

Andrea Pinkney's *The Red Pencil*: The Child's Voice in A Genocide

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Abstract

This article will focus on the child's immigrant voice during the Darfur genocide which began in west Sudan in 2003. The genocide happened because of the government funded militia murdering Darfurians due to differences in race, leaving 480,000 civilians killed and 2.8 million displaced. Despite continuous political unrest, little mainstream media has brought attention to this issue meaning there is a lack of global acknowledgment of their trauma, leaving their voices unheard. To fit the special issue's theme of peripheral voices I feel this topic is appropriate and have chosen to focus my article on Andrea Davis Pinkney's *The Red Pencil*¹. Her novel conveys Amira's perspective of the genocide, a young girl who represents many of what the children of Sudan were confronted with. I will examine how Pinkney's novel brings this peripheral voice to the forefront through choice of audience, symbolism within the narrative, and the psychological impact on the child.

The novel centres on the life of Amira, a young girl in Sudan who witnesses the Darfur genocide. We follow her daily life, chores, thoughts and family relationships until the conflict reaches her village. Affected by the horror she's seen, she loses her voice. Pinkney guides us through Amira's journey of escape and her new life as a refugee. From there we watch how she regains her voice and begins her journey of healing.

Pinkney's choice of directing the novel towards children is significant as she builds an understanding of what other children a similar age is experiencing, without explicitly referencing violence. Amira's perspective only alludes to these events as she is unable to comprehend fully what she is witnessing as she repeats 'Is this truly happening? How is this happening?'² reminding us the extent of horror she was exposed to. The narrative features illustrations, enabling the younger readers to gain insight of difference in culture and dress, and the drawings making frequent reference to the hijab. Pinkney shows the young reader that despite differences in appearance they share common ground as Amira's stubbornness, her refusal to obey her parents and her wish to play with her friends are characteristics of many children. This is particularly significant, as Pinkney makes her novel accessible for young readers which broadens the audience and in turn raises awareness of stories like Amira's.

The narrative features several instances of symbolism and allusion. Pinkney alludes to the social context and expectations of Sudanese culture through a female protagonist. One example is when Amira states her desire for an education but expresses her mother's feelings, suggesting that 'She does not like any place where

¹ Andrea Davis Pinkney, *The Red Pencil* (New York: Little, Brown Young Readers US, 2015).

² Andrea Davis Pinkney, *The Red Pencil* (New York: Little, Brown Young Readers US, 2015) P.111.

girls learn, or think beyond a life of farm chores and marriage'³ Through Amira's observations Pinkney reminds us of the continuing difference in gender struggles. Perez states:

'Women's societal inferiority and lack of rights is directly written into their legal code and is enforced—stoning of women for offenses as small as "immodest dress" is not an uncommon act in Sudan even in our modern day. Basic education is free in Sudan, factors such as geographical proximity, out of pocket financial costs, and crippling gender roles prevent many women from gaining even a basic education. Males are heads of households and dominate the economic and social domains whereas traditionally women are responsible for childrearing, the sick, old and mentally.'⁴

This notion of inferiority is reinforced when we see Amira watching the child brides in the refugee camp. In 2017 UNICEF provided data on child marriage in South Sudan and discovered that 52% of girls in South Sudan are married before their 18th birthday and 9% before their 15th birthday.⁵ These statistics highlight the growing power struggle between men and woman in Sudan and the vulnerable positions these women are in, because of inequality.

Amira's twig, a treasured item she uses to create sand illustrations with, is lost when her village is attacked. Despite her attempts to find it, the stick is gone and Pinkney hints at the idea of Amira's sand illustrations being erased as easily as people's lives in this conflict. When Amira witnesses the death of her father and village she loses her ability to speak. We see several attempts in the novel where she desperately wills her mouth to talk but she is unable to. Pinkney not only highlights the true impact of horrors these children experience but shows how these people's voices and identities become stripped. Pinkney provokes the audience to consider the mental health of a child immigrant. Al Jazeera examined the mental health of children in Sudan who have been impacted by the conflict. In one interview with a young girl she told them 'I saw a lot of bad things, people being killed...I keep hearing the sound of guns.' The reporter stated:

The horrors of south Sudan's conflict have left a mental impact on those living in the camps; especially the children. Many witnessed homes being burned and dead bodies, as they made their way to refuge. People here have said that the displacement has led to teenagers taking their own lives.⁶

Graca Machel notes in her United Nations report that 'War undermines the very foundations of children's lives, destroying their homes, splintering their communities and breaking down their trust in adults.'⁷ The west's desensitisation to conflict in

³ Andrea Davis Pinkney, *The Red Pencil* (New York: Little, Brown Young Readers US, 2015) P 12.

⁴ Nadine Perez, 'The Sudanese Woman: an Analysis of Gender Roles and Equality in the Sudan', (2017), <www.medium.com> [accessed 29 December 2019].

⁵ Girlsnotbrides, Child marriage around the world (2019) <www.girlsnotbrides.org> [accessed 29 December 2018].

⁶ Hiba Morgan, 'South Sudan: Deep impact of war on children's mental health' (2017), <www.aljazeera.com> [accessed 29 December 2019].

⁷ Graca Machel, 'The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children', International conference on war-affected children, (2000), 49.

countries like Sudan, consequently hides the voices of the individuals who experience this trauma. Khambay notes:

'You have to really think about it, the large population of the West's attention span is limited, it seems the focus quickly turns back to focus on the 'dangers of immigration' so quickly. Why is it that conversations and questions are only asked when a picture of a Syrian child was found dead on a beach near the Turkish resort of Bodrum? Yet look how quickly it was forgotten.'⁸

The Red Pencil is significant because Amira's perspectives on the events are brutally raw but still contain an element of childlike innocence. This contrast is what forces the audience to perceive the grim reality of this conflict and leaves a lasting afterthought, meaning stories like Amira's will not be forgotten.

Despite the trauma Amira has witnessed, Pinkney highlights how refugees with similar experiences can regain hope. Once Amira arrives at the camp she is greeted by volunteers offering help. One of the volunteers begins to hand out pencils and the other children all push to the front, leaving Amira behind. The volunteer notices and gives her a red pencil, different to the yellow pencils given to the others. The red pencil is the ultimate beacon of hope as it is something that becomes physically Amira's, after losing everything. Amira is now able to regain her voice through this pencil by expressing herself through art and we watch as she begins her journey towards healing.

Pinkney's ability to build characters that establishes a bond between friends and family relationships allows us to form a connection with the narrative. The strong personalities and powerful imagery of their rural village emerge, and we become connected to Amira, wishing for her dreams of completing an education to be fulfilled. We laugh at her stubbornness and empathise with her sadness, which ultimately is what is important about Pinkney's novel. Hearing stories like Amira's we can become desensitised to these events and their voices become hidden. Through building these connections with her audience and highlighting the reality from a different perspective she reminds us to be more aware, bringing an authentic voice to the forefront.

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