

VÉRONIQUE TADJO'S *L'OMBRE D'IMANA* AND BOUBACAR BORIS DIOP'S *MURAMBI* AS ARCHETYPAL *TESTIMONIOS* OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

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Abstract

Hate wars and inter-ethnic conflicts such as the Rwandan genocide is the interest of post-Rwandan genocide war narratives. Authentic accounts of the genocide were from writers who survived the ordeal within Rwandan and others who visited Rwanda at the end of the war for the purposes of documenting atrocious committed against victims. The end of the genocide marked a turning point in Francophone African literature and birth of post-Rwandan genocide narrative writings in form of testimonies, memoirs, diaries, and travelogues that portray personal and collective experiences of victims/survivors and genocidaires. Texts are *factions* characterised by unspeakable anguish, physical and psychological trauma. Véronique Tadjo's *L'ombre d'Imana* (2000) and Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi* (2001) come as two archetypal *testimonios* depicting individual and vicarious traumas suffered by victims. This study adopted testimony and trauma theories as frameworks in examining the creative works on basis of shared acts of violence directed on minority Tutsi populace and moderate Hutus. Texts conform in detailing grisly acts of violence perpetrated against defenseless victims.

Key words: Francophone African literature, *testimonios*, trauma literature, war narratives, Rwandan genocide.

Introduction

The Rwandan genocide has continued to generate interest among African creative writers who are engaged in recreating the horrors witnessed during the pogrom. Veronique Tadjo and Boubacar Boris Diop were among some Francophone African writers who participated in a writing expedition to Rwandan, starting in 1998 for the purpose of documenting the atrocities that took place through creative works. The writers traveled across towns and villages interviewing victims and perpetrators of the carnage. The two texts being examined for this research are part of the creative works produced after the writing project. Literature was called to bear witness to cruel acts committed against Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. The texts are testimonial narratives based on accounts given by actual people involved in the ethnic crisis as either victims or perpetrators. Testimony is a mixed form of literature because the writer employs all forms of literary devices to tell a story. The writer isolates self from the story.

This is the view of Dulong (1998, p. 225), who maintains that "The witness does not produce any theory, teaches no doctrines, and does not attempt to convince one of his own world view". The writer of testimony therefore tells the story

with a view of enacting as close as possible the historical facts being reenacted. This paper explores features of *testimonios* as found in the narratives, to demonstrate how Francophone African writers succeeded in recreating images of horrendous acts of human tragedy perpetrated during the Rwandan ethnic war of 1994. While the event of genocide is generally agreed to have occurred in Rwanda, there are varying accounts of the sordid acts inhumanity meted on victims. Literary works are indeed a veritable means of reexamining tale of woes that occurred in Rwanda.

The Rwandan Genocide

In 1994, Rwanda was the centre of an ethnic war against the minority Tutsis. The Hutu ethnic group in Rwanda rose against Tutsis and moderate Hutus in what is described as Africa's most vicious ethnic war. In less than one hundred days, close to one million Rwandan Tutsis were massacred in cold blood in organised killings supported by the government. Tens of families were displaced, children orphaned, and survivors fled into neighbouring countries in exile. Hate speech and stereotyping was used to mobilise the Hutu population to take part in violence against Tutsis. Hutu elites deployed the media in circulating hurt on Tutsis. Radio stations portrayed the Tutsis as cockroaches and snakes. They were

singled out for hate crimes and blamed for everything including the economic problems facing Rwanda at the time. Tutsis also portrayed as foreigners who migrated from Ethiopia to inherit their land. Stereotyping and hate have often preceded inter-ethnic wars especially genocides. Militia groups such as the *Interahamwe* and *Impruzamugambi* were created and prepared to carry out the genocide and other acts of violence against the Tutsis. The genocidaires cut across every stratum of the Hutu ethnic group. According to Tadjó (2000, p. 109), reveals that every group of people in Rwanda participated in the genocide in one way or the other.

Toute la société est représentée: anciennes autorités politiques, hommes d'affaires, fonctionnaires, cadres, enseignants, artistes, élèves, étudiants, paysans, médecins, femmes, prêtres, pasteurs, religieuses...

