

# "The Pain of Violence is a *African Women Writing*

BY VANESSA FARR

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Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of violence against women is particularly important for contemporary women writers in areas of conflict in Africa.

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*Cet article attire notre attention sur les défis que rencontrent les femmes journalistes qui font les reportages sur les conflits en Afrique. C'est à travers l'analyse du travail fait par les organisations féministes dans la foulée du régime de l'apartheid, que l'auteure suggère que l'écriture des femmes peut soutenir les initiatives de solidarité communautaire au-delà des frontières, et peut aider les femmes qui ne veulent pas la guerre.*

In 1999, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair held a Women Writers Conference which brought together writers from all

over the continent. Delegates presented "country reports" in which they offered an assessment of the conditions under which women were writing and publishing in various parts of Africa. In report after report, violence was the central theme.

Before I attended the conference, I had been studying women's collaborative life writing in Southern Africa, and working as an activist in the women's movement in South Africa. But, because I was focusing on women's writing about how they survived apartheid, I had not sufficiently examined the explicit connections between life writing about that period and the continuum it forms with women's current resistance to the violence that surrounds us in South Africa. This article explores some of the connections that the conference allowed me to make. In it, I shall discuss the means by which African women writers have resisted, and continue to defy the imposition of silence during conflict, as well as offer an analysis of women's ongoing struggle for a voice in post-apartheid South Africa.

Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of violence against women is particularly important for contemporary women writers in areas of conflict in Africa, but it is also the most difficult subject for them to write about. The challenges that typically face women writers are particularly exaggerated in situations of conflict and flight. In order to reassert conservative social values, which implicitly rely on the voicelessness of women, political movements all too often

use women's bodies as a site on which to assert their power. The last thing such regimes would tolerate is women organizing around and publicizing this abuse.

Cynthia Cockburn traces, in *The Space Between Us*, how the re-imposition of "traditionalist images of women and men" (13) is usually intrinsic to conflict. Although her book does not examine the situation in Africa, her description of the process whereby independent, emancipated women are transformed by war into "victims" and "refugees," is possibly more resonant for a continent whose women are so frequently depicted as hapless, than for anywhere else. After all, the history of colonial ideologies and the patriarchal states that succeeded them have always premised their portrayal of African women on their being voiceless and silent (Busia).

Cockburn insists that "primordial explanations" of war violence disguise the "important idea" that "apparently ethnic wars are, in a sense, also gender wars." She traces a continuum whereby ,

[t]he communal power these political movements, armed with guns, seek to establish or defend is (among other things) gender power, the regimes they seek to install are (among other things) gender regimes. As well as defining a relation between peoples and land, they shape a certain relation between women and men. It is a relation of male dominance, in some cases frankly patriarchal. It is constituted at best in a refusal to challenge the existing balance of gender power enforced by male violence, at worst in an essentialist discourse that reasserts a supposedly natural order and legitimates that violence (13).

Recognizing this, African women writers find the courage to continue to resist attempts to silence them.

The writers were almost universally struggling to cope within precisely the extremes of patriarchal manipulation that Cockburn describes above. Norah Mumba, founder of the Zambian Women Writers Association, voiced the universal fact that violence against women is further aggravated when it is concealed by a code of silence. Given this constraint, those women who wish to write about the violence that surrounds us experience intense social pressure to keep quiet. At the Women Writers Conference, several country reports focused on public reactions to unpalatable subjects. Even in countries where women's

