

Narrative and Thematic Structure in Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana*

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Abstract

*The Rwandan genocide has become the source of much of the creativity emanating from Africa and elsewhere. Here, the Ivorian writer, Véronique Tadjo embarks on a journey. Her journey is first a physical one as she documents the events of that period in the chequered history of Rwanda. Secondly, the journey is spiritual in the sense that writing plays a therapeutic role, as the author, through the textual medium lets off some bottled-up emotions by way of self-exorcism. This article thus, engages a narrative and thematic critique of Véronique Tadjo's nonfiction novel, *The Shadow of Imana*. The approach is essentially socio-historical as the human society serves as the canvas which anchors time-delineated chronicles. In this regard, textual analysis as a method informs the narrative and thematic analysis this work requires. The author/narrator employs a range of narrative devices to tell her story while violence serves as the overwhelming theme. The textual analysis reveals that ethnicity or racism is at the root of much of the violence that plagues humankind. As a result, governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should launch a massive campaign through*

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relevant agencies to discourage social profiling and xenophobia caused by ethnicity.

Introduction

Véronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* comes through like a journalistic reportage of a real historical event: the fratricidal massacre which pits Hutus and Tutsis against each other in one of the most gruesome genocides since the Holocaust.² Tadjo traveled to Rwanda in 1998, in the aftermath of the violence and observed that the horrible conflict remained etched in the collective memory of its people and humanity. She visited refugee camps, homes, museums, sites of torture and murder, saw corpses on display, and interacted with some of the individuals who were involved, directly or indirectly in the Rwandan genocide.

The Shadow of Imana is essentially the story of persons and families who have become the unwilling victims of a war of attrition. Some of the victims are named, some are not, yet some of them do not have the opportunity to tell what they saw or experienced because death shut them up before someone reached them. The author, therefore, tells their stories from information gleaned from survivors who are willing to speak. This is the case of Tonia Locatelli (the Italian nurse) and the woman at Nyamata Church, among others.

Even though the author is a female, she does not spare us her repulsion for, and resentment of women who took part in the massacres: women who helped men to rape, women who assisted their sons in their killing spree, and women who robbed the dead and took away their valuables.

As a novel which draws from the recent historical upheavals in Rwanda, the author feels compelled to document her observations and findings for the sake of posterity.

This article, therefore, undertakes to study in the primary, narrative and thematic structure of the text. The narrative modes and techniques adopted by the author as well as the thematisation of violence at once form the overall architecture of the book.

Narrative structure

Here, we undertake a study of the narrative techniques employed by the author in the rendering of her accounts. These techniques range from the point of view and mode of documentation, characterisation, narrative style, space, and time. These devices coalesce to confer some degree of subjectivity as well as literariness to the nonfiction novel.

The Shadow of Imana is thus, by its very nature, a nonfiction book. As M.H. Abrams and Harpham (2005, P. 202). put it, the nonfiction book,

uses a variety of novelistic techniques, such as deviations from the temporal sequence of events and descriptions of a participant's state of mind, to give a graphic rendering of recent people and happenings, and is based not only on historical records but often on personal interviews with the chief agents.³

In this narrative, therefore, the author relies on personal accounts of some of the victims of the horrific episode. These include refugees returning home after the pogroms, victims of rape, orphans, psychologically traumatised persons who witnessed the events. There were also lawyers determined to bring the perpetrators to justice and soothsayers who set out to appease the dead through the medium of exorcism.

The author/narrator

In a literary text, especially the novelistic genre, the narrator tells the story. The perspective adopted is essential to the understanding of the story. For Scholes, Klans, Comley and Silverman (1978, P)

The nature of the story teller is itself far from a simple matter. It involves such things as the extent to which he is himself a character whose personality affects our understanding of his statements, and the extent to which his view of events is limited in time and space or in his ability to see into the minds of various characters⁴

In *The Shadow of Imana* Véronique Tadjó doubles as author and narrator. Her narrative point of view is moderately complicated. She is not part of the story she tells. Occasionally she adopts a first-person perspective in which the story follows the itinerary of a journalist who embarks on a journey through space and time to get first-hand information on the crisis in Rwanda. This is evident in the journey motif as the author/narrator travels through Durban-Johannesburg, Paris-Brussels-Kigali.

