



## Beyond Victims: Re-Representation of Women in Conflict

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### Abstract

The intransigent nature of war in parts of Eastern Africa continues to be a grave concern to the world. Periods of violence within the region have invoked memories of conflict by both men and women. Drawing on feminist studies of women's autobiographical writings, this paper examines the experience of women during conflict. The memoirs highlight the special concerns of women, such as: malnutrition; shelter; reproductive health including childbirth and family planning; rape and sexual abuse; relocation stress; role strains and role change; family separation and perceived helplessness. Of specific interest is the manner in which female memoirs of conflict contest stereotypical images of women as passive victims of war. I argue that stereotypic images of women as apathetic victims of conflict overshadow their agency and contribution to peace building. The memoirs examined from Uganda, Sudan and Somali disprove the portrayal and treatment of women solely as victims. The writers under study help to institute a female role in national conflict and female literature of conflict. They provide concrete examples of how women demonstrate resilience in overcoming despair, participating in conflict prevention, management and resolution. This paper aims to contribute to the discourses on the inclusion of women in the different phases of conflict and peace building processes.

### Introduction

The memoirs of Grace Akallo, Halima Bashir and Hawa Abdi represent the life experiences of three survivors of conflict. These memoirs contribute to the knowledge about women's specific encounters in conflict-torn parts of Africa. The authors also go beyond prevalent images and stereotypes about African women. These three women write against the usual images tied to the perception that African women lack any agency. I define re-representation as a better way of portraying something which is thought to have been portrayed negatively or initially portrayed with prejudice.

Muchiri defines memoir as a piece that "*devotes more attention to occurrences around and outside the writer. From the memoir we learn a great deal about the society in which the writer or subject moves, but only get limited information about the writers themselves*". (39) Literary devices website defines memoirs as follows "*a literary memoir, on the other hand, is usually about a specific theme, or about a part of someone's life, as it is a story with a proper narrative shape, focus and subject matter, involving reflection on some particular events or places*". The memoirs of Hawa, Halima and Akallo give readers an opportunity to connect with the reality of conflict in Africa. The memoirists in this study focus on a slice of their lives during conflict, sharing with the reader how conflict affected their communities and their contribution to the peace effort. Memoirs are a beneficial resource for interdisciplinary exploration and

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study. McCue observes that “*the contemporary female authored memoir combines elements from multiple disciplines and creates a strong voice for feminism by expressing the personal while also examining the cultural contexts from a female perspective*”. (1)

The writers of conflict memoirs take on a responsibility to tell and thus resist existing notions on conflict and by extension conflict resolution. To write about one's own experiences regarding conflict in itself is to denounce and therefore, resist and demonstrate a defiance of the intended aims of conflict (to completely destroy). Writing is one of the processes that promote healing and public consciousness on the subject of conflict. The writers of the texts selected portray themselves as peace seeking and having made a positive contribution to their societies either during or after the conflict. By transforming the reader into a witness, the texts advocate for a change through the assumed powerful impact of the text on the reader. In her book *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide: Their Impact on Collective Memory*: Fournet asserts Israel Charny's words, “*most genocides are marked by indifference, silence and inactivity*”. (83) Charny's works focus on the reasons for “*social amnesia*” when it comes to genocide. It is hoped that the keeping alive of memories through narration will help in the prevention of conflict, creating awareness of the causes and effects of conflicts.

It is worth noting that most of the memoirs examined in this paper have been co-authored. This was not a deliberate choice on my part but it appears to be a common trend as far as memoirs of conflict are concerned. In my quoting of the texts studied I use the names of the key author; key here referring to the author whose narrative the audience of the texts read. I engage with the following texts *Tears of the Desert* by Halima Bashir and Damien Lewis, *Keeping Hope Alive* by Hawa Abdi with Sarah Jenkins from Somalia and *Girl Soldier* by Faith J. H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo from Uganda.

