

# INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF WAR ON CHILDREN: A READING OF SOME POST-RWANDAN GENOCIDE WITNESS NOVELS

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## **Abstract**

*The ideology of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was chiefly driven by power-drunk Hutu politicians who were bent on establishing an only Hutu Rwandan society. To achieve this, every Tutsi in Rwanda was targeted to be killed, this included adults, children and the unborn. Tutsi children were seen as vital to the survival of the Tutsi ethnic group. They were, therefore, targeted for immediate extermination. The early days of violence against Tutsis created countless homeless children and orphans as Tutsi men were summarily executed. Displaced Tutsi children fled into cities and towns as rampaging Hutu extremists pursued them. This paper investigates the portrayals of children in crisis situations as found in selected post-Rwandan genocide testimonial novels. Children and infants have often been the first victims of war, this is connected with their dependence on their parents. In Rwanda, children not only suffered from physical abuse, but they were also targeted for sex-related abuse. While countless researches has been carried out on the causes and consequences of the genocide, the direct effects of the violence on children during the carnage and the period immediately after the crisis have received minimalist interest from scholars. Drawing from some witness novels on the genocide, this paper arrives at the conclusion that Tutsi children were the first victims of violence perpetrated by Hutus against defenseless Tutsi populace during the carnage. Some traumatising acts inflicted on children in the texts include: family separation, physical and psychological pains, diseases, hunger, and sexual violence among others.*

**Keywords:** *Children in war, Lost childhood, Rwandan genocide, Sexual violence, Witness novel, Trauma.*

## **Introduction**

In 1994, Rwanda became the epicenter of one of the most horrible manmade disasters in modern African history. It was the genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group. In less than three months, over 800,000 Rwandans of Tutsi ethnic group were massacred in across towns and villages in Rwanda. About 2 million Tutsis were also displaced. The violence against Tutsis led to mass migrations of Rwandans across borders to other African countries such as Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi. A deep-rooted animosity between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda partly caused the Rwanda genocide. Although the Tutsis were the minority ethnic group, they have always been privileged in Rwandan society. They had better education, dominated the political landscape and

evidently were considered superior to the Hutu ethnic who had more population in Rwanda. This was the situation of the Tutsi/Hutu relationship up till the 1950s when Hutus began to mobilise politically to displace the dominant Tutsis. With most African countries gaining their independence from European countries in the early 1960s, Hutus would take political control in Rwanda in 1961 when the country gained independence from Belgium. This change in political dominance in Rwanda by Hutus would fuel more violent attacks on members of the minority Tutsis some of whom by then had fled to neighbouring countries where they lived as refugees. These Tutsi refugees abroad formed armed groups and began making plans to attack Rwanda from outside Rwanda. This was the situation before the total break out of genocidal violence in Rwanda in early April 1994. The ideology of the genocide was the extermination of the Tutsi ethnic group in Rwanda.

### **Retelling African Wars in Prose Fiction**

The consequence of war on human condition in African literature and society has often received minimal scholarly attention among African researchers. The history of Africa it appears, is intrinsically enmeshed in violence and civil wars. This is because, from the pre-colonial era till date, there is no region in Africa that has not witnessed a civil war. A form of war is currently ongoing in countries such as Cameroun, Ethiopia, Congo Democratic Republic, Libya and Mozambique (Okolie, 2021). Writers draw inspiration from history making events in their societies. From the ancient era to our modern age, wars, ethnic conflicts, and political turmoil have shaped literature from different societies and cultures. Africa is not an exception to the influence of wars on literature. Creative writers in their texts reflect on numerous issues that often lead to wars, such as - Are wars inevitable in the world? What really necessitates wars in human society? Are the initial set objectives of wars achieved at the end of the violence? Who are the lions and victims of wars? (Emenyonu, 2008). Writers chose different angles in dealing with these questions as they also try to suggest possible answers to these perennial questions on wars. Nwahunanya (1997) asserts that the Nigerian civil war has contributed immensely to the body of literature in Africa in the area of history and fiction. He maintains that the war has inspired a great number of war narratives fifty years after it ended. In these works are descriptions of the direct effects of war as witnessed while it lasted. Children are often portrayed

as hapless in war situations and are the first victims of the violence associated with wars and ethnic violence. Wars bring despair, pain and death eventually.

