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Gendered Trauma, Colonial Education, and Subaltern Resistance in Scholastique Mukasonga's Our Lady of the Nile

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Abstract

This article reads Scholastique Mukasonga's novel Our Lady of the Nile (2012) through the lens of postcolonial feminism, grounding its argument in close textual analysis and in sustained engagement with the existing critical literature on the novel. Set in a Catholic girls' boarding school in Rwanda in the early 1970s, the novel presents the school as a microcosm of pre-genocide Rwandan society, where colonial legacies, ethnic discrimination, and patriarchal ideology intersect to produce a regime of normalized oppression. I examine how institutional mechanisms, from the high-altitude architecture of the Lycée to the bureaucratic enforcement of ethnic quotas, produce the double marginalization of Rwandan women. Drawing on Spivak's theorization of the subaltern, Mohanty's critique of the monolithic "Third World Woman," and Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, I deconstruct the gendered construction of the female body and the systematic silencing of indigenous identities within the school's colonial curriculum. The analysis shows that the school is not merely a setting but a failed utopian project that anticipates the logic of the 1994 genocide by normalizing ethnic hatred and gendered oppression in everyday institutional life. Through an intersectional lens, I demonstrate how Tutsi girls bear a double burden, targeted both by the racism of the Hutu-dominated state and by the sexism of a patriarchal society that polices their bodies and controls their reproductive futures. Hutu characters such as Gloriosa occupy morally complex positions that complicate any simplistic victim-perpetrator binary, illustrating Mohanty's insistence on the agency and diversity of women in the Global South, while the novel's third-person narration and shifting focalization resist any single authoritative voice. By examining narrative technique, characterization, symbolism, and the novel's sustained use of foreshadowing and irony, I show how Mukasonga foregrounds women's vulnerability within systems of intersecting oppression while also documenting subtle forms of every-

day resistance. The study contributes to postcolonial feminist literary criticism by situating its close reading against the three axes that organize existing scholarship on the novel, gendered trauma, colonial education, and subaltern resistance, and by addressing gaps this scholarship has identified, including the underuse of intersectionality as an analytic method rather than a citation. Ultimately, I argue that Our Lady of the Nile functions as a form of témoignage, literary testimony that preserves the memory of a pre-genocide world and exposes the slow, bureaucratic, and gendered processes through which mass atrocity becomes thinkable.

Subject Areas

Literature, Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, African Studies

Keywords

Scholastique Mukasonga, Our Lady of the Nile, Postcolonial Feminism, Rwandan Literature, Double Marginalization, Literature Review

1. Introduction

Scholastique Mukasonga's Our Lady of the Nile occupies a peculiar space in contemporary African literature. Set in a Catholic girls' boarding school in southern Rwanda during the early 1970s, the novel appears at first to be a coming-of-age story about adolescent friendship, petty rivalries, and the awkwardness of growing up. But beneath this veneer lies a carefully constructed premonition of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, a catastrophe that would claim the lives of most of Mukasonga's family. The school, far from being a neutral backdrop, functions as a microcosm of Rwandan society, where colonial institutions, ethnic categorization, and patriarchal control intersect to produce a specific form of gendered trauma. Because Mukasonga writes as a genocide survivor whose earlier volumes functioned as direct testimony, her turn to fiction in this novel matters beyond its considerable literary merit: it stages, in the enclosed and ostensibly protective space of a girls' Lycée, the slow institutional process by which colonial racial ideology and patriarchal control combine to make mass violence thinkable. Examining how gendered trauma, colonial education, and subaltern resistance intersect in this text is therefore significant both for the study of Mukasonga's oeuvre and for postcolonial feminist criticism more broadly, since the novel shows atrocity being rehearsed in the ordinary business of schooling long before it erupts into open violence.

Scholarship on Our Lady of the Nile has grown steadily since the novel's 2012 publication, and, as the literature review in Section 2 details, it has clustered along three axes that correspond to the institutional and symbolic architecture of the school itself. Trauma-oriented criticism has established that Mukasonga represents catastrophe as plural and layered rather than singular, with the pupils and

their families already carrying the memory of earlier pogroms even as the narrative moves toward 1994 [1] [2]. A second, historiographical grounded body of work has established the Lycée as the novel's true antagonist, reading its curriculum, quota system, and Marian iconography against Mamdani's account of the Hamitic hypothesis as the founding racial logic of the Rwandan state [3]-[5]. Lebourg's sociological reading of the school through the lens of stigmatization, labeling, and institutional deviance offers one of the most precise accounts of how the lycée's everyday operations produce the ethnic categories that later license violence against its Tutsi students [6]. A third axis imports the vocabulary of subaltern studies, applying Spivak's account of the doubly erased colonial and patriarchal subject to ask under what conditions, if any, the novel's Tutsi girls can be said to speak [7]-[10]. Together, this scholarship has firmly established that the school is not a neutral setting but an active participant in the production of the trauma the novel depicts.

