

## Articulating the Trauma of Genocide and Sexual Violence: A Study of Halima Bashir's *Tears of the Desert*

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### Abstract

*The term 'Genocide' is generally associated with a purposeful and systematically premeditated annihilation of a national, ethnic, or religious group. This term is of a hybrid origin and combines the Greek word genos meaning 'tribe', 'people' or 'race' with the Latin suffix -caedo, signifying 'act of killing'. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer, and jury associated as an adviser to the US Department of war during World War II is best known for coining this term. Genocide is essentially a product of the Western modes of violence, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Multi-ethnic postcolonial nation-states are the subject of increasing concern of this manmade massacre. Since 1933, ethnic conflict and genocide in the different parts of the world like Syria, Sudan, Germany, Armenia, and Bangladesh, have been seriously in question.*

*Halima Bashir's Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur co-authored with a journalist Damien Lewis, has received the serious attention of the world for the explicit description of shocking, devastating, and heart-wrenching atrocities perpetrated by the Sudanese Government, by proxy, against Black Africans in the Darfur region in western Sudan. Historically this ethnic killing is considered the first genocidal incident of the 21st century. Being a Black African, Bashir recapitulates the nightmarish and harrowing experience that leads to an unforgettable tragedy with her genital mutilation to rape and the ruin of her entire family. She unfurls the dark reality of unimaginable violence towards women. This narrative highlights the lived experiences of marginalization, racist discrimination, and the precarious position of women. This article seeks to examine after Hamila Bashir, the causes and consequences of sexual violence and rape as a war strategy against women to intimidate and subjugate them physically, emotionally, and psychologically in the war zones drawing attention to Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the "abject" and on the discourse of wartime rape.*

**Keywords:** Genocide, Ethnic killings, Sexual violence, Rape, Survival, Black African, Feminism.

### Main Article

**In *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present*,** Estelle C. Jelinek opines that neither men nor women are likely to explore the painful and intimate memories in their narratives (10). She also emphasizes that women, unlike men, reveal self-consciousness and a need to shift through

their lives for explanation and understanding (15). Hamila Bashir, on the contrary, breaks the silence in her memoir *Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur*, co-authored with a journalist Damien Lewis, to expose the atrocities and violence perpetrated on her community, especially on women. This memoir is a burning example of a survivor's experience and narrative about the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. This gruesome tale shows her flexible and obdurate spirit that rejected to be silenced amid terrific odds. This memoir is a physical as well as a cultural voyage from the ancient superstition and weird folk remedies to the contemporary therapeutic practice and from crude tribalism and racism to political awareness.

In this article, I want to examine the appalling, devastating, and heart-wrenching atrocities inflicted by the Sudanese Government, by proxy, against Black Africans in the Darfur region in western Sudan. Historically this ethnic killing is considered the first genocidal incident of the 21st century. Being a Black African, Bashir summarises the frightening and traumatic experience that directs to an unforgettable tragedy with her genital mutilation at the age of eight years, rape, and the ruin of her entire family. In this tormenting individual account, Bashir highlights hundreds and thousands of innocent victims eliminated in one of the most shocking and terrifying genocides. She unfurls the dark reality of unimaginable violence towards women. This narrative also highlights the lived experiences of marginalization, racist discrimination, and the precarious position of women.

The study of genocide needs an extensive approach and a probe into its fundamental nature. Genocide is more distinguishable from all other crimes by the obvious motivation behind it. O'Byrne perfectly opines that:

“Genocide may be a crime as old as humanity itself but the sheer magnitude of atrocities committed in the twentieth century distinguishes it as a modern crime (324).

