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A LITERARY APPROACH TO CATASTROPHE  
AN ANALYSIS OF SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA'S NOVEL  
OUR LADY OF THE NILE

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## ABSTRACT

### A Literary Approach to Catastrophe

#### Traces of Catastrophe in Scholastique Mukasonga's Novel

#### *'Our Lady of the Nile'*

Chronicling genocide through documents, statistics or archives, dehumanizes and isolates the victim. Thereby, the victim loses her voice and eventually becomes ignored. As a result, the reader can only have a general overview of the subject and his/her knowledge cannot cross the border of numeric, geographic or political information, such as death toll and whatsoever. Scarcely, genocide takes its place among the courses of violent acts in world history. History books cannot give voice to the victim. History excludes the reader. S/he can only establish a mutual relationship with the victim's words. S/he internalizes the suffering, makes it his/her own grief. S/he finds the meaning not in the facts but in the words of the victim, which get through her imagination. Hence there occurs the urge of telling the unspeakable through literature.

The aim of this study is to analyze why literature is the essential way to find a meaning in catastrophic events, both for the victim herself and for the reader. To do so, Rwandan writer Scholastique Mukasonga's vivacious novel *'Our Lady of the Nile'* will be the target work. It is my intention to scrutinize the relationship between history, literature and genocide, to track the steps that paved the road to the catastrophe, to put forth how the writer made a sense of catastrophe through literature and brought the real meaning of catastrophe for her into the light.

## ÖZET

### Felaketin Edebiyat Yoluyla Anlatımı

#### Scholastique Mukasonga'nın *Our Lady Of The Nile*

#### Romanında Felaketin İzleri

Soykırımı veya Marc Nichanian'ın tercih ettiği kelimeyle Felaket'i belgelerle, kayıtlarla, arşiv bilgileriyle ve istatistiklerle anlatmak, kurbanı metalaştırır ve yaşanan acılardan soyutlar. Böylece kurbanın sesi kesilir ve kurban yok sayılır. Bunun neticesinde de okuyucu, yaşanan felakete ancak genel bir bakış edinir ve felaketin toplumdaki karşılığı, meydana geldiği coğrafya, kurbanların sayısı gibi bilgilerle sınırlı kalır; bundan öteye geçemez. Böylece soykırım, ancak dünya tarihindeki felaketler sıralamasında bir yer edinir. Tarih bilimi kurbanların sesini okuyucuya duyuramaz. Ancak edebiyat yoluyla bağ kurar okuyucu; acıyı içselleştirir ve anlatılan acı onun acısı olur; gerçeklerle değil, ancak imajinasyonla özdeşleşme kurar. Yaşanılan ama anlatılamayan acıları edebiyat yoluyla anlatmak bundan ileri gelir.

Bu çalışmanın amacı, yakın tarihin en büyük felaketlerinden biri olan Rwanda soykırımından kurtulmayı başarmış ancak annesi dahil ailesinin büyük kısmını vahşete kurban vermiş Ruandalı yazar Scholastique Mukasonga'nın '*Our Lady of the Nile*' romanı üzerinden tarih, edebiyat ve soykırım ilişkisini incelemektir. Bunun için romanda felaketin izi sürülerek, yazarın edebiyat yoluyla felaketi nasıl anlamlandırdığına ve Mukasonga için gerçek felaketin ne olduğuna ışık tutulacaktır.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mama, I wasn't there to cover your body, and all I have left is words – words in a language you didn't understand – to do as you asked. And I'm all alone with my feeble words, and on the pages of my notebook, over and over, my sentences weave a shroud for your missing body.

Scholastique Mukasonga, *Bare Foot Woman*

The further we get into the reading Scholastique Mukasonga's novel *Our Lady of the Nile* the more we realize that the novel is not about the Rwandan genocide. The main theme of the novel, which is also Marc Nishanian's main focus in *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, is the crisis of representation of catastrophes. The novel represents a true picture of the colonized and decolonized Rwanda, but actually, as we get into it, we realize that Mukasonga shows a bigger picture, that is, the issue is not limited to Rwanda. It is a universal concept and this concept, the tension between the reality about the atrocities and their representations, can be applied to anywhere in the world, where people suffer under any kind of oppression. Through the novel, we become engaged thinkers. We understand the relationship between the text and the reality. We care more about the truth, what is going on around us, and inevitably we feel kind of responsibility. Subsequently, we either search for Rwandan genocide or any other catastrophe in the world, and this leads us to the truth which can be found through cultural products. The truth must be said because the victims and their killers have to move on in the aftermath of the genocide. As writing is an act of remembrance and reconciliation,

literature will allow them to learn living together, side by side. The Hutu will remember the circumstances that led them to what they did, so there will be a peace and unity, and the Tutsi will find a remedy for their grief.

All in all truth must be said, and since history looks at the issue from a general perspective and is engaged with ideological, political and economical concerns, literature and cultural product in general have a significant role in representation of violence. A Benjaminian perspective can be applied here and we can say that history is always the history of perpetrators. For more than a century, the colonial powers formed a new history for the peoples of Africa. Through her novel, Mukasonga manages to break the dominant discourse set by the colonial powers, that is the Africans are barbarians and it is normal that they are killing each other, without falling into that reductive reasoning. As art has the ability to reach a broader public and broaden the scope of the issue, literature plays a crucial role in unfolding the reality and representing catastrophic events. Life continues and since the Hutu and the Tutsi are living together, sharing daily chores in their villages, they should forgive and ask for forgiveness. Otherwise, one cannot build a country.

From the excerpt above, we can infer that writing is the sole way for Mukasonga to mourn and seek a remedy. She writes to deal with the catastrophic loss to be mourned, to make sense of her suffering and make it perceivable for the reader. In an interview, she brought forth that writing had been a way of mourning to remember and respect those lost ones who even did not have a proper grave. For her, her books are ‘Tombeau de Papier’<sup>1</sup> of her loved ones that enable her to keep them beside and to remember them.

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<sup>1</sup> Mukasonga describes her books as ‘Tombeau de Papier’ in French, which means ‘Tomb of Paper’, for the victims of the genocide do not have a proper grave.

Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Rwanda in 1956, before the social revolution in 1959 which was a turning point in the history of Rwanda. That is to say, she was born into an atmosphere of conflict, hatred and fear, for revolution brought not peace but turmoil to the country. She witnessed brutal assaults of the Hutu, until she settled in France in 1992, leaving her family behind. She experienced malevolence during her studentship, which later turned into the subject of her novel, *Our Lady of the Nile*. Finally, in 1994, during one of the most horrendous mass violences in history, she lost 27 members of her family, including her parents.

Although she was not a flesh witness<sup>2</sup> of the genocide, Mukasonga witnessed the Hutu violence throughout her life. In her books, which consist of two autobiographies, several short stories and novels, she accomplished to show the grounds of the genocide in 1994 effectively and realistically. After her two autobiographies, *The Bare foot Woman* and *Cockroaches*, Mukasonga wrote her first novel *Our Lady of the Nile*. In an interview she claimed that she had started writing fiction because she felt it gave her the distance she needed to say things that couldn't be expressed in a straightforward autobiography. She notes that she chose fiction as the form of her narrative because, "fiction makes it possible to take on subjects that would be too difficult or painful to address in the first person. It allows me also to maintain a certain distance from what I write."<sup>3</sup> For her it was a dilemma to express her grief. Yet, literature gives her the opportunity

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<sup>2</sup>This term is borrowed from Yuval Noah Harari's article *Scholars, Eyewitnesses and Flesh Witnesses of War*. In the article, Harari claims that knowledge is something we obtain through experience and sensibility. Flesh witness lives through the phenomenon, feels it, tastes it and sees it, and that makes him/her gain authority over the eyewitnesses and scholars.

<sup>3</sup> Scholastique Mukasonga, "Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide," interview by Deborah Treisman, *The New Yorker*, November 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/scholastique-mukasonga-11-12-18>



to overcome this dilemma, and using it as a tool, she explores the borders of her imagination, and we see that clearly in her novel.

As a moral witness, she also aims to delve deep into the root causes of the genocide. For her, it would be insufficient to address the Hutu as the perpetrators of the violence and ignore the colonial impact on the dynamics of the country. She believes that to change the Western perception of the Rwandan conflict and African people in general, the truth must be said, which is something that couldn't be found in history books. In her novel, she achieves her goal and tells the reader the untold. To do so she adapts the turmoil of Rwanda to the girls' school and uses adolescent female characters to demonstrate a divided nation. She contends assuredly in an interview, "I'm not a political writer or a historian. Many African specialists, like Jean-Pierre Chrétien, have studied the way in which the myths of nineteenth-century European racist anthropology interpreted Rwandan society in terms of races and invasions – an interpretation that had tragic consequences for Rwandan society."<sup>4</sup> Here, Mukasonga refers to the Hamitic myth, which was made up by the colonizers to form a new history for the peoples of Rwanda. The Hamitic myth, which bore the idea that Tutsi came from somewhere else and they were superior while the Hutu were the natives, was written by the colonizers and translated into Kinyarwanda<sup>5</sup> immediately in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With this came the race policy, which got into every aspect of life of the Hutu and the Tutsi. What is significant in Mukasonga's statements is that, on the one hand writing is a way for her to recover the colonial trauma she had been through; and, on the other hand, as history is set up the Western world, it is literature that will break the dominant influence of the West on the country. Marc Nichanian stresses the point

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<sup>4</sup> Scholastique Mukasonga, "Interview with Scholastique Mukasonga," interview by Suzy Ceulan, *New Welsh Review*, Issue 102, <https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=645>

<sup>5</sup> Kinyarwanda is one of the official languages in Rwanda.

by claiming that art has the power to reestablish the phenomenon in the universal memory.<sup>6</sup> This is one initial purpose of Mukasonga; writing to unfold the truth for the next generation and the whole world.

Nichanian indicates in *Edebiyat ve Felaket* that, “History is denialist by its essence.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, according to the ever-changing conjuncture and ideologies, diversifications occur in historiography. Another comment comes from Sara R. Horowitz:

“[...] writing history entails the same set of problems, that as soon as one writes history, one has produced a narrative similarly shaped and distorted by the limitations of language, generic conventions, ideology, and the like. “Just write history,” I told him, is precisely what we cannot do.”<sup>8</sup>

So, what Mukasonga needed to do was to confront the Western gaze on Rwanda which was and still being defined by the colonial forces.

Historical writings give only a general framework of the phenomena; they dehumanize and finally exclude the victims. All in all, the victim loses his or her voice. Through the literary representations, the victim gains her identity back. As Daniel Terris states, “Fiction restores souls to the victims”.<sup>9</sup> Marc Nichanian, too, argues that the unique realm to give voice to catastrophic events is literature: “[...] we think we can write history based on testimonies. Even worse, we

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<sup>6</sup> Marc Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, translated by Ayşegül Sönmezay (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011), p.111.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> Sara R. Horowitz, “Review: Rethinking Holocaust Testimony: The Making and Unmaking of the Witness,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1992), pp. 45-68 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/743434>

<sup>9</sup> “Literary Responses to Mass Violence”, Brandeis University, last access March 12, 2020 [https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary\\_Responses.pdf](https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary_Responses.pdf), p.120

presume testimonies display pure experience for the world to see and, in this way, transcend the fictionality literature requires.”<sup>10</sup> Testimonies fail to touch the essence of the catastrophe, because it is impossible for the victim-survivor to confront the power of the perpetrators which forms the denialist disposition of genocide. Moreover, we do not understand what testimony means in reality, for we cannot comprehend what catastrophe comprises.

Having said that, my research indicates that history, archives, testimonies and whatsoever are insufficient to put forth the unseen. As Edward Hallett Carr argues, “The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.”<sup>11</sup> Carr hits the right note on the issue in his autobiography. He puts forth that the first idea that gave him the meaning of history was when he learned that Herodotus’s narrative of Persian Wars had been formed and interpreted according to his attitude against the Peloponnesian War which had been ongoing at that time. His statement makes us infer that to reach the bare truth is something almost impossible. I believe it will be to the point to refer to Fanon here:

*“History, of course, though nevertheless written by the Westerners and to serve their purposes, will be able to evaluate from time to time certain periods of the African past. But, standing face to face with his country at the present time, and observing clearly and objectively the events of today throughout the continent, which he wants to make his own, the intellectual is terrified by the void, the degradation, and the savagery he sees there. Now he feels that he must get away from the white culture. He must seek*

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<sup>10</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.37

<sup>11</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1987), p.12

*his culture elsewhere, anywhere at all; and if he fails to find the substance of culture of the same grandeur and scope as displayed by the ruling power, the native intellectual will very often fall back upon emotional attitudes and will develop a psychology which is dominated by exceptional sensitivity and susceptibility. This withdrawal, which is due in the first instance to a begging of the question in his internal behavior mechanism and his own character, brings out, above all, a reflex and contradiction which is muscular*".<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the first chapter of my study will focus on the theories on how literature deals with catastrophic events. I will try to show how literature succeeds to speak for future generations while historiography fails to do so. As my research indicates history is engaged by its nature. The ideologies and conjuncture, international relations and future concerns of politics form history as a necessity.

In the second chapter of this research, *Our Lady of the Nile* will be analyzed. The title of the novel represents the elite Catholic boarding school for girls, which, with its inhabitants, displays Rwanda on a micro scale. In the novel, the river Nile and Virgin Mary stand as the root of the conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi. That is to say, colonial powers created a myth that the Tutsi had come from Egypt and invaded Rwanda. This made the Tutsi invaders, and the Hutu righteous owners of the country, which turned the Hutu against the Tutsi, instead of the colonial powers. The emergence of the Hamitic myth brought race policy and the novel puts it in the center to show how the Hutu as well as the missionaries welcomed it. What Mukasonga marks in her novel is that it is not a racial conflict that comes up, but the colonial-made hatred based on superiority

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<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.220.

and subalternity. No doubt she brilliantly uses those concepts to lay bare what really was the motivation of that animosity, of those who massacred their neighbors, even in some cases, people from their own blood. To show that the division of the Hutu and the Tutsi was engineered by the church and the Belgian administration hand in hand, Mukasonga depicts the girls as close friends who chat and laugh about the boys or argue about the best recipes of their mothers' cooking. All in all, the use of Hamitic myth and its reflection on the inhabitants of the school deserves a scrutiny, which will be one of the themes of chapter two.

The historical background of the conflict between these two tribes will be covered shortly in the second chapter of this study. The social revolution stands as the turning point in Rwanda's history of violence. It is known that before the independence in 1962, the Tutsi king was in charge and the Hutu were the secondary citizens. After the social revolution in 1959, the Hutu asked for their democratic rights as it was the dream of Africa as a whole. However, it was not a Rwandan revolution. It was a Hutu revolution that sought freedom both from the Tutsi and the colonial powers. Following the revolution, the regime shifted and with the support of the church and the Belgian administration the Hutu gained power. This was the starting point of the violence against the Tutsi, and Mukasonga reiterates the case in the novel in several occasions that takes the reader to one of the root causes of the genocide.

