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‘Giving Memory a Future’: Confronting the Legacy of Mass Rape in Post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina

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WINNER OF THE FWSA ANNUAL ESSAY COMPETITION

Abstract

Responses to the prevalence of wartime rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s civil war has been characterised by a conflicting paradox between the international legal attempts by the ICTY to prosecute perpetrators, and Bosnian society’s silence, marginalisation of individual victims, and the pronounced desire to “forget” about certain aspects of wartime victimisation. Given that the contemporary prospects of retributive justice and inter-ethnic reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina remain a distant prospect, the question of what can be done to reassert the ethical value of the victims of mass rape and violence continues to be of great importance. Minow’s response to this question is that even ‘if the rigor of prosecution and punishment are not pursued, some other form of public acknowledgement, overcoming communal denial, is the very least that can be done to restore dignity to victims’ (1998: 17). Pertaining to this, women’s testimonies of wartime violation have resulted in the conception of critical and reflective cultural texts such as the two analysed in this paper. *As if I Am Not There* (Drakilić, 1999) and *Esma’s Secret* (Žbanić, 2006) attempt to confront Bosnian society about its neglect of the women who suffered wartime rape. The texts further broach the subject of the social significance of the children who were born as a result of these rapes. The underlying focus of these texts is an attempt to propose and work towards a vision of post-conflict Bosnian society based on a future of reconciliation and the refusal to differentiate along ethnic lines.

Keywords: post-conflict, narrative, reconciliation

Introduction

Despite the centrality of prosecutions for sexual violence and rape in ICTY² indictments (Engle, 2005), the post-conflict communal response to the estimated 20,000 Bosnian women who survived rape and sexual torture in the numerous detention camps across Bosnia during the Balkan Civil War (1992 – 1995) has been characterised by amnesia and silence on the subject (Helms, 2007). Given the symbolic significance of ‘rape stories’ for the wartime construction of the post-conflict *Bosniak*³ identity, the

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² International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia

³ The post-conflict category of identification that has re-enforced the wartime emergence of the notion that Bosnians of Muslim heritage are a distinct “ethnic” group, similarly to Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats

ensuing silence on mass rape, which has been argued, is necessary for future reconciliation and the establishment of an inclusive *Bosnian*⁴ national identity, has left many pressing questions unanswered. These questions relate to Bosnian society's response to the legacy of wartime rape, namely the children that were born as a result of inter-communal violence.

Are these children Bosniak, like their mothers, or Serbian, like their fathers? Are they "the enemy within", as the men who conceived them intended them to be, or are these children Bosnian? And if so, what does it mean to be a Bosnian in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina? What cultural legacy should Bosnian children inherit in order to ensure that the violent past does not revisit the future? These questions and others will be broached by way of an analysis of a post-conflict novel which deals with the subject of mass rape in detention: Slavenka Drakulić's *As If I Am Not There* (1999). Jasmila Zbanic's *Esma's Secret* (2006), a post-conflict film about the legacy of the wartime victimisation of Bosnian women, will also be analysed⁵.

To many observers the 1992-1995 inter-ethnic Civil War that raged across Bosnia-Herzegovina resembled a throwback to a bygone era. The news that Bosnian Muslim civilians were being herded onto busses and trains and transported away from their homes to makeshift detention camps, which doubled up as sinister locations of routine rape and torture by Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces, were reminiscent of the genocidal Nazi concentration camps in 1940s Europe (Gutman, 1993). Moreover, the emergence of witness accounts and the publication of news reports of the widespread use of mass rape against Bosnian Muslim women, as one of the tactics deployed by Serb forces to intimidate and terrorise the Muslim population in order to 'ethnically cleanse' Bosnian territories for secession to 'Greater Serbia', led some contemporary observers to label the conflict 'a war against women' (Stiglmeier, 1994). Stories of the rape of women, both real and exaggerated, became essential to nationalist wartime propaganda, in particular for the Bosnian Muslim leadership who felt that the International Community had abandoned it by enforcing an arms embargo on Bosnia, while the aggressors, the Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces, were freely aided and abetted from Serbia by the JNA (Yugoslav National Army) (Pajić, 1995).

The signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995 rendered post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina a de-facto apartheid state⁶, which coupled with widespread institutional corruption in Bosnian society has meant that the culture of impunity which allowed the mass rapes to take place in the first instance continues to hold sway over Bosnian society.

⁴ Bosnian is a national category that does not rely on exclusionary ethnic identities such as Bosniak (Muslim); Serb or Croat, it constitutes a post-conflict attempt to institute a cohesive and multi-cultural society in Bosnia.

⁵ My analysis of the book and film does not take account of the cultural works in their entirety, but rather aims to engage with the scenes and themes which deal specifically with representations of the subject of rape and the internal and social conflict faced by the women who have/had to deal with the legacy of rape and the children they gave birth to as a result of these violations.

⁶ The Dayton Peace Accords designated Bosnia-Herzegovina as an International protectorate that is constituted by the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serb controlled entity Republika Srpska. The later entity occupies 49% of Bosnian territory and is still governed by the same nationalist party that started the war, and which continues to shelter war criminals and obstruct the return of displaced Bosniaks, which has led critics to indict it as a reward for nationalist aggression (Cockburn, 2001).

This is reflected, in particular, by the low conviction rates for war crimes due to Republika Srpska's refusal to hand over indicted individuals to the ICTY. This tendency coupled with the animosity that already exists in Bosnian society over the ICTY's decision to hold all sides equally responsible for war crimes, despite the commonly held view among Bosniaks and Croats that the Serbs were the biggest aggressors during the conflict, is perceived by these communities as yet another betrayal by the International Community (Delpla, 2007).

The remoteness of the ICTY from the Bosnian people, coupled with the state's continued inability to administer and dispense justice at the local and national levels, has rendered retribution a relatively ineffective means through which to reconstitute the cohesion of Bosnian society. Moreover, the International Community's re-iteration of wartime ethnic divisions in the construction of post-conflict Bosnia, coupled with the relatively successful wartime campaign of 'ethnic cleansing', has meant that the country that was once affectionately known as 'little Yugoslavia' due to its cultural diversity has now been successfully divided along ethnic lines. The challenge then remains that if retributive justice and inter-ethnic reconciliation are unfeasible in the near future, what can be done to reassert the ethical value of the victims of mass rape and violence? Minow's answer to this question is that even 'if the rigor of prosecution and punishment are not pursued, some other form of public acknowledgement, overcoming communal denial, is the very least that can be done to restore dignity to victims [and their children]' (1998: 17).

Since the end of the war post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina has been plagued with the legacy of the civil war and the urgent tasks of reconciliation and reconstruction. The task of reconstruction has necessitated the need to (re)establish democracy and restore a system of law and order; while reconciliation has required a fine balancing act between socio-cultural 'remembering' and 'forgetting' of the war. For the most part in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina 'remembering' has been defined by nationalist and patriarchal priorities, with the explicit expectation that the issue of mass rape during the civil war will be referenced within the framework of collective 'Bosniak' wartime victimisation (Helms, 2007); while individual women's experiences of wartime rape have been marginalised and silenced in an attempt to re-establish social "normality".

This radical shift away from the prominence of mass rape in war-time reportage and rhetoric to a post-conflict desire to "forget" can be partly attributed to the social desire to disassociate the image of Bosnian women from the war-time western media representation of them as the "raped women". At the same time, this response can be viewed as a symptom of a war ravaged society that is unable to bring to justice those responsible for individual and collective violations, and hence shuns a painful confrontation with the legacy of inter-communal mass violence.

