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Reimagining Disaster: War, Displacement, and Refugee Precarity in *The Lost Girl Found* by Leah Bassoff and Laura DeLuca

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Abstract:

This paper reconceptualizes "disaster" as a complex and layered phenomenon shaped by social, political, and economic forces rather than as a purely natural or isolated event. Drawing on key frameworks in disaster studies, particularly the work of Enrico Quarantelli and Wolf R. Dombrowsky, it situates disasters within a broader spectrum of crisis situations, thereby incorporating conflict and complex emergencies into its analytical scope. Within this framework, the Second Sudanese Civil War is examined as both a man-made disaster and a complex. The paper offers a close reading of the novel *The Lost Girl Found* (2014) by Leah Bassoff and Laura DeLuca, delineating how literary narratives function as critical sites for representing and interpreting disaster. It demonstrates how the novel captures core disaster characteristics such as sudden onset, large-scale impact, and long-term disruption, while also revealing structural conditions that intensify vulnerability during the post-disaster scenario. Applying Giorgio Agamben's concepts of the 'state of exception' and 'bare life', along with case studies and UNDRR frameworks, the paper shows how these structures sustain precarity in post-disaster contexts. The paper also underscores the gendered dimensions of disaster, evidencing how women and girls face heightened vulnerability in both conflict zones and rehabilitation spaces.

Keywords: Disaster; War; Displacement; Refugee; Bare life

Introduction

The term 'disaster' encompasses multiple interpretations and definitions, and its meaning has expanded considerably through a wide range of studies that integrate insights from diverse disciplines. Researchers approach the concept using empirical evidence, heuristic understanding, and logical analysis, which together enrich its scope. Consequently, disasters are no longer viewed merely as natural events, but rather as complex phenomena shaped by the dynamic interplay of social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors. In

his landmark work, *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question,* E. L. Quarantelli, one of the pioneering scholars in disaster research, notes that the attempts to formulate a uniform definition of disaster are neither attainable nor necessarily desirable, given the diversity of perspectives within the field (xiii – xv). He also contends that this lack of consensus does not impede the development, persistence, or effectiveness of disaster research; rather, it allows for conceptual flexibility and the incorporation of varied disciplinary insights, which ultimately strengthen disaster research (xvi-xviii). Nevertheless, there are certain common parameters on which most studies and definitions broadly agree when defining a disaster, such as the 'occurrence of a sudden event' that results in 'significant damage and disruption', often with effects that persist over an 'extended period'. The United Nation's Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines disaster as "a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts" (UNDRR). It also explains that the effects of a disaster may occur suddenly and affect a specific area, but can also extend across wider regions and continue for a prolonged period. Such effects may overwhelm a community's ability to manage the situation with the resources available to it. This leads to a situation where external assistance, such as help from nearby regions and support from national or international organizations, is required.

It is widely recognized that, although disasters are often caused by nature, they can also have human origins. Such man-made disasters consist of warfare, terrorism, technological disasters, and other complex emergencies ("Understanding Man-made Disasters"). They typically involve destructive events such as explosions, fires, transport crashes, or chemical and radiological releases into the environment. In recent times, the potential threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), whether biological or otherwise, has drawn significant attention to public health systems and the need to strengthen emergency preparedness and response (EPR). In this context, terrorism is widely regarded as an "escalating and evolving threat", as terrorist actors today have increasing access to "highly destructive technologies" (Aliyu 123). The globalization of the arms trade has further intensified conflicts, particularly in developing regions, leading to severe humanitarian and economic consequences. Among technological disasters, petroleum pipeline explosions in Nigeria stand out as some of the most deadly and injurious examples of man-made disasters. Within this broader category, complex emergencies represent a particularly significant subset. They refer to "situations arising from interconnected social, economic, and political problems, which almost invariably involve armed conflict" (Aliyu 123).

