Research Article

Section: Literature, Languages and Criticism

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This article is published by Royallite Global, Kenya in the *Research Journal in Modern Languages and Literatures*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2021

Article Information
Submitted: 27th Jan 2021
Accepted: 30th April 2021
Published: 11th May 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code

Negotiating escape: De-muted voices of female narrators in the Rwandan and Sudanese conflicts

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Abstract
Eastern Africa has experienced its fair share of violence since independence whether one thinks of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia or South Sudan among others. These wars have come to define the postcolonial discourse not only in Eastern Africa but also in the whole continent of Africa. This paper discusses the female voice in negotiation of escape in the testimonial writings revolving around the conflicts as represented in *Slave: My True Story* by Mende Nazer and *Left to Tell: One Woman's Story of Surviving Rwandan Genocide* by Immaculée Ilibagiza. The two non-fictional works are echoes of happenings in the wars that took place in the nineties in Rwanda and South Sudan respectively. They mark a significant paradigmatic shift from the predominant discourse of the boy soldiers who narrate their military experiences that depict the ambivalence of victim and culprit. From the female narrators' point of weakness, the voice is a testimony of the space of the victim in the whole disposition of the violence.

Keywords: escape, female voice, postcolonial discourse, violence

How to Cite:
Musumba , O. (2021). Negotiating Escape: De-muted Voices of Female Narrators in the Rwandan and Sudanese Conflicts. *Research Journal in Modern Languages and Literatures,* 2(1). Retrieved from https://royalliteglobal.com/languages-and-literatures/article/view/613

Public Interest Statement
This research illuminates successes recorded by women in overcoming the obstacles placed in their way by the patriarchal institutional structures. The ultra-nationalist wars fought in Rwanda and Sudan in the 1990s are just some of the expressions of male hegemony in the society which leave the most vulnerable members such as women and children's marginal contours valorised. The act of telling their stories and escaping from these war traps is a major step in transcending the collective silence imposed on them. In foregrounding the space of these women, this research significantly asserts the emerging and unassailable presence of women in Eastern Africa literary and cultural ecology.

Introduction

This paper interrogates testimonial writings of two female victims of internecine ethnic conflicts in their respective countries of Rwanda and Sudan[1]. The books are *Left to Tell: One Woman's Story of Surviving Rwandan Genocide* (henceforth *Left to Tell*) by Immaculée Ilibagiza and Steve Erwin and *Slave: My True Story* (henceforth *Slave*) by Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis. The paper views the emergence of these women to speak out as a significant shift in otherwise male territorialized spaces in this kind of genre. Many of the war narratives that took place on the continent around the same period as these ones are rendered by men[2]. The coming in of Ilibagiza and Nazer then is disruptive of the structures designed to favour male dominance in plane with patriarchal patronage espoused in the African cultural and traditional dispensation whose chief plank is suppression of the female voice. Silence is a trope in this kind of narratives undergirded by violence muting of a section of the society considered 'Other'. These groups include a 'wrong' ethnic group like Tutsi in the Rwanda of 1994, or race as in Nuba and other black Africans of Sudan in the 1990s among other imagined marginal communities. Commenting on the silenced victims and casualties in a foreword of *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, Julien opines that creative work "gives voice to those who can no longer speak – recovering, as best as we can, the full, complex lives concealed in the statistics of genocide and rendering their humanity" (Diop, 2006 p.x). Although Julien's reference in the quotation is a signification of the silence of the dead, the voices of survivors of such gruesome violence like Ilibagiza and Nazer is a welcome enunciation of another equally important fraction of the casualties of the violence. The war industry in its entirety is started and sustained by the male members of the society with death being its most significant product. In the two texts, as it is with similar gory stories, death is a certain eventuality. The number of people dying is so high that escaping alive is a remarkable act of ingenuity, an act that must be marvelled at. This justifies the focus on the discourse centring on the two main narrators negotiating escape from this tight entrapment of death.

