

**The Voices of Female Resistance in the Memorial Texts of the 1994 Genocide of Rwanda,
Left to Tell Written by Immaculée Illibagiza; *Murambi* by Boris Diop and *Shadow of
Imana* by Veronique Tadj**

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The view that the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was a catastrophic world tragedy is also shared by the writer Boris Diop who states in the introduction to his novel, it was not only an African tragedy. Its specter continues to haunt not only the central African political and social landscape, but the rest of the world as well. (*Murambi*, XVI)

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda was not just a spontaneous incidence of violence but seems to have resulted from a calculated plot by the Hutu majority's administration to cleanse the country of the Tutsi ethnic minority. Both ethnic groups had lived alongside each other for centuries and were linked through intermarriages, shared customs and the shared language of Kinyarwanda. Their shared history was also marked by conflicts and tensions between the ethnic groups which started since colonial days and continued to plague the post-colonial nation state leading to rivalries and deep seated animosities as both groups tried to negotiate their claim to power in the nation. The first explosion of the tensions occurred in 1959 when the then Tutsi president Kayibanda was assassinated. Then later in the 1973 in another violent spate of attacks by the Hutus scores of Tutsis were killed or exiled from Rwanda. The most severe attack on the Tutsis was yet to be come however. The 1994 assassination of the president Juvenal Habyarimana was the spark which signaled the beginning of renewed unrest in the country. This time it was orchestrated by the administration and reflected a calculated plot to erase the Tutsis completely from the Rwandan body politic.

During a period of one hundred days from April to June of 1994 it was said that evil reigned in the country as the violent campaign was realized by the militia and the Interhamwe bands. Spurred on by the direct incitement from the administration to kill their neighbors who were considered cockroaches, ordinary citizens took up arms against their Tutsi neighbors. According to reports the Hutus killed until they were tired of killing and, until they themselves were confused by their own crimes. All over the country from Kigali to Burundi in the south of the country to the north villagers were attacked at street barricades, in their homes and at refuge sites such as churches and schools. The attackers were allowed to carry out their "work" with very little resistance from the International forces present in the country at the time. International organizations such as the United Nations despite reports of the genocide refused to recognize the validity of these reports. Therefore, the massacre was allowed to continue uninterrupted until almost a million Rwandans had fallen victims of the perpetrators who were armed with machetes, grenades and guns.

The resistance movement formed by Tutsi expatriates in the northern frontier countries with Rwanda, Uganda and the Congo was able to present a successful counter attack on the Interhamwe bands. Even though their intervention was still too late in coming but it was due to their organized resistance effort that they were able to put an end to the genocide. Gradually they were able to de-stabilize the administration capturing some of the leaders and forcing others to flee the country. By the time they were able to restore order in the country the streets were littered by amputated bodies and mass graves were scattered all across the country, from Nyamata, Nyanza and Butare. The country was left with survivors who had been traumatized by the witnessing of violent crimes or who had also been perpetrators of the crimes and now experienced trauma because of the memory of their violent crimes.

The literary texts included in this paper were created as a result of the political conflicts which I have described.

They represent texts that have been described as “ memorial text” (Hitchcott, 52) because they have been created with a similar purpose as the memorial sites which were constructed to memorialize the lives of the victims of the genocide perpetrated by the government of Rwanda in 1994. These memorial texts according to the assertions made by Hitchcott, “ ... (encourage) the continuing processes of memory rather than recording and fixing memories in the past”. (50) They attempt to memorialize the tragedy in a literary medium and contribute to making the process of remembering an active one which is not static in time and can be ultimately forgotten. It inspires an active engagement and exploration of the past in order to understand the causes and motives which shaped the histories of genocide.

