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Stretching the Temporal Boundaries of Postmemorial Fiction: Shades of Albert Camus' Absurd in Biyi Bandele Thomas' *Burma Boy*

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Nigerian-British writer and playwright Biyi Bandele Thomas' novel *Burma Boy* (2007) is inspired by his father's combat experience in the Burma Campaign of World War Two. This postmemorial re-enactment not only commemorates his father but also the marginalised black African soldiers who participated in that campaign. Critical attention paid to Bandele's work has noted his surrealistic and satirical style, usually in alignment with a post-colonial epistemology. This paper aims to show how the novel evokes the origins of a trauma and the futility of war within an African consciousness, alongside broader ontologies concerning the modern condition. I contend that through an aesthetics of the Absurd, as outlined by Albert Camus, *Burma Boy* not only evokes the absurdity of war but transcends its temporal wartime boundaries by offering a broad reflection on the fundamental cause of the author's father's wartime trauma: the divorce of humankind from the reality of existence. Thus, I conclude that this post-generational novel leverages an aesthetics of the Absurd to address contemporary political and environmental concerns.

Keywords: Postmemory; Burma Campaign; The Absurd; Albert Camus; Biyi Bandele Thomas

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La ampliación de los límites temporales de la ficción posmemorial: las influencias del Absurdo de Albert Camus en *Burma Boy*, de Biyi Bandele Thomas

La novela *Burma Boy* (2007) del escritor y dramaturgo nigeriano-británico Biyi Bandele Thomas está inspirada en la experiencia de combate de su padre en la campaña de Birmania

en la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Esta recreación posmemorial no solo sirve de conmemoración de la figura de su padre sino también de los soldados africanos negros marginados que participaron en esa campaña. La atención crítica prestada al trabajo de Bandele ha destacado su estilo surrealista y satírico, generalmente vinculado a una epistemología poscolonial. Este artículo analiza cómo la novela evoca los orígenes de un trauma y la inutilidad de la guerra dentro de la conciencia africana, junto con ontologías más amplias sobre la condición moderna. A través de una estética del Absurdo, tal como la esboza Albert Camus, *Burma Boy* no sólo evoca lo absurdo de la guerra sino que trasciende sus fronteras temporales, al ofrecer una reflexión amplia sobre la causa fundamental del trauma de guerra del padre del autor: la separación del ser humano de la realidad de la existencia. Por lo tanto, se concluye que esta novela posgeneracional aprovecha la estética del Absurdo para abordar las preocupaciones políticas y medioambientales contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: campaña de Birmania; el Absurdo; Albert Camus; Biyi Bandele Thomas

“In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.”
(Albert Camus)

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigerian-British author Biyi Bandele Thomas' novels have been described as “rewarding reading, capable of wild surrealism and wit as well as political engagement” (Centre for Creative Arts, 2011, n.p.). And his most personal novel, *Burma Boy* (2007), the focus of this article, remains faithful to this style. Based on his father's experience serving with the Special Forces known as the Chindits under General Orde Wingate during the Burma Campaign of World War II, it both commemorates his father and reveals the forgotten history of the young black Nigerian soldiers who fought for the Allies in that campaign.¹ Yet in this fictional recreation, Bandele attempts to “confront and exorcise those demons that had hovered over [him] from [his] childhood” (Bandeled 2007, 216). Thus, we can read it as a second-generation creative re-enactment of a trauma that in Dominick LaCapra's terms “works through” family resonances (La Capra 2001, n.p.) and as an act of postmemory (Hirsch 2012, n.p.). Post-generational writers attempt innovative ways to express the seemingly inexpressible Real behind traumatic memory. This article argues that a stylistic choice that involves elements of the Absurd allows an engagement with the origins of a trauma induced by violence and fear in a war zone

¹ The novel was initially published in the United States and the United Kingdom under the title *Burma Boy* and then later in the U.S. as *The King's Rifles* and in the U.K. as *Burma Boy*. The later U.S. title refers to the multi-battalion British colonial regiment (the King's African Rifles, or KAR), which was recruited from East Africa from 1902-1960s, whereas the U.K. title refers specifically to the special forces within the KAR who fought against the Japanese in Burma—now known as Myanmar. The survivors of this campaign became known as ‘Burma Boys’. For British and Nigerian readers this would be a more familiar term for these veterans.

and, at the same time, permits the reader to view the deceptions and illusions that led humankind to the most violent events of the twentieth century. Wit, irony and surreal elements allow the reader to see anthropocentric western modernity as a con, and to realise that it was not only the colonials who had been duped, but humanity. Thus, the Absurd entices the reader into the narrative to see themselves as unwitting provocateurs. Ultimately, the novel can be read as a cautionary tale that stretches its temporal wartime boundary by addressing contemporary concerns and relational thinking that are compatible with an African philosophy.

Bandele's novel shares artistic premise with the late medieval fools' theatre, or the theatre of folly, popular in the aftermath of the Hundred Years' War and the plague. In their psychoanalytical work on generational received memory of traumatic war experience, French psychoanalysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillère note the "political and therapeutic" nature of the follies (Davoine and Gaudillère 2004, Loc.598) and its reflection on the absurdities of humanity. The actor who played the fool in these plays sometimes invited the audience to look at themselves through a mirror—blurring the boundaries between spectator and stage—and thus see themselves as part of the absurdities, inauthenticity and vanities of society. Its modern counterpart, the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin 1961), also in vogue after World War II, works in a similar vein. Likewise, *Burma Boy* invites its audience to observe the absurdity not only of the war but, more broadly, of the modern human condition—a humanity out-of-synch with the reality of the world.

