

Theatre of Ghosts and the Other under the Threat of Mass Death:

Some Ethical Thoughts on Plays of Genocide¹⁾

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Abstract

As Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, contends that Eichmann, the persecutor lacked imagination to think of the persecuted and was only thinking of following orders and rules, for any soldier fighting in a war, to defy given orders risks his life and therefore he has to oppress conscience in killing his enemy. Likewise, Kitty Felde's *A Patch of Earth*, a play set in Serbia, delves into the wound of a soldier who, with his fellow soldiers, took part in a genocide of hundreds of Islamic people. The soldier is the only man who admits the crime at the International Criminal Court. Other soldiers suppress the existence of the genocide itself.

Such disavowal of persecutors' side always makes it difficult to disclose what happened. debbie tucker green's *truth and reconciliation*, a play set in the aftermath of genocidal incidents in five different countries — South Africa, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland —, shows how it is difficult for persecutors to break their silence before their victims and the families of victims. In both plays by Felde and tucker green, ghosts appear to approach persecutors, trying to get the truth out of them. However, in either case, those who ordered the mass murders are speechless or invisible so that a Kafkaesque nightmare emerges.

1) This essay is based on the paper read at a culated panel of the International Federation of Theatre Research's world congress held at Studio-Laboratory for Performing Arts, Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, on July 11, 2018.

Moreover, treatment of refugees who escape genocidal violence and migrate to safer places also complicates the issue in a global scale. Key Adshead's *The Bogus Woman* denounces inhuman receptions of British authorities for asylum seekers who have escaped from brutality of their homelands. Such asylum seekers have no place to be sheltered in safe.

This essay will focus on how such plays dealing with recent crimes of mass murders can bring ethics and aesthetics to the audience.

I.

Ever since military technology was first developed and weapons of mass destruction were invented and used, innocent citizens have become their easy victims. News of inhuman mass murders is heard almost every day as the result of the development of wide networks of information. Especially after the 9/11, the global tyranny has become militarily and economically conspicuous as a writer and an art critic, John Berger laments:

On the world scale emigration has become the principal means of survival. The national state of those who had suffered the worst genocide in history has become, militarily speaking, fascist. National states in general have been politically downsized and reduced to the role of vassals serving the new world economic order. The visionary political vocabulary of three centuries has been garbaged. In short, the economic and military global tyranny of today has been established.²⁾

Emigration is, of course, the last means of survivors of mass murders and genocides or of refugees from war and conflicts. Even such survival means as emigration has been impeded recently by strong oppositions toward immigrants and refugees within advanced nations. There is no place for many of them to settle down on the earth and they are indeed at a loss. How can we save them? How can we reduce the number of refugees? It is impossible to eliminate them as far as the economic and military global tyranny exists. Why does such tyranny

2) John Berger, "Wanting Now" in *Hold Everything Dear*, New York: Vintage, 2007, 7.

persist or even spread in the world?

In this essay, let us focus on cases of genocide. When genocide happens, how can we prosecute the persecutors? How can the persecutors reconcile with their victims and their family? How can the victims' trauma be healed? Is it even possible to restore well-being to the casualties of military injuries? Can persecutors live in peace after what they did? By examining plays that have dealt with these issues, this essay will discuss and analyse the ethics and the aesthetics that arise from each play on the theme of genocide to reflect on the insight that theatre can offer to the world.

II.

In her famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt, by examining the response of Eichmann, the high-ranking Nazi SS operative who was arrested and accused by an Israeli court, makes clear that the persecutor lacked the imagination to think about the persecuted and was only following orders so that he would be promoted in that totalitarian regime. To him, defying the given orders would result in the loss of his job or worse, endanger his life. Most of the persecutors of any genocide would be likely to respond in a similar fashion. Like Eichmann, they would also probably deny their accountability for the act of having killed a large number of people. At the same time, it is true that there are those who suffer from feelings of guilt stemming from actions performed during conditions of war.

