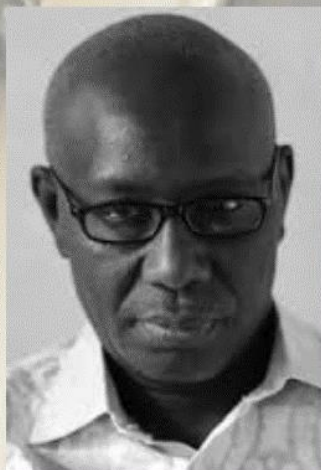




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Boubacar Boris Diop

Une écriture déroutante



Hors série

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Coordonné par:
Boubacar CAMARA
& Ousmane NGOM



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B.P. 234 Saint-Louis (Sénégal) – Tél. (221) 961 22 87 – Fax 961 18 84
Courriers électroniques: boucamara2000@gmail.com ou naedioba@yahoo.fr

Compte Chèque Postal n°09553-A Saint-Louis, Sénégal
Directeur du G.E.L.L. : Pr Boubacar CAMARA

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Boubacar Boris Diop: The Achievement of the Craft of I-Narration

Ousmane NGOM*

Résumé

Boubacar Boris Diop affectionne la narration à la première personne à tel enseigne qu'elle semble chez cet auteur la règle de la relation du récit romanesque. Que lui permet de réaliser cette forme narrative ? Qu'est-ce qui explique ce choix quand on sait que cette forme de narration est particulièrement délicate du fait même des limites de l'être humain ? La problématique est donc la nécessité d'atteindre la plénitude et la profondeur du récit sans enfreindre l'illusion réaliste en dépit des limites qu'impose la narration à la première personne. Cet article tente de répondre à ces questions en se focalisant sur les trois derniers romans de Boubacar Boris Diop publiés à ce jour, à savoir Murambi, le livre des ossements, Les Petits de la guenon et Kaveena.

Mots clefs : *Narration, oralité, mémoire collective, vraisemblance narrative, Francafrique, génocide.*

Introduction

Novelist, essayist, playwright, and short-story teller Boubacar Boris Diop is one of the most outstanding contemporary African writers. He is celebrated for great themes such as African memory, neocolonialism, specifically the Francafrique system he makes his hobbyhorse and he is also honored for his freedom of speech and the riches of his literary productions. Diop has a great inclination for first-person narration erected as the structuring principle of his stories. If all his novels and short-stories from *Le Temps de Tamango* (1981) to *La Nuit de l'Imoko* (2013) house first-person narrators, in the early productions the identity of the narrators was fleeting even elusive, earning Boubacar Boris Diop the fame of an experimental novelist. The latter novels, however, present first-person narrators with more clear-cut identity.

This paper probes into Diop's last three novels: *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, *Les Petits de la guenon*, and *Kaveena* which are entirely narrated by I-narrators, with the exception of *Murambi* that houses an external narrator whose position is not central in the novel. Agreeing with Sob that « tout choix de genre, de forme ou de style est

* Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, Sénégal.

sémaphore de l'intention de l'auteur »¹ and sharing Kjerkegaard's view that « the Medium is *also* the Message »², we will endeavour to specify what the first-person narration device allows Diop to realize. Aware of the constraints of this form of narration, we will decide whether Boris succeeds in achieving entirety and profoundness of the story without jeopardizing the necessary realistic verisimilitude.

I. *Murambi, le livre des ossements*: A Cathartic Re-Membering of Post-genocide Identities

Murambi, le livre des ossements is a documentary novel that stems out of the Fest' Africa initiative, "Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire", held in 1998 by ten African writers who stayed in Rwanda for a writing mission on the genocide. The title of the project itself informs that memory is placed at the core of Diop's novel to which it has given birth. A commemorative work of fiction is very efficient in the fight against oblivion, denial or revisionism. Nissim asserts that more than in any other work of Boubacar Boris Diop « dans *Murambi. Le livre des ossements* [...] le thème de la mémoire devient un devoir éthique incontournable. »³ This is translated in the textual strategy by the fact that the narration of the genocide rests on a string of eight character-narrators relating their experiences either as subjects or objects of disparate events of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Each of the chapters of the novels

¹ Jean Sob, *L'Impératif romanesque de Boubacar Boris Diop* (Irvy-sur-Seine : Éditions A3, 2007), p. 18.

² Stefan Kjerkegaard, "The Medium Is *Also* The Message: Narrating Media in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*" in *Style*. Vol. 45, n° 4, Winter 2011.

Cf. Quoting Michel Butor, Jean Rousset points the existing distinction between the first and the third form of narration : « les romans sont habituellement écrits à la troisième ou à la première personne [...] Nous savons bien que le choix de l'une de ces formes n'est nullement indifférent ; ce n'est pas tout à fait la même chose qui peut nous être racontée dans l'un ou l'autre cas, et surtout notre situation de lecteur par rapport à ce qu'on nous dit est transformée. » Jean Rousset, *Narcisse romancier. Essai sur la première personne dans le roman* (Paris : José Corti, 1972), p. 7.

³ Liana Nissim, « "Ne pas écrire couché": Boubacar Boris Diop, l'écrivain tourné vers l'avenir », in *Altre Modernità / Otras Modernidades / Autres Modernités / Others Modernities*, n° 2, 2009, p. 201.

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bears the name of a character who narrates his or her story, save the two chapters named after Cornelius and handled by an external narrator. This textual choice is very relevant as Cornelius was abroad during the genocide. His desire to discover what really happened between April and July 1994 made his return a necessity after a twenty-five-year long exile in Djibouti. Hence, although dealt with by a he-narrator, it is Cornelius's point of view that conveys the story. His enquiries about the events make the narrative progress thanks to the information he gleans from various characters.

