



Unhomeliness, unending phobias and liminality in Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire*



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In Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire*, the legacy of childhood maltreatment is reproduced in the relationship between the father, Ghebrehiwet, and the daughter, Senait. A former victim of atrocity, Ghebrehiwet is a broken man with an identity that makes him transfer his traumatised childhood and his dissatisfaction with Eritrea's political system to his family members. Because of these psychosocial issues, he gives his three daughters away to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to train and fight as child soldiers. Drawing on trauma studies, postcolonial theories as well as current research on child soldier narratives, this article examines Mehari's depiction of her experiences with her father and, later, with fellow soldiers during the Second Eritrean Civil War. Specifically, it examines the concepts of unhomeliness and liminality, with reference to Mehari's depiction of her anxiety in the tension-filled space of her parental home and the contingent 'homes' of the various ELF camps where she stayed as a child soldier. To that end, the article considers Mehari's unending phobias as a recurring motif in *Heart of Fire*.

Ontheemtheid, oneindige fobies en liminaliteit in Senait Mehari se *Heart of Fire*. In Senait Mehari se *Heart of Fire* word die nalatenskap van mishandeling in die kinderjare gereproduseer in die verhouding tussen die vader, Ghebrehiwet, en die dogter, Senait. Ghebrehiwet, 'n voormalige slagoffer van wredehede, is 'n gebroke man met 'n identiteit wat tot gevolg het dat hy sy eie getraumatiseerde kinderjare en sy ontevredenheid met Eritrea se politieke sisteem op sy familieleden projekteer. As gevolg van sy psigososiale kwessies, gee hy drie van sy dogters weg aan die Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) om opgelei te word en te veg as kindersoldate. Gebaseer op traumastudies, postkoloniale teorieë asook huidige navorsing oor kindersoldaatverhale, kyk die artikel na Mehari se uitbeelding van haar ervarings met haar vader en later met haar mede-soldate gedurende die Tweede Eritrese Burgeroorlog. Meer spesifiek ondersoek dit die konsepte van ontheemtheid en liminaliteit, met verwysing na Mehari se uitbeelding van haar angste in die gespanne omgewing van haar ouerhuis en die opeenvolgende 'huise' van die verskeie ELF kampe waar sy as 'n kindersoldaat vertoef het. Met hierdie doel voor oë beskou die artikel Mehari se oneindige fobies as 'n herhalende motief in *Heart of Fire*.

Introduction

In 'Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal', Jon Abbink makes a sober assessment of youth and conflicts in Africa. In his view, 'African youths are over-represented in armed rebel or insurgent movements of various kinds as well as in criminal activities, to which they are so easily recruited' (2005:1). Even if we choose to disagree with Abbink's 'perception', or argue that he participates in the homogenisation of 'African youths', he is not off the mark if one considers his views against the use of children in violent conflicts. Most children are used and abused by both adults and governments or institutions. Some of them are enlisted by warlords, mercenaries and even governments to fight (and work) as child soldiers. A complex of political and sociological factors emerges then, one that is also attentive to the nexus between youth, exploitation by (known) adults and political expediency in Africa. In this article, I consider one such incident: representations of the (ab)use of youth in the domestic and public spheres. More specifically, I will propose that Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire* documents the author's feeling of unhomeliness in her parental home and in the contingent 'home/s' of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), where she stayed as a child soldier.

The study is divided in three sections. I begin with a discussion on the genre of witness narratives and the limits of representation this genre seems to offer, locating the debate against accusations of false witnessing levelled against Mehari and her memoir. Here I affirm the narrative truth that *Heart of Fire* possesses and insist on the memoir's status as a human-rights testimony of the

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atrocities that have happened in Eritrea's civil war history. Next, I reflect on how Mehari situates her narrative primarily in the domain of the everyday and the family home to depict adult betrayal and parental abuse in pre-war and domestic spheres. My intention here is to show Mehari's depiction of her anxiety in the tension-filled space of her parental home and in the various contingent 'homes' of the ELF camps, where she also stayed as a child soldier, as reflecting unhomeliness. I extend the discourse of betrayal and of feeling unhomely in the next section, which focuses on Mehari's experiences as a child soldier. I propose that even though Mehari admits to not fighting on the war front, she qualifies to be called a child soldier because of her experiences at the war front. I also suggest that Mehari's experiences place her in the potentially unending, liminal state. In a way, then, this section proposes a way of looking at child soldier identities as traumatised, fluid, relational and always in flux.

