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## The Physiological and Psychological Dilemmas of War- Torn Children: A Discursive Study of Akpan's *My Parent's Bedroom*

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### Abstract

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This qualitative research focuses on the effects of adult discursive structures, on the consciousness, identity formation and development of worldview of children belonging to war-torn regions, as portrayed in contemporary literature. I have analyzed *My Parent's Bedroom* by Uwem Akpan, based on Dijk's socio-cognitive models for Critical Discourse Analysis. Various language strategies in relation to discursive structures/practice, used in the texts have been analyzed to explore the physiological as well as psychological effects of war and violence on children. The ultimate motive of the research is to highlight the provision of a safe zone for children belonging to war-torn regions, where they can nourish and nurture into confident members of the society.

## **Introduction**

*My Parents' Bedroom* (2008) in *Say You're One of Them* by Uwem Akpan is a short story written in the political context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Monique, the nine year old narrator tells how, in order to save her and her younger brother's life, their father (who is a Hutu) murders his wife (because she is a Tutsi) in front of the children. The children thus, not only lose their parents and relatives but also their trust in life and humankind in general. The author voices the fear and shock of the violence-hit child and his/her status in the war-torn continent of Africa.

## **Methodology**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed as the strategy of analysis and interpretation, of the selected texts, in this study. Discourse Analysis does not constitute a single unitary approach; rather it is a constellation of different approaches and as a method of analysis rests on multidisciplinary approaches to analysis and interpretation.

Wodak and Meyer (2001, p. 2) state, "CDA is not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomenon which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodological approach." CDA is thus, a critique of the social issues related with dominance and injustice in society and views discourse in the light of Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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ideological and socio-political context, through a multidisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to discourse analysis. Most importantly, it views *power/dominance* as the driving force behind all discourses that regulate the society. This study aims to investigate how the psyche/identity of children, as presented in the selected texts, proves to be a consequence of the dominance practiced by the cultural/political/religious institutions on adults and by adults on children and thus distort their worldview.

### **Socio-cognitive Analytical Framework**

To achieve the objectives of this study, I have selected van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive analytical framework within the domain of CDA, for the Analysis and Interpretation of the selected texts. Dijk himself does not follow any hard and fast, fixed method of analysis, and instead molds the methodological approach according to the needs/nature of research. However, he bases the methodological framework/s on his socio-cognitive approach to the *micro level* and *macro level* structures of the social order.

The socio-cognitive approach to discourse analysis holds that *discourse, society* and *cognition* are interrelated and embedded in a socio-political context of power relations in society. Dijk further differentiates between the *micro* and *macro* levels of social order and considers that discourse, language use, and verbal interaction belong to the micro level of the social order, whereas, power, dominance, inequality between different groups belong to the macro level of social order.

The aim of CDA is to bridge the gaps between the micro and macro levels of the social order, and draw conclusions which aim to end social injustice and inequality caused by the power relations in society.

The methodological framework selected for this study is therefore, based on Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA and includes the analysis of socio-political context, the *micro level* critique of discourse structures including lexical style, embedded local meanings, and the *macro* Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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*level* critique of power structures enacted /resisted by them as incorporated in different implications and global meanings of the selected passages.

## **Literature Review**

One of the most terrible forms of violence which human beings suffer from is war. Its effects are not only limited to the physical destruction of humans and their world, but also psychological devastation. In his research paper, *Children Exposed to War/ Terrorism*, Shaw (2003, p. 244) defines war as “War by definition implies a chronic and enduring exposure to trauma-related events with marked disruption in the contextual and social fabric within which one lives.”

War, therefore, is not only an armed conflict between different groups of people; instead it is a series of inhumane, traumatic events which result only in destruction and devastation. The present day armed conflicts are no more a series of man to man fight; instead it has become a massacre of the civilian population by terrorism, bombings and drone attacks. The worst victims of war are children who suffer from severe physical and psychological injuries as a result of being directly involved in war or by being indirect victims.

## **Psychological Trauma**

More than the physical injuries caused to children in war, it is the psychological trauma that has a drastic effect on their personalities, their understanding of self and the world, cognitive skill and normal development of a physically and psychologically nourished child. The psychological trauma, suffered by children during war and genocide, keeps on haunting them in even adulthood.

While discussing the neurobiological effects of war and violence on children, Shaw (2003, p. 239) states:

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It is known that exposure to intense acute and chronic stressors during the developmental years has enduring neurobiological effects vis-à-vis the stress response and neurotransmitter systems with subsequent increased risk of anxiety and mood disorders, aggressive dyscontrol problems, hypimmune dysfunction, medical morbidity, structural changes in the CNS, and early death.