### **Children Under Genocidal Violence in Rwanda**

Children and adolescents were exposed to unimaginable sufferings during and after the Rwandan genocide. These hardships were in the form of physical and psychological pains. Thousands of children were immediately orphaned and made homeless as a direct consequence of violence directed against members of the Tutsi ethnic group. Family members were separated and in some instances, parents abandoned their children, the latter having no alternative but to fend for themselves while the carnage lasted. The most traumatising period for children in Rwanda was the period between 1994 to 1998. This covers the genocide period and the five years of insecurity after. With no central government in place immediately after the genocide, chaos was unleashed on the populace as the crime rate soared and insecurity spread across the country. This crisis would have far-reaching adverse effects on Rwandan children who survived the violence as would be portrayed in this paper.

The violence that broke out immediately in April 1994 following the death of the then Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana in an airplane crash near the Kigali Airport would lead to the suspension of education in towns and cities across the country. School infrastructures were destroyed and pupils, students as well as teachers were attacked. Educated Tutsis were particularly targeted by the Hutu extremists. The end of the genocidal violence did not bring about the resumption of schooling across Rwanda. Years after the violence ceased, thousands of children could not access formal education. This relates to the lack of parental care that the now-orphaned children faced. With no one to fend for them, Rwandan children who have survived the carnage would engage in child labour to make a living. The children worked mostly in farms as labourers and also engaged in menial jobs in the cities. With the increase in children working as labourers is a corresponding decrease in the number of children attending schools.

However, it is observed that attacks on Tutsis in schools in Rwanda precede the genocide. Tutsi students have often been singled out for hate crimes in boarding schools in Rwanda. Scholastique Mukasonga in *La femme aux pieds nus* (2008), recalls how Tutsi students were singled out and assaulted in her school. Mukasonga was a student then at a town named Bature.

She describes how she had to run for her life as she was being pursued by her fellow students ... “Je ne veux pas revoir l’image de mes camarades hutus, des garçons du groupe scolaire, lancés à ma poursuite pour me tuer, moi et mes camarades tutsi”... (80) (“I do not want to remember the image of my Hutu mates, of schoolboys, chasing me to kill me. Me and my Tutsi mates”). Hutu children were encouraged to attack Tutsis, and in schools, authorities allowed Tutsis to be beaten up by their schoolmates. Benjamin Sehene also recounts attacks on Tutsi students in *La feu sous la soutane* (2005). This attack took place while the protagonist in his novel was a young student in the minor seminary. The year of this attack was given as 1973.

J’étais au petit séminaire quand éclatèrent des purges antitutsi, les premières auxquelles j’assistais. Un jour, pendant le cours de géographie, des étudiants du grand séminaire firent irruption dans la classe. Ils fermèrent portes de fenêtres puis demandèrent que tous les élèves tutsi se lèvent (35).

I was at the minor seminary when the first anti-Tutsi purges that I witnessed broke out. One day during the Geography lesson, students from the major seminary burst into the class. They closed the doors and windows, then demanded that all Tutsi students should stand. (*My translation*).

The mention of attacks in the different novels by different authors is a testimony that the narrations are valid accounts of what happened in Rwandan schools before the genocide.

Although international law requires that in a situation of war, women and children should be protected against rape and all other forms of gender-based violence, this was not implemented during the Rwandan genocide and as a result, there were numerous cases of sexual abuses perpetrated against Tutsi women and moderate Hutus. Rape was widely used as an act of warfare during the genocide and children were not spared from sexual violence. Sexual violation of young girls continued after the genocide had effectively ended. This was occasioned by the lack of a central government that existed soon after the genocide. Criminal gangs took the opportunity created by the lawlessness to unleash terror on the populace. On the frequent use of rapes during the genocide, Noworojee, (1996, p.14), asserts that:

Sexual rape crimes have been perpetrated through repeated violations, gang rapes by soldiers and militias, or neighbours, and some rape cases of girls and women in front of the members of their family for humiliation purposes.