Yet, as the fuller review in Section 2 shows, this scholarship remains thin in specific and consequential ways. Critics working from Euro-American trauma models have sometimes treated the lycée as a transhistorical schoolyard of suffering rather than as a historically specific colonial institution, a risk Hitchcott's insistence on regional political history is meant to correct [8]-[10]. Readings anchored in the school's curriculum and historiography have tended to reduce the novel to sociological allegory, leaving its irony, comedy, and patterned imagery under-examined as objects of properly formal criticism. Most importantly, Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality is invoked throughout this literature as a citation rather than a method: critics gesture toward the co-constitutive operation of ethnicity and gender without tracing, in sustained textual detail, how the two categories jointly produce the specific vulnerability of individual characters [11]. The closest studies to the present project each leave part of this task unfinished. Gowsalya and Jothi's trauma reading of the novel [2] traces its layered temporality of catastrophe but keeps ethnicity and gender largely in parallel; Lebourg's institutional sociology [6] maps the school's labelling mechanisms without sustained attention to gender; and Otuegbe's comparative work on colonial schooling [12] [13] foregrounds gender without operationalizing intersectionality as a structural method. The distinct position of, for instance, a poor scholarship student such as Virginia, whose family's poverty compounds her ethnic and gendered vulnerability, or the precise mechanics by which ethnic slander becomes gendered violence, remains under-examined. The present article builds directly on these studies: it takes up Gowsalya and Jothi's account of Mukasonga's women as custodians of memory [1] [2], Lebourg's analysis of institutional deviance [6], and Otuegbe's attention to the missionary school as a structure of violation [12] [13], while adding what none of them attempts, an intersectional analysis that is structural rather than additive, and a fuller account of the counter-pedagogy of the plane tree as evidence that the lycée is a contested, rather than total, pedagogical field.

This article addresses these gaps by combining postcolonial feminist theory,

particularly Spivak's concept of the subaltern [7], Mohanty's critique of the monolithic "Third World woman" [14], and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality [11], with Herman's feminist trauma theory [15] [16] and Hirsch's concept of post memory [17], and by using intersectionality not as a citation but as the central analytic method through which the novel's characters are read. Through close textual analysis of narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, and institutional power, the article traces in sustained detail how ethnic categorization and gendered control co-produce the specific vulnerability of characters such as Virginia, while extending the field's attention to the school's counter-pedagogy into a fuller account of the Lycée as a contested pedagogical field rather than a total institution. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to three overlapping fields. First, it adds to the growing body of scholarship on Mukasonga's work by offering a sustained postcolonial feminist reading of Our Lady of the Nile that operationalizes intersectionality structurally rather than invoking it in passing. Second, it demonstrates how literary texts can serve as sites of memory and testimony, preserving histories that official narratives have sought to erase. Third, it contributes to trauma studies by showing how gendered trauma operates through institutional structures rather than only through individual psychological experience.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Our Lady of the Nile (Notre-Dame du Nil, 2012 [18]; trans. Melanie Mauthner, 2014 [19]) has grown steadily since the novel won the Prix Renaudot and the Prix Ahmadou-Kourouma, consolidating Mukasonga's reputation beyond the testimonial volumes Inyenzi ou les Cafards (2006) [20] and La Femme aux pieds nus (2008) [21]. Read across its first decade of reception, the critical conversation clusters along three axes that correspond to the institutional and symbolic architecture of the school itself: gendered trauma, colonial education, and subaltern resistance. These axes are not sealed compartments, and critics regularly traverse them, but organizing the review along these lines clarifies both what the field has established and where it remains thin.

2.1. Gendered Trauma: Anticipatory Catastrophe and Post Memory

Trauma criticism has had to strain against the novel's proleptic setting, which places the action roughly two decades before the genocide that gives every page its dreadful charge. The dominant framework in early readings, drawn from Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an event that arrives too soon to be assimilated and returns belatedly through repetition [22], understands catastrophe as fundamentally retrospective. Gowsalya's trauma-theoretical reading of the novel complicates this Caruthian template, however, by showing that Mukasonga represents trauma as plural and layered rather than singular: the pupils and their families already carry the memory of the 1959 revolution and the pogroms of the early 1960s, so the novel depicts a community for whom catastrophe is simultaneously

remembered, lived, and foretold [2]. This inversion of trauma theory's usual temporality is not a flaw in the criticism but its central discovery: in Mukasonga's Rwanda, trauma runs in both directions, from a buried past and from an approaching future.

A parallel generic argument concerns the contract the novel establishes with its readers. Beverley's account of testimonio as first-person witness narrative delivered on behalf of a community otherwise denied history [23] clarifies what is formally at stake in Mukasonga's turn from testimony to fiction: her earlier books functioned as classical testimonio, whereas the novel rebalances the contract, letting a witness narrate a collective prehistory she did not personally attend. Other critics refine this insight through distinct vocabularies. LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through has been used to read the novel as a fictional rehearsal of how structural violence congeals into genocidal habitus [24], while Herman's staged model of recovery underwrites readings that stress the fragile sanctuaries the girls build among themselves [15] [16]. Fryer-Davis's dialogic account argues that Mukasonga's narratives renegotiate Rwandan genocide narratives dialogically, as survivor testimony, reconciliation discourse, and literary form answer one another across time [25]. The limit of these approaches is a certain universalizing drift: critics working from Euro-American trauma models have sometimes treated the Lycée as a trans historical schoolyard of suffering rather than as a historically specific colonial institution, a risk against which Hitchcott's insistence that Rwandan fiction be read against the region's political history offers a necessary corrective [8]-[10].

