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The Power of the Written Word: History and Counter-Memory in *The Barefoot Woman*

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Abstract

This essay examines Scholastique Mukasonga's, *The Barefoot Woman* through the lens of history and counter-memory. It explores how Mukasonga employs narrative techniques to challenge dominant historical narratives and reclaim the silenced voices of Rwandan women. By delving into the personal and collective trauma experienced by survivors of the Rwandan genocide, Mukasonga constructs a counter-narrative that subverts official historical accounts and centers the experiences of marginalized groups. The paper analyzes the author's use of oral storytelling traditions, fragmented narratives, and the blurring of past and present to create a powerful and evocative narrative. By focusing on the intimate details of everyday life, Mukasonga reveals the profound impact of historical events on individual lives. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Mukasonga's work contributes to a broader understanding of the Rwandan genocide and the enduring power of memory and storytelling.

Introduction

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Scholastique Mukasonga continues her semi-autobiographical exploration that began with her first work, *Cockroaches*. Published in 2008, *The Barefoot Woman* builds upon the narrative framework established in *Cockroaches*, weaving a vivid counter-memory account that draws deeply from Rwanda's history and personal memories to honor the legacy of her mother and, by extension, Rwandan women as a whole. Memory, for a society just emerging from the throes of genocide, is pivotal since the event could remain indelible in psyche of individuals and by extension national consciousness. Memory is the process by which individuals, communities, or societies interpret and give meaning to the past from a present perspective (Nora, 1984: XXXVII; Lowenthal, 1985: 39; Halbwachs, 1992: 37; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994: 150; Brockmeier, 2002: 16). In this context, novels that seek to interpret the past serve as quintessential memory texts (Nyirubugara 14). Employing

counter-memory — a narrative technique that seeks to recover and reinterpret marginalized or suppressed histories — Mukasonga exhumes the collective memory of Rwanda's traumatic past, particularly the 1994 genocide, to recontextualize and give voice to those whose stories have been silenced. From the outset, the reader encounters a deliberate intertwining of personal memory with historical events, a blending that underscores Mukasonga's role as both a historian and a storyteller. This interplay of history and memory allows her to craft a powerful homage to her mother and the resilience of Rwandan women, framing her mother as a symbol of the nation's endurance in the face of extreme adversity.

Through her evocative descriptions, Mukasonga brings to life the brutal realities of the Rwandan conflict, its actors, and its chronology. She paints a raw, moving portrait of the struggles of the Tutsi people, recounting how they endured violence, displacement, and dehumanizing conditions. Her prose captures the resilience required to survive in the harsh, unforgiving landscape of Bugesera, where Tutsi communities grappled with the "abnormal" life of constant threat and deprivation. Mukasonga's narrative serves as a testimony to the courage and fortitude of the Rwandan people, highlighting both the intimate and collective memories of survival that continue to shape Rwanda's identity today.

The author demonstrates in her first novel how Hutu soldiers humiliated the Tutsi. Again in *The Barefoot Woman*, she always strikes on this point. According to her, the soldiers ransack the houses of the Tutsi countless times; they terrorize them by destroying their property. They do not make a distinction between adult and child, between what interests them most, girl or woman, it does not count. The most interesting thing about them is to assault the Tutsi. The narrator recounts a harrowing encounter in *The Barefoot Woman*:

> And then all of a sudden, the clang of sheet metal crashing down rolling: I just have time to snatch up my little sister and roll off with her to one side, dodging the

> boot that grazes at her face, the boot tramples the sweet potatoes and buckles the metal plate like cardboard. I make myself as small as I can, I wish I could burrow into the ground, I hide Jeanne beneath a fold of my pagne, I stifle her sobs and when I dare to look up again, I see three soldiers overturning our baskets and jugs, throwing the mats we'd hung from the ceiling out into the yard (12).

The recollection of events through the lens of history and memory by the narrator, the violence and humiliation of Tutsi hardly stops, as from time to time the sounds of boots, the cries of children, the cries of women, and the moans of men fill the air of a group that cannot take revenge against a well-programmed genocide. The continuation of violence against Tutsi triggers or inspires the attempt to save oneself. One of the most remarkable ways for Tutsi survival is to flee their homes. This forced displacement engenders the abandonment of their villages, property and break in family ties because of the exigent need for survival.

Equally captured in *The Barefoot Woman* are issues associated with migration and exilic experience. Deliberate relocation is inconsequential in a peaceful ambiance, where justice and equity are nonnegotiable incentives for human coexistence. But someone may decide to move for a change of environment, in search of greener pastures. Nevertheless, in the case of the Tutsi, relocation became compulsory; they were displaced from their comfort zones to settle outside their villages, because the Hutu authority already created a brutish mandate for the gradual disappearance of the Tutsi from national consciousness. In exploring the trauma and psychological burden genocide engenders, *The Barefoot Woman* makes genocide composite especially as it "by definition, genocide annihilates everything, including the myths, symbols and language that define a community and its people" (Kalisa, 158). It is due to this decision of the Hutu authority that the Tutsi are condemned to the interior region of Rwanda,

Bugesera. A place infested with the tsetse fly as the narrator captures it in her second novel *The Barefoot Woman* that:

> Maybe the Hutu authorities put in charge of the newly independent Rwanda by the Belgians and the church were hoping the Tutsis of Nyamata would gradually be wiped out by sleeping sickness and famine (*The Barefoot Woman* 10).