The argument is constructed on the premise that at every stage of African history, there has been a common strand characterizing the unique literary corpus on the continent ranging from pre-colonial times to the present. In the advent of the new millennium, the continent has seen unprecedented quantities of testimonial writings revolving around the wars which were more widespread in the late eighties climaxing in the nineteen nineties. This witnesses emergency of writings that highlight 'the lost generation' of Africa with the central narrator being the child soldier. Moolla (2014) in reference to child soldier in the novel *Crossbones* (Farah, 2011) asserts that "[…] the 'lost generation of child soldiers' […] has become such a familiar part of conflicts throughout Africa" (p.178). This statement is echoed by Waberi (2017) who refers to the conflicts of this period as the First World War of Africa, a war that spreads its tentacles to consume countries like Liberia (1989 - 1996), Sierra Leone (1991 - 2002), Ivory Coast (2002 - 2007), Central African Republic (2012 – to date), Uganda (1981 – 1986, 1987 – to date), Sudan (1983 – 2005; South Sudan 2013 – to date), Rwanda (1990 - 1994), Burundi (1993 – 2005, 2013 – to date), Congo DRC (1993 – to date), Angola (1975 - 2002), Somalia (1991 – to date) to name but a few. To think of it, more than half of African countries have experienced civil strife since they attained flag independence.

These grim prospects, as indicated above, are the precursor to the birth of a vibrant genre of literature in the continent. On a brighter note also, this new genre provides outlets into the reversal of the long standing marginalization of the African female writers in both publishing and criticism (Brown, 1981, Krüger, 2011). The testimonial writing on the Rwandan genocide is not only heavily skewed towards the female narrator but has also attracted a lot of criticism of the

non-fictional work including theorization on trauma (Norridge (2012) and Sontag (2003) are just a few examples of such critics). This is in addition to the product of the writing project that was commissioned on the genocide to commemorate its 10th anniversary. The writing project, *Rwanda: Ecrire par devoir de mémoire* (Rwanda: Writing with a Duty to Remember)[3] was founded by a journalist and writer of Chadian origin, Nocky Djadanoum who is also a co-director of Fest´ Africa. The post African war writings have also insinuated the common objects into completely different connotative (traumatic) meanings. Machetes and cockroaches hitherto the 1994 Rwandan genocide were harmless domestic tools and uncomfortable domestic vermin respectively that are now associated with trauma in the post genocide discourse. Similarly, in Sudan, the word *abda/yebit* bears its full stigmatizing nuances in the metonymic life of the enslaved narrator.

The books under focus in this paper are co-authored as is characteristically common of non-fiction narratives recording events and episodes of war (trauma) in Africa. This has become a trend in the narration of experiences at the war front in Africa by former soldiers. Majority of these narrators memorialize their childhood experiences. Due to the disruptive nature of the wars, the child characters are removed from learning institutions before they gain any meaningful literacy making them dependent on co-authors in mediation of their narratives. Why almost all the co-authors come from the West is a point of reckoning. The question then is whether it is possible for the second author to limit themselves to articulation of the story without going beyond the language issues. Understanding the dynamics revolving around co-authorship is a subject that calls for more research.

However, there is a discerning over-determination of these co-authors in the narratives especially as they overreach themselves on certain areas that would incite the Western readers to frown. An example in the texts analysed in this research is the thematic area touching on values and significance placed on the customary practices by the members of the respective communities of the main narrator. A few illustrations will suffice here. The way circumcision of girls is represented in *Slave* is in such a way that the activist attitude handed down by the Western sponsored Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) against what has come to over-generalized as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). However, Bowman and Kuenyehia (2003) distinguish FGM from any minor operation conducted in the initiation of girls in some cultures across the world which may involve ritualistic "washing the tip of the clitoris, pricking it with a pin, or separating and cleaning the foreskin (prepuce)" (p. 427). They thus define FGM as "[…] the actual cutting and removal of sexual organs […]" (p.427). This apparent undertones come out clearly in the chapter entitled, "The Cutting Time" (Nazer & Lewis, p.78-84). As much as this tone may be coming from the main narrator's long years of interaction with the western culture, there is a possibility that the co-author is behind the amplification of this contradiction. Bowman and Kuenyeha (2003) are in concordance with the view that circumcision of girls in Nazer's community is held in high esteem. They state that "Some of the Bantu and Sudanese, among others, practice circumcision for purification" (p.439). The role played by the West, in as much as it is laudable, provides an anti-climax of this new promising development by mediating the migration of African writer to the western capitals. Most of these writings have been published in the West, in fact, the two books under focus in this paper are published in the West with the main narrators living, writing, and publishing from there.

