A Descent into Hell, Genocide in Two Narratives: Philip Gourevitch’s We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families and Boubacar Boris Diop’s Murambi, The Book of Bones: A Novel

Abu, Adeyemi Samuel
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
In his 1951 essay on Auschwitz, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Theodor Adorno wrote: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” In his 1989 article, “Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory,” Elie Wiesel argues that art should be silent about the Holocaust for Auschwitz defeated both culture and art and only those who lived through it can transform it into knowledge. About art Wiesel says bluntly: “stop insulting the dead.” These views expressed by both Adorno and Wiesel mark an uneasy ethical attitude towards genocide, which is often seen as a constant cause of ethical anxiety. They both understood genocide as untranslatable and unspeakable. To them, therefore, art or imaginative literature should embrace silence. This thesis interrogates these ethical concerns in relation to the Rwandan genocide as an event and writing about the genocide as art.

Using a comparative ethical approach, this thesis examines two narratives about Rwandan genocide, namely Philip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families* (1998), a factual report, and Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi, the Book of Bones: A Novel* (2000), to explore various ethical dimensions concerning genocidal writings as well as to engage criticisms against imaginative literature as being capable of bearing witness to genocide. This thesis raises three fundamental questions that concern ethics and writing about genocide: should or can genocide be the subject of literary enquiry? Can literature bear witness to genocide and at the same time preserve the memory of the victims? Why should literature speak if genocide is considered unspeakable?

This thesis argues that art has the psychological and ethical capabilities of capturing the horrors of genocide and must, therefore, bear witness to it. The study reveals that the literary response of the novel to the Rwandan genocide may take the reader closer to the heart of the tragedy than a factual report. The point of writing about genocide is clear: it is to increase our empathy for those affected, to see where we failed in our collective humanity and to say “never again”.” Good literature has the creative and psychological power to bear witness to genocide, and at its best, it can confront and express the inexpressible.
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The West’s post-Holocaust pledge that genocide would never again be tolerated proved to be hollow, and for all the fine sentiments inspired by the memory of Auschwitz, the problem remains that denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good. (Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*)

1.1 Introduction

Philip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* and Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi, The Book of Bones: A Novel* are two startling narratives bordering on the unspeakable and the unimaginable: the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which saw the organized killings of almost a million—if not more—Rwandans within the hundred days for which it lasted. The majority of the victims of the genocide were Tutsi. The génocidaires were Hutu. There may have been conflicting reports on how many people were involved, or how many were killed, but it is clear that the gruesome deaths were the result of group violence in which the central goal was to exterminate the Tutsi. As Mahmud Mamdani points out in *When Victims Become Killers*, “No ONE can say with certainty how many Tutsi were killed between March and July of 1994 in Rwanda … the killings of Tutsi between March and July 1994 must be termed genocide”. (5) This thesis agrees with this.

The reception of my two chosen texts has been astonishing. They have both been widely accepted as two of the most critically engaging narratives of the history of Rwanda and the history of the genocide. Toni Morrison, for instance, calls Diop’s *Murambi* “a miracle” (*Murambi* back cover) for its literary enquiry into the genocide, while in his review of *We Wish*, published by *The New York Times*, titled “Heart of Darkness”, Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, commends the style of Gourevitch thus: “that sobering voice of witness Gourevitch has vividly captured in his work” (nytimes.com). *We Wish* is a nonfiction work of journalistic enquiry. Both works, nevertheless, were written by journalists and writers, neither of whom are historians, who journeyed to Rwanda shortly after the genocide to make sense of the horror. Their works both represent an outsider’s perspective to Rwandan genocide.

A critical look at these two works reveals three levels of problem: the problem of using a past event or an experience to either condemn or justify the present, the problem of writing the history of the colonized, and the problem of writing about genocide. These problems are made obvious in their style of confronting and describing the genocide. Both of my chosen texts present a narrative of genocidal depictions using polyphony—a multi-perspective narrative mode that is deployed deliberately to capture the voices of the victims, the killers as well as the inciters. I see both writers’
use of polyphony as a means of making sense of the genocide from diverse perspectives, and to comprehend the consequences of human destructions.

Furthermore, the two works belong to a different class of genre. One is nonfiction, and the other is fiction. But while the borderline between fiction and nonfiction remains blurred, I intend to walk the thin line that separates the two to show how a nonfictional text partly relies on fictional modes to handle the genocide. In this sense, I argue that even a nonfictional work on genocide relies specifically on narrative modes and consider narrative modes to be important elements in capturing such a scale of violence. Moreover, *We Wish*, a nonfictional work, selects and focalizes on only one aspect of the genocide—the Tutsi’s. It mainly sees the genocide from the perspectives of the Tutsi victims only.

I claim that both *Murambi* and *We Wish* use narrativisation to represent the realities of the Rwandan genocide. One question raised is whether art is capable of handling the enormity of human destruction, whether literature is capable of capturing the indescribable realities of genocide and translating it into meaning. Other questions border on ethics: should or can genocide be the subject of literary enquiry? Can literature bear witness to genocide while at the same time preserve the memory of the affected? Why should literature speak if genocide is considered unspeakable? To all this, I argue that art has the psychological and ethical capabilities to capture the horrors of genocide and can do it alone. The point of writing about genocide is clear: it is to increase our empathy for those affected, to see where we failed in our collective humanity and to say ‘never again’. Good literature has the creative and psychological power to bear witness to genocide, and at its best, it can confront and express the inexpressible.

I engage these two texts using a comparative ethical approach. Ethical criticism, like any other literary approach, is not without its criticism, but for the issue of genocide, I consider it appropriate and necessary. The choice of ethical criticism is necessitated by the type of criticisms that imaginative literature of genocide has taken. Most critics of imaginative literature of genocide, such as Theodor Adorno and Elie Wiesel, express distrust and argue against imaginative literature from an ethical basis, claiming that to write about genocide after the event is “barbaric” (Adorno 4). Therefore, to make a case for imaginative literature as opposed to nonfiction, I engage with these ethical distrusts by upholding the ethical purposes of literature which these critics appear to ignore. For literature, “Identifying with characters in stories can exert a powerful influence on the quality and content of our lives,” (Gregory 194). And one of the major purposes of writing literature about genocide is to assess our humanity, to show where we were wrong, and to change the way we see others as different from ourselves. It is simply about “never again”, and imaginative literature can assert that notion. Moreover, Rwandan genocide is politically motivated, and this thesis considers the political domain as one of the domains where ethical criticism is most effective, particularly to make sense of a tragedy
of such magnitude. We may find ethics unthinkable outside of the political domain, as Judith Butler observes: “It’s not only that ethics is unthinkable outside the domain of the political, but that thinking itself depends on the complex intertwinement of the two”, (qtd. in Schwendener, “Ethical Criticism”), but only through ethics can genocide be considered thinkable.

Therefore, between the history of colonialism in Africa and the colonialism of African history, between the darkest periods of modern history and the collective memory of one of the most horrible and vicious deeds of humankind, the horrors of the Rwandan genocide cannot help but affect us. It is unspeakable, yet cannot be overlooked or forgotten. It is unimaginable, yet worth recollecting because to think back to this event might be to avoid a repetition of perhaps the most brutal killings of modern times.

1.2 Textual Comparison from a Socio-Political and Historical Background

Some twenty-four years ago, between March and July 1994, the Hutu-led Rwandan government sentenced the entire Tutsi population, which constituted about 15 percent of the entire Rwandan population, to death. And by the end of the hundred days for which the killings lasted, between 800,000 and over one million people had been slaughtered. It was the swiftest killing spree of one of the darkest periods of modern history. These were vulnerable and defenceless men, ordinary women and children, and the simple reason why they were hacked to death was because they were Tutsi. According to the official figures published by the Rwandan government, an estimated 1,174,000 people were slaughtered within 100 days (10,000 murdered every day, 400 every hour, 7 every minute). It is also estimated that about 300,000 Tutsis survived the genocide. Thousands of widows, many of whom were subjected to rape, were infected with HIV. There were about 400,000 orphans and nearly 85,000 of them were forced to become heads of families.

Most works that have been written on the Rwandan genocide have shown, from within both historical and political context, how the Hutu-led Rwandan government brainwashed the Hutu majority in Rwanda into the slaughtering of their own friends and neighbours, brothers and sisters and in many cases, wives and husbands, cousins, nephews and nieces, providing the Hutus with machetes—the major weapon used for the killings—and other destructive handy weapons to carry out the extirpation of the Tutsis. There are established arguments, however, claims and counter-claims, that throughout this period of the massacre, the entire world virtually turned away and did almost nothing to stop the genocide even after several warnings and adequate ‘intel’ were provided to the United Nations to foil the attempted plot before it became a full-blown.
This thesis, however, is not concerned with ascribing blame. What I do wish to raise is the question of the nature of narrative, using two narratives on the Rwandan genocide, as to whether or not imaginative literature is capable of bearing witness to genocide the same way nonfiction is considered an acceptable norm. Diop’s text explores the genocide from a fictional perspective, especially the fear and anger that clouded over Rwanda before the genocide, the genocide itself, and the memories of the genocide in its aftermath. Gourevitch’s work, from a factual perspective, is also deeply enmeshed in the horrors of the slaughter. Both works share similarities of content but are different in style even though they are both styled for a general audience. Gourevitch’s approach is a blend of nonfictional and fictional style of writing where he consistently mediates between his interviewees. For Diop, his style follows a fictional pattern where the chapters of his text bear the names of his characters. Both works are full of chilling stories and at many points scary.

From a historical perspective, the Hutus were seen as victims of Western colonialism whose lives were placed in the hands of Tutsi oligarchs, who Hutus see as colonial masters in African form. For many Hutus before the genocide, it was a campaign to take back Rwanda, a country they spiritually and culturally believe is theirs alone. That idea is nationalistic. It considers the Tutsis as settlers who must be uprooted by any means necessary, and during the genocide, that means took a violent form. *We Wish*, in confronting this turn could not hide its outrage for the Hutus, understandably so because of the large scale of the massacre. But it, however, disregards the claim of Hutus as historical victims, focusing on how the West tore the country from history and how the Hutus exhibited the inherent evil in humankind. *Murambi*, in any case, does the opposite. Rather than blame the Hutus or history, it considers both sides as culpable to what led to the genocide. It is interesting to note that where *We Wish* focuses on genocidal victims alive, *Murambi* goes beyond that to humanize the victims that are dead, restoring their humanity so that we can feel the events that transpired before their final death.

Genocide is a product of the insatiable desire for status and association. *Murambi* sees a country divided by racial categorizations, by political classes who are power drunk, by a people who felt that by doing what the government says automatically gives them a sense of belonging in a society that in reality cares little about them. The irresponsibility of the government in failing to provide basic postcolonial gains led to a difficult time for the people.
1.3 Justification of the Work

Most studies on genocide have, in no doubt, focused largely on the Holocaust. Other studies on genocide, which have managed to shift their focus to other events of genocide, have mostly concentrated on understanding genocide from within social and political history. Such is the case with Rwandan genocide where numerous studies about it have focused more on its historical causes, its political underpinnings as well as its impact on the social fabric of Rwandan society. There has been a dearth of scholarship on how writers—particularly literary writers, have represented the event of the genocide and portrayed both the génocidaires and the victims in their works. Currently, no study has attempted to approach the Rwandan genocide from a comparative ethical point of view, comparing how the Rwandan genocide is represented in fictions and nonfictions in relation to popular ethical debate on whether or not art or imaginative literature has the capability to handle the tragedy and make an ethical meaning out of it. Hence, the need for this thesis, which is to fill this gap.

The place of literature, fiction and nonfiction, as is widely known, is to tell, inform and educate. Literature is there to remind us so that we do not forget the events of the past in order to make sense of the present. Articulating literature may cause us to reconsider some of our actions towards other people. Literature and Art, it can be argued, have the power to bring about changes, both in reasoning and in feeling. The function of literature in representing the troubled times we live in cannot be overemphasized. In the case of genocide, one role of literature is to be a constant reminder, a point of reference from which we can learn and understand both ourselves and other people. Genocide, as an event, is neither a hidden knowledge nor something that has not occurred before, therefore, writing about it would arguably help educate and transform lives. One of the purposes of writing about genocide in the literary form is to elicit empathy for the affected and to deter those who have read about it from repeating such actions.

Most events that involve humans can in some ways be connected, even though it is not always possible to give explanations why certain things happen. The Rwandan genocide should be seen within its African context, but it is also morally and ethically a world burden. Nonfiction on genocide, particularly the likes of We Wish, which infers from history to evaluate the Rwandan genocide, helps in studying the past, provide an explanation for the present, and leave us to imagine the future. We can hear directly from those who went through troubled times and offer blame, but we may not get to see their humanity or even that of the dead. Imaginative literature, like Murambi, also represents the past, rearranges the events of that past so that we do not condemn the realities of that past to only the past because the issues it raises share a semblance with present issues. Imaginative literature also speculates about the future. This thesis seeks to show that the contribution of imaginative literature,
in this case *Murambi*, to genocidal discourse may well be of greater force than supposedly factual or non-fictional representations.

I see *Murambi* as prophecy. I see *Murambi* as a novel that develops one’s empathy. Empathy, again, is an important element of human relationship. Its influence helps us to rethink human actions and assess the level of our collective humanity. And in doing so, we might be able to solve current social issues, particularly in periods of nationalistic struggle. On this note, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge not only as a work that complements other works that focus on Rwandan genocide, it looks at the notion of genocide from a comparative perspective. *Murambi* is a work of social engineering that tackles the problem of indifference and inhumanity in society. It helps us understand how Africa has been constructed and portrayed, and aids our comprehension of Africa today.

### 1.4 Meet the Authors: Boubacar Boris Diop and Philip Gourevitch

**Boubacar Boris Diop**

Boubacar Boris Diop was born in 1946 in Dakar, Senegal. He is a novelist, journalist, screenwriter and a teacher. He has numerous published works credited to him, of which are many novels and political writings. He is also an activist who founded an independent newspaper in Senegal popularly known as *Sol*. He has also written in his language Wolof. His novel, *Doomi Golo*, published in 2006, is one of the few novels written in Wolof. It deals with the life of a Senegalese Wolof family, and the English version is set for release later this year. His fifth novel, *Murambi, the Book of Bones*, is to date his most celebrated and popular novel. Diop holds a place among leading African writers with experiences and representations that cut across different genre of literature. As a journalist, and former editor-in-chief of *Le Matin de Dakar*, an independent daily newspaper based in Senegal, he has worked in collaboration with various European-based newspapers in Germany and in Italy. He currently writes for the London magazine, *The New African*, as a columnist. His latest book is *Kaveena* (2016), published by Indiana Press. His works have won major literary prizes, including the Prix de la République du Sénégal, the Prix Tropiques, and most recently the Grand Prix Littéraire d’Afrique Noire. *Murambi* was listed by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair among Africa’s 100 best books of the 20th century.
Philip Gourevitch

Philip Gourevitch, born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1961 is an American author, and like Diop, a journalist. He is a longtime staff writer at The New Yorker and a former editor of The Paris Review. As a journalist, he had a writing stint with The Forward between 1991 and 1993, first as New York bureau chief and then as cultural editor. His journalism has taken him to major parts of the continent outside America. He has reported from Asia, Africa and Europe for a number of magazines like Granta, Harper’s and The New York Review of Books. He lives in New York City. We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families is his most popular book till date. It is a book that is based on Gourevitch’s travelling experiences in Rwanda after the genocide and which shot him into prominence upon its publication. The title of the book, which is one of the longest titles of any book ever, is based on a letter written around April 15, 1994 to a pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, president of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rwanda at that time, by several Adventist pastors who took refuge in an Adventist hospital along with many other Tutsis in the locality of Mugonero in Kibuye. Gourevitch would later accuse Ntakirutimana of complicity in the killings in that hospital, and Ntakirutimana would then later be convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Among the numerous awards Gourevitch has won through his writings, this book accounts for many. One of the most important ones the book won is the National Book Critics Award in 1998.

1.5 A Brief Historical and Political Background of the Hutu-Tutsi Division

The origin of the Tutsi and Hutu people as well as that of their division is a major issue in the history of Rwanda. The divide may have begun in their pre-colonial past, but it was further provoked and developed during the colonial period. According to a 2018 statistics published by World Population Review, Hutu constitutes the ethnic majority of Rwanda—about 84%, while Tutsi are about 15%, and Twa, 1% (Rwanda Population 2018). There are two aspects to this divide. One is how these ethnic groups see themselves and the other is how outsiders see them. During colonialism, the divide became obvious because of the issue of identity cards given to these ethnic groups by the colonialists in order to separate them according to physical features. So, afterwards, these ethnic groups began to see themselves as different. Before then, there was no obvious difference between them, and physiognomy was not considered significant. This means that the colonial background of
Tutsi and Hutu people became different from the attitude of the colonialists to them. Tutsis occupied the higher class in Rwanda’s social hierarchy during colonialism, while Hutus occupied the lower. Therefore, it is considered that Tutsis enjoyed warmer attitudes and greater benefits from the colonialists. This may have resulted in Hutus harbouring a long-term anger for the Tutsis, anger which will later materialize in the form of genocide. What is, however, important to note here is that while these two groups may perceive themselves as different during colonialism and the genocide, they have the same culture and speak the same language, *Kinyarwanda*. Therefore, to outsiders, they are likely to be considered the same people.