The narrator, shifts the limit of the narrative range to counter-memory narrative of digression in order to appropriate the genocidal culpability to the Belgians and the church, accusing them of having facilitated the appropriation of the Tutsi in this inhabitable region with the aim of exterminating them in order to foreground the tag or badge of cockroaches already established, thereby justifying the genocide since the Tutsi are now equated to some kind of infestation. As Kuperman suggests, the deployment of metaphor of the cockroaches appears to be bifocal, depending on who uses it and the context of usage:

> The Inyenzi, cockroaches in Rwanda were used by the Tutsi refugees who tried to take power in 1961 when they launched attacks in Uganda and Burundi and they earned the name for their propensity to return repeatedly at night despite attempts to stamp them out. The name carried disrespect when used by the Hutu rebels in 1994. The name cockroach was adapted by the rebels themselves "as a symbol of their relentlessness" (7).

This harrowing journey into the interior sheds light on the severe hardships endured in the refugee camp during the annihilation period. The forced relocation of the Tutsis to Bugesera did not alleviate the oppression inflicted by the Hutus; instead, the Tutsis remained under constant surveillance, with every aspect of their lives meticulously controlled. As the narrator notes:

> I can still picture the soldiers from Gako bursting into our house, a rifle boot crumbling the piece of sheet metal we used as a door. They claimed they were looking for photo of king Kigeri or convert letters from exiles in Burundi or Uganda (11).

Oppression became an enduring lifestyle for the Tutsis as established in historical records, and fictionally depicted in the text. Scholastique Mukasonga also attacks the oppressive coercion imposed on women, particularly brutality by men. In a real war situation, it is normal for one group to be overwhelmed by the other. In the novel, Scholastique Mukasonga demonstrates this oppressive situation through the characters of women and men of Hutu origin. The Tutsi are confronted with psychological and physical problems. Amongst the Tutsi women, they celebrate louder when they have male children. However, this joy hardly endures time because they watch pitifully how their boys are subjected to contempt and reduced to mere items. Historical facts affirm that the Hutu often kill boys for fear that they will one day become snakes, and become dangerous to Hutu dominance. The Hutu soldiers want to tell Tutsi women that they are "bearers of death" (22), they give birth to the boys alive, Hutu soldiers also brutalize them and most times kill them. Making the elimination of the boy child, a norm. The narrator recalls:

> In Rwanda, mama used to say women were proud to have children. Many children. Especially boys but in Nyamata they tremble in terror when they give birth. Not for themselves, but for their children especially the boys. They know they'll be killed (20).

History has it that the Hutus are not comfortable with Tutsis that are economically accomplished or those well educated and in strategic positions in the country. This is because they fear that these Tutsis that are well lettered and economically stable will no doubt re-establish communicating with their relatives on exile outside the Bugesera region, in Burundi or Uganda, feeding

them with information that may turn the political tide. This is the case of Merciana who was watched and finally tortured to death. The narrator explains: They grabbed Merciana. They dragged her out to the middle of the school yard, where everyone can see. They pulled her clothes off. They left her completely naked. The women shielded their children behind their pagnes. Slowly the soldiers shouldered their rifles. “they didn’t aim for her heart”, mama said again and again,” they aimed for her breasts, only her her breast” (22).

The civil war did not prevent the observation of the cultures or traditions of the Tutsi. Culture is obviously an integral part of the life of the people, which is why they are not likely to forget it despite the series of upsetting conflicts. In *The Barefoot Woman*, a title that reflects and refers to the time and space of the people, the cultural activities that distinguish the Tutsi remained a sinequanon even in the excruciating moments of the brutish internal exile of the Tutsi. It is to this extent that the author triggers herself in a personal project other than to narrate the tribal conflict in Rwanda. It is possible to say that it is an attempt to bring about a restoration or a cultural renaissance. Traditional marriage, religion, the agriculture, traditional medicine, meals, festivities, cultural values, and the oral literature of the people are re-accentuated explicitly in the narrative.

The manifestation of the conjugal tradition is revealed in Mukasonga's novel, as a way of obeying God's commandments. Ultimately, marriage becomes an unavoidable cultural practice even in hostile situations, such as genocide. In any situation humanity is confronted with, such as the exilic condition of the Tutsi of Nyamata, marriage rites continued to be observed as a vibrant strategy to uphold the sacred mandate of the creator. The author demonstrates the enduring force of marriage in *The Barefoot Woman*. Scholastique as narrator tells us about the traditional wedding in Nyamata and the events that accompany it. The preparation for marriage begins with the construction of an inzu (sacred dwelling) for girls of marriageable age, which "no man can enter, not even the father" (33). Stefania, Scholastique's mother, also plays a very important role in the matter of marriage, that of consulting suitors. They or their families must make the necessary investigations to ensure the good quality of the woman, the ideal woman:

> If there was no delousing to do on Sunday afternoon, the women of Gitagata and even some from further away- inevitably came to consult with Stefania on the subject of young women looking for husbands. Mama was a highly respected matchmaker (82).

