

Genocide Drama:

Three Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish attorney, and writer, coined the word genocide in 1944 by combining two words, “genos” a Greek word that means race, and “cide,” a Latin word that means killing. Genocide is defined by the United Nations as the various means via which violent acts are committed, usually with the intent to destroy, in part or in whole, an ethnic, national, religious, or racial group. For example, killing members of a certain group, deliberately inflicting conditions that subsequently lead to physical destruction, causing serious bodily harm to the group members, imposing measures geared towards preventing births among them, or forcibly transferring the children of that group to another, i.e. the intentional destruction of national or ethnic groups. Genocide has been part of the human history for millennia. However, since the 19th Century, the nature and scale of genocide have dramatically changed. Genocide is attributed to various factors, including the rise of nationalism, as well as political and national affinities.

Genocide drama demonstrates real happenings of genocidal incidents. In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of works, mainly artistic and literary expressions, about genocide. Genocides are mainly caused by different social, religious, ethnic, and political prejudice, while the world, in most cases, as in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, stood still. As a result of the increase of genocide crimes - mostly under the sponsorship of some states that

call these crimes "ethnic cleansing" - the International Criminal Court was established in 2002, in spite of the opposition of some countries, like the United States. Though modern history has witnessed various crimes against humanity, many studies on different cases of mass murder and genocide appeared, studying the dynamics of these crimes, and the possible solutions, if any.

The world during the previous century witnessed not only two world wars, but also the cold war between the Soviet Union and the West, which subsequently fought proxy wars in developing and decolonized countries. For instance, in World War I, the government of Turkey staged barbaric massacres against the Armenians and exterminated around 1.5 million of them. However, since the world had not witnessed such crimes, no actions were taken against the government, perhaps because the world was unable to grasp this scope of atrocity, commonly known as genocide. Moreover, mass murders in Indonesia and East Timor were committed by the Suharto regime during the period from 1960s and 1970s. Reports of mass murders came from various parts in Africa: in Burundi in 1972, in Ethiopia in 1974 and in Rwanda in 1994. Other parts of the world also witnessed genocide crimes, like Bosnia in 1991-1995, and again in East Timor in 1999. These crimes are on-going till the present day, the most recent of which is the 2017 Rohingya Muslim Genocide in Myanmar Burma, which resulted in over 1000 Rohingya Muslims butchered and raped, and their villages torched to the ground. The UN Refugee agency has declared that over 290,000 Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, had fled to

Bangladesh. An unprecedented humanitarian crisis was created as over half a million families became in desperate need of shelter, water and food. The UN Report has concluded that the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar "face the final stages of genocide."

GENOCIDES AND LEMKIN'S PRINCIPLE

Lemkin proposed to the International Conference for Unification of Criminal law held in Madrid requesting the codification of what he termed as the connected crimes of vandalism and barbarity, to outlaw the annihilation of ethnic, religious, social, and national collectivities. According to Uvin, genocide is exacerbated by the fact that the people are socially dead, just like the Tutsis and Hutus who participated in the Rwandan genocide, and compared them to the Jews and Nazis (Uvin 113). Not only political scientists, historians, psychologists and sociologists contributed in studying the nature and implications of genocide, but also men of literature. Consequently, the dramatization of genocides has since then been part and parcel of the works of writers and film directors, as well as playwrights. Examples include *Eyes of the Heart* by Catherine Filloux, *A Patch of Earth* by Kitty Felde, and *Maria Kizito* by Erik Ehn, performed on the stages of the United States. These plays - that are discussed in this paper - depict the atrocities of genocide from different perspectives, dramatize the prosecution of war criminals, and point out the need for reconciliation.

Genocides intentionally obliterate groups of innocent people on religious, racial or national basis. Yet, no society has readily prepared rituals that are mainly intended to deal with the aftermath of collective experiences of destruction and death. Thus, new rituals and procedures after a genocidal event must be prepared for people to deal with mourning their dead, commemorating the event, preserving the memory, and creating a path to reconciliation.

