

Between Silence and Madness: Trauma and the Ethics of Representing Genocide in *Deogratias*

Anandhi S^{1*}, C. Arul Renuga²

¹*Research Scholar, Dept. of English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tamilnadu, India, Email: anandhitv17@gmail.com, Reg.no. 22214014012039

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Sri Paramakalyani College, Alwarkurichi, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tamilnadu, India, Email: arulrenuga@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Anandhi S

*Research Scholar, Dept. of English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tamilnadu, India, Email: anandhitv17@gmail.com, Reg.no. 22214014012039

Abstract:

This paper examines *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* as a critique of genocide narratives, focusing on how Jean-Philippe Stassen uses the graphic novel format to explore the psychological and historical perspectives of trauma. Set against the backdrop of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the novel defies Western narratives of trauma that usually focus on redemption, closure and healing. Instead, it focuses on the protagonist's descent into madness due to systematic violence. The novel interrogates the politics behind who is allowed to speak and who is forced into silence. Drawing on the theories of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Primo Levi and Frantz Fanon, this paper challenges the psychological and linguistic frameworks used to understand trauma in post-genocide societies.

Keywords: Rwanda, genocide, trauma, catharsis, perpetrator

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda is one of the most devastating atrocities of the late twentieth century. Within a short span of hundred days, over 8,00,000 Tutsis were massacred by the Hutu extremists. The genocide was caused by years of ethnic tension that existed between the two groups, fueled by political propaganda and colonial strategies. Neighbours turned against neighbours. Civilians, including teenage boys, were provided with machetes and forced to go on a killing spree. While the United Nations and other global powers were clearly aware of the situation, they merely stood by, watching the terror unfold. This left the survivors carry the burden of trauma, memory and testimony with little international acknowledgement.

Jean-Phillipe Stassen's *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* is a graphic novel that was published in French in 2000 and later translated into English. The novel depicts post-genocide trauma through the eyes of a teenage boy named Deogratias who descends into madness after participating in the crimes during the Rwandan genocide. The name 'Deogratias' in French means "Thanks be to God" in Latin, which tragically contrasts with the horrors its protagonist endures and enacts. This was one of the first major graphic novels from the West to address the Rwandan genocide. It blends historical fiction, trauma narrative and visual storytelling. The novel was widely praised for its unflinching portrayal of guilt and complicity in the crimes. While the characters are fictional, the events closely align with the real historical incident, such as the racial hatred between the two groups, the bodies of dead Tutsis piled up in heaps, the sexual exploitation of Tutsi women, the participation of teens in the massacres, the role of foreign Christian missionaries and the following silence from the global communities.

Stassen adopts the medium of graphic novel to build a unique trauma narrative. He visualizes the protagonist's trauma through his use of colours, disrupted chronology and visual metaphors, which a traditional prose will not allow. Hillary Chute states that graphic narratives about trauma can suture the reader to the event through visual means, making the experience of reading itself an act of witnessing (Chute 181).

There is a stark contrast between the past and the present through the use of colours. The days before and during the genocide are rendered in bright and saturated colours, giving an aura of life, warmth and normalcy. In contrast, the present is rendered in sickly brown and gray, representing the post-genocidal landscape in its moral decay and Deogratias' deranged mind. Hillary Chute in her work on trauma comics *Graphic Women* argues, "Colour often functions not to beautify, but to mark trauma in ways that resist narrative absorption" (Chute 3). This shift in colour palette not only helps track time but also signals the protagonist's psychological dissonance in the novel.

The chronology is disrupted. The novel begins in media res, showing a mentally disoriented Deogratias who has taken to drinking. The reader is then slowly given the context and the story that builds up to this part in an incoherent fashion. The past and present are intertwined with abrupt transitions, forcing the reader to share Deogratias' confusion and mental disorientation. The traumatic events are vaguely shown in flashbacks through the protagonist's stream of consciousness. As he wanders the genocidal landscape, he recalls the past in fragments. This mirrors Cathy Caruth's

theory that trauma is something that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Caruth 4). Deogratias does not just remember the genocide, he relives it again and again through these visual and somatic flashbacks.

The animal metaphor is another form through which Stassen visualizes the protagonist’s trauma. In the novel, Deogratias believes he is turning into a dog. In his eyes, this is not a metaphor. He literally barks, crawls and pants. His body morphs into canine form. This motif symbolizes his dehumanization, guilt and his descent into madness. In Rwandan cultural memory, dogs are a symbol of desecration. After the atrocities, the corpses of Tutsis were piled up in heaps and dogs fed on them (Dauge-Roth 92). In the novel, Deogratias sees dogs feeding on the bodies of Benina and Apollinara after they get killed by his peers. Because he played a part in their deaths, his guilt forces him to view himself as a perpetrator and scavenger. He is no longer the boy who once loved those girls. He is now a fractured being-half-human, half-animal. He does not speak of what he did. Instead, his body remembers for him.