The latter point is particularly noteworthy in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina due to the socio-cultural significance of the occurrence of mass rape against Bosnian Muslim women during the inter-ethnic conflict. Mass rape was one of the tactics of 'ethnic cleansing' deployed during the conflict by Serb nationalists who manipulated previously unproblematic religious categories into ethnicised signifiers of difference. Prior to the outbreak of war, the inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina were characterised by their diverse ethno-religious heritage and for the most part they co-existed relatively

peacefully, with up to one-third of all marriages being 'inter-ethnic', with an even higher percentage of the population being of 'mixed' heritage (Engle, 2005). Yet, the ethnicist ideology prevalent among nationalists on all sides, espoused that there were three distinct "ethnic" groups in Bosnia who were identifiable by their religious affiliation: the Orthodox Christian Serbs, the Catholic Croats and "the Muslims". The last category being at times viewed as renegade Serbs or Croats who had converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire, and at other times as settled "Turks" who did not belong in Bosnia (Bakić – Hayden, 1995). These ideological postulations fuelled ethnic hatred and led to the Serb wartime strategy of 'ethnic cleansing' of Bosnians of Muslim heritage.

Bosnian Muslim women became a double target for the Serbian plans to create an ethnically homogenous Bosnia-Herzegovina, because of their ascribed membership to the "Muslim" collectivity and because of being women. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) theorises the strategic significance of women for the patriarchal nation as the symbolic reproducers of the national collectivity. In wartime women become a specific target for sexual violence by enemy forces due to the perceived vulnerability of women's bodies to defilement and miscegenation. The vulnerability of the inter-relationship between gender and ethnicity was strategically exploited by the Bosnian Serb nationalists who drew on patriarchal traditions, and deployed violent militarist tactics to demarcate and separate Bosnia's diverse society into essentialized groupings. Anyone who had a father of Muslim heritage was rendered "Muslim" and hence to be "cleansed". Moreover, from this ethnicist patriarchal perspective the rape of Bosnian Muslim women took on the symbolic meaning as a site of "ethnic cleansing", as the policy of forced impregnation practised by the Serb forces was claimed to be a military strategy of generating future "Serb" generations which would rise up with their fathers against the "Muslims" (Stiglmayer, 1994).

The deeply flawed notion that children born of rape carry their father's ethnicity and are possibly "the enemy within" is highly problematic in a post-conflict society that is faced by the challenge to confront the legacy of inter-communal mass violence and to attempt to reconcile and restore the relationship between violated individuals, those who are the product of such violations, and the Bosnian community. The challenge of reintegrating survivors of mass violence remains compelling. This is particularly true of the Bosnian women who were raped during the conflict and the children that were born as a result of these rapes.

History, memory, forgetting

History, memory and forgetting play a central role in the (re)construction of all national collectivities; however the power of these driving concepts takes on extra potency in post-conflict societies which have to confront the legacy of mass inter-communal violence and attempt to heal the wounds of the victims of violence in order to avoid future conflicts. Historical over-emphasis on the past violations of one's community can result in a victimhood mentality that serves to neglect responsibility and excuse current acts of violence against others, as was the case with the narrative of Afrikaner suffering during the Boer War being used as a tool of legitimisation for the oppressive Apartheid regime in South Africa. The inability to put behind the memory of certain historical wrongs has also been observed in the inter-ethnic violence that raged in

the Balkan countries in the 1990s: ‘What seems apparent in the former Yugoslavia is that *the past continues to torment because it is not past*. These places are not living in a serial order of time but in a simultaneous one, in which *the past and present are continuous, agglutinated mass fantasies, distortions, myths and lies*. Reporters in the Balkan wars often observe that when they are told atrocity stories they were occasionally uncertain whether these stories had occurred yesterday or in 1941, or 1881, or 1441’ (Ignatieff quoted in Minow, 1998: 14, *emphasis in the original*).

