

Book Review

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Title: *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex changed A Nation at War: A Memoir*

Author: Leymah Gbowee with Carol Mithers

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This book is very interesting, insightful, engaging, and hard to put down. It is also spicy, informative, and illuminating in all ramifications about the Liberian war, and her personal life and it unearths the hidden criminalities of war on vulnerable groups. The book is about the evolution of an individual and a nation at war; how a person, that is, the author fought her personal “wars” and translated the enormous strength she developed within the intervening years to confront the warlords bent on annihilating her nation and people. She dared the demons and prevailed but it was indeed not an easy assignment that life’s battles had equipped her for. The structure of the book is logical with a prologue and twenty-one-chapters, filled with gripping personal details and others stories related to the war of attrition that defined that epoch.

Chapter one begins with the story of how her parents serenaded her to a party for making good grades fresh out of high school, just before the sunset on peace and the rein of horror that was to descend on Liberia. All hell broke loose and Liberia descended into the abyss of despair and unfathomable horror with attendant deaths and despoliations. She was a happy

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girl with her whole world ahead of her. Her life and those of her four other siblings - all girls - was torpedoed. Chapter two chronicles how the relative peace in Liberia was shattered around the Christmas of 1989. A rebel movement headed by Charles Taylor began a steady push with a promise to topple the government of Samuel Doe even though it seemed a tall order, it gradually became a reality. In the beginning, not many gave Taylor any chance but with time the insurrection grew mighty undermining both internal and sub-regional peace and security.

By March 1990, the author had secured admission into the University of Liberia but her promising life was to take a sharp and unintended bend into darkness and turmoil as the war progressed. Violence defined daily living and could abruptly end a life at the drop of a hat. The author, her family and many other Liberians at the initial stage disbelieved that the anarchy could grow into a major conflagration which would consume them. They were wrong and many would pay with their lives for the complacency in the opening phase(s) of the war.

Chapter three details the author's resolve and willpower to survive the horrors of war. Uncertainty and instant death are the ultimate features of warfare, especially in the 1990s Africa where ragtag elements with access to arms, drugs, and illicit mineral exploitations fuelled anarchy in their determination to wrestle power in Liberia and Sierra-Leone. In war, fear stalks around and gratitude for making it to another day completes the circle. Another characteristic of war is utter stillness and quiet - no sound except of instruments of war such as guns. The author witnessed sheer banalities that will define her existence in perpetuity. Massacres took place everywhere. She and her family escaped the infamous St. Peter Chapel killings by the whiskers. She saw death everywhere. Soldiers or rebels could attack at any place or time. People could get stopped at checkpoints only to be summarily executed for any excuse. It was bedlam and the only thing that made sense to her and her family was escape. They did this by sailing to Ghana to start life at the Buduburam refugee camp. The only respite at the camp was that there were no killings, life there was extremely hard and hellish. With the war still raging, she elected to leave the barren, ugly fortress of the refugee camp back to Liberia.

Chapter four chronicles her return to Liberia in May 1991 and by July, she was being wooed by a man she referred to as trouble. Their dalliance was bittersweet. She recalls him as a lady's man. In the refugee camp back in Ghana, she had noticed him with a wife and child. She had a boyfriend and he had his family but as they say in Liberia: "Never belongs to God". He was unrelenting, she was alone in war-torn Liberia and before long, she started dating him. He took her out for dates and when she took ill, he paid the bills. She admitted that financial security was part of her reason for dating him. When she looks back on the whole affair, she is at a loss for the choice she made. He spent freely on her, giving her gifts of jewellery, perfume, and constant eat out but tears flowed with emotional bruises. As the

relationship progressed, Daniel, that was the name of the man, started to hit her. He would trail her when she went out with friends and under flimsy excuses would assault her. Around the time, she made up her mind to end the relationship, she was pregnant. She was trapped and wouldn't get her liberty until years after with four children - another story within the raging fire burning in Liberia.