### **Effects of War on Children**

In *The Effects of War on Children in Africa*, Albertyn, Bickler, Van As, Millar and Rode (2003, p. 228) highlight the effects of war in Africa, which seems to be a particular background for several civil and international wars. Some of the direct and indirect effects of war on children, as highlighted by them are:

In situations of armed conflict it is children who are increasingly exposed to abandonment, abduction and forced soldiering, separation from and loss of parents, health problems, poverty and hunger....it is estimated that during war 5% of children's deaths results from direct trauma and 95% from starvation or illness, and that many are left with permanent disabilities. As many as 37% have lost both parents, 45% their mother and 55% their father.

As Albertyn, Bickler, Van As, Millar & Rode observe, the worst victims of present day wars are children who are suffering physically, mentally and psychologically. In addition to the direct physical and psychological trauma, the indirect effects of war include low socio-economic conditions which result in poverty, hunger and starvation. Lack of health facilities cause numerous diseases in children which result ultimately in their death. Children are left homeless and parentless, and in hostile environments, they become victims of abuse and torture at the hands of the enemy clan.

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## **Forced Soldiering**

Apart from physical and psychological victimization of children during war, another important devastating experience for children is ‘forced soldiering’, that is, children are forced to fight in wars as child soldiers with or without their consent. Plunkett and Southall (1998, p. 73) state:

In Afghanistan, after more than 17 years of war, it is estimated that up to 45% of soldiers are under 18 years of age. Drugs, alcohol and violence, physical and psychological have been used by military organizations in brutal induction ceremonies where children may be compelled to kill others, including their own family members.

While some child soldiers may be inducted in the military by force or by exposing them to drugs, many adolescents willingly join the military in order to gain a sense of belonging and protection in the chaotic world. They find taking up arms in war as liberating since it frees them from the unending tortures, and gives their life a structure and purpose. So, in order to be safe and to get food and shelter, many children make the deliberate choice of fighting in the war although they are neither trained for it nor are they economically benefitted by it.

## **Physical and Sexual Torture and Abuse**

Finally, the worst form of war victimization is physical torture and child abuse, both physical and sexual. Since children do not have the physical strength to stand up to the tortures of the strong adults and also because no one listens to their pleas, children become easy victims of torture in events such as war. Plunkett and Southall (1998, p. 73) state:

Children have been detained and tortured in the pursuit of military objectives.

Torture of children may be used as part of a collective punishment of a community, as a means of extracting information from the child, the child’s peers or parents, or as entertainment. Allegations to cruelty to children as

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young as 12 years—involving solitary confinement while naked and blindfolded, beatings, electric shocks, and hosing with cold water—all have been documented by Amnesty International and corroborated by medical evidence.

War, terrorism and physical/ sexual abuse, thus are the worst forms of violence which a child can suffer from, and it is no less than a nightmare for the child which affects his/her physical and psychological health, identity, sense of belonging, natural comfortable family life with siblings and parents and the overall worldview.

### **The Future of Children Who Suffer from War and Violence**

The future of children who suffer from war and violence is even bleaker than their horror filled experiences of war. The *Human Rights Watch* (2003, p. 41) observe the situation of Rwandan children after the 1994 genocide as:

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of the genocide and war in Rwanda is the hundreds of thousands of children who have been orphaned or otherwise left without parental care since 1994. During the genocide and afterwards in refugee or displaced person camps, these children were left to cope with atrocities taking place around them and to fight for their own survival. Today, they struggle to rebuild their lives with little help in a society that has been completely devastated. With many living in poverty, they confront the daily challenges of feeding, sheltering, and clothing themselves; trying to attend school; or trying to earn a living. In the meantime, thousands of vulnerable children are exploited for their labor and property and denied the right to education.

So, it is very difficult to rebuild the lives of children who are left orphaned and without protection after war and conflicts. The physical devastation and the psychological trauma they

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have to go through is a life time consequence of their suffering in events such as wars. As a result, not only their physical and psychological health is affected but their personalities, identities and worldviews are also distorted for their lives. With such marks of horror on their personalities, these children fail to follow a normal childhood and developmental route to a healthy and nourished adulthood.

### **Micro and Macro Analysis of ‘Say You’re One of Them’**

*(I circle the parlor, like an ant whose hole has been blocked)*

#### **Synopsis of the Story**

*My Parents’ Bedroom* is a short story from the collection *Say You’re One of Them* by Uwem Akpan, written in the socio-political context of war and violence in Africa. The collection focuses on the situation of the suffering children in different parts of the continent. *My Parents’ Bedroom* is written in the political context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus.

The story opens with the introduction of the child narrator, Monique, who is “nine years and seven months old”, and loves to play peekaboo with her little brother, Jean. The children’s father belongs to the Hutu tribe and their mother comes from the Tutsis. While the parents hide out in the night to survive the Hutu massacre of the Tutsis, the children’s uncle and other relatives breaks in the house to kill their mother. Not finding the parents at home, they tear the house upside down in rage, and one of the men tries to rape the nine year old Monique.

