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Historical Trauma: Genocidal Memory in Monénembo's *The Oldest Orphan*

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Abstract: The historical knowledge that the past holds within its purview could be conceived as a catalogue of re-imagined association—a reciprocity between a pluralistic history and multifaceted undertaking of memory. This transition is symbolic of a continuous significance of memory in arguing that history alone does not have any particular claim to truth. It is only when the past is counter-questioned through the dichotomy that history and memory share, that the present unfolds before us the historicity of colonialism that has purposefully downplayed the memory of its subjects. By acknowledging the nexus between history and memory, this paper brings into play issues such as: the transmission of intergenerational memory, the role of trauma of the unrecognized and how it vies to claim the past. The primary focus, therefore, is to demonstrate how there is a conscious confrontation with the implications of nationalist discourses that have failed to provide a sense of justice to the marginalized.

Keywords: Genocide, Rwanda, Memory, Hutu, Tutsi, Trauma

The legacy of colonialism is engaged with the questions of trauma, displacement and violence that are irrefutably paramount for analyzing the transition from colonial to postcolonial times. Yet any such attempt primarily involves a reassessment of histories that have been nurtured by the nationalist ideologies to reclaim this aftermath. To document the past marred by misrepresentation is to bear witness to the repercussions that the post-generations of colonialism are faced with. The conceptualization of the past is both construction and deconstruction of an inventory of officially approved histories that continue to play a vital role in politics of nationalism. It remains a matter of speculation, as a result, to arrive at a verifiable past that could result in the appropriation of a particular historical situation that is tenable. The fluidity of this past, thus, demands a multidisciplinary approach to legitimize any particular claim to truth.



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Chandigarh**

In recent years, scholars have underscored that interrelatedness of history and memory is crucial for a systematic understanding of the past. History is neither merely a record of events attempting to recover the past nor can it alone provide a nuanced understanding of the forms of knowledge such as literature, art, language, religion—written or oral, explicit or implicit—through which the past could be studied beyond its one-sidedness. Memory, on the other hand, visualizes the inherent dichotomy between time and space by unifying the many instances including wars, assassinations, commemorations that have come to shape history. A correlation between history and memory is necessary to conceive of a past that is culturally imaginative of the lived experience that everydayness conceals. In short, the past is represented as an enigma that both history and memory attempt to compensate for by constantly evoking each other.

The colonial past is detrimental to the misplaced political foreclosure suggestive of discourses in quest for a new totality of ideas and orientations that could strike a balance between the detritus of history and traumatic memories, including events and virtual experiences that give way to a sense of vicarious victimhood. Beset by an immediacy to perceive the past, the absence of loss itself is but a narrative fortifying the *nothingness* that has come to shape the present devoid of recognition through which the marginalized could crystallize their accounts of survival. Still, to establish a connection between the traumatized and those who have been affected only in entailment, the past should not be perceived as that which is conflated with absence or presence of voices of resistance, but as a constitutive of historical truth. What confutes the past is, therefore, not simply a misrecognition or critique of affirmation or even placement of trauma in the context of history purportedly assuming a tone defying the rhythms of acknowledgement but a dubious ambivalence that induces anxious empowerment—systematically eliding the very ruins of the present.

In light of these arguments, my paper examines the intricacies of memory and history while drawing out connections between colonial and postcolonial encounters in Tierno Monénembo's *The Oldest Orphan*. The entwining complexities of the past, as accentuated by the hegemonic manipulation of memory, invariably represent a constant struggle over the meaning of history and how it pursues the trajectory of socio-political crisis. The novel blurs the