Genre, authenticity and the limits of representation

In *Heart of Fire* (2006), a witness narrative that aroused a lot of public debate about its authenticity because of charges of false witnessing, Senait Mehari recounts her experiences in the Second Eritrean Civil War of 1980–1981 in which she ostensibly participated as a child soldier.¹ What gradually develops is the story of a childhood lived in between the abuses of a dissociative and violent father on one hand, and a freedom fighter group 'on its last legs' of existence (p. 64) on the other. The book tells the story of a young girl who was forcefully sent away by her father to train and then fight with the ELF against the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Born to an Ethiopian mother and an Eritrean father, Mehari suggests that her life took a turn for the worse after her parents were indoctrinated into believing that they could no longer live together as husband and wife while their countries were at war.²

On one level, Mehari's story is an example of what several critics, including Esther Addley, call the 'memoir of crisis' or 'misery lit'. This is a genre that depicts personal suffering in a particular, almost formulaic, pattern. According to Addley (2007:n.p.):

the standard tale begins in childhood, and almost invariably involves some form of abuse at the hands of a trusted adult, usually a parent. It is frequently written in the first person ..., tracing a heart-breaking arc of lost innocence and damage. The tale always ends in some form of escape or redemption.

1.While acknowledging the obvious imperfections and contradictions involving the term, this study's use of 'child soldier' is in keeping with the understanding derived from the 1997 'Cape Town principles and best practices' conference. Delegates at this symposium agreed that a 'child soldier' is not only someone 'who is carrying or has carried arms' but: any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. Girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriages during such contexts are also thought to be child soldiers. ('Cape Town principles' p. 12).

2.The war in question here is the Eritrean War of Independence between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It was fought from 1961 until 1991 when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) defeated the Ethiopian forces in Eritrea. While this war went on, Mehari tells us that 'the original freedom fighters, the ELF, were engaged in a ferocious battle with its splinter group, the EPLF' (p. 65) in what came to be known as the Second Eritrean Civil War of 1980–1981.

In *Heart of Fire*, we see a rich evocation of trauma of the author–narrator, following the abuses she receives both from her father and fellow soldiers in the various makeshift ELF camps. On another, the memoir is more of an exploration of Mehari's retrospective reflection on her relationship with her father. In other words, I read the negative portrayal of her father (and not her mother, who is equally to blame for abandoning her) as a symbolic transfer of her anger from the soldiers (who used to abuse her on the war front) to her father. That said, I do not create excuses for Ghebrehiwet's ill-treatment of his daughter as narrated in the texts.

The story of Mehari's unpleasant experiences both at home and in the civil war is also the story of how the Eritrean civil war affected its people. For Mehari, however, her 'fidelity' to tell the 'true' story of her purported experiences (especially) during the civil war has drawn a lot of criticism from the public, who believe that she intentionally produced a false version of her life. Soon after it was first published in German, for example, the book came under the spotlight when the author was charged with downright misrepresentation of facts. Her critics branded the memoir 'a media invention' and that her 'biography [had] been molded to fit the public taste'. Essential parts of the memoir, it was said, were not true. Following the accusations, Mehari is alleged to have admitted to NDR, a German radio and television broadcaster, that she never was a child soldier. She also acknowledged that she never fought at the front or even fired a gun; maintaining instead that the story told in the book is nonetheless similar to the experiences of thousands of children in Eritrea. Mehari's German publisher had to withdraw the German edition of the text from circulation.³ The publisher also issued an official apology, stating that the book included 'regrettable mistakes in relation to the character Agawegahta'. The publisher went on to indemnify Almaz Yohannes – the woman who claimed to be the Agawegahta portrayed in Mehari's memoir – after she filed a libel lawsuit in which she contested Mehari's story (*The Asmara* 2008). Within this critique and Mehari's own admission of culpability, *Heart of Fire* seems to be stripped of its status as human-rights testimony, as if the issues she bears witness to in her memoir never happened in Eritrea's history. I explore the implications for witness narratives in decisions such as the German publisher's in the concluding section of this article.