However, the feeling of guilt is complicated. Using Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory, Judith Butler contends that "guilt is linked to fears about survivability" and that "if guilt poses a question for the human subject, it is not first and foremost a question of whether one is leading the good life, but of whether life will be livable at all."³⁾ Thus, according to Butler, "guilt refers less to any humanness than to life, and, indeed, to survivability."⁴⁾ One becomes a persecutor to sustain his or her own life in a crisis while victims who have survived

3) Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London and New York: Verso, 2010, 45.

4) Ibid., 46.

genocide also feel guilty for the death of their friends or family members. Therefore, guilt is an aspect of human vulnerability shared by both persecutors and victims.

American playwright Kitty Felde's *A Patch of Earth*, a play set in Serbia, delves into the wounds of a soldier who killed Islamic people along with the fellow soldiers in his unit. He, a Croat, is the only soldier who admitted his crime at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Other army personnel who committed the same crime tried to stop him from confessing and attempted to suppress the existence of the genocide itself. Such disavowal on the side of the persecutors always makes it difficult for an individual to disclose the truth of what happened.

The responsibility of any war rests on a nation or a group of people who governed the nation, not on individuals, for those who committed mass murders in the name of war are either forced or ordered by their bosses or top leaders, who are more or less invisible to them, as in Kafka's novels. However, it is undeniable that the family and friends whose beloved one was murdered in the genocide cannot help blaming an individual murderer. It is also true that, under such chaotic conditions, individual persecutors had no choice but to do his superior's bidding, otherwise his life would be endangered. Therefore, reconciliation between persecutors and victims is very difficult, more so in the case of war and conflicts.

British playwright, Debbie Tucker Green, who chooses to write her name and the titles of her plays in lower case, in her play entitled *truth and reconciliation*, shows how it is difficult for persecutors to break their silence before their victims. This play depicts five different cases: a South African black family seeks an apology from the absent policeman who killed their daughter/sister in an anti-apartheid conflict; a pregnant Bosnian woman tries to get two Serbian ex-soldiers to admit to rape; a Zimbabwean man asks a woman in authority for the whereabouts of his missing wife; a Rwandan Tutsi widow, facing a Rwandan Hutu murderer, asks him how her husband died when he was killed; and a Northern Irish woman accompanied by two of her friends blames another Northern Irish woman for having allowed her son to kill his enemy who included the son of the former woman. They all face disavowals, and the onstage characters do not find the truth they seek, though the audience is given glimpses of the facts through scenes in which some of the victims—the daughter/ sister in the South African

family and the Tutsi husband—appear as ghosts and talk to their murderers. The ghosts pressure the persecutors to tell the truth in both cases, but their requests are ignored.

In both Felde's and Tucker Green's plays, ghosts of the murdered appear to force the persecutors to reveal what really happened. This strategy succeeds in the former play while it fails in the latter. The appearance of ghosts in tragedies is conventional in theatre, as is evidenced by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. They emerge because their souls cannot be purified due to their mortification and their indignation against the murderers. In contemporary plays, however, ghosts may be interpreted as the embodiments of fear and anxiety that probably emanate from the feelings of guilt hidden in the minds of the persecutors. They may also be wishful devices used by playwrights to remind the audience of the atrocity of mass murders in the name of war. Post-modern philosophers often theorize about the importance of being aware of the ghosts or the dead who surround us. For example, Jacques Derrida, quoting Nietzsche, writes:

Our entire world is the *cinder* of innumerable *living* beings; and what is living is so little in relation to the whole, it must be that, once already, *everything* was transformed into life and it will continue to be so . . . The living being is only a species of what is dead, and a very rare species.⁵⁾

"Cinder," which is "never found here but there"⁶⁾ is, according to Derrida, the word of the dead that "remains beyond everything that is, remains unpronounceable in order to make saying possible although it is nothing."⁷⁾ Similarly, Berger states, "The dead surround the living. The living are the core of the dead. [. . .] The living reduce the dead to those who have lived; yet the dead already include the living in their own great collective."⁸⁾

To be aware of the ghosts or of the dead, therefore, means that we, the living, must hear the word of the dead who are the construct of our universe. The theatre,

5) Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, Trans. Ned Lukacher, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, 69; Italics original.

