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Trying to Find The Words

A former translator in Darfur recalls the genocide he survived.

Amber Haq
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Back in 2006, when Daoud Hari, an interpreter for American journalists in Darfur, was captured by Sudanese militia, he was suspected of being a rebel spy. The soldiers bound his ankles with tight rope and hung him upside down from a tree. "At first I thought, 'Well, this is not so bad'," he writes. "But after a few minutes, however, it gets very bad. Your eyes feel like they're going to pop out. Your head throbs and you can't breathe." That wasn't the only form of torture Hari endured during the ongoing conflict in Darfur: he also saw entire villages set alight, witnessed men lose their minds and dug the graves of family and friends. "It's hard to take these things out of our heads," he says. "It's my faith that keeps me going."

It will be hard for anyone to forget such images after reading "The Translator," Hari's account of the brutal decimation his people, the indigenous Zaghawa tribe, suffered at the hands of the government-backed Janjaweed fighters. He places the conflict, one of the bloodiest and most complicated of the 21st century, in a simple context. Darfur, an oil-rich region in western Sudan, was for some 200 years home to farmers of the Fur tribe, shepherds from the Zaghawa tribe and nomadic Arabs. While disagreements over land use would occur from time to time, these were typically resolved locally, by tribal leaders, according to a strict code of conduct. In the '90s, when Chinese oil corporations began investing in the fields of Darfur, they struck a deal with Khartoum over the compensation for oil. "The government of Sudan has been pushed by Chinese companies to create a problem between Arabs and blacks, but the West forgets this," says Hari, who now has political-refugee status in the United States. "The lands had to be emptied for the Chinese companies to come to work, but people refused to accept the destruction of their villages. So they picked up guns against Khartoum." The ensuing fighting and political unrest has led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of more than 2.5 million since the rebel insurgency started in 2003.

In the book, Hari recounts how he learned English at school and started working as a translator for international aid workers and journalists after his village was destroyed. "It was my way of fighting back," he says. In uncluttered prose and a soft voice, he speaks poignantly of how the conflict utterly transformed his homeland. "Growing up, I lived in a multicultural community," he says. "We are all Muslims, and as children we all played together." He describes a shared way of living based on warmth and generosity. "But the people are angry now and have become aggressive," he adds. "This conflict has not just murdered old friends. It has destroyed a culture."

Amid the torment, Hari retains a sense of humor. When he was captured at gunpoint while working for a British journalist, Philip Cox, he writes, "I still had to translate things. I said, 'Philip, these guys are going to shoot me. Could you go through the numbers in your phone?' He found the rebel commander's number and called him and he told his rebel not to shoot me." But he's a lighter touch in person. "[Western] society is very materialistic. You have four-wheel drives," he says with a laugh, "but you complain about the price of gas." Still, his grief is never far away. "You have everything, but you don't know you have everything," he says. "You should think about the reality of Darfur."

That reality is crystallized in the lives of the region's women. Hari tells of their beauty and the bold colors they wore in times of peace: the bright, clean reds, oranges and yellows; the brilliant blues and greens. But their lives are riven by despair; he describes a 30-year-old mother found hanging from a tree, her dead babies lying in the shade of her suspended corpse. She had been raped repeatedly and then set free in the desert. "With no food or water for five days, there was nothing she could do except watch her children die," he writes. So she tied her shawl around her neck and took her own life.

He spares no detail in recounting the Janjaweed's atrocities. When a 4–year-old girl runs crying toward her imprisoned father as he is beaten by soldiers, an Army officer coolly lowers his bayonet and pushes it through her tiny body, raising the child above his head to dance under raindrops of her blood. He describes girls as young as 8 who are ritually raped, and the pain written deep in their flat eyes and voices. But Hari's point is not to shock or horrify; it is to record and pay tribute. "Our women have been displaced from their homes; they have lost their husbands," he says. "But when you enter a refugee camp, you'll still find children running around, the smoke of small fires, the cooking smells of spices and tea. Despite the atrocities, our women continue to live and love."

Through "The Translator," Hari not only tells his own harrowing story of survival but aims to speak for his people, keeping them alive in the global conscience. "When I was a child, my grandmother would recount happy, fantastical tales," he says. "It is part of our tradition. Now I'm telling the stories." The stories are neither happy nor imagined. But Hari's voice is loud, strong and impossible to forget.

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