

Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda. Jennie E. Burnet. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780299286446

In this captivating story of one of the greatest travesties thrust upon the world, Jennie E. Burnet's work on Rwanda, and the impact of its 1994 genocide casts its glare upon female survivors willing to record the atrocity in their own words. Burnet not only provides a gripping account that touches upon every imagined emotion, she also uses her literary canvas to paint the horror that took the lives of 800,000 Tutsis. This assault on humanity occurred following the plane crash of President Juvenal Habyarimana following his return from peace talks in Arusha, Tanzania. Employing an array of methodologies, Burnet uses interviews, surveys, and focus groups to address these issues: the impact of war and genocide on Rwandan women, their prominence as heads of households, the relationship between survivorship and gender; the impact of violence on society; the ways in which the country reconciled; and women's positions in post-genocide government (5). Situating this analysis within historical context, Burnet explains how the tensions between the country's largest ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi, developed. Citing the belief that the Tutsi derived from the biblical figure Ham, Burnet then turns to the colonial period. Germany and Belgium favored the Tutsi because they found their appearance, thin figures, and slender noses, more aesthetically pleasing. While Burnet brings readers up to speed in this overview, she spends the rest of the work discussing how the nation, especially its women, reconciled these divisions when Habyarimana required all ethnic groups to carry identity cards in 1973. These cards contained the following information: their ethnic identity and their places of residence. Rwandans first became aware of ethnicity at schools, when they obtained national identity cards, applied for jobs, or took national exams (52).

Rwandan survivor author Immaculee Ilibagiza shared her moment of "awakening," in her

autobiography, *Left to Tell*, when she recalled the exchange between her and her teacher, “Immaculee Ilibagiza, you didn’t stand up when I said Hutu, you didn’t stand up when I said Twa, and you’re not standing up now that I’ve said Tutsi. Why is that?” She responded, “I don’t know teacher (13).” This moment took away Ilibagiza’s innocence and also the other Rwandans faced with the decision to face the complexities surrounding ethnicity.

While Burnet exposes readers to the encounter between innocence and complicity, she segues into the main thrust of her book, the women, their survival skills, and their forms of reconciliation. Organized into seven chapters, the work coalesces around three main themes: coping mechanisms, the politics of memory, and reconciliation. In writing this timely narrative, Burnet challenges the bifurcation of the genocide into these pairs: victim/killer, Hutu/Tutsi or survivors/perpetrators. By doing this, Burnet complicates the notion of identity politics by giving voice to women, their position during the genocide, and their inherited roles following its conclusion. The author not only analyzes this historic event, she also weaves in the women’s stories to amplify their words and silences to the different tunes of death that they voiced. Throughout the slaughter that rocked the nation’s urban center and hillsides, for four months during April to July 1994, women, as Burnet shows were not passive. These actors had agency, and, while Jean Hatzfeld’s *Machete Season*, shows how women participated in the looting, finished off some killings, or stripped the bodies from dying or deceased Tutsis (108-113) - the ethnic group marked for extermination during the genocide - Burnet’s study centers more on how women evolved following its aftermath.

In having this focus, she asks an all-important question, “What is a genocide survivor?” To answer, Burnet allows women, like Antoinette, a Hutu, often discriminated against because of presumed Tutsi looks, to speak. Antoinette, is one of Burnet’s survivors, whose story not only

challenges notions of identity, but also the politics of memory. In her time with the author, Antoinette recalled how the Interahamwe, a group which sought Hutu power, menacingly threatened her with machetes, the tool used by perpetrators to conduct their agricultural work, and their killings. Her story also supports other similar narratives. For instance, in Hatzfeld's study, a Hutu mother witnessed her son and husband killed before her very own eyes, after the son had begged for this request. When she and a daughter were left standing, one of the killers said, let them go, we've done enough for now. The others will get them (75). Being left with the memory of death was something many survivors talked about, in fact, as Burnet shows many of these women developed mechanisms to cope with their grief. They faced life by forming different constructions of normality. For instance, they shared food with family and friends, participated in women's cooperatives, prayed and worked in the fields, as they, as the author shows, paid no attention to ethnic distinctions (5). This concept for normality differed for those participating in the decimation of an ethnic group. Hatzfeld work shows how normalcy for the killers consisted of eating, mostly meat in the morning, going out to the fields and the hills to conduct their "work" and returning in the evenings to eat again. Some consoled themselves by drinking. The fact that the idea of normalcy centered on food, and cabarets, suggests how these escapes provided some form of reconciliation in the midst of civil war, and, in the aftermath, of its absence.

Burnet and Hatzfeld's work, as well as the documentary "Komora" by Natalia Ledford and Emmanuel Habimana focusing on the orphaned community, illustrate how ordinary Rwandans remembered the country's past. Their recollections not only provide a counter-narrative to the state, they also challenge it, and its definition of nationhood. As part of the government's reconciliation policy all citizens identify as Rwandan rather than their ethnicity. In

fact, it is illegal to ask someone if they are Hutu or Tutsi. While this is now an official policy, the state, as Burnet illustrates, continues to see the civil war in black and white terms. That is, the state policy, its statues, and other sites of commemoration distinguish between the perpetrators and the victims, and, as this scholar shows, omits the products of ethnically mixed marriages. Instead of complicating the notion of identity, the state is culpable as Burnet argues, of erasure and perpetuating difference, instead of a national unity based on equality. Not only does Burnet make this point, she also deconstructs how mythico-history develops. This is not only problematic as the scholar posits, it also tells another narrative that dominates discussion and features the Tutsi as victims and the Hutu as perpetrators. Burnet, in drawing testimony from women, refutes this notion, using the combination of NGO workers, community leaders, government officials, ordinary Rwandans, and leaders of women's organizations to show not only the diversity in terms of demography but also geography. The latter category gains importance for the following reasons as the topography became a large part of the battle, as its fields served as places for the "agriculturalists" to plant and replenish the soil with the "tall trees" that lay strewn on the ground.

