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BREAKING SILENCE, SHAPING HISTORY: UNVEILING MARGINALIZED FEMALE WAR-CRIME SURVIVORS' VOICES

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Abstract

This paper is the synopsis of an ongoing qualitative research project on an intersectional and biopolitical analysis of selected war memoirs written by marginalized female war crime survivors. The primary object of this research is to explore the layers of subjectivity as expressed through the memoirs by women who, in different corners of the world, were subjected to different forms of war crimes during the late twentieth and the twenty-first century. The research paper aims to find whether these life-writings should be recognized only as chronicles of their silent sufferings or as bold proclamations of their resistance against the biopolitical oppressions they were exposed to. In order to do so, a theoretical framework comprising intersectionality and biopolitics will be used according to which the selected memoirs will be critically analyzed. The proposed research will follow a research methodology that is descriptive, correlational,

analytical, and exploratory in approach. The primary findings reveal the historical trajectory of women's autobiographical writings related to war and conflicts, identifying the scarcity of such narratives that underscores the challenges faced by survivors in documenting their experiences. The expected outcome is to offer a counter-narrative to official war stories, demonstrating the efficacy of testimonial life-writings from marginalized individuals as human rights activism tools, with potential implications for policy-making, advocacy against sexual violence in conflict zones, and contributing evidence for prevention, justice, and support initiatives, while also highlighting ethical challenges and paving the way for further studies on the intersectional and biopolitical dimensions of sexual violence.

Keywords

Life Writing, Women's Experiences, War Memoirs, Intersectionality, Biopolitics

1. Introduction

The paper addresses the common tendency to oversimplify and generalize women's experiences of war by primarily focusing on gender while neglecting the intersectionality of various factors such as race, culture, class, religion, and socio-political identity. It criticizes the prevalent reduction of women's war experiences to a singular perspective, emphasizing the need to consider a broader spectrum of influences.

The literature on life writings during wartime is noted for its limited exploration of how biopolitical oppression becomes ingrained in the fabric of society during conflicts. The study recognizes the significance of examining narratives from individuals at the margins of society, aiming to shed light on how their stories reflect the pervasive reality of biopolitical oppression during wartime.

The main goal of the study is to challenge the existing paradigm by asserting that testimonial writings by marginalized women should be analyzed using a framework that goes beyond gender alone. The proposed analytical tools include a consideration of race, culture, class, religion, and socio-political identity. By doing so, the study aims to demonstrate that the oppressions shaping these women's experiences are not solely attributable to gender dynamics but are deeply intertwined with broader biopolitical forces.

In essence, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences during war, highlighting the complexity of their narratives and the need to

incorporate a diverse set of factors in the analytical framework to capture the nuanced reality of biopolitical oppression.

2. Literature Review

Claire M. Tylee, in her 1990 book *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64*, tries to explore “what part women's [wartime] writing plays in the construction of a national culture” (Tylee, 1990, p. 15). However, she “limited [herself] to works that were written by women with experience of Europe ..., published in English, and available in England” only (Tylee, 1990, p. 17). Besides, her highly subjective opinion “[w]omen have always been the sufferers in wartime” makes it apparent that she took up a slightly essentialist stance on women's experiences of war (Tylee, 1990, p. 13). To challenge such essentialist notions, Victoria Stewart, in her 2004 book *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma*, attempts to diversify women's experiences of war by taking into account “a degree of cultural specificity which historical generalizations do not always allow” (Stewart, 2004, p. 21). But, even after advocating the need for “cultural specificity”, Stewart's discourse centers around women of white and Western origin¹ only.

Miriam Fuchs' *The Text is Myself: Women's Life Writing and Catastrophe* (2003) is an exception as it clearly states that since “catastrophe [is] a global phenomenon to which no one is immune, there is less justification for examining only one national literature” (Fuchs, 2003, p. 4). On a different note, Nicole Ann Dombrowski, in her 2004 book *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent*, draws attention to the fact how, in the context of war, women are always given the status of “agents, accomplices, opponents, and victims of wartime violence” and how “[all] four of these classifications pose problems for a woman's autonomous self-expression and her subjectivity as a private individual and engaged citizen” (Dombrowski, 2004, p. 2). Finally, in an attempt to show how testimonial texts by female survivors of human rights violations can be successfully read as tools for raising voices against such crimes, Ana Belén Martínez García, in her 2020 book *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life Writing and Human Rights*, asserts that intersectionality should be the critical lens to read and interpret such texts (Martínez García, 2020, p. 5).

