

(RE)GENDERING MEMORIES OF THE KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY: THE SILENCED GUERRILLA OF WOMEN

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Abstract: Across the world and throughout history, women have played an active part in combat (Enloe, 1989; and Enloe, 2000) and yet discourses of war tend to be male dominated. Is the forgotten warfare of women in combat due to the absence of social exchanges or a deliberate choice of silencing? This paper argues for the latter by investigating the silencing of female combatants using the example of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and their subsequent lack of visibility and input in Kosovo's nation-building project [1]. Based on preliminary findings from an oral history project with female KLA combatants, this paper seeks to question why, after having occupied such a key place in combat, women have not defended their history, their words, their experiences - their memories - of their time at the front. It then explores the different forces behind the silencing of their roles as combatants and the types of narrative allowed in collective memory and remembering.

Breaking the silence of women combatants encourages an engagement with various gender frameworks that are absent from nation building narratives, and an understanding of what women are cultural products of. This paper does not aim to find heroes or glorify the hegemonic war narratives of the KLA, but rather to draw particular attention to the role of women combatants in

post-war nation-building projects, such as Kosovo, and the silencing of that role. In doing so, such a project intends to reframe how we remember and write national histories, as well as helping to shed light on the cultural construction of gendered identities in a post-war era.

Keywords: Kosovo, Gender, Memory, Silencing, Kosovo Liberation Army

I. INTRODUCTION

In Kosovo coverage of the war experiences of the Kosovo Liberation Army (henceforth the KLA) combatants has tended to be male-dominated from street names, to public monuments to visually celebrated heroes such as Adem Jashari, founder of the KLA, whose portrait welcomes any visitor to Kosovo airport. Using the example of Kosovo and KLA combatants, Jamie Munn has discussed hegemonic male identity and its link with nationalism, briefly acknowledging women as 'supporting actors whose roles reflect the patriarchal notions of femininity and of women's domain' (Munn, 2006 : 290). Although few studies ac-

knowledge women's roles on the home front, such as the book 'Her History is Herstory Too' (Farnsworth, 2008) or document personal memories of war such as Activist Sevdije Ahmeti has done in her Journal (Ahmeti, 2001), the noticeable lack of visibility of female combatants in post-conflict Kosovo has been flagged up (Marku, 2013, Krasniqi, 2007). They are also acknowledged as being fighters in James Pettifer's latest book about the KLA, although remain very much in the background (Pettifer, 2013: 13, 20, 76).

As far as I am aware, female KLA combatants are not yet a group that has been specifically researched in and of their own right unlike their male counterparts. Nor has their inclusion into post-conflict Kosovo been adequately addressed by the international community or by academics. Putting aside these memories when moving into the future signifies an incomplete picture of experiences from the front and may deny any alternative representation to the current dominating male discourse in a patriarchal society such as Kosovo. This is not to say that one representation of war may be more authentic or accurate than the other, but it is an additional experience of equal importance and weight which could help create an alternative future.

Yet women did fight in combat and have their personal memories of their experiences which some have started to share with a Kosovo based NGO, the Kosova Women's Network [2]. The memories of these female KLA combatants have their own language, own rhythms, and own colours. It is not my place to tell these stories which are still being collected, but what can be offered for now are some brief observations from meetings conducted with female ex-combatants to date.

