



Remembering the Rwandan Genocide through a Survivor's Perspective: Memory and Biopolitics in Consolee Nishimwe's Memoir Tested to the Limit

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Abstract

Written in the context of the Rwandan genocide (1994), Consolee Nishimwe's memoir *Tested to the Limit* (2012) provides a detailed and intimate account of the harrowing events that unfolded during that dark period. While the paper will focus on emphasising the significance of personal narratives by survivors or witnesses of genocides in the field of memory studies as they offer viewpoints often missing from mainstream historical narratives, it will also try to elucidate how Nishimwe's memoir narrativises the biopolitical nature of oppression where institutionalised forms of hatred and discrimination based on ethnic identities and their forced memorialisation give rise to the extreme condition of genocide.

Keywords: Memoir, Memory Studies, Oppression, Rwandan Genocide

Introduction

“Utazi iyo ava ntamenya iyajya!”
(If we don't know where we came from,
we don't know where we're heading)
- Kinyarwanda proverb

Thirty-one long years have passed since the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, one of the deadliest chapters of human history and one of the most horrible episodes of mass slaughter and atrocity since the Second World War. However, the shadow of this

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cataclysm has not yet left the collective memory of the Rwandans who have still been bearing the ineradicable scars on their minds, bodies, and overall socioeconomic lives. This was an incident where humans had forgotten the meaning of humanity, or Ubuntu as they call it in Kinyarwanda (national language of Rwanda) and, as a consequence, an estimated 800,000 people belonging mostly to the Tutsi ethnic group were killed by the Hutu extremists. As the proverb in the epigraph emphasises the necessity of knowing the past to understand and envisage the future better, the Rwandans have put every effort into making sure that they remember their past and never forget. “Kwibuka”, which is “to remember” in Kinyarwanda, is the name of the national commemoration event in Rwanda that takes place every year from April 7 to July 4, marking exactly the dates when the genocide occurred. However, in the enormity of this multitudinous collective memory, is anyone allowed to have the required space or an opportunity to remember (emphasis added) the trauma that each survivor of this pogrom had to go through? Does memorialising collective trauma overshadow or diminish individual trauma in the context of events like the Rwandan Genocide?

“We talk about millions of Rwandans, Tutsis killed during the genocide, and we seem to forget the individuals. This exhibition is here so that we remember the history of each individual” – said Immaculée Songa, a survivor who lost her husband and two daughters in the genocide (Westergard). The exhibition in question being “Stories of Survival and Remembrance - A call to action for genocide prevention,” launched in April 2023 at UN headquarters. How does this very act of individual ‘*remembering*’ help assemble and reconstruct the collective memory of the violence endured by the multitude? How can it provide insights into a deeper analysis of the incident through different theoretical perspectives? And finally, how can such remembrances be effectively used to prevent such atrocities from occurring in future? This paper will strive to find answers.

Background

During the Rwandan Civil War (1990-1994), the Tutsi people, who were an ethnic minority in Rwanda, constituting about 14 per cent of the total population then, became the target of the Hutus, who comprise the vast majority of the country. Apart from an age-old strife between these two ethnic communities, the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana, who was an ethnic Hutu, on April 6, 1994, helped escalate the collective hatred against the Tutsi minority and the political propaganda of ethnic violence was tactically spread like bushfire. Between April 7, 1994 and July 15, 1994, more than 5,00,000 people (Guichaoua 125) were killed in this “land of a thousand hills” and the majority of them were Tutsi. Rape was used as an active weapon of war and around 2,50,000 to 5,00,000 women (Nowrojee), mostly Tutsis, were subjected to severe sexual abuse, including rape and murder, sexual assault with the use of objects, and deliberate infection with HIV.

Consolee Nishimwe, the eldest daughter of a respectable family in Kibuye, district of Karongi, was only fourteen years old when the genocide began. Her family tried their best to seek refuge in various places but the Interahamwe (Hutu Paramilitary group) hunted them down and she lost her father Andre Ngoga, her three young brothers Philbert, Pascal, and Bon-Fils along with several other relatives and friends. She herself had to undergo severe physical and sexual abuse which resulted in her getting infected with HIV. However, she bravely survived the catastrophe along with her mother Marie-Jeanne Mukamwiza and younger sister Jeanette. Now, Consolee “is a committed speaker on the genocide, a defender of global women’s rights, and an advocate for other genocide survivors” (“About — Consolee Nishimwe”). She wrote her poignant memoir *Tested to the Limit: A Genocide Survivor’s Story of Pain, Resilience, and Hope* (2012) to spread positivity, awareness, and, most importantly, to “educate the world so that history won’t keep

repeating anywhere in the world.”ⁱ Through the eyes of a survivor who endured various forms of profound biopolitical oppression within her homeland, the book provides a detailed and intimate account of the harrowing events that unfolded during that dark period.

