

# Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

Written by Vanesa Valcheva

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/07/08/traumatic-memory-and-historical-narratives/>

VANESA VALCHEVA, JUL 8 2024

'The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe' (Edkins 2013 via Žižek 1991), and yet Transitional Justice (TJ) weaves traumatic memory as a central thread in the fabric of post-conflict societies 'to address the past in a constructive future-oriented manner' (Robins 2017 via Rigby 2001). The nexus of traumatic memory and the construction of narratives, historical or otherwise, is subsequently largely enabled by TJ in post-conflict societies since it is precisely in the aftermath of their trauma-ridden experiences that a narrative vacuum appears, necessitating a (re)construction of collective values, beliefs and myths.

This discussion will problematise the question through the cases of Rwanda (Kigali Genocide Memorial) and Bosnia (Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial) by suggesting that the role of traumatic memory is exceptionally mechanical and weaponised. In this vein, it can be both corroborative and/or disruptive; that is to say, it can construct and deconstruct narratives simultaneously. In mechanising and weaponising traumatic memory, the narratives that are constructed/deconstructed are incredibly polarising. In this vein, the purpose of traumatic memory is not to make peace with and acknowledge the grey areas in post-conflict societies but to provide a black-and-white synopsis of the past that is easily digestible by silencing and de-legitimising the experiences in the grey zone, be it in proportion to other ethnic groups or gender. The TJ paradigm dictates this sanitisation of memory because it is a Western conception, designed with a built-in failure to recognise cultural differences and the complexities of ethnic dynamics, particularly in the chosen cases. The mechanisation and weaponisation of traumatic memory in this context services the scholars of TJ who set out to measure the successes of the schemes through visible and quantifiable results, as opposed to healing and bona fide reconciliation.

In the first section, the discussion will address the assumptions inherent in the question and their implications in the discussion. This will precede two consecutive engagements with the discursive case studies of Rwanda and Bosnia to account for the corroborative and/or disruptive nature of traumatic memory. The discussion will conclude that, in the context of TJ, traumatic memory is politicised because of the inherent in TJ Western framework that has a tendency to treat the phenomenon as a means to an end.

Preeminently, two terms require definition: traumatic memory and historical narratives. Definitions of the former, especially in TJ, are heavily coloured by a Western ontology of coming to terms with a past experience as a necessary precondition to a post-conflict society emerging from its transition as a healed unit. In this vein, traumatic memory is no longer a condition limited to the psyche of a private character but a process that has spilt into and for the collective to rally around in its period of (re)construction and reconciliation (Zolkos 2013). As such, the discussion will frame traumatic memory as the process of memorialising the sense of helplessness in the victim's 'enforced encounter with death, violence and brutality' (Edkins 2013: 3) as a springboard for both the construction and simultaneous deconstruction of narratives.

'Historical narratives', in the context of the question, will be referring specifically to narratives about ethnicity, that is to say, the promotion and re-introduction of divisions between ethnic groups. 'Historical narratives' is too broad a statement that requires some grounding in a specific context since any narrative can be considered historical. What is significant with the chosen cases of Rwanda and Bosnia is that the central narrative emerging from these post-conflict societies is that of ethnic divisionism. Traumatic memory, therefore, constructs a narrative that clearly

# Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

Written by Vanesa Valcheva

ascribes the status of victim and perpetrator along ethnic lines and simultaneously deconstructs narratives about genuine post-conflict resolution and reconciliation because in said constructive narratives, whilst the appearance of justice is projected in respecting and honouring the victims (particularly in Rwanda), an assumption that only one of the ethnic groups can be a victim is disseminated as common knowledge.

