



Poet of Darfur

Emtithal Mahmoud is an award-winning poet with a mission. She hopes to tell the world about mass killings in her hometown of Darfur, writes ANNABELLE LIANG



Emtithal Mahmoud wrote poetry to convince others to hear and see her people's plight.

[Photo: Yale University / Román Castellanos-Monfil]

When Emtithal Mahmoud was aged 10, she learnt the word “**genocide**”.

It applied to her hometown of Darfur, where many people are killed simply because they did not belong to the majority Arab ethnic group. Darfur is a region in Sudan, a country in north Africa.

The likely culprits are Sudanese military and police forces, who are working with Arab militants. Non- Arab rebel forces have been unable to stop them.

Since 2003, the conflict has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, including the elderly, women and children. Ms Mahmoud's family escaped. They moved to the United States years before the conflict started. But, that did not stop her parents from condemning Sudan's government, led by President Omar Al-Bashir.

Through poetry, Ms Mahmoud – the oldest of five children – started speaking out in her own way. “One day, I walked in on my mother crying, and I asked her why we are burying so many people. I don't remember the words that she chose to describe genocide to her 10-year-old daughter, but I remember the feeling,” she said.

“We felt completely alone, as if no one could hear us, as if we were essentially invisible,” she added, at a TED Talk last November. “This is when I wrote my first poem about Darfur. I wrote poetry to convince people to hear and see us.”

Poetry that’s spoken

Ms Mahmoud continued to write about the experiences of her countrymen. Still, she only discovered spoken word, or poetry that is meant to be performed, as a student at Yale University. She studies Anthropology and Molecular Biology.

“I choose poetry because it’s so **visceral**. When someone is standing in front of you, mind, body and soul, saying ‘Witness me,’ it’s impossible not to become keenly aware of your own humanity,” Ms Mahmoud said. “This changed everything for me. It gave me courage.”

After being rejected from both of Yale’s spoken-word teams, she joined spoken-word group *iOyé!*, which did not require auditions. *iOyé!* is Spanish for “hey” or “listen”.

The group was “a space where I could grow my art and write for the sake of writing and for the sake of community,” Ms Mahmoud said in an interview with *YaleNews*.

She got better at spoken word. During a summer break, she wrote and taught youths about poetry.

In 2015, she was given the chance to participate in the Individual World Poetry Slam, held in Washington D.C. Ms Mahmoud was elated. Among its 96 participants were established spoken-word poets Rudy Francisco and Porsha O.

Ms Mahmoud eventually placed first, beating her closest competitor by one-tenth of a point. She received a perfect score and standing ovation for her final poem, “Mama”, which is about her mother. An excerpt reads:

“Let me tell you something about my mama
 She can reduce a man to tattered flesh without so much as blinking
 Her words fester beneath your skin and the whole time,
 You won’t be able to stop cradling her eyes.
 My mama is a woman, flawless and formidable in the same step.
 Woman walks into a warzone and has warriors cowering at her feet
 My mama carries all of us in her body, on her face, in her blood and
 Blood is no good once you let it loose
 So she always holds us close.”



Rebels from the Justice and Equality Movement (Jem) in Darfur.
[Photo: Kalou Kaka]

Overcoming the odds

The victory did not come easy. On the day that Ms Mahmoud was set to register for the competition, her grandmother died from lung cancer.

After hearing the news, Ms Mahmoud did not want to compete. She wanted to grieve instead. Still, her parents persuaded her to join the competition.

“My grandma never learned how to read or write. They didn’t teach women how to do that back then in my country,” Ms Mahmoud explained. “Even when she was staying with us here, she was always over my shoulder: ‘Do your thing. Read, read, write.’”

In one of her poems, titled “You Have a Big Imagination or 400,000 Ways to Cry”, she pays tribute to her grandmother:

“My grandmother could cure anything by talking the life out of it.
And she said that I could make a thief in a silo laugh in the middle of our
raging war.

War makes a broken marriage bed out of sorrow.

You want nothing more than to disappear,
but your heart can’t salvage enough remnants to leave.”

Ms Mahmoud was one of broadcaster BBC’s 100 Most Influential Women of 2015. She teaches spoken word poetry, speaks at conferences and is set to publish a book.

Reflecting on the 2015 competition, she said, “I came away from it feeling much better than when I went in, and feeling like I did something for (my grandmother). But at the same time, I’m left in this very bittersweet state because of the genocide and the war. This is the first death in eight years in my family of natural age and natural causes.”

VOCAB BUILDER

genocide (say “je-ne-said”; noun) = the mass killing of a group of people, such as a whole race, or religious group.

visceral (say “vis-e-rel”; adjective) = based on deep feeling and emotions, instead of thought and reason.

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Thank you. — News For Kids, 5 April 2022