The two issues raised in the foregoing paragraph – to tell a 'true' story about one's lived experience, and be taken to task for telling that story – raise interesting questions about genre and the way in which *Heart of Fire* crafts itself in this genre. That the memoir contains fabrications is, perhaps, undeniable. I argue, however, that all witness narratives have had one issue or another with their local (read native) audience as well as their 'ethical subjects'. They have been called to account, for example, in terms of what Smith and Watson call 'the metrics of authenticity' in which 'additional features of

3.The fact that Mehari's German publisher withdrew *Feuerherz* (whose English equivalent is *Heart of Fire*) from circulation does not mean that it is not available to readers. In fact, English and French translations of the text are still available on Amazon, and they can easily be accessed by anyone.



production and circulation' (2012:595) are inserted in narratives of witness to 'take care' of allegations of inauthenticity, absences, lacunae, or incoherences in them while, at the same time, asking 'the sympathetic reader ... to suspend critical judgment and instead respond with uncritical empathy, as he or she identifies with those positioned as victims' (2012: 595–596). In a sense, these issues are the result of a key related phenomenon that rings true of narratives of witness. It is what Leigh Gilmore calls 'the crucial limit in autobiography'. In Gilmore's (2001) view, this is:

the limit of representativeness, with its compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others, the peculiar way it operates both to expand and to constrict testimonial speech, and the way it makes it hard to clarify without falsifying what is strictly and unambiguously 'my' experience when 'our' experience is also at stake. (p. 5)

These problems of representation have prompted scholars such as Ana Douglass to call for restraint in the criticism of texts such as Mehari's. Douglass (2003) insists that such narratives:

constitute a kind of performance during which it is not the absolute 'truth' of the witness's experience but his or her experience of 'speaking', the speech act itself, that confronts or exceeds questions of truth. (p. 83)

Therefore, even as the public contests the 'truths' in them, the writers achieve the larger symbolic truth about the situations they describe. Suggested here is what Sally-Ann Murray (2014) also observes, that:

it is mistaken to assume, for instance, that 'I', the first person voice, somehow constitutes a guarantee of truthfulness, or that 'she', the third person, is marked by a narrative distance incapable of emotional identification. (p. 76).

Murray (2014) insists that 'even the supposedly empirical [narrative] turns out always to be told slantedly', that, therefore, a witness narrative:

cannot be an official map; it toys with memory as an uneven form of mapping at the same time as it actively works to create, in language, an elusive, personalised series of idiosyncratic sites which appear in/on no formal record. (p. 76)

This serves to remind us that the ostensible 'truth' that witness narratives claim to advance is *artfully created*, by the author, with David Shields (2010:5) noting that 'all the moments are "moments," staged and theatrical, shaped and thematised'.

Given such noteworthy discussions on 'truth' in fictional and autobiographical works, I examine and critique *Heart of Fire* against the different shades of truth it purports to illuminate. More concretely, my analysis of the text develops out of the working hypothesis that narratives of witness work with 'truth values'. In other words, I acknowledge that whatever 'truth' Mehari advances in her work 'lie[s] betwixt and between history and imagination' (Murray 2014:77). Thus, my analysis will not seek to privilege one form of 'truth' over another or question the veracity of Mehari's story.

Rather, I discuss and affirm *Heart of Fire* as offering narrative truth about her lived experiences. Most important of all, I read the memoir as a literary, symbolic construction of this lived experience, which might psychologically be true beyond the empirical historical accurateness it has been charged to misrepresent.

