



Traces, Memory and Resistance: A Semiotic Reading of **La Vie et demie** by Sony Labou Tansi and **Rescapés de la Shoah** by Kasereka Kalwaghe Jean-Hilaire

Mwandi Serge Mulimani¹

¹Assistant Lecturer at the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Ruwenzori, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)



ABSTRACT

Collective violence always leaves marks that outlive the events themselves and those who experienced them. The battered bodies, the names, the words, the writings and the places that bear these traces become vessels of memory.

This study offers a comparative semiotic analysis of **La Vie et demie** by Sony Labou Tansi and **Rescapés de la Shoah**

by Kasereka Kalwaghe Jean-Hilaire. It examines how the traces of violence are transformed into signs of memory and forms of resistance.

The analysis draws on the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes and Algirdas Julien Greimas. It adopts a qualitative approach and employs both comparative methodology and documentary analysis. The study shows that, in both novels, violence fails to erase the victims entirely: the traces remain, they circulate and acquire collective

significance. In Labou Tansi's work, these traces primarily fuel political and literary resistance, whilst in Kasereka Kalwaghe's work they lead more towards testimony, solidarity and reconstruction.

Keywords: trace, memory, resistance, semiotics, violence, survival, reconstruction.

Introduction

In many countries shaken by political, communal and security crises, literature provides a privileged space for the representation, preservation and reinterpretation of such violence. The fact is that this violence never disappears along with the events that caused it. It remains in the bodies, names, words, places and accounts of the survivors. It is this persistence of traces that forms the point of convergence between Sony Labou Tansi's **La Vie et demie** and Kasereka Kalwaghe Jean-Hilaire's **Rescapés de la Shoah**, which form the subject of our comparative study.

In the first novel, key characters such as Martial, Chaïdana, Layisho and Martial's people play a part in preserving a memory that the Providential Guide's regime sought to erase. In the second, Taboleyi, Bira, Dr Jackson, Father Marc and the other survivors transform the memory of the Saio massacre into testimony and action.

Thus, the study seeks to answer this main question: how do the traces of violence become, in both novels, signs of memory and resistance? Both works trace a path leading from violence to the trace, from the trace to the sign, from the sign to memory, and from memory to resistance. This qualitative and comparative study is based on a documentary analysis of the corpus and draws on the work of Peirce, Barthes and Greimas.

Whilst **La Vie et demie** has already prompted numerous studies on dictatorship, violence and resistance, the comparison with **Rescapés de la Shoah** nevertheless allows us to shift our focus to the semiotic function of traces and their circulation amongst several characters. The analysis focuses successively on bodily traces, verbal and written traces, then on places, names and the transformation of memory into resistance.

I. Methodological approach and theoretical framework

I.1. Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs a comparative method. The choice of this method stems from the need to compare two works which present different

narrative structures but are rooted in the same thematic logic: the representation of violence, the persistence of its traces and the transformation of memory into resistance.

The corpus consists of **La Vie et demie** by Sony Labou Tansi and **Rescapés de la Shoah** by Charles-Hilaire Kalwaghe. The documentary method was used to collect the textual data. A careful reading of the two novels enabled the selection of passages that depict physical traces, words, names, places, objects and practices of remembrance.

The analysis is organised around four categories: bodily traces, verbal traces, spatial traces and nominal traces. These categories are not mutually exclusive: in both novels, a single character may bear several forms of trace and participate simultaneously in several processes of remembrance.

The comparison takes place on three levels: firstly, the nature of the trace; secondly, its transformation into a sign; and finally, its function within the process of resistance. The aim is therefore not to juxtapose two analyses, but to create a constant dialogue between the two texts.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This research draws on three complementary semiological references to explain the traces of memory and resistance: Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes and Algirdas Julien Greimas.

According to Peirce (1978), the sign is embedded in a triadic relationship between the sign, its object and its interpretant. His distinction between icon, index and symbol is particularly relevant to this study. A material trace can be regarded as an index when it refers to the event that produced it; it becomes a symbol when the community ascribes a broader meaning to it.

Barthes (1957) enables us to grasp the cultural and ideological dimension of signs. In both novels, signs are caught up in power relations. Names, official discourse, colour or inscriptions can serve to impose a particular interpretation of reality, but they can also be subverted by victims and survivors.

Finally, Greimas (1966) enables us to view the narrative as a system of transformations. The victim is not fixed in a passive position: they can become a speaker, a bearer of memory or an agent of resistance. This perspective allows us to trace the transition from suffering to action.

