

Cinematic Representations of Girls Who Participate in African Political Conflicts

Norita Mdege, University of Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

Fictional films which mainly focus on the experiences of girls who participate in African political conflicts are often caught up in the politics and dominant ideologies of their times. In films about wars that are widely perceived as just, such as the anti-colonial wars, girls who participate in the conflicts are often represented as brave and heroic. But in films about African postcolonial wars, girls are largely represented as innocent and sometimes helpless victims of these “unjust wars.” This paper considers the cinematic representations of the participation of girls in both African anti-colonial conflicts and postcolonial wars. It focuses on *Sarafina!* (Roodt, 1992), which is set within the context of South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle, and *Heart of Fire* (Falorni, 2008), which focuses on the conflict between the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in Eritrea during the early 1980s. The paper argues that the representations in these two films are heavily influenced by both local and global political, economic, social, and other interests that may suppress the voices of the girls that these films represent. The paper does not attempt to determine what the authentic voices of the girls are because authenticity depends on perspective. Rather, it explores the many interests, including those of the girls themselves, which inhibit access to some of the narratives about girls’ experiences in African political conflicts. Studying these fictional films is important because they are closely linked to real historical experiences, and can therefore influence the imagined identities of African girls.

Keywords: Girl soldiers, African, conflicts, anti-colonial, postcolonial, identity.

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Introduction

Documentaries such as *Grace, Milly, Lucy: Child Soldiers* (Provencher, 2010) and stories such as that from Senait Mehari's memoir, *Heart of fire: From child soldier to soul singer* (2006), demonstrate the necessity for girl soldiers to tell their own stories. These narratives offer particularly gendered perspectives that go beyond the idea that girls are simply helpless victims of irregular soldiers.ⁱ The documentary *Grace, Milly, Lucy: Child Soldiers* focuses on Grace, Milly and Lucy's experiences as child soldiers in the Ugandan civil war. It presents some nuanced dynamics among the former girl soldiers. For example, Milly pushes Lucy to accept responsibility for physically and emotionally abusing her during their time as child soldiers. She strongly believes that some of the things Lucy did were not because she was forced. She mentions that their husband did not approve of some of Lucy's abuses on the abductees.ⁱⁱ But Lucy keeps insisting that it was not her fault, she had to do it. In Mehari's memoir, the writer provides insights into the Eritrean war during the early 1980s through an exploration of her own experiences as a young girl who fought for the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). These stories indicate that there is so much more to the stories of girl soldiers than what the dominant narratives on child soldiers offer. Fictional stories about child soldiers mostly focus on boys, and the narratives are often what Catarina Martins (2011) has labelled 'the single story' (p. 434).

Martins' (2011) use of the phrase "the single story" is inspired by the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie (2009), speaking at a conference, warns that only hearing a single story about a community, person or country may result in stereotypes and incomplete and potentially damaging views about other people. Regarding the single story about child soldiers, Martins (2011) points out that the contemporary general characterisation of child soldiers includes forced recruitment, mostly through abductions, being forced to kill, drug use, sexual and other forms of abuse (p. 437). Additionally, the warlords turn the children into monsters with no conscience. We see such stories in fictional films such as *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006) and *Johnny Mad Dog* (Sauvaire, 2008), and these are reinforced in documentaries such as *Chain of Tears* (Strasburg, 1988), *Bling: A Planet Rock* (Cepeda, 2007), *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (Reticker, 2008), and *Return to Freetown* (McCullagh, 2001). Many researchers have concluded that these representations are largely based on the humanitarian discourse about children, which relies on how others see them, rather than how they see themselves (Edmondson, 2005; S. M. Rosen & D. M. Rosen, 2012).

The humanitarian discourse 'hinges on the assumption that images of suffering can invoke compassion in viewers, and that this compassion can become a catalyst for positive change' (Bleiker & Kay, 2007, p. 139). But emphasis on pain and suffering has also affected the way African political conflicts as well as the roles and experiences of those affected by them are understood. Many people are still unfamiliar with Africa and its complex histories. As a way of understanding the continent, they often rely on representations in the media (Tully, 2010). These representations are however not value free; they reflect the power dynamics within global politics. Cheryl Sterling (2010) argues that 'representations of African conflicts generate a discourse of self-deception or perversion as it is rarely about Africa but rather about the subjectivity and subconscious of the Western interpellator' (p. 196). Within this context, African child soldiers are often 'portrayed with qualities which

children ought not to have, and as products of societies with qualities that societies ought not to have' (Utas, 2011, p. 213). Kate Taylor-Jones (2016) argues that films about child soldiers are a significant tool in global politics (p. 189). She states that these films are often 'aimed at a specific globalised, Westernised audience that is seeking to have its own world position ratified and consolidated via this viewing experience' (p. 180). To that end, filmmakers and journalists have been known to request 'to talk to ... children with "more traumatic" stories' when they approach humanitarian organisations (Machel as cited in Denov, 2010, p. 8).

