught up" in wars which lie beyond their power.

The same idea of children's defencelessness is further developed by the two mottos of the memoir. One is a quotation of an African proverb, which returns readers to the specific context of the account, yet reaffirms the innocence of childhood: "*When two elephants fight,/ it is the grass that gets trampled.*" The allegories of grass referring to children and elephants standing for fighters are generic and prefigure the memoir's disinterestedness in taking sides in politics. Rather, the proverb points to the helpless suffering which those in power impose on children, to children's expendability in war, which is later confirmed by the harsh treatment the protagonists receive from soldiers who are supposed to look after or train the protagonists. The same meanings of war-affected childhood are conveyed by the final introductory paratext, by Alephonsion Deng, where the simile "like a colony of ants" again emphasises children's helplessness and vulnerability.

The image of childhood created in the paratexts is complemented by the collaborative author's introduction of the narrators. Judy Bernstein's description of her first meeting with the authors dramatises the encounter between the implied audience and the authors' identity narratives. As a member of the Western community, Bernstein addresses and alleviates potential anxieties about the newcomers, in relation to their reportedly radically different cultural background, and particularly regarding their experience with war without the protection of parents. The authors' status as children/adults is problematised from the beginning of the introduction. They are called "Lost Boys" at first, a title they retain even after they have grown up. Bernstein's introduction also presents the authors in terms of their childhood: "I'd read how twenty thousand or so boys, many no more than five or six years old, fled a thousand miles

across Africa's largest country" (ix). This initial reference to the author-protagonists as boys, which connotes innocence, is quickly undermined by Bernstein's concerns at the prospect of mentoring them, as "[t]hey wouldn't be boys now, but young men, nineteen years or older, who had grown up in refugee camps without parents" (ix). Thus, the representation of parentless children is as much an image of vulnerability as a potential threat. Their survival, which appears to be a transgression of childhood as requiring adult protection, evokes for the narrator associations with the dystopian representation of children outside the age hierarchy in *Lord of the Flies* (ix). From this point onwards she refers to them both as "young men", and "lost boys" alternately (x) until she learns their names.

Even though she acknowledges their extraordinary experience and the knowledge they have accumulated, when discussing the three authors' war involvement, Bernstein adopts a mother's point of view, inviting readers to adopt a paternal attitude too. Her positioning herself as a parent can be interpreted as a strategy of dealing with the contradiction presented by the phenomenon of very young children whose child status has been unsettled because its definitive element, adult care, has been denied: "Five and seven years old. I've been worrying, five years ahead of time, about the day Cliff will go off to college. How does a mother bear letting her child go at any age, much less seven?" (xiv). In her struggle to imagining what separation from family at this age might mean, Bernstein compares the young protagonists to "kindergarteners" (xxi). The invocation of a Western phenomenon to make sense of the Lost Boys' experience is an example of the controversial application of the universalising image of the child, at once enabling and precluding understanding.

In *They Poured Fire*, as well as in other memoirs with the same structure, the invasion of war is an abrupt occurrence, portrayed in similarly cataclysmic terms as Latifa's account, though through different imagery. A significant element in the experience of war is the separation from parents and other elder family members, with war destroying the family structure and thus subverting childhood. Not all memoirs, however, adhere strictly to this structure. An example of a departure from the traditional rite of passage model, while still relying on it, is Ésaïe Toïngar's memoir *A Teenager in the Chad Civil War*. Despite the structural difference within the body of the narrative, Toïngar employs a device for portraying his involvement in war which is similar to the representations in *God Grew Tired* and *War Child*: foregrounding in a prologue one particular episode of exposure to danger and violence, which acts as a separation rite

from his family and is later revealed to be the initiating moment of the protagonist's subsequent direct involvement in war. Similar to *God Grew Tired*, the opening sentences of the prologue place the reader in the middle of the action, opening an informational gap about the circumstances of the conflict, and inviting an ideological alignment with the victimised young protagonist:

“Run quickly,” my aunt whispered urgently, with great agitation.

I shot out of my hut toward the bush that surrounded our village.

“May God save you, my boy,” she called, and I knew the man with his rifle was right behind me. (7)

The prologue bears all the classical elements of many of the memoirs and of young adult novels' accounts of the invasion of war in protagonists' lives. A child protagonist witnesses violence (the murder of an innocent fellow villager), is himself exposed to risk, and becomes separated from an elder who appears to have lost her power to protect him. It invokes the image of the child as a witness, at the moment when war deprives him of normative adult protection. The prologue then proceeds to place the personal experience of the invasion of a more general historical context and to connect a personal experience with political positioning in the war:

I remained on the ground, huddled amidst the shrubs. How had it come to this, that strangers would drive into our village on a sunny morning, kill us, set fire to our homes, and leave? This was the spring of 1983, I was 14 years old, and I was terrified. (7)

As with *God Grew Tired*, the voice is that of the adult narrator looking back, and the child's point of view is potentially overlaid with a historically broader retrospective reflection on the event. The question about the causes of the violent breach of everyday reality signalled by “a sunny morning” appears to be attributed to the hiding child in the bushes. However, both the tone of the question and the subsequent narrative, which reveals the protagonist's already existing political awareness by this point, demonstrate that this is a rhetorical device. The supposedly innocent child narrator asks the question on behalf of the audience, and narrates the rest of the memoir as an answer elucidating the historical circumstances of the conflict.

Despite the employment of the familiar structural element of inauguration of the rite of passage, however, the memoir constructs an alternative story. For one, it complicates the motivation for joining the rebels, providing a variation on the forceful recruitment or desire for revenge scenarios, which are commonly used as frameworks

for explaining the process of becoming a child soldier. The problem of the circumstances of involving children in war is politicised in various contexts. The narrator in *What Is the What* refers directly to this homogenising practice in narrating the Southern Sudanese childhood war experiences, quoting the different ways and reasons for which the boys left their homes and travelled to Ethiopia (21). In his work on the representation of the Lost Boys' experiences, which mixes biographical, historical and journalistic modes of writing, Mark Bixler also comments on how many of the accounts of the Lost Boys of Sudan relied on a blanket narrative of separation from family after an attack on their villages. These stories, according to Bixler, were in some cases true, but in others were used to cover up potentially more problematic facts, such as training with the SPLA, in order to allay the suspicions of humanitarian organisations that refugee camps in Ethiopia were used by the SPLA for recruiting young fighters (60-61), or, as applicants thought, to improve their chances to be accepted for resettlement in the USA from the Kakuma camp in Kenya (89). Apart from the particular political function regarding each conflict, the representation of involvement in war via forceful abduction or for revenge feeds into the general dichotomy of describing child soldiers as innocent victims or demons, identified by David Rosen (134).

Toingar's account of his motivation to join the CODOs diversifies the view of adolescents' recruitment. He points out as a reason for his involvement the fact that life with the CODOs was less dangerous than life in the village at that moment in time (25). Furthermore, later in the narrative Toingar contemplates whether he could use his membership in the army to get education in a military school. The condition he poses to himself for joining the paramilitary group to a degree subverts its purpose: "I told myself that my goal would be to join my cousin Sanabé Abel with the CODO where I might be safer – but not to kill" (25). Envisaging the possibility of non-violent participation in war also subverts received ideas about war. This notion is not discarded as naïve in the course of the narrative, and thus, alongside the political inside-view of the relationships between fighting forces, demonstrates some of the less usual circumstances related to war, and what it might mean for a young person to join in.

Another important departure from the traditional structures of values and experiences in this memoir is the treatment of the common opposition between family and war. The memoir represents a curious inversion of the war-shatters-family narrative, where family relations carry onto, and override military rules and activities.

First, the narrator-protagonist is aware that because of his young age his family might disagree with letting him join the CODOs or travel the necessary long distance on his own (25). Despite the representation of the initial event as a threshold experience in unison with the other memoirs as well as with young adult fiction, the narrator's extended family retains its influence on decisions about the protagonist. The boundaries between life with the rebels and family life are diluted. Toïngar is sent to live with family residing in a nearby village on a couple of occasions, staying with them during his training (30-31). Later, on a visit to family members his aunts object to his return to the rebels because of his young age. Toïngar explains the rules of his culture:

It would have been disrespectful of me to contradict them. Though I wanted to rejoin my unit, I could not comfortably leave without their approval. A person who does not show respect for elders will not have a good future. (40)

Thus, Toïngar's memoir presents a different version of involvement in war, which does not necessarily result in the disempowerment of elders, or in the superiority of those in the military over civilians, which is another common aspect of young people's militarisation reported in the memoirs. Rather, the age hierarchy remains preserved, and at points influences the performance of war-related roles. Thus, when Toïngar accompanies his older cousin on a mission, they both need to take a special detour to avoid meeting relatives, because the social rules of politeness and respect for family members would otherwise delay them (65). Furthermore, Toïngar describes his process of involvement in the war as a negotiation with his elders, thus offering access to a traditional culture where notions of individual development and selfhood have a communal grounding. On another occasion, his senior aunt expresses her disagreement with his joining the army not just because of his age, but also because, as she reveals, he has been chosen to be "the pillar and mainstay of our next generation," whose role is to "preserve the wisdom of our generation" (63). Personal success or prosperity in this view is not left only to the individual, but is a larger family project, hence the normative process of growing up is not related to a separation from parental authority, as the hero myth often implies. Eventually, war displaces this normative pre-arranged path for the protagonist, and similar to other texts serves as a symbolic substitute for these experiences. Nevertheless, his involvement is at least to a degree eventually approved by elders, and happens after he receives some basic training in family and traditional lore by his aunt.

Another memoir which questions the set-up of war involvement as a rite of passage from childhood towards maturity is China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier*. Similar to Toïngar, Keitetsi blurs the distinction between pre-war and child-soldiering activities, but unlike the description of elders' protection received by Toïngar, Keitetsi uses war-related symbolism to reconstruct her pre-war life story. No happy childhood precedes her participation in the conflict as a child soldier. Instead, Keitetsi narrates the horrific abuse which she experiences since a very young age, marked by numerous beatings and psychological torment by the elders charged with looking after her: her grandmother, stepmother and father. She is repeatedly beaten to the extent of needing medical care, starved, and psychologically abused, in one notable instance by her family's slaughtering a small herd of goats, in whom she had found a replacement for her family's love and care, and forcing her to eat them. This representation fits in with the traumatic mode of writing childhood in autobiographical discourse. The imagined appropriate relationship between children and parents, which defines childhood as a period of not only control by adults, but also care, is dismantled from the start of the narrative, and any possible contrast with war is precluded. The blurring of the boundaries between childhood and war is also explicitly articulated in a dialogue between the narrator and her siblings, who discuss joining forces against their step mother, in which China's older sister Margie tells China and another sibling that they are "fighting for the same cause" (66). In the family context of deceit and violence, China does not rely on the traditional image of childhood innocence in representing her young self. She tells stories of her own learning how to lie and perform acts of rebellion and revenge. A chapter entitled "The Forming of My Dark Side" explores a kind of psychological transformation which enables her to perform violence, which in child soldier narratives is usually reserved for the description of children's experiences as fighters: "I told myself then that the only way I could get the fear out of me was to kill more and more" (59). Thus, the commitment of violence, even though against animals, is portrayed as a means of everyday survival for the abused child narrator.

The narrator's reaction at the outbreak of the civil war poignantly subverts the common perspective on family-reliant child narrators. When Keitetsi learns about the attacks on her tribe, the Tutsis, she does not respond with the characteristic anxiety which features, for instance, in Emmanuel Jal's memoir or in *They Poured Fire*, but with contentment: "I watched what was happening to the other Tutsis families and became happy, because I knew that it would, as well, happen to my father and his wife,

thinking that the revenge would be on my side” (53). Voicing a perspective on the war which belongs to the child self, the narrative works both as testimony to the extremity of abuse to which she has been subjected, and to the child’s limited knowledge at the time. Even though the narrator’s adult voice does not intervene to reflect on it from the distance of experience, the naïveté of the comment itself creates an ironic distance similar to Jal’s and evokes sympathy for the child who misinterprets the circumstances in her hope for achieving some sort of justice.

The depiction offered by Keitetsi’s narrative thus questions the image of pure, innocent childhood, and particularly the effect that its recurrent construction might have of implying that it is a universally recognised value and a security priority during conflict. Another episode which further subverts the usual rendering of the separation from family narrative is China’s description of a motivational speech delivered by the rebel leader Museveni himself in front of a group of child soldiers shortly after China has been recruited. While the speech conditions the young recruits to seek revenge for their lost family, or to try to liberate them, the narrator reasons:

But I was different, being with a different background, I knew where my parents were, and I just hoped to stay alive, so that one day I could return home and kill them. I had decided that they pay the price for the pain that I was now in. (123)

This statement offers a radical alternative to the nostalgic constructions of pre-crisis lives in the memoirs I discussed earlier, and especially to the images in the young adult novels, where returning to a semblance of family life before the crisis, and resuming the role of the child is often represented as the goal to aspire for.

What is the effect of Keitetsi’s subversion of the figures of the rite of passage? While it challenges the myth of childhood as safe and protected by definition, or as redeemingly pure, the narrator’s psychological response to being subjected to violence works powerfully to show the child’s vulnerability when the desirable parental care is withheld. While China demonstrates certain independence in choosing to join the NRA in Uganda, this choice is nevertheless seen as resulting from her disorientation and lack of a place to go after escaping her father’s home and after a failed attempt to reconnect with her birth mother. China presents her previous traumatic experience as a reason why she cannot trust the kindness of her birth mother’s household. As an important, threshold element in the story, her mistrust is represented both within the flow of the narrative, recalling the eight-year-old’s vocabulary and worldview: “I couldn’t tell if

they were happy to see me or happy to eat me” (111), and confirmed from a more analytical adult point of view, which explains the child’s reaction from the more experienced view of the adult, who can make causal connections in the process of identity formation: “*Her love and care could not find its way into my heart, because it was too cold and my suspicion had no end...*” (112). There are only a few such interventions of the adult voice in the narrative, which occur at significant emotional turning points, and are separated from the rest of the narrative both in terms of tone and by the use of italics, revealing the self-consciousness of creation of the self through narrative. Through this comment the abuse she has suffered as a young child is interpreted as the cause of future emotional damage, which prevents the young person from recognising what is possibly genuine love and care.

