

Mass rape in Bosnia and Rwanda. Violence, silencing and feminist answer

Sara Valentina Di Palma

saravalentinadipalma@gmail.com

Introduction

This paper examines mass rape in the wars of the Nineties of the Twentieth century in Bosnia¹ and Rwanda – conflicts which are usually known as ‘ethnic wars’. The aim of this work is firstly to show how the ethnic definition is not adequate and hides a deeper construction of nationalism. This construction is implemented for instance by using the female body as symbol of the nation, and by the focusing of violence in Bosnia and Rwanda (which is not only sexual and physical but also psychological and symbolic) on women's bodies with the aim of affecting the future of the enemy group, and thereby interconnecting nationalism, gender, gendered body and sexuality. Secondly, it will be described that in the aftermath of these wars recovery programmes are not sufficient and leave out many women, while rape survivors in the programmes are marginalised and stigmatised. Finally the chapter will analyse how women try to find their answer to the problems in the post-war period through their own organisations and associations.

This approach questions the post-feminist focus on women's inferiority and on the psychology of rape victims, and instead agrees with a feminist approach on gender and sexual violence which calls in question the excessive victimisation of raped women (Mardorossian 2002: 747-48, 776). Here the focus is still the victim, but the term “victim” itself should be rethought in relation to women's lived experience in the rape situation and afterwards, taking into account the political, social and psychological aspects of rape, survival and recovery. Women themselves may describe their strategy to react and their experience with other words and categories than “victim” and “survivor”. My study follows this interpretation and use the

intersection of gender, sexuality, ethnicity/nationalism and identity/memory to scrutinise the processes developed by those women who survived mass rape and rethought their engagement in post-war societies as citizens more than as victims.

Nationalism and rape in Bosnia and Rwanda. A weapon of war to affect the future

There is a linguistic distortion in the ethnic issue (Macedo 2000: 21) and in the temptation of primitivism and tribalism (Vidal 1996: 326). The war of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) immediately received significant attention by the media interested in “ethnic rapes”, and many theoretical analyses were tempted by the ethnic issue (Bruneteau 2004: 218-220) and by the “tribal trap” (Glover 2001: 123). Nevertheless, the ethnic label does not explain what happened in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, characterized by an aggressive nationalism to split Bosnia and Herzegovina and a fight for political and economic power in Rwanda through nationalistic policies. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was prepared already in the previous civil war (1990-1994) with intra-ethnic intimidation (Strauss 2006), artificial creation of boundaries, opportunism in the competition over fields or crops or cattle (Tilly 2003: 31-32, 136-142). Also the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia has many reasons: the economic collapse due to all the contradictions which emerged with the end of communism, inefficiencies and frustration, and competition among the Republics of the Federation (Ramet 2006: 285-323).

Mass rape organised in rape camps or in the so called “women's rooms” during the war in Bosnia (1992-1995) is something which has never occurred before, and the origin of which is both on one hand the idea of women as embodiment of the nation, and on the other hand the building of the nation state with rape as weapon of war which is mapped on women's

bodies. The political construction of Serbian nationalism in the Eighties defined itself in opposition to an external “other” from which it was to differentiate through body symbols and metaphors, such as the body of the nation *versus* the external bodied of the enemies. As a consequence, the own people's violation passes through the violation of one's own women. This explains why after the death of the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the false accusations of an increasing number of rapes committed by the Albanians in Kosovo (one of the two autonomous province of the Republic of Serbia) against both Serbian men and women contributed to create the Serbian belief in a “nationalist rape”, that is the politicisation of rape, which was seen as part of the Albanian political plot to force the Serbs to leave (Bracewell 2000: 563-565).