Chapter five details the renewed violence that led to her fleeing with her partner and infant child back to Ghana. The journey to escape was dripping with anxiety, cruelty, and death. They set sail in a dilapidated Nigerian ship that almost torpedoed in the sea. They, however, reached Ghana and it was another round of tumultuous events on the domestic front. Her partner would hit her, verbally abuse her, and leave her and their young infant child hungry, almost always, since he didn't have a regular job. If her partner, Daniel treated her with disdain, his mother and other siblings didn't act differently. The disdain was instantaneous and lasted all through her sojourn with them in Ghana. YOU was the only way her partner's mother addressed her. Not once did she address her by name. The abuse was all-round but she was grateful for the shelter. No feeding. She fended for herself. The coldness and distant were round the clock. Under such shabby treatment, she would become pregnant again. With the pregnancy came exhaustion. She battled constant malaria and was anaemic. When the doctor asked, that she be transfused, her partner declined that he couldn't donate blood. The doctor observed she was in an abusive relationship and needed an escape. He advised her to move on and away from her partner. She couldn't at that time because her strength, self-confidence, and self-worth had all disappeared. While still in the despair of confusion, she again got pregnant. When her time for delivery came, it was another drama of the absurd. Her partner drove her to the hospital and promised to wait for her outside the delivery room but after the delivery, he was nowhere nearby.

She stayed back sleeping on the hospital floor with the child bare without clothing until a week when he returned. He only came to announce that he was still in search of money and vanished again. She was still sore and bleeding from the birth. Some good Samaritans came through for her, paying her bills, and feeding her. A doctor paid for her drugs as well. With the frustrations and poverty came rounds of beatings and verbal assaults with unprintable words. She was always hungry and depression set in as well. In the whirlwind, she packed her bags and fled with her children back to her native Liberia - without saying goodbye.

Chapter six. The escape from Ghana to Liberia lasted a week. Without a dime, she rode with her kids on credit. She returned in 1996 to a country where the warring factions had signed a truce but it was fragile. Except for the United States and Nigeria, all other foreign embassies had closed. She returned perplexed, bruised and defeated. She was no longer the goal-getter but a shadow of her old self. She slept and idled away and it drove her father wild. He complained and heaped insults upon her with rapidity. She was traumatized having only escaped an abusive relationship only for her father to resume the insults she had fled from. She continued

to wallow in despair, blaming her parents, her partner, single motherhood, the war, and herself until she assumed responsibility for herself and her children. That was the game changer.

Chapter seven. The author narrated the turnaround. She had to step forward. She needed to take responsibility for herself and the kind of life she needed to live. Though still discouraged, she went in search of a friend who could be of help. Tunde, had asked her out years ago but she declined because she had a partner. When the abuse began, he counselled her to jump out but it was late as she was already pregnant. So, he helped her get a job and renewed his interest in her. Tunde's marriage had collapsed as he was separated from his wife.

Chapter eight. She recounted her struggles with despair and self-hate. Yet, she plunged further into her work as a social worker rendering whatever help she could with her skills and at the same time studying. Before the war, she had gained admission into the University of Liberia but the war disrupted her studies and her life in profound ways which she was ready to redress with the relative peace which the country was enjoying at that time.

Chapter nine. By May 1999, her voluntary work and especially her hard work paid off when she was given full employment at the Trauma Healing Project, her first real paid employment. By this time, she also picked up a relationship with Tunde, her long-time friend. In time, she rediscovered her old confident self, her beauty shone and men began to seek her attention again. From then on, it was a forward movement for her. There was no stopping her again as she broke into national and international limelight on account of her work.

Chapter ten. She plunged further into her work and opportunities for conference attendance opened to her in Ghana. Also, about this time, the war in Sierra Leone and the role of Charles Taylor were just unfolding. It was another hectic and no less stress-free period for both countries and the sub-region as well as the people. She learnt about non-violence and met a Nigerian, Thelma Ekiyor, a meeting that became a silver bullet for her life and career. In chapter eleven, she narrated how she broke the glass ceiling. It came with a lot of hard work and sleepless nights obtaining a first degree in the process. The journey was tedious and appeared impossible yet she was able to attain such feat due to determination, hard work, sacrifices and support from her friends and family. Following the attainment of a first degree, she was hired full-time and had her salary doubled. It was the advent of greater prospects and opportunities which were hitherto beyond her reach. About the time that the world was opening up to her, her native country, Liberia was plummeting into another round of crisis again.

The author in chapter twelve continued with her story of striving to attain personal set goals and pushing the limits of her talents and abilities. She collaborated with others to birth the Christian Women Peace's Initiative in April 2002. They started by praying, fasting, and mobilizing for peace. The atmosphere in the country was tensed with arbitrary arrests and

torture. The Liberian Unite for Reconciliation and Democracy rebel group was waxing strong in the North and the central government of President Charles Taylor responded forcefully with clampdown and massive forceful recruitment for summary mobilization for the war efforts. Under such thick and dark cloud of brutalities and uncertainties, the author and some women banded together to push for peaceful resolution of all lingering issues.

