

Violence and its Linguistic Framing: An Exploration of Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi*, *The Book of Bones* and Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*

Ayobami Onanuga

Summary

Several existing studies have investigated the aesthetics of genocide literature. However, there are few studies on genocide literatures from Nigeria especially as there is still a debate on what constitutes genocide in Nigerian literatures. A comparative study of genocide literature from Rwanda and the arguable genocide narratives from Nigeria will further the discourse of what constitutes genocide in Nigerian literature. This study delves into the examination of the use of violent language in Boubacar Boris Diop's documentation of the Rwandan genocide in *Murambi* and Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* and how this replicates the genocide experiences in the two contexts. The study asserts that the convention of measuring and defining genocide based on the scale of killings subverts the reality of the victims of genocides. It further establishes that Akpan's recreation of ethno-religious killings in Nigeria is in sync with the deployment of language in other established instances of genocide literature.

Opsomming

In talle studies word die estetika van volksmoordliteratuur ondersoek. Min studies handel egter oor die volksmoordliteratuur van Nigerië vanweë die debat oor wat volksmoord in Nigeriese literatuur behels. 'n Vergelykende studie van die volksmoordliteratuur van Rwanda en die betwiste volksmoordvertellings van Nigerië lewer 'n bydrae tot die diskoers oor wat volksmoord in Nigeriese literatuur uitmaak. Hierdie studie ondersoek die gebruik van gewelddadige taal in Boubacar Boris Diop se optekening van die Rwandese volksmoord in *Murambi* en Uwem Akpan se *Say You're One of Them* en hoe dit die belevens van volksmoord in die twee kontekste uitbeeld. In hierdie studie word beweer dat die konvensie om volksmoord op grond van 'n dodetal te meet en te omskryf, die werklikheid van die slagoffers daarvan ondermyn. Daar word voorts aangevoer dat Akpan se taalaanwending in sy herskepping van godsdiens-en-volksmoorde in Nigerië ooreenstemming toon met dié in gevestigde voorbeelde van volksmoordliteratuur.

Introduction

Incidents of genocide precipitate horrible experiences that most people never want repeated. The images of gory death, violence and destruction are imbued in the minds of participants and victims of such events. Genocide narratives, literary outcrops of genocides, are guides and reminders to document and mitigate the recurrence of the errors and mistakes of the past. They speak to the present generation about things that had gone wrong and they are also records or memories that children unborn will learn from. These records and memories show us how horrendous genocide is, an event that should never happen again. Unfortunately, however, genocides are repeated, on different levels and scales often because the word “genocide” is considered extreme in describing the rife ethno-religious and sectarian killings, particularly in Africa. In Rwanda, for instance, when the 1994 genocide started, many of the Tutsis and other bystanders did not foresee the irreparable damage that would be unleashed on the Rwandan nation. It looked “normal”, just like any of the lingering ethnic conflicts and killings already commonplace. By the time the ugly event was accorded serious attention, the genocidal acts had taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis with a comparable number displaced from their homes.

The emergence of genocide narratives in Africa can be traced to the 1998 writing project, “Writing by Duty of Memory”, as these works were solely dedicated to the engagement of the horrors of genocide. This writing project was to commemorate the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and different literary narratives were borne out of this project. Among these are Tierno Monenembo’s *The Oldest Orphan*, Veronique Tadjo’s *The Shadow of Imana*, Phillip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi, the Book of Bones*, Koulsy Lamko’s *The Butterfly of the Hills* among others. After this project, there have been numerous other works on the Rwandan genocide.

In Nigeria, Christians and Southerners have been victimised and killed in the Northern part of the country for years and this has spurred reprisal attacks and the embers of vengeance being silently nursed among the victimised. The Boko Haram terrorist group has also declared a Jihad against the Nigerian state with part of its plans being the imposition of Islamic sharia laws in the entirety of Nigeria. The group, as its Hausa name implies, is against Western education and has been committing “low scale” genocide to send its message home. Their targets are usually Western institutions, religious centres and government establishments in Nigeria. They have also killed Muslims. As much as these killings may not be aggregated among recorded incidents of genocide, especially as they have been termed overtime as acts of terrorism or insurgency, the fact remains that for any number of people to be killed for the sole reason of group affiliation, there is already a genocide. Consequently, scale or number of victims should not be the dominant factor in the

consideration of genocides, particularly as “small and unacknowledged genocides” often culminate into more serious genocides as the perpetrators become more confident.