The first text which is examined in this paper is an autobiography written by Immaculée Ilibagiza. It was created because of the author’s urgent need to preserve the memories of her family and friends who perished in the genocide. The title of her memoir, “ Left to tell” seems to be indicative of this motive, and suggests an awareness of the role of the witness that she would be called to assume in the aftermath of the genocide. She expresses the belief that her life was probably spared so that she could bear witness to the injustice of genocide. Thus the autobiographical text that she has created serves as a testament to the atrocities of the genocide. In so doing the writer has produced a material record of her personal experiences, and also of the wider community of Rwandans. Therefore, it seems that the writing of this creative non-fiction text, “Left to tell,” itself represents an act of resistance by the female writer. She has defied the violence of the perpetrators and subsequently, the pain and suffering endured by the victims to narrate her story of how their lives were permanently transformed by what took place during those one hundred days of genocide in 1994 in Rwanda.

Murambi, the Book of bones, a novel written by Boubacar Boris Diop and the *Shadow of Imana*, a travel journal/testimony /short stories written by Veronique Tadjo, unlike Ilibagiza’s auto-biographical treatment of the subject are works of fiction. These African authors created their literary texts as a response to the genocide and the need to understand it from the perspective of Rwandans. They were produced at the end of a special literary project “ Rwanda: Writing as a Duty to Memory” organized in Rwanda four years after the genocide. They were written with the purpose of “ ...writing to fulfill the duty of memory, or the duty of remembrance”(Small, 86). During a period of residence in Rwanda the authors were able to collect the oral testimonies of survivors and also visit the sites where the genocidal massacres took place. The writers after having immersed themselves in the memories of the experiences of survivors were then able to re-construct them in their fictional accounts of the genocide.

Additionally, the creation of these works of fiction also seems to express the solidarity of many African nations which the writers represent with Rwandans. Veronique Tadjo is from the Ivory Coast and Boubacar Boris Diop is from Senegal and they were among the ten writers who gathered in Rwanda to produce the works on the genocide. The creative process that was used in the creation of these works also demonstrate the sensitivity of these writers who approached the creative task with the attitude of seeking “ ... to speak without speaking falsely?... without trespassing on the grief of the survivors of the genocide”(Small, 87). Their mission was therefore to act as filters for the experiences which were shared with them by survivors and not to manipulate the basic material so that the essence of the experience would be lost. Their goal was to present works which would represent a “ collective witness” of the genocide. (McLaughlin in *Murambi*, 1)

Through the use of creative fiction according to the writer Boris Diop they would be able to narrate the story of the genocide of the Rwandan people by engaging the imagination of readers in a way which the bare narration of facts cannot do.(Small, 88) They would also seek to reflect on the past as a means of confronting it so as to not succumb to the mistakes of forgetting, denial and erasure as had been done in the past. The creation of a text of memory, which is based on the past experience of genocide seems to represent an act of resistance in itself as it refuses to accept silence as an option for dealing with genocide. Therefore, it shows a commitment to deal with the truth and “to call the monster by its name,” as well as to focus on the causes of injustice and crimes against humanity without resorting to evasive tactics and negationism.

In this paper I examine the texts which consist of texts of non-fiction as well as fiction which have been created with the genocide as a central theme in the narrative space. I am interested in seeing how the voices of the female subjects have been articulated in these narratives to tell the story.

I therefore seek to determine whether the voices of the female subjects which are represented in the literary works are only situated within the realm of broken and silenced victim, or whether they have been ascribed with a degree of agency and resistance to the oppressive forces that have attempted to annihilate and silence them.

Through the examination of the narratives we can therefore explore the experiences of women of the genocide. For although both men and women suffered in the genocide it is believed that Tutsi women especially were more severely affected both during the period of the conflict and in the post-conflict years. (Hamilton, 3) In her article Heather Hamilton also mentions that, "... women were targeted because of their gender, specifically because they were women".(3) They were firstly targeted for extermination through the defamatory propaganda reflected in the "Hutu ten commandments" as well as in the caricatures which appeared in magazines and newspapers such as the Kangura newspaper.