Within the novel, trauma is distributed by gender with methodical precision. Tutsi femininity is eroticized and pathologized at once: the students are told they descend from Ethiopian queens carved on the stelae by the Nile, measured against a white statue of the Virgin, and hunted through a sexual economy that culminates in the journalist Fontenay's predations. Lucas describes this mechanism as a national psychodrama powered by colonial race craft and a Christian-inflected myth of Tutsi female beauty, a fatal beauty that both exalts and marks its bearers for destruction [5]. Otuegbe's comparative work places the missionary school in a lineage of Black women's writing, reading the Lycée alongside Tsitsi Dangarembga's fiction to show colonial schooling as a repeated structure of violation in which gender, race, and religion converge on the bodies of schoolgirls [12] [13]. Hirsch's concept of post memory, describing how the generation after catastrophe remembers through inherited stories and images [17], has proved fertile here precisely because critics have had to invert it: Mukasonga writes after 1994 about a world before it, so the reader's retrospective knowledge becomes the organizing memory of a narrative whose characters cannot yet know their fate. Gowsalya and Jothi extend this line with the figure of the woman who remembers, arguing that Mukasonga's women are positioned as custodians of a matrilineal archive rather than merely as victims [1]. The principal weakness of this cluster is methodological: intersectionality is invoked constantly, yet Crenshaw's insistence that race, gender, and class

be analyzed as co-constitutive rather than additive [11] is rarely operationalized, leaving the distinct vulnerability of, for instance, a poor scholarship student such as Virginia, whose family's poverty compounds her ethnic and gendered vulnerability, under-examined.

2.2. Colonial Education: The Lycée as an Apparatus of Racial Pedagogy

The strongest consensus in the field concerns the school as the novel's true antagonist. The most illuminating work on this axis reads the lycée's curriculum against the historiography of the Hamitic hypothesis: the history lessons that present Tutsi as foreign Nilotic invaders reproduce, almost verbatim, the colonial ethnology that Mamdani identifies as the founding racial logic of the Rwandan state [3]. Chrétien's demolition of the Hamitic myth in the Great Lakes region and Semujanga's analysis of Rwanda's founding narratives provide the scholarly spine against which the novel's classroom scenes acquire documentary force [26] [27], while Eltringham's account of post-genocide debates over origins explains why the hypothesis retained its lethal traction decades after decolonization [28]. Read through this historiography, the Lycée is not a backdrop but a factory: it manufactures the epistemic conditions under which neighbors become categories and categories become corpses.

The theoretical framing of the school's alienating pedagogy derives chiefly from Fanon and Ngũgĩ. Fanon's account of a colonial education that epidermalizes the subject, fixing the Black body at the intersection of a white gaze and an internalized inferiority [29], illuminates the Tutsi girls' double consciousness as they perform proper Catholic femininity while being silently reclassified as foreign. Ngũgĩ's argument that colonial schooling seizes the language of the child and seats the dynamics of domination in the classroom [30] maps directly onto the novel's French-only regime, in which the language of sophistication is also the language in which extermination is planned. The risk in this vein of criticism is that the novel is reduced to sociological allegory, its irony, grotesque comedy, and patterned imagery treated as mere vehicles for a historical thesis rather than as objects of properly formal criticism.

If the curriculum racializes, the institution sacralizes. The planning of the Virgin statue's nose so that she will look African rather than Tutsi condenses the novel's argument about colonial religion into a single act of iconographic vandalism, and critics read the white Virgin, the crucifixes, and the school's regime of confession as components of a Christian-inflected racial pedagogy [5]. Coste's study of adolescent rivalries and the genocidal plot shows how the novel's schoolstory conventions, feuds, factions, cheating scandals, are systematically darkened into the rehearsal of a national conspiracy [4]. A growing strand of commentary also reads the Lycée as biopolitical, an incubator of the future elite in which admission functions as a eugenic sorting of respectable womanhood. Two evaluative observations follow: this is the most complete body of scholarship on the novel,

doubly anchored in the text's pedagogical scenes and in regional historiography, but it harbors an unexamined assumption that education in the novel is exclusively colonial. The girls also receive a clandestine education under the plane tree, in Kinyarwanda, and criticism has only begun to treat this counter-pedagogy as education in its own right rather than as background texture.

2.3. Subaltern Resistance: Voice, Silence, and the Counter-Archive

The third axis imports the vocabulary of subaltern studies, and no essay in it can avoid Spivak's founding question, or her warning that representation splits between political speaking-for and artistic making-visible [7]. Applied to the novel, this framework yields an austere insight: Tutsi girls do speak, constantly, to each other, but their speech is systematically disavowed by every institution that could convert it into truth. Several critics describe Mukasonga's narrative strategy as a form of ventriloquism for the dead, lending acoustic space to voices history refused to record, and Gowsalya and Jothi read in this strategy a reclaiming of women's agency in the aftermath of atrocity [1]. Yet the most careful work on this axis resists a celebratory register: Hitchcott's broader project of recuperating Rwanda in Mukasonga's writing cautions against readings that would make the novel's Tutsi girls spokeswomen of a nation, since the novel ends precisely in the extermination of its speaking subjects [8]-[10]. The strongest formulations treat silence not as absence but as negative voice, a structural condition the novel documents with clinical patience, secured narratologically by a distribution of focalization that lets Tutsi speech surface locally while denying it any channel into the decision-making scenes where it would matter.