This physical and sexual abuse leaves the children fearful and in pain when they finally leave only to return back the next night, and demand from the father to kill his wife in order to save his children. In his desperate attempt to save his children, the father murders the children’s mother with a machete before them and leaves the children in shock. Ultimately, the house is lit on fire, and Monique runs away into the chilly night with her younger brother. The children witness

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vultures poking their beaks on the dead bodies left unattended in the open. Finally, they escape the site of violent Tutsis rushing after Hutus and run into the hills.

## **Context Analysis**

The short story *My Parents' Bedroom* by Uwem Akpan is written in the political context of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. The Rwanda genocide originated from the conflict between Tutsi and Hutu tribes, the two dominant tribes in Rwanda because of political and historical reasons. Tutsis, being in minority, were brutally massacred by the Hutus, who claimed to be the righteous owners of Rwanda. Apart from being in minority, the Tutsis differed from the Hutus in physique as well, being taller and fairer like Europeans.

In 1994, after the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda, Hutu extremists took over the government, blamed the Tutsis for the assassination and within 24 hours began slaughtering the Tutsis. In the next hundred days, thousands of Tutsis were brutally murdered, mostly with machetes, clubs or knives and were not even spared in churches, hospitals and even schools. Thousands of women and children were raped and tortured. To further degrade the Tutsi, Hutu extremists did not allow the Tutsi dead to be buried, and their bodies were left to be fed by the vultures and dogs.

The genocide ended when Rwandan Patriotic Front, a trained military group consisting of Tutsis, took over the country. Thousands of children were killed during the genocide, worst of all those who survived witnessed brutal acts of murder of their loved ones, like parents and siblings were tortured, mutilated and sexually abused. In their research paper, *Trauma Exposure and Psychological Reactions to Genocide Among Rwandan Children*, Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad and Mukanoheli (2000, p. 9) state:

Virtually all the children interviewed had witnessed some kind of violence during the genocide. More than two-thirds of the sample actually saw someone being injured or killed, and 78% experienced death in their immediate family, of which

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more than one-third of these children witnessed the death of their own family members. In addition, almost all the children saw dead bodies or parts of bodies, and more than half of the children witnessed many people being killed at one time (massacres), people being killed or injured with pangas (machetes), and people being beaten with sticks. The majority of children saw their homes destroyed/looted and/or heard people being injured/killed.....Finally, 16% of the children reported that they had to hide under dead bodies in order to survive the genocide.

With this kind of traumatic violence, the Rwanda Genocide is considered to be one of the most brutal acts of violence in human history, and its worst outcome strikes child survivors. Children who survived the genocide developed severe psychological problems, and suffered from impaired cognition. Their situation, ultimately turned equivalent to “an ant whose hole has been blocked.”

### **The Focus of Analysis Here**

The Analysis (Micro and Macro Analysis) and Interpretation of the selected passages focuses on the effects of violence, massacre and abuse on children. The psychological and physical effects of events, such as genocide, are critical for children’s normal development. Such political events shape children’s worldviews and distort their ethnic, personal and social identities. The psychological trauma that children face during war haunts them even in adulthood, and it becomes very difficult for them to regain a normal routine in life. Following is the *micro* and *macro* analysis and interpretation of the story.

### **4.3. Micro and Macro Analysis**

In the start of the story, Monique the child narrator introduces a slight background of her family stating that her father belongs to the Hutu tribe while her mother is Tutsi woman. Although they belong to different tribes, her parents share a deep love for each other. The family is devoted to Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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Christianity as their religion and finds solace and peace in its practice. The parents hide out at night knowing that the tribal conflict will lead the outraged mob to their house, ultimately leading to their murder. The children are left at home alone, when finally their uncle, with all other Hutu relatives, crashes the doors of the house open to look for them. The children are afraid when they see the aggressive mob turning the house upside down. The worst however, falls upon little Monique when a “big-bellied man” tries to rape her. He fails to finish the brutality because the elder tells him to stop as they consider the children parts of the Hutu tribe, and only their mother, who is a Tutsi, as a rival. After the rampage is over, the fear that takes over Monique is expressed as:

*(1) I want to sleep, but fear follows me into my room. My fingers are shaking. My head feels heavy and swollen. There's a pebble in my left thigh where the naked man hit me. My mouth is still bleeding, staining the front of my nightie. .... Jean is covered in goose bumps. I m too afraid to tidy up our room. We huddle in one corner, on the mattress, which has been tossed onto the floor. I start to pray. (p. 273)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

The lexical choice of the author features vocabulary that expresses “**fear**” of the child caught up in violence, war and abuse. At the local level of meaning, the author focuses on the physical and psychological effects of violence on children. The words “**shaking**”, “**head feels heavy**”, “**swollen**”, “**bleeding**” reflect the physical outcomes of violence on children, while “**fear**”, “**goose bumps**”, “**too afraid**” refer to the psychological effects of violence on children. In the first line, the narrator explains that she wants to sleep but “**fear follows**” into her room and makes her sleepless.

