

## Holocaust in My Mind\*

\* For an intense cinematographic rendering of this issue see *Grbavica* (dir. Jasmila Žbenić, Bosnia and Herzegovina/Croatia/Austria/Germany 2006).  
[Editors' Note]

*In 1992 thousands of Muslim women, particularly from Bosnia, were victims of systematic rape by the Serbian Security Forces. Sexual violence was inflicted upon them because of their ethnicity and gender, and it brought to light how systematic rape can be used as a tool for ethnic cleansing, based on gender. It was also a desperate measure to raise Serbian children.*

*Bosnian women were raped and tortured by Serbian soldiers as part of their attempt to eradicate Bosnian roots. It is estimated that the number of women being raped ranged from 2,400 to 20,000. Victims were raped more than once every day, whilst others were forced to witness the rape of other women, and to endure physical torture. Rapes resulted in unwanted pregnancies, and most women desperately wanted to abort. There is no exact record of how many abortions were arranged and performed in those days, but estimates indicate that from 10 to 1,000 women delivered the children of the rapists. Figures may further escalate, considering that many women hide their rapes. Others decided to keep the babies, without escaping the depression and the effects caused by the trauma as a result of what they endured. The women who decided to accept the children, still, found it hard to love them and, at times, pretended that the children did not exist.*

*In the former Yugoslavia, the war led to millions of refugees and displaced persons, and the majority of them were women. The survivors faced constant trauma, loss of homes and of family members, and physical injuries. The chances of psychological recovery were – and still are – remote, and the women survivors, continuing to relive their trauma, are still suffering from long term post-traumatic stress disorder.*

*In spite of this, women came forward to testify to and recount their experiences. As a result, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia became the first tribunal to prosecute war rape as a crime against humanity. Based on several testimonies, the Tribunal named twenty-one individuals responsible for the crimes, including, among the perpetrators, General Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, the leader of Bosnia Serb, the self-declared government.*

*The reality is that women survivors are still experiencing anxiety, sexually transmitted diseases, and physical illness. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2012, Amnesty International declared that hundreds of women continue to live with the effects of rape and other forms of torture, without access to medical, psychological and financial assistance which is necessary to rebuild their lives. Amnesty International added that, out of thousands of documented cases of crimes of sexual violence, only a few perpetrators have been prosecuted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, or by the Bosnian domestic courts. Two years ago, after persistent pressure by local and international civil society groups, the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina developed a national programme for the female victims of sexual violence. The programme has not been finalised or adopted.*

*Women have been waiting in the silence of their memories.*

*They cannot wait any longer.*

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*They come for me.  
And my tears drown in silence,  
My stories buried within.  
Steps ravaging my body.  
For war has torn me apart.  
Now I belong to nowhere.*

As the night settles in, and the curtain of the day fades, the crowd disappears into the void. Silence is what comes after, and it is when the noises hammer in my ears like endless drums. The noise never stops; the footsteps follow one after the other. In the stillness of the night, they come back, and I hate them as much as I hate this life.

My name is Mirka, and I have come a long way, surviving the war in Bosnia and what it brings with it. Now, it seems that a part of me is coping with life. I have a job, a home, and a son! The other part of me is wandering somewhere in a space which is unknown to me. Only the light of the moon, attempting to enter my window, knows my story and shares my grief.

For, deep within me, lies a dormant monster hating me and hating my son who is soundly asleep, unaware of the life around him. I watch a programme on television; at times I follow it; at other times, my mind wanders into places that I do not recognize. I do not even recognize the pale woman with sad and dark eyes. She does not resemble me, though she pertains to my self. My thoughts, and the worlds conjured up in my mind, are suddenly interrupted by the voice of Joshua, my son.

“Mama, mama.”

His soft voice brings me back to the real world in the room, and I make my way towards his bedroom. A loving child with golden curls, different from my raven black hair, Joshua looks at me with tears streaming on his tender cheeks.

“Mama, I had a bad dream.”

He is my bad dream, I think, but I dare not reveal that to him. Joshua is innocent, and, though not conceived out of love, I brought him up and loved him.