According to Hamilton Tutsi women were portrayed via the media as "... temptresses to be avoided".(3) They were considered as especially dangerous because of what they represented for the continuation of the ethnic group through reproduction and also intermarriage with the Hutus. They were thus seen as a threat to Hutu supremacy and this was used to justify the campaign of violence against them. The female body was therefore targeted as a site for violation, mutilation and destruction. Hamilton confirms this when she states that, "Systemic rape was used as a tool of genocide against Tutsi women, against her family, her community, and her honor". (3)

The written texts included in this paper therefore examine the female voices which occupy the narrative space and provide the reader with a view of the atrocities committed against women during the genocide. They show the nature of the oppressions suffered by women who experienced the genocide, who in some cases survived it to become witnesses in the aftermath.

The auto-biography written by Ilibagiza provides the reader with a first person account of the genocide by a survivor who was present when the atrocities were being committed. The writer narrates the story from the hiding place, the small bathroom where she along with five other women were housed for the one hundred days of violence. From this small cramped space, a crack in the wall she is able to direct the reader's gaze to the actions of the perpetrators of the violence. She is positioned outside the direct line of action of the violence but news of the progress of the riots reach her through various channels. Firstly, her protector himself, Fr. Murinzi, then the radio reports, other oral reports, as well as the eye witness accounts from Solange and Malaba. These were tutsi women who disguised themselves as Interhamwe members and with a Hutu identification card were able to travel across the country accompanied by Marianne, Fr. Murinzi's daughter. The narrator therefore functions as an interlocutor who is receiving the reports of eye witnesses. Later on she is able to transform them into writing to reveal the truth of what took place.

Solange and Malaba brought news to the narrator of how Tutsis were being killed for having an identification card and also for not having one. According to the reports people were being killed for just having the physical attributes of a Tutsi. Solange states that, I recognized one of the men they killed- I knew he was a Hutu, ... He was a little taller than they were ... that's all it took. They called him a Tutsi spy and shot him. Then they killed another Hutu because he argued with them ... all he said was that it was wrong for them to be killing Tutsis. (109) The narrator also reiterates the insider /outsider gaze positioning that she occupies when she states that "... we had already heard similar horror stories on the radio and from the pastor. It sounded like the apocalypse had arrived, and Rwanda was the first stop". (110)

When the narrator herself insisted on looking out of the small bathroom window to witness the scenes for herself she was immediately repulsed by what she saw. She saw hundreds of people dressed like devils with horns strapped to their bodies and dried banana leaves covering their bodies who had murder in their eyes and weapons in their hands and were chanting a chilling song of genocide, "... kill the old and kill the young ... a baby snake is still a snake, kill it, too, let none escape!" (77) In this riotous band she recognized that the killers were not the soldiers or the militia men, but rather many neighbors and people that she was familiar with. This fact therefore caused her great emotional pain and anguish.

From the narrator's hiding place she did not escape completely the effects of the violence that was taking place on the outside. Although her wounds were not directly inflicted on her body, it seems that she was also suffering even though her pain was of a psychological nature. She experienced a profound crisis and trauma as news of the fury which was extinguishing lives in the streets and homes of Rwanda filtered into her consciousness.

She therefore seems to experience a doubling of her consciousness which she describes through the dialogue between the two voices that arose in her interior. She states that a dark voice was speaking to her accusingly:

My temples pounded. The dark voice was in my head, filling it with fearful, unspeakable images. Dead bodies everywhere. Mothers have seen their babies chopped in half, their fetuses ripped from their wombs... and you think that you should be spared? (78)

In contrast to this accusatory voice of despair there also arose in her interior another voice which reflected hope and therefore countered with the words:

He loves me and wouldn't fill me with fear ... He will not let me die cowering on a bathroom floor. He will not let me die in shame! (79)

The subjectivities of the author seem to be reflected by these inner voices which engage in the inner dialogue of contrasting rage and hope. They reveal the psychological suffering and anguish that she experienced as she tried to come to terms with the significance of the destruction that was taking place outside of her hiding place. Even though the atrocities were taking place out of her direct view, yet still she was able to reconstruct them in her imagination. The reports she was receiving were enough to allow her to recreate the scenes of carnage and destruction which were occurring in the streets, villages and towns. The reality of what was taking place was being firmly imprinted in her psyche and so her inner world became an imaginary battleground where the warfare was being waged.