Another point that also needs foregrounding at this early stage, as it will help us better understand Mehari's story, is that of Ghebrehwet, her father. Mehari portrays him as a terror in the home. She suggests that his irrational behaviour was because of his own cold upbringing during childhood. We are told that Ghebrehwet had 'a disturbed personality' (p. 230), the result of living with a stepmother who used to 'brand him with iron tongs and forced him to gnaw walls when he had said he was hungry' (p. 191). His disturbed personality, we learn further, becomes more entrenched because of his fanatical commitment to a disintegrating rebel army: the ELF. Mehari's descriptions of her father's behaviour seem to confirm Judith Herman's understanding of former victims of atrocity. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman suggests that for such people, a disturbed personality follows them, and its relationship to the violence that informs their lives is undeniable. According to Herman, there are only 'a limited number of roles' available to them: one can be a perpetrator, a passive witness, an ally or a rescuer (1992:92). These options notwithstanding, Herman is of the view that 'the victim's greatest contempt is often reserved, not for the perpetrator, but for the passive bystander' (1992:92) because 'long after their liberation, [these] people ... bear the psychological scars of captivity' (1992:95) which may prevent them from leading normal lives. I find Herman's ideas useful in understanding Ghebrehwet's actions. He symbolises the character of a broken man, with what Herman calls a 'contaminated identity' (1992:94) that makes him internalise the negative self-image rubbed off onto him by his stepmother and his experiences in the war. Within the confines of this article, I give only minimal attention to Ghebrehwet's traumatised past even though, it must be noted, his actions may have triggered Mehari to write this memoir.

Unhomeliness and persistent phobias in *Heart of Fire*

Mehari's depictions of her anxieties in the tension-filled space of her parental home and the contingent 'homes' in the various ELF camps where she stayed as a child soldier need to be understood in terms of contemporary debates around what actually constitutes a 'home'. In *The politics of home: Postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*, Rosemary Marangoly George suggests that the word home 'connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' (1996:1; [authors' own emphasis]). George (1996) brings up the notion of home here not so much to agree with what it suggests than to problematise it. As she usefully clarifies:

One distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a



learned (or taught) sense of kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. (p. 9)

A home is, for George (1996):

a place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions.... Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home ... is not a neutral place. (p. 9)

George's (1996) observations provide a useful lens for understanding Mehari's ambivalence towards her home. At various points, Mehari narrates her lived experience as that of someone who fails to find 'shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' within the space of her father's (and country's) home. A frightening portrayal of this ambivalent feeling is reflected on the very first page of the memoir, when we are introduced to a foreboding atmosphere that threatens to destroy the personality of both father and daughter when Mehari narrates that her father never liked her. As the narrative progresses, this antipathy is deeply etched into the relationship between the two. We learn, for example, that upon being introduced to her father as a 5-year-old girl, she 'shied away from his greeting by hiding in Mbrat's [her aunt] skirt' (p. 38). Even when Mbrat 'pushed [Mehari] towards him', she 'turned away, hunched and silent' (p. 38). We soon learn that this is because her father 'ha[d] done nothing to help' her while she was growing up (p. 35). Mehari (2006) also states that 'the dislike was mutual from the first instant' (p. 38) she set her eyes on him, and that when she started living with him she soon became his favourite victim:

The longer I lived with him, the clearer it became that he had it in for me.... My father did not beat me merely as a matter of course, ... but with a directed vindictiveness, regardless of whether I had done anything wrong. (p. 48)

Mehari (2006) suspects that her father 'was not quite so violent with his other children' but he was with her because 'I clung to my opinions even when he beat me; I put up a fight and never simply submitted to him' (pp. 48–49). Because Ghebrehiwet cannot stand his daughter's defiant and inquisitive spirit, he decides to kill her by taking her to the forest under the pretext that he wants the two of them to go and fetch firewood. While there he orders her to 'stand in front of a tree' so he can fell her down with a machete. But just as he is about to kill her, Werhid, her stepmother, '[comes] running up to [them], screaming at [her] father. "Stop it! Stop it! ... We'll send Senait, Yaldiyan and Tzegehana to the Jebha!"' (p. 51).⁴ Here, Werhid prefers sending the children away to join the rebel forces (known as the Jebha) rather than seeing them being killed by her husband. It is after the failed filicide that Mehari and her two step-sisters are handed over to the ELF.