According to him, the rise of the nation-state makes the possibility of the emergence of new forms of genocide. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer, and jury associated as an adviser to the US Department of war during World War II is best known for coining this term which has a hybrid origin and combines the Greek word *genos* meaning ‘tribe’, ‘people’ or ‘race’ with the Latin suffix *-caedo*, signifying ‘act of killing’. Genocide is essentially a conception of the Western modes of violence, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Multi-ethnic postcolonial nation-states are the subject of escalating concerns about this manmade massacre. The term is generally associated with a purposeful and systematically premeditated annihilation of a national, ethnic, or religious group. Lemkin observes that the world was being confronted with an unprecedented phenomenon and affirmed that “new conception requires new terminology” (Destexhe 1). Towards the end of the Second World War, Winston Churchill stated that the world was being brought face to face with “a crime that has no name”. The earliest general understanding

of genocide was drawn almost entirely from Holocaust, leading to some incorrect interpretations. It was attributed to the Holocaust, namely that it had a broader programme of extermination while other genocides were confined to the state. Mark Levene in *Genocide in the Age of Nation-State* defines genocide as essentially a product of Western modes of violence, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. With the disintegration of the Soviet systems, ethnic conflicts have emerged on the centre stage. Multi-ethnic postcolonial states are the subject of increasing concern like those in Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are proving to be previews of a host of genocidal crises. Their feasibility beyond the new century is seriously in question. The polarization of ethnic conflicts over land and other resources and the failure to accommodate minorities only increases the flames of intolerance and exclusion, both of which are the forerunner to huge extent killings. Genocide represents man's desire to annihilate an entire section of the human population. Genocide must satisfy the *jus cogens* or 'compelling law' - It assigns norms from which no derogation is permitted by way of particular agreements. In fact, through a unanimous resolution, the United Nations General Assembly has condemned genocide in an inclusionist manner. This is the foundation of other norms which safeguard all human clusters from the crime of genocide committed on religious, racial, political, or any other grounds.

**Hamila Bashir's *Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur*** is divided into two halves - the first part narrates her childhood in her village and the second half delineates her journey to the city and the university life as well as her career as a doctor. The narrative starts with a note of reminiscences of Africa while she sings an African lullaby to her son in London. Hamila mentioned, "the unfathomable joy of her home" (Hamila 4) as she recapitulates her birth into the proud Zaghawa tribe, - "a fierce warlike black African people" in Darfur, Sudan. She also remembers her doting father, and fearsome grandmother though it conjures an awful image of dark terror and an unending evil to the rest of the world. The delineation of Bashir's childhood is one of the strongest elements in the memoir. Her memory captures the heavenly and idyllic childhood spent with her passive mother and two younger brothers, one wild and another gentle. She spent her childhood listening to the legendary tales of their warrior tribe. Politically wise and wealthy as well, her father considered and insisted that she could obtain a brilliant education away from the tribal, rural milieu as only a good education can make the Black African Sudanese break the bondage of the Arab supremacy and domination. Her strict and traditional grandmother believed an opposite way of her father that there is no good to educate the Muslim girls so she made Bashir travel a long way to fetch water and wood. Bashir informs the readers of one significant fact about her tribe, the Zaghawa who were "renowned for its warrior spirit and its strong sense of identity" (Bashir 31). This Zaghawa tribe was spread across the Sudan-Chad border region known as Darfur and formerly the ancient African kingdom of Kanem. She beautifully delineates the typical rural atmosphere of her home with goats and a donkey. The prevalent culture has "the taboo on drinking was

enforced much more strictly against the women than the men” (Bashir 41). Life was easy going as most of the things were easily available. Her interesting observation is that- “women did most of the work; the men believed that the more wives they had, the easier life would be.” (Bashir 42).

This narrative also clearly shows the process of indoctrination well-rooted in tribal clans which is generally a common feature of many modern societies. Her frank confession regarding some of the prevalent customs may appear barbaric to the external world such as the obligation for a widow to remarry one of her husband’s brothers, and Zaghawa scarring- is a traditional ritual that engages the cutting of the facial skin at a very tender age to which she rejected to yield. But the most horrific account that Hamila portrays is of her genital circumcision at the age of eight. In their tradition, circumcision has marked the passage from girlhood and she was treated as if she was getting married. (Bashir 42). Genital circumcision has been perpetuated by the male-dominated tribal clans of Africa to suppress women’s sexuality. The cruelty of patriarchy and the repressive nature of gender relations in African cultures are proof of the most vividly present practice in that culture. These summarise a conception of patriarchy in which the African women are seen as wholly subservient, passive, timid, and voiceless: the sexual and reproductive potential is controlled by men and whose genitals are mutilated in silence and without any protest. All her uncertainties were gone after the thorough preparations and she was ignorant about the awful reality when the *taihree* or the woman who is supposed to circumcise took Bashir on her lap. She was dismayed and felt betrayed by her loved ones and enquired what was wrong with the way women were born. (Bashir 70). She writes: “To this day, I still believe in the Evil Eye and the power of hijabs, medicine women and the Fakirs”- a very astonishing confession from a doctor who had gone through some of the folk remedies from her childhood.

