

DIVERSE AND DYNAMIC ROLES OF WOMEN IN NARRATIVES OF WARS AND CONFLICTS: CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL DEPICTION SOLELY AS VICTIMS IN DENIS MUKWEGE'S *THE POWER OF WOMEN*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the prevalent depiction of female characters as vulnerable victims and marginalized bystanders in male-dominated war and conflict narratives. The aim is to deconstruct such peripheralized perceptions and highlight women as central figures—active, agential, and resilient war heroines who overcome trauma and victimhood, amplify their voices, and challenge the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender-based violence. The primary source is drawn from selected text of Denis Mukwege's *The Power of Women*, while secondary sources and reference materials are drawn from journals, library resources, and internet databases. The findings reveal that despite efforts by gender-sensitive writers to portray women as active participants functioning as mothers, caregivers, breadwinners, family heads, and peace activists in militarized narratives, some narratives still perpetuate victimized representations. While this paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge promoting gender positivity, it recommends that society makes concerted efforts to de-emphasize patriarchal and masculine hegemonic ideologies. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable cultural narrative, writers, who are products of their societies, can portray women from less biased perspectives, recognizing their full spectrum of roles and contributions in conflict situations.

Keywords; Agency, Activism, Resilience, Trauma, Sisterhood Solidarity, Bonding War, Women

Introduction

In traditional narratives, women in war and conflict situations are often portrayed primarily as victims emphasizing their weaknesses, sufferings, and passive roles. However, despite this stereotypic depiction which overlooks the diverse and dynamic roles women play in such settings, a more nuanced examination reveals more inclusive roles, challenging these one-dimensional depictions. According to Vishnu Kotagiri, an unbiased examination of women in war literature “unveils a rich and evolving tapestry of narratives, reflecting the dynamic roles, experiences, and perspectives of women amid the chaos and conflict of war” (Kotagiri 634). He further posits that “Initially marginalized and stereotyped, women's voices in early war literature often portrayed them as passive victims, heroines on the home front, or objects of romanticization” (Kotagiri 634)

This paper, therefore, examines the

transformation of women's roles in war literature over time, from traditional portrayals of docility to more diverse and dynamic representations. It highlights their heroic and spirited efforts to cope regardless of their adverse experiences in times of wars and conflicts. These evolving roles include women as combatants and leaders in various conflicts, activists driving peace movements and promoting nonviolent resistance, caregivers providing vital support as nurses and aid workers, often at great personal risk. Women have also, assumed leadership positions in military and political spheres, making strategic decisions that shape the course of conflicts and societal wellness.

Additionally, women have emerged as survivors of unimaginable trauma, including sexual violence, displacement, and loss of loved ones, yet have demonstrated remarkable resilience and strength. They have played crucial roles as peacemakers, negotiating peace agreements,

mediating conflicts, and building bridges between communities. By exploring these roles, we can better appreciate the complexity and agency of women in such circumstances not merely as passive victims but as courageous, active change agents who are crucial to the stories, capable of resisting and transcending their victimhood, and playing pivotal roles in their own survival and that of their communities.

The exploration aligns with a major objective of this study: challenging the reductive portrayal of women and highlighting their multifaceted contributions through the intricate dynamics of agency, activism, trauma, resilience, sisterhood, solidarity, and bonding. These themes are vividly portrayed in the above novels by Gbowee and Mukwege, set in militarized environments. Furthermore, it explores how the female characters navigate and respond to the challenges of volatile and war-torn settings, which serve as the backdrop for the narratives in question.

To accomplish this, the paper has been divided into three sections, each focusing on a pair of the identified themes as follows: Agency and Activism, Trauma and Resilience, and Sisterhood solidarity and Bonding. These sections critically analyze how the overlap of women's agency and activism re-create the women survivors and propel the plots forward, how they cope with trauma and demonstrate resilience in the face of harsh conditions, and the significance of sisterhood and bonding in their journeys.

Theoretical Framework

As stated earlier in the introduction, the focus this paper is to interrogate the negative depiction of female characters as just passive traumatized and peripheral victims in war and conflict related narratives and seek to position them as heroines both victimized and agential. Additionally, it will also locate and examine traditional patriarchy as triggers of the war/conflict induced gendered sexual abuse, the connectivity between victimhood, trauma, female agency, resilience, and activism. Consequently, an eclectic theoretical framework/ academic approach which draws from dual literary theories of Feminism and Trauma is deployed. This method helps incorporate diverse perspectives and insights into

the analysis for a more holistic understanding of the gendered complexities and multifaceted experiences under study. Furthermore, the varied investigative theoretical method takes into consideration, the convolutions of gendered violence, the binary realities of victimhood/agency, survival/ heroism all rolled into one, and the political environment that enabled the scenario.