Attempts have been made by historians to provide straightforward answers to who the Tutsis or the Hutus are. Some definitions are drawn from observation of cultural differences, others are made from economic, social or political perspectives. But adequately designating the two is complicated. For instance, many were born Tutsis and later in life became Hutus and vice versa. According to the Outreach Programme on the Rwandan Genocide and the United Nations article “Rwanda: A Brief History of The Country”, prior to the colonial era “Tutsis generally occupied the higher strata in the social system, and Hutus, the lower. Nonetheless, social mobility was possible. A Hutu who acquired a large number of cattle or other wealth could be assimilated into the Tutsi group and an impoverished Tutsi would be regarded as Hutu” (un.org). This was possible because of the practices of the clan system that existed at that time. Being influential and wealthy were some of the most immediate ways of gaining the respect of people. Hence, social status could change the ethnic status of a person. “The most powerful clan was the Tutsi group known as the *Nyinginya*, and throughout the 1800s, the *Nyingiya* expanded their influence by conquest and by offering protection in return for tribute” (un.org). Such an account of the history of Rwanda shows that the Tutsis had influence in Rwanda before colonialism, and before Rwanda was created as a republic in the early 60s. The Tutsis were a class of people who wielded power and controlled the vast majority of the Highlands east of Lake Kivu, where Rwanda and Burundi are located.

Mahmood Mamdani is a notable historian of Rwanda and the genocide. In his book, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, he examines the conflict and differences between the Hutus and the Tutsis. According to Mamdani, the power players of the two groups make conflicting claims regarding their relationship. In the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), most of its members are made up of Tutsis. It is the party of Paul Kagame, who Gourevitch admires in *We Wish*. Kagame insists that the Hutus and the Tutsis are “the same people”, while the proponents of the propaganda concept known as Hutu Power, argue that they are distinct “ethnic—even racial—groups” (Mamdani 41). Apart from this, there is the socioeconomic difference debate, namely “either a class difference between poor and rich, or a division of labour between
agriculturalists and pastoralists” (41). In this debate, the supposed class difference can be considered “normal” because it is not peculiar only to Rwanda. There is also a sociobiological difference. It is said that “Hutu and Tutsi were two distinct peoples with separate histories, until the Tutsi migrants conquered the settled Hutu communities and reduced them to the status of a servile population” (41). This later opposing view, which Mamdani calls the “Migration Hypothesis”, is one which saw the Tutsis as alien. This type of history is favoured among the Hutu. It sees Tutsis as foreigners even though this is difficult to substantiate, especially in the light of their common cultural heritage and language as well as factors like cohabitation and marriage.

Like many other Bantu groups in Africa, the Tutsi expanded to Lake Kivu. The relationship between the Tutsi and the Hutu today is perceived along conflicting thoughts with regard to the “origins and claim to Rwandan-ness” (“Origins of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa”, n.d.). At least four different kinds of studies dedicate their thoughts to exploring and upholding claims of the supposed ‘distinct difference’ as established by Mamdani, and all four tend to invoke and rely on certain parts of the history of the Rwandan people for evidence, of which, two would be considered in this section. The most defining moment of this divide began to take effect when the Germans took over the area following the death of the powerful Tutsi king Rwabugiri in 1895. He had conquered the land from the Hutu agriculturalists that lived there. His realm was formed on feudalism, with the Tutsi as aristocrats and Hutu as vassals. After the Germans were defeated in the First World War, the Belgians took over the area and ruled directly, putting the Tutsi in charge of the economic labour and in control of the Hutu. This pattern of ruling became enshrined in the consciousness of the Hutu, who would from then on see the Tutsi as colonialist creations. Their battle with the Tutsi could thus be seen in the light of the colonized perpetuating violence as a means to break free from the grip of the colonial masters.

One of the supposed differentiating patterns advanced by the colonialists, as identified by Mamdani, is ‘phenotype’. By phenotype, a Tutsi is said to be different in physical appearance from a Hutu, particularly with regard to the height of the body and the shape of the nose. A Tutsi is said to be taller and leaner than a Hutu: “the Twa were short, like pygmies. Hutu were squat and of medium height and Tutsi were slender and tall (Mamdani 44). Another form of classification differentiates according to genotype. It is believed that sickle cell traits, for instance, are common among Hutu but absent among Tutsi, and that it is common among Tutsi to be able to digest a large amount of lactose. The colonialists, based on phenotype or genotype theories, believed the Tutsis were more intelligent than the Hutus. Both theories are developed from supposedly “commonsense observation” of the two ethnic groups.
The Tutsi/Hutu divide cannot in practice be analysed in terms of physical differences. Instead, the division is better explained in political and historical terms, and in the light of three major periods of Rwandan history: the reign of King Kigeli Rwabugiri in the mid-eighteenth century, the indirect rule of the Germans, and the divide and rule tactics of the Belgians.

The Hutus were considered to have been living in the area now known as Rwanda before the coming of the Tutsis. During the 1700s, the Tutsi king Rwabugiri employed an expansionist strategy, acquiring more land and subjecting the Hutus to forced labour. Rwabugiri conquered several smaller states, expanded the kingdom west and north, and initiated administrative reforms. “These includes *ubuhake*, in which Tutsi patrons ceded cattle, privileged status, to Hutu or Tutsi clients in exchange for economic and personal service, and *uburetwa*, a corvée system in which Hutu were forced to work for Tutsi chiefs. Rwabugiri’s changes caused a rift to grow between the Hutu and Tutsi populations” (Origins of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa). The tensions between the two was, however unaddressed by the King and led to hatred between them. In 1884 the Berlin Conference assigned the territory to the Germans, but “The Germans did not significantly alter the social structure of the country, but exerted influence by supporting the king and the existing hierarchy and delegating power to local chiefs” (Origins of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa). Despite being the majority in the area even at that time, the Hutu felt marginalized and the hatred for the Tutsi increased.

At this time, some Hutus attempted to increase their wealth, actively striving to be in the upper class and in some cases even adopting a Tutsi identity. After the Germans lost their colonies in Africa after the First World War, the Belgians introduced more direct rule to the land but failed to address the existing social status inequalities. Instead, they threw their weight behind the Tutsis and even made it more difficult for Hutus to raise their social esteem. The Belgians subscribed to the Hamitic hypothesis that saw Tutsis as more intelligent and belonging to a superior race than the Hutus. “Both the Germans and the Belgians promoted Tutsi supremacy” and “In 1935, Belgium introduced identity cards labelling individuals as Tutsi, Hutu, Twa or naturalized. While it had previously been possible for particularly wealthy Hutu to become honorary Tutsi, the identity cards prevented any further movement between the classes” (Origins of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa).

The actions of the Belgians sealed the Hutu hatred for the Tutsis and the realities of their differences became obvious, such that by independence, tension had grown in large proportion between them—between Tutsi who wanted early independence and the Hutu movements which struggle for the emancipation of Hutus. This resulted in the Rwandan Revolution of 1959, where the Hutus overthrew the Tutsi monarch and first commenced the killings of Tutsis. Though it eventually
failed to achieve its aim of exterminating the Tutsis, but the hatred had actualized in violence, and the deadliest of it was carried out in 1994, resulting in genocide.

Pre-colonial and colonial factors are not the only factors that led to the genocide, for postcolonial factors also exist. After independence and even close to the period of the genocide, Rwanda was facing internal conflicts and a huge refugee crisis, which it chose to ignore. “There were already 550,000 refugees, predominantly Tutsis, in Central Africa, most of whom fled Rwanda in the pogroms that followed the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy in 1959. The largest exile communities were in Uganda (200,000) and Burundi (245,000)” (The Rwandan Refugee Crisis; Before the Genocide: Part 1).

Amidst such crises, which led to the deaths of over 20,000 Tutsis, Rwanda’s postcolonial period was ushered in by grievances and aspirations. In between the refugee crisis at the Rwandan border and the 1994 genocide, attacks were staged and carried out on Hutu targets, and a counterattack on the Tutsis, most especially in the 90s. It was a seemingly endless play of attacks. While many died in these attacks, each attack and its consequence sparked a new wave of refugee crisis. The consequence of all these began to take a toll on the Rwandan economy. Both during and after Independence in 1962 the economy began to deteriorate, effect of which was felt majorly in the 80s.

An article published by the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, titled “Corruption and Genocide: Lessons from Rwanda” observes: “the price of Rwanda’s main export, coffee, fell by 50% as a result of an international crisis”, an impact which resulted in the devaluation of its currency by 40 percent. In the midst of all of this, one would expect that the government would use the funds and aid packages provided by the IMF to assist its citizens on a recovery project; instead the money was embezzled by a corrupt administration and the rest of the country were left out in the cold:

Beyond the high walls of Habyarimana’s [Rwanda’s President at that time] presidential palace, the country declined rapidly. With 85% of the population falling below the poverty line and farmland devaluing greatly, the country fell further and further into debt. Amid the economic deterioration and rising political corruption Tutsi rebel groups formed in Uganda (mainly the Rwandan Patriotic Front) and ignited a violent civil war. After a pair of missiles shot down Habyarimana’s plane after a peace accord had been signed with the RPF in April 1994, the Hutu government began the massacres. Over the next four months, Hutu extremist militias exterminated 11 percent of the country’s population and left the rest of the world in shock. (www.auschwitzinstitute.org)

A country in debt can indeed be a country on the brink of violence. A country on the brink of violence can also be doomed for destruction. In Rwanda the Tutsi refugees outside the Rwandan border, as represented by the RPF, believed that to overthrow Habyarimana would automatically translate into a rightful return to their homeland. Hutu power, represented by the president and his
fellow Hutu propagandists, believed that demonizing the Tutsi would increase their popularity among their ethnic affiliates. And even though a peace accord was signed by both parties in 1993, it was not implemented. The downing of the presidential plane carrying Habyarimana and his Burundian counterpart would then later become the immediate spark that ignited the genocide.

1.6 Aims, Method and Expected Contribution to Knowledge

In my analysis of Gourevitch’s *We Wish* and Diop’s *Murambi*, I compare the two texts to show how texts belonging to different literary genre handle the horror of genocide. I show how they represent the events from factual and fictional perspectives. I aim to establish that the fictional representation takes a reader closer to the heart of the tragedy than the factual one. I also argue that the question of ethics is a necessary one in the discussion of genocide. The psychological nature of imaginative literature has the capability of transforming the genocide into meaning, increasing empathy for the affected and causing changes in the way we perceive others who are seen as different from ourselves.

I evaluate the way both works handle genocide through a description and depiction of the characters and the events of the genocide. I am as concerned with the questions of fiction/nonfiction and fictionality as I am with how both works translate the burden and consequences of the genocide into meaning in their own ways. This research aims to examine the role of fiction in genocide and to see what fiction is able do that nonfiction finds difficult to do unless it uses elements of fiction. I also seek to answer the question: “can literature bear witness to genocide?”

I intend to do all these through a critical ethical reading of the texts. The choice of ethical criticism is necessitated by the fact that ethical criticism explains the affective nature of literary works as well as its moral functions. It is apt in dealing with various ethical issues, particularly those that are concerned with investigating the consequences of human actions, like the Rwandan genocide. It is also concerned with the consequences of control (both external and internal), the politics of knowledge and the knowledge of politics, and the functional relations between a people’s socio-historical and political past, and their present. On the issue of Rwandan genocide and ethical criticism, I turn to ethical insights on holocaust literature, engaging critics like Theodor Adorno and Elie Wiesle, both of whom are important cultural and political critics who expressed sceptical views on imaginative literature on genocide. I also rely largely on the views of Ruth Franklin and others on the importance of imaginative literature to genocide. Finally, I seek an understanding from the views of Hayden White as well as other scholars of narrative and fictionality of nonfictions and the issue of narrativisation.
This thesis aims to contribute to the body of knowledge in literature, history, social and political sciences, and contribute to scholarship on literature on Africa’s history, on literature on African genocide, on critical writings on Rwanda and on the Rwandan genocide itself. It aims to construct a link between colonialism as the reason for the underdevelopment of Africa and Africa as a neocolonial continent that has been exploited by the complicity of government and big businesses. It also touches on the issue of the fictionality of nonfictions generally, and specifically, those concerned with genocide. Above all, this study aims to make sense of African realities today and make speculations about tomorrow.
CHAPTER TWO

This chapter reviews the critical notions of ethics in genocidal writings. I use the insights of ethical criticisms of Holocaust studies to approach the Rwandan genocide. Although Holocaust writing is primarily associated with the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War, compared to the Rwandan genocide, the historical and cultural context was different. One of the broader categories in which the two can be compared is the notion of the ethics of writing about genocidal tragedies. My two chosen texts are *Murambi: The Book of Bones, A Novel* by Boubacar Boris Diop and *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, a factual report by Philip Gourevitch. Using the views expressed therein, combined with ethical perspectives of certain critics of Holocaust studies, I argue that the literary response of the novel to the Rwandan genocide may take the reader closer to the heart of the tragedy than the factual report.

There are two parts to this chapter. First, I make an attempt here to extrapolate the thought processes that informed a dismissal of imaginative literature on the Holocaust by focusing on the notion of the “inexpressible” or the “untranslatable” nature of the Holocaust as a view held by most critics of imaginative literature. In doing this, I revisited the constructed image of imaginative literature that Holocaust critics retain. I review criticisms of imaginative literature as an acceptable and reliable form of Holocaust writing, and which prefers memoirs and testimonials to any fictional representations of the Holocaust. I concern myself primarily with both the question of the ethics and the capability of literature to represent genocide; problematizing their notion of ‘distrust’ of imaginative literature. I argue that while the ethical argument is undeniably understandable, amplifying the scope of capability poses a reductive understanding of the psychological and transformative nature of imaginative literature, which seems to be taken for granted in this debate. I concur that art alone can bear witness to genocide and translate its consequences into meaning. The point of writing about genocide is clear: it is to improve our empathy for those affected, to see where we failed in our collective humanity and to say ‘never again’. Good literature has the creative and psychological power to bear witness to genocide, and at its best, it can confront and express the inexpressible.
Second, I make a further attempt to show that imaginative literature has much more to offer to the understanding of genocide than factual reports, and that most factual reports, as we know them, usually appear to rely somehow on fictive elements to make their cases. So, in view of this, I re-examine the notion of narrative (as it relates to the Rwandan genocide) as an intersection between fiction/nonfiction and reality, upholding the argument that even nonfictions, in certain proven ways, do employ fictional techniques in their operations (the art of narrativisation) and as such, the so-called most acceptable and the most reliable form of Holocaust writing—genocidal memoir, factual reports, and testimonials, cannot free itself completely from the influence of literary imaginations.

2.1 On Expressing the Inexpressible: Can imaginative Literature also Bear Witness to Genocide?

“Never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence,” Mr. Clinton said. (“Clinton in Africa, the Blood Bath,” Tim Weiner, 1998)

“Part of the horror of Rwanda is that we think of genocide as belonging to an age we had left behind.” (“Laying the Blame: The Scandal of Rwanda and the West”)

In his 1951 essay on Auschwitz, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Theodor Adorno wrote: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch,” (4) which Samuel and Sherry Weber, in their English translation of the statement, rendered, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Prisms 34). The implication of Adorno’s statement would seem to be that the event of the Holocaust was so horrendous that poetry (or art in general) cannot possibly express it. Consequently, Adorno’s response to writing about genocide is an ethical one. And if that is the case, does it then mean that by writing about such horror we in many ways disrespect the dead, even if our intentions were not to do so? Is there any way to translate the horrors of genocide without violating the sacredness of such an incomprehensible aspect of human history? This study preoccupies itself with this latter question in order to help interrogate why imaginative literature about genocide is a target of ethical attack.

Two questions might be posed: how does one create a story from such a horrible tragedy as genocide and what kind of story does a literary author create from it? Since authors of literary works intend to profit from their creative works along with their publishers, some critics consider that this dishonours the dead and the survivors because the event in question is ‘unspeakable’, and the
experience is never the authors’ but that of the dead and the survivors. Apart from that, the idea that creative writers would impose literary aesthetics on the event is also considered unethical. On such an ethical ground, literary writers are faced with the ethical difficulty of what type of truth or authenticity about the genocide a literary author, who never directly experienced it, can show. Any literary writer who picks genocide as an imaginative source would first have to deal with these issues and overcome them. Part of the anxiety raised by these ethical concerns is writing about the genocide without treating it as just a historical event which is already in the past. This, according to Adorno, would be barbaric.