### **The Memoirs: Grace Akallo, Hawa Abdi and Halima Bashir**

*Girl Soldier* is the story of Grace Akallo who was among the 29 Aboke girls who were abducted from St. Mary's College in October 1996 in Uganda. This book is co-written by Faith McDonnell, an American activist and writer with special concern for the future of the vulnerable Acholi people of northern Uganda and Grace Akallo, who narrates how she and the other innocent girls suffered under the brutality of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), is a rebel group that originated in Northern Uganda as a movement to fight for the interests of the Acholi people. Through Akallo's voice the reader catches a glimpse of what it meant to be a girl soldier in the Lord's Resistance Army and the disturbing facts of the impact of violent Uganda on children of the war. McDonnell's voice gives a historical context to the crisis in Uganda.

Akallo and her schoolmates were captured at their school and marched into Southern Sudan where they endured savagery, starvation and abuse. Akallo was also forced to commit crimes against civilians and fellow captives. After a long struggle, surviving on leaves and soil, Akallo eventually managed to escape together with another group of children. Akallo's story is a story of hope and a cry for awareness about the children of

war. She managed to complete her studies and serves as a spokesperson and activist for Peace in Northern Uganda.

Halima Bashir's *Tears of the Desert* gives an account of the persecution of her tribe --the Zaghawaby the Arab Sudanese government. Halima was born and raised in South Darfur in Sudan; she shares her childhood experiences which highlight the culture of the Zaghawa community. Halima portrays herself as a high achiever. Against all odds she excels in school and becomes a medical doctor. The conflict in Darfur was on one side mainly the Sudanese military and police together with the Janjaweed, a Sudanese militia group recruited mostly among Arabized indigenous Africans and a small number of Bedouin of the northern Rizeigat. The majority of other Arab groups in Darfur remained uninvolved. The other side was made up of rebel groups, notably the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement JEM, recruited primarily from the non-Arab Muslim Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit ethnic groups. When war breaks out, Halima Bashir's community is scattered. She witnesses gruesome acts, loses her father and is gang raped by government soldiers. Halima flees to Britain where she finds asylum albeit after great struggle.

Halima believes that she has a calling and responsibility to be an advocate for peace in Sudan. She says

[...] possibly God chose me to send out a message to the rest of the world, to alert the entire world that there are innocent people dying, so that the world might protect them and extend assistance to them. (344).

The Reach all Women in War (RAW) website records that "*Halima has testified against the current Sudanese President, Omar El Bashir, before the International Criminal Court, which indicted him in 2009 for crimes against humanity.*" This in itself is an act of valour and commitment to courageously advocate for justice for the women and girls in South Sudan.

*Keeping Hope Alive* is the memoir of Hawa Abdi from Somalia. Hawa's memoir is a story of hope and resilience and a woman's contribution to restoring Somalia. Hawa details how she creates an oasis in the midst of chaos. Characteristic of life narratives, this is Hawa's coming of age story. Hawa shares what it was like to be a girl/woman in Somalia, her circumcision, early first marriage and motherhood. Despite the challenges she faced, her story culminates into a success story as she acquires a medical and a law degrees which she uses to serve her community.

When the Somali government collapsed in 1991, Dr Abdi was running a clinic on her farm. As the conflict intensified, it grew into a 400 bed hospital ultimately morphing into a refugee camp. This farm that was a refuge to an estimated 90,000 displaced men, women and children whose lives had been fractured by conflict, famine, and disease became known as Hawa Village. Besides being a story of a woman on a mission to rehabilitate a country, it is an inspiring personal story about bravery and perseverance in times of life's losses. Dr Hawa Abdi was an Alfred Nobel Peace Prize Nominee in 2012. Through the Dr Hawa Abdi foundation, Hawa continues to fight for the women, children and elderly people of Hawa Abdi Village.

## **Instituting Women's Role in Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution**

Conflicts greatly affect the lives of women many times changing their roles within families, communities and in the public domain. During conflicts large numbers of men are conscripted, displaced, detained or killed. This leaves women with a greater responsibility to care for the children, the elderly and the wider community. For a long time, in times of crisis women have been classified in the single category of "women and children". This implies that their needs, experiences and roles are the same as those of children, which is not true. The ICRC observes that the use of the term "vulnerable" loosely to refer to women in conflict zones encourages the stereotypic image of women as helpless victims. It records:

Women also tend to be recognized as only "vulnerable", yet they are not necessarily vulnerable and even display remarkable strength, as evidenced by their role as combatants or agents for peace, or by the roles they assume in wartime to protect and support their families (28).