Feminist Literary Theory

Feminism as a concept advocate for the equality of all sexes and by extension, all mankind. It preaches equality of all mankind, irrespective of their gender, in all aspects of life, be they social, economic, religious, or political and often seen as a response to/against hegemonic traditions of patriarchy, sexism, marginalization, and subjugation. Starting from its origin in the 18th century, the term feminism has been defined variously by many proponents based on the cultural reality and historical truth. For instance, Burkett and Brunell see it as "the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes", (Brunell & Burkett.1). Lewis argues that feminism is a "complex set of ideologies and theories that, at its core, seeks to achieve equal social, political, and economic rights for women" (Lewis 1).

Feminism as a movement has evolved over time with different strands, including social feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, Black feminism, Separatist Feminism, Ecofeminism, African and Intersectional feminism, among others. There are also different waves of feminism consisting of the first wave which is concerned with property rights and franchise for women championed by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 as contained in her book, *The ideals of Feminism in her book, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The second wave, spanning the 1960s to 1970s, was kickstarted by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It marked a pivotal turning point, as the focus shifted to address a wide range of women's issues, including liberation movements, legal and social equality, reproductive rights, equal pay, and an end to domestic violence. This era also saw a critical recognition that gender-based violence was a deeply ingrained, systemic problem

requiring a collective and concerted response, thereby laying the groundwork for the intersectional feminist movements that followed.

The third wave which is crucial to this paper was announced by Rebecka Walker, the mixed-race daughter of second-wave leader Alice Walker, in 1992. This was on account of failed justice for Anita Hill by the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, regarding her accusation of Clarence Thomas, a supreme Court nominee, of sexual harassment. It particularly focused on intersectionality; a concept made popular by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's works which demonstrates the relation between systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, and gender. The high point here is the importance of individual agency and choice, which connects to the fact that our multiple identities and our social locations are identified and characterized by a focus on individuality and diversity.

There is also the fourth wave which debuted in 2012 and is still ongoing. Its main focus is on body positivity, use of internet tools to encourage online activism to deconstruct the stereotypical depiction of the female gender, use of social media and technology to further advance their causes, like gender equation on work and remuneration, combating sexual harassment, body shaming, sexist imagery in the media, gender violence and rape culture.

However, specifically employed for this paper as part of the complex theoretical framework are the third wave of feminist literary theory which emphasizes positive female representation in narratives, and the concept of intersectionality which recognizes that individuals experience oppression and privilege differently based on race, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and other factors. Both the third wave and intersectionality align with the core objective of investigating female characters in narratives of conflict and war-related violence as more than just passive victims but also as empowered heroines. The positive representation of women in war narratives as heroines with agency is strongly associated with the third wave of feminism and continues to shape contemporary feminist perspectives. Again, intersectionality "highlights how systems of oppression intersect and create distinct

experiences for individuals with multiple identity categories" (The Editors). Since it acknowledges that individuals experience oppression based on the intersection of their values, it underpins the aim to examine the portrayal of diverse realities of female characters in conflict and war narratives, moving beyond the passive victim trope to depict empowered heroines especially in the text under review.

Literary Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is a concept in literary criticism that examines how literature and other cultural forms represent and engage with the concept of trauma. It focuses on the representation and exploration of trauma within literature and involves the depiction of distressing or traumatic events, experiences, and their aftermath in fictional narratives, poetry, memoirs, and other forms of literary expression. Nasrullah Mambrol asserts that Trauma studies explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance (Nasrullah Mambrol 1). Despite varied definitions, it is important to note that it is rooted in Freud's psychoanalysis studies as expounded in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), it explores how trauma affects individuals and society as a whole. Trauma theory looks at how trauma is narrated, remembered, and processed in literary texts, and how these representations can help us better understand the impact of trauma on both individual and collective identities. It also explores how literature can bear witness to trauma via narration of the survivors and be a tool for healing and coping with trauma.

The key concepts in trauma theory provide a framework for analyzing how literature engages with the complexities of trauma, memory, and narrative, and how it contributes to our understanding of human experience in the aftermath of trauma. These include the **Survivor Narratives concept** which depicts accounts of traumatic events told from the perspective of survivors, it emphasizes the importance of amplifying survivor voices and explores the ways in which trauma is narrated, remembered, and processed in literature. The next is **The Recovery and Resilience Trauma concept** which

acknowledges the resilience of survivors and explores narratives of recovery, healing, and transformation. It examines how literature portrays the process of coping with trauma, finding meaning in suffering, and reclaiming agency and identity. Other concepts include Fragmentation and Disruption, Witnessing and Testimony, Intergenerational Trauma concept, Cultural Memory and Collective, Ethics and Representation Trauma concepts respectively.