The revolution did not bring stability to Rwanda, but it poured out the consciousness of the oppressed Hutu. Mahmood Mamdani's comments on the subject as: "the underside of the Rwandan revolution, its political tragedy, was that this relentless pursuit of justice turned into a quest for revenge. That quest

was the hallmark of the First Republic.”<sup>13</sup> For the Hutu, the Tutsi were aliens to be got rid of. Adopting the Hamitic Myth, they justified their suppression by claiming the Tutsi were aliens who invaded the country. When and how did the racial segregation start? To what extent did the colonizers support racial conflict? Although the Rwandan genocide has been frequently described as the ‘neighbors killing their neighbors’, were the Tutsi and the Hutu really neighbors? We will trace the answers for these questions in the novel. Also, in the chapter entitled ‘Cultural Bomb’<sup>14</sup>, the identity confusion among the girls will be analyzed. As the novel indicates, there are significant instances where the reader sees the standing European values in the country, specifically in the region where the school is located. In the novel it can be seen that even the vegetables served at the school are not local but from Europe, because it was believed that this was a necessity to civilize the girls. Also, at a significant moment, girls try to whiten their skin color with a lotion to look like their favorite European film stars. All in all, Mukasonga demonstrates the fragmented identities of the girls under white supremacy. Madan Sarup defines identity as follows:

*“I believe that our identities are, to some extent constructed by social structures. To put it briefly, structures are often constraints on the way we act. These constraints can be material, or political. Political constraints mean that, in some situations, other people have the power to determine how we act and even influence how we think.”*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.55.

<sup>14</sup> Ngugi wa Thiongo’o describes the term ‘Cultural Bomb’ in his work ‘Decolonising The Mind’ which will be discussed in chapter 2

<sup>15</sup> Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.,1996), p.9.

As Sarup puts forth clearly, the identity of a person, tribe, society and nation is formed by the external powers, which can be a father, a chief, or a political leader. Here the important thing to ask is how identity or let's say lack of identity motivates a person to commit such violent acts; first at the school among the students, then all over the country. This is a significant point to be examined to understand one of the chief reasons of the Rwandan Genocide. With their given identity, first the Tutsi had the power and oppressed the Hutu. And when the wind blew from a different way, colonizers shifted the subjects. Accordingly, the suppression of the Tutsi by the Hutu started. That was the major reason for the failure of the social revolution. For, it was the revolution of the Hutu, not Rwanda. There was not a unity in the nation, which was fundamental to form a free nation. Eventually, the violence evolved into the 1994 genocide. As Fanon states,

*“National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped countries, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging.”*<sup>16</sup>

Finally, I believe that Mukasonga's choice to demonstrate the origin of the violence through girls deserves a scrutiny. I argue that, by doing so, she tries to show that the seeds of hatred had been planted long before the genocide. It did not just pop up as a sudden reflex. Unquestionably, as we will cover in the novel, even innocence of young girls, if there remained any, could not help it and failed,

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<sup>16</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, P.168

because along with the racial segregation hatred had been internalized by the Hutu as a natural notion. Mukasonga puts her finger on the subject:

*“The character of Fontenailles in Notre-Dame du Nil (Our Lady of the Nile), uses irony to lay bare the myths the colonial administrators and missionaries had created about the Tutsis. The genocide didn’t suddenly erupt on 7 April 1994; it began on 1 November 1959, and its ideological roots go back to the 1930s and beyond.”*<sup>17</sup>

No doubt she skillfully shows the reader that the colonial powers distorted Rwanda by writing a new history, reconstructing the identities, and annihilating its culture. “With a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation,”<sup>18</sup> stresses Cabral. What happened in Rwanda like the other colonized countries all over the world is exactly what he brings forth. The colonizers came, reconstructed the country, exploited it however they wished, and finally ‘seemed to’ left it in ruins.

As a final point, the school was built after Rwanda had gained independence and was raising well-educated Christian girls. We see that the French-speaking school with its administrative staff embodies the colonial powers and the students are stuck between several identities as well as Western values and their own beliefs. Overall, we see that as the novel proceeds, the horror, prejudice, hatred and violence unveil giving the marks of the genocide of 1994. In the chapter entitled *The Virgin’s Nose: The Footsteps of the Genocide*, we will delve into the suspense of the upcoming massacre that Mukasonga depicts as the gospel truth. Yet, it takes a minor place in the novel, as it is not the objective of

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<sup>17</sup>Mukasonga, “Interview with Scholastique Mukasonga,” *New Welsh Review*

<sup>18</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, (New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1973), p.89.



Mukasonga to ‘write’ the genocide. Rather, she wants to unfold the truth that had been hidden for such a long time, and her novel gives her that opportunity.

The reader of this thesis will see how a catastrophic event turns into an inexpressible delusion. Likewise, the reader will comprehend why literature is necessary to show what the ‘real’ thing is among the concrete but questionable facts. A well-told story is a powerful thing that can change the world. *Our Lady of the Nile*, which was also adapted to a feature film with the same title, fits well into that definition. It accomplishes to demonstrate the pre-colonial culture of peoples, unfolds the truth to confront the colonizers’ influence, and attempts to change the view of the Western world on Rwanda.

Before moving into details, Amilcar Cabral’s words will summarize Mukasonga’s overall intention for writing:

*“In combatting racism, we don't make progress if we combat the people themselves. We have to combat the causes of racism. If a bandit comes in my house and I have a gun I cannot shoot the shadow of this bandit. I have to shoot the bandit. Many people lose energy and effort, and make sacrifices combatting shadows. We have to combat the material reality that produces the shadow. If we cannot change the light that is one cause of the shadow, we can at least change the body. It is important to avoid confusion between the shadow and the body that projects the shadow. We are encouraged by the fact that each day more of our people, here and in Africa, realize this reality. This reinforces our confidence in our final victory.”<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, p.77.

As a post-colonial writer, Mukasonga gives herself and the countless victim-survivors a chance to mourn their loss and gives voice to the victims and the survivors who had been silenced for a long time. She restores the identities of her peoples and evokes recognition of a nation in the Western world.

## CHAPTER I

### RESPONSE TO CATASTROPHE

#### 1.1. Predicament of Literature as a Response to Catastrophe

Scholastique Mukasonga did not witness the genocide herself. Yet this doesn't make her an invalid narrator of the catastrophic events entreated in her writings. The Rwandan genocide, or in Nichanian's words the 'catastrophe', was a result of linear events dated back to almost a century beforehand. So, it would be deficient to focus on the 'genocide' itself, with the horrid acts, types of torture, and figures of death toll and so on. This attitude would give 'genocide' a kind of identity and take it as a materialized phenomenon, which does not bear the human and human factors in itself. To be more precise, genocide makes no sense to its victims. It is beyond comprehension and articulation for them. What remains for the victim is either death or unspeakable grief.

To demonstrate the motive of using the word catastrophe in lieu of genocide, Marc Nichanian succinctly points out the difference between the two terms. If they were used interchangeably, it would be disrespectful to both terms. Consequently, what genocide means for the victim, how it turns into a catastrophe for her would be inevitably eluded.<sup>20</sup> The source for the catastrophic events in Rwanda, in which the subjected group changed as per historical and economical context, started in 1916 when the country was recolonized by Belgium<sup>21</sup> who put in the race conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu. From then until the end of the

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<sup>20</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.20

<sup>21</sup> Rwanda was first colonized by the German forces in 1889. After the WWII, in 1916, it came under the rule of Belgian administration.

genocide, which followed four years of civil war, the Tutsi and the Hutu switched the roles as oppressors and victims. Yet the majority of the victims were Tutsi who faced the horrendous incidents, which caused almost one million deaths in a very short span of time.

What were the factors that brought a country to such a dreaded point? Mukasonga is on the way of searching for the answers to this question. As she had been the flesh witness of the process of displacement of the Tutsis which resulted in the oppressive and humiliating acts of Hutus and as the moral witness of the mass killings in 1994 in which she lost almost her entire family, she had a word to utter not only for herself but also for the ones who didn't have the chance to do so; for they were either dead or lack such opportunity. Her 'feeble' words will try to provide remedy for her grief, and through her words a nation will be appreciated by the world and remembered by the future generations.

Rwanda is unique in the black continent in terms of the ethnic conflict enduring still today with regard to political and scholar interpretations of the discord. Peter Uvin lays bare the condition in Rwanda as follows: "There is no place in the world where such a radically opposed views of ethnicity confront each other in such a bloody manner in the political arena."<sup>22</sup> As he stresses in the same article, the "[...] polarizing interpretation of the history of ethnicity in Rwanda"<sup>23</sup> is still standing among the scholars. As he claims, the debate on the ethnicity realities and the internal and external factors of the genocide as well as the failures of the international intervention in the phenomenon are still a major matter of debate among the arbiters of the issue. Here the point is, among the

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Uvin, "Reading the Rwandan Genocide", in *International Studies Review* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 75-99

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

highly complicated issues such as ethnicity, identity, political and economic concerns in a formidable country where the clash of authorities had a major role, to find the truth is not within possibility. In these circumstances, the truth will be bent, reconstructed, written and finally presented by the authorities (needless to say, they would be the Western authorities and scholars). As the colonizers have formed the Rwandan history since the early twentieth century, and still have an influence on the geography, it would be insufficient to take the notion of the authorities as the truth. To add more, since Rwandan peoples did not have an alphabet, their culture was highly based on oral tradition until the colonization of the country. Their traditions had been transferred by oral literature centered in mythology, in which the political and cultural life was framed. Yet, colonizers replaced their mythology with an invented one, namely the Hamitic myth. What is more important is that oral literature bears the culture of a nation, which plays a crucial role in forming and preserving identity. Unfortunately, it was interrupted as French became the dominant language as the colonizers entered the region. During the colonization, Rwandan mother tongue Kinyarwanda was restricted. Specifically at schools French became the only language that children were taught. To come to the point, these cases show that what is left for the nation is literature as a truthful ground liberated from the imperialist ideologies to form their identity and expose it to the Rwandan people and the world.

Why Mukasonga does not write the genocide? The genocide did not pop up all of a sudden. As she points out, ‘The genocide didn’t suddenly erupt on 7 April 1994; it began on 1 November 1959, and its ideological roots go back to the

1930s and beyond.’<sup>24</sup> During her school years in 1970s, which stand as the epicenter in her novel, there already had been genocide-like barbaric doings and they just repeated themselves in 1994. Ultimately, it may be argued that while Mukasonga leaves the question of ‘genocide’ to the arbiters such as scholars and power holders, she tries to lay bare the truth behind the curtains. She has a word on this point:

*“I want nothing to be forgotten. Justice has not been done. So we have to continue commemorating. To do so, truth must be told. Actually, genocide is an ending. That is why, with this book I tried to plumb the depths of its reasons. Who closed his eyes and turned their backs? I write because I want the truth to take place in the international literature.”*<sup>25</sup>

In the pursuit of the truth, Mukasonga looks back and wanders among the infamous events of pre-genocide era.

Another crucial question is why Nichanian uses ‘catastrophe’ in lieu of ‘genocide’? Marie Berry has a clear explanation. She states that in recent years scholars debate on conflicts to be named ‘genocide’. While the UN Genocide Convention refers to the conflicts in Bosnia, Armenia, Cambodia and Rwanda as ‘genocide’, scholars including human right activists and Western policymakers debate on whether the destruction of indigenous people in Americas or elsewhere should be counted as genocide.<sup>26</sup> We may also add Indonesia or several other

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<sup>24</sup> Mukasonga, “Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide,” *The New Yorker*, November 2018

<sup>25</sup> *L’invité*, “Scholastique Mukasonga: “Le Rwanda Veut la Vérité sur le Genocide,” June 26, 2014, video, 9:56 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMjMneUXVPs&t=46s>

<sup>26</sup> Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 22.

minor or major cases and ask how the authorities account for it. Berry claims that the problem here is not only the genocides but also the wars, which should be counted as evil and immoral by the authorities. She also points out that civilian casualties have been climbing up to 90% in recent wars of the 1990s especially when the Middle East is taken into consideration. It is certain that the matter of classifying those requires further examination. She has more to say on the subject:

*“Moreover, the term “genocide” tends to simplify complex, overlapping conflicts into a neat framework, wherein one social group is the perpetrator and another is the victim... the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) massacred tens of thousands of Rwandans as it invaded and took control of the country... Even further, some members of each ethnic group committed atrocities against their co-ethnics; for example, Hutu extremists killed tens of thousands of Hutu who were political opponents of the regime, were married to Tutsi, or who refused to participate in the violence. Hutu men also raped Hutu women. Genocidal racism, in other words, harms many beyond the target group. In any case, when we exclusively refer to these conflicts as genocides, we unintentionally neglect these diverse and multilayered logics of violence. Understanding those killed in genocidal violence as somehow more definitive victims than those killed in more conventional military engagements can create hierarchies of victimhood that intensify social divisions, thwart reconciliation and justice, and perpetuate cycles of violence.”<sup>27</sup>*

Conflicts in a given geography do not bear homogeneous traits. It was not only

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.23-24

the Tutsi who were massacred in Rwanda. The Hutu had their share in 1972. We know that the Tutsi troops in Burundi attacked the Hutu killing almost two hundred thousand of them. Yet, it would be insufficient to ignore the Western influence both as an initiator of the conflict during the colonial era and later as a supporter of the mass violence during decolonization. If the essence of any kind of conflict becomes comprehensible, if it is put on the table with its multiple dimensions, then there can be a chance to avoid tragic futures. Therefore, the multifaceted components of genocide, or ‘mass violence’ as Berry prefers to state, need to be examined. This is one reason why Mukasonga does not write, cannot write about the genocide. For her, the genocide was an end and it was insufficient to focus on genocide to find the truth. In an interview she pinpoints the issue:

*“They lay the blame of the genocide on Rwandan people. However, there is a responsibility on international level. They are responsible because they turned their backs. For this reason the justice has not been done. Yes it was the Rwandan that did it. But there are things in necessity to be uncovered. That is why I am writing. Why have all this happened? Why have we killed children? In Rwanda Tutsis and Hutus are parts of a mosaic. They are dependent on each other all the time. Why have we all lived through such horrendous events? If people know the covered truth, then justice will be covered.”*<sup>28</sup>

“Catastrophe and Genocide do not amount to the same thing”<sup>29</sup> says Nichanian. Coinciding with Berry, he argues that since there are so many people suffering in this world, it is not general facts, experiences or sufferings of the victims that he

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<sup>28</sup> *L’invité*, “Scholastique Mukasonga: “Le Rwanda Veut la Vérité sur le Genocide,”

<sup>29</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p. 19



deals with. He is interested in the catastrophe not the genocidal case.<sup>30</sup> As he repeatedly points out genocide is something that the historian should deal with, and catastrophe is the destruction of the linguistic competence of the victim; it is the death of the witness<sup>31</sup> which is worth to be focused. “It is necessary to distinguish phenomenon from case. My objective is the phenomenon of catastrophe itself; not the historical case nor the historical events.”<sup>32</sup> Nchanian proceeds in his book putting a divergent yet thought-provoking view on the subject, underlining how insufficient, further manipulative it is to write about genocide. For, “[...] catastrophe is not the totality of atrocities. Yet, no human being bears the capacity to calculate this totality.”<sup>33</sup> Mukasonga meditates on the same subject as follows:

*“I’m not a political writer or a historian. Many Africa specialists, like Jean-Pierre Chrétien, have studied the way in which the myths of nineteenth-century European racist anthropology interpreted Rwandan society in terms of races and invasions – an interpretation that had tragic consequences for Rwandan society.”*<sup>34</sup>

So, we may suggest that something beyond the ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ can have a word for catastrophe. So, it is precisely literature that will set the victim/survivor free to demonstrate her view on the catastrophe and not the perpetrator’s will. She says:

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*,p.20.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p.33.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

<sup>34</sup> Mukasonga, “Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide,” *The Newyorker*

*“I am telling the poison that had been injected to us from the day I was born. I wrote what I saw. I wrote the reasons of the genocide. We already were expecting the genocide. So I do not want to address the perpetrators directly. They already know themselves. Yet there are still things waiting to be uncovered... I do not blame Hutus. We are all responsible for what had happened. Yet it is just a result. We need to discuss the causes.”*<sup>35</sup>

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Mukasonga depicts the daily life of girls and their struggles within their identity under the influence of Christian and Western values. She pictures her experiences of school years and points out the discriminative politics (such as 10% quotas<sup>36</sup> for Tutsi students’ admission to the school or taking the end of the food line) along with the cheerfulness of the girls with all their innocence, dealing with menstruation, and sharing recipes of cooking banana. While Mukasonga tries to signify a Rwandan identity by depicting daily life routines and Rwandan characteristics, she tries to direct the attention of the reader to the roots of the genocide, force them to take a position on behalf of the social justice idea. No doubt, Mukasonga is not an exploitative writer. She does not write the ferocity she experienced in Rwanda. Even her autobiography *‘Bare Foot Woman’*, which is dedicated to her mother, does not involve horrendous actions or any dreadful deeds. For, she is in search of the reasons not the actions.