“It is ok, my dear,” I utter softly, and hug him tightly, the warmth of motherhood running through my veins.

Still, when I look into his eyes, which are blue as the sea reflecting freckles of crystals, I get another view. My son is beautiful, like an angel, I tell myself, but, all at once, his face changes and he becomes someone else. Another man looks at me, piercing me and transporting me back in time. My breath turns heavy and, like a thunder, I see myself in utter darkness, if not for the dim light in the room. His footsteps come closer, hammering in my ears, causing me pain and discomfort. Instantly, I realize that it is him as he comes closer and looks into my eyes. The Serb soldier. He takes me as his prey, and attacks me, as he usually does, till his seed is implanted deep within me.

His child is here.

“Mama, I dreamt of papa,” my son says.

“Yes, tell me,” I say half-heartedly.

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“I saw him being killed in war. Tell me about him. What does he look like?”

Tears are flooding my eyes, but I lower my head to hide them. When I look at him, I see the shadows of the glittering moon shining on his innocent face.

“Joshua, your father was a great soldier, and he was handsome too,” I say, marvelling at my courage.

“He is watching you from heaven,” I lie again.

A shiver runs over my spine, and dark clouds descend upon me. This is not the truth I see into my son’s eyes. How long will this lie go on? It will go on forever till memory ebbs away. That day should not have dawned; the sun should not have risen. It would have been much better for me and for my sister, the victims of that dark day in history.

My son Joshua remains a constant memory of that night and day in 1992. He is seven years old, and, like the children of his age, he wants to know of his father. He dreams of a hero, a perfect father, and I let him live in that dream.

There are other times when I wonder and ask myself: why did I keep the seed of rage and hatred deep in my womb? Then, again, the innocent creature who was growing within me gave me strength. Joshua was there, and life went on day after day, like repetitive beats all forming one whole rhythm.

It sounded the same to me.

Joshua is doing well in school, my efforts are being fruitful. He has not asked again about his father, but his questions remain in my mind. It is afternoon, and, after finishing work, as usual, I go and pick him up. As I stand waiting for him, I watch the children coming out of the school and running towards their mothers.

It is nice to be a mother, to care each and every day for those who depend on you. My eyes fall on one of the girls who come out of the school. She smiles at me, and I smile at her, and then she walks towards a young woman with long black hair. My mind is overcrowded with thoughts transporting me back to other times, a past that I long to forget. The woman looks like my sister. My sister is no longer on earth. I suddenly find myself in her house in former Yugoslavia, now Bosnia. It was in 1992, and my sister Olena was in mourning after losing her husband in a car accident. Feeling lonely, she asked me to go and stay with her for a while. It was nice to be together again, and I accepted willingly – it was a dull moment for her and I could comfort her. The village where she lived was surrounded by countryside and high hills, and I loved its simple life. At that time, I was eighteen years old and had to look for a job; still, I could not resist going and staying with my sister. Life was peaceful there, and I was happy to be with her again, even in those dark moments. Until the war broke out and changed everything. The magnificent hills and the evergreen areas turned, without warning, into an eternal hell, and we, the women, were the direct victims who had to pay for sacrifice. It was a dispute between two territories, and it led to a senseless war, a cynical battle between two groups with one aim: grabbing as much territory as possible. Most terrifying were the measures the Serbian army used as a form of ethnic cleansing for eliminating us, the Bosnian Muslims. The soldiers were all around, until one

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day they showed us what they were made of.

My story knows its origins in that dreaded day when I went shopping, as usual.

It was still daylight, and the area was safe, or at least I thought so. I put on the veil and went out, as that evening I was cooking a treat for my sister. I had been walking for ten minutes when a car stopped, and, looking back, I saw it was the soldiers. I kept on walking, ignoring them, trying to avoid them. We had heard a lot about the Serbs, but I could never have imagined they could go so far. Their car stopped exactly at the point where I was walking, and two soldiers came out and started following me. I kept on walking, but they were faster than me, and, before I could utter a word, they were all around me. It was them, the soldiers. Panic seized me; my mind became overcrowded by thoughts. I tried to figure out if I had done something wrong, but it had nothing to do with that: it had to do with me being a woman from Bosnia. One of the soldiers grabbed me and took off my veil, already humiliating me, a Muslim woman. With his hands, he stroked my cheeks, "What do you want?" I asked him, full of consternation.