In Bandele's work prior to the publication of *Burma Boy*, scholars have noted similar tropes to the follies, often allied with post-modernist style, including the carnivalesque, satire and humour (Negash 1999; Kehinde 2003; Bouchard 2008). These tropes, common to the Euro-American Absurd, also abound in *Burma Boy*. However, according to African philosopher Odun Balogun, the Absurd "has always been manifest in African literature both oral and written" (1984, 41) as constituted in folktales and oral traditions. He notes that despite similarities with its Euro-American counterpart in its manifestation of a general world malaise, the African Absurd differs in two principal features: its realistic non-absurdist narrative style and, instead of despair, a more optimistic outcome. The Absurdist style of *Burma Boy* aligns it with this African tradition; a point we will return to shortly.

The resurgence of ideological and religious extremism, coupled with increasing environmental disasters in recent decades, has sparked a renewed scholarly interest in Albert Camus, the leading proponent of the Absurd. Notably, Ronald Srigley's *Camus' Critique of Modernity* (2011) stands as a pertinent contribution to this revived interest. Srigley describes Camus' work as "an increasingly honest and uncompromising account of modernity's darkest ambitions" (2011, 7). Philosophically aligned with Martin Heidegger's condemnation of technological modernity for transforming humankind into "standing-reserve"—which views human beings as objects or commodities intended solely for human utility rather than appreciating their intrinsic nature or

essence (1993, 308-41)—for Camus these “ambitions,” to use Srigley’s term, triggered a loss of control over humans’ proper nature, converting them into “things” and, thus, absurd beings. Senayon Olaoluwa reads *Burma Boy* along these lines. He implicates western imperialism for converting the colonised subject into its vassal. And he makes a convincing argument for these young Nigerian soldiers as a resource with which to feed western capitalism and “to serve the British interest” (Olaoluwa 2021, 94). Certainly, slavery and the Holocaust stand as the ultimate manifestations of the de-subjectification and commodification of human beings. Indeed, scholars like Zygmunt Bauman (1989) and Edith Wyschogrod (1985) believe de-subjectification to play a pivotal role in genocide. Like their equally ensnared western counterparts, these Nigerian soldiers portrayed in the novel served as cannon fodder for King George’s war—a war not only engendered by modernity’s darkest ambitions, but deeply entangled with Christian theology. Matthew Sharpe describes Srigley’s perspective on Camus’ work as an attempt, prompted by the events of World War II, to understand “[w]estern modernity and its cultural antecedents, and finally—in his conception—a total critique of the modern age” (2013, 402).

Camus attributes the severance of humanity from the vital reality of existence to anthropocentric western modernity, while Srigley, in outlining the Absurd, defines it as “an affection of the mind [...] arising from a misrelation between human beings and the greater reality in which it exists” (2011, 28). At the risk of oversimplification, but essential for present purposes, we could encapsulate this misrelation as comprising three broad elements: First, techno-modernity has obscured the “greater reality,” converting humankind into a “thing.” Olaoluwa has already addressed the novel within this framework, and consequently, we will not explore this further here. Second, as Srigley observes, “Absurd Man” [*sic*] wants to know the truth beyond the falsities of society; that is, to “approach his [*sic*] “naked reality” (“réalité nue”) and to escape the various “phantoms” and “illusions” that obscure his [*sic*] understanding of that reality” (22). Camus’ Absurd thus rejects any transcendent moral imperative as illusory; it is a world without God. And third, our relatedness to the universe constitutes the greater reality—the divorce from which renders humankind absurd. I address these latter two facets in this article.

Now let us return to the question of the African Absurd. For many existentialist thinkers in the post-war period, the divorce from reality channelled a feeling of despair and hopelessness. But not so for Camus. His later works—from *The Rebel* (1951) onwards—reveal defiance and rebellion. Scholars have often highlighted his Mediterranean upbringing as inspiring his celebration of life, aligning him not with European Absurdists but with a positivist philosophy more in line with traditional cultural beliefs that venerate cosmic relationality. Significantly, Camus rejects any doctrinal belief in an eternal after-life as being illusory and thus absurd. In *Summer in Algiers* (1946), he wrote that the great sin of life “is not perhaps so much to despair of life, as to hope for another life and to lose sight of the implacable grandeur of this one”

(quoted in Hinchliffe 1969, 38). Also, we should consider Camus' colonial standpoint. As Hinchliffe, referring to Cyril Connolly's introduction to *The Outsider*, points out, "the basic absurdity of the novel is the application of Christian morality and a European code of justice to a non-European people" (38). In what follows, we will see how *Burma Boy* stages the war against a background of Christian theology and notion of justice. But how does Camus encapsulate optimism through the Absurd? Srigley encapsulates it precisely when he states that for Camus, "Absurd Man" cannot change the structure of reality, but can confront and accept it in full consciousness of the "greater reality in which he [or she] exists" (2011, 29). This broadly means attending to the pure essence of being in relation to the Universe. This Camus called Revolt.