The reader comes off with the impression that the narrator documents her observations in a diary. As observed from the narrator's account aboard a Sabena Flight 565 to Kigali:

We begin the descent to Kigali. I have no entry visa. A letter of invitation should suffice. I count my dollars (...) I think of my suitcase. (...) I am ushered into a room. Several people are waiting there.⁵

Moreover, during Veronique Tadjó's second journey to Rwanda aboard a Sabena 565 flight, the same narrative technique is adopted:

I am sitting next to a woman who is part of the Dian Fossey Foundation. We are talking about the gorillas. They are Rwanda's principal attraction. (81)

From the above accounts, we notice the author/narrator's predilection for short sentences. This is hardly fortuitous. This is consistent with the diary form narrative. Besides, short and laconic convictions in the simple present tense produce the effect of verisimilitude and spontaneity. The narrator sustains this short style through the use of parallelism whose principal function is essential to create 'balance and reason' to discourse through the repetitive use of sentence structures.⁶ Consider the following account on page 11:

NYAMATA CHURCH
Site of genocide.
Plus or minus 35,000 dead.

A woman bound hand and foot.
Mukandori. Aged twenty-five. Exhumed in 1997.
Home: the town of Nyamata.
Married.

But, that on page 14:

NTARAMA CHURCH

Site of genocide.

Plus or minus 5,000 dead.

White-haired and serene, the little old man has a quizzical look.

However, Veronique Tadjou, perhaps as a show of solidarity with her reader also adopts occasionally, the traditional African narrative mode as exemplified in the woman at Nyamata church:

She has been raped. A pickaxe has been forced into her vagina. She died from a machete blow to the nape of her neck. You can see the groove left by the impact. She still has a blanket over her shoulders but the material is now encrusted into the skin (p.11)

In a style reminiscent of the African storytelling session where the storyteller and the audience share from a collective patrimony, she invites her reader to pay attention to her story. The use of the allocutive *you'* - as the reader (or narratee) is addressed-, serves to retain the reader's interest and solicits empathy. This traditional mode of narration implies an *I* and a *You*, who are involved in the meaning-making process of the narrative.

However, it must be noted that occasionally, characters in the novel appropriate the first person pronoun *I* to recount their personal experiences during their interactions with the author. The example of the 'young Zaïrean woman who looked like a Tutsi' will suffice:

It was evening, I'd finished eating and I was at home flicking through a magazine with my baby beside me. I

heard rifle fire, but it didn't bother me because hereabouts you do hear gunshots from time to time... (88)

Here the author/narrator allows this Zairean, who finds herself in Rwanda during the crisis to tell her story all by herself. Although mistaken by the rampaging Hutu militia for a Tutsi; she suffered rape, and her baby died and she was left to her own devices. Perhaps no other individual can tell her story as much as she does. Her rendering of the harrowing experiences she went through is spine racking. In the general presentation of her characters, events, and scenic descriptions, she adopts the third person narrative technique.

The role of the author/narrator in this body of work is, therefore, in the main, four dimensional. First is the narrative function as she tells the story, and organises the internal armature of the narrative. The second role of the author/narrator here is communicative as she informs the reader of the events in Rwanda. The testimonial function expresses the relationship between the author/narrator and the story she tells. Here she bears witness to what she sees and feels. Lastly the ideological function expresses the author/narrator's judgment on the society⁷. The author takes a position; for her, the violence in Rwanda has a potential for all of us, either as individuals or as a group.

Characterisation

The novelistic form relies primarily on characters whose actions, and interactions within the diegesis of the text define an essence. Veronique Tadjó employs the *telling* mode of characterisation⁷ in which authorial influence and intervention are evident. This, she achieves through the evaluation of characters as she penetrates their psychology to decipher their inner impulses, "their inner thoughts, feelings, and responsiveness to events."⁸

The characters in a nonfiction novel furnish information that form the basis of the narrative. In telling her story, Véronique Tadjó leaves little room for dialogue among her characters. Hence, these characters are in the main flat and undeveloped. Also, no particular protagonist anchors the narrative. Moreover, as the author/narrator

moves from one scene of violence to the other, she informs her readers of her encounter with individuals and families affected directly or indirectly by the genocide. In this strategy the authorial intervention becomes the access into the psychology of the man at Ntarama Church:

White-haired and serene, the little old man has a quizzical look. He is observing the visitors, weighing them up, studying them closely, stripping them of their masks. He can categorise them straight away: those who will avert their gaze from the spectacle of death(...) those who will be shocked, those who will weep, those who will remain silent (...) Out of these bones he has built his kingdom, his world. He knows them. He is used to them and fear of them has long since left his heart...p14

Véronique Tadjo also does penetrate the woman at Nyamata Church (p.11); Tonia Locatelli, the Italian nurse who was murdered because she dared protest the massacres(pp 16-17); the Kubwimana family (p.20); the lawyer from Kigali (p.23); the Writer (p.26); Consolate (p.27) the journalist(p.32); the Project Manager (p.29); the pastor (p.95),etc. Through authorial influence, she narrates their stories, their involvement in the crisis and the indelible scar etched into their collective psyche. Even when the characters involved have told their stories to the author/narrator, she adopts the indirect free speech technique to render these accounts her way; for her very words and expressions give life to the characters she encountered and the scenes of massacre she witnessed.