# Powerful Silencer" *About Conflict*

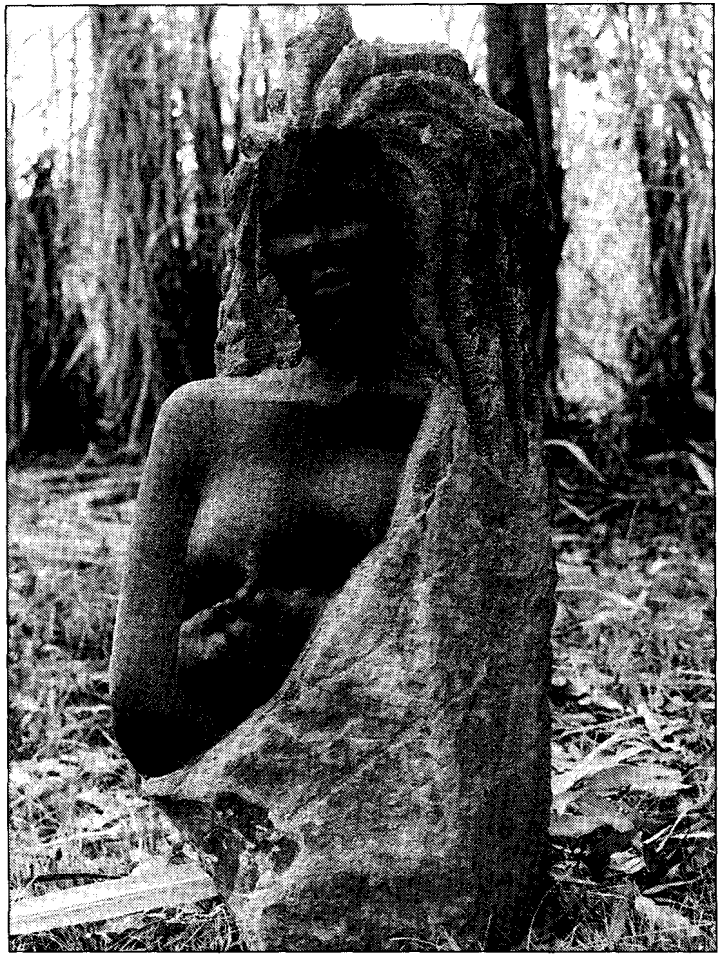
writing is tolerated, authors experience problems; their writing is acceptable only as long as it is constrained to the traditional spheres of children's literature or romantic novels. Many participants at the conference revealed that their exclusion from the male-owned world of politics often extends quite specifically to the forms and subject matter they can use in their writing. They also spoke of the blank refusal of editors to publish stories of sexual assault from a perspective respectful to women.

The small creative space that is allowed to women as writers is continually under threat of subversion to serve the dominant male ideology. In many African countries, the country reports revealed, women can publish their work as long as they support certain stereotypes—especially those that celebrate male warmongers. This is particularly true when militant governments are in power. As Cockburn suggests, militancy and patriarchy are mutually supportive. In particular, women are expected to uphold a celebration of "the archetype of woman as caretaker," which, Laura Kaplan asserts,

supports patriarchal militarism because it is used by male warriors in the service of the war effort and because it builds on a gender opposition created by patriarchy to contain women. (124)

Casting women as caretakers who cannot write about "male" subjects such as conflict also places them in opposition to the fact that, for many men, war is considered to be "a creative masculine act," the contemplation of which, in historical and literary accounts, they alone control (Kaplan 124).

Women writers in war zones want to resist this male hegemony. But how can they do so when material difficulties of wartime exact their toll on any ambition to write? If writing is difficult for women living within the constraints of "normal" society, it is nearly impossible for those displaced by violence who try to do their work in spaces where the conditions for basic existence, let alone for contemplation and writing, are wholly inadequate. As Teresa Samuel Ibrahim of the Sudan asked at the Writers Conference, who would prioritize guarding her writing materials when she is fleeing from a war? And then, how do you put in writing facts about displaced women's lives? Who is prepared to venture into a war zone to collect women's stories? How will they find people who are



*"Nursing Mother." Sculpture in the Chapunga Sculpture Park in Harare, Zimbabwe. All sculptures are carved in stones which are found in the area. Photo: Vanessa Farr.*

willing to speak? In refugee camps, a lack of facilities, space, or leisure overwhelms any attempts to contemplate writing. And if you *are* able to collect any material, Ibrahim asked, what can be done when you are faced by the pact of silence that prevents women's stories from being heard? Publishers in the Sudan, she said, simply refuse to print "nasty" stories about women's suffering—especially when the victims are from the non-Muslim population who are the principal targets of a decades-old civil war.