Given the general characteristics of disasters from various standpoints, the emergence of complex emergencies warrants critical attention, as they have occurred in many countries both in the past and the present and often require coordinated, multi-layered responses involving multiple actors. The sixteenth meeting of the Working Group of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee defines a complex emergency as a "humanitarian crisis

arising from serious social, political, and/or military disruptions, such as civil conflict or foreign aggression, that lead to a substantial breakdown of state authority and normal societal functioning" (IASC). It is typically characterized by "large-scale human suffering and insecurity and exceeds the response capacity of any single organization or agency, thereby necessitating coordinated national and international action involving extensive political, humanitarian, and managerial collaboration"(IASC).

However, there are differing perspectives on how complex emergencies should be positioned within the broader framework of disaster studies. Complex emergencies can be categorized under conflict situations, but there are scholars who consider conflicts as disasters, while others do not view them as such (Quarantelli 269). Quarantelli examines this scenario while investigating 'newer types of crises' and potentially disastrous occurrences that could happen in the future. He cites certain newer types of crises such as the contamination of the Rhine River that affected five nations, computer system failures and related problems such as the Barings Bank collapse in England, and the copper trade losses in Japan which resulted in losses of 1.8 billion dollars, all of which produced severe human, material, economic, and environmental losses and impacts (267). Along with this, he cites certain potentially disastrous occurrences that may happen in the future, including medical and agricultural cloning and crises of a biogenetic nature. He also suggests the possibility of neurotechnological crises that may occur in the late twenty-first century (267).

Quarantelli analyses whether they can be categorized within the conceptual framework of disaster. He sums up that the issue is not whether these should be classified as disasters, but how to respond to these new types of crises, as they show clear and noticeable differences compared to responses to traditional disasters(268). These responses involve dealing with distant causes, producing large-scale but not always directly deadly impacts, and involving highly complex organizational systems. Quarantelli, at this juncture, draws on Wolf R.Dombrowsky, who argues that instead of focusing narrowly on 'disasters' as discrete events, scholars should develop a broader 'typology of crisis' situations in which disasters are understood as "only one category among many forms of social crisis" (256). Building on this line of thought, Dombrowsky refers to Allen H. Barton's formulation of 'collective stress situations', based on four key dimensions enlisted as "scope of impact, speed of onset, duration, and level of social preparedness" (256). This framework encompasses not only natural disasters such as floods or tornadoes, but also political, economic, and social crises, including "ghetto riots, national depressions, famines, genocides, and pogroms" (256). Dombrowsky emphasizes that this approach is valuable because it situates disasters within a broader spectrum of societal disruptions, rather than treating them as unique phenomena. Accordingly, he suggests that complex emergencies are better understood within broader crisis typologies in which interconnected elements such as conflict, famine, and social breakdown can be analyzed together rather than confined to a single category (269).
Within such a framework, Sub-Saharan Africa emerges as a significant site for examining the convergence of disasters and complex emergencies. The region has witnessed numerous

political conflicts and civil wars that have resulted in immense loss of life and widespread socio-economic devastation. The Second Sudanese Civil War (1980s–2000s) stands as a prominent example, representing a man-made disaster rooted in prolonged political conflict that led to large-scale displacement, humanitarian distress, and enduring socio-economic disruption. In this context, it also exhibits the characteristics of complex emergencies, as prolonged armed conflict intersects with famine, mass displacement, and institutional collapse, producing a multi-layered humanitarian crisis that exceeds the state's coping capacity and necessitates sustained international intervention. Furthermore, inadequacies and disruptions in governance within humanitarian spaces contributed to further human loss.