¹ Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf, Anne Frank, Charlotte Delbo

From a biopolitical point of view, the chapter titled “Embodied Memories: Settler Colonial Biopolitics and Multiple Genealogies in Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*” by René Dietrich in the 2016 book *Biopolitics and Memory in Postcolonial Literature and Culture*, edited by Michael R. Griffiths, explores how acts of life writing by North American Indigenous authors raise the biopolitical logic of racialization, regulation, and naturalization fundamental to settler colonialism. The texts of life writing by Indigenous authors, according to Dietrich, make visible the settler colonial biopolitical logics and illustrate how they construct Indigenous bodies and lives as objects to be variously removed, discarded, contained, and fetishized. In their acts of life writing, as postulated by Dietrich, these authors offer a dominant means of intrusion into the biopolitical logics of settler colonialism, as they expose the foundational aspect of eradication and renunciation in settler-colonial biopolitics, reject to be contained within the depoliticized category and attain a position of agency from which to not only offer a severe critique of the politics of the settler state but also to denaturalize settler-colonial rule. The current research aims to adopt this very idea in order to conceptualize the selected memoirs as vehicles for marginalized women’s resistance to totalitarian biopolitics prevalent during wartime.

In addition to these books, a few recent papers have also thrown some light on this topic, albeit differently. Carol Acton in her 2004 paper “Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text in Women’s War Writing” draws attention to how women’s writings about their experiences of war, especially those written after the two world wars, are mostly neglected in any discussions on the effects of war on different literary genres. But, like most of her predecessors and contemporaries, her essay focuses only on British and white American women’s² memoirs. On the other hand, Inger Skjelsbæk’s 2006 paper “Victim and Survivor: Narrated Identities of Women Who Experienced Rape during the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina” provides an intersectional analysis of women’s testimonies in which their identities are examined as both gendered victims and ethnic survivors. Helena Grice’s 2012 paper “‘The Voice in the Picture’: Reversing the Angle in Vietnamese American War Memoirs” explores how life-writings by Vietnamese people offer a counter-narrative of the Vietnam War. Fardowsa Abdullahi, in her 2016 MA thesis on International Studies titled “Rape as a Weapon of War in Darfur”, submitted to the University of San Francisco, questions the validity of universalizing third-world women’s

² Enid Bagnold, Vera Brittain, Mary Borden, Lynda Van Devanter, Winnie Smith

experience of wartime sexual violence and the assumption that they are unable to speak for themselves. Very recently, in 2021, in a paper titled “A Geocritical Rethinking of Iranian and American Female War Memoirs: *Da* and *Rule Number 2*”, authors Farideh Shahriari and Leila Jamili challenge the androcentric representations of war narratives which they call one-dimensional because of their scant regard for geopolitical and cultural differences.

Considering these books and papers as the pioneers in this field, this study aims to examine the selected memoirs from an intersectional perspective and discover how the narrators’ predicament fueled the testimonial impulse in them which resulted in both verbal and literary protests against the perpetrating biopolitical policies they were victimized by.

3. Theoretical Framework

The proposed research will be conducted through a theoretical framework comprising the theory of intersectionality and the theory of biopolitics.

Coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when she published a paper in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, the term ‘intersectionality’ refers to the system for conceptualizing a person, a group, or a social issue as affected by several discriminations of different nature and it considers people’s imbricating identities and experiences to recognize the intricacy of prejudices they encounter. In other words, intersectional theory proclaims that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers. Intersectionality identifies that these identity markers do not exist autonomously and that they together create a multifaceted convergence of oppression. Now, since the women, whose memoirs are to be selected for this research, are simultaneously females and members of some specific religious/racial/ethnic minorities, the very construction of their identities as ethnic survivors and gendered victims is expected to be best interpreted through the lens of intersectionality. Because, the heterogeneity of their experiences would probably be subordinated within a framework comprising only critical race theory or only feminist studies as these theories, as analytical tools, cannot fully represent the totality of the discriminations they faced.

The historical events and the socio-political contexts that led to the production of the three selected memoirs will be examined through a biopolitical perspective as well. Coined by Rudolf Kjellén in his 1905 book *The Great Powers*, the term ‘biopolitics’ refers to an

intersectional field between human biology and politics that can be defined as the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are regulated under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and systems of subjectivation. The concept of biopolitics was popularized by Michel Foucault in several of his famous lectures like ‘Society Must Be Defended’, ‘The Birth of Biopolitics’, ‘The Courage of Truth’, ‘Security, Territory, Population’, and so on. In a Foucauldian definition of the term, biopolitics can be understood as a political rationality that takes the administration of life and populations as its subject “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life” (Foucault, 1978, p. 138)³. In contrast to Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and other modern scholars have argued that the unbridled exercise of biopower denies not only individuality but also humanity. Moreover, Achille Mbembe critiques Foucault for failing to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how biopower operates within systems of violence and domination. Consequently, Mbembe introduces the concept of ‘Necropolitics,’ which refers to the power and capacity to determine both who may live and who must die. In the case of this research, the various types of oppressions that form the crux of these memoirs will be scrutinized through a biopolitical lens because the lives of these women and people belonging to their communities as well as the bodies of these women and their biological functions were perceived as territories to be politicized, or, in Agamben’s term, depoliticized, in the governing power’s favor.