ACCOUNTING THE HISTORY OF GENOCIDE DRAMA

Essentially, real events help shape genocide plays, thus, *A Patch of Earth* by Kitty Felde was inspired by the genocidal happenings of Bosnia in the 1995 Srebrenica Massacre in which approximately 8,000 Bosnian boys and men, coupled with an ethnic cleansing of about 30,000 refugees, were shot near and inside the town of Srebrenica in Herzegovina and Bosnia by the units Army of Republika Srpska (the Bosnian Serb Army) following the command of General Mladic'. Earlier, in the mid-1980s, when the Serbian leader Milosovic came into power, tension and discontent arose between Serbians in Bosnia and Croatia, and the nearby Croatian, Bosnian and Albanian peoples. Brutal clashes increased in 1991 after Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia declared independence, and in 1992, Bosnia's independence was proclaimed. After the recognition in 1992 by the United States and the European Community of the independence of Bosnia, the Yugoslav army bombed Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital. Bosnian-dominated towns were brutally attacked and civilians were expelled from their counties. This was later known as "ethnic cleansing". However, it did not differ from genocide, as torture, rape,

and mass-murder were all practiced. The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia was later formed, and many soldiers and leaders, like Slobodan Milosevic, were charged with genocide and war crimes. All these events and atrocities in Yugoslavia dictated and formed the basis of *A Patch of Earth* by Kitty Felde .

The play was premiered in 1999 in Buffalo, New York, at the Alleyway Theatre. Drazen Erdemovic, the main character, is a young 24-year Bosnian Croat soldier, serving in the Bosnian Serb army. He is facing trial as a war criminal, as he, along with his colleagues, killed many unarmed Bosnian Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica on July 16, 1995, after the departure of the United Nations peacekeepers. Thus, he is trapped in a whirlwind of genocide. The play dramatizes Erdemovic's internal struggle; he is a tortured remorseful soul, who, due to his feeling of guilt, is haunted by the ghosts of the victims he killed. In spite of the fact that Erdemovic confesses and admits his guilt, he repeatedly claims that he was only following orders.

Erdemovic is a reluctant soldier who has been ordered to kill Bosnian Muslim civilians or be killed if he does not follow the instructions. He states that he had managed to fight in the Bosnian war without killing a soul, not until one July afternoon when he and his colleagues were sent to a corn field located in Srebrenica, where they were taught how to kill large numbers of people within the shortest time possible. Buses carrying Bosnian Muslim men arrived for their execution; Erdemovic, at first, refused to shoot, but he was told that if

he did not participate in the execution process, he himself would be shot. He confesses that he had killed no more than 70 of the 1200 people who were executed in that afternoon only. Erdemovic was later shot and left to die by Stanko, a violent and vengeful fellow soldier in his unit, because he, according to his colleagues who call him a "crybaby", speaks a lot. However, he survives but feels compelled to tell his story so that he could exorcise his victims' ghosts that haunt him. He has nightmares and visions of blood coming out of the corpses of the Muslim civilians that he killed. The blood of only three bodies is absorbed, while, starting from the fourth body, a huge pool of blood is formed, denoting the title of the play. This pool of blood symbolizes Erdemovic's guilt. Thus, the play serves as an accusation and a blame note addressed, not only towards the Serbian soldiers who committed genocide, but also towards those who supported and protected them, and those who stood still and watched, whether they were common citizens, leaders or whole countries.

The main question that Felde raises is whether or not Erdemovic and soldiers in general should be accountable when they commit genocide, following unjust commands, given by violent bloodthirsty leaders. The answer is provided through the prosecutor, who, after Erdemovic is found guilty, asks the judge to be lenient towards this young soldier who confesses his guilt. Erdemovic had sacrificed his life, family and reputation when he sought an ABC reporter in order to confess the genocide. Without doing so, the International Crimes Tribunal court would have had no case. Thus, *A Patch of*

Earth, like all genocide drama, does not highlight the atrocities of genocides as much as it raises questions about morality and justice .