There are documentations and recreations of ethno-religious killings in Nigeria in literary texts though there is paucity in their numbers. Uwem Akpan’s “Luxurious Hearse” in *Say You’re One of Them* is one of these few and this study will posit that the actions in the text are acts of genocide no matter how small in number the victims are. It is to be noted that the acts of killing people based on their ethnicity or religious affiliation have not been generally accepted as genocides and this could be one of the reasons Nigerian writers on these atrocities have not labelled these killings as such.

Nevertheless, these writings from Nigeria embody the features and aesthetics of genocide literatures like the preoccupation with the issues of violence, dehumanisation, trauma, horror, to mention a few. Generally, writers on genocide individually seek suitable forms or styles to convey their concerns effectively. They create and develop characters that allow the readers to partake and feel the experiences of the casualties. Nicki Hitchcott posits that writers on genocide engage the readers in this way so as to shock the readers and also implicate the readers through what is called “ethical reception”. (Hitchcott 2015: 197) Apart from making use of historical realities, the writers heighten the involvement of the readers in the sufferings, fear, horror, trauma and the rationalisation process the characters go through. Writers of genocide narratives also make use of violent language to depict the horror of genocide. These they do in a bid to “resurrect the dead, render the full human dimensions” (Tadjo 2004) to genocide stories so that these stories will be difficult to forget.

Boubacar Boris Diop and *Murambi*

Boubacar Boris Diop, a Senegalese journalist, screenwriter and novelist was born in 1946 in Dakar. A former editor of the independent Senegalese daily *Le Matin*, he is the founder of *Sol*, an independent newspaper in Senegal. He has written articles and essays, scripts, short stories, plays and screen plays. He wrote *Le Temps de Tamango* (1981), *Les Traces de la Meute* (1993), *Doomi Golo* (2003), *Kaveena* (2006). His book *Murambi, Le Livre des Ossements*, was published in 2000 and translated in English to *Murambi, the Book of Bones* by Fiona McLaughlin in 2006. Diop stayed in Rwanda for two months in 1998 to research the gruesome genocide perpetrated by Hutus against moderate Hutus and Tutsis in April 1994.

Diop artistically recreates the facts of the haunting aftermath of the genocide that he gathered during his research in Rwanda in *Murambi*. As a screenwriter and journalist, Diop’s narrative relays the emotional involvement he

experienced during his research and how difficult it is to call a monster by its name thus:

I was invited to visit Rwanda by some of my friends who live in Northern France. I said, “OK, I’ll go, but I won’t write about it”. I just wanted to make a simple report of what I saw and heard. I didn’t want to be involved with all these killings. Maybe I was afraid because I knew it would be very, very hard. So I went there as a journalist, but after a week, I knew that the only way to deal with the genocide was to write a novel. When you feel such strong emotions, the best way to deal with them is not to pretend like it’s not your business. I had to get involved because of the scale of the killings. About ten thousand people [were] killed every day for one hundred days. It was horrible. There were so many different stories I needed to tell For me, the most important thing was to underline the human side of the story. After genocide, it is important to give a face, to give a name, to give blood and flesh to the people who were killed I wanted readers to confront reality. The story wasn’t just from my imagination. I wanted people to read the book and know that everything I had to work with in the novel was true. I wanted human beings to ask questions about themselves, about human nature, and about Africa, where there is so much violence.

(Morris 2011)

It is evident, through the multiple narratives Diop makes use of, that he intended to give voice to the people involved in the genocide – victim, perpetrator, bystander and outlander. *Murambi* shocks the reader in its portrayal of the horrors and trauma that the genocide brought about as the people that were killed, whether Tutsi or moderate Hutu, were given a face. They were no longer seen as belonging to an ethnic group or a remote country but presented as human beings who have their aspirations, emotions and fears. The perpetrators too were given a voice so that their righteous indignation against their Tutsi neighbours could be seen and their different and united reasons or justification for eliminating the enemy could also be observed.

Murambi, despite its linguistic simplicity, is loaded with images and occurrences that put the readers on edge throughout. It is evident that a story about a serious occurrence like genocide will make the reader uncomfortable. Diop however is concerned about waking up the reader out of any passivity so as to get involved mentally and emotionally. According to Diop:

People don’t want to have to think about Africa. When you have killings in Africa, it’s seen as “business as usual”. It’s considered normal. They are killing each other for tribal reasons, and they will stop, but they will start again. I also felt a kind of shame. I must confess that when the genocide started in 1994, I didn’t understand what was going on. Even when I visited in 1998, I didn’t understand. In the West, we rely on global media, and that’s not enough. We have to reach deeper to understand what is going on in the rest of the world. I had shame and anger.