For this paper, it is imperative to incorporate trauma literary theory as one of the two pillars in the varied theoretical framework, focusing more on the Survivor Narrative Concept and the Recovery and Resilience Trauma Concept. The trajectory depicted by the female characters in the text analyzed here follows a progression from being victims of militarized sexual violence, marked by trauma and emotional numbness, to reclaiming their voices and sharing their own narratives. This act of storytelling, akin to psychotherapeutic healing in Freudian terms, not only frees them from the confines of victimhood and shame, but also bears witness to their trauma. G Kelly agrees that the “act of storytelling serves as a way for humans to make meaning out of their life experiences, to construct identity, and to cope with trauma, stress, and uncertainty” (G 1), and Caruth suggests, it can only be fully grasped through verbal expression. This newfound sense of liberation empowers the women to exercise agency and draw strength from adversity, while showcasing resilience.

Furthermore, the Paper is divided into three sub-sections, each focusing on a pair of the identified themes such as: Trauma and Resilience, Agency and Activism, and Sisterhood solidarity and Bonding. These sections critically analyse how the- overlap of women's agency and activism re-create the women-survivors and propel the plots forward; how they cope with trauma and demonstrate resilience in the face of harsh conditions, and the significance of sisterhood and bonding in their journeys.

To contextualize these analyses, it became imperative to provide synopsis of the novel under review. The synopses will further forge the link between the analysis and the stories presented in the book, enhancing the understanding of the

characters' experiences and the themes explored within the text.

Synopsis of Denis Mukwege's *The Power of Women*

Against the backdrop of the prolonged conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which has claimed millions of lives over two decades, Denis Mukwege's *The Power of Women* emerges as a touching narrative advocating for positive masculinity and celebrating women's resilience, strength, and influence. Trained as a medical doctor in Burundi with specialized knowledge in gynecology and obstetrics from France, Mukwege's return to his homeland and the founding of Panzi Hospital in 1999, mark the beginning of his intertwined journey of medical care and advocacy. Mukwege's memoir intricately weaves together his experiences in treating survivors of sexual violence in the DRC with his fervent advocacy for women's rights and justice.

He emphasizes the urgent need for building inclusive, gender-balanced societies that can catalyze systemic changes in male behaviors and attitudes towards women. The book sheds light on the daunting challenges faced by Congolese women, especially those subjected to brutal sexual assaults, while also highlighting their enduring strength and resilience in the face of trauma. The title, *The Power of Women*, encapsulates Mukwege's belief in women's innate and collective strength, their capacity for healing, and their potential to drive positive transformations. Through distressing accounts of working with survivors and witnessing their courage, Mukwege underscores the transformative impact of women's voices and activism in combating violence and advocating for justice.

Apart from being a personal memoir, *The Power of Women* serves as a compelling call to action, urging readers to confront the grim realities of sexual violence in conflict zones and to actively support initiatives for healing, empowerment, and accountability. It stands as a testament to the unwavering spirit of survivors, the vital role of solidarity in seeking justice and dignity and challenges the historical depersonalization of female characters in armed conflict narratives. Dr. Denis Mukwege is the 2018 Nobel Laureate for Peace.

Agency and Activism

Agency encompasses an individual's intentional capacity to act, make decisions, and shape their life circumstances. Diana T. Mayers describes it as "... account of their capacity for individualized choice and action" (Mayers 1). For women and marginalized communities, it signifies the ability to make autonomous choices, exert control over their own bodies, and assert their rights in alignment with their own aspirations, free from oppressive norms. Activism, on the other hand, entails advocating for societal, political, or environmental change. It involves organised endeavours to challenge and reform systems of inequality, discrimination, gender-based violence, and oppression affecting women and marginalized groups. Activism manifests in diverse forms like protests, awareness campaigns, and community organizing efforts.

Consequently, addressing and advancing women's issues requires a focus on agency and activism for several key reasons, particularly in terms of empowerment, social visibility, advocacy for rights, policy and legal reforms, and fostering solidarity. Agency and activism intersect when women challenge the status quo; by asserting their agency, women disrupt existing power dynamics, while activism amplifies this disruption by organizing collective efforts to challenge oppressive norms. This dual approach is essential for driving meaningful change and ensuring that women's voices and experiences are recognized and valued. According to Lee and Logan in their essay, "Women's Agency, Activism and Organization":

agency, activism and organization have been central and constant themes in women's and gender history. Both separately and in combination, they constitute a valuable analytical framework for the study of women's lives... (Lee and Logan 2).

This approach provides a counterbalance to 'victimization' models of women's history by focusing on narratives of resistance and the challenge or subversion of social norms. It allows women to be seen as instrumental agents of the forms of power that were potentially seen to

determine them. Additionally, critics like Swank and Fahs emphasize that "collective resistance offers feminist-identified women a pathway to challenge existing power structures and norms". They also note that "women and their allies often mobilize into massive feminist movements, collectively challenging the structural sources of male privilege". (Swank and Fahs 1).