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English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

boundaries between personal and historical trauma by providing the narrative of a fifteen-year-old survivor who has witnessed the atrocities of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. What emerges out of the novel is a testimonial narrative that juxtaposes knowledge of the genocide with personal story—validating the ongoing process of surviving and of coming to terms with trauma. However, to describe the imperceptible order of things, Monénembo relies on a narrative that is not linear. The employment of such a technique is especially useful for the reason that in order to engage with the historical trauma of genocide, the author exhibits a concoction of systematic violence and its ramifications that partakes in the devaluation of human life. The 1994 genocide has its roots in the colonial past of Rwanda, particularly the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi. To focus on the personal and the political victims of the genocide, it is pertinent to first understand the Rwandan past. The seeds of discontent between the two ethnic groups were sown as early as in the pre-colonial Rwanda—and the differences only solidified under German and Belgian colonial rule.¹ It is a noteworthy fact that the 1994 genocide was a culmination of many failures—indisputably among them was a blatant disregard for life of this otherwise impoverished and economical unimportant African nation.² A global failure to prevent the genocide only points at the obstinate persistence of colonial ideologies that have shaped the Rwandan history. The idea that the aftermath of the genocide does not relinquish the memory of the dead demonstrates the complexities of an assumed social order implicitly created by the politics of post-genocide. To appropriate the mendacity of the eruption of violence, the pre-colonial history should be understood in relation to colonial spaces reclaiming the negated

¹The colonial masters with their agendas made Rwanda a political playground where the need to seize power and control the local population could only be achieved through identity politics. While this division meant “us” or “them” for the Rwandans, it was a chance to legitimize and then politicize the ethnic divide by colonial powers. This particular division goes back to the Hamitic myth so as to justify a hierarchy between the Twas, the Hutus and the Tutsis. The ploy undeniably had overtones of prejudice since it was believed that “Tutsis were descendants of the biblical figure Ham, had lighter skin and held more European intellectual and social qualities than the Hutu who were Bantu and the Twa who were identified as pygmies” (Dauge-Roth 14).

² The Rwandan history could have been different had the UN intervened and contained the situation. The irony is that the world’s chief powers among them the United States, Great Britain and France argued against any such military intervention. The United States’ reservation on the issue could be understood as the “Somalia fatigue,” a bitter reminder of its withdrawal from Mogadishu in 1993 after the deaths of eighteen US rangers (Thompson 4).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
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histories of the genocide.³The turbulent history of Rwanda situates the theatre of genocide rather accurately within the neocolonial forces than the Western nations would have us believe:

It was a genocide by those who saw themselves as sons—and daughters—of the soil, and their mission as one of clearing the soil of a threatening alien presence. This was not an “ethnic” but a “racial” cleansing, not a violence against one who is seen as a neighbor but against one who is seen as a foreigner; not a violence that targets a transgression across a boundary into home but one that seeks to eliminate a foreign presence from home soil, literally and physically. (Mamdani14)

As is the case with Monénembo’s *The Oldest Orphan*, the creative endeavor offers a counter-narrative that represents Rwandan experience of the genocide—the conversion of absence of loss into loss which is beyond the Western imagination. That the absence of loss is a channel through which the traumatized can hold onto a specific portion of the past as theirs is but a coping mechanism to register the experience of the genocide. Written for the 1998 project organized by *Fest’Africa: ‘Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire’* (writing so as not to forget), the novel succeeds to “write genocide into memory” by reconstructing the narrative perspectives of the survivors who have directly experienced the genocide and of those who have witnessed it indirectly. Throughout the course of the novel, Faustin Nsenghimana, the narrator, suffers from an inability to tell his story—reproduce the past to overcome his flailing victimhood. The ease with which Faustin is able to suppress and at times repress his share of traumatic memories may leave the reader in disbelief. It is only when the reader becomes a participant in Faustin’s trauma that the discursive narrative unfolds before him a subject who happens to be both a victim and a manipulator possessing the firsthand knowledge of the genocide. In doing so, the author shapes the structure of trauma by problematizing the history of the genocide—loading the narrator with

³ The official stance of the US when it came to the systematic killings in Rwanda was a factual denial of any misdeeds to the point that the terms civil war and genocide were used interchangeably so as to not admit the genocide officially. It was only on June 10 that Secretary of State Warren Christopher finally acknowledged the genocide (Barnett 138-39).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

unreliable memories while improving upon the quality of indefiniteness—to process the conditioning of the past.