The whole society is represented here: former political officeholders, businessmen, civil servants, manager, teachers, artists, school children, students, peasants farmers, doctors, women, priests, pastors, nuns...(98)

This assertion is indicative of the fact that all classes of Hutu populace supported the genocidal violence against Tutsis either as organisers, financiers or provided abode and directions for the perpetrators. Moderate Hutus who had a second thought on the morality of the war were immediately labeled traitors and executed. Many Hutus were therefore cajoled into taking part in committing violent crimes against Tutsis.

Literary Intervention in an African Ethnic War

A literary program was organised in Rwanda starting in 1998. It was meant to bring together some writers from the French speaking countries of Africa. The main objective of the program was to produce literary works based on the events of the genocide. The literary expedition was organised under the aegis of the African Writers' Project tagged "Rwanda: Écrire par

devoir de mémoire" (Rwanda: Writing as a duty to memory). It was the first of its kind in any post conflict situation in Africa and took place in 1998 and 1999 four years after the end of the genocide. It was started by "L'Association Arts et Médias d'Afrique de Lille" which has been organising annually the "Fest' Africa", a cultural, literary and artistic festival for promoting creativity in Africa. About twelve Francophone African writers were invited to Rwanda for the residential writing expedition. The writers interacted daily with genocide's survivors of the genocide as well as perpetrators who were at detention camps across the country. The program ended in 2000 after which several books in the form of memoirs, novels, dramas, and poetry has been published on the genocide.

The most notable ones are *Murambi* (2001) by Boubacar Boris Diop; *L'ombre d'Imana* (2000) by Véronique Tadjó; *Rwanda, le génocide des Tutsi explique à un étranger* (2000) by Jean-Marie Rurangwa; *Murekatete* (2000) by Monique Ilboudo; *La phalène des collins* (2002) by Koulsy Lamko. These works marked a turning point in African literature since many writers began writing explicitly on the atrocities committed in Rwanda and political condition in other States. Diawara (2002), posits that these literary works marked a decisive point in African literature. This is because writers and the intelligentsia are once again engaged in political discourses within the continent instead of writing back from their comfort abodes in the diaspora. These works were in the French language. They opened a new literary creation named testimony literature, and by extension, the birth of testimony literature in Francophone African writings.

The narratives were largely based on the genocide by the survivors, journalists, perpetrators and other creative writers from within and outside Africa. This literature also ushered in new themes in Francophone African literature. According to Germanotta (2010, p. 4), Francophone African literature from this period shifted from the traditional themes of exile, violence, social ills, dictatorial regimes, to historical and anthropological themes. These themes were in the form of testimonials of the atrocity committed against the Tutsi ethnic group, and historical

inquiries into the causes of the genocide. It is justifiable to argue that the end of the Rwandan genocide ushered in an era of modern creative writing in Rwanda.

Testimonial Writing, Mimesis of Trauma and Genocidal Wars

Nevarez (2004), explains *testimonio* (Spanish), meaning testimony as showing proof or evidence and witnessing the truth. It could also be compared with another close term testimonial. A testimonial is defined in law as a statement in support of a particular proof, truth or a fact, a written affirmation to the character or worth. According to Beverley (2004, p. 3), “*testimonio*” in Spanish carries the connotation of an act of truth telling in a religious or legal sense- *dar testimonio* which means to testify, to bear truthful witness.” Further on, Beverley describes how:

Testimonio's ethical and epistemological authority derives from the fact that we are meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person, or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbours, or significant other, the events and experiences that he or she narrates. What gives form and meaning to those events, what makes them history, is the relation between the temporal sequence of those events and the sequence of the life of the narrator or narrators, articulated in the verbal structure of the testimonial text. (Beverley, 2004, p. 3).

From the scholarly perspective, *testimonio* is explained as a form of writing that comes from the marginalised or traumatised people. These are people who struggle against bad conditions such as repressive governments and hardships. *Testimonio* has its origins from Latin America. The Latina Feminist Group (2001, p. 13), explains the meaning of *testimonio*:

Testimonio is often seen as a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who

then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere. Thus, scholars often see *testimonios* as dependent products, an effort by the disenfranchised to assert themselves as political subjects through others, often outsiders, and in the process to emphasise particular aspects of their collective identity.