China’s immediate involvement with the rebels after sneaking out of her mother’s home is a chronological fact, which also has the symbolic function of replacing what should be a normative, appropriate environment for a child, with recruitment in the military. The narrator analyses this link by discussing children’s involvement in the military as related to a search for compensation for family love (135). This idea is also encapsulated as the interpretation of the child soldier’s most important attribute, the gun: “But all the time we searched in a wrong place, and insisted on love, the stranger forced us to find love from the gun. We were told that the gun was our mother, our friend and our everything, and to lose it, we would rather lose ourselves” (135). This function of the gun to replace the parent as a source of protection, as well as of identity, is a symbolic redefinition of relations to family, as well as a personal transformation which is reminiscent of the rite of passage. Thus, the alternative to the traditional rite-of-passage structure offered by Keitetsi’s memoir still returns to the familiar tropes of the desirable ideal for childhood as included in adult-dominated hierarchy, and antithetical to war. The mature Keitetsi’s indictment of war, contrary to her childhood expectations that it could redress her family situation, is pointed out as a purpose of the memoir in her dedication: “to prevent this from happening again” (v). A similar view on childhood along the lines of the human rights understanding is presented by Keitetsi in an interview for the Xarabank talk show on Maltese national television: “Every young person, every child should belong to the world and not to a country” (“Xarabank”). This view concurs with an understanding of childhood as a universal category which matters across countries and cultures, and

needs universal protection, and in which loving family care remains an underlying ideal to aim for.

SECTION C

THE LIMINAL STAGE: BETWEEN AGENCY AND TRAUMA

The plot-initiating event in the majority of the texts in my study disqualifies protagonists from their child status and reconfigures them into liminal subjects. The forceful removal or erosion of parental authority in these texts opens the possibility of exploring the phenomenon of war-affected childhood. An oxymoron in contemporary discourses around childhood and war, children's war involvement is often described in the memoirs and novels as a paradoxical state of increased vulnerability and independence. This ambivalent representation fits in a post-Second World War tradition of autobiographical writing for young people outlined by Gillian Lathey. As Lathey explains, while under regular circumstances the "child's world is almost inevitably domestic in scale" and he or she "is effectively powerless within society," under the circumstances of war:

the child may be traumatised, but also empowered. The twentieth-century concept of a 'protected' childhood may be lost, but there are compensations in the breaking down of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and the elevation of children to the status of equal partners with adults in the fight for survival. (Lathey 132)

As Section B demonstrated, the moment of crisis inaugurates a new stage where the young protagonists are exposed to danger, but are also provided with opportunities to act, sometimes even more efficiently, than their disempowered elders. In Section C, I argue that in texts of both genres young protagonists during the war-initiated crisis stage are represented as fluctuating between extremes of agency and vulnerability, power and disempowerment, knowledge and innocence, which, as I have previously shown, are used to construct childhood and adulthood as opposites. I interpret this combination of opposites through the concept of ritual liminality, in which the order of categories is suspended and contradictory symbols can coexist, so that initiates can explore communal meanings and remake their social selves.

Liminal representations provide an opportunity to play out and appease various largely adult anxieties around the involvement of children in war. Liminality resonates with the perception of children's exposure to war as a breach of normality, but also by

being a stage in a ritual, suggests that the breach is only temporary and will be followed by re-inclusion in social structures. Liminality provides a template for thinking about overwhelming experiences, such as trauma, but redefines them in a framework of learning by overcoming trials. Thus, while children's experience of extreme suffering, as well as their ability to inflict suffering are voiced and acknowledged, they are also resignified in frameworks of recovery and development, which inhere in the narrative conventions of both genres.

Among the traditional binaries between which liminal protagonists are torn, a dominant contemporary cultural model of casting these experiences is the power-disempowerment opposition, which is most often represented on a plot level in the texts through concepts of agency at one end of the pole, and trauma at the other. As I suggested in the previous section, the initial violent event is described as either granting special agency to the protagonists, or inflicting great psychological anguish, which is often portrayed as trauma. Even if neither of these models is evoked in the initial episodes corresponding to the separation stage of the rite of passage, the "agency-versus-trauma" conceptual framework transpires within the later development of the plot as well as in the framing and paratextual segments. It is also a major theme in critical work evaluating these texts. I start my analysis with a brief outline of the debates on which the primary texts draw to construct representations of agency and trauma. I then argue that Turner's liminality is a useful tool for explaining how the texts unsettle the mutual exclusivity of the members of this binary, and how the fluid interplay between them is countered by linear narrative structures which lead from disempowerment (figured as trauma) to acquisition of adult-like agency.

Representations of war-induced psychological suffering in texts of both genres often engage in discourses of trauma, as in *The Other Side of Truth*. Other texts where the traumatic framework appears include *A Stone in My Hand*, *Little Soldier*, *Refugees*, and among the memoirs in *The Story of My Life*, *A Long Way Gone*, *War Child*, *Child Soldier*, *Tasting the Sky*. The concept of trauma has generated its own canon of theoretical studies, literature and art, and has come to be associated with specific aesthetic and ethical issues of representability and transcendability. Its study is a field where medical, military, philosophical, historical and cultural discourses intersect. Trauma has emerged as a dominant cultural framework for discussing personal experiences and larger social and historical events, as well as for understanding history since the Second World War (Felman and Laub xiv). Drawing on Freud, Cathy Caruth

defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Trauma symptoms occur because the event is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). It is the “unassimilated nature” of the traumatic experience, “the way that it is precisely *not known* in the first instance” (4) that explains trauma’s notorious resistance to representation, especially verbal. The relation of trauma to catastrophic historical events or social injustice politicise its unrepresentability, making it not only a cognitive, but an ethical issue too.

Thus, Caruth formulates as a dominant concern of reconstructing trauma the issue of “how not to betray the past” (27). According to Caruth, a way to remain faithful to the traumatic event and to protect it from the normalising function of language is to preclude comprehension (56). A similar argument is offered by Robert Eaglestone, who insists on the “otherness” with which testimony can confront the reader “precisely because identification – a grasping or comprehension which reduces otherness to the same, events outside one’s framework reduced to events inside one’s framework – cannot (or should not) happen” (71). As much as trauma is considered unrepresentable, it demands to be witnessed (Caruth 9). Caruth argues that trauma is a space of connection with the other, because of “the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another” (8). Perhaps this notion of trauma could account for the ubiquitous reference to traumatic experiences in texts of both genres. Trauma is supposed to be a familiar experience, sometimes deliberately invoked in Western plots in young adult novels, such as *Refugees*. It is a concept which might alert recipient societies to their potential political responsibility in the conflicts described. Space limitations do not allow me to explore this issue in greater detail, but my analysis so far suggests that texts of both genres tend to externalise the enemy in conflict, paying only limited attention to, or obscuring altogether, Western responsibilities.

Simultaneously with the construction of trauma as unspeakable and impossible to overcome, there exists another current in more popular mediums such as television talk shows and popular memoirs. In these discourses aesthetical issues are of lesser concern, and greater emphasis is placed on a therapeutic process often related to a psychoanalysis-inspired “talking-cure” approach. Kate Douglas argues that memoirs of

childhood are often seen “as therapeutic ‘silence-breakers’ for individuals who have suffered pain or distress” (107), and that the genre privileges the portrayal of resilience and recovery (109). In therapy, the recovery from trauma in children is described by Steele and Malchiodi through the power-disempowerment binary: “Because the experience of trauma is often one of terror, and being vulnerable and powerless to do anything about one’s situation, trauma-informed care must . . . help . . . bring about a renewed sense of empowerment” (xix). An important concept in the recovery from trauma is resilience, which Steele and Malchiodi define thus: “the ability to thrive and grow during adverse and/or chronically disruptive experiences (physical, social, or environmental)” (173). The two authors draw on T. R. Tedeschi and L. G. Calhoun to define not only the benefits of healing from trauma, but benefits which can be derived from the traumatic experience itself, termed ‘posttraumatic growth.’ Posttraumatic growth is said to involve: more compassion and empathy; increased psychological maturity compared to peers; increased resilience; deeper understanding of personal values, purpose and meaning of life; deeper spiritual focus (186). Steele and Malchiodi ultimately formulate the goal of therapy for traumatised children and adolescents as becoming “thrivers”: “Individuals who can move from surviving to thriving have developed a sense of wholeness, balance, and satisfaction and respond to others and the environment in a more productive way” (197).

The idea of post-traumatic growth has also been discussed in a larger societal context in relation to responses to traumatic events such as terrorism or immigration. According to Joseph and Linley, trauma-related growth may affect three areas of psychological well-being,³⁵ in particular “changes in life philosophy,” which include “purpose in life, autonomy”; “changes in perception of self,” including “environmental mastery, personal growth, self-acceptance”; “changes in relationships with others” (“Positive” 11). Negative effects of stress and positive ones are not mutually exclusive but coexist, as they “represent separate dimensions of experience rather than opposite ends of a single continuum” (Joseph and Linley, “Psychological” 33). This formulation serves as an apt context for the representations of traumatic responses in the texts I am researching. The studies above reflect and shape the cultural climate within which childhood war experiences are created in contemporary writing. As one of them

³⁵ Psychological well-being is used as a technical term which is contrasted to subjective well-being, which refers to emotional affects, and which is impaired by the pattern of “re-experiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal following trauma” (Joseph and Linley, “Positive” 11).

explicitly says, a shift has occurred “in the clinical view of traumatic responses, from one concerned with symptoms and deficits to one that also encompasses the struggle to find meaning or benefits or even the experience of distress as antecedents of potential growth” (Morland, Butler and Leskin 57). The scientific climate which privileges thriver status as a therapeutic goal and which seeks positive outcomes from devastating experiences also testifies to a cultural environment where such models are deemed desirable. These social frames of reference inevitably influence the ways in which traumatised subjects are produced, particularly via genres like the ones I am discussing, which are involved in modelling rites of passage into acceptance by dominant social structures.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I explore how texts draw on these occasionally contradictory discourses in constructing images of liminal experiences. Before exploring the link between trauma and liminality, however, I will consider briefly the potential criticism of the application of trauma discourses as frameworks for textual construction and interpretation. One concern in particular is that the employment of the therapeutic pattern for traumatic experiences may erase their cultural function as testimony. As Robert Eaglestone eloquently formulates this concern regarding the historical context of the Holocaust:

The risk seems to be that the term trauma . . . , if it is invoked with all the rest of the analytic and therapeutic tools, will overcode the accounts of the Holocaust with a discourse of healing analysis or therapy, and so pass over both the epistemological and ethical impossibility of comprehending the survivors’ testimony by seeming to grasp and resolve it . . . (33)

His discussion is applicable to testimonies from other violent events, including the ones which the young adult novels and memoirs focus on, especially in a cultural environment which emphasises individual experience and thus invites use of the therapeutic pattern. Eaglestone warns that the therapeutic reading might also further revictimise survivors, depriving them of their role to testify, and thus denying them agency (32).

Another concern about the application of trauma to frame and interpret the adverse effects of war on children is the potential cultural specificity of trauma. Since the concept of trauma has been produced through Western medical, scientific and cultural discourses, it may be inadequate in translating the experiences of non-Western

children. Discussing the issue of measuring the psychological effects of war on resettled South Sudanese in the United States, for instance, Fox and Willis categorise views on the matter as divided into two camps. One camp believes that Western frameworks such as measurements of anxiety, depression and PTSD are applicable to refugees from other countries “with some cultural variations” (172). The other, calling for a reorientation towards local forms and cultural schemas, “cautions us not to cavalierly export the Western worldview of PTSD which represents but a social construction driven by culture-based meaning systems” (173). This issue is particularly sensitive where the authors who create representations of suffering belong to the Western community, but also where the recipient audience’s demands play an important role in regulating the field. In such cases the use of the trauma framework may be counterproductive to a testimonial project, even culturally assimilating.

While the discussion of trauma has produced varied and systematic critical study, the concept of agency is rather more loosely defined. In its manifestations in character portrayal in young adult novels and memoirs, and in critical readings of these texts, agency appears to be associated with empowerment as a way of resisting or overcoming trauma. Further, agency, especially in post-colonial and gender-oriented criticism, comes across as a privilege for socially dominant groups in relationships where there is a power imbalance. Thus the subalterns’ acquisition of agency, and the textual representation of this agency, is similarly to traumatic experiences threatened by assimilation into the dominant model. An example is the representation of non-Western girls’ empowerment as an adoption of masculine or Western models of agency, which I discuss in Chapter Six. In terms of testimony, as Eaglestone and others suggest, agency is related to the survivors’ ability to own and tell their story, and construct their own selves. Finally, within the adult-child opposition, agency is related to adult power, and represents the ultimate goal (forever withheld in children’s literature) of maturation.

While agency and trauma appear to occupy two ends of a continuum, their coexistence in the way protagonists are described can be explained in terms of the liminal stage of the rite of passage. A space of paradox, de-construction and re-construction of social and psychological categories, liminality is marked by simultaneously positive and negative features, and thus allows for expression of the conflicting roles of children in war: on the one hand, as passive, objectified recipients of adult protection or targets of abuse; on the other, as endowed with remarkable resilience, with agency which could work around repressive adult (militarised)

structures of power. In the liminal stage, young people can be represented as both totally submissive and victimised, and charged with a disproportionate responsibility, taking over adult family and public roles, including as combatants.

Liminality offers a possibility of confronting horrific experiences and violence which exceed “normal” frames of reference, and exploring in particular the primary sensory images related to trauma, which resist verbalisation (Steele and Malchiodi 2-3), in the context of the bizarre disjunctive symbolism of liminal experiences. The contextualisation of trauma within the rite of passage also accommodates positive reworkings of the traumatic experience. Both physical and psychological suffering is part of rite of passage (Turner, *Forest* 23, van Gennep 75, 78-79). Van Gennep links the “physical and mental weakening” of initiates to cutting their connection with their childhoods and preparing them to be reborn into a new social status (75). Thus, the concept of liminality can contain different aspects of the traumatic experience, such as its “otherness” and its inexpressibility, but also the possible alignment of the representations I explore with the concept of traumatic growth, so that childhood trauma and childhood growth can be seen as simultaneously viable categories of describing children’s experiences of war.

Liminality is also suitable for conceptualising the protagonists’ experience of a maturing effect of war because of its function of generating a special kind of learning. As Turner summarises this process:

The passivity of neophytes . . . , which is increased by submission to ordeal, their reduction to a uniform condition, are signs of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life. (*Forest* 101)

In the traditional rites of passage this learning is related to an encounter with, and absorption of, the most fundamental values and principles of the community to which the ritual allows access (Turner, *Drums* 2). The process of learning is performed by instruction, symbolic behaviour, and presentation of tribal sacra, and this knowledge is believed to be transformative for the ritual subject, “impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. . . . not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being” (*Forest* 102). Thus, suffering and learning are melded into one, and effect a profound change in the subject. The knowledge which initiates acquire is of a different order, a knowledge of the most essential principles of the community, and of the sacred, which also marks out the knower as a figure of special wisdom. For this

reason what is learned through trauma may be compared to mystical knowledge. Psychological disorders have been linked to mystical experiences by using a mythologico-ritualistic reading instead of the tools of Western scientific thought (Campbell, *Myths* 201-208).³⁶ This association inscribes trauma as a version of the shamanic journey, which bestows special knowledge and a visionary role to its subjects, as in the controversial conceptualisations of Holocaust survivors as mystical figures (Luckhurst 68-69). Such an interpretation of the traumatised child as a source of special wisdom appears in children's literature with the child as survivor and saviour. According to Katharine Capshaw Smith this is a reincarnation of the pervasive Romantic figure of the child healer "who can offer adults spiritual advice in how to triumph over pain through simple, honest, essential values like love, trust, hope and perseverance" (116). The tellers of traumatic childhood stories are also associated with a similar status in the field of life writing, where they "position themselves, and are positioned in their promotion, as people who have written against trauma" (Douglas 78).