Theoretical Framework

In his celebrated lecture series titled “Society Must Be Defended”, Michel Foucault offers a distinct perspective on modern warfare, which he describes as:

. . . the discourse of a battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage. (61)

In this intertwining of biological and political factors, or, in a ‘biopolitical’ context, the survival of a particular religious, ethnic, or political group is seen to have a direct impact on the survival of another similar group, which suggests that the preservation or dominance of one group is perceived as being at odds with the well-being of another. Politically promoted memorialisation of these ‘essential’ differences between two groups may lead to an atmosphere of antagonism and, ultimately to war and genocide. In Rwanda, where biopolitical schemes had a historical precedent in the colonial period when Belgian authorities implemented a system of ethnic identification, classifying the population into Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa categories based on arbitrary criteria such as physical characteristics, it was quite evident that propagating a collective remembrance of Tutsis being privileged over Hutus both during and after the colonial rule would instigate genocidal intents among the mass. Apart from a Foucauldian lens, such biopolitical manipulations can also be explained according to the theory of homo sacer/bare

life, propounded by Giorgio Agamben, who explained how the unrestrained exertion of biopower leads to a denial of individuality as well as humanity and gives birth to a politically unwanted population that can be exterminated at the whims of the authoritative power, and Achille Mbembe, who developed the idea of ‘necropolitics’ defined as the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die in a biopolitical state system. And, all these biopolitical strategies can successfully shape collective memory, which, in turn, can influence political dynamics and responses to governance. Understanding this interplay is crucial for analysing how power was operated and how memories were constructed, contested, or preserved in the sociopolitical context of Rwanda in 1994 and thereafter – and that is what the paper aims to do.

Rwandan Genocide: How a Tragedy Unfolded

A small, landlocked country in the eastern part of central Africa, Rwanda is known for its beautiful landscapes, including rolling hills, lush forests, and numerous lakes. Bordered by Uganda to the north, Tanzania to the east, Burundi to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west, Rwanda is situated in the converging area of the African Great Lakes region and Southeast Africa. According to the World Factbook Report of 2023, the current population of the country is 13,400,541 (Rwanda - the World Factbook) and, in the 1990s, around 85% of the population were ethnic Hutu, 14% were Tutsi, and 1% were Twa. In present-day Rwanda, “the national census no longer tracks ethnicity, so at least officially, no one knows how many of one or the other there are” (Gwin). After the mayhem, the Rwandan government prohibited the mention of ethnicity in the national identity cards, the very identity cards which played a major role in identifying the Tutsis during the genocide. This ethnic segregation of the Rwandan population had not been there since the primordial history of the country and even after the inception of the idea of different ethnic identities, it was not

socioculturally exclusive and was interchangeable based on cattle ownership. Prof. Howard Adelman, founder and director of the Centre for Refugee Studies, at York University, even refused to identify these people as belonging to different 'ethnic' groups. In the 1997 documentary *Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda*, he says:

There was a precolonial state in which there were mixture of groups. And these groups were classified by so-called ethnicity, but ethnicity is really the wrong term for the difference between the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. They were differentiated by clans. They were differentiated by region. (03:41-04:00)

Historically, the Hutu were primarily engaged in agriculture and made up the majority of the rural population while the Tutsi were often associated with cattle herding and were considered to have higher socioeconomic status and, in some cases, seen as a ruling elite:

Pre-colonial Rwanda was a highly centralized Kingdom presided over by Tutsi kings who hailed from one ruling clan . . . While the relationship between the king and the rest of the population was unequal, the relationship between the ordinary Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa was one of mutual benefit mainly through the exchange of their labour. The relationship was symbiotic. A clientele system called "Ubugake" permeated the whole society. (About Rwanda – the Embassy of the Republic of Rwanda – USA)

Social and marital intermingling between the two groups was not rare and, by acquiring more livestock, Hutus often elevated their status in this hierarchical system. J. J. Carney, in his 2014 book *Rwanda Before the Genocide*, explains:

Despite their central importance in Rwanda's tragic postcolonial history, the categories "Hutu" and "Tutsi" are

not easily defined . . . If there is a narrow consensus, it holds that Bantu-speaking groups later associated with the Hutu arrived in Rwanda beginning around 1100 AD as part of the broader Bantu migrations that shaped so much of Iron Age history in Africa. Although they worked in both agricultural and pastoralist work, Hutu were more associated with the former . . . Hutu and Tutsi mixed more frequently in central and southern Rwanda. (10)

But, the origin of the Tutsi in Rwanda is more controversial as their immigration to the country has been viewed (by European theorists and Hutu extremist historians) in terms of military invasion (Carney 10). However, Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully in Rwanda until the onset of colonialism in the country, which played a significant role in exacerbating and codifying the divisions between the two ethnic groups.

Rwanda, as well as the neighbouring Burundi, became German colonies in 1899. After World War I, in 1918, these two German colonies were placed under Belgian mandate by the League of Nations according to the Treaty of Versailles and were administered under two Tutsi monarchs (Keane193). Between 1926 and 1933, the Belgian rulers intensified the practice of ethnic divisions in Rwanda by issuing ethnic identity cards, making these distinctions more explicit and codified. By applying the pseudoscientific conjecture of biological racism that was used to ‘examine’ and ‘identify’ racial superiority and inferiority by measuring human skulls, nose structures, and heights, and detecting eye and skin colour, the Tutsis were declared to be racially superior to the Hutus. The Tutsis were viewed by the colonisers as “somehow less African (Black) and more European (White) and, by extension, superior (more human) to their Hutu fellow countrymen and women” (White 473). For the foreign colonisers, befriending the existing rulers of the country was more diplomatically beneficial, which could easily be strengthened by asserting their racial closeness with the

Europeans: “In order to strengthen their control, the Belgians imposed the rigid system of racial classification, and divided Rwanda’s ethnically mixed clan structure into three distinct groups, Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa” (Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda 04:08-04:22). The Tutsis were described as Hamites or black Aryans or proto-Europeans who “had come down from the north, possibly Ethiopia, into the dark and savage lands in the heart of Africa to impose their superior civilization” (Keane 13). Besides, they were also ‘diagnosed’ to be taller than other Rwandans and, as famous American journalist John Gunther says in his description of Tutsis, this ‘tallness’ was perceived as “the symbol of racial exclusiveness and pure blood” (Keane 14). Consequently, the Tutsis were granted preferential treatment in education, employment, and administration, and also favoured by the Christian Missionaries, which stoked resentment among the Hutu majority and ultimately gave rise to the formation of PARMEHUTU (Party for the Emancipation of the Hutus) in 1957, when the country was still under colonial rule.

After the death of the first Christian Tutsi king (Mwami) Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1959, the country saw the first large-scale uprising and violence against the Tutsi elites, as a consequence of which a great number of Tutsis fled and sought refuge in Burundi, Tanzania, Zaire, and Uganda. In 1962, Rwanda gained independence from Belgium, and the Hutu majority, led by Grégoire Kayibanda’s Hutu nationalist PARMEHUTU took political power, marking a reversal of the previous hierarchy. The divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi persisted as the Hutu-led government continued to emphasise the Hutu identity and promoted Hutu nationalism and this sustained hostility became the source of ethnic violence, including killings and forced migrations. The exiled Tutsis in the neighbouring countries, especially in Burundi, now started attempting homecoming through military invasions, which triggered more massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda between 1963 and 1967 and the numbers of Rwandan refugees escalated rapidly in

different African nations. Before Army Chief General Juvénal Habyarimana seized power in 1973, promising to restore peace and order, the Tutsis were already getting expelled from educational institutes offering higher studies and were also systematically persecuted and killed. During Habyarimana's one-party regime, the pro-Hutu sentiment was carefully nurtured under the façade of maintaining the peaceful coexistence of both groups. In October 1990, the Tutsi-controlled rebel organisation Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from its northern borders, which resulted in the intervention of French and Zairean troops to aid the Rwandan government. The conflict apparently ended with the signing of a ceasefire on March 29, 1991 but it was the time for the Rwandan government to prepare a militia group named Interahamwe, which roughly translates to "those who stand together" in Kinyarwanda, with radical members of the youth wing of the ruling National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND) party. For the next three years, hate speech against the Tutsis, dehumanising them by calling them cockroaches (*Inyenzi*), separate incidents of massacres of Tutsis, political murders and various other forms of violence and discrimination were rampant throughout the country. As Dr. Gregory Stanton elucidates in his "Ten Stages of Genocide", the first five stages of genocide, namely, Classification, Symbolisation, Discrimination, Dehumanisation, and Organisation were noticeably taking place in the pre-genocide Rwanda (page no.. The society was already divided between 'us and them' i.e., Hutu and Tutsi, the identity cards helped identify the targeted group, the Tutsis were discriminated in academic and professional sectors, they were dehumanised by being called 'cockroaches' by the extremists, and finally, the militia group was well-prepared to carry out the mass slaughter at any given time.