Serbian nationalism was soon imitated by the Croatian regime of Franjo Tudjman, thus empathising with the process started with XIX century's nationalisms who linked masculinity and political aggressiveness through the metaphor of the mother-homeland and of the holiness and inviolability of the homeland's body, whose boundaries have to be protected (Blom, Hagemann and Hall 2000; Banti 2005a; Banti 2005b). As a consequence, when the war was brought to Bosnia in 1992, mass rape was used to define the boundaries between different groups, to terrorise and above all to use the “enemy child” issue for the future assets of the nation states. In Bosnia in fact, rape aimed above all at giving birth to “children of another religion” (Héritier 1996: 15) or to children “of the perpetrator's ethnicity” (U.N S/1994/674/Add.2 1994: 11), and rape was “usual/normal/systematisable” (Nahoum-Grappe 1996: 192). The United Nations stated that women of all national groups were raped in the Yugoslavian war, but there is no “moral equivalency in the analysis” (U.N S/1994/674/Add.2 1994: 9): rape of Bosniaks (Muslim women of Bosnia) was used as a military strategy as a symbolic defamation of the enemy's culture and religion – for instance, with a deliberate cruelty and humiliation in killing

victims by cutting their throat with a butcher's hook thus mocking the ritual Muslim killing of animals for food consumption (Goytisoló 2001: 22). In Rwanda as well rape was used extensively, and also here the purpose was to obstruct the future recovery of the enemy group: women were raped, deliberately infected with HIV and kept alive to spread the infection (Sharlach 2002: 117).

The international jurisprudence settled by the two International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR) made important steps in recognizing the meaning of rape in these wars. The two tribunals in fact established that rape and genocide were strictly connected: the massacre in Srebrenica was a genocide (ICTY IT-98-33-A: 87); rape was used in Bosnia to force the population to leave (U.N S/1994/674/Add.2 1994: 10) and as crime against humanity (ICTY IT-96-23-T&23/1-T: 281-283); and rape was as an act of genocide in Taba in Rwanda (ICTR-96-4-T: 149). Nevertheless, the juridical formal success should not hide several unsolved problems which I will analyse in the next paragraph.

The aftermath. Silencing and new violences

"I can't sleep without pills. [...] I have to run away from children not to shout at them. I don't want my problems to affect them. I need help", a woman living in Republika Srpska confesses 14 years after the end of war (Amnesty International 2009: 3). Health care is crucial, but also practical aspects such as housing need to be solved for all those women who cannot or do not want to go back to the place where they lived before the war and where they today are stigmatised by their own community – such as Zilhada, a rape victim who cannot join her surviving sons because she fears their judgement (Doni and Valentini 1993: 34).

In Bosnia (divided after the war mainly in Republika Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), women rape victims face exclusion

as to wealth, geographical area, and community as well as being stigmatised by their families (CEC 2008: 18; Avdibegovic, Hasanovic, Selimbasic, Pajevic and Sinanovic 2008), for which they are not legally protected. In both countries by law, war veterans count more than civilian war victims as to get an insurance refund. In the Republika Srpska, war veterans need a lower certified body damage from the war to get a refund from insurance: for war veterans 20% of damage is enough, while civilian victims of sexual violence need a certified damage of 60% - where a complete damage of 100% would mean a total disability (RS Law N. 25/93, n. 46/04 and 53/04 Art. 4). In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the case of victims of sexual violence is not even considered (FBiH Law n. 39/06 Art. 5), and civilian war victims receive a maximum of refund which is 30% lower than the one granted to veterans invalids from war (FBiH Law n. 39/06 Art. 9).

This creates a vicious circle: few women find adequate treatment, and even less women seek help (Klarić, Klarić, Stevanovic, Grković and Jonovska 2007). The situation is similar in Rwanda (Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008; Human Rights Watch 1996), where women's marginalisation is even bigger than in Bosnia due to high HIV/Aids rates among survivors of the genocide, lack of basic hygienic conditions, and insufficient infrastructures in the aftermath (African Rights 2004: 30; UNAIDS/WHO 2008: 11-12). Several women interviewed in Rwanda describe how they are not even allowed to take the HIV test not to worsen their situation (African Rights 2004: 50), how their community often expel them, how even their families may force them to leave, and how they feel obliged to deny having been raped not to be left by new partners whom they have met in the aftermath (de Brouwer and Hon Chu 2009: 39, 83, 110).