The inclusion of this paradoxical categorisation of young people within a coming of age framework also links with developmental ideas such as Erikson's of the "normative" identity crisis, "a necessary turning point, a crucial moment when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (16). The concept of developmental crisis, as that of Turner's rite of passage, helps configure difficult or traumatic experiences as an expected disturbance whose successful overcoming leads to maturity. This interpretation is particularly significant for the young adult novels, which deliberately position their protagonists on the verge of adolescence, where "crisis" as I have shown is represented as imminent. Certainly, this is not to say that the novels and memoirs by default endorse this interpretation of experiences of war as constructive. They do have

³⁶ Campbell draws on psychiatry studies from the 1960s on the occurrence in altered/abnormal psychological states of images and symbols similar to those of mythology and shamanic practice. Shamanic initiation itself is associated with the experience of acute "psychological crisis" which in the language of contemporary Western medicine would be categorised as psychosis (*Myths* 204). Unlike contemporary interpretations of such psychological symptoms as pathology, which according to the material reviewed by Campbell could be linked both to inability to resolve schizophrenic crises (204-207), and to young people's "aggressively antisocial attitudes" (208), a mythologico-ritualistic treatment of such symptoms suggests that they are potentially beneficial and can lead to resolution and to qualify a shaman as a religious agent (204). What I find relevant in this discussion in relation to trauma is that the occurrence of extraordinary psychological responses, which result from experiences exceeding normative frames of reference, could be seen as a parallel to such rite-of-passage experiences, and their processing and overcoming could be linked to psychological growth and to gaining esoteric knowledge.

the potential to question it, for instance by blurring the boundaries between the narrative stages of development, by representing war-affected childhoods, or the lingering characteristics of liminality in post-war experiences.

One more factor which frames the liminal fluctuation between extremes, and inflects experiences of both trauma and agency, is gender. Apart from cultural background, war is in itself a factor in representing gendered maturation. Similar to the polarisation of ethnic and national labels between warring parties observed by Kaldor, there appears to be a persistent division along gender lines within warring societies, with masculine qualities associated with the role of the fighter, and feminine ones with peace, civilian “normality,” and symbolising the nation (Goldstein; L. Smith (26-27)). Apart from solidifying the gender division, however, as the previous section demonstrated, war might also enable or demand a fluidity of gender roles. I will explore the ways in which texts might provide representation of changeable gender roles in the context of the liminal experience, and consider the effect this might have on the construction of adulthood. The issue of gendered agency is further complicated with regard to children, including adolescents, who are protected from combatant status by contemporary humanitarian law, which also includes adolescents, but who are involved in armies and paramilitary organisations, boys and girls alike. In my analysis, I focus on children affected by conflict in non-combatant roles. The majority of the examples I use refer to girl protagonists, but I also discuss boy protagonists, who in non-combatant roles portray the same model of linear narrative from disempowerment to empowerment. Child soldier narratives, which remain outside the scope of my thesis for lack of space, especially eloquently exemplify the contingency and political malleability of the terms of agency and trauma, in particular by rereading the traditional story of the acquisition of masculine agency in terms of trauma.

Chapter Six

Liminal Experiences in Young Adult Novels

In many of the young adult novels parental disempowerment is paired with an empowerment of adolescent protagonists, both allowing them greater independence, and charging them with responsibilities of protectors and carers in order to fill in the vacuum of adult control. The resolution of the period of crisis depends on young characters' successful performance of a number of adult roles: caring for depressed or ill parents (*The Breadwinner* and *Under the Persimmon Tree*), adopting parenting roles for the sake of younger siblings (*Parvana's Journey*, *Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Other Side of Truth*, *A Little Piece of Ground*), providing an income for their families, ensuring the reunion of the family by discovering lost family members, or freeing parents from prison (*The Breadwinner*, *Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Other Side of Truth*). I regard the represented ability of adolescent characters to perform such tasks, which push against international humanitarian views of the range of the child's sphere of action, as liminal hyper-agency. By hyper-agency I refer to their ability to perform tasks which in the extreme situation of war lie beyond the power of adults, and which symbolise the disintegration of normative social categories (in this case of childhood and adulthood) characteristic of the rite of passage. In the context of young adult literature, the endowment of adolescent protagonists with such hyper-agency accommodates and attenuates various concerns about the topic of children's involvement in war. First, hyper-agency works as a form of child- as well as adult-sparing strategy to counteract the devastating effects of war on children today, similar to the reassuring function of the figure of the child survivor discussed by Katherine Smith (116). At the same time, the performance of typically adult roles could be interpreted as a correspondence to the symbolic role-play within the rite-of-passage framework, which helps accomplish the transformation of the individual. This representation also accommodates the genre function of providing a recognisable and useable model of adolescent development for its implied audience, where the goal of the transition to maturity is associated with the acquisition of adult power and agency. However, the representations of successful accomplishment of adult roles are not an unequivocal celebration of the opportunities provided by war. Under the extreme situation of violence and without their elders' support, even the most ostensibly empowered characters are represented as fluctuating between power and disempowerment, in

constantly tense power relations with caring or controlling adults. Thus, the polarised responses of hyper-empowerment and complete disempowerment, often encoded as trauma, are in fact related characteristics, which co-exist within characters, constructing young characters as liminal subjects and war's effect on them as ambivalent.

The Breadwinner protagonist Parvana exemplifies this liminal fluctuation between power and disempowerment, despite ostensibly being one of the most empowered characters in my corpus. In *The Breadwinner*, like the protagonist of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Parvana is symbolically assigned an elevated status over the rest of the family by her father during the initial scene of his arrest. In his absence, Parvana's and the rest of the family's survival depends on her taking on his work as a salesman and translator in the marketplace. Parvana's disguise as a boy raises the issue of the significance of gender and cultural background in defining agency. Just as the construction of pre-crisis childhood, the portrayal of female agency is also the centre of competing requirements: of representing a "local" form of childhood/adolescence which is consistent with the cultural context it represents, and matching the overt or implicit Western educational requirements associated with the genre of children's literature.

Discussing the connection between gender and maturity in children's literature, Eric Tribunella explains that in cultures where masculinity and femininity are considered to be mutually exclusive, adulthood is defined through masculinity, while those "who enact conventional femininity, are left to be patronized, infantilized, or otherwise dismissed as silly, dependent, less competent and, indeed, less emotionally *mature*" (xiii). The setting of the Taliban regime is presented by the novel as a case of extreme polarisation of masculine and feminine roles where gender overrides age as far as public agency is concerned. Thus, Parvana's position as a child on the brink of adolescence provides her with more power than her female elders, because of the fluidity and uncertainty of gender roles her age entails:

Parvana wasn't sure if she would be considered a woman. On the one hand, if she behaved like one and stood outside the shop and called in her order, she could get in trouble for not wearing a burqa. On the other hand, if she went into a shop, she could get in trouble for not acting like a woman! (50)

She transforms what at first appears as a disadvantage, as neither way of behaving seems appropriate, into an advantage by assuming a male identity. This decision is depicted as a manifestation of agency only possible because of her young age, and as an

indirect form of political resistance because of successfully “tricking” the regime. Being devoid of gender characteristics and in between ages allows Parvana to step out of her traditional role as a female child and experiment with other roles, especially the archetypal male role of the breadwinner. This flexibility resonates with the character of ritual liminality, where initiates are stripped of gender characteristics or endowed with characteristics of both genders.

Parvana’s exploration of typical male roles goes beyond the public sphere. Even while her hair is being cut, Parvana starts to “feel like a different person” (63). Later, when she works in the market, she receives small gifts thrown at her by a mysterious woman from a nearby window. Parvana never meets or sees the woman properly, but she and her friend Shauzia build a fairytale princess-in-the-tower narrative around her, in which Parvana places herself in the role of the prince rescuer:

She saw herself climbing up the wall, smashing the painted-over window with her bare fist and helping the princess down to the ground. The princess would be wearing silk and jewels. Parvana would swing her up onto the back of a fast horse, and they’d ride through Kabul in a cloud of dust. (125)

The potential subtext of sexuality associated with the trophy bride from the hero myth is suppressed by the text, signalling how the preadolescent audience is imagined. The focus is instead on women’s rights, as the “princess” is implied to be the victim of domestic violence (129), a representation which solidifies colonialist views of Third-World women as passive and subjected to violence. The episode contributes to the rewriting of the heroic quest, which the novel seeks to accomplish by selecting a female character for the male-dominated genre of war fiction. Parvana’s fantasy may not deconstruct gender binaries, as the princess is an epitome of traditional essentialised (and in this case exoticised) femininity. Nevertheless, her experimentation has a psychological dimension too, and makes her role-play go beyond an external “posturing” or “covering up” an essential feminine nature. Bean and Harper explain Parvana’s gender positioning through the theoretical framework of performative gender theory which views masculinity and femininity as “socially scripted but amenable to change, rather than as a fixed set of biologically determined behaviors” (12). They see in Parvana’s adoption of masculinity a potential for examining and questioning essentialist views, because *The Breadwinner* successfully “separates the performance of a gendered identity from the sex of the performer” (26). Parvana’s embrace of

masculinity is a sign that her metaphorical rite of passage is deliberately constructed as a departure from the traditional female one, which often links female maturing to marriage and child-bearing (Turner, *Forest* 22-23). Not only is she shown to feel relieved to not have to perform housework if she earns money (70), but she is also presented as a more awkward carer than a male peer, Asif, in looking after an orphaned baby (*Parvana's Journey* 217). Nevertheless, she is involved in quasi-maternal roles: finding the baby in the first place, and looking successfully after him and after another two children she meets in the sequel to *The Breadwinner*. One scene explicitly establishes her in this role by comparing her washing of Asif's hair to the way that "her mother used to do for her" (220). Thus, while Parvana is represented as preferring masculine roles, she is equally at ease with feminine ones.

A similar interpretation of early adolescence as a stage of in-betweenness which can be useful in the otherwise disempowering environment of war is also portrayed in *Under the Persimmon Tree*. In a self-reflective moment, which is in itself a sign of maturing, Najmah thinks:

I am no longer the girl Najmah of Golestan, that child who was afraid of leopards. . . . Neither am I a boy named Shaheed. But I must pretend to be Shaheed if I am to look for my father and brother. . . . Reuniting with them is my one and only reason for existence, and if I must do it as Shaheed, then I will be Shaheed for as long as necessary (164).

Najmah dissociates herself from both her previous child self and the new self which others try to impose on her, in particular the competing male and female identities imposed on her by two adults who are taking care of her. Instead, she recognises her own independence, portraying gendered identity as something she can manipulate. This representation conveys an important characteristic of the liminal stage of the rite of passage. In its undermining of stable categories, it allows to a certain degree for their revision. According to Turner "life-crisis rituals" are a fairly conservative practice in which "society reappraises its ideology and structural form, and finds them good" (*Drums* 237). Nevertheless, they are also potentially transformative, not only for the particular individuals whom they prepare for adulthood, but by producing new categories and ways of being within the productive context of ritual liminality (*Forest* 97).

While representation of free play with gender roles as part of the journey to maturity is an important educational aspect for Western young adult literature, it is

ethically controversial when its framework is used to represent coming of age in a different cultural environment. In both *The Breadwinner* and *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the representation of female protagonists has been argued to reproduce Western orientalist and neo-colonial discourses (Bradford; Bean and Harper 26; Sensoy and Marshall). Bean and Harper analyse the relation between the polarised constructions of gender in Taliban Afghanistan as it is represented in *The Breadwinner* and “the implicit suggestion of how they should be organized from a Western, liberal gaze that renders the story intelligible” (26). Sensoy and Marshall consider Parvana’s ingenuity in her experience of war as the desirable female agency according to Western feminist “girl power” criteria (299-300), in which she needs to attain goals such as mobility or education “to save herself from her ‘Third World girl’ status” (299). They assert that the novel positions Western female adolescent implied readers “as the saviours or caretakers of ‘Third World’ (read: brown/Muslim) girls” (296), both through the discourse of “paternalistic caring” (Uma Narayan’s term) towards the protagonist, and directly through purchasing the book whose proceeds are donated to a charity supporting Afghan women (299). While I agree with Sensoy and Marshall’s reading of the construction of an Afghan girlhood through Western ideas of female adolescent empowerment, I think the representation of Parvana as enterprising downplays the need of care and suggests that exposure to a violent situation is potentially beneficial. Furthermore, implied readers are aligned with Parvana’s perspective through focalisation, and also through her enactment of a form of adolescence which is a recognisable current genre ideal of gender equity. If attitudes of paternalistic care are elicited, they are more part of the “hidden-adult” perspective, and might be sought from the adult members in the chain of distribution and consumption of young adult literature, to whom the dedication in *Parvana’s Journey* – “To children we force to be braver than they should have to be” – is more plausibly addressed. From this perspective, readers are invited to respond empathically through identification, still an ethically dubious act of reading,³⁷ but one which recognises the represented “other” as a peer, rather than as someone in a necessarily diminished position.

Issues of misrepresentation however remain. Claims by Western authors regarding the authenticity of the described experiences may obscure the authors’ mediatory role and the power imbalance underlying the process.³⁸ Yet, the stories Ellis

³⁷ See Eaglestone; Whitlock.

³⁸ Bradford elucidates this hidden relation in regard to Staples’ novels depicting Muslim girls:

narrates particularly in *The Breadwinner* complicate the form of agency adopted by Parvana because they are based on actual children's experiences as narrated to Ellis by their mothers in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Sensoy and Marshall argue that their students' response to the problem of cultural transaction – wishing to find out whether the story is 'true' – misleadingly diverts the attention away from the mechanism of discursive construction of Third-World girlhood (306). Certainly, with Ellis and other authors who write on the basis of others' "true" experiences, as with any other kind of historical writing, the selection of events, and indeed what might constitute an event (worthy of writing) in the first place, is already a mediated process, in which the cultural and political preconceptions of both author and intended audience have a decisive role. It would not be possible, for instance, to gauge on the basis of these fictional representations how working in the market while dressed as a boy could have been experienced and how it could have been evaluated from within the culture where such a transgression of norms takes place. Yet, re-inscribing in criticism certain strategies or forms of agency which Afghan children might have used as entirely Westernised, even if especially selected and constructed to educate Western children, may further work to erase what representation these children might be receiving through these texts.