In the unlikely event that the stories are published, yet another crushing constraint remains. When illiteracy rates are high and education receives no priority, who will read what you write? Do those who have passed through a war zone even want reminders of their experiences? Or is the writing always undertaken for outsiders, who may or may not be sympathetic to the situation and the people portrayed? If so, can such readers be trusted to perceive the



"Praying Woman." Sculpture in the Chapunga Sculpture Park in Harare, Zimbabwe. Photo: Vanessa Farr.

strategies that women develop to challenge and survive the constraints of militarization, or will they read the accounts through eyes which reinforce stereotypes of otherness and barbarity, and reassert exclusionary race, class, and gender norms?

Such questions are very real to African women writing in conflict. Nevertheless, the writers at the conference were unanimous in their aim to voice their experiences of suffering and survival. They have experienced the fact that muteness is one of the most invidious forms of poverty and violence, and recognize that it is a root cause of women's lack of power and, simultaneously, key to the continuance of their suppression. They know that widespread sexual assault, which has only recently gained proper recognition as one of the primary weapons of war,<sup>1</sup> is rendered most effective by its stigmatization as a crime against the dignity and honour of the family, the tribe, and the nation of the women violated. They have seen how, especially during times of conflict, individual women lose their selfhood when they are subject to rape. Their suffering is not even eased by post-war tribunals because these, too, are hampered by the perception that rape is a crime which somehow violates the cultural ideals of honour or morality, rather than named as a crime against women's humanity.

If women cannot write about the pain of women, then how will systems that support conflict and subvert justice ever be forced to change? In order to answer this question, I shall look at the situation of South Africa, a country which is trying to transform itself in the aftermath of conflict.

### Women writing after conflict in South Africa

The recognition that apartheid constituted a form of civil war which brutalized *all* South Africans has been seen as essential to the nation's chance of healing and moving away from behaviours that were entrenched and normalized under the previous regime. As a nation, South Africa has struggled to find an appropriate space from which to address the horrors that its citizens, living and dead, have endured.

The establishment of a public discourse about the apartheid war has had important implications for the emergence of the survival stories of ordinary South Africans. One obvious forum in which these heroic tales have been told is through the submission of testimonials to the (by now world famous) Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This body was established after the promulgation of the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No 34 of 1995, and launched by Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the Day of Reconciliation, 16 December, 1995.

One of apartheid's most devastating legacies is that it continuously exposed people to violence, "either directly or indirectly." Over the decades, such violence "came to be seen as a legitimate means of resolving conflict, which worsened violence against women, children, and older people" (Goosen and Klugman 53).

The appalling incidence of violence against women in South Africa has been carefully analyzed and reported by many women's organizations in the country for a number of years. It was always recognized as one of the most invidious products of apartheid's brutality, but it nevertheless failed to make a significant impact on the initial structure and workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This serves as a warning that, despite important developments such as the establishment of a gender-sensitive Constitution which includes provision for a Gender Commission, sexual inequality remains a problem to be consciously addressed—even in newly formed South African institutions like the TRC.

Entrenched gender blindness was a key topic at a recent conference on the aftermath of war held in Johannesburg, South Africa. As Joyce Seroke, one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners, explained in a keynote address:

In the course of [the TRC's] work, it became apparent that the voices of women were not being heard; that their real stories were not being told. Women were

being cast as secondary victims of apartheid—as the mothers, the wives, the sisters and the aunts of the primary victims, who were almost all men.<sup>2</sup>