The capability of imaginative literature to handle such tragedies is also thought to be questionable. Can one put coherence on an event that is chaotic, possibly with imagined people and perhaps places, and a made-up setting? Can imaginative literature capture genocide reliably and truthfully and translate it into meaning? For such reasons critics of Holocaust writings tend to favour Holocaust memoirs and testimonials as the acceptable form of Holocaust writing. Imaginative literature is discarded as a serious form because it is imagined, whereas those who write testimonials and memoirs must have, in most cases, actually witnessed the horror directly. Hence, “the dominant form is testimonial memoir” (A Thousand Darknesses 3) without any form of embellishments.

Of all the critics whose works have directly or implicitly made a case for the significance of imaginative literature in the study of the Holocaust, one critic has stood out. In her provocative ground-breaking book, A Thousand Darknesses: Truth and Lies in Holocaust Fiction (2011), Ruth Franklin draws our attention to the memory-obsessed culture of Holocaust study and the testimonial narratives that have become the dominant form of writing about the Holocaust. Concerned with both the questions of ‘why’ and ‘what’, she probes the prevailing arguments which have demoted imaginative literature about the Holocaust and elevated testimonial writings. Franklin investigates the difference between writing traumatic memoirs and fictionally representing the Holocaust. She examines why fiction is dismissed as incapable of providing adequate ‘truth’ about the facts of history, or is too aesthetically preoccupied to capture the horrors, and why memoirs are seen as worthy. Her first attempt is to draw attention to the frauds that have pervaded so-called memoirs in recent times.

Franklin observes amidst new information that keeps surfacing that some of those acceptable and canonized testimonials on the Holocaust are gradually coming out as frauds, some of which were published by renowned publishing firms and upon release were showered with a large amount of praise before turning out to either be a literary forgery, fake memoirs or ‘misery lit’. Those who have been quick to applaud Holocaust literature have learned to be more cautious. One example is Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood by Binjamin Wilkomirski. It was described in The
New York Times by Julie Salamon as an “extraordinary memoir that recalls the Holocaust with the powerful immediacy of innocence, injecting well-documented events with fresh terror and poignancy. Writing in The Nation, Jonathan Kozol called it “so morally important, and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all, that I wonder if I even have the right to try to offer praise” (A Thousand Darknesses 2). Only later was the memoire revealed to be a fraud.

Franklin’s comments on literary fraud need to be seen in the light of genre and genre expectations. It is natural that every reader of a text reads with some expectations informed by the genre of the text. If a work proclaims to be a historical or factual account, we are deeply offended if we find that certain events have been made up. If, however, the genre is fiction, the reader accepts the notion of “poetic licence”. We, as readers, usually judge it less on a factual basis and more on the basis of “imaginative truth”. And in this case, Franklin’s judgment on the text is based on expectations predicated on genre categories: expectations of factuality which turn out to be imagined.

The problem here, as shown earlier, stemmed from Adorno’s dictum, making many who would have written aesthetically on the Holocaust with the intention of raising empathy and teaching morals, embrace instead a testimonial of a horrible event they never witnessed. Franklin puts it this way:

For the pathetic fraud perpetrated by Wilkomirski was the inevitable consequence of the way Holocaust literature has been read, discussed, and understood—in America especially, but also in Europe—over the last sixty years. Ever since Theodore Adorno’s famous negation of poetry after Auschwitz, which dates from 1949, a fog of suspicion has clouded the very possibility of creating art in the wake of the Holocaust. (2)

Faced with Adorno’s prohibition, it is unsurprising that many writers who wish to surmount it have had to explore the inexpressible. This is what they assume as their ethical obligation: to describe the events as witnessed, in ‘truth’, based on evidence and facts, and without embellishing it. Therefore, to write what can be considered acceptable is to create something in the form of a memoir. The genre matters in the discussion of Holocaust. That is, what does not take the form of a testimonial cannot ‘know’ the Holocaust because the holocaust is unknowable to those who do not experience it firsthand. In the same vein, the Holocaust is also not transmittable or interpretable because to do so is to reduce the enormity and extremity of such a human tragedy. While I respect the sentiments of those who feel so, an argument rooted in such a mystique appears to be illogical. Why should not imaginative literature deal with a tragic event such as the Rwandan genocide? I refer back to the set of questions I raised earlier but in a more amplified manner. Is it that literature would put coherence where there is chaos? Or is it that it will lead to writers profiting—whether financially or literarily—from an event considered to be one of the darkest periods of human history? Is that why writers such
as Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski, who are both Holocaust survivors, dismissed imaginative literature? I probe this further.

Elie Wiesel, has argued in many of his essays that a recourse to imagination in capturing the Holocaust is an insult to the memories of the dead because the Holocaust was unlike any other. To him, the events defied any logic and any ability to understand them or even speak about them is outrageous. In his 1989 article, “Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory,” published in The New York Times, he bluntly argues:

Let us repeat it once again: Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation. Auschwitz lies on the other side of life and on the other side of death. There, one lives differently, one walks differently, one dreams differently. Auschwitz represents the negation and failure of human progress; it negates the human design and casts doubts on its validity. Then, it defeated culture; later, it defeated art, because just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz. The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so…stop insulting the dead.

Wiesel’s main concern here is whether human suffering on the scale of the Holocaust can ever be translated into words. In that essay he argues for silence, for only silence can demonstrate the unspeakability and untranslatability of the Holocaust. But this raises another question, however. If we are to embrace silence as the only way to not insult the dead, how can ‘silence’ assist or contribute to socio-cultural and empathetic healing after the genocide? Silence can demonstrate the unspeakability of the genocide, but can it also bring about recuperation and transformation? There are others who share Wiesel’s sentiments of course. What is exceptional about Wiesel’s argument is his extreme position to not speak about the Holocaust but to be silent about it. Later in this essay, he criticizes others who have attempted to translate the tragedy into various forms of literature. However, since he published the article, many works on the Holocaust have been written in different forms and the Holocaust has not stopped being a source for others to explore. So the question remains, what form should literature about the Holocaust and other similar atrocities take?

In Anna Richardson’s “Ethical Limitations of Holocaust Literary Representation”, she discusses the point about the impossibility of speaking with reference to the writings of Thomas Trezise and Berel Lang: “Clearly we are not dealing with a physical impossibility here, but rather a moral prohibition, which Thomas Trezise further characterizes as a ‘taboo.’ Part of the inspiration behind this taboo is a moral problem of representation” (2), about the way and manner in which the
mass death of people has been written down or continues to be written down, hence, we are faced with an ethical taboo as to how best to talk about the Holocaust if we are to talk about it at all. In a time when memory can be unreliable following an experience of a traumatic event (a huge problem of memoir), how possible is it for imaginative literature to overcome the ethical boundary gripping the writing of Holocaust or of later genocidal disasters?

Berel Lang investigates these issues further in *Holocaust Representation* (2000). Lang’s concern is the obscure relationship between ethics and art as it relates to the Holocaust. His thought is about whether or not art has a moral duty to shoulder the burden of the Holocaust, and in the face of arguments on focusing on actual history and truth telling, what place do the arts occupy in the discourse on the Holocaust? He claims: “…by definition there must be a difference between a representation and its object un-represented, with the former adding its own version to the “original” it represents”’ (51). That is, art has a tendency to embellish the events by recreating the events from the present experiences of the writer. He argues that any form of representation should not be seen as actual telling, but ‘representation-as’, that is, a way of seeing the Holocaust, not as it actually is but as the writer sees it and from whose perspective he sees it. This concern also runs in Lawrence Langer’s *The Holocaust and Literary Imagination* (1977), namely that there is “something disagreeable, almost dishonourable about converting the suffering of the victims into art that is then offered for the delectation of the world that murdered them” (qtd. in *A Thousand Darknesses* 5). The concern here is both ethical and aesthetic:

There is also an aesthetic difficulty: the danger that art can impose a false meaning on events…the prospect of art denying what it seeks to affirm (the hideous chaos of dehumanization during the Holocaust) raises a spectre of paradox for the critic, the reader, and the artist himself. (6)

Michael Wyschogrod takes this point even further: “Art takes the sting out of suffering…any attempt to transform the Holocaust into art demeans the Holocaust and must result in poor art” (qtd. in *A Thousand Darknesses* 7) What does not appear to be considered in these views is the idea that literature can draw readers closer to the event and introduce the voices of the victims into the hearing, triggering empathy. Indeed, the power of literature in this regard is dismissed. Therefore, they imply, like Wiesel, that literature has to be silent. Franklin draws attention to the insecurity of critics who respond to Holocaust literature, while Alvin Rosenfeld in *The Double Dying* refers to such critical responses as blasphemy. Franklin puts it thus:

If it is barbaric to write a poem about the Holocaust, is it not also barbaric to read one—or at least to read one critically? This is a fundamental insecurity of many critics who address themselves to this body of literature—a canon that is vast, diffuse, and growing steadily, not
to mention extremely demanding on the reader. Critics and scholars tend to proceed hesitantly, offering caveats, prefacing and concluding their arguments by emphasizing their own inadequacy to the subject. (6)

The focus of thought processes in the debate regarding whether or not imaginative literature can also bear witness to genocide, as shown so far, has been largely based on the ethical notion to not speak about it; to remain silent, undermining the significance of speaking or expressing it. But research has shown that imaginative literature contributes to the way we see the world. Literature can develop collective empathy. It shaped civilizations and connects humans through words expressed aesthetically. The idea that literature is the mirror of society can also be referred to. How life is viewed and understanding the minds of others is an important part of literature and it is what makes the psychological nature of imaginative literature so significant to this debate and to the study of genocide.

For instance, in a series of experiments conducted by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano at the New School of Social Research in New York in 2013, their research shows that reading literary fiction improves our ability to understand other people’s emotions and perhaps to sometimes understand their rational for doing what they do that we may not welcome. For the researchers, it was a crucial point to test the notion of the significance of literature to human minds and to society. In these experiments –about five experiments with about 1000 participants who were each randomly selected and assigned a piece of literary fiction to read—responders responded more emotionally to what they read in fictions than in non-fictions:

In a series of five experiments, 1,000 participants were randomly assigned texts to read, either extracts of popular fiction such as bestseller Danielle Steel’s *The Sins of the Mother* and *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, or more literary texts, such as Orange-winner *The Tiger’s Wife* by Téa Obreht, Don DeLillo’s “The Runner”, from his collection *The Angel Esmeralda*, or work by Anton Chekhov… The pair then used a variety of Theory of Mind techniques to measure how accurately the participants could identify emotions in others. Scores were consistently higher for those who had read literary fiction than for those with popular fiction or non-fiction texts. (*The Guardian*, 8 October, 2013)

Susan Keen in her book, *Empathy and the Novel*, advances this thought further to see what in fiction evokes people’s emotions and triggers empathy. She follows up on Wayne Booth’s investigations into the world of the novel and empathy with an attempt to prove the psychological nature of fictions. Booth’s question to his interlocutors was simple: “Name fictions that changed your character—or made you want to change your conduct” (Keen 66). Booth’s question, as noted by Keen, already suggests that it is in the nature of imaginative works to do both things: change
characters and alter conducts. In her findings, Keen confirms that when “I took the early versions of this book (Wayne Booth’s) around as talks to a variety of different venues (including church groups, friends of the local library, book clubs as well as university audiences), I found that a majority of my interlocutors agreed with Booth’s premise—reading fictions ought to change your character or want to alter your conduct” (66).

Kidd and Castano and Booth and Keen suggest that imaginative literature can alter character and change one’s conduct. They all found that empathy grew out of a relationship with the characters portrayed in literary texts as well as the experiences represented regardless of whether or not the identity of those portrayed is similar or different to that of the readers. To take an instance of a few of the comments made by some of Keen’s interlocutors on the texts they read:

Although I have never been in a situation in which I was charged with murder, I have experienced empathy for Vernon, the 15-16 year old boy in Vernon God Little. In my reading, I have been overcome by stress and frustration for him as he has been ignored by the “grownups”, wrongly accused, and tricked.

I think if anything at all I felt empathy with Edwidge Danticat’s Krik? Krak! Coming from a war-torn country myself, I could honestly feel what the characters were feeling. The story that sticks out to me the most is the one where the woman found an abandoned child which we discovered is dead. (71)

The significance of literature in the way we read our world is the reason why, in the study of Holocaust or genocide literature, there is need to acknowledge a place for imaginative literature because “the act of imagination...is the act of empathy” (Franklin, 15). The affective purpose of creative works is also important. Rather than dismiss imaginative literature for its aesthetics, which is seen as inappropriate to the study of genocide, we need literature “about the Holocaust not only because testimony is inevitably incomplete, but because of what literature uniquely offers: an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing” (Franklin, 13). The same would be true of literature on the Rwandan genocide. Even what is referred to as factual writings on the Holocaust may in some cases depend on artifice to render the events convincing. Also, the art of narrativisation, which non-fictions or factual writings frequently employ, can help in triggering emotional connectivity with the subject at hand. For example, the proclamation, “never again”, made by President Clinton on the Rwandan Genocide was made after reading Gourevitch’s We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families. We Wish is a non-fictional work, but it is one that employs narrativisation to elicit empathy and render the story convincing. We Wish is not a work of fiction like Boubacar Diop’s Murambi, but it shares the same sentiment as Murambi and
borrows from the same body of stylistic techniques as Murambi. In one sense, it is a product of historical research or genocidal reporting. In another, it is a product of the imagination. The significance of narrativisation in both works shows that the line between fact and fiction, between history and literature, is not an absolute one.

2.2 The Art of Narrativisation: The Nexus between Fiction and Reality

Every canonical work of Holocaust literature involves some graying of the line between fiction and reality. (Ruth Franklin, A Thousand Darknesses 11)

The crossing of boundaries (if there was ever any obvious boundary), the graying of lines between fact and fiction, is similar to the one between history and myth. The notions of myth and history have been largely analysed to show that both are relatively defined according to culture categories in which they are placed. In the same vein, fact and fiction tend to function within that range. That is not to say that both are the same, at least in terms of how they are perceived and defined, but that in expression, they are bound by the same code of culture categorisations. In Holocaust writings for instance, part of the reasons why imaginative literature is dismissed as a serious form of Holocaust writing is based on an assumption that fictions are somehow equivalent to “lying”; an assumption that fictions would focus the perception of the historical events on the minds of the average reader through various forms of character humanising rather than on the ‘truth’ of the event itself. This they see as marking it as different from non-fictions, which are supposedly based on actual events, and which focus on the event itself. But since both are dependent on language use and use the same language and its linguistic strength to express their views of the events, there is bound to be more similarities in their productions than differences. Part of these similarities are that both focus on inner states of mind and on external events.

Martin Löschnigg once observed this notion of equating fiction with lies in his research on autobiography as published in his essay, “Postclassical Narratology and the Theory of Autobiography”, where he debunks the whole idea as untruthful:

The question of fictionality, including the fictional elements in autobiography, has been discussed extensively…suffice it to say that a pragmatic definition is now widely accepted which regards fiction as a specific form of communication that is subject to aesthetic norms rather than those which govern non-fiction texts, and by different contextual conventions, and which can therefore not be contested in the way non-fiction texts are. However, this
understanding of fictionality does not allow for a clear-cut distinction between “factual” and “fictional” autobiography, especially if one considers that it is really the representation of inner states which is at the core of the genre. Neither does it provide guidelines for distinguishing “genuine” from “fake” autobiography, since fiction does not equal “lying”. (267)

The two texts under survey may not be autobiographical texts, in that neither Boubacar Diop nor Philip Gourevitch witnessed the genocide firsthand or wrote these texts as accounts of someone who witnessed it directly, but still the question of where to draw the line between fiction and factuality raised by L öschnigg is still relevant to them. Definitions are not enough to differentiate what is factual/truthful and what is fiction/“untruthful” because all definitions limitations; many important facts are usually lost in definitions or are not taken into consideration. Moreover, both fiction and nonfiction both share a tendency to attempt to capture the inner states of things.