The novel *The Lost Girl Found*, written by Leah Bassoff and Laura DeLuca chronicles the experiences of a group of orphaned young girls, popularly known as the 'Lost Girls', who were forced to flee violent attacks on southern villages during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Displaced from their homes, they undertook arduous journeys spanning thousands of miles before eventually reaching 'Kakuma', a United Nations refugee camp in Kenya. Even after their arrival, their suffering persisted, as they faced severe food shortages, harsh environmental conditions such as dust storms, and limited access to adequate healthcare. Previous examinations of the novel primarily dealt with how young adult fiction depicts the refugee crisis in Sudan. Studies examined the relevance of the novel in bringing to light the plight of the Lost Girls compared to that of the 'Lost Boys' of Sudan, whose tumultuous experiences have been discussed in novels and movies. The Lost Boys of Sudan were a group of 4,000 boys from Sudan who undertook an arduous journey on foot to refugee camps in neighbouring countries, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, to seek shelter. They crossed wild forests, harsh deserts, and long rivers. Although the Lost Girls also undertook such a perilous journey, their stories were not sufficiently portrayed.

This paper offers a novel approach by undertaking a close reading of *The Lost Girl Found* by Leah Bassoff and Laura DeLuca to examine how literary narratives operate as critical frameworks for understanding and representing disaster. It reads the novel's portrayal of the Second Sudanese Civil War as a man-made disaster and a complex emergency with core characteristics such as sudden onset, large-scale impact, and long-term disruption, affecting a massive number of people. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's concepts of the 'state of exception' and 'bare life', together with case studies and UNDRR frameworks, it explores how various structural conditions intensify vulnerability in post-disaster contexts. The paper also highlights the gendered dimensions of disaster, showing that women and girls face heightened vulnerability in both conflict zones and rehabilitation spaces.

Textual Analysis

Warfare is widely understood as a form of man-made disaster, characterized by large-scale loss of human life, destruction of infrastructure, ecological disruption, and the displacement of populations ("Understanding Man-made Disasters"). Civilians are often compelled to flee their homes, resulting in forced migration and the establishment of refugee camps. Such displacement frequently leads to overcrowded conditions, pressure on limited

resources, and increased exposure to health risks. Moreover, acts of violence such as explosions, fires, and bombings inflict severe damage on essential infrastructure, including buildings, transportation systems, and communication networks, thereby crippling the functioning of affected regions. Beyond these immediate impacts, war-related disasters also produce long-term social and cultural consequences, including the disintegration of communities, the erosion of cultural heritage, and enduring psychological trauma that can persist across generations.

The novel *The Lost Girl Found* captures the essential elements that frame war as a disaster, illustrating how its narrative reflects the conditions that bring warfare within the ambit of disaster. The novel foregrounds the life story of Zenitra Lujana Paul Poni, a thirteen-year-old girl who is forced to flee her village in South Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Leah Bassoff and Laura DeLuca authored the novel based on the real-life experiences of young female Sudanese refugees, popularly known as the 'Lost Girls' of Sudan. These girls had to cross long rivers, wild forests, and harsh deserts to reach the refugee camps in neighbouring countries. They did not have anyone to look after them, as their parents and other family members had been killed in the war. Thus, they were orphaned and abandoned, and they undertook the journey to the camps collectively, organising themselves into groups of thousands. In the camps, women who had lost their families were assigned the duty of looking after these girls as foster mothers. However, in addition to the lack of essential resources in the camps, they had to endure other hardships owing to their gender. They were given in early marriage to men much older than them by their foster mothers to obtain the bride price. The central protagonist of the novel, Poni, is characterised based on the real-life experiences of many young female Sudanese refugees. In the novel, Poni first flees to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya and then moves to an orphanage run by Sister Hannah in Nairobi, where she assists the authorities and pursues her education for a few years. Later, she gets an opportunity to move to the United States of America as part of the refugee resettlement programme conducted by the United Nations.