However, “forgetting” certain events from the past is equally dangerous for preventing the re-emergence of inter-ethnic violence. Omitting the legacy of violence that has tied communities together in “blood” denies the inter-connectedness and shared heritage that has characterised and continues to characterise the “genetic” make-up of the people of the Balkans. Moreover, ethnically “mixed” Bosnians are not only the legacy of rape and conflict, but also the legacy of over 40 years of peaceful Yugoslav relations between people of diverse ethno-religious heritage. Yet the recent violent past and the contemporary post-conflict arrangements have forced Bosnians to fit into rigidly defined exclusionary categories of belonging. The separate infrastructure of the two Bosnian inter-entities, including separate schools for the different “ethnic” groups which enforce cosmetic differences on the same national language and teach history in a way that privileges the role of one ethnic group over another (Cockburn, 2001), reinforce a sense of exclusivity, separateness and irreconcilable difference in the face of an urgent need for critical reflection and reconciliation. In the immediate absence of a reflexive historiography in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina, this paper will proceed to explore the role of literary and visual narratives of representation in aiding the role of critical history ‘not only in expanding collective memory beyond any actual memory but in correcting, criticising, even refuting the memory of a determined community’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 500) by seeking to address ‘the silences of history by giving a voice to the voiceless’ (Kearney, 2002: 136).

Narrativising Trauma

The novel and film which this essay analyses explicitly attempt to undertake precisely this political project of reintegrating the experiences, memories and testimonies of the “forgotten” victims of war into the post-conflict narrative of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Grbavica, 2006). Further, Humphrey (2002) writes that ‘individual testimonies also serve as alternative sources of “memory” of events which have been expunged from “official memory”’ (ibid: 106). Individual testimonies not only play a key role in *As If I am Not There* and *Esma’s Secret*, but Drakulić’s novel has been constructed entirely out of the fictionalisation of women’s testimonies of wartime violation in the numerous ‘rape camps’ across Bosnia, which she collected while she worked as a journalist reporting on the ICTY trials⁷. Drakulić’s decision to narrate the story of S.⁸ in *As If I am Not There* from a third person perspective can be viewed as an expression of ‘the mimesis of other minds’ (Ricoeur, 1986) and an ‘ethical consciousness’ (Kearney, 2002) that attempts to make meaning out of the senselessness of the Bosnian war by giving expression through narrative to the ‘untransmissible parts of extreme experiences’ (Ricoeur, 2004). Kearney

⁷ Information supplied by Christina Demaria at a seminar in The University of Nottingham, 2008.

⁸ All names of people and places in the novel are represented in single initials.

asserts that at times ‘an ethics of memory is obliged to resort to [the] aesthetics of storytelling’ (2002: 62) – an aesthetic that permits the author/film-maker and/or reader/listener/viewer to immerse oneself and participate in the events that are recounted before one, in a way that is not necessarily possible within the rigid structures of historical or legalistic narratives.

As If I Am Not There is a powerful and emotionally charged novel that not only invites us to bear witness to the testimony of violence and personal violation recounted from the perspective of a 28 year old primary school teacher, who is identified anonymously as S.; but it also invites us, in the words of Veena Das (1997), to ‘give another’s pain a place in [one’s] body’ by encouraging empathy for and identification with the protagonist. The decision to abbreviate all names of people and places that are featured in the novel can be attributed to, on the one hand, the novel’s utilisation of testimonies which originate in legal proceedings, where rape victims are allowed to remain anonymous; but it is also a reflection of the difficulty to narrate the nature of the events being recounted. Whose story is the author to tell? How can she pick one name out of the 20,000 women who were brutalised? Which location should the story be set in, when the same violations took place in so many different places? Despite the fictional nature of the novel, the obligation to remain “truthful” and “representative” of historical events clearly bears a lot of weight on the author’s decisions in relation to recounting the events that happened to so many Bosnian women during the war. Ricoeur (2004) describes this ethical urge as ‘the duty of memory’ which is ‘the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self’ (ibid: 89).