The word “**staining**” refers not only to the physical blood stains on the child’s dress, but also to the psychological marks of horror and pain left on the child’s mind as a result of physical and

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psychological torture that originates in war-torn regions. The sentence “I am too afraid to tidy up our room” marks the disturbance of children’s life because of severe situations like ethnic conflict and war. Violence interrupts the lives of children in a terrorizing manner, making them mentally, physically and psychologically inactive.

The last two lines express children’s reaction to adult violence. The child’s retreat to a safe place and the desire to be protected is expressed in the line, “**we huddle in one corner**”, and the child’s dependence on some sort of physical and psychological support system is revealed in the last line, “**I start to pray.**” Children therefore, who are suffering in violent situations across the globe because of adult savagery, are left at the mercy of God and are forced to retreat physically and psychologically to spaces that are cornered. The child’s position is thus defined as children are pushed to physical and psychological spaces that are not noticed or paid attention to by the adults. Thus they are without protection and support, and left to suffer the brutalities and horrors of war and violence.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

At the macro level, the author highlights the physical and psychological effects of violence and abuse on children. Bloomaert (2005) considers it more important to analyze the “power effects” than to just criticize power practice or to react against domination. When it comes to war and ethnic violence, it is the children who are the worst affected victims since they do not understand the adult ideological reasons for such acts.

To children, all humans are equal and the same whereas adult thinking divides people on the basis of gender, race, religion and ethnicity. This division of the *self* and the *other* becomes the reason for ethnic conflicts. Children are not only physically traumatized in ethnic genocide but psychologically tortured also. Moreover, the worst part is that they become easy victims of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the rival groups. Tamashiro (2010, p. 1), while stating some of the worst impacts of armed conflict on children, claims that “children, especially girls, Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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are subjected to an increased risk of sexual violence from armed combatants during conflict. Rape has been a prevalent component of armed conflict....causing increased risk of psychological trauma, unwanted pregnancy, and susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections.”

Nevid, Rathus and Greene (1997) hold that the physical injuries suffered by physically abused children are tragic, and the emotional wounds may run deeper and are even more long lasting. Child survivors of sexual abuse fall at an increased risk of different psychological disorders like post-traumatic disorder, anxiety problems, phobias, low self-esteem, lack of trust and social withdrawal. To save children from such horrible acts, it is important that they should be given attention as a separate group in society, and protected by adults in situations like war and genocide. It is therefore, adult responsibility to protect children in war-torn regions, and also show potential commitment to safeguarding the future from such heinous crimes.

The next night the mob arrives again and finds the family together. The Hutu people and Tonton Andre, who is Monique’s father’s brother, demand him to kill his Tutsi wife because she is not one of them. Not finding the courage to kill the love of his life himself, he asks someone else to do it. But he gets the following reply:

(2) *“If we kill your wife for you,” the wizard says, “we must kill you. And your children too.” He thuds his stick. “Otherwise, after cleansing our land of Tutsi nuisance, your children will come after us. We must remain one. Nothing shall dilute our blood. Not God. Not marriage.” (p. 285)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

At the local level of meaning, the lexical style features vocabulary which highlights the notion of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and how people adhere to their cultural and social identities with respect to their superior rights to land and its resources as compared to other ethnic groups. The phrase Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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“cleansing our land of Tutsi nuisance” reflects that people associate qualities of being “clean” and pure with their own group and “dirt” and impurity with other groups. Based on such assumptions people kill other people like animals and forget associating any goodness with them. The sentence “**we must remain one**” reflects how people are devoted to their ethnic groups and the strength of ethnic identities with which they associate is depicted in the last line, “**Nothing shall dilute our blood. Not God. Not marriage.**” The last lines of the passage express the importance of ethnic identity and the role of ethnicity in the lives of people. Every group of people considers itself as superior to others, based on their self-proclaimed truth claims, find the rest as false, and it is for this ethnic superiority that humans find rationale to brutally murder other humans.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

At the macro level, the passage implies the role of ethnic identity in cultural group dynamics and functioning. According to Burke and Stets (2009) ethnic identity is a part of the subject’s social identity. Through the development of social identity, individuals categorize self and others in particular ways and therefore, associate certain forms of behavior and thoughts with people belonging to their group and the *other* group. This *othering* helps individuals to gain control over their actions and lives. It also provides for a multicultural dialogic platform for different groups of people belonging to different cultures.

However, as Barker and Galasinski (2001) observe, the multicultural stance of different groups also leads to various cultural differences between them and become a cause of contestation for ascendancy and pragmatic claim to truth within various patterns of power. On the basis of these truth claims, people consider their groups as righteous and the other groups as inferior and wrong.