(Amanda Morris. “Boubacar Boris Diop: Interview”)

One of the strongest voices in the novel is Michel Serumundo and he echoes Diop's concern at the beginning of the novel. Michel Serumundo is a video shopkeeper who bemoans the slow business he has been experiencing for a while. He closes his shop to notice that there is something amiss around him. It is through him that the readers are hinted about the events to unfold in the novel. Despite the prospective severity, Serumundo knows nobody will feel concerned if anything was to happen in Rwanda. He knew that it will just be the case of Africans killing Africans and people will simply lament that:

... "They're embarrassing us, they should stop killing each other like that." Then they'll go on to something else. "Did you see that acrobatic flip of Kluivert's?" What I'm saying is not a reproach. I've seen lots of scenes on television myself that were hard to take. Guys in slips and masks pulling bodies out of a mass grave. Newborns they toss, laughing, into bread ovens. Young women who coat their throats with oil before going to bed. "That way", they say, "when the throat-slitters come, the blades of their knives won't hurt as much". I suffered from these things without really feeling involved. I didn't realize that if the victims shouted loud enough, it was so I would hear them, myself and thousands of other people on earth, and so we would try to do everything we could so that their suffering might end. It always happened so far away, in countries on the other side of the world. But in these early days of April in 1994, the other country on the other side of the world is mine.

(Diop 2006: 9-10)

Serumundo himself is a victim of this syndrome of being unconcerned about violence and killings so long as his side of the world is peaceful. He knows that there is really no hope for the Tutsis this time. Diop involves the readers through the above statement of Serumundo. The feeling of guilt that might not come in the course of reading the novel is shoved in the reader's face as soon as possible so that every reader is now aware of their own passive reaction when the horror Diop fictionalises was really happening in 1994.

Murambi progresses from the events immediately before, during and after the genocide. This is achieved through the different voices that Diop employs so that the reader could be exposed to the different experiences of the victim, the perpetrators and the bystanders or outsiders. *Murambi* is divided into four parts. Part One, titled "Fear and Anger", deals with the events before the genocide. The fear is on the part of the soon-to-be victims of the genocide who had a premonition of what was about to happen in Rwanda especially as there might be no help or intervention for them. In this part, we encounter Michel Serumundo, who would soon be a victim of the genocide; Faustin Gasana, one of the perpetrators and organisers of the genocide; and Jessica, a RPF spy. The second and fourth parts of the novel are on Cornelius, a Rwandan history teacher in Djibouti who returns to Rwanda after the genocide. The third part is titled "Genocide" and is about the happenings during the genocide.

As a genocide narrator, Diop artistically deploys language and aesthetically fictionalises the reality of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. From the first part of the story, it is evident that Diop is ready to carry his readers through the long journey of what informed the genocide and its consequences. This involves the causes, down to the aftermath of the genocide especially as some Tutsis were clamouring for revenge in any little way.

In order to do adequate justice to the horror of the genocide, Diop like other writers on genocide makes use of violent language. By doing so he makes the readers deeply aware that genocide is about violence, corpses, screams, fear, apprehension, and in the case of Rwanda, machetes and clubs, acid and excrement. This calculated violence on the readers is necessary so that the readers will be unable to deny the reality of man's inhumanity to man as was the case in Rwanda in 1994. Diop's account "refuses the comfortable position of distance and mere observation" (Harrow 2005: 40). Starting with Michel Serumundo's recollection of TV scenes he watched on genocides, the readers are introduced to "guys in slips and masks pulling bodies out of a mass grave", "newborns tossed into bread ovens", "young women who coat their throats with oil before going to bed so that when the throat slitters come the blades of their knives won't hurt much" (Diop 2006: 10). The voices of the Interahamwe shouting "we have to kill them all" as they sing and scrap one machete against the other or sharpen the blades make the readers aware that Diop's narrative will not spare them the details of the horror. There are references to how beautiful Tutsi girls are killed. The perpetrators, men numbering up to fifteen, sometimes rape women. When they have finished this reprehensible act, they go further to pour acid in their vagina, stick pieces of broken bottle or pieces of metal in it (93). Perpetrators kill people with violent axe blows (102) slitting throats and hacking bodies, screams coming from everywhere (31-32). The father of Marina Nkusi, while killing his victims, handles his machete like a maniac (89). Diop tells the story of skulls, arms, and legs detached from their torsos (144), children suffocating in mass excrement before dying (111) and people taken away to be cut into pieces (93).

