

Bar-Ilan University

Department of English

A Proposal for a Master's Thesis

"זה מה שבני אדם עוללו לאחרים": השפעת מלחמת בוסניה-הרצגובינה על

הספרות ותאוריית הטראומה.

"This is what people have done to other people": Trauma and
Literary Representation in the Bosnia-Herzegovina Genocide.

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I. Aims and General Description

"This is what people have done to other people"- Zofia Nalkowska¹

The Bosnian-Herzegovina war and genocide had the most devastating outcome in Europe since World War II. It is called the "unspoken of war" owing to its recent occurrence in 1992-1995. Beverly Allen, in her book *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia*, examines the terms "genocidal rape" and "rape camps" through the testimonies of Bosnian and Croatian women who survived rape camps set up by the Yugoslav army and Serbian militias. Allen relates her difficulties with the testimony:

I was faced with a major cognitive problem; how to believe the unthinkable...The voices of the women rang with the clarity of experience lived in the body; however, and thus aided me past the impediments of my own hesitant, unwilling cognition. Thanks to their courage, my initial disbelief abandoned me to the greater horror of conviction as I read on and on. (xii).

I aim to investigate the point Allen makes about her initial disbelief of and subsequent trust in these testimonies. I will examine how literature or narratives, in different styles and constructs, are a way in which traumatic experiences can be relayed. Using insights from the field of literary trauma studies, I will compare and contrast different literary genres about the genocide in Bosnia as ways for victims to speak about difficult memories and to possibly heal from the trauma.

¹ Taken from a pamphlet I received in Poland in 2007, called *From the Pages of Polish History: Nazi German Camps on Occupied Polish Soil during World War II*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Promotion. Zofia Nalkowska is a Polish writer and was a Auschwitz prisoner.

II. Methodology

My aim in this thesis is to compare and contrast literary texts of various genres, namely: diaries, memoirs, dramas and graphic novels and see how they differently represent traumatic experiences, deal with memory and act as a vehicle towards healing. I will analyze the plays, *Necessary Targets*, 2001 by Eve Ensler and "Cheers to Sarajevo", 2014 by Aimee Goldsmith and Lidja Marelic; *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo*, 2006 by Zlata Filipović; the memoir, *Sarajevo Roses*, 2004 by Anne Marie Du Preez Bezdrob; and the graphic novel, *Safe Area Gorazde*, 2007 by Joe Sacco. The foundation of my methodology is scholarly work on trauma theory in literary studies. Historical background about genocide and rape warfare, characteristic of the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, will be the backdrop of this thesis.

III. Scholarly and Critical Background

Magda Strojinska's states in her book *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma:*

Storytelling about life events seems to be a universal human activity, one of the first forms of discourse we learn as children and use throughout our life span (Nelson, 1989)...Personal narratives, stories we tell about ourselves and our world, bring meaning to our past and organize our future. The listener in a conversation is a witness and companion on the journey. Despite the universality of the personal narrative, some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about: they are often perceived as *unspeakable*. There is no language to express them and no words to describe them. People who have lived through trauma are often silent because it is too difficult to speak about and to listen to. (263)

These *unspeakable* memories, accounts and factual occurrences come to life through various literary molds.

Leading trauma theory scholars such as Judith Lewis Herman, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dory Laub, amongst others, analyze the role literature and narratives play for people to face and articulate traumatic experiences. I will apply this research to the literary texts I have chosen. Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery* states: "Janet described normal memory as 'the action of telling a story.' Traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static" (175). She further discusses the second stage of recovery in which the victim of trauma can face the wordless and static memories through therapy and reconstructing the story (175). As Jakub Kazecki observes in an essay in Magda Stroinska's book, scholars of humor have also noted laughter is a "coping mechanism" (45). This is apparent in Joe Sacco's comic illustrations in his graphic narrative *Safe Area Goražde* and Zlata's everyday jokes or anecdotes in her diary. Hillary L. Chute, a leading scholar of graphic novels, has investigated graphic narratives as a genre which deals with trauma, witnessing and retelling. Photography is another medium explored in the graphic novel by Sacco and the play by Goldsmith and Marelic. Eve Ensler's play emphasizes the need to talk and reconstruct the memories of the rape victims of the genocide. All these works pose important questions about how victims can heal by their documenting and retelling of past experiences.