As a feminist, a former Yugoslavian, and a journalist who reported on the war and the subsequent attempts to bring the perpetrators of violence to justice, Slavenka Drakulić has been involved in critiquing and criticising the ‘war against women’ from the very beginning of the conflict. Her critical anti-patriarchal and anti-nationalist analysis of the conflict in the early 1990s earned her and five other Croatian feminists the labels of “traitors” and “witches”, and led to their subsequent vilification and persecution that ended in Drakulić’s self-exile (Kesić, 1999). Drakulić’s personal experience of the violence of the nationalist wars that gripped the Former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s may also point us to observe the possibility of her self-identification with the main protagonist of her novel. The name of the character whose story Drakulić narrates is perhaps accidentally marked by the initial S., the initial of Slavenka’s first name. Nevertheless, Drakulić explicitly avoids speaking for the victims of the war; on the contrary, the third-person narrative voice and the novel’s biographical style indicate that she is taking the position of someone bearing witness to another’s suffering.

The novel (Drakulić, 1999) has two narrative voices: the third-person narrator who is somewhat impersonal and removed; and the second voice which is highlighted in italics and narrated in the first person. Interspersed throughout the novel this voice represents excerpts from Drakulić’s notes which she recorded at The Hague; it is the voice of women’s testimonies. The first person narrative does not merely recount past events but actively reflects on the past; it signifies the women’s agency, that they are not simply victims and subjects of others’ violence; they are also survivors and witnesses. The voice of the women who bear testimony to the atrocities they survived and witnessed in the wartime camps constantly reflects on the senselessness of the past events: ‘I go

back to that moment for the nth time, and I'm still not sure that I understand how it all happened (ibid: 14.)... The only thing I learned in the camp was the importance of forgetting (ibid: 114)'. Yet, the women's post-conflict act of bearing witness to wartime atrocity and violation at the ICTY, and Drakulić's conclusion to the novel that 'their murderers need to forget, but their victims must not let them' (1999: 216), reveals the political significance of the act of remembering as a tool to combat perpetrator-induced amnesia which commands that we disregard the significance of their crimes and victims.

As If I Am Not There

As If Am Not There (1999) is narrated in a circular fashion; the first and last chapter narrate the same event, a hospital scene set in Stockholm, March 1993, on the night and morning after S. gives birth to a child, who, we are informed, has been conceived in wartime through rape. We witness her dilemma over giving up the baby for adoption; a baby she never wanted, a burdensome "act of war" she cannot wait to be rid of, to put the memory of "the camp" behind her (ibid: 1-10, 205-216). The second and following chapters recount the story that brings us to the hospital scene. The novel is set in the period over the summer months of 1992. S.'s journey begins in a village called B., where she is covering for the local primary school teacher who is on maternity leave. One morning in May a soldier bursts through her front door and she is ordered to pack her belongings. The rest of the villagers are also rounded up and herded into the local sports hall. The men and teenage boys are separated and taken out, the burst of gun shots from outside is heard, and the men are never to be seen again; the women are boarded onto buses and taken to a temporary "exchange" camp (ibid: 11-27). The camp becomes their permanent place of residence for the next four months. Despite the primitive conditions in which the women are forced to live, S. and the others quickly adapt to existence in the camp, until the soldiers start selecting young attractive women for "the women's room". "The women's room" is where S. ends up, a place where the chosen women endure night after night of terror, rape and violent sexual abuse at the hands of mostly drunk Serb soldiers.

As If Am Not There attempts the task 'to create meaning against the abject void' by narrating memories populated by terror (Humphrey, 2002: 112). The very title of the novel reminds us of the process of fragmentation, disassociation and de-subjectification that assail an individual whose world and sense of self is unmade in the process of being subjected to extreme violence by others (Scarry, 1985). The title of the novel is a direct reference to S.'s first experience of rape in "the women's room": 'These are her legs, of course. S. tells herself that these are her legs, but she does not actually feel them. *As if I am not there*, she thinks. As if I am gone' (Drakulić, 1999: 67; author's emphasis). Throughout the novel there are constant references to the necessity for the camp's inmates not to think of life before or after, to just exist in order to survive, 'to survive whatever the cost' (ibid: 121). An act of agency or resistance is suicide, S. reminds us in the instance when she considers to "execute justice" by killing the Captain of the camp who has taken her as his "mistress" (ibid: 118-119). The desire for revenge remains with S. even after the camp inmates are exchanged for Serbian prisoners-of-war and taken to a refugee camp in Croatia at the end of 1992, and in the months afterwards when S. is finally free as a refugee in Sweden, waiting to give birth and give away the child