The end of the genocide created yet another problem for children namely, the problem of children who were born out of sexual violence that took place during the crisis. Wax, (2004) holds that close to 10,000 children were born of rapes that were perpetrated during the genocide. These children are discriminated against up till today, and given derogatory names such as “les enfants de mauvais souvenir (children of bad memories) (Goodwon,1997), or “enfants indésirés” (children of hate/unwanted children). Nowrojee, (1996, p.14), adds that some of these children were maligned and given very degrading names such as “devil’s children.” The parents of these children were also stigmatised and they lived in shame and low self-esteem unable to make a living to care for their children. Many of the rape victims also got infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted disease. This chronic ailment would affect them years after the end of the genocide. Some of these women would pass on the infections to their young children. Thus many children born of rape during the genocide were never under the care of healthy mothers. This situation is aggravated by high poverty levels experienced across Rwanda after the genocide as a result of the poor state of the economy. The children were also unable to complete their basic education.

### **Witness Novels as Veritable Accounts of the Rwandan Carnage**

Testimonial or witness literature is written narratives by people who have witnessed extraordinary events such as wars, rape, mass murders, other forms of violence and natural disasters. Testimony literature has its history from post-holocaust writings. These were literary and non-literary creations of people who have survived the Shoal and other atrocities committed by the Nazis. Testimony however began as a tool of literary analysis around the early part of the 1980s. It began as a framework for studying numerous books and essays in philosophy, cultural studies, literature, art theory and historiography. (Giovani, 2011). It soon became associated with the oppressed and subaltern groups of people who have suffered from one form of dehumanising treatment or the other. Thus, the blacks in the Americas who suffered oppression as a result of

the Trans-Atlantic slave trades, the Jews in Europe who were killed through mass murders, those living with disabilities that were discriminated against, feminist theorists who wrote on gender disparities, the queers and other marginalised groups all saw testimony literature as a means of expressing their predicaments. Renowned essayist in testimony literature, Oliver (2004) argues that testimonies are beyond witnessing to atrocious acts. She sees testimonies as mere struggles for recognition and acceptance. For her, testimonies from after the Holocaust involve witnessing the deepest feelings of the survivors of atrocities. This covers feelings that are not seen with mere eyes. (Oliver, 2004: p.79). She puts this succinctly in her writing in “*Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*” (2001), in which she describes witnessing as beyond the ordinary. According to her, victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witness to horrors beyond recognition” (Oliver, 2004: pp.79-88).

Testimony literature, therefore, does not end with narratives of past events, rather, this literature deals with issues of pains suffered by the oppressed that are never recorded but which they have to live with for the rest of their lives. The pains include emotional torments, afflictions, sorrows, bitter passions and self-pity, among others. Greenspan ((2012) emphasises that “giving testimony bestows meaning on the sufferer and the loss so that it was not in vain.” This perhaps is one of the positive attributes of testimony writing.

Tierno Monénembo *L'Ainé des orphelins* (2000), presented a child who is both a victim of the genocide and a criminal. Faustin Nsenghimana a traumatised child of about 15 years lost his parents during the genocide. He was accused of murder after he found that his friend Mushinkoro another street child and gang leader had been having an amorous affair with his sister. His narrations show the memory of a traumatised child victim of the horrors of the genocide. Faustin is a reminder of the effects of the genocide on children who suffered unimaginable abuses. He represents children who lost their families and childhood, children who were forced to kill, children who engaged in vices such as arson, drug abuse, larceny and prostitution in order to survive, and homeless children who were orphaned and lived through violence.

The protagonist, Faustin, a young Hutu survivor narrates how Tutsis were separated from Hutu by militiamen and the military before they were executed in the presence of all. He gave a chilling account of how Tutsis were murdered at a church where he and members of his family

had fled to. Before the execution, Hutu militiamen used a loudspeaker to separate Hutus from Tutsis.