He did not answer; he moved closer and threw me on the ground. I tried hard to release myself from his grip, but in vain because he was much stronger than I was. He covered my mouth and, with the other hand, went through my garments looking for my thighs. I cried, but I instinctively knew what was coming next, what he was up to, what he was going to do with me. He was lying over my body; I could feel something on my thighs. I had never been touched by a man and did not know what it meant. We were always taught that a woman is touched only by the one who loves her, before the eyes of God.

It was not so, and I would have preferred death.

The soldier went on forcing himself upon me, and violating me. It was painful, but it did not end there; more was to come. I made an effort to move, but he did not let me. More soldiers came down, and, one after the other, took their turn in raping me, fiercely, one after the other. Their laughter echoed in the air, and I heard one of them murmuring, "She is virgin, and we do not get them everyday." I can hear his voice now. I heard another one saying loudly, "You will raise your bastard as a Serb." The men laughed loudly, and left me alone on the ground.

It was hard to stand the pain. More painful was that, for a Muslim woman, virtue is of utmost importance. I felt humiliated, deprived of dignity, and just wanted to die. Still, there was my sister whom I adored, and she was waiting for me.

But, when I got home, a horrible scene was waiting for me, which stays engraved in my mind. A car was parked near my sister's house. I recognised it at once, and a shiver ran over my spine as it dawned upon me that the soldiers had been there. No, it could not be. My feet felt clumsy, but I plucked up my courage and walked into the house. There I felt the greatest shock of my life, witnessing the most horrifying scene before my eyes. It was far worse than rape. I could not believe what my eyes were seeing: on the cold ground, my sister was lying in a pool, drowned in blood, whilst a Serb soldier was adjusting his trousers. I felt like fainting, but my paralyzed feet kept on, firmly stuck on the ground.

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There I stood, motionless, staring, dazed as if an alien. I could not register that my sister was lying there, lifeless. I felt sick, terribly sick, and fell on my beloved sister's body. In the flash of a second, the vision of our childhood came before my eyes, the days when we played together; unaware of what would befall us, later in life.

I suddenly felt some arms taking me away from the corpse. "No, no," I sobbed, for I wanted to remain with my sister, die with her. Still, more was waiting for me. They were taking me away, and I looked at the one who was gripping my hands. I shuddered. He was a soldier; I still remember his gaze. His squinting eyes were penetrating, piercing my heart like daggers as he dragged me by hand and forced me to walk. "Where are you taking me?" I asked one of the men. "You will soon get there, sweet."

Devastated and wretched as I was, I did not dare utter a word for fear of being raped again. The soldiers were huge, and looked hard, and I did not want to go through the same experience. Yet, I was heading to the same experience. I kept on walking, barefooted, but the rough ground did not damage me as much as before. I thought of my sister lying in cold blood and of the soldier near her. It was so hard to bear that I kept on walking and walking, hoping to cancel the scene. My mind was wandering, but it kept coming back to torment me, even though my soul had left me and, perhaps, altogether, life.

They ordered me to stop, and when we stopped near another village, more women joined me. We looked at each other, as if acknowledging the pain and despair with our eyes, but we could not talk. It was easy to grasp the truth behind their harrowed expressions, so full of grief: they had been through the same act of violence.

We were merely lost souls, walking and walking away from our homes, which had once warmed our hearts, and from our families. It took long hours of walking till we arrived at destination. The area was isolated except for some large buildings and the countryside surrounding it. We were forced into a large building. We were led into a hall, only with beds. Other women were sitting there, and they all stared at us, with the same appalled looks. I could see no life in their eyes; it had been taken from them. These women were waiting for death to relieve them from hell. I was soon to become like them.

Now that my sister was gone, and my honour defaced, there was nothing left to live for. Most of the women were pregnant, in advanced pregnancy or at its beginning. For a moment, I felt as if I had been driven into a dark abyss of no return.