4. Research Questions

- i. How does war or any such social conflict affect the genre of life-writing?
- ii. How do issues like race, religion, political views, and gender affect war memoirs?
- iii. How feasible is it to interpret a marginalized woman’s war memoir as a literary resistance against biopolitical oppression?
- iv. Is it possible to read these memoirs as counter-narratives to the official war narratives?
- v. Which socio-political aspects should be taken into consideration while interpreting life-narratives by female war crime survivors?

5. Research Approach

5.1. Selection of Texts

The texts that have been selected for this intended research include:

³ *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1

- *Tears of the Desert* (2008), war memoir by Halima Bashir
- *Tested to the Limit* (2012), war memoir by Consolee Nishimwe
- *The Last Girl* (2017), war memoir by Nadia Murad

5.2. Reasons for Selecting These Texts

- a) All three texts are authored by women from different cultural, social, and religious backgrounds: Nadia Murad is a Yazidi woman, Halima Bashir is a Zaghawa woman, and Consolee Nishimwe is a Tutsi woman. Their experiences are shaped not only by their gender but also by their racial, religious, and ethnic identities. Analyzing their stories through an intersectional lens allows for a deeper understanding of how multiple axes of oppression and privilege intersect to shape their experiences and responses to violence and trauma.
- b) The three texts are deeply connected to biopolitical themes, as they explore the impact of violence, genocide, and conflict on individual bodies and collective populations. Through their narratives, these women bear witness to the ways in which political and social forces attempt to control, discipline, and manipulate their bodies and lives.
- c) All three texts document the authors' experiences of violence and trauma in various contexts. Nadia Murad survived the genocide against the Yazidi community perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq, Halima Bashir experienced violence as a member of Sudan's non-Arab population during the Darfur conflict, and Consolee Nishimwe survived the Rwandan genocide which was carried out against the Tutsis. An intersectional and biopolitical analysis allows us to understand how violence and trauma are not just isolated events but are deeply entangled with power structures, social hierarchies, and the ways in which bodies are treated as sites of political control.
- d) Despite the immense hardships they faced, each author demonstrates remarkable resilience and agency in navigating their traumas and reclaiming their lives. Finally, these narratives resonate far beyond the specific contexts in which they are set. They offer insights into the wider issues of violence against women, the perpetuation of conflict, and the complexities of healing from trauma. By examining these texts through the proposed theoretical framework, it is expected that valuable insights can be gained into the profound interplay between individual experiences and broader sociopolitical dynamics.

5.3. Methodology

The proposed research is expected to follow a research methodology that is descriptive because it will describe the phenomenon of war crime by observing facts and then drawing conclusions from them, correlational because it will seek to establish a relation between the selected memoirs and the theories, analytical because it will try to critically examine the texts according to the selected theoretical framework, and exploratory because it will attempt to clarify why and how there is a relationship between the varied aspects of the phenomenon of war crime. Following will be the steps of this research:

- Beginning with a chronological survey of women's life-writings documenting their experiences of wars across the world, the project aims to throw some light on the available literary criticisms examining female self-narratives composed in the context of armed conflicts.
- Next, the theoretical outline of the research will be examined to demonstrate how it can provide a feasible framework for analyzing the selected texts as well as other similar texts.
- For this, the historical contexts of the selected memoirs will be analyzed according to the theory of biopolitics, with its predominant focus on the opinions of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe.
- In order to explore the factors contributing to the oppression documented in the selected memoirs, they will next be interpreted according to the theory of intersectionality, concentrating chiefly on how Prof. Kimberlé Crenshaw defined the term.
- To conclude the project, an attempt will be made to find all those possible ways through which further research works, using the same theoretical framework, can be conducted on memoirs by men and transgender people who were survivors of war crimes.

6. Primary Findings

While tracing the history of women's autobiographical writings written in the context of war and conflicts, it has been discovered that probably the first memoir written by a female war-crime survivor in the contemporary era is *Ravished Armenia* (1918) by Aurora Mardiganian, a survivor of the Armenian genocide (1915-17) who was sold into sexual slavery by the Turkish militants. After that, in 1954, an anonymous memoir was published with the title *A Woman in*

Berlin that depicted the mass rapes of German women, including the author, by the Soviet Occupations Troops in 1945. Later, in 2003, the identity of the author was revealed to be Marta Hillers, a journalist. Then, in 1994, the memoir titled *Fifty Years of Silence: The Extraordinary Memoir of a War Rape Survivor*, written by Jan Ruff O’Herne, who was forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War, was published.

