

Mrs Esther Mujawayo- public oration by Professor Mirna Džamonja,
July 2016

Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, I have the honour of supporting the University's decision to confer an Honorary Degree upon Mrs Esther Mujawayo-Keiner.

Mrs Mujawayo, Esther, is a former UEA graduate. She obtained a Graduate Diploma in psychotherapy, working with Professor Brian Thorne, who is now an Emeritus Professor in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning. She started her studies in 1996 funded by a Scholarship from Oxfam, and graduated in 1997. Esther is Rwandaise and all of us know what happened in Rwanda in those years: a terrible genocide that killed about 1,000,000 people, largely Tutsi, in a period of just two terrible months in 1994. Esther was there. So was her entire family. Only she and her three young daughters survived. Her husband and about 300 members of her family did not.

Esther found herself in a refugee camp. With her degree in sociology from the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium and many years of social and educational work, she took upon herself the duty of an engaged intellectual that she is: in spite of her personal pain she engaged in helping others. In particular, she co-founded the association AVEGA (Association des veuves du [génocide d'avril 1994](#)), helping rwandaise women survivors. However, feeling that she needed more training in psychotherapy, she undertook further studies at UEA, which she chose for many reasons, but also for a practical one: being able to get a degree in one year, the exact length of her scholarship from Oxfam. As she told me, her work at UEA would not have been possible if it were not for the understanding and guidance of Prof. Thorne, who accepted her as a student in these tragic circumstances. After graduating at UEA, she worked for Oxfam for several years until getting married to Mr. Helmut Keiner, with whom she lives in Germany. Since 2001 she has been working in the psychological unit of the Centre for the refugees in Düsseldorf, where she advises victims from various countries, mostly women and children.

Esther is also an author: she wrote two books, "*Survivantes*" ("*Women who survived*") and "*La fleur de Stéphanie*" ("*Stephanie's flower*") (co-authored with the journalist Souâd Belhaddad). In the first of the books, she describes the life before the genocide, leading to the complex political background of it, pointing out various international responsibilities and failures, which those who have thought of the problem will bring back all the way to the early days of colonisation. She engages especially with women victims who continue to be discriminated in various ways, for example not being offered a treatment for AIDS after having been raped in war crimes.

"*Stephanie's flower*" is a book about return to Rwanda 12 years after the genocide, searching for the remains of her sister Stephanie and Stephanie's children. This was supposed to be helped by the Rwandan Peace process, which included the confessions by the murderers and forgiveness, if such a thing is possible in these circumstances, by the victims. But none of the murderers wanted to speak and all that Esther found remaining was a tree that her sister planted. The book questions the soundness of the supposed Peace Process and the possibility of forgiveness, with the conclusion that we should first help the victims and then ask them if they can forgive.

Both of her books (in the French edition) contain interviews with Simone Veil, the celebrated French politician and feminist.

Last week I had the occasion to share the news of Esther's Honorary Degree with another celebrated French (and Congolese) personality, the writer Alain Mabanckou, who on this occasion said: "Esther M. est celle qui a le mieux su traduire dans des mots aussi simples que touchants les fêlures causées par la tragédie rwandaise", meaning that "Esther is the one who was best able to translate in her simple but probing words the cleavage left by the rwandaise tragedy".

Esther has many engagements, including plenary talks in various conferences, such as the 2004 *International Forum in Stockholm* and the opening ceremony of

the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague in 2004. She also runs a campaign “*A cow to each widow*”, trying to reestablish the Tutsi war widows in their traditional way of living. She has received many honours, including the *World Social Award* from *Women's World Awards* in 2009, an order of merit in Germany in 2008 and *the Prize Ahmadou Kourouma* for her book “*La fleur de Stéphanie*”.

We at UEA are honoured to join our name with those who have already recognized the greatness of Esther's work.

Dedicating the last words of my oration to all victims of genocide around the world, especially Esther's family, Chancellor/ Vice –Chancellor, I present to you Mrs Esther Mujawayo for the Honorary Degree.