The following sections discuss how *Burma Boy* interweaves the Absurd with traumatic memory through a close analysis of key scenes. As I contend that Bandele stages the absurdities of humanity and the dark side of modernity against the backdrop of war, we must first analyse the theatre of war as the main stage, which includes the setting and characters who enact the drama of war. The setting of a front-line combat narrative constitutes the war zone. And as Kate McCloughlin notes, "its God is the war machine" (2011, 168)—the system of regulations and demands that seems to operate independently of human necessities and frequently opposes them. Thus, the war machine not only ensures that the war zone lacks logic but also amplifies its lack of logic beyond what is nonsensical outside the zone, highlighting its absurdity (168). Section three addresses religion and, more specifically, dogmatic Christian theology as justifying violence. The final section concludes with a discussion of Camus' notion of Revolt and how this plays out in *Burma Boy*.

2. STAGING THE FOLLIES OF HUMANITY: THE THEATRE OF WAR

Let us begin with the theatre of war—the soldier's absurd universe, a "Locus Horribilis" (McCloughlin 2011, 106). The war zone stages the fourteen-year-old protagonist Ali Banana's transformation, but as a fictional setting it also acts as an aesthetic framework to mirror Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin notes that although events in Absurdist theatre

might be absurd, they remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually, the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence. Thus, the absurd and fantastic goings on of "The Theatre of the Absurd" will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure (1960, 5).

Bearing in mind Esslin's words, in *Burma Boy*, war and imperialism form part of the absurdity of human endeavours and the irrational side of existence, as Paul Fussell acknowledged when he wrote that "the whole war was mad and every participant

insane from the start” (1989, 273). In the most infamous example of the Absurd in war literature, Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961), absurdity arises from the over-rationalisation and logical workings of the war machine. But in *Burma Boy*, it principally arises from illusion; that is, distortion and the illusory perception of reality through human consciousness and its evasion through transcendental beliefs, vanities and falsehoods. And it is through illusion that we will explore the war zone and war machine. I argue here that there are two principal components to illusion: First, a disconnect from nature, and second, vanity and inauthentic idolatry bestowed on figures of higher command, from the King to the lowliest officials. Like the follies, revealing these illusions drags the reader into the narrative and pushes them to perceive themselves as part of the absurdity.

The war zone evokes an absurdity that feels surreal. Yet, in Esslin’s terms, it does relate to reality. An example lies in the animation of trees and their ability to kidnap soldiers—strange occurrences put down to Guntu’s absurdly obsessive imaginings:

[...] leaning against the tree, [Guntu] fell flat on his back and sat up to find the tree flying past the security wire and disappearing into the jungle. In its hurry to depart, the tree stepped on a mine and was blown up. Guntu cut short his cigarette break and fled back to the stream where the other trees suddenly developed feet as well (1960, 142).

The Japanese, however, would indeed masquerade as trees, a reality inciting fear in soldiers. This scene thus manifests an aesthetics of the Absurd in its “exuberant mingling of the real and the nightmarish” (10). In a rational world, trees as *themselves* are nothing to be feared. But here, they have adopted a surreal quality which at first sight seems to be Guntu’s own mental projection. As Esslin reminds us, absurdity emerges from an estrangement from the world—its familiar and named objects and elements, such as trees or stones, having become unfamiliar. When experienced, this alienation may engender “nausea,” which Guntu manifests through fear and anxiety verging on madness. Thus, the surreal quality endowed on familiar elements creates a state of constant vigilance and heightened awareness—a crucial survival skill in a war zone where trust has crumbled in the once familiar world beyond its borders. Furthermore, it also evokes the irrationality of war. Like Camus, Odun Balogun asserts that the African Absurd arises from the situation rather than life itself (1984, 46). It is not Guntu who has lost his mind—his irrational fears are indeed grounded in reality—but rather the world he exists in. Bandle draws on what Esslin refers to as the “mingling of the real and the nightmarish” (1960, 10) to great effect. Shooting at his own shadow and personifying trees who kidnap soldiers externalises Guntu’s mental processes; he thus not only reveals the fear that may grip a young soldier in a war zone, but the folly of war.

However, it is not so much cruel nature enfolding the subconscious of the subject here but western humankind’s illusory capacity to transform and use it for its own

violent ends. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus interprets “estrangement from the world” as humanity’s increasing alienation from a world that has turned into a “lost paradise” (1942a, 28). He also states that “the world evades us because it becomes itself again” (13). This means that our overly familiar surroundings have long been shaped only for our own usage and purposes, while nature always remains unchanged in its indomitable essence. The jungle may seem wild, overwhelming and initially grotesque, even labelled “uncivilized,” yet significantly it resists being “civilized” by western imperialism. As Pallavi Rastogi points out, “[t]he heart of darkness subsumes Western technology” (2015, 32). But in Bandele’s depiction of a war zone it becomes apparent that it is not nature itself that is inherently lethal and fear inducing. Instead, it is the humans who ironically blend into it, along with the man-made objects (antipersonnel and antitank mines) camouflaged in it. Nature, in its pure form, is presented as unadorned reality, or “*réalité nue*” (naked reality).