In November 1992, Léon Mugesera, an ethnic Hutu and a prominent member of MRND, allegedly delivered an infamous speech, which, according to Philip Gourevitch, "laid the

groundwork for the carnage that was to follow two years later” (“Alleged Rwandan War Criminal Must Leave Canada: Top Court”). As Gourevitch himself elaborates in his 1998 book *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, the Hutu Powerⁱⁱ ideologue called on “Hutus to send the Tutsis back to Ethiopia by way of the Nyabarongo River”, a euphemism that literally happened when, in “April of 1994, the river was choked with dead Tutsis, and tens of thousands of bodies washed up on the shores of Lake Victoria” (Gourevitch 53). After a renewed attack by the RPF in February 1993, international mediators, including the United Nations, Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union), and regional African leaders, facilitated negotiations between the Rwandan government, led by President Juvénal Habyarimana, and the RPF, led by Paul Kagame. At Arusha in Tanzania, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Rwanda, commonly known as the Arusha Accord, was signed on August 4, 1993. It outlined a comprehensive peace agreement that addressed numerous issues, including the sharing of political power, the integration of the RPF rebels into the Rwandan Armed Forces, the return of refugees, and the disarmament of militias. As a part of this, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda or UNAMIR was established by the United Nations Security Council through Resolution 872 on October 5, 1993 to administer the implementation of the Arusha Accord. However, despite the presence of 2,500 UN peacekeepers under the supervision of Canadian Major General Roméo Dallaire, the implementation of the peace agreement faced several obstacles, including resistance from hardline factions within the Rwandan government and the military, increased training of the militias, and unrestrained broadcast of hate speech from the extremist radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira, the president of Burundi, was shot down before its landing at Kigali Airport. According to some

governmental reports published in post-genocide Rwanda, the Hutu extremists, who anticipated the president's ultimate surrender to the agreements of the Arusha Accord, were behind the assassination (Holland). Whoever the assassin was, the radicals used the news as proof of the Tutsis' treachery and exhorted the Hutus to precipitate the 'final solution' against them. Thus, began the genocide.

Biopolitics and a Collective Memory of Hatred

Rory Stewart, in his introduction to *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, says: "At the heart of the genocide was repetition, which is so often the enemy of understanding" (Gourevitch viii). As the field for the pogrom was being prepared in Rwanda much before the time when it actually took place, a forced repetition of an age-old collective memory of discrimination and hatred was widespread throughout the country. The gullible common people became the easiest target of the anti-Tutsi propaganda which compelled the mass to 'remember' the 'oppressive' Tutsi monarchy, the anti-Hutu and pro-Tutsi sentiment of the colonisers, and the century-old 'suffering' of the Hutus. And, to fuel the already brewing resentment against the Tutsis, the well-calculated use of media and public entertainment forms was strikingly extensive. Let us consider, for example, the lyrics of a few popular songs by Simon Bikindi, the notorious musician and composer:

"We have put the monarchy behind us/The evil feudal and colonial yoke have both departed" ("Making Violence Ordinary" 89)

"Remember the whip, remember the harsh labour, /Remember the days you spent working for the chief without any compensation!" ("Song Lyrics with Translation")

“If I could have a daring child and another with fast feet,
/So that I can send them to Muhinzi, he who saved the
farmers /By chasing away the cattle breeders of Mwima
and Muschirarungu.”ⁱⁱⁱ (“Making Violence Ordinary”
91)

Though the lyrics are carefully composed using elliptical language and were open for different interpretations (as Bikindi pleaded himself not guilty by claiming that his songs were being misinterpreted), three songs by this famous singer were reckoned staunchly political and they were played every day by RTLM repetitively. As Bill Berkeley remembers in his 2001 book, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full*:

“Defend your rights and rise up!” a voice on the radio was singing . . . A popular crooner named Simon Bikindi was beseeching his fellow Hutu – the bene sebahinzi, the sons of cultivators – to carry on the slaughter without delay. “Defend your rights and rise up against those who oppress you! . . . The Tutsi are ferocious beasts, the most vicious hyenas, more cunning than the rhino,” he cooed. “The Tutsi inyenzi [cockroaches] are bloodthirsty murderers. They dissect their victims, extracting vital organs, the heart, liver, and stomach.” (qtd. in “Making Violence Ordinary” 93)

Before looking for references to Bikindi’s songs in Nishimwe’s account, one must look at what other Rwandans, both survivors and perpetrators, had to say about them^{iv}:

“Bikindi was awakening the Hutus “to work” [meaning, to kill], because the enemy was the Tutsi . . . He had a purpose, even though he was only playing music; he knew the genocide would occur . . . Truly, I know that [his songs] influenced Hutu to kill others.” – Beata, a young woman whose father and brother were killed

during the genocide; a Tutsi (“Song Lyrics with Translation”)

“What I’m telling you is that if I did participate in those killings, it is because of the teachings or what I learnt from Bikindi’s songs.” – ICTR Prosecution witness AEY, testifying against Bikindi; former Interahamwe member, incarcerated in Rwanda; a Hutu (“Song Lyrics with Translation”)

Consolee Nishimwe, a teenage schoolgirl at this time, similarly recalls how they “continued to hear personalities such as the well-known singer Simon Bikindi singing songs of hatred against Tutsis on the RTLM radio airwaves” (Nishimwe 29). In the third and fourth chapters of her memoir, she vividly describes how the collective hostility against the Tutsis was gradually being institutionalised by portraying them as past oppressors, invaders, and an unwelcome group in Rwanda (Nishimwe 14, 15, 17, 21). Even children were systematically indoctrinated into believing that their fellow Tutsi children were harmful to their existence (Nishimwe 22). “The Hutu memories of preindependence Rwanda had been passed down through the generations, and Hutu children could recall at length the sins the Tutsi had committed against their forefathers” (Power 337). General Dallaire, in his personal reflection on the genocide *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2003), recounts the same incident:

At the tail end of February, one of our African MILOBs [Military Observers] . . . noticed the teachers . . . were registering the ethnic identities of their pupils and seating them according to who was Tutsi and who was Hutu . . . As he visited other schools, he discovered that the same procedure was taking place. We mistakenly assumed that this was just another example of ethnicity at play in Rwanda. (198)

Probably there is no country in the entire world that does not have a history of class hierarchy and oppression. But, using that history manipulatively against a particular group and compelling people to ‘remember’ that history as a means to doubt and hate that group gives birth to racial/ethnic/religious/regional segregation and hostility. In the words of Foucault: “Racism first develops with colonization, or in other words, with colonizing genocide” and, to justify genocide by applying biopower, separatism in the name of evolutionism becomes essential (*Society Must Be Defended* 257). Instigating people to remember that Tutsis were originally immigrants from Ethiopia, that they misruled Rwandans for centuries, and that they were on their way to enslave the Hutus once again was the stimulus for the genocide: “Tens of thousands became infected . . . by an anti-Tutsi psychosis; they were convinced through newspapers, radio and the frequent public speeches of Habyarimana’s closest supporters that the Tutsis were going to turn them into beasts of the field once again” (Keane 9). This is an acute example of how memory can be employed to create or exaggerate perceived threats to a population and can be selectively used to implement oppressive biopolitical strategies by shaping and manipulating historical narratives. In a biopolitical regime, as Foucault elaborates in the fifth part of *The History of Sexuality*, the “entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity” because the biological existence of that population is seen as in danger because of the existence of another population. People are taught to kill because they are made to believe that it is the only way to live (“Right of Death” 137). It is, as Foucault describes in *Society Must Be Defended*, “a way of improving one’s own race by eliminating the enemy race” because the enemy represents a sort of “biological threat” to their existence (257). A close reflection of this can be seen in Nishimwe’s memoir where she recalls the yells of the militias in their killing spree, immediately after they slaughtered her three toddler brothers: “Hutu Power! Hutu

Power! We have exterminated some little cockroaches and saved our people the trouble of having them grow up to cause problems!” (Nishimwe 87). And, this “pathological hatred of the Tutsis” that rendered them a threat to Rwanda was caused precisely because of the forced memorialisation of all “the stories of oppression and humiliation that had been handed down from their parents” and “all the conspiracy theories of the government” (Keane 165-166).

