War and Women

by Diana Wong

Cet article sur les femmes et la guerre commence par le récit d'une femme érytréenne qui a dû se réfugier à l'Ouest à cause de la guerre qui régnait dans son pays. En se basant sur le récit de cette femme, l'auteure analyse la littérature qui existe sur les femmes et la guerre.

When Tiebe, who had lived in a provincial German city as an Eritrean refugee for the last eight years, agreed to tell her story in the summer of 1992,[1] she added this comment at the end of her brief and halting narration:

> *Our people—they can understand such situations. They have seen—not experienced the way I have—but they have also experienced, even though they remained at home. They can understand.*
>
> *But the Germans—that a girl such as I—for them it is unthinkable that a girl goes through such things in war. That was a surprise. Everyone said to me "War—ahhh! Did you actually handle weapons, did you shoot?"*

Beverley Deutch

> *They see with eyes narrowed, they see that a girl should not kill. "Don't you have a conscience? You shoot?" When someone asks like that, it's enough to make me angry. Then I just can't talk about it at all.*
>
> *Then I recount carefully. But I have no desire to tell all.*

Tiebe's story begins in the Eritrean countryside:[2]

> *My name is Tiebe, I was born in Eritrea in 1962, in the province of Akkele Gezai, that is my land, my village land. That was where I grew up, my parents are peasants.*

This land, her village land, as she adds later, was "not yet developed." Peasant life ("to be a peasant, to harvest, etc.") seemed immutable. Society was characterized by a strong collective orientation ("very social...if a village had 50 people, it was like one big family") and virtual autonomy in the regulation of community affairs ("for example divorce and marriage, the rules were not made from above, no written rules, just from the society, simply regulated by the society itself").

After thus setting the stage, she proceeds with the narrative:

> *Ya...what can I say... that I spent five years in school, primary school. That, where we were, it was also difficult. For example, a girl could never complete her school education, because they would limit her. The parents, for example, think that the fourth or fifth grade is enough. If you can write, then you can leave, that's enough, then you can marry. But I wanted very much to continue going to school, but it was not much possible, but in spite of this, I completed the fifth grade.*

The story of her childhood is the story of her love of schooling. "When other children asked me, and then said 'ah, you must marry,'" "no! I won't be separated from the school by anyone." Girls were sent to school, but not for long; parents were of the opinion that "when a girl could write her name, she should get married." With the entry of her two younger sisters into school, pressure mounted for her to leave. The introduction of school fees later led to the first test of will. Her father refused to pay, whereupon she ran away to an uncle who lived in town and got the money from him. Some time later, the father's resolve to remove her from school for the purpose of marriage led to a second flight to town, this time without a destination. "I didn't know where to go, just seated myself in the bus." She found shelter as a maid to a childless couple. They

were nice to her, and it was an educational experience. "I could only carry water and wash dishes, etc., but I couldn't bake and so on; she taught me a lot, in those three weeks I learnt a lot." But she soon realized that her dreams of schooling would not be realized there as well. She returned home, having at least wrested the promise from her parents, who had launched a futile search for her, that she would be allowed to finish her primary schooling before marriage.

Ya, after that, my parents wanted to marry me off, but I didn't want to.

"I wanted it, because I saw no other way out. If I had returned, I would have had to marry and I wouldn't have been able to go any further. I had no other chance to go further."

And well...ya, as you know, there has been fighting in my homeland since 1971. Well actually, Eritrea has been a colony since 1890, for a hundred years. Because of this, there has always been fighting in my homeland.

And then, at my age, I was thirteen in 1975, I decided to leave to join the struggle—just like that, for freedom.

The Damocles' sword which had overshadowed her childhood and which was to end it could not be deflected for much longer. Under these circumstances, a chance encounter changed her life. While her parents were away at a wedding, an armed stranger walked into the village to ask for water. Tiebe was alone with her sister and after the initial fear had dissipated, she needled him with questions: "whether they carried arms, whether women were allowed to fight, which countries helped us, and so on." When her parents returned, they invited him to stay the night.

"I couldn't sleep the whole night, I just wanted to go, that was terrible, oh..." The next morning, the stranger, who had read her mind, attempted to dissuade her from executing her plan: "hey you, you have to be careful, don't run away, you're still young, you still have a lot to learn." But Tiebe was adamant. "I was already in a hurry, like having fire in my guts." When her parents were out of the house the next day, she made her escape.

She had discovered that the guerrilla fighters were to be found in an area close to her mother's village. In order to avoid detection, she had to arrive after nightfall. She ran for four hours through the night and was almost raped along the way by a man who desisted only when another man came by. When she arrived, the guerrillas wanted to send her back. Shortly thereafter, her father came to take her home.

She describes the heart-rending scenes which followed.