Culture then, as Allan (1998) states, functions as an ideology that produces a type of false consciousness and works to oppress a group of people. It is because of this ideological interplay Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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that adults refuse to tolerate *others* and impose ideas such as ‘ethnic cleansing’ of human beings and their lands. Children however, fail to grasp such contesting ideological rationales for massacre and genocide and suffer more, both physically and psychologically, because they cannot make logical sense of such events. The effect of this confusion is a distortion of their cognitive skills and their understanding of the world and life in general. Ultimately, they grow up into perplexed adults with distorted psyche and understanding.

*(3) Papa lands the machete on Maman’s head. Her voice chokes and she falls off the bed and onto her back on the wooden floor. It’s like a dream.....There’s blood everywhere—on everybody around her. It flows into Maman’s eyes. She looks at us through the blood....the blood overflows her eyelids, and Maman is weeping red tears. My bladder softens and pee flows down my legs towards the blood. The blood overpowers it, bathing my feet. (p. 285)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

At the local level of meaning, the words, “**her voice chokes**” suggest the repression of ‘voice’ of certain members of the society, in this case a Tutsi woman for not being a Hutu by blood. The role of the woman as a mother and as a wife is not considered because she is looked at as the “other” who does not belong to the tribe. It is thus, this ‘otherness’ that causes all the havoc and deprives people of even their lives.

The sentence, “**It’s like a dream**” reflects upon the child’s perception of the event, that is, the murder of her mother by her own father right before her eyes. The fact that the narrator expresses it as a dream shows that the child finds it hard to believe and does not consider it as a realistic event. Also it depicts the child’s unwillingness to accept the event as a real one.

The next sentence, “there is **blood everywhere, on everybody around her**” expresses the fact that everybody around her is her murderer and everybody has her blood on them. The line, Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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“Maman is weeping red tears” expresses not only sorrow at death of the woman but also at the brutality and violence of humankind. The severity of cruelty which marks the event is depicted by the term “red tears”.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

At the macro level, the passage implies the killing of *voice* of one group in the society by other groups. As Bakhtin (1981) claims, human existence is in essence a dialogic existence dependent on shared mutual understanding of socio-cultural beliefs and norms. Dialogue, in all forms, be it linguistic, cultural, social or political, develops respect for mutual understanding and sharing of *voice*, giving rise to multiple accents and meanings in society.

This multiaccentuality is repressed when, based on certain ideologies, meaning gets fixed for a particular group of people, because the kind of shared mutual understanding displayed by violent groups as ‘mob mentality’, leaving many different traces upon weak and dependent minorities is not justified. As a result, different groups come in direct contest with each other with respect to what is right and what is wrong, and fail to tolerate others’ views and beliefs. This ultimately leads to political power possession, and creates situations like war and ethnic violence.

The fact that is ignored, in such violent acts, is the suffering of innocent children who become victims of physical and psychological trauma as a result of these. Moreover, children are indirectly forced to be a part of such adult violent acts. This is the most inhumane consequence of political and ethnic rivalries that result in wars, causing innumerable deaths and massive destruction with unimaginable after-effects.

At the macro level, the author has also highlighted the horror filled, inhumane, actions committed by adults during the genocide and its impacts on children’s minds. The worst that a child can witness in his/her life is the murder of one of its parent by the other. For children, the site of blood and killing, and its lingering in their psyche, is in itself a horrifying image but the

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killing of parents and siblings is the worst one can imagine for a child to suffer from. The Rwandan genocide was one of the worst political events for children who got orphaned and were left shelter less, vulnerable to terrorist acts such as abuse and torture by the rival groups. The *Human Rights Watch* (2003, p. 44) reports:

Some 400,000—more than 10 percent of Rwanda’s children— are estimated to be orphans today. Most were orphaned during the genocide or the war.....genocide survivors who were orphaned in 1994 are the most visible of these groups. They are among the most vulnerable children in the world: many witnessed unspeakable atrocities including the murder of family members and some narrowly escaped death themselves, leaving them deeply traumatized. Many of those who survived now live in misery, often lacking the means for education and basic health care.

So, the future of children who suffered from the brutal acts of the genocide is among the most traumatized groups of children in the world. The lack of education facilities and health care leaves them at the mercy of the circumstance.

*(4) I cry with the ceiling people until my voice cracks and my tongue dries up. No one can ever call me Shenge again. I want to sit with Maman forever, and I want to run away at the same time.....my mind is no longer mine; it's doing things on its own. It begins to run backwards, and I see the blood flowing back into Maman. I see her rising suddenly, as suddenly as she fell. I see Papa's knife lifting from her hair. (p. 286)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

The lexical selection in the first line, “**until my voice cracks**”, suggests how adult conflicts and violence affect children and repress their voice in society. The word “**crack**” refers to the fact Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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that something intact gets *cracked* because of mishandling or carelessness. The *voice* of the child should have an authentic status in the social order, but, because of adult ignorance and mishandling, the child's voice gets not only repressed but crushed. Children, who suffer from the violence and brutalities of adult political events such as war and ethnic conflicts, fail to understand their social position and thus do not recognize that they have a *voice* in the first place.