By writing this book, Burnet attempts to rebuild society through the pages in which she translates women's pains, sorrows, and joys into their diverse cries, triumphs, and experiences. This exists not only in terms of ethnicity but also in terms of reconciliation. Coming to terms with death was one of the many issues that women faced. They also dealt with the vacancies and the voids that human contact from former loved ones left behind. One woman, who was stricken by her grief, refused to sleep in a double bed because she did not have her partner. Other women dealing with absences, chose to relocate, remarry or have children (75). These examples not only tell of physical movement, but also spiritually too, as newborns united the living with the

ancestral world. It also formed part of the women's reconciliation as they recommitted themselves to being whole. Babies, and the act of mothering humanized them in ways that the genocide had demonized them.

Women recalled their tragic experiences in different ways. Sometimes women revealed their stories in snippets, through silences, at opportune moments, at specific places and witnessing certain objects. One survivor, for instance, saw a gardener with a machete and fainted. The vision of the genocide had flashed before her very eyes (82). Another survivor told her story, and then pointed to others present that had lived on the same hill as she. They were all running away. Not only did this man and woman experience the fear with the narrator, they also formed part of her catharsis as she made known the invisibility of their collective endurance. This woman, and members of her audience memorialized their stories either through their bodily scars, their emotional ones, or the scars that the landscape carved (87). Even the soil became an identifying marker in the narrative on death. The landscape with its self-identifying hills became part of the tapestry of mourning and part of the visibility of pain. The landscape was, in essence, a forensic site where witnesses and survivors could recover information, but while Burnet talks about its importance, she focuses less on its interaction with gender and the women's mourning practices with the soil. In fact, the land became extensions of their bodies, as their loved one's fluids leaked out onto its earth.

While Burnet shows how the policy of reconciliation created a perceived harmonic existence, she also reminds readers of how social classifications define Rwandans in the post-genocide era. For example, there are terms that signify Tutsi. These include victims (*inzirakarengane*), survivors (*abarokotse*), genocide widows (*abapfakazi b'itsembabwoko*), and old returnees (*abaturutse hanze, abarutashye*). For Hutu these designations apply: perpetrators

(*abicanyi*), prisoners (*abafunze*), infiltrators (*abacengezi*), and new returnees (*abatingitingi abatahutse, abahungutse*). While these terms presumably connote ethnicity, they, as Burnet argues, defy the alleged perception of a South African like ‘Rainbow Nation,’ while at the same time, these words dispel the myth of perceived unity among the country’s populace. But, while the government orchestrates this campaign to promote togetherness, these words pour salt into wounds still fresh from the genocide’s impact. They even challenge the authenticity and the impact of the gacaca courts. Gacaca, according to Wikipedia was “a system of community justice in the grass,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gacaca_court.

Building upon traditional institutions, these courts allowed survivors to give testimony about the genocide. Testimonies unearthed different recollections. Sometimes survivors learned how they could recover the bodies of their loved ones or learned how they had passed. While these were the positive things that the gacaca produced, there are other results that challenged the integrity that they rested on. Many times, defendants admitted to crimes that they had not committed or lied about the atrociousness of the death, falsely implicated people, or used money to get reduced sentences or none at all. While well-intentioned, this practice as the author points out, had its flaws, as It reinforced divisions within society between the haves and the have nots, thereby making reconciliation an issue of class rather than an issue of spirituality.

Thus, in this study, which bares the soul of its female survivors, Burnett answers her questions with meticulous analysis and interspersed narratives. While more women survived than men, they paid dearly to live by enduring rape, sexual torture and sexual enslavement. The inclusion of gender, or in the case of Ledford’s and Habimana’s award-winning film, “orphans, Hatzfeld’s killers, or therapist’s Esther Mujawayo’s widows, address stories that needed to be told. While Burnet’s work invites us into the homes, the minds, the fields, and the bodies of

women, she makes us mindful of renowned Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk. Championing heterogeneity and multi-varied interpretations, Adichie suggests "there is danger in the single story." While Burnet shows the non-monolithic female community, their counterparts -the males who survived,- are not part of the featured analysis on gender. Having them in a dialectic with each other would complicate even further identity markers such as widowers/widows, orphans/, killers, and parents/children etc. While this is not really a criticism of this rich work, and its engagement with women, it is more of a compliment to honor what she has produced. Burnet has engendered thought for further intellectual inquiry. Not only did she mine the libraries that existed within the women, the author created an archive within the seven chapters in which she interrogates Rwanda's history. Thus, *Genocide Lives in Us* illustrates how women's bodies became part of both: the analytical terrain and the politics of memory, and this book serves as a testament to these inquiries.

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