The complementary nature of these three perspectives thus allows us to view the mark both as an indication of an event,

as a cultural sign laden with meaning, and as an element contributing to a narrative transformation.

II. The bodily mark: the body as a memory of violence

In both novels, the body is not only the site where suffering manifests itself; it is also, and above all, the primary space where violence is inscribed. It is a sign that refers to an absent event and serves to maintain its presence in the collective memory. It therefore constitutes one of the primary vehicles of memory. However, its semiotic functioning differs.

In **La Vie et demie**, Martial's body is subjected to the violence of power, but this violence fails to erase him completely. Paradoxically, Martial's physical destruction gives rise to a new presence. The materiality of the destroyed body is transformed into a trace.

The episode of 'Martial's blackness' is particularly significant. Following the violence inflicted upon Martial, the Providential Guide observes that his hands have turned 'black, as black as Indian ink' and that, despite all attempts to wash them, 'the blackness did not disappear' (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 12).

The mark is, first and foremost, an index in the Peircean sense: it provides material evidence of contact. But it quickly transcends this function. The text gives it a name – 'Martial's black' – and thereby confers upon it a collective significance. The individual trace becomes a social sign (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 14).

The political dimension of the sign is evident in the reaction of the Providential Guide. He does not merely seek to erase a physical mark; he attempts to eradicate what it signifies. Yet the sign persists. The mark, which was meant to be a consequence of violence, becomes precisely what reminds the executioner of the victim.

Furthermore, Chaïdana's body particularly illustrates this transformation. After the violence she endured, she remains paralysed and lives with Layisho. The narrator reports that he becomes her 'father of identity', because she must renounce her name in order to escape the surveillance of the authorities (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 25). The body and identity are thus subject to the same logic of control. The authorities seek to recognise the body in order to control it more effectively; Chaïdana responds by adopting multiple identities.

The mark becomes even more evident at the moment of her death. Layisho discovers a mark on her face and states: 'I knew she was marked' (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 57). The mark

here is an index in the Peircean sense: it maintains a material connection with the prior violence. But its function does not stop at this indexical dimension. It also becomes the sign of a history that the community must interpret.

Following the same logic, Martial, even though he has passed away, continues to exist in the signs associated with him. His name gradually detaches itself from the individual to become that of a community: the 'People of Martial', the 'Literature of Martial'. The character is therefore no longer merely a dead man; he becomes a collective sign.

Furthermore, in **Survivors of the Holocaust**, the body takes on a different role. It is less that of the returning martyr and more that of the survivor bearing witness. The fifty survivors who return to their fields carry, by their very presence, the memory of those who have perished. The narrator describes a village that is gradually regaining its vitality, but insists: 'We, the survivors, alone, could never forget our own' (Kalwaghe, p. 55).

Taboleyi and Bira survive the massacre, but their bodies bear the scars of it. The narrator observes: 'The face is the mirror of the soul' and adds that they have become 'human wrecks' and have 'aged before their time' (*Survivors of the Shoah*, pp. 19–20).

The survivors' bodies are a kind of archive. They do not yet tell the whole story, but they make visible what has happened. This has enabled us to interpret the signs of fatigue, ageing and distress that appear on the characters' bodies.

The survivor's body thus becomes a living sign of the past event.

Table 1: The semiotic function of the body in the two novels

Semiotic function of the body	<i>A Life and a Half</i>	<i>Holocaust Survivors</i>
Main form	Martial's tortured body	The survivor's body
Trace	Mark / 'Martial's black'	The presence of the survivor
Connection to the past	Brings Martial to life	Brings the dead to life
Function	Resistance to oblivion	A testament against oblivion
Horizon	Challenge	Memory and reconstruction

This comparison therefore allows us to view the body as an archive of violence: in Labou Tansi's work, this archive is embodied by the mark; in Kalwaghe's, it is embodied by the survivor.

It may also be said that bodily semiotics takes on a different form in the works of the two authors. In Labou Tansi's work, the scarred body gradually becomes a sign of protest, whilst in Kalwaghe's work, the surviving body becomes, above all, a sign of testimony.