Female memoirists portray themselves as peace builders and peace makers. Hawa details in her memoir how she got her community of refugees to embrace her philosophy of equality above clan loyalty. Clan animosity fuelled the Somali civil war due to the politicized clan identity. De Rouen and Heo note that "*Clan rivalries require all disputes to be settled with blood if necessary. Therefore, when one clan achieves superiority over another or all others, it is possible to manipulate clan sensitivities* (684)." When clan hatred and suspicion became evident in the camp, Hawa and her team came up with a code of conduct to help reduce suspicion, arguments and attacks within Hawa village which was growing very fast. "*To change people's attitudes we created a rule with no exceptions: In our place we are all Somali If you want to identify by your clan, you can't stay* (111)."

Hawa chose to see the needs of humanity beyond clan affiliations and peace as the only way to restore Somali. She records part of her speech during a Somali Reconciliation Conference.

I was at the reconciliation conference for weeks, restless and uncomfortable frustrated by the oppressively hot weather and the same old arguments of clan, clan, clan 'We want only peace to rebuild our beautiful country', I said in a session one day. 'We can't all sit in the president's chair, but if we select someone suitable to bring us peace, that, for us, is enough'. (154)

With that statement Hawa defines herself as a peace builder and as one who has the ability and foresight to bridge ethnic, religious, political and cultural divides easily. It is also a testament to the fact that women have a positive impact at the negotiation table.

Hawa and Halima, both medical doctors, played a great role in trying to save the lives of the victims who sought medical attention. Both Halima and Hawa note that the government did not want their victims treated, they wanted them dead. Self-portraiture is a motive of autobiography where writers use their autobiographies to paint themselves in a certain light, in most cases a positive light. Halima reiterates her position of serving humanity equitably by using the repetition technique to foreground that belief. She says "*I was treating people from both sides of the war. (212) [...] Anyone who came to the*

*hospital in need of my help would get it, no matter which tribe they came from. (223) I'm a medical doctor, I treat all people equally, it doesn't matter who they are (245)".*

Though she was harassed and threatened by the police, Halima continued to treat the wounded Zaghawa fighters in secret. She set up a makeshift clinic at a friend's house, treating the wounded fighters at night and sending them to the bush with consignments of medical supplies. This scenario is replayed in Hawa's memoir;

Now we had to do what we could with what we had, and we also had to work in secret- if government soldiers saw that their victims were being treated by us, they could shell or shoot up the hospital. When wounded people came to us, I often administered first aid quickly and sent them into the bush to recover (83).

Halima pays a great price for the sacrifices she made to treat the wounded soldiers, she is attacked, tortured and gang raped by the military officers. These women courageously rise up to serve their communities during dark times. They prove that women are not powerless victims of war but have the strength and resolve to make a difference in times of crisis.

Trujillo Gomez contends that one of the roles of women is to speak out "*Women also strategize to get attention from the international community in order to get more support for peace*".(13) Halima's appeals for asylum were rejected a number of times. The Home Office argued that Halima's story was a pack of lies and that the Zaghawa were not affected by the war in Darfur. Shocked that the world did not know the magnitude of the conflict in Sudan, Halima began speaking out. Halima became the face of Darfur, taking media interviews and presenting the stark reality of the suffering in Darfur.

In *Keeping Hope Alive*, Hawa narrates how during an attack at the camp her daughters reached BBC producers to interview her so that she could tell the world what was happening in Somalia. Hawa uses this platform to appeal for help from the world and also to the Somalis to stop fighting, "*Imagining my voice on the radio, I tried to appeal to all Somali people begging them to stand up to defend their society*" (210)

These three memoirs exemplify how women can give voice to their concerns during different phases of conflict. Muchiri writes "*The autobiography reflects an author's pursuit for voice, the desire to be heard. It allows writers to define themselves as individuals, distinct from the images fostered by society or cultural stereotypes*"(45).The three memoirists share their stories through their memoirs as acts of hope as Hawa puts it in her introduction "*We Know that just doing it is an act of hope- that as we share our story with the world, we are inviting the truth to come out and to save us*"(xvii).