Yasmin Souka, Chair of South Africa's Human Rights Violations Committee (TRC), agreed. Enlarging on Seroke's report, she described how, although more than 55 per cent of depositions to the TRC were received by women, it was rare that they were able to speak of their experiences *as women*, and even though efforts were made to arrange special hearings for women, the stigma of reporting sexual assault remained overpowering. Reinforcing the patriarchal lie that rape is something women secretly desire, women victims were regarded as "sell-outs" by the liberation movement in the 1980s. The legacy of this stigma prevails in the fact that there were very few accusations of sexual assault during the hearings, and even fewer admissions of sexual assault and applications for amnesty for this crime. Faced with the silence that surrounded the subject of war rape, the TRC was forced to rethink its handling of women's testimonies. Commissioners had to ask difficult questions: is sexual assault not perceived as a crime of the same magnitude as those which *did* attract amnesty appeals? Do perpetrators feel confident enough about their victim's silence to ignore this issue? Or is the real problem that mechanisms such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are not designed to be sufficiently sensitive to the particular forms of suffering endured by women?<sup>3</sup>

### Finding South African women's voices: feminist alternatives

While the formal channels through which people could speak might have been slow to recognize their own perpetuation of inequality, feminist activists have explored other means to bring to light previously hidden experiences.<sup>4</sup> Their projects have involved the production and publishing of women's stories about life under and after apartheid, not merely to ensure an historical record of women's survival, but to transmute their suffering into a celebration of injustice defeated.

While painful, the process of writing a life history can be affirming and creative. David Read Johnson, a psychotherapist and advocate of creative arts therapies, argues:

It is probable that art originally developed as a means of expression of, and relief from, traumatic experience. Art, song, drama, and dance in primitive (*sic*) times were motivated by the need for catharsis and gaining control over threats to the community or to the individual. The arts abound at times of ... death ... war, and natural disaster, for they help to encapsulate terror. ( 13)

While they may have access to other forms of indigent art, ordinary South African women, particularly



"The Family." Sculpture in the Chapunga Sculpture Park in Harare, Zimbabwe. Photo: Vanessa Farr.

rural black women, who were the most dispossessed by apartheid, do not find abundant opportunities to save their stories for posterity. The chance to record their histories in a supportive environment affords them, thus, both a catharsis and the affirmation of an experience of suffering and survival shared by their immediate community. In the words of Nothemba Ngcwe, author of *Not the End of the World*,

I have always wanted to write my life story.... If a story is being written, many people can read that story. And from that story we can find that our stories are sometimes the same. So people can learn that it's not only me who has suffered this, there are many people.

And writing of stories will help other women also. There are women who are folding arms and saying, I've been through this and this, and I don't know how to go on, and I'm unable to go forward. But if they read our stories, they are going to learn that we didn't fold our arms. We just fought forward and tried to come out if it. (1)

In her awareness of the influence of stories in challenging women's powerless self perceptions and in recognizing

their strategies for survival, Ngcwece participates in a broader feminist project to overthrow present perspectives on conflict that refuse to pay attention to the breadth of women's experiences. Even the most simply written survival stories form part of a growing body of literature that disturbs existing paradigms, and, in the words of Cockburn, permits women to "represent war as a continuum of violence from the bedroom to the battlefield, traversing our bodies and our sense of self." Such a development has made visible the paradox that, for women, "the 'homeland' is not, never was, an essentially peaceful place" (8).

### **The underpinnings of gendered violence in South Africa**

Cockburn's use of the word "homeland" has particularly ironic resonances for rural black South African women, who were specifically victimized by the centrality of the homeland system to the apartheid policy of "separate development." In 1951, only three years after the National Party came to power, the Bantu Authorities Act was promulgated to establish the basis for grand apartheid. Reserves, known as "homelands" were established as so-called "independent states" (recognized by no other nation except South Africa) to which black South Africans were forcibly removed. This carving up of the country was the cornerstone of the regime's segregation policies, and permitted the National Party to exploit the most arable and/or mineral rich parts of the country and to create unprecedented prosperity for whites in South Africa. Dwellers in the homelands had no political rights, including citizenship, except for those afforded by their designated homeland, and could only enter the Republic to work if they held a valid pass. The possession of passes was largely restricted to men who were forced into migrant labour in mining and industry. Rural women were particularly dispossessed by apartheid policies, as they, along with children and the elderly, were considered "surplus population" whose movement away from the poverty of the rural areas was illegal. Women without passes could, and did, enter the vast squatter camps surrounding the cities of South Africa, but this placed them in a vulnerable position from which they could only participate in the informal economy—as street vendors, beer makers, sex workers, or domestic labourers.