6) Ibid., 71.

7) Ibid., 73.

8) John Berger, "Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead" in *Hold Everything Dear*, 3–4.

within its limited space, embraces the unlimited dimensions in which the audience can transcend the border of reality and can communicate with the unreal. Ghosts, embodied as characters in our contemporary theatre, often express the trauma of the main characters, their own angst, or the suffering of their surviving families.

III.

The trauma of genocide survivors is often realistically depicted in documentary plays such as Key Adshead's *The Bogus Women* and Sonja Linden's *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda*. While both plays are written by British playwrights, the former is a monodrama with one-woman performing several characters; the latter consists partly of monologues and also incorporates dialogs with another character. Both plays portray an African woman who, escaping her own country as a refugee, seeks asylum in the U.K. The protagonist of *The Bogus Woman* is a journalist who criticized the regime back in her country, causing her entire family to be mercilessly killed. She barely escapes to England with her life. Although she is obviously a refugee, she is considered an illegal immigrant, imprisoned, and accused by the British authorities who never make the effort to listen to her desperate appeals. Instead, she is repeatedly asked to furnish proof. She is finally deported to her country and murdered. She is thus twice victimized —first in her own country and next in the U.K. She has no place to live as a human being.

Although *The Bogus Woman* ends negatively and tragically, Linden's play is more positive and optimistic. The heroine, Juliette, also a refugee, is allowed to live in the U.K. She, too, has been through the atrocious genocide with her family and relatives killed in Rwanda just for being Tutsi. Trying to expose the tragic incident that happened in Rwanda, Juliette wrote a novel about it. She shows it to Simon, a British writer who helps refugees heal their trauma by writing their stories. Simon advises Juliette to write her own personal story, rather than to depict the dry facts of what happened in her country. She struggles, because in order to do so, she has to re-submerge herself in the memories of the atrocious past that traumatized her and that she desperately wants to forget.

Almost giving up the project of publishing her stories, she once says to Simon,

“My book is too hard for me to finish [. . .], I need to start my life, I need to live now, but every time I write, I’m *there*, I’m *there*! I don’t want that no more. I want to be *here*.”⁹⁾ If we recall Derrida’s *Cinders* once again, “there” is where the dead speak and reconciling with the dead is not easy for a person like Juliette, who is racked by survivor’s guilt. Although no ghosts appear in this play, writing her own traumatic stories does mean that she recalls the memories of her dead ghosts.

It is often considered ethical that victims make their voices heard, but acts such as telling their stories to the public, to journalists, or even privately to therapists do not always heal pain. Only a few fortunate people like Linden’s Juliette can overcome their trauma and be somewhat healed by recalling and revealing their personal experiences. Interestingly, Sonja Linden is a Jewish British playwright who represents the second generation of survivors of the Nazi’s Holocaust and her view in the play is, perhaps, an expectation of her own healing. Many refugees often reject exposing their own traumatic pasts.

Eve Ensler’s *Necessary Targets* calls our attention to such ethical questions as whether it is right to reveal the traumatic experiences of the victimized to the world. Based on her interviews with Bosnian women victims after the war, Ensler uncovered the deception of the American intervention under the guise of a humanitarian act. The main characters in the play are two American women who go into the refugee camp to supply psychiatric treatments to the war-stricken Bosnian female refugees. One of the American women, named J. S., is a wealthy psychiatrist who was appointed to the camp by the U.S. President, while the other, Melissa, is her much younger aid who ambitiously records the stories of the refugees to compile them into a book to sell, though she believes it necessary to let the world know what happened. As the play progresses, the older psychiatrist, who initially maintained a professional distance from the refugees, becomes one with them and acknowledges that what she initially considered a humanitarian intervention would neither help nor heal their trauma. J.S., having lost her assurance and her sense of justice, feels empty and becomes nobody like her patients.