Like her flexible characterisation in terms of gender, during the liminal journey Parvana's status within the age hierarchy remains in flux too. On the one hand, she is represented as performing adult roles particularly successfully, while surviving exposure to extreme scenes of violence such as the chopping off of arms as punishment at a stadium or performing particularly disturbing activities such as digging out human bones for sale. Certainly, the text is wary of unconditionally heroicising her performance because that might contradict its overall anti-war ideology. Instead, the novel uses humour to deflate potentially pathos-provoking episodes, in particular those which are in some way aligned with military values. For example, Parvana's fantasy of liberating the "Window Woman," invoking the mythical narrative of the hero, is subverted through humour, when Shauzia suggests a sheep for the "fast horse" Parvana has imagined. Another case in point is the episode when Parvana tries to muster courage by invoking the image of the Afghan national girl hero Malali, with whom her father

To accept Staples's response as simply testifying to the accuracy of her writing is to overlook exactly those varieties of "structural domination" to which Mohanty refers, and which inevitably inform the processes and politics of Staples's interviews with her Afghani informants, as well as the transformation of their "stories" into fiction for Western readers. (50)

has metaphorically identified her previously: “‘I’m Malali, leading the troops through enemy territory,’ she murmured to herself. That helped, too, although it was hard to feel like a battle heroine with a cigarette tray hanging around her neck” (144)³⁹. Instead of capitalising on the ready narrative of exceptional courage, Ellis uses the contrast between the heroic epic and the harsh prosaic reality to subvert a romanticised reading of Parvana’s fight for survival, which would collaterally glorify the military narrative. And yet, Parvana finds some sort of consolation in the story, leaving a degree of ambivalence regarding her newly developed agency.

While an entirely heroic interpretation of Parvana’s actions is curbed through comic subversion, by virtue of her ingenuity Parvana is represented as out-performing her elders. Despite her limited resources, she does not just make do with providing for her family, but excels in it. Ironically, her father’s absence allows her to embark on what could be interpreted as a successful career development, starting from reading letters and moving on to selling things from a tray, which is considered more profitable. After getting used to working in the market, Parvana starts to appreciate its diversity and her independence: “Parvana loved being in the market. She loved watching people move along the streets, loved hearing snatches of conversation that reached her ears, loved reading the letters people brought her” (87-88). Such representations of agency work to affirm the rite-of-passage framework within which the experience of crisis is assigned a positive, constructive function, subjugating it to the goal of the achievement of maturity.

Despite asserting Parvana’s authority and agency, however, the novel portrays her also as dependent on her elders’ advice and decisions. Her experiences within the crisis period in *The Breadwinner* are framed by her father’s instruction from the initial arrest scene to look after the rest of the family. Her mother’s status of adult authority is undermined by her political and psychological disempowerment, even infantilisation, as I suggested in the previous chapter. Even so, Parvana’s mother retains her influence over her daughter. A dialogue near the end of the novel is indicative of the power struggle between them. The mother insists that Parvana should join the family on their trip to Mazar-e-Sharif, demanding Parvana’s submission by repeatedly referring to her being a child who “has no business telling her mother what she will and will not do”

³⁹ Curiously, the context is that of a dangerous situation where Parvana leads to safety a traumatised woman without a veil across the streets of Kabul, and thus gets to act out a version of her hero rescuer fantasy.

(134). Occurring after Parvana's experience in practicing adult roles and after her partial assumption of responsibility during her mother's depression, her mother's argument sounds ironic. However, Parvana's own handling of the argument, stamping her feet and slamming the door when she is sent out, resembles a childish tantrum, returning her to her pre-crisis status. The final decision on whether to be disguised as a boy is left to Parvana by another adult, Mrs Weera, with the argument that it would only work long-term if she agrees. Parvana's reaction, "Somehow, knowing that made it easier to agree" (62), partially acknowledges the decision as her own and as an affirmation of her agency. This reading, however, is subverted by the scene of the night before the idea is suggested to her, in which while drifting off to sleep Parvana overhears her elders discussing what to do to provide for the family (58). Parvana is not included in the discussion, which acquires the overtones of conspiracy and poses the question of whether Parvana's choice might be considered genuinely independent or whether it is manipulated by adults, choice being a common issue in discourses of involving children in war, especially child soldiers. The degree to which Parvana still feels under the control of her elders is also reflected in her reaction when she hears Mrs Weera's plan of producing a women's rights magazine and smuggling copies across the border: "Who will do the smuggling?' Parvana asked, half afraid they were going to make her do it. After all, if they could turn her into a boy, they could have other ideas for her as well" (97). In another context, such a suspicion might appear unrealistic, confirming the protagonist's inability to maturely assess the situation. However, her history of involvement in otherwise adult roles inverts the meaning of this strategy of constructing childhood and affirms the subtext of children's eventual dependence on and even vulnerability to the decisions of adults. The episode suggests that under the extreme circumstances of war, adults may override the assumed priority of a child's best interests for another cause.

Not only do adults attempt to exercise control over Parvana, but she herself seeks their control. Parvana repeatedly insists that elders, such as her mother and her elder sister, look after her on the grounds of their age, even when they are unable to. At the beginning of *Parvana's Journey*, Parvana even demands care from a strange woman, who appears to be mentally disturbed (188). Within the limits of this novel, this episode positions Parvana as a child at the beginning of her maturing experience, but as part of a sequel to another novel about growing up it questions the representation of the war experience as a rite of passage. Furthermore, in both novels Parvana's actions are

driven by the motivation of reuniting with her family members. In both, she achieves her goal through a chain of relatively independent actions, only to be reinstated as a child under parental care. At the end of both novels she is represented as transformed in some ways, having acquired a degree of independence and maturity. The uncertainty of her status, which subverts the outcome of the rite of passage, in some ways fits Roberta Trites' interpretation of young adult novels as *Entwicklungsroman* where the protagonists develop but do not reach adulthood. Contemporary young adult war novels employ this ambiguity to reflect on the effect of contemporary conflicts on children. The circumstances of ongoing conflict which has destroyed the social order leave no social scripts of adulthood for the character. The indeterminacy of the plot is supported by the serial form; another instalment, *My Name is Parvana*, was published in 2012. Thus, while the character undergoes a passage where she demonstrates a degree of resilience and agency, she is nevertheless constantly in danger of being plunged into yet another liminal experience of danger and mutable roles.

At the other end of the power-disempowerment continuum, as the introduction to Section C suggested, crisis experiences are often represented through the terms of trauma as a culturally dominant frame of representing extreme suffering. Within the field of children's literature, problems of representability related to the subject of trauma acquire an additional genre-specific dimension: how to convey trauma in a way which is still ethically engaging, but which nevertheless protects the implied child reader from transmissibility of the traumatic experience, which Felman, for instance, discusses in her analysis of the relation between trauma and pedagogy (Felman and Laub 1-57; also Luckhurst 3). Or, as Mitzi Myers phrases the dilemma in the context of Holocaust literature, "how may horrors like Nazi crematoria and American atomic destruction be represented for young audiences so as to inspire and not paralyze moral action" (24). Discussing children's literature on the Holocaust, Lydia Kokkola suggests a certain "protocol" of ethical representation. With the young reader's age in mind, Kokkola favours representations which enable "mourning" by refocusing feelings of grief on another object and stimulating action, over representations which provoke melancholia, a paralysing state of irresolution dominated by a moral feeling of guilt (172-73). Kokkola specifies that while melancholia might be an appropriate reaction to the subject-matter of the Holocaust, burdening young readers who have no personal responsibility for the described events with it would be "sadistic" (172).

Representational approaches which Kokkola approves of combine, on the one hand,

openness about the events, historical accuracy, and signalling the unrepresentable through framed silences, with a protection for child readers, on the other, emphasising learning and action in relation to their maturing. Eric Tribunella also interprets the link between traumatic representations and coming of age in children's literature. He opposes Kokkola's dismissal of the Freudian concept of melancholia, and argues that trauma is a major device in American children's literature used to induce melancholic maturation. Tribunella's theory is grounded on his argument that the contemporary Western concept of adulthood bears the characteristics of low-key melancholia where "[t]o be mature is to be wounded, so maturity is a state of injury that is valued and valorized" (xiv). At the same time, by the values of the same culture, childhood is considered a period to be safeguarded as much as possible from any form of injury, theoretically precluding opportunities for the achievement of maturity. He sees portrayals of loss in children's literature then as a "substitute for 'actual' traumatic experiences" (xxvi). Adult authors repeatedly employ such portrayals to discipline children into becoming members of "a national community of citizens" (xv), an argument which shares Trites' view of young adult literature as teaching about the constraint of individual power by social institutions. Tribunella addresses the use of traumatic loss in war fiction as well, focusing on literature about the American War of Independence. Drawing a parallel between war representation and the rite of passage, he argues that the incompleteness of the war experience prompts disappointment in readers, conditioning them for an experience of growth through loss (90-91). Kokkola's and Tribunella's models of representation of traumatic events differ mostly in their emphasis on what constitutes desired adulthood, but both agree on its employment to aid the movement towards maturity. This interpretation of trauma complies with the genre conventions of children's literature, and resonates more with psychological ideas of traumatic growth than with the cultural studies concept associated with irresolution and ineffability.

Young adult novels in my corpus which portray the traumatising consequences of war-related loss, such as *Under the Persimmon Tree*, *The Other Side of Truth*, and *A Stone in My Hand*, construct young protagonists' experiences by drawing on some of the "classic" features of trauma as challenging the previous frames of reference, interfering with cognition and the ability to communicate through language. These characteristics of the represented traumatic experience simultaneously resonate with key features of liminality. Texts immerse protagonists, and the implied audience whose

perspective is aligned with them, into a dream-like “other” world, where the fixed social reality disintegrates, prompting a re-examination of binary categories and effecting a transformation of the liminal subject towards maturity. While trauma seems to be a condition which strips young protagonists of agency, similar to the hyper-agency model of response to parental loss, it is in fact represented as a liminal stage of tension between power and disempowerment, knowledge and ignorance, as I will demonstrate by considering in greater detail the construction of trauma in *A Stone in My Hand*.

A Stone in My Hand employs many of the same aesthetic strategies as the opening scene of *The Other Side of Truth*, which I outlined in the previous chapter. Trauma is represented as part of the knowledge about war, politicised by connecting both its initial cause and later triggers of re-traumatisation to political violence. Learning about the disappearance of her father overwhelms the young protagonist Malaak, impairing her perception of reality and her ability to communicate with others. Malaak’s loss of her capacity to understand the world around her, her own emotions, and language itself is described by her through the metaphor of the “pieces”: “Now I feel, see, hear the words in my mind, but it is like the front page of a newspaper that someone has torn into little bits. No one can read me. There are too many ragged pieces that don’t go together” (14-15). This simple, concrete noun is used to convey for young readers the complexity of the traumatic experience by a network of multivalent metaphorical references to various forms of physical and psychological destruction. The description of cognitive and communicative disintegration which Malaak portrays through the image of the pieces alienates the narrator from herself and from others, and yet, another description of her fragmented perception adds a more ludic, creative layer of meaning to her experience:

Yesterday when I drank a glass of water, a piece of sadness appeared.
During lunch I listened to Hamid tell a story, and a piece of silly laughter
settled next to a stab of pain in my ribs. Then in the afternoon, a piece of
sunshine made me angry, so I touched my cheek and that made me hum.
Such a clutter. (14)

The bizarre combination of events and psychological responses, which do not follow a regular cause and effect pattern, marks the traumatic experience as a stage of incomprehensibility, yet the poetic quality of the description also evokes the liminal recombination of elements of the familiar reality, characterising Malaak’s trauma also as a period of acquiring special knowledge.

Also similar to the construction of Sade's traumatising, for Malaak trauma manifests itself as a loss of temporal perception, similarly portrayed by use of the present tense. Another device shared by the two novels is the metaphor of physical immobility, especially at critical moments when her brother appears to be in danger. In one such instance, Malaak's reaction is contrasted to that of her mother and elder sister. While they immediately rush into the street to stop Hamid, Malaak describes her response thus: "The darkness has a shape. It has arms and it is squeezing me. I can't move" (20). Her use of personification for the traumatic experience is a device which contributes to the construction of the child's voice as both innocent and imaginative and which, by taking over her agency as a subject, signifies her loss of control over an environment marked by the haunting violence of an ongoing war.

While her inability to act is represented as a result of her traumatising, there are also references in Malaak's account which potentially align passivity with Malaak's gender. Describing their walk back from school, Malaak comments on her brother's behaviour: "Everyone knows him. He lives out here, just going from thing to thing. But I've lived mostly from the inside, looking out" (40). Indeed, this reference to her more passive, contemplative attitude could also be related to her status as a child, a hypothesis confirmed by the choice of the verbal category of aspect which suggests a potential forthcoming change. However, the gender base of her non-involvement in the public sphere is also suggested by another comment made by Malaak: "The jitters in my body are too strong. I want to run, jump, scream, throw stones myself, but I'm not supposed to leave our house. So instead, I race up and down the stairs to the roof" (107). Instead of channelling her anxiety in a political act, Malaak is portrayed in a domestic role, repeatedly sweeping the floor. While there is no overt reflection on the role of gender in Malaak's remark, it fits with the traditional distribution of gender activities enacted by Malaak's siblings: her sister, who "lives in the smell of the stove . . . like the other girls I know" (1), and her brother, who "brags about being one of the *shabab*" (3). Malaak distinguishes herself from both models, and presents herself instead as metaphorically "above" gender categories by identifying with a pet bird, through whose eyes she is able to "see things my sister and brother will never see" (1). Malaak's self-portrayal characterises her as a liminal subject because of her traumatic experience but also possibly because of her younger age: a flexible gender identity emerges as a typical trope in young adult novels depicting girls' involvement in war. This characterisation is in tension with the linear development of the plot which

reproduces the traditional distribution of categories by aligning femininity with passivity and immaturity, and framing the developmental task as taking physical action within public space, a traditionally masculine form of agency.