In order to defend herself and resist the violent attacks on her psyche the author developed a survival mechanism. It seems that she was determined to not allow the dark voice that arose in her consciousness from taking over, and so she held on to hope and courage to defeat the dark energy. Her resistance to defeat was based on the inner strength that she was able to garner from her faith and all the moral principles that she had learned from her family and community. This survival mechanism seemed to have taken her through her darkest moments of psychological pain and despair, and to strengthen her resolve to not be silenced about the truth.

In the novel *Murambi* by Boris Diop, the reader is also able to witness the horrors of the genocide through the gaze of an outsider, both that of the writer and the main character. As Cornelius makes his journey back to Rwanda from his exile in Djibouti he revisits his country's past history through the visits to old friends, physical sites and also through the memory that they invoke together. Through the narration of eight other fictional first person flashbacks the novelist further reconstructs the past history. Within the multiple voices that are featured in the first person flash backs the voice of the female stands out to add the female dimension to the multiple perspectives on the genocide presented in this narrative. The effect of this structure as the critic Hitchcott states is to encourage the reader to view the genocide from a variety of different angles and to resist a reductive interpretation of the events. (54) Therefore, as we examine the perspective of the female included in this narrative we are further able to access the female experience and perspective on the genocide.

Just as Ilibagiza has used her testimony in *Left to Tell* to resist silence and tell others about her experiences of the genocide, Diop in his novel has used the narration by Jessica, one of the protagonists that he created, to present the testimonies of other women. The identity of this female character itself seems to metaphorically indicate the resistance of the female subject, of the female voice. As a female member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front she was responsible for providing intelligence for their operations during the genocide by the government. Her voice was the instrument which was used to contribute to the resistance for the counter-attack by the rebel army. Her father, Jonas Sibomana had been a member of a Pierre Mulele's resistance movement in Kivu in the early years of conflicts had inspired a revolutionary spirit in her. When he symbolically passed on his old guns to her she knew that it was time to accept the baton that was being passed on to her. At eighteen she therefore joined the guerrillas in Mulindi.

Her role as an eye witness seems to be what is most important to the movement and she reflects on this when she states that, what could I, Jessica Kamanzi, possibly brag about? Others have given their lives for the success of our struggle. I have never held a gun nor participated in the military actions of the guerrillas. I stayed almost the whole time at Mulindi to take care of the cultural activities of the resistance. ...I was called to give summaries to our delegates. But those were humble tasks... It's true that my presence in Kigali today is not without danger. ... I have to move all the time.(31)

Even though she does not believe that her positioning in the resistance movement is critical to success in the movement yet still the role that she has to fulfill is important. She assignment was to infiltrate the site of the destruction so that she could bear witness to the butchery as she states and to provide moral faith and hope in the community which is necessary for the success of the mission.

As she walks through the streets of Kigali which seems to represent a panoramic viewing of the crisis the words of their night watch songs return to her, “ If three fall in combat, the two who are left will free Rwanda... These words ... give me strength. The moment of liberation is at hand”. (31) This hope and faith in liberation is what gives her strength to continue even when faced with the sight of “ ... hundreds of corpses” and the sight of the bodies of victims being shattered and mutilated completely. (31) Sometimes however, as a form of resistance to this destruction, as a form of self preservation she too has to turn away from the cries and screams for help by the victims in order to go unnoticed by the killers. She has to wear the mask of the enemy.