Postcolonial theory is applied with a reading of the colonial legacy of violence in the former colonies, traumata of the subjects of these postcolonial states and the postcolonial discourse of the marginal groups with a specificity of the space of women in a largely patriarchal set up. These

strands of violence, trauma and marginal subjectivities interweave into reconstruction of the current African postcolonial state. Woods (2007) argues that colonialism is an event that refuses to peter out in the memory of the postcolonial African whose trauma has far-reaching effects on his/her epistemology. Trauma, which is a direct product of violence, is the fruit of what Fanon (1963) attributes to the colonial legacy.

The methodology used in this research is textual analysis whereby a close reading of the two selected texts has been done. The paper looked at how the main narrators in the texts, Ilibagiza and Nazer respectively employ narrative techniques to highlight their narrow escape from a situation that is dire and responsible for massive loss of lives. It operates on the hypothesis that testimonial texts by women survivors of these violent onslaughts are an intertwinement of preservation of life and transcending silence imposed on women in African literature.

The Bliss before the Storm

One feature that is common in the testimonial writing around the wars is the peace and tranquillity that precede the eruption of the chaos. The image of home before the war as represented by the narrators is that of paradise. The main narrators live in a close – knit families that rarely engage in squabbles. In *Left to Tell*, Ilibagiza portrays a society where the future antagonists co-exist harmoniously. Before the war of 1994, the co-existence is total though there is undercurrent animosity informed on the history of the nation's ethnically based massacres going back to pre-independence times of 1959, to post-independence times of 1963 and 1975 (Hatzfeld 2005). These years are characterised by violence against the Tutsi by their Hutu neighbours. The animosity was sown by Rwanda's former colonizer, Belgium. The evils of colonialism as highlighted by Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe among other postcolonial scholars always come back to rear its ugly face at intervals in the historical epochs of Rwanda. The colonial instruments of disseminating hatred and propaganda are put into play at full throttle. In Rwanda, the national radio was used to spread the hatred and terror in equal measure with the result of indoctrination of the Hutus and instilling fear and terror in the Tutsis who formed the majority of the victims of the apparently well-orchestrated genocide. On the other hand, in Sudan, the southern part of the country terrorized by the Mujahidin was kept in darkness; they had no access to news.

The peaceful co-existence is such that even during a pause in ostracising of one ethnic group by another, there is still forgiveness and attempts to forget all and live together. Ilibagiza states that she did not even know that she belonged to a different ethnic community from her other friends and classmates. Her slightly older brother who was a brilliant student did not know this ethnic permutation and its significance in their country either. Their parents who had obviously witnessed all the previous phases of violence chose to protect the children from knowledge and trauma of the atrocities by keeping them ignorant. Apparently, this is not the case with the offspring of the Hutu who know the details of their ethnic background. They respond 'correctly' in the roll calling of their names based on their ethnic affiliation. On the other hand, Nazer in *Slave* has a great childhood among members of her Nuba community. Unlike Ilibagiza's, her community is homogenous and people live in a big extended family where everyone is related to the other. The landscape is so beautiful that it adds to the serenity in the village. The only threat is posed from wild animals due to proximity to nature. But even this danger can easily be dealt with by the men in the community. Nazer describes this in *Slave*:

> Life in our home was very peaceful. My father and mother never argued. The

> only fights I ever had with my brothers and sisters were in play. My father was always joking with our neighbours and inviting them to eat with us. While he was boisterous, my mother was very quiet and reserved. Everyone liked and respected her. She did not join in the village gossip. People said that while my mother was like an angel my father was like a naughty but very lovable devil (Nazer & Lewis, 2003 p.20).

The physical landscapes of these places are described in flattering terms as lush green mountainous regions.