Despite this understanding, in Holocaust writings, there is a heavy distrust of fictions (even of non-fictions at times) in whatever form they may come because the reception of genocide literature usually focus on a heavy insistence on truth—literal truth: “The slightest hint that even a single passage in a memoir might not be literally true is enough to cast doubt on the entire enterprise” (Franklin, 11). This insistence on literal truth, which led to the boom in memoirs, also led to testimonial frauds as shown earlier. Moreover, memoirs which are expected to at least be literally true rely largely on the memory, and memory has been proven to be largely fallible. Someone who experienced a traumatic event in the past cannot be expected to recollect everything in the present in the exact way they happened, particularly when the time of the occurrence and the time when it was written about are many years apart. Human minds simply do not work like that. It would in this sense be a miracle to find any memoir that is completely accurate because in most cases, part of the realities contained there are narrativised to fill it up. Franklin puts it this way:

Such insistence on literal truth is particularly absurd in the light of all that scientists have learned about memory in the past few decades, confirming what poets and novelists have been telling us for centuries. The fundamental unreliability of the human mind has been established over and over again; it has become a truism that our memories are not the tape recorders they were once thought to be, playing back duplicate copies of original experiences on demand, but are rather more like mosaics: pieced-together scraps of experience from various sources that generate the appearance of coherence. “Every person carries within himself a rough draft, perpetually reshaped, of the story of his life,” Lejeune wrote. (11)

So the idea of literal truth in memoir, that is, a memoir that is so authentic that it has zero percent chance of being partly fictional can only be an idea or an expression that is certainly not
grounded in reality or as Hayden White would call it, it can only be a “linguistic entity”. Most memoirs or testimonials go through publishing firms which are interested in profit and usually subject most of those writings to editing. That is in fact if the authors themselves do not embellish things, as is common knowledge today about the diary of Anne Frank, or in some other cases where events sometimes get exaggerated and genders get substituted. Therefore, seeking the “truth-value” in the so-called acceptable forms of historical representation of a traumatic historical reality is somewhat absurd. Franklin writes:

   By emphasizing the fallibility of memory…I do want to question fundamentally the idea that testimonials about the Holocaust—the “holy writ,” in Rosenfeld’s words—are pure, authentic documents that exempt themselves from criticism and interpretation. If we start examining these manuscripts closely, we discover that there can be no such authentic document, because all written texts are in some way mediated. To consider any text “pure testimony,” completely free from aestheticizing influences and narrative conventions, is naïve. (11)

   In Holocaust and genocidal writings not enough attention has been paid to the art of narrativisation. As Franklin points out, narrative choices are made in the representation of historical events, which means that the line between fiction and fact is not absolute. Or as Robert Braun quotes Hayden White in “The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation”: “In conveying ‘historical reality’ historical representation employs narrative form as a mode of emplotment, thereby weakening the direct connection between factual statements and the means of representation” (172).

   Hayden White is one of the few figures in historical criticism “eager to emphasize the artificial, fictive and anti-realist nature of historical narrative” (Hayden White: The Historical Imagination: 10), and one of the few popular critics to argue for the acknowledgement of the art of narrativisation which traditional historical writings, particularly those on genocidal narratives, tend to overlook. The idea he foregrounds is that historical representations of any kind of historical realities usually emplot their narratives, whether inadvertently or deliberately. In his 1987 collection of essays titled The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, White took on the task of examining various critiques underrating the value of narrativity in historical discourse. He held the value of narrativity as a universal and cultural fact, rather than as a “merely a neutral discursive form” (ix) in historical writings, or as a mere form of mythmaking. He called for a return to narrative representation of historiography, which is not only valuable to scientific historians alone or to literary writers, but even to those who write about the ‘unspeakable’, just as many fields of discipline are beginning to acknowledge the social and cultural significance of telling a story about the past:
Philosophers have sought to justify narrative as a mode of explanation different from, but not less important than, the nomological-deductive mode favored in the physical sciences. Theologians and moralists have recognized the relation between a specifically narrativistic view of reality and the social vitality of any ethical system. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts have begun to reexamine the function of narrative representation in the preliminary description of their objects of study. And cultural critics, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, have commented on the death of the great “master narratives” that formerly provided precognitive bases of belief in the higher civilizations and sustained, even in the early phases of industrial society, utopistic impulses to social transformation. And indeed, a whole cultural movement in the arts, generally gathered under the name post-modernism, is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling presuppositions. All of this can be taken as evidence of the recognition that narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing. (Preface: The Content of the Form, xi)

For the Holocaust fictional writer and the Holocaust reporter, their use of narrativisation as a mode of explaining genocide is based on their concern for sociopolitical and cultural understanding and the moral question: ‘what does it mean to be human at the end of the twentieth century?’ If critiques of these imaginative narratives are seriously concerned with the problem of truth in Holocaust writings, they should also be concerned about the political and moral implications that underpin every other form that has being supposedly considered acceptable. Or to simply ask the question as White did in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”: has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator? (21). Indeed, I would argue that memoir, testimonial and imaginative literature of genocide are all driven by the same moral impetus to create a compelling story and capture the voices of witnesses to genocide to show the anger and grief, and how suddenly things can fall apart and emotions can run the gamut from joy to despair.

In this sense, therefore, Murambi is a fictional work, but in another sense it can also be seen as not a fictional work for two reasons, namely moral concern and inspiration. If genocidal memoirs and testimonials are both inspired by an experience of a horrible past that was lived, Murambi is also inspired by the same event and by direct encounters with those who experienced the genocide, because the novelist’s imagination is shaped by the relation between his experiences and those of the ones he attempts to describe. And perhaps to discard Murambi as merely fictional and affirm We Wish as a factual report and norm, thereby overlooking other literary aspects of it, is to underestimate the level of literary sophistication displayed therein. This is not to deny that Murambi is not a novel or to
deny that *We Wish* does not belong to the genre of nonfiction, but that labels for these works do not matter so much as their narrative dispositions, which aim to come to an understanding of the indescribable.

So, finally, amidst the whole debate on the insistence on the truth of fictions, on accuracy of the events represented, on factual realities and objectivity, the following chapter examines to what extent *We Wish* demonstrates faithfulness to the views of critics of literary imagination and deal with the event of Rwandan Genocide. This thesis also does the same with *Murambi* later. I examine how *Murambi* demonstrates its capability to deal with the consequences of human destructions and at the same time translate these consequences into meaning. One major enquiry made is what made *Murambi* different from other literature of genocide and what does it do differently that other nonfictions cannot? Eileen Julien in her foreword to Boubacar Diop’s *Murambi*, titled; “Foreword: An Urn for the Dead, an Hourglass for the Living”, puts the question thus: “what does a novel such as this bring to the awful violence of genocide that journalistic accounts and histories cannot?” Her answer to this is worth quoting at length:

> These forms of narrative are held to a well-known standard of truth. They are meant to establish and report facts, to offer an accurate and balanced, if not objective, representation of events. *Murambi* does contain such elements. It makes plain that the slaughter was pre-mediated and prepared and that it had external support. But it does not delve into pre-colonial and colonial history to explain the shifting relations of domination that helped consolidate the divisive identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa and fuel violent ethnic hatred. Nor does the novel propose the definitive and unambiguous answers we may be looking for—why did the slaughter take place? What was the chronology? Who shall we blame? *Murambi’s* significance lies elsewhere. It does what a creative and transformative work alone can do. It distills this history and gives voice to those who can no longer speak—recovering, as best as we can, the full, complex lives concealed in the statistics of genocide and rendering their humanity…It is through the work of imagination and language that the novel reconstitutes those unique human beings, now lost to us, and allows them nonetheless to survive and to be heard. Their stories may lead us to reflect on the practice of evil and help us claim our very own humanity amidst the routine banality of violence, the numbed indifference or silent acquiescence of which we are all a part. (ix-x)
CHAPTER 3

Genocide in Philip Gourevitch’s We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families

Decimation means the killing of every tenth person in a population...The dead of Rwanda accumulated at nearly three times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust. It was the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (We Wish3)

Philip Gourevitch’s We Wish, considered to be a factual investigative report, is arguably the most remarkable report to have been written about the Rwandan genocide. Remarkable in the sense that in confronting the topic of genocide, in this case the Rwandan genocide, it gave its readers very rare details of the violence. Writing for the Washington Post Book World for instance, Jonathan Randal equates Gourevitch’s text with Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. According to him, We Wish is “a milestone of foreign reporting and a chronicle of evil rarely rivalled since Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness... Gourevitch’s compelling account should be required reading.” (We Wish, i). Yet, despite the accolades the book has received, reviewers tend to ignore or fail to acknowledge other aspects that helped the book to achieve success. One of these aspects is the style of its writing.

Gourevitch’s idiosyncratic style interweaves literary aesthetics with a factual journalistic account of the genocide. Gourevitch conducted a series of interviews with a variety of people, who are mostly victims of the genocide, immediately after the genocide, so that We Wish takes up a vital position in that realm or spectrum where fictional techniques border on factual reportage.

There are other reasons for Gourevitch’s achievement, namely the sentiments and responsibilities that shaped the book and rendered an explicit account of the genocide convincing. Gourevitch’s report is a historical evaluation of Rwanda, and partly a piece of historical revisionism on the persecuted Tutsis. Empathy for the Tutsis is dominant, but the historical victims of pre-independence Rwanda were Hutus, who were largely persecuted during the domination of Rwanda by foreign powers. It was not until after the violent atrocities they provoked shortly after independence that they were first designated as killers. But the way Gourevitch portrays them in this
book does not conform to this historical reading. In fact, they are portrayed as though they had always had that propensity for extreme violence. This suggests Gourevitch’s underlying political ideology; to present one group as bad so that the other group can be seen as the opposite.

Gourevitch’s text can be seen partly as an author’s moral and ethical obligation to humanize the thousands of voices of victims of Rwandan genocide whose cries were never heard during the genocide. Gourevitch attempts to come to terms with what has happened as well as the consequences in the aftermath of what transpired: “I wanted to know how Rwandans understood what had happened in their country, and how they were getting on in the aftermath. The word ‘genocide’ and the images of the nameless and numberless dead left too much to the imagination” (7). Hence, Gourevitch faces the challenge of interpreting and putting into words the overwhelming nature of evil. Gourevitch wishes us to feel and comprehend the severity of the massacre.

This chapter explores Gourevitch’s style of writing and how it aids his representation of the genocide. The work aims primarily to be factual, but this does not exclude the deliberate use of narrative elements and techniques. The Hutus are represented as evil and the Tutsis as good, simplifying the events into a conflict between good guys and bad guys, the triumph of evil over good, and a struggle between light and darkness. As I shall argue in this chapter, this mode of rendering is at best oversimplifying, and at worst distorting. There is no “bad guy” or “good guy” in this type of genocide, no light or darkness, but a case of revenge taken to extremes, where those who saw themselves as ethnic and historical victims, on acquiring political power, took the extreme form of marking the other group for extermination.

Gourevitch’s “emplotment” of a series of Rwandan historical events makes them seem like a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. The use of specific narrative techniques and imaginative modes enliven even factual narration and arouse empathy. *We Wish* is not entirely a factual report or a purely journalistic work; with its carefully delineated characters and plotted synchrony of events, it can be seen as literary journalism.

3.1 Of Confronting and Describing: Binality in *We Wish*

Binality is a scientific method of expressing or representing two things as pairs in oppositions whereby one becomes stronger because the political forces responsible for its strength largely oppress the other to an extent that the other becomes weaker. The initial relation between the two (before, during or after conflict) can partly be symbiotic and/or parasitic depending on the circumstances involved. The concept of *Binality* originates from the binary oppositions or binary systems of the
It is the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the notable French anthropologist, that are considered to have fundamentally changed modern anthropology and revolutionized our understanding of how the human mind works in relation to established structures like human society, its culture and mythology. His revolutionary doctrines extend the Saussurean structuralist theory of binary oppositions to myth and culture. He argues that people think and behave in certain ways within various sets of binary categories, and it is through these thoughts that meaning can be derived. Ferdinand de Saussure had earlier claimed that a “sign's meaning is derived from its context (syntagmatic dimension) and the group (paradigm) to which it belongs” (Narrative and Genre 64). That is to say a word literally derives its meaning from its opposite. For instance light becomes light only if darkness is understood as darkness; light takes its meaning from darkness and vice versa. Lévi-Strauss’ theory of binary opposition is also applicable to literature and myth: the underlying idea regarding myth is that “mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution” (Structural Anthropology 224); similarly, most narratives contain elements that oppose each other as well as elements that mediate or resolve conflicts.

In the light of We Wish, we can see that the conflict is demonstrated in the form of ethnic cleansing, which the Hutus believed would save them from their enemies, the Tutsis. The text follows that narrative progression of an awareness of conflict between the two groups of people, where the author becomes a personal mediator between the event being narrated and the people. How authors mediate may, however, depend on their agenda about the events being described and their emotions toward their characters. This work reflects both in this particular author. His attitude towards genocide is not surprising because he descends from parents who fled Nazi brutality, a brutality that is analogous to the genocide he focalizes on: “My own parents and grandparents came to the United States as refugees from Nazism. They came with stories similar to Odette’s (one of the interviewees in the text), of being hunted from here to there because they were born as this and not that, or because they had chosen to resist the hunters in the service of an opposing political idea” (71). Therefore, the Rwandan genocide could be his own way of revisiting and reliving the stories he must have heard from his parents, which may in turn explain why almost all the voices of the victims in the text are Tutsis when there also numerous Hutu moderates who were victimised by génocidaires, some of whom were killed by their kinsmen on account of being labelled Tutsi sympathisers.

It is indeed a wonder how the book is somehow silent about them but mainly recounts the experiences of the Tutsi victims with less effort to understand the other side. The text appears to condemn the Hutus on almost every page. There is an expectant feeling that begins from the opening
pages of the text, that to be a Hutu is to be bad. This leaves the reader unsatisfied with the one-sided distortion or reduction of the Hutus and their history, especially when placed side-by-side with other deeply informative texts on the Rwandan genocide, such as Mahmud Mamdani’s *When Victims Become Killers*, which recognises the Hutus to be historical victims, as the title suggests. Mamdani refers to the Hutus as historical victims who later became killers because of the historical oppression they had experienced at the hands of the Tutsis. *We Wish*, however, seems to contradict this.

Gourevitch uses binarity in such a way that throughout the book the Hutus, whether moderate or not, are presented as the face of evil. Were there no good Hutus at this time who fought in defence of the defenseless and in defiance of the national call to murder? He uses juxtaposition, and at times the juxtaposed conflation of character elements can be misleading. It is always clear which side of the binary divide the author is on. Take this paragraph from the early pages of the book:

A few weeks earlier, in Bukavu, Zaire, in the giant market of a refugee camp that was home to many Rwandan Hutu militiamen, I had watched a man butchering a cow with a machete. He was quite expert at his work, taking big precise strokes that made a sharp hacking noise. The rallying cry to the killers during the genocide was “Do your work!” And I saw that it was work, this butchery; hard work. It took many hacks—to chop through the cow’s leg. How many hacks to dismember a person? (17)

Note how the author’s words create a sensory image of a Hutu in the act of killing, even when he never mentions the butcher’s tribe. But the idea of mentioning that the place at that time belonged to the Hutu militiamen, and then later juxtaposing the act of killing a cow to the act of dismembering a person raises questions about whether the Hutu are those who enjoy killing. It is easy to draw a distorting view of Hutus from this paragraph alone. Not only that, there is also an implied comparison between butchering a cow and butchering a person. Could it be accidental that Gourevitch seems to be suggesting that Hutus are expert in both dealings—killing of cows and dismembering a human body? One gets a clear binarity from here of an author leading the reader into an opposing divide, where one possesses animalistic attributes (evil) while the other is the victim (good).

In one of the interviews with two survivors, there seems to be a situation that can only be best described as an action-play of the triumph of evil over good, between the Hutus who were allegedly lusting for blood and a set of pastors whose manner of death informs the title of this text. Two men, Samuel and Manase, are interviewed to narrate what led to the death of the Seventh-day Adventist pastors who were reportedly murdered while hiding in Mugonero hospital. Samuel who worked as a medical orderly in the hospital and Manase, whose profession was to care for the doctors, reported the level of inhumanity that evil demonstrated against defenseless victims who went ahead for the last time to seek help from their spiritual leader, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, with the hope that
he, being a Hutu and whose son, Dr. Gerard, happens to be the mayor of the town, would come to their aid. That never happened. Their spiritual leader would later be alleged to be responsible for sentencing them to death after the pastors had written a letter to him seeking his intervention so that they would not be killed in the church. Earlier, Samuel had observed that there was “a change in climate” (26), a period of muteness where no one wanted to “talk to anyone anymore” (26) because Gerard, who people have always seen as “one who sets the example” (26), was cooking up a plan to exterminate Tutsis. From a letter came a response that would exterminate all hope:

“And the response came,” Samuel said. “It was Dr. Gerard who announced it: ‘Saturday, the sixteenth, at exactly nine o’clock in the morning, you will be attacked.’ But it was Pastor Ntakirutimana’s response that crushed Samuel’s spirit, and he repeated the church president’s words twice over, slowly: “Your problem has already found a solution. You must die.”…Manase remembered Ntakirutimana’s response slightly differently. He told me that the pastor’s words were: “You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you.” (28)

There is a focus here on how religion and politics both failed the people. It is about how a person representing the government and a person who is seen as a symbol of religious piety combined to cause the death of hundreds of people they had sworn to protect. This yet again reveals an underlying divide that places one ethnic group on the negative side and the other on the positive side despite records which show that both groups were a combination of good and bad. Certainly, the Hutus in power massacred a huge number of Tutsis and genocide was carried out by them, but at the same time many Hutus were married to Tutsis and refused to kill their wives as instructed, and choosing not to be part of a killing spree were also killed in the process. At least, the record shows that a high number of Hutu moderates suffered the same fate as the Tutsis. And when the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) matched into Rwanda, many atrocities were committed and many moderate Hutus were killed along the way. Gourevitch, however, only sticks to the story of equating Hutus with evil and Tutsis as good. The death in Mugonero shows the triumph of evil over good. In the aftermath of the tragedy, Pastor Ntakirutimana would walk away a free man.