It is crucial to highlight that within feminist discourse, agency and activism are intricately linked, with agency serving as a foundational element of feminist activism. The pursuit of collective action and social change, which prioritizes centring women's voices, experiences, and perspectives in movements for societal and political transformation, relies on recognizing and empowering individual agency. Activism not only champions the acknowledgment and safeguarding of women's agency but also endeavours to establish environments where women can freely exercise their agency without hindrances or limitations.

Agency and Activism in Mukwege's *The Power of Women*

Despite the elements of agency and activism expressed in the two books by both writers, their accounts are shaped by their distinct gender perspectives and experiences. While Gbowee writes as a woman with firsthand experience of gendered war abuses, Mukwege writes from a medical and positive masculinity points of view. In *The Power of Women*, Denis Mukwege departs from the stereotypical depiction of women in narratives of conflict-related sexual violence by most male writers. Instead of presenting them as peripheral, weak victims, he portrays them as central, resilient, and empowered individuals. Mukwege challenges and redefines these stereotypes, emphasizing the power, courage, and strength of spirit of Congolese women. His portrayal counters the typical depiction of women in war narratives as weak and powerless, instead, he highlights their pivotal roles and remarkable resilience. For instance, it was through the testimonies of fifty-eight victims of sexual violence and slavery that brought to book notorious policemen and militia who were perpetrators. According to the narrative, "they knew the risk of reprisals if they were identified.

But they also knew they were fighting for something bigger than justice for themselves alone” (Mukwege 163-164). These women put their shame aside and fought for justice that would change the status quo.

Unlike most male writers, Mukwege underscores the importance of empowering women to assert their agency and reassures survivors that even though their psychological wounds may never fully heal, they can still recover and thrive with the right care and support. To encourage them, he invites from New York, Eve Ensler whom he calls V in the narrative to address the survivors. V shares her story of sexual abuse, depression, and recovery, inspiring others to overcome adversity and rebuild their lives. By sharing stories of women who have been subjected to sexual violence, rape, and abuse, yet have found the courage to speak out, seek justice, and advocate for change, V motivates others to quicken their own agency and activism. According to her, “her father had sexually abused her for years as a child...she fled and lived on the streets of New York City, taking drugs and suffering even more abuse” (Mukwege 90). She had to take control of her own situation to put a stop to the abuse.

Wamuzila’s story is also that of agency and activism. She is a young teenage girl from the village of Shabunda, who was abducted and held captive by the Mai-Mai militia for over a year and subjected to unimaginable sexual violence and brutality. After her rescue and treatment at Panzi hospital, including four surgeries to repair her damaged fistula, she defied all odds to become a powerful voice among the women victims. Despite her subsequent re-victimization, physical and psychological trauma, she transformed from a broken victim to an empowered agent of change. Knowing what she and other women desired, she boldly speaks out for transformative change when V after the talking therapy, poses the question, “Tell me what I can do for you” (Mukwege 90). She poignantly captures the collective longing of her fellow survivors for a positive change when she said, “Every time we think about seeing soldiers again, we're scared...find us somewhere we can heal emotionally and prepare ourselves for new lives” (Mukwege 92).

Additionally, her circumstances did not pose a barrier to her bold plea for a shelter which underscores one of the tenets of feminist activism that emphasis environments where women can thrive and fully exert their autonomy, free from obstacles, constraints, and gender-based barriers. Another example of this unalloyed demonstration of agency is the testimony of twelve-year-old Witula whose fearlessness and power of words made a high-ranking army officer faint. The said officer was on an inspection tour at the hospital and could not bear to hear the ordeal of the little girl, “then his knees buckled. He fainted, falling hard on his back” (Mukwege 131).

The case of the sixty-year-old victim/survivor is also one of such cases of brutality. Her voicing of her trauma and expectations in the following lines speaks volumes of her agency and activism.

I don’t need anything, but I want one thing. We deserve respect. We give birth, we bring up children, we work. But we are being humiliated by children... the same age as my grandchildren... but what I want is for the president to come here and apologize in public. (Mukwege 192)

The excerpt above represents the deep-seated trauma and psychological scars of the survivors who despite their ordeal still find their voices to tell their stories and remain resilient.

In addition to his personal efforts in promoting masculine positivity, Mukwege emphasizes the agency, empowerment, and leadership of women, highlighting their roles in driving social and political transformation. To achieve desired results, he seeks international assistance from individuals like V and organizations like UNICEF and the UN, which encouraged their activism and helped transform the pain of these women into power. Mukwege recounts how V “approached the head of UNICEF... UNICEF eventually donated \$1 million” (Mukwege 92). This gesture amplified their voices and brought the issue of sexual brutality against Congolese women to the international stage. Further to the amplification of their voices and experiences he encourages them to speak out and share their experiences,

challenges dominant narratives and stereotypes that pressure women to suffer in silence or face stigmatization and public ridicule.