Finding relevant texts for this research has been an exacting task since very few survivors were (and still are) fortunate enough to accumulate sufficient resources to write and publish their memoirs. Apart from the selected texts for this research and the memoirs mentioned above, a few similar texts that have been found are enlisted here:

- *A House in the Sky* (2013) by Amanda Lindhout, a Canadian journalist who was abducted and raped in a war-torn Somalia
- *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS* (2016) by Farida Khalaf, a Yazidi survivor of genocide and war rape
- *Not Yet Sunset* (2017) by Grace Acan, a Ugandan survivor of war crimes

However, it has been noticed through the course of this research that testimonies, predominantly oral and sometimes written, from the survivors can be a significant repository of authentic resources to conduct this research. For example, the official testimony of Bakira Hasečić, a human rights activist and a war rape survivor of the Bosnian genocide (1992), available on the official website of ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) and the documentary archive of BBC World Service, can be referred to for understanding how individuals belonging to a specific group are viewed as politically unwanted entities in the politico-judicial discourse in a particular territory during a particular historical period, thus necessitating their extinction and how their socio-political and biological identities contribute to their oppression. Motivated by the authenticity of such resources and driven by the necessity to obtain a more profound understanding of the basic premise of this research, an interview has been conducted with Ms. Consolee Nishimwe which has helped perceive the phenomenon of war and simultaneous and/or subsequent genocide and other forms of violence from the perspective of a survivor and comprehend the significance of life-writings in spreading awareness.⁴

⁴ Details can be found here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1UDbDQHK2c0OqV7GJ-UD7ZES4PV4UBZI9?usp=drive_link

Finally, to interpret and solidify the social relevance of this research, a survey has been conducted on the topic of “War Rape and Its Impact on Women’s Writings” where 200 respondents, selected on the basis of simple random sampling, participated and helped enrich the research. The majority of the respondents were of the opinion that war rape is a serious war-crime, that women’s experiences of war are different from those of men, and that female war-crime survivors’ autobiographical writings about their lived experiences do have political importance.⁵

7. Expected Outcome

This research is expected to provide a counter-narrative to the official war narratives of the contemporary world and it intends to show how different forms of testimonial life-writings by people belonging to the margins of the society can be used as effective tools of human rights activism for raising voices against the crimes committed in conflict zones worldwide. Besides, the findings may have implications for policy-making and advocacy efforts related to sexual violence in conflict zones. The research could provide evidence and insights to support initiatives aimed at preventing war rape, seeking justice for survivors, and providing support and reparations to victims. The study’s outcome might also highlight the ethical challenges faced in researching and disseminating these stories responsibly and with respect for survivors’ privacy and well-being. Finally, this research is expected to pave the way for more studies on the intersectional dynamics and biopolitical aspects of sexual violence in different contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding this issue.

8. Research Limitations

The primary limitation of this research lies in its exclusive focus on war memoirs by female survivors of war crimes, neglecting the narratives of male and transgender individuals who have also experienced the harrowing effects of armed conflicts. By centering solely on female perspectives, the study inadvertently perpetuates a gendered bias in understanding the diverse and complex experiences of war.

⁵ Details can be found here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1XZaRFWVnIp7ct3tJek06sMeRNAa1-MN?usp=drive_link

This limitation may result in an incomplete and skewed portrayal of the multifaceted impacts of war on different genders and identities. Overlooking the narratives of male and transgender survivors may contribute to an inadequate exploration of the intersectionality inherent in the aftermath of war crimes. The failure to include diverse voices can hinder the development of a comprehensive understanding of the biopolitical implications of conflict on a broader spectrum of identities.

9. Scope of Future Research

Recognizing the aforementioned limitation, future research endeavors should aim to address this gap by incorporating the narratives of male and transgender survivors of war crimes. A more inclusive approach would contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the intersectional dynamics at play in the aftermath of armed conflicts.

Future studies could explore the unique challenges faced by male and transgender survivors, considering how societal expectations, gender norms, and cultural factors intersect with the biopolitical consequences of war. By broadening the scope to include a diverse range of voices, researchers can uncover patterns and variations that may be overlooked in a study exclusively focused on female perspectives.

Additionally, expanding the scope to include narratives from various genders can pave the way for comparative analyses, revealing commonalities and differences in the ways different groups experience and cope with the aftermath of war crimes. This inclusive approach would contribute to a more holistic understanding of the complex interplay between identity, power structures, and biopolitics in the context of conflict.

10. Conclusion

Since antiquity, women's role as primary caregivers had endowed them with the strong feminine instincts that helped mothers save their progeny from imminent attacks and fight back when the attack could not be thwarted. It will be the aim of this project to show that life-stories of assertive and resilient women are living proofs that the instinct is still alive and will remain so until there are battles yet to be won.

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