The denouement further strengthens “*réalité nue*.” Both Rastogi and Courtois note the “osmosis between [Banana] and nature” (Courtois 2020, 6), the former understanding it as Banana’s “shedd[ing] of the accoutrements of western culture, including military clothing, rendering himself ‘naked as the day he was born’ (210)” (Rastogi 2015, 31). Rastogi also interprets the denouement as Banana realising the futility of an Other’s war. I suggest, however, that in shedding these “accoutrements” he reveals a metaphysical “*réalité nue*,” abandoning the illusions and falsities of western modernity, including the disconnect from the universe, that cloud reality—a key element of the Absurd. Banana comes to the profound realisation that the jungle answers to no master, especially not to white colonialists embodying a capitalist land ownership mentality, evident in the Allies’ forward operating bases White City and Aberdeen—yet he embraces his inherent bond with it. The land provides food and protective shelter for Banana; the leeches clinging to Banana’s body as he stumbles into White City may drink his blood, but he has permission to eat them too. They need each other and they coexist. This aligns with an African way of knowing that does not aim to dominate nature but rather to respect it, reflecting a sense of *ubuntu*, described by Yusef Waghid as meaning “human interdependence” (2016, n.p.), which also espouses a non-anthropocentric humanism, a more ethical relationship to community and environment than western modernity. Banana embraces *ubuntu* when he calls to the snake whose “home” he has requisitioned for the night, “[...] there’s room enough for both of us. It’s your home after all. There’s room enough for every one of us” (207). He thus emerges as a “naked African” (211), born again in his nakedness. Yet, he is also humanity, confronted in all its nudity with the world becoming itself again—“*réalité nue*.” We will return to this denouement in the final section to see that confronting the world as *itself* means embracing the absurdity of it, finally grounding Banana’s sense of wellbeing.

Alongside the revelation of nature as *itself*, the second illusion lies in human vanity and existentialist inauthenticity. Esslin—previously cited—remarked that the Theatre

of the Absurd reveals the “illusion of what we thought was [the human condition’s] apparent logical structure” (1960, 5). Bandele’s aesthetics reveals the illogicality of unflinching trust in the war machine—the logical structure of command and the godlike figures of both the nation’s leaders and colonial overseers. The reader senses their illusory nature and the trust and reverence injudiciously allocated to them, through the subtle textuality of the Absurd.

The use of dramatic irony exposes this illusion through the mismatch between the characters’ naive beliefs and the readers’ implied post-generational standpoint, revealing the disparity between what the characters believe and what the reader comprehends about reality. For example, Banana’s childlike perception of the glory and honour of fighting a war for the far-off foreign King “Joji” (George), and his assumptions, trust and hero-worship of his commanders is rooted in what General Wingate called “propaganda”—a sign of inauthenticity. Banana’s innocent reverence for the British military commanders parallels the colonials’ delusional, and equally innocent, ennoblement of their imperial rulers. Irony arises from Banana’s failure to see this, drawing attention to the cruel reality not only of the war itself and the merciless workings of the war machine, but also to the “civilizing” forces of colonialism. Bandele’s comic irony exposes the honour of fighting the “whiteman’s” war as being a fraud: “[E]veryone knew someone who had been *specialy invited* to Boma [Burma] by King Joji to teach the Janpani [Japanese] what’s what” (44; italics added). Like the deceitful intentions of World War I propaganda, the townspeople overlook the reality of their sons being used as pawns in the colonial war machine. Recognising this misconception, the reader is confronted with dramatic irony, emphasising the foolish and absurd nature of war.

Irony stemming from the readers’ temporal perspective, furthermore, illuminates the artificialities and hype surrounding the military command, from the highest to the lowliest ranks. The “gods” of the war machine appear illusory and inauthentic—vainglorious subjects of groundless and absurd idolisation, merely players in the business of war. In writing about the “Conqueror,” Camus observes that “[e]very man has felt himself [*sic*] to be the equal of a God at certain moments” (1942a, 86); but we could add that this is only the case if people treat them as such. Banana raises King “Joji” to the status of a deity worthy of a soldier’s worship and allegiance, proudly risking his life in the king’s name. For his courage on the battlefield, Wingate is similarly held in such reverence and he is equated with a “Noble Lord” (65). Like the highest commanding colonialists, Wingate, as Camus would have it, had lived “on the heights and fully aware of that grandeur” (1942a, 86). But Camus contrasts the conqueror’s transitory nature, with the lasting, “true riches” of the “strong and chaste friendship among men” (1942a, 86). This contrast highlights that the conqueror’s image is merely an illusion, lacking authenticity. For instance, the initial portrayal of Wingate as a “crazed British officer” (4) sharply contradicts the heroic ideals envisioned by the young African soldiers. Bandele portrays him as a vulnerable individual, afflicted by malaria and trauma, revealing him a victim of the power and might of the war machine rather

than a commanding officer in full control, far removed from the towering heights of authority. Far from the mythical figure whose oratorical gift for charming the troops left them “possessed by his visions and drunk on his words” (63), the soldiers meet a fragile mortal.

Yet this does not imply a depreciative portrayal of Wingate. Bandele’s retrospective analysis permits a more critical characterisation than that of “official army chroniclers” (172) of the time. Bandele leverages an omniscient narrator to provide new insights into a man whose “brazen stratagems wrong-footed the Japanese commanders into making some of the worst tactical blunders that eventually cost them the war in Burma” (178). Indeed, he credits Wingate with a great deal of psychological intelligence, of being fully aware of his and his men’s predicament as players on the propaganda stage (173) and as simple “agents in the trade of war” (169). Perhaps, then, Wingate’s true strength lies in his awareness and direct confrontation with the Absurd.

However, he chooses the wrong kind of escape—attempted suicide; a point to which we will return in the final section. Once unmasked as another imperfect mortal amongst all those sacrificed to the war machine, Wingate stands as an absurd subject of reverence. We see him in his “réalité nue.” As Camus notes, “nothing of the conqueror lasts, not even his doctrines” (1942a, 87). Yet Bandele extends the irony of the situation by maintaining the colonised young soldiers’ historical positionality *vis-à-vis* Wingate; their innocence and delusional faith blinds them from seeing beneath the rhetoric. This mismatch between illusion and reality undermines assumptions of trust and blind allegiance to the war machine, illuminating the absurd sacrifices of innocent lives to it.