Testimonio covers a wide area of scholarly writing. There are no restrictions to the jurisdiction of *testimonio*. Burciaga (2007), holds that *testimonio* is a well-established method originating in Latin America that includes politics, social, and cultural history that accompany one's life experiences. It covers all categories of literature such as autobiography, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life-story, *novella-testimonio*, nonfiction novel or “factographic” literature. According to her, *testimonio* is related to oral history, and it attempts to gain insight and information on a person's development and how they make sense of their lives.

Trauma is originally defined as a wound or an injury inflicted on the body capable of causing pains and bodily sufferings. It could be due to piercing of the body or hitting with an object. This indicates that trauma was conceived earlier from the medical perspective. However, later researches carried out in psychology would transfer this meaning to the psyche also. In this case, trauma therefore covers non-physical injuries inflicted on the mind. The trauma of the mind is understood to be as a result of something intense that enters the psyche and the mind is unable to process or receive our normal mental processes. As the mind is not able to receive it, it tries to relinquish it. This is what leads to the nightmares, hysterias and hallucinations associated with mental traumas.

Garland (1998, p. 108), explained further by noting that trauma causes a kind of wound that disrupts the protection mechanism through which we have come to feel safe in the world. As a result, one feels exposed to harm from past unpleasant experiences even when there are no real threats to their lives.

Trauma has always been with mankind, the featuring of trauma in literature is a new phenomenon. In fact, it was only after the 1980s that trauma literary theory became established as a distinctive area of inquiry in literature. Before then, there were no works clearly defined as trauma literature. This is why many scholars consider trauma literature new in postmodernism literary studies. This is the view of Vickroy (2015, p. 3), who affirms that:

Trauma is an ancient human phenomenon, but trauma literature- that is, literature written with a conscious awareness of the concept-has become a kind of contemporary genre. Located at a particular juncture in history with common types of stories, it demonstrates knowledge of psychological processes and includes literary elements and figurative language reflecting the causes and consequences of traumatic reactions.

Trauma narratives are works that are written with the intention of making the readers share in the traumatic events presented in the works. These events affect not only the characters but also whole communities as portrayed in the works. These works became very popular in the 1988s and 1990s. Themes that featured regularly in these works included the Holocaust, incest, oppression, the Vietnam War, racism, the effects of colonisation, discrimination against gays and genocides. (Vickroy, 2002, pp. 1-6).

Painful events such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, wars, accidents and psychological tortures all feature in trauma fictions. This view is also opined by (Vickroy, 20002, p. 24), who argues that:

Trauma fiction provides scenarios that confront readers with subjective endurance in the face of crisis and conflict, representing how defensive responses are created out of many types of wounding. This fiction also provides a contemplative and experiential link to traumatic

processes.

Vickroy is of the opinion that readers of trauma fiction are involved in the imaginary worlds of the traumatised people who build psychological defenses against threats they encounter. Through the studying of these texts there is a perpetuation of the history of events of the genocide for the future generation. This is surely one way of preventing a repeat of genocide on the African continent. This research which purposely studied selected testimonial novels has added to the body of literatures on the genocide.

Testimonial writings have remained a good avenue of presenting trauma narratives. The works are often in the forms of narrations of personal experiences of the writers. Previously tabooed topics such as incest, rape and gay relationships are featured extensively on these works.

L'ombre d'Imana and Murambi as Archetypal Testimonios of the Rwandan Genocide

Tadjo's *L'ombre d'Imana* and Diop's *Murambi* come as archetypal *testimonios* written by Francophone African writers from outside Rwanda on the genocide. Tadjo is Ivorian while Diop is of Senegalese origin. Both writers took part in a writing expedition to Rwanda organised at the end of the genocide for select Francophone African writers. Tadjo's account is a passionate narrative about the horrors that took place in Rwanda. Tadjo, explores the role of writing in remembering the events of the genocide. The author believes genuine information should be made available to all in order to achieve true reconciliation. This view is manifested in her characters who are ordinary folks who suffered physical and mental pains during war. Without knowing the truth, true justice will never be achieved after a conflict. Her views are summed up in her description of the writer's difficulties in presenting genocidal acts:

Le génocide est le Mal absolu. Sa réalité dépasse la fiction. Comment écrire sans parler du génocide ? L'émotion peut aider à faire comprendre ce qu'a été le génocide. Le silence est pire que tout. Détruire l'indifférence. Comprendre le sens réel du génocide, ?? l'accumulation de la

violence au fil des années.