Mehari (2006) builds her case around this tense relationship with her father, in the process revealing the terror she and her

siblings experienced at home when she moved from Asmara to stay with him in the countryside and, later, when they joined their father in Germany.⁵ We learn, for example, that Ghebrehiwet is a bully at home, demonstrated through the way he 'lashed out with blows whenever anything displeased him' (pp. 47–48). Elsewhere in the book, he is portrayed as someone who was 'horrible ... to people outside the family' (p. 40) since he generally derived great pleasure from humiliating others and diminishing their profiles. In Germany, for example, he is portrayed as being given to 'punch-ups' with the Eritrean community and on a couple of occasions his children 'felt so ashamed of [his] loutish behaviour' (pp. 189–190) that they 'sometimes wondered how a man of his age could have such childish tantrums instead of behaving in a mature way' (p. 190). A prevailing trope in the memoir is thus that of fear, planted in the hearts of Ghebrehiwet's family members. This trope is reiterated in the text, especially in Mehari's (2006) reference to how she relates to him and the outer world:

I was so afraid of him that I often peed in my pants the moment I heard him open the door. Whether I was doing my homework, having something to eat in the kitchen or standing elsewhere in the flat, I found it impossible to control my bladder when I heard my father coming home. Even before he had opened the door, I shot to the bathroom, where I waited until he had gone to the living room or the kitchen. (p. 183)

As soon as I was sure of not bumping into him, I washed and changed my clothing and crept into my room like a hunted animal [...]. It was safest not to speak to him or have any contact with him at all, but even that did not always work. When he got into a rage about something, he used to knock and kick the door of my room until I was forced to open it. (p. 183)

In *An Adult's Guide to Childhood Trauma: Understanding Traumatized Children in South Africa*, Sharon Lewis observes that one of the post-traumatic stress responses that traumatised children develop is a psychogenic condition called 'hyperarousal', which she describes as a case where 'trauma victims may feel and act as though they are constantly faced with more danger' and who feel 'frightened, jumpy and experience sweating and a rapid heartbeat' (1999:14). Lewis' observations throw light on Mehari's petrified state here. Her father's irrational behaviour amplifies her insecurity around him, and makes her 'find it impossible to control her bladder' and 'pee in her pants'. This is because she is painfully aware of the consequences of not staying away from him or crossing his path, as she often puts it.

Besides chronicling the horrors in her home, however, Mehari (2006) also espouses the extent to which familial violence mirrors what is happening at the national level where we see whole families living in fear of 'the enemy' (understood in the memoir as 'the EPLF and the Ethiopians' [p. 85]) and, therefore, constantly on the move. This is exemplified in her own family's flight from 'the enemy' 6 months after she joins her father in the countryside. She relates:

4.The 'Jebha' in question here is a reference to a unit in the Eritrean Revolutionary Front (ELF). According to Mehari, it was called 'the Jebha al Tahrir or simply Jebha (front) or Tahrir ("morning star" – the name signifying youth, given to the younger brigades of the army)' (p. 64).

5.Ghebrehiwet resettles himself in Germany after the ELF, the faction he strongly supported and on whose side he fought, was defeated by the EPLF. Here, he meets a large community of fellow Eritreans, also running away from the civil war.



Life at my father's was insecure and transitory. We packed up and moved half a year after my arrival there...

We had to move because more and more soldiers had been coming to our village and threatening us...

We were a pathetic sight as we set off: my father, his wife and the motley collection of children, all laden with sacks, blankets and other odds and ends. We had neither a camel nor a car.... So, along with everyone else, we had to squash into the backs of the overcrowded lorries which had replaced the bus services disrupted by the war.

...

This was no mere journey from one place to another. We were fleeing for our lives. (pp. 41–42)

In an earlier episode in the memoir, Mehari (2006) foregrounds the journey motif in her narration of the chain of movements she had gone through as a child. As a baby, she was 'shut ... in a suitcase' and 'put [away] on top of a wardrobe' (p. 2) where she was left to die. Later, she physically inhabits the movement metaphor by first being taken to a state-run orphanage. Shortly afterwards, she is moved to the Daniel Comboni Catholic Convent. Her paternal grandparents then take her out of the convent and *move* her into their home in Asmara, before she is moved again this time to her biological father in the countryside. Here, Mehari expresses the fear and sense of helplessness that grips a community which lives in fright of 'the enemy', one that makes it flee its natal home and relocate to seemingly 'safe' places in the countryside. This reflects Homi Bhabha's ([1994]2004) notion of 'DissemiNation', which he defines as 'the scattering of the people' and their gathering elsewhere (p. 243). Here, then, Mehari proposes 'DissemiNation' as a metaphor which, I argue, provides a way of locating (internal) migration, as well as the anguish and trauma of ordinary Eritreans in their search for home and belonging in a country that seems to deny them these rights.