Rape warfare is also explored in both Beverley Allen's book, *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia*, and in her journal "Toward New Feminist Theory of Rape." Skjelsbaek's book: *The Political Psychology of War Rape: Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina* takes a more political outlook on the

aftermath of rape warfare. Other leading scholarly work listed in my bibliography will inform my investigation about representation and expression of genocidal rape.

The play by Lidja Marelic and Aimee Goldsmith is the inspiration behind my interest in this topic. As a result, I read diaries and memoirs about the war. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson include a quote by Wilhem Dilthey in the beginning of their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*:

"Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life comes before us." Dilthey's poignant remark about Autobiography illustrates the crux of my thesis: how literature, in its different structures, teaches us things about life and portrays traumatic experiences in a way no other type of expression can. In sum, I will examine the instructive nature of life narrative, which is also evident in graphic novels and plays.

IV. Chapter Outline

Introduction

This chapter will open with a brief historical discussion about the Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the years 1992-1995 and its distinguishing characteristic of genocidal rape warfare and camps. I will then examine some of the major work in current trauma theory in literary studies. I will also outline the basic structure of the chapters. Each chapter will examine a different literary genre on the Bosnia-Herzegovina genocide with scholarly criticism about the genre, to shed light on how it functions and its effectiveness in expressing the authors' experiences.

Chapter One: A Double Take: Drama, Plays and Trauma

The play "Cheers to Sarajevo" was written by Lidja Marelic and co-written and acted in by Aimee Goldsmith in 2014. The actors put on the show every few

months around South Africa and are planning to take it abroad.² Marelic escaped Croatia with her family when the war in the region broke out and witnessed the unthinkable. This chapter will examine the way in which her writing of this play deals with post-traumatic stress. The play by Eve Ensler, *Necessary Targets*, was produced in 1996 and published in 2001. It is based on Ensler's trip to former Yugoslavia in 1993, when she interviewed Bosnian women rape victims and war refugees. In 1996, the play was read by Meryl Streep and Anjelica Huston in the United States, Vanessa Redgrave in London, and Glenn Close and Marisa Tomei in Sarajevo. In 2001, it was performed in Connecticut and Washington, D.C, and in 2002 it was performed in New York at the Variety Arts Theatre. Ensler highlights the importance for the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian rape victims to speak about and remember their ordeals through therapy groups and special psychological activities, like acting and singing. The question in this chapter is if and how drama can act as a vehicle for healing.

Chapter Two: Writing History: A Memoir, Diary and Trauma

Zlata's Diary: Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo by Zlata Filipovic and *Sarajevo Roses* by Anne Marie Du Preez Bezdob, are both non-fictional autobiographical texts. I will examine how Zlata's diary entries during her traumatic experiences, and Bezdob's memoir writing, after her experiences, represent and convey trauma. A significant part of this chapter will discuss ideas and theories about life writing and identity, by scholars of autobiography such as, Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and the French autobiography specialist, Philippe Lejeune. Lejeune's works have been translated into English and Eakin edited his book

² The play has not officially been published but Aimee and Lidja are working on that with Anne Bezdob, whose memoir I am using in the second chapter of this thesis. They are working towards international exposure with relevant connections and efforts.

On Autobiography (Theory and History of Literature). Eakin discusses the role of memory in own book, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* in the chapter entitled, "Talking about Ourselves, The Rules of the Game." Diaries and memoirs consist of memories and experiences, and therefore I will consider how the act of remembering can lead to a victim's healing.

Chapter Three: Goražde in Picture: A Graphic Take on Trauma

This chapter is devoted to the graphic narrative of Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Goražde*. Sacco recounts his experiences as a photojournalist in the Bosnian town of Goražde, known as a safe zone for Bosnians during the peak of the war. I will examine this text along with critical sources on the genre by Hillary Chute, Mitchell, W. J. T and other academics who specialize in the graphic narrative. The question here is how this literary genre functions in traumatic storytelling with the use of images and text.

Conclusion

This chapter will sum up the observations made about the comparison between the different literary genres and how each one expresses the *unspeakable*. My thesis is not an attempt to define which genre is more effective or popular, but about why, how and which one is more accessible for victims of trauma under different circumstances. A victim of genocidal rape may find it easier to represent his or her experiences in a drama, while a child living through war can quell certain fears and traumatic experiences by writing personal diary entries. The focus is on how literary genres can bring the *unspeakable* back to life for the writer and listener.

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