(Tadjo, 2000, p. 37)

Genocide is Evil incarnate. Its reality exceeds any fiction. How can one write without mentioning the genocide that took place? Emotion can help us to understand what the genocide actually was. Silence is the worst thing of all. We must destroy indifference. We must understand the real meaning of the genocide, the accumulation of violence over the years. (26).

She maintains that as long as we cringe away from speaking on genocide, the fear will remain and the possibility of a re-occurrence is high with this silence.

Tadjo highlighted acts of killings in her text through the character of the young Hutu farmer named Froduard who became a genocidaire. He confessed how they were gathered at meetings and instructed to kill Tutsis wherever they see them. These folks from the countryside were to carry out these instructions methodically unaware that they were committing heinous crimes against humanity. In Froduard's words:

Dans les meetings, les conseillers disaient: <<Ou bien vous les tuez ou bien c'est vous qui serez tués.>> C'était facile parce que nous connaissons tous la liste des gens à tuer dans les zones qui'il fallait. Dans les collines tout le monde se connaît, tu ne pouvais pas cacher ton identité. Chaque nuit, quand on réperait aux barrages routiers et quand ils essayaient de passer pour se sauver avec leur famille, ils étaient découverts et tués tout de suite. (117)

In meetings the advisers would say, "Either you kill them or they will kill you." It was easy because we knew the list of the people to kill in the targeted areas. In the hills, everyone knows everyone else, you

couldn't hide your identity.

Every night, when we were locating the accomplices, the enemy, the orders would come to the roadblocks and when they tried to pass or run away with their families, they'd be discovered and killed on the spot. (104)

Written in form of a travelogue covering all the cities, towns and villages she visited, it is an account of her interactions with survivors and genocidaires. Take note of her personal observations as she lets out her inner mind and reflections on the carnage. Tadjo concludes that the genocide would continue to haunt Rwanda in the near future. For her, every Rwandan took part in the genocide and its effects would also affect every Rwandan irrespective of age or sex. *L'ombre d'Imana* gives imageries of destructions of the environment as a result of the war. Tadjo describes Kigali as a devastated malodorous city in ruins. (83). These show that apart from human lives that were lost, Rwandan's environment suffered from physical trauma that will take time to rehabilitate.

Deploying a moving style of narration, the writer opines that there is need to write about what happened in Rwanda as avenues of preserving memories of victims of the carnage. (11). She believes that the events in Rwanda concern all of us from Africa. Thousands of unnamed Rwandan lost their lives during the war. Some were buried in mass graves while others never got buried.

Ce n'était pas uniquement l'affaire d'un peuple perdu dans le coeur noir de l'Afrique. Oubier le Rwanda après le bruit et la fureur signifiait devenir borgne, aphone, handicapée. C'était marcher dans l'obscurité, en tendant les bras pour ne pas entrer en collision avec le futur. (11).

It was not just one nation lost in the dark heart of Africa that was affected. To forget Rwanda after the sound and the fury was like being blind in one eye, voiceless and handicapped. It was to walk in

darkness, feeling your way with
outstretched arms to avoid colliding
with the future. (3)

Tadjo's novel reminds us that wars, ethnic and religious crises are part of our problems in Africa and that we should strive to avoid a repeat of the tragedy that occurred in Rwanda. This she did by maintaining that most Rwandans participated in the genocide irrespective of their social and economic classes. Considering the numerous inter-ethnic conflicts plaguing Africa years after the genocide, it is agreeable with Tadjo that a repeat of such a disaster elsewhere in Africa is a possibility.