Akallo, Halima and Hawa have been on the forefront of decrying the senseless killing of innocent people speaking in various forums around the world about the atrocities of war and pleading for an end. Akallo who speaks out for children of war ends her story with this plea; "*To the whole world, this is my cry: there is no future without healthy children who grow up in a peaceful environment. Do not turn your hatred on the children.*" (195) Choosing to rise up to speak is an act of courage, Halima faced threats and suffering for speaking her mind about the war to a news reporter. She was forced to

sign a paper committing herself not to speak out about the conflict. When she flees Darfur, Halima gathers the courage to begin speaking again. These women realize the power that lies within the act of speaking. As Hawa's daughter Deqo aptly notes in *Keeping Hope Alive* "We have to speak out, it's the *only power we have*." (213)

## **Narratives of Resistance**

As much as the memoirs of conflict focus on events related to the conflict, the female memoirists in this study use that platform to address socio-cultural issues. The memoirs provide a space for the creation of narratives of resistance. Beard suggests that "*writers have chosen autobiographical genres in order to claim spaces in which they might write an 'I', or sometimes a 'we' that can work to uncover mechanisms of oppression and lay out paths towards political and social change.*" (1)

Both Halima and Hawa frown upon female circumcision, a cultural practice they both endured. Halima details her painful experience as an initiate at the age of eight years. She gives this ceremony close to eight pages in which she invites the reader to share her agony, while also learning about her culture. The length and attention given to this process is meant to ensure the reader is sufficiently moved to the point of shunning this practice. Halima records, "*The pain was so unbearable that it had taken over my whole head, driving me to the borders of sanity, I felt as if I was dying and even death would have been preferable to where I was now*" (68). By employing artistry in her memoir Halima effectively uses her choice of words to paint the circumcision process as vicious. She uses words such as "*brutalized*", "*crippled*", "*pain and horror*", "*unspeakable pain*", "*terrible scarring*", "*butchery*", and "*imprisoned me in pain*". (67, 69, and 71)

Halima uses rhetorical questions to make the point that female circumcision cannot be justified. She asks "*What was wrong with the way we were born? What could possibly be so wrong that would justify what I had been through?*" (70) She expresses disappointment in her family. Halima felt a sense of betrayal because she had no choice in the matter and was not told the whole truth regarding female genital cutting. Female genital cutting/mutilation is recognized as a human rights violation. Halima's inclusion of this practice in her memoir creates an opportunity for public scrutiny of the practice; this has been recognized as one of the ways to ignite change. The UNICEF Female Genital Mutilation Report (2013) states that "*Finding ways to make hidden attitudes favouring the abandonment of FGM/C more visible and opening the practice up to public scrutiny ...can provide the spark for community wide change*". (5)

Unlike Halima, Hawa does not give the reader details of her female genital cutting experience. She sums it up in two sentences leaving the reader with the burden of imagining how painful it was. She says, "*I did not understand. I knew that I had been closed -- it was a memory so painful, from when I was just seven years old, that I do not speak of it.*" (60) Hawa shares with the reader how this affected her marriage and pregnancy as a child bride at the age of twelve. Both Halima and Hawa use their memoirs to enlighten the reader on the possible dangers of FGM/C. Having gone through the cut and being medical doctors enables them to lend a credible voice to the programs aimed at eradicating the practice.

One of the projects Hawa set up in her village is the Women's Education Centre. This centre provides education and self-empowerment programs for the women. Hawa talks

to the women about the dangers of female genital mutilation; on realizing that “*telling the people to stop the practice would not work*”. (205) In consideration of their deep seated beliefs she devises a new method of communicating the dangers to the women. “*The most straightforward way was to show them many complications of circumcision*”. (205) Hawa records that the women began to understand the horrible effects of FGM only after seeing practical cases of the negative impact of FGM/C at the hospital. This may be used as a model in the effort to eliminate the practice.

The memoirists in this study also resist the use of religion as an excuse for oppressing women and killing innocent people. Halima in her TV interviews poses these questions to the religious:

Where is the Muslim world? Where is the Arab world? Where are the people of the whole world? How can Muslims kill other Muslims for no reasons? This is something that God forbade. God said, “Do not take a life without justification and right.” But this is happening with no right, no justification, and people killing innocents for no reason. (344)

McDonnell who co-authors *Girl Soldier* dedicates a chapter titled *Killing as the Spirit leads* to explain how the abuse of religion led to horror for the children of northern Uganda. Albeit from a Christian bias McDonnell attempts to explain how the misguided integration of faith and spiritism in the day to day lives of the Acholi led to spiritual disaster. She summarizes this as having been caused by a hunger for influence, power and stature on the part of Auma who is said to have mobilized the Holy Spirit Mobile Force. This army wanted to cleanse Uganda, many of its soldiers were killed as the magic spell, holy oil and the stone grenades proved to be empty incantations.