II. FIGHTING AS GENDERS AND AS SOLDIERS

Women did not enact male roles. According to the women interviewed, they owned their roles fighting both as 'genders and as soldiers'; sharing the same spaces of combat, and maintaining their femininity by washing their hair regularly even if it meant using water collected in the cover of mines for instance. Although one female ex-combatant saw the role of female fighters as a support to men, the female memory of combat is dominated by the sense of being an equal to man, fighting till the end, feeling the same fear or joy, signing the same songs and being killed in the same ways. The freedom of 'sameness' to men sounded to me like a distanced status that has since been lost. Breaking taboo and popular opinion was key to becoming a female fighter, marking a huge cultural shift in gender relations. Some had the support from their parents although interestingly this was always noted as a silent support. But this social fight for female equality seemed to be no longer apparent in their experience of post-conflict Kosovo. Perhaps fighting for the freedom of a nation appears to justify an elevated role for the female, a role that can only be temporary and becomes void in times of constructing a nation. In recounting their memories many felt that their history is a shared history and shared sacrifice. Nationalism, nationhood and notions of freedom motivated this group. The women spoken to did not remember their combat as being about personal gain or claims to heroism, and reacting to a situation was said to be more important than the act of joining the KLA itself.

External narratives also seem to have an impact. For example, the female ex-combatants we talked to appeared conscious of an alternative narrative being

constructed that claims KLA women were whores rather than soldiers. This suggests a potential division in any future attempt to unify women and a nation. I also got the sense that a self-limitation and self-silencing process was taking place during the interviews as if they had no right to claim they were heroes which very much sets them apart from the well documented self-glorifying male narrative. Where the female narrative separates from the male collective memory of combat is when it comes to decisions about the future of this collective narrative in the creation of a new nation. Women combatants no longer exist in that future. Having occupied key places in combat, women have not defended their history, their experiences or memories of their time at the front. It seems that internal and external processes are at play to silence these narratives and memories. This group is also absent from the narratives of war and have seemingly returned to roles that they momentarily broke free from.

Baraban, Jaeger and Muller in their book *Fighting Words and Images* have noted that the complexity and variety of war experiences mean that no one group can adequately represent war in its entirety (Baraban, Jaeger and Muller, 2012: 5). Excluding the war experiences of women combatants therefore would be to present an incomplete picture of war experiences and perhaps encourages women's post-war life to be restricted to a life as a male-defined symbol. The exclusion of the lived and remembered experiences of the female ex-combatants in the post-conflict nation-building project is not, I believe, entirely benign or accidental. Its omission could be seen as encouraging silence from a group which has the potential to disrupt an already established male-focused narrative of con-

flict that is loyal to men and nation. Silence, a deliberate strategic choice and a construction of public memory according to Jay Winter (Winter, 2010: 23), thus becomes an active process, to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

Women fought strongly for their beliefs, beliefs that are clearly linked to a future nation and its freedom. Without the full recognition and representation of all groups that experienced war in one form or another, a post-conflict society cannot truly encompass the views of the people being unified under the banner of a new nation nor can it truly represent all the identities that contributed to that new nations' existence. Let me here turn to the post conflict situation of Kosovo. I have outlined some of the key themes that emerged from interviews with female KLA combatants, but what place is there for these stories and memories in the post-conflict society? Rather than the absence of social exchanges I believe it is about a deliberate choice of silencing that reinforces patriarchal gender relations and roles.

III. BACK TO THE HOME FRONT: THE CONTESTED ROLE OF WOMEN

If silence is a deliberate and active process, the very omission of the female combatant in the post conflict nation-building project becomes a strategic silence that can be seen to reflect gender relations overall in Kosovo. Gender relations are severely impacted by patriarchal tradition in Kosovo and being silenced means that female combatants are seemingly left with no other option but a return to tradition and her role in the home. This was indeed the case for many of the women that we talked to, most of whom are now

house wives. Those who worked in politics however seem to have a memory of war that is rehearsed or learned memories. In fact, one ex-combatant informed me she has been told, by another female combatant, to not speak out too much about her memories in public. Why this was I was unable to find out but it highlights a certain pressure for a unified female narrative, or a unified war-time narrative that silences women.

Despite tradition being replaced by a modernising society, many of the patriarchal traditions and attitudes associated with tradition in Kosovo remain. In particular, a return to the tradition has been noted as a 'characteristic' trait of women's memory (Slapšak, 2005), particularly in the context of a new national narrative being formed. Svetlana Slapšak claims that women resume "the roles they had in a patriarchal society – those of wives and mothers" in order to be "accepted" by the new society founded on a collective narrative (Slapšak, 2005: 109). Within the collective national identity the voice of women fighters seemingly disappears, or limits itself suggesting an inherent marginalised history of women.