In addition, the protagonist’s act of eating bones and drinking urwagwa (banana beer) suggests that trauma is not just mental, but corporeal. His inability to digest the past pushes him to indulge in compulsive drinking and vomiting. As Dominic LaCapra states, the traumatised subject gets stuck in a cycle of “acting out” rather than “working through” it (LaCapra 21). He attempts to purge the haunting memories through self-erasure, but the alcohol only worsens his hallucinations, dragging him deeper into the past. He gets caught in an endless loop of traumatizing memories without any resolution.

Stassen considers the ethical stakes of representing trauma through art. In the novel, Stassen deliberately leaves the most violent events to the readers’ imagination, particularly the circumstances of the sisters’ deaths. They are implied or partially obscured, rather than shown directly. This withholding of events mirrors Dominic LaCapra’s idea of ethical representation that certain horrors must be approached obliquely rather than depicted head-on. According to him, trauma is not a spectacle, but a silence, fragmentation and suggestiveness (LaCapra 36). The flashbacks imply that Apollinara and Benina are handed over to the Hutu militia members by Deogratias himself, perhaps under pressure or in a hope to shield them. They get raped and murdered in the same manner as most other Tutsi victims during the genocide. Deogratias recalls these memories in haunted fragments showing that he has internalized their violent deaths vividly.

A distinct feature in the novel is who is allowed to speak and in what way. Deogratias, the protagonist, barely utters a coherent sentence in the narrative. His voice is reduced to mere grunts and barks. Many panels in the novel contain no dialogue, only visual cues of distress like tremors and blank stares. The narrative is carried by the other characters around him such as foreign priests, government officials and passersby who either pity or dismiss him. His muteness points towards the unspeakable nature of what he has endured and committed. This selective muting of the protagonist reflects the limits of testimony in the aftermath of genocide. This silence is not just personal, but political. The other characters such as Sergeant Bosco and Julius (a leader in the Hutu militia who pushes Deogratias to join the killings) stand for the institutional voices that rationalize the genocide. Characters like Father Prior and Brother Philip are seen ignoring the atrocities, in spite of their framework of Catholic guilt and humanitarianism. They represent the failure of the international community in intervening and stopping the genocide. The conversations of all the surrounding characters reflect a denial and minimization of the crimes.

Deogratias challenges the usual trope of “innocent child” often seen in genocide narratives. As a teenager who is put in close proximity to violence and traumatised for life, he is a victim. However, he also takes part in the rape and betrayal of Benina and Apollinara, which makes him a perpetrator. His complicity in the crimes is not shown as cold-blooded malice, but as the helplessness of a boy caught in a genocidal machine. The distinction between perpetrator and victim gets blurred here. Deogratias stands as a perfect example of Primo Levi’s concept of ‘gray zone’. Levi warns against simplistic moral judgements, pointing out that in extreme situations, “the network of human relations is reduced to a minimum and moral decisions become ambiguous” (Levi 42). Deogratias embodies this moral ambiguity. His madness is not simply an escape from guilt, but its most honest expression.

Cathy Caruth observes that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment. It returns later in the form of nightmares and haunting memories. In the novel, Deogratias does not seem to react emotionally during the killings. Instead, the horror returns to him after the genocide through his hallucinations. His gradual descent into madness signifies a delayed eruption of trauma. Caruth asserts that is not the direct experience of death that defines trauma, but rather the endless return to it (“Experience”). Deogratias keeps returning to these events he can neither understand nor process.

Stassen critiques the way global audiences consume narratives of violence. In most of the post-genocide representations in art and cinema, there is often an implicit expectation from the western audiences that the survivors will “rebuild”, “testify” and “move on”. Stef Craps argues, “Western trauma paradigms often emphasise recovery and catharsis- models that do not fit postcolonial contexts marked by systemic violence and historical erasure” (Craps 28). However, *Deogratias* resists this approach. This is not one of those cathartic “Never Again” narratives that end with hope, justice and redemption. Its protagonist, both a perpetrator and a victim, stands for the utter psychological wreckage that genocide leaves behind. There is no redemption arc for him. There is no moral clarity. There is no forgiveness or healing. Deogratias dies poisoned, hallucinating about the girls he aided to kill, trapped in a cycle of guilt or horror. The novel offers the readers no comfort or moral closure. In that sense, this graphic novel is a political and moral statement

about the dangers of oversimplifying historical trauma. It reminds the readers that some stories cannot and should not be resolved. Some truths, particularly those forged in atrocity, should remain raw and irreconcilable. Deogratias' madness is a form of protest and refusal to participate in the world's eagerness to 'move on'.