However, the representations we see on film of child soldiers as helpless victims should not necessarily be seen as a simple case of identities being imposed on child soldiers by filmmakers. Honwana (2006) states that within the humanitarian discourse, 'the victims quickly understand that their status as victims is crucial to obtaining aid' (p. 15). That is, some child soldiers use victimcy as a tool for social navigation. As Utas (2011) states, victimcy, or 'the agency of presenting oneself as a victim' is 'a key tool in the toolbox of a former child soldier' (p. 215). For instance, in the story about Grace, Milly and Lucy mentioned above, Lucy may indeed be what Erin K. Baines (2009) refers to as a 'complex political perpetrator,' occupying the 'ambiguous status as victim and perpetrator' (p. 164).ⁱⁱⁱ But Lucy clearly realises that she now has to use a different approach since she is no longer a child soldier as she says to Milly, 'some things from the past should remain in the past, let's not bring them up right now.' As such, when filmmakers include speaking to former child soldiers as part of their research, as was the case with Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire and Kim Nguyen, the children may simply tell the filmmakers what they want to hear.^{iv} But child soldiers remain at a disadvantage as they are often not in a position to determine the way they are represented on film.

Children involved in African political conflicts have to rely on others to represent them on film. As a result, filmmakers who make films about these children are often outsiders looking in. They are outsiders in terms of age, class, cultural background and experiences. Graeme Turner (2009) argues that filmic communication happens within specific cultural contexts. Turner (2009) defines culture as 'a dynamic process which produces the behaviours, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence' (p. 66). He adds that 'the language system of a culture carries that culture's system of priorities, its specific set of values, its specific composition of the physical and social world' (p. 67). Because girl soldiers are largely not in a position to "present" themselves in fictional films, they have to rely on others to represent them and give meaning to their experiences. Therefore, their representations often depend on meaning-making processes external to their own. It is for this reason that Myriam Denov (2010) argues for the need 'to develop alternative visions of child soldiers that are grounded in the perspectives of the children themselves' (p. 17).

Filmmakers such as Luigi Falorni, with *Heart of Fire* (2008), and Kim Nguyen, with *War Witch* (2013), give the impression of representing girl soldiers from the perspectives of the girls themselves. In these films, it is the girl soldier characters who narrate the stories. This approach enables the films to present girl soldiers as 'rational human actors ... [who have a] mature understanding of their predicament,' to use Peters' and Richards' words (as cited in Denov, 2010, p. 20). The use of the "I" in the narration also point to an insistence on the particular rather than the general. But

sometimes the nature of presentation can simply provide the guise of an added measure of “authenticity” that hides the power relations between filmmakers and those represented, or the ideologies the films seek to perpetuate.

Although most films about African political conflicts reflect local and global power dynamics, there is a marked difference between the representations of girls who participated in African anti-colonial wars and those who participate in postcolonial wars. In films about wars that are widely perceived as just, such as the anti-colonial wars, girls who participate in the conflicts are often represented as brave and heroic. In these cases, ‘the child fighter represent[s] “the people” in their struggle for democracy [...] and] serve[s] as a collective representation of all that [is] good, striking to break out of an encrusted social order’ (S. M. Rosen & D. M. Rosen, 2012, p. 306). Examples of such representations are Sarafina in Darrell Roodt’s *Sarafina!* (1992) and Flame in Ingrid Sinclair *Flame* (1996). Unlike films about anti-colonial wars, in films about the African postcolonial wars girls are largely represented as innocent and sometimes helpless victims of these “unjust wars.” Examples of such representations are Awet in *Heart of Fire* (Falorni, 2008) and Komona in *War Witch* (Nguyen, 2012). It can then be said that judgements about the wars and the societies in which the wars are waged are reflected through the way girl soldiers are represented.