According to him, keeping quiet creates an environment in which men can continue to abuse with impunity. It serves their interests. For as long as knowledge of a problem is suppressed, the same destructive behavioral patterns are allowed to continue. (Mukwege 138).

From the above excerpts, it is obvious that agency begins with breaking the code of silence against sexual abuse and is the first step towards activism and group therapy. Speaking up educates both men and women to advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society.

As Lee and Logan astutely observe,

Agency highlights the individual action/social structure... whilst activism... help focus on the specific ways in which women have challenged, resisted, overthrown, or gained entrance to social structures and institutions that had tended to ignore, exclude, disadvantage, or penalize them. (Lee and Logan 1).

This perspective is vividly illustrated in Mukwege's narrative through the actions of Congolese women who not only participated in the process of transformation and reformation of traumatized victims of conflict-related sexual violence, but also engaged in the physical building of the City of Joy, a safe place for survivors to heal, receive education, and inspire others. For instance, even though female builders were unheard of in Congo, these women so impressed the contactor that he testified about their zeal and prowess. According to Mukwege, "the women had inspired and pushed them to improve and work harder" (Mukwege 95). Their actions underscore the enduring truth of Lee and Logan's assertion above and highlight the collective strength and activism of these women in the face of adversity and again countering the narrative of minimalization.

Trauma and Resilience

Trauma as has earlier been established in this study, is a distressing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It can

result from violence, abuse, loss, or natural disasters. Laderer argues that "Trauma is a complex experience that can have major consequences for someone's well-being. A single traumatic experience or ongoing, repeated incidents of trauma can take a toll on mental health" (Laderer 2). However, literature serves as a powerful medium for acknowledging and grappling with trauma, allowing both personal and collective voices to be heard. It plays a significant role in bearing witness to trauma and provides a space for exploring and expressing the often-unspeakable truths of traumatic experiences. Resilience on the other hand is the ability to bounce back from setbacks, adapt to change, and maintain well-being despite adversity. It also includes the means to respond to life stress, challenges, and additional trauma, possibly develop beyond recovery thus experiencing post traumatic growth. According to research, post traumatic growth is the positive change, in which a person develops greater inner strength as a result of their journey through trauma ("Healing and Resilience")

Trauma and Resilience in *The Power of Women*

In *The Power of Women*, Mukwege focuses on the medical aspects of healing from conflict related sexual violence, including physical and psychological trauma. He also underscores the importance of holistic approaches to healing and supporting survivors in their recovery journey as he explores the intertwined themes of trauma and resilience through the experiences of Congolese women who have endured extreme violence and suffering. Mukwege, a gynaecologist, and an advocate for survivors of sexual violence, provides a compassionate and powerful narrative that highlights the impact of trauma and the incredible resilience of the women he helps. He takes the readers on a detailed journey of the brutal realities faced by women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly those subjected to sexual violence by armed groups. For instance, most of the women had been raped and gang raped by armed men while in their homes, at the fields working or snatched while fetching water or firewood but they refused to cave in.

Survivors like Wamuzila, Jeanne, Alphonsine, and Tatiana represent deep-seated

trauma resistance and intentional choice to move on. Wamuzila, as earlier referenced, survived unimaginable brutality, endured gang rape and sexual slavery in the hands of the militiamen who targeted and abducted women and girls during the DRC conflicts. Her story is so pathetic and a heart-wrenching testament to her strength and agency. She was forcefully taken from her village of Shabunda, subjected to unimaginable violence, pinned down by drunken assailants who raped her repeatedly. We were told how she struggled with her more powerful assailants to no avail, “She trashed her arms at first and squirmed her teenage body with all her force against the weight of the drunken brutes who pinned her down and raped her. Then they led her into the forest” (Mukwege 77). After tying her to a stake like an animal and raped her repeatedly, she was only released after she fell pregnant and was of no more sexual use to them. With the baby’s head stuck in between her legs as she tried to expel it, she summoned the strength as “she stumbled through the undergrowth... until she saw smoke in the distance. She managed to mumble a few words ... before collapsing” ((Mukwege 78). Fortunately, it was at this stage she was brought to Panzi hospital where she underwent corrective surgeries for her damaged fistulas. Despite her ordeal, Wamuzila demonstrated remarkable resilience and a will to live by learning soap-making skills from palm oil, starting a small business, and sharing her story with fellow survivors to offer hope and encouragement.