In a new society that strives to construct a new national or 'Kosovar' identity that is both about Kosovo as a sovereign state or Kosovo as a European state [3] the emancipated role symbolised by the female fighter may undermine male autonomy, that Munn claims is traditionally about "defenders of freedom, honour, homeland and their women" (Munn, 2006: 291 original emphasis). The absence of the memories of female fighter may thus serve to reinforce normative hegemonic male narratives of men characterising Kosovo (Munn, 2006: 289) and constructed post conflict national identity. In the few interviews we had, the female ex-combatants did not appear to criticise their

male counterparts from during the conflict. Instead they tend to reproach them in the post-conflict nation-building project, particularly those they see as 'corrupt politicians'. During the conflict, men are spoken of as equals. Post war they are linked to disappointments and corruption.

Whether it is politically motivated, a conscious effort or an unconscious consequence of events, women speaking out may symbolise a potential threat to this normative hegemonic male identity, or represent a 'critical memory' (Slapšak, 2005: 109) to future discourses about Kosovo's history and its future. For example, I noted how one ex-KLA combatant felt embarrassment that some men 'falsely' claimed to have fought with the KLA. Rather than speak out and dishonour these men, she chose silence. Whilst this keeps in line with the attempt at collective unity post-conflict, it also has the potential to reappear later as critical discourse. Either way, Zerubavel's 'conspiracy of silence' defined as "people collectively ignor[ing] something of which each one of them is personally aware" (Zerubavel, 2010: 32) appears to come into play in post-conflict nations; women actively silence their own memories and men speak up theirs, both serving to reinforce the hegemonic male narrative of conflict and nationalism, whilst encouraging the return to past patriarchal and traditional societal structures. Silence then becomes necessary to protect the masculine credentials of memory of warfare and the creation of a post-conflict nation.

IV. BREAKING THE SILENCE

Breaking the silence of women combatants encourages an engagement with various gender frameworks

that are absent from nation building narratives, and an understanding of what women are cultural products of. I mentioned at the start taking from Baraban, Jaeger and Muller, that no representation of war experiences is accurate or authentic (Baraban, Jaeger and Muller, 2012: 5), be it the celebrated male heroes visible across Kosovo, or the silenced narratives of women combatants. But not to include the narratives of both female and male combatants in the post-conflict nation-building project, is to exclude opportunities for a richer historical account and to construct an unrepresentative collective narrative of history. It is to also silence the very memories that have the potential to eventually disrupt the referential integrity of collectively established representations of the past.

Memory, according to Amy, is very much 'a process of re-membering for a future' linking both past and present (Amy, 2010: 84). Silencing any links to the past encourages discontinuity in the narrative of female combatants, preventing them from becoming a part of the future. As I have suggested, for the women of the KLA it seems that to be accepted in the new Kosovo means reverting back and 'silencing' the past combative roles of women as fighters, killers and equals of men, perhaps so as not to openly dishonour those men who did not fight or undermine attempts at a collective male hegemonic narrative of conflict. And yet, as has been seen from the enthusiasm for our oral history project, these women are very much wanting to break that silence and speak out. The consequences of breaking this silence are still to be observed.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Although it is equally valid to ask why any public recognition of women's role in combat is needed if it means replicating the male vision of how conflict should be remembered and displayed in accordance with 'male' norms of such display. By offering a voice to women an alternative way of representing conflict and war could be considered as being equally justified.
- [2] The Kosova Women's Network is currently working together with female ex-combatants on an oral history project. At the time of publication the project is in its early stages and discussions held with female ex-combatants are not yet ready for publication.
- [3] The advertising campaign 'Kosovo the Young Europeans' is an interesting example of Kosovo's nation branding project, attempting to portray itself as the missing piece of Europe.

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