Even justice is often denied: witnesses from Bosnia are intimidated and feel abandoned (Lombezzì 2006). In Rwanda, many former perpetrators threaten women "to complete the job", that is the genocide, and survivors are

beaten or killed (de Brouwer and Hon Chu 2009: 71, 90, 105, 116, 123). Women are humiliated by being offered inadequate compensations, as in the case of a woman whose perpetrator offered a cow to 'buy' her forgiveness (de Brouwer and Hon Chu 2009: 63).

Important trials do not include rape among the charges, even if there is a lot of evidence (ICTY IT-98-32/1-T, 2007: 18). The *gacaca* (Rwandan local courts) exclude women from the judging function and release many charged perpetrators, and thus women feel that the *gacaca* “are bringing more tears than smiles”, as P. affirms (de Brouwer and Hon Chu 2009: 77). Social stigmatisation within the community, lack of justice, inadequate health care, economic problems, and revictimisation by former perpetrators, may force some women to prostitution for food (Amnesty International 2004: 9).

Women's reaction. A feminist perspective

As many other post-colonial feminist movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, Rwandan activists have to face poverty, harsh labour conditions, and lack of adequate education and health care (Maerten 2004: 1); all these problems growing worse after the genocide. Women responded to the deterioration of life conditions by entering political power to solve gender inequality, and many of them today hold important positions (Gallimore 2008: 25). Nevertheless, their high participation in politics is usually not reflected at local levels, and many women found that they had to develop other strategies to fight the increased discrimination in the aftermath. The most committed among them organized women's associations and activists networks. Activists are gathered under *Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe*, a platform of different associations (among which *Avega Agahozo - Association des Veuves du Génocide* is the one most linked to institutions). This platform is devoted to peace culture, gender promotion, legal affairs, combating violence against women, education, anti HIV/AIDS programmes, economic

empowerment, training and housing, and to the supporting of widows and orphans of the genocide.

On the contrary, in the Former Yugoslavia the first women's network was devoted in opposing nationalism, war and violence and to keep women of different national groups together, already since the beginning of the war. In the aftermath, women believed especially in the importance of creating a gender dimension of memory, directed against the exploitation of the raped victim, as was done by the media during the conflict itself (Cockburn 2001). Any violated women could then suddenly be turned into a symbol of the violated nation, while after the war women's memories have been excluded from the new public, male focused, patriarchal collective memory (Kesić 2003a: 011; Kesić 2003b: 043).

The first step was therefore for women to start sharing memories of the war, in the belief that facing the past was the only way to construct a peaceful future by including previous suppressed memories into the collective one. The Croatian *Centar za Žene Žrtve Rata* (*Centre for Women War Victims*) then significantly decided to change its name in 2003 into *Centar za Žene Rosa* (*Women's Centre Rosa*): “we wanted to emphasize and record our collective memory of a specific women's history of resistance and civil society building” (Kesić 2003a: 010). feeling uncomfortable with the expression “war victims” as it did not stress women’s resistance to the war and women's efforts to rebuild the civil society with a particular attention to gender needs. This is a new “philosophy of feminism” (Kesić 2003b: 049), whose culture of tolerance and responsibility is the feminist answer to past and present violence and to women’s victimisation.

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¹ The term "Bosnia" is used for brevity instead of "Bosnia and Herzegovina". After the war, the states born from the former Yugoslavian Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina are three: the small Brčko District of BiH, which is a self-governing administrative unit with international control and which is the only exception to the Dayton Agreement of 1995; the Republika Srpska (inhabited by Serbs) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (inhabited mainly by Bosniaks, that is Muslim of Bosnia, and Croats).