In narrating these experiences about her (family's and the civilian population's) wandering from one place to another, Mehari is perhaps reflecting a Freudian understanding of home as a space/place that shares features of the uncanny or the unhomely. Sigmund Freud ([1919] 1997) (after Ernst Jentsch) uses 'the uncanny' or 'the unhomely' as terms to describe the combined experience of familiarity and strangeness that surrounds 'what is frightening – or what arouses dread and horror' (p. 193). We generally feel unsettled towards such situations since they bring with them some form of dread. Central to the notion of the unhomely is a feeling of uneasiness. In its focus on the ravages of the civil war in Eritrea, *Heart of Fire* suggests that the threats and bombings unleashed by 'the enemy' on the civilian population (Mehari 2006:42–45) have left an uncanny effect on its people; one that is also attentive to the ambivalent feelings ordinary Eritreans have towards their 'home country'. Thus, one of the ways in which the memoir's polysemous title reverberates is that *Heart of Fire* has the ambition of being an updated, 21st century version of Eritrea as a nation whose people are unhomed, a nation whose people are gripped with what Anthony Vidler (1992) calls 'spatial fear' and 'paralysis of movement' stemming from 'the transformation of something

that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so, from the *Heimlich* ... into the *unheimlich*' (p. 6). From the perspective of Bhabha's notion of 'the unhomely' not as a state of lacking a home, but rather 'the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place' that 'creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself ... in a state of "incredulous terror"' (1992:141), and Vidler's (1992) extension of the uncanny as 'a special case of the many modern diseases, from phobias to neuroses, variously described ... as a distancing from reality forced by reality' (p. 6), it could be argued that, by evoking phobic scenes wherein the civilian population either lose their lives or flee their natal homes, Mehari imagines both her father's home and Eritrea as *unhomely*.

Child soldier experiences and liminal identities in *Heart of Fire*

Mehari's experiences of war and her participation in it only appear in Chapter 6 of the memoir, with the rest of the chapters only acting as props to the issues she ostensibly experienced. Eponymously titled 'Morning Stars', Chapter 6 gives detailed accounts of what used to happen at the Jebha, a unit within the ELF notoriously known for recruiting 'children between six and ten years of age, not as child soldiers yet but in preparation for fighting' (p. 64). Its full name was 'the Jebha al Tahrir or simply Jebha (front) or Tahrir ("morning star" – the name signifying youth, given to the younger brigades of the army' (p. 64; original brackets). Mehari describes herself as being 'part of the last contingent' (p. 64) of this group of young soldiers, who took on the rival EPLF. She also explains that as the last contingent, the young recruits were immediately given military training and then sent to the battlefront.

Heart of Fire focuses more on the effects of war on the civilians than on Mehari's 'action' in the battlefield. Indeed, apart from carrying a heavy Kalashnikov which was 'pressed into [her] arms' by Agawegahta (p. 84), Mehari (2006) does not portray herself as a combatant. In fact, she admits that she 'was much too cowardly and hated the military training and exercises' (p. 80) and that the Kalashnikov was 'a burden to [her], a very clear sign of [her] physical weakness (p. 86). She also relates that as a young child in the ELF, she would purposely sit out the rigours of military training and real combat: 'I ... join[ed] in everything except fighting with guns. I did not want to murder in the name of Eritrea' (p. 123). Her resentment of the gun, and military life, finds further resonance in the confessional manner in which she relates her bitter experiences in the Eritrean Civil War:

I did not want to, and could not, carry my machine gun with me all the time. It was an awkward lump of metal far too large for me to hang from my shoulder as the older children did as they worked in the camp, marched around or took cover crawling over the ground. The gun was also much too heavy for me to be able to carry it as well as a canister of water, a bundle of firewood or a spade. If I carried the gun on my back, it pulled me backwards; if I cradled it to my chest, it yanked me forwards.... It was difficult to climb with the gun, and it knocked against my



legs whenever I bent down to pick something up.... It was an impossible thing to carry around – I didn't want to have it with me at all. (p. 85)

Although some would look at this as a mark of cowardice, as Mehari herself also admits, I would like to suggest that Mehari's actions must be read as forms of resistance, albeit minimally, to the coercive way she was conscripted into the ELF, and the way she was being treated as a young child in the army.