The female voice is also used to reflect resistance by the avoidance of over sensationalized responses to the grotesque crimes against women. When Cornelius is indignant with rage after viewing the image of the female victim, Theresa who had been savagely raped and left with a stake lodged in her vagina he turns to Jessica for a response, but she remained impassive and, “ ... pretended not to have noticed anything” (73). However, in her interior she remembered her friend’s last words that the attackers would not dare hurt them in the house of God. Without a display of noticeable anger she thought to herself that, “ In those days, Theresa, God was looking elsewhere...”(73) She does not respond outwardly to the rage and despair that the preserved image of her friend evokes but silently she questions herself about the senseless violence that led to such cruelty. She also understood that this terrible violation and mutilation of the female body was a central act of the Hutu genocide against the Tutsis. It exemplified their ideology of hate towards the Tutsis in general, and the Tutsi female in particular because she represented the procreator of the ethnic group. In this characterization of the female protagonist, we can see the female who functions as an interlocutor and also as an inter-cultural medium between the two ethnic groups. Her resistance seems to occupy the realm of the cultural and social and thus she is able to remain in the space of the violence so that she can obtain information from others and at the same time collect information as she witnesses what is taking place.

In another of the episodic narrations Jessica is chosen by an unknown female to listen to her final testimony of her experience of the genocide. Although she addresses Jessica by her full name she at no time discloses her own identity to her. She is the female without a name, therefore she seems to have chosen to represent the larger community of women. The female according to Jessica is extraordinarily beautiful and therefore on an allegorical level represents the standards of physical beauty that is sought by men in women. Jessica comments that she is, The kind of woman who arouses in men desire, fear, crazy dreams of a new life, and a vague feeling of frustration. She was really stunning.(91)

However, it is because of her extraordinary beauty that she is being condemned to death. She will not survive while Jessica will be allowed to survive. In contrast to the stranger’s perfect physical attributes Jessica was plain, according to Cornelius she was not a pretty woman and she looks more like her father. While the unknown woman represented the perfection of the feminine image, Jessica seems to reflect a female image that shows more masculine characteristics. The woman with no name had been idolized for her beauty but now she was being victimized because of it. She therefore admits “ I’m too beautiful to survive. I’m as beautiful as the sun, and like the sun there’s nowhere for me to hide” (91).

The testimony of this woman narrates the story of her rape by the priest who was supposed to provide protection for the victims for whom he was providing refuge. He tried to make it seem like a consensual encounter by forcing her to agree under the threat that he would turn her in to the Interhamwe if she did not agree, and that he would request that they reserve the special treatment for her. At this time she decided that she could not resist the physical rape because she did not want to suffer. She was also aware of the futility of survival and as a last act of resistance she had to tell her story which was the story of so many other women like herself. Her testimony represented an indictment of a system which was based on superficial values and distinctions. She was speaking against a system which targeted innocent women to unleash its hate and fury.

In her parting words she equated her death with the merging of her existence into the sun, symbol of power and light from which nothing could hide on the earth. She states,

I will be the sun. From there I'll have my eye on you, you the Rwandans. Join together. Aren't you ashamed, children of Rwanda? Whether you are Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. What is it to you? Then after this awful business is over, behave yourselves and be united, won't you? (99)

Another female voice of resistance which is heard in the narrative of *Murambi* was that of a Hutu nun called Felicité who refused to be converted into a mindless killer for any reason. She chose to respect human life no matter what the cost to her own life. She rejected the safe asylum that was being offered for her compliance with the state directive, and chose instead to die with the group of forty five Tutsis that she was protecting.

She told her brother in a letter that, "Thank you for wanting to help me. But instead of saving my life and abandoning my charges, these forty three people, I choose to die with them. .."(116).

She therefore expressed her agency as a human being and a woman of integrity with untarnished moral values even when she was threatened by the perpetrators. She insisted that "They can spin whatever tales they want,

...but I will not kill anyone and I will do everything I can to save lives." (108) This female voice also illustrates another case in which a member of the Hutu ethnic group was not invested in killing their Tutsi neighbors. Heather Hamilton mentions in her article *Rwanda's women: The key to Reconstruction*, "...that some Hutus did undertake to perform heroic efforts to save Tutsis or to oppose the genocide and that many of them paid for their refusal to become killers with their lives." (3)

Similarly, in the non-fictional narrative *Left to tell*, Ilibagiza and the other women who were locked away in the bathroom cell during the genocidal killings owed their survival, and their avoidance of sexual violation to the Hutu reverend, Pastor Murinzi. He and his family insisted that they would maintain their humanity and have compassion for their neighbors even if meant that they had to endure victimization and even death at the hands of the Interhamwe.