Jeanne, who according to Mukwege later became one of the most valued staff of the City of Joy, was carried in a basket to Panzi hospital by her rescuers. She was in her late teens when she was captured by the rebels who subjected her to months of abuse and like Wamuzila was released after she became pregnant. When she was brought to the Panzi hospital, “We feared that Jeanne would never recover. She has no family, no children and will face complications as a result of her injuries for the rest of her life” (Mukwege 98). Yet despite the trauma of her ordeal, both at the hands of the rebels and fight for her life at Panzi hospital, Jeanne’s resilience and strength of human spirit kicked in. She not only survived, but also chose to move on and be happy. So now in her

early thirties, she went back to school for her diploma, and dedicated the rest of her life to helping others and being a voice for silent sufferers of abuse.

As for Tatiana, her village of Bukavu having been overrun by forces loyal to the war lord, Laurent Nkunda, she was one of the teens taken as the troops went house to house looting, torturing and assaulting women and girls. Having lost her parents earlier to the conflict, she shared the story of her ordeal with her fiancée, but it backfired as he abandoned her. Despite this, she persevered and secured a place at the university determined to educate herself, but due to the traumatic consequences of her abuse, she became depressed, ended up “battling alcoholism, eating disorders, and suicidal attempts” (Mukwege 99). Notwithstanding all these, Tatiana sought medical and psychological help after ten years, demonstrating remarkable resilience and strength. Mukwege acknowledges that she was made of sterner stuff beyond her physical and psychological challenges,

I could see that beyond the pain lay a woman of extraordinary force... today she has vanquished her demons. She can never forget her past, she still cries sometimes under the shower...but it no longer defines nor paralyses her (Mukwege 99)

The above is a testament of Tatiana’s post traumatic resilience. Additionally, she eventually got married, and helps both the women at the City of Joy and other abused women find their voices as she travels widely to share her experiences and inspire other women with similar experiences. As Mukwege so eloquently puts it, the women’s actions demonstrate “that women are so much more powerful and capable than the positions and roles they are assigned in society” (Mukwege 93).

Again, the brutality and assault on some of these women knew no bounds. Beyond penile as in the case above, object penetration was also used indiscriminately in the assaults as Mukwege describes here,

some had been shot deliberately into their genitals. The rapists would insert their guns into a victim’s vagina and then press the trigger. Others had

sticks, sharp objects, or burning plastic forced inside them. One woman was forced to squat over a barbecue fire, causing her grievous burns. (Mukwege 61)

Coupled with the manner of the above assaults is the fact that most were carried out in the presence of their families and at times their sons were forced to be part of it. This caused an untold traumatic effect on both the direct victims and the secondary-the families. Some of the survivors suffering from dislocation, a reaction to trauma would describe their after- experiences as having the feeling that their spirits are not there, “feeling as if their spirits have left their bodies”

However, despite sharing the heart-wrenching stories of these women who have been raped, tortured, and left with severe physical and psychological scars, Mukwege leads us to believe that their profound trauma was no barrier to the exhibition of their remarkable strength and resilience. The story of Bernadette is an example of deep trauma and self -remaking doggedness. After her reproductive organs were destroyed by gun shots into her vagina by soldiers, abandoned by her husband with no hope of raising a family, she was treated at the Panzi hospital, struggled to get a diploma and later specialized as an anaesthetist. As Mukwege would let us know, “she couldn’t afford to take the bus to college, so she walked for an hour and half each way from her home” (Mukwege 69), showing single mindedness and strong determination. Other instances seen at the Panzi hospital and City of Joy shelter for empowering women demonstrate how survivors can rebuild their lives with proper care and support and impact positively on other victims. According to him, the idea of the City of Joy was

to build on the strength and resilience evident in the women at the hospital. We wanted to do more than help the women come to terms with their traumatic past and face the future with confidence. We wanted them to become agents of change with the power to make a difference (Mukwege 94).

The above excerpt indicates that women already have the strength of spirit and resilience as active

participants in their healing and in the broader struggle for justice. They are not passive recipients of aid but have the ability to be leaders and advocates for change, using their experiences to raise awareness and demand justice.

Furthermore, this depiction accentuates their resilience, capacity for leadership and empowerment despite their severe trauma which is crystalized in the process of building and management of the City of Joy. The narrative captures how the women were physically carrying concrete and engaging in the masonry aspect of the project to the bewilderment and amazement of both the main contractor and the Congolese public who had never seen female builders. The women turned out to be eager learners and excellent committed builders as some of their “male colleagues confessed that the women inspired them and pushed them to improve and work harder” (Mukwege 93.) Again, the charge of running and managing the City of Joy centre was the sole responsibility of these women who have actively turned their victimhood to one of strength and survival. According to the narrative, the security architecture which included manning the gate, the gardening to produce natural organic food, were presided over by Mama Christine who delegates tasks accordingly. For instance, “each newcomer enters through high black gates that are guided by former graduates who have been trained for the task” (Mukwege 95.)