Withal, the question assumes that traumatic memory can and should be understood as a mechanism rather than an exclusively psychological phenomenon, as mentioned, but this, in turn, implies that traumatic memories are quantifiable, and because they are so, they can be subsequently hierarchised. The hierarchisation then implies selectivity – if traumatic memory is the process of memorialising a sense of helplessness, then what is a particular (ethnic or gendered) iteration of this narrative constructed and/or deconstructed for? The collective over the individual, one ethnic group over another, or male over female? In all instances, the process of memorialisation becomes a mechanism that seeks, first and foremost, to transmit a swift and neatly packaged narrative about the recent past with the presupposition that healing and reconciliation can happen if there is a simple synopsis.

## Rwanda

The Rwandan 'genocide against the Tutsi' of 1994 erupted as a result of years of civil war and over forty years of violence between the Tutsi and the Hutu ethnic groups, the latter having occupied a place of power during the era of colonialism and neo-colonialism (De Ycaza and Fox 2013:350). The fallout of the unprecedented violence was the loss of close to one million lives, hundreds of thousands of imprisoned perpetrators, orphaned children, and HIV-positive women as a result of genocidal rape, and a lack of any infrastructure, political, economic, legal or otherwise (Ibid).

Since the genocide, the Rwandan government and the international community have implemented TJ schemes to usher the country into recovery, which included local and international legal responses such as Gacaca courts, functioning as a hybridisation of traditional courts and truth commission, and nation-wide memorialisation initiatives (Lischer 2019). Those initiatives have come in the form of implementing memorials; 'the national government provided significant resources including funding, research, organisation and housing of archives to most memorials, focusing on seven major national sites' (De Yeaza and Fox 2013: 351). The symbolic reparations, on the one hand, aim to serve the (re-)establishing of the victim's dignity and, on the other, promote a particular form and iteration of traumatic memory, which necessarily contributes to nation-building, post-conflict identity politics (Buckley-Zistel and Björkdahl 2016) and political power.

Memorialisation here is particularly integral to the popular and political legitimacy of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) since it is a monopoly that carries the potential to construct a highly favourable RPF narrative. The exclusionary dominant narrative that quickly emerged in the Rwandan post-conflict environment defined all Tutsis as genocide victims and all Hutu as genocide perpetrators (Ibid, 818). The implications of this, aside from the erasure of those Hutu victims belonging to the grey zone of atrocity-ridden societies, is the appearance of the RPF as the logical post-conflict body of political power since it appears to be actively encouraging and leading the 'therapeutic' reconciliation of the nation (Zolkos 2013). Contrasted with Lebanon's fragile ecosystem, for instance, where the political leaders overtly reinforce personal narratives 'to the detriment of those of ordinary citizens' (Jaoude and Rugo 2021: 13), the RPF and the Rwandan effort of memorialisation appear progressive. Nevertheless, the appearance of such dazzlingly positive memorialisation is overwhelmingly merely an appearance.

In 2008, the RPF formalised the clear-cut division of Tutsi victims and Hutu perpetrators by altering its official terminology from 'genocide and massacres' to 'genocide against the Tutsis', essentially conducting 'the long-term symbolic erasure of Hutu victims of the genocide from national memory and mourning' (Ramos 2013: 6). Viebach (via Brahman et al. 2000) astutely suggests that Hutu victims and the traumatic memory of Hutu survivors are 'side-lined' through a 'tutsification of genocide' (Viebach via Prunier, 2009: 3). This 'side-lining' is palpable across all seven national memorials, all of which though attempting to avoid an explicit narrative of blame, nevertheless omit the Hutu from the category of victim, despite some Hutu victims being buried alongside Tutsi victims (Viebach 282) at some locations, such as the Kigali Genocide Memorial.

# Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

Written by Vanesa Valcheva

The Memorial is a particularly significant site of reconciliation in Rwanda, firstly because it serves as a flagship site and secondly because it is curated in an internationally-centric manner (Yusin 2016). It features three permanent exhibitions that incorporate 'the main museum, a memorial garden, a library and documentation centre and ten mass exterior graves that contain the remains of approximately 250,000 victims' (Yusin, 348). Of the three exhibits, the second, titled 'Genocide' and sectioned as 'Before', 'During' and 'After', explores the story of Hutu and Tutsi relations. The exhibit refines Hutu involvement via information about militias and key figures responsible for carrying out the genocide, and whilst, as scholar Jennifer Yusin suggests, the exhibit is 'careful to avoid a rhetoric of blame', the omission of Hutu victims in contrast to the spotlight placed on Hutu participation, supports RPF's rhetoric that giving voice to any other non-Tutsi perspective, 'makes one guilty of diminishing the evil of the genocide and committing the error of moral equivalence' (Zolkos, 818).

Additionally, it is incredibly significant that in the development of the Centre, the Rwandan government sought the aid of the Aegis Trust, a British NGO, to ensure the Memorial was a space that simultaneously memorialised and educated. Primarily, the Western tendency of oversimplification becomes apparent – the absence of nuance, that is to say, the lack of awareness that suffering is not confined to the Tutsi community, advances the idea that 'only Tutsi are victims of genocide; moderate Hutus are victims of politicicide who died in massacres' (Ramos, 6), a distinction that hierarchises not only suffering but also the memories of victims alike. It advances a claim of superiority whereby Tutsi suffering and trauma are more worthy because it was the overwhelming majority.

The Rwandan mechanisation of traumatic memory institutionalises the understanding that since the victim of the genocide was Tutsi, it is the Tutsi memory that is allowed to have a voice and to become the shared post-conflict narrative of Rwanda. It seeks to promote a strictly defined story of good and bad by adhering to 'narrative preferences based on Western cultural values and the problematic consumption of exotic suffering [which] indirectly encourage[s] an easily digestible and oversimplified narrative' (Lischer 2019: 807). What subsequently emerges is that (1) traumatic memory is a state monopoly, and as such, who and how is to be remembered and victimised becomes a top-down decision; (2) this memory, in turn, corroborates/constructs black-and-white tropes of victims and perpetrators along ethnic lines and simultaneously deconstruct narratives about genuine reconciliation and socio-cultural healing between the communities; (3) individual traumatic memory is usurped from the victims, Tutsi and Hutu alike, to promote a sense of amnesia in the name of shared identity; and finally (4) this strict pursuit of clear cut narrative tropes of good/bad speaks to a Western tendency of oversimplification in the name of swift transition of post-conflict states and by proxy, the success of T.J.

## Bosnia

Against the backdrop of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Bosnian civil war took place from 1991 to 1995. A crucial turning point of the war was the slaughtering of over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys by members of Serbian forces in and around the town of Srebrenica over a period of just four days in July 1995. As a 'safe zone' established 'by a UN resolution in 1993, Srebrenica was placed under the protection of peacekeeping forces, one of which was Dutch troops who were based in a battery factory where the Bosnian refugees took shelter from the Serbians' (Jacobs 2017: 425). 'Despite being designated as a safe zone, the Dutch military forces failed to intervene at Srebrenica when the Serbs invaded', being responsible for the failure to prevent at least 300 deaths (Hasanbasic 2014).

The civil war was swiftly ended in the aftermath of the genocide with the Dayton Peace Accords, orchestrated by the United States, creating 'a complicated geopolitical entity that today comprises the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina' (Jacobs 425). In a war where multiple ethnic communities struggle against one another, committing civilian atrocities, justice is fraught, but more than that, each group can simultaneously be both a victim and a perpetrator – a prospect that threatens the simplicity of ethnicised victimhood (Cohen 2018: 40-41). Nevertheless, particularly for Bosnian Muslims, the ethnic narrative of the Bosnian Muslim victim and the Bosnian Serb perpetrator is extremely potent, with the Bosnian government's narrative of Srebrenica dovetailing significantly with the traumatic memories and narratives of victims and survivors (Lischer 2019: 823). While this largely converges with the case of Rwanda, it diverges in that the ethnic narrative in Srebrenica is constructed via gender, that is to say, the absence and omission of 'sexual crimes as a trope' of memorialisation. Traumatic memory here is hierarchised and selected carefully to

# Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

Written by Vanesa Valcheva

construct a viable ethnonationalist Bosnian Muslim campaign which hinges on 'women's goodness and men's protective manhood' (Jacobs, 426). This ethnic chronicle is encapsulated in the Memorial Room at Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Centre, mainly because it is the only official memorial dedicated to the genocide but also because the disparity between female and male traumatic memory is overt.