conceived in “the women’s room”. She is continuously plagued by a recurring dream in which she violently kills one of the men who raped her, but each time she wakes up feeling that revenge is futile because the man in her dream does not recognise her as his victim; for him she is a total stranger (ibid: 7, 216).

Minow (1998) refers to survivors’ impulse to avenge wrongs that have been done against them as an expression of their basic self-respect as a human being, but she also warns that vengeance can ‘set in motion a downward spiral of violence, or an unquenchable desire that traps people in cycles of revenge, recrimination, and escalation’ (ibid: 10). Drakulić (1999) similarly draws attention to the legacy of violence and vengeance in a scene in the novel in which a young boy in the refugee camp, who had witnessed the murder of his older brother, shocks the by-standing adults by declaring: ‘when I grow up I will kill the Serbs like this. He raises his arm and aims as if shooting someone at close range’. The narrator comments with a sense of tragedy: ‘One generation of people in that room has already finished its life and reduced it to memories. The other will grow up with a desire for revenge. They are all like the living dead’ (ibid: 172).

Drakulić (1999) proposes that “remembering” in order to bring the perpetrators to justice is the only way to escape the trap of vengeance which promises to lock future generations into a cycle of violence that merely reverses the position of victims and perpetrators. However, remembering is a problematic task in itself, because the refusal to forget carries the double burden of choosing what to recount about the past in order not to fuel revenge in the future. This troublesome anxiety about the future is articulated as S. contemplates the different outcomes of giving up her baby for adoption or bringing it up herself. She wonders what would she tell him when he asks about his father, what would she say to him about the man who she cannot think of as one single man, but as the plural “fathers”?:

‘The children of war are in any case doomed to grow up living a lie. And should it happen that one of the mothers keeps the child, she will have to lie to it. She will have to invent for the child a father, a family, a past. Which is greater, the right to a father or the right to the truth, S. wonders as she leans over his cot. She senses the answer. To tell the child the truth would be to add yet another injustice to the one already done to it.

And she, what would she tell him? She would lie and tell him that his father had died a heroic death while trying to liberate his town. This child has a right to a father hero. She would find it hard to invent and describe in detail this father’s face, voice or habits. Hardest of all perhaps, would be to think up a love story for this non-existent man.

Which story would be better for this child, the one the adoptive Swedish mother would tell him, or the one she, his mother, would tell him?

Both would lie, except only one of these stories would mean a victory over the horror of war. Victory over herself, thinks S., dropping her hand down towards the child. Only his mother could show him that the hate from which his life emerged can be transformed into love. One day she will tell him that he is her child, hers alone. That he has no father – because this is the truth’ (Drakulić, 1999: 213-214).

As If I Am Not There ends with an emotional scene in which S. reconciles herself to the fact that her baby is not guilty for its violent conception and that there is hope for a shared future between the traumatised mother and her child.

Forgetting the Past for the Future?

Esma's Secret (2006) begins where *As If I Am Not There* ends. *Esma's Secret* is set 12 years after the war and the narrative recounts the story of a woman called Esma (Mirjana Karanović) and her 12 year old daughter, Sara (Luna Mijović). The film is not concerned with bearing testament to past atrocities but to confronting their legacy. From the title of the film, at least to the informed viewer, it is relatively clear that Esma's "secret" concerns "the truth" about her daughter's father. At the beginning of the film, Esma is determined that she will acquire the full sum for her daughter's looming school trip, rather than provide the certificate that will exempt Sara from payment by confirming that her deceased father was a *shaheed* (martyr/war hero). The story Esma has told her daughter, about her father having died as a war hero while fighting for Bosnia, is precisely the story S. foresees having to make up for her son. However, a fabricated story can only be told for so long, before a child starts seeing through the inconsistencies of a taken for granted founding narrative and begins to ask questions about her heritage. As Ricoeur (2004) reminds us, history and memory are never experienced and lived by individuals in a vacuum, they are always produced within and shared with a collectivity.