Even this deprivation continues with her in her education scenario. She exposes the injustices perpetrated against her and other Africans by many of the Arab students and faculties. With her excellent academic endeavour, she got a chance to enroll herself in the university at Khartoum and eventually got a shock to witness that those students who were fighting for jihad and had hardly turned up in the class had been awarded higher marks than her. Even in medical college, she faced the sheer discrimination perpetrated against the blacks. Only the dead bodies of the blacks are used for dissection. At the viva board, despite her brilliant academics, she suffered at the hand of the external examiner. Despite numerous odds, she was the first in her sub-tribe, the Coube, to qualify as a medical trainer at an age of 24. The whole village except her grandmother celebrated her achievement.

However, in the year of her graduation, conflict burst out in Darfur and she had been posted to a hospital nearby where she was in the emergency and trauma centre. There she encountered hundreds of wounded people. By that time, the Janjaweed had begun attacking black Africans with the support and

consent of the Sudanese government in Darfur. The Janjaweed were armed partisans drawn from Darfurian and Arabic-speaking tribes that became notorious for the alleged massacre, rape, torture, and forced displacement in 1990 and from 2001 to 2005. The Janjaweed in Arabic means ‘devil on horseback’ or ‘a man with a gun on a horse’ is meant to term gunmen in Darfur, Western Sudan. The Janjaweed comprised nomadic Arabic-speaking African tribes the core of whom are from the Abbala, i.e. Camel Herder.

The majority of Darfur’s Arabs, the Baggara confederation, started to show their existence in the war over grazing territory. Khartoum’s defense and protection were equipped with the Janjaweed forces due to intimidation faced by the rebellion in Western and Northern Darfur. When the insurgency soared in February 2003, headed by the Sudan Liberation Movement, and the Justice and Equality Movement, the Sudanese Government responded by using the Janjaweed as its main counter-insurgency force. Since 2003, they played a pivotal role in Darfur which has pitted the largely nomadic tribes against the sedentary population of the region in a battle over resource and land allocation. By 2006, many Janjaweed had been absorbed into the Sudan Armed Forces including the popular Defense Forces and Border Guards.

Bashir apprehended that many of her patients incorporated the rebel fighters and men from government-backed Janjaweed Arab militants. She carefully attended to all of them. She also voiced her opinions to the print media and assist societies with the heavy price of the aftermath of warfare. She stressed the issue that the fighting must cease and stated that the government should offer the right kind of aid to the people of Darfur. One day, when she was on her duty, the Sudanese secret police came to her and powerfully removed her to a ‘ghost-house’- a secret detention centre (Bashir 115) where she had an experience of their furious vengeance and knew “the chill, cringing dread of absolute fear” (Bashir 222). The government send soldiers to terrorize her and she was relocated to a secluded and distanced village clinic in Mazkhabad, a punishment posting indeed with only her presence as the doctor. There Hamila had a unique experience when an old woman came for treatment; she refused to believe that Hamila may be the doctor at such a tender age. To her, a doctor meant “an old man with grey hair and glasses” (Bashir 233).

Rape and sexual violence have always been instrumental as a method of genocide and the darkest nightmare in Bashir’s life happened when the Janjaweed attacked the girl’s school with government troops on guard, the Arab militia gang-raped more than forty girls aged between seven to thirteen. This gang-rape of girls has impelled a fresh call for interference in the western Sudanese region, where tens of thousands of women and girls have been subjected to rape and other extreme sexual violence since the eruption of the crisis. The Islamist government in Khartoum has given the Janjaweed militia a free hand