In the wake of the death of President Habyarimana, who was then the President of Rwanda before the genocide began, and when the shape of the genocide was just about taking the form of an impending atrocity, Gourevitch, using the art of narrativisation examines the life of Thomas Kamilindi, who was then a reporter for Radio Rwanda, a popular propaganda station that was notable for inciting the majority of Hutus to take up arms against their Tutsi neighbours. Broadcasting over the air, the radio had announced that “the President has been attacked” (110) while returning from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and his plane had crashed. Till this day, officially, no one has been able to prove the group responsible for the bombing of the President’s plane. What is, however, clear is that
both of the conflicting groups have a motive. For Hutu, it could have been a reason to start an all-out war against the Tutsis by claiming that they are responsible for the death of their “esteemed” president. The Tutsis, on the other hand, could argue that the Hutus killed their own president because they needed a reason to carry out the already planned objective of a full massacre. Whichever case it was, there is only one thing that is certain: the president died along with his counterpart from Burundi who was flying with him at the time.

But Gourevitch does not seem to be convinced that either of the sides could be responsible. It is as though he would only accept that the Hutu were responsible for it when it was obvious that at that point in time the RPF, which would later bring the genocide to a stop, had already invaded Rwanda. Gourevitch uses Thomas as his focalisation to suggest this view:

Thomas, who had well-placed friends, had heard that large-scale massacres of Tutsis were being prepared nationwide by the President’s extremist entourage, and that lists of Hutu oppositionists had been drawn up for the first wave of killings. But he had never imagined that Habyarimana himself might be targeted. If Hutu Power had sacrificed him, who was safe? (111, emphasis mine)

Note the author’s immediate inference from the situation is to bring to the fore the unsafe period of that time and the fear that this brought into the nation. He completely ignores the logicalities of the situation that both groups may have had a reason to sacrifice the President. The Tutsis may have sacrificed him with the hope that getting rid of him, like in a game of chess, would somehow bring a stop to the genocide, and of course Hutu Power as well. Whether or not Hutu Power sacrificed the President, there was tension already in the air caused by both the invasion of the RPF and the genocide that was already starting. But for the author to rhetorically suggest that only the Hutu Power was culpable seems to yet again reflect the binarity that portrays one as good and the other as entirely a product of evil who would sacrifice their leader to achieve their objective.

What is also ironical and particularly interesting is that the motivation for Gourevitch’s journalistic endeavour to Rwanda is informed by what he considered the general reporting of the war on Rwanda across various media channels in America, where the notion of bad guys as against the good guys first came up. He was inspired by this notion that he became curious to visit Rwanda to understand things at first hand for himself. While he seems to disagree with the notion, he does not clearly deny it either:

That is how the story of Rwanda has generally been reported, as the war between the génocidaires and the RPF-installed government drags on. In a typical dispatch, headed “Searching in Vain for Rwanda’s Moral High Ground,” my local paper, The New York Times,
described a Hutu refugee maimed in an attack by Tutsi soldiers, and a Tutsi refugee maimed by Hutu Power militias as “victims in an epic struggle between two rival groups” in which “no one’s hands are clean.” The impression created by such reports is that because victims on either side of the conflict suffer equally, both sides are equally insupportable. To drive the point home, the Times got a sound bite from Filip Reyntjens, a Belgian who is considered one of Europe’s leading authorities on Rwanda. “It’s not a story of good guys and bad guys,”... “It’s a story of bad guys. Period.” (185-186)

The idea that such concept of binarity exists to be considered in the analysis of the Rwandan genocide would only lead to more misleading positions and inaccuracies because the historical terrain on which he writes is riddled with contested history. Good and bad cannot be matched to a particular ethnicity. There were perpetrators and there were victims on both sides. This moral relativity is described by Annick and Alexandre, two people Gourevitch interviewed at the site of the confrontation between Hutu Power escapees and the RPF in Nyarubuye: “You don’t know how to think about it...who is right and who is wrong, who is good and bad, because the people in that camp were many of them guilty of genocide” (200).

As a writer, Gourevitch was curious to make sense of the genocide and to find a balance so that an understanding of the idea that “Hutus kill Tutsis, then Tutsis kill Hutus” (186) would not be that “mindless and simple” (186). However, Gourevitch cannot hide his fascination and admiration for Paul Kagame, the leader of the RPF, who he often describes with a degree of reverence and wonderment. Gourevitch makes a case for Kagame as a man of strength, comportment and reason with a clear vision of a future Rwanda. While Gourevitch felt himself be fearful of a nation of people with such a volatile past, Kagame stood firm in action and intelligence. Gourevicth sees Kagame as a leader comparable to the Greek war lord, Achilles, or even the god of Olympus himself, Zeus. From one of his various interviews with Kagame, he says of Kagame:

I felt tempted, at times, to think of Rwanda after the genocide as in impossible country. Kagame never seemed to afford himself the luxury of such a useless notion...He always sounded so soothingly sane, even when he was describing, with characteristic bluntness, the endless discouragements and continued anguish that surely lay ahead...He was a man of rare scope—a man of action with an acute human and political intelligence. It appeared impossible to discover an angle to the history he was born into and was making that he hadn’t already reckoned. And where others saw defeat, he saw opportunity. (225)

At no point does Gourevitch criticise Kagame even in his seemingly cautious perception of the leader. Kagame was no stranger to revolutionary movements. He had engaged in such activity in the politics of other nations bordering Rwanda for more than fifteen years. He led the invasion into
Rwanda where their conflict with Hutu Power left many innocent people dead along the road, and where the RPF laid waste to a number of people, génocidaires among them, in one of the humanitarian camps on the border of Rwanda. Gourevitch, however, absolves Kagame of any guilt. To the author, Kagame is infallible, whatever others might say:

Because he (Kagame) was not an ideologue, Kagame was often called a pragmatist. But that suggests an indifference to principle, and with a soldier’s stark habits of mind, he sought to make a principle of being rational. Reason can be ruthless, and Kagame, who had emerged in ruthless times, was convinced that with reason he could bend all that was twisted in Rwanda straighter, that the country and its people truly could be changed—made saner, and so better—and he meant to prove it. The process might be ugly: against those who preferred violence to reason, Kagame was ready to fight, and, unlike most politicians, when he spoke or took action, he aimed to be understood, not to be loved. So he made himself clear, and he could be remarkably persuasive...And what he said mattered, because Kagame was truly somebody of consequence. He made things happen. (225)

In other words, to Gourevitch, Kagame might have emerged in the political limelight during a ruthless period but he was never ruthless himself. He justifies Kagame’s revolutionary style as “overthrowing dictators and establishing new states in the harshest circumstances” (225). He dismisses any claim of Kagame’s perceived violent or ruthless style and instead sees him as a paragon of reason at a higher altitude than most political leaders could attain. To Gourevitch the Tutsis are an extension of their leader. Kagame is a figurative symbol for the Tutsis, discussed in the most admirable terms. He is a symbol of everything good. And in binary terms, the Hutus are the good side of the equation, which, of course, raises the question of ethics in writing.

Therefore, while Gourevitch shows a fidelity to the ethical obligation of empathising with the victims of genocide, he fails in his moral obligation to question the ethics of violent actions. In addition, Gourevitch relies on fictive elements and a narrative style that promotes binary thinking about complex political issues.

3.2 A Form of Literary Journalism: How We Wish Upsets Our Genre Expectations

Each time we pick up a book to read, we normally have some expectations about the book. These expectations usually vary in different ways. We have expectations about the content, the focalisation and the form. We can also have expectations informed by our own preconceived ethical implications of the text and the effect the text can have on us. Some texts are expected to arouse our
empathy for people in our real world whose lived experiences are similar to the experiences of the characters in the text we read. Other texts can teach us about an event which may be an event that once happened in history that we can be either familiar or unfamiliar with. What about at the level of literary genre, do our expectations have profound implications on our perceptions about the text after reading it?

The general consensus about literary works is that they are written works that deal in different ways about diverse issues. The nature of these writings—the style—dictates which genre of literature it can be qualifiedly designated. When we pick up a book, we are usually aware of the book’s genre. If we pick up novel we expect an imagined tale. If we read a nonfiction, we expect factual accuracies, not made-up characters. Hence, we might be offended by a non-fictional work which saturates an event in aesthetics and uses narrative elements to present it. Imagine when the event is not simply just another event but a very serious one like genocide. But although *We Wish* is said to be a nonfictional work that deals with an untranslatable event, the text challenges our expectations by the author’s artful blending of narrative techniques with journalistic modes within the confines of what is regarded as nonfiction.

Here, I outline three major narrative styles or elements, among others, that the writer invoke in representing the experiences of his characters. At the level of plot, the writer uses a backstory which is set at the beginning of the text and which ushers us into the events of the text. It is, however, not clear how relevant it is to the main plot of the story, although it is plainly significant to the understanding of the general mood instigated by the genocidal events, and the ethical concern of writing either a fiction or a nonfiction on genocide. In terms of perspectives, we encounter multiple perspectives of the events told by different interviewees, and moderated by the author whose perspectives have an intrusive way of standing for his characters. The different kinds of style used include amplification, a descriptively-narrativered mode of patterning through imagery and rhetorical questions to constitute serious and highly empathetic sensory details. The aim of the following section is again, to show that a recourse to fictional strategy can be a means to achieve an end in writing about genocide.

**The Plot**

Gourevitch’s use of a backstory in *We Wish* is not without significance. A backstory is regarded as any story that precedes the major events of a work of art. Its major significance lies in its role in leading the reader into the main idea or depth of a text and even beyond. In *We Wish*, we are introduced to the backstory first without any prior knowledge about its significance in the main event,
and even to the very end, we are left uncertain about its connection to the genocide. Nevertheless, some parts of the story show how the author expects us to interpret the events of the genocide and cue us to what actually happened in Rwanda. According to the author, the reason why he tells the story at the beginning is “because this is a book about how people imagine themselves and one another—a book about how we imagine our world” (emphasis mine, 6).

The story, as presented, reflects the author’s experience on his trip along the Southern hill town of Gikongoro, in a bar with some drunk soldiers and a civilian. He had intended a conversation with the soldiers but on realising how drunk they are, his attention turns to the only civilian among them, who happens to be a pigmy, and with whom he has the whole conversation that makes up the entire backstory. The content of that conversation is about a white woman. The pigmy insists that he must only marry a white woman without even explaining clearly the reason for his choice. They spend some time talking about that and how frustrating the barriers to realising one’s cherished dreams are. They extend that conversation to how humanity is part of nature and how human beings struggle to conquer nature, which the pigmy considers a problem.

Part of what we learn from this backstory concerns not only distrust but the perpetual desire for something different and how this desire often becomes frustrating if one’s chances of achieving one’s dream are slim, leading to bigger problems. To some extent, this backstory is connected to the main text, but it can also be seen as different. An instance of distrust can be seen in the early period of getting into the bar with the drunk soldiers, when a glass of beer is passed around, and Gourevitch is to sip at it last to prove it is not poisoned: “A single glass of beer was passed, from which I was the last to sip—a ritual signifying that I was not to be poisoned” (5). This at the beginning of a text on genocide affects our expectations and mood. Here we are cornered to begin to believe that there is a high level of distrust in this society and that distrust is a significant reason behind the genocide: the Hutus killed the Tutsis because they cannot trust them to live together within the same society.

Even while the pigmy tries to argue using the principle of Homo sapiens to refer to his theory about all humans being one, he, a black man, still insists that he must marry a white woman. The author challenges the pigmy to rethink his statement: “Why not? I said. Then after a moment, I said, “But why if we’re all the same? Who cares what color your wife is?”(6). At this point, the pigmy realises that he himself has a problem: “But I have a problem. I must marry a white woman. She must be a white woman, only a white woman can understand my universal principle of Homo sapiens. I must not marry a Negro” (6). This is another case of distrust: the pigmy does not think that a black woman would be capable of understanding his worldview. He sees worldviews within the framework of colours and his frustrations soon begin to set in as to how he can achieve this aim: “This is my problem, he went on. How am I to attain this goal? ... How am I to meet the white woman? How do
I find a white wife?” (6). The entire part of this text appears somewhat fictional and would appear to have little direct connection with the genocide. But what Gourevitch is doing, however, is introducing foreshadowing—the theme of distrust, central to the Rwandan tragedy, is brought in this semi-comic way.

**On Perspectives**

In this text, we are confronted by multiple viewpoints from multiple narrators who are either directly or indirectly involved in the events of the genocide, whether as perpetrators or victims, or as non-participants who function as implied narrators. However, one of the limitations of the text is that it focuses more on what the victims have to say about the genocide and how they talk about it, while less space is given to the perspectives of the perpetrators. In short, we do not get to hear from the génocidaires except when the implied narrator portrays or represent their views through his perceptions of the events, inferred from what the victims talked about. We thus eventually have a shifting focalization from one narrator to the other; from the perspective of an implied narrator from one character to another, leading to a plurality of perspectives.

In fact, the implied author appears to be the main focaliser because all the events, the character's position in relation to the events as well as the interpretations of their words, are all filtered through his view of genocide. His mediation on the characters, words and the events reveals his own consciousness and position concerning the events of the genocide. All information reflects the subjective position of the implied narrator. So, at different points, the author rejects the position of an external focaliser and only presents internal focalisation.

Odette, for instance, is one of the narrators whose perspective on the events the author mostly dwells on. She is described as a “girl who is sent away as a cockroach and comes back as a medicine woman” (69). In one of her versions of the event that took place while in school, we are ushered into her feelings about the nature of the topic and asked to imagine her life:

The Belgian director of Odette’s old school in Cyangugu would not readmit her, but she found a place in a school that specialized in the sciences, and began preparing for a career in medicine. Once again, the headmistress was a Belgian, but this Belgian took Odette under her wing, keeping her name out of the enrollment books, and hiding her when government inspectors came looking for Tutsis. “It was all trickery,” Odette said, “and the other girls resented it. One night, they came to my dormitory and beat me with sticks.” Odette didn’t dwell on the discomfort. “Those were the good old years,” she said...The only thing that Odette said about her life as a medical student was: “In Butare once, a professor of internal
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medicine came up to me and said, 'What a pretty girl,' and he started patting my bottom and tried to set up a date even though he was married.” The memory just popped out of her like that, with no apparent connection to the thought that preceded it or the thought that followed. Then Odette sped ahead, skipping over the years to her graduation and marriage. Yet, for a moment, that image of her as a young student in an awkward moment of sexual surprise and discomfort hung between us. It seemed to amuse Odette, and it reminded me of all that she wasn’t telling as she recited her life story...This made sense to me. We are, each of us, functions of how we imagine ourselves and of how others imagine us and looking back, there are these discrete tracks of memory...My own parents and grandparents came to the United States as refugees from Nazism. They came with stories similar to Odette’s, of being hunted from here to there because they were born as this and not as that… (70-71).

Here we are introduced to how the harshness of Odette’s story as a victim of sexual abuse and as an unwanted personality in the Rwandan society because of her identity as a Tutsi causes her a feeling of discomfort. We are made aware of her emotions through the focaliser (implied author) with a connection to the plot of the story which is replete with a terrible and discomforting mood. Here also we realise what Odette did not say or refuses to say and all that she said. We also realise how the implied author attempts to place the story of Odette within his own story of the son of parents who had experienced similar events. Here we see both the implied author and the narrator sharing the same discomfort at an emotional level while providing a similar mood or feeling in the story. In the same vein, the implied narrator appears to be mediating between Odette’s story and her actions toward the story: “Yet, for a moment, that image of her...It seemed to amuse Odette…”

Apart from Odette and every other character who gave similar perspectives on the event, there are also some who cast doubt on the idea of genocide in Rwanda. This represents a different view from the obvious perspective of the implied narrator, who insists that the genocide did happen. There is, for instance, a certain Mbonampeka, who offers an opposing view to what transpired in Rwanda. Where others see genocide in Rwanda and believe that genocide took place, Mbonampeka disagrees: “Personally, I don’t believe in the genocide. This was not a conventional war. The enemies were everywhere. The Tutsis were not killed as Tutsis, only as sympathizers of RPF” (98).

There is also the question of unreliable narrators concerning certain aspects of the genocide. One cannot be sure whether the author uses this technique deliberately or not, but it raises the readers’ suspicions as to what is truthful about the information provided, how the information is provided or when the information was provided. Were, for example, the narrators interviewed at the same time or at different times regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of the Seventh-day Adventist pastors who were killed in Mugonero church?:
“And the response came,” Samuel said. “It was Dr. Gerard who announced it: ‘Saturday, the sixteenth, at exactly nine o’clock in the morning, you will be attacked.’” But it was Pastor Ntakirutimana’s response that crushed Samuel’s spirit, and he repeated the church president’s words twice over, slowly: “Your problem has already found a solution. You must die.” One of Samuel’s colleagues, Manase Bimenyimana, remembered Ntakirutimana’s response slightly differently. He told me that the pastor’s words were “You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you” (28).