On this point Nichanian’s view on the subject must again be taken into consideration. It can be claimed that Mukasonga is the kind of writer who

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<sup>35</sup> *L’invité*, “Scholastique Mukasonga: “Le Rwanda Veut la Vérité sur le Genocide,”

<sup>36</sup> In 1960, the Hutu majority took over the power in Rwanda. The following years brought turmoil between the Hutu and the Tutsi, which resulted in 20.000 Tutsi’s death in seven years. By the mid-1960s it was estimated that half of the Tutsi population were living in neighboring countries. The remaining Tutsis faced discriminative policies, one of which was the quota system. Accordingly, the Tutsi had a 10% of allocation in social and political life in Rwanda, including education and employment.

precisely fits in Nichanian's account on writers of disaster. He argues that the subject who is exposed to torture betrays him/herself when he or she starts telling or writing.<sup>37</sup> For, catastrophe destroys the language. Since the former is beyond any kind of comprehension and is unspeakable, the attempt to tell or write the catastrophe in order to form language integrity for salvation would be a betrayal to the victim. He proceeds: "If you do so, you betray the experience of the victim and you lie to her. You establish normality for denial-driven experience to a certain extent. You force the victim to reject her own experience."<sup>38</sup> Precisely for this reason, Mukasonga writes about daily routines and specific details of Rwandan folklore, which seem to be insignificant, yet they bear life in themselves. Does she depict a kind of denial of the horrendous acts? It is quite clear that the themes she points out in her novel show the opposite. While she points to Rwandan folklore and pagan rituals, she tells about racism and hatred in between the lines. When she deals with political issues, the reader realizes how a nation delved into an atmosphere of hatred and paved the road to an inevitable ending. Mukasonga does not give detailed accounts of hideous acts in her works. This would mean to repeat the will of the executioner.<sup>39</sup> Those evils do not belong to the victims. They are beyond the victim's horizon. Therefore, Mukasonga makes an exchange between life and death. She chooses 'life' instead of death. No doubt it is the culture, language and traditional rituals that humanize people, give them an identity, and make them bear a 'self' rather than 'otherness'. Most importantly, these features form the collective memory of peoples. Ultimately a nation is supposed to emerge, which was expected after the decolonization period in Rwanda. Instead genocide came up.

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<sup>37</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.27.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p.28

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p.80.

Mukasonga's novel is a heart-warming story. She writes what she remembers and most importantly what she longs for. While she depicts the beautiful landscapes of Rwanda in the chapter entitled 'Rain', she writes how the girls miss their homemade food instead of white people's food. She gives a certain amount of space, as she explains the girls' chatting about their mothers' recipes, which makes the reader empathize and form a genuine link with the girls. It is rational to say that she retells the story and fills the gaps in which she puts her soul and heart as well as the lost ones, and welcomes the appreciation of the reader as well. Trinh T.Minh-ha's comment on the issue is worth noting:

*"The simplest vehicle of truth, the story is also said to be 'a phase of communication', the natural form for revealing life'. Its fascination may be explained by its power both to give a vividly felt insight into the life of other people and to revive or keep alive the forgotten, dead ended, turned into stones parts of ourselves."*<sup>40</sup>

To revive or keep alive the forgotten is the motivation for Mukasonga to write. In an interview she says:

*"I know why I write...to revive the lost ones. If I close my eyes, I'm forever walking down that path nobody takes anymore. For there are no more houses, no more coffee shrubs, no more sorghum or sweet potato fields...no more little girls dragging their dolls by a string. They have all fallen to the machete, without proper graves."*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> *L'invité*, "Scholastique Mukasonga: "Le Rwanda Veut la Vérité sur le Genocide,"

Why did I survive, and they did not? is one of the major questions the survivors ask themselves in a state of utmost guilt. This is something that never leaves Mukasonga and by writing, she finds a way to ease her feelings of guilt:

*“I’ve often said it was the genocide of Rwanda’s Tutsis in 1994 that made me a writer. Writing has been a way of mourning for me and, with my books, I’ve woven a shroud for those whose bodies, buried in mass graves or scattered in ossuaries, are lost forever. It was in 2004, when I finally found the courage to go home to Nyamata, that I became aware of my duty of remembrance, because I could write. I was somehow the memory-bearer for those whose very existence, whose every trace, the génocidaires had wanted to wipe out and deny.”<sup>42</sup>*

Mukasonga is a survivor. Yet she does not consider herself a survivor. While she has been holding a guilty conscience as the sole family member who remained alive, she has been shouldering a responsibility for the lost ones. In her autobiographies, *Cockroaches* and *Bare Foot Woman*, the reader can see that Mukasonga does not directly point out the tyrannical acts of the Hutu. Rather, she gives life to the reminiscences of being a Rwandan and depicts the Rwandan culture for the world. Most importantly, it must be underlined that in a world where Rwanda or any other colonizer-violated geography is perceived and put forth through the colonizer’s gaze as an ‘other,’ Mukasonga’s attempt to make a nation visible is of vital importance. A short excerpt from *Cockroaches* gives a hint of her approach to the subject matter of her writing objective:

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<sup>42</sup> Mukasonga, “Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide,” *The Newyorker*

*“In 1994, the old woman was viciously attacked. I won’t describe how she was humiliated, raped, tortured. I want to remember only the woman who gave us milk, Gicanda, the queen with the beautiful face.”*<sup>43</sup>

Or when she writes about her mother, who constitutes the biggest portion in her memoirs, she mostly depicts her daily chores softly and in a lyrical way:

*“Sometimes she spent the whole afternoon on the little patch of land she set aside for plants no one grew anymore. For her they were like the survivors of a happier time, and she seemed to draw a new energy from them. She grew them not for daily consumption but as a way of bearing witness to what was in danger of disappearing, what did disappear in the cataclysm of the genocide.”*<sup>44</sup>

Mukasonga is a memory bearer. She bears memories of her life, of her family, not the genocidaire’s horrendous acts. As a flesh witness of the violence during the exile, and a moral witness of the genocide, she feels responsibility to honor her family’s memory, and those are definitely not the memories formed by the perpetrators of mass violence. Mukasonga thinks of herself as a ‘witness of suffering, but writer and poet all over’<sup>45</sup>:

*“It took me ten years to overcome the guilt of surviving and return to Rwanda, to Nyamata, where my family had been deported in 1960, from where I left for exile in 1973, and where all my loved ones were massacred in April 1994. There I found nothing, not a grave, not a witness – bushes had covered everything. This may be a myth I forged for myself, but I am convinced that my parents chose me for exile not*

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<sup>43</sup> Scholastique Mukasonga, *Cockroaches*, (Paris: Archipelago Books, 2016), p.44.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p.66.

<sup>45</sup> Mukasonga, “Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide,” *The New Yorker*

*only to save my life, but also to perpetuate their memory. By writing I hope to have accomplished what they expected of me.*"<sup>46</sup>

If we turn back to Nichanian, he clarifies the issue in a short yet effective way: "The experience of the survivor is an unrepairable loss; both a specific and immeasurable loss. What the survivor lost is precisely the capacity to speak of the loss."<sup>47</sup> Since the lexical integrity is destroyed, the demonstration of any catastrophic event in any kind of language is beyond possibility. As a result, catastrophe is beyond the ability of articulation of the survivors.<sup>48</sup> The linguistic deed, which is far beyond the approach of the witness, which experiences despair and impossibility in itself, is literature only.<sup>49</sup> Briefly, literature can create a room for the survivor to find a way out of this dilemma. The following quotation is taken from Maurice Blanchot's thought provoking book *Writers of Disaster* that corroborates Nichanian's account on the issue:

*"The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; "I" am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me — an other than I who passively become other. There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future — that*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.88.

<sup>48</sup> ibid, p.33.

<sup>49</sup> ibid, p.34.

*which is yet to come— if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it...We are passive with respect to the disaster, but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date.”*<sup>50</sup>

The victim is passive, for ‘she is considered to be the steady bearer of its (disaster’s) madness.’ In Nichanian’s words, as he shows how Zabel Yesayan fails to put the agony of a ‘respected nation’ into words, the victim cannot bear witness because the witness is dead.

Literature creates a room for those representations. It can pass beyond the law of witnessing and demonstrate the unseen, make it comprehensible both for the victim/writer and the reader. With its immensity, literature allows the writer to pass beyond his/her imagination, gives her an opportunity to express his/her feelings and creates a realm in which the reader establishes a strong bond with the characters. *Our Lady of the Nile* is such a novel written with a humoristic style, which makes the reader either cheer up or grieve with the characters. Precisely this empathy establishes a bond between the novel and the reader that ultimately allows creating a condition for recognition of the ‘peoples’ of the catastrophe. Mukasonga’s meditation on the subject is clarifying for us:

*“Humor has always been an integral part of my books. It gives me the distance I need to carry on writing without succumbing to the pain and madness that stalk survivors. Even in tragic circumstances, a sense of*

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<sup>50</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p.1.



*humor is something that all Rwandans share. It feels important to stress that.*<sup>51</sup>

Literature sets Mukasonga free to find a way to express her emotions and anxieties. Also pushing the genocide aside, she plugs the reader into the feelings and experiences of the girls. By doing so, she manages to create a consciousness and she would have failed if the genocide was taken at hand not the reasons lay behind. On this point, Nichanian elaborates on two Armenian writers: Zabel Yesayan and Hagop Osagan. It will be necessary to scrutinize Nichanian's analysis of these writers to fully understand the impossibility of narrating catastrophic events. He puts forth that catastrophe is not a sum of brutal acts and no human being has the capacity to calculate the sum of those brutalities.<sup>52</sup> Having said that, he takes the case of Zabel Yesayan, which serves a significant point in Nichanian's account on writing about catastrophe. As he argues, for Yesayan, while mourning still was within possibility after her experiences in Adana Kilikya, she failed to do so after 1915.<sup>53</sup> She asserts that the deaths during the Adana massacre had been in the name of becoming a nation, forming a civic consciousness within the Empire. Nichanian argues that one needs to find a meaning to death, and the capacity of mourning allows one to do so.<sup>54</sup> For, a reason has to stand for those deaths. Yesayan had the power to write what she had witnessed in Adana, but when it comes to 1915, she was devoid of making a sense of her people's annihilation. What has changed for Yesayan in 1915? The answer to this question will take us to the point. Nichanian argues, "the

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<sup>51</sup>Mukasonga, "Interview with Scholastique Mukasonga," *New Welsh Review*.

<sup>52</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.25.

<sup>53</sup> During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid in 1909, an estimated of 30.000 Armenians were massacred in Adana province, in Turkey.

<sup>54</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.48.

hesitation between literature and history in terms of testimonials, takes hold of Armenian writers during 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>55</sup> Yesayan, as the witness of the Armenian Genocide, fails to pass beyond being an archivist after 1915, because she cannot find the words to vocalize the catastrophe. She does not know what and how to write. Additionally, she feels overwhelmed by the magnitude of the violence that took place in 1915 and she believes that literature was not capable to explain it. Quoting from Nichanian, here is her reason:

*“She knew that the country was demolished; the citizen turned out to be an executioner, thus, during the transformation of the witness who is obliged to multiply herself to find evidence for a utopic court, the victim faces the reality of genocide machine which crushes her and aims to wipe off the concept of genocidal fact.”*<sup>56</sup>

It is obvious that Yesayan cannot grasp people’s grief. She cannot calculate the despair and indescribable sorrow, which is beyond her imagination. The most important reason for her struggle is that she comes against the concept of ‘death of the witness’. Moreover, she cannot break loose of the competence of the archive. Thus, she forbids herself to make such suffering a subject of literature. For, it would be a sinful act against those who had lost their lives.<sup>57</sup> Nichanian clarifies the issue: “The modern reign of the archive... The survivor’s memory is subjected to the rules of the archive.”<sup>58</sup> Then how can we write about catastrophe? How will the survivor find the words to talk about the catastrophic events? If there is a dead-end, what and how the survivor will transmit the grief, and how is s/he going to succeed? Above all, why does she need to write? Mukasonga

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, p.75.