Through Poni's account of the conflict, the narrative clearly delineates the key characteristics that enable war to be understood within the framework of disaster and the vulnerabilities faced by refugees in the camps during the post-disaster scenario . At the onset, 'the presence of a triggering factor', such as a specific event or action that initiates the disaster, is a common characteristic of disasters (Sawalha). In the case of the Second Sudanese Civil War, this trigger can be traced to deep-rooted political, religious, and ethnic tensions between Northern and Southern Sudan. Northern Sudan was largely Arab and Muslim, and the government in Khartoum promoted Islamic law (Sharia) along with centralized political control. Southern Sudan, on the other hand, was inhabited mainly by African ethnic groups such as the Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk, who were predominantly Christian or followers of indigenous belief systems. These tensions led to armed resistance by southern groups, particularly the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army). In addition, the discovery of rich oil deposits in regions such as Bentiu further intensified the conflict, as

the northern government sought to assert control over these resources. Poni's eavesdropping on a conversation between her father and the local chief of the nearby village, Lokolong, during a moment of heightened tension, underscores the perception that the "biggest curse of their homeland" lies in the "discovery of valuable resources on our own soil," and that these "natural riches will be their downfall," as "people have smelled oil and would tear apart the land to get it." (Bassoff and DeLuca 53) This moment effectively signals the underlying trigger of the catastrophe. Further developing this line of thought, Dennis Wenger argued that "social factors within communities" should also be taken into account while explaining how disasters unfold (Quarantelli 5). Such an argument implies that the "real impact of a disaster depends on the social context in which it occurs" (5). Within this framework, it can be observed that deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and regional divisions, along with the systemic marginalization of the people of the South, who lacked meaningful political representation in a government dominated by the majority northern faction, constituted the internal social factors that precipitated and sustained the conflict.

Another general characteristic of a disaster is its "sudden and abrupt occurrence", often with little or no warning(Sawalha). The novel clearly portrays this defining aspect by foregrounding how aerial bombings were carried out at night, when villagers were asleep and unprepared, thereby intensifying the shock and devastation. Through vivid imagery and effective use of contrast, the novel underscores the suddenness of the disaster. As Poni recalls, she wakes abruptly and "runs out of the hut with her hands covering her head, as though they might shield her from whatever is falling from above" (Bassoff and DeLuca 61). At first, she notices the moon, "fat as a cow's belly," a familiar and ordinary presence; in the next moment, however, she sees planes overhead and bombs descending from them (61). This juxtaposition of the serene, natural image of the moon with the violence of aerial bombardment highlights both the abrupt onset of the disaster and its intrusion into an otherwise ordinary, peaceful setting. The chaos and abruptness of the event are captured through vivid description, including "screams coming from all sides", people collapsing to the ground, "blood pooling like black ink around them", "mouths gasping like fish out of water", and voices crying out in confusion, wondering whether they had not all been asleep only moments before (62). The "large-scale impact on society and the surrounding environment", along with the "difficulty of managing such crises", is another characteristic of a disaster (Sawalha), and this is vividly depicted through the horrifying accounts Poni witnesses, including a woman carrying a child on her shoulder, the child having been decapitated by the bombing, both of whom are later killed near the 'Kinyeti River'(Bassoff and DeLuca 62); a jeep full of people destroyed in an explosion (68); individuals devoured by lions during their desperate flight through the forest(69); and, amid extreme starvation, people forced to consume snakes, insects, and worms, with many ultimately succumbing to illness and diarrhoea(68-69). People sometimes collapsed and died after walking continuously for months without food. They had nowhere to turn for help, as the entire governance structure had collapsed. Poni describes how, out of intense thirst, her "mouth became dry and her tongue felt as though it were hanging uselessly inside her mouth" (69).

Informed by the lived realities of those who fled during the Second Sudanese Civil War, and as a work of literature, the novel renders these experiences with vivid detail and emotional depth.

Post-disaster management of affected populations is crucial; otherwise, vulnerability and precarity are further intensified rather than alleviated. At such a juncture, the presence of humanitarian actors becomes imperative. Humanitarian actors typically intervene in situations of emergency or crisis. The very label 'crisis' suggests a temporary disruption of normal social order that demands immediate action. This framing creates a "sense of moral clarity", making it appear both necessary and justified for humanitarian actors to step in and respond (Lima and Firoz 7). However, anthropologists have expressed strong critiques regarding the ethics of international humanitarian aid, arguing that such actors wield "enormous managerial power over the populations they govern", particularly "through the systems and structures" within which these operations unfold (5-7). In the context of forced displacement, such objections become particularly salient when humanitarian actors exercise "a form of biopolitics", especially in situations where "state actors are either absent or incapable of safeguarding life" (3).