Hawa hopes that the people hiding behind religion for their own gains will be exposed. “*I know that one day the truth will come out; the bandits, the people who use our religion as a shield, will be destroyed totally, and the poor people will get back their rights.*” (238) This raises the question of the role of religion during various phases of conflict. What contributions do the religious leaders make towards conflict prevention? Does society question where there is a discrepancy between the tenets of a faith and their involvement in conflict?

Amina, Hawa's daughter, questions the basis of the prejudices within the harsh Sharia property laws. “*What is this religion? How is it fair (197)*”? She was shocked that when Hawa was ailing there was talk of male relatives inheriting their land since her husband and son had died. Hawa notes that she always argued with her professor over women's rights; which she felt were not equal. Hawa observes that the generation that has grown without law and order twists religion to suit their own desire to have control over women.

They have clung to fundamentalist, inaccurate version of Islam to give them a sense of power; as they try to destroy our society, they are also trying to destroy our religion. Now we are hostage to their ungodly belief that a woman is an object, an instrument, to be used only for their purposes (xv)

Both Halima and Hawa disapprove of the actions of the “*so-called religious people (189)*” by quoting the religious texts that show that these people were wrong.

One of the motives of autobiography is to give voice to the writer and the other voiceless people they choose to speak for. While sexual violence has been recognized as an international crime, the chaotic nature of conflict zones makes it difficult to end impunity for perpetrators and to find justice for victims. Rape victims are shrouded in shame and humiliation. Halima gets the courage to speak about her rape after soul searching and choosing to go beyond her shame to alert the world about the horror of rape and murder. Hawa, Halima and Akallo all mention rape in their memoirs, giving it adequate space and speaking for the many voiceless victims of rape. Hawa says in her introduction, "*As I speak for millions of Somali women who have no voice.*" (xvi)

The Nobel women's initiative states on their website that "*Modern conflicts are not only fought in trenches and battlefields, but also within communities and on women's bodies.*" Halima says of rape, "*It was part of the dark and evil texture of this war.*" (255) One complete chapter in *Tears of the Desert* recounts the ordeal of more than forty school girls who had been raped by The Janjaweed. The Janjaweed invaded their school and took control for two hours, shooting at anyone who tried to stop them. Halima was also a victim of war rape and she chose to break the silence by sharing her story with newspapers across the world, "*My face became the face of the suffering in Darfur, as newspapers across the world carried full advertisements bearing my photograph and decrying the rape of women in my homeland.*" (344)

The very act of this female memoirist choosing to highlight the issue of rape in their memoirs contributes to an increasing recognition of rape as one of the tactics of war. Increased recognition calls to attention the need to urgently address the issue of sexual violence in conflict. In his annual report on sexual violence in conflict (2013), the UN Secretary-General emphasizes the urgency of ensuring that sexual violence considerations are explicitly and consistently reflected in peace processes and peace agreements.

## Conclusion

Laura Beard contends that "*one of the most important aspects of autobiographical manifesto, an aspect shared with the genre of testimony, is that it looks toward the future, toward positive change, for the self and for society.*" (6) The memoirs discussed share this very important aspect, though they look back painfully, they also look forward to the future with hope. Hawa says, "*I live for hope that peace will come, so I can build a beautiful home for myself by the seaside...where I will spend my happiest days.*" (239) Halima is very critical of the Khartoum government and cries out for justice. Though she obtained asylum in the UK, she writes in her memoir of Darfur, "*It was and is that irreplaceable unfathomable joy that is home.*"(4)

I have argued that these women use their memoirs to institute women's role in conflict prevention, management and resolution. Through sharing their life narratives they portray women as more than just victims of conflict. The writers also use their memoirs to speak against issues such as rape as a weapon of war, religion as a scapegoat to oppress women and perpetuate senseless killings and female genital mutilation.



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