The concrete practices of resistance the novel depicts, storytelling under the plane tree, the parents' quiet mathematics of exemption and bribery, have attracted increasing attention, and critics read these practices as resistance in a registrable rather than heroic sense, survival as strategy rather than triumph [1] [8]-[10]. Gloriosa poses the axis's hardest problem: the subaltern girl who seizes voice and agency precisely by becoming an instrument of patriarchal and colonial power, embodying Spivak's lesson that agency is not the same as emancipation [7]. Finally, Okoth's review essay subjects the metropolitan reception of Mukasonga's work to skeptical scrutiny, asking how the material afterlife of Rwandan suffering in the Anglophone literary marketplace conditions the very readings this axis produces [31], a question of method rather than ingratitude: if subaltern resistance is mediated by the publishing houses and prizes that brought the novel to Anglophone readers, reception belongs to the analysis of resistance itself.

2.4. Positioning the Present Study

Read together, these three axes converge on a single problem: how to narrate a catastrophe that has not yet happened but is already inscribed in institutions, curricula, statues, and myths. Their combined strength lies in this convergence; their limitations are symmetrical, a tendency to universalize trauma beyond the re-

gion's specific history, a reluctance to engage literary form on its own terms, and a near-total silence on translation, reception, and the operationalization of intersectionality as method rather than citation. This last gap is the one the present article addresses most directly. Where existing criticism gestures toward Crenshaw's framework without applying it structurally, this article uses intersectionality as its central analytic method, tracing in sustained detail how ethnic categorization and gendered control co-produce the specific vulnerability of characters such as Virginia, rather than treating ethnicity and gender as separately theorized, additive concerns. It also extends the field's attention to counter-pedagogy, begun in readings of the plane tree, into a fuller account of the school as a contested pedagogical field rather than a total institution. In doing so, the analysis that follows builds on, rather than repeats, the groundwork this literature review has surveyed.

3. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and the Politics of Trauma

3.1. The Subaltern Woman and the Problem of Voice

The question of whether the subaltern can speak, posed by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal 1988 essay, remains a productive starting point for analyzing the representation of marginalized women in postcolonial literature [7]. Spivak argues that the subaltern woman is doubly erased: first by colonial and patriarchal structures that deny her agency, and second by intellectual discourses that claim to represent her but ultimately speak for her. In Our Lady of the Nile, this double erasure is embodied by the Tutsi female students, who are systematically silenced by both the ethnic hierarchy imposed by the Hutu-dominated state and the patriarchal norms enforced by the Catholic school.

Spivak's framework is useful here not because it provides a definitive answer to the question of subaltern speech, but because it forces us to attend to the conditions under which speech becomes possible or impossible. Mukasonga's novel does not simply give voice to the subaltern woman; it shows the complex, often contradictory ways in which subaltern women negotiate, resist, and sometimes fail to escape the structures that seek to silence them. The novel's narrative perspective, which shifts among the limited perspectives of individual characters within a third-person frame, creates a space in which the reader can glimpse the subaltern woman's consciousness without the text pretending to fully possess it.

3.2. Intersectionality and the Critique of Universal Sisterhood

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides an essential corrective to feminist analyses that treat gender as an isolated category of oppression [11]. Crenshaw argues that Black women experience oppression not as the simple sum of racism plus sexism, but as a specific form of marginalization that is qualitatively different from either racism or sexism alone. In the Rwandan context, this means that Tutsi women cannot be understood simply as women who happen to be Tutsi, or as Tutsi who happen to be women; their oppression is produced through

the specific intersection of ethnic categorization and gendered control.

Chandra Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse further complicates the picture by showing how the category of "woman" has been used to erase the specificities of race, class, and colonial history [14]. Mohanty argues that Western feminism often constructs a monolithic "Third World woman" who is uniformly oppressed, poor, and victimized, thereby erasing the agency and diversity of women in the Global South. Our Lady of the Nile challenges this construction by presenting female characters who are neither uniformly victimized nor uniformly resistant. The Hutu student Gloriosa, for example, is both a perpetrator of ethnic violence and a product of patriarchal conditioning, while the narrative's shifting focalization moves through characters who are at once witnesses to and participants in the school's culture of discrimination.

3.3. Feminist Trauma Theory and Post Memory

Judith Herman's work on trauma provides a gendered lens for understanding the psychological dimensions of the characters' experiences [15] [16]. Herman argues that trauma is not merely a personal wound but a disruption of human relationships, trust, and agency, often resulting from violence and betrayal in both public and private life. Her three-stage model of recovery, safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection, offers a useful structure for analyzing how Mukasonga's female characters navigate the long aftermath of ethnic violence. Herman further contends that trauma can never be fully resolved when justice and recognition are lacking, a condition that acutely describes the pre-genocide Rwandan context depicted in the novel.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory explains how trauma is transmitted across generations [17]. Post memory describes the relationship that descendants of survivors bear to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before them, experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. It is important, however, to distinguish three temporal registers that the novel's proleptic structure risks conflating. The first is the characters' own inherited memories of the 1959 revolution and the early-1960s pogroms: these are genuinely postmemorial, transmitted to a generation born after the events through family stories, silences, and habits of vigilance. The second is the reader's retrospective knowledge of the 1994 genocide: this is dramatic irony rather than postmemory, since it belongs to the reader, not to the characters, who cannot yet know their fate. The third is Mukasonga's own relation to the catastrophe: as a survivor who lost the great majority of her family, she writes from lived memory and grief, which her fiction then transposes into the register of testimony. Anticipation of future catastrophe, however pervasive, does not by itself constitute postmemory; postmemory requires an inherited relation to an already enacted past. In Our Lady of the Nile, the students inhabit a space saturated with inherited memories of ethnic violence and colonial oppression, even though the genocide itself lies in the future; it is this inherited satura-

tion, rather than mere foreboding, that the concept of postmemory helps to illuminate.