Thus, *A Stone in My Hand* employs a selection of tropes which evoke the dominant psychoanalytical and cultural discourses on trauma, representing an effect of war which appears to be opposite to that of the hyper-empowerment described in the first part of this chapter. However, in correspondence with the middle stage of the rite of passage, the traumatic experience is also endowed with its converse characteristics, as hinted at by the poetic portrayal of the fragmented experience of reality above. Further, in her repeated self-characterisation as being able to “see things” that others around her cannot (1, 5, 39), as well as by descriptions of vivid dreams and symbolic images, Malaak is represented as the survivor-mystic who has special visionary powers. Her own sympathetically ironic descriptions of her elder siblings’ goals position her unusually as the wiser, more experienced elder. She describes her sister as “Hend, the wait-and-see girl” implying an assessment of her sister’s optimism as naïve (4). Malaak’s humorous interpretation of her brother’s talk about his initial participation in the Intifada as bravado also places her in a more knowing position: “The brave Hamid who left his friend in the street. For now, Hamid’s biggest fist in his mouth” (3).

Yet, despite her special access to her father’s wisdom and moderate politics through dreams and visions, Malaak is unable to convey her knowledge (constituted in symbols) to her brother, just as she is unable to physically interfere. During an argument between her mother and her brother in which Hamid defends terrorism as a way of resistance, Malaak attempts to dissuade her brother by evoking their father, first by making a gesture, which Hamid fails to see, and then by trying to communicate an image she has of her father giving her water from the Dead Sea: “When I turn and try to give it to Hamid, it is gone. My hands are too small to hold the sea” (43). Thus, Malaak’s quasi-shamanic role remains unfulfilled, and the empowering character of her knowledge has no practical consequence until she regains her voice and her ability to act. The unspeakableness of her trauma-mediated insight corresponds to the incongruence of the liminal knowledge acquired by Campbell’s hero: “How render back into the light-world language the speech-defying pronouncements of the dark? How represent on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional form, or in a three-dimensional image a multi-dimensional meaning?” (*Hero* 218). However, this kind of knowledge is also invalidated, because it is represented as unusable, and this mode of

knowing as a stage to be transcended. Also, later in the narrative her interpretation of both her siblings' attitudes is re-evaluated in a talk with her brother, and while it is not completely rejected, views on the subject are represented as more complex, and Malaak's privileged status of knowledge is once more subverted.

Perhaps the most vivid example of the ambivalence of Malaak's traumatic experience is her relationship with her pet pigeon Abdo. The bird is a complex symbol of layered political and familial relations, as well as of childhood and trauma. Abdo's first appearance at the moment when Malaak is being told that her father is missing is a symbolic act of replacement, which provides the young character with some reassurance and agency at a time of greatest hardship, when she dissociates herself from the external world. The metaphorical connection between Abdo and Malaak's father is further implied in the resemblance between his name, which Malaak claims she "hears" in her mind, and Malaak's own middle name "Abed," which traditionally is the father's name. Near the end of the narrative Malaak spells out this interpretation herself: "Father sent him to me" (150). In his constant silent presence, Abdo provides a sense of safety and a form of communication for Malaak when she has lost her ability to express herself verbally, and in the conditions of constant threat from further conflict-related violence: "When I'm too tired to run anymore, I climb to the roof, my safe place, to be with Abdo. Abdo, who stays in the same place and doesn't change" (107).

Abdo not only compensates for her father's absence, but also makes up for Malaak's own immobilisation. His ability to fly is imaginatively "used" by Malaak in different ways: "asking" him to watch over her brother (a role which Malaak thinks would have belonged to her father (19)), but also to escape the physical confines of her life under occupation by identifying with Abdo and imagining or experiencing a vision of flying above the city (2). The rhetoric of the text leaves space for multiple interpretations of the nature of her experience: whether her soaring out of the Gaza Strip is a dream, an imaginary act, or even an artistic one through the construction of the narrative itself, which is in the form of a fictional diary. In one of the poems which are interspersed between chapters and which seem to be authored by Malaak herself, the lyrical "I" also describes a flight above Gaza City, and a visit to prison where Malaak imagines her father to be: "*I land on the roof and then find/ my father's tiny window. So tiny. . . . /I take him a piece of the blue*" (17). The poem expresses and possibly alleviates the anguish of her loss. The sequence of verbs referring to actions suggests that this imaginary/visionary encounter is perceived by the protagonist as a

psychological means of gaining some control over a situation which has left her powerless. Abdo can thus be interpreted as the hero's magical helper in Campbell's model, a typical part of the middle stage of the journey (*Hero* 97). It is significant in this context that the novel is historical fiction, rather than fantasy, and thus the powers which Malaak as a narrator assigns to Abdo work more to characterise her as an incarnation of the Romantic child, who is associated with closeness to nature and with the powers of the imagination. Also, the appearance of the special helper contributes to constructing trauma as a breach in mundane reality of the kind which ritual stages, in which extraordinary things take place.

As part of the liminal experience, however, Abdo is a highly ambiguous symbol. The same aspects of their relationship which appear enabling for Malaak are also disabling. By being metaphorically associated with Malaak's father, as well as with Malaak herself, the image of Abdo performs a symbolic identification between father and daughter, and serves to construct trauma as a vicarious experience of death. Thus, Malaak's imaginary flight has a much darker side, the danger to succumb to trauma, and to fully immerse herself in this experience. She experiences this urge at a critical moment at the end of the novel after her brother has been shot and taken to hospital:

I want to look into Abdo's eyes. I want to fly away. The need to fly is so strong in me today. . . . I don't know if I can do it again, if I can see Hamid and not go flying away. (176)

This representation adapts for young readers a concept of trauma according to which survival is an irresolute state marked by the inability to detach oneself from the event of death: "the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition, which may lead to destruction" (Caruth 62-63). The experience of symbolic death, metaphorically represented by Malaak also as the "pull" of darkness, or her wish to join her father in the "wordless place" (78-79), in a ritualistic context can also be read as a form of the encounter with the abyss, "the bliss of the deep abode," which is simultaneously dangerous and enticing, and which the hero may be reluctant to leave (Campbell, *Hero* 207). This places the protagonist in danger of remaining within the liminal world. However the narrative structure of the myth as well as the structure of the rite of passage represent this as an experience to be overcome, symbolic death being followed by a rebirth into a new social self. Similarly, Malaak's friendship with her bird is only a temporary stage, which ends at the end of the novel.

Two different narrative approaches come into play in the construction of the traumatic version of the liminal stage. On the one hand, contradictory qualities and manifestations within the protagonist of both agency and disempowerment, knowledge and ignorance/delusion seem to constantly dissolve into one another in a repetitive, cyclical way, matching the waves of external danger. Thus, despite its inner dialectical dynamics, just like Abdo, who “doesn’t change,” the liminal stage also remains the same, precluding resolution. Counter to this representation goes the general developmental linear form of the narrative, which requires the character to overcome the middle stage of duplicity and fluidity, which is defined as transformative. Malaak’s success in working through her trauma is marked by physically running and preventing her brother’s involvement in terrorism, yet finding her own way of political resistance. Malaak’s achievement of a degree of psychological resolution is expressed in establishing control over the images of her traumatic experience at the end of the novel: *“I did it. I did it. /I outran the darkness”* (183).

The resolution of trauma is also represented through an ambiguous episode of separation with her bird. After Malaak finds out that Abdo has probably left, she sees what appears to be another bird: “But it is not Abdo. It is a wild bird. It stays on the corner of the porch, watching me” (176). Malaak’s perception of the bird might signify that she has moved on from the imaginative agency associated with childhood and trauma, and perceives the same bird as a different one, not because the bird has changed, but because from an “adult” perspective the bird never really was a pet bird with quasi-supernatural powers. The interpretation of the “wild” bird as Abdo is supported by the way it visually appears to Malaak as “a white flutter [that] separates me from the face of the moon” (176). The moon as an image is associated with Malaak’s father throughout the novel, so Malaak’s failure to recognise the bird as her father’s messenger is also a symbolic resistance to the dangerous erosion of the boundaries of the self, and a redefinition of the relationship with her father, which asserts her growth.

And yet, the ending of the novel is ambiguous. The uncertainty is related to the comatose state in which her brother is left, which suggests that in the situation of war, the heroic overcoming of psychological anguish and the adoption of what is valued by the narrative as the appropriate kind of agency are not rewarded by an optimistic outcome. Also, while Malaak appears to have overcome her problematic identification with loss, the ending of the novel is again a return to the figure of her father. Malaak is

reminded of her father's interpretation of the rain over Gaza as a sign of God's smile, and the novel ends with the ambiguous "I open my mouth and eat the raindrops. *Thank you, Father*" (184). The final sentences might on the one hand be interpreted as providing psychological closure, reconciling with loss, and learning to find a positive interpretation of events which have initially been perceived as negative. In the context of the earlier ambiguity around Malaak's relationship to her father, the final return to him may also be read as her perception of the rain as a gift from her father, and a potential return or escape to the space of imagination, which precludes growth.

A Stone in My Hand offers a sophisticated account of the complexity of trauma, which highlights some of the most salient problems around the ethics and techniques of trauma representation. In depicting trauma in a coming-of-age framework the text might be ethically problematic as well, and might appear to represent or fail to represent it, depending on the particular ideological outlook. For example, Malaak refers to trauma as embodied knowledge similar to the knowledge bestowed by the liminal experience, which according to Eric Leed cannot be externalised from the person who experiences it:

Until Father died, I hadn't known what it meant to be wounded into silence, but now I do. And now I can see it in others. It's like the first time I lost a tooth. Before that I never noticed missing teeth, but after I lost mine, I saw gap-toothed people everywhere. (75)

Malaak's account of the traumatic experience seems to imply that experience grants a kind of knowledge that would not be available to others. Yet, the fictional narrator immediately resorts to a simile to attempt to give access to this apparently inaccessible knowledge. However significant the event of losing a tooth might be in the personal universe of a young child, there is a gross incompatibility between the terms of the simile, which threatens to trivialise and downplay the seriousness of the traumatic experience and suggests the tenuousness of the project of trauma in children's literature. Furthermore, Malaak's coherent self-analysis creates a paradox by reporting on a supposedly incommunicable experience in a neat, clear way, in contrast to the professed inability to speak with other characters within the novel. Thus, despite some of the ambiguities in Malaak's story, readers are afforded privileged access to her inner world, which suggests that Malaak's self remains to a degree intact, and she is still in control of telling her own story. Such a narrative technique empowers the character and provides security for child readers while leading them through the threatening world of the novel.

At the same time, what seems to be a child-sparing technique overrides the attempt to point to core features of the traumatic experience such as its unrepresentability. Instead, the use of metaphorical language enables the implied audience to imagine something which is supposedly unimaginable. While this is a central issue in representing trauma regardless of genre, other decisions in the portrayal of trauma in the book are more clearly genre-bound. For instance, the interpretation of trauma within a coming-of-age pattern, and particularly of its overcoming as a personal achievement, can be considered inadequate, similar to the questionable association of traumatic memory with choice identified by Adrienne Kertzer (212).

The tooth-loss episode questions in principle the possibility of conveying war suffering to a Western audience. Other novels also attempt to represent war-induced trauma by comparing it to supposedly more familiar realities. For instance, in *Refugees*, a Western character and an Afghan character bond over their experience of the consequences of global warfare: the 9/11 attacks and violence in Afghanistan, but also on the basis of the Western character's experience of childhood abandonment trauma. In *The Other Side of Truth*, it is the experience of another current social evil in children's lives, bullying at school, which triggers Sade's traumatic dream about her mother's murder. Such attempts at mediating war trauma, while possibly generating empathy, may also contribute to absorbing "otherness" in West-based frames of reference, especially since the traumatic experiences of Third-World subjects are portrayed through the tropes of Western trauma figures. This is not to trivialise the descriptions of psychological wounding and social problems experienced by children in the West. Yet, such comparisons, just like the lost-teeth-simile, might speak of a limit of representability of childhood war trauma in contemporary West-produced young adult literature in English.

Thus, young adult novels portray war experiences as double-edged, marked by both empowerment and disempowerment, and using models of agency and trauma which belong to Western cultural frameworks. Their plot resolutions also appear to affirm a principle of sameness based on ideas of shared human values in the face of suffering, of which Elsa Marston offers a representative formulation in the context of books about Palestinians:

things can get better through the characters' courage, moral strength, and perseverance. In this respect, the young Palestinian protagonists are similar to the kids who drive many a YA novel set in America. They all

learn to focus on what they know is good, fight evil when they must, and somehow keep going. (653)

Thus, war experience in both trauma- and agency-led novels is represented as having a certain maturing effect, with the characters adopting the identity of “thrivers” of psychological trauma discourse, a desirable identity model in the West, which is part of the passive ideology of children’s literature. Furthermore, the maturing effect of war is also related to a genre convention, particularly in realist young adult novels, inviting implied readers to perceive “personal growth as a value, and most importantly, to accept that growth as a consequence of coming into contact with various social issues and problems (including violence, teenage pregnancy, homosexuality, sexual abuse, suicide, death, and disease)” (James 7).

In some novels, however, there are indications of challenging the dominance of Westernised forms of agency. At the end of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the protagonists oppose the Western adult character’s insistence that they join her in the USA, where she could provide them with opportunities such as healthcare and formal education. They both repeatedly insist on going back to claim their land as a matter of duty and of honouring their father’s final wish, despite the immediate risk to which the two of them would be exposed during the journey. Bradford reads this ending as an affirmation of protagonist Najmah’s decision to return, but suggests that even then Najmah is represented as denied any choice (60), in contrast to the privileged Western character Nusrat, who represents herself as having chosen her Afghan family and their culture (59). In this way, Bradford suggests, the dominance of “the notion that the Western world offers the normative model of female agency” is not undermined (60). However, the young protagonist’s renouncement of choice, and substituting it with concepts of honour and duty might in fact offer a destabilisation of the Western form of agency. If choice is perceived as a privilege of the Western-style empowered individual, then Najmah’s resistance to it suggests an evasion of the Western model, especially because in consequence she stays in her country and the value of her cultural identity is affirmed. Further, both she and her brother are extremely eager to perform their duty, so they are not represented as merely submissive or disempowered. Thus, their adherence to the values of their culture appears to be a different, contextualised agency. Furthermore, their formulation of their final goal, “to make our life there and the lives of our children and our children’s children” (Staples 274) represents a perspective uncharacteristic for children, and suggests their achievement of a degree of maturity.

Maturity in the text is also linked to national identity, as their decision is supported by an Afghan adult on the grounds that “[w]e are all Afghans and we know what we must do” (284). The experience of war thus appears to have transformed the characters, and assigned them a degree of independence, which is recognised by the elders on the basis of shared communal identity whose adoption is a target in the traditional rite of passage.