My father said: 'I'll clobber you, then I'll bring your dead body back, then you'll come home.' I said to him: 'Look, you have seven children, they too have a mother and father, why do you want me?' And he said: 'No, you are like light,' he said, 'because you are the first child.' He said: 'Look, I have seven children at home, but you are like light for my house, without you, it will be in darkness. I cannot enter, you must come, I'll take you with me.'

Two days later, the camp was strafed by a government plane.

He didn't want to take cover. We all ducked, but he remained standing, and then I said: 'Please, Papa, do come.' Then he said to me: 'No, I want to be killed by the airplane, then you take my dead body. I wanted to take yours, but you take mine then. We'll go home together, and you can tell your brothers and sisters what happened.' That's how he spoke.

Tiebe adds:

That was tortuous, but I wanted to do it. I wanted it, because I saw no other way out. Because if I had returned, I would have had to marry and I wouldn't have been able to go any further. I had no other chance to go further—that was the only thought in my head—but inside me, oh, that was a torture.

In light of her determination, the guerrillas allowed her to stay, and sent her father home. Her mother came next, and "just wept." Tiebe hurled "bitter words" at her, "so that she would hate me." But the mother replied: "Ah, I know your mouth is bitter, but your inside is not." She, too, had to leave without her.

It was, Tiebe mused, a shock for her parents. Her father "had not believed me when I said no." Her mother "wept for many years, always, at home." When her brothers also left to join the fighting, the mother's bitter wail etched itself into Tiebe's memory: "What is my womb, what I bear just goes away...they just go away."

Later, when every family had incurred losses in the war, "it's the same for all," but at that time, losing a child to the war was a rare occurrence, unusual for a male, "impossible" for a female. For her parents, it seemed as if "the other families are so lucky, they have all their children with them, they can bring them up, they can marry them, and so on." "But now," Tiebe adds, she is "there again" for her parents, and now that she is there with a family and children, "it is good now."

Then, from 1975 to 1982, I was fighting with the ELF [Eritrean Liberation Front], although I understood very little. For example, equal rights for women. I understood very little about that. But I did feel oppressed nonetheless, like with my parents not allowing me to go to school. It

had bothered me, but still, I didn't understand very much about women's rights.

But that was fortunate for me, I mean, I could learn a lot about my country, about politics, also personally, as a woman, that I can do something for my rights. Yes, I got a lot out of it, I learnt about politics, I could also continue with my schooling.

Two weeks after Tiebe joined the guerrillas, she left the Eritrean highlands with 30 other women on a 40-day foot march to a training base close to the Sudanese border.

"I was happy on the whole, glad that I didn't remain at home. I would have been married off. I wouldn't have achieved so much, that was on the whole good for me."

After three weeks of military and political education, she was sent to a hospital in the highlands, where she trained and worked for three years as a nursing assistant. After that, she was assigned to an operational brigade of 30 soldiers as their medical officer. She remained with the brigade until its military defeat in 1981. The year 1980, during which they were subject to the relentless assaults of the Ethiopian government forces, is highlighted by her as "the most difficult time in my life."

While with the brigade, she met her future husband, who was attached to another brigade. Although they had already received permission to marry, the marriage was put off as military conditions worsened: "when there is constant warfare, when people are dying, it doesn't make much sense." Just as he was away to arrange a substitute for her in her brigade, fighting broke out with a rival guerrilla organization and his brigade and hers had to flee—in opposite directions. They were separated for a year and she feared that "I'll never meet him again, either I'll die or he or both of us." They were reunited in the Sudan—"fortunately"—and married there.

During the seven years she was at the front, she did meet her parents a few times, as her unit was operating close to her home village. She visited her parents once; once they came to see her. Each time, it was "very hard" on her, and eventually, she avoided such encounters by not informing her parents of her whereabouts. She last saw her father by sheer chance in the Sudan. As she was standing in line for her meal, she saw someone familiar. "I looked closer, am I dreaming or what? I had a shock, I said, 'Papa' and then, I simply ran to him. He had not recognized me." Her father recounted to her how he had always looked out for her in the midst of all those battles (he belonged to the rival organization) and had feared her death. "Well...I'm still alive," she said to him laconically.

In retrospect, she is thankful for those years of struggle:

Yes, that was fortunate on the whole, I was happy on the whole, glad that I didn't remain at home. I would have been married off, I wouldn't have achieved so much, that was on the whole good for me.

In retrospect, it was also those years of struggle which effected a reconciliation with her parents: "At that time, I was so angry and hated my parents...but after I had left to join the struggle, later, after two years, then I understood that our society was like that." Weighing the balance of those years, she formulates her vision for the future:

That the children will receive an education, that there will finally be freedom, where mothers have always had to give away their children, to always weep, to have to grieve, that they can finally be left in peace, that they can say: 'Okay, thank God it is over, now I can hold my children, the remaining children, in my hands.'