This combined framework of postcolonial feminism, feminist trauma theory, and postmemory, read alongside the axes of scholarship surveyed in Section 2, allows for a nuanced reading of how gender, ethnicity, history, and memory intersect in Mukasonga's depiction of the school as a microcosm of Rwandan society.

4. The School as Colonial Apparatus: Education, Ethnicity, and Gender

4.1. The Belgian Colonial Legacy of the Lycée

The school at the center of Our Lady of the Nile is not a neutral institution. It is a Catholic Lycée run by Belgian nuns, located in the southern Rwandan town of Nyaminombe, and its very existence is a product of Belgium's colonial project in Rwanda. The Belgian colonial administration, working in close collaboration with Catholic missionaries, constructed an ethnic hierarchy that privileged the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority, a hierarchy codified from 1931 in the ethnic identity cards that the colonial administration required all Rwandans to carry [28] [32]. Crucially, however, the colonial state and the post-independence Hutu-dominated state did not simply reproduce one another: Belgian rule had favored the Tutsi, and its racial ideology was the Hamitic hypothesis, whereas the discriminatory machinery of the Second Republic, above all the quota system analyzed below, was a post-independence policy that inverted the colonial grid while retaining its ethnic categories intact [3] [32]. The school, with its Belgian nuns, European curriculum, and rigid discipline, is a physical embodiment of this longer colonial legacy, and this reading is consistent with the historiographical work of Mamdani, Chrétien, and Semujanga surveyed above [3] [26] [27].

The novel makes clear that the school's ethnic composition is not accidental but is enforced through a quota system that limits the number of Tutsi students to roughly ten percent of the student body, two Tutsi students for every twenty pupils [19]. This quota, which the novel's historical setting identifies with the Habyarimana regime's discriminatory policies rather than with colonial practice as such [32], ensures that Tutsi students are always a visible and vulnerable minority within the school. The ethnic identity of each student is not a private matter but is publicly known, constantly referenced, and used to allocate privileges and punishments. The school thus functions as what Michel Foucault might call a disciplinary apparatus, one that produces and reproduces ethnic difference through its everyday operations.

The Belgian nuns who run the school are not neutral educators either. They are products of a colonial missionary tradition that viewed African cultures as inferior and sought to "civilize" African students through European education and Catholic indoctrination. The novel's depiction of the nuns, particularly the Mother Superior, reveals how this colonial mentality persists even after formal independence. The nuns enforce a curriculum that has nothing to do with Rwandan history

or culture, that teaches European literature and history as universal, and that treats Rwandan traditions as primitive or pagan. The students are taught to be ashamed of their own culture and to aspire to European standards of behavior, beauty, and knowledge.

4.2. The Curriculum of Cultural Hegemony

The school's curriculum is a primary instrument of cultural erasure. The students study French literature, European history, and Catholic theology, but they learn nothing about Rwandan history, Rwandan literature, or the precolonial political systems that governed their country before the arrival of Europeans. This curriculum is not simply incomplete; it is ideological. It constructs a worldview in which Europe is the center of civilization, knowledge, and progress, while Africa is peripheral, backward, and in need of European guidance. The students internalize this worldview, coming to see their own culture as inferior and their own history as irrelevant, a dynamic Fanon and Ngũgĩ theorize as central to colonial pedagogy [29] [30]. The school's founding boast that its pupils "know just how much they are worth" ([19], p. 8) thus conceals the very mechanism by which their worth is measured against European norms.

The language of instruction, French, further reinforces this cultural hegemony. French is the language of the colonial administration, the Catholic Church, and the Rwandan elite. The students are required to speak French at all times within the school, and Kinyarwanda, their native language, is discouraged or punished [19]. This linguistic policy has a profound psychological effect: it alienates the students from their own culture and forces them to express their thoughts and feelings in a language that is not their own. The novel shows how this linguistic alienation contributes to the students' sense of displacement and disconnection from their own identities.

The school's disciplinary regime, with its strict rules, uniform requirements, and constant surveillance, further reinforces the colonial power structure. The students' bodies are disciplined through uniform codes, movement restrictions, and behavioral regulations that teach them to internalize the authority of the institution. The body becomes a site of colonial power, where the norms of European femininity, modesty, and obedience are imposed on Rwandan girls. This disciplinary regime is not only about controlling behavior; it is about producing a particular kind of subject, one who is docile, obedient, and assimilated to European cultural norms.