Tadjo as a woman engaged on the issue of sexual abuse that happened during the genocide. Tutsis women were targeted for sexual violence and mass rape. Victims were subjected to unspeakable sexual violence including impaling and rape with objects. Hutu extremists believed Tutsi women were vital to the procreation of Tutsis hence were often dehumanised before being murdered. There were instances of gender based violence against women and femicide throughout Rwanda. Tadjo described scenes of rapes and impaling of women through their vaginas. Of note here is a local woman named Theresa whose body was found at the Nyamata church. She was impaled after being raped by a group of militiamen.

On lui a ligoté les poignets, on les a attachés à ses chevilles. Elles a les jambes largement écartées. Son corps est penché sur le côté. On dirait un énorme foetus fossilisé. Elle a été déposée sur une couverture souillée, devant des crânes bien rangé et des ossements éparpillés sur une natte.

Elle a été violé. Un pic fut enforcé dans son vagin. Elle est morte d'un coup de machete à la nuque. (20)

Her wrists are bound, and tied to her ankles. Her legs are spread wide apart. Her body is lying on its side. She looks like an enormous fossilised foetus. She has been laid on a dirty blanket, in front of carefully lined up skulls and bones scattered on a mat.

She has
been
raped. A
pickaxe
has been
forced
into her
vagina.
She died
from a
machete
blow to
the nape
of her
neck.
(11)

Tadjo gave account of a young Zairean woman who was raped after her baby had been killed before her eyes by the militiamen. The woman had hidden under a bed in her bedroom when her flat was attacked by the men seeking out Tutsi families. Although she told the assailants that she was not Tutsi, her baby was taken from her and killed. Traumatized, she passed out. When she regained consciousness, she felt pains on her private part. This incident she had narrated in her account to Tadjo that "... ils sont tué mon enfant devant moi et puis ils l'ont jeté dehors dans la cour, je suis tombée Quand je me suis réveillé, c'était la nuit, j'avais mal dans le sexe et ma robe était déchirée, j'ai pleuré...(100) (... They killed my baby right there in front of me and then threw him into the yard, and I collapsed.....When I woke up, my vagina was sore and my dress was torn, I wept...) Torn clothes and painful vagina, points to sexual violence.

Many victims of the genocide also suffered from physical and psychological trauma that resulted in suicide and insanity. Families were separated, children orphaned and properties destroyed. There were also displacements as Tutsis moved across borders into neighbouring countries where they sought refuge. Tadjo describes the physical appearance of a certain Tutsi woman named Nelly who although survived the genocide but contracted HIV as a result of frequent rapes she was subjected to. From her displays, she was obviously also mentally unstable. (46).

Diop's *Murambi* is a polyphonic fiction that portrays unrestrained acts of violence by Hutus against Tutsis and moderate Hutus during the genocide. The story is a collection of accounts by actual participants in the genocide. Chapters bear names of characters whose narratives were given. The narration opens with the account given by Michel Serumundo, a Tutsi who operated a vidéothèque in a district of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. He recounts that on the night the genocide began, soldiers immediately mounted roadblocks and began checking for identity cards of Rwandans and molesting Tutsis. Next, there were broadcasts on radios encouraging Hutus to take up arms against Tutsis. The violence broke out same day. Other characters in the novel gave similar accounts of their parts in acts of violence against Tutsis. The story is concluded with a visit to the town of Murambi by Cornelius Uvimana, a Rwandan returnee from exile who lost all members of his family. Mass killings took place in Murambi. In fact, the Tutsi population in Murambi was practically wiped out. The horrors of the genocide were captured at Murambi Church where there were piles of skeletons and skulls of victims within and outside the church premises. (176-178). Most shocking effects of the genocide on the environment were recorded at Murambi. At Nyabarongo River in Murambi, Cornelius was told of how corpses floated on the river. Hutus had after killing Tutsis, thrown their bodies into the river. At a time, there were over forty thousand corpses floating on the river. Jessica a survivor and an old acquaintance of Cornelius who accompanied him during his visit to Murambi had informed him horrifyingly that:

Sur cette rivière, le Nyabarongo, on a dénombré pendant le génocide jusqu'à quarante mille cadavres en train de flotter en même temps. On ne pouvait même plus voir l'eau. (86).