This outrageous killing of the Tutsis was not only made inevitable but was also justified, which was again a direct effect of the long-nourished memory of the oppressive Tutsi rule. As Giorgio Agamben explains in his 1998 book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, in contemporary political systems, there exists a state of exception where a person can be reduced to ‘bare life’ and become subject to violence and exclusion without any legal protection (9). Drawing from ancient Greco-Roman law and political theory, he relates this condition to that of *homo sacer*, or sacred man, “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben 8). This refers to individuals who can be killed with impunity but cannot be sacrificed in a ritualistic or religious sense, thus leaving their chances to live at the hand of the divinity, and hence, ‘sacred’. Agamben critiques how modern governments utilise biopolitical techniques to manage populations and create conditions where people can be reduced to bare life. He argues that the state’s power is grounded in the ability to define who falls into this category of bare life and who does not. In the Rwandan Genocide, the Hutu extremist government systematically dehumanised the Tutsi population and the process stripped the Tutsis of their legal and political rights, rendering them as a form of “bare life” in the eyes of the Hutu regime. Similarly, as Agamben’s theory of “bare life” emphasises the state of exception, where the normal legal and political order is suspended, in the Rwandan context, the government declared a state of emergency and exploited it to carry out mass killings.

This dehumanisation, which, according to Dr. Stanton's "Ten Stages of Genocide", constitutes stage four, manifests in Nishimwe's memoir where she remembers the ranting through the loudspeakers: "We don't want Tutsis around us, they are snakes! Kill them all and don't forget the small ones!" (Nishimwe 28); "We need to exterminate all of those Tutsi cockroaches from young to old! . . . Kill them big, Kill them small! . . . Kill them all!" (Nishimwe 38). She also remembers her neighbours telling her that her community did not have the right to live:

"The government is giving orders that every Tutsi in the country must be searched for and killed wherever they are!" (Nishimwe 33)

"I don't know why you are hiding; . . . you don't deserve to have a life and you will all be exterminated anyway" (Nishimwe 58)

"Tutsis do not have the right to live among us!" (Nishimwe 78)

Here, one might refer to Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics which he defined as the biopolitical authority over the lives of people and "the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe 66). Additionally, he also says that

War is, after all, a means of achieving sovereignty as much as a way of exercising the right to kill. When politics is considered a form of war, the question needs to be asked about the place that is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular when it is wounded or slain). (Mbembe 66)

In Rwanda, the state, media, and political elites played a pivotal role in orchestrating and inciting violence against the Tutsi

population and, the normalisation and inevitability of death in this necropolitical context demonstrates the state's exercise of sovereign power over life and death.

In the history of almost all genocides recorded in the modern world, the use of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon to perpetrate genocide has always been pervasive. Rwanda was not an exception and, here also, a forcibly implanted collective memory of Tutsi women being seductive, arrogant, and spurning Hutu men “whom they considered ugly and inferior” (Nowrojee) played a significant role in organising the systematic mass rape. And, again, these women are portrayed as potential “biological threats” (Society Must Be Defended 61) for the entire Hutu population because, as it was propagandised, the Tutsi women were “femme fatale” and “seductive agents of the enemy” (Nowrojee) who, by using their sexual prowess, could manipulate Hutu soldiers and politicians and even the UN peacekeepers in favour of the RPF leaders. As Foucault elaborates on the “biopolitics” of the human race” in *Society Must be Defended*, one can understand the political justification of the mass rape because, in an oppressive biopolitical regime, “after a first seizure of power over the body” there comes “a second seizure of power that is not individualizing but...massifying” (243). Past memories of the supposed ‘arrogance’ of some Tutsi girls were used to create the collective hostility against all the females of this community en masse and defiling their bodies became synonymous with destroying their pride, thus, securing a way to victory over their entire community. Rape was used as a form of genocide where Tutsi women (including Nishimwe) were deliberately infected with HIV (rape squads were formed with HIV+ Hutu patients who were all released from hospitals) to expose them to a “slow, inexorable death” (Drumbl 574). This intersectional form of oppression is reflected in Nishimwe’s account of her rape, where she painstakingly mentions the verbal abuse she endured, which shows how her ordeal was caused not only because of her gender

but also, and primarily because of her ethnicity: “I tried to resist . . . but he put the sword to my neck and kept insulting me saying that we are snakes and cockroaches” (Nishimwe 91).