This paper uses a sociological approach to consider the cinematic representations of the participation of girls in both African anti-colonial conflicts and postcolonial wars by looking at two films, *Sarafina!* and *Heart of Fire*. A sociological approach ‘assumes that films can be studied as social indicators of the society from which they have emerged’ (Tomaselli, 2015, p. 11). The paper argues that although fictional films about girls who participate in African political conflicts sometimes provide the girls with some agency and express some of their interests, they often subordinate the girls’ voices to both local and global political, economic, social, and other interests. The paper does not seek to determine what the authentic voices of the girls are because authenticity is dependent on perspective. Rather, it explores the many interests, including those of the girls themselves, which inhibit access to some of the narratives about girls’ experiences in African political conflicts. Studying these fictional films is important because the films often blur the boundary between fact and fiction.^v Thus, they can influence the imagined identities of these girls.

Sarafina!

Sarafina! is based on Mbongeni Ngema’s play of the same title. The film depicts the experiences of township youths in apartheid South Africa during the late 1970s and the 1980s by mainly following the experiences of a high school girl, Sarafina. Sarafina is represented as politically conscious and participating in anti-apartheid protests because of her awareness of the injustices of the system.

Unlike the play which was written and performed in the mid to late 1980s, during the apartheid era, the film was released in 1992, after the unbanning of political organisations and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, but before the first democratic elections were held in 1994. As a result, the film deals with the subject of the youth uprising at a time when the dominant African nationalist discourse was now framing violence as a hindrance to political negotiations that aimed at establishing a democratic South Africa. In that environment, rather than explore the multiple voices

and subject positions of girls during the youth uprising, the film uses “the girl” symbolically to express the nation building values of the early 1990s.

The girl is suited for this because, as Tanya Lyons (2004) notes, females are often stereotyped as nurturers who should ‘only be involved in life-supporting rather than life-destroying activities’ (p. 21). Where Ngema’s Sarafina is consistently militant, Roodt’s Sarafina is more interested in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. We see that, for example, in an incident in which a group of students, including Sarafina, confronts their schoolmate, Guitar, who is an informer for the apartheid police. Sarafina saves Guitar from the potentially violent punishment that he might have received from the other boys. She investigates the context of Guitar’s betrayal rather than simply consider it as separate from Guitar’s conditions of existence. She helps the other students to understand that Guitar only betrayed them out of desperation; a police officer, Sabela, had threatened his crippled father. Guitar is then forgiven and reintegrated into the group. This is in line with the reconciliatory message that was being promoted in South Africa in the 1990s. The message culminated in the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) ‘in terms of the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No 34 of 1995.’ The TRC set up hearings in which ‘perpetrators of violence [during apartheid] could ... give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution’ (*South African History Online*, 2011). Thus, in the film Sarafina becomes less of the militant girl in Ngema’s play to enable the film to serve the political needs of the 1990s.

Additionally, Sarafina breaks out of the traditional female roles without necessarily challenging the patriarchal order because her adventures are represented as only temporary. In that sense, Sarafina’s representation is linked to the stereotypical representation of adult females. As Eileen MacDonald argues, ‘in times of war ... women are permitted to enter the arena of violence – up to a point ... But as soon as the war [is] over they [a]re glad, we are led to believe, to go back to their “natural” roles’ (as cited in Lyons, 2004, p. 19). The impermanence of girlhood plays right into the presumed flexible relationship between women and the nation. Women are not given as much significance as men when imagining a post-apartheid South Africa. The film ends with Sarafina performing as Mandela in a play about the day Mandela is released from prison. In this scene, Sarafina becomes the go-between who communicates the desires of the fathers to their sons and daughters. The return of the fathers is supposed to signal a return to normal. Perhaps somewhere in there are the voices of the girls who participated in the youth uprising, but they are under so many layers of other interests.

Heart of Fire

Heart of Fire is inspired by Senait Mehari’s memoir, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006). The film is set in Eritrea during the country’s war of independence from Ethiopia, and focuses on the young girl Awet’s rather turbulent childhood. Awet becomes a child soldier after her father gives her over to one of Eritrea’s liberation armies, the Jebha. This paper is not interested in the veracity of Mehari’s story. The story is viewed as representing the way Mehari chooses to construct her history.^{vi} In that sense, *Heart of Fire* provides for an illuminating exploration of the silencing of girl soldiers through examining the differences between the memoir and the film. These differences are explored through looking at

how the war is framed, the relationship between children and adults and the solution that the film suggests.

How the war is framed

Heart of Fire is set within the context of Eritrea's War of Independence against Ethiopia, but its main focus is the conflict between two Eritrean liberation groups, the Jebha and Shabia. The war is waged in the liberated section of Eritrea, which has a negative implication on what independence entails for African nations.