Crime of Belonging

The prevailing condition in conflict zones is such that a certain group of people abrogate themselves the powers to decide who to live or die. Usurpation of such immense powers is not entirely new in the world. Foucault (1978) explains how the sovereign had the power to decide who to die or live. He postulates how power was used as "a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it" (Foucault, 1978 p.259). Although this was the situation in the past, in the current times we have a scenario of mass murders committed in the name of living. Foucault opines that wars "are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital" (Foucault, 1978 p.260). This point by Foucault was the major rallying ideology behind the Hutu offensives in Rwanda. The majority of the attackers were made to believe that Tutsi posed a great danger to their existence and their extermination meant their survival. Mbembe, in concordance with Foucault, critically evaluates how "[…] the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill" (Mbembe 2019, p.70). He argues that "[…] power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency and a fictionalised notion of the enemy" (Mbembe 2019, p.70). During the period of conflict, both Rwanda and Sudan experienced the situations discussed by Mbembe. Hitherto friendly neighbours, friends and even pupils/students are overnight turned into enemies under imaginary evils committed by the so-called marked enemies. Human beings are thus classified "into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others" (Mbembe, 2019 p.71). The governments of Rwanda and Sudan at that time, after dichotomizing their citizens into those deserving of life and death, went ahead and executed those seen as possessing the right to die. In Rwanda, for instance, members of the Hutu community were incited and mobilized by their leaders who paradoxically were the leaders of the whole country to decimate members of the Tutsi community and moderate Hutus. Within a span of barely three months, a Tutsi population estimated at one million was massacred (Hatzfeld, 2005). At the same time in Sudan, the people of the northern part of the country were incited, and armed to attack the communities in the southern parts especially the Blue Nile, Nuba mountains, and generally southern Sudan burning their homes, killing and maiming, looting and capturing children who were later sold into slavery in the northern part of Sudan.

Most of the civil wars in Africa pit members of different ethnic communities against one another to an extent that one is a victim by mere fact of belonging to a different ethnic community. Children who in their quintessential nature stay together are rudely brought to the realization of this imagined difference at an unexpected point in their lives. In both *Slave* and *Left to Tell*, the narrators witness with humiliation this imposed alterity of their belonging in class and from their

erstwhile respected and trusted teachers. In *Slave*, it sets in as soon as Nazer starts schooling in an Arabic run government school:

> But I soon realized there was a sinister side to the school too. During my first week at school, I was shocked when a teacher told us: "You must stop speaking Nuba. You must learn Arabic instead. Nuba is very stupid because no one can understand it. Arabic is a far superior language." At first, we knew very little Arabic. But, if we tried to answer the teachers in Nuba we were immediately punished. If we were lucky, the teacher would just grab our cheek and twist it or slap us on the face. But they all carried a long switch and if they whipped you on the bottom or across the back it was very painful (Nazer & Lewis, 2003 p.50).

A similar traumatic occurrence is suffered by the main narrator in *Left to Tell*, Ilibagiza at the hands of a teacher that she knew very well all the way from home. She narrates:

> "Immaculée Ilibagiza you didn't stand up when I said Hutu, you didn't stand up when I said Twa, and now you're not standing up now that I've said Tutsi. Why is that?" Buhoro was smiling, but his voice was hard and mean.
>
> "I don't know, Teacher."
>
> "What tribe do you belong to?"
>
> "I don't know, Teacher."
>
> "Are you Hutu or Tutsi?"
>
> "I-I don't know."
>
> "Get out! Get out of this class and don't come back until you know what you are!"
>
> I collected my books and left the room, hanging my head in shame. I didn't know yet, but I'd just had my first lesson in Rwanda's ethnic divide, and it was a rude awakening (Ilibagiza & Erwin, 2006 p.13).

Using the first person narrative voice, the two main narrators in the texts relate their first unhinging and shocking encounters with discrimination based on their ethnic communities. This categorization is the initial step into condemnation that makes the narrators candidates of death.