The narrator uses her older brother, Antoine's attempted marriage to Mukasine, a beautiful young girl, to tell the story of a wedding in Rwanda. This wedding story occupies a poignant position in the narrative. The reenactment of this rite is well articulated in Chapter VIII. In traditional indigenous African society, parents choose the future of their children. Stefania proposes this position to her son. The father of the latter must go and "announce to Mukasine's parents" his intention, the first step. The second visit is part of the second wedding process that requires a lot of preparation: the jugs of beer. And the third results in the payment of the dowry (including a cow that validates the marriage) which is interrupted by the kidnapping of the daughter (102-104), and then “the cow was given as dowry to Jeanne’s family, and she became Antoine’s wife” (105). Marriage is typically followed by prayers made by the parents of the groom or bride. In Antoine’s case, his mother is begging for mercy from the God of the Christians and the ancestral spirits.

Religion is fundamental in human existence and continuity. Wo/man always has the belief that there is a being greater than earth, the all-seeing eyes. This fact pushes wo/man to belong to one religion or the other. In Africa, before the colonial incursion into the continent, Africans worshiped many gods such as woods, the sun, the moon, thunder and others. Although the author's family is strictly Christian. In her first novel, *The Barefoot Woman*, unambiguously, expresses how the African negotiates his/her way between tradition and Western modernity. The narrator describes her mother's religious attitude as follows:

> But before she sprinkled the powder on the wound, my mother crossed herself again and again all while invoking the great master of the

> Spirits, Ryangombe whom the fathers described as the devil himself: “Ryangomberya, ya data [...] (60).

The character of Stefania is ambiguous and ambivalent. It is hybrid, suffering from the identity crisis that comes from the two religiously contradictory cultures. She practices Christianity and also traditional religion. The image of 'sign of the cross' refers to Christianity and 'Ryangombe' to traditional religion. In Nyamata, most Tutsi are Catholics. Every Sunday, they attend mass led by white people, yet they indulge in the values of traditional religion and the superstitions that characterize it. Superstition is part of the worldview of traditional Africa. For traditionalists, it is a question of how to perceive the world, how to interpret world events and how to constitute the orders of society. It is a cultural and religious belief system. It is civilization that typifies these experiments as superstitious. In *The Barefoot Woman*, the author lets us see this system of beliefs and morals, called superstitions. The society described is truly traditional and therefore superstitious. Scholastique relates this superstitious attitude of her mother in these words:

> Mama went to make sure that the embers, the seeds of the new fire, were still red under the ash, if by some misfortune they’d gone dark (and no matter how careful you are, a misfortune is always possible) you had to go borrow fire from the neighbors (67).

Mukasonga again blames the misfortune that befell the Tutsi on the whites. Through the mother’s character as a reservoir of memory that is most times, recollected in moment of painful insight, she states:

> André used to poke fun at Stefania: “Why do you walk all over the village to find fire when we have a box of matches right at home?” Because along

> with the vial of Lourdes water and the pair of glasses for reading the Bible, the Fathers had given Papa, as head of the Legion of Mary, a box of matches. I don't know if they ever gave him a second one. "Listen to me, my son," Mama would sigh, "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 (38).

Such superstitions define the lives of Rwandese even during the civil war owing to the fact that historicism has a greater influence on the people. More interestingly, observation is linked to the moral values that govern the interpersonal relationships of the villagers. This is why Stefania again recited the incantations, which we had to repeat in chorus, replacing for that one evening the prayer papa made us recite before every meal. These superstitions interrogate the indigenous festivities among the Tutsi. For example, sorghum is harvested in July, at the start of the dry season (39). However, Umuganura, the name of the festival, allows the villagers to make wishes for next year in order to have good harvests. Nevertheless, all her activities are guided by these superstitious beliefs, recounted to avoid misfortunes. Although the war continues, the traditional festivities do not stop as they form the basis for the construction of memory and history traditional historians or griots and creative writers must document for future generations; a part of demonstration to show how vibrant life could be without rancor.

Nevertheless, birth, as articulated in the narrative, is celebrated when the moon rises because "we'd been told it's the moon that gives newborns their hair, and that child's head it had left only a crescent, exactly in its image." (64) Scholastique demystifies this superstition of her mother. She is worried about the future of her two children – Julienne and Scholastique – whose feet are most exposed to injury. The maternal explanation is that their toes do not sit on the

ground properly, so they say it is unhappiness. The narrator emphasizes that despite these ritual healings of her toes, her daytime wounds do not cease. Never mind, Scholastique's marriage is a romantic reality in *Cockroaches*. This superstition must come from African mythology, which is also deeply entrenched in traditional festivals.

The Tutsi community, as expressed by the author in *The Barefoot Woman*, is truly rooted in indigenous culture, despite the influence of foreign religion. The sorghum festival, similar to the annual festivals of the 1st of January of the whites, inaugurates a new year, ensuring the prosperity and fertility of agricultural activities. To celebrate the first fruits of the harvest, physical and spiritual preparations are necessary. This typically requires rites and ritual Umuganura is a family celebration. On a full moon night, the narrator explains that they eat the sorghum paste. The character-narrator describes it with vivid clarity:

> Once that was done, Stefania again spoke the incantations, which we then had to repeat in chorus replacing for that evening the prayer papa made us recite before every meal. The time had come to eat the *umuganura*. I swallowed it as reverently as I did the holy wafers the Fathers put on my tongue (45).