Adults do not care how the violent outcomes of their conflicts affect and harm children's physical, psychological and mental health and growth. The same is suggested by the words, "**my tongue dries up**". Children are thus physically and psychologically pushed into a state of cognitive paralysis in which they fail to think of themselves as independent beings who have a voice of their own.

The second line, "**no one can ever call me Shenge again**", suggests that adult manipulate and distort children's identities depending on their own situations and needs. In the beginning of the story, Monique states that her father and his Hutu people call her "**Shenge** (my little one)" because she has physically taken after her mother (p. 266). After her father murders her mother, the child not only loses the parent but the identity that was given to her because of her mother.

At the local level of meaning, in the next line, "**I want to sit with Maman forever, and I want to run away at the same time**" the author brings to light the child's desire to be protected, loved and cared and the adult brutality which forces the child to do otherwise. Children are therefore, left confused with respect to what is right and what is wrong.

The line, "**my mind is no longer mine; it's doing things on its own**" reveals the loss of control from which the child suffers because of the severity of adult ignorance of the child's suffering in situations like war and genocide. And the child's mind "**begins to run backwards**" enforces the child's desire to undo the brutal act of murder, and bring things back to normal the way they were when her mother was alive.

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## Macro Analysis

### *Global Meanings and Implications*

At the macro level of meaning, the passage focuses on the status of child's voice in society in the socio-political context. According to Bakhtin (1981) a mutual understanding of meaning develops in dialogue, which is an amalgamation of two consciousnesses, in other words, two different *voices* in society. However, the result of this mutual understanding is supposed to be constructive for humankind. The understanding shared by the groups belonging to the power bloc proves to be destructive for the minorities who suffer because of their understanding of their groups as the dominant ones. One of such negative impacts of adult dialogic understanding is that adults hold the right to voice their choices and opinions in life but when it comes to children, they do not get a chance to raise their voice against adult actions which are imposed on them. For instance, the event of war or genocide is mono-accentuated because it is understood in a socio-political context by the adults who perpetuate it. As a result, the violence of war or ethnic conflict is imposed on children that is not understandable to the adults. Therefore, the dialogic understanding of meaning fails when it comes to the in socio-political interaction between adults and children. This failure to achieve a dialogic understanding thus turns into adult imperialism, as Kincheloe (1997) contends, and represses the voice of the child to a "discursive closure."

The second important implication of the passage is the discursive construction of identity. As Lye (1997, discussed in Ch. 2, p. 49) observes, subject identity originates from a dialogic process of the social and cultural interaction of the individual with its group members and the ideological beliefs of his/her society. Subjects therefore, develop a self-image from their identity groups, from their activities in society and from the repertoire of common and shared meanings and practices of their sub-cultural groups. Right from birth, a child is "interpellated" (Althusser, 2001) into a subject of the society. S/he is given a name according to a cultural understanding of the individuals place in society. This naming or construction of identity also draws upon the child's gender, religious and ethnic positions and roles. From early childhood onwards, the child accepts this identity as something natural which positions him/her in the society, and barely ever challenges it. However, the socio-political events such as war, 'ethnic cleansing' and tribal

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conflicts confuse the child's sense of self and belongingness since it becomes very difficult for children to rationalize war and violence 'others are not a part of us.' The effect of ethnic violence on child's development of identity and self-image is, thus, crucial in the overall understanding of 'self and others'.

(5) *There are corpses everywhere. Their clothes are dancing in the wind. Where blood has soaked the earth, the grass does not move. Vultures are poking the dead with their long beaks; Jean is driving them away, stamping his feet and swirling his arms. His hands are stained, because he has been trying to raise the dead. He's not laughing anymore. His eyes are wide open, and there's frown on his babyish forehead. (p. 288)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

The lexical selection of the word “**corpses**” in the first line associates the local meaning with the idea of death. The words “**corpses everywhere**” emphasize the idea of death as a massive effect of war and conflict. Similarly, the fact that the clothes of the corpses are “**dancing everywhere**” expresses the seriousness of the event. It also refers to the *silence* created as an effect of death, the immobility of human life.

The line “**where blood has soaked the earth, the grass does not move**” suggests the effects of human brutality on nature and nature's response to it. The fact that the grass does not move, while the clothes of the corpses dance, reflects how even nature is affected by human cruelty. It also expresses the prevalence of death and ending signs of healthy life on earth.

The line “**vultures are poking the dead**” refers to the gravity and horror of violence created by adult conflicts, the disrespect that people have for each other is reflected in the idea of vultures poking the corpses.

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Furthermore, “**Jean is driving them away**” represents child’s repulsion for violence and cruelty and their sense of right and wrong. The child is aware of the fact that vultures are not supposed to “poke the dead”, and it is something that should not be allowed.