On this River Nyabarongo during the genocide, people counted up to forty thousand corpses floating at the same time. You could not even see the water any more

Imagery demonstrates that the river was polluted. Rwanda is a rural country with rivers being sources of potable water. Villagers got their drinking waters from river and streams. Rivers are also source of water for animals. This shows that the environment at Murambi was degraded as a result of the genocide since water is vital to all living things. Cornelius observed that the air was polluted by corpses that have been left unburied. (90-91). Many of the victims of the genocide were not given proper burials.

Diop engaged in sexual abuse of women and violence that were witnessed during the genocide. Young Hutu militiamen used the opportunity of the genocide to engage in unrestrained sexual orgies. A Tutsi survivor Gérard Nayinzira narrated a rape scene he witnessed at the beginning of the genocide. The victim a Tutsi woman was killed after being raped by a youth.

A Murambi, au début de l'attaque, j'ai vu un *Interahamwe* violer une jeune femme sous un arbre. Son chef est passé et lui a crié: "Hé, toi, Simba, partout où on va, c'est toujours la même chose, les femmes d'arbord, les femmes, les femmes ! Dépêche-toi de finir tes pompes, on a promis à Papa de bien faire le travail!" Le chef a fait quelques pas, puis, se ravisant, est revenu écraser la tête de la jeune femme avec une grosse pierre, et il y a eu d'un seul coup juste cette bouillie rouge et blanche à la place du crâne. Cela n'a pas interrompu l'*Interahamwe* qui a continué à besogner le corps agité de légers soubressauts. Il avait les yeux hors de la tête, tournés vers le ciel, et je crois même qu'il était encore plus excité q'avant. (Diop, 2001, p. 210-211)

At Murambi at the beginning of the attack, I saw an *Interahamwe* raping a young woman under a tree. His boss passed by and shouted at him: "Hey, you, Simba, everywhere we go it's always the same thing, women first, women, and women!"

Hurry up and finish with your pumpings, we promised Papa to do the work well!" The boss took some steps, then changed his mind, and came and smashed the head of the young woman with a big stone, and all of a sudden a red and white mess replaced skull. That did not interrupt the *Interahamwe* who continued to screw the shuddering weak agitated body. His eyes were not looking on the head, but turned towards the sky, and I believe also that he was more excited than before. (Our translation)

Gérard Nanyinzi claimed he saw this with his two eyes, and asked that he should be believed since he has nothing to gain by making up the story. Gérard also held that by talking about these brutalities, a repeat will be prevented and by denying them, there is every possibility for a reoccurrence of genocide in Rwanda. (211)

Conclusion

Literature is a tool for preserving lived experiences of trauma as demonstrated in the two testimonial texts based on the events of the Rwandan genocide. They highlighted atrocious acts perpetrated against defenseless civilians in Rwanda during one of the most devastating ethnic wars the world has witnessed. The authors created ordinary characters that represented actual people

who suffered maltreatments such as rape, insanity, physical assault, trauma and diseases during the genocide. Accounts of what transpired before, during and after the genocide were represented in the texts through dialogues, imageries, descriptions and plots. The stories are shocking as it portrays difficulties faced daily by Tutsi populace as they fought for their lives in the hands of Hutu extremists.

The odious activities of the militia who were the executioners of the genocide were narrated. Véronique Tadjou and Boubacar Boris Diop describe their observations of individual and collective trauma suffered by survivors of the genocide. Tadjou's novel is a collection of her interactions with genocide victims and perpetrators who were serving jail terms and others awaiting trials across the country at end of the genocide. *Murambi* by Diop is based on individual accounts rendered by participants and victims of the carnage. Diop took part in the writing project organised after the genocide. These authors produced well written narratives of their experiences that form some of the most authentic literary works on the genocide. The texts are coherent, lucid and graphic representations of the inhuman committed in Rwanda. These novels will not only be read as literature but as a source of history and reminder of the internecine nature of ethnic wars.

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