



Self-heroification, Demystification, and Villainisation in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide Memoirs: A Study of Paul Rusesabagina’s *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda* and Edouard Kayihura’s *Inside the Hotel Rwanda: The Surprising True Story... and Why It Matters Today*.

NURAYN FOLA ALIMU
University of Lagos, Lagos Nigeria

Abstract. This paper explores the dynamics of self-heroification, demystification, and villainization as portrayed through a counter discourse between Paul Rusesabagina’s *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda* and Edouard Kayihura’s *Inside the Hotel Rwanda: The Surprising True Story... and Why It Matters Today*. “Self-heroification” in this paper refers to the act of presenting oneself as a hero, often through self-aggrandisement and selective narration, while “demystification” and “villainization” are understood as the deconstruction and critical reassessment of self-fashioned heroism. These interrelated concepts are examined through the theoretical lenses of New Historicism and Narratology. By analysing the narrative techniques employed in both memoirs, this paper explores how the authors, as individuals, construct/reconstruct (framing) personal accounts (memory) of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and simultaneously deconstructing each other’s narratives of the genocide. The research involves a close reading of the selected texts with particular focus on how diction, narrative structure, and authorial bias shape the construction of Rusesabagina as either a heroic savior or a self-serving controversial figure. My findings suggest that the two memoirs, while valuable historical sources, are inevitably influenced by the subjective perspectives of their authors, resulting in contrasting interpretations of the same historical event. This research emphasises the need for critical engagement with personal narratives in post-genocide literature on the 1994 Rwandan genocide and underscores the complexities of memory, trauma, and identity in reconstructing history. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader discourses on representation in African Literature and genocide studies, highlighting the vital role of perspective in shaping historical storytelling.

Keywords: Memory, Demystification, Heroification, Rwanda Genocide, Villainization

1. Introduction and Background Context

This paper interrogates the self-heroification of Paul Rusesabagina in his memoir, *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda*, (henceforth *An Ordinary Man*) and his demystification and villainization in Edouard Kayihura’s memoir, *Inside the Hotel Rwanda: The Surprising True Story and Why It Matters Today* (henceforth *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*). The study analyses the narrative style deployed by both authors in their memoirs to memorialise the events that occurred during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide through their varying and unique perspectives. Paul Rusesabagina is a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and also a Rwandan human rights activist. He worked as a hotel manager for the *Hotel des Mille Collines* located in Kigali during a time when Hutu and Tutsi refugees, fleeing the Interahamwe militia during the Rwandan genocide (Beloff R Jonathan 39), were accommodated in the facility. An account of Rusesabagina’s self-proclaimed heroic actions during the genocide was later depicted in the 2004 film, *Hotel Rwanda*, and this led to his claim to fame in the subsequent years after the film’s release. His memoir, *An Ordinary Man* details his life and upbringing before the genocide, the agonising days of the genocide and his life as a survivor and activist advocating against the atrocities that permeated the genocide. However, his recent trial and conviction in 2021 in relation to terrorism, despite winning award as a humanitarian hero, indicates that heroism can be interrogated from multiple perspectives (Belloff 40).

Edouard Kayihura, human rights activist, survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide and, like Rusesabagina, Kayihura spent the harrowing 100 days of the genocide at the *Hotel des Mille Collines*, which he recounts in his memoir, *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*. According to Filip Reyntjens, before his relocation to America, Kayihura worked as a prosecutor in charge of the department of the prosecutions of the genocide crime and crimes against humanity before the Tribunal of the First Instance of Kigali to bring those responsible for the genocide to justice (11). His memoir narrates the fear, desperation, and resilience of those trapped within the hotel during the genocide (Jennings Kathleen 2025; Paolo Tripodi 2023). More importantly, Kayihura's narrative not only challenges the glamorised persona of Paul Rusesabagina, who has been portrayed as a hero in the film *Hotel Rwanda* and in Rusesabagina's memoir, but also gives an account of the events that went down at the hotel during the genocide. Thus, Kayihura's memoir provides a distinct perspective that paints Rusesabagina as a complex character with questionable motives and undeserving of the hero title portrayed in the film.

As has been pointedly reported by critics and historians, the origin of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 dated back to the colonial period. The Berlin Colonial Conference of 1884-1885 apportioned Rwanda to Germany. The Germans then favored the Tutsi over the Hutu. After the First World War, Rwanda was awarded to Belgium by the League of Nations. The Belgian government also made the Tutsi predominant, disregarding ethnic tensions and the growing frustrations of the Hutu majority (Donatien Nikuze 2014; Van Haperen 2025). After independence, the Hutu, as the majority, came into power and reinforced tyranny against the Tutsi, causing about 300,000 of the Tutsi to flee to Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi. Many Tutsi were killed, and their property was confiscated by the Hutu-led Rwandan government. Due to the existing tensions, the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6, 1994 led to a 100-day massacre of the Tutsi by the aggrieved Hutu militia, which led to the death of about 500,000 to 1.2 million victims (Van Haperen 2025; Saaida Mohammed 2024; Rawnak Miraj U Azam 2025).

2. Memoirs, New Historicism, Narratology and the Portrayal of the Rwanda Genocide

According to Susan A. Crane, The genre distinctions on which professional identities are based indicate that self-exposition and self-referential narrative belong to the realm of memoir, autobiography, or fiction. When historians write

memoirs, they bring their skills to bear on themselves and thus on the *ego-histoires* they write" (435).

Indeed, memoirs are not entirely objective, as they are based on a 'self-referential' account of events. As a form of historical documentation, therefore, Memoir offers a unique creative perspective on life-writing because it is laden with subjectivity, inaccuracy, and bias. Even though this might seem to lessen its value as a sub-genre of prose writing, compared to fiction Memoir gives insight into the lived experiences of people whose views may not be found in official historical sources. It is not in doubt that, memoir humanises and gives a nuanced understanding of historical events, which is the reason critics often read it with critical awareness. As a subgenre of literature, memoir has also served as a testimonial narrative because it is a subgenre of nonfiction that focuses on a defined thematic scope in the life of the author. Overall, memoir often provides the platform to see the interconnection between literary narrating of truth and creative framing of memory. Within a subjective non imaginative framework, memoir in this regard serves to construct or reconstruct or re-enact history and events and, by this token, human experiences are memorialised.

Since the end of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, memoir has provided a platform for individuals to not just memorialise the 1994 Rwandan war and genocide but to outrightly weave truthful and emotional perspectives into the meaning of genocide as a discourse (see Richard Dowden 283-290; Nicki Hitchcott 48-61). David Mwambari observes that Rusesabagina and Kayihura, both survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, shared conflicting perspectives on the war in their memoirs noting especially that, Rusesabagina and Kayihura's experiences are mainly subjective, since their perspectives were shaped by their awareness at the time (21-22).

Thus, the deployment of conceptual elements from New Historicism and Narratology in this paper is to bolster the analysis of Rusesabagina's and Kayihura's presentations of narrative and counter-narrative of the Rwandan genocide. I agree in this paper with Stephen Greenblatt, foremost New Historicist, who argues on the "textuality of history" positing that a text is a product of the time it is produced and its meaning is shaped by the power structure and social "negotiations" surrounding its production. For instance, it is my argument that the memoirs under study are more than a recollection of personal memories of the war and the genocide. Rather, from the viewpoint of new historicism, the two accounts are

competing historical documents because the idea of a single objective or monolithic perspective to what actually played out in the course of the genocide does not exist. Indeed, Kayihura's *Inside the Hotel Rwanda* provides a counter historical perspective to Rusesabagina's account of not only about himself and the role he played but, more importantly, about the entire experience of the genocide captured in *An Ordinary Man*. This suggests that each of the memoirs participates in the discourse of the genocide as sub set of the general discourse on the 1994 Rwandan genocide. It is of interest that Rusesabagina's memoir is a narrative that draws its entire subjective perspective from the Western neoliberal discourse of the concept of heroism. The idea of Rusesabagina as the hero is well portrayed in *An Ordinary Man* and the filmic representation of such heroism is well amplified in the film *Hotel Rwanda*. Nurayn Fola Alimi observes that the vital ingredients that shape the contextuality of the film, *Hotel Rwanda* has been regarded as fitting in the category of films Michelle Brown and Nicole Rafter describe as "form of public criminology" (129). But Kayihura's memoir on the same subject matter of the Rwandan genocide provides a subversive counter-historical account, which triggered a reassessment of Rusesabagina's self-heroism in the film *Hotel Rwanda* and later his arrest and trial by the Kagame administration in 2021.

However, since the whole interest of new historicism is to look outwards at the society and its role in the production of the text as broadly deployed in this study, it would only make sense to also attempt to see how the two memoirs have placed each other in contradistinction within the discourse of the Rwandan genocide. In other words, it is pertinent to analyse the internal structure of the memoirs in order to synthesise the narrative strategies deployed by the two memoirs (narratology) with the textuality of history (new historicism). Indeed, a synthesisation of new historicism and narratology as the theoretical platform for analysing the subject matter of self-heroification, demystification, and villainisation will ensure an exhaustive interrogation of personal emotion and trauma of the Rwandan genocide and how these metamorphose into political and historical capital through the memoirs. Hence, in this paper, the narrative style employed by both Rusesabagina and Kayihura in their memoirs on the Rwandan genocide, as well as issues pertaining to self-heroification, demystification and villainization in these narratives, are analysed and interrogated. The paper also examines how the historical, cultural and literary contexts of *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda* and *Inside the Hotel Rwanda: The Surprising True Story and Why It Matters Today*

morph into the overall meaning emerging from the works' narrative of the Rwandan genocide. Through a close reading method, data are generated qualitatively from the texts in order to highlight their narrative structure and demonstrate how the elements are constructed and work together to create meaning from the intertextual dialogue between the texts. Thus, concepts in New Historicism and Narratology are broadly employed weaved into contextual dialogic process in the analysis of the discourse and memorialization of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

3. *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda: A Distinguished Background to Self-heroification*

While suggestively emphasising humility, the title of Rusesabagina's *An Ordinary Man* paradoxically functions as a vital rhetorical strategy that allows a privileged and distinguished construction of the author's self-heroification story within the memoir. A deconstruction of the title reveals that the sentiment of "an ordinary man" in the title is deployed to set the tone for a narrative grounded in relatable human experience rather than extraordinary acts of a heroic figure. Altogether, a close look will show that the title is a deliberate and profound narrative choice; in other words, despite its self-acclaimed simplicity, the title reveals a complex interplay of meaning and intent. To begin with, certain linguistic elements in the title of Rusesabagina's memoir, *An Ordinary Man* make it appear simple even as they actually introduce the ambiguity to the construction of heroism in the text. First, the title asserts the image of the author as a common man ("An Ordinary Man") and second, it purports that Rusesabagina's memoir is a true account ("The True Story") of the scenario that played out in Hotel Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. The indefinite article "an" in the title frames Rusesabagina as one out of many ordinary people, playing down any notion of intrinsic heroism. This further suggests that his actions during the Rwandan genocide did not arise due to a preconceived notion of exceptionality. Thus, by emphasising his ordinariness, the image of the author, Rusesabagina in the title of his memoir on the 1994 Rwanda genocide is subtly amplified; his heroic actions and the truth about his activities are framed and sentimentalised against the backdrop of his being "an ordinary man."

It is not also surprising that the opening paragraph of *An Ordinary Man* contradicts the notion of ordinariness suggested by the title. The memoir opens with a deliberate attempt to self-assert:

"My name is Paul Rusesabagina. I am a hotel manager. In April 1994, when a wave of mass murder broke out

in my country, I was able to hide 1, 268 people inside the hotel where I worked” (4).

This description of himself underscores a conscious attempt to downplay his privileged position of authority, power and importance as opposed to being an ordinary employee. As this statement suggests, while the account of the genocide is factual and believable, it ironically introduces a sentimental protagonist whose actions transcend the ordinary, foreshadowing the linguistic choices employed by Rusesabagina throughout the memoir to shape his distinguished heroic narrative. This point is further strongly illustrated by Rusesabagina’s presumptive assertion:

“Today I am convinced that the only thing that saved those 1, 268 people in my hotel was words, not the liquor, not money, not the UN. Just ordinary words directed against the darkness” (10).

His emphasis on “only thing” reinforces a narrative of him as a singular hero whose efforts saved all the people in the hotel, potentially downplaying the contribution of other unacknowledged factors and individuals, which Edourd Kayihura emphasises in *Inside Hotel Rwanda* in a counter-discourse. In the concluding lines of his introductory chapter, Rusesabagina revisits the ordinariness expressed in the memoir’s title thus:

“I am not a politician or a poet. I built my career on words that are plain and ordinary and concerned with everyday details. I am nothing more or less than a hotel manager, trained to negotiate contracts and charged with giving shelter to those who need it. My job did not change during the genocide, even though I was thrust into a sea of fire. I only spoke the words that seemed normal and sane to me. I did what I believed to be the ordinary things that an ordinary man would do. I said no to outrageous actions the way I thought that anybody would, and it still mystifies me that so many others could say yes” (31).

But while asserting that he was neither a “politician nor poet” and merely a “hotel manager”, his self-proclaimed remarkableness is complicated by the inherent privilege and influence associated with managing the *Hotel des Mille Collines* in the Rwandan society at the time of the war.

In addition, Rusesabagina’s claim that his use of “plain and ordinary words” was the singular key to survival warrants critical scrutiny, as it risks oversimplifying the significant privilege and social asset and privileges he possessed while attributing his survival solely to rhetorical skill. While communication and negotiation are undoubtedly crucial in the circumstance, framing language as the sole means of salvation risks diminishing the complex realities of the genocide and

reinforcing a narrative that overstates Rusesabagina’s individual influence in safeguarding the hotel’s occupants. Besides, Rusesabagina’s assertion that “I did what I believed to be the ordinary things that an ordinary man would do” (32) reinforces the perceived heroism of his actions. By framing his conduct as typical of any “ordinary man”, he paradoxically elevates himself as an exceptional moral figure that rose above fear and complicity in extraordinary circumstances, thereby solidifying a self-image rooted in quiet virtue. Moreover, his mystification at others’ willingness to say “yes” to violence underscores a deliberate moral positioning within his narrative. Even though this reaction is understandable in the given context, it inadvertently elevates his moral stance, potentially oversimplifying the intricate ethnic, historical, economic, political, social, and psychological forces that incited the widespread violence and presenting a moral polarity that may not have fully captured the complexity of the situation.

As a quintessential characteristic of a memoir, Rusesabagina’s recounting of his childhood in rural Rwanda works as a significant narratological strategy that entrenches the framing of his self-heroification. His place of birth, “a steep hill” is far removed from the urban setting of the *Hotel des Mille Collines* and the immediate context of the genocide, yet, Rusesabagina’s graphic depiction of his rural and rustic background is a narrative strategy to underscore his extraordinary courage and to construct his image as a hero:

“I was born on the side of a steep hill in the summer of 1954. My father was a farmer, my mother his helper. Our house was made of mud and sticks. We were about a mile away from the nearest village. [...]. We would have been considered quite poor, of course, when viewed through the lens of a European nation, but it was all we knew, and there was always plenty to eat. We worked hard, and I grew up without shoes. But we laughed a lot. And I knew there was love in my family before I knew the word for it” (42).

This narrative establishes a foundation of relatable ordinariness as it emphasises Rusesabagina’s connection to traditional Rwandan culture, values and lifestyle. By portraying his upbringing as humble and his childhood as unexceptional, Rusesabagina sets the stage for the extraordinary circumstances that he faces later on. It is a deliberate construction of events which foreshadows the interpretation of his subsequent actions during the genocide, suggesting that his heroism emerged from deeply ingrained principles cultivated in his “ordinary” beginnings. For instance, a significant aspect of Rusesabagina’s childhood was his early exposure to the act of negotiation. He

recounts stories of elders settling disputes amongst fellow villagers through simple dialogue and what he recalls as “the most important part of justice on the grass: the two aggrieved men were required to share a gourd of banana beer as a sign of renewed friendship” (48) in his memoir. By highlighting this early learning, Rusesabagina asserts the notion that his later diplomatic acts during the genocide were not sudden but a result of his cultural affiliations and his internalisation of a deeply rooted moral practice.

Moreover, Rusesabagina constructs a multi-layered self-image in his memoir, drawing on his actions and elements of self-representation, notably the symbolic significance of his name and his early association with the church, to shape his self-proclaimed heroic narrative. His surname, Rusesabagina, meaning “warrior that disperses the enemies”, functions as a literal reflection of his protection of those sheltered at the *Hotel des Mille Collines* from the génocidaires. In addition, his first name, Paul, evokes biblical allusions, particularly the Apostle Paul, known as “the great communicator of the New Testament” and described by Rusesabagina as “the man who described himself in one of his letters as being ‘all things to all people’” (62). This parallel is a narrative strategy deployed by the author to subtly aligns himself with the Apostle, suggesting that he, too, became a crucial figure for those he saved. Although not clearly emphasised, the significance of his name works as a form of narrative foreshadowing that he uses to carefully hint at his future heroic actions during the genocide. Rusesabagina’s early aspiration to also become a “churchman”, although not the path he ultimately chose, adds a crucial dimension to his self-proclaimed heroic narrative. He reflects: “I have since come to realize that those years studying to be a churchman were not wasted at all. It was where I acquired knowledge that helped to shape my future. I gained an even greater understanding of human beings— what motivates them, where their failings are, where the good might be found that can trump the evil inside” (63).

Rather than a failed endeavour, he presents this period as formative, cultivating intellectual skills vital for his future. He notes that the ministry teaches persuasive communication, stating, “Learning to be a preacher makes you a better talker” (63), a skill central to his diplomatic survival tactics during the genocide. Furthermore, this connection to the church subtly positions Rusesabagina as someone with inherent ethical grounding, aligning his choices during the genocide with established moral authority.

Finally, as the general manager of the Hotel Diplomes, he continued to hone his skill in hospitality and impeccable customer relations, an experience that exposed him to a diverse range of people, foreshadowing the distinct interactions he would later navigate during the genocide. He states: “I met many people in Rwanda whose racial ideology I couldn’t stand, but I was unfailingly polite to them, and they learned to respect me even though our disagreements were obvious. This led to a priceless realization for me. Someone who deals can never be an absolute hard-liner. The very act of negotiation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to dehumanize the person across the table from you” (65).

In essence, his professional training in making guests feel valued became a vital and unexpectedly effective tool during the genocide. This ability to maintain precarious yet necessary relationships, even with those holding dangerous ideologies, allowed him to navigate future volatile encounters with the génocidaires.

Having established the foundation of Rusesabagina’s professional skills in diplomacy and fostering beneficial relationships, it is crucial to understand the tragic event that thrust him and his honed abilities into an inconceivable field: the Rwandan genocide. In April 1994, following the assassination of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, the country was plunged into chaos almost overnight. Rusesabagina recounts; “I know with certainty that you will find nobody living in Rwanda today who does not remember what they were doing in the early evening hours of April 6, 1994, when the private jet of President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down with a portable missile as it approached for landing at Kigali Airport” (56).

Rusesabagina notes that in the first hours after the violence erupted, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTL) shifted from threats to explicit instigation of murder. The broadcasts instructed Hutu listeners to “clean your neighbourhood of brush” and to “cut the tall trees”, coded phrases that meant to kill Tutsi and their Hutu sympathizers (57). He emphasises how “fantasy had become reality”, as the station openly encouraged the slaughter of neighbors. This rapid transition from propaganda to direct commands to commit genocide reveals the horrid speed with which ordinary citizens were made into agents of mass violence. In the following days following the president’s death, organised militias, namely the Interahamwe, initiated systematic killings that targeted Tutsi and moderate Hutu with inhuman efficiency. Rusesabagina vividly describes the widespread killings of the Interahamwe militia as they

set up makeshift roadblocks using bamboo poles, burn-out vehicles, and, later, appallingly, human corpses. Ethnic identity checks became deadly, with Tutsi and moderate Hutu brutally killed on the spot. Rusesabagina recounts how “doctors were pulled out of their homes and shot in the head” while “schoolchildren were hit on the head with wooden planks” and the elderly “thrown down the waste holes of outhouses and buried underneath a cascade of rocks”. His grim depiction captures the collapse of social order and the prevalent brutality that characterized the first days of the genocide.

An interesting narrative moment in *An Ordinary Man* that extends Rusesabagina’s self-heroic performance occurs when he chooses to shelter his Tutsi neighbors and negotiate with the soldiers’ intent on murdering them. When the soldiers arrived on the morning of April 9 to escort him to the Hotel des Diplomes, Rusesabagina quickly insisted that his “family” (a broad term he uses to include his neighbors) accompany him. His account underscores his quick-thinking skills as well as his ability to be a decisive leader in moments of duress. The ensuing roadside confrontation, amidst evidence of mass slaughter, became a test of his negotiation skills. Noting a critical hesitation in the captain’s averted gaze, Rusesabagina exploits this weakness firstly through moral persuasion:

“Look, is this really the enemy you are fighting?” I pointed out a baby in a mother’s arms. [...] You are what? Twenty-five years old? You are young. Do you want to spend the rest of your life with blood on your hands?” (72)

And ultimately, when morality fails, he appeals to the captain’s greed instead; “we began to talk in terms of cash. It seems strange to say, but putting a price on lives was like a kind of sanity compared to the murders he had been suggesting” (74). His calculated deployment of communication, shifting tactics from appealing to conscience to material incentive, is to highlight his resourcefulness in the face of impending danger. Furthermore, his insistence on honoring the bribe, despite the opportunity to renege once safe, functions both as a pragmatic strategy to prevent retaliation and as a reinforcement of his self-image as a man of integrity. Basically, Rusesabagina’s reflection on his personal ability to “negotiate with evil” further solidifies the narrative of his self-fashioning as an ‘ordinary man’ made heroic by circumstance.

Furthermore, Rusesabagina clearly positioned external forces or representatives, such as the UN peacekeepers, as “useless. This nullifies the possibility that the UN or any external actor contributed any

commendable act of heroism to protect or save the people sheltered in the hotel. Rusesabagina condemns the UN agents as “well-meaning but useless” and portrayed them as individuals unwilling to help. He argued that his friend, Commander Habyarimana, brought five policemen whose fragile protection was better than what the UN officers offered (75). He also acknowledges that General Dallaire was willing to help but was crippled by the UN’s hierarchy of authority and “foolish orders” that prevented them from acting decisively (76).

These rhetorical moves align with Rusesabagina’s broader strategy of self-heroification as he implicitly suggests that, unlike Dallaire, he did not yield to inept authority but took morally courageous risks to protect the vulnerable. By depicting the UN as creating a “fatal illusion of safety” and describing it as “worse than useless”, Rusesabagina bolsters the narrative of his indispensability. Ultimately, his story not only condemns the failure of the international body but also works as a foil against which his actions appear moral, practical and effective in a world crippled by systemic cowardice.

Finally, in the closing passage of his memoir, Rusesabagina blends humility with self-heroification, reflecting on his actions during the Rwandan genocide while reinforcing his heroic narrative. He acknowledges that the opportunity to make a significant difference is fleeting, and yet claims that through his ordinary skills as a hotel manager, skills such as negotiation and providing shelter, he was able to protect lives for seventy-six days. By describing his efforts as a “fragile defence”, he frames his actions as driven more by circumstantial fortune and his training than by intrinsic heroism, allowing him to present himself as a man merely doing his ‘ordinary’ job in an extraordinary situation. However, his closing Rusesabagina’s conclusion reveals an interesting logic:

“Wherever the killing season should next begin and people should become strangers to their neighbors and themselves, my hope is that there will still be those ordinary men who say a quiet no and open the rooms upstairs” (231).

This statement subtly elevates his actions to a level of moral heroism, suggesting that while his actions were not exceptional, they were inspirational. The blend of humility and moral self-justification serves as both a form of resolution for his morally ambiguous choices and a subtle assertion of his heroic status. Ultimately, Rusesabagina frames his actions as a universal ideal, positioning himself as both a relatable figure and a symbol of moral resilience.

4. Rusesabagina's Demystification and Villainization in *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*

In the introductory chapter of *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*, Edouard Kayihura asserts a forceful abrogation of the widely accepted image of Paul Rusesabagina as a humanitarian hero. He writes: "I knew Paul Rusesabagina. All the people who survived inside the *Hotel des Mille Collines* during the genocide knew Paul Rusesabagina. No one among us has ever thought of him as altruistic, let alone heroic. On the contrary, of all the people who were within the hotel during the genocide, he would quite possibly be considered the furthest from a hero any of us could imagine" (5).

Kayihura explicitly challenges the dominant narrative established by the film *Hotel Rwanda* and Rusesabagina's own memoir. This blunt opening works as a discursive rupture, aligning with Michel Foucault's theory that power is exercised through discourse and that truth is socially constructed rather than objectively discovered. Rusesabagina's dominant self-heroification narrative, reinforced by media, international awards, and cinematic dramatisation has elevated Rusesabagina as a symbol of moral fortitude. Conversely, Kayihura's introduction reframes him as a "war profiteer" and a "friend to the architects of the genocide", implicating him as complicit in systems of violence and survival economics, rather than a figure of resistance. To be sure, Kayihura's immediate and candid condemnation establishes his narrative as a crucial counter-discourse. It strategically reclaims narrative authority from international myth-makers and Rusesabagina's self-representation, returning it to the survivors. This approach compels the reader to reevaluate both Rusesabagina's celebrated image and the broader notion of heroism within the context of survival during the genocide.

It is pertinent to note that Kayihura's narrative strategy is essentially hinged on the deployment of contrast rhetoric. He draws a sharp contrast to Rusesabagina's memoir by distancing himself from any personal claim to heroism in *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*. He writes, "I say this not because I believe myself to be a hero of this episode in time. I am merely a survivor" (6). This assertion functions as a deliberate rhetorical tactic to redefine the ethical framework of Kayihura's memoir. Rather than promoting a narrative that centres on a single saviour, Kayihura focuses on the shared struggle for survival within the hotel. His refusal to claim heroism, thus, underscores his intent to bear witness and offer an alternative perspective on the genocide, not to elevate himself. He, indeed, presents

a definition of heroism grounded in "self-sacrifice" and the "selfless pursuit of justice and right", acknowledging, however that, while some were in positions to act heroically, he was not among them: "I was not tested in that way, and for that I make no excuse or apology" (15). Through this, Kayihura implicitly critiques Rusesabagina's self-portrayal, rejecting an aggrandised version of events that elevates individual narratives at the expense of collective memory and experience. Thus, this reframing aligns Kayihura's narrative with the promotion of ordinary survivors' experiences. Rather than a performative identity, heroism emerges in Kayihura's narrative as a rare and often silent form of courage. Finally, Kayihura ends his introductory chapter with the words, "His voice has been heard. Now is the time for the voices of the other survivors" (18). With this line, he establishes a clear boundary between the dominant narrative shaped by Paul Rusesabagina and the marginalized perspectives of other survivors of the *Hotel des Mille Collines*. In doing so, also, Kayihura challenges the assumption that the history of the Rwandan genocide can be fully understood through a single account.

In *Inside the Hotel Rwanda*, Edouard Kayihura's journey to the *Hotel des Mille Collines* is not marked by grand gestures or bold heroics, but by the desperation-fueled decisions that defined survival during the Rwandan genocide. His account challenges the simplistic narrative that assigns rigid roles of victims and heroes by illustrating how small acts of defiance particularly by certain individuals played a vital role in saving Tutsi lives. One of such acts came from Pascal Hitimana, a Hutu friend whom Kayihura describes as one of the few good people "who saw beyond the madness and had a civilized, decent sense of humanity", especially during a time when aiding a Tutsi could amount to a death sentence.

After the president's assassination triggered the genocide, Kayihura's initial attempt to erase any evidence of his Tutsi identity by destroying documents and music, which he described as "subversive", reflects the absurd cruelty of a time when ethnicity alone could result in execution. "My very existence as a Tutsi was now a crime", he reflects, underscoring the idea that his survival depended not on concealing his identity, but on the humanity of people like Pascal, who were willing to act in defiance of genocidal hysteria. Pascal's decision to shelter Kayihura was not inherently heroic, but it carried tremendous significance. He helped him despite the danger, escorting him through backyards and abandoned homes, and even performing a final act of deception at a roadblock: "Please don't kill him! He is ours!" By

pretending Kayihura was Hutu, Pascal risked his own life to protect another. Kayihura does not romanticise Pascal's actions; rather, he recognises their complexity. Pascal's assistance may have been driven as much by fear as by moral conviction, as revealed in his own words:

"I am afraid, Edouard. They threatened my wife. I fear I cannot protect her. That is my first and most important job. I'm sorry, but the longer you stay here, the more danger she and I are in. They are going to kill us all" (68).

Despite this, Kayihura still acknowledges Pascal as one of the unsung heroes of the genocide, someone whose actions carried no promise of fame or reward, yet exemplified the moral backbone of resistance in a collapsing society. Kayihura's arrival at the hotel is not marked by triumph, but by harrowing relief and lingering dread even in the presence of UN peacekeepers whose protection offered only symbolic safety. His statement, "Thank God I will die with other people" (76), captures the futility of survival even within a supposed sanctuary. Ultimately, Kayihura's narrative suggests that true courage lies not in those who are celebrated as heroes but in individuals like Pascal, whose subtle bravery has been overlooked by popular memory.

The emphasis on subtle, often conflicted heroism stands in stark contrast to the dominant narrative popularised, for instance, by the Film *Hotel Rwanda* and reinforced in Paul Rusesabagina's memoir *An Ordinary Man*. Kayihura challenges this portrayal not by entirely dismissing Rusesabagina's role, but by exposing the deeper complexities surrounding his emergence as the hotel's figurehead. A significant episode is the dispute over the hotel keys, which both men recount differently. According to Kayihura, Pasa, the de facto manager before Rusesabagina's arrival was troubled by Rusesabagina's abrupt assumption of power. He is quoted as saying, "He just showed up and asked me to hand over the keys!" (89), expressing both anger and surprise. Pasa complies only after Rusesabagina presents a fax from Sabena headquarters. This moment becomes a crucial framework for dissecting the conflicting claims to legitimacy and leadership. In contrast, Rusesabagina describes his handover as a battle for order and survival rather than an opportunistic usurpation. He also references an employee under the pseudonym "Jacques", which is likely a veiled reference to Pasa, whom he portrays as unserious and potentially dangerous, accusing him of debauchery and possible collaboration with the génocidaires. This portrayal frames Rusesabagina as the lone protector safeguarding hotel occupants from internal threats,

and so, the conflicting accounts underscore how power and authorship influence who is remembered as a hero or villain. In Kayihura's account, Pasa is more than a villainous caricature; he is a diligent worker resisting perceived opportunism. By reinterpreting Pasa's role, Kayihura highlights how historical memory is often shaped by dominant narratives rather than by those who may have had a more significant impact.

A notable divergence also emerges where Kayihura's *Inside the Hotel Rwanda* serves as counter discourse to Rusesabagina's *An Ordinary Man* in their respective accounts of how resources and finances were managed at the *Hotel des Mille Collines* during the genocide. In this textual dialogue Rusesabagina portrays himself as a selfless protector of those rendered vulnerable by the violence. He repeatedly asserts that monetary contributions were neither solicited nor demanded, and that even the affluent individuals offering promissory notes were afforded respect and empathy. As Rusesabagina recounts, "nobody was asked for money". In his narrative, Rusesabagina further claims that the hotel is redefined not as a commercial establishment, but as a haven where survival was imperative and financial gain nonexistent: "We charged no money for rooms. [...]. To take cash away from anyone would also be to strip them of money they might need to bribe their way out of being murdered" (97). Conversely, however, Kayihura offers a significantly different account. According to him and other survivors at the hotel, Rusesabagina imposed charges for accommodation, even on the hotel employees who, like the refugees, had nowhere else to go. Kayihura recalls that some refugees were issued invoices and instructed to either pay or vacate their rooms. Pasa, a hotel staff member, expresses his outrage at the shift from collective survival to managerial exploitation. He is quoted in *Inside the Hotel Rwanda* by Kayihura thus:

"Now he wants to charge the hotel employees! We are stuck here. We cannot go home. If we try to leave here, we will be killed. We must stay here as well as sleep here. He wants to charge us for our rooms! He wants to charge us for food! Not only that, we are no longer getting paid! How can we pay him when he is not paying us?! It is like a form of slavery" (123).

Kayihura further recalls a formalised system allegedly implemented by Rusesabagina, whereby refugees facilitated by an employee of the Bank of Kigali were made to withdraw funds from their personal accounts in order to pay the hotel. Conceding that these financial transactions may have indirectly contributed to their survival, Kayihura reflects thus:

"Frankly, in this time of our circumstance-imposed imprisonment inside the hotel, our only real need for

money was to ward off Paul Rusesabagina, who by now was threatening to evict us from the hotel unless we paid for our lodgings” (131).

These conflicting narratives underscore how power and resources were managed in a time of extreme crisis. While Rusesabagina presents himself as a principled protector untouched by capitalist or political motives, Kayihura contends that he was willing to exploit people’s desperation for financial gain. These opposing depictions therefore go beyond mere differences in memory or interpretation; they highlight the broader question of whose rendition of historical truth will ultimately be recognised and accepted.

Another deeply polarising aspect of the conflicting portrayals of Paul Rusesabagina concerns his alleged relationship with members of the genocidal regime. In *An Ordinary Man*, Rusesabagina depicts himself as a pragmatic negotiator who relied on diplomacy and personal connections to protect the refugees inside *Hotel Milles Collines*. He underscores the moral complexity of his position, engaging with the génocidaires purely out of necessity, framing these interactions as strategic, morally displeasing, but ultimately justified. Kayihura, conversely, offers a far more critical assessment. From his perspective, Rusesabagina’s proximity to key génocidaires, namely Georges Rutaganda, Colonel Theoneste Bagosora, General Augustin Bizimungu, and Froduald Karamira, appears less as reluctant diplomacy and more as evidence of shared political ideologies. Kayihura and other survivors recall witnessing Rusesabagina socialising with these men, including individuals directly responsible for orchestrating the genocide. These encounters, described by eyewitnesses, resembled social gatherings rather than tense negotiations, characterised by familiarity and even camaraderie:

Many others inside the hotel, including embassy employee Wellars Gasamagera, young student Jean Pierre Nkurunziza, and our friend Alexis, who worked at the hotel, noted the close relationship between Bagosora and Paul Rusesabagina. They told tales of seeing the two sitting together, laughing and drinking as if nothing was wrong with the world. Afterwards, Rusesabagina would strut around, speaking as if he and the colonel were good friends and equals—powerful, important men who liked and respected each other” (152).

While Rusesabagina might argue that such relationships were the price of survival, Kayihura suggests that they were not mere transactional alliances but ideological alignments. He implies that

Rusesabagina’s membership in the extremist MDR-power party, known for promoting anti-Tutsi rhetoric, offered him protection and insider status. This affiliation, according to Kayihura, shielded Rusesabagina from harm and further fueled suspicions about his true loyalties. He reflects, as long as Paul was a member of MDR Power, nobody could threaten him or kill him:

“Judging by his actions, by the way he was exploiting us and mistreating us so mercilessly, we could only speculate that the reason he was sharing beers with those killers was that they shared the same ideology” (140).

Furthermore, Kayihura notes the disturbing possibility that the refugees were inadvertently financing their own demise. He recounts how Rusesabagina purchased luxury items from Georges Rutaganda, one of the primary architects of the genocide, using funds provided by those sheltering in the hotel. This detail adds another layer to Kayihura’s critique of Rusesabagina, seeing as he was not only associated with the génocidaires, but may also have enriched them financially during the genocide. As genocidal leaders lounged comfortably within the hotel, seemingly unbothered by its function as a supposed safe haven for Tutsi and moderate Hutu, it is implied that Rusesabagina not only failed to shield the refugees from the psychological trauma of their presence but also enabled and normalised their access to the hotel. Ultimately, the distinction between the two accounts lies in their respective analyses of power and proximity. Rusesabagina presents himself as a man torn between moral compromise and humanitarian obligation. Kayihura, conversely, portrays him as someone who benefited from a system that facilitated mass murder of Rwandans and who used his limited power not to protect but to exploit the vulnerable. These divergent narratives challenge the simplistic dichotomy of hero versus villain, instead revealing the unsettling possibility that survival itself can become a manipulated performance, one that obscures more than it reveals.

Moreover, in his account, Kayihura portrays the United Nations as a vital and protective presence during the Rwandan genocide, particularly at the *Hotel Milles Collines*, which he describes as a “de facto protected site” and “an isolated outpost of peace in the gruesome violence”. He emphasises the active and constant presence of the UN peacekeepers, noting that they maintained their own office within the hotel and that personnel were stationed there at all times. This acknowledgement betrays Rusesabagina’s downplaying of the symbolic role the UN Peacekeepers played through their presence while

genocide raged. Finally, in *Inside the Hotel Rwanda* Edouard Kayihura offers, toward the end of his memoir, a powerful and corrective perspective on the narrative popularised by the international acclaim surrounding Paul Rusesabagina. He argues that the survival of those who sought refuge in the *Hotel des Milles Collines* was not the result of a single man's actions, but rather the outcome of multiple forces working together, namely the UN peacekeepers, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), well-connected and generous fellow refugees, and parts of the international community. Kayihura explicitly rejects the notion that Rusesabagina was their saviour, stating: "Had Paul Rusesabagina never lived, every one of us who took refuge in that hotel and is still alive would still be alive" (245). This reframing decentralises Rusesabagina's role and underscores a broader, collective effort in ensuring survival. Kayihura emphasises the presence of many small heroes, ordinary individuals who acted with courage amidst the horrors of the genocide. He writes: "We were there. We lived to tell the story, the truth. Ours is a tale of many small heroes, many more ferocious villains, and a few petty irritants" (248). Overall, in reflecting on post-genocide Rwanda, Kayihura's memoir presents a society that has learned to speak out, challenge lies, and demand accountability. For Kayihura, true heroism lies not in fame or recognition but in daily acts of courage and integrity. As he states: "Like our experience in the hotel, it is not necessary that the world know our names or even that we all know one another's names, but that we act heroically each and every day. Acting together, we all can be heroes" (267).

Ultimately, his message is one of empowerment, whereby ordinary Rwandans, standing up for truth and justice, embody a form of heroism more meaningful than the myth of a lone saviour.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the conflicting accounts of the Rwanda genocide provided by Paul Rusesabagina and Edouard Kayihura demonstrate how memoirs are tools for conveying subjective memories. The memoirs demonstrate that truth in historical accounts depends on the interpretations of individuals giving the testimonies. This paper has demonstrated how Rusesabagina framed his pre-war experiences and his roles during the war to create a hero out of himself due to his acts of hospitality and negotiation. Contrarily, Kayihura's account demystifies the hero Rusesabagina created and recasts him from a selfless savior into an opportunist and extortionist. The memoirs of trauma show how historical revelations do not function as

objective historical records but as personal instruments of identity-formation and moral justification. The analysis helps to recognize the importance of a synthesis of multiple or contradictory perspectives. It emphasizes the need to reject a monolithic truth about the roles of human and organisation agencies during a genocide.

References

- Alimi, Nurayn Fola. (2024) Dialogism as the Contextuality of Hotel Rwanda's Filmic Rendition of the 1994 Rwandan War. *Alore: Ilorin Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 33, Pp122-137.
- Azam, Rawnak Miraj U.I. (2025) The Role of Hate Speech in Inciting Genocide: A Case Study of Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda. *Contemporary Challenges: The Global Crime, Justice and Security Journal* 6 412-437.
- Beloff, Jonathan R. The Arrest and Trial of Paul Rusesabagina and its Impact on Rwandan Foreign Affairs. *Journal of Strategic Security* 15.3 (2022): 39-61.
- Crane, Susan A. (2006) Historical subjectivity: A Review Essay. *The Journal of Modern History* 78 (2) 434-456.
- Ford, James Thomas. (2005) Developing a Global Perspective through Historical Memoirs. *Power of One*.
- Hitchcott, Nicki. "Writing on Bones: Commemorating Genocide in Boubacar Boris Diop's 'Murambi.'" *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2009, pp. 48-61. [JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40468136](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40468136). Accessed 13 Feb. 2026.
- Jennings, Kathleen. (2023) "'Rwanda cannot be exorcised': Representations of the Trauma of the Rwandan Genocide in Selected Films and Novels."
- Kayihura, Edouard, and Kerry Zukus. *Inside the Hotel Rwanda: The Surprising True Story... and Why It Matters Today*. BenBella Books, 2014.
- Mwambari, David. *The Evolution of Commemoration in Postgenocide Rwanda 1994-2013*. Diss. La Trobe, 2015.
- Nikuze, Donatien. (2014) The Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda: Origins, causes, implementation, consequences, and the post-genocide era. *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 3 (5) 1086-1098.
- Novick, Miriam Hannah. (2015) *Impostures: Subjectivity, Memory, and Untruth in the*

- Contemporary Memoir*. University of Toronto (Canada).
- Reyntjens, Filip. *Again at the crossroads: Rwanda and Burundi, 2000-2001*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2001.
- Dowden, Richard. "Comment: The Rwandan Genocide: How the Press Missed the Story. A Memoir." *African Affairs*, vol. 103, no. 411, 2004, pp. 283–90. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518613>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2026.
- Rusesabagina, Paul, and Tom Zoellner. (2006) *An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Saaida, Mohammed. "Rwandan genocide timeline (April-July 1994)." 2024,
- Tripodi, Paolo. (2025) Rwanda 1994 A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide. *Marine Corps University Press*.
- Van Haperen, Maria. (2025) The Rwandan genocide, 1994. *The Holocaust and Other Genocides*. Routledge, 96-119.