<sup>56</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.78.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p.78.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p.80.

writes because she needs to keep the memories of her beloved ones that she lost. She fills the gaps in her heart and mourns for Rwanda. Also, she manages to show that there is not Tutsi or Hutu; there are Rwandans. So in an effort to promote reconciliation in her country, she holds the truth tight and shows the influence and in some cases the support of the Western powers in the violence. To do so, she devalues the colonial-made identity, look inside herself, and find her origin as a Rwandan. By positioning Rwandan values against Western values that had been imposed for almost a century, she presents the realities of the Rwandan genocide to the international community. Also, writing in French instead of her mother tongue supports her position as a writer of catastrophe. Although writing in a Western language seems to be ironic, it serves as a crucial tool to deal with a whole Western-engineered discourse. In an interview she says, “Of course, I’d love to write in Kinyarwanda. But who would publish me? In Rwanda, even though English is now the official language, my readers are still mainly French speakers.”<sup>59</sup> She also adds that it is an opportunity to write in French because it allows her to put the issue on the international platform, which stands as a significant motivation for her writings. Hence, we may argue that she stands as a representative of Rwandan Literature in particular, African Literature in general. To raise awareness in the Western perception of the effects of colonialism in Africa, in particular Rwanda, she bears responsibility as a writer. She has to demonstrate the truth about 1994 and draw the attention of the world to the political and economical interests of the European powers that led a nation to catastrophe. She needs to make Rwanda visible and help sustain peace, not only in Rwanda but also in

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<sup>59</sup> Mukasonga, “Interview with Scholastique Mukasonga,” *New Welsh Review*

other parts of the world. For, it is not only about Rwanda. Mukasonga demonstrates the true picture of the colonized countries all over the world. The world remained silent for so long and the violence in Africa was expressed as inter-ethnic conflicts which was a misinterpretation of the issue. With her novel the reader becomes an engaged thinker and finds out that violence is a universal concept and understands the relationship between the text, the universality of violence and its representation. Boubacar Boris Diop has a striking view on the subject:

*“In an Africa viewed as the natural site of all the world’s disasters, the Rwandan massacres were just one more tragedy to add to those in Somalia, Algeria, and Liberia. This attitude demonstrates a racism so complacent that it no longer even knows it exists.”*<sup>60</sup>

Africa remains as the ‘other’ for the rest of the world. It has been perceived in such a way in history, literature, cinema and several other fields for decades. Thereby the conflicts in the continent are perceived as typical of the geography, and thanks to the power holders, they are assumed to be natural and subsequently overlooked by the global conscience. Therefore, literature plays a crucial role in showing what the real issue is. Since the power holders made up the history of Rwanda, since history itself hardly bears the truth and is denialist by its essence, why should not imagination undertake the role as the narrator of the genocide? As a participant of the project “*Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory*”, Diop has more to say:

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<sup>60</sup> Boubacar Boris Diop, “African Authors in Rwanda”, in *Literary Responses*, Brandeis University, p.110 [https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary\\_Responses.pdf](https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary_Responses.pdf), last access March 13, 2020.

*“These texts have given rise to debates that will continue all over the world. This proves, by the way, that different forms of expression are not necessarily in conflict. Because of our novels, journalists are returning to the subject and asking questions of themselves. We used, to a great extent, the work of historians and journalists to create our own lies, which in the end have become even more profound truths.”*<sup>61</sup>

As we come to an end, Mukasonga’s rejection of being a historian or a political writer gains more meaning. The genocide did not pop up all of a sudden. Peoples were massacred in just three months, yet the issue involves more than this. There is more to tell than the events of those infamous three months and the accurate way to do so is possible through literature, which will humanize the victims and subsequently make them visible. To reiterate the point, Mukasonga calls her books ‘*Tombeau de papier*’, which is a striking expression for the situation. The victims of the genocide do not have proper graves and with these books, it seems they have one. She says, “In this way they are with me. It is like visiting them in their graveyards”. The project ‘*Writing by Duty of Memory*’, which was presented in a symposium hosted by Brandeis University in 2003, supports Mukasonga’s position by showing the crucial role of literature in dealing with genocidal events. The project gathered African authors such as Boubacar Boris Diop in Rwanda and their task was to write about the genocide in literary forms. Diop claims that the project has been helping to preserve the memory of 1994. He proceeds that the novels they wrote drew the attention of the journalists, made them revisit the subject, and face the truth that is subjected to cover the works of historians and the arbiters. It was important to produce their own texts and also a good

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<sup>61</sup> Diop, “African Authors in Rwanda”, in *Literary Responses*, p.121

opportunity to reconstitute a collective memory in the wake of human tragedies. Hence, it will be appropriate to finish this part with Diop's words:

*"[...] fiction is an excellent way to fight back against genocide. It restores souls to the victims; even if it can't bring them back to life it can at least give them back their humanity through a ritual of mourning in which the novel becomes a sort of funerary monument."*<sup>62</sup>

In a place where reality and fiction clash with each other, literature creates a unique place for the demonstration of the phenomena.

## **1.2. "I'm Not a Political Writer or a Historian" or "The Modern Reign of the Archive"**

*Like a journalist facing a deadline, forced to jump from one massacre to another, the historian has no choice but to let the dead bury the dead. The novelist, on the other hand, tries to bring them back to life. We must put faces on events rather than just state facts and reel off statistics.*<sup>63</sup>

One cannot fathom Rwanda without considering the colonial influence on the country, which dominated every aspect of life. Starting from the 1896 German occupation and gaining strength with the takeover of Belgian powers, the colonial dominancy interpenetrated to such a degree that a new Rwanda was formed. As a result, the crucial elements of being a nation, such as history, language and collective memory were Westernized. Since Rwanda was a nation whose history had been formed by colonial powers, importance of literature emerges to resettle

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<sup>62</sup> idib, p.120.

<sup>63</sup> idib, p.119

the identity of the peoples as it is the unique tool to replace culture and memory.

Mahmood Mamdani writes in *When Victims Become Killers*:

*“In the absence of written archival sources that go back more than a century, and a recognition that it is difficult to stretch the reliability of oral sources for more than a few generations, historians have looked for other source materials, mainly archaeological and linguistic, to piece together a narrative.”*<sup>64</sup>

It is known that peoples of Rwanda had an oral tradition and after the colonization of the territory, it was the Belgian authorities that composed the Rwandan history. At this point, Mukasonga’s rejection of being a political writer or a historicist becomes more of an issue. There was already a history formed by the colonials, which has been perceived by the Western world, especially during the neocolonial era, and precisely after the 1994 genocide. Moreover, history in general looks at the issues from a general perspective. There is not the victim to be mentioned in history. For this very reason, literature has a key role to plug the reader into a longer set of discourses. With her novel Mukasonga says ‘here is the unfolded reality.’ As a cultural production, literature affects us in a way that can broaden the scope of the issue. It signals more interest for us and ignites feelings of empathy and curiosity as well. We know a little bit more. As a result the dominant colonial discourse that people have been believing, that the African people were barbarians, will not make sense any longer. This is what makes literature significant in representing catastrophe.

The most ill-fated ideology, which was the main motivation of the emergence of racial segregation, and later on, of the 1994 violation, was the

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<sup>64</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.96.

Hamitic theory. It was a colonizer-made theory, which claimed the Tutsi's origins were Hamites. The Belgian colonial reform of 1926-1936 put forth the idea of the Tutsi having Egyptian origin for the Tutsi had different physical characteristics than the Hutu. The Tutsi were taller than the Hutu and had narrow structured noses; they looked more like whites than the Hutu. This was a convenient excuse for the Belgians to exploit the country. Subsequently, in 1935 they promulgated the most significant implement, that is the ethnicity discrimination were to be put on the cards, which enforced the racial segregation in Rwanda. This was one of the major reasons of the 1994 events (After the genocide, during the recovery, Rwandan people removed ethnic discrimination of their identity cards). When the Tutsi were disempowered, colonial powers supported the Hutu and until the genocide, they supported them to resume the exploitation. It will be to the point to state that this double-crossing ideology of the Belgians served a major role in the conflict between the two parties. For this reason Mukasonga places her narrative of *Our Lady of the Nile* into the frame of Hamitic theory, and shows the origin of 1994 genocide in the novel, which will be scrutinized in the second chapter of this research.

If we turn back to the problematic state of writing the catastrophe, Mukasonga's statement in the title needs to be further clarified. Nichanian argues that history is denialist by its essence.<sup>65</sup> It is a situation where Osagan finally finds himself in after struggling with writing catastrophe. He finds Osagan's statement extraordinary:

*“Tens of hundreds of books would remain incapable to tell exactly what a simple village had been through. Yet what had happened is not even a*

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<sup>65</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.16.



*narration. It is a tragedy that extends over years. The only difference is that, the scene in which the tragedy took place spread all over the world and the actors were the human material adorned with diverse and imaginable various types of psychology. One human being would be unable to demonstrate all of these with the reference of historical approach. After all, I believe Cyprus is not Island of Saint Lazarus. I have to content within the bounds of my power.”<sup>66</sup>*

Nichanian comments that what Osagan tries to say here is that since he does not have the archives, he cannot write the 1915 events. He continues that the necessity of testimonials for Osagan occurs when he faces the truth of the impossible demonstration of catastrophe through literature.<sup>67</sup> Osagan apparently finds himself in a kind of dilemma. While he takes history as a denialist concept, he relies on testimonies and archives as tools to approach to the demonstration of the catastrophe. However, keeping a certain distance with these tools, as Mukasonga did in her works, would forge a possibility of understanding, mourning and lastly presenting the grief of a whole nation and bear the capacity of reaching the whole world.

In her autobiographical work *Bare Foot Woman* Mukasonga reluctantly gives only a few testimonial accounts of the exile towards the ending. What she takes into account is, as in chapters like “Medicine”, “Bread” and “Land of Stories”, telling about Rwandan folklore, her mother’s traditional medicines, ways to plant sorghum and everyday life. By doing this, she overcomes the dilemma of being a witness and turns testimonial accounts into a commemoration which

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, p.114.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p.115.

allows her to remember warm and joyful times that she spent with her family. As Nichanian asserts, the reason Osagan failed to get over the dead end was that he could not set himself free from the testimonials or archives. On the other hand, Mukasonga does not rely on testimonies while she puts catastrophic events into words in her works. She knows well what catastrophe is: The death of the witness, the impossibility of vocalizing the catastrophe, and finally the invisibility of a nation. She intersperses the oppression coming from either colonial supremacy or extremist Hutus in her narrative. In *Bare Foot Woman*, while she tells about everyday life, she does not exclude the outcomes of colonial influence on her nation. Here is a striking example of her mother's answer as she refuses to use a box of matches given by the missionaries to build a fire in their hut:

“[...] the white people have given us so many gifts, and look where it's gotten us! So, when I have to, let me go looking for fire just as we've always done here. At least that's one thing we have left.”<sup>68</sup>

We have to ask why Mukasonga needs to refuse being a political writer or historicist. Nichanian sets forth brilliantly that not the genocide but the catastrophe is the experience of the victim. Since Mukasonga deals with the catastrophe itself, it is only literature that will pass this experience and make it comprehensible.<sup>69</sup> For this reason, Mukasonga does not rely on testimonial facts in her autobiography. Most importantly, she doesn't write about the genocide in any of her works. Moreover, following *Bare Foot Woman*, she writes her novel *Our Lady of the Nile*, again not to focus on the genocide but to chronicle the past. It is not about being a flesh witness. Mukasonga might not be in Rwanda during

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<sup>68</sup> Scholastique Mukasonga, *Bare Foot Women*, translated from French by Jordan Stump, (Newyork: First Archipelago Books, 2014), p.58.

<sup>69</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.190.

the mass killings. Yet, it is not the genocide that is worth noticing. For, genocide is a political and historical issue that is taken into consideration by the power holders. So, it is worth laying bare the circumstances, the reasons and the conditions that lead the way to such a catastrophic phenomenon. It is crucial to reiterate that the four months of mass killings did not just start all of a sudden. There is a background to this phenomenon, how the Hutu became butchers and the Tutsi became the victims. It is useless to point at the Hutu as the criminals. Yet it is important to point out how the Hutu turned into ‘mimic men’<sup>70</sup> and how the Tutsi walked the road to annihilation. This is precisely what Mukasonga achieves in her works. She escapes from the realm of genocide’s will, deals with her grief and tries to find a meaning for it. And this is a challenge to be taken care of in the field of literature. The loss of the capacity of verbalizing the loss and the loss of the ability of interpretation<sup>71</sup> ...that is the catastrophe and it is all about the process, not the final deed. Nichanian quotes the clarifying statement of Osagan, which supports Mukasonga’s approach to catastrophe in her novel: “Yet novels cannot come to life in the epilogue.”<sup>72</sup> According to Nichanian, what Osagan tries to assert here is that a novel should carry itself to a time before phenomenon and once more, accompany the whole process that led the nation to catastrophe. One should look back to find a meaning and pass that meaning to the peoples of the world. This is striking when we think about Mukasonga’s works. Through her life with her people, she suffered being an exile in her own country, and subsequently, almost one million Tutsi were slaughtered. Yet, genocide put aside, her experiences under the oppression of the neo-colonial influence and the Hutu’s

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<sup>70</sup> V.S. Naipaul uses the term ‘mimic man’ to define the colonized people who adopted Western values. I borrowed the term to emphasize the Hutu who mimicked the colonizers in terms of violence in addition to Naipaul’s view.

<sup>71</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.176.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, p.177.

tyrannical acts do not play a major role in her novel. Nichanian's words will explain the point. He firmly states that the catastrophe is not an abstraction and any kind of political or historical approach would fail to define the experience of the victim.<sup>73</sup> That is to say, genocide is a case that should be evaluated on the historical and political grounds. One cannot approach it through literature.

Mukasonga says: "I started writing fiction because I felt it gave me the distance I needed to say things that couldn't be expressed in straightforward autobiography."<sup>74</sup> As we see, and there is more to come, Mukasonga overcomes the challenge of demonstrating what she had been through in Rwanda as an exile. As we will see in detail in the second chapter, she finds a way to tell catastrophe where Yesayan and Osagan reach the dead end. The two writers Nichanian refers to in his book fail to demonstrate their perception of the catastrophe. At this point, it will be crucial to analyze the situation of Hagop Osagan after Yesayan. Nichanian states that, "[...] is it novel itself that gives the necessary space for presenting the impossible to the full extent? If it is so, then the novel will give the opportunity for us to express the essence of the catastrophe."<sup>75</sup> Nichanian comes to this point after stating the failure of Osagan in writing his novel's last chapter, which was intended to tell the 1915 events.

Nichanian defines Osagan as "[...] the only writer who possesses the knowledge of obligation to cope with the magnitude of catastrophe and the power of writing".<sup>76</sup> Yet, eventually he cannot deal with this challenge. Hagop Osagan is a leading writer and novelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, p.190

<sup>74</sup> Mukasonga, "Scholastique Mukasonga on Tutsi Life and the Rwandan Genocide," *The New Yorker*

<sup>75</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.110.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, p.85

Literature. He survived the exile of intellectuals in April 1915 and gave his life to the reconstruction of Western Armenian culture. The significant books among his works are the ten-volume *Panorama of Armenian Literature* and *Mnatsortats (The Remnants)*. Osagan tries to write about the catastrophe in *The Remnants* in novel form. According to Nichanian, Osagan believed that, to form a nation, one needs to aestheticize literature: “It is not possible to live without imagination...we will not be disappointed to prefer literature as a final voice of self determination”.<sup>77</sup> Nichanian stresses that Osagan puts forth the idea of creating fiction, a mythos for the needs of the nation.<sup>78</sup> Yet, he failed to express the catastrophe in the last chapter and the novel was left unfinished. His failure will be analyzed as we proceed but first, we need to fully understand the phases he went through. As Nichanian proceeds, we see the crucial point of the matter. He quotes the words of Osagan as follows:

*“This will be the most difficult part, for sure. For, to rely on power of novel will be insufficient to penetrate to the subject...the catastrophe which is both limitless and oddly ordinary, does not fit in the imagination of the artist, who attempts to penetrate to the subject.”*<sup>79</sup>

To repeat Nichanian, “... then novel will give the opportunity for us to express the essence of the catastrophe”.<sup>80</sup> Why does Osagan need to form a new literature for the Armenian nation? What does literature mean to him? Why do Mukasonga and many other writers of disaster from various geographies feel the urge to write? The reason is that there is nothing else left for them. Mukasonga needs to step out of the catastrophic demolition in order to recollect her identity

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p.97

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p.98

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, p.110

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*, p.110.

via her memories and re-form her identity. Madan Sarup words are worth noting:

*“Any minority group, when faced with hostile acts, does several things. One of its first reactions is that it draws in on itself; it tightens its cultural bonds to present a united front against its oppressor. The group gains strength by emphasizing its collective identity. This inevitably means a conscious explicit decision on the part of some not to integrate with ‘the dominant group’ but to validate their own culture (their religion, language, values, ways of life).”*<sup>81</sup>

‘The dominant group’ Sarup refers to is, in *Our Lady of the Nile*, the more than one hundred years of colonial influence in Rwanda. To confront the Western-centered ideologies, to restore Rwandan identity Mukasonga feels the urge to write. As for Osagan, he needs to form a new literature, an estheticized Armenian philology, to form an Armenian nation under the influence of Ottoman Empire. Most importantly, it is the argument of this thesis as well as the main notion of Nichanian’s work *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, that writing the catastrophe in the form of novel, excluding hideous details passing mostly through testimonials, is achievable for the writer and eloquent for the reader. Doing otherwise would mean to draw the victim/survivor as well as the whole persecuted and destructed nation in the meager realm of History. At this point, it may be said that while Mukasonga refuses to be a political writer, Osagan falls into the trap of necessity of testimonials in demonstrating catastrophe. How does he fall into that trap? The answer is that he cannot grasp the inevitable state of witnessing (death of the witness) and comprehend the immensity of literature. As Nichanian claims,

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<sup>81</sup> Sarup, *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*, p.3.