The nightmarish aspects of real happenings of genocide in Rwanda in 1994 helped shape *Maria Kizito* by Erik Ehn – an American playwright, director and theorist. The play, which opened at 7 stages in Atlanta in 2004, specifically features the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which the Hutu, who formed the majority, murdered 800,000 Tutsi. *Maria Kizito* is the result of Ehn's research in the country. The play mainly meditates on a recent trial where two Benedictine nuns of Rwandese origin (both Hutus), Sister Gertrude Mukangango - mother superior - and Maria Kizito are charged with genocide. In essence, they were accused and subsequently found guilty of facilitating and encouraging the murder of seven thousand refugees that sought shelter at the convent during the Rwandan genocide. At first the nuns denied them shelter, and then they reported their place to the Hutu extremists who did not want to share power or land with the Tutsi or even with the moderate Hutu. Those who turned to the church for sanctuary were shot, burnt or executed with hand tools at a close distance. These hand tools were provided by Sister Maria and Mother Superior Gertrude. Not only that, but they also called the Hutu militia to kill the refugees hiding in the ceilings in the convent, who are actually the families of Tutsi sisters.

Erik Ehn narrates these events, in which about 7000 Rwandan Tutsi were slaughtered in one week with the help of convent nuns who watched the

atrocities involved from their terrace and even served tea to the militias. Moreover, Maria Kizito herself provided gasoline for the burning of the Tutsi refugees who were hiding in the convent's garage. The story that Erik Ehn read in a newspaper in 2000 about the upcoming trial of Sister Gertrude and Maria Kizito in a Belgian court for crimes against humanity triggered the writing of *Maria Kizito*, which depicts the true case of their trial. The scenes move back and forth between the trial and the events of the Rwandan genocide. The role of the refugees and the nuns is played by a chorus holding fish bowls full of burning paper huts, symbolically representing the atrocities of genocide. On the other hand, the indifference of the nuns reflect their unstable psyche, as Maria sometimes bursts with hysteric laughter, then puts her hand on her mouth like a child. The play, in poetic language, describes the shocking atrocities of genocide and the ineffaceable passion of eyewitnesses who describe how people were burnt alive and how babies were sucking the breasts of dead mothers.

The play, however, does not explain the causes of the Rwandan genocide or fix the blame; instead, it attempts to enter and portray the inner life and psyche of the genocidal perpetrator. For example, the nuns' deeds reflect the fact that their hearts are void of Christian mercy. In essence, one of the features of drama is to portray the causes and daily rituals of events, and *Maria Kizito* is no different. According to Ananda, the play showcases legendary theatre, in that it reflected government-driven information campaigns that were based on carefully scripted history (Ananda 47). In essence, this type of theatre

is just like propaganda, but intended mainly for social “good”. Playwrights attempt to imagine societies that encompass separate ethnic identities, but because they fail to coexist, genocidal killings occur. Maria Kizito and her mother superior in the play spend most of the time in prayer; however, the refugees and nuns extract out of the Bible verses of Genocide: in that all readings, for example, hymns and psalms, relate to genocide where many people are killed. Moreover, as she attends the trial, an American nun tries to imagine Maria's prayer life. Thus, it can be highlighted that the history of genocide drama emanated from the variant communities and differences regarding political inclinations, religious, or tribal differences, as in the Rwandan genocide, which was mainly exacerbated by the different ethnicities in the country .

As such, dramatizing the atrocities of genocide in Ehn's play reveals the need for reconciliation to end the genocide in Rwanda. For example, nowadays in Rwanda it is illegal to mention a person's ethnicity because it might lead to bloodshed. Essentially, the play was not meant to be an explanation or a condemnation of the genocide, Ehn tried to provide a space of time whereby the audience can be with Maria, not judging her guilt, but trying to understand it.