This violent use of language and horrific words Diop employs to create his narrative form pictures in the readers' minds. What readers read paint pictures and this imaginative reproduction of the violence of genocide is one of the reasons Diop uses violent expressions and images. There are images of decay, stench and destruction. There is the bad breath that Faustin's father exudes, the fetid breath that stinks which Faustin finds difficult to bear (14). There are also repetitive presentations of images of corpses and mass graves, rooms filled with decaying corpses and stench, dogs eating up corpses, little puddles of blood forming on the ground and dogs quenching their thirst, monsters drinking the blood of Rwanda (152-153), vultures picking corpses clean of their last shreds of putrid flesh (180). These descriptions are ways to make the readers picture what the atmosphere of Rwanda was like during and after the

genocide, a place filled with dead bodies, blood, disjointed bones, decay and rot, overwhelming stench, flesh eating dogs and vultures. It was an atmosphere of destruction and decay.

One of the most explicit instances of Diop's use of language to depict the violence of genocide (graphic representation of violence) was at the Ntarama parish church, a site of genocide that Jessica takes Cornelius to visit. There are descriptions of bones and cadavers. Then Diop decides to describe the dead body of Theresa Mukandori, a Tutsi girl who the readers had known earlier in Jessica's narrative.

The young woman had her head pushed back and the scream extracted from her by the pain had been frozen on her still grimacing face. Her magnificent tresses were dishevelled, and her legs wide apart. A stake – of wood or of iron, Cornelius didn't know, he was too shocked to notice – had remained lodged in her vagina.

(Diop 2006: 73)

Though other Tutsi girls who were raped and killed in terrible ways, they are not known by name to the readers, this was a victim they had known earlier. She was full of life and hope and here the readers know how her life was terminated.

Diop in his genocide narrative has artistically recreated the history of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. As a writer who is interested in imprinting the memory of genocide in the minds of his readers in a way that they will not easily forget the horrors, he uses language in a way that leaves a lasting impression in the minds of his readers, a language of violence filled with machete and club words, a language that calls the monster by its name. Diop also portrays traumatised as well as nuanced characters that allow the readers to see the human side of the genocide so that they can understand how real and how horrendous genocide is. Diop's narrative technique bridges the gap between the narrative, the characters and the readers in a way that readers are able to personalise the experiences of these characters and reflect on them. In a nutshell, Diop's artistic narrative of genocide contributes to the relatively new and developing genre of genocide literature in Africa.

Uwem Akpan and *Say You're One of Them*

Uwem Akpan informs that he was born under a palm-wine tree in Ikot Akpan Eda in Southern Nigeria. He studied Philosophy and English before he studied Theology for three years. He became a Jesuit Priest in 2003. He also studied Creative Writing in the University of Michigan in 2006. *Say You're One of Them* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in Africa Region in 2009 and PEN/Beyond Margins Award in 2009. It was also selected in Oprah's *Book Club* as Oprah's 63rd influential book. According to him, in

his village everybody knows everybody and he has a big happy family living together in one compound.

Say You're One of Them is a collection of short stories on the numerous problems facing Africa as a continent and how peculiar or different they are in different African countries. Through the voices of children, Uwem tells stories ranging from slavery to child trafficking, poverty, ethno-religious conflicts as well as genocide. African children are exposed to a lot of ills that they should have been protected and guarded from. However, they are exposed to these brutish and terrible realities and how they survive individually is one of the concerns of the author in this collection of short stories.

“An Ex-mas Feast” talks about a very poor family in Kenya where the children take kabire to kill hunger because their poor parents have no means to provide food for them. The eldest daughter becomes a prostitute and she takes up the responsibility for her brother’s education and for paying off the family’s debt. Akpan through the narrative of Jigana documents the difficult life that children of poor parents face in the slums and how they persevere through it all.

“Fattening for Gabon” is about slavery in Benin. Through Kotchikpa’s narrative, we see how his Uncle decides to sell Kotchikpa and his sister to child traffickers. Fofu Kpee, the Uncle, buys the children new clothes, gets them good food and coaches them on how to answer questions about their new life in case they are asked by law enforcement agents. Fofu Kpee does this to change his lot and that of the children from their present state of poverty but he continually doubts his actions till he is later killed by the traffickers.

In “What Language is That?” (Ethiopia) a young Christian girl’s best friend is a Muslim and because of faith differences which her parents tells her about, she can no longer talk to or greet her best friend. In the wake of a religious clash, the girl’s parents look for ways to keep their family safe and it is decided that they will go to Addis for a while. In spite of this, the two young girls find a way to communicate disregarding the complex religious difference their parents warned them of.