In chapter thirteen, in the build-up to the 2003 elections, there were pervasive fears that the fragile peace in play could be torpedoed by violence. The chapter chronicles the spiralling violence and how it affected women. The displacement, killings and wanton destruction took a huge toll on the populace and women, and the situation elicited much reaction. Unlike previously, the women of Liberia demanded that peace be given a chance. The author and some women support groups made the demand regardless of what danger it posed to them as it was seen as a direct challenge to Charles Taylor. The mass action galvanized the women, gained international attention, and also brought rancour among the women. The opportunity for the women to push the country on the path of sustainable peace also brought fissiparous tendencies within the women's movement.

Chapter fourteen. The people of Liberia wearied by the cycle of war, continued to demand peace as the warlords battled for control of the country with the attendant loss of lives and wanton destruction of properties. The women once again took to the street to protest the war and within the intervening period, the peace talks in Ghana resumed. The peace talks in Ghana led to agreements with hope of a negotiated settlement. Almost immediately, the agreements collapsed with dashed hope for peace. The relapse to war was so ferocious as the LURD launched three different offensives against Monrovia, which were so horrific; they became known as World War I, II, III together. Sensing that if they do not intervene in a decisive manner, Liberia will be engulfed in another round of war, the women mobilized themselves and journeyed to Ghana, venue of the peace talks. They charged into the hall and held the delegates' hostage till peace was enforced. It worked as all the warring parties put pen to paper for peace but with possible fears of a relapse to war as Charles Taylor was indicted for war crimes in Sierra Leone. Charles Taylor resigned, three days after leaders of LURD and The Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and representatives of forces loyal to Taylor signed the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Chapter fifteen chronicles the dashed hopes that had trailed fourteen years of war. People were on the edge of emotional wreckage. Many a peace treaty had been signed and violated with impunity. Of course, there was a lull in fighting but the magnitude of what had happened to Liberia stared all in the face. The country had become a country with unimaginable damage. A whole generation had never known peace, thousands of women were widowed, raped, or had seen their daughters and mothers raped, and their children decimated. Neighbours had turned against neighbours and the dangerous cloud was not only thick but hovering round the

country. Liberia had become the famished land where the survivors weren't sure they could see the dawn of another day as it was not guaranteed. It was under this climate that Interim President, Gyude Bryant took office in 2003. This period coincided with the efforts at disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts of the rebel fighters.

In chapter sixteen, the author chronicles some family struggles and her role in galvanizing women in Liberia to actively participate in the polls which saw the emergence of the first African woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The author's choice of Sirleaf over the football star George Weah didn't come easy. The choice of Sirleaf was made because, in her words, it was about the high value she placed on education, which the soccer star lacked. With the end of the war and return to democracy and with former rebel leader and president, Charles Taylor arrested and subsequently jailed, she yearned for an advanced degree which she reckoned would earn her much higher pay and new opportunities.

In chapter seventeen, the author suffered an unexpected and unthinkable loss of her sister. The experience was surreal and devastating given the pivotal and stabilizing role which the sister played in her life, helping her raise her children while she pursued her goals. Her sister was full of life one moment and the next she was battling with life, her life hung in the balance only to ebb away as there was no doctor to attend to her medical emergence. She was aged forty and only fell sick within hours, and typical of African hospitals where anything could happen, medical doctors were on strike in Ghana, hence she could not access medical assistance at a most trying period leading to her untimely death. The death was a blow not only to the author and to her children who had all grown fond of her but to the entire family. After the funeral rites, she resumed for graduate studies in the United States to sharpen her skills and to deepen her knowledge in strategic peace engagements.

Chapter eighteen. The author's initial disadvantages began to recede as she progressed with life and her studies. In September 2006, as her graduate studies began, she got opportunity to address the United Nations on the fifth anniversary of the passage of Resolution 1325, which called for bringing more women into UN peace and security efforts, and more warring countries to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. Aside from her personal development, she suffered a heartbreak with the end of a treasured relationship of several years. Before long in an unexpected twist of fate, she found love again. Beyond Liberia, the author organized women in Sierra Leone campaigns for peaceful elections. In spite of her best efforts, there were reported pockets of violence which were not substantial to de-rail the return to democracy after years of civil war. Chapter nineteen, as in all through the book, the war in Liberia dotted the author's every step. Even after the end of the war, she was preoccupied like other Liberians with the post-traumatic after-effect of the war. After the war, she participated in the premier of a film that chronicled the devastating effect of the war on women. It was titled "Pray the Devil Back to Hell". The documentary was hailed as

“gripping, inspiring, and exhilarating”. The film was mainly about how women organized themselves for change in the face of societal violence and the film screened in many countries of the world such as Srebrenica, Bosnia, Peru, Georgia, Germany, Afghanistan, Iraq, Korea, the Netherland, Brazil, South Africa, Rwanda, Mexico, Argentina, the United Arab Emirate, Kenya, Cambodia, Poland and Russia. Even though the author averred that fame was the least concern of her when the film was being done, it came to her and loads of global awards and recognition.