Memory follows history in a way that it could make sense of what has occurred in the past by relying on the aspect of remembering and forgetting—erasing yet keeping traces of what has disappeared. At the same time, history itself relies upon memory to authenticate its aftermath without which there is no validation to its implications. But then isn't memory already archiving of history and accessing the past to historicize it in so far as to provide a meaning by stabilizing the continuation of a commonality that is reciprocal of both history and itself? Andreas Huyssen points out that “[m]emory whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past” (8). Not everything that the past is can be archived or understood in the form of history. The representation that the past is shaped and influenced by remembering and forgetting itself materializes in the form of present that is memory. For that reason, the struggles of the past within memory are articulated through the manifestation of both remembering and forgetting. Furthermore, the idea that this manifestation is a pivotal aspect in understanding the past comes from the fact that “explorations of memory in our world cannot do without the notion of historical trauma. The focus on trauma becomes legitimate where nations or groups of people are trying to come to terms with a history of violence suffered or violence perpetrated” (Huyssen 9).

Consequently, the wounds of the past continue to trouble the present in the form of memories or what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’—a way to understand the transmission of traumatic memories across generations. Hirsch is of the view that postmemory “describes the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5). However, the connection between trauma and memory is peculiar and at times contradictory since postmemory transmits one generation's experience by affiliating with an indirect past that the other generation has not experienced firsthand. Understanding the complexities of memory in the context of trauma begins with an understanding of its past. Cathy Caruth asserts that a traumatic recollection is more than a



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

“simple memory” since “the ability to recover the past is . . . closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it” (151-52). It is precisely due to this reason that the recollection of such traumatic events manifest in flashbacks as the experience of memory has been “obstructed by a later repression or amnesia” and as a result is “constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness” (152).

In *The Oldest Orphan*, Faustin’s ability to recall is also his ability to distort or simply forget “the trauma [that] seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 153). By and large, this ability to recall and forget does pose a challenge in representing a truthful history by means of memory as it already suffers from incomprehensibility. Yet traumatic memories validate the accounts of survivors by carrying forward a “transmissible truth” (154) that results in detailing the ruptures and dislocations when writing about the past. This, in fact, allows the integration of trauma of the first generation within second generation’s consciousness thus partaking in a historically nourished yet debilitating experience that is seemingly impossible, especially in the context of genocide. There can possibly be no doubt that Faustin “has a past so heavy that he seems unable even to recall it” (King x). Moreover, Faustin’s role as an unreliable narrator serves the double purpose of creating a space where he can detach himself from the reality and at the same time accentuate the experience of trauma in the aftermath of the genocide. The fragmentation which fills the pages of the text is overwhelming until the end resulting in the narrator’s memory being constantly under negotiation:

We heard someone shout some orders. The stained-glass windows shattered, the icons crumbled to dust, dozens of mangled brains splashed against the ceiling and the walls. They were throwing grenades. My memory of the genocide stops here. The rest, I was told later, or it resurfaced on its own in my tattered memory, in spurts, like muddy water pouring out of a clogged pump. I don’t know who died first, my father or my mother. Did they die from a grenade or finished off with machetes or hammers? When I regained consciousness, I noticed that their bodies were in pieces except my mother’s chest whose



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

breasts still in perfect condition were dripping with blood. An old woman was standing over me. She found the strength to smile at me amid the swarms of flies and the piles of decomposing corpses. (Monénembo 96)