The refugee camp embodies the space of biopolitical control and is marked by a form of hostile hospitality. In such spaces, inclusion is conditional and exclusion persists. As Hannah Arendt aptly observes "human rights can only be effectively upheld if there is a political community—a state or a "newly defined territorial entity"—that can guarantee that rights will be respected" (Hirsch and Bell) and consequently these displaced people are left with nowhere in the world to turn. In such a context, as Giorgio Agamben argues, "the refugee camp becomes the spatial embodiment of the state of exception—a 'temporary' space where the 'normal' juridical-legal framework is suspended or does not apply in the same manner as it does outside its perimeter" (Fusco 4). Agamben also introduced certain figures and concepts to illustrate life under such conditions of exception. He formulated the concept of 'bare life', drawing on Aristotle's distinction between '*zoē* and *bios'*. '*Zoē* 'denotes "natural life, the simple fact of living common to all living beings" (animals and humans), encompassing basic biological processes such as breathing and reproduction, whereas '*bios'* refers to "politically qualified life", the life of the citizen within the state, vested with rights, recognition, and the capacity for political participation (Agamben 1) . Bare life denotes a form of "persecuted humanity" reduced to its basic biological existence (Malkki 11). Bare life remains "included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (Agamben 11). Also a "bare life is stripped of every right, to the extent that anyone can kill such a person without committing homicide" (Agamben 183). Agamben illustrates this through the figure of *homo sacer*, a "figure in Roman law who could not be sacrificed but could be killed with impunity" (Fusco 4).

The novel portrays the precarious lives of forcibly displaced people from Sudan in the refugee camp at Kakuma. It elaborately narrates the lack of agency among the displaced, alongside deteriorating health conditions and the absence of basic infrastructure, nutritious food, and clean-living spaces, as well as the negligence of aid workers The conditions in the camp are exceedingly harsh, as it is overcrowded with tens of thousands of people, and this rehabilitation space has been established in a location with hostile weather conditions, where frequent dust storms cause irritation and watery eyes. They were provided with only the bare minimum of supplies meant to sustain life; for instance, "two metal cups of dried maize and a small quantity of cooking oil", which had to be stretched over several weeks owing to severe ration shortages (Bassoff and Deluca 75). Even aid workers exhibit no response upon witnessing the large queues of people waiting for meager quantities of grain, despite knowing that the supplies are insufficient and quickly run out before reaching everyone (76). Poni's description of the young children underscores the severity of hunger in the camp, as they become emaciated. As she observes, "hunger comes and grabs each morsel of flesh that it can find; some of the children no longer have any buttocks, the last bite of flesh to go"(79). She further adds that they "can no longer sit comfortably", as there is "nothing to protect their tailbones", and they are often forced to lie "directly on the ground" (79). There were instances of pregnant women and other sick people being deprived of medical care. The descriptions of people dying after standing in queues under the scorching heat, collapsing from fatigue, and of a pregnant woman, "whose ribs are visible" except for her swollen belly, pleading for food for her child, only to be denied entry into the queue, along with the horrific scene of security guards beating her and her eventual death(111), emphasize how these forcibly displaced people are reduced to a condition of 'bare life'. Taken together, these conditions demonstrate that forcibly displaced people are reduced to a state of bare life, where they are provided only the minimal means necessary for biological survival, while being systematically denied agency, political recognition, and full legal protection. The camp thus operates as a space in which life is sustained in its most reduced form, and where structural arrangements render such populations vulnerable to neglect and suffering.