It is important to recognise, however, that Mehari's views in the passage above do not preclude her from being called a child soldier. A child soldier is not always involved in carrying arms or fighting on the battle front. More crucially, not all children involved in war are combatants. Because of their age, most of them are used as porters, cooks, spies, messengers or for providing sexual services to (usually) older male soldiers. As such Mehari (2006) fits perfectly into the description of a child soldier, for although she resisted carrying a gun and fighting in the war, she and the other children her age were constantly being used by the older soldiers to fetch firewood and water, among other tasks, as she reports:

we were sent off to collect firewood. We crawled on all fours through thick undergrowth, picking up branches and roots and breaking off dry twigs with our bare hands. We had no saws, knives or machetes to help us. (pp. 57–58)

And in another incident, they are ordered to pull the dead out of the river together with fellow soldiers: 'The next day Agawegahta summoned a few of us younger children – those who were not carrying machine guns yet – and told us to get the bodies out of the river' (pp. 75–76). Although still children – from the standpoint of Alcinda Honwana's biological immaturity (2005:31–52) – Agawegahta orders Mehari (2006) and her peers to bury the dead, as if they are adults:

Getting the bodies out into the undergrowth was only the first step. We had to bury them quickly to keep them from the jackals, the rats and the flies, and also to bury the all-pervasive smell...

We started digging on the same day. There were not enough spades to go round, so some of us had to dig with our hands. We also had to heave rocks out of the ground to create a grave large enough for all the bodies. While moving a gigantic rock with the others as darkness was falling, I was suddenly overcome by a wave of putrescence so strong that I fainted. It was night when I regained consciousness, and the stink of the corpses was still in the air. (p. 77)

This is an important moment of self-inscription in the memoir, as it gives further testimony to the plight of children exposed to and involved in organised hostilities and combat. Young or old, weak or strong, they always have tasks cut out for them. These tasks, as seen in the passage above, are not only unfit for them but also traumatise them for many years to come. Mehari's fainting because of the 'wave of putrescence' from the corpses thus anticipates the psychosocial impacts of war and war-related activities on child soldiers. Most important of all, war experience may

lead to the suspension of the child soldier's identity. I propose that the act of pulling dead bodies out of the river and burying them – a task unfit for people her age in most societies – makes Mehari inhabit a space that is neither a child's nor an adult's.

At one level, this is the condition of all 'liminal *personae*', understood by Victor Turner as individuals whose characteristics are 'essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling' (1974:274), since they 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (1969:95). I find Turner's observations particularly enabling for my textual construction of Mehari's suspended identity. As a child who is removed from the idyllic home of her paternal grandparents in Eritrea's capital, Asmara, to join her father in the countryside and who, later, constantly runs away from 'the enemy' as a child soldier, she fails to find her true mark in her formative years since she does not gain proper guidance from those who should have provided it to her. Her status as a child thus 'becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification' (Turner 1974: 232). This punctures her confidence and leaves her in the potentially unending, liminal stage of a symbolic rite of passage. This is exemplified in Mehari's (2006) self-reflexivity after she witnesses four fellow child soldiers being court-martialled and then executed for attempting to escape from war. She begins to think that unlike them:

I was the only one who had never imagined running away because I had no home to go back to. I would not have gone back to live with my father for all the world.... After all that I had seen and lived through since [joining the ELF], I could not simply go back to playing the same games with the same children in those small streets in Asmara that I had known so well. I was a different person now, and I could not go back. (p. 100)