The Labyrinth of Oppression and Memory

In Rwanda, memory was formulated, fabricated, and then disseminated that finally led to the 100-day nightmare of 1994. In post-genocide Rwanda, none of these past memories can be traced anymore; there are no identity cards and asking someone about their ethnicity is almost a crime. But, “[n]ational memory is remembrance through the lens of present-day circumstances by those who are currently in power” (Fox 7). What impact does the memory of the genocide itself have on the individual and collective psyche? The Rwandan government has meticulously preserved the national memory of the genocide by observing Kwibuka every year and by erecting six memorials in the country including one in the capital Kigali itself. Is this ritual of ‘remembering’ very healing for the survivors? In the words of Consolee: “In addition to the psychological trauma which we had suffered, a large percentage had also experienced varying types of physical trauma that left them with visible scars, serving as a grim reminder to them every single day” (Nishimwe 156). At the mention of going back to the place where they once had their lovely home, she responds: “. . . we don’t want to see that place anymore! . . . I am scared to go back and relive those bad memories of what happened to us!” (Nishimwe 135). She remembers how another girl of her age shared her feeling: “. . . I couldn’t control the bad memories which constantly flooded my brain . . . ” (Nishimwe 157). Even while receiving treatments for HIV infection in the US, Consolee could not avert her memories: “The reality of being on that hospital bed brought back painful memories of how I was raped and reminded me that it was the cause of me lying there with that

illness” (Nishimwe 171). As an HIV+ patient, every day she has to re-experience her traumatic past and this act of uncontrollable recollection undoubtedly exacerbates her pain instead of alleviating it. The tragedy that was caused by a forced, somewhat false memory gives birth to another painful, unforgettable memory, which becomes a tragedy again in itself.

Conclusion

The memorialisation of man-made disasters like genocide is necessary to make the world learn from past mistakes so that history does not repeat itself. However, individual experiences, memories, and repercussions get somewhere lost in the multitude. Probably no government-run genocide memorial in Rwanda mentions Consolée’s baby brothers or her brave father. The world will never know the names of the individuals whose grimacing skulls, as their last remains on this earth, are lying in Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre merely as proof of the darkest 100 days of the country. Besides, as Nicole Fox tries to explore in her book *After Genocide*, such memorialisation may not always bring positive consequences for every individual:

Anitha feels deep shame about being raped during the genocide, explaining she will never marry because of it. While she values the memorial, declaring that it brings her much needed peace, she also feels that Rwanda’s remembrance processes have left her behind because she is poor and the victim of trauma and rape. (Fox 5)

By coining the term “stratification of collective memory,” Fox explains “how memory projects in particular, in both process and outcome, can serve to reinforce previously existing

hierarchies and their attending ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic cleavages” (Fox 6). Besides, this “stratification can lead to civic disengagement and nonparticipation as well as further violence, pain, and social isolation” (Fox 6).

As this article is being written, numerous people across the world are struggling hard to keep their individual memory of the atrocities committed against them alive and bring justice. Similarly, numerous others are equally struggling to cope with those very memories that still haunt them and compel them to relive their trauma every other day. National memorialisation of the collective past is almost always carried out from the perspective of an authoritative body that holds power; selective individual memories only get a foothold there when they cater to that national agenda, without besmirching the image of the country. While collective remembrance serves as a powerful mechanism for preserving historical lessons and fostering societal healing, it is in the personal narratives and recollections of survivors and witnesses that one can find the most intimate and unfiltered accounts of the human experience of genocides. As this multifaceted interplay between personal and national memory continues to be explored by researchers and policymakers, it becomes increasingly evident that the preservation of both is essential to the vital mission of ensuring “never again” is not just a slogan, but an enduring commitment to human rights and the prevention of future crimes.

Endnotes

- i. As Consolee herself said in an interview with the author of this paper. Details can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1UDbDQHK2c0OqV7GJ-UD7ZES4PV4UBZI9?usp=sharing>

- ii. An extremist ideology propounded by Hutu extremists and widespread during the 1990s in Rwanda, promoting racial and ethnic supremacy by claiming the superiority of the Hutu ethnicity and justifying their domination and even the brutal violence against the Tutsis
- iii All songs are originally in Kinyarwanda and the translations are by Jason McCoy
- iv All quotations and their details are from the website bikindiresearch.com, created by Jason McCoy, Ph.D. Musicology

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