The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Centre was opened in 2003, but its establishment was not without its opposition, especially since the town of Srebrenica falls under Serbian territory and the victims are Bosnian Muslims. The stalemate over the existence of a commemorative space was ended by a decision of 'the Office of the High Representative (OHR) to create a national memorial cemetery to provide the final resting place and a site for those who perished' (Jacobs, 426). Like the involvement of the Aegis Trust in Rwanda, it is particularly significant that the Memorial exists in the first place because of international involvement – it makes the international community an external stakeholder that inevitably influences and shapes the narratives of Srebrenica through Western paradigms of simplification, which inherently exploit the ethnic division as a logical cornerstone of post-conflict victimisation. It is also indicative of a Western tendency to employ and frame TJ schemes in conflict-ridden states 'under the twin cloaks of morality and compassion' (Cohen, 77). In this vein, international involvement in post-conflict memorialisation becomes a process through which 'dominant countries derive their legitimacy' as much as they attempt to usher in reconciliation (Cohen, 77).

As an ode to traumatic memory, the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial comprises a cemetery and a Memorial Room/Museum. The Room, housed in the original battery factory where Bosnian Muslims sought refuge before the massacre, promotes traditional tropes of gendered traumatic memory that hierarchise the suffering of the male victims over the consequential suffering and loss of the surviving mothers and wives (Jacobs, 429). What can be seen as tokens of life and death of men and boys are exhibited in glass cases containing personal belongings such as clothes. By comparison, since very few women were killed, their memory and suffering are palpable through the display of photographs that capture women in groups or alone with children (Jacobs, 429). The symbolic disparity between these memorialisations is in their very tangibility or lack thereof; whilst the physical tokens of the men and boys make their suffering tangible, the proximity between their lived experience and death immortalised, and the photographs of the women communicate distance. As manifestations of wartime maternity, the photographs serve as a memento of the destruction of the Bosnian Muslim family and the disordering of gender standards, such as the male being the source of protection for the woman (Jacobs, 429). The photographs become physical evidence for the prioritisation of male suffering and memorialisation because the narrative goes that female traumatic memory here is such in the first place because the Bosnian Serb has erased her male protector.

'Maternal widowhood' then becomes synonymous with the Serbian acts of genocide. Women become emblems 'not only of tragedy and suffering but also of a particular kind of female survivor, one who personifies the norms of patriarchy in which women represent traditional maternal values of family and domesticity' (Jacobs, 431). Traumatic memory here is recalled differently for men and women; it is selective, and it is curated in a way that advances a gendered narrative of ethnonationalism. This is particularly poignant, once more, through the lack of memorialisation for the approximately 50,000 victims of mass rape. Just like the Rwandan mechanisation of memory seeks to promote a strictly defined story of good/bad (Tutsi/Hutu), at Srebrenica, the weaponisation of memory pursues a narrowly confined story of Bosnian Muslim victimhood by projecting a clear-cut chronicle of gendered victims and survivors. What emerges then is, similarly to Rwanda, traumatic memory is a monopoly over which the ethnic quilt of the Western Balkans struggle to lay claims; it becomes a means of ammunition in a war of denial, responsibility and suffering more than it is a process of reflection and reconciliation. Ultimately, it corroborates/constructs gendered tropes of male victims and female survivors to propel a narrative of the collective innocence of Bosnian Muslims and deconstructs the presumption that memorialisation results in reconciliation invariably.