Conclusion

The young adult novels in my corpus all retain a degree of irresolution, which questions the success of the rite of passage. The effect of the characters’ experimentation with adult and masculine roles cannot be measured in the context of their societies because war persists as a generator of liminality. Social relations remain unsettled, and the texts’ open endings do not preclude a repetition of similar liminal experiences. One element in particular which unsettles the rite of passage narrative is the return of adult power. Protagonists at the end of young adult novels are either placed back within a family setting under parents’ or other responsible adults’ care, or recall and follow parental instructions and messages where parents have been lost. Even *Under the Persimmon Tree*, which offers one of the most empowering endings, ends in ambiguity. Despite perceiving themselves as having grown, the young protagonists are nevertheless still in danger from war violence and from the greed of more powerful adults. Further, while they have internalised their sense of duty, it is nevertheless related to following their father’s instruction from the plot-initiating moment: “We must do everything to obey our father’s wishes, no matter what the cost” (274). The return to the father’s command offers a certain circularity to the plot, which subverts the linearity of progress and growth. This narrative device across my corpus of young adult fiction could be explained partially by the age of the protagonists, who do not reach Western-based majority age. Thus, the novels reinforce the idea that children within this age group need to be reinstalled in a position of protection, despite their resilience and ingenuity, which have been demonstrated to exceed or equal those of adults. While the restoration of adult control might be a standard procedure for this age-band of predominantly early-adolescence novels, it also reflects on the construction of war, challenging its function as a rite of passage.

Chapter Seven

Writing Memories of War as Liminal Growth

Like young adult novels, the memoirs characterise their protagonists' experience of the liminal stage via a fluctuation between empowerment and disempowerment. They testify to the extreme danger that exposure to war represents for young people, especially in their family's absence. Children are represented as vulnerable both to direct military violence, shootings and bombings, and to related threats such as starvation, dehydration and disease, a particularly prominent theme in the memoirs set in Sierra Leone and Sudan, detailing the children's wanderings through unfamiliar, often inhospitable landscapes. Memoirs describe contact with war as a cause for various psychological problems, occasionally expressed in physical sickness (*They Poured Fire, My Forbidden Face*), which can be related to the "somatic idioms of distress" often associated with non-Western cultures (Fox and Willis 169). Survival under these circumstances is associated with the assumption of roles which the texts define as contrary to typical child roles. In *They Poured Fire*, the opposition between child and adult behaviour is directly related to the possibility of survival. The simple diction of the narrative and its adherence to the child's perspective contrasts with the content of the knowledge of life and death which the narrator Alepho and other boys acquire in the situation of war:

When Peter cried he made me and the other boys cry too. Usually I was the one who went in and tried to break that up. We didn't want that. We saw that the kids who were crying and not eating were dying. (112)

The terse logic of the statement aims to reconstruct the six-year-old child's attempt to make sense of the reality of war, as well as his awareness of his own and his peers' mortality. Alepho offers a straightforward connection between emotional despair and losing one's life, and transforms it into a practical tool in acquiring some control over extremely powerful and unyielding circumstances. This display of agency in a situation of disempowerment complies with the survival and maturation direction of the narrative.

Acquiring this kind of knowledge is directly associated with maturing in Alepho's own re-construction of a dialogue with Peter. Alepho tries to encourage Peter, by using arguments which emphasise the non-child position in which they have been placed, and which requires non-childlike behaviour: "You are not in your mama's house

anymore . . . I'm not saying I'm a grown adult, but this is the situation" (116-17).

Alepho thus places himself in a liminal position. He borrows the phrase "not in your mama's house" from the adult carers and guides, and denounces his potential adult status, accounting for the adult source of his advice and for his own lack of competence. At the same time, in the absence of their mothers' protection, which appears to cancel their child status, Alepho takes on the adult-like position of adviser and carer for his brother. This idea of the change of status is confirmed by Peter's reaction, again described by Alepho: "he listened to me like an elder" (117). A similar self-comparison to adopting an uncharacteristic age status is offered by another of the narrators in *They Poured Fire*, Benjamin, who describes his survival in terms of emulation of a mature role: "I made myself strong like an elder. I made my heart strong. I told myself I was going to make it" (83). These self-descriptions defy the image of the passive war-affected child, and replace it with a view of war as a liminal situation in which young children manifest the ability to transcend their child status in order to survive.

According to this representation, determination and agency, survival and growing up are linked concepts. Survival depends on the ability to adopt an adult-like agency, which then allows for the protagonists to reach adulthood and be able to narrate their story, once again affirming their agency in the act of self-construction. While this and other war memoirs testify to the lives of others too, including those who do not survive, as a retrospective genre, memoirs offer self-representation only to those who have succeeded in this process, predetermining the models of development and survival.

A similar figuring of the journey as an encounter with and escape from death, which places even greater emphasis on the maturing effect of the war experience, is offered in *God Grew Tired of Us*. The young protagonist describes various experiences of extreme hardship and danger, including several occasions when the child narrator thinks that he might die (54, 66, 72). John Bul Dau, however, portrays himself as overcoming despair and actively resisting the difficulties of his long journey in various ways. The narrator mentions examples when as a boy he independently applies knowledge which he has acquired from elders. Further, in a way which resembles Parvana's embracing of the opportunities provided by the power vacuum in the war stage, the narrator tells of undertaking important leadership roles whose scale in the context of his age invites the audience to interpret his actions as a kind of hyper-agency. For instance, at the age of only thirteen he is put in charge of 1,200 boys at the Pinyudu camp, some of whom are older than himself (77). Dau relates several occasions on

which he takes responsibility for the lives and health of others, and arranges the burial of the dead. He uses a technique his father had applied to sick animals – reducing the amount of fluids, to rescue boys from a deadly disease (77-79). As he explains, “I don’t know if there is a medical explanation for what happened. I merely gave treatment and observed the results” (79). Thus, without any adequate preparation or advice, and in the absence of sufficient food or medical resources, the protagonist nevertheless takes action which turns out to be successful, and helps his and others’ survival. Later, while he and his peers are on the run from a hostile tribe, he organises the rescue of an ill boy, with the argument, “I was a leader of my group, and his safety was my responsibility” (121). On another occasion he tells of how he tries to “model good behavior” for boys who suffer psychological problems from the daily encounter with death (80). Preserving his own psychological stability in these encounters with death places the protagonist in a position of power, which is associated with adulthood.

Yet, Dau qualifies his experience of empowerment as an undesirable consequence. His own perception of the loss of life he witnesses is experienced as a contrast to the traditional attitudes and ceremonies pertaining to the end of life in his Dinka culture, where “children were shielded from death” (105). Instead, he self-consciously describes his own altered view: “I found myself using words like ‘killed’ and ‘died’ in conversations without giving them much thought. How much I have changed, I thought” (105). The very reflexivity of his change of perception suggests a degree of maturity, and presents the complexity of his viewpoint. Not only does he register his newly acquired attitude, but his memory of the traditional ceremonies related to death makes him distance himself from it because it is a breach of norms. His participation in the abnormal replacement of the burial rites where “the necessity of burying so many children telescoped the ceremonies of mourning into a few moments of silent grief” (106) is implied to metaphorically substitute for a rite of passage to maturity: “I felt as if I had grown up too fast. Death had become all too familiar” (106). Maturity in this comment is aligned with familiarity with death, which could be interpreted more as an inversion of the notion of childhood innocence as protection from knowledge of death and violence, rather than a statement about adulthood itself. The modality marker “as if” also suggests that the perception of maturing is only apparent, an experience of the disruption of the regular social fabric. However, even this perspective is further complicated by adding a positive reinscription of his life and work in the camp:

It's strange to say it about such a violent time, but I was happy. I had a daily routine of cooking, games, and building huts and trenches to keep my mind occupied. . . . I discovered the constants and the variables in the algebra of survival. If I had plenty of food but risked violent death, I felt better than if I had starved in peaceful times. (108-109)

Dau's positive interpretation of this period of life testifies to the versatility of the war experience, complicating the monolithic narrative of the devastating effect of war. The detail of the perceived gradation of the dangers of hunger and war adds value to the text as an authority on an experiential reality which is unfamiliar for the implied audience, and which might challenge received notions of the positioning of children in conflict. Happiness seems to be related to a sense of achievement in establishing a routine and "learning" how to survive, with learning being part of the normative transition to adulthood. The eventual success of this acquisition of adulthood is evident from the adult diction and from the ability to make use of the mathematical reference in the first place. The retrospective algebra metaphor suggests that survival and growth are a matter of personal effort and ability to calculate, thus ascribing control and responsibility for this act to the protagonist himself.

The narratives analysed above exemplify how memoirs resemble young adult novels in their treatment of the liminal experience as some version of the encounter with violence and death, to which two response models appear possible. One is succumbing to the traumatic experience which brings the threat of madness and death, as depicted by the stories of the protagonists' peers. The other, which is adopted by the protagonists themselves, involves acting out adult roles in a process which leads to survival and is recognised as effecting growth, but which – similar to young adult novels – is represented in ambivalent terms, as accelerated but incomplete, provoking both positive and negative feelings in its subjects. To draw out the similarities and differences between the two genres in representing the liminal experience of agency and trauma as inflected by gender and cultural background, I will now focus my discussion on three memoirs by female authors, two of which are set in Afghanistan, and one in the West Bank. These memoirs could to a certain degree be considered a counterpart of the young adult novels discussed in Chapter Six. Again similar to young adult novels, no strict distinction between traumatic and hyper-agentive representations can be made in these texts. I explore the employment of agency and trauma to categorise both the experiences of war exposure themselves, and the process of recreating them through writing.

My Forbidden Face exemplifies the model of linear development in which the protagonist is disempowered by the intrusion of war, and then regains a sense of power by running a secret school. After the initiation of the war experience which I discussed in Chapter Five, Latifa's narrative follows a negative development pattern of victimisation and immobilisation characterised by an accumulation of images of disintegration. She describes her world as growing "degraded," and "rot[ting]" (63). The liminal experience of the destruction of her environment is mirrored on a personal level by a physical illness, later diagnosed as a pulmonary disease, which, however, the narrative connects to political disempowerment: "the internal revulsion that rages through me has become a sickly inertia" (57). The described transformation of emotions suggests a psychological cause for the inability to act. Latifa's depiction of her state, "A bizarre and nameless exhaustion nails me to my bed" (55), politicises the specific circumstances of her suffering. Her experience is "nameless" because under the Taliban regime she is denied medical help. However, it is also nameless because it is a symptom of disempowerment, its obscurity suggesting an unknowability akin to trauma. The connection between the physical and the psychological is also strengthened by her perception of freedom from the regime as recuperating during a medical journey to Pakistan: "like a miraculous breath of oxygen," which "could almost clear my lungs" (73). Similar to the description of traumatic experiences in the young adult novels above, the young protagonist's experience of war is defined as immobilisation, which is either directly referred to: "rag[ing] impotently against the Taliban who imprison us" (56), "without our being able to battle against the process" (63), or implied by a potential metaphorical reading of the protagonist's increased escape to sleep (81), as well as in her evocation of her whole society as being "buried in a silence that resembles death" (153).

The sense of passive suffering created by the accumulation of images of sickness, sleep and death, however, represent part of the liminal loss of self, which is followed by a rebirth. Latifa describes her recovery through a change which helps her regain her agency. The activities in which she is engaged are interestingly the same as those which girls and women take up in *The Breadwinner*. Latifa sets up an illicit school, and adopts a form of her coveted journalist role, initially by restoring the handmade magazine she and her friends had been running before, and subsequently by travelling to France to offer her testimony to women's experiences of oppression. The text maintains present-tense narration for the main plotline, and thus positions the reader

to follow the protagonist's apparently immediate self-evaluation. Her commentary on the process of reclaiming agency creates a gradation of events and actions whose portrayal counteracts the imagery of disintegration and paralysis. The idea to start the school is described as an awakening: "my student's brain suddenly wakes up" (105). The immobility and emotional devastation are then opposed by Latifa's description of taking action as a constructive, developmentally beneficial act: "I feel stronger after we've taken this first step" (108). What she achieves is a recovery of some of her desired models of agency, especially the "journalist" roles, to a certain extent making up for her loss of her intended occupation. The maturing effect brought about by undertaking a usually adult role, teaching and caring for younger people, especially under the circumstances of extreme danger, is confirmed by Latifa's own conclusion: "I've changed. I've grown up" (126).

Thus, Latifa's reconstruction of the events of her young adulthood follows the rite-of-passage framework, which is also implied in the subtitle of her memoir: "Growing Up under the Taliban." Further, similar to the model of hyper-agency in young adult novels, Latifa acquires power which at times appears greater than that of adults. It is her idea of the school that gives her mother "a sudden burst of energy" (109) and later motivates her to cook for the pupils. Also, it is Latifa's youth and her status in-between ages that helps the family pass through security at the airport on their secret mission to France to testify to the suppression by the Taliban rule. Latifa addresses one of the airport officials as an elder who is her father's age (166), and he responds accordingly, using the same argument of Latifa's assumed innocence to convince a policeman to let them through: "What harm can she do? She's young. She's like my daughter" (167). While this episode might appear to affirm the age hierarchy, its presentation of power is ambivalent, because similar to Parvana, Latifa turns the hierarchy to her advantage. She finds a way not only to persuade adults, but also to bend rigid rules around international borders, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of hyper-agency.

Yet, all of Latifa's achievements are qualified. Again similar to the power ambivalence in Parvana's performance through the liminal stage, Latifa's experiences are also always undermined by the political situation over which she realises she has no ultimate control. For instance, her success with the secret school, which remains undiscovered, is included in a chapter entitled "The Little Girls of Taimani" (104), referring to an atrocious incident involving the murder of a group of young girls who

had been attending a secret school (109). It is this context which dominates Latifa's own operation of her school, as well as her awareness of the dangers of kidnapping and forceful marriage which she reports is practiced by Talib forces. Thus, Latifa's self-evaluation as having grown up does not follow simply from her successful work at the school, but from being aware of the dangers. It is preceded in the narrative by her looking at one of her students from the position of an elder, and perceiving her as innocent and vulnerable: "I'll also watch Ramika's burqa with extra care as she makes her way along the street" (126). This sombre context defines growing up in terms of learning about the immediate danger of horrendous violence, and overcoming the more free-spirited attitude of her pre-crisis adolescence, matching Eric Tribunella's proposed view of maturing as wounding.

While the undertaking of hyper-agency roles resembles the development plot of young adult novels, particularly *The Breadwinner*, Latifa's memoir avoids the kind of gender flexibility which fictional young adult characters benefit from. Rather, both disempowerment and subsequent achievement of agency are strictly gender-specific. The political situation, as portrayed in the memoir, imposes restrictions which, like the descriptions of the Taliban regime in young adult novels, give precedence to gender over age. Thus, in the altered social system which Latifa inhabits, younger boys are granted more social privileges than adult women, for instance as their mahrams (compulsory companions). One notable occasion shows boys employed to search women at a checkpoint. Latifa's description of one of them demonstrates the mismatch between his youthfulness and the power he has been accorded, which she perceives as potentially damaging to society: "The child doesn't even address us. . . . The boy looks serious, slightly contemptuous, but he is probably proud of his work, despite his youth. . . . What kind of man will he grow into?" (67). The status of womanhood on the other hand is implicitly represented by Latifa as being collapsed into one indiscrete state, in which age is no longer a structuring factor. Adult women are denied access to public activities which socially characterise them as adults, in particular their jobs and their freedom of movement. Young girls are represented as denied the safety of childhood, as they become targets of sexual violence and early forced marriages. Thus, the concept of womanhood imposed by the regime is experienced by Latifa as a state of limbo without the possibility of development.