There was a woman sitting alone on a bench, and I approached her. She must have been in her late forties: her dark eyes had deep circles around them; her cheeks were slanted and firm, revealing beautiful high cheekbones. She introduced herself as Marie. She looked at me and said in a low voice: "It would have been better for you if you had died, my child." In that horrid darkness, I thought of my sister. What a way to die! But it was better than the martyrdom waiting for us. Yet Marie was right, for what was to follow was far worse than death. Looking back, I

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say I would have preferred to go along the death flow, rather than going through the events that followed. Certainly, the hands of God were with me, constantly.

The so-called camps were under the responsibility of the Serbs and, later on, I learned the reason why I was taken there. These camps consisted of stores, empty factories and old schools, and all served the purpose: to accommodate the Serbian soldiers, in their tasks of eliminating the Bosnians by raping their women. It was my turn. A man in his late thirties, wearing a uniform, took me by the hand. "What do you want from me?" I asked him. He grabbed me and threw me on the floor. A sudden prickle ran all over my spine for I could tell what was coming. They were going to rape me again, and his voice pierced my heart.

"Open your legs!" he said in a loud voice, as usual, using hard and cold words. I tried to resist, but he untied his trousers and came closer. I fell onto the ground, and he was all over me. His filthy body was penetrating me, and it was a searing pain. While he was raping me, another officer entered the room. I took a deep breath and sighed in relief as I thought they were going to stop. But hell was not going to end; it was only the change from one soldier to another. The nightmare had no end, for the other officer took down his pants and raped me. There was no escape. I closed my eyes and drifted into the world of unconsciousness. Opening my eyes again, I found myself in a dark and filthy room. There was no one, and it all came back to me: the scenes, the officers, the pain... From the other room, I could hear screams of the women who, like me, were being raped and violated. Of all ages. What were they taking from us?

One after the other, the women came into the room, and only the walls can recall the tears we shed in silence. In the darkness and stillness we had forgotten the meaning of being women. With each new day, we hoped it would come to an end. It did not. We were raped by the military Serbs every day, no women escaping their barbaric lust. Most of the time they kept telling us they were following orders, that the reason behind their actions was to humiliate us and make us lose our honour – because we were Muslims.

Most of us were virgins at the time of rape, giving away their innocence to these savages. For us, moral shame was the deepest wound; premarital sex was prohibited, yet they came and took it away. I gave my innocence to someone who did not love me – not a man, but a savage.

My eyes are full of tears now.

"Mama, mama..."

Joshua's voice echoes in my ears, and I hug him.

"How was your day, my dear?" I ask him.

"We had maths today," he replied.

"Oh, I know you do not like maths."

"No."

"Maths is important whether you like it or not. What we do not like is what is most good for us." Of course he does not understand. Joshua hates mathematics,



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and he has taken this from me. At school I hated mathematics, but the subject is important and he has to study it, as I did. It resembles my experience very much, I hated it but I had to go through it, making me relive memories that never desert me.

Time flies away, almost ten years have passed from that nightmare, but in my mind it seems it is happening everyday. Memories are crystal clear, and, day after day, they live within me almost to the point of becoming part of me. Joshua is rapidly growing up, and I love him more than anything in my life. He is the only remaining thing, and, yes, one day, he will study and graduate; he will be the gentleman that the one who conceived him was not.

It was a bleak day when I found out I was carrying him. That day dawned like the others before it, but darker than the others. One day I noticed my periods had stopped, and it was not due to shock but to the repetitive rape by the monsters. My belly was expanding, and it was not due to overeating – we ate very little – and along came the nausea, the illness, and an instinctive feeling which warned me deeply: I was pregnant. Being raped is a nightmare, but carrying an unwanted seed is a grave reality.

I hated to look in the broken glass serving as a mirror in our hall. That woman annoyed me, and I did all I could to evade her gaze. She was constantly there, haunting me, living deep within me. Who was the father? Who could tell? It was not easy to tell, as there were many savages who brutally raped and ravaged me, for how many times I dread to recall.

Yet, deep inside of me, there was a new life, a child who was innocent. Yes, innocent, and unaware of how he was introduced to the world, and in need of protection.