“Luxurious Hearse” is about the ethno-religious crisis in northern Nigeria where the Hausa Muslims decide to get rid of Christians, Southerners and their apologists. Jubril a child of mixed identities is caught up in this violence and, as he is perceived to be neither here nor there, he is killed by his father’s people who he is journeying with so as to find refuge. The happenings in the bus are a reflection of what happens in the larger world (country) as there are arguments on who is who, from the perspectives of religion, ethnicity, and politics. The story also exposes attempts to deprive people of their rights, bribery and other vices.

“My Parents’ Bedroom” is the narrative of young Monica about the Rwanda genocide. Through her eyes we see how her Hutu father kills her Tutsi mother when he is forced to do so by his Hutu relatives. It is clear from the girl’s

narrative that her father loves his wife and children dearly even to the extent of hiding some Tutsi neighbours in his roof but, because of the seriousness of the genocide at the time, he kills his wife and joins the perpetrators.

Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* makes use of language in a way that draws the reader's attention to the issues raised in the novel. Through the child-like, innocent, penetrating and trusting and confused language of children, Akpan raises serious issues that a reader gets absorbed in. This makes the reader appreciate the importance of what Akpan is saying. Akpan's choice of characters and the way they individually deal with the tumultuous situations around them also provokes the readers' thoughts and makes them ask questions about the dynamics of how harsh realities could provoke some actions or inactions in people. Akpan could have raised these serious issues in a mild and innocent way, but the fact is that this technique makes the issues more shocking and horrific. Or what could be more horrendous than an untouched mind narrating the plague in the society, man's inhumanity to man, the wickedness and pain they experience firsthand?

This study will examine two of the short stories in Akpan's work and these are "Luxurious Hearses" and "My Parents' Bedroom". These two are chosen because of the issues they raise on genocide and ethno-religious killings. The attempt here is on examining how Akpan's creative imagination contributes to other narratives on genocide.

"Luxurious Hearses"

"Luxurious Hearses" is the fourth story in Akpan's collection and one of the longest stories; it could as well be a novella. It is the only story that is narrated through the third person omniscient narrative. This choice of narration is important as it seems that Akpan is drawing the attention of his readers to how important this story about his country is. It is important for Akpan to single out this narration because of the pertinent issues he raises in this narrative. The story presently under discussion is the only story among the collection that ends with the killing of the protagonist, a child by adults because he is identified as the "Other", a threat, and the enemy.

Akpan's decision to single out "Luxurious Hearses" as the story that needs narrating through the omniscient point of view could be informed by the fact that the protagonist is incapable of narrating the twists and turns that later led to his death. Akpan in the other stories in the collection had made use of innocent baby language to narrate the horrors that these children deal with but the story of Jubril, his transition from a discriminating and fanatically inclined teenager to a human being ready to tolerate differences, to a victim in the hands of those who unknowingly taught him to be a human, becomes too complex for the protagonist to narrate.

In another vein, narrating this ironic but shocking story by an omniscient narrator is Akpan's way of giving his readers a total picture of how events unfold in the microcosm that the bus is especially as it relates to other passengers in the bus. This would not have been possible through a restrictive narrating technique like the first person narrative. Through Akpan's all-knowing narration, the readers could observe and appreciate the characters' individual thoughts like Jubril's mind-drifts, hopes and fears, their apprehensions, plights, pains, and the processes that make them victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

The narrator through a detached and objective voice tells the story of the asylum seeking passengers. The narrator witnesses it all but allows the readers to know the protagonist among the crowd of strangers as he fearfully but carefully mixes among them on his way to safety. It is through this detached narration that the readers come to know how Jubril comes to realise his mistakes and appreciate humanity. At this point, the readers who would have labelled Jubril a bad person come to realise how people can change when they have the chance to experience how it is on the "other side". It is also at this point that Akpan situates the readers in a position that they also fear and hope for Jubril's safety, knowing that he could be the light in the darkness that ethnic and religious distrust had caused. Killing Jubril and the soldier who stands up for him kills this hope and it is realised that the "Other", whenever s/he is identified and labelled as such, has no hope of surviving, no matter the package they come in: child-adult, male-female or old-young.