Here we are confronted with the dilemma of whose version to believe while at the same time tempted to distrust both versions. Both claims about the pastor’s response to the cry for help of his other pastors might be conceived as a product of memory loss or psychosis caused by the trauma of the genocide even though one is not sure how the two narrators came by the exact words purportedly said by the pastors for they were not in the location when they were killed. Again, it can be argued that the implied author uses this technique to reflect the state of mind of these narrators as unstable and traumatised.

On Style

The narrative nature of Gourevitch’s text is evident in its provision of detailed accounts of interrelated events in Rwandan history and the history of its genocide. It puts together pieces of Rwandan history and situates the information derived from these events within a temporal space, the genocidal space. So in an effort to provide readers with deeper meanings that can best aid them in visualising and imagining the horrible nature of the genocide, it evokes a narrative style that reinforces the argument that in writing about genocide, art may be inescapable.

A lot can be said about the common narrative styles that are evident in this text, many of which follow the style used in most fictions. One device is amplification, when writers embellish their stories with extra details, elaborate more than necessary or decorate a sentence in order to stimulate our interest in the story. The aim of this device is to create an emotional effect, or aid our understanding of the text’s thematic implications. Another device is imagery. Imagery is one of the most significant techniques of narration that is used to generate mental images of the scenes within a text and is achieved by using descriptive words. Finally, rhetorical questions create a dramatic effect, asking questions that influence our thinking but require no answer.

In the case of amplification, consider the following extract from the text: “As I travelled around the country, collecting accounts of the killing, it almost seemed as if, with the machete, the masu—a club studded with nails—a few well-placed grenades, and a few bursts of automatic-rifle
Also, in the passage quoted earlier in this section about the butcher killing a cow, there is a use of amplification as a change in connotation. Here, the writer refers to the killing of a cow in terms of the amount of effort required to kill a human being. In another place, the writer, using amplification, compels readers to consider the wasteful and erroneous nature of the ideology of genocide, and to make us imagine why people have to fall in line to back an ideology of extermination: “I can see that it happened. I can be told how, and after nearly three years of looking around Rwanda and listening to Rwandans, I can tell you how, and I will. But the horror of it—the idiocy, the waste, the sheer wrongness remains uncircumscribable” (19). This is another example of amplification as both an emotional effect and as the subject matter—the repetition on ‘I can’ is rhetorically used to evoke the horror of genocide.

Amplification can also affect us through the use of unusual thoughts or images: “The dead at Nyarubuye were, I’m afraid, beautiful. There was no getting around it. The skeleton is a beautiful thing. The randomness of the fallen forms, the strange tranquility of their rude exposure, the skull here, and the arm bent in some uninterpretable gesture there—these things were beautiful, and their beauty only added to the affront of the place” (19). We move from the amplification of words to the incongruity of high-sounding imagery applied to the dead at Nyarubuye. One wonders how dead people are beautiful when the nature of their death is horrible. Conjuring such paradoxical sentences may sound absurd on the surface, but deep within as it evokes the agonising pain behind the death of these beautiful people. We are confronted with the visual images of skeletons and dead bodies and a sense of smell of their decaying bodies, even if the writer does not specifically say so. Another implied contrast is that between genocide and natural beauty: “Rwanda is spectacular to behold. Throughout its centre, a winding succession of steep, tightly terraced slopes radiates out from small roadside settlements and solitary compounds. Gashes of red clay and black loan mark fresh hoe work; eucalyptus trees flash silver against brilliant green tea plantations; banana trees are everywhere. On the theme of hills, Rwanda produces countless variations: jagged rain forests, round-shouldered buttes…” (20) Here, the marked beautiful visual imagery connected with natural elements contrasts with genocide as a concrete reality in Rwanda’s history.

Rhetorical questions are used in this text to create certain literary, persuasive and emotional effects. They are also used to make the readers ponder on the situation within the text, reevaluate their
position regarding certain aspects of the Rwandan genocide and to make a point. Consider this: “Considering the enormity of the task, it is tempting to play with theories of collective madness, mob mania...with each member killing one or two people. But at Nyarubuye...hundreds of thousands of Hutus had worked as killers in regular shifts. What sustained them, beyond the frenzy of the first attack, through the plain physical exhaustion and mess of it?” (17). This is a deliberate use of rhetorical technique to make the readers rethink the how of the attack, particularly in relation to the timing of the genocide and how long it lasted.

The author also contemplates the issue of rape and how it intersects with the question of murder and ethnic cleansing:

If you cry out, where you live, can you expect to be heard? If you hear a cry of alarm, do you add your voice and come running? Are rapes often averted, and rapists captured, in this way in your place? ... What if this system of communal obligation is turned on its head, so that murder and rape become the rule? What if innocence becomes a crime and the person who protects his neighbour is counted as an “accomplice”? Much to contemplate here and much to imagine about rape and murder and how we act under such circumstances. (34)

Later we have this: “Thomas, who had well-placed friends, had heard that large-scale massacres of Tutsis were being prepared nationwide by the President’s extremist entourage, and that lists of Hutu oppositionists had been drawn up for the first wave of killing. But he had never imagined that Habyarimana himself might be targeted. If Hutu Power had sacrificed him, who was safe?” (111)

Again, the writer uses rhetorical questions to make the point that Hutus could have sacrificed their own to achieve their aim of ethnic cleansing and to send a warning to other Hutu moderates who at that time might have been unwilling to comply.

Another literary device used in We Wish is allusion, such as historical, political, literary, and biblical (like the reference to the story of Cain and Abel on page 47). There are also cultural references, such as an allusion to the activity of the famous naturalist, Dian Fossey (77). Again, all this points to one thing: that while some critics have insisted that literature cannot bear witness to genocide, a study of We Wish shows that a work that is classified as nonfiction can employ literary styles on various levels to write about genocide. Writing in this way does not reduce the horror of the genocide but is instead an attempt to apprehend genocide even when the author is an outsider and has not witnessed the genocide at first-hand.

The reliance of nonfiction on elements of fictions is not uncommon. It is one way that fiction can translate the genocide into meaning, being faithful to the ethical obligation that the memory of the dead be preserved. In the following chapter, I examine the work of another outsider whose work
also bears witness to the genocide. Like Gourevitch, Diop is also a journalist who travelled to Rwanda to comprehend and understand the genocide from within. The difference between Diop and Gourevitch, however, is that the former is an African from Senegal, while the latter is an American. In terms of genre, the former’s work is fiction, while the latter’s is nonfiction, though as I have shown, the two texts can overlap.
Chapter 4: Diop’s Murambi

Closer to the Heart of Tragedy: But Who Heals a Headless Progeny?

One of the significant aspects of rendering genocide in the imaginative form is that it reveals the effective and affective nature of the genre on one hand, interrogates the functionality of human empathy, and activates the innate ability of humankind to feel, on the other. Often we come across fictional works, which after reading them, would have lasting effects on our psyche, especially in the light of empathy for the characters who have gone through harsh and terrible experiences. We can associate and dissociate. We can relate to and celebrate actions and events. In the case of genocide where the focus is on the génocidaires, the victims and the event itself, balanced reporting is essential. This means that we need to hear both the victims’ and the killers’ relationship with the events. with victims, including the dead is of great value to a genocidal work because not only may we want to know their thoughts during the events of their last hours, but as Eileen Julien in her foreword to Murambi puts it: “their stories may lead us to reflect on the practice of evil and help us claim our very own humanity amidst the routine banality of violence, the numbed indifference or silent acquiescence of which we are all a part,” (Murambi ix). These stories mean we can once again value and treat the dead as human beings rather than mere decomposed bodies, or to use that biblical term, ‘dust’.

While We Wish fails in this regard to hear from the génocidaires and the dead by only focusing extensively on genocide survivors, although understandably so because it cares so passionately about how they feel, Murambi creates a balance. Julien writes: “It is through this work of imagination and language that the novel reconstitutes those unique human beings, now lost to us, and allows them nonetheless to survive and to be heard” (Murambi ix). In Murambi, we hear from the three sides: the génocidaires, the victims who survived and the dead. It can be argued for this reason that Murambi fills the gap left by We Wish. Reading Murambi, one gets an unfiltered feeling of empathy for the victims which is different from that elicited when reading We Wish. In order words, it completes it.

Murambi deals with some of the burdensome philosophical questions that are raised by the Rwandan genocide, but it leaves us to contemplate the notion that some of the answers we may seek about the genocide cannot be answered. Comparing Murambi and We Wish raises the question of who or what genre should bear witness to the genocide and how these events might be handled.

So what does Murambi do differently exactly? Julien makes the case for the importance of Murambi, and of good imaginative literature about the genocide:
What does a novel such as this bring to the awful violence of genocide that journalistic accounts and histories cannot? These forms of narrative are held to a well-known standard of truth. They are meant to establish and report facts, to offer an accurate and balanced, if not objective, representation of events. *Murambi* does contain such elements. It makes plain that the slaughter was premeditated and prepared and that it had external support. But it does not delve into pre-colonial and colonial history to explain the shifting relations of domination that helped consolidate the divisive identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa and fuel violent ethnic hatred. Nor does the novel propose the definitive and unambiguous answers we may be looking for—why did the slaughter take place? What was the chronology? Who shall we blame? *Murambi’s* significance lies elsewhere. It does what a creative and transformative work alone can do. It distills this history and gives voice to those who can no longer speak—recovering, as best we can, the full, complex lives concealed in the statistics of genocide and rendering their humanity. (*Murambi* ix-x)

At the centre of *Murambi* is the effort to make readers understand the most important, underlying point of writing about the killings of people we may have perceived differently from ourselves, namely, empathy for the affected. Psychologically speaking, it has to do with collectively weighing the extent of such monstrosities on our souls as human beings, and not just treating the event as merely a Rwandan or an African phenomenon. It is a world issue that we all have to come to terms with. Here in *Murambi*, as noted by Julien, “we confront the enormous disproportion between the work of art, as beautiful and powerful as it may be, and the terrible events it symbolizes” (x). *Murambi* is an artful blending of fact and fiction that focuses on accuracy of reporting and on a reconstitution of unique human beings whose voices have been forever lost to us, those who may have been silenced, but whose voices speak through the text.

From such an imaginative yet transformative viewpoint, in this chapter, I focus on *Murambi’s* representation of the Rwandan genocide by examining how the novel bears witness to the genocide, depicting the experiences of those haunting voices affected by the horrific event of 1994. Again, this part is mostly concerned with the question of what is described and how it is described and for what purpose these descriptions are made. The essence of this is to show that imaginative literature has the creative mechanism and the psychological power to challenge and cause a change in our political worldview, particularly in how we perceive others we see as different from ourselves. It possesses the ability to effect a transformation and also bears witness to genocide. Imaginative literature has the possibility of handling genocide with accuracy and truth. As we shall see here, *Murambi* does this and, I shall argue, takes us closer to the heart of the tragedy than a factual report might do. The point of writing about genocide is clear: it is to increase our empathy for those affected, to see where we failed in our collective humanity and to say ‘never again,’ and that is what *Murambi* envisions.

In 1998, the Chadian journalist and writer Nocky Djedanoum and his co-director of Fest’Africa, an annual African cultural festival in Lille, France, invited Boubacar Diop and nine other prominent African writers to visit Rwanda two years after the genocide. Their journey meant metaphorically marching on skulls and imagining spectres in their process of comprehending the genocide; to make sense of the genocide (if that was possible) they would have to be willing to unlock the doors of hell. Rwanda to these people was just another distant place where something bad had happened and where there was an urgent need to report it as journalists. But Diop, against instructions to write a nonfictional text as others did, found fiction a better way of approaching the genocide. In doing so he wished to reverse the common error of simply reducing the Rwandan event to merely a Rwandan experience. It was also an event in which each person experienced the tragedy differently. Explaining it away as merely a Rwandan event is erroneous, but to call it a world problem is apt.

In an interview which appeared in the journal African Identities, Diop talks to Véronique Tadjo (one of the ten-person team that visited Rwanda) about Murambi:

This book marks an important step in my own journey as it was necessary for me to go to Rwanda before I could properly understand the role and responsibilities of the writer, whether that writer was African or not…The passage from Murambi, le livre des ossements [Murambi, the book of bones] which we have just listened to corroborates what I observed in Rwanda. At the end of the novel one of its characters says more or less the following: ‘I am a true Rwandan: both innocent and culpable’. The book itself is conceptualized in such a way that it appears seamless. What I mean by this is that the different chapters are not necessarily linked to each other, each one having, without this necessarily being true in every case, a meaning which is more or less independent of the others. What I realised, and Véronique probably did too as we were in Rwanda together, is that, although genocide is a collective tragedy, each person experienced that tragedy very differently. When we look beyond the cries of hate and terror, beyond the general confusion, each person is absolutely alone. (425)

Diop is convinced that while it is important to write about the sufferings of people that have been affected by the excesses of hate and terror, it is equally important not to betray these people’s sufferings by clumping them all together as those whose experiences of the same catastrophe are the same. This shows a writer’s moral responsibility to see people’s experiences as unique, realising that
words like ‘victims’ and ‘génocidaires’ are not enough. On another level is a concern to show that no single person is specifically to blame for the tragedy; there should be no scapegoats because everyone is culpable. The ethical burden was to look beyond the terror and admit that sufferings of this nature are borne independently and differently; what remains are Rwandans who are partly culpable and partly innocent of the genocide.

Diop addresses his moral burden through the polyphonic nature of his novel. *Murambi* explores the experiences of several interdependent characters within the not necessarily interlinked chapters of a work of fiction. What we hear is a multiplicity of narrative voices with individual characters speaking for themselves (not as representatives of their ethnic groups), revealing what they underwent as the events unfolded. What we see are characters whose actions are influenced by how they are politically and culturally designated, that is, in terms of their identities as either Hutu or Tutsi. But they are not limited to that. We see moderate Hutus here who at that time were defenders and protectors of persecuted people, not judging them by how society tended to see them but as individuals who ignore identity markers and focused on saving some human lives to the best of their capabilities. We see Tutsis who saw it all and yet are alive and some who saw it but are not alive to bear witness to it. We see some of the dead being once again endowed with life to tell their tales and we see those dead whose stories are told from another’s point of view. We see Diop as a character who was not there when it all happened but came in at a later time to comprehend it.

Diop felt it essential for his readers to see for themselves how ethnic nationalism breeds fear and anger, and the consequences of this if left to fester. We also see what happened when the genocide eventually started. We are confronted with what remains and how those that remain struggle to “call the monster by its name” (179) or are faced with the numbness there is in trying to understand the best way to live a sane life after such a catastrophe. All these characters offer us deeply nuanced multi-perspectives of the tragedy, challenging us to reexamine ourselves about what makes us human. Genocidal stories are not just mere stories about violent human activities, they are about our own violence towards others. Rwandan genocide is our collective story where Murambi (the setting of the novel) is no longer a distant place, but our everyday world.

From the first part of the novel, one already gets a feeling of an intermix of different characters’ voices. Diop drops them into the novel with each chapter bearing the name of a character. The first character introduced to us is Michel Serumundo, who appears to be a defenseless, innocent Tutsi operating the Fontana video shop within a space where unusual things are about to happen. He wonders why people have not been visiting his shop to rent some movies, which would have been the usual thing on a normal day. But this day is not normal. The reason for the abnormality is not necessarily because he is going home “…almost without a penny in his pocket”(4) but because there
have been unusual blaring of sirens and disturbing movements of the presidential guards and their tanks, taking positions in strategic places around the bus stations. This, maybe, is the reason why no one visited his shop that day but naively, he goes on until he is stopped by a guard, who asks for his identity. Serumundo’s statement says it all about the essence of identity markers and shows how polarized the region is: “Sure enough, the first thing they want to know is if you are supposed to be Hutu, Tutsi or Twa” (4). And on telling them, the soldier’s response is one of hopelessness and possibly sympathy, difficult to know when the soldier responds with a mere: “Ah Tutsi…,” (4) and then gives the card back to him, shaking his head in pity.