- **Description**

The author/narrator's force of evocation both of characters, scenes, and events comes through the descriptive mode. The description is one of the pillars of the literary edifice. In *The Shadow of Imana*, Véronique Tadjo employs description, not as subordinate to narration, but as a complementary technique whose aim is to solicit the reader's attention⁹ and evoke the desired atmosphere either of fear, pity, repulsion or indignation. As Sara Thorne puts it:

The creation of a range of different atmospheres is essential to the success of fiction. If readers are to believe in the world of the novel or short story, the writer must be able to arouse their emotions. By creating a dramatic, poignant or euphoric atmosphere, writers can persuade their readers to feel as the characters do. Often a striking atmosphere is created through description mirroring a character's state of mind or a theme.¹⁰

The air of the pervasive presence of death emerges through the description of the scenes of murder. Consider the following description:

The horror of the sullied earth and of time laying down layers of dust in its passage. The bones of the skeleton-corpses are disintegrating before our very eyes. The stench infects our nostrils and settles inside our lungs, contaminates our flesh, infiltrates our brains. (p.12)

The above description is a constant reminder of the horror of the genocide. It is an episode that remains engraved in the mind of the living. It is a grim reminder of the fate of the living should they decide to continue in their pursuit of revenge and hatred.

Descriptions such as above abound in the novel. The whole narrative throws up an atmosphere of brutality, betrayal, violence, and death.

However, the author/narrator also creates a 'euphoric' atmosphere through the description of the Volcano National Park where silverback gorillas inhabit:

Strange vegetation plunged into a thick fog, territory lost in eternal mists, it is here that the mountain gorillas have chosen to make their home. In this silent space, outside of time and far from humans, dense bamboo forests, gigantic plants, prehistoric flora and long-haired trees stand guard over these majestic animals. And the mossy carpets, replete with dampness and stagnant

water, stretch as far as the banks of the lakes huddled into craters. (p.81)

The above description serves as a contrast to the former. Towards the end of the novel this particular description is thrown up to depict the serenity of nature as against the chaos found in the society of men; the love found among animal and plant species as against the hatred shared among humanity. Véronique Tadjó merely informs her reader that man, in his quest for vanity, has lost his essential humanity. This pitches man at a level lower than that of an animal. Thus, description has its semantic dimensions. The scenes and characters described reinforce the theme of violence that suffuses the text.

Space /Time

The story of a novel does not come *ex nihilo*. The author is a product of society and is, therefore, like every other African writer, 'in situation'. Akakuru expatiates on this when he posits that:

The African writer (...) operates in specific socio-political contexts and lives out the society of which he/she is part (...). The writer cannot afford to be neutral; literature is therefore, from this point of view, 'commitment.'¹¹

Véronique Tadjó is not just an Ivorian. By her calling as a writer and chronicler, she belongs to the larger African society. Her writing is a result of an impulse to respond to the appeal of a continent in turmoil. The author's documentation of the events in Rwanda places her squarely in the category of writers of the commitment literature.

Society thus provides the impetus for literary creativity. Even when characters, places, and events privilege auto-censorship or fear of reprisal, the percipient reader often makes recourse to historical events within time and space to sift the factual from the imaginary. This diegetic approach comes from an endless play of coding and decoding in which writer and reader are part of the meaning-making process.

In *The Shadow of Imana*, Véronique Tadjó presents identifiable space. The plot revolves around places in Rwanda. Also, note that places like Paris, Brussels, South Africa, Kigali, as spatial entities get attention. Some local districts in Rwanda are also evoked: Nyamata, Ntarama, Butare, Nyanza, and Byumba. These places are interconnected logically as the 'journey narrative' relies on such details for verisimilitude. Besides, the author sets out on a long journey to Rwanda to get first-hand information on the Rwandan debacle. Each place provides some new information for writer and reader. Space plays a very dominant role in *The Shadow of Imana* in the sense that the places mentioned serve to reinforce the thematic focus of the narrative.