Lower in rank, but no less worthy of Banana’s reverence, is Samanja Damisa, who is in charge of D-Section. His self-worth and respect arise from Janar’s/Wingate’s flattery and recognition for having served under his command in Gideon Force.² This impresses the young soldiers: “But he not only remembered you, he remembered your name. That’, said Zololo firmly, ‘is something’” (65). Furthermore, Banana idolises Damisa primarily because he “was immortalized in a photograph shaking hands with Emperor Haile Selassie” (30). Although Damisa “tried to play it down [...] to pretend that it was nothing really” (65), he enjoyed the recognition that meeting a revered personage afforded him. This exemplifies the Absurd manifested in false idolatry, whether a godhead or a human being. Furthermore, worshipped by Jamaican Rastafarians as God Incarnate, Haile Selassie was in turn the object of groundless mythology and idolatry. Neither Banana nor lower ranking commanders had ever met the King. And Zololo had only seen Wingate from afar “riding on a great white horse” (65). Most soldiers’ and townspeople’s information about these white “lords” was hearsay. Only Damisa had met Wingate in person—the reason for

² Gideon Force, led and formed by Major Orde Wingate, was a compact elite unit composed of British, African and Ethiopian military components, including the Sudan Defence Force, Ethiopian regular forces and Arbegnoch. This force engaged in combat against the Italian occupation in Ethiopia as part of the East African Campaign during World War II.

his reverence. Thus, the ironic discrepancy between these young soldiers' assumptions and reality evokes the absurdity of false idolatry.

3. VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF GOD: STATE LEGITIMATED KILLING

This section explores the novel in the light of Camus' condemnation of religious conflict, his thinking on Christian theology underpinning anthropocentric western modernity, imperialism and extremisms, and his abhorrence of capital punishment to reveal how the novel challenges the legitimacy of violence in the name of righteousness. The argument here is that the text engages with the deep causes of the war alongside contemporary issues at the time of publication. We will see how this works in two inter-related scenes: first, Wingate's rallying speech to the Scottish Cameronians and second, the last public execution in Sokoto.

In the first scene, Bandele dramatises Wingate's religious zealotry, as he is promoting a Crusadic campaign in which soldiers would be armed "with the sword of justice and protected by the Breastplate of Righteousness" (169). When Wingate asks a Scots soldier his opinion, he replies "You and God can fucking well do without me, sir" (169). L. B. Namier noted that "good and evil, and the constant struggle between light and darkness in the world and in the heart of man, were [for Wingate] real" (1952, 180). And General Wingate took his theological doggedness into battle. Through comic irony, the novel supports the accusation that Wingate employed terror against terror (Oren 2006, 392). Considering the employment of violence against "terror" absurd, Camus would no doubt have agreed with this indictment.

The writing of *Burma Boy* coincided with the rise of Jihadist movements, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and similar global uprisings. Thus, it seems no coincidence that it raises contentious issues of contemporary political and religious violence. Wingate's perceived superiority of his divine cause and the use of violence in its name pose moral concerns, particularly regarding the concept of a righteous war based on one's identity. Wingate's blinding ignorance that these seemingly agnostic Scots soldiers could be goaded into action by a sanctimonious Englishman illuminates his colonialist Christian mindset, revealing his use of religion to bolster brotherhood, loyalty and communal identity in what he supposes to be shared beliefs. The Scotsman's reply discloses his reluctance to sacrifice life to a dispassionate machine, a Deity in which he does not believe and, more discernibly, an Other's—and an Englishman's at that—senseless rationale. Thus, comic vernacular and straightforwardness heighten the satirical effect, disclosing deeper and broader considerations about "Just Killing" under the aegis of religion or identity, revealing it as absurd.

Throughout his work Albert Camus explored the notion of "Just Killing" contending that killing in the name of ideology is inherently absurd. He placed immense value on life itself, advocating for embracing life and taking action even in the face of existential meaninglessness and inevitable death (Morisi 2014, 50). His post-war play *The Just*

Assassins (1949) centred on the moral complexities surrounding murder and terrorism, exploring the endorsement of killing for an “absolute *raison d'état*” (Morisi 2014, 50). In this light, Wingate's colonial rationale for killing, which aligns with his use of “terror against terror,” contrasts sharply with Camus' stance as an Algerian, actively opposing the colonial regime's execution of activists for their political convictions. Thus, for Camus, the notion of “justified” killing and the death penalty were the ultimate example of the Absurd (50). In this regard, we will now see how the image of the sword strengthens the absurd justification of violence by virtue of ideology and, furthermore, draws attention to killing as nothing but *itself*.

The sword functions as an extended metaphor, but it can also be *itself*, namely a sharp tool used for putting an end to life—“*réalité nue*.” Yet we only need to look to Anglo-Saxon literature, such as *Beowulf* or the Arthurian tales, to understand its symbolic magical powers and glamorous charm and its potent and enduring cultural mythology. But in theological terms, it denotes Justice, separating Good from Evil—the crusades in Christianity and the quest against infidels in Islam. We have already seen Wingate's unwavering belief in Good versus Evil and it is, thus, an appropriate symbol. But both Christianity and Islam see it as a symbolic tool in applying *their* vision of morality and equally impose ideological meaning on a simple metal tool for killing. Like religion, then, appropriation of the sword as a symbol of Justice remains inauthentic and absurd.