We remained in the camp for days, even months, and there was no doubt about my situation: I was with child. Being pregnant, however, did not alter our situation, still subjected to rape. The soldiers went on raping and raping, turning into fierce animals; it would be better to describe them as ‘demons’. In my memory there is a horrid scene that will never leave me, of a pregnant woman in her eighth month. I saw the soldiers raping her one after the other, until she was exhausted, until she could not breathe any more. But what could we do? Confronted with situations like this, we were helpless.

There was little hope in our heart, and, at every new dawn, we hoped it would be over, but it was not. The only comfort and strength we could find was in our own company. Affinity in tragedy kept us together, and love and solidarity between us kept us going. We lived day by day, breathing on, every one of us praying and longing our souls would travel with the night. Our prayers were not answered.

One fine day it was again my turn. I went for a walk, away from the filthy smells of rape, away from the place haunting me. I was walking, and a soldier was walking behind me. Even in broad daylight, these men without scruples attempted to rape us in all situations. He grabbed me. I could not tell which one of them it was, for

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every time there were new ones. Rape had become a daily part of life, shattering our hopes and making us immune to everything. I tried to escape, but he seized me. He brought out a knife and put it close to my throat, so close I could not breathe.

“Do not try to resist me!” he said in a harsh voice. I knew there was no escape. I thought of the child who was growing inside me. They could not kill me, because taking my life would take my child away, and, for the sake of my child, I let myself be raped. It did not hurt me, as rape had become a part of me, and, for the first time, there was a mission, a purpose embodied in this evil act: while he penetrated me, my sacrifice was offered to my child. There was nothing to live for, and nothing to die for. They had turned us into mad machines, breathing but not living.

Another day dawned, and, unlike the others, it did not bring about the usual rapes; it offered a ray of hope. It stopped, but it was too late for us. We were almost dead, lost and lifeless, and the harm done by the Serbs would remain in our minds and souls forever. We will always recall the silent cries in the night. It will always be there.

We were taken to see a doctor when in a state of shock and when we had infections or diseases. I decided to carry on my pregnancy. I wanted to carry my child on, even if many women in situations similar to mine asked to abort. I had lost everything, but there was this child growing inside me. Though ashamed for losing my virtues and my dignity, I wanted this child to live on.

I thought I was relieved, but, as time went by, thinking of my days in the camps, I saw the men acting like beasts. Thinking one of them was the father of my child was a thought chillingly piercing my heart. In the long nights I cried and cursed myself; still, my child had nothing to do with it. Inside me there was a new life, and all I could do was to give it protection. Carrying their seed in my womb day after day was an ordeal. There were moments when I even thought I would give birth to a monster rather than a child. I soon discarded these thoughts, and I went on.

If the worst came to the worst, I could always give my baby up to adoption. I had a choice: to abort the child and finish with it. But I was alone in the world, and I needed the child, however conceived. Also, the pregnancy was in its advanced stage, it was not right, the child would sense the pain...

And this child seemed to sense everything, and, for unknown reasons, he had decided to come into this world. Perhaps, it was the sensation of the coldness and darkness of my own experience, or because the child knew how conception had taken place. In a decision to come to the world, after long days of waiting, I gave birth to a boy.

I recall the dim light in the cold delivery room at the hospital. The pain and force of the movements are with me every night; the images of women come to my mind, to haunt me with the memory of a time when violence was used to dominate a nation, mostly through women.

It is followed by deep silence.



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This is my story. Joshua is now a young man studying medicine; he will never be like his father. I will perhaps one day tell him the truth, and he will understand. Not now; so far I have succeeded, but my life is a constant torment of dark nights in turmoil, overshadowed by violence and injustice.

It will always remain there, haunting me, like discordant notes in my ears, like a holocaust. Like me, many women were in concentration camps, raped by the Serbian soldiers. Some of them could not keep their children or, when unable to abort, they gave their children up for adoption. Some women killed themselves because, as Muslims, it was too painful and shameful to commit abortion. It was, in all cases, and for all of them, a life of 'mental death', when the body survives and the trauma remains.