Ya, but then I had to flee to the Sudan, from Sudan to Frankfurt, to Germany, to live as a refugee.

After the military withdrawal from Eritrea, they remained in their camp in Sudan for a year. Their subsequent demilitarization by the Sudanese army convinced them of the futility of their military cause. "There was little hope that we could continue fighting." She was pregnant, there was no hope of return, life in the Sudan was difficult. "We had to flee." She adds immediately,

That wasn't in our mind, that I should go abroad or to Germany or anywhere, that was never a dream of mine. I had thought that till the very end I would sacrifice my body. Either I die for my homeland, or there is freedom. That was never my dream, nor that of my husband.

They made their way in the dark of the night from the camp to Khartoum. There, they sent an appeal for help to a friend abroad. He sent money and the suggestion that they should flee to Germany. "We didn't know which country we should go to, but he said: 'It's better for you to go to Germany.'" When she arrived in Frankfurt in January 1983, she was eight months pregnant.

And well, I'm there, I've lived since eight years, since 1983—it's become eight years—that's right. Ya, I think, that's enough.

Her narrative ends: "that's enough." It's been eight years. That's enough.

War and the gender divide

Women and war delimits an area of human experience, difficult, as Tiebe discovers, to talk about in the West. War

has been represented as an experience to which women, and thus the female imagination, has been denied access. The boundary of female incomprehension, it has been argued, replicates the very real border between the *front*, domain of the fighting male, and *home*, domain of the protected female (Rupp; MacDonald; Hanley; Ruddick).[3]

The discourse of war has been enlarged in recent writing by the attention drawn to the largely female composition of the victims of war residing in refugee camps entrusted to the care of relief agencies, generally in the context of their special "needs" as women (Pittaway; Martin; Ferris; Vickers). However, the limitations of this discourse are obvious: women become visible only when enumerated far away from the front, women are cast as victims, and ultimately, victims are cast as women. The conceptual divide of front/agent/male vs. home/victim/female remains unchallenged, being merely enriched by the additional contrast between soldier and refugee.

Female management of survival assumes critical importance. The experience of being tried and proven transforms consciousness, with an impact which becomes visible only in the generation of daughters.

Refugees, it has to be emphasized, are "generated" at the front. The figure of the refugee, as opposed to that of the soldier, is a reminder that warfare intrudes into society. The refugee, whose presence also points to those who do not or cannot flee, disproves the myth of the front as an empty space functionally differentiated for the purpose of war, and attests instead to the bitter reality that social space is the space in which sanctioned violence occurs.

The prevailing representation of war and women which suggests that these spaces are separate derives from the discourse of invasion. War and its front are located elsewhere—in some other place. The trench dug into a no-man's land as the determining icon of western memory of war (Fussell) symbolizes this basic perception of war's spatial neutrality and otherness. This perspective, however, is not universal. It is based on the historical experience of the Anglo-Saxon world.

This perspective, with its rigidly gendered structure, cannot account for—and indeed, silences—the individual and collective experiences of societies which have undergone the agony of war sur place. A list of wars in this century, in particular of so-called low-level intensity wars in the second half of the century fought in the shadow of the Cold War, would belie the assertion that war is unimaginable. For countless individuals and families and families of survivors, the experience, and memory, of war and collective violence "brought to them" was to remain a watershed in their lives. Where their stories are silenced, where they "just can't talk about it at all" to those whose imagination is steeped in another paradigm, that paradigm clearly has to be re-examined.

In reality, wars are hardly ever fought over no man's land; indeed, more often than not, they are fought on account of, and on, some other people's land. "There has always been fighting," says Tiebe," in my homeland." Where this has been the case, war has not been sparing of women and thus hardly elusive to the female imagination. As Martha Gellhorn, the American war journalist, wrote in 1967, "anybody can imagine war; there is nothing arcane about it" (xiii).

What does war mean to women who have to live through it? Tiebe's account can only provide a starting point, for there is no common denominator to war, nor to women. With this caveat in mind, some issues arising from her story will be explored below.

Women and war

When the armed stranger entered the village in search of water, Tiebe's parents were away in another village attending a wedding feast. War, at critical moments, envelops and overwhelms society; more often, however, it is embedded within it. The ordeal of battle and the frenzied orgy of rape and massacre which follows constitute authorized transgressions of the social order which cannot be sustained for an unlimited length of time. "Normality" returns, but under vastly altered conditions.