Osagan thinks of novel as the *'lesser evil of History'*.<sup>82</sup> This is the very reason of Osagan's failure.

### **1.3. Conclusion**

All in all, as it is underlined in this chapter, it is certainly not the archives or testimonies that allow the victim/survivor to describe the indescribable. The phenomenon remains as an inexplicable experience for the survivor. Moreover, giving a detailed description of the catastrophe would mean to serve the perpetrators' will. To be more precise, writing on catastrophe within this context excludes the victim and puts the catastrophe in the center, repeats the perpetrator's deeds and says nothing for the victim, for the lost ones and for the future generations. As a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, we see that Mukasonga avoids giving details of gruesome events she experienced until her migration to France in 1992. She chooses to share those lovely memories with her loved ones. Using her mother tongue Kinyarwanda alongside with French, she writes about everyday life of Rwandan people, remembering and by this way commemorating her family and in the last instance, her country. She writes because she only has words left from her loss. She writes because she needs to call out to the world to break down the Eurocentric view on the issue, to show the truth and make it visible:

*"We are told to forget what had happened. In fact, there was a saying like the Rwandan genocide was not that serious. Today, I want to say that it is dead serious and also horrendous. I want to show that... What happened to us is definitely a direct consequence of Christian colonization. We did*

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<sup>82</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.115.

*our best but the power holders who sit around a table, negotiate and finally come to a decision, should take the responsibility of what had happened.”*<sup>83</sup>

Why do we need to write? Madan Sarup says, “one needs a homeland to feel stable, to defy alienation, to survive in rapidly changing world”.<sup>84</sup> He suggests that the concept of home is tied up to the notion of identity. Using Sarup’s point of view, we may argue that in the pursuit of Rwandan collective identity Mukasonga finds her homeland in her books, and thereby shows it to many others. Daniel Terris also meditates on the issue as follows:

*“These writers and scholars—and the others who came to Brandeis in September—remind us that literature can help individuals and nations recover their humanity in the aftermath of brutality. Literature can also call the larger human community to account for the humanity we are abjuring every time we fail to prevent such atrocities. Silence has its place, but ultimately we must count on literature—alongside history and law and activism—to rouse us from complacency”.*<sup>85</sup>

Other than this, we may say that the victim/survivor needs to write about the catastrophic events in order to find a balance in his/her psychological condition. Thus s/he will gain the ability to mourn, find remedy and pass hope onto the future generations. Shoshana Felman in *Testimony, Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* demonstrates a Holocaust survivor’s statement about the issue, which serves as a timely example at this point. Felman quotes the survivor:

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<sup>83</sup> *L’invité*, “Scholastique Mukasonga: “Le Rwanda Veut la Vérité sur le Genocide,”

<sup>84</sup> Sarup, *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*, p.3.

<sup>85</sup> “Literary Responses to Mass Violence”, Brandeis University, last access March 12, 2020 [https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary\\_Responses.pdf](https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Literary_Responses.pdf), p.12



*“The thing that troubles me right now is the following: if we don’t deal with our feelings, if we don’t understand our experience, what are we doing to our children...Are we transferring our anxieties, or fears, our problems, to the generations to come? And this is why I feel that we are talking here not only of the lost generation like the term they coined after World War I- this time we are dealing with lost generations. It’s not only us. It’s the generations to come”.*<sup>86</sup>

It is not the testimonial literature that will set the victim free from her nightmares. As it is the argument of this thesis, which takes Marc Nichanian’s notion into its center, the sole way to access to the realm of indescribable catastrophic events is to ponder on the borders of language, which will be possible solely in the realm of literature.

Another instance Felman puts her finger on while talking about the necessity of literature in demonstrating the catastrophe is quite striking. She lays bare how her students remain speechless after seeing Holocaust videotapes for her lecture. The reaction of the students is remarkable and gives us a kind of justification of how a victim/survivor of a catastrophic event loses his/her balance, becomes fragmented or ‘disconnected’ and subsequently unspeakable. For Felman this crisis was unique and bore the ‘germination’ of her book. She describes the situation as follows:

*“They were set apart and set themselves apart from others who had not gone through the same experience. They were obsessed. They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they*

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<sup>86</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.47

*could not reach each other. They kept turning to each other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. As I listened to their outpour, I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted”.*<sup>87</sup>

The situation Felman depicts shows us the necessity of literature in demonstrating the unspeakable. As in the case of Paul Celan, art will allow the victim/survivor to pass beyond the wordlessness. Felman makes another crucial quotation from the poet Celan, who was a victim/survivor of the Holocaust:

*“Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language. This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling-mute, and pass through the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech. It passes through and yielded no words for what was happening-but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, ‘enriched’ by all that”.*<sup>88</sup>

These ‘passing through’ experiences of Celan are the ones that Osagan experienced himself. It is the dilemma that the victim/survivor finds herself in, in searching for a way to demonstrate her grief. In Mukasonga’s case, wandering among the death-bearing memories, she finds her own ‘feeble’ words to demonstrate her grief and to commemorate her beloved ones.

*“Like a journalist facing a deadline, forced to jump from one massacre to another, the historian has no choice but to let the dead bury the dead. The*

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<sup>87</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, p.48

<sup>88</sup> *idib*, p.50

*novelist, on the other hand, tries to bring them back to life”.*<sup>89</sup>

Lastly, as Nichanian considerably refers in his book, Dori Laub’s remark on witnessing situations justifies the essentiality of literature of catastrophe. She puts forth that the victim loses her capacity of witnessing the tyrannical acts. In the case of Holocaust, the survivors who remained silent became disintegrated in terms of their memory. The more they continue holding to their silence, the less they know about themselves. Mukasonga confronts this dilemma with her books, and gives an effort to remember being a Rwandan not a Tutsi or Hutu, which is her primary concern in her works.

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<sup>89</sup> Diop, “African Authors in Rwanda”, in *Literary Responses*, p.119

## CHAPTER II

### TRACES OF CATASTROPHE IN THE NOVEL

For colonizers, Rwanda was perfectly suited to their exploitative objectives. Belgians encountered a complex structure when they entered the country, which would inevitably turn into an advantage for them. By planting enmity between the Hutu and the Tutsi, colonizers coworked first with the Tutsi monarchy, and then, after the social revolution in 1959, with the Hutu, because the Hutu came into power after the Bahutu Manifesto<sup>90</sup> which had been published by a group of Hutu intellectuals claiming that Rwanda belonged to the majority Hutu. Embracing the Hamitic theory, they claimed that the Tutsi were the aliens and after more than forty years of oppression, they demanded for their democratic rights. During that time the Hutu gained the support of the church and the colonial administration. Finally, the monarchy was abolished and subsequently violence commenced against the Tutsi population prior to the independence. Thousands of them went to exile to neighboring countries while the remaining Tutsi witnessed atrocities committed by the colonial backed Hutu power.

The Hutu-Tutsi dispute well covered the reality of colonial exploitation. Borrowing the term from Naipaul, they interchangeably became ‘mimic man’, turning the rival into the ‘other’, without noticing that Rwanda was the ‘other’ per se. So, in the name of triumphing over the rival, the people perceived the colonizers as their allies. What is primarily important to bring forth at this point is that the veiled truth of colonial effect on the country was to be ignored by the

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<sup>90</sup> In 1957, in an atmosphere of freedom spread the whole continent, the Hutu majority drafted a document which denounced the Tutsi superiority in political and social grounds. It is stated that the privileged state of the Tutsi, which was based on the Hamitic theory, was the first thing to abolish even before the independence. The Bahutu manifesto is significant in Rwandan history as it stands as the political justification of the 1994 genocide.

world during the pre-genocide and post-genocide era. We know that up to one million Tutsi along with Hutu were perished and the world remained silent, as it was perceived as an inter-ethnic conflict, which was a misinterpretation of the war. Since the imperial forces do history writing, one needs an alternative way to demonstrate the truth. Postcolonial theoretician Cabral argues:

*“The colonialists usually say that it was they who brought us into history: today we show that this is not so. They made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history”.*<sup>91</sup>

That is to say, the alternative way to expose the truth is literature, which Mukasonga uses as a tool to achieve her goal. She attempts to break the Western gaze on Rwanda, takes it out of the colonialist point of view, writes her own text and makes it visible for the whole world.

Mamdani supports Cabral’s claim by stating that history writing has been subdued by imperialism. As in the placing of the Hamitic theory as a crucial point in creating history, the Tutsi and the Hutu became political identities. In other words, the Tutsi and the Hutu were politically produced identities as if they were natural constructs.<sup>92</sup> “I was an object in the midst of the other objects,” recalls Fanon when he was called Negro on his arrival in France.<sup>93</sup>

As Mamdani locates the emergence of Hutu and Tutsi violence in the colonial period, he tries to understand the political nature of violence, the process that leads to it and the specific conditions that make it possible. For literature, Mukasonga does the same. She illustrates the consequences of colonial implements among the students and missionaries on a micro scale, yet it can be

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<sup>91</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Post Colonialism, A Very Short Introduction*, (Newyork: Oxford University Press, 2003),p.18.

<sup>92</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.16.

<sup>93</sup> Young, *Post Colonialism, A Very Short Introduction*, p.20.

inferred that this applies to the whole country easily. As a matter of fact, it wouldn't be insufficient to contend that Rwanda itself is the embodiment of colonial and postcolonial violence as a whole. With her novel, Mukasonga brings this fact to the surface.

There were two prominent tribes in Rwanda, each having separate roles. While the Tutsi were the cattle herders, which gave them a privileged position, the Hutu were the farmers having a secondary position in the society. However, prior to the colonization, the potential conflicts between the two subjects were not ethnic-based. Rather there were economical and political concerns that formed a kind of tension among the people. Only after the Christian colonization was the unity destroyed gradually. Starting with the Belgian colonial effect, the ethnic conflict which rests as the precursor of the violent events, found its grounds primarily on the identity issue. One solid implement that caused segregation between the Hutu and the Tutsi was the identity card practice in which ethnic root was stated. It was a handy tool for the colonizers to divide the country. To manage that, they formed a new history for the peoples of Rwanda. To achieve this goal, to legitimate their policies on identity cards, and to support racial segregation they needed a solid justification. What they found was the Hamitic myth, which has its origin in Biblical sources.<sup>94</sup> For colonizers, the point of origin of the Hamitic myth as claimed by nineteenth-century aristocrat and writer Arthur de Gobineau, was based mostly on the physical features of the Tutsi and the Hutu. With the support of the Church, the Belgian powers adopted Gobineau's contention, and claimed that the Tutsi who bore European physical aspects, were originally

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<sup>94</sup> It is believed that the Word 'Ham' is first appeared in the fifth chapter of the Bible. Ham was one of the sons of Noah, and he was cursed by his father for his rebellion, eventually with his descendants they were exiled to Africa. There are several other accounts on the issue, some of which interrelate the Hams and Negro Africans. For more information Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers* offers a detailed analysis on the subject.

Egyptian. As Mamdani states, they were the invaders who came to Rwanda alongside the river Nile, and inevitably, that made the Hutu natives and righteous owners of the land.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Hamitic theory was used to make the Tutsi superior over the Hutu. During that time until the revolution, the disguised invaders made use of the country's resources. Mamdani's examination of the Hamitic theory is more elucidating:

*“The idea that the Tutsi were superior because they came from elsewhere, and that the difference between them and the local population was a racial difference, was an idea of colonial origin. It was an idea shared by rival colonists, Belgians, Germans, English, all of whom were convinced that wherever in Africa there was evidence of organized state life, there the ruling groups must have come from elsewhere. These mobile groups were known as the Hamites, and the notion that they were the hidden hand behind every bit of civilization on the continent was known as the ‘Hamitic hypothesis.’”<sup>95</sup>*

After the 1950s, in unison with the spirit of independence, the Hamitic theory turned the Tutsi into alien invaders in the eyes of the Hutu, which was a good and righteous reason for the Hutu to claim Rwanda as a Hutu nation. Overall, Hamitic theory turned into a racist ideology which was a sufficient tool for the colonizers, first in favor of the Tutsi, and then of the Hutu. Eventually, this ideology turned into implements in every aspect of life which Mukasonga chooses to refer as everyday experiences without being sentimental, yet she multiplies it by placing the matter at the ‘girls’ school’.

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<sup>95</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.132.