Despite Esma's painstaking efforts to protect her daughter from the truth of her conception, she cannot prevent the ultimate outcome, which is to tell Sara, having been forced to do so by her at gun point, that she was raped by "Chetnik" soldiers in the "prisoner of war" camp during the war, and that Sara's father is one of the men who raped her (*Esma's Secret*, 2006). The revelation about Sara's father could not be avoided in a post-conflict society that, despite shunning the violation of the female victims of war, is saturated with masculinist imagery of male martyrdom. The juxta-positioning of Esma's silence on the subject of her suffering, which is couched in secrecy and shame, in relation to the figure of the war-hero father, as a source of pride, reveals a post-conflict subversion of wartime victimhood with a narrative of noble sacrifice for the nation. Such an emphasis on masculine warfare marginalises individual memories of violation, while giving primacy to nationalist and patriarchal discourses of militant heroism.

Esma's Secret provides a social critique of the legacies of the conflict and the patriarchal social relations that continue to exploit and marginalise women, a post-conflict set-up in which Esma lives in relative poverty and is not recognised as a 'war victim'⁹. The film is also critical in its portrayal of the pervasiveness of corruption and the culture of impunity that permits criminals and war profiteers to continue to play a powerful role in Bosnian society, while their victims remain unacknowledged and sidelined. *Esma's Secret* further highlights the legacy of the not so distant communal violence, which continues to hold sway over post-conflict generations, a statement

⁹ Following the release and international acclaim of *Esma's Secret*, Jasmila Zbanic joined The Association of Women Victims of War to campaign for a law change which will recognise the women who suffered war-time rape as victims of war, and hence be eligible for state financial support. The Campaign was successful. (Why Women Count – Bosnia, 2007)

reiterated in the scene in which Sara uses the loaded gun of a school friend to threaten her mother with (Grbavica, 2006).

The title of the film, *Esma's Secret* clearly implies silence and even shame in relation to the past. Secrecy implies that forgetting or even conjuring up a fictional past is preferable to speaking out or about social suffering. Drakulić gloomily remarks about the post-conflict situation in which 'rape will no longer be mentioned, as if it never happened. There will always be talk of the camps, the torture, the executions, and so on. And the women will listen with their lips sealed' (1999: 153). This painful legacy of war with its silences and agonising secrets is also embodied in the film's subtitle and setting: *Grbavica*. Grbavica is a district in Sarajevo, which during the two year long siege by the JNA and Serb paramilitary forces in the 1990s was transformed into a de-facto prison camp for Grbavica's residents. The film alludes to some of the atrocities that took place there, including that 12 years after the war mass graves are still being exhumed in the district's vicinity, and both Esma and her colleague Pelda (Leon Lučev) are in search of their fathers' bodies (*Esma's Secret*, 2006). Grbavica also features in *the story of S.*, the protagonist S. comes from Sarajevo and her family lives in Grbavica. Toward the beginning of the novel she is informed that her parents and sister "disappeared" at the start of the war, and towards the end she discovers that her parents' bloated bodies were found floating in the river (*As If I Am Not There*, 1999).

