"It seems that all of you have two things in common . . . You are afraid of looking a man in the eye and afraid of holding a gun. Your hands tremble as if the gun is pointed at your head. . . This gun will soon belong to you, so you better learn not to be afraid of it . . ." (Beah 109).

These gut-wrenching words by the lieutenant foreshadowed Ishmael Beah’s future numbing reality, as described in his memoir *A Long Way Gone*. The AK-47 became the key instrument that led Ishmael into a cave of distorted reality (109). Just like the prisoners in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, Ishmael became bound by chains of ignorance and blindness, chains that could only be broken by patient and loving education.

At the onset of his introduction to war, Ishmael was physically trained to be a soldier and mentally trained, or brainwashed, into thinking like a desensitized one. For example, the army engrained into his mind the idea that all rebels were responsible for his family’s death. As a result, Ishmael began to hate the rebels, experiencing the first effects of the numbing reality of war—Ishmael was a slave to this new, awful military mindset (112-113). In the same way, the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave were “slaves” to their distorted perspective. The prisoners were entirely insensitive to the outside world and the only knowledge they possessed was that of the cave.

Very soon, Ishmael entered the fray, donning the army’s uniform, packed with as much ammunition as he could carry and energized by the drugs given to him. His only mission was to shoot any man without a red band on his head or a helmet like the corporal’s. During his first fight, Ishmael was overwhelmed by what he saw: blood was splattering around him, bodies were
falling into piles, bullets were closely whizzing by, and Josiah and Musa were killed in battle. Once he saw his two dead friends, Ishmael began shooting everything that moved, developing a gloomy reality of no mercy toward any enemy (115-118).

This reality carried on throughout Ishmael’s war life, and soon, “. . . killing had become as easy as drinking water” (122). Ishmael was captive to this horrible outlook on life, blind to the concept of “humane.” As a result, Ishmael eventually began to feel home in his military perspective, which was demonstrated as he found it easier to kill rebels, even the ones that he had wounded already. Similarly, the prisoners in the cave soon felt home where they were and they found its grim atmosphere much easier to endure and live in. Consequently, they were trapped in a mindset that deceived them, blinding them of a better reality outside the cave.

As war became Ishmael’s life, his squad became his “family” and his gun became his “provider and protector” (126). In the Allegory of the Cave, the prisoners who were fond of the cave consequently became a family, determined to remain in the cave together. The prisoners in the cave and Ishmael were all obliged to stay loyal to their fellow friends, and thus, were motivated to stay in their reality. However, the longer the prisoners and Ishmael stayed in their reality, the more accustomed they became to it. For instance, Ishmael was in his reality long enough to develop his own philosophy for war: “. . . kill or be killed” (126). As a result of killing people daily, Ishmael lost feeling for others. Ishmael had lost all memory of the light he had once lived in, the light of a better and more satisfying reality.

Furthermore, Ishmael needed rescuing from his state of ignorance, just as the prisoners in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave needed rescuing. His liberation, however, came in the form of UNICEF, an organization established to rescue child soldiers from the war. Ishmael was one of the several child soldiers who were chosen to be transported away from the war and to the city,
where they would be re-educated and slowly forced back into knowledge of normal life (128).

This was not an easy transition, however. Just like the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave who preferred the dark cave over the outside, Ishmael preferred to stay as an active soldier in the war—he wanted to remain in his awful cave.

Fortunately, like the freed prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave, there was someone who dragged Ishmael out of the cave of war—this person was a very compassionate and loving nurse with enduring patience and strong persistence. However, Ishmael disliked the nurse because she was just a citizen and he was not sure if he could trust her. Here, Ishmael was brought into the light, but similar to that of the prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave, he could not bear it and consequently turned away. This is also seen through Ishmael’s intentional and prompt leaving whenever he wakes up in the medical center (138, 140-141, 144).

To Ishmael’s benefit however, the nurse was relentless in her kindness toward him. For example, she gave Ishmael a Coca-Cola, telling him that he could visit her at anytime (152). She even told Ishmael that she wanted to be his friend and introduced herself to him as Esther (153). Esther continued to drag Ishmael out of his cave, giving him a Walkman and cassette with rap music on it as a gift. This time, Ishmael finally opened up and hugged her for it. At last, Ishmael was getting used to the light and he began to accept it.

Nevertheless, Ishmael was still adjusting to the light and he had a long way to go in order to fully accept Esther’s assistance. For example, after Ishmael opened up and shared some war stories, Esther told him that it was not his fault and that he was just a child when it happened. From hearing those words, Ishmael became annoyed and left, throwing the walkman to Esther, for he had heard those words said much too often (154-160). Here, the light is more bearable, but Ishmael is still struggling to see clearly.
Ishmael continued to wonder about Esther's sympathy and pondered over her quickness to listen to him as he would tell her his bad dreams. He even noticed her sensitivity toward him in how she would politely ask if she could speak (160). Ishmael could not help but notice this unconditional compassion. Later on, Esther still proved her love and concern for Ishmael as she took him on a tour through the city. She even let Ishmael's friend Alhaji come too. While in the car, Esther tickled the two boys and put her arms around them, showing them that she truly loved them (161). Esther was determined to kindly drag these two boys out of their dreadful war outlook and into the light of knowledge, in regards to normal life.

While in the city, Esther took Ishmael and Alhaji to a market, where she bought Alhaji a soccer jersey and Leslie, the driver, bought Ishmael a Bob Marley cassette. Esther also bought each boy a Coca-Cola bottle. Gifts were an excellent way to prod a previous child soldier back into the reality of normal life. All children love gifts—Ishmael and Alhaji were no exception. Shortly after this, Esther gave Ishmael a pen and paper to write down the lyrics of the songs he listened to (163). This action really softened Ishmael's heart and played a huge role in facilitating Ishmael's ability to see the reality of a world not engrossed in war. Ishmael was well on his way to healing—the light was becoming home.

Through Esther's incessant and patient care for Ishmael, Ishmael slowly acclimated to the light of normal life. As Esther gradually pulled Ishmael out of his cave, Ishmael began seeing things as they really were: there were people in the world that did not live to kill, but rather, lived to better their society and to enjoy it. Also, identical to the freed prisoner's sincere concern for his fellow friends in the cave, Ishmael felt responsible to share his story in order to let the world know what war can do to children. In view of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Ishmael was the freed prisoner, liberated from the chains of war, and healed from the pain of change.
Works Cited