Another important tool for the colonizers' exploitative purposes was the initiation of the 'cultural bomb'. "A people united cannot be defeated,"<sup>96</sup> writes Thiong'o in *Decolonization of the Mind*. Knowing that, Western powers tried to erase the cultural memory of the people by reconstructing their values, language and religion as they set foot in Africa. With the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, not only the lines were drawn on the map but also a thorough language division was created in the continent. Subsequently, Rwanda fell to Germany's share. Names of the people were changed; schools were Christianized and every aspect of a culture, which forms an identity and ultimately a nation, was replaced by Western values. Thiong'o states that,

*"the effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own."*<sup>97</sup>

All in all, the ethnic distinction and the cultural shift alongside with the white supremacy adjusted by first the German and then the Belgian power holders, allowed them to reconstruct a country of their own will. The repercussion of omnipresent cultural dilemma is effectively depicted in Mukasonga's novel. She vividly demonstrates the effects of colonialism, which leads to the Rwandan genocide and concentrates primarily on the ethnic conflict between the Hutu and

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<sup>96</sup> Ngugi wa Thiongo'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African literature*. (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House 1982), p.3.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*, p.3.



the Tutsi, and secondarily, the cultural clash between the Western and Rwandan values. First and foremost, the title of the novel stands as the premise of Mukasonga's approach to the issue. She rejects to mention the Hutu as oppressors. She believes that the Hutu and the Tutsi have been sharing a homeland and a culture, forming a unity by sharing a history on the soil of Rwanda. She tries to break the Western perception of the violence in Rwanda, and Africa in general. As the Western media had been rationalizing the civil wars and mass violence through the conflicts between the tribes in all over Africa, the main reason must be set forth and Mukasonga fulfills this objective. Brent Beardsley, who served as an executive assistant to General Roméo Dallaire (he was the Force Commander of the United Nations peacekeeping forces during the genocide) in Rwanda explains the situation:

*“The international community knew little about Rwandan history and culture; about the political, economic, and social root causes of the Rwandan civil war and ethnic strife; or about the false ‘Hamitic myth’ of Tutsi and Hutu as two tribes in perpetual conflict. This lack of knowledge directly contributed to the Western failure to understand Rwandan discord and the genocide that followed. The ignorance about Rwanda by virtually every non-Rwandan decision maker during this crisis could hardly provide the foundation upon which to build a solution to the problems there. Decision makers cannot expect to be part of the solution if they do not understand the problem.”*<sup>98</sup>

On the one hand, Mukasonga's urge to tell the reality about her country is crucial to heal the wounds and reunite a nation. On the other hand, the truth must be said

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<sup>98</sup> Brent Beardsley, “Lessons Learned or Not Learned from the Rwandan Genocide,” in *The World and Darfur, International Response to Crimes Against Humanity in Western Sudan*, ed. Amanda F. Grzyb (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p48-49

to break down the Eurocentric view on the Rwandan genocide. In other words, the readers need to look at Rwanda, and Africa in general, through the eyes of the victim-survivor. Thereby they can have an opportunity first to seek the truth and then embrace it. And those representations of literature in any geography in the world will be the voices of the 'other' and eliminate the Western gaze to a certain degree. Cabral corroborates Mukasonga's purpose:

*“In combating racism we do not make progress if we combat the people themselves. We have to combat the causes of racism. If a bandit comes to my house and I have a gun, I cannot shoot the shadow of the bandit; I have to shoot the bandit. Many people lose energy and effort, and make sacrifices combating shadows. We have to combat the material reality that produces the shadow.”*<sup>99</sup>

In the novel, the school stands as the symbol of discrimination between the Hutu and the Tutsi as well as the domination of the European values on the country. The Hamitic myth, as the title embodies, lies beneath the former and the dilemma of Christianized-civilized black girls personifies the latter. In several striking occasions, the reader observes those instances and appreciates how Mukasonga manages to build this strenuous narrative around the statue of *Our Lady of the Nile*. It is 1970s and after 1962 regime-shift (monarchy and colonialism end concurrently), the Hutu have been in power. As a result of the quota system in the country, there are two Tutsi students in the school, Veronica and Virginia, and the tyrannical Hutu student Gloriosa constantly reminds them of their ethnic identity.

All in all, Mukasonga demonstrates how colonial powers manipulated Rwandan identity and the roots of the 1994 genocide. She depicts the intricacies

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<sup>99</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, (New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1973), p.77.

the girls were immersed in by illustrating the white supremacy and the Hutu oppression. Mukasonga shows the despair and the destruction of a nation stuck in between those two components. This issue will be analyzed in this chapter, targeting on how Mukasonga depicted the grounds of violence in her novel. First the traces of the Hamitic myth and its outcome will be analyzed. And then the elements of cultural and religious assimilation and its consequences will be examined thoroughly.

It would be to the point to end this section with Thiong'o's words:

*“Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship-to the world. Economic and political control can, never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.”*<sup>100</sup>

### **1.1. The Hamitic Myth in the Novel**

In the book the course of events take place in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, a Catholic boarding school for young ladies, which is located high up in the hills on the ridge of the source of the Nile. The school took its name from the statue of Virgin Mary, which had been erected 200 meters away from the school prior to the events. It is depicted in the very beginning of the novel as follows:

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<sup>100</sup> Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African literature*, p.16.

*“The statue of Our Lady of the Nile looms among the large rocks overhanging the spring. It’s not quite a grotto, although a sheet metal shelter protects her from the elements. OUR LADY OF THE NILE, 1953, reads the engraved pedestal. To the right, a pyramid has been erected, bearing the inscription: Source of the Nile. Cock Mission, 1924. It was Monsignor the Vicar Apostolic who decided to erect the statue, in order to consecrate the Nile to the Virgin Mary, despite the King of Belgium persuading the Sovereign Pontiff to consecrate the whole country to Christ the King.”*<sup>101</sup>

Mukasonga draws the reader’s attention immediately to the Hamitic theory. As an Egyptian symbol, the pyramid with the inscription of the year 1924 on it embodies the Belgian colonialism’s politics of ethnic discrimination between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Since the race policy became dominant from 1925 and on, the pyramid’s plate signifying the year 1924 emphasizes the core reason of the future events. On the other hand, the Virgin Mary statue which was actually painted black, stands as the symbol of dehumanized and Christianized Rwandan people.

The narrator goes back to 1953 and depicts the erection ceremony of the Virgin Mary with a sarcastic tone targeting the colonialism’s effects both on Rwanda and Africa as a whole. During the ceremony Monsignor the Vicar Apostolic gives a sermon to the crowd comprising the missionaries, whites and children:

*“He spoke of the Holy Virgin, and how she would be known here as Our Lady of the Nile. He said: “The drops of this holly water shall mix with the*

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<sup>101</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p. 9.

*burgeoning waters of the Nile, which in turn shall mix with streams and become The River, flowing through lakes, flowing through swamps, pouring over waterfalls, braving the desert sands, soaking the cells of bygone monks, even lapping at the feet of the surprised Sphinx. It is as if, by the grace of Our Lady of the Nile, [Christian and black], those holy drops were to baptize all of Africa; and Africa –now Christian- shall save this world from perdition.”<sup>102</sup>*

This was in 1953, before the revolution. Then the Tutsi were in power. But after the 1962 independence it was the Hutu who took the control and dominated the school and the country as a whole. In a significant instance, Gloriosa, Modesta and Veronica find the old photographs of the ceremony in which the administrator salutes the statue under the Belgian flag. Tutsi chiefs and their wives accompany him. But their faces are crossed out with red ink. Gloriosa’s comment on the photograph lays bare the Hutu hatred which ended up in the massacre: “The chiefs’ photos have suffered the social revolution...a dash of ink, a slash of machete, that’s all it takes...and no more Tutsi”.<sup>103</sup> Mukasonga skillfully shows the racial hatred through a young girl who is supposed to be innocent, and emphasizes the profound effects of colonial implements.

In another significant instance the Hamitic myth shows its effect on the students. When the girls come back to the lycée from a visit to the Virgin Mary statue, Veronica inquisitively opens up her geography book and follows the course of the river Nile, which she seems to have a clear track of its end among the deserts of Egypt, near the pyramids. It is one of the significant moments in the

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<sup>102</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p. 12.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*, p.14.

novel that shows the Hutu adoption of Hamitic myth as well as the inferiority that Tutsi girl Veronica feels when she hears Hutu Gloriosa utter these words:

*“So, are you looking for the way back to where your people came from, Veronica? Don’t worry, I’ll pray to Our Lady of the Nile that the crocodiles carry you there on their backs, or rather in their bellies.”*<sup>104</sup>

As the novel proceeds, in several occasions Gloriosa bullies the Tutsi Veronica and Virginia; and in the final episode of the novel, the events pour into a violence foreshadowing the 1994 genocide.

Rwanda as a colony was unique among the other colonies. There was not a native vs. settler situation in Rwanda. As the colonial power successfully managed to bring forth racial segregation, the subject of the opposition was not the Belgians during the decolonization of Africa. Rather it was the Tutsi whom Hutu confronted and revolted against. This was marked as the ‘Bahutu Manifesto’. As Mamdani underlines, it was not a Rwandan manifesto declared against the foreign powers. For, by reason of the Hamitic theory, the foreigners were the Tutsi as they were the alien invaders. Mamdani makes it clear for us:

*“Precisely because Hutu and Tutsi had, under colonialism, become synonymous with an indigenous majority and an alien minority, decolonization was a direct outgrowth of an internal social movement that empowered the majority constructed as indigenous against the minority constructed as alien. Recall that the majority declaration was called “the Bahutu Manifesto,” not “the Rwandan Manifesto.” It claimed that “the conflict between Hutu and Hamites—i.e., foreign-Tutsi” was the heart of*

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, p.18

*the Rwandan problem and called for a double liberation of the Hutu: "from both the 'Hamites' and 'Bazungu' (white) colonization."*<sup>105</sup>

Mukasonga puts her finger on the issue and conveys the motivation behind the Hutu manifesto. A speech made to the students by one of the school monitors, Father Herménégilde, refers to the Bahutu manifesto and states that the Hutu were the new people of Rwanda. He posits that the Hutu, as the people of the hoe, freed themselves from 900 years of Hamitic domination; that the social revolution had abolished slavery. He declares that the Hutu were the majority as they were the natives<sup>106</sup>, and the Tutsi were the old oppressors who formed the minority. With this representation, Mukasonga attempts to demonstrate the catalyst of the Hutu manifesto and its grasp. Also, she reflects the colonials' revert because of the changing dynamics in the country, which reveals their unreliability on their assertion of the Hamitic theory.

In the chapter titled *Up the Virgin's Sleeve*, Mukasonga asserts a causal link between the Hamitic theory and the great exile of the Tutsi after the independence. As Father Herménégilde speaks, the reader becomes aware of the Hutu and the church collaboration against the Tutsi:

*"Tutsis may not want to conquer the world, but they do want to seize this whole region. I know they plan a great Hamite empire, and that their leaders meet in secret...their refugees are everywhere in Europe, in America. They are hatching every possible plot against 'our' social revolution. Naturally we have chased them out of Rwanda, and those who've stayed, their accomplices, we're keeping an eye on them, but one day we'll maybe have to get rid of them, too, starting with those who infect*

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<sup>105</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.200.

<sup>106</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p. 37.

*our schools and our university. Our poor Rwanda is surrounded by all her enemies.”*<sup>107</sup>

We know that starting from the early years of the colonization, the church had a crucial role in racialization of Africa. Mamdani clarifies the case as:

*“As a process both ideological and institutional, the racialization of the Tutsi was the creation of a joint enterprise between the colonial state and the Catholic Church. Missionaries were “the first ethnologists” of colonial Rwanda.<sup>26</sup> As such, they were the primary ideologues of colonization. For Father Léon Classe, the future bishop of Rwanda and the key architect of missionary policy, the Tutsi were already in 1902 “superb humans” combining traits both Aryan and Semitic, just as for Father François Menard, writing in 1917, a Tutsi was “a European under a black skin.”<sup>27</sup> If the Church heralded the Tutsi as “supreme humans” in 1902, the same Church would turn into a prime site for the slaughter of Tutsi in 1994.”*<sup>108</sup>

Then it makes sense the way Father Herménégilde perceives the Tutsi. The Race Policy that the church and the colonial administrators made hand in hand is invalid now. Since the Tutsi does not count for anything at all, they may get rid of them whatever it takes. And far from any doubt, Mukasonga reflects the hypocrisy as one of the underlying reasons of the catastrophe.

Another presentation of the Hamitic theory in the novel is made through a Frenchman, a former coffee planter who resides close to the school. In the chapter called ‘Isis’<sup>109</sup>, Monsieur de Fontenaille, whom Veronica and Virginia call ‘crazy old man’, portrays the Western perception of the Tutsi. He is obsessed with the

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid*, p.119

<sup>108</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.174.

<sup>109</sup> Isis is the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility, motherhood, death and rebirth.



Tutsi girls and their descendants, which he believes to be of Egyptian origin. He tries to create the cult of Isis in the person of the Tutsi girl, Veronica:

*“It was the tales about the Tutsi that convinced him. That they weren’t Negroes: one only had to look at their noses, and the reddish gleam of their skin. But where did they come from...The Empire of the black pharaohs that was exactly where the Tutsi came from. Chased off by Christianity, by Islam, by desert barbarians, they undertook the long trek to the source of the Nile, they kept their cows, their sacred bulls, their beauty, but they had lost their memory.”*<sup>110</sup>

In order to fulfill his mission, he persuades Veronica to visit and pose for him. He creates an Isis temple inside his mansion. Since he finds his Isis, he abandons everything and starts sketching portraits of Veronica. What is significant here is that his perception of his target embodies the initial violence supported by the colonizers and foreshadows the upcoming genocide. The narrator reveals the issue as,

*“When the Hutu kicked out the head Mwami [king] of Rwanda and began to massacre the Tutsi, with the help of the Belgians and the missionaries, he understood how urgent it was that he fulfill the promise he’d made to himself. It would now be his life’s mission. The Tutsi would disappear, of that he was certain. Here they would eventually be exterminated, while those who had gone into exile would ensure their own people’s decline.”*<sup>111</sup>

In another scene, Virginia’s encounter with Father Pintard at Monsieur de Fontenaille’s mansion reveals the swing of the whites transparently:

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<sup>110</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p. 77.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, p.77.

*“When I arrived in Rwanda, almost forty years ago now, people swore by Tutsi and only Tutsi, bishops as much as Belgians. They’d had to change kings, but we were soon to baptize the new one, it was Constantine they wanted. Then the Belgians and bishops turned coats: they swore by Hutu and Hutu only, the doughty democratic farmers, the Lord’s humble sheep. Well, I’ve got no views on the matter, I obey Monsignor, and those young missionaries just fall for everything they’re told about the majority demokarasi. But I’ve spent nearly forty years studying: the Bible on the one hand, the Tutsi on the other. It’s all in the Bible, the story of the Tutsi and everything else.”<sup>112</sup>*

And he goes on into a kind of lecture addressing Virginia, pouring out the church’s perception of the Hamitic theory:

*“Without going as far as Noah, let’s start with Moses. The Israelites left Egypt, Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea with his staff, but some of them went the wrong way, heading south, and arrived in the land of Kush, these were the first Tutsi, then there was the Queen Sheba, who was also Tutsi, and she went to visit Solomon and returned home with the child she begat with the great king, and then her son became emperor of a land where the Jews were Tutsi called Falashas.”<sup>164</sup>*

What remains for Virginia after her encounter with Father Pintard shows the grim reality:

*“Tell me, Virginia, did you play the queen at Fontenaille’s?” asked Veronica.*

*“I did what I needed to do. But I also learned that Tutsi aren’t humans:*

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<sup>112</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p. 164.

*here, we're inyenzi, cockroaches, snakes, rodents; to whites, we're the heroes of their legends.*"<sup>113</sup>

Father Pintard says it was the Belgians and the Christians who upheld the Tutsi rule forty years back. And when the things changed, they took up the Hutu, the ones who asked for their rights, and eventually started the revolution. As we see, Mukasonga's narrative shows the hypocrisy of the whites as well as the irrational perception of the Hamitic theory by the church. It is made clear that the colonizers took a pre-existing biblical story about the Hamites and exploited it to fulfill their goals. What is more, she shows how their theory talks nonsense while trying to stick to it. "[...] colonial imperialist domination has attempted to create theories, which, in fact, are nothing but crude racist formulations and express themselves in practice through a permanent siege of the indigenous populations, based on a racist (or democratic) dictatorship,"<sup>114</sup> writes Cabral in *National Liberation and Culture*. The emphasis on 'democracy' (I assume that it is intentionally misspelled as 'demokarasi' by the writer) reveals the true facet of the social revolution: Those 'democratic farmers', receiving the support of the colonizers, carried out tyrannical acts against the Tutsi, othered them and finally killed them. Likewise, the cases of Father Herménégilde, Monsieur de Fontenaille, and Father Pintard demonstrate the discourse of the colonizers as the true reason of the genocide. Mukasonga skillfully signifies the role of the church in the tribal conflict and underlines the intriguing role of the missionaries. Mamdani, states the issue solidly and reveals the position of the church:

*"Missionaries were the first ethnologists of colonial Rwanda. As such, they were the primary ideologues of colonization. For Father Léon Classe,*

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid*, p.165.

<sup>114</sup> Amílcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture", *Transition* No.45 (1974), pp.12-17  
[https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935020?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935020?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

*the future bishop of Rwanda and the key architect of missionary policy, the Tutsi were already in 1902 superb humans combining traits both Aryan and Semitic, just as for Father François Menard, writing in 1917, a Tutsi was a European under a black skin. If the Church heralded the Tutsi as “supreme humans” in 1902, the same Church would turn into a prime site for the slaughter of Tutsi in 1994.”*<sup>115</sup>

Overall, Mukasonga puts the Hamitic Theory in the center of her novel and brings forth the role of the colonial powers in the violence, which escalated into the civil war that eventually turned into genocide. She attempts to change the Western discourse of Rwanda, tries to break down the ‘white history’ and form a Rwandan one.

## **1.2. The Cultural Bomb**

*The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.*<sup>116</sup>

Ngugi wa o’Thiongo stresses that the biggest weapon used by imperialism to suppress defiance of a nation is the ‘cultural bomb’, or as the natives define, it is the cultural genocide that the colonized went through for such a long time, the consequences of which were devastating. Thiong’o defines the term as follows:

*“The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in*

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<sup>115</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.143

<sup>116</sup> Thiongo’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African literature*, p.16.

*their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.”*<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, starting from the early years of colonialism, the peoples in Rwanda abandoned their names, language, beliefs and rituals that united them. They were dismembered from their self, memory and history that form their identity. Moreover, the racial division set forth by the colonials ensured the annihilation of the cultural bonds between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Once the cultural unity is destroyed, it was easy for the colonizers to restrain the whole population. Fanon describes the subject as follows:

*“The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.”*<sup>118</sup>

As a result of the cultural alienation, the peoples in Rwanda could not form a unity against the colonizers. In addition to this, the pervading racial hatred in the

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<sup>117</sup> Thiongo'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African literature*, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.210.

country and the ongoing strife on attaining supremacy over the counter, dramatized the effect of cultural alienation. Subsequently, in an era in which the notion of national liberation flourished among the colonized countries all over the world, Rwanda gradually moved into the civil war, and then to genocide.

It was not until the early twentieth century that the Rwandan people became literate. Before, they had oral literature and, through stories and myths, they transmitted Rwandan culture, moral values and folklore from generation to generation. They did not have a written history or literature. So, the conditions were convenient for the Europeans to write a history in default. Indeed, the Belgian powers immediately turned the racial ideology, namely the Hamitic theory into solid implements on social and cultural level. First, they translated the Hamitic hypothesis into Kinyarwanda.<sup>119</sup> Then, the Roman Catholic priests stepped in by opening schools introducing Christianity along with Western education.<sup>120</sup> What is significant in that period is that the racial discrimination was initiated through the education system. As Mamdani points out, the students who had superior education in French were the Tutsi elite while the Hutu were taught in a different stream.<sup>121</sup> During the reign of the Tutsi mwami until the social revolution, the inferiority that the Hutu had dwelt in went on. And this was one major cause for the Hutu hatred towards the Tutsi, in which the Hamitic myth stands as the core reason. Cabral's contention is to the point as if he refers to Rwanda:

*“The colonizer, who represses, and opposes the culturally significant manifestations of the popular masses at its roots, supports and protects the*

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<sup>119</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.174.

<sup>120</sup> Julius O. Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda*, (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), p.48.

<sup>121</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.177.

*prestige and the cultural influence of the ruling class. He installs some friendly and influential chiefs, gives them various material privileges including the education of older children, he creates chiefdoms where they do not exist...he assures the political and social privileges of the ruling class over the popular masses by means of the repressive machinery of colonial administration.”*<sup>122</sup>

In Rwanda, it was the Tutsi elites who had access to superior education and high ranks in political and social area, while the Hutu were treated as the secondary citizens. We may infer that the motivation behind the social revolution was, on the surface, to decolonize the country. Nonetheless, the essence of it was to obtain independence from the alien-invaders, the Tutsi. Mukasonga reveals the matter in the novel with these words:

*“[...] the lycée Our Lady of the Nile would provide [Gloriosa] with the kind of democratic, Christian education appropriate to the female elite of a country that had undergone a social revolution, freeing it from the injustices of a feudal system.”*<sup>123</sup>

“The social revolution had abolished serfdom and drudgery.”<sup>124</sup> The Hutu freed themselves from slavery and sought for justice, only to massacre the Tutsi. Following the revolution, twenty thousand Tutsi were killed and more than three hundred of them fled. Overall, the significant matter in the urge of social revolution is that the Hutu did not question the cultural genocide. They grasped the Western values to obtain superiority over the Tutsi.

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<sup>122</sup> Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, p.14.

<sup>123</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.28.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid*, p.36.

Mukasonga vividly demonstrates the replacement of Rwandan culture by Western values through the girls. To start with, at the school it is forbidden to speak in any other language except French. Madam Superior's speech to the girls reveals the issue. She reminds the girls that their duty is not only to become good wives and good mothers, but also good citizens and good Christians. And to maintain that, they were required to use French as their main language. "It was forbidden to utter a single word Swahili<sup>125</sup> in the lycée."<sup>126</sup>

On another occasion, she stresses that in the name of civilizing the girls, even the vegetables are not local but Western. It is stated, "Madam Superior always says that the pupils must get used to civilized food."<sup>127</sup> Yet the girls, stuck in between two cultures, either incline to their native culture when they miss their mothers' cooking, or eagerly search for skin whitening creams as in the case of Immacule, one of Hutu-Tutsi students who tries to possess a Western look by wearing skintight trousers and plunging necklines.<sup>128</sup> All these bring forth the term 'inferiority complex' set by Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, which emphasizes the destruction of self-identity under the white supremacy.

A significant moment passes between the two Tutsi, Veronica and Virginia, and demonstrates the consequences of inferiority complex. As Veronica regularly visits Monsignor Fontenaille to ensure his help for going to Europe, Virginia, as if she foresees her tragic ending, warns Veronica not to go back to the mansion. After one of her visits, Veronica realizes that she was drugged by the

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<sup>125</sup> Swahili is a language that the Hutu students were confined to use in their "second-rate Kiswahili-medium education" under the Tutsi supremacy. Mamdani<sup>214</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.36.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, p.25

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*, p.30-31.



Monsignor and tells this to Virginia. The final contention of Virginia on the issue is striking:

*“And he didn’t do anything to you?”*

*“No, he didn’t touch me. He’s not like the other whites, who only want to fling you into bed. What he wants is to play out his crazy notions. I’m his Isis.”*

*“Why did he drug you, then?”*

*“I don’t know. He was afraid I would refuse to play along; that I’d make fun of him...He invited me to stay at his place during the long vacation. He’ll pay my fees, even for me to go to Europe.”*

*“And you believe his promises?”*

*“Can you imagine if they were true?”*

*“You’re as crazy as he is. You’ll end up believing you’re the goddess. You know what happened to us Tutsi when some agreed to play the role the whites assigned to us. My grandmother told me how when the whites arrived, they thought we were dressed like savages. They sold glass beads, loads of pearls, and tons of white cloth to the women, the chief’s white. They showed them how to wear it all and how to fix their hair. They turned them into Ethiopians, the Egyptians they’d come all this way to seek. Now they had their proof. They dressed them to fit their own delusions.”<sup>129</sup>*

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p.85-86.

Mukasonga manages to show the effects of cultural genocide clearly. The reader can see that Veronica, as the symbol of the Tutsi population, turns into an object in the hands of the Monsignor just like the Tutsi and later the Hutu experienced more than fifty years ago. They became this and that, yet they've never been themselves.

In a heart-breaking scene, Mukasonga lays bare the truth of what the colonizers did to a nation. In this instance, she puts her finger on the division between the two parties, which was achieved through cultural assimilation:

*“At sundown, the clanging bell and the creaking of the closing gates solemnly ushered in the start of the new school year. The monitors had already led the girls to their various dormitories. The seniors were entitled to certain privileges. Their dormitory was divided into alcoves to give each girls some privacy- all relative, since the only thing that separated them from the corridor, where the monitor did her rounds, was a thin green curtain that the sister pull open at any moment. And although this partitioning of beds, which they called “rooms”, was presented by Mother Superior as an example of ‘progress and emancipation’\* the girls could enjoy thanks to the education provided by the lycée of Our Lady of the Nile, not everyone appreciated it. Late night gossip and whispers were hushed. Above all, how could a girl sleep on her own? At home, the mothers made sure the younger girls shared a bed or a mat with the older girls. ‘Are sisters really sisters if they don’t fall asleep all squashed together? And how can true friendships form without the exchange of confidences on a shared mat?’ The lycée girls had a hard time falling*

*asleep in their solitary alcoves... Sister Gertrude refused to let the boarders move their beds together. "We're at the lycée, here, not at home," she said. "We sleep alone, each in her own bed, like civilized folk."*<sup>130</sup>

Before the Belgians there was a full-scale paganism in Rwanda, which Mukasonga refers to occasionally in the novel. It was after the 1930s that the mwami and the Tutsi chiefs abandoned their beliefs and adopted Catholicism as they were forced to maintain their positions. This was one of the turning points in Rwandan colonial history. It was the traditional belief, which united the peoples in Rwanda, and it was their king who was supposed to maintain it. Yet, after the conversion of the royal elite, the peoples welcomed the new religion. All in all, with the successive implementations, it was inevitable for the peoples to be eluded from a fragmented identity. Mukasonga refers to the issue as:

*"Religious Studies was obviously Father Herménégilde's domain. Using proverbs, he demonstrated how Rwandans had always worshipped a single God, a God named Imana who was like a twin brother to Yahweh, the Hebrew's God in the Bible. The ancient Rwandans were already Christians without realizing it, and so they waited impatiently for the missionaries to arrive and baptize them, except that the devil got there first and corrupted their innocence. Wearing the mask of Ryangombe, he induced them into nocturnal orgies where countless demons took possession of their bodies and their souls, forcing them into obscene utterances and the committing of acts that decency forbade him from*

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<sup>130</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.34-35.

*specifying in the presence of such chaste young ladies.”*<sup>131</sup>

We can assume that Mukasonga depicts Father Herménégilde as the embodiment of Monseigneur Classe, a member of Catholic White Fathers, who worked with the state powers hand in hand to achieve a ‘successful evangelization’<sup>132</sup> during colonialism. The father represents the church’s mission all over the country on a micro scale. With a made-up story, he perpetuates the girls’ Christianity. Yet, in the case of Virginia, we see that the narrator underlines the struggle of a nation, stuck in between counter values.

Virginia diverges from the other girls at the school. We may assume that Virginia is a self-depiction of Mukasonga. Portraying her as a conscious and questioning young girl (as Mukasonga had been during her school years in Nyamata), she makes her speak through her own mouth and transfers her own horrid experiences as the token Tutsi at the school. Returning to the subject, while Virginia receives a Christian education, she sticks to her pagan values strictly. During the long school break Virginia returns to her hometown. We see touching scenes of her mother and siblings. She does not act as an ‘educated upper class girl’ although she is welcomed as a superior and well-educated girl who is destined to have a promising future. Instead she goes back to the fields as before, carrying her youngest sibling on her back and telling them stories from her school.

*“She was the first, before the sunrise, to hitch up her wraparound and step barefoot into the mud to wield her hoe. She knew how to track the parasites by making her way between the stems of maize, around which the beanstalks attempted to twine themselves, without crushing the*

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<sup>131</sup> *ibid*, p.43.44.

<sup>132</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.182.

*younger shoots sown in December. She could tell the young sorghum from the threatening weeds, which she ripped out, leaping between the mounds of earth covering the sweet potatoes. "Now, that's my daughter!" said Leoncia [her mother], "May her name bring her good fortune: Mutamuriza, "Don't make her cry.""*<sup>133</sup>

When it comes to religion, although she is Christian-educated, Virginia does not refrain from consulting the witch doctor who lives out in the forest. She finds an opportunity to consult him because she is scared of her delusions of the Tutsi Queen, whose remains were discovered in the territory of Monsignor Fontenaille's mansion. She visits the witch doctor and asks for his help. After multiple visits, she manages to learn how to comfort the soul of the Queen, and achieves her task. This scene shows Virginia's loyalty to her cultural values.

Another significant theme during Virginia's vacation is that it presents an opportunity for the reader to see the beautiful landscapes of Rwanda. We may presume that Mukasonga wants the reader to appreciate a truly beautiful country destined for an infamous catastrophe.

*"The narrow path followed the ridge, above the slope of cultivated terraces that ran down to marshland planted with maize. All the hills, as far as the eye could see, were similarly terraced, and dotted with houses, some round, some rectangular, their roofs mostly thatched, a few tiled. Many were hidden behind thick banana groves, their presence betrayed only by the bluish plumes of smoke that stretched out lazily above the large lustrous leaves. Coffee bushes, planted in neat rows, already hung heavy with their bunches of red berries. A few bunches of papyrus sedge*

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<sup>133</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.136.

*managed to thrive in the swampy hollows, while four black-crowned cranes strutted with carefree elegance, oblivious to the women working their fields.”*<sup>134</sup>

Identity of a nation comprises language, religion, history, shared folklore and overall collective memory. All these components were destroyed by the colonial powers and replaced with Western equivalents. Peoples’ religion, tradition, food – every element that unites a nation– was replaced. The Hutu and the Tutsi turned into fragmented objects to become submissive entities. “Colonization = ‘thingification’” says Aimé Césaire.<sup>135</sup> What the colonizers did was to fragment a nation, annihilate its values, make it inferior and exploit it however they wished. All in all, the colonial impact on a nation, which gradually leads a catastrophe, is well demonstrated by Mukasonga. The reader feels the girls’ inferiority, empathizes with the Tutsi fear and understands the Hutu hatred. She puts her finger on the real perpetrators of the violence and reminds us of the forgotten Rwandan culture and identity.

Aime Césaire puts forth the reality of colonization clearly in these words: “They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks [...] I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life-from life, from the dance, from wisdom.”<sup>136</sup> All those were Mukasonga’s concerns to evoke recognition of the truth, both for her nation and the Western community. Most importantly, as a memory bearer she takes upon herself the responsibility to unite her nation and bring neo-colonialism into question.

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<sup>134</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.138.

<sup>135</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (Newyork and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p.6.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid*, p.6.

### 1.3. The Virgin's Nose: The Footsteps of the Genocide

There are several instances in the novel that evokes the 1994 genocide. One of them comes from the Hutu student Immaculée. She visits gorillas with her friend Gorette up in the mountain once in a while. After one of their visits, she tells the schoolgirls that Gorette's mother believed gorillas were once humans. Then she humorously declares:

*“Let me suggest a different story: Gorillas refused to become humans. When they saw that other monkeys like them had become humans, but had also become mean and cruel and spent their time killing each other, they refused to become humans.”*<sup>137</sup>

Mukasonga suggests that not only Tutsi but also Hutu were discontented of the ongoing violence in the country. Yet, she portrays the genocide over Hutu Gloriosa, who ignites the events, which end up with a pogrom against the Tutsi. Gloriosa is a Hutu girl whose father had an important role in the social revolution and became the leader of a political party. The narrator describes her as, “She is the spitting image of her father”, and marks her name as “Nyiramasuka” which means “She of the Hoe”<sup>138</sup> as if, as a young girl, Gloriosa fully achieves to bear the total rage of the Hutu population, including her father.

Before her final fatal act, Gloriosa embodies the Hutu hatred occasionally. Mukasonga succeeds to lay bare the colonial-made dispute between the Hutu and the Tutsi. “A dash of ink, a slash of machete, that's all it takes...and no more Tutsi”<sup>139</sup> Gloriosa's words not only show her animosity but also the upcoming violence in which machetes were used as a weapon to kill the Tutsi. In another

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<sup>137</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.108-109.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p.27.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

instance, Gloriosa reveals the intention of the social revolution, in a clear and grabby way. She talks to the Hutu girls Godelive and Immacule at the beginning of the new semester: “<sup>140</sup> I’m counting on you girls to be real militants...not like you were last year. Our Republic requires more than vanity and a banker father.” In the following years of the social revolution, one of the major fears of the Hutu administration was the ‘re-invasion’ of the country by the Tutsi exiles. In fact, in 1990 the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front, which was found by a group of refugees in Uganda) started a military action and invaded Rwanda. Then the civil war began and ended with the 1994 massacre. As Mamdani stresses, the social revolution and the 1990 invasion are turning points for Rwandan genocide,<sup>141</sup> and Mukasonga reiterates the former in her novel. Gloriosa puts it more explicitly when she comments on the newcomers (the incoming freshman):

*“Did you notice, Modesta? The old regime still wields influence in the ministry. They’re lax with quota. If I counted right, and I only counted the girls I know, those I’m sure of, we’re way over the percentage that, unfortunately, they’ve been granted. A fresh invasion! What was the point of our parents’ social revolution if we let them carry on like this? I’ll be reporting this to my father. But I think we’re going to take care of things ourselves and get rid of these parasites, once and for all. I told the Bureau of Militant Youth about it, and we see eye to eye. They listen to me. It’s not for nothing my father named me Nyiramasuka.”<sup>142</sup>*

In this excerpt, Gloriosa both refers to the quota system and the youth militia that formed Interahamwe (far-right Hutu paramilitary organization) in 1990. Towards the end of the novel, Gloriosa skillfully exploits this sense of fear and traps the

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid*, p.31.

<sup>141</sup> Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p.69.

<sup>142</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.31.



Tutsi girls.

Queen Fabiola of Belgium's visit to the school is significant, for it evokes the veiled intentions of Gloriosa, which she puts into action eventually. The school is in a great excitement to host the Queen. The girls mainly talk about the Queen's beauty, her white skin and her white outfits: "Indeed, everything about her was white: she wore a white skirt, a white jacket ...white shoes that remained pristine"<sup>143</sup> While there is such an envy among the girls, Veronica cannot help but say that Queen Gicanda, the former queen of Rwanda was more beautiful than Fabiloa. Gloriosa's burst to this remark shows that even beauty switched sides, as the Tutsi no longer allowed to set the norm for African beauty:

*"Her so-called beauty didn't do her much good. I don't foresee a great future for her, locked up in her Butare villa. And you Tutsi, you always think you're the most beautiful in the world, but beauty's switched sides now. Your supposed beauty will bring you misfortune."*<sup>144</sup>

She adds that the queens of Rwanda had been all Tutsi, which meant, "lazybones who'd never lifted a hoe, parasites feeding on the labor of the poor."<sup>145</sup>

Gloriosa becomes agitated and thinks about the Virgin Mary statue and her Tutsi characteristics. She thinks that 'Black' Virgin Mary's small and straight nose points out a Tutsi nose and it needs to be changed into a Hutu one. Here, Mukasonga refers to the physical discrimination that the colonizers forged as one of the grounds of the Hamitic theory.<sup>146</sup> Now, disturbed by the black virgin's nose, Gloriosa tries to find an ally and turns to Modesta:

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<sup>143</sup> *ibid*, p.193.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid*, p.193

<sup>145</sup> *ibid*, p.193

<sup>146</sup> There are several approaches to the Hamitic hypothesis that focus on scientific researches. The colonizers picked the suitable one, and claimed that the "Tutsi were the European under the black

*“Modesta, [...] have you ever taken a good look at the Virgin’s face?”*

*“Which one?”*

*“Our Lady of the Nile, the statue.”*

*“Yes, and? Sure, it’s not like the other Marys. It’s black. The whites put black makeup on her. Probably to please us Rwandans, but her son in the chapel, well, he remained white.”*

*“But did you notice her nose? It’s a straight little nose, a Tutsi nose.”*

*“They took a white virgin, painted her black, and kept that white nose.”*

*“Yes, but now she ‘s black, it’s a Tutsi nose.”*

*“You know, back the, whites and missionaries were on the Tutsi side. So a black Virgin with a Tutsi nose was a good thing for them.*

*“Yes, but I don’t want a Holy Virgin with a Tutsi nose. I no longer want to pray before a statue with a Tutsi nose.”*

*“What can you do! [...] Unless you talk to your dad...”*

*“Of course I’ll talk to my dad...In fact, he said they plan to de-Tutsify schools and government. It’s already started in Kigali and at Butare University. You and me, we’ll begin by de-Tutsifying the Holy Virgin. I’m going to correct her nose, and there will be some girls who ‘ll understand the warning.”*

*[...]*

*“So, how are you going to do it?”*

*“It’s not difficult: We smash the statue’s nose and stick a new nose on. We’ll get some clay [...] and mold Mary a new nose.*

*[...]*

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skin”, for they had narrow face and straight nose. Mahmood Mamdani examines the subject in detail in his book.

*“We’ll go at night, the day before the pilgrimage, so the next morning everyone will see Our Lady of the Nile with a new nose. A true Rwandan nose, the nose of the majority people.”*<sup>147</sup>

The girls very well know that it is a white statue, which was colored black, but for the new regime, even a Tutsi nose needs to be replaced. Scared of the deed, Modesta unwillingly joins Gloriosa couple of days later. Their attempt to pull the nose off fails and the entire head breaks off. To save her skin, Gloriosa makes up a story and tells the school administration that they were attacked by the Tutsi guerillas and it was the ‘Inyenzi’, (it is the name Hutu called for Tutsi which means cockroaches) to be blamed for the scattered statue. She says, “[It is] our eternal enemies, the executioners of our fathers and our grandfathers, the Inyenzi”, and agitates the public. While blaming the imaginary Tutsi, she adds that they also had accomplices at the school. Her lies grow and everyone at school awaits for an attack in fear. In the following days, Father Herménégilde and Gloriosa organizes a ceremony for the opening of the new Virgin Mary statue, “which would be both religious and patriotic in nature.”<sup>148</sup> Militant Rwandan Youth, the JMR, “who at this very moment were continuing their parents’ glorious social revolution throughout the country” is also invited to participate in the ceremony. The narrator marks Father’s speech which gains a burst of applaud:

*“He finished his speech in Kinyarwanda, proclaiming that the Rwandan youth would swear an oath to Our Lady of the Nile, who henceforth stood for true Rwandan women. He told them to always remember the centuries of servitude they had endured at the hands of arrogant invaders [the Tutsi], to continue to defend the gains of the social revolution, to tirelessly*

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<sup>147</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.197-198.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*, p.220.

*fight those who remained the implacable enemies of the majority people both outside [the exiled Tutsi] and within Rwanda's borders.”<sup>149</sup>*

Gloriosa adds in Kinyarwanda “the lyceé would follow the brave militants who rose up in schools and in local government to rid the country of the Inyenzi’s accomplices.”<sup>150</sup> The two Tutsi girls, Veronica and Virginia hear the footsteps of upcoming calamity:

*“It’s coming, Virginia, you do realize that? Don’t think we’ll escape it just because we’re in a lyceé for the privileged. On the contrary. We’re their biggest mistake. And they won’t be slow to correct it. Gloriosa has engineered the whole thing: that business of the phantom Inyenzi, the attack on the statue, the Hutu’s new Madonna. It’s all in place. All that’s missing is the JMR gathering. And they won’t come singing hymns to Mary, they’ll come with fat truncheons, with clubs, maybe even machetes, to honor Their Lady of the Nile.”<sup>151</sup>*

The Tutsi girls are in fear about the outcome of the increasing militarization of the Hutu, which was engineered by Gloriosa. (Indeed, after the social revolution, to maintain their power and confront a possible Tutsi attack, the Hutu power gradually gained strength both in political and social sphere that was followed by oppression and violence on the Tutsi). Veronica wants to run but Virginia insists on getting her diploma. Veronica’s answer is remarkable, which reveals the footsteps catastrophe:

*“You know, they’ve started to hunt Tutsi bureaucrats and students across the whole country. Soon it’ll be the turn of the lyceé of Our Lady of the Nile, why would we escape it? The purge will end with a bang at the lyceé*

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid*, p.221.

<sup>150</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile* p.221.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*, p.222

*of the female elite. You know what awaits us. Have you forgotten what we've already suffered and what they are promising everyday will happen to us? In 1959, half my family fled to Burundi as refugees. In 1963, three of my uncles were killed, though my father escaped-in Kigali, they didn't do as much killing as they'd have killed to because of the people from the United Nations-but he was sent to prison with loads of others, he was beaten to a pulp, and when they let him go- because the President wants to show the whites just how peace loving he was-they made him pay a colossal fine [...] they made him sign a document confessing he was a spy and an Inyenzi accomplice. My father's frightened: that document is still with State Security. Because of that, now they might kill him.*"<sup>152</sup>

Eventually, Gloriosa claims herself the "absolute mistress of the lycée"<sup>153</sup> and giving instructions to the Hutu militants, they chase the Tutsi girls at school. Veronica and Virginia become the primary target. Veronica hides in Monsignor Fontenaille's mansion, yet taking direction from Gloriosa's, the militia find her, and after raping kill her. As for Virginia, she manages to escape with the help of Hutu Immacule, who sends secret messages to Virginia for her safety. After everything settles down, "Rwanda is the land of Death" utters Virginia and makes her decision to leave her country, only to return "when the sunshine of life beams over our Rwanda once more."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *ibid*, p.223.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, p.226.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, p.244

## CONCLUSION

*And the rain fell on the cattle, on the Tutsi, on the Hutu, on the Batwa.*<sup>155</sup>

Colonizers' goal in Africa, particularly in Rwanda, was to notice the potential of convenient circumstances for their interests and make use of them. Thus, exploiting the social and political difference between the Hutu and the Tutsi by drawing a racial frame around them, they formed a conflict, made it visible and turned it into a massacre, which was unmatched to any other in terms of the death toll in a very short time. My study claims that literature bears veracity more than history. The latter fails to demonstrate the essence of catastrophic events, ignores the victims within their entirety of culture and history, and finally makes the grief unseen. What is left for the survivor? How does she find a way to deal with her suffering? How can she find a meaning to all those incomprehensible events? The victim-survivor is in need to utter her own words, restore the truth as she witnessed, reclaim her suffering in her own terms, and finally make all these seen by the whole world.

Nichanian claims that, if there is a slight meaning to catastrophe, it is the loss of the capacity to find a place in the realm of forgiveness.<sup>156</sup> In addition, what is exactly impossible for the victim-survivor is to forgive the deprivation of having the right to speak.<sup>157</sup> Mukasonga breaks this dilemma with her novel. "I want an apology from the United Nations. I want international community to take responsibility and they also owe an apology to us," says Mukasonga. She directly

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<sup>155</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.62

<sup>156</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.198.

<sup>157</sup> *ibid*, p.124.

addresses the Western world to acknowledge their part in the catastrophe. In her novel, she skillfully demonstrates the ignorance of the West as follows:

*“Mother Superior has shut herself away in order not to see anything; Belgian teachers will “keep on teaching, unperturbed”, while the French educators will obey their embassy’s instruction of “no interference” and respond, when the killing starts, with the usual comments that “it’s always been like that in Africa”, with locals “killing one another for no discernible reason.”*<sup>158</sup>

Africa was believed to be a natural field of violence by the Western world, which was used as a tool to justify colonization and its implements on the continent. As Madam Superior closes her eyes to the massacre of the Tutsi girls at school, the Western power holders remained silent to the violence before and during the 1994 events, and it stands as a vital point that Mukasonga wants to point out. Then, she might find a meaning to the destruction of her nation and initiate a chance of lasting peace in Rwanda. In her heart warming yet somber story, she achieves to demonstrate the truth of the doom of Rwanda, and the multifaceted components of the conflict. Most importantly, she makes the grief of the victims visible for the reader, and eases the suffering of the survivors to some extent.

Another essential point that my thesis brings out is to examine the approach to the catastrophe on behalf of the victims. Nichanian compares ‘history to novel’, and the outcome is easy to comprehend:

*“Tens of hundreds of books wouldn’t be sufficient to chronicle the events that a village had been through. Already the goings-on are not a story.*

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<sup>158</sup> *ibid*, p.225.

*They are elements of a tragedy that extend to years, that cannot be expressed through history. However, novel is nothing but the life itself.”<sup>159</sup>*

Also, there is another facet of the issue, which states the case of history: “There is only a single history and it belongs to the perpetrators. In its essence, history is the thorough and unfailing accomplice of the perpetrators.”<sup>160</sup> Mukasonga strikingly refers to the case as follows:

*“Africa had no history, because Africans could neither read nor write before the missionaries opened their schools. Besides, it was the Europeans who had discovered Africa and dragged it into history. And if there had been any kings in Rwanda, it was better to forget them, for the country was now a republic.”<sup>161</sup>*

The Rwandan genocide is unique for it bore multi-dimensional precipitating factors. Also, the violence was beyond comprehension with thousands of piled bodies all over the country and corpses which were carried by the rivers that flow in red. It had been perceived as a natural field of conflict and killings by the world. Mukasonga’s novel attempts to change this view. She manages to demonstrate the true political aspect of the genocide as well as the grief of the victim-survivor to initiate unity among the peoples. To do so, she uses literature to re-form the collective memory of her nation and engage the Western community to the Rwandan reality.

‘And the rain fell on the cattle, on the Tutsi, on the Hutu, on the Batwa.’

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<sup>159</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p.240.

<sup>160</sup> idib, p.199.

<sup>161</sup> Mukasonga, *Our Lady of the Nile*, p.42.



As the above quote implies, life treats all races equally, and we may infer that this is the essential point Mukasonga brings forth in the last instance.

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