Negotiating Escape

Escape as used in this paper is a trope calling for a multi-layered interpretation. First, is the literal meaning of the word catering for self-preservation instinct of the main narrators trapped in a situation of life and death. The conditions that the narrators who are representatives of many people who suffer the torment of similar situations of capture motivate the narrators (who are also victims) to escape. Unlike the child soldier's conditions which pit him/her on the same lane with the culprits though mostly he/she is a victim; the captured victim is ensnared in a situation where s/he has no option, not even a fleeting feeling of heroism or power that comes with the possession of a powerful weapon such as a gun. S/he is most of the time subdued and escape is a mere wishful imagination lodged in the remotest of his/her faculties. Survival during this capture becomes the primary and instinctual objective. For it is only through this survival instinct that one escapes the dangers and deplorable conditions. Naturally, in such situation of massacres, survival becomes a primary pre-occupation of the members of the targeted groups. We see the

main narrators adopt various tactics to avoid death in the adversities that they are caught up in. The escape routes are sealed to the extent that the hostages contemplate taking their own lives. Ilibagiza wishes for death when she is trapped in the pastor's tiny bathroom together with eight other people. Nazer, on the other hand, is at a point of planning suicide. She starts making arrangements for this until she is dissuaded from it by a loose promise offered by the possibility of visiting her family back in the Nuba Mountains. Suicide as a form of escape from entrapment is a subject explored both by Foucault and Mbembe. Foucault explicates the freeing power of suicide, he states "[…] it testified to the individual" (Foucault, 1978 p.261).

Second, is representation of escape as a metaphorical image that captures the psychological and metanarrative dispensation of the narrator. The escape here may manifest itself in psychological, emotional, and mental ways. The narratives revealing the painful moments that the victims of wars in Rwanda and Sudan went through offer an opportunity for the narrator victims to aestheticize pain. Norridge (2012), citing Dangor, emphasizes the importance of writing about pain, "writing about the enduring wounds of apartheid, suggests that pains create interpersonal divisions based on the subjectivity of the survivor's experience of pain and its necessary distance from the imagined suffering of the witness" (p.1). This research deliberately chose to focus on two female victims of wars in cognizance of the fact that in all wars over the world, women and children form the largest number of casualties and victims. Norridge (2012) emphasizes that "[…] the civilian casualties of war are literally silenced by violence in death or denied the opportunity to speak their pain" (p.2). In the main narrators' respective communities, women are in one way or another subjugated and suffer a double jeopardy that almost all the African women find themselves in. As women, they are seriously affected by the male dominated cultures of their communities and by the discrimination and aggression directed at their communities by their hostile neighbours. It is this kind of suppression that has motivated me to focus on the main narrators' efforts to come out to tell their stories. Given the pain they underwent during the period of the wars, the sharing of their narratives is an important therapeutic venture as Norridge qualifies, "[…] pain is often either as a result or a cause of the denial of another person's voice" (Norridge, 2012 p.2). Just the effort of voicing one's point of view in a form of a narrative of the war is, "a gesture of resistance to the ideology underpinning genocide, which aims to suppress the human and conscious existence of the individual" (Norridge, 2012 p.2).

Norridge (2012) describes trauma theory as being located in "[…] the impossibility of accessing the suffering of the past from the present" (p.4). This is a concept that foregrounds the belief that "survivor writings, which explore the notion that extremes of experience are inaccessible because those who suffered the most are no longer with us" (Norridge, 2012 p.5). In Ilibagiza's story *Left to Tell*, there is a lot of suspense surrounding the pain the main narrator's close relatives had to endure before they were killed. The same case occurs in *Slave* with Nazer's faceless (and voiceless) villagers disappearing into slavery without trace. This situation leads to the discourse of "vicissitudes of literary depiction with the chasm between what happened and aesthetic process of remembering" (Norridge, 2012 p.5).

Conclusion

As the Swahili saying goes *Banyani mbaya kiatu chake dawa* (even though the Indian may be bad, his shoes is medicine). Unfortunate as the Rwandan genocide and the government orchestrated fatal attacks on black African communities of Sudan were, there has sprouted out of it a large reservoir of African literature whether considered in terms of creative and critical works. A sizable fraction

of this genre of writing is dedicated to women. The African woman's voice reverberates in the narration, criticism, or as subject in the plot of these narratives. The narratives of post Rwandan genocide are populated with characters and foreground the female voice. In this research, it has emerged that the woman victim of the grotesque and heinous murders and attacks not only negotiates her escape but also reconstructs the events of this traumatic moment in the African history. By negotiation and reconstruction of these events, Ilibagiza and Nazer are, in many ways, a symbol of hope to the marginalized African woman.

Note

*****This paper was first presented at Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference held at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania from 24th to 26th August 2017.

There is no conflict of interest.

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