

The Education of a Boy Soldier

By Steve Godawa

In order for a human to lead a fulfilling life, he must break free of the proverbial chains in the world of illusion and set off on the path towards the realm of reality and reason. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" illustrates this voyage and quest for the attainment of education. In many ways, the life of Ishmael Beah in *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* is a direct reflection of Plato's allegory. This is exemplified through his vigilante life style as a boy soldier, the rehabilitation process, and ultimately, the full recovery and detachment from his horror-ridden life.

Ishmael Beah had nowhere to go when Sierra Leone's civil war tore his family apart. He could jump from tribe to tribe and risk getting killed, or join the army and risk getting killed. It was a lose/lose situation. He took the path towards joining the army to avenge the death of his family by the hands of the rebels. The army took the boys in and unknowingly to them, made them their prisoners. They locked them up in chains in the form of speed tablets, marijuana, and a mixture of cocaine and gun powder called brown-brown. The soldiers became addicted and could not live without it. With the chains fastened tightly, the generals and corporals showed movies at night. They watched them "with the aid of a generator or sometimes a car battery." Plato describes something much like this:

Their light is from the fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-

handlers set in from of the human beings and over which they show the puppets. (Plato, *Republic* 514b)

In essence, the movies that they watch are much like the puppets that the prisoners see in the cave. They represent reality; however they are just a depiction of reality. They are forms. Being locked up in chains of drugs, these movies are the only truths that the soldiers know. Plato states “such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.” The boys could not wait to implement the techniques they saw on the movie screen.

He whispered that he wanted to practice his Rambo moves before we started firing.

Before I said a word, Alhaji was already rubbing mud on this face, using a combination of saliva and some of the water from his backpack to wet the mud. (Beah 143)

These movies represent reality to the boy soldiers, much like that of the prisoners of the cave with the illuminated puppets.

One day, some men from UNICEF come to take away the youngest boy soldiers for rehabilitation at a building called the Benin Home. Ishmael and the boys were infuriating that they had to be told what to do, especially by civilians. It “enraged me some much that I would punch the wall, my locker, or anything that I was standing next to.” This resistance is complemented by the prisoners in Plato’s allegory as well.

. . . someone dragged him away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn't let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun wouldn't he be distressed and annoyed at being so dragged? (Plato, *Republic* 516a)

In addition to the struggling, the lack of drugs and the images from the war are starting to take their affect. Being forced to live a life not known to them is very difficult.

My hands had begun to shake uncontrollably and my migraines had returned with a vengeance. It was as if a blacksmith had an anvil in my head. I would hear and feel the hammering of metal in my head, and these unbearable sharp sounds made my veins and muscles sour. I cringed and rolled around on the floor by my bed or sometimes on the verandah. (Beah 140)

In direct similarity to the boy soldiers, the prisoners expressed much of the same pain from being released from the chains and shown the light of reason.

Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. (Plato, *Republic* 515d)

The rehabilitation process is a constant struggle for the boy soldiers. They each have their own withdrawal stages and deal with it differently. However, one thing they do share in common is the pain of being forced to “look toward the light.”

Ishmael starts recovering rapidly during his visits with a nurse by the name of Esther. In a way, Esther is like the sun in “The Allegory of the Cave.” She is the source of knowledge and wisdom that allows Ishmael to recover from his past life. They begin to build a real close relationship, and with every visit Ishmael’s side effects from the war subsided. After eight months, he is allowed to leave and live with a family member in the city. However, a close friend of his, Mambu, did not have a family that desired to take him in. He returned to the army, and could not get out. Plato described this as well.

If such a man were to come down again and sit in the same seat, on coming suddenly from the sun wouldn’t his eyes get infected with darkness?

(Plato, *Republic* 516e)

Ishmael’s luck of having a family close by that would take him in gives him the opportunity to interview for a project where children all across the world talked to people about their childhoods and their struggles. He was chosen due to his first hand experiences of the war. Plato predicted this as well.

. . . the man who is sharpest at making out the things that go by, and most remembers which of them are accustomed to pass before, which after, and which at the same time as others, and who is thereby most able to divine what is going to come, in your opinion

would he be desirous of them and envy those who are honored and hold power among these men? (Plato, *Republic* 516d)

This shows that he has been fully enlightened by the sun's rays of light. Ishmael educated people on his life who live in the dark, and lack the knowledge of what really happens. It is natural for a human to let others know what they know. However, this can be a dangerous task and Ishmael realizes this. He has to get away from Sierra Leone before it takes him back down into the depths of the cave, much like Mambu. Plato hypothesizes that if the enlightened went back down into the cave to teach the others, "wouldn't they kill him?" Once escaped, Ishmael "was happy to have made it out of Freetown, to have escaped the possibility of becoming a soldier again."

Life as a boy soldier in Sierra Leone was incredibly difficult. The boys must go through many trials and tribulations in order to break free from the chains of the war. They must have the strength to endure the pain of being in the realm of reality and see the sun of reason for the first time in their lives. Finally, they have to have the will and fortune to avoid the depths of the cave from which the turmoil they call their lives started. These stages are clearly represented and depicted in Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave."

Works Cited

- Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007.
- Plato. "The Allegory of the Cave" (from *Republic*). *The Human Experience: Core 110/115 Coursepack*. Valparaiso University. Southlake, TX: Fountainhead Press, 2007. 41-47.