The film's representation of liberated zones as areas of "fanatical" infighting seems to take its cue from the neo-colonial archive which holds the sanctity of colonial borders and decontextualizes African postcolonial wars. Such a representation has negative implications for understanding the postcolonial experiences of African countries. It seems that for a war to be defined as justified, then there should be a common goal across all groups within artificially determined borders. In cases where the groups have different views, as was the case in Eritrea, which is made up of a diversity of people, the war then becomes aimless.^{vii}

In a fight between Awet's father and an ELF supporter, the film emphasises ego as the reason behind the war. It seems the main motive for the conflict is to claim full credit for bringing independence to Eritrea. Awet's father says to the man 'We were fighting for Eritrea before you or your father were born!', thus suggesting that the conflict may have been just about egos. This scene is particularly interesting because it is the filmmaker's construction and not from Mehari's book. In her book, Mehari (2006) states that after the demise of the ELF, her father could just 'not accept that the ELF had lost the war' (p. 191), but she does not suggest that egos were to blame for the war. Bereketiab (2016) argues that the ELF's loss of control to the EPLF was 'bitter medicine to swallow' since they had begun the struggle (p. xvi). But in explaining the reasons for the war he proposes a 'synthetic model' that combines factors such as ideology, foreign policy orientation, 'geo-religious and geo-linguistic, personal difference and elite competition' (p. 236). The film's focus on egos makes the conflict truly aimless.

The film sets up Awet, the girl, as an eyewitness to adult interactions that only serve to show the aimlessness of the war. On the other hand, Senait, in Mehari's book, seeks to find out why they are fighting the EPLF but fails to find a satisfactory answer. Although her failure to find an answer may be an answer in itself, it becomes more a personal observation rather than a general one. Additionally, the film also represents Eritrean adults as largely incapable of looking after children.

The relationship between children and adults

Singer and Dovey (2012) note that in portrayals of African civil wars, adults are often represented as 'alternately brutal, devoid of agency, or quite simply absent' (p. 153). In *Heart of Fire* the film, Awet is abandoned by her mother as a baby and placed in the care of an orphanage run by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church ends up having the most positive influence in her life. It is the place where she is given the "heart of fire," which becomes a symbol of strength, resilience and survival. The Catholic orphanage is represented within the colonial discourse of the civilizing

mission. This is despite the fact that in her memoir, Mehari (2006) indicates that her experience at the Catholic orphanage was characterized by institutional racism. She explains that black children were not allowed to use the playground, which she describes as a 'paradise' (p. 13). Black children also ate at a small table in a tiny room while the white children ate in a 'large dining room, with a ceiling so high that you could barely see it' (p. 13). What Mehari describes as a form of institutional racism is transformed into bullying perpetrated by one of the children at the home. In a symbolic representation of the deterioration of Awet's condition after living the orphanage, for the rest of the film she wears the same dress she is wearing when she lives the home, and the dress gets more torn and dirty as the film progresses.

In the bar fight mentioned above, Awet's father declares that he will fight to his death for his village, but ends up sending his daughters to fight instead. The book explains the desperation that leads the father to sending her daughters to the war: he is poor and cannot afford to look after them. The war had reduced the family into nomads who were constantly on the move and had to scavenge for food. In the film, according to Freweyni, Awet's sister, the father simply volunteers her daughters because his friends were doing the same. If Freweyni is to be believed, the father is all about keeping up appearances. For example, in the bar fight mentioned earlier, the father shows the EPLF supporter a scar from a wound that he claims he obtained in the war. However, Freweyni later informs Awet that the wound was not from the war; he got injured in a bar fight.

Mehari (2006) also indicates that European adults can also neglect their children. One of the ELF soldiers in the book, Mike'ele, was abandoned by his Italian father. Mehari (2006, p. 91-92) indicates that she thought Mike'ele's father was not any different from an African father like hers:

Mike'ele said his father must be dead, for otherwise he would have been there with Mike'ele. I did not dare to contradict him but merely thought to myself that it was possible for fathers to be alive but not be there, as was the case with mine.

What is perhaps more interesting is that in the book, before Senait Mehari is sent to live with her father, she goes to live with her grandparents. But this episode, which she describes as the happiest time of her life because she felt loved and nurtured, is completely eliminated from the film. When introducing her book, Mehari (2006) writes that:

Now that I have written everything down, I am free.
This book will give me peace.
The story I have to tell is a terrible one.
But I do not want those who read it
to see only the darkness.
I want a door to open as they read it.
So light comes through – and hope.

Thus, it seems Mehari does not wish to adopt a humanitarian discourse, which, according to Laura Edmondson (2005), demands that the traumatic past be represented 'as a time of unrelenting terror and suffering' (p. 469). As the title of her

book, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer*, indicates, Mehari writes an inspiring story that may potentially empower other former girl soldiers to work towards creating a more meaningful life for themselves. Regardless, Falorni tailors Awet's experience in line with the humanitarian discourse by focusing only on the unhappy and/or distressful moments.

However, Falorni complicates the image of the helpless child by characterising Awet with 'agency and inner strength,' an approach which Edmondson (2005) argues 'run[s] a considerable risk of diminishing the emotional response that theoretically generates charitable contributions' to the cause (p. 469). But it is possible that Falorni's strategy may not reduce viewers' emotional response because Awet's agency only serves to emphasise the incompetence or absence of adults. For example, Awet is the one who ensures that she, her sister and her friend leave the military group. Her decision to leave the camp indicates that she has finally come to terms with the fact that she cannot rely on adults or expect them to do the right thing. That is, she decides to write them off. This is unlike in the book in where Mehari and her sisters are saved from the military by their father's brother, Haile.

Suggested Solutions

After establishing that African adults have neglected the responsibility to look after their children, and the issue of racism is eliminated, the film suggests an escape to Europe as the solution for Awet. Mayer (2009) argues that the film 'offers the neo-imperialist dream of globalisation in place of both the reality of Italy's current mistreatment of African migrants and the possibility of a functioning, independent African democracy' (p. 64). It should be noted that Senait Mehari does indeed leave Eritrea, then Sudan, and ends up in Germany where she lives with her father for a while. But in her book, she does not present an escape to Europe as the ideal solution. She describes the neighbourhood she lived in after moving to Germany as a "foreigners' ghetto" which, for the most part, 'looked not unlike Africa' (2006, p. 179). Thus, although she no longer had to deal with war or extreme poverty, she had to deal with the racism and discrimination that Africans faced in that country. But she also notes that, at the time of her move, if she had a choice on the matter, she would have stayed with her uncle, Haile, in Sudan rather than go and live with her abusive father in Germany (p. 168-173).

Taylor-Jones (2016) argues that in films about girl soldiers the girl often becomes representative of 'a series of complex and negative connotations' (p. 183). She also adds that girl soldiers are mostly 'used to uphold the narratives of development, gender, and politics that the global North expects' (p. 188). It seems that Falorni adopts this approach in his film.

Conclusion

Girl soldiers have very little control over how their histories and stories are constructed on film. Their representations are heavily influenced by perceptions about the societies within which they exist. The result is that they are imagined as stuck in certain situations, whether it is traditional gender roles or failed states, and it becomes difficult to envisage that social change might happen from within. Sarafina, the girl in Darrell Roodt's *Sarafina!*, shows so much potential, but she is still unable to

effectively challenge the patriarchal system. Awet, the girl in *Heart of Fire* finds herself stuck in a hopeless situation in which the only solution is to leave.

The perspective from which narratives about girl soldiers are told matters. Stories from the perspectives of girl soldiers have greater potential to broaden our understanding of their experiences. The girls' voices might help to foster meaningful engagement between them and the wider society and thus create a space where change might just be possible.

Notes

¹ The phrase “gendered perspective” is used to refer to a perspective that reflects the differences in experiences as influenced by a person's gender. Gender refers to ‘the socially constructed differences between men and women, and boys and girls’ (Mazurana, McKay, Carlson & Kasper, 2002, p. 98). These constructed differences influence the determination of the ‘social roles of men, women, boys, and girls, and [the] relationships between and among them’ (ibid.).

¹ Milly and Lucy were co-wives.

¹ Baines (2009) uses the term ‘complex political perpetrators’ to ‘describe a generation of victims in settings of chronic crisis who not only adapt to violence to survive, but thrive’ (p. 180).

¹ Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire who directed *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008) spent a year with former child soldiers who acted in his film (Utas, 2011, p. 213), and Kim Nguyen, who directed *War Witch*, met ex-child soldiers in Burundi in addition to reading about Angola and Sierra Leone (Morales, 2012).

¹ In many fictional films about child soldiers, filmmakers often reflect a desire to situate their fictional narratives within recognisable historical experiences through, for instance, the use of filmic realism. For example, *Heart of Fire* is inspired by a former girl soldier's memoir and is shot on location using non-professional actors.

¹ The idea of choice is not without limitations. Mehari still needed to consider her readers when writing the book. She also needed to write a book that publishers would be interested in.

¹ Eritrea is ‘half-Christian and half-Moslem and home to nine ethno-linguistic groups’ (Bereketeab, 2016, p. 146).

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Contact email: nmdege@yahoo.com