This brings us to the second scene in which righteousness legitimates violence: public beheading by the sword. The brutality portrayed here parallels Camus' view of the guillotine as an inaccurate and brutal tool of execution and his rejection of capital punishment on political grounds. As boys of poor families, the soldiers Dogo and Damisa had both been “*Almajirai*-pupils at *Allo* schools, derelict open-air madrasahs where children of the poor were sent to learn the Qur'an by heart” (149) and therefore subjects of an Islamic vision of Justice.³ Dogo and Damisa find themselves apprenticed to “the executioner of the Native Authority prison in Sokoto” (149) and inadvertent witnesses to the last public execution there. Failing in his usual dexterity, the executioner misses the neck of his victim, sentenced to death by the Sultan's court, wounding him in the shoulder and back. It is a brutal act of butchery. Here, the symbol of the sword functions first as *itself*—a sharp instrument with a long metal blade—and second, as an embodiment of righteousness. First, as *itself*, it parallels the guillotine as a rapid and clean form of killing, though it was often anything but precise, respectable or honourable. Camus abhorred this tool, expressing that exposing people to the grim reality of the guillotine could awaken public consciousness to reject both the language used—such as “justice,” “honourable” or “pay debts to society”—and the practice of

³ Despite their noble foundations, Bandele portrays these institutions unfavourably, lending support to more recent accounts of child neglect and abuse as well as them being cradles of recruitment for Boko Haram. Colonialist powers are often blamed for the dire financial circumstances of these schools due to their refusal to finance them, resulting in their later targeting by radical groups (Udbodaga 2020, n.p.).

capital punishment (1957, 133). Ève Morisi notes how Camus describes this kind of language as metaphors that embellish and legitimise state-sanctioned killings (2014, 48). Wingate's rhetoric in his speech to the Cameronians illustrates this tendency. His language transforms the sword from a mere weapon to an ideological instrument of righteousness, symbolising the Absurd. It reveals the absurdity not only of theologically justified judicial killing but also of violence justified by western Christian imperialist motives, even when sanctioned by the Sultan's court.⁴

Furthermore, portraying death as public entertainment highlights desensitisation to killing and the devaluation of life itself, something that Camus valued above all else. Bandele's stylistic approach, identified by Odun Balogun as part of the African Absurd, grants "equality on everything, just as in an absurd world everything is of equal value" (Hinchliffe 1969, 39). This stylistic choice also highlights the desensitisation to violence portrayed in the narrative. This desensitisation is also mirrored in Damisa, the narrator of this childhood memory, who, born into poverty and accustomed to violence, already displays an immunity to state induced bloodshed. The stark contrast between the brutal violence and everyday themes of family and friendship in the subsequent paragraph amplifies this illusion. It exposes not just Damisa and Dogo's desensitised acceptance of capital punishment and unquestioning loyalty to their Master, but also challenges our own beliefs and allegiances, pulling us into the narrative. Moreover, desensitisation to killing remains necessary to a soldier's functioning and can even become "a source of entertainment" (Crossman 2009, 311). This sanctioned killing remains pivotal to the profession of both boys as trained killers, aligning Banana's indifferent soldierly response to killing in the subsequent scene with the mindset of the executioner. Also, vocabulary choice such as "strafing" (152) and "vaporised" (153) further evokes nonchalance (152) to killing legitimised by a state whose political ideology remains underpinned by Christian theology. Thus, through this juxtaposition, Bandele effectively blurs the distinction between sanctioned, sanitised executions and killing justified under the banner of a "Just War."

Finally, Dogo's calm acceptance of his own inevitable death, expressed through his statement, "[i]t wouldn't surprise me if God has willed it that we should both die on the same [-]" (151), is abruptly interrupted by an explosion, intensifying the portrayal of the Absurd. The only God here is the war machine, ironically led by Wingate's "Sword of Justice".

4. CONFRONTING THE ABSURD: RELIGION, SUICIDE AND REVOLT

For Camus, there were three options with which to confront the Absurd. First, suicide; second, turning to God or a transcendental entity; and third, what he termed Revolt.

⁴ Stacey Hynd reveals the way execution was employed throughout colonialism as a means of moulding behaviour and maintaining respect. She notes that Northern Nigeria maintained judicial control in their own courts, but these would most likely have been accountable to British rule (Hynd 2008, 403-18).

Camus ultimately dismissed suicide as a form of evasion. Wingate's attempted suicide stands as a prime example of this evasion. Far from the mythical hero of these young African boys, he appears as a pathetic anti-hero, characteristic of Absurd drama. By attempting to end his life, rather than confronting the Absurd, he in fact succumbs to it. But notably, his difficult circumstances test his integrity and, ironically, the sense of Christian righteousness he preaches in rallying his men into battle. In Srigley's discussion of Camus' critique of modernity, he offers a relevant insight that can be aptly applied to Wingate: "[r]egardless of how desperate a war may be, you do not abandon friends while the fighting continues and lives are imperilled. Nor do you try to flee an existentially unsatisfying situation while your companions continue to endure its hardships" (2013, 2). Far from heroic, then, suicide means cowardly flight. And this hero not only attempts to evade his own hardships but dishonourably abandons his men. Ironically, Wingate does not find solace in either the self-created illusion of himself nor in the Christian Sword of Justice.