Maria Kizito employs an aspect of hallucinatory realism, which according to Edmondson (69) uses the tension between facts and poetry, as well as reality and nightmare. As such, the nightmarish aspects of the real

happenings of genocide, such as that of Rwanda in 1994, helped shape *Maria Kizito*. The play is full of poetic imagery, expressed in highly lyrical language. The nuns' disturbed state of mind, in addition to their lamentations, are highly poetic, probably to parallel the Psalms that are twisted in their unstable minds. That is why, in order to justify her deeds, Maria's defense is that she was trying to save lives. Her confused state of mind is highlighted in her imagist, surrealistic, and incomprehensible language. This is evident in her words to Gertrude, explaining why she obtained the gasoline that was used in burning Tutsi men, women and children who took refuge at the convent:

My heart is a yellow jerrican

A jerrican of gasoline.

Red.

White.

Yellow .

Raping the bloody.

I am in God.

I know I am in God.

(p. 198)

"The play does not highlight any information about the background of Maria that contextualizes her actions in the tradition of naturalism and realism Ehn was able to create a glimpse of this incomprehensible but specific world of the Rwandan genocide" (Edmondson 70-71). The language in which

the two nuns express themselves is Ehn's means to explore their motives in committing genocide. Moreover, the judge in the Belgian court attempts to find an answer to the crucial question that the play raises: are the people who commit genocide insane, are they merely driven by political and social hatred and prejudice, or do they kill in the name of God? Ehn, in the play's head note, presents the answer by quoting a verse from John 16:2: "The hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God".

The question of morality and justice is similarly raised in *Eyes of the Heart* (2004) by Catherine Filloux. The play, produced by the national Asian-American Theatre Company, is based on oral histories of Cambodian women who were at a refugee camp known as St. Rita's Refugee Center in the Bronx. The play mainly falls in the paradigm of political theatre, for it is based on political incidents that led to genocide in Cambodia, one of the worst in the 20th century.

The genocide carried out between 1975 and 1979 by the Khmer Rouge, a rebel group that took over the capital with the aim of eliminating the modern world, believing that innovation and cities are evil and that society should be purely agricultural, resulted in the death of around 1.5 to 3 million Cambodians (more than 25 percent of the population of Cambodia). The victims were either slaughtered or died due to starvation or diseases. Intellectuals, monks, artists, military men and policemen were all killed. The Khmer Rouge forced the rest of the population to large labour camps with insufficient resources to survive.

Schools were transformed into torture chambers for all suspected enemies who were tortured until a confession could be made, after which suspects were eliminated as traitors. At other times, suspects were shot on the spot without any questioning.

Thida San, the heroine of *Eyes of the Heart* is a middle aged Cambodian widow, who arrives from Cambodia to Florida, the United States, to live with her brother Kim and his daughter Serey, a teenager, who wittingly realizes that all Thida wants is to be left alone. Thida, who is completely blind, refuses to speak, and the doctor who tries to heal her cannot find anything that explains her loss of sight. As the plays go on, it is revealed that she suffers from psychosomatic blindness attributed to the atrocities that she witnessed in the "killing fields" in Cambodia. Thida is a victim of the savagery of the Khmer Rouge who tortured their victims, blindfolded them, kept them in the dark, and interrogated them under blinding flashlight with their legs shackled into iron bars. Above all, Thida was forced by the Khmer Rouge to witness the slaughter of her daughter, Oun, after which she lost her eyesight, with this traumatic scene as the last sight she witnessed. This is best described by Thida herself:

THIDA: Rays of sunlight shine into my eyes. The loudspeakers are hanging in the tree. There are flowers on the tree. She is tied. Water drips from a tiny hole in a bucket on her head. The drops of water mix with her tears. They tied Oun to a tree. A magnolia. They're forcing her to marry.

...

The official he unties her. He points to young soldier. "Will you marry him?" She shakes her head no. She is stubborn. Will not accept. The official takes out his blade. He grabs Oun by the hair. They cut off her head.

...

He looks at me. He holds her head. He throws it into a fire where a pile of corpses and body parts burn ... Smoke got in my eye... Don't cry. don't cry. or they kill you. (To KIM) Please. Let me die.