As a reader, it is hard not to notice the non-linear narrative being used to depict Faustin's traumatic state of mind. On the last page of the novel, he finally admits the massacre at Nyamata without suppressing the trauma. The author links the finality of Faustin's personal memory with the genocidal memory that supplants the history of trauma—to obliterate the urgency of forgetfulness—of a staggered apprehensive past. Although Faustin's relationship with the genocide is far from unproblematic, it cannot be denied that he time and again abuses his memories to circumvent the trauma. Paul Ricoeur relates memory with identity in a way that it results in a demand for public expression. It is through narrative that “memory is incorporated into the formation of identity” (84-85). The narrative of memory consists of protagonists constantly remembering and forgetting “where ideology operates as a discourse justifying power, domination, that the resources of manipulation provided by narrative are mobilized” (85). For Ricoeur, the duty of memory is related to the idea of justice since “[e]xtracting the exemplary value from traumatic memories, it is justice that turns memory into a project; and it is this same project of justice that gives the form of the future and of the imperative to the duty of memory” (88). To Faustin belongs a set of manipulated memories—concerned with circumspection to establish an inverted state of awareness as he assumes a protective bravado in the post-genocide Rwanda. Once Faustin begins to function in his role, his victimhood supports both the burden of his past and of a society rife with widespread destruction. This should explain the violent tendencies Faustin undertakes once the trauma overwhelms him—maps onto his psychea genocidal memory—laden with survivor guilt. Monénembo, it seems, has deliberately presented Faustin's narrative as fragmented—marred by ambiguity and onslaught of memories—to represent the misrepresented in the aftermath of the genocide. Defeated by the circuitry of colonial heritage, the postcolonial Rwanda inherited incriminating politics that endlessly derived



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

its meaning from historical losses.⁴The 1994 genocide indeed was a vehement response, albeit a more calculated one—to the successive attacks against the identity politics in the past that have come to shape the Rwandan history.

There is at times an ambivalent counteraction—a positioning toward transformative viewpoint that would hold the belated historical understanding from representing the appropriation of traumatic experience as disruptive. Without this notion, the past imputes its origin—absolutizes the loss in the absence of trauma. To locate the traumatized then would require a critical inquiry into the paradoxical nature of perpetrators and victims. Moreover, the testimonial reliability alone cannot identify the localization of histories of trauma, especially when there are external factors at play. The presence of international media in the days that followed the genocide or its absence thereof at the onset meant a delay in relaying the details of the conflict to the world.⁵Interestingly, Monénembo uses this fact in the novel to deride the Western media's attempt to sensationalize the conflict by adding "a bit of humor" (King x). In particular, the relationship between Faustin and Rodney, the English journalist clearly demonstrates how inventive and false testimonies mislead the trajectory of trauma. Faustin intentionally invents a false account of his parents' death and furnishes the narrative with details that never occurred in reality:

⁴Post-independent Rwanda witnessed massacres and mass exodus of its population on a large scale. The political instability that dictates much of the Rwandan history promoted regional insecurity followed by growing intimidation. It is estimated that during the first elected President Grégoire Kayibanda's term, 10,000 Tutsis were killed and between 130,000 and 300,000 fled the country (Jessee8).

⁵The decisive role that the Western media played in not covering the Rwandan genocide is appalling. This was indeed a time of many political conflicts and unrest in the world. The disinterested Western media turned the other way to cover a more animated conflict that had turned into a major theater of war. The Rwandan genocide happened at the time when "[m]illions of dollars were pouring into Yugoslavia in 1994 along with tens of thousands of troops. Everybody was looking at Yugoslavia. Nobody came to Rwanda . . . There were more people killed, injured, internally displaced and turned into refugees in 100 days in Rwanda than during the six years of the Yugoslav campaign" (Dallaire13). This apathy could be because "Rwanda was black. Yugoslavia was white European" (13). And while with each passing day, the situation worsened in Rwanda "[t]he story never really got told and that's why O.J. Simpson and Tonya Harding got a lot more press than 800,000 human beings being slaughtered" (15).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

When we left the BBC people, I had become as good an actor as those I used to see on the TV at the Fraternité Bar, writhing and falling off horses as if they had been hit by real bullets. . . .

In places where I had never set foot, I'd immediately recognize the charred hovel my parents had been dragged out of; the yard filled with hibiscus where their hamstrings had been slashed; the church hall where they had been murdered; the old wooden brewery where their blood had been used to make banana beer; the stove where their ears and intestines had been roasted and seasoned with peppers to serve as meals for the attacking forces, who had proved to be the bravest. I'd remove my cap to show the scars across my head, lift my old sweater to expose the machetecuts on my shoulders and my torso. Some film directors would shed tears. So then I'd invent some heroic deeds to move them even more. (Monénembo 66)