The novel critiques post-genocide society's superficial return to normalcy. The author shows scenes of daily life such as the idle banter in cafes, the consumption of banana beer, characters like foreign priests and expatriates engaging in mundane activities a few weeks after the genocide. Julius, the former militia leader, is seen walking away freely and unpunished, engaging in casual conversations and drinking at bars. The Hotel Umusambi which was once a refuge during the genocide, now serves as a place where people socialize, tell jokes and pretend as if the past never happened. While life resumes for these characters, Deogratias still remains trapped in a moral and emotional void. The juxtaposition of these banal scenes with Deogratias' psychological devastation reflect the contrast between the nation's collective amnesia and individual suffering. The nation may attempt to enforce reconciliation and healing, but for individuals like Deogratias, the past is not just past. His scars are real and irreparable.

As a significant literary contribution to the post-genocide discourse, Stassen's *Deogratias* challenges the very framework through which trauma is understood, such as the Western psychological models and linguistic models. The novel suggests that genocidal trauma can exceed the capacity of conventional diagnostic labels and narratives forms to explain it. Deogratias' behavior, constituting his dog-like howling, barking, obsessive drinking, his delusions of mad dogs devouring the bellies of corpses and insides of their bellies rising up to the sky and dissolving the stars, is deeply unsettling. But the author does not pathologise him in the familiar terms like PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or survivor's guilt. His madness goes beyond the reach of clinical diagnosis. It is not something that can be categorized or cured. It defies all the Western models of trauma, which often presume a coherent person who can gradually recover through recollection of memory and articulation.

As for the linguistic models, the novel critiques the limits of language itself. The protagonist loses his ability to speak meaningfully and instead barks and grunts. This reduction to animalistic sounds symbolizes the collapse of language and its meaning in the face of atrocity. In many trauma narratives following the Western literary traditions, storytelling is considered redemptive. It is a way to work through the pain. But Deogratias refuses this model. His experiences of horror, such as the rape and murder of the girls, cannot be narrated. They exist outside the realm of linguistic representation.

While post-genocide Rwanda relied on testimonial forums like the Gacaca courts, *Deogratias* suggests that these mechanisms cannot capture the full weight of trauma. Primo Levi famously noted, "the ones who truly experienced the horror did not return to tell it" (Levi 63). Deogratias' silence echoes this tragic reality. He is unable to testify and his madness becomes his only language. This also resonates Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "Muselmann", the concentration camp figure who cannot speak and yet is the most authentic witness to the horrors ("Auschwitz"). The novel challenges the assumption that testimony equals healing.

Although the graphic novel is set during and after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the author insists that Deogratias' traumatic rupture is not just the result of one single catastrophe. It is the cumulative effect of decades of colonial domination, religious indoctrination and international abandonment. The genocide itself cannot be fully understood without referencing colonial powers and their attempts to enforce the 'divide and rule' policy by exacerbating the ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. The Belgian colonial administration institutionalised racial hierarchies by classifying the minority Tutsis as the "superior race" and formed allegiance with them. They made the majority Hutus the "inferior race", thus sowing the seeds for long-term resentment and violence among the Hutus. Deogratias, like most other Hutus, has inherited this violence. His memories are shaped on the narratives of false binaries and historical injustice. The genocide is thus a consequence of colonial engineering. Deogratias' guilt is magnified by the realization that he is just another cog in this genocidal machine.

Deogratias' trauma is also shaped by the imprint of Catholic missionary influence in Rwanda. Characters like Brother Philip and Father Prior represent a system that renders moral authority while silently abetting systematic violence. They remain passively neutral when Tutsi children are rounded up, and girls like Benina and Apollinaria are handed over for sexual exploitation. Their failure to intervene when the girls are endangered and their continued presence in Rwanda as moral guides represent the colonial - Christian paradox. This moral hypocrisy reflects Frantz Fanon's idea of "internalisation of the oppressor's values", a psychological effect by which the oppressed are taught universal ethics by the oppressors under conditions of systemic cruelty (Fanon 14). The ideas that suffering is redemptive, forgiveness is noble, violence must be endured silently are all Christian colonial teachings. Deogratias is raised to believe in these values. His mental breakdown is due to the clash between the morality he was taught and the horror he took part in.

The novel also abruptly critiques the global inaction during the atrocities. Throughout the novel, characters like priests, foreigners, aid workers and military expatriates who have been living in Rwanda for a long time either flee in times of danger or remain passive. Their absence and their polite indifference haunt Deogratias' memory like a wound. He roams the streets, unwashed and unstable, and he is met with pity or contempt. They do not engage with his suffering in a meaningful way. The society around him functions with a selective memory, remembering just enough to show performative grief but not to reckon with complicity. The international community's silence during the genocide

becomes a psychic burden that he carries with him till his death. This silence is what Michel- Rolph Trouillot calls “formulas of erasure”, the ways in which the West silences and flattens history that is too disruptive to its moral compass (Trouillot 96). The Rwandan genocide is thus a crime perpetrated not just by the civilians who wielded machetes, but also by those who stood by and watched quietly.

Deogratias does not just tell the story of a boy involved in genocide. It embodies the long shadow of trauma and memory that genocide leaves behind. His madness is, as Frantz Fanon would argue, “a rational response to an irrational world” (Fanon 250).

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