9) Sonja Linden, *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda*, London: Aurora Metro Press, 2004, 52; Italics added.

At the end of the play, J.S. tape-records her feelings: “I am without a country. I am without a profession or pursuit. I am without a reason or even a direction. I am *there* in that refugee camp in the middle of nowhere. I am with Zlata and Jelena and Seada and Nuna and Azra.”¹⁰⁾ She is thus aware of the situation of the refugees and questions the attitude of people like Melissa who, without any doubts, proceed ambitiously to perform their tasks.

It is true that we can hear voices of the victims of any catastrophe happening in the world thanks to volunteer journalists like Melissa in *Necessary Targets* or to courageous writers like Juliette in Linden’s play. On the other hand, the victims’ private experiences are exposed to the public by the strong sense of justice of those journalists and thus may serve to grievously damage the victims a second time. On a larger scale, when the United Nations or the super-powers intervene in civil wars in the name of “humanitarian intervention” or “justice,” for example during the Syrian war in the most recent instance, people are led to more traumatized situations and their wounds cut deeper. Zlata, one of the refugees in *Necessary Targets*, says angrily to J.S., “Why do you assume I want your help? You Americans don’t know how to stop helping. You move so fast, cleaning things up. Fixing.”¹¹⁾

Jenny Edkins, scholar of international politics, explains such dilemma of justice today as follows:

[A]lthough the power of the sovereign state over the lives of its populations has been successfully challenged in the post-cold war period and the notion of humanitarian concern as overriding sovereignty widely accepted, this is not a liberating or an emancipation but merely the beginning of another and more authoritarian form of sovereign control over life.¹²⁾

In the belief that those atrocious wars should never be forgotten, surviving victims are often urged to speak about their experiences, however traumatic they

10) Eve Ensler, *Necessary Targets: A Story of Women and War*, New York: Villard, 2001, 117; Italics added.

11) Ibid., 64.

12) Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 212.

may be. This often torments victims in the second time by making their harrowing experiences open in public. Ensler's play raises a question of today's humanitarian intervention given unilaterally by the power, where pain of the vulnerable is often ignored.

IV.

Pain that the sufferers experienced is "something that takes place outside language . . . outside the linguistic realm,"¹³⁾ writes Edkins, quoting the philosophical messages by Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. The most brutal and atrocious occurrences they went through are indeed "something that takes place outside language." Therefore, they should be expressed "outside the linguistic realm." It is a playwright's role to convey such unspeakableness through his/her work. Ensler's play, like tucker green's play in which the South African mother stays mute till the exposure of her grief, succeeds in expressing something that is unspeakable in language. Steven Miller, referring to Samuel Beckett's last prose, *Worstward Ho*, in his philosophical reading of literature on war, concludes that "Only imagination makes it possible to think beyond war; to *see* what cannot be said, to say what cannot be imagined, and thereby to stage the cause of word's failure to respond."¹⁴⁾

With our imaginations, we, the audience and the readers, can share the pain, the anguish that goes beyond any word, with victims or even with "victimized" persecutors in a play like *A Patch of Earth* and can understand their pain. To "understand" here does not mean that we see voyeuristically or descriptively the reality of what happened, but that we become aware of indescribable torment of sufferers that include the dead and the ghosts.

Theodor W. Adorno admonishes us of our forgetfulness with regard to calamity, saying that it "is already a form of guilt."¹⁵⁾ He contends that philosophy leads us to be conscious of "each moment of identification with the victims, and of

13) Ibid., 213.

14) Steven Miller, *War After Death: On Violence and Its Limits*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, 128; Italics original

15) Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 113.

alert awareness and remembrance.”¹⁶⁾ I believe that it is not only philosophy that does so. Theatre also makes it possible for us to identify with victims or “victimized” persecutors of today’s catastrophes that include not only genocides or mass deaths caused by war but also terror attacks, accidents, or natural disasters.

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16) Ibid.