Le haut-parleur grésilla une nouvelle fois :

-Est-ce qu'il y a des Hutus parmi vous ? Les Hutus sont priés de sortir. Je répète : Les Hutus sont priés de sortir avec leur pièce d'identité ! (154)

The loud-speaker crackled once again:

-Are there Hutus amongst you? The Hutus are requested to come out. I repeat: The Hutus are requested to come out with their identity cards! (*My translation*)

Faustin lost his father a Hutu and his mother a Tutsi here. His father had courageously refused to abandon his wife and child. He and his wife died and his son miraculously survived the killing. He was imprisoned and waiting for his execution. He was later released, only for him to commit murder. His narrations show the memory of a traumatised child victim of the horrors of the genocide. Faustin Nsenghimana is a reminder of the effects of the genocide on children who suffered unimaginable abuses. He represents children who lost their families and childhood, children who were forced to kill, children who engaged in vices such as arson, drug abuse, larceny and prostitution in order to survive, and homeless children who were orphaned and lived through violence. The end of the genocide witnessed the imprisonment of more children who had taken to vices during the violence. Thousands of under-aged children were thrown into overcrowded jails across Rwanda. The detention centres that are described as unfit for humans became places of drug abuse by the inmates. Life in the prisons was tough and there were often fights leading to the deaths of inmates. (Monémbo, 2000, p.11,12). The children also suffered from sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS (p.18).

Mukasonga(2008) bemoans the difficulties and fear that exiled families at Nyamata faced daily as they struggled to survive ordeals that confronted them. She recalls nostalgically her simple life as a kid and the hard times they faced at the refugee camps. She regrets their endless hopes of

returning to their original abodes. The innocence and sincerity reflected in her narration depict the effects of the genocide on children and women. The novel describes ceremonies performed each time a Tutsi child was born and why they were often encouraged to live as one and protect themselves:

Les enfants comprenaient confusément que goûter l'ubunyano du nouveau venu, c'était l'accueillir, le reconnaître comme notre frère que l'on devrait protéger, aider à grandir, auquel il faudrait apprendre à échapper aux menaces mortelles qui pesaient sur lui puisqu'il avait eu le malheur d'être, comme nous, né tutsi. (69)

The children understood confusedly that to taste the *ubunyano* dish of the newborn baby was to receive him, and take him like our brother whom we must protect, help to grow, and whom we ought to teach how to escape from life-threatening events that will weigh down on him because he was unlucky like us to be born Tutsi. (*My translation*)

She particularly laments the fear of Tutsi women each time they give birth at Nyamata, which is ironic because having children is a thing of joy in Rwanda and in most African societies. This fear, according to her, is because the women knew for certain that someday, their children would be killed. Her lamentation further exposes the imminent dangers which children of Tutsi parents faced every day in Rwanda at the time of the genocide.

...Au Rwanda, disait maman, les femmes étaient fières d'avoir des enfants. Beaucoup d'enfants. Surtout des garçons. Mais à Nyamata, elles tremblent de peur quand elles mettent au monde. Non pas pour elles, mais pour leurs enfants. Surtout pour les garçons. Elles savent qu'on les tuera. Qu'un jour ou l'autre, proche ou lointain, on les tuera...(25)



... In Rwanda, my mother said that, “women were proud of having children, a lot of children. More importantly boys. But at Nyamata they tremble with fear each time they are delivered of babies. Not necessarily for themselves but for their children. Especially their male children. They know that they would be killed. That one day or the other, close or far, they would be killed...”(*My translation*)

Mothers in Rwanda were often apprehensive of what would befall their children. This is because Hutu extremists hunted them down. The genocide was basically conceived to totally exterminate Tutsis from Rwanda. Allowing Tutsi children to grow to adulthood would have negated its major ideology which is having a Rwandan society without the Tutsi ethnic group. They therefore killed Tutsi children each time the opportunity calls. Parents were aware of that and hardly allowed their children out of their sight. Even at that, mothers knew it was just a matter of time before the evil day. (Mukasonga, 2000. 24)

Mukasonga’s text shows that Tutsi young girls were also routinely raped by Hutu youths at Nyamata. The militiamen would ambush girls going to the stream to fetch water and have them raped in turns. This sexual violence against Tutsi girls sometimes resulted in the deaths of the victims. The Hutu soldiers often looked on while these abuses took place. A celebrated case at Nyamata camp according to Mukasonga was the rape of an innocent Tutsi girl Viviane.