Faustin's testimony falsifies the conventionality of his trauma for its assertive interpretation is resolvable. That is to say, to be evasive within the tropes of trauma "implies a confusion of self and other which may bring an incorporation of the experience and voice of the victim and its reenactment or acting out" (LaCapra 28). Faustin as a survivor has to participate in the aftermath of the genocide on daily basis as "one possessed . . . by the past and reliving its traumatic scenes may be tragically incapable of acting responsibly or behaving in an ethical manner involving consideration for others as others" (28). This incapability should not be confused with mourning since the massacre at Nyamata changed the course of Faustin's life forever because he was "born twice in a way"⁶ (Monénembo, 96) that day. As a result, what he experiences is his "postmemory's connection to the past" for it is "actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5). It is so because the second generation does not have a personal memory of trauma and as a result relies on the first

⁶Faustin's death and his eventual birth link the generation of colonial Rwanda to the generation of post-colonial Rwanda. In other words, the traumatic memories of the genocide will haunt the successive generations of the country.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

generation to propose their position in history. Faustin's violent actions and false testimonies should be read as an intimation of a future lost in undoing his victimization.

In addition, the lived experience of Faustin as a witness and survivor destabilizes his identity by marking an end to his supposed innocence. There is no doubt that his relationship with the society at large remains complex. It is so because in his repeated attempts to escape the chaos of trauma, he unconsciously keeps coming back to it. The difference between a perpetrator and a victim is so narrowed in the aftermath of the genocide that it is almost interchangeable. The conversation between Faustin and the RPF soldier only points at this: "You really think I am a *génocidaire*?" to which the soldier responds, "Everyone is! Children have killed children, priests have killed priests, women have killed pregnant women, beggars have killed other beggars, and so on. There are no innocents left here" (Monénembo, 23). Homeless and orphaned, Faustin answers everything with a stroke of violence. The shooting of Musinkôro at HQ by Faustin once he finds out that he was having sex with his sister Esther solidifies this notion. This particular incident unhinges the memory of the murder of the Italian woman who was Faustin's neighbor: "I was getting ready to go to school when they arrived. Some were armed with clubs, others with machetes . . . they grabbed her on her doorstep. They hit her on the back of the head. They dragged her to the church. They hacked her to pieces" (Monénembo, 75).

Given the force of memories, Faustin's ability to translate the loss incurred conflates the appropriation of his trauma. This sort of tendency is "the kind of traumatropism . . . that [is] performed by victims who experience post-traumatic phenomena, such as recurrent nightmares, not as symptoms to be worked through but as bonds or memorial practices linking them to the haunting presence of dead intimates" (LaCapra, xv). Faustin's identification with violence brings forth the complexities involved in the assertion of justice in the post-genocide Rwanda. He, as a result, is orphaned twice: first, when his parents are killed at Nyamata and secondly, after he is sentenced to death. Not only was Faustin untouched by the violence prior to witnessing the genocide, he did not have any inherent violent tendencies until his parents were killed. His mocking tone in the court, as a result, presents him as a threat to society since his response defies the usual post-traumatic behavior when he says to the judge: "You, if I slept with your sister,



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

you'd do what I did to this swine, wouldn't you? Family honor isn't debatable anywhere in the world, at least not with the Nsenghimanans" (Monénembo 82).

For Faustin and other survivors of the genocide, the socio-political order continues to inhibit the interconnectedness of their voices that allows them to insinuate into historically accurate versions of the traumas they have undergone. In that sense, to re-imagine the past as a continuum that doesn't isolate history's dependence on memory allows us to fully understand the forms of narratives signifying the claims for an unmediated history that includes the accounts of those who have been traumatized without falsifying or silencing any details. Indeed, the past when accessed through the exploration of history and memory allows us to engage in a continuity of experience—attempting to clarify the certainty of a contested space between the two that would otherwise remain unexplored if studied in isolation. Moreover, national histories amalgamate a collective consciousness that clash against memories of the marginalized vying to claim the engagement between the present and the past. To that end, the anxious containment of nationalist fascination to impede the shaping of collective identity that is pitted against the social formation of history is symbolic of contesting the hegemonic resonance of politics in national remembrance.

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