(Scene 7, p.36)

Eyes of the Heart shifts between the past in Cambodia and the present in the 1980s in Florida; the brutality of the past is echoed in the present through Thida's flashbacks. This gives the audience access to her internal thoughts and unites the past with the present. In spite of the difference between Thida and the doctor, who - at first - suspects that she is faking her blindness so as to apply for disability, the benefits of which are the highest in California, their relationship develops to identification. They share their grief and the experience of losing a husband. Thida's husband, Sipha, disappeared, probably died, and the doctor's husband died of a nervous-system disease. Dr. Simpson

fails to cure Thida's blindness, and she finally accepts it as a symptom of trauma, i.e. one of the numerous psychological scars caused by genocide.

Eyes of the Heart is an intimate drama about the havoc caused by the Khmer Rouge, and makes for a balanced play of survival and hope, of pain and courage. The play is the outcome of Filloux's five-year cultural research and documentation in Cambodia. Though the play is informative, built on the oral histories of Cambodian refugees who survived mass murder and the different forms of brutality inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, it serves as a cultural, social and political commentary achieved through the connections developed between the different characters. Thida and her doctor, for example, are united through their suffering. Their alliance is based on their survival mechanism, which, consequently, involves all the audience who is able to identify with the characters. Thida is a witness to the atrocities of the Cambodian genocide, and the doctor and the audience are witnesses to her memories. Though Thida's blindness is not cured, she teaches everyone else to see with the heart, not with the eyes or the mind only. This is the significance of the title. The lesson taught by Thida is to see beyond personal pain and terror, so as to comprehend and hope for a better future; people need to maintain hope for a brighter morning even in the darkest nights. This is how she survived one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

It can be deduced that genocide plays, in general, and those analyzed in this paper, in particular, describe real events in which people were massacred, killed, tortured and subjected to unbearable atrocities inflicted by terroristic groups with different ideologies, serving their own agenda. The atrocities committed against different peoples are mainly attributed to social, religious, ethnic, and political hatred, and to prejudice. Genocide drama emanates from studies of these events, causes and possible solutions, highlighting the need for reconciliation between cleaved communities. The rampant violence, in addition to the revelations of past genocides and the discovery of new evidence, drove different writers to research different cases of mass murder so as to depict true-to-life forms of literature, whether plays, poems or fiction.

The plays discussed in this paper are the fruit of long research periods of playwrights who were motivated by the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the revelation of evidence about mass murder in different parts of the world, such as the security archives of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Evidence also was discovered about the long hidden crimes committed by the French officials during the Algerian war, and the war crimes committed by Guatemalan security forces, supported by U. S. against the Mayan natives in 1981-83, in addition to genocide atrocities committed by leftists in Latin America. This proves that violence is an on-going process, and, like any predator, it will survive and grow as long as there is a suitable environment. The aim of genocide plays is not to judge perpetrators of violence, but to study the ideological notions that drove extremist leaders and

oppressive regimes to destroy entire nations through mass murder and forced immigration. Thus, the three plays discussed in this paper are chosen not only because they present different forms of genocide, but also because they differ in style and form, and present different elements of realism and surrealism. The flashbacks and the testimonies of eyewitness survivors depicted in the different plays are not only powerful, but they also reveal – through a variety of perspectives – how hatred and cruelty helped shape the world, which, by standing still and silently watching, encourages violence, prejudice and, consequently, genocide.

The social, economic and political conditions of the victim groups, survivors and perpetrators, and the different violent regimes, are all studied, with an aim not only to study these conditions and motives, but also to figure out all possible means of reconciliation, while demanding the need to implement justice against war criminals. Through their study of specific cases of genocide, Kitty Felde, Catherine Filloux and Erik Ehn stress the need to protect not only various social, religious and political minorities, but also to protect humanity in general against all forms of violence, cruelty, abuse and genocide. That is why the horror, pain, courage and grief of victims are dramatized with a note of hope of a better future, and a need to reject and stand against all forms of injustice and cruelty, so as to overcome and survive them.

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