The soldier’s action and that of his other colleague, who also asks Serumundo a series of unnecessary questions about his work and what he does there in the market and how sure he is that such work is what he does, reflects a sort of dramatic irony because at that point in time, and unknowingly to Serumundo, the apocalypse has come: “It dawned on me later that he (the soldier) had taken me for a mad man. As I moved away, I felt them staring at me, baffled” (5), lurking around the market when hell is about to come down on earth. But Serumundo continues his journey towards the bus station where on getting on the bus, the events of the day begin to make sense to him. It is the first time he would realise that the President’s (Juvénal Habyarimana) plane had been shot out of the sky on the 6th of April, 1994. How people in the bus react to the news and how this event becomes translated among them, the majority of whom are of Hutu ethnicity, is worthy of note here, so also are the religious implications:

We made a U-turn and a big man with a mustache, wearing a blue jacket blurted out in a loud and almost joyful voice: “this time they are not joking, are they? ...” That’s it,” He said coldly without taking his eyes off me, “they are going to tell us again that it’s an unfortunate accident.” Most of the passengers agreed with the man and repeated that this time it wasn’t going to happen that way. They said it was going to be a field day for the militia. My blood froze. The Interahamwe militia, whose only purpose in life was to kill Tutsis. Someone announced that he had seen a ball of fire fall from the sky. “It’s a sign from God.” (6)

This is not the first time that God has been used to justify senseless killings of innocent people. And the religious implications of old doctrines have always found a breeding ground in every new civilization. The Old Testament of the Bible, for instance, is replete with various passages where God is said to have commanded the leaders of Israel to commit genocide. Later, the wanton killings of innocent people were defended in a similar way: the murder of Jews during the People’s Crusade, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Saharan slavery, colonialism, Islamic Jihad, etc. Here, some even argued that when the plane got blown out of the sky, the debris was seen on the lawns of the President’s house, which to them was a sign from God to avenge the death of the
President even when no one was sure about who was responsible. But because of an age-long hatred, it is interpreted as another call from God to action. That action is the utter destruction of everything that is Tutsi. And for Serumundo, who is a Tutsi, it sounds like the end that Radio Mille Collines, the propaganda station that has been operating to instigate people to insane murder, has always spoken of. This radio station was a factory for violence and an actor—one of the principal actors—in the tragedy.

This was also the time of the World Cup, where the world’s awareness was focused on the competition and Rwanda would have been the least of the world’s worry. Here we see once again the usual lack of interest in what does not affect us directly. Rwanda, to the world at that time, is another distant reference which could have easily been explained away as another story of blacks beating up and killing each other. Even Serumundo understands that quite well, telling his wife and assuring her that the whole world is watching Rwanda and she should not worry because they would work to avert such an impending disaster, though knowing otherwise: “In my heart I knew I was wrong. The World Cup was about to begin in the United States. The planet was interested in nothing else” (10). Diop, through the haunting voice of this character, evokes our usual lack of concern for things outside our own interests. Without putting the blame on any side, Diop insists that we are all guilty of this act, and Serumundo, who would later die in the massacre, testifies that he had always treated news such as this with indifference until it happened to him:

I’ve seen lots of scenes on television myself that were hard to take. Guys in slips and masks pulling bodies out of a mass grave. Newborns they toss, laughing, into bread ovens. Young women who coat their throats with oil before going to bed. “That way,” they say, “when the throat-slitters come, the blades of their knives won’t hurt as much.” I suffered from these things without really feeling involved. I didn’t realise that if the victims shouted long enough, it was so I would hear them, myself and thousands of other people on earth, and so we would try to do everything we could so that their suffering might end. It always happened so far away, in countries on the other side of the world. But in these early days of April in 1994, the country on the other side of the world is mine. (10)

Faustina Gasana and Jessica, whose stories make up the remaining chapters of the first part of this novel, represent the two opposing sides of this divide. Gasana is in the Hutu militia and appears to have been brought into the killings of the Tutsis partly by some form of parental compulsion and partly on account of his hankering to prove himself to his fellow Hutus to be someone who believes in the struggle as fundamental to the survival of their ethnic group. Jessica, on the other hand, is one of Rwanda Patriotic Front’s liaison agents. During the genocide, she exerted her intelligence skills as an undercover agent with a fake Hutu identity card to gather intelligence for the RPF, who would
eventually bring the killings to a stop. Both of these characters’ stories offer us an insight into the minds of the génocidaires and their victims. Jessica’s actions may demand another look at the collective term, victims. Jessica does not appear to be a defenseless victim even though her people are being subjected to horrendous tragedy. She is a victim of a type who many will see today as a typical example of a strong woman who puts her life on the line for her people so that they may live to see another day.

The relationship between Gasana and his father is of note because it reveals different levels of hatred. Gasana’s father has been eaten up by historical hatred for the Tutsis, who he wants wiped out. He partly sees the Nazis as his idols. He demands of his son the same—to inflict the same Jewish suffering and impose the same Jewish fate on the Tutsi people. It is not surprising, however, that such a man is a high-handed person who everyone in his house finds terrifying because of his intense oppression of both his wife and his children. While there is no justification for evil, one can argue that Gasana may have been a different person if he had never been pressurised by his father, and fed the insane animosity of his father’s hatred for the Tutsi. On the other hand, there are also instances that show Gasana himself becomes a modern-day symbol of Hutu bigotry. Here, for example, is his conversation with his father:

Father asks me straight away: “Do those people take us for real men or for women?” Without leaving me the time to respond he adds that this time, “They have gone too far”...I have never heard him pronounce the word “Tutsi.” He always calls them “them” or “Inyenzi,” literally cockroaches. “We’ll teach them to respect us,” I say after a moment of reflection. “We’re ready.” (14)

The idea behind this level of hatred is to eradicate the Tutsi. But what is also noticeable is the sense of fear that ironically plagues these plans. What troubles them most is not the taking of human life, but their fear that they will be unable to accomplish their plans, so that people will label them “bad guys in this business” (15). It is unclear, however, whether Gasana truly believes that people will see them as good guys should they succeed. So, here, we are confronted with the way propaganda has brought confusion into the notion of good and bad guys. Gasana seems to have stretched the term “bad guys” beyond its meaning such that, on the flip side, it conflates with the notion of good guys. Or how can someone whose plan is to commit genocide ever believe he is a good guy? This is one of the problems with genocide in history where the génocidaires could somehow feel that they were doing the right thing by murdering human beings in their hundreds, nay thousands. Here, one can feel Gasana’s compulsion changing from a family thing to his desire to prove himself a good guy doing what is ‘right’ for his country. However reluctant he may seem and resistant to his father’s
extremeness, he knows that “after the first machete blow, we’ll have to see it through to the bitter end” (15).

It is also disturbing to see how the father, who in this novel can be seen as embodying the minds of the Hutu militia and dictators at that time, compels his own child not to spare children. To the father, killing the children of Tutsi is of utmost importance to their plans because according to him, the children always return to lead a battle of vengeance against them. He tells the story that the leader of the RPF at that time is someone who, in a similar tragedy that broke out in 1959, was spared by the Hutus because of the Hutus sheer recklessness and distraction from the cause in looting and raping women. Although Gasana does not seem to be interested in his father’s advice, which makes the old man angry, they both share the same hateful sentiment behind the genocide—they both believe that they can never live together with the Tutsis in the same country. According to Gasana: “I’ve always known in becoming an interahamwe that I might well have to kill people myself or perish under their blows. That’s never been a problem for me. I’ve studied the history of my country and I know that the Tutsis and us, we could never live together” (19).

Jessica is unlike any in Gasana’s family, not just because she is of different ethnicity but because she “leads a double life” (25) as a Tutsi agent and a Hutu incognito. She also knows where she stands and how level-headed she has to be in bringing the genocide to a stop. Gasana’s mother is indecisive as no one knows her stance about the whole thing, but Jessica’s loyalty to the Tutsi cause is unquestionable. Through Jessica’s eyes, we learn about a number of things as well as about other Tutsis whose lives are snuffed out by the tragedy. We learn about the love between Lucienne (a Tutsi) and her boyfriend, Valence Ndimbati (a Hutu), and how they were planning to get married. Shortly after this, the killings begin. Valence, one day, after having protected Lucienne at first, went after his fiancée with a machete shouting, “no love today” (69). Lucienne’s life ends in suicide, haunted by cases where a husband murders his wife or vice versa. Lucienne’s story is just one of many. This calls the notion of love into question and how love becomes a mere construct that often loses its meaning during genocide.

Jessica’s good friend, Theresa Mukandori, is another character we learn about but see her violent death through the eyes of Jessica: “The young woman had her head pushed back...A stake—of wood or of iron...—had remained lodged in her vagina” (73). There is also Stephane Nkubito, Jessica’s comrade in Bisesero, who pens a letter a few hours before his death about the culpability of a Hutu businessman who sponsored the supply of machetes to the Hutu militia to kill the Tutsis in Bisesero. Despite Nkubito’s awareness of the risk in spreading such information, he puts his life on the line to warn others of an impending tragedy that is about to befall them. We are also told about the death of ten Belgian soldiers, how Belgium decides to pull out of Rwanda, and how certain Hutu
moderates who do not want to have anything to do with such monstrosity and publicly condemn the tragedy, were killed. Jessica’s perspective gives credibility to the idea that the Rwandan genocide was an organized killing. In one of her stories of how the Hutu militia works and how it killed the prime minister, she reveals the anger in the background of such planned attacks and the pain of the victims:

They uttered the terrible words: *Muhere iruhande*. Literally, “Begin with one side.” Neighbourhood by neighbourhood. House by house. Don’t spread your forces out in disorderly killings. All of them must die. Lists had been drawn up. The prime minister… and hundreds of other moderate Hutu politicians have already fallen to the bullets of the presidential guard. To tell what they did to Agathe Uwilingiyimana is beyond me. A woman’s body profaned. After the so-called *Ibyitso*, the collaborators, it’ll be the Tutsis’ turn. What they’re guilty of is just being themselves: they’re barred from innocence for all eternity. (28)

But Jessica’s actions come at a high price, a burden she may well carry for the rest of her life. One of the burdens is the memory of the many killings she witnessed while undercover pretending to be Hutu, having to stand and watch her people being slaughtered every day. In scenes of daily slaughter, the question is raised, what can the individual do? One concerns a woman about to be slaughtered. She tries to escape and begs Jessica for help, but she can do nothing to help:

A woman they’ve wounded but are waiting to finish off a bit later comes toward me, the right part of her jaw and chest covered with blood. She swears that she’s not a Tutsi and begs me to explain to the man in charge of the barrier. I move away from her very quickly. She insists. I tell her dryly to leave me alone. Seeing this, the Interahamwe militiaman is convinced that I’m on his side. He blurs out in a joyful peal of laughter…Then he brutally pushes the woman back toward the throat slitters… (32)

Whether or not the woman being killed is Tutsi is irrelevant. What is relevant is how much can one person do in such a situation to help another from being killed. It is not exactly sure what Jessica could do in the face of blood-thirsty people like the militia, coupled with the fact that she is just one woman among men. But the empathy she feels to talk about this woman later and the regret she feels is plain, such that even later on, years after the genocide, she still remembers the sharpness of massacre. Of course, how can genocide ever be forgotten?

This question of forgetfulness and forgiveness has always been one of the most difficult questions that genocide has raised. Genocide is brutal, yet it is a source of creative art, including imaginative literature. And as much as one tries to forget, which is impossible, there exists a sort of attraction to the events from a creative point of view. Curious minds want to make sense of
catastrophes and the more they do, the more they keep stumbling on new things, opening up old wounds. One of the characters who clearly embody this curiosity is Cornelius Uvimana, a Hutu who has been in exile in Djibouti and was not in Rwanda during the genocide. Cornelius represents someone who did not witness the 1994 genocide but decides to visit Rwanda later. He also represents those who are in the habit of treating genocide as a distant event that does not affect them directly. Cornelius is a Hutu whose mother was a Tutsi, meaning that he is a mixture of both ethnicities. But in his mindset, his return to Rwanda after the genocide is simply to write a story about it. However, he is not interested in writing a story from Djibouti, he is interested in writing a first-hand account. For this reason, Cornelius travels to Rwanda, four years after the genocide.

Ignorant of the exact nature of what had happened four years earlier beyond the news that he had lost all his family in the genocide apart from his uncle, Simeon Habineza, Cornelius’ determination to simply write his story will backfire. The difficulty of writing a story about genocide is clear here: writing about genocide in order to make people feel the tragedy and learn from it usually comes at a price. Being someone who comes to Rwanda to confront its past and understand its present, he is struck by a weirdly ironical feeling. He does not understand whether he is coming to his country to suffer or be happier. His departure from Rwanda in the 50s was caused by a similar experience to the one that brought him back. He seeks an answer, “to understand it” (42).

Cornelius initially represents those minds who seek easy and quick answers to the genocide; those who would rather leave dissatisfied than suffer because of the information they would stumble on; on the bones and skulls and spectres of the Rwandan dead. However, Cornelius’ situation turns out to be a point of reawakening, a rebirth from ignorance to awareness, from passiveness to activity. Diop seems to be making a claim that genocide cannot be left unspoken, it should be speak-able so that as each day passes, these tragedies will serve as a point of remembrance to avoid future ones. Diop puts it this way about Cornelius: “To come back to one’s country—to be happy or to suffer—was a rebirth, but he didn’t want to become someone without a past. He was the sum of everything he had experienced. His faults. His cowardliness. His hopes. He wanted to know, down to the very last detail how his family had been massacred. In Murambi, Simeon Habineza would tell him everything he had to” (44).

Cornelius’ friends, Stanley and Jessica, who knew exactly how the genocide played out and even tried to treat Cornelius in as friendly a way as they could, also struggle sometimes because they know that no matter how Cornelius acts as if he has no blood on his hands, memory always has a way of reminding one of an old wound: “Stanley had tried very hard to sound natural, but his voice had betrayed him” (44). Murambi in this novel, through the interactions of the characters, changes from being a mere name to a spatial setting where nothing seems to make sense and where the dead of
Rwanda haunt whoever seeks sense in a senseless world. Even Stanley himself, during the first tragedy, had taken it upon himself to travel to the West to bring attention to the killings in Rwanda, a tragedy about which nothing was done. His comparison of the Rwandan case to the Nazi Holocaust to create a mental picture of the genocide in Rwanda seems to have little effect on the Westerners. Stanley still harbours rage but he is one of the few who struggles to forgive the West for their betrayal.

Stanley speaks for Diop when he insists that no matter what the offence of any country or any people is, no matter what the grudges against one another are: “let’s save human lives first and talk about it later” (47). This is one of the points about writing or speaking about genocide; to pass on the message how vital it is for humans to always rise in defence of other humans and to save them from being killed by murderous and callous souls. Stanley also deconstructs the notion of nationalism, which has become a watchword and pretext for hate. For him, bigotry is contrary to every notion that makes us human. He argues that the idea of claiming to belong strictly to one country and being essentially of that country has no basis in what really defines us. Using the Rwandan case, he argues: “What that whole period of my life taught me is what makes us different from other people; no one is born a Rwandan. You learn to become one. I read that somewhere else, and its fits our situation perfectly. It’s a very slow project that each one of us takes upon himself” (48). In other words, everything we take up as identifying markers are things we were told or we learned about as no one came into the world bearing a national marker. And that what has always led to massacres of this scale has always been a notion of difference: “us” vs “them.”

Another aspect, yet again, that this novel confronts is the problem of the mind after the genocide, particularly in relation to the issue of forgiveness and forgetting and how difficult both seem. One instance is when Cornelius goes to the bar to relax with Stanley. A situational irony occurs when he does not hide the fact that he is in Rwanda to write a story about the genocide. Unknown to him, people in the bar know exactly who he is and many were there for the first time to see what he looks like. To them, it means looking at their killer, or the offspring of one of the killers. To him, they are just ordinary Rwandans who are there to have a relaxed evening. A character, known as Skipper, who cannot hide his feelings any more after seeing Cornelius, blurts out in anger, “Me, forgive? But you must be joking! You must be joking!” (51). This outburst raises Cornelius’ fear. He is so worried that he struggles unsuccessfully to find the face of Stanley, who looks away. In his response later to that scene, Stanley expresses the deep nature of wounds and rage that many victims of the genocide carry about each day, having to walk through the streets and see their killers walking freely in the same society where they have been told to bury their grudges and embrace one another as Rwandese. He says: “We try and forget, but sometimes it comes welling up so powerfully. No-one can do anything about it. That man (Skipper) escaped a massacre” (53).
Stanley cannot hide his uneasiness talking about the genocide, and even when Cornelius presses him further, he confirms that he hates to talk about it and that he even wants to forget. Forgiveness to these people is a burden they must carry with them their entire lives: “No, I hate it. Know that for once and for all I want to forget...If you want to know the truth, here it is: Skipper wasn’t looking at anyone and he’s already forgotten all about it” (53). Drinking seems to be their only way out of their misery, and that only works for a short while.

Most of these characters find relief in different things or in the different active roles they played during the tragedy, some of which are comforting, yet it does not come without feelings of regret. All this does not heal the wound of their rage. Jessica, for instance, believes that her participation in the struggle to stop the genocide was simply to restore normalcy. But when things are hard and the génocidaires are left walking the street without being made to answer for their sins, she feels a sense of regret: “when things are really hard, I have to admit that I feel adrift. But then I immediately feel ashamed for having thought so...We fought to make Rwanda normal, that’s all. It was a good fight” (63). This sense of shame can be seen in two different ways. One involves opening up another way of thinking for those who have sought to change the world in whatever way they attempted to, and the other is to distance oneself from such experiences and continue to live one’s life as normally as possible. Both instances are what Diop contrasts. Cornelius explains it thus: “But we live in such a bizarre period. In Africa, in Europe, everywhere, the few people who still want to change the world are almost ashamed to say so, they’re afraid of being taken for idiots... But you know all too well, after the genocide, life continued” (64). One can then wonder whether this is the sense of normalcy that Jessica and the rest fought for. Diop insists that most times when people claim to fight to restore normalcy, what often comes out of it is a return to abnormalcy. The idea of normalcy in this sense is the same as abnormalcy. And such is the recycling of abnormalcy in a world where people feel helpless and no one can see an end in sight. Jessica seems to know that all too well: “That’s what’s terrible: we can’t do anything” (64).

