



Naila Kira



Illustration by Chris Rutayisire

I remember a house full of laughter, joy and love. But when we went outside the gate, we always felt anxious, fearful and lost in the big world outside home.

I was always told to be brave.

I remember one beautiful Saturday morning when I was eight years old, my uncles, grandparents and other family members came to our house. I was dressed in a yellow flowery dress and Mum tied my hair into three ponytails. As she got me ready for the day ahead, she reminded me that I was her 'brave girl'.

As the day passed, I realised that I was leaving my family. My father had decided to send me to Uganda so I could be safe. That was the beginning of my dark days. I remember Grandma's smile faded away as the day went by. When I was leaving, she whispered, 'I don't know if I will ever see you again, but you are our beautiful, brave girl. Look after yourself and don't forget to pray.'

As Dad put me in the car, he reminded me that I was his bravest girl.

I remember standing by the shore of Lake Victoria when bodies washed up, coming from Rwanda to Uganda. I stood there waiting, afraid that I would see my family. I heard people saying the bodies

were infecting the water, making the fish filthy. I felt alone, broken, not knowing whether my family was alive or among the bodies being mocked.

I couldn't cry. I remembered I needed to be brave, after all, I had promised everyone. I had promised Dad.

I returned to Rwanda after the genocide to the place that was once my happy home. There was nothing there except one wall, still upright. My legs shivered and my heart broke.

I was not sure what Dad would have wanted me to do, because at this point I could not be brave.

After a few days, I managed to find my mother and siblings.

I remember the look on her face when she saw me. She smiled with tears in her eyes and hugged me tightly.

'Remember, you are my brave girl,' she said.

Written by Naila Kira



Summary

Naila Kira's testimony about her experience of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda focuses on the recurrence of her memory of being told to be brave. This memory is rooted in her last day in Rwanda before being sent to Uganda. It resurfaces during difficult moments: seeing dead bodies in Lake Victoria and returning to Rwanda to find her childhood home in ruins.

Naila's testimony can help young people aged 13-14 learn about memory and narrative, testimony as a genre, and the importance of family and belonging.

Themes: memory, testimony, non-fiction, family, belonging

Context

In her testimony, Naila, an 8-year-old Tutsi girl, describes being afraid of going outside her loving family home because of the discrimination and hate she and her family faced. Before the genocide, Rwanda's population consisted of three ethnic groups: Hutu 85%, Tutsi 14% and Twa 1% (statistics from official records that are not fully reliable). In the pre-colonial period, these were social labels and could change depending on wealth and social status. Under Belgian rule, the colonial administration made these categories more fixed, drawing on racial theories about physical appearance and intelligence. They favoured the Tutsi minority, who they deemed superior to the Hutu. However, after a revolution exiling the Tutsi monarchy in 1959, and as Independence approached in 1961, the Belgians switched their allegiance to the Hutu majority. Violence began against the Tutsi in 1959 and worsened over the following decades. Tutsis were excluded from education and employment, and many fled the country.

By the 1990s, successive waves of violence against the Tutsi had created a diaspora of up to 700,000 refugees. Many of these were in the surrounding countries: Uganda, Burundi and the country then known as Zaïre, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although Naila's parents managed to successfully send her to safety in Uganda, it was very difficult for Tutsis to get a passport at the time. Many had to cross the border without proper papers and the journey was very difficult. In July 1994, after the end of the genocide, Rwandans began to return home from the diaspora. Many found most of their family members had been killed.

Since 1994 the new government has focussed on national unity and reconciliation and has encouraged young people to think of themselves as Rwandan rather than belonging to a particular ethnicity.

Lesson and activity ideas

Learning objectives

- Understand an experience of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda
- Have awareness of the characteristics of testimony
- Identify changes to perspective and the impact of memory

Starter

Ask learners to write down or share in a pair something they remember from when they were 8 years old. Invite volunteers to share their memory and discuss with the group what makes these memories strong and meaningful.

Activity 1 – Naila's memories

Explain to learners that Naila's family are survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, referring to the Ishami Foundation History of Rwanda as needed. Flag that this may be a challenging story for some of the class and could bring up a range of feelings.

Share Naila's testimony with learners and ask them to read it. You can work through the material in small groups or ask students to write down their responses to questions before unpacking together.

Questions

- **What does Naila remember?**
- **What different time periods does she evoke in her text?**
- **Why do you think Naila's memory of being told to be brave recurs in her story?**

Activity 2 – Testimony

Explain to learners that when Naila wrote down her memories, she created a testimony. Ask the class if they understand what a testimony is. You may want to share a definition on the board. Depending on class skills and experience, you can simplify or complicate different components. For example, you may wish to remind students about the differences between fiction and non-fiction.

Testimony is an authentic oral or written account of the past. Survivor testimonies reflect an individual's memory of particular events and draw attention to their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and motivations at the time and in the present. Testimony can also refer to a formal statement or declaration. In law, testimony functions as evidence of a truth or fact, often when there is a lack of other forms of evidence such as written records. Most testimonies are meant to be shared with an audience. Literary testimonies often invite the reader to identify with the author's experience. At the same time readers are encouraged to appreciate the specificity or extreme nature of the events.

Questions

- **Why is Naila's writing a testimony?**
- **Why is it important that she wrote it?**
- **Why is it important to read it?**

Naila's story about her childhood experience of genocide encourages us to see her as a human being. This helps counter dehumanisation of the Tutsi by genocide perpetrators.

Activity 3 – Testimony

If you have more time, learners could consider the subjectivity of memory and experience, as well as decisions around narrative inclusion and exclusion:

- **Do Naila's siblings remember her final day in Rwanda in the same way?**
- **What does Naila share with the reader and what does she leave out? Why?**

This could be a short (5 minute) writing or drawing task to consolidate learning after the discussion.

Closing

To close, go around the room with each student sharing one word or phrase to describe how bearing witness – listening respectfully to someone's testimony – made them feel. Teacher to model by starting with a positive, such as more compassionate, reflective or grateful. Emotions are likely to be varied. Acknowledge that all are valid.

Further reading on testimony

- *100 Days, 100 Stories: Rwandan Voices on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi*, edited by Jo Ingabire Moys. This collection is edited by a survivor and contains a range of perspectives.
- *After the Genocide in Rwanda: Testimonies of Violence, Change and Reconciliation*, edited by Hannah Grayson, Nicki Hitchcott, Laura Blackie and Stephen Joseph.
- *Not My Time to Die*, by Yolande Mukagasana, translated by Zoë Norridge. This was the first book-length survivor testimony to be published after the genocide.
- *Small Country*, by Gaël Faye, translated by Sarah Ardizzone. This novel describes a Rwandan childhood in exile in Burundi.
- Holocaust Memorial Day Trust website [life stories](#) in their resource section.

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