to douse the flame of rebellion by African tribes in the region, and there has not been a single conviction in Darfur for rape against displaced women and girls. There has been a severe rise in sexual violence in the region and more than two hundred women in Darfur's largest displacement camp, Kalma, had been sexually assaulted. UNICEF has expressed grave concerns over the heinous and gruesome incidence of gang rape of minors by at least fourteen men. Bashir, appalled and shocked beyond any vocabulary, was forced to treat the victims; the youngest among them was only a blossoming eight years old girl. "She turned her head towards me, but her eyes remained a glazed mask and the cries kept coming" (Bashir 250). She recalls the encounter with the first child she reached: "She had withdrawn to some inner place, a fairy tale landscape of childhood innocence, where the horrors had no way of reaching her" (Bashir 250). This nightmare goes on. She was petrified while going from bed to bed attending to the little girls. The family persons were also terribly shocked to find the truth. Bashir recounts the whispering of a mother of a tiny girl: "They want to drive our children insane, our children..." (Bashir 253). The aiding agencies insisted she report the actual happenings and without thinking of the consequences, she did that. The result became traumatic as on the very next day, the military personnel came to interrogate her but instead she was beaten, tortured, and taunted at the gibes of 'black dog', 'slave' etc. And the hell was that she too had been gang-raped repeatedly but did not take her life as she could tell the world about the excruciating pain of rape: "...go and tell the foreigners about rape". In 2007, the United States Government declared the Janjaweed killings in Darfur to be genocide, as two lakh to four lakh civilians have been killed over three years. The United States termed some foremost Janjaweed leaders including Musa Hilal as genocide criminals. In 2008, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court filed genocide charges against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, as the mastermind to wipe out African tribes in Darfur with murder, rape, and deportation using the Janjaweed.

The Janjaweed implement a plan of the ethnic massacre, plunder, robbing; rape, and forceful displacement of civilians in Darfur. The government had thought to put upon a reign of terror on the rebels who came mainly from the African or non-Arab Fur, Masaalit, and Zaghawa communities. Almost one million Darfurian ordinary inhabitants were compelled to take off from their homes thus several of them had gone astray from their near and dear ones, they also lost their livestock and all other assets and valuables. The two insurgent groups in Darfur- the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement- declare that they try to find a remedy for the grievances of decades over perceived political marginalization, socio-economic negligence, and inequity toward African Darfurians by consecutive federal governments in Khartoum. The government of Sudan categorically denied the existence of such a situation and refused to provide protection or assistance to the affected people of Darfur. A huge number of vulnerable people fled across the border into neighbouring places.

Bashir narrates the agonized pain exerted on her family and watched helplessly as Sudanese aircraft spread terror from the sky. She stated that though Janjaweed was mainly liable for this massive genocide the Sudanese government was also involved in these abuses and was accountable for pursuing a military policy that has a ruthless impact on humanity. But the worst happened one day when Janjaweed came with the Sudanese army to ravage the village. Halima's father persuaded her to flee the village with her mother and other kins. Her father was alone to confront the Janjaweed with modern sophisticated weapons with a dagger. He was brutally killed. The entire village was torn apart. The Darfuri community has experienced psycho-cultural trauma. After the Janjaweed raid Bashir's village and kill all men, we next hear of the surviving women and children leaving their homes. The secret police came, warned the "the Zaghawa rebel doctor", but this time she realised not to be safe in Sudan. The fact that Part Four of the memoir focuses on the journey trope in which Bashir runs away from her community and into exile is further proof of the "insidious awareness" and "gradual realization" So, she alone walked through the deserts, deprived and frightened headed south for the Nuba area, where black Africans welcomed Darfur refugees. She handed over her whole family wealth including grandma's gold jewelry to the hand of a trafficker to sneak her out of the country. It is often thought that an entire community feels violated when its female member are violated by the enemy.

Ultimately in 2005, she arrived in the UK and was granted asylum but she was unaware of her family's whereabouts. Halima Bashir's story narrates the true picture of how the survivors of gruesome sexual violence encounter innumerable impediments to getting justice, leaving them without significant redress where the probability of prosecution is still more distant. Halima Bashir, now a human rights activist, has been honoured with the prestigious Anna Politkovskaya Award in 2010. She assured us that despite pressures, the Darfur victim's voices have been communicated in the White House and there remains a new ray of hope.

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