The effect of adult imposition of violence on children is expressed in the line, “**his hands are stained, because he has been trying to raise the dead.**” Consciously or unconsciously, adults involve children in their brutal wars and conflicts and do not care of their horrible implications for them. The word “**stained**” refers to the marks adult wars leave on children, physically as well as psychologically. The fact that “**he’s not laughing anymore**” shows the emotional crisis which is thrust upon the children suffering from violence and abuse.

Similarly, “**his eyes are wide open**” represents the surprise and shock with which the child faces violence. The placement of the words “**frown**” and “**babyish forehead**” shows the emotional effects of adult discursivity on children since babies are supposed to laugh and smile and not frown, but the adult gesture is imposed on the child as a result of ethnic conflict.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

The passage focuses, at the global level of meaning, on the development of child’s worldview in war-torn regions where violence has not only destroyed the physical and natural world but also the child’s sense of the world as a place worth living in. The author has brought to light “the darkness of human heart”, which devoid of all kindness and humility, preys upon its own species.

Witnessing the site of corpses lying on grounds, bloodshed, brutal murders and vultures preying upon the corpses leaves severe traumatic marks on not only adults’ but on children’s minds as well. Children however, get more perplexed and fearful because they cannot relate the events of violence with the love and kindness they are always preached to live with. Also because children are used to of adult protection, their experiences in war and genocide leave them more fearful,

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dreading the darkness of human heart. Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad, & Mukanoheli (2000, p. 11) state:

More than two-thirds of the children reported that they often tried to stay away from situations or things that reminded them of the event. Overall, the data indicate that many children continued to have intrusive images, thoughts, and feelings 13-20 months after exposure to the events of the war, despite their attempts to remove the event from their memory and to avoid these reminders. Many of the children also reported increased arousal symptoms such as inability to concentrate or pay attention.

So, according to the authors, one of the greatest psychological effects of violence on children is the post-traumatic stress which immobilizes and impairs children's cognitive and mental skills. The passage thus, highlights the effects of war and violence on children. Children are directly affected emotionally, physically, and mentally by war and violence. The passage also implies the child's position in war-torn regions. Children are not paid any attention to and are left alone to suffer from the trauma of murders and genocide without any help.

*(6) Then he wanders towards the UN soldiers at the corner, their rifles shiny in the twilight. They are walking away from him, as if they were a mirage. The vultures are following Jean. I scream at them, but they continue to taunt him, like stubborn mosquitoes. Jean does not hear. He sits on the ground, kicking his legs and crying because the soldiers won't wait for him. I squat before my brother, begging him to climb on my back. He does and keeps quiet. (p. 288)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

The lexical choice in the passage features the absence of any help for children suffering from war and violence. The first line introduces the idea of “UN soldiers” who are “**moving away from** Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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**him (Jean)**". Global peace keeping like UN who are supposed to help those who are suffering in different parts of the world neglect the fact that children are also a part of the social event and need attention and help in situations of political turmoil.

The word "**mirage**" refers to the help and support that may be there for children but in actual practice does not exist. The next line, "**vultures are following Jean**" depicts the position of the unprotected child in the socio-political context. Children, who are parentless in war and violent situations, are left at the mercy of the circumstance and become vulnerable victims of adult abuse and violence.

The words "**I scream at them**" raise the child's voice in situations like genocide. The word "scream" refers to the horror, surprise and anger of the child at adult cruelty. The author expresses children's frustration and sadness at the absence of help in the line, "**he sits on the ground, kicking his legs and crying because the soldiers won't wait for him.**" The words also express the child's desire and plea to be rescued. Ultimately, children are left with their siblings or other children for support and help.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

The passage brings to focus the importance of organizations like the UN in upholding the status of children suffering in war-torn regions. More than that, it is a critique of the role of such organizations, which claim to be participating in peace keeping activities and providing support to people in the war-torn areas of the world. The author uses the word "mirage" to relate to them, when it comes to child support and help in areas of violence and war. To children suffering in different parts of the world, their help and support is like a mirage, which shows itself but is actually never in their reach.

Fleishman (2002, p. 10), while stating the problems for children's rehabilitation after war and referring to a speech by Kofi Annan, observes that "the problem, Mr. Annan's report makes Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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clear, has not been the absence of money, but the lack of will.” Ultimately, children suffer unprotected and isolated in conflict hit areas without any care or support.

*(8) We limp on into the chilly night, ascending the stony road into the hills. The blood has dried into our clothes like starch. There’s a smaller mob coming toward us....these are our people on Maman’s side, and they are all in military clothes. Like another soccer fan club, they’re chanting about how they’re going to kill Papa’s people. Some of them have guns. If Papa couldn’t spare Maman’s life, would my mother’s relatives spare mine? Or my brother’s? (p. 288)*

## **Micro Analysis**

### ***Lexical Style and Local Meaning***

At the local level of meaning, the word “**limp**” refers to the physical injuries and damage done to children in war-torn regions by adults. As an outcome of violence, children are handicapped and their physical health is severely affected. The phrase, “**chilly night**” refers to the coldness of situation in which children are caught as opposed to the warm and comforting situation of a normal happy and peaceful life.