Chapter twenty. The author wrote about how consultation is integral to successful democratization everywhere in the world but particularly in Africa, where those in government arrogate a know-it-all attitude to themselves. She was elated to write about the first President’s Peer Review meeting between president Ellen Sirleaf and female activists, an effort which was both novel and welcoming in deepening democracy. The idea for such an exercise was that of the author but the president asked her to lead it. Liberia has indeed come a long way from the days of war but the country still has a long way to go. The country in its post-war phase still grapples with devastation of critical national infrastructure and torn lives. A lot of healing is still required and people are still struggling to survive. Happily, the country is making some modest and profound progress in the post war era.

Chapter twenty-one as the concluding chapter piece is entitled, “the story doesn’t end”. It is interspersed with stories about the author giving birth again. She wrote, “I always knew that I would have another child, a last child, born in peace”. Other stories about her personal aspirations, those of family and the country fill the pages. The author is full of hope for a greater and better tomorrow. She detailed her aspirations for herself, family members and her children. She however, regrets that none of her children is inclined for her career path.

Generally, the book is informative and highly inspirational but that is not to say that the book is without some deficiencies. In some cases, the author went extreme in the use of expletives on some of her opponents. Perhaps because of trauma and the inferno of war, she could have handled some cases in other ways. That is not to judge her. She has a right to question the political direction and choices made by the Liberian leaders. The Liberians bore the burden of war. Thousands were killed, with astounding numbers that were maimed. The inferno of war burnt both the soul of the nation as well as those of its citizenry.

The book is filled with some essential lessons that can be helpful to readers, hence the book is strongly recommended to the reading public, especially feminists, development workers, peacekeepers, politicians and members of the armed forces across Africa. Ultimately, the book is recommended to any despondent woman or man who may have missed or taken an unwanted detour in life. The author’s ability to stage a comeback from varied traumatic and unpleasant experiences to the apogee of the global stage by addressing the United Nations and attending conferences across the world is both commendable, inspirational and instructive.

However, the book's central argument about making Charles Taylor, the former disgraced warlord/president of the Republic as solely responsible for the war crimes perpetrated during the war, a view shared by many in Africa and beyond may not be entirely factual. War crimes in Liberia were committed by all the rebel movements, the Liberian Armed Forces and in some instance(s) by the ECOWAS Peacekeeping Force-ECOMOG.

As in all human enterprise, the war in Liberia was caused by remote and immediate factors, such as the politics of exclusion between settlers and natives, endemic corruption, wanton violation of human rights by the ruling elites and abuse of state powers, all of which pre-dated the emergence of Charles Taylor. The fact that Charles Taylor took advantage of these grievances is not lost on observers of the Liberian tragedy. The serious and costly errors entrenched by Taylor's obstinacy didn't immediately evaporate after his ouster from power also. The rumbles of discontent, insecurity and widespread accusation and counter-accusation continued to undermine collective efforts for peace and stability even as Ellen Sirleaf Johnson was elected President. The highly charged notion that most states in Africa are vulnerable and prone to instability because of colonialism or in the case of Liberia lumping together of strange bedfellows shouldn't be lost on observers.

This highly controversial thesis, controversial because some commentators have continued to dismiss the basis of colonialism and the lumping together of strange bedfellow thesis as not tenable given the fact that such happened in Asia and such states have become viable, functional and advanced. Although such argument(s) may have its place in the commentary of state creation and viability, perhaps in Asia but not in Africa, where the result of state collapse and civil strife and the role of strongmen in the evolution of the states cannot be denied. In Liberia, of course, Charles Taylor was a divisive figure, but initially he was seen or acted as a liberator who came to rescue the people from the grip of another dictator, Samuel Doe, who was on the verge of state destruction, however, now that he is nowhere near power and paying his time in prison for war crimes committed during his reign, the question to be asked is how has Liberia fared? African states are perennially flawed, hence the need to critically initiate a review; that is the enduring legacy that African states including Liberia should embrace going forward.