The memorial text created by Veronique Tadjo *The shadow ofImana* seems to explore to a large degree the question of the role of writing in invoking the collective memory in Africa. She believes that, we must write to give information some permanence. The writer pushes people to listen to his voice, in an attempt to exorcise buried memories. (27)

She believes that the process of revelation, of baring one's soul is an important first step towards true reconciliation. Without an encounter with the truth, no matter how horrible it may be then justice cannot be achieved. It was thought that women who largely resisted involvement in the killings and attacks on Tutsis were innocent of such crimes. However many testimonies indicate that some of them were involved in the killing of their brothers and sisters. The eyewitness flash backs in *Murambi* sometimes alluded to the fact that there were not many people in Rwanda whose hands were not dripping with blood. Those who were thought to be innocent were later found to be guilty therefore showing that the official records were not completely reliable.

In "Consolate's story" one of the female testimonies included in the reportage/ travel diary of Tadjo the reader can get a sense of the tenuous nature of applying justice after the genocide. Consolate's mother has been indicted for her participation in the genocide. Even though the daughter is able to visit her mother yet still the burden of guilt seems to extend to both of them marring their ability to interact with one another as mother and daughter. She states that she didn't think that she would visit her again because it causes too much pain and states that, " In this place, mother and daughter no longer exists".(28) The author says that her mourning is an eternal and profound one because it does not only influence the past and the present but extends to the future. (29) The prison sentence of her mother is not only limited to her life but also extends to that of her daughter who is imprisoned in the hills and a captive of " ... memory, fixed, frozen in time".(29) This story illustrates the effect of the genocide in the aftermath and shows that not only the victims have been traumatized but all survivors and their families whether they were perpetrators or victims. Whether or not their crimes have been exposed in the country's official courts of law or in the Gacaca courts they are still burdened by their consciences and the consequences of broken lives and human loss.

These burdens of guilt are realities not only for the person responsible for the crime but also for all those who share blood or ethnic ties with them.

In a similar manner to Constance, Cornelius, the protagonist of *Murambi* has to bear the burden of the guilt when he discovers that his family is not at all without blame for the genocide. His father has committed the incomprehensible crime of ordering the execution of more than forty-five thousands people including his wife and children.

With this discovery he realized that he had become “... the perfect Rwandan; both guilty and a victim”.(78) Dealing with this guilt can never be thought of as an easy process as Jessica explains when she refers to the fact that many Rwandans, Hutus, Tutsis, fathers, mothers, decent people were complicit in the genocide either by choice or by force. She further suggests that the path to recovery will be a long one which has to take place “.. in your heart and in your mind. You’re going to suffer a lot, and that might be good for you.” (79) She is therefore alluding to the collective suffering of the community which can only be overcome through a profound commitment to justice and reconciliation.

Through creative non-fiction, works such as Ilibagiza’s *Left to tell* and works of fiction, such as Diop’s *Murambi* and Tadjó’s *The Shadow of Imana* meaningful reflection and dialogue on the past history can be achieved. Literary representations can facilitate this process of discussion and can therefore play a decisive role in the reconciliation and recovery process in the society. The further privileging of the female voice in the collective retelling of the history of the genocide also allows for the visibility of experiences of a group largely marginalized in the pre-genocide patriarchal society of Rwanda. By allowing the female voice to be heard, to be un-silenced in the discourse multiple aspects of the genocidal terror can be revealed. They can therefore serve as a witness and as a testament against those who conceived and executed the crime. In this way the representation of the female voice in the literature expresses resistance against denial and erasure, as well a sincere confrontation of the truth. The dead would have liked to speak but no one could hear them. They would have liked to say all that they had not had time to say, all the words whose utterance they had been denied, cut from their tongues, torn from their mouths.” (Tadjó, 41)

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