## Conclusion

This essay framed the role of traumatic memory as mechanical in the construction of ethnic and deconstruction of TJ paradigmatic narratives via the post-conflict transitional cases of Rwanda and Bosnia. The discussion proposes that this mechanisation of traumatic memory, which is most explicit in the context of TJ, is such because of a Western tendency to treat post-conflict conditions through oversimplifications and negations of non-Western cultural (ethnic)

# Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives

Written by Vanesa Valcheva

dynamics. In an effort to induce TJ successes and results, the oversimplification of the relations, or lack thereof, between groups necessitates, firstly, the prioritisation of one group's trauma over another's and, secondly, the detaching of personhood from memory for it to become a monopoly. This was succinctly explored via the examples of the Kigali and Srebrenica-Potočari Memorials, which serve as physical manifestations of strictly defined narratives that are inherently exclusionary, be it ethnically or gender-wise, or both. Consequently, if traumatic memory is a mere mechanism, a means to a narrative end in contexts of TJ schemes, it follows that TJ does not provide a framework in which atrocity-ridden societies can achieve bona fide reconciliation.

## Bibliography

Cohen, Laura Beth, 'Conflicted Walls, Mixed Messages: Untangling Transitional Justice and Traumatic Memories at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial in Bosnia', Doctor of Philosophy, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (2018): <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/59201/>

David, Lea, 'Against Standardisation of Memory', *Human Rights Quarterly* 39:2 (2017): 296-318.

Edkins, Jenny. 'Introduction: Trauma, Violence and Political Community' in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 1-19.

Elderkin, Rupert, 'Case Study: A Review of Transitional Justice Responses to the Srebrenica Genocide, 1995-2013', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Rights Law* 8 (2014-2015): 103- 123.

Hasanbasic, Jasna, 'Liability in Peacekeeping Missions: A Civil Cause of Action for the Mothers of Srebrenica against the Dutch Government and the United Nations', *Emory International Law Review* 29:2 (2014): 415-450.

Jacobs, Janet, 'The memorial at Srebrenica: Gender and the social meanings of collective memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Memory Studies* 10:4 (2017): 423-439.

Jaoude, Carmen Hassoun Abou and Rugo, Daniel, 'Marginal memories of Lebanon's Civil War: Challenging Hegemonic Narratives in a small town in North Metn' in Daniele Rugo and Nina Parish eds. *Memories from the Margins: Violence, Conflict, and Counter-Narratives*, *Journal of the British Academy* 9:3 (2021): 11-28.

Lischer, Sarah Kenyon, 'Narrating atrocity: Genocide memorials, dark tourism, and the politics of memory', *Review of International Studies* 45:5 (2019): 805-827.

Mohatt, Nathaniel Vincent, Thompson, Azure B., Thai, Nghi D. and Tebes, Jacob Kraemer, 'Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present- day health', *Soc Sci Med* 106 (2014): 128-136.

Ramos, Carse, 'Transitional Justice, Victimhood and Collective Narrative in Post-Genocide Rwanda', Master of Arts, Central European University (2013): [https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2013/ramos\\_carse.pdf](https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2013/ramos_carse.pdf)

Saul, Gwendolyn W. and March, Diana E. 'In Whose Honour? On Monuments, Public Spaces, Historical Narratives, and Memory', *Museum Anthropology* 41:2 (2018): 117-120.

Viebach, Julia, 'Of other times: temporarily, memory and trauma in post-genocide Rwanda', *International Review of Victimology* 25:3 (2019): 277-301.

Yusin, Jennifer, 'The Itinerary of Commemoration in the Kigali Memorial Centre: On Trauma, Time and Difference', *Culture, Theory and Critique* 57:3 (2016): 338-356.

Zolkos, Magdalena, 'Redressive politics and the nexus of trauma, transitional justice and reconciliation' in Susanne Buckley-Zistel et al. *Transitional Justice Theories* (Routledge, 2013): 163-183.

**Traumatic Memory and Historical Narratives**

Written by Vanesa Valcheva