One of the new conditions imposed by subjugation to military rule is the suppression of civil society and the public sphere, domains traditionally controlled by men. Scarcity of political resources is accompanied by a scarcity of economic resources. Society retreats into the private domain, where the organization of survival becomes the order of the day. Domesticity and the social order spun around it takes centre-stage. Under these new parameters of social life, men often have to abdicate responsibilities previously monopolized, and take on others previously shunned. Female management of survival assumes critical importance. The experience of being tested and tried and proven transforms consciousness, with a profound impact which often becomes fully visible only in the generation of the daughters (Gluck).

The loss of social space under wartime conditions is often paralleled by the creation of new social space, where traditional boundaries, such as those of gender, are more easily challenged. Tiebe was a young and intelligent peasant girl confronted with the fate of early marriage and motherhood. She describes the possibility of escape she saw and seized in the ranks of the liberation army as a desire she was intent on fulfilling, at great emotional cost, against the will of her parents and initially, of the soldiers. She was transformed, she says, by the experience. She has no regrets. Women have their own agendas and they pursue them, in peace, as in war. For previously marginalized people, however, war may open up new opportunities denied under the previous social order.

Tiebe's flight was emulated by her three younger brothers. The graphic description of her father's grief over her loss indicates the closeness of their relationship. It is the mother, however, who is made the icon of suffering at the end of the story. The war should end, children should be able to go to school, mothers should cease to have to cry, the price is too high to pay. The vulnerability and strength of women are two sides of the same coin (Moussa *et al.*). Women's vulnerability in war, in which violence is institutionalized, is clearly heightened.

Wanton rape is succeeded by enforced prostitution (as in the case of the "comfort women" assigned to the Japanese armed forces in World War II). Women who lose their husbands and children to the war, and remain, have to fend for themselves and the remaining children under conditions of extreme scarcity. Women who flee become refugees at the mercy of incomprehensible bureaucracies and hostile governments. Lives are so disrupted that Martha Gellhorn could write: "Anybody who has seen any part of any war can imagine every war; geography, technique and ideologies vary, the common denominator of suffering does not" (xiii).

The domestication of violence in the process of civilization (Elias) has not been complete. Violence, to which women are particularly vulnerable, is still authorized in two realms of behaviour—in the private realm of domesticity and the public realm of war. Both arenas tend to be enveloped in silence. Unravelling the texture of women's lives in the face of war is a task which remains to be undertaken.

Dr. Diana Wong is a sociologist and Deputy Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Her current work is on migration and on the social impact of the Pacific War in Southeast Asia. She has just completed a study of refugees in Germany entitled, "Asylum as a Relation of Otherness."

[1]The interview was conducted in German, which was the only common language shared between Tiebe and the writer, a Chinese woman from Malaysia. Tiebe's German is quite rudimentary and an attempt has been made in the translation to retain the flavour of the language used.

[2]Two interviews were recorded. The first "brief and halting" account is the narrative reproduced in full in the double-indented paragraphs. In the second interview, more details were provided. They have been woven into the text.

[3]"Like abortion and childbirth, war is an experience men and women have not shared. For women, the battlefield is shrouded by the same sex mysteries and taboos that surround the birth chamber for men. While European and American women novelists of the last two centuries have experienced and recorded in their fiction the effects of war, the war zone itself has remained a peculiarly alien masculine territory, akin to the locker room and the men's club, only more unthinkable" (Hanley 73); "Nearly everyone agrees that war is in some sense 'masculine.' Throughout history and across the globe, whatever the 'race' or history of particular cultures, men have greatly predominated among the generals, chiefs of staff, and heads of cadre, tribe, nation, or state who direct wars... (Ruddick 110); "Women are metaphorically and psychologically 'behind the lines,' resented for their safety, scorned for their ignorance of the 'real' and really masculine experience" (Ruddick 111).

References

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.

Ferris, Elizabeth G. *Beyond Borders: Refugees, Migrants and Human Rights in the Post-Cold War Era.* Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Gellhorn, Martha. *The Face of War.* London: Virago Press, 1986.

Gluck, Shema Berger. *Rosie The Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Hanley, Lynne. *Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 1991.

MacDonald, Sharon. "Drawing the Lines—Gender, Peace and War: An Introduction." Sharon MacDonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener, eds. *Images of Women in Peace and War.* London: MacMillan, 1987.

Martin, Susan Forbes. *Refugee Women.* London: Zed Press, 1991.

Moussa, Helene, *et al.* "Cultural Adjustment as Empowerment. June 1988 Workshop." *Canadian Woman Studies* 10(1): 16-20.

Pittaway, Eileen. "Refugee Women—the Neglected Majority?" *Migration Action* 14(3) (1991): 44-48.

Ruddick, Sara. "Notes Towards a Feminist Peace Politics." Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds. *Gendering War Talk.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Rupp, Leila J. *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Vickers, Jeanne. *Women and War.* London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993.