Table 2: The function of the bodily mark in the two works

Dimension	<i>A Life and a Half</i>	<i>Holocaust Survivors</i>
Main characters	Martial, Chaïdana	Taboleyi, Bira
Nature of the record	Mark, paralysis, identity	Ageing, trauma
Function	Resisting erasure	Bearing witness to violence (massacre)
Transformation	Body → political sign	Body → testimonial sign

This interpretation aligns with Peirce: the bodily trace functions first and foremost as an index, since it maintains a relationship with that which produced it. But it then becomes a cultural and collective sign once it is given a shared interpretation.

III. Speech and writing: the sign against silence

The second major medium of memory is the use of speech and writing. Here, speech and writing fulfil an existential and political function. Speaking enables the subject to maintain their status as a subject. Writing, meanwhile, enables one to resist oblivion and erasure, for silence is tantamount to an inner disappearance. The verbal sign thus becomes a form of resistance to annihilation.

In **La Vie et demie**, the authorities attempt to control speech, but it is precisely this that becomes a means of resistance. Chaïdana asserts: 'I am in a season of speech. If I do not speak, I die slowly from within.' (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 74).

And she adds: 'When I speak, I contain myself, I define myself' (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 74). Speech does not merely serve to convey information; it enables the reconstruction of the subject's identity.

However, tyranny cannot stand idly by in the face of the victims' defiance. It therefore seeks to control speech and writing. This is particularly evident in **La Vie et demie**, where those in power are not content merely to control bodies; they seek to control words and narratives.

Faced with this domination, Chaïdana transforms her experience into writing. The narrator states that she composes 'songs, cries, stories, dates, numbers', thereby creating 'a veritable universe' (Labou Tansi, **, 1979, p. 33). Aided by the 'People of Martial', the 'pistol-typists', she haunts the Providential Guide through her writing: 'She recruited three thousand boys tasked with writing, on Christmas Eve, at every gate of Yourma, her father's famous phrase: "I do not wish to die this death." ' The fine battalion of 'pistol-writers' had worked a treat: they had managed to write the phrase as far as the third gate of the palace walls. Some of them—no doubt the most daring—had succeeded in writing the phrase on the bodies of several military officials, such as General Yang, Colonel Obaltana, Lieutenant-Colonel Fursia and many others. Amedandio claimed to have written the phrase on one thousand and ninety uniforms' (Labou Tansi, 1979, p. 33).

Chaïdana does not simply produce her own personal literature. She brings together fragments: cries, stories, dates, numbers. In other words, she transforms the scattered traces of experience into a memory organised through writing.

This is where Amedandio comes in. He does not necessarily produce the texts himself, but he ensures their circulation. The novel states that he ‘set about distributing Chaïdana’s writings amongst the People of Martial’. It is from this dissemination that ‘Martial’s literature’ arises, whose manuscripts ‘circulated clandestinely from hand to hand’ (*Labou Tansi*, 1979, p. 57).

Amedandio’s role is that of a mediator of memory. He transforms individual writing into a collective practice. The manuscript is no longer merely a literary object; it is a sign of recognition amongst those who reject the established order.

Furthermore, Layisho fulfils a complementary role. He reads Chaïdana’s texts and, in particular, copies out ‘Bouts de viande, troncs de sang’ (*Labou Tansi*, 1979, p. 57), thereby becoming both the guardian and transmitter of the writing.

This circulation confirms Barthes’ conception of the sign as a cultural fact. The meaning of the text no longer lies solely in Chaïdana’s intention; it is constructed through its social circulation. A banned text acquires political significance precisely because it is banned, read clandestinely and passed on.

In **Rescapés de la Shoah**, speech functions differently. It is, first and foremost, a testimony. Upon their arrival at the parish of Notre-Dame des Pauvres, Taboleyi and Bira recount to the clergy what they have just experienced. Father Marc questions them in particular about the identity of the attackers and their fatigues (**Rescapés de la Shoah**, p. 16).

This testimony then enables a shift from individual experience to collective knowledge.

Memory is then institutionalised through Dr Jackson’s speech. During the school ceremony, he reminds the pupils that they were orphaned during the Saio massacre on 13 February 2014 (*Survivors of the Shoah*, p. 27). Public discourse transforms personal recollection into collective memory.

When we compare the two novels, we see that they assign a common function to speech: to prevent erasure. Yet their approaches diverge. Writing, for Labou Tansi, is about clandestinity and protest, whilst testimony, for Kalwaghe, is about transmission and mobilisation.

Speech and writing as signs	Labou Tansi	Kalwaghe
Threat	Silence and domination	Oblivion
Speaking Subject	Victim / Resister	Survivor / witness
Role	Staying alive	To pass on
Recipient	Power and community	Future generations
Impact	Resistance	Collective memory

The difference is therefore less a matter of opposition than a difference in approach: in Labou Tansi’s work, speech resists; in Kalwaghe’s, it bears witness and passes on.