Gender is also a crucial concern in disaster studies, as women are identified as a 'vulnerable group' by agencies operating in disaster scenarios, and the cultural patterns that structure the lives of women and men must also be taken into account. The "inhibiting gender roles" of women make them more precarious, and gender differences in disasters arise as an "outcome of both biological and socio-cultural factors" (Siddiqui). In post-disaster scenarios, especially in rehabilitation centers, these serve as "key points of contact and decision-making for relief personnel" (Siddiqui). Due to the "high concentration of people in a limited space, security is compromised, and women are largely exposed to rape and other forms of sexual and physical abuse in camps" (Siddiqui). The novel narrates that in the camp, girls were often placed with temporary Sudanese foster families or foster mothers to make them "less conspicuous" (Bassoff and Deluca 197). However, these families were frequently reluctant to let them go, as the girls were viewed as a potential source of significant bride wealth in the form of cattle and money. The novel narrates an incident in

which Poni's mother tells her that a tobacco seller in the camp, already married, has enough money to pay the bride price to her foster mother for marrying Poni .This worries Poni and later becomes a crucial reason for her to escape from the camp. There is an instance in the novel set in the refugee camp where a girl is raped by a 'Turkana' man while collecting firewood. Even the girl could not take sufficient time to recover from the trauma; immediately after the incident, she continued collecting firewood, as otherwise she would have been punished by her foster mother. Poni states that "the girl would be blamed for her own rape", would be deemed unmarriageable, and would be labelled a 'malaya', a prostitute(81). The novel, imbued with such real-life incidents, suggests that rehabilitation centres after disasters, or post-disaster management mechanisms, should also consider gender dimensions to ensure the well-being of people of all genders; otherwise, certain sections will remain perpetually precarious even after the catastrophe. The above-mentioned instances of girls being forcibly married in refugee camps and subjected to abuse clearly reveal very serious shortcomings in the structural coordination, vision, and calculated planning of humanitarian interventions.

This analysis demonstrates that warfare, when examined through literary representation, can be understood as a form of disaster marked not only by immediate devastation but by prolonged conditions of displacement, vulnerability, and structural breakdown. By engaging theoretical frameworks on 'disaster', 'biopolitics', and 'humanitarian governance', the paper reveals how refugee camps function as sites where life is reduced to precarious survival, intensifying conditions of marginalization. It further underscores that gender remains a critical axis through which vulnerability is produced and experienced, highlighting the need for more inclusive and ethically grounded approaches to post-disaster intervention.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to reconceptualize disaster not as an isolated, natural occurrence but as a complex and layered phenomenon shaped by social, political, and economic forces. By drawing on key theoretical frameworks in disaster studies, particularly the work of Quarantelli and Dombrowsky, it has situated disasters within a broader spectrum of crisis situations, thereby enabling a more expansive understanding that includes conflict and complex emergencies. In this context, the Second Sudanese Civil War has been examined as both a man-made disaster and a complex emergency, marked by prolonged violence, displacement, and institutional breakdown.

Through a close reading of *The Lost Girl Found*, the paper has demonstrated how literary narratives function as critical sites for representing and interpreting disaster. The novel has been analysed to highlight core disaster characteristics such as sudden onset, large-scale impact, and long-term disruption, while also foregrounding the lived experiences of displacement. Furthermore, the study critically engages with humanitarian structures, revealing how refugee camps operate as spaces of biopolitical control where displaced individuals are reduced to conditions of "bare life".By employing Giorgio Agamben's

concepts of the state of exception and bare life', alongside insights from case studies and UNDRR frameworks, the paper delineates how such structures intensify vulnerability and sustain precarity in post-disaster contexts. Additionally, the paper underscores the gendered dimensions of disaster, demonstrating how women and girls experience heightened vulnerability within both conflict zones and rehabilitation spaces. In doing so, the paper ultimately argues that disaster narratives must be read not only as representations of catastrophic events but also as critical interventions that expose and challenge the structures that produce and sustain vulnerability.

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