As part of a comprehensive empowerment program, the City of Joy Centre offered a mix of soft skill sets and vocational training courses for each survivor to stabilize their trauma and build their resilience. The initiative also placed a strong emphasis on body- love and female body positivity, helping survivors of sexual violence reclaim their sense of self-worth and body image through gender and female anatomy classes. These classes were designed to educate and empower women, enabling them to embrace their bodies and rebuild their confidence in a supportive environment. For instance, most of the abused women blame their gender as the cause of their problems, “if I were a man, I could have protected myself” (Mukwege 95). They identify their vagina as the origin of their suffering, “it’s because of that that I was raped... their vaginas are the problems

not their attackers” (Mukwege 95)

Again, inspirational stories of women who have transformed their trauma into advocacy shared at the centre were a huge encouragement for resilience and determination to others. For instance, the stories of Wamuzila, Jeanne, Alphonsine, and Tatiana—young girls who survived extreme brutality and sexual slavery and emerged as successful beacons and vocal advocates—illustrate the transformative power of trauma -resilience and agency. Wamuzila who was captured in her village helps alleviate the suffering of others through her advocacy, Jeanne becomes a valued staff member at City of Joy and a voice for silent sufferers of sexual abuse, Alphonsine trained as a nurse and now assists in operating theatres. Tatiana earned a college degree, started a family with several adopted orphaned children, and became an international spokeswoman for other victims, demanding that survivors like her be heard and treated fairly. Her poignant open letter to her attacker published in 2017, "Letter to My Rapist," underlines her defiance, resilience, and total recovery from trauma. As she puts it, "I want you to know that now more than ever, I'm no longer scared of you... you gave me the courage to combat you." (Mukwege 100.) By focusing on these stories which highlight women's strength and their critical roles in driving social and political transformation, Mukwege once again shifts the narrative from one of victimhood to one of strength and survival.

It is noteworthy here that these themes of trauma and resilience in *The Power of Women* align with concepts in literary trauma theory, particularly the concept of testimony and witness. Mukwege's narrative serves as forms of testimony, bearing witness to the unspeakable truths of trauma and providing a voice to those who have suffered in silence. This approach not only aids in individual healing but also empowers other survivors to share their stories and find strength in their shared experiences.

Sisterhood, Solidarity and Bonding

Generally, the notions of Sisterhood, solidarity, and bonding refer to the powerful connections and relationships among women, particularly in the context of feminist movements and struggles for social justice. These concepts

emphasize unity, mutual support, and collective strength among individuals, particularly among women and are vital in fostering strong communities and achieving social and personal renewal, especially in contexts of victim/ survivor, and trauma/resilience. Similarly in literature, these concepts play a significant role in highlighting the power of collective action and emotional support among individuals, particularly women. They underscore how personal and collective struggles can be navigated and overcome through mutual support, shared goals, and unified actions.

The term Sisterhood refers to the emotional and social connections among women based on shared experiences, struggles, and goals. It is about building relationships that transcend individual differences, promote collective inspiration, and embodies the idea of women supporting one another through understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. According to Oyeronke Oyewunmi,

Sisterhood has emerged as the dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. A term of political solidarity, "sisterhood" speaks women's activism. The meaning it carries for its originators and deployers is one of shared oppression, common victimization, community of interests, solidarity, and collective activism. (Oyewunmi 1)

The key thoughts of Sisterhood include shared experiences, mutual support, and empowerment, while the importance lies in the fact that connecting with other women with similar experiences and realities help victims and survivors find strength and solace.

Solidarity on the other hand, refers to a principle of standing together in support and unity, often in the face of adversity or oppression. Solidarity among women involves recognizing and amplifying each other's voices, experiences, and struggles, and working collectively towards common goals. It is the unity and agreement of feeling and action among individuals with common interests. It involves standing together and advocating for common causes, often in the face of oppression or injustice. Solidarity is crucial in social movements and collective actions aimed

at bringing about change. Jo and Catherine posit that,

Solidarity invoked in a feminist context is often thought to cut across different identity categories — such as race, class, sexuality, or nation — without assuming sameness among women or falling back into gender essentialism. To express solidarity with others is ostensibly to recognize and respect differences without colonizing those differences. (Littler and Rottenberg)

Additionally, Emerge Woman Magazine asserts that it is “the bond between women that transcends race, ethnicity, and cultural differences. It’s a mutual understanding of each other’s experiences and the support that follows as a result”. (Emerge Woman Magazine 2023). The key aspects are unity of purpose, collective action, advocacy, and support.

Bonding is another of the strong connections and safety social network for women especially in times of war and conflicts. It is actually the foundation upon which the duo of sisterhood and solidarity are built and borne out of shared experiences, struggles, or activities creating a sense of community and belonging. Bonding allows survivors to break their isolation, combat feelings of shame, and find common ground. These connections help them rebuild their sense of self and regain agency. Its key aspects include emotional connections, shared activities, trust and loyalty. Together, sisterhood, solidarity, and bonding form a powerful foundation for women's empowerment, social change, and collective action. By supporting and uplifting one another, women can challenge patriarchal structures, overcome obstacles, and create a more just and equitable society.