4.3. Ethnic Quotas and the Normalization of Discrimination

The ten percent quota for Tutsi students is perhaps the most explicit manifestation of ethnic discrimination within the school. This quota mirrors the ethnic quotas that were enforced in Rwandan universities and government institutions under the Habyarimana regime, which limited Tutsi access to roughly ten percent of places in education and public employment [32]. Crucially, the quota system was

a post-independence policy rather than a direct colonial inheritance: it was the Hutu-dominated Second Republic, not the Belgian administration, that institutionalized discrimination against the Tutsi, even though it operated on the grid of ethnic categories that the colonial state had created [3] [32]. The novel's fictional quota thus condenses a specifically postcolonial mechanism of exclusion. The quota is presented as a fair and reasonable policy, a measure to prevent Tutsi domination in education, but in practice it functions as a mechanism of exclusion and marginalization. Tutsi students who qualify for admission on academic grounds are turned away simply because of their ethnicity, while less qualified Hutu students are admitted to fill the ethnic quota [19].

Within the school, the ethnic quota creates a culture in which ethnicity is constantly foregrounded. The students know who is Tutsi and who is Hutu, and these categories shape their friendships, their rivalries, and their sense of belonging. The Tutsi students, always outnumbered, develop a sense of solidarity born of shared vulnerability, but they also internalize the stigma attached to their ethnicity. The Hutu students, meanwhile, are socialized into a culture of ethnic privilege, taught to see Tutsi people as inherently different, potentially dangerous, and undeserving of equal treatment.

The novel's depiction of the ethnic quota system reveals how discrimination becomes normalized through bureaucratic procedures. The quota is not enforced through overt violence but through administrative rules, paperwork, and institutional policies that make ethnic discrimination seem routine and unremarkable. This normalization of discrimination is a crucial precursor to the violence that will later engulf Rwanda. The school, in this sense, is not merely a reflection of Rwandan society; it is a training ground where the attitudes, hierarchies, and mechanisms of ethnic division are learned and internalized.

5. The Double Marginalization: Silencing, Violence, and the Subaltern Woman

5.1. The Erasure of Indigenous Female Identity

The female students at Our Lady of the Nile are subjected to a process of identity erasure that operates along both ethnic and gendered lines. The school's European curriculum, French language, and Catholic morality all work to sever the students from their Rwandan cultural heritage, while the patriarchal norms of the institution teach them to be ashamed of their own bodies and desires. The result is a form of double alienation: the students are alienated from their Rwandan identity by the colonial curriculum, and alienated from their own female experience by patriarchal control.

The novel shows how this double alienation affects the Tutsi students most acutely. Tutsi women in Rwandan society have historically been subjected to specific forms of sexualization and objectification, rooted in colonial racial theories that portrayed Tutsi women as more "European" in appearance and therefore more desirable or more threatening. The school environment amplifies this sexu-

alization, as the Tutsi students' physical appearance becomes a topic of comment, speculation, and hostility among their Hutu peers, a dynamic Lucas and Otuegbe track closely in their readings of the novel's beauty myth [5] [12] [13]. The girls themselves articulate the double bind: "here, we're inyenzi, cockroaches, snakes, rodents; to whites, we're the heroes of their legends" ([19], p. 165). The novel's depiction of Virginia, a Tutsi scholarship student who is subjected to ethnic bullying, eroticized attention, and ultimately the threat of the pogrom, reveals how the intersection of ethnicity and gender produces a specific form of vulnerability that cannot be reduced to either ethnicity or gender alone [19].

The erasure of indigenous female identity is also evident in the school's treatment of Rwandan cultural practices related to womanhood. The students are taught to reject traditional Rwandan norms of female beauty, behavior, and sociality in favor of European norms. The mothers who appear on the margins of the narrative, by contrast, transmit a different archive: the girls smuggle home foods into the Lycée and gather secretly at night to compare the recipes and memories the institution forbids, and the ancestral beliefs the curriculum dismisses as superstition continue to organize the girls' inner lives [19]. The school offers no alternative conception of female identity that is rooted in Rwandan culture; it simply replaces Rwandan norms with European ones, leaving the students with a fractured sense of self.

5.2. Gendered Violence as a Mechanism of Silencing

Violence against women in Our Lady of the Nile takes multiple forms, from verbal harassment and ethnic slander to the organized brutality of the novel's final episodes. This violence is not random; it is systematic, directed primarily at the Tutsi students, and serves the function of enforcing both ethnic hierarchy and patriarchal control. The violence is instigated within the school itself: Gloriosa, having shattered the head of the Virgin's statue while preparing to replace its "Tutsi nose" with a "majority" one, invents a story about Tutsi-affiliated bandits and persuades her Hutu classmates, along with elements of the school authorities, to turn against the two Tutsi girls [19].

The novel's final episodes distribute the girls' fates with a precision that any reading must respect. It is Veronique, not Virginia, who is hunted down and murdered: she hides in the house of the journalist Fontenaille, is found there, and is raped and burned to death by the mob that Gloriosa has summoned to the school [19]. Virginia, the novel's protagonist, escapes, the only Tutsi girl to survive, led to safety by the spirit of the ancient queen whose bones Fontenaille's excavations had disturbed [19]. The nuns and teachers, far from protecting their charges, retreat behind locked doors, and the Mother Superior collaborates with the Hutu zealots who track down their Tutsi classmates [19].

