

Authenticity in 'Witness literature': an examination of 'truth' in three memoirs of war-survivors

Wasena, Antony Wanyonyi

Date: 2010

Abstract:

Testimony never precedes action. We like to talk of testimony only after something has taken place. The action has to carry a sense of importance for us to be interested in it. In many cases, testimony is our last test of verification as to whether something took place or not. In other situations, it is the final answer as to whether--and how-- something took place. Using three memoirs of war survivors, this research seeks to understand the place of 'Witness Literature' which is taken in this study as testimony of the horrendous experiences that people go through. The argument in the study starts by way of examining theoretical issues on 'Witness Literature.' In this case the study explores the nature and form of 'Witness Literature.' It then moves on to analyse the reliability of memory in transmitting a past experience. At this stage the study explores the authenticity of a childhood experience of suffering told from the perspective of a grown-up. The research considers knowledge of the hindsight and foreknowledge as possible factors that compromise the accuracy of a story. Since in a number of personal memoirs recounting a life of suffering we have a claim of overcoming pain and suffering, the study interrogates the role of writing and narration in transcending a physically and psychologically challenging experience. Further, the research explores the probability of making a personal story more authentic by lacing it with the collective experience of a social group such as a tribe or a political entity such as a nation.