Apartheid relied implicitly on achieving its racist and economic imperatives through disenfranchisement and the systematic imposition of violence and silence on the majority of the population. It affected every part of people's lives, destroying both mental and physical health, and family and social life. Rape and sexual assault were commonly employed weapons of oppression in the apartheid era. Their continued presence is a particularly dreadful legacy, an explicit reminder of the gendered underpinnings of the apartheid system, and a fearful testimony to

the lingering effects of the psychological damage that so many South Africans suffered.

### **South Africa will never be free until the women are free!**

The *Country Report on the Status of South African Women* prepared for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 recognizes the need to address sexual assault as a significant part of South Africa's current turmoil, and argues that it is an area demanding urgent and specialized attention. The writers state:

It is generally accepted that the high incidence of violence against women is not a problem of individual pathology, but a severe social disorder, and that intervention strategies would need to address the ideological, socio-political and psychological factors involved. (Pregs Govender *et al.* qtd. in Goosen and Klugman 61)

Rape Crisis, a national organization dedicated to revealing the high rates of sexual assault in the country, has taken to heart the recommendations of the writers of the Beijing Report. Its researchers, too, insist that the most urgent work in South Africa lies in reforming and enlightening outmoded and gender insensitive institutions, in particular the judiciary. The organization has been at the forefront of developing a two-pronged approach to legal reform which involves both broad-based advocacy through "mainstreaming feminist jurisprudence or gender equity in law" and strategic advocacy which works at many levels, from "shifting policy and legislation through critical response and intervention" to "contributing to the re-drafting of legislation pertaining to violence against women, gender equity, maintenance, bail, sentencing" and the formulation of "policy appropriate to criminal justice service delivery to survivors of domestic violence" (<http://www.rapecrisis.org.za/>).

The efforts of Rape Crisis and its many sister institutions have resulted in an unparalleled level of public debate about the previously marginalized problem of violence against women, and have raised awareness to the point that South Africans have a public language with which to talk about the stigma of our sexual assault rates. The work these organizations undertake to raise levels of public discourse is on-going, creative, and hard-hitting. Their sustained campaigns have been crucial in raising awareness about gender violence in the country, and aim to speak to ordinary people, in graphic terms, about the real rates of violence.

The call to "Break the Silence!" has not, however, made for a less complicated public discourse about rape. Calculating that one woman is assaulted every 23 seconds in South Africa, and that one in two women is likely to be

assaulted at least once in her lifetime,<sup>5</sup> Rape Crisis have not hesitated to shock the public into action. Statistics on sexual assault rates are, however, controversial and variable in South Africa, and can range anywhere from the claim above, to the more moderate argument that one in six women are assaulted. The National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) Women's Support Centre in the Western Cape estimates that one in three women will be sexually assaulted at least once in her lifetime. This figure is derived from the official statistics of the South African Police Services, which tell a complex story of what is happening in the country with regard not only to the high rates of sexual assault, but also to public awareness and responsiveness to the problem. In 1993, reported sexual assaults in the Republic of South Africa numbered 27,037. In 1994, this figure increased by 18.75 per cent to 32,107. In 1995, there was an 8.33 per cent increase in reporting, and in 1996 this grew by an enormous 46.17 per cent, to total 50,841 assaults. In 1997, 52,160 attacks were reported, a 2.58 per cent increase over 1996 (www.womensnet.org.za).