Time is another important element in a narrative. In this text, individual temporal indices help to situate it in real historical context. Others include specific dates such as the time of death of Tonia Locatelli, 09.03.1992 (p.16); the Travelling court martial at Ntongwe' and the tribunal held on 17 June 1999, and whose second hearing came up on 20 July 1999 (p.93). Others are, the events in Camp Kibeho, South Rwanda, on the 22 April 1995 (p.114) These indices point, not to the pre-independence era, but to the last quarter of the 20th century. The Rwandan genocide took place in 1994.

Thematic structure

A common denominator which runs like a thin thread and unifying the various strands of the narrative fabric into a thematic whole is violence. Thus, other sub-themes such as social profiling, mutual hatred/distrust, pessimism, injustice, fear, and death all converge to sustain an atmosphere of violence.

Violence could be as a result of the actions and/or inactions of governments and their agencies in addressing the core needs of particular segments of society. We are not unaware of examples of deliberate neglect of government to address rising levels of poverty and diseases; the systematic exclusion of whole sections of society from governance; the enactment of laws that are anachronistic and inimical to good living conditions. Aside the above instances also are the muscling and intimidation of real and perceived opponents of the government and their policies; gender insensitivity;

favouritism along religious and ethnic lines; corruption and elitism in governance; political killings, etc. Violence is therefore not only physical; it could be psychological too. Violence has also been known to be 'collective' especially when it is directed at whole groups or even perpetrated by a group.

In *The Shadow of Imana*, the direct assault experienced by victims of rape and torture constitutes direct physical violence. However, in some instances, this could also lead to psychological violence in cases where victims experience all kinds of post traumatic disorders. Alienation also comes within the general theme of violence. Whole families go into exile by force as a result of profiling. The rampaging Hutu majority carried out an ethnic cleansing of the minority ruling tribe: the Tutsi. This kind of violence is highly 'structured' to achieve desired ends.

Ethnic profiling is a canker worm which destroys the very fabric of our collective humanity, not only in Africa but in the world as a whole. It is, therefore, a major cause of mutual suspicion that could lead to extreme violence if not checked. The author /narrator while recalling her experiences in her country informs the reader thus:

Yes, I went to Rwanda but Rwanda is also here in my country. The refugees are scattered all over the world, carrying within themselves the blood and fury of the abandoned dead. And I am afraid when, in my country, I hear people talk of who belongs there and who doesn't. Creating division. Creating foreigners. Inventing the idea of rejection. How is ethnic identity learned? Where does this fear of the Other come from, bringing violence in its wake? (p.37)

People of the same country express sentiments of alienation, insecurity, discrimination and outright rejection. This general state of affairs has resulted in a sense of foreboding and forlornness among compatriots.

Literary expression of violence

Although Véronique Tadjo's nonfiction novel tells the story of the

real events that occurred in 1994 in Rwanda and neighbouring countries where Hutus and Tutsi live, her narrative has all the trappings of a literary text. She captures instances of violence through the instrumentation of language. Here language is used as a metaphor. The author/ narrator deploys various devices of rhetoric such as personification, hyperbole, bathos, etc. to render her account. For through language an author "can convey the richest and most delicate kinds of understanding by bringing together different images and ideas."¹²

Language, therefore, foregrounds theme. Words and expressions are imbued with imagery and a strong evocative force which move the reader to the point of pathos. Her story thus evokes the feeling of fear, pity, guilt, disgust and shock. One can assert that through the use of figurative language, Véronique Tadjó paints a horrific universe of extreme violence. A few examples taken from *The Shadow of Imana* will suffice:

- She looks like an enormous fossilised foetus (p.11)
- But school no longer holds any interest for him, the future for him is too distant, too uncertain (p.21)
- The crowd applauded but the atmosphere was grim (p.25)
- Night. Walk to the bed, a poor resting place of rumpled sheets covered by a thin blanket. Immense solitude, so deep that sleep becomes a desire to fall into the abyss, to abandon oneself completely (p.32)

These expressions, in addition to words which portray a steady decline or descent to the abyss, are according to Charles Nnolim "summarizable under the general figurative metaphor of bathos."¹³ For as we observe in *The Shadow of Imana*, there is a steady movement from benign forms of violence (ethnicity, hatred, racial profiling) to the ultimate violence which is death.