It was the rape of Viviane that made all the women question the treatment imposed by tradition. Viviane was a very young woman, still a teenager. The mothers held her up as a model of good behaviour to their daughters when they showed a wild streak. She committed the impudence of going to fetch water at Lake Cyohoha alone, at an hour when the young men of the Party were in their camp whiling away their leisure time over a few cases of beer boasting of their brutal attacks on Tutsis, planning more. (139)

The young Hutu militiamen evidently drunk, pounced on Viviane and took turns in raping her. She would be found later in the day when a search party was sent out to look for her after she failed to return from the lake. When she was eventually found, it was evident she had been raped. ...A little further on, in a thicket, they found Viviane herself, blooded and covered with bruises. She 'd clearly been raped...(139).

Sehene (2005), highlights traumatic effects of the genocide on children. Fr. Stanislas after meeting the children of Mrs. Speciose, the lady who had fled to his church for safety observes the conditions of the children:

Le garçon, Canisius, un gamin maigrichon d'à peine dix ans. N'est pas très bavard. Sa sœur non plus d'ailleurs. Les pauvres sont traumatisés. Dieu sait à quelles horreurs ils ont dû assister depuis le début des massacres ! Tous ces gens assassinés dans leurs quartiers, ces cadavres que les miliciens amassent à chaque barrage routier. (8)

The boy Canisius, a skinny kid of barely ten years old, is not very talkative. Neither is his sister, on the other hand. The poor little things were traumatised. God knows the horrors they have witnessed since the beginning of the killings: all these men that were assassinated in their quarters. These corpses that the militiamen dump at each roadblock. (*My translation*)

The priest found that the children had been without food for days. He did not waste time in asking their mother to have something prepared for them. « Tu peux préparer quelque chose pour les gosses, ils ont sans doute faim. – Oui, Padre. Vous avez raison. Cela fait deux jours qu'ils n'ont pas mangé" (8). ( "You can prepare something for the kids, they are hungry no doubt. – Yes, Father. You are right. It's been two days since they ate.").

Many children suffered from malnutrition during the genocide. There was a collapse of the economy, scarcity of provisions, and prices of basic foods skyrocketed. This was coupled with the fact that agriculture the mainstay of the economy of Rwanda was abandoned. Farmers also

fled from the fields abandoning their cultivated farms. This led to a scarcity of basic foods. With no option left, some were compelled to engage in cannibalism to escape death by hunger.

Children were not spared from violence during the genocide. In fact, Hutu militiamen encouraged and pressured Hutu children to attack Tutsi children. The children were brainwashed and indoctrinated in the violent ideologies of the Hutu extremists. Usually, those who refused to join in the violence against Tutsis were considered traitors and enemies. Thus some children actually killed their fellow children who were their playmates and schoolmates.

Tadjo (2000), highlights the devastating effects of the genocide on children. These children were direct victims of events of the genocide. According to Tadjo, the children were traumatised by the scenes of killings and destruction that they had witnessed. (118). Often, they refused to recount the ordeals they had suffered. She concludes that with the level of destruction witnessed in Rwanda, these children have a bleak future. According to her, the social and economic fabric of Rwandan society were completely broken and would need years of rebuilding. In these children, Tadjo foresees a continuum of suffering and hopelessness of genocide.

... Enfants du génocide, ils sont la blessure qui pourrait faire mourir encore une fois le pays car leur souffrance est amère et leur avenir ne va pas plus loin que le bout de la rue. Ils grandiront la rage au ventre et qu'importe l'appartenance, la vie n'est pas chère, la vie ne vaut pas grand-chose. Mourir n'est pas une grosse affaire puisque ça se fait au bord de la route, dans la poussière ou la boue...(97)

... Children of the genocide, they are the wounded that might kill the country all over again, for their suffering is bitter, and their future extends no further than the end of the street. They will grow up with rage in their hearts for, after all, what does belonging matter? Life is cheap, life has no great value. Dying is no big deal, for death comes on the side of the road, in the dust or mud...(87)

Tadjo is here speaking about children who witnessed violence committed during the genocide. These children as we know are the future of the country. It should be noted here that the

genocidaires did not in any way spare children from death. They were hunted down just like their parents. They were left not only to fend for themselves but also to find means of escaping daily from killers. Tadjofurtherdescribe the children as warchildren:

Orphelins de la guerre, du sida ou de la dislocation des familles, quand ils n'erreraient pas dans les rues, ils passaient leurs journées à la décharge de Kigali. Chasse au trésor : fouiller dans les détritius, les restes du capital. (96)

Orphans of the war, of AIDS, or family dislocation, when they are not roaming the streets, they spent their days at Kigali's rubbish dump. A treasure hunt: rummaging in the garbage for the leftovers of the capital. (86)

Tadjo is particular in discussing the involvement of children who were active participants. This is evident from the revelation given by Isaac a certain young genocidaire detained in prison who was facing trial for his involvement in the killing of Tutsis. Isaac had revealed that : "Au moment des événements, les miliciens prenaient les jeunes de forces et les obligeaient à combattre et à tuer: Si tu ne tues pas, nous te tuerons. Si tu ne les tues pas, ilstetueront !" (30) (During the war, the militias were taking young people by force and making them fight and kill: If you do not kill, we will kill you. If you do not kill them, they will kill you!") (22). It is obvious that the militias not only coerced young people to join in the killings but brainwashed them using propaganda. Most of the young people who took part in the killings were not aware that they were committing crimes against humanity. Tadjo makes a case for innocent sharing in the punishment of perpetrators of the genocide. Many children were detained with their mothers in prisons across Rwanda. (112). There were instances where women were delivered of babies in the detention centres. (113)

Tadjo's accounts foreshadow a bleak future for Rwanda after the events of the genocide. The author is of the opinion that Rwanda will continue to suffer from the consequences of the genocide for a while. Specifically, she mentions children who were born during the crisis and those who took part in the violence. According to her, they are children who have witnessed

violence and it would definitely affect them since they did not have parental care during the war. Of note is the fact that thousands of Rwandan children were orphaned as a result of the genocide as earlier discussed. Children are the future of tomorrow, therefore, these children of war will have a negative influence on the society even after peace is restored in Rwanda. (124-125).

Tadjo's overall interest is in the function of writing in recalling the history of the ethnic cleansing. She believes genuine information about the carnage should be made available to achieve true reconciliation. According to her, without truth, justice will not be achieved for victims after a crisis. For her, the writer is faced with the enormous difficulty of recreating the violence and inhuman treatment victims were subjected to (Tadjo, 2000: 37). She concludes that as long as we cringe away from speaking on genocide, the fear will remain and the possibility of a re-occurrence is high with this silence. Her travelogue highlights the effects of the genocide on ordinary people and the confessions of perpetrators who were awaiting trial in prisons across Rwanda.

## **Conclusion**

The Rwandan genocide remains one of the most devastating manmade disasters in the history of modern Africa. Although the violence associated with the crisis has ended, the direct negative impact of the ethnic war on children across Rwanda is yet to abate. The genocide created countless vulnerable children in Rwanda. These children would live for the rest of their lives with traumas they experienced first-hand during the carnage. Mostly orphaned and with little or no help from the central government, the children took to the street to live the hard way. They engaged in vices such as drug trafficking, prostitution and violent crimes. Children born out of rape also suffered from discrimination and stigmatisation in their families and immediate communities. This rejection made it impossible for the children and their mothers to heal from their traumas. The children also suffered from challenging health conditions. Most health facilities in Rwanda were destroyed during the violence. Those children who contracted HIV from their mothers would eventually die from the ailment. Hunger was rife during the crisis and greatly affected children who hitherto depended on their parents for sustenance. With thousands displaced and families separated, thousands of children also suffered from hunger and associated health challenges such as malnutrition and underdevelopment. Hunger and lack of basic food supply were common at Nyamata and other cities in Rwanda affected by the violence. Tutsis

starved and could not afford bread which is considered as both food and medicine. This staple food was unavailable in most towns and villages and men traveled as far as Kigali the capital city to source loaves of bread. While these children grow into adulthood, the intergenerational effects of trauma in later lives should not be neglected. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in later lives is possible for people who have suffered from trauma. The case of the Rwandan genocide children shows that children who are victims of trauma take a long period to heal. The government should, therefore continue to pay attention to these former young victims of the genocide even in their adult lives.

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