While it is possible to conclude, as some feminists do, that both the rate and the brutality of sexual assault has dramatically increased since the end of apartheid (Fedler quoted in Meer) this assertion is not without its dangers: the right-wing movement in the country, for one, has not hesitated to use such statistics to support its propaganda in support of racist policies. In a different interpretation of the figures, Judge Albie Sachs says: "I have heard about continuing violence, violence against women, I think it was always there. It is being reported now because silences are being broken."<sup>6</sup> The statistics above can hopefully be read to indicate a growing public willingness to speak out, and I would like to think they indicate the results of what women have been organizing for many years (Goosen and Klugman; Meer). It could be argued that such responses are only possible now that the end of the anti-apartheid struggle has cleared the way for a greater focus on the broader social ills it brought about.

### Fighting forward

Urged on by women's organizations, the media have been at the vanguard of an awareness campaign which has ensured that rape is an increasingly visible crime in South Africa, and that myths about sexual assault are being undermined in a way which is unprecedented on the continent. Radio and television talk shows and country-wide advertising campaigns, mass rallies, and a petition administered by a national retailer and delivered to the President, Thabo Mbeki, on National Women's Day, 9 August 1999, have all contributed to a public "coming to voice" which can be seen to parallel the individual journeys to expression captured in women's life writing. Altogether, an environment is being fostered in which the nation is forced to face up to its failure to protect its

vulnerable members and to engage in the on-going pursuit of solutions to the crisis.

What I have learned from talking to women writers in other parts of Africa is that the ways in which we are learning to voice our resistance against ongoing violence in South Africa will not only be useful for the betterment of our country, but could also be applied to other parts of the continent. When women are able to speak out against the violence that occurs in so-called "peacetime," and to prove that it is a repercussion of the self-hatred and brutality promoted by war, they will be empowered to effect far more revolutionary change than anything we have seen in Africa thus far. It is an enormous and difficult task that we face, and sometimes, when you live in South Africa, it still feels as if not enough has changed and that the obstacles to achieving true freedom are just too immense to be overcome. In concluding her life story, anti-apartheid activist Neliswa Mroxisa recognizes this, but urges us forward:

*Ek het koue dae in die tronk geslaap. Ek het koue aande sonner my kinders geslaap. En ek het gesê dit sal my kinnners se kinnners se rykdom wees, wat ek voor strugle....*

*Ons moet praat, dan moet ons nou sê: "The voice of the women must be heard." En so ons kan nou 'n bietjie hard praat, en onse stemmetjie word ook nou gehoor.*

*Ek is nog nie klaar nie. Ons moet nog baie dinge regmaak.*

I spent cold days in a prison cell. I spent cold nights without my children. And I said, "this will be my children's children's reward, that which I am struggling for now."

We have to speak out, now is the time to say: "The voice of the women must be heard!" We must speak a little louder, so our small voices will also begin to be heard.

I am not yet finished. We still have a lot of things to put right. [my translation] (77)

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<sup>1</sup>This recognition is largely the result of media exposure of mass rapes in the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

<sup>2</sup>Keynote address at "The Aftermath Conference: Women in Post-War Reconstruction." Johannesburg, Republic of

South Africa, 20-22 July, 1999.

<sup>3</sup>A submission entitled "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" was prepared by Sheila Meintjies and Beth Goldblatt in May 1996. The full text of this is available online at <http://www.truth.org.za/submit/gender.htm>. Its main purpose was to plead for gender sensitivity within the TRC hearings, but, even as it raised awareness within the Commission, this submission could not prevent the pitfalls outlined above.

<sup>4</sup>This article is part of a broader analysis of feminist collaborative life story projects in South Africa. As far as I am aware, initiatives to collect the life stories of ordinary South Africans have been undertaken exclusively by women and for women. By contrast, it is only the biographies of famous male heroes of the struggle that have been published.

<sup>5</sup>The figure in Canada is one in four. This is also alarmingly high, but in Canada, Jenny Horsman argues, in spite of "overwhelming evidence about the frequency of violence ... conceptualizations of violence as not 'normal' and silences about the extent of violence in society, make it possible to assume violence is an uncommon event."

<sup>6</sup>Sachs, one of the most famed anti-apartheid activists and now a Judge in the Constitutional Court of South African, was another keynote speaker at The Aftermath conference.

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