Akpan's narrative employs the use of flashback so that the readers could get a glimpse of where Jubril is coming from. It is through these flashbacks that Jubril's mixed family, and how they fall apart, is known. It is also through Jubril's mind-drifts that the readers know how he came to be on the run from the only home he had always known. Through another flashback, Jubril is saved along with some Christians by a Hausa/Muslim like him. These flashbacks allow the readers a reprieve from the tensions and fear in the bus and they also heighten the suspense as the fate that will befall Jubril is postponed for a while. It is important to note that these mind-drifts for Jubril are like temporary hiding spaces from his fear, the activities around him and they help his concentration to disguise for as long as the journey will last. Though these were moments for him to lose concentration as he becomes carried away in his reminiscences, he did not forget his fear and the need to hide. However, it was at the point, when he raises his maimed hand to dry his tears when he realised that his hope for a peaceful society (after what he has experienced) was not to be, that his disguise was discovered. This makes the readers to realise how hopeless it is to hope in the midst of traumatised individuals who have not had a chance to heal and become humans again after the horror and loss they had gone through.

Apart from Akpan's engaging narrative techniques, his creation, development and portrayal of his characters give a glimpse into how the characters

deal with their traumatic past and how they use this past to define their future. The characters in “Luxurious Hearses” are victims of ethnic and religious violence and as they seek for a safe haven, Jubril notes that his “fellow passengers (look) like drowning men, grabbing on to whatever they could ... some had lost everything, even their sanity” (Akpan 2010: 139). As they all wait for the driver to arrive, they have gloomy, misery-stained faces. Emeka, Monica, Colonel Usenetok are among these suffering characters. These passengers are still in a state of shock over their experiences and as they get into the bus, they see it as their space. It is this space that Jubril “infiltrates”.

Akpan in portraying these characters and narrating their experiences on the bus paints a picture of violence, pain, impending doom and destruction through his use of images. From the beginning of the narration, readers are told of drawn red window blinds in the bus and a dying glow (138), there are also descriptions of the harsh harmattan that deprives trees of leaves and singed grass. These perhaps explain the past situation of destruction that the narrative refers to and the present plight of the passengers but importantly they signal the impending doom that will befall the protagonist. In “Luxurious Hearses” there are “bats filling up the sky” (166), killers who “were a drove of locust in their destructiveness” (188), and “howling winds” (225). These descriptions are ways to make readers aware of the level of evil, destruction, fear and anger that surrounds the environment of the bus and which will determine the ending of the narrative. Apart from these images of destruction, fear and anger, there are references to rot, decay, death and stench. There was a “foul smell that filled the bus” (204), the soldier with the rotten hair with an army beret sitting on it like a crown of disgrace (201), a dog convulsing with cramped body, wide open jaws, vomiting blood (204), and a bus filled with dead bodies and blood everywhere with children gawking at dead bodies until they got used to it (221-223). This is the condition in which the passengers are making their journey and the readers could not but see and identify with the difficulty these traumatised characters are in as their past tragedy is still very much with them. This makes forgetting or transiting to humans with tolerance for the “Other” difficult. “In this moment, the novel demonstrates the complexity of individual recovery within wider national recovery (O’Neill 2012: 193).” From the foregoing, it is established that Akpan’s narrative techniques and characterisation go a long way to show how his characters deal with their feelings of helplessness, fear, anger, and trauma and how these determine the ending of the story.

According to Pribe,

In broad terms, representations of violence in any literature, as in life, may do one of three things: they may overwhelm us with a sense of the banality of violence, they may impress in us our capacity for the demonic, or they may serve to leave us with some sense of the sublime.

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Akpan's "Luxurious Hearses", like Pribe posits, encompasses these three characteristics of literatures of violence. Akpan like other writers of genocide narrative makes use of violent descriptions and violent language apart from his characterisation, imagery, and narrative technique that is used to engage the themes of dehumanisation, disillusionment, violence, suffering and trauma among others. According to Mary Karr, Akpan "invented a new language – both for horror and for the relentless persistence of light in war-torn countries" (Quoted in Official website of Uwem Akpan.). This is the language that piercingly describes through the innocent view of children the horrors in places where ethnic and religious sentiments overrule the instincts of humanity to be humane. There are instances of violent language use in Akpan's "Luxurious Hearses" to recreate the recurring violence that happens in Northern Nigeria.