If there is anything the return of Cornelius to Rwanda proves, it is beyond the problems of forgetting and forgiving, or our way of treating genocide as a distant thing, it is about the fact that human stories are our personal stories and the Rwandan story is our collective story. A moment of truth within the novel confirms this. Cornelius, whose return to Rwanda carries with it that distant effect of writing a story about the genocide, would later realise that the story he seeks to write is actually his own story. This happens when Jessica tells him of the complicity of his father in the genocide. Cornelius’ intention is to visit Murambi, where his family lived to understand the nature of his family’s death and to write a story about every detail he is able to get, but Jessica’s revelation of genocide is astounding: “Tomorrow, you’re going to Murambi, and you should know that your father organized the massacre of several thousands of people there. The carnage at the Murambi Polytechnic
was his doing. You should also know that he had your mother, Nathalie Kayumba, your sister Julienne, your brother Francois, and all his in-laws killed there” (77). Cornelius’ father had formerly defended the rights of the common people against injustice, but during the genocide, he became monstrous. Rwandan genocide raises the question of whether human beings are inherently evil, and whether or not we only have to come into contact with something to unlock the evil inside. And after genocide, we sum up death in terms of numbers, talking of figures rather than lives. We categorise the numbers as occupying a mere geographical space rather than showing a respect for life: “people think that forty-five thousand deaths aren’t very much for Africans...we’ve never done anything to respect human life” (79).

In Murambi, we are confronted with a number of reasons for killing. All the motivations point to the same cause, namely hatred and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda. But these motivations have other inner levels that are worth analysing. Some are motivated by greed: an opportunity to take property. Some are motivated by violence and lust: an opportunity to defile bodies and commit rape. Some are motivated by a love for inflicting pain and suffering on others, eventually killing them too. These latter people have violence in them already, but they only need an official reason to justify their actions. So with the hateful call to action and with government support, they have all the necessary justifications they need. In a sense, one can argue that the idea of ethnic cleansing is simply a pretext to carry out the self-interests that have always lurked within certain individuals.

Aloys Ndasingwa, one of the génocidaires, is someone who falls within the latter category. His intentions were to kill. He participates in the killing of the 25,000 Tutsis hiding in Nyamata church and feels no remorse at all for being a part of it. While the Tutsis thought that being in a church would somehow deter the killers from coming into the church to kill, Aloys sees that as “attributing good intentions to your enemy” (85). And while he recognises the church as the House of God, he also reassures himself that both the Hutus and the Tutsis are not serving the same God and where they are at that moment is the House of the Tutsi gods, so that killing them there would mean defeating the gods of the Tutsis. Aloys’ thirst for Tutsi blood is an uncontrollable one because where others like him seem to be distracted with other intentions—looting, raping and even abducting for sexual purposes—all he and his local prefect want to do is to kill them all. He confesses thus: “The Inyenzis who were under hiding underneath the bodies were already having a hard time breathing. The tear gas made them sneeze loudly and all we had to do was lay our hands on them. They opened their eyes wide when they saw us, stunned. It was really funny. We discovered four Inyenzis who were pretending to be dead. The little sneaks. The prefect said dryly, ‘four is too many.’... ‘You can’t even comprehend that tomorrow those four will be telling lies to the newspaper’” (85). These set of génocidaires derive pleasure from their inhuman acts and despite the fact that only four out of such a huge number appear to be still alive, sparing them is not an option. Aloys and his prefect sees this
legalized form of committing murder as a responsibility, a job that needs no distraction. In fact, he further claims: “Among other groups of Interahamwe the fellows are already getting into fights: one of them wants to kill a girl and another wants to keep her for the night, or vice versa. That’s just human nature. I’d be happy to, but when you start to let emotions enter into the picture you just can’t stop, and it’s the work that suffers” (86).

Another set of intentions are those shown in the story of the priest, and that of Rosa Karemera, a frail limping old woman who was struck by polio from birth. The priest, who one would have thought would wish to save people from the slaughter happens to be saving them, mostly females, for his own personal pleasures. Anyone who chooses not to yield to his sexual advances, he sends out to the killers to be raped and slaughtered. Rosa’s case on the other hand is one of the many Tutsis who were blacklisted by their neighbours and friends to be killed. One of Rosa’s neighbours on the same street, Valerie Rumiya, had submitted her name to the killers to be killed. Valerie would constantly go from one barricade to another asking them to kill Rosa. Valerie’s intention is influenced by pure hatred of a woman who she claims always looked down on everyone. “Her idea of genocide, that bitch, is just that: to get me, Rosa Karemera, killed” (98).

We also have instances of husbands killing their wives, parents killing their children, friends against friends, neighbours against neighbours, the list goes on, those who one would never imagine would be able to act so violently. Cornelius’ father belongs to this group; a group who sees genocide as a sense of ethnic duty. No matter who is there on the opposite side, whether his wife or children or uncle, he condemns them all to death. Doctor Joseph Karekezi, Cornelius’ father is the reason why Cornelius now realises that the people he has met look at him differently; he is the son of a monster. As Jessica puts it: “After genocide, the real problem is not the victims but the executioners. To kill almost a million people in three months took a lot of people. There were tens or hundreds of thousands of killers. Many of them were fathers. And you, you’re just the son of one of them” (79). Diop depicts Cornelius as representing the “perfect Rwandan; both guilty and innocent” (78) at the same time, so that those looking for who to blame would have to look inward to see if they are guilty or victims, or both.. So, to rethink Rwanda would be to feel the suffering of a million people, and to contemplate the effect of the tragedy inflicted by the executioners. This is a painful process with no consolation.

Karekazi’s sense of the genocide is a rationalising one. For him, he consoles and convinces himself with the idea that Rwanda, at that time, was at war with itself, and this absolves him of the crime of organising the death of the Tutsis that were killed in Murambi Polytechnic. For him, it is like being at the war front and killing enemies: “Of course I didn’t like that scene. I’m neither a monster nor an idiot. But I would be lying if I were to say that it affected me very much. If you’re a determined person, it’s a question of knowing what you want. We are at war, period. The sadistic
way that things sometimes happen is just a detail. The ends justify the means. Nothing else counts. And in any case, we can’t go back now” (102). Karekazi’s words here re-echo Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Eichmann’s Final Solution—the Nazi’s policy of exterminating European Jews, which resulted in the death of 6 million Jews in Nazi-developed concentration camps between 1941 and 1945. Murambi Polytechnic, in this sense, is another concentration camp, where Karekazi himself supervises the death of about fifty thousand Tutsis. His callousness, stone-heartedness and lack of empathy is reflected in his words that “the moaning of the victims is only the devil’s ruse to block the breath of justice and prevent its will to be carried out” (108). This is a case of an elite using his influence to subvert and exploit words and people. He alone defines what justice means. His influence in the society helps give it an entirely different meaning.

It is, however, through the perspectives of characters like Simeon Habineza (Cornelius’s uncle, a Hutu moderate) and Gerard Nayinzira (also known as Skipper, a Tutsi who narrowly escaped the Murambi Polytechnic massacre) that Diop can eventually justify his effort to make sense of the genocide. Here, Diop, rather than looking for figures to blame for the carnage, attempts to look towards a hopeful and positive future. Simeon is a teacher who appears to detach his emotions from an analysis of the genocide by embracing objectivity. At the same time, Simeon expresses a degree of sensitivity to the plights of the victims, and a philosopher who alludes to Plato’s allegory of the cave. As such, Simeon offers us a more consciously reliable view of Rwanda and the genocide. For many, Rwanda may be synonymous with genocide; the thought of the country may evoke gruesome faces of butcherers and butchered human beings, but Simeon still sees Rwanda as a place that “God finds so pleasant that he never spends the night anywhere else” (141). What this means is not basically to show that God delights in blood and other gory situations, but that behind such bloody pictures, there exists a beautiful place which only the excesses of human activities have violated. This also argues against any position that God must have been in support of such genocide, which some Hutu extremists claimed.

Gerard, on the other hand, represents one of the many Tutsis who struggle with the act of forgiveness. But how should they forgive such evil destruction? In fact, in his encounter with Cornelius in Kigali before they meet again in Murambi, he cannot hide his hatred for Cornelius because of his father’s act: “The other evening, in the Café des Grands Lacs, I was just about to do something really stupid… I wanted you dead. It’s your father who did it. And you weren’t there when we were suffering” (150). This is one of the problems with healing (if that is possible), especially when it comes to the part of forgiving someone for perpetrating genocide when one continues to see the perpetrator on the same street without having to pay for their crimes. Some, however, have argued that the act of forgiveness is not necessarily about the perpetrators, but about oneself—releasing oneself from the burden of hatred. This thought is theoretical rather than practical. It is particularly
inadequate since it fails to show the system through which that can be more practically possible. Would it not rather be better to put these perpetrators into perspective and offer a viable place for confession and justice? To argue that it has nothing to do with the perpetrators is to imply that in situations where you walk on the street and see your killers live on as if nothing had happened, one just has to pretend that everything is alright. However, Diop, in this text, believes that admitting a wrong done to another would offer a pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation.

For instance, between Cornelius and Gerard, there is a constant feeling in the former of the inability of the latter to ever fully forgive him. Despite the fact that Cornelius was never directly involved in the genocide, his father was, and that to Gerard as well as to others who suffered, makes him automatically culpable, by blood. While Cornelius is out there on his return acting as though everything is normal, others were looking at the face of their enemy, watching his gestures and listening to every sound he makes:

“You were there in the Café des Grands Lacs, comfortable, sure of yourself, and you didn’t know that everyone was following your slightest gesture and listening to your words. People were coming expressly to see, with their own eyes, the son of the Butcher of Murambi…” (150)

“You started to talk about the pretty girl who gave you the eye in a bar in Abidjan,” said Gerard coldly. “You were making big gestures, your entire body was getting away from you, while we, because of circumstances, we’ve learned to draw in our bodies, we’ve received so many blows, right? And there, at the GL, the only thing we heard was you, you joked with Franky the waiter, in a word, you felt great. The first day you were rather on guard, you probably told yourself: ‘Ah! They’ve suffered so much, I’d better be quiet,’ but you quickly got to thinking that you could still have a good time, genocide or not!” (151)

Cornelius comes to understand that no matter how much one denies being complicit, only those who are affected directly fully bear the scars of suffering for the rest of their lives. But Cornelius’ admission of these charges and his acknowledgment of his father’s acts, brings tears to Gerard’s eyes, and only then is there a hope of reconciliation. Forgiveness, though, is not easy.

Even though evil may sometimes be rendered banal, Diop insists through Simeon that everyone has an element of evil in them and that it usually requires something to trigger the evil for it to manifest itself. Evil, moreover, is the common denominator between the sufferer and those who caused them to suffer. While Gerard believes that the trigger is political class: “our problem isn’t our poverty, but our rich people” (159), Simeon does not object but sees evil as beyond class; whether rich or poor, it does not matter: “you have suffered, but that doesn’t make you any better than those
who made you suffer. They are people like you and me. Evil is within each one of us” (164). Diop insists emphatically, through the lens of this character, that humans are inherently evil and that every human has a dark side.

In conclusion, Diop seems to be suggesting that the history of Rwanda as well as the events therein did not call for genocide. He claims through Simeon that there is no evidence that the genocide was incited by any of the events in Rwanda’s history: “He thought he knew the history of Rwanda, but he couldn’t see anything there that could justify such a vicious hatred” (170), especially when all that took place in Rwanda was not entirely different from the colonialism experienced in other parts of Africa. Blaming the colonialists for the division between the Hutus and the Tutsis would not offer a pathway for reconstruction since the colonialists would never acknowledge the mistake they made: “they won’t say I’m sorry to have conquered your country, it was a mistake, I’m really very sorry. They won’t even think that they have committed a crime” (170). He does, however, offer a solution. Simeon believes that looking back on what happened in Rwanda 1994 should be acknowledged as a “defeat”(171) on both sides, because the set of leaders that are named the ‘head of the country’, are really “puppets” (171). This forms part of Diop’s agenda, namely looking to the future rather than bemoaning the past. He suggests that the way forward to overcome such a defeat is to replace puppets with visionaries and philosopher kings. In that way, Rwanda might find a peace that breaks from the cycles of violent history. Diop insists that this can be achieved and we can say, “never again”, if only Rwanda has a unifying rather than a divisive leader.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

At the very most, Simeon had given him a presentiment: a genocide is not just any kind of story, with a beginning and an end between which more or less ordinary events take place. Without ever having written a line in his life, Simeon Habineza was, in his own way, a real novelist, that is to say, when all is said and done, a story teller of the eternal. (Murambi 179)

The ethical dimensions of writing genocide align past memories and the present with feelings of empathy. Together, these elements help form an active connection to probe into our consciousness to interrogate our collective humanity. Both We Wish and Murambi aim to bring home the reality of genocide. History has shown that genocide has a way of repeating itself, and for this reason it must be addressed, no matter how painful this may be. This is why literature must bear witness to history.

Both Diop and Gourevitch’s works focus on translating this painful truth, confronting and describing the genocide from an outsider’s perspective and within the social and historical experiences of Rwanda. Murambi and We Wish identify how this genocide is engendered by two major factors: the social and historical experiences of Rwandans, which bred historical animosity on one hand, and the internal and external post-independence responses to them on the other hand. The two novels demonstrate their dissimilarities in two distinctive ways. We Wish appears to take sides, seeing the Tutsis as good and Hutus as evil. Murambi on the other hand does not apportion blames for the genocide, not even for the colonialists. We Wish sentimentalises and romanticises, for example, in its treatment of Paul Kagame. Murambi instead humanizes the dead and demonstrates the danger in lumping every experiences of violence as collective because people experience evil differently. But they both seek healing as a reconciliatory pathway for the future even where forgiveness may not be possible.

Genocide is a problematic concept, one that should not be rationalised or seen in terms of conquerors and vanquished. A climate of blame and victimization is not a fertile ground for reconciliation. We Wish sees one political figure as a true hero, celebrating his military prowess and escapades and enshrining the images of Tutsis in that heroic sphere. Murambi offers no celebrations. Instead it raises the question: what is the point of romanticizing in the face of utter waste and extreme violence. It acknowledges cruelty and sees the complexity of forgiveness. Both Tutsis and Hutus were
culpable in the genocide, and the only pathway to improving empathy and denouncing evil is to learn from the past.

A further comparison of Murambi and We Wish shows not only why imaginative literature has the capacity to bear witness to genocide but also why it must bear witness. As I showed in my analysis of We Wish, nonfiction can use fictive elements in style, perspective and language to “translate” the genocide. A study of the novel Murambi, a fictional representation with invented characters, reveals that imaginative literature can treat genocide ethically and sensitively. More so, Murambi also does not stop there, it projects into the future by suggesting ways by which the repetition of such horrendous history can be avoided, as shown in my analysis of the text. In this sense, the fictional account can be considered a prophecy.

Through how Murambi handles the tragedy of Rwandan genocide, with fidelity to ethical expectations of genocidal writings, it is obvious that imaginative literature possesses the psychological and ethical capabilities to handle genocide. If history and nonfictions could speak about genocide, why should not imaginative literature or art, which has the potential to take a reader closer to the heart of the tragedy? The question of should or can genocide be the subject of literary enquiry is one that can be answered by what literary enquiry brings to the discussion of genocide. As shown in my analysis, fictional texts may have an impact on human feelings towards a subject. In the case of genocide, developing empathy for the affected is important to cause changes in human actions. And this is why literature should speak even when genocide is considered unspeakable. The point of writing about genocide is clear: it is to increase our empathy for those affected, to see where we failed in our collective humanity and to say “never again”. Good literature has the creative, ethical and psychological power to bear witness to genocide, and at its best, it can confront and express the inexpressible.

I, therefore, advance four major hypotheses of writing imaginative literature of genocide in this study through the lens of Murambi. First is to memorialize the memory of the affected in writing with language that takes a reader closer to the heart of the tragedy, which does not ‘insult the dead’ as Wiesel feared. Second, the lives of victims can be illuminated by giving a voice to the dead, seeing them as humans with lives of their own rather than as numbers. Every victim (the dead) lived a different and unique life. Third, Murambi identifies patterns that create a meaningful aftermath. Ascribing blames is not a viable solution to the problem of trauma and does not aid reconciliation. Lastly, violence should not be rationalised. The purpose of imaginative literature bearing witness to genocide should be to do two major things: to “remind every society of its essential fragility” (Murambi 177) and to improve empathy for the affected and influence changes in the way we view those who are different from us so that such a barbaric history does not repeat itself. Murambi
encourages empathy and sees genocide not as a distant phenomenon but as part of the history of the time we live in.
Bibliography


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