This is the manner in which the meal is taken by each family, in religious devotion and solemnity. The narrator exalts this local ceremony to the pedestal of the European Catholic host. Such an explicit statement is part of the project of cultural valorization of negritude. This means that traditional African religion is not inferior to Western Christianity. The solemn family prayers represented by 'incantations' in chorus give this meal a symbolic and spiritual quality. Ubunyano was also the name of a festival celebrated just after the birth of a baby, its first time out of the house:

> The party, the Ubiyano was held in the evening, when the sun glowed red at the very bottom of the sky, before

> it disappeared behind the banana trees. Then all the childrenof gitagata headed toward marie therese house. We sat downon mats layed down in a circle in the court yard. Our mamas stood behind us. There were no men; the Ubunyano wasn’ttheir affair (64).

This birth ceremony is celebrated with its own special activities. The narrator's neighbor organizes it. Madame Thérèse has just given birth to a son in Gitagata. This festival is exclusively for women and children who come to eat their meal towards evening. On this subject, Scholastique tells us of her mother's attitude:

> The climax of this celebration is this scenario described above. Although Stefania does not want to practice it, having her personal apologies, but it is part of the traditional ceremonies of the people. The attitude of this woman already shows us a manifestation of cultural hybridity. Before, Stefania, can't refuse to party, but now with the modern or Christian influence, she gives hygienic excuses. No one complains about the disease. However, even if the child happens to be sick, traditional medicines are used (67).

In pre-colonial and colonial Africa, the use of medicinal herbs for the healing of a sick person is a tradition. This is because Africa and its inhabitants do not know the modern Western medicine that arrives with the whites. Western medicine has just penetrated the country with the whites. The author of *The Barefoot Woman*, who presents the community life of the Tutsi people, shows how sick persons are cared for and cured, thanks to herbs. The main character, Stefania has what the narrator calls "the medicinal plant garden" which serves as her personal traditional pharmacy. Faced with the contagious diseases that strike the displaced and the nurse's aspirin or syrup, she strongly doubts the power of these European drugs as the narrator tells us:

> She didn't believe in Bitega's syrup and pills. She was sorry she had lost the means to concoct the traditional remedies – the only ones she assured us, that could combat the illnesses that afflicted Rwandans, particularly children (55).

This traditional indigenous Tutsi woman does not approve of the application of the Western medicine represented by 'Bitega tablets and syrup' because she doubts their potency and medicinal efficacy. Bitega works as a nurse or perhaps, a doctor in this elitist community of displaced people. Like a traditional African woman, Stefania knows how to use the world of herbs to heal the sick. For "her pharmacopoeia was the herbs, tubers, roots, tree leaves of the savannah" (56), found in his "medicinal garden" or his "botanical pharmacy" to "against the diseases and injuries that would inevitably befall her family as the days went by" (56). The use of these herbs always passes with incantations such as "Pfuba nk'ubwanwa bw'umugore" which the author translates as "let not the burn come out like a woman's beard" (56). It can be assumed that these incantatory words have therapeutic effects but mysterious and mystical, yet superstitious. Traditional medicine has its prescriptions according to Scholastique's mother. For a small wound, you only need to put black, moist soil inside the wound. Explaining further, the application of other herbs is cleaverly spelt out as: If the pain persists, then the umutumba, with dried leaves of nkuyimwonga, is added. But, in case of infection, you need kalifuma, a mysterious powder; and in desperate cases, there is Muriro leaves. For intestinal worms, umubirizi leaves are useful. There are so many remedies for multiple health problems, applied in public or private. In the novel, the therapeutic power is not in doubt. Examples of healing are left to convince the doubtful power of traditional medicine. A Rwandan woman is not only looking to feed her family, but to protect them from disease. She is considered to be the family's caretaker, caregiver, nurturer, cook and nurse. She plays multiple roles. Stefania typically represents these traditional functions. These traditional healings are facilitated by the plant-based

nature of the local foods of the Tutsi people. It should not be forgotten that most of these herbs/plants are taken as meals. One can equally make a drink with any of the herbs above. This drink, which is made strictly following a traditional process, is very important to Rwandans when we talk about a holiday. She shows us that from these plants we can even make more than one type of food. She presents sorghum as a plant with value. The first thing to make sorghum beer is a great many vessels." You gather up all you own – the trough that's also used for banana beer, the big urns for storing rainwater" (50). "Making sorghum bear does not take long: just a day and a night" (51). Sorghum beer is used during major traditional festivals, weddings and for visitors. Its nutritional quality is not questioned; this drink is venerated by the natives. In addition to sorghum, we make dough made in an earthen pot. There was also agacoma, a porridge, like very thick soup. Agacoma was considered a tonic, and was given "to children instead of milk, to convalescents, to women in labor, to old people" (49). Apart from sorghum beer, there is also banana beer.

Other meals from the Tutsi region mentioned in the text are rice, beans, and sweet potatoes. They are used for different types of ceremonies. The community life of the people: Unlike the whites, Africoans live in communities. Interpersonal relationships come from the myth of collective origin, from the linear system of the family. In the text, the author shows us this community life of Africans, this solidarity that defines African life. Solidarity becomes necessary and manifests itself in cases where there are problems. The author demonstrates the solidarity between the Tutsi from the beginning to the end of the novel. The Tutsi have only the choice to come to an agreement after their displacement in the interior of a hostile bush. They are beginning to live a communal life. The narrator tells us about it as follows:

> A jerrican, as the evolved people called it a container for the palm oil the shop keeper parceled out in broken Fanta bottles. Common property that precious made the rounds from family to family (50).

The solidarity defined by this scenario also defines the life of the Tutsi even during the Rwandan crisis. Cohabitation animates the spirit of survival, allows them to overcome their collective problem and to better escape the whims of their common enemy. Speaking of food, if a woman has nothing to feed her children, she can go to a neighbor's house to ask. They live together for their common development.

> Our neighbours! What would they do without neighbours? There is always something you need to borrow from a neighbour. There is always a neighbour coming to borrow something from you. And if no one ever comes to borrow something, it makes you very sad (121).

This description above unambiguously underlines this community or communal life of the Tutsi, and by extension, of the Africans, affirmed via counter-memory narrative. Everyone is supposed to live in this social and cultural interdependence, based on the unwritten social codes of African society. Most accounts of the Rwandan crisis show this interpersonal solidarity among the Tutsi. In Tierno Monenembo *L'ainé Des bOrphelins* (2000), Faustin lives together with Musinkoro, his friend, and then with Josepha, Emilienne and Tatien at the headquarters, and also with the prisoners in *L'Ombre d'Imana* (2000) by Véronique Tadjo. The author praises the African woman. The female characters are well x-rayed to the disadvantage of the men. The author emphasizes that her text is dedicated "to all the women who recognized themselves in Stefania's courage and persevering hope." The dedication already predicts the aim of the text since Scholastique cannot pick up her mother's body from her mother's murderer in the 1994 genocide, she begins to mummify her verbatim. This is the project that the story aims to establish, in an autobiographical form.

> The training of a child so that he or she remains a role model is the pride of an African mother. In the novel,

> Stefania, Mukasonga's mother, learns how a Rwandan woman behaves. The narrator bears witness to her mother's roles in the traditional community. Pedagogical and didactic role aimed at the formation of children. Mukasonga says, "At home, my mother taught me what every young Rwandan girl should know... (57-58).

The roles of the Rwandan woman are more accentuated in the author's barefoot woman. In The *Barefoot Woman*, as established earlier, the structure is partial and sexist, perhaps feminist. It promotes the women's cause. The author shows that the African woman of Rwandan origin is a hard-working, evolved woman, guardian and protector, nurturer, and nurse, not only the one who is suffering, sexually harassed, violently raped and murdered. It is to this extent that the author embarks on a feminist commitment to the valorization of African women, otherwise perceived negatively. In Mukasonga's narrative, the backdrop of the Rwandan crisis serves as a framework that brings her larger project to life: honoring the resilience and strength of Rwandan women. Central to the story is the figure of the Tutsi woman, whose relentless work ethic and dedication to her family's well-being shine through every aspect of her life. She embodies values of discipline, selflessness, and unflagging commitment, managing to keep her family sustained and, at times, even happy amid harrowing circumstances. Whether working tirelessly in the fields or bargaining in the bustling Kigali market, the Tutsi woman finds ways to provide for her family against all odds.

Mukasonga recounts that at the Kigali market, "women sold bread they made themselves" (69), a testament to their self-reliance and enterprise. Notably, Nyirabazungu, also known as Kilimadame, stands out as a figure of entrepreneurial spirit. She was the first to introduce bread to the Nyamata community, where her resilience and success drew admiration and envy alike. A free-spirited woman, she established herself in Nyamata as a formidable figure, eventually turning her small shop into a hotel. Her enterprise redefined social expectations, as even the men who frequented her establishment

challenged traditional roles and customs under the disapproving gaze of other women.

While certain harvest activities, like gathering sorghum, were traditionally men's responsibilities, the labor-intensive work of cutting the sorghum heads fell to women and children. Tutsi women labored so intensely that "mothers…farm with their babies on their backs" (p. 51). Strength and endurance were prized traits, not only for survival but also as markers of a woman's suitability for marriage. As Mukasonga notes, "Was she a hard worker, unafraid to pick up a hoe?" (p. 82) – this became a key quality sought after by suitors. Physical beauty alone was insufficient; prospective brides needed to exhibit the hard-working spirit essential for family life and survival (100).
Through these narratives, Mukasonga honors the remarkable qualities that defined the Tutsi women of her heritage, portraying them as pillars of strength who held their families and communities together despite the relentless pressures of their society:

> A good wife was expected to know how to work. To her would fall the task to cultivate the field to keep the family fed: plowing the earth, weeding, barefoot. In the mud, hands covered with calluses from the hoe (101).

This excerpt reveals the Rwandan woman as a hard-working woman whose responsibility is to feed her family with her agricultural activities. A nurturing woman indeed! Invariably, the responsibility of men is not to specifically feed one's family, the woman owes her family this domestic task. This is why in the text women get by, "because a woman's hands must never remain idle" (122), while the image of men shows them as economically parasitic. The women try to guard and protect their families. The image that the author of *The Barefoot Woman* portrays, lays credence the traditional Rwandan woman as the one who functions as the guardian and protector of the family. Faced with the conflict and the violence of the military, the narrator says in a sentimental voice that her mother Stefania:

> […] had only one idea in mind, the same project for and so my mother worked out every detail of our escape to Burundi, in case of emergency she went off alone into the bush, scouting for trails that might lead to the border. She marked out a path, and under her guidance, not quite understanding why we played that strange game of follow the leader (18).

In order to re-accentuate the prime importance of the woman through counter-memory narrative technique, the father's silence in the above excerpt is eloquent albeit an artistic creation of the author. This is meant to underline its passivity and inaction, and to announce the sacrifice of Rwandan women during the civil war. The text is full of scenes of sacrifices of Stefania who will ensure the safety, protection, education and general well-being of her children. She is only a symbol, yet all the women described are guardians and protectors of their families. Stefania not only plays the role of guardian, but also that of healer and nurse as already established the cause of the analysis of text so far. She establishes a pharmacological garden to remedy her children's health problems. Women's agency appears to be fluid; it is neither completely traditional, or pervasively western. It evolves in the face of socio-economic changes considering the prevailing attitude of the time.

The deployment of counter-memory narrative technique here is to flatten the authoritarian narrative style that portrayed women as second class and inferior, women who cannot lead in war situation. By using this narrative technique, Mukasonga has demonstrated that women can actually lead in any war situation as expressed in Stefania. Another woman used to deflate the authoritarian narrative style of inertia of women during the Rwandan war is Marie-Thérèse. She is presented as experiencing the novelties that characterize a fashionable life in the novel as most of the women in Scholastique Mukasonga's text are traditional, not in the upper echelon of the social class. In reality, it would be anachronistic for her to show them how she has evolved at the social and academic level, given that Rwanda as a country had just emerged from the throes

of European colonization. However, the Rwandan woman captured in the text evolve with the passage of time. It is only a minority of women who are educated or in the process of having a Western education. There is already a school for social workers in Butare that helps train girls, instilling the emancipatory spirit of the modern age on the subject of fashion and related socioeconomic matters. Scholastique also manages to wear boxer shorts. She said that "it was the pride of intellectuals, the privilege of girls" (93). Her mother, traditional, also came to appreciate this habit, telling her to "sew her a pair of underpants". Tutsi women are also open to new developments.

A good example is Marie-Thérèse oldest daughter, who was at the convent school run by the Benebikira Maria sisters, as she says “I’ve forgotten where, maybe in save. In the Rwanda of the Belgians or President Kayibanda, being part of the church was the surest, smoothest path to "civilization" (91), thus allowing the family to benefit from the advances of modernity. Her idea of having a little house to herself seems strange to neighbours, "sleeping alone, without her sisters, yes, without her sisters! People found it shocking, an affront to all our traditions [...] (92). She manages to get it despite the villagers' perception. Félicité even plays "the inanga, the eight-stringed zither, which is absolutely forbidden to a woman." In the eyes of the neighbors, she transgresses tradition, yet most of them silently admire her.

What Mukasonga had done through counter-memory narrative technique is to demonstrate that a return to history and memory, only help reestablish the agency and virility of independent women in Africa who can stand on their own, and function as leaders under life threatening situations as most women like Stefania, Marie-Therese, Gaudenciana, Theodosia, Anasthasia, Speciosa, Leoncia, Petronilla, Priscilla and many others in *The Barefoot Woman*. In the text, the author does a critical assessment of the traditional Rwandan woman in the process of development. This sums up these roles that has been grossly discussed in this study. Depending on counter-memory, Mukasonga relies heavily on historical facts, which has exposed powerful women who sacrificed so much for the unity of Rwanda in order to deflate the erroneous belief that

women do not make any contributions during the war as she presents their importance as follows:

> Stefania, Marie-Therese, Gaudenciana, Theodosia, Anasthasia, Speciosa, Leoncia, Petronilla, Priscilla and many other: were they, the beneficent Mothers, the benevolent Mothers, the ones whofed, protected, counseled, and consoled, the guardians of family, andthe community, the ones the killers slaughtered as if to wipe out the verysources of life (127).

This shows the reverent, exaltation and glory of the Rwandan woman which the author tries to enunciate. This is the high point of her feminism, which seeks to revalue the roles of African women, like Stefania, the narrator's mother. She, illiterate, encourages her children's education. Stefania seeks the liberation of her children through the literacy of other children in the village. She encourages the children of her village to continue education. This is why she does everything to ensure that her children, especially girls, go to school. It is thanks to education that she, her children and the other people of her village begin to enjoy the contributions of Western civilization. Scholastique and André, two of Stefania's children, had been emancipated from the yoke of ignorance thanks to education, then they were delivered from the painful death that took the lives of several Tutsi. Scholastique and André were not in Rwanda during the greatest massacre of the Tutsi in 1994.

Education creates the leeway for them to leave Rwanda for Burundi and later France and Senegal respectively. Feminism advocates the emancipation of children, especially girls, through literacy, so that they can help in the development of their society. Scholastique, one of Stefania's daughters, became a social worker to facilitate the development of humanity. The advancement of clothing and textile enterprise in Rwandan society constitute another aspect social change captured by Mukasonga. Rwanda like other African societies that are opening up to colonialism and its exotic cultures, is undergoing a cultural

revolution. This revolution affects all aspects of indigenous culture: language, food, religion, clothing, and more. The Tutsi woman is perceived as opening up to modern and foreign clothing. Nevertheless, it is a question perceived to be open to modern and foreign clothing. But it is first and foremost the one who lives in the city. The city, unlike the village, remains a symbolization of modernity and civilization. The narrator calls the inhabitants of Kigali "the evolved" (*The Barefoot Woman* 74). Kilimadame, in other words, the one of the whites, Nyirabazungu is one of these evolved people who are in Nyamata. Her clothing becomes topical among the people, Scholastique puts it frankly: “We envied her colorful pagnes, her high-heeled shoes but there was no imitating the way she ties her scarf on her head […]” (70). The envy that the Nyirabazungu dress stimulates in adult women and girls. This clothing is revolutionary and new. Maria Theresa was too quick to adopt the new ways, but she always kept an eye on her, sometimes she ended up imitating her. Everyone knew who was behind the novelties we first saw only at Pancrace’s house:

> Felicite, Marie-Therese’s oldest daughter, who was at the convent school run by the Benebikira Sisters. Marie-Theresa had a lot of white hair. White hair was not admired on a woman, unless she was a respectable grandmother but she was determined to uncover her secret (94).

Maria Theresa's sartorial revolution had a lot of influence on Stefania and the women's community. Young girls and students run after this modern fashion, introduced by "a few emancipated pupils". At school, Scholastique said that it was no longer a question of "amasunzu – that was an archaic, degrading custom [...] straight was the order of the day, and the new ideal for fashionable girls (90). It was also the students who revolutionized the dress in boxer shorts, called 'ikaliso'. This one is an innovation "that fascinated all the girls who stayed in the village", but draws critical examination from women like Stefania. The evolution of clothing obviously shows the cultural dynamism among the Tutsi.

The incursion of Europe in Africa demonstrates the elasticity of cultures – another demonstration of the theme of social change Mukasonga depicts in the novel. This is because no culture is stable, but culture undergoes a total or partial transformation, conscious or unconscious. In *Inyenzi* or *Cockroaches* and *The Barefoot Woman*, the author reveals the cultural dynamism of the Tutsi. Colonialism is the main cause of this cultural dynamism that has continued to influence the tradition of the Tutsi people. The narrator, who tells the story, says unequivocally “Deep in our bush, "civilization" is taking us away from our roots” (78). Tutsi society did not know what coffee was before the arrival of the whites. It was not part of their meals. The coffee plant brought the cultivation of coffee to the meals of the Tutsi who were not accustomed to the care required for coffee farming. Typical of Tutsi society is the cultivation of sorghum and banana plantations. The cultivation of sorghum is the most popular, which requires festivities. The Rwandan War also contributed to bringing about cultural transformation among the Tutsi. In *The Barefoot Woman*, Scholastique speaks of “the unknown food that was distributed to us” (57) and two drugs to be prescribed: aspirin tablets and cough syrup (55), these are medical novelties though, it is however, important to state unambiguously that before hand, the villagers get medical care from plants. This is why Stefania advises “the ailing to use medicinal plants” (55), from plant pharmacy. These facts were dug up historically to deflate authoritarian narrative that Africans were uncivilized before her contact with European countries.

With colonization, the Christian religion penetrated into the interior of Africa, which knew only one traditional religion. There are new converts, both practicing and non-practicing. Cosma, Stefania's husband and Scholastique’s father, is a practicing man; He was in charge of several religious responsibilities in the parish. Unlike his wife, who attends Masses, she still clings to traditional belief. His religious hybridism is explicit in *The Barefoot Woman*. When it is clear that Mukasine is going to become Antony's wife, Scholastique reports that “She offered thanks to the Virgin Mary along with Ryangombe, the master of

the Spirits. My mother was a good Christian, but she said you shouldn't leave anyone out, especially not the gods of our ancestors". (100).

The coexistence of two contradictory religions, Christian (Virgin Mary) and traditional (Ryangombe) explains Stefania's religious consciousness. His reason is not to abandon the spiritual heritage of his ancestors. Although Scholastique calls her mother a good Christian, this is not evident in the passage. Stefania is typically a non-practicing christian. Another cultural or social change motif that is explicit in the texts is the perception of Rwandan women. Marie-Therese, Kilimadame and Stefania are open to the novelties that mark the modern period. Marie-Therese now wears "white hair", Kilimadame dresses in "her colourful loincloths, her high-heeled shoes" and Stefania tries to have an ikaliso, young girls' boxer shorts. What is revolutionary is the construction of a house for a woman. It is mostly seen as taboo. Félicité's house was adorned with toilets that replaced the local pits. Impressed by these modern innovations, "the women talked their husbands into digging new trenches so they could install the same facilities as at Marie-Thérèse'." (94), that is to say, Félicité's mother. This is evolving. She "played the inanga, the eight-stringed zither, which is strictly prohibited for women." (92) It should be noted that this 'inanga' is not 'our traditional inanga', but 'that of the whites, a guitar'. Although adult women remain doubtful, children and young girls are impressed. Félicité's music and song interest them and attract them to her miraculous house.

With the whites in Rwanda and the Rwandan conflicts, Rwandan culture evolved. Its dynamism comes from the culturally exotic influence. Fashion, food, perception of the world, language, and others are dynamic in Scholastique Mukasonga's works. New clothing attracted the interest of the villagers. They adapt to the new meal and exotic medicine to survive during the war. The perception of Rwandan women is also undergoing a dramatic change. Women are no longer primitive, playing only traditional roles. It is now modern. So, what is important to Mukasonga, is the demonstration of portraying the African woman as a strong woman who can lead even in war situations. Also, through the use of marginal and counter-memory techniques in documenting the grisly

experiences of the Rwandan war, she has achieved her aim of telling her story through the lens of historical facts, albeit painful remembrance. More importantly, marginality and counter-memory narrative techniques have helped her flatten the Hutu's account of the remote and immediate causes, killings and post-traumatic events of the Rwandan war that demonized Tutsi as evil tribe that deserve to the agonizing pains of genocide.

Through history and counter-memory *Cockroaches* and *The Barefoot Woman* recount the historical events, leading to the genocide. The narrators in the narrative remind the readers of the tendency to reduce the composite processes of history to particular historical events: the revolution, the civil war, the genocide. *The Barefoot Woman* advocates a challenging and tumultuous history by questioning and seeking all possible answers to those questions that plunged Rwanda into the abyss of genocide. Essentially, the history of the genocide is sometimes convoluted when recounted by historians from the outside, especially Western journalists. From the review of related literatures and anthropological data, one point is very glaring, the fact that the Rwandan story has for too long been told by outsiders: colonizers, missionaries, journalists, researchers, humanitarian organizations, and non-indigenous writers of fiction. A good example of this historical distortion of facts from outsiders is Aimable Twagilimana *Manifold Annihilation* when Jean goes to watch the news in the American Cultural Center in Kigali, Rwanda is mentioned in a long list of African countries involved in what is nebulously described as "some kind of civil war over ethnic or tribal differences" (103).

As already observed, such misinformation and distortion of facts was a common feature of Western reportage of both the civil war and the 1994 genocide and even today, 30 years later, some still refer to the genocide as the Rwandan civil war. As Rwandese can easily attest to, especially those living in Rwanda in the early 1990s, Scholastique Mukasonga's narratives have first-hand knowledge about what was happening in Kigali in particular and other towns in Rwanda albeit fictionalized. Scholastique Mukasonga succeeds in presenting an alternative lens in appreciating the genocide through counter-memory, fictional

visions that demonstrate the complexity of Rwandan history and the difficulty of disentangling genocide and civil war in the 1990s. As novels by a Rwandan author who is both witness to the build-up to, and during the hundred days of genocide, *The Barefoot Woman* has made important contributions to the narrative of the genocide making it a composite and more nuanced understanding of what happened in Rwanda in 1994.

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Scholastique Mukasonga harnesses the power of the written word to create a profound counter-memory of the Rwandan genocide, redefining the role of literature as both a historical record and an emotional tribute. Through her eloquent narrative, Mukasonga challenges traditional modes of documenting history by foregrounding personal memory, family stories, and community experiences that would otherwise remain unacknowledged. Her text transcends mere storytelling; it serves as an act of resistance against the erasure of the Tutsi people's suffering and resilience, allowing readers to access a nuanced, intimate perspective of events often flattened by conventional historical accounts.

By centering her mother, Stefania, as a symbol of Rwandan womanhood, Mukasonga transforms individual memory into collective memory, giving voice to the often-overlooked experiences of women whose stories are typically marginalized in official histories. This approach highlights the inherent limitations of conventional historical narratives, which may lack the emotional depth and cultural specificity that counter-memory captures. Through Mukasonga's counter-memory, the reader is not only invited to witness the traumatic history of the Rwandan genocide, but is also introduced to the everyday lives, struggles, and resilience of Tutsi women whose contributions to their families and communities were invaluable. Her mother's legacy becomes emblematic of cultural endurance, making *The Barefoot Woman* a testament to the strength and spirit of the Rwandan people.

Mukasonga's use of the written word bridges the gap between memory and history, creating a layered narrative that engages the reader intellectually and emotionally. She reminds us that literature has the unique ability to preserve

voices and experiences that history may overlook, capturing the essence of a people's identity beyond dates and events. Her work challenges readers to reconsider the sources of history, urging us to value personal testimony and cultural memory as vital components of historical truth.

To sum, *The Barefoot Woman* illustrates the transformative power of literature to act as both witness and participant in history. Mukasonga's work reclaims the stories of her people, ensuring that the memory of their lives, suffering, and resilience endures. Through this act of remembrance, she not only honors those lost, but also asserts the importance of counter-memory as a means to resist forgetting, affirm identity, and fortify cultural heritage. Her narrative stands as a powerful reminder of how the written word can preserve and protect the memories that define our humanity, challenging each of us to hold space for the stories that history may otherwise silence.

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