The personification of violence and death is achieved through strong imagery. At the end of her narrative, the author/narrator ends on this sad note:

Rwanda cannot be exorcised. Danger is ever present, lurking in the memory, crouching in the bush in neighbouring countries. Violence is still there, on every side (...) Death is natural. It is the other side of life and we should not be afraid of it. And if you want to come closer to Rwanda, you must put it aside (...) It is human violence that has made death cruel, hideous. An eternal monster in the memory of time. (p.118)

Despite tribunals and court-martials set up to try, and bring the perpetrators of violence to book, irrespective of the exorcism carried out by a diviner to appease the spirit of the dead, there is no respite for the living, for they will continue to be tormented by the dead. Hope appears forlorn in this narrative where the pervasive presence of violence and death hangs like the proverbial sword of Damocles over the head of humanity.

Conclusion

Véronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* is an exciting nonfiction novel which draws on the literary and the subjective to portray a real event which occurred during the last decade of the 20th century. The narrative techniques employed by the author in weaving her story coincide with the thematic thrust to paint an overall picture of gloom. Her point of view and choice of language hold her reader spellbound.

The Rwandan genocide which informs her novel is the subject-matter of most historical accounts and literary narratives. The author cannot be absolved of taking an ideological position. For the force of her *écriture* reveals her preoccupation: universal humanism. Thus, the Rwandan genocide as recorded in her novel serves as a clarion call to the rest of humanity to condemn mutual hatred and violence in all their ramifications.

Violence caused by ethnicity and religion has always been part of humanity. It happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Kosovo, in Yugoslavia, in Chechnya, etc. Today, we still experience acts of terror which threaten the very existence of whole nations. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has claimed hundreds of thousands of life

since it began in the late 90s. It has been variously given some ethno-religious coloration which threatens the indivisibility of Nigeria.

It is our recommendation that governments through their agencies and ministries, as well as well-meaning nongovernmental organisations(NGOs), should intensify efforts aimed at discouraging ethnicity, hatred, and violence. Governments should encourage the passage of laws that support the vulnerable sections of society to avert feelings of resentment and alienation. Defining mechanisms to discourage acts capable of inciting violence on a massive scale is now a necessary and positive action on the part of governments.

Notes and references

1. The original French title is *L'Ombre d'Imana*, published in 2000 by Actes du Sud. The present English translation which forms the corpus of this article is translated from the French by Véronique Wakerley. This edition is by African Writers Series.
2. The holocaust (whose etymology dates back to Jewish sacrificial offerings) has come to stick as the extermination of about six million Jews during the Nazi campaign of madness in the course of World War II. The ethnic cleansing that occurred in Rwanda assumed such an alarming proportion that it could be equated with the holocaust. For a general idea of the Holocaust, see John Toland's, *Hitler*. London: Wordsworth, 1997.
3. M.H. Abrams, Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (Boston: Thomson Corporation, 2005), p.202 Eighth edition.
4. Robert Scholes Card H. Klaus, Nancy R. Comley and Michael Silveman, *Elements of Literature*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.133 (4th edition)
5. Véronique Tadjó, *The Shadow of Imana*, (African Writers Series, 2002), p.8. Further references from the text shall be noted by page number in the body of the work.
6. See Sara Thorne, *Mastering Advanced English*. (New York: Palgrave, 1997), p.81

7. For functions of the narrator in a literary text see Yves Reuter, *Introduction à l'analyse du Roman*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009), pp56-57
8. M.H. Abrams *et al* makes the distinction between two modes of characterisation, namely "showing" and "telling". In showing, which they also term the dramatic method, characters are simply presented as talking and acting. In this case, the reader is allowed the liberty of inference as regards the impulses that underlie what the characters say and do. In telling, there is the authorial intervention. The author describes the inner dispositions, impulses and even judges the characters. See Character and Characterisation in M.H. Abrams *et al*. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p.33-35
8. M.H. Abrams *et al*. , *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p.34
9. We owe this idea to Kester Echenim. See his critical work *Etudes critiques du Roman Africain francophone*, Benin: Mindex Publishing, 2000.
10. Sara Thorne, *Mastering Advanced English*. (New York: Palgrave, 1997), p.296
11. See Iheanacho Akakuru, *Conversations with a critic*. (Port Harcourt: Pearl publishers, 2009), p.165 Notes
12. Robert Scholes Card H. Klaus, Nancy R. Comley and Michael Silveman, *Elements of Literature*. p.133
13. See Charles Nnolim, *Pessimism as Dialectic, The Form of Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. (Yenagoa: Treasure Communications Resource Limited, 2005), X. (preface)

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