Sisterhood, Solidarity and Bonding in *The Power of Women*

In *The Power of Women*, Dr. Mukwege emphasizes the importance of women coming together, sharing their experiences, and supporting one another. Through sisterhood solidarity and bonding, survivors find solace and encouragement. It has been established that sexual abuse creates deep psychological wounds and is

processed differently from other types of physical assault and women agree “that sexual violence is an attack on our most private parts. “Not having control over our genitals creates a deep sense of humiliation” (Mukwege 133) "From the above quote, it is evident that women appear to be at their lowest when they are sexually abused. In such situations, being abandoned due to deep-seated patriarchal traditions exacerbates their plight, making social support and succour seem farfetched.

However, in the cases of Victims/survivors as shown in Mukwege’s *The Power of Women*, sisterhood solidarity and bonding fill in the gap and help rebuild their shattered lives. Denis Mukwege highlights them as vital forces in the journey toward healing and empowerment for survivors of sexual violence in conflict zones. His narrative underscores how the sense of community and solidarity among women is instrumental in their recovery and advocacy efforts.

Women survivors look out for one another especially the fresh victims, encouraging them to recreate themselves. For instance, at the Panzi Hospital and the City of Joy, the importance of creating this supportive environment where women can connect with one another, share their experiences, and rebuild their lives together is underscored, “group therapy sessions of between four and five women are encouraged to share their personal stories with each other...” (Mukwege 96). Panzi and City of Joy are more than just places of medical treatment; they are sanctuaries of mutual support and collective healing. The women who come to these centres find solace in the company of others who have endured similar traumas, forging deep bonds that help them regain their strength and sense of self.

Bernadette is one the inspirational women both at the Panzi hospital and the City of Joy. We are told that she spends hours in the surgery, literally talking away the pains of other women. In between her official work hours in the theatre, and physiotherapy sessions, she gives encouragements, sharing her stories and helps others believe in their futures through the power of her example as illustrated in the following excerpts,

It is not the end of life, she tells them, there's another life waiting ...the injuries, the rape, the memories won't go away. You have to accept them. We can't wish them away, however much we'd like to. But with one foot in front of the other, every day, slowly, over time, we can leave them behind (Mukwege 73)

Additionally, sisterhood, solidarity and bonding encourage group therapy. Women who share similar traumatic experiences can provide each other with emotional support, understanding and empathy that others might not be able to offer. This mutual understanding can create a safe space where survivors feel comfortable expressing their feelings and experiences. This is very true in the case of women in *The Power of Women* who realize through the shared experience of V, that they are not alone in their ordeal, neither are they to blame for their circumstances especially against the background of Congolese patriarchal society where the woman is always blamed for being sexually abused. At the City of Joy, the likes of Jeanne and Mama Christine are the champions of this process which makes others come to terms with the fact that they face the same struggle and pain.

The trio of the concepts of sisterhood, solidarity and bonding helps the process of smashing taboos. Sexual violence thrives in silence and to the extent that victims are quiet about their experiences, sexual crimes would continue to thrive. One of the milestones recorded by women in Mukwege's memoir is the ability to feel free to share their stories and hear similar accounts from others. It not only validates their experiences and feelings but frees them from oppressive societal pressure which encouraged them to suffer in silence. The group relationship makes them draw strength and support from one another. This collective support found in

sisterhood and solidarity among abused women creates an environment conducive to healing, making therapeutic interventions more effective and meaningful.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the diverse and dynamic roles of women in narratives of wars and conflicts, challenging their traditional depiction solely as Victims. It investigated the centered depiction of women in the book under review as the writer markedly deviates from the conventional portrayal of women in narratives of conflict-related sexual violence, as marginalized, powerless, and helpless victims. He instead presents nuanced and empowering representation of women as resilient survivors, active agents, and courageous champions of change, who defy the stereotypes and challenge the patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and negative representation.

The title of the memoir, *The Power of Women*, by Denis Mukwege, effectively illustrates the focus of the narrative. It highlights the central themes of the strength, resilience, activism and solidarity of the women, particularly those who have survived trauma and abuse. This title reflects the author's emphasis on the empowerment, courage, and solidarity of women in rebuilding their lives and supporting one another through adversity. Again, the choice of the title, underscores the diverse and dynamic roles of women in fostering hope, healing, and change, which is not only the core focus of the narrative, but also aligns with the aim and title of this paper

Additionally, the themes of trauma and resilience in the text align with concepts in literary trauma theory, particularly the importance of survivor testimony and witness and that of recovery and resilience. Mukwege's narrative serves as a form of testimony, bearing witness to the unspeakable truths of trauma and providing a voice to those who have suffered in silence.

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