In contrast to the testimonial narrative of *As If I Am Not There* which commands the victims to "remember" as a form of triumph over the perpetrators; the "truth" in *Esma's Secret* threatens to add further injustice to the one that has already been done. Even though bearing witness to past horrors is an obligation survivors have in respect to those who are no longer here to testify of their own suffering (Ricoeur, 2004: 89), nevertheless, as Paul Ricoeur (2004) suggests, some degree of "forgetting" is necessary in order to embrace the possibilities of the future. It is important to emphasise that successful "forgetting" does not necessitate amnesia or denial; on the contrary, *Esma's Secret* demonstrates that the duty to future generations is to tell the "truth" in order for society to be able to put the violence of the past behind and to look forward to the future. Moreover, the film's narrative is redemptive in that it permits Esma's revelation of her painful secret to begin the process of healing, allowing the articulation of her traumatic memory to be integrated into a cohesive narrative that restores the mother and daughter to each-other and to Bosnian society. This point is perhaps most clearly embodied in the unitary national narrative represented by the concluding scene of the film in which Sara sings, as she waves her mother goodbye, a popular Bosnian song called 'Sarajevo, My Love' together with the other school children on the bus (Grbavica, 2006).

The redemptive ending in which Esma and her daughter reconcile with each other and the tragic past advocates a novel approach to Bosnian identity; an approach which rejects ethnicist notions of belonging, reiterated throughout the film in the refusal to articulate wartime ethnic categories such as "Serb" or "Muslim". As a matter of fact, we never find out about Esma's ethnicity, all we know is that she was and is a resident of Grbavica, and similar to S. she may also be of mixed heritage. *Esma's Secret* also avoids making any accusations or attributions of guilt along ethnic lines; the men who raped Esma, and whoever of them fathered Sara, are merely referred to as "Chetniks". While historically "Chetniks" were Serb Royalist forces during WWII and since the war in the

1990's the concept has been associated with the Serb nationalists, "Chetnik" remains an ideological and political category of identification and differentiation rather than an ethnic one. Thus, encouraging post-conflict thinking to move away from and avoid the ethnicist categories that led to the war, and further, paves the way for inter-ethnic dialogue and the possibility for reconciliation.

Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of the Balkan civil war the response to mass rape has been characterised by a conflicting paradox between international legal institutions such as the ICTY which have sought to prosecute perpetrators, and a societal response characterised by silence, the marginalisation of victims, and the pronounced desire to "forget" about certain aspects of wartime victimisation. Despite this, women's testimonies of wartime violation have inspired critical and reflective cultural works such as *As if I Am Not There*, that have in turn paved the way for more pronouncedly political ventures such as the film *Esma's Secret*, which confronted Bosnian society about its neglect of the women who suffered wartime rape, and broached the subject of the social significance of the children who were born as a result of these rapes; proposing a vision of post-conflict Bosnian society consisting of a shared future based on reconciliation and the refusal to differentiate along ethnic lines.

Both of the cultural texts examined in this paper point towards the conclusion that attempts at post-conflict reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina necessitate constructing a careful balance between the "remembering" and "forgetting" of wartime victimisation in order to free future generations from the trap of recurring recrimination and vengeance. However, the request to forget in order to embrace the future poses a challenge in relation to the ethical responsibility to remember the victims of wartime violence, and to create a safe space for survivors to be able to narrate their trauma. The failure to carry out this duty can bolster social amnesia, and further reinforce impunity and exonerate the perpetrators while doing yet another injustice to their victims. In response to this ethical dilemma, Slavenka Drakulić's *As If I Am Not There* (1999) attempts to bear witness to the stories and memories of the women who suffered wartime rape and became pregnant as a result of this violence. Moreover, both texts seek to confront the legacy of mass rape in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina by suggesting an alternative reading of the legacy of inter-communal violence. *Esma's Secret* (Žbanić, 2006), in particular, deals with this legacy in terms of the potential for the transformation of wartime trauma into a more constructive post-conflict remembering: a form of recollection that is not based on secrets and silences but on the acknowledgement that war and violence do not always achieve what they seek to. While violence acts to destroy and rupture individual and social bonds of trust and coexistence, the converse consequence, albeit unintended, is to fuse and create interconnectedness between victims and perpetrators, and between so called enemies. Bosnian's post-conflict children, Esma's daughter Sara and S.'s baby boy, are the unexpected synthesis of a violent social encounter that has the potential to be transformed into a triumph of love and reconciliation over the horrors of war.

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