These violent descriptions are so explicit that readers become shocked and uncomfortable at the way the writer describes them. Different weapons of violence and destruction are mentioned like guns and machetes, stones, knives and sticks. There are burning corpses as well as kids fried in gas. Emeka shouts "give it to them ... Blow the head off that pagan Muslim with firebombs" (Akpan 2010: 173). References to the slurp of machetes slashing into flesh and the final cries of victims (230) gives the readers a horrific detail of how human beings are killed. Akpan does not spare his readers the details of how Jubril was killed. This is a young child the readers had got to know well enough to pity him and fear for his safety but "the refugees dragged him (soldier) and Jubril out and slit their throat" (234). This final act of violence in the story dampens the spirit of the readers as they realise that the journey to tolerance and finding humanity might still be far though a character like Jubril is a hope that we can get there.

The strategies of narrative that Akpan makes use of in "Luxurious Hearses" connect the readers in a way that we are first guilty of ascribing Jubril with the bad attitude or identity and labelling him as the enemy. Akpan gives us the benefit that Jubril's fellow passengers do not have; we see him go through a genuine process of mind renewal and there is the struggle to see him in a new light. With his deployment of the third person narrative technique, the readers are given the opportunity to have an objective view of the happenings in "Luxurious Hearses". Akpan's references to violent situations and the use of violent language make the reader picture the shocking and painful details that Akpan narrates. This enables them to understand the effect of violence on the characters and victims of violence. Also, the use of images and metaphors of decay, rot, stench, destruction, and death makes the readers uncomfortable as they try to appreciate the awful and unpleasant situation the passengers are making their journey. All these and his creation and portrayal of the character of Jubril and his traumatised fellow travellers paint a larger picture of how it becomes difficult in the larger world, that the bus represents, to heal and

become humane again in the face of rot, death, decay, violence, and dehumanisation.

My Parents' Bedroom

“My Parent’s Bedroom” is the last story in Akpan’s work and it is the story that informs the title of Akpan’s novel. “Say you’re one of them” is the narrator’s mother’s instruction to her so that she will be spared by the Hutus when they come after their family. It is a first person narrative of a nine year old girl who narrates how things changed in her family. The pervasive sense of fear, apprehension and gloom is difficult to ignore as the girl starts her narration with how they have been kept indoors in the darkness with closed doors and windows with a whispering and panting mother. The silence turns to yelling, hurting lights, banging on doors and slammed doors. The narrator and her baby brother huddle in one corner praying, then a whispering and trembling father, a shouting and crying mother increases the fear and sense of helplessness. Akpan’s genocide narrative is in line with Lawrence Langer’s position on genocide literatures as “not the transfiguration of empirical truth ... but its disfiguration, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the readers’ sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable” (Langer 1975: 2-3).

In a simple and easy-to-understand narrative, Akpan allows the readers to access this young girl’s inner thoughts, fears and doubts. It is through her narration which is so childlike, innocent and trusting that we know the seriousness of what is happening to her family. Though she did not quickly understand what her fate and that of her family would be, she patiently unfolds how things start to change and how they end. Narrating the experiences of violence through the perspective of a child shocks the readers and makes them ill at ease at the kinds of suffering, violence, pain and trauma the child would have gone through. If the events had been narrated from the perspective of an adult, it would not have elicited the kind of response readers give to the narration of a young and helpless child. Akpan depicts these events through the eyes of a child so that readers could see the effects of violence and fear on children during times of violence in Africa most especially as the innocence that exudes from this narrative in the face of insecurity, violence and discrimination is shattering.

Akpan’s use of the first person narrative technique in “My Parent’s Bedroom” gives the narrative a limited representation as the readers can access only the narrator’s perspective. As a result, the other character’s inner thoughts, emotions, and fears that make them perpetrators, victims or bystanders are not accessible to the readers. Thus, we can only know them through what the child says. The narrator herself is incapacitated as a child to

fully understand and grasp the drivers at work in the story she is narrating and it depends on the readers to know that this representation is not enough to portray what really happened though the violence described in the story is horrific for a child of nine. This is one of the fears of Madelaine Hron about child narratives as “children do not fully grasp history or politics ... they run the risk of being too simple or reductionist – of infantilising or relativising the horrors of genocide (Horn 2014: 165)”. What Akpan has achieved is the difficulty the readers go through in comprehending how young children are targeted as victims of genocide, as witnesses and survivors of the violence of genocide.

There is the use of flashback in Akpan’s narrative as the narrator recollects better and happy times though filled with warnings from her mother about the days that might come. In these good times, birds rise and tumble and swing, their voices mixing with the winds, Papa laughs his jolly-jolly laugh, the winds carrying his voice (246). This gives us a brief moment of relief and a glimpse into how the narrator unconsciously wishes for an end to her present ordeal. This flashback is also like a place of refuge for the narrator to find solace.