The dissolution of the age hierarchy for women, however, also becomes a source of political identity for Latifa. She identifies with and speaks out for an imagined

community of women, which she refers to with the collective personal pronoun “we.” For Latifa carving out a particularly feminine version of agency is of political significance but within the context of her specific cultural environment. The blurring of gender boundaries which I have discussed as a feature of girls’ maturation is not desirable for the protagonist:

I know very well that in our culture a woman can’t live without a man’s protection, whether it is her father’s, brother’s or husband’s. . . . I don’t refuse this protection. On the contrary. But I want my independence and the freedom to think. (56)

This explanation further contextualises her cultural options, stemming from a particular historical situation which allows for the coexistence of both patriarchal domination and the freedom of choice of a partner, which the incursion of the regime prevents. The division of roles is upheld when Latifa and her family travel to France: “While the men talked politics, Mother, Diba and I could only speak of women, the oppressed who lived without voice or rights, designated victims of a systematic purification” (171). Such analysis offered by Latifa might be argued to show her own internalisation of the divisions imposed by the regime. Talking politics remains a man’s occupation, while women’s issues are described as a separate field on which only women are an authority, and which is also the only field on which women are an authority. However, such reading is countered by the multiplicity of stories and testimonies which Latifa’s memoir offers. It does reveal the main focus and political purpose of her text, and outlines the forms of agency which are understood as desirable within the described society’s cultural context, but also explains that in this historical context this is perceived as the most pressing and urgent issue. Under such circumstances, Latifa’s memoir places a greater emphasis on the oppressive force of the political regime, against which the fluidity of gender identity played out in young adult novels might appear a little facile. But also, the lack of an exploration of gender fluidity suggests that the memoir operates under a different set of ideological beliefs and demands, and suggests that the play with gender, at least within the corpus of texts I am examining, might be a more direct consequence of the pedagogical requirements in the field of children’s literature.

An alternative way of addressing the linear growth narrative is the evocation of trauma as a framework for reporting on war childhood experiences. The trauma-invoking approaches of Farah Ahmedi and Ibtisam Barakat could to a certain degree be

regarded as corresponding to the traumatic portrayals in young adult novels such as *The Other Side of Truth* and *A Stone in My Hand*. This correspondence is based on the use of common imagery to depict trauma, such as intrusive flashbacks, inability to communicate, and paralysis which suspends normative development. Texts of both genres also share the ambivalent representation of trauma, its alleviation through the preservation of a certain degree of agency throughout, as well as a narrative resolution which redefines it as a maturing experience. In both Ahmedi and Barakat's memoirs, the rite of passage applies not so much to the war experience itself, but to its remembering and reconstruction. The beginning and the ending of both texts are set at an imagined moment of writing the memoir, with the beginning describing the narrators' experience of recognisable symptoms of trauma, which occasion the telling of their story. The ending suggests a certain degree of resolution which the recounting of the journey in the body of the narrative more or less explicitly brings about.

Both Ahmedi and Barakat start their self-representation at a point where their childhood war experiences are unavailable and unassimilated, which is a characteristic attribute of traumatic memory. In Ibtisam Barakat's narrative, the selected moment of writing is the protagonist's late adolescence, while she is still in the West Bank, although the memoir is written much later, after the author has settled in the United States. Her choice of the moment at which to start the narrative contributes to establishing a connection between working through traumatic experiences and coming of age. The initial episode represents Barakat as attempting to overcome her child status and the restrictions imposed by her family because of the ongoing conflict by maintaining secret correspondence with pen-friends around the world. Her ability to communicate, however, is frustrated by her lack of knowledge of herself and her childhood. Forgetting is also linked to a suspension of the process of growing up, which is suggested by the motto of the book, a quotation from a song by the famous Lebanese singer Fairuz: "Why have you not grown?/If asked,/We'll say we'd forgotten" (xi). Forgetting is also related to her child status because it is represented as the result of the young protagonist's following her mother's advice: "'Forget, just forget.' And I do" (7). Forgetting, however, is not only related to the personal experience of suffering, but has a political dimension, as it is seen by Barakat's mother as a precaution against the young protagonist's involvement in politics and exposure to danger. Suppressing traumatic memory thus represents a state of unfinished childhood, which is associated with an isolation from the immediate political reality and the larger world, signalled by

the title of the introductory chapter “A Letter to No One” and with submission to parental authority. The nature of traumatic memory, however, involves resistance to control and suppression, especially in the context of continued violence, which, similar to the environment described in *A Stone in My Hand*, abounds in potential triggers. In *Tasting the Sky*, it is the experience of a flashback after being detained at a checkpoint, which provides the occasion for initiating the recovery of memory: “my mind begins to fill with soldiers. . . . With every step I take, more images of war appear” (15). Thus, the recovery of memory is represented as a paradoxically inevitable, imposed act, but also a symbolic act of will, of rebelling against the mother’s authority, and thus earning the status of an adult: “But I do not want to do what Mother says. I cannot follow her advice. I want to remember” (16). The body of the text thus represents a narrative reconstructing memory, in which writing itself is presented as instrumental.

The three parts of the memoir refer to the process of letter writing. The middle part narrates the development of a special relation between the young child and the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. The metaphorical identification of the letter Alef with her own experience in the final poem at the end of the book, “Alef the letter/Is a refugee/From paper/To paper/He knows/No home” (170) brings together the narrator’s construction of an identity as a writer as well as a refugee. Barakat uses the image to imply a discovered possibility to communicate, suggested by the letter’s mobility, and by the title of the chapter, “A Letter to Everyone”. Her conclusion also affirms the rather contested idea of scriptotherapy, according to which narrative can give order to disconnected traumatic experiences. Although the process remains incomplete, as the narrator explains she is “midway from forgetting to remembering” (169), she uses the same metaphor of the pieces as in *A Stone in My Hand* to celebrate the healing power of narrative and writing to help “find the splinters of my life . . . and piece them back together” (169). The scriptotherapeutic strategy has been questioned for different reasons by psychologists and critics (e.g. van der Kolk et al. 289 qtd. in Steele and Malchiodi 3). In the context of the age of the protagonist, as well as the connection between growing and remembering set up in the preface, the constructive conclusion of the memoir invites reading the text as a staged ritual of accomplishing and redeeming the experience of growth. While the framing device creates a certain circularity, it also entails a process of transformation, in which the author claims writing as a tool of acquiring control over her past.

The body of the narrative in *The Story of My Life* is similarly framed by a moment of writing, but the connection between frame and body is less explicit, and thus both invokes and questions the developmental pattern based on trauma and recovery. The first chapter of Ahmedi's narrative, "The Gondola," introduces the protagonist shortly after she has resettled in the United States. She relates her experience of a traumatic flashback on a carnival ride, where a spark from the machinery works as a "trapdoor into some other reality . . . out of that day and into a moment ten years in the past" (5). Ahmedi's traumatic experience, whose linguistic description recalls the classical symptoms of trauma, testifies to the scarring effect of war, which continues to affect the protagonist even after she has escaped its violent environment. The traumatic event carries on into her present, and suggests a sense of incompleteness in her inner world, as well as a disconnection from her new social environment. Even though she has insisted on participating in a form of entertainment like everyone else, and her screams blend into those of the others (4-6), her traumatic experience marks her as different, and interferes with attempts to create a new identity for herself. The metaphorical description of the traumatic flashback as forceful relocation into a different reality could be interpreted as pointing to incompleteness in her territorial transition, which has not been accompanied by efficient transitional rites, which in this case bring together the territorial and the coming of age rites. As in *Tasting the Sky*, the traumatic flashback becomes the occasion of revaluation of the present and confronting the past. Taking stock of her current situation, Ahmedi enumerates the various benefits of her refugee experience, yet reveals the anxieties which still haunt her: "My mother and I are safe now. . . . I should be happy every day, every minute, every instant. It troubles me that I'm discontent and sad so much of the time" (7). The passage uses parallel syntactic structures using contrastive conjunctions to counter each positive feeling with negative ones: "I say to myself, *As soon as I get home, I'll go to sleep, first thing*. But when I get home, I feel restless."; "I . . . think, *Now, finally, I'll go to sleep*. As soon as my head touches the pillow, however, sleep scatters to the winds" (7); "We have everything we could ask for, God be praised. . . . And yet at times I find I can't enjoy what I have" (8). Ahmedi connects her feelings of insecurity with her dreams, which also bring up memories of unresolved issues of the past. They are introduced in paragraphs with anaphoric beginnings: "Sometimes I dream," or only "I dream", whose accumulation creates the effect of overwhelming and intrusive suffering and helplessness, which is augmented by the images of paralysis and inability to move or

attract the attention of others within the dreams themselves. Her unsettled relation with the past disempowers the character because it deprives her of control over it. When she introduces the episode with the traumatic flashback, she says about the land mine: “I don’t like to think about it either, but on that score I don’t always get to choose” (3). The chapter returns to the same idea at the end, where the traumatic past is explicitly interpreted as an obstacle for moving on. Farah recounts a positive dream of flying, which might be compared to the image of Malaak’s traumatised agency through the identification with her bird. As in *A Stone in My Hand*, flying symbolises agency in the context of physical and psychological disempowerment, which in Ahmed’s memoir might also be interpreted as counteracting her war-induced disability, and reliving her trauma through the medium of the nightmares: “I *am* flying in some sense: flying into my future – and yet – the past won’t let me go. Not completely. Not yet” (12). This closing paragraph thus implies that the story which follows might in some way serve the purpose of giving closure to the past, of realising the potential of moving on from it encoded in the temporal adjunct “yet”, but this link between the narrative and the occasion of narration is only implicit, relying on an already established convention of the relationship between frame and body of the memoir, which at the same time leaves space for questioning the efficacy of the trauma pattern.

The final chapter loops back on the present moment, and thus represents a symbolic equivalent to the return to society in rituals of passage and the hero’s journey. It engages with indicating the transformation which presumably the journey of remembering has brought about. Rhetorically, the structure of the final chapter inverts the first one, because it reverses the order of difficulties or anxieties and positive outcomes. Every setback or shortcoming is countered by an optimistic “but”-clause: “My life remains a struggle in many ways, but things are better now” (244); “Some of the improvements are just details, but details add up” (244); “My mother is sort of blank now . . . , but she’s better than she used to be” (245); “I don’t like the differences in her, but she’s getting better” (246). Ahmed’s renewed perception of herself and her environment elucidates the positive, maturing effect of her transition, which is akin to the concept of traumatic growth, with its improvement of self-acceptance and acquisition of a sense of purpose, which I outlined in the introduction to Section C. The change of attitude to which the final chapter points also serves as a revaluation of the journey the protagonist describes in the main part of the narrative, which she summarises thus: “*I did do one thing right in my life: I saved my mother*” (248). Thus,

the recovery of the past in narrative accentuates the rescue of an elder who has been overwhelmed and disempowered by war, shifting the emphasis from the traumatic effect of war to the protagonist's display of hyper-agency. The narrative of Ahmedi's childhood experiences and her journey as a refugee resonate with a hyper-agency reading as well, because it is based on key episodes of demonstration of extraordinary resilience, such as making a difficult trek across an illicit mountainous border-crossing despite her disability, as well as supporting her mother by working as a servant in Pakistan, and undergoing an almost impossible procedure of applying for asylum.

The maturing effect of Ahmedi's journey is suggested also by her successful renegotiation of cultural identity. Ahmedi's restoration of her past represents fulfilment of the territorial rite of passage, which recurs as a motif throughout her journey. Not only are her experiences related to multiple trips and border crossings, to Germany and back for her treatment, and then to Pakistan and eventually the USA, but the adaptation and the difficulty of reinventing her self which each change of location occasions is represented as a central issue in the memoir. Initially, Ahmedi struggles and fails to adopt a single cultural identity. Upon her return from Germany, she describes her sense of alienation from the traditional way of life of her family, and remains distanced from them by refusing to participate in the local rituals which hold the family and community together, such as eating on the floor from the same dish. She evaluates this separation as "a loneliness of my own making" (86), but also relates it to having lost the habit of living under the threat of ongoing war (78). When she finally, albeit reluctantly, decides to regain her Afghan identity, she decides to mark the transition by a quasi-ritualistic change to Afghan-style clothing. Her father's wish to make the clothes for her, however, which is supposed to enact a symbolic embrace back into family and community, is thwarted by the war. On the same morning that she goes shopping for material with her mother and brothers, Ahmedi's house is bombed and her father and sisters killed. Her later attempt to integrate into American society is a continuation of the series of incomplete rites of passage. Her attempt to blend in remains unsuccessful, as suggested by the traumatic flashback of the opening chapter. Thus, in Ahmedi's narrative it is war that forces the passages on her, and it is war that symbolically precludes the success of the territorial rite, which can allow for the subject to adopt a new self. The conclusion of the memoir by contrast with previous experiences reflects a new way of negotiating identity:

When I first came to America, I wanted to forget my past. . . . I wanted to become totally American through and through as quickly as I could.

But time passed and I began to think about it. I realized that it's good to remember my own customs and traditions. . . . Now I don't want to erase, or forget, Today I am both Afghan and American. (249)

Thus, her new hybrid identity, which is a celebration of multiculturalist ideas, represents an integration of her whole previous experience, and thus a symbolic overcoming of the disjunctive effect of trauma. Further, her adoption of a stable identity represents an Eriksonian sign of completing the stage of adolescence, and thus a marker of the protagonist's growth. Represented as an act of independent rethinking and an expression of her will, her new identity is also related to a recovery of agency unlike the previous vulnerability to the situation of war, as well as supposedly over her own self-representation.