Here, Mehari could be said to be lamenting her lost childhood and her inability to fit into her previous life as a child. She also regrets the fact that she has no place she could call home and confidently go back to, if she were to desert the war front like her fellow child soldiers had attempted to. This is understandable, given the fact that all her life she has been on the run, moving from one makeshift home to the next, and, maybe, also because the only place she could call home is marked by her father's violence. When she finally becomes a child soldier, she is made to do things an ordinary Eritrean child would not do. All these things make her feel that she is different from the other children on the streets of Eritrea, for example. But Mehari (2006) is also not the *complete* child soldier in the way the rest of her age-grade is for, as she admits, she 'was too young to be a soldier' (p. 63) and that she 'kept away [from training as a child soldier] instinctively, knowing that [she] would hate such training' (p. 78). By choosing to neither touch the gun nor participate in the routine training, Mehari could be read as prolonging her stay in a liminal period where she is without proper identification, 'no longer classified and not yet classified' (Turner 1967:96). She is neither the ordinary Eritrean child nor the brainwashed child soldier who accepts everything the grown-ups feed her.



Mehari thus occupies a space between the child she should have been and the child soldier she loathes becoming. This space problematises the limited options and roles available to children in her state of mind and condition.

There is little doubt that fear and innocence are very much at the centre of *Heart of Fire*. Mehari is not just dogged by fear but also presents herself as an innocent bystander-turned-victim/perpetrator. Eventually, though, Mehari (2006) finds an ideal home, especially after she meets Haile, her uncle. It is Haile who first risks his life and his well-paying job with the Red Cross in Khartoum by disguising himself 'in the long white robes of the Bedouins, and spend[ing] a few days with them in the desert in order to study their behaviour' (pp. 152–153), before he successfully 'arranged a daring escape' for her and her step-sisters (cited in the blurb). It is also Haile who develops a keen interest in her welfare and education, and who 'takes the trouble to explain things to [her]' (p. 150) whenever her rights as a child are threatened or even violated. During this rehumanisation, Mehari learns how to assert herself. This helps her 'to make a decision that was long overdue' (p. 194), later, when she reunites with her father and stepmother in Germany: a complete separation from 'the pressures and humiliations of life with [her] father' (p. 195). The newfound freedom this decision affords her has its downside, however: sleeping and eating rough, deflated moods, constant fights and fresh beatings from her boyfriend, petty theft and prevarication. But the break is also what she needs to weave her own life and launch herself into a career in music that, in the end, helps her to complete her extraordinary journey from child soldier to soul singer. It also allows her to reunite with her long-lost family members and heal from the wounds she had suffered since childhood at the hands of cruel and insensitive elders, as she narrates in the closing pages of her memoir.

Conclusion

It is almost a cliché to say that there is too much unresolved baggage to the life of someone who is exposed to violence, or who has experienced the unhomely. In the case of children, they typically enter a liminal zone when they fail to identify with a happy home. They usually become distrustful and disobedient to adults who scupper their hopes away, or who constantly mistreat them. Most important of all, they grow to not only hate themselves and the adult who inflicts pain on them but they may resort to harming the said adult. *Heart of Fire* suggests that central to having a good childhood identity is a homely atmosphere. Mehari describes herself as inhabiting a disrupted social system, one in which the social and political structures are disintegrating. In this unhomely space, the notion of home as connoting 'shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' (George 1996:1) no longer seems to be valid to children like her.

As stated above, Mehari's story about 'her' experiences on the war front was heavily contested in the German media soon after it appeared in print. The author's German

publisher 'responded' to public criticism by withdrawing the book from circulation. In my view, these incidents seem to ignore what Douglass (2003) explains, that:

in texts of witness, the figure of the witness – the 'I' – articulates a fundamentally social space in which his or her testimony functions as the arbiter of a larger cultural experience, one that seemingly transcends individual experience. (p. 83).

Natasha Rogers seems to stand at the side of Douglass in her observation that texts such as Mehari's create 'a particular, ideologically motivated version of events [that] explore the historical re-writing of the traumatic pasts of ... exploitation, abuse, war and genocide' (2004:19). In my view, it is these 'traumatic pasts' that are imagined by Mehari as her (compatriots') lived experiences. In *Heart of Fire*, then, I propose that Mehari writes a trauma narrative that re-examines Eritrea's tension-filled and traumatising past, because of the civil war. In keeping with these observations, I find the decision by the German publisher to remove the book from circulation, as well as the accusations of untruthfulness levelled against the text, partly unjustified.

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