This leads us to the second option: religion. Camus called it "philosophical suicide" (1942a, 27-49). The embrace of religious or transcendental concepts to rationalise uncomfortable inconsistencies in human existence amounts to a philosophical surrender, leading to meaninglessness. Certainly, for Wingate, it does not provide solace, unless he believes an after-life to be a better option. This latter position means disengaging from the worldly realities and hardships of existence.

Finally, Camus suggests Revolt as the best response. In brief, this means accepting the Absurd as fact, facing it consciously and in full awareness of life's volatility. It means confronting the essential truth and beauty of existence in its transitoriness. Far from passive acceptance, it invites action, a sense of liberty and vitality. Sisyphus exemplifies this ideal by finding happiness through Revolt. The following passage from *The Myth of Sisyphus* highlights Camus' thesis:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (1942a, 119).

Notable here is Camus' engagement with a deeply reflective awareness of the world and its relatedness. Like Sisyphus, we can see and touch the stone as a "thing" and we can use it as an object or a tool for our purposes. But we can easily overlook its "réalité nue." The atoms, the smallest constitutive entities, unperceivable to the human eye, are not experienced in our daily lives, thus we disregard their existence. To notice and experience details that escape us takes explicit attention. This aligns with Heidegger's "dis-worlding of the world"—a state of disconnect from the realities

of the universe engendered by hyper-modernity; that is, we are so distracted by the inauthenticity of our lives and our daily grind that we no longer heed the details, the simple things and activities constituting existence. If, like Sisyphus, we pay attention to the worldliness of the world, we too might find happiness. Moreover, as David Bernstein suggests in his essay on Camus' treatment of nature, the stone and Sisyphus work in harmony, "Camus's envy of stones would later find its natural resolution in his own re-creation of the Sisyphus myth, where man and stone join together in eternal happiness!" (1974, 36).

Notably, in *Burma Boy* it is African soldiers and Banana who voice Revolt. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, Odun Balogun states that "[t]he African absurdist may have a pessimistic cynical vision, but he [*sic*] has not yet despaired" (1984, 46). And neither does Camus. Like Sisyphus, realising death's inevitability and arbitrariness compels these soldiers not to spiral into despair but to accept life's beauty and the worthiness of living it in full awareness. Danja puts it thus: "Life is a cruel joker. One minute we're here and the next we're not. We must live it to the full" (198). Furthermore, Srigley notes that the third stage of Camus' literary project after the Absurd and Revolt was Love, which was, though, unfortunately halted by Camus' premature death. Like many soldiers, friendship, community and love for battle friends often remains the strongest motivation for survival. In literature, from the memoirs of World War I to wars in the Middle East, love for brothers-in-arms remains a common characteristic. Damisa characterises not only resignation to death and acceptance, at least while he lived, that life was worthwhile, but also love for others: "It's a shame but that's life. But I've had a really good life too, you know, and so many good friends. And I'll never forget my brothers in D-Section. And the kyaftin too, he was a good sort'. He shivered. 'It's cold out. I'm ready when you are'" (201). Damisa's words further reflect irony in non-absurdist style, equally comic and tragic. In death, Damisa would neither be able to "forget" his comrades, nor would he feel the cold. Yet he faces death with the utmost bravery. And it is also love that finally arouses Bloken from his traumatic stupor in the closing scene, as Banana, finally reunited with his beloved battle buddy, declares "Bloken, it's me' [...], his voice full of love, 'It's me, Ali Banana. It's so good to see you Bloken'. Bloken burst into tears" (212).

While Wingate may be considered a western anti-hero in his repudiation of life, Banana epitomises an Absurd one. In line with Odun Balogun's observation that it is the situation rather than life that is constitutive of the African Absurd (1984, 46), Banana recognises his situation as cannon fodder for King George's war. But he resists being broken by it. Nonetheless, like Sisyphus, whose fate was to continuously push the rock up the mountain day after day, absurdity endures—Banana realises he has gone "full circle and arrived exactly where he had set out from that morning" (207). Knowing he does not need to understand the world, he consciously accepts his daily grind: "He was in Burma to fight King George's war and that was the end of the matter" (206). Indeed, as Kate McCloughlin recognises, Sisyphus' drudgery replicates the futility and

suffering of a soldier in the war zone (2011b, 181) and, thus, its absurdity. But rather than despair, this realisation compels Banana to see reality and to make the best of what he has. He makes “the best meal he’d had since he came to Burma” (207) with a bizarre mix of left-over rations including a fruit bar and bully beef. This strange but simple culinary delight makes him want to “run to D-Section dugout to tell all the boys” (207). He undergoes a transformation. While he may change from a boy to a man, as Courtois remarks (2020), more notably he changes from someone whose “thought of death had been the most terrifying thing weighing on his mind” (1984, 206) to one whose “thought of death filled him with scorn. I laugh at you, he said to death. I laugh at you” (206). Banana thus epitomises a sense of Revolt. After this epiphany, next morning sees a change in Banana’s mood. Noticing the “sky was aglow with the sun” (206), he feels a renewed sense of optimism reminiscent of Meursault’s words in Camus’ *The Stranger*:

And, I too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, and indeed, so brotherly, made me realise that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still (1942b, 120).