In the afterward to the novel, the author confesses to feeling half-guilty for not acceding the interviewees' demands not to turn their testimonies into a work of fiction. But, if he has betrayed the letter of the contract, he has nonetheless profoundly respected its spirit in the sense that is, in his intimate conviction, the best way. In fact, the concern of the interviewees and that of the Rwandan post-genocide authorities who decided to exhume corpses from mass graves to expose them to the sight of the whole world is to engrave the genocide into humanity's mind forever, as "the skeletons of the victims appear to continuously re-enact the atrocities of April 1994."⁴

Burying the victims and keeping silent about their tragic story would ultimately culminate into another genocide, that of forgetting. This is why parents have been convinced after fierce and arduous arguments that the best way to honor the memory of the slaughtered is ironically not to give them a decent sepulture, but to show them in display. In the novel, the author explains the reason of the exhibition of the corpses in the following sentences: "au moment de périr sous les coups, les suppliciés avaient crié. Personne n'avait voulu les entendre. L'écho de ces cris devait se prolonger le plus longtemps possible" (*Murambi*, 177). Diop's intention is then to make reecho the plaintive delirium in order to pierce the reader's mind. So his writing as a duty of memory proceeds by a metaphorical unearthing of the victims.

⁴ Nicki Hitchcott, "Writing on Bones: Commemorating Genocide in Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi*" in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, n° 3, Fall 2009, p. 49.

The debate over the most suitable form of commemoration is enacted in the novel. The author believes that steles, journalist chronicles and books of history cannot render the complexity and profoundness of the genocide; the novel can.⁵ Cornelius, a professor of history in Djibouti, has read a lot of non-fictional accounts about the genocide, but is still dependent on Simeon's mediation in order to fully grasp the whole meaning of the genocide. His conclusive commentary on his uncle's assistance is telltale of the importance of the novel as an efficient medium to understand massacres of the kind of the Rwandan genocide.⁶ "Sans avoir jamais écrit une seule ligne de toute sa vie, Siméon Habineza était à sa manière un vrai romancier, c'est-à-dire, en définitive, un raconteur d'éternité" (*Murambi*, 214).

In fact, the choice of a fiction rather than a non-fiction work is grounded by the aim to touch the reader on a tender spot by giving a human seal to the story contrary to the coldness of statistic figures. Nicki Hitchcott contends that "shrines and testimonials [...] fail to generate such a painful proximity; works of fiction, on the other hand, can – and sometimes do – achieve this aim."⁷ It means to impinge a name and a face to the story of each victim. In the novel, the reader encounters authentic historical names cohabitating with fictitious characters made real through a strong and appropriate characterization.

⁵ Boubacar B. Diop shares Kundera's following words : « L'esprit du roman est l'esprit de complexité. Chaque roman dit au lecteur : 'Les choses sont plus compliquées que tu ne le penses.' C'est la vérité éternelle du roman [...]. Milan Kundera, *L'Art du roman* (Paris : Gallimard, 1986), p. 30.

⁶ In his essay following the novel *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, Boris highlights what he terms "l'efficacité de la fiction dans la lutte contre l'oubli" Boubacar Boris Diop, *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir* (Paris : Philippe Rey, 2007), p. 28.

He adds "La sérénité de l'historien peut-elle dire [le] déchaînement des passions humaines les plus folles ? Je ne crois pas. Le roman, qui trouve le tueur sur son terrain, celui de l'émotion et de la falsification, me paraît plus apte à remplir cette tâche" (p. 30). « La fiction est un excellent moyen de contrer le projet génocidaire. Elle redonne une âme aux victimes et, si elle ne les ressuscite pas, elle leur restitue au moins leur humanité en un rituel de deuil qui fait du roman une stèle funéraire. » (p. 30).

⁷ Nicki Hitchcott, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

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The adequate use of first-person narration and the internal focalization bring the story closer to the reader and succeeds in making him sympathize with the I-narrator or focalizer as it suppresses the distance between the producing and receiving instances more systematic in the case of a neutral external narration. Boris's voyage to Rwanda equates and parallels Cornelius's return. Their inquiries on the genocide trigger painful and shameful memories that the characters must confront so as to definitely conjure the demons of the genocide. In this regard, Diop strives to show that albeit being the most disastrous and infamous massacre, the 1994 genocide is not the first Rwandan ethnic tragedy: "Au Rwanda, [...] depuis 1959 une partie de la population, toujours la même massacre l'autre, toujours la même" (*Murambi*, 90).

The various character-narrators and their disjointed stories bring a fragmented structure that copies what Karin Samuel terms "the physical fragmentation that occurred during the genocide."⁸ But this physical fragmentation she describes as "the mutilation and dismemberment of bodies"⁹ is a minor damage compared to the psychological fragmentation of the genocide survivors. Then the author, Simeon and, to a certain extent, Cornelius act like psycho-therapists by inviting the characters to remember the genocide in order to re-member their post-traumatic fragmented selves.

The survivors of the genocide have lost relatives and parts of themselves in the tragedy; they need to voyage back to confront the pathology, to re-member their scattered selves and become whole again. Ironically, most of these survivors are simply ashamed of being alive; haunted by the guiltiness of escaping death while their valued relatives fell under the Interahamwe's machete strokes. Some of them even ask what sin they have committed to stay alive. This paradox raises the fundamental predicament of survivors of this kind of tragedy who question their present condition and their role in the past events, but through the prism of biased lenses blurring the line between normality and abnormality. Considering one's survival as abnormal betrays an incredible position shift. This reaction means they

⁸ Karin Samuel, "Bearing witness to trauma: narrative structure and perspective in *Murambi, the book of bones*" in *African Identities*, Vol. 8, n° 4, November 2010, p. 368.

⁹ Karin Samuel, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

believe that they deserve death. As such, they fail to identify who the real culprits of the genocide are.

At this level, Boris's casting of the narrators is very relevant. It brings the sense of a complete painting in which each of the parties in the conflict is represented. In addition to the victory over oblivion and traumatic silence, the novel plays out the prosecution that should have happened after the victory of the FPR rebellion. The absence of a genuine trial leads to a trapped reconciliation which does not heal the profound wounds of the Rwandan nation brought about by the genocide. The idea is put at the foreground by the character Jessica who analyzes the situation as putting the cart before the horse. "Après la victoire, la question sera inévitablement posée: que vaut un pardon sans justice? Les organisateurs du génocide en savent trop. Ils sont en train de s'enfuir et leur fuite les met à l'abri d'un procès qui guérirait notre peuple de son traumatisme" (*Murambi*, 135).

Diop figuratively enacts the prosecution of the genocide by giving voice to a realistic sample of characters. Among this large group, the reader encounters some Tutsi survivors, Interahamwe militiamen, intellectual organizers of the genocide and their French allies. Their respective narrations shed light on the racist theory which underpinned the genocide and its perfect organization with a view to killing all Tutsis without any exception. However, the narrations of the culprits don't foreshadow any aftertaste of remorse or culpability. They are done on the mode of "self-exposure"¹⁰, meaning characters laying bare their misdeeds not out of regret or to amend for them, but rather to brag about them.

The Interahamwe militiamen like Faustin Gasana recount the events with the same intensity of light glowing in their eyes and betraying a taste of power and lust for blood. Karekezi, the engineer of the massacre of Murambi, relates with a great sense of satisfaction the authorities' and his roles in encouraging the would-be victims to find refuge in the administrative buildings and the worship places in order to make them easy prey for the Hutu militia backed by the regular army. Karekezi is the

¹⁰ David Cook & Michael Okenimkpe, *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his Writings* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1972), p. 126.

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embodiment of the affluent Hutu seeking in the genocide an occasion to secure his financial empire and an important statesman position in the Hutu Republic of the Hutu Power. A former doctor, he now holds a tea company estate, a cloak for his dubious activities. He is responsible for the killing of more than fifty thousand people including his wife, children, and his wife's family. He poetically relates the events in the incoming paragraph that discloses his horrible rationale:

Au moment où le chauffeur démarrait, j'ai embrassé du regard la colline de Murambi. Demain, je serai là. Des ombres dans la brume de l'aube, face aux arbres immobiles. Des cris monteront vers le ciel. Je n'éprouverai ni tristesse ni remords. Ce seront des souffrances atroces, certes, mais seules les âmes faibles confondent le crime et le châtement. Dans ces cris vulgaires, battra le cœur pur de la vérité. Je ne suis pas de ceux qui redoutent les ombres de leur âme. Mon unique foi est la vérité. Je n'ai pas d'autre Dieu. La plainte du supplicié n'est que ruse du diable. Elle veut obstruer le souffle du juste et empêcher sa volonté de se réaliser. (*Murambi*, 131)

France and the international community are summoned on the dock for their role in the massacre. They denied the reality of the genocide, but were quick to fly to the recourse of their Hutu allies threatened by the FPR advance. The narration of Colonel Perrin – The Frenchman in charge of the operation *Turquoise* – clearly determines the participation of France in supplying materials to the regular army. In a bout of state of mind, he seems to loathe his mission : “Et nous voilà obligés d'aider les tueurs à échapper à la justice de leur pays... C'est une logique terrible.” But the flinching moment is swiftly replaced by the more realistic reconsideration of the stake: “mais on ne peut pas faire autrement. S'il y a un procès, ils peuvent essayer de sauver leur peau en nous mettant tout sur le dos. On est littéralement coincé” (*Murambi*, 150). So France, the only country that was capable of preventing the massacre, continues harassing Rwanda by refusing a real trial of the organizers of the genocide.

As an insider in Rwanda for the account of the FPR rebellion, Jessica's position is of paramount importance. Many chapters of the novel are constructed around her narrative, which gives the reader a clear view of the beleaguered Tutsis and the bloodlust Interahamwe as well as the role of the international community. Through her narrative we are told that hundreds of democrat Hutus, like the Prime Minister

Agathe Uwilingiyimana, are killed by the genocide perpetrators who considers them as *Ibyitso*, traitors. We are also introduced to the unbearable fate of Hutu men killing Tutsis, not out of conviction, but only to save the lives of their own children. Disseminating these kinds of complexities, Diop means to fight stereotypical descriptions of the genocide as barbarous Africans slaughtering one another over nothing. He also observes that genocide is no easy understandable matter, that the line is not so clear-cut between all Hutus killing all Tutsis as an oversimplified view would put it.

The effect of these multiple narrators is to encourage the reader to view the genocide from a variety of different angles and to resist a reductive interpretation of the events. Diop has explained his decision to present the genocide from multiple points of view as a desire to let readers come to their own conclusions and, in doing so, to create their own narratives of genocide.¹¹

In fact, Diop humbly acknowledges that his voyage to Rwanda helped him correct his previous perception of the genocide biased by the neglect or underestimation on behalf of the international community. The shock was so terrible that it imposed on the author a revision of his conception of history and literature.¹² This new resolution has given birth to the subsequent non-conventional novel *Doomi Golo* written in Wolof, the author's mother tongue.

II. *Les Petits de la guenon*: The Jali's Version or Subversion of History

First written in Wolof as *Doomi Golo* and agreeably translated into French as *Les Petits de la guenon*, Boris's novel coming after *Murambi* tackles the European centered view of African History by putting at the foreground the oral version of this history. The avowed intension of the two narrators (Nguirane Faye, then Ali Kaboye) to relate Nguirane's grandson – a migrant in an unknown country – the family drama played during his absence is subtly superseded by a politico-historical narrative. The novel is in fact a plea for the deconstruction of the official version of History and its

¹¹ Nicki Hitchcott, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹² The author explains plainly this idea in his essay *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir* that devotes a large part to his Rwandan experience and its aftermath on his personality.

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replacement by the grass-root account. Then the intended digressions fill in the blanks in Badou's mind and the reader's mind by watering them from the oral source.

The novel's opening raises the fundamental problem of the recording and transmission of the oral tradition. Nguirane starts his long "conversation" with Badou in these sentences:

J'aurai préféré te parler de vive voix, comme tous les conteurs dignes de ce nom, pour faire battre plus vite ton cœur et t'éprouver par mes déroutantes énigmes. [...] Je t'écris faute de mieux, et parce que sans cela il me serait bien égal d'être mort ou vivant (*LPG*, 19-20).

Stating his preference *to talk* to Badou in a live and clear voice is a proof of Nguirane's awareness of the complexity of his enterprise. Being himself raised in the oral tradition whose way of transmission is by word of mouth and its record and conservation by memorization, he has no other choice, at the decline of his life, than *to write* his memoirs to pass on the legacy to his chosen inheritor, losing by the way "the vital immediacy of spoken language itself."¹³

However, Nguirane's choice of the written form – because of the obstacle of the geographical distance – reveals Boris's progressive attitude toward tradition. For him the importance of the issue at stake justifies the transcendence of the hurdles imposed by the medium. Furthermore, by launching the digitally recorded audio version of the novel, he deals another strike to the proponents of the sacrosanct purists' theory which advocates oral transmission and reception only.

¹³ Abiola Irele, "Orality, Literacy, and African Literature" in *African Literature. An Anthology of criticism and theory*. edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. pp. 74-82 (p. 77)

On the same token, the written form lacks the interaction of the oral performance, where the audience could participate and orient the narrative. Wyile observes that "Readers, whether they are critical of the narrator or not, have no control over the outcome of the narrative; once they have submitted to it (fully engaged in it), they are at its mercy."

Andrea Schwenke Wyile, "Expanding the View of First-Person Narration" in *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1999, p. 192.

Nguirane evokes, in the same breath, the medium “vive voix” and the agency “le conteur” whom he later identifies with the griot – the repository, custodian, and transmitter of oral tradition. By substituting Nguirane and Ali Kaboye to the traditional griot and letting them *write* the story of the novel, Boris decentres and modernizes the role of (hi)story-telling. In fact, in many occasions in the novel, the two narrators identify themselves explicitly with the musician griot. This identification with the *Jali* serves then as an ethos, giving more credit to the narrators all the more as the *Jali*’s creed is to preserve and authentically deliver the content of a message. In fact, he is the authorized voice who has license to tell any truth to anybody without fearing for his life. This attribute which Finnegan calls the “power to mock with impunity”¹⁴ is what the griot shares with crazy men, like Ali Kaboye, capable of airing political and social satiric criticisms without endangering themselves. As such, they are institutions enjoying a social and moral immunity. According to Finnegan, traditionally “[the griots’] membership of the special poetic caste gave them impunity, so that together with their low status they at the same time had freedom from the sanctions that deterred other members of society from open insult of their fellows.”¹⁵

Accordingly the frequent insistence by the two narrators on the word “truth” foreshadows the subversive dimension of the novel. The reader is not disappointed, as Nguirane and Ali Kaboye do engage in a revision of history by placing the focus on the indigenous population’s perspective. They, more precisely, tell the story of the common people that otherwise would be hidden or ignored by the official colonial discourse. Their narratives draw the timeline of the history of resistance against any form of domination with the patent intention to let Badu know that the foreign penetration in his country was not an easy enterprise, but it met a fierce resistance that was only defeated by a materially more sophisticated power and also by internal strife. Important pangs of the history of resistance are therefore highlighted and the memory of resisters called back into life. One can mention the episode of *Talaatay Ndeer* when, after a heroic battle, the women of *Ndeer* under the guidance of Mbarka Dia chose to burn themselves down rather than undergoing

¹⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), p. 98.

¹⁵ Ruth Finnegan, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

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Moorish enslavement. In the same vein, the allegorical fight of the two gorillas against the colonial railroad implantation is evocative of Lat Dior, the epic resister who opposed the railroad's trespassing of his kingdom, Cayor. Yet the two narrators are not systematically siding with the people, nor are they idealizing the past. In this, Boris shares Achebe's conception of the role of the African writer in restoring African history:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the one I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfection – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.¹⁶

The narrators' objectivity can be perceived in the appropriate description of the history of treason through real, historical characters colluding with the slave traders. These infamous characters are represented in the novel by gluttonous wrens like Daaw Demba and corrupt interpreters like Baye Sèye. Yet the two narrators are keen enough to describe the figure of treason through a changeable, fleeting shape embodied in turn by ancient wrens such as Daaw Demba, Mame Ngor, and modern presidents like the fictitious characters of Dibi Dibi and Daour Diagne, or the factual Mobutu. In this sense Mbagnick Ngom's comment on Ali Kaboye's role is very relevant: « ses imprécations transforment peu à peu *Doomi Golo* en une fable politique charriant les plus lointaines douleurs de son peuple, mais aussi ses lâchetés et ses impostures »¹⁷. This literary device means that the eras change, so do the regimes, but the practice of selling out the population to foreigners remains constant. The villainous characters in the novel are contrasted with Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba etc. shown as role models for Badu to copy. To these political and ideological characters, Nguirane adds the writers and cultural activists such as Moussa Ka, Alioune Ndao etc., fighting for the promotion of national languages.

Les Petits de la guenon presents two narrators convergent in ideology but very divergent in approach. It is the self-effaced Nguirane, using the first person plural

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁷ Mbagnick Ngom, quoted by Jean Sob, *L'impératif Romanesque de Boubacar Boris Diop. Op. cit.*, p. 58.

(*nous, on*) and the egocentric Ali Kaboye, always starting his subversive speeches by “moi, Ali Kaboye...” They confirm Marcus’s pattern in which “the conforming voice is correlated, to a great extent, with the use of the first person plural, whereas the non-conforming voice is correlated with the first person singular.”¹⁸ Nguirane gets lost in the mass of the populous district of Niarela and seems to be the voice of the collective conscience. However, he morally and politically outdistances his cohabitants of Niarela, which confers irony to his statements beginning with “Nous de Niarela...” or “A Niarela, on...” that locate him simultaneously within and outside of the group. His *we* is then a “plural of camouflage”¹⁹ enabling him both to criticize openly the authorities and subtly his cohabitants. That is why Ali Kaboye singles Nguirane out of the population of Niarela he considers morally corrupt and politically unaware. This explains also his use of drastic means to pull them out of their sleep, which he assimilates to their hypocrisy.

The story of *Les Petits de la guenon* encapsulates the span of events before colonialism up to the present day of African independent States. The choice of first-person narration in this novel is relevant because Nguirane and Ali describe events in which they actively took part, or which they witnessed. The first-person narrative of both narrators is tinged with lyricism that expresses betrayed hopes and disappointment. Nguirane’s narrative reveals that he is a resister, an unflinching former leader of a trade union despite being frequently arrested and jailed. He militated in a nationalist party, the PAI that fought for immediate and total independence; which led him to Accra where he and his companions in ideology were received by Nkrumah who supported them financially and promised to supply weapons. He is also an earnest admirer of Cheikh Anta Diop whose political meetings he attended, impressed by the man’s strong determination and courage to carry out his ideas no matter what.

Ali Kaboye is an enigmatic character, an immortal, as is shown through the aspect of magical realism in the novel. He recounts with clear details his companionship with Kocc Barma, the Senegalese philosopher of the 17th century and tells with

¹⁸ Amit Marcus, “A Contextual View of Narrative Fiction in the First Person Plural” in *Narrative*, Vol. 16, n° 1, 2008, p. 54.

¹⁹ Amit Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

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mordant irony the episode he witnessed of the colonization of Nimboi led then by an impotent and shameless wren. The duplicity of oral tradition is conveyed through the mysterious character of the crazy Ali Kaboye who is simultaneously fascinating and intimidating like the traditional griot who is “at once feared, despised, and influential.”²⁰ Often the population of Niarela, fond of sensational revelations, circles around him to listen to his social chronicles that he pretends to observe from a magical mirror. Each of the loungers is at the same time excited to hear their fellow citizens’ scandals and nervous at the idea of having their own misdeeds revealed. In fact, these people know the power of words. In their own saying it is preferable to be cast with stones rather than be thrown bad words. The politicians compete to befriend him in order to have their rivals denigrated.²¹ Even self-sufficient president Daour Diagne calls upon his wisdom to pull the country out of the stagnation in which it has remained. « Oui, tu es le seul à ne pas me mentir, Ali, et c’est pourquoi j’aime bien parler avec toi [...] Je cherche le chemin, Ali. Guide mes pas sur la voie juste. [...] Ne me déçois pas, Ali...J’ai foi en ta sagesse » (*LPG*, 338-339).

However Ali Kaboye is killed as soon as he shouts that the colonist should return to his home country (*LPG*, 283). The desperate and humorous obstinacy to raze down his shack and the hiring of theorists who come right into Niarela to convince the inhabitants that Ali Kaboye has never existed and that they were rather in a collective daydream is a clear evidence of the local authorities’ attempts to erase all his traces. Likewise, the assassination and the attempts to throw Ali Kaboye into oblivion show the desire to silence the collective memory and oral history. Diop’s aim is then to counter the enterprise of the falsification of history whose goal, as Nissim puts it, is the inhibition of the African people.

Le romancier considère comme une sorte de vocation prioritaire pour tout artiste, pour tout intellectuel, la tâche d’éveilleur et de gardien de la mémoire (aussi bien individuelle que collective), surtout en Afrique, où la domination

²⁰ Ruth Finnegan, *op. cit.*, 98.

²¹ As we said elsewhere, Boubacar B. Diop castigates the modern griot and the journalist who are stipended to denigrate or shower praises on people. See Ousmane Ngom, « Métaphores obsédantes du *seetu* et reflets identitaires dans *Doomi Golo* et *L’Afrique au-delà du miroir* de Boubacar Boris Diop » in *Langue et Littérature, Revue du GELL*, n°17, jan. 2012.

coloniale a tout fait pour l'oblitérer, trop souvent imitée en cela par les régimes des indépendances, qu'arrangent des peuples oublieux de leur passé, et par là même inaptes à l'édification responsable de leur avenir.²²

Indeed suppressing oral history is germane to denying history and civilization to Africans. However, Ali Kaboye, like oral tradition, goes through much turmoil but manages to resuscitate and become stronger. The author's refusal to let Ali die can be read as a metaphorical attempt to keep oral tradition alive. Although a written document, the novel is replete with oral materials. Song, dance, proverb and tale shape the contour of the story. The abundant use of the folklore proves fruitful efforts by the writer to provide the novel with the flavor of oral tradition with the view to contradicting the *tabula rasa* theory that underpins the colonialist and neocolonialist enterprise. This leads Wane to describe it as an oral novel to be read with one's ears.²³ The oral tonality is enforced by the fact that it was first written in Wolof, and the French translation manages to keep the flavor of the original version.

III. *Kaveena*: Disparaging the Empire from Inside

Crafted as a whodunit novel, the story of *Kaveena* explores the ritual murder of a six year-old girl which continues to be in the news even fifteen years later. This barbaric event serves as a pretext for a wider inquiry about the more intricate nature of a neocolonial African State lost in the meanders of the Françafrique system. Liana Nissim's review of this novel is very accurate :

On retrouve une écriture multiple dans *Kaveena*, où s'alternent deux scripteurs, qui reconstituent l'histoire d'un pays africain non nommé et de pure invention,

²² Liana Nissim, « *Vivre et écrire dans l'odeur de la mort (L'Afrique au-delà du miroir et Murambi, le livre des ossements de Boubacar Boris Diop)* » in *Altre Modernità / Otras Modernidades / Autres Modernités / Others Modernities*, n° 4, 2010, p. 200.

²³ Ibrahima Wane, « Du français au wolof : la quête du récit chez Boubacar Boris Diop », *Ethiopiennes*, n°73, 2ème semestre, 2004. <http://ethiopiennes.refer.sn/spip.php?article98>

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mais si croyable, qu'il s'affiche comme archétype emblématique de plusieurs situations bien réelles.²⁴

Like *Les Petits de la guenon*, *Kaveena* presents the model of a double written narration. After the collapse of the dictatorial regime in which he occupied a central position, colonel Asante Kroma takes it as a duty to relate the story of the State from its foundation to the collapse. He crosses his narration with that of the overthrown president N'Zo Nikiema, consisting of official documents and pathetic letters he used to write to his companion Mumbi to convince her that he is not the murderer of her daughter Kaveena.

The two narratives are intimate testimonies of former neocolonial authorities on the grotesque comedy of African democratic States. They expose the mechanisms of power controlled by an authoritarian and corrupt State backed by the former colonial power and relying on brute force for its hegemony. It is a two-fold confession of fallen state apparatuses – the former president and the chief of the dreaded political police. So narrating the neocolonial odyssey from these two figures is an ingenious literary choice by the author. It gives a particularly bitter-sweet tone to the novel, achieved through scornful self-criticism of the two narrators. However, like the Interahamwe in *Murambi*, they feel no remorse and do not fall into hypocritical excuses. But unlike the criminal Hutu narrators who are still sure of the well-grounded nature of their actions, Kroma and Nikiema do recognize that they have betrayed the ideal of their country after independence.

Peu de temps avant notre indépendance, deux voies se sont ouvertes à N'Zo Nikiema. Il s'est engagé en toute conscience dans celle de la trahison. Il savait très bien ce qu'il faisait. Et nous avons bien mérité, lui et moi, ce qui nous arrive aujourd'hui (*Kaveena*, 165).

Hunted down by the armed rebellion, the two men have prescience to accept their fate as something they deserve. However, this confession does not exonerate their past crimes; and the reader is not even once called to have any sympathy for them.

²⁴ Liana Nissim, « “Ne pas écrire couché”: Boubacar Boris Diop, l'écrivain tourné vers l'avenir », *op. cit.*, p. 199.

Kroma is a torturer, a cold blood murderer: “Nous les flics de l’ombre. Nous faisons un travail très dur. Traquer les gens et les tuer – parfois en sachant qu’ils sont innocents – ce n’est pas un job facile” (*Kaveena*, 12). Nikiema describes himself as a tyrant, a betrayer of the people whose destiny he swore to lead. He shamelessly states that he has never controlled the power, which in reality rested in the hands of the French businessman Pierre Castaneda, director of the important Cogemin, a multi-national company that is, according to Nikiema, in the heart of the State. “Ce pays, c’est avant tout la Cogemin (*Kaveena*, 69). La Cogemin était devenue un Etat dans l’Etat” (*Kaveena*, 112). The former president’s words are illustrative of the company’s presence and role in the country whose political and economic life it has determined from the colonial era up to the present day of the so-called independence.

Nikiema, the crown prince of the kingdom of Nimba, was an employee in the company. During his kingship, Nikiema’s father handed a vast territory rich in minerals to the French colonials in exchange for popcorn and whiskey. Through the grotesque character of the king and later his son Nikiema, Boris duplicates the sad patterns of African wrens and weak presidents who, from slavery to colonialism to independence, dilapidate the goods of their countries to foreigners for derisory advantages. The story of how Nikiema became president is a sound illustration of the bitter farce of independence and democracy, and how the people are deceitfully maintained in the same abject dominance no matter the name of the regimes. In fact, being aware of the imminence of independence because of the colonies’ increasingly violent demands for sovereignty, Castaneda schemed a plot where Nikiema resigned from the company in order to found a virulent nationalist party that advocated immediate independence and the nationalization of Cogemin.

The colonizer’s strategy to leave so as to better stay bears fruit, as the new president Nikiema signs the contested 212 protocol of Nimba to ensure exploitation of the mine. Through Nikiema, Diop describes the African president as so indebted for his position to the former colonizer that everything he does is in the view of pleasing his mentor, becoming therefore the footman of the foreigners. Even the white civil servants have no respect for the institution Nikiema stands for, as he admits: “Je leur parlais ainsi à ces gens, sans façons. Je ne jouais pas au président avec eux. Ça les aurait tellement fait marrer !” (*Kaveena*, 77-78) He makes up for his lack of authority

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over the whites by bullying his own population. Here also his self-description as “a dictator”, “a tyrant” (*Kaveena*, 140) is a good illustration. He speaks overtly to Mumbi of his crimes “Oui j’ai du sang sur les mains” (*Kaveena*, 68), and finds comfort in the corrupt nature of his African peers, he describes in derogatory terms « [...] une belle brochette de hyènes puantes! Si je te racontais l’histoire de chacun de ces types, Mumbi, tu vomirais pendant des nuits entières (*Kaveena*, 137). « Sept brigands aux faces sinistres, des mecs tellement corrompus que c’est pas possible » (*Kaveena*, 140). They are at best murderous puppets who must appease the whet of the former colonial power to preserve their own authority. Pouring such a deprecating depiction on the function of African presidency from the mouth of a former president is an effective artifact to better win the reader’s adhesion.

In the same vein, the portrayal of the character Castaneda is very relevant. Former boss and current mentor of Nikiema, he is called the white twin of the president, with whom he constitutes, to the eyes of the population, a duo of affliction or a double-headed snake. He is a cabinet minister without portfolio, always in the shadow of Nikiema, but holds the reins of power. From time to time his discourse is inserted in the text of Nikiema or that of Kroma, and reads as the colonial rhetoric blaming the Africans for their own gullibility. It is the typical discourse of the colonist claiming his right to take profit from a country he has built with his own hands.

Castaneda is the epitome of the greedy colonizer, ready to kill out of mere suspicion anyone who can jeopardize his interests. The decimation he ordained during the colonial era in villages that sheltered members of independence movement and the political assassinations in independence time show the former colonizer’s will to stay in the former colony at any cost. Hence the president’s comments casted in a pedagogical tone to instruct Mumbi on the stake of neocolonialism: “Ne l’oublie jamais : le colonisateur a tué beaucoup plus de gens pour ne pas quitter l’Afrique que pour la conquérir” (*Kaveena*, 75). In the same trend, Castaneda’s murder of Kaveena is explained by a strange rite according to which the carved body be buried in the four cardinal spots so as to ensure protection and prosperity to his company. Kaveena is then the metaphor of purity raped then murdered on the altar of neocolonialist interests. The subsequent civil war between the militias of the two strongmen is

evocative of the white mercenaries who did not even deem it necessary to hide to overthrow African presidents.

The victory of Castaneda's militia over the regular army is informative of the frequent instability and the difficulties which African armies are face in order to stem rebellion. It raises also the issue of the training and equipment of rebels which are often more sophisticated than those of the national armies.²⁵ In addition to the fact that, more often than not, most rebellions are sustained by developed countries in quest of more profitable partners, more often than not, the advancement in the army in dictatorial countries doesn't comply with any logical or objective criteria; it simply rests on corruption and nepotism as Nikiema acknowledges but too late.

Kaveena reveals Boubacar Boris Diop's pertinent textual strategy. The unnamed African country and its relationship with the Empire is seen by the reader through the well informed eyes of the ex-president, the director of the intelligence service, and the representative of the former colonial power. The hideous face of the empire is thus exposed to the sight of the whole world. The real image that emerges is that of a nominally independent country with bloodless economy and corrupt leaders who allow the country's natural resources to be siphoned by foreign multinationals and international capitalism.²⁶ The tableau is all the darker as the three characters speak with a pedantically sincere voice, feeling no need to hide whatever.

²⁵ [...] chaque crise africaine est l'occasion de constater l'interventionnisme de la France sur le continent. Elle soutient à bout de bras des régimes dictatoriaux tout en finançant secrètement leurs opposants les plus virulents ; elle entraîne des armées monoethniques et prétend veiller, en une sinistre comédie, à la bonne tenue démocratique des chefs d'Etats africains. Il se trouve simplement que ce sont souvent ses propres fantoches, choisis parmi les éléments les plus bornés et corrompus de la classe politique. (Boubacar Boris Diop, *Négrophobie*, p. 91.)

²⁶ According to Boubacar B. Diop multinationals are the obstacle to African independence and to the end of the Françafrique : « Croire qu'un « bon » et heureux président français va entrer en contradiction avec ce système serait méconnaître l'interaction des forces économiques. La France, par exemple, contrôle l'uranium du Niger, et la compagnie AREVA ne laisserait pas faire. Il y a aussi les banques, les opérateurs des télécoms, etc. Bref, il est important pour l'économie française de garder prise sur l'Afrique et la morale n'a rien à voir avec cela. C'est idiot de penser que la Françafrique puisse disparaître sans notre propre lutte. » Boubacar Boris

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In fact, Kroma and Nikiema are Diop's typical characters of the agonizing person. Having no more hope to live, they can reveal the truth crudely. So, their narration is like the memoir of the person knowing his end very close and refusing to die with an important secret however shameful. Narrating can even constitute a kind of salvation, as it ultimately proves for Kroma who escapes death with the collapse of the short-living regime of Castaneda.

The story of *Kaveena* is narrated from a cave, the workplace of the woman artist who later turns out to be Mumbi Awele, Kaveena's mother; which adds mystery to the enigmatic character Mumbi. Described with a double personality she occupies a central place in the novel by sharing the bed with Nikiema and Castaneda without their knowing. This indecent relation with the persons she considers the murderers of Kaveena is in fact a tactful ploy to avenge her single daughter. She succeeds in "killing" Nikiema and beheading Castaneda. The fact of exposing the heads of the two former strongmen while throwing their bodies in the garbage is to be read as a means to further the vengeance. Since her daughter was not entitled to have a grave, her murderers won't be allowed one either.

Mumbi's act is all the more significant as it is based on the metaphor of the colibri, the little bird who tried to put off the forest arson alone, and who responded to the mocking remarks of the other animals about his useless act saying that he was at least doing what he could. The cleansing of the country from its parasites by an ordinary woman is not fortuitous; it shows Diop's lack of faith in both the politician and the military regimes to deliver African countries from the Françafrique structure which is the double yoke of corrupt leaders and their foreign mentors.

Diop, interview avec Luis Martinez Andrade. Source: Legrandsoir.info | Webnews | Lundi 08 avril, 2013 00:17 | http://www.seneweb.com/news/Afrique/boubacar-boris-diop-quot-il-est-temps-pour-nous-intellectuels-d-rsquo-amerique-latine-d-rsquo-asie-d-rsquo-afrique-de-_n_92616.html

Conclusion: Diop's first-person narration and the quest for verisimilitude

How to attain the completeness and profoundness of the story with first-person narration without threatening the necessity of realistic verisimilitude is what we study at this point. The fundamental conflict is the author's desire to recount a plain story and the realist constraints imposed on the I-narration mode. In fact, Booth identifies the difficulties related to this narrative form as follows:

choisir de faire un récit à la première personne est parfois exagérément limitatif ; quand le *je* acquiert maladroitement des informations qui lui sont indispensables, l'auteur est parfois amené à créer des situations invraisemblables.²⁷

The improbable situations Booth hints at are more likely when a character-narrator renders another character's conscience, or when she or he describes events that happened in places from where she or he was absent without clarifying how she or he took possession of the story.

Boubacar Boris Diop manages to transcend this dualism by producing sophisticated narrative patterns. The first important textual choice he uses to achieve complete and verisimilar I-narration is the multiplication of the narrative voices. None of the three novels under probe is narrated by a single voice. Each of *Les Petits de la guenon* and *Kaveena* enjoys two character-narrators, whereas *Murambi* is constructed around the perspective of eight characters allowing the viewing of the story from different angles.

It is obvious that "First-person narration does not provide the freedom of knowing many character's minds that omniscience does."²⁸ For this reason, the author avoids unlikely interior narration situations as, most of the time, the characters put forward

²⁷ Wayne C. Booth, « Distance et point de vue. Essai de classification » in *Poétique du récit*. Œuvre collective (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1977), p. 91.

²⁸ Harold F Mosher, Jr, « Recent Studies in Narratology » in *PLL*, EBSCO Publishing, 2002, p. 105.

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their own experiences in a self-reflexive manner. This category of I-narration which Genette terms homodigetic²⁹ is when the character deals with his own participation in the related events. Therefore, Diop's narrators in *Murambi* recount their actions, feelings and thoughts during the tragic events. Even when they relate actions done by other characters, they are satisfied with the visible side not venturing to produce the latter's interior monologues. This does not, however prevent from providing full characterization predicated on the deeds and discourses of the characters at the behaviorist mode. In fact, Marcus observes that "The inference of other people's states of consciousness based on their speech and conduct, despite its relatively high fallibility, is not usually considered implausible or unreliable, neither in ordinary life nor in literature. A large part of the information that each of us gathers about others relies on such conjectures."³⁰ As we wrote earlier, the completeness and riches of the story leans on the apt casting of character-narrators with a view to representing all the factions and covering each aspect of the conflict before, during and after the genocide.

Unlike the spoken I-narrations of *Murambi*, leveled at the same diegesis, the I-narrations in *Les Petits de la guenon* and *Kaveena* are written and hierarchical, one embedding the other. Thus, the second narrative – chronologically speaking – is aware of the existence of the first it can confirm, contradict or complete. Because of his ever declining health, Nguiran invites Ali Kaboye to complete the story he promised his grandson. Quite similarly, the hunted colonel Asante Kroma accidentally stumbles on the corpse of the refugee president N'Zo Nikiema, in the cave of the woman artist Mumbi, with compromising documents and confession letters. By a professional deformation and also to season his otherwise monotonous days of a refugee, Kroma decides to bring together all these documents into a coherent narrative. Then the second narrators – chronologically speaking – in the two novels have the opportunity to assess the first narratives and to complete them with stories that occurred after the deaths of the first two narrators. For instance, as to legitimate the taking up of the narration, each of Ali Kaboye and the colonel starts with

²⁹ Gérard Genette, *Figure III* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1972).

³⁰ Amit Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

describing the conditions of the death of their predecessors and unearthing their former relationship which enables them to knowingly complete the story. It is friendship in *LPG* and privileged professional relation in *Kaveena*.

Sometimes *LPG* and *Kaveena* present cases of apparent unrealistic narrative situations when the narrators deliver characters' streams of consciousness and when they describe events that happened in places where they could not normally be. However, the internal logic of the novel makes it coherent. One of the explanations to these situations is a delayed revelation. The narrators in *LPG* can narrate events they likely did not witness, before revealing, sometimes very tardily, their sources of information. The reader is most of the time belatedly informed or led to assume that most of Nikiema's non-witnessed narration hinges on the intelligence service's reports. Likewise, it is known that Kroma's non-witnessed narration is based on Nikiema's documents which he often directly inscribes in the form of italics in his own narrative, but sometimes they are also summed up in Kroma's narrative without being signaled at first. In *LPG* Nguirane frequently indicates that he is conscious of the problem of I-narration and non-witnessed events by addressing Badou in expressions of this kind: "Tu te demandes sûrement, Badou, comment j'ai pu être informé de ces entrevues clandestines." (*LPG*, 280). « Cet ultime récit, Badou, n'est pas celui d'un témoin. Je n'étais pas parmi la foule [...] » (*LPG*, 321). These observations are always followed by explanations revealing the source of the information that is mainly Ali Kaboye and the rumor.

The narrators in *LPG* and *Kaveena* are aware of their narrative function, meaning they produce a written document and directly address the reader. In this respect, deduction and creation are raised into narrative techniques. The narration relies on the reconstitution of previous narratives or raw materials. In fact, the reader encounters expressions of these kinds: « Je suppose que... »; « j'essaie d'imaginer... » ; « je peux aisément me faire une idée... » ; « je n'ai aucun mal à reconstituer ce bout de conversation » (*Kaveena*, 71 ; 87 ; 99 ; 101). « Je crois pouvoir affirmer, sur la foi de nombreux témoignages, que (...) » (*LPG*, 84).

In *LPG*, in addition to being a rumor monger, Nguirane excels in fiction writing which he uses to fill in the blanks of his narrative. A case in point is the narrative of his great-grand father's story which he does not know very well, as he acknowledges

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to Badu: “Tu as voulu savoir ce qui se racontait sur Mame Ngor Faye. Je t’ai rapporté fidèlement mes souvenirs. Si j’y ajoute un seul mot, ce sera de la pure invention. Eh bien, pourquoi ne pas inventer un peu ? Cela vaut mieux, après tout, que de laisser ce portrait inachevé ». (*LPG*, 84)

Mention should be made of Ali Kaboye’s peculiar case. He produces apparently unrealistic and “cognitively impossible”³¹ narratives, according to Monica Fludernik’s phrase. For instance, unlike Nguirane, Ali Kaboye knows the country to which Badu has emigrated even if he doesn’t reveal the name so as to keep the secrecy and mystery around it. He nonetheless provides a description of the setting, and presents the hardships bedeviling Badu and his companion, Abdelkader Mahjoub the Sudanese, related to their skin color and their status of immigrants.

Magical realism explains Ali Kaboye’s “unlikely” narrative. He is a supernatural character who claims to have lived hundreds of years. He claims also to be omniscient and ubiquitous:

...moi, Ali Kaboye, je suis le seul à qui il soit donné de traverser les âges et les océans. J’entends tout. Je vois tout. Les siècles passés et à venir somnolent sous mon crâne et à mon commandement ils se lèvent et viennent se coucher à mes pieds (*LPG*, 402).

The architecture of the novel makes Ali trustworthy, since the other narrator Nguirane vouches for his credibility. He describes Ali’s physical attributes as unnatural; especially his voice so powerful that it shakes the trees and walls in Niarela, and seems to come at once from the sky and from under the earth (*LPG*, 260). He has been killed twice by Baye Ndene and his acolytes and sank into the depth of the sea, but has always resurrected. Whoever tries to sack his shed down is stricken to death by the mystic energy inside the shelter. In addition, Ali is able to metamorphose into other people or insects. Therefore, he is the type of supernatural characters Fludernik describes as “anthropomorphic fictional creatures [that] can walk through walls, read other people’s minds, speed up (or slow down) their aging, transform themselves into animals, and so on. Many of these feats are magical or

³¹ Monika Fludernik, “How Natural Is “Unnatural Narratology”; or, What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?” *Narrative*, Vol. 20, n° 3, October 2012, p. 362.

supernatural features [...].”³² Blending reality and the marvelous inside the novel shows the thin borderline between the two entities which Diop’s traditional oral education blurs naturally.

The profile of the narrators in the three novels contributes a big deal to the believability of the stories. These narrators are Diop’s archetypal characters of the crazy and the agonizing persons who are more inclined to tell the truth without any calculation. In fact, the author considers three types of characters – the crazy, the child, and the agonizing – as very useful to the realist novelist:

Je dirais que ce qui est toujours intéressant pour un romancier ce sont ces trois types de personnages. C’est le fou. C’est l’enfant. C’est l’agonisant, celui qui est en train de mourir. [...] C’est parce que ces personnages, le fou, l’enfant et l’agonisant, ne sont plus concernés par les enjeux de la vie. Ils peuvent tout dire. Le fou peut tout dire. La personne qui va mourir n’a plus grand chose à cacher. Pour peu que cette personne décide d’aller au bout de sa parole, tout peut être exprimé.³³

The revolutionary use of first-person narration allows Boubacar Boris Diop to revise many aspects of history from pre-colonial to neocolonial Africa, reserving a severe criticism to the Françafrique monster that maintains the population in a perpetual dominance by any means available, even creating civil wars in *Les Petits de la guenon* and *Kaveena*, or genocide in *Murambi, le livre des ossements*. The multitude of the voices, some of whom are professional narrators – “reconstitutionists” and creators –, enable viewing the stories from varied angles and having a global and profound understanding of the subjects in hand. In the three novels “the narration is immediate-engaging-first-person, the positions of focalizer and narrating agent are equivalent.”³⁴ The reader is therefore more easily invited to better sympathize with the victimized characters and to feel antipathy for the oppressors, because the stories are more humanized than cold statistics of non-fiction documents.

³² Monika Fludernik, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

³³ Boubacar Boris Diop, “Interview with Boubacar Boris Diop” by Yolande Bouka & Chantal Thomson in *Lingua Romana: a journal of French, Italian and Romanian culture*, Volume 2, number 1 / fall 2004. <http://linguaromana.byu.edu>

³⁴ Andrea Schwenke Wyle, “Expanding the View of First-Person Narration” in *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 30, n° 3, 1999, p.191.

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