Ahmedi's narrative of war trauma, while stylistically very different to the complex artistic representation of *A Stone in My Hand*, also raises issues regarding the representational possibilities and significance of the pattern. The span of represented time between the first and the last chapter is rather limited, and nothing especially significant is said to have happened in between, except for the emergence of the main part of the narrative, which is spatially situated between the two. Yet, a complete inversion of perception is reported to have taken place. This change might be attributed to the restorative effect of the narrative, but there is no explicit link between the process of writing and healing. Also, while the inverted relation between positive and negative evaluations signals a completion of the rite of passage, Ahmedi's description of her own perception of age: acting like a child with her mentors, yet feeling "older than most kids my age" (210) counteracts the effect of closure. All these features which subvert the conclusiveness of the final chapter draw attention to other factors which may have influenced the choice of the pattern. In the Prologue, Ahmedi prefigures her experiences through overarching comments on her life which serve as a key for the interpretation of the memoir: "out of my losses have come tremendous gifts as well," or "I have seen my dreams crushed, but new ones have sprouted in their place" (2). These formulas represent a condensation of the structural principles of experience drawn out in the contrast between the first and final chapters. They also resonate with the predetermined conditions set out by the "coaxer" on this particular occasion. As the blurb on the cover informs readers, the production of the book was sponsored by ABC News, after the

author won a contest announced by *Good Morning America*, requesting its viewers to write essays describing “true-life experiences about romance, adventure, loss, and overcoming tremendous odds,” and later directly involving the audience in voting for the best among three short-listed candidates for publication. This description reflects the preconditions set out by the media, but the active involvement of the audience positions it as a co-author, as well as a participant in evaluating the identity narrative for its suitability for the cultural template of life writing in the West.

Furthermore, Ahmedi’s changed perspective is an evaluation of the short period which separates the temporal settings and the first and final chapter, and by extension of Ahmedi’s refugee experience and her ability to adapt to the new culture. It is not possible to determine the degree to which framing her experience in terms of trauma, personal effort and success chimes in with the author’s perception of the events, but the publication of the text under the author’s name gives authority to such a reading. But I do not imply that predetermination necessarily means disingenuousness. Rather, I would like to point out that such form of telling, as well as such form of experience, is the functional and desirable option, as defined by the medium through which the story is solicited and produced, and by cultural expectations in general. As a refugee narrative, the text reads as a metaphorical rite of passage in itself, securing the young subject’s entry in and contribution to her new environment, overcoming liminal experiences, and also testifying, sometimes unwittingly, to the complex intersection of agents and interests which condition its creation.

Conclusion

The young adult novels and memoirs analysed in this chapter share a lot of strategies in representing the effect of war on young people after the destabilisation of elders’ authority. Both genres construct liminal subjects marked by a simultaneous experience of extraordinary agency and disempowerment, often represented as trauma, one of which might appear more prominent. Both affirm the maturing effect of this disintegration of categories, yet in both cases characters are left to a certain degree in a state of indeterminacy, with the final stage of the rite of passage occasionally deferred because of the lack of stability in the social structure of war-affected societies, or because of the difficulties of overcoming the war experience, and fitting into a new culture where the narratives include emigration. The examples above, however, demonstrate that while similar methods are used, there are also some genre differences.

Young adult novels seem to include in their closure a certain form of return to adult authority, which fits the pedagogical function of the texts. Although the examples I have considered seem to provide a certain degree of psychological closure, they leave the question of the eventual maturing effect of war open, using the young adult novel's genre convention of deferring the final achievement of adulthood to convey a message of the irresoluteness of contemporary protracted conflicts. Memoirs of young people's experiences of war, on the other hand, seem to place a greater emphasis on successfully overcoming the states of childhood and trauma, because of their performance as identity narratives securing the completion of their authors' territorial rite of passage. While memoirs describe the experience of children of both genders in non-combatant roles through the same pattern of disempowerment and acquisition of agency, they do not demonstrate the same flexibility of gender roles as the young adult novels, affirming the representation of gender fluidity as a possibly pedagogically-intended trope specific to the genre of young adult fiction. As the treatment of gender performativity suggests, in both genres there is a tension between the Western received notions of agency and trauma, and the specificity of the protagonists' experience as defined by cultural background. In their representations both genres seem to be guided by frames of reference which are recognisable, Western-based or palatable by Western standards. This practice of representation threatens to elide the specificity of experience and leave them open to criticism regarding their commitment to faithfulness of the represented reality. However, both genres attempt to provide contextualisation. In the conclusion I will take a brief look at memoirs which might represent alternative interpretations of the war experience, with greater emphasis on the source culture's perceptions of traumatic experiences, which diversify the single model of framing childhood war experiences discussed here, and also elucidate certain limits of representation which are particularly related to the genre of young adult fiction.

CONCLUSION

My comparative study of young adult fiction and memoirs has yielded more similarities between the two genres than expected. Their shared strategies of representation, and especially their employment of the rite of passage, as I have shown, are to a great extent related to their subject matter. By adopting the structure and symbolism of the rite of passage, the texts of both genres restore a model traditionally used to conceptualise both war experiences and maturing, and revise it for the purposes of a contemporary historical and ideological situation. In the context of the transition to adulthood, the rite of passage re-emerges as a nostalgic figure of elders' control and order in social categories of age, which are perceived as undermined by war in the represented communities, and diluted in the Western societies where the texts are produced. In the context of war, preparation for warrior roles has been traditionally associated with male rites of passage, and has been used to represent various earlier conflicts. Yet, contemporary revisions of gender identities, postcolonial evaluation of historical events, and a trend of protectionism towards childhood, especially in war, have problematised the myth of war as a rite of manhood. When applied to contemporary young people who by international legal and humanitarian standards are classified as children, the maturing force of the involvement in war is re-imagined into a pattern of overcoming psychological victimisation and negotiating power with adults within a disintegrating social structure. The adoption of a warrior identity associated with male coming-of-age rites still surfaces in some of the texts, but is often viewed ironically, or reread as a form of traumatisation which stunts development, for example in child soldier narratives, which have remained beyond the scope of my thesis. The ideological props of political violence are usually undermined, rather than embraced, and maturity is consistently associated across the corpus with the adoption of antimilitaristic values, and with "seeing through" the glamorisation of wartime violence as manipulative or sometimes immature.

This function is of particular significance in the two genres I have discussed, because of their association with and instrumentality in different extraliterary transitions. I have demonstrated the relevance of the rite of passage to an understanding of the genre of young adult literature as a mechanism of adult control over and guidance for Western adolescents, whose maturation is often perceived by adults as deviant.

From this point of view, the rite-of-passage framework can be considered as a vehicle for contingent pedagogical concerns related to the “other,” multiculturalism and war, which provide the specific content with which the model for maturing is fleshed out. I have interpreted the genre of the memoirs as enacting metaphorical rites of passage in which transitions of maturing through war and of migration overlap. In this context, the memoirs perform a variety of functions, such as seeking to provide completion for their narrators’ personal experiences of growing up through war, and to do justice to their commitment to their war-affected communities. Simultaneously, because of their destination, the memoirs respond to similar Western adult concerns about childhood and war as young adult novels. They offer models of self which are conditioned by the unequal power relations involved in the process of publication, and by the circumstances of their writers who seek access to their new cultural environment. This may explain the dominance of Western frames of reference in depicting non-Western children’s war experiences, such as the myth of the transcendent innocent child, as well as concepts of agency, based on notions of Western individualism, and trauma, produced through West-based psychological and cultural discourses.

Just as both genres evoke the rite-of-passage framework and thus imply a contextualised maturing effect of the involvement in war, they also question the pattern, most commonly by their ambiguous endings. In young adult novels, the protagonists’ acquired independence is partly undermined by a re-inclusion into hierarchical age relations, which blurs the boundaries with literature for younger children. The indeterminacy of the novels within the age structure of young adult literature could be related to the topic of war. The violent destruction of the childhood universe makes childhood a coveted goal to which the texts strive to return. This narrative feature can be interpreted as part of the colonising project of children’s literature, but it can also be read as a result of a reappraisal of values in the liminal situation of war, similar to the reconsideration of social norms in rituals. In memoirs, ambiguous endings point to the insecurity of the authors’ immigrant status and the impact of their past, which pushes against the organising effect of the rite-of-passage identity narratives. In both genres, the ambiguity of the endings is also related to the nature of contemporary conflicts, and the time of writing. The lack of closure is characteristic for retrospective rite-of-passage narratives about war, as exemplified by Leed’s and L. Smith’s work on First World War writing, because of the disjuncture between wartime and postwar reality. In the context of contemporary wars, the completion of the passage is further troubled by unending

conflicts, whose repercussions persist not only in the memory of their subjects, but in their immediate social reality, or that of their communities of origin, with which they maintain often troubled connections. In young adult novels, this characteristic of new wars is reflected both in the multiple reactivations of traumatic experiences, as in *A Stone in My Hand*, and in the restaging of the rite of passage in the instalments of *The Breadwinner* series. In memoirs it manifests itself in narrators' discontentment and anxiety, as shown in *The Story of My Life* and *My Forbidden Face*.

Alongside the similarities in the textual strategies used by the two genres, my thesis has also discovered that the memoirs display a greater variety in employing the rite-of-passage pattern, with examples which comply with it, and others which depart from or modify it. The evocation and undermining of the boundaries between childhood and war involvement in Toingar and Keitetsi's memoirs, for instance, draw attention to the textuality of representation, and reveal the tension between lived experiences and writing conventions. In both cases, the texts offer valuable contextualisation of young people's experiences of war, but they do not challenge the traditional image of the vulnerable child. In both Keitetsi and Toingar's works, even when the structural model of innocent childhood and liminal war experiences is disrupted, childhood as an ideal is yet again affirmed as the domain of adult control and protection. This representation, which legitimises humanitarian views of childhood, may challenge the "decolonising" strands of criticism which read the application of the human rights discourses and protectionism as systems for enforcing adult control by stripping children of agency.

Other distinctions between the memoirs and the children's novels include representations of gendered maturing. As I demonstrated in Chapter Seven, gender relations in Middle-Eastern memoirs appear more fixed than they do in the young adult novels. Further examples from the memoirs confirm this trend, challenging the empowered view of female characters in children's novels. For instance, China Keitetsi's experience of sexual harassment by a woman who mistakes her for a boy soldier represents an important counterpoint to Parvana's fantasy in relation to the rescue of the Window Woman, and thus reveals a much darker side to gender flexibility in the circumstances of war. Furthermore, the narratives of motherhood in both Kamara's *Bite of the Mango* and Keitetsi's *Child Soldier* challenge depictions of enhanced agency and ability to care for siblings and other young people which feature in the young adult novels. In *Parvana's Journey*, the protagonist is afforded experimentation with a mothering role by stumbling upon an orphaned baby. Parvana

concludes that caring for the baby might be “like having a puppy” (194). This comparison, aimed to fit the frames of reference of its implied audience, enacts the genre-characteristic elision of what is considered adult knowledge, in this case not only the traditional knowledge of sexuality, but also of war violence. The memoirs reveal what is glossed over by the young adult novel. Both Kamara and Keitetsi narrate experiences of rape as girls, and describe their feelings of guilt because of their inability to look after their children in the circumstances of war. Keitetsi’s foreword reveals her sense of confusion and suspension between child and adult roles, against which she, as well as other child soldiers, are called upon to care for children of their own: “it’s us with no thoughts of a child; or grown-up thoughts, yet we are already mothers and fathers to the child given to us by men the same age as our fathers” (xi-xii). While Kamara’s story of sexual abuse is not related to the war, her loss of her son because of malnutrition is connected to her poor living conditions as a displaced person. Thus, the memoirs appear to reveal stories of sexual violence and lack of agency which lie beyond what is acceptable representation of war in young adult novels for this particular age range. Yet, while this comparison demonstrates certain mediating aspects of young adult fiction, this is not to imply that the genre of young adult literature is deficient. Rather, it offers its own representational advantages. In the context of gender, offering the opportunity to imagine identities as fluid and malleable can enable the re-imagining of the war-defined social environment, which is at times experienced as restrictive.

Representations of agency and trauma have also been discussed from the point of view of the cultural exchange between West and East. The memoirs and young adult novels which I have discussed use largely Western frameworks of trauma. There are texts in my corpus which arguably offer alternative representations of trauma. For example, *Bite of the Mango* associates the initiation of war with a prophetic dream, which the narrator shares with her grandmother at the end of the memoir, and which her grandmother defines as preventable by witchcraft. According to the local interpretations, a ritual act could have been used to “leave those demons in our heads and not let them take the guise of the rebels” (204). This episode thus inverts the causality between “psychological” state and physical event, offering a distinctly “other” framing of war suffering. However, the conclusion of the dialogue returns to the survivor ideology of the rest of the memoirs: “But you have turned your hurt and pain into something positive. When those demons reappear, think about all the angels who have come into your life” (204). This formulation represents a convergence of referent

and recipient societies' worldviews, and it remains unclear whether the convergence is due to a coincidence between the two modes, or of adaptation of the local mode to fit into the dominant Western discourse of refugee story of trial and triumph.

This ambiguity of the mechanics of cultural translation is another important feature of texts of both these genres, but especially the memoirs. The similarity of attitudes could be a matter of coincidence of independent points of view, in which case the text would be considered empowering, because it articulates an "authentic" experience. If it is an adaptation, then it might be interpreted as an act of neo-colonial cultural assimilation. As my analyses of the texts have demonstrated, however, both these options are more complicated. Even if the described experience is faithful to the source culture's frames of reference, it nevertheless can only be made available through permissible forms and recognisable models for its recipient audience. On the other hand, the perception of an adaptation of the experience of trauma may nevertheless also represent faithful testimony to the narrator's own adaptation to a new political role and cultural reality. The very indeterminacy of the representations makes them testimony to their subjects' experiences as well as to the process of writing and disseminating these stories.

One final question for further discussion is the degree to which the representation of liminal experiences prompts a reconsideration of the elements of the rite of passage, and a redefinition of age categories. Since Turner sees liminality as a form of experimentation, it is worth considering whether the texts might offer such an opportunity regarding the notions of childhood and adulthood. Judging by the organisation of age categories via linear plots, and by their affirmation of the traditional image of the innocent and vulnerable child, the texts seem to affirm the age hierarchy. Since categories of agency and trauma are themselves aligned with the child-adult binary, the representation of childhood through trauma is often critiqued as disempowering for the subjects described, and there is greater emphasis in social and literary criticism on viewing war-affected children as agents as an age- and cultural decolonisation act. However, the notion of agency itself needs further exploration and theorisation as part of tacit contemporary Western ideology, so that it does not turn into another mechanism of control of what is sayable by and about children who experience war. Finally, decolonising projects which aim to destabilise age boundaries need to be wary about the more far-reaching social effects of endorsing supposedly empowering politics. Many of these approaches rightfully advocate tailoring the engagement with

groups perceived as suppressed, in this case war-affected children, to local circumstances, in order to address the needs and take into account the perspective of those who experience the events, especially in dealing with the aftermath of war. On the other hand, care should be taken in advocating lifting hard-won protection over groups of people perceived as vulnerable, so that a suspension of the human-rights framework is not co-opted for renewed forms of abuse, denial of support and dehumanisation.

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