Similarly, Banana faces nature alone. And by pitting Banana against nature Bandele reveals the absurdity of men’s actions and, thus, of the war. Bernstein observes the duality of nature in Camus’ works. He notes that, “[o]n the one hand, there is the docile and enticing side of Nature [...]. On the other, there is the violent and destructive side” (1974, 32-33). Bandele’s jungle reveals this latter side of nature: Strangler figs, vultures feeding on dead bodies, disease carrying flies, falling trees and constant rain and mud turning the jungle “into a giant bed of sludge” (204) all evoke an oppressive and destructive nature. Yet, like Meursault’s perception of the “benign indifference of the universe” cited above, nature’s indifference to human activities in *Burma Boy* renders futile and insignificant the soldiers’ deaths, and the war tragic in its absurdity. The moment where Banana faces the decision to end Damisa’s life to prevent the enemy from inflicting further brutality upon his wounded body perfectly illustrates this indifference. Just as Banana “pulled the trigger” (202), killing his friend, “[a] flock of brown dippers sunbathing on a rock nearby screeched in alarm and dived” to the bottom of the water where they stayed for a whole minute. When they emerged from the belly of the stream, they had established a healthier distance between themselves and the frightening sound” (202). The sudden blast of the gun intrudes on nature—the birds previously sunbathing peacefully, unaware of the unfolding tragedy—serving as a poignant reminder of humankind’s disregard and detachment from the natural world.

Yet, here, there seems to be a modern perspective that differs from Camus’ emphasis on prioritising nature over humankind. This perspective extends from

nature's indifference to encompass fear, wariness and bewilderment towards human behaviour. Bandele's temporal perspective on environmental awareness may explain the portrayal of nature as a victim of violence, and the personification thereof, suggesting a deep resentment towards humans. For example, in the same death scene a wild dog "that had been watching the two men all morning growled angrily and scampered off" (202). Anger attributed to the animal Other debases the moral actions of humankind while raising the value of the animal's own actions. Thus, even with indications of indifference, such as an elephant's detachment from the soldier (191) and the presence of some "bemused monkeys" (207), nature remains in a superior position, observing human behaviour with abhorrence and even amusement. Although Banana wants to be integrated and to commune on equal terms, the snake's refusal to share its home with him (207) suggests nature's wariness to approach what represents a menace to its existence.

Like Camus, Bandele's treatment of nature renders humankind's search for meaning, the delusions of grandeur embodied in figures such as Wingate or Haile Selassie, as well as the war itself, utterly meaningless. Bandele stages this revelation through Banana's dream shortly after he curls up in a hole listening to the howling wind and relentless storm. Amidst the violent and destructive forces of nature, indifferent to humanity, he realises the inherent absurdity. Specifically, he finds the fusion of King George with the Emir of Zaire "unbelievably funny" (205). But for Camus, it is Christian theological western modernity that has instigated the divorce from nature, engendering absurdity—and the African leader seems to have signed up to the same ideology. Camus posited that humans struggle with a longing to assimilate into nature while perpetually staying detached (Bernstein 1974, 33). Banana embodies this longing, but interestingly, he does eventually immerse himself in it. Upon this immersion, he begins to perceive a mutual connection with nature, discovering contentment in the essence of *ubuntu*. As he "[luxuriates] in the splendour of his surroundings" (208), he cultivates a profound sense of interdependence with nature, evident in his gratitude towards the snake (207) and the mutual survival between himself and the leeches. Like Sisyphus, then, Banana confronts and finds joy in his dilemma. He revolts by defying death and, unlike Wingate, resists being broken by its absurdity.

5. CONCLUSION

Mirroring the Theatre of the Absurd, Bandele's postmemorial recreation draws us into the narrative to view the intersection between traumatic memory, the ills of colonialism, history, politics and a reflection of the madness and absurdities not only of the war but of humankind. Bandele's generational positionality provides a clearer lens through which to view the Burma Campaign, enabling a reconsideration of the events and actions of its main players. He gives readers just as much insight into Black African soldiers' subjectivities as he does the Christian and colonialist viewpoint of

the Englishman General Orde Wingate. Thus, the novel remains particular in its African position, historically accurate as a war narrative and yet universal and timeless. It stretches its temporal boundaries into the present political landscape by reflecting on the fundamental origins of the war. This reflection touches upon the roots of Bandele's father's war trauma, revealing the dark side of western modernity and its anthropocentric nature. Moreover, it explores the connections between this worldview and the influence of dogmatic Christian theology. Indeed, Bandele holds the multi-layered perspective of a postmemorial writer, encompassing the post-colonial, post-war and contemporary eras.

Ultimately, this postmemorial act functions as a cautionary tale. Like the medieval follies, it invites us to see ourselves as participants in the absurdities, inciting us to step outside western rationality to realise the import of cosmic reciprocity not only to the survival of humankind but to world peace. By disclosing a complex multiculturalism, connectedness and a critique of theism, the novel reveals a philosophy of *ubuntu*, overlapping with traditional tribal and indigenous animist beliefs, challenging the mechanistic Cartesianism of western modernity. In this sense, it reflects a recent cultural relational shift that "*is the antidote to those assumptions of modernity that have turned out to be wrong*" (Spretnak 2011, 17; italics in the original).

But, above all, Bandele's African consciousness, rooted in reverence to ancestral memory through oral tradition, allows the convergence between the familial and the collective trauma of both war and colonialism to emerge as a spiritual healing. We must acknowledge, reconcile and take heed of ancestral trauma to process the wounds of the past and for healing to take place. The novel's hero Ali Banana, in the act of Revolt, undergoes a spiritual transformation from being fearful, innocent and blind to the absurdities of western modernity and colonialism, to inhabiting a place of wisdom, hope and renewal that embraces relational reality. Thus, this postmemorial act, through an aesthetics of the Absurd, reveals the need to address and reconcile generational trauma and historical conflict to build a more peaceful future.

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