The novel's treatment of this violence is significant for what it reveals about the relationship between gender, ethnicity, and power. The violence against the Tutsi girls is not an isolated eruption but the culmination of a long process of dehuman-

ization, in which Tutsi women have been portrayed as sexually promiscuous, morally corrupt, and inherently threatening to Hutu society [5]. The ethnic slander that circulates throughout the school, portraying Tutsi girls as seductive and manipulative, creates a cultural climate in which violence against Tutsi women seems justified or even necessary. This process of dehumanization through slander is a well-documented precursor to genocidal violence, and the novel shows how it operates within the microcosm of the school [3] [32].

The school's response to the violence further reveals the complicity of institutional power in gendered oppression. Rather than protecting their Tutsi students, the Belgian nuns and teachers shut their ears and doors to the purge, and the Mother Superior's collaboration with the student zealots shows institutional authority abandoning its protective function at the decisive moment [19]. The girls had long anticipated this abandonment: "For there was now a shameful secret lying coiled deep within the Lycée, and deep within each of the girls, too" ([19], p. 132). The silencing mechanism is thus institutional as well as discursive, and it operates on the bodies of the girls before it operates on their testimony.

5.3. The Subaltern's Struggle for Voice: The Case of Virginia

Virginia's trajectory throughout the novel can be read as a sustained struggle for voice and survival within a structure that seeks to silence her. As a Tutsi girl from a poor family, admitted under the ethnic quota, she is positioned at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression: ethnic discrimination, gendered vulnerability, and colonial cultural erasure [32]. Yet Virginia does not remain a passive victim. She asserts her agency through various means: she excels in the European curriculum in which she is schooled, she maintains her family's memory against the school's contempt for "the sticks," and, when Fontenaille's excavations disturb the bones of an ancient queen, she consults a Rwandan healer to learn how to lay the queen's spirit to rest [19]. The queen returns in a dream to claim Virginia as her favorite in the world of the living, and it is this spirit, together with a worldly protector, who leads Virginia to safety when the violence erupts [19]. Her escape is not triumphal: she flees the Lycée as the only Tutsi girl to survive the purge, and her story survives only because the novel has made her its protagonist [19].

The novel's depiction of Virginia's struggle reveals the limitations as well as the possibilities of subaltern agency, and it bears directly on the caution that Hitchcott and Spivak both urge against premature narratives of triumphant voice [7] [8] [10]. Virginia's speech is repeatedly dismissed or disavowed by the institutions around her: her warnings about the mounting threats are not converted into protection, and her survival depends on forces outside the school rather than on any institutional recognition of her voice [19]. Her position at the novel's end, alive but exiled from the world the Lycée was meant to confer, is not a natural condition but a produced one, the result of a systematic effort to deny her credibility and agency.

Yet Virginia's struggle is not entirely in vain. Through her friendship with Ve-

ronique and her bonds with other students, she creates alternative spaces of recognition and solidarity that exist outside the official structures of the school [19]. Her story, focalized through the novel's shifting third-person narration, becomes a form of testimony that preserves her experience even when official institutions refuse to acknowledge it [19]. In this sense, the novel itself functions as a mechanism of voice, giving literary form to experiences that institutional power has sought to erase. Virginia's story, embedded within the novel's narrative, becomes a testament to the subaltern woman's persistent struggle to be heard, even when the conditions for speech are systematically denied.

6. Resistance in the Cracks: Education, Solidarity, and Voice

6.1. Educational Aspiration as Pedagogical Resistance

Within the repressive institutional structure of the school, educational aspiration emerges as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance, particularly for the young Tutsi women who are simultaneously marginalized by ethnicity and gender. The character of Virginia exemplifies this pedagogical resistance. Her academic success in the European curriculum, which puts her writing at the service of wealthier classmates who cannot produce it themselves [19], constitutes a deliberate refusal of the roles allocated to her by both the colonialist state and patriarchal Rwandan society. Her desire to learn is, as one critic puts it, her refusal to play the roles society has allocated to her [1]. Veronique's dreams of Europe, which Fontenaille exploits for his own purposes, testify in turn to the girls' ambition to escape the futures mapped out for them [19].

Education functions as a strategy of self-empowerment in several ways. First, it provides the students with knowledge and skills that exist independently of the ethnic hierarchy of the school. Academic achievement, at least in theory, is based on merit rather than ethnicity, and the Tutsi students' success in the classroom becomes a form of quiet defiance against the ideology of ethnic inferiority. Second, education opens up possibilities of mobility and escape from the restrictive environment of the school and the ethnic conflict of Rwandan society. The students' dreams of studying abroad, of pursuing professional careers, and of living lives beyond the constraints imposed on them are all fueled by their educational aspirations. Third, education provides a space for critical thinking and self-reflection, allowing the students to question the naturalized assumptions about ethnicity, gender, and power that pervade the school.

The school itself, despite its function as an instrument of colonial and patriarchal control, becomes an ambiguous space where resistance is possible. The Belgian nuns who run the school, while agents of colonial power, also provide the students with access to education and knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to them. The classroom, while a site of cultural indoctrination, is also a space where ideas can be debated, questioned, and reimagined. The students' engagement with European literature and philosophy, while intended to assimilate them to European culture, also provides them with intellectual tools that they can

use to critique their own society. The girls also receive a clandestine education under the plane tree, in Kinyarwanda: the storytelling, genealogies, and ancestral lore that the French-only curriculum refuses them continue to circulate there, and this counter-pedagogy is best understood as education in its own right rather than as background texture [19]. This ambiguity, the way in which the school simultaneously oppresses and empowers its students, is one of the novel's most complex and insightful observations about the nature of colonial education.