IV. Names and places: memory inscribed in space

Memory is not carried solely by bodies and discourse. It is also inscribed in names and places.

In **La Vie et demie**, the multiplicity of Chaïdana’s identities reflects, first and foremost, the need to evade power. The text presents her as possessing numerous identities and specifies that Chanka Seylata is ‘Chaïdana’s two hundred and fourth identity’ (*Labou Tansi*, 1979, p. 57).

This multiplicity can be read as a paradoxical sign. Power seeks to fix identity in order to better identify and control; Chaïdana, on the contrary, transforms identity into movement. Her name thus becomes a space of resistance.

The grave constitutes another semiotic site. After his death, no identity is inscribed on the stone: only two dates and the phrase ‘I was a filthy parenthesis’ (*Labou Tansi*, 1979, p. 57). The absence of the name is itself significant. It recalls the attempt to erase the individual whilst allowing a statement to remain that resists this erasure.

In **Rescapés de la Shoah**, the relationship between place and memory is constructed primarily around Saio. The destroyed village remains present in the survivors’ consciousness. Reconstruction therefore does not consist of turning the page, but of re-inscribing the past within a new space.

The choice of the name **Saio II** is particularly significant. Taboleyi recounts: ‘Our camp, which I named Saio II, was a beautiful village’ (*Charles-Hilaire*, p. 56). He adds that the new camp reminds him of the ‘devastated village of Saio’.

The name functions here as a catalyst for memory. ‘Saio II’ signifies both continuity and rupture: continuity because the name Saio is retained; rupture because the place associated with destruction now becomes a living space.

Here we find a conception similar to Barthes’: a name is never neutral. It carries a history and conveys cultural significance. Saio II is not simply the name of a camp; it is a sign of the transformation of disaster into a future.

Spatial/nominal sign	One and a Half Lives	Holocaust survivors
Central name	Martial / Chaïdana	Saio / Saio II
Memorial site	Grave, hut, areas belonging to Martial’s people	Destroyed village / new camp
Function	Preventing oblivion	To preserve and transform memory
Focus	Resistance	Reconstruction

V. From memory to resistance: two semiotic trajectories

The main value of the comparison becomes apparent when one traces the path of signs in both narratives. Violence first produces a trace. This trace becomes a sign when it is recognised and interpreted. The sign then nourishes memory, and memory produces action.

In Labou Tansi’s work, this transformation is particularly clear. Martial disappears physically, but his name remains. Chaïdana suffers violence, but writes. Layisho preserves, Amedandio disseminates, and Martial’s People read. The text itself then becomes a space of resistance.

The phrase ‘Martial’s literature’ is particularly significant. It shows that an individual can become a collective symbol. Martial’s name no longer refers merely to a single person: it signifies a memory, a community and opposition to authority.

Nor does Chaïdana’s death put an end to this circulation. A year after his burial, some artists are singing his verses; writers

are seeking to carry on his method; and painters are exhibiting his drawings (*Labou Tansi*, p. 57).

Memory thus becomes contagious. It passes from one character to other subjects. The authorities may punish individuals, but they cannot completely halt the circulation of signs.

Greimas’s framework allows us here to consider the transformation of actantial roles. The characters initially subjected to violence do not remain forever in the position of victims. Chaïdana becomes a subject who produces discourse; Layisho becomes the sender and guardian; Amedandio becomes the mediator; Martial’s people collectively become subjects of resistance.

In **Survivors of the Shoah**, the same dynamic is present, but its outcome is different. Taboleyi and Bira begin as survivors of a massacre. Their traumatic experience, however, does not result in permanent isolation. They resume their studies, build family and professional lives, and then return to the victims of the war.

Dr Jackson plays a part in this transformation. He welcomes the survivors, supports them and subsequently helps with their reintegration. Later, he presents Taboleyi and Annie Bira as doctors who have given up their commercial activities to come ‘to the aid of the victims’ (*Charles-Hilaire*, p. 41).

Memory thus takes the form of a moral obligation. The Saio II reconstruction project embodies this transformation. The funding is intended to enable the resettlement of the survivors, the purchase of tools and seeds, and the construction of a school and a clinic (*Charles-Hilaire*, p. 56).

This shift is crucial to our analysis: memory moves beyond the realm of remembrance into that of social action. This distinction allows for a better understanding of the two imaginaries:

Stages	La Vie et demie	Holocaust survivors
Violence	Political domination	Communal massacre
Trace	Bodies, names, writings	Bodies, stories, places
Memory	Martial, Chaïdana	Victims of Saio
Transmission	Clandestine manuscripts	Testimony and commitment
Resistance	Symbolic, political, literary	Social, humanitarian, reconstructive
Horizon	Survival	Reconstruction

This comparison thus allows us to qualify the concept of resistance. It should not be understood solely as a direct confrontation with authority. In both novels, resistance means preventing violence from having the final say on the meaning of history.

VI. A semiotic analysis of two novels

An analysis of the two texts ultimately allows us to propose a simple model: **violence** → **trace** → **interpretation** → **sign** → **memory** → **action**.

From Peirce's perspective, the trace initially possesses an indexical dimension: it refers to an event of which it constitutes the mark. The transformed faces of Bira and Taboleyi, the mark on Chaïdana's face, and the ruins of Saio are thus linked to a prior event. But these traces only become fully memorialised through interpretation.

Barthes helps us to understand the second stage. Signs acquire a cultural and ideological dimension. Martial's name becomes the sign of a community of resistance; Saio II becomes the sign of a reconstructed memory. The sign is therefore no longer content merely to recall an event: it attributes a value to it.

Finally, Greimas helps us grasp the narrative transformation. The characters are not condemned to remain the objects of violence. They gradually become subjects of memory and action. The trace does not, therefore, mark the end of the narrative; rather, it is the starting point of a new journey.

This dynamic explains the profound convergence of the two works despite the differences in their narrative worlds.

In Labou Tansi's work, the sign of memory is essentially subversive. It threatens those in power because it brings back what they would like to see disappear. Chaïdana's body, Martial's name, the manuscripts and the drawings form a set of signs that elude political control.

In Kalwaghe's work, the sign of memory is more constructive. The survivor's body serves as a reminder of the catastrophe; testimony establishes the truth; the name of Saio II preserves the memory; and reconstruction gives this memory a forward-looking direction.

Thus, the two novels present two forms of the same resistance: *resisting oblivion and transforming memory into a force for action*.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to analyse, from a comparative semiotic perspective, the way in which Sony Labou Tansi's **La Vie et demie** and Kasereka Kalwaghe Jean-Hilaire's **Rescapés de la Shoah** transform the traces of violence into signs of memory and resistance.

The analysis has shown that these traces appear in several forms: physical, nominal, verbal, written and spatial. In **La Vie et demie**, Martial and Chaïdana are the main focal points of this memory, but it never belongs exclusively to them. Layisho preserves it, Amedandio disseminates it, and Martial's people collectivise it. The scarred body, the name and, above all, writing become instruments of resistance against erasure.

In **Rescapés de la Shoah**, Taboleyi and Bira carry within their bodies and their accounts the memory of the Saio massacre. Dr Jackson, Father Marc and the other members of the community play a part in passing it on. The transition from Saio to Saio II shows, above all, that memory can become a principle of reconstruction: the destroyed place is reborn in a new guise without losing its name.

The comparison thus reveals a common structure: *violence produces a trace; the trace becomes a sign; the sign sustains memory; memory produces resistance*. The difference lies chiefly in the orientation of this resistance. Labou Tansi favours symbolic and textual challenges to power; Kalwaghe favours testimony, solidarity and reconstruction.

The three semiotic perspectives drawn upon help to account for this dynamic: Peirce sheds light on the indexical nature of

the trace, Barthes on its transformation into a cultural and ideological sign, whilst Greimas enables us to observe the characters' transition from the position of victims to that of subjects bearing memory and taking action.

Ultimately, both novels suggest that *violence may destroy lives, but that it does not necessarily control the signs through which survivors continue to give voice to the dead*. Literature thus becomes a space of survival: it gathers the traces, organises them, gives them meaning and passes them on to those who come after.

Bibliographical references

- Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Greimas, A. J. (1966). *Structural Semantics: In Search of a Method*. Paris: Larousse.
- Kalwaghe, K. J.-H. (2024). *Survivors of the Shoah*. Butembo: Éditions Ishango.
- Labou Tansi, S. (1979). *La Vie et demie*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Peirce, C. S. (1978). *Writings on the Sign* (trans. G. Deledalle). Paris: Editions du Seuil.