Akpan makes a direct and detailed description of the ethnicity of his characters. The narrator’s mother is a very beautiful Tutsi woman with high cheekbones, a narrow nose, a sweet mouth, slim fingers, big eyes, a lean frame and a light skin, her father like most Hutus is very dark with a round face, a wide nose, brown eyes and lips as full as a banana (237). Describing characters with the physical features which set them apart from other characters by the young girl shows how much Rwandans are aware of the differences that set them apart from one another. By describing his characters in such a manner, the readers are forced to immediately notice the differences between the characters and, though they are all relatives, they seem to share nothing in common other than the suspicions, hatred, fear, and prejudices they have for one another.

Through the violent language used by the adults in the narrative and their actual violent actions, the narrator comes to realise that things were not as simple as she thought. Akpan shows the effect of these violent language and actions on the narrator and her brother. Apart from the yelling, hurting lights, banged and slammed doors, there are attackers with machetes, axes, guns and small hoes (239). The crucifix that the wizard breaks with his stick which comes crashing to the floor, limbless with only bits of his hands and legs hanging on the cross, becomes symbolic for the girl and it increases her frustration and fear (240). There are crushed flowers, a trampled altar cloth, pieces of glass everywhere, drawers hanging out, a fallen book shelf to signify chaos and commotion. These may not be as jarring and distressing to the reader as the attempted rape of the narrator by one of the perpetrators and the innocent way the child narrates the incident. There is the feeling of disgust that arises in the reader at the innocent description of the man’s semen on her

thighs “his short pee is pouring on my thighs and my nightie, warm and thick like baby food” (242). This violence on a child shocks and disgusts the readers and at this point they come to realise how serious things are getting in this narrative. When the narrator’s uncle shouts “I’m killing these children if I don’t see him”, the narration becomes more complex. Akpan reaches the peak of his depiction of violent acts and the use of violent words when he describes how the narrator’s father kills her mother, his wife, in front of his children and relatives.

There is the use of animal imagery and comparisons in the work. This is in a bid to relate the behaviours and the actions of the characters as victims and the perpetrators to that of animals. There is the metaphor of sickly, hungry cows in pharaoh’s dream and the comparison of the perpetrators sniffing around like dogs (249). The narrator moves like an ant whose head has been blocked while the narrator’s mother is acting dumb and bewitched like a goat fed with sorghum beer because of her fear for her safety and that of her children (245). Apart from these, there are references to horror, stench, blood, destruction, discomfort, and gloom. The narrator’s house is filled with heat and steam. She sees widening and swelling traces of blood and the perpetrators move like floodwater while her house smells like an abattoir (248-254). Towards the end of the narrative there are giant lizards and blood soaks the earth while vultures poke the dead with long beaks, baby Jeans eyes are wide opened with a frown on his babyish face and the flame eats the night as they make their escape among tall grasses and thorns (257-258).

Akpan’s deployment of the techniques of language, narratives and structure immerse the readers in the world of his stories and they grapple to comprehend the horrific and violent nature of genocide in the society. His portrayal of characters allows the readers to see the human aspect of genocide and how a normal person can become a victim or perpetrator of genocide. Akpan in his own way evokes “the atmosphere of monstrous fantasy (and) reconstitute reality in shapes and images that reflect a fundamental distortion in man” (Langer 1975: 30).

Conclusion

This study has foregrounded the incidents of genocide and the need for adequate attention to ‘small genocides’ and their enkindling factors. The task of genocide narrative writers, like Cornelius said, is to “recount the horror. With machete words, club words, words studded with nails, naked words ... words covered with blood and shit ... to call a monster by its name” (Diop 2006: 179) so that literature will be a wake-up call for Africans that the “other” is also human and that the “other” is not so different after all. This textual violence – the combination of factual material and creative imagination – is what African nation-states need at this point in their historical

development so that Africans will know that statistical significance or insignificance is not enough to accept or discard any instance of genocide. It is imperative to note that when we look the other way and act in a nonchalant way to the news of butchered school children in their school compound or hostel; the bombing and/or slaughtering of Christians and Southerners in their churches or homes; the victimisation of a particular ethnic group because of what they had done before or the features stereotyped to them; and the political exploitation of ethnic and religious sentiments among other postcolonial realities in Africa, then, we are not ready to learn from the genocides in the history of Africa. This is because whenever what we call ‘a full blown genocide’ will happen, it will not look like it in the beginning as it will start like the ‘not quite genocide’ acts that we are familiar with.

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Onanuga, Ayobami Olajumoke
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife
debbyrayy03@yahoo.com