The line “**ascending the stony road into the hills**” depicts the strife of children caught up in war-torn regions of the world. Their life becomes as difficult as a journey on a stony road, moreover it is the “ascending” that shows their struggle to survive the violence and brutality of mass murders in war. The innocent perception of children is expressed by associating the chants of “**soccer fan club**” directly the chanting of the mob about “**how they’re going to kill Papa’s people.**”

The passage is full of words that refer to the conflict between the in-group and the out-group, for instance, “**our people**”, “**us**”, “**our people**”, “**they**” and “**them.**” The words not only highlight the struggle between different cultural, social and political groups of people but also depicts Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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children as a separate group in the society as against the adults. When the narrator uses the words “a smaller **mob** coming toward **us**”, she places herself and her brother into a separate group of people who stand against the opposing group of people, that is, the “mob”. Children therefore, understand themselves as a separate group of people than the adults, however, adults fail to recognize the same.

## **Macro Analysis**

### ***Global Meanings and Implications***

At the macro level, the passage implies the effects of ethnic confusion on children, which results from political events like ‘ethnic cleansing’ of a land. According to Burke and Stets (2009) ethnic identity is a part of the individual’s social identity and it helps people to relate to a certain group, giving them confidence and a sense of belongingness. It also reduces uncertainty and develops a sense of positive self-worth.

However, this association with one group originates in opposite or similar response to some *other* group. Hence, one’s own group is seen as the ‘in group’, which comes in direct opposition to the other’s group, that is, the ‘out group’. This categorization of self and others in defined categories, and expecting particular thoughts, feelings and behaviors to follow from these categorizations enables individuals to exercise control.

Critically however, this distinction of the ‘in group’ and the ‘out group’ turns into a form of imperialism when one group tries to dominate the other by repressing their voice and access to various resources. This ends up in ethnic wars and conflicts resulting in massacres and genocides through the so-called process of *ethnic cleansing*.

The impact of such violent actions on children is severe; it affects their physical, psychological and mental health and growth often leading them to a state of “crisis heterotopia” (Foucault, 1967). The mental state of crisis, ‘heterotopia’, is a state of liminality and confusion, in which children tend to fight out what is real and what is not. Being taught by adults about kindness of Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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heart, love and non-violent ways of life, when children witness brutal acts of genocide, they become confused and therefore become victims of different psychological disorders.

Finally, the passage highlights the future of the world since children are the future and for them, life as defined by the adults is only “ascending the stony road” and the world merely “chilly night.” As Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad & Mukanoheli (2000, p. 19) state:

Children and adolescents who managed to survive the genocide represent the future generation of Rwanda, and serious attention must be given to these survivors in order to restore a sense of hopefulness about their future and to prevent long-term psychological sequelae.

So, the survivors of the genocide call for attention because they are the future of the world. Otherwise, the psychological trauma and physical ailments they carry are to be passed on to the future generations. It is not only the future of the children, suffering because of irrational brutal adult wars and genocides, that is bleak and filled with horror, but the future of the world is equally dark and hopeless.

## **Conclusion**

The short story, *My Parents' Bedroom* in the collection *Say You're One of Them* by Akpan is thus, a highly important piece of literary discourse that highlights the problems of children suffering in Africa because of adult wars and conflicts. It reflects the most brutal acts that have been imposed on children; when they watch their parents kill each other, watch their siblings being raped, witness massacres and bloodshed, hide under corpses to save their lives, face health and nutrition problems and are drugged to participate in wars as child soldiers. The future of the world indeed, appears bleak if children across the world are subjected to such suffering.

The analysis and interpretation of the selected passages from the texts leads to the unnoticed status and position of the child in society. The voice of the child is repressed because children are

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not considered as an independent group in society who may think and feel other than the adults' choices for them and their lives. Moreover, various socio-cultural ideologies such as religion, social decisions of gender roles, child education and politics also limit the child's cognitive abilities by constraining their thoughts to fixed ideals and related behavioral patterns in society. These limitations perplex the child with reference to his/her identity, worldview, and his/her place and role in society.

Childhood, therefore, becomes a social construct; a socio-cultural process of interpellations through which children are shaped as members of a certain group or class of society. Through such social construction of children into interpolated subjects, they are bound to grow up into individuals with distorted concept of 'self' and the world as isolated, psychologically troubled or disordered members of the society instead of healthy, nourished minds that can contribute to the development of the society at large. Thus, the future generations are bound to be confused and psychologically disturbed if issues concerning today's children are not attended properly.

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