6.2. Women's Solidarity as Psychological Resistance

Beyond individual acts of resistance, Mukasonga constructs webs of women's solidarity that function as tools of psychological survival and collective resistance. The young girls at Our Lady of the Nile navigate institutionalized racism and misogyny through shared experiences of marginalization that foster silent forms of resistance: solidarity in silence, secret prayer, and the subversion of imposed identities [1]. These actions, though often subtle and easily overlooked, exemplify a gendered resilience strategy: the creation of safe spaces and emotional sanctuaries through sisterhood.

The friendship between Virginia and Veronique, the school's only two Tutsi students, is a primary example of this solidarity [19]. Their bond, forged through shared experiences of marginalization and vulnerability, provides both characters with emotional support and a sense of belonging that the school cannot offer [19]. Their conversations, shared secrets, and mutual understanding create an alternative community within the school, one that is based on empathy and recognition rather than ethnic hierarchy and patriarchal control [19].

Mothers and older women also serve as cultural mentors, transmitting knowledge, stories, and advice that help younger women preserve their identity and self-respect. The novel's brief glimpses of the students' family lives reveal how maternal figures provide emotional resilience and cultural continuity, linking the personal struggle for survival to the broader project of cultural preservation. These maternal figures, though largely absent from the school environment, exert a powerful influence through the memories and values they have instilled in their daughters.

The solidarity among the female students is not without its tensions and contradictions. The ethnic divisions of Rwandan society penetrate even the closest friendships, and the novel does not romanticize women's solidarity as a simple solution to structural oppression. Gloriosa, the Hutu student who becomes an agent of ethnic violence, demonstrates how patriarchal and ethnic conditioning can turn women against each other. The Hutu student Immaculée, by contrast, refuses Gloriosa's authority, leads the expedition to visit the gorillas, and declares that she no longer wants to be part of "this marketplace", rejecting the marriage economy for which the Lycée prepares its students [19]. Yet the novel also shows how, despite these divisions, moments of connection and mutual recognition persist, offering glimpses of an alternative form of community based on shared female

experience rather than ethnic categorization.

6.3. Narrative Focalization, Witnessing, and the Ethics of Testimony

Our Lady of the Nile is narrated in the third person, with a shifting focalization that moves among the students and, occasionally, the adults who surround them [19]. This narrative architecture is itself an ethical choice. Rather than installing a single authoritative witness, the novel distributes perspective across the school's community, allowing the reader to see the violence of ethnic categorization from within the girls' world while never granting any single character full control of the story [19]. The faux-naïve tone of the narration, at once ironic and tender, lulls the reader into the school's own routines before the final violence shatters them [19].

This witnessing function should not, however, be located in a single narrator-character. The novel's focalization performs the work of witnessing directly: it lets Tutsi speech surface locally, Virginia's fears, Véronique's dreams, the girls' whispered exchanges, while denying that speech any channel into the decision-making scenes where it would matter [19]. The narrative thus reproduces, at the level of form, the structural silencing that the school enforces at the level of institution.

This position of the witness, as described by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, involves a specific ethical responsibility: to listen to the testimony of the other without appropriating it, to bear witness to suffering without claiming to fully understand it, and to preserve the truth of the other's experience even when it is painful or uncomfortable [33]. The novel's narrative fulfills this function, creating a literary space in which the testimony of the subaltern woman can be heard without being reduced to any single perspective. The novel, in this sense, is not simply about the suffering of Tutsi women; it is about the ethical act of bearing witness to that suffering, and the responsibilities that such witnessing entails.

7. Discussion: Trauma, Memory, and the Ethics of Representation

7.1. The School as a Failed Utopian Project and Predictive Model

The school at Our Lady of the Nile can be read as a failed utopian project, an institution that was intended to provide education and moral guidance to Rwandan girls but instead became a breeding ground for ethnic division, gendered violence, and cultural alienation. The school's name, invoking the Virgin Mary and the sacred river of Rwanda, suggests a space of purity, protection, and spiritual nourishment. But the novel reveals this space to be anything but pure: it is contaminated by ethnic hatred, sexual violence, and the legacy of colonial power. The irony of the school's name is one of the novel's central rhetorical strategies, drawing attention to the gap between the institution's ideals and its reality [19].

The school also functions as a predictive model, a microcosm in which the dynamics that will later produce the Rwandan genocide are already visible and op-

erative. The ethnic quota system, the culture of ethnic slander and dehumanization, the complicity of institutional authorities in violence, and the gradual normalization of ethnic hatred all prefigure the larger catastrophe that will unfold in 1994. The novel's explicit alignment of the Tutsi with the Jews, as the people of the Book, belongs to this predictive rhetoric ([19], pp. 119, 164). The novel's power lies in its ability to show how genocide does not emerge suddenly or unexpectedly but is produced through a long process of institutionalization, normalization, and cultural conditioning. The school, in this sense, is not merely a setting for the novel's action; it is an argument about the origins of genocidal violence.

This predictive dimension of the novel raises important questions about the relationship between literature and history. Mukasonga, writing after the genocide, knows the outcome of the dynamics she describes. Her narrative is infused with a sense of dramatic irony, as the reader knows what the characters do not: that the ethