

**Review of *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* by Jennie Burnet, University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, 302 pp., \$29.95 (paperback)**

*Reviewed by* Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel  
Goethe University Frankfurt

Anyone who has read any of Jennie Burnet's work in article form is bound to look forward to reading her monograph *Genocide Lives in Us*. In meticulous detail she analyzes Rwandan women's experiences of living in the highly complex situation of a post-genocide context, in which gender relations are re-negotiated on a daily basis. The ways in which women – mostly as survivors of Rwanda's civil war and genocide – navigate a shifting terrain of social, cultural and political realities forms the heart of her analysis. Apart from her focus on women's experiences, which build the cornerstone of feminist studies, one of the reasons that her work stands out is her ability to relay intricate material plausibly. The prerogative of interpretation on Rwandan politics, social relations and cultural practices is at once highly contentious and scholarship on these matters divided. Therefore, her rereading of such categories as ethnicity or her questioning of existing policies bring to light a critique of theories and practices around reconstructing post-conflict states. For both those new to the study of Rwanda, or even those familiar with the environment of an African post-conflict society, her reconstruction of the dynamics at play in Rwandan state-society relations is vital.

Beyond depicting the elaborate gender landscape of Rwanda for a wider audience, Burnet employs different types of illustrative material, including photos, maps, extracts from her field notes and considerable quotations from interviews, to make her reflections on the everyday lives of those women in her study more accessible to readers. Her main interest lies in understanding how successfully gender justice can be integrated into reconciliation work in a society such as Rwanda's that has been torn apart by colonial engineering, civil war, genocide and contested practices of memory politics, all of which impact the current gender order. The text is accordingly structured into seven substantive chapters. Whereas Chapter 1 sets the historical and

social background of gender relations, conflict and politics in Rwanda to date, Chapters 2 and 3 contrast official memorialization practices and personal memory experiences respectively. How such different – yet related ways of remembering – collide with each other is shown in the havoc they have caused in the personal biographies of individual women and the operation of grassroots-based women’s organizations, the latter of which have to traverse these dynamic and volatile boundaries.

“Amplified silence,” the key concept introduced in Chapter 3 primarily denoting the lacking public discussion of alleged crimes by the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s armed wing during the conflict, shows itself to be a coping and survival mechanism used by women caught between official narratives and personal trauma. Women’s experiences of the genocide did not end when the fighting between the warring parties ended; instead, as Burnet shows at length, concerted actions to successively end the wars, to pursue and prosecute extremists and close refugee camps have resulted in a protracted aftermath. Burnet details this issue in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, in which she describes the new social categories that adapt to the new constellation of women in the roles of wives, widows and unmarried women. At first, she focuses on discussing the fate of those Rwandan women who have been marginalized in the post-genocide order. Recalling the genocide’s official narrative, these women (Tutsi wives of prisoners, rape survivors and Hutu genocide widows) were not meant to exist as distinct groups. Their existence, however, illustrates how gender and ethnicity intersects in a changing society. Thereafter, in Chapter 5, she introduces the national institutions and a variety of definitions by those actors shaping the course of reconciliation politics in the country. Finally, she weaves together different practices of reconciliation. In spite of being a conflict-laden process, it should ideally be bottom-up and attentive to different forms of suffering as well as surviving. If nothing else, the post-genocide situation calls for singular approaches to nation- and state-building; it also necessitates comprehensive measures of institutionalizing reconciliation. In practice, however, reconciliation starkly differs on an individual and communal level. As a consequence, all of these different measures of remembering, of coexisting and of cohabiting should be elevated from marginal or renegade processes to being

recognized as integral processes of a larger socio-political project. Chapter 7, the book's penultimate chapter, describes the challenges related to reconciliation posed by mechanisms such as *gacaca* courts, where social practices meet judicial and cultural traditions. Throughout these chapters, Burnet questions the potential of achieving justice despite the practice of amplified silence.

What becomes extremely visible in Burnet's analysis, which is situated at the local and national levels, is that there is no easy solution to the massive challenge of transformation after genocide. No *simple* categories (such as those of ethnic ascription) exist to distinguish between those who belong to the new post-genocide society; neither is the highly-loaded, yet permissible, discourse (with terms such as "survivor" or "perpetrator") sufficiently adequate to describe present conflict lines. Without ever using the term "feminist", to describe her own work or that of the women and women's movement she writes about, Burnet displays all the qualities one would expect from a feminist social scientist. She draws an unmistakable connection between the private and public spheres by pointing out that the social, and in this instance cultural, is also political. Old caseload returnees, those Rwandans who had been living in exile since the politically-motivated violence of the mid-twentieth century, unless framed as part of the present elite, admittedly feature less in her work than survivors and/or new caseload returnees do. The latter group mainly constitutes those Rwandans who became displaced or were refugees towards the genocide's end and returned to their communities thereafter. Her approach is motivated with important ethical and methodological considerations, which belong to any feminist study of war and politics. It also reflects how difficult it is in practice to portray "women" as a heterogeneous group even while displaying her commitment to emancipatory goals or exposing silence as a pivotal feminist topic. Finding a way to present a differentiated picture of elite women and/or female old caseload returnees, who also have to contend with the genocide's repercussions albeit from a different social and historical setting, would have provided a means to augment state-centered perspectives. In suggesting that state and society interests diverge in the instance of

memory politics, Burnet does not shy away from identifying controversial subjects that might otherwise be disguised under the cloak of gender research.

Burnet's reflexive and critical analysis productively blurs the lines of disciplinary boundaries. Her book provides an insightful analysis at the level of community and social interaction, and does not ignore the impact of the state and the international community (in lesser part) in fashioning social subjectivities. These actors create a structural setting that simultaneously shapes normative frameworks and material living conditions. Burnet falls into line with a cohort of Anglophone scholars, among them Lee Ann Fujii, Timothy Longman or Scott Straus, who judiciously engage developments in Rwanda after 1994. Those scholars who have travelled to Rwanda know that the question of genocide accompanies most social interactions that takes place there. Yet, life since the genocide is not only about the conflict nor exclusively about retribution and revenge. As Burnet reminds us, it is also about the things that make life worth living and worth remembering. War is by no means singular, even while genocide in Rwanda was extraordinary. The overarching question therefore becomes, how do people experience the vacillating shift from war to peace? How is a peace that benefits *all* members of society, including women, possible and which obstacles to a sustainable peace do we find in Rwanda? Burnet's book remains a welcome addition to the study of women and gender relations in Rwanda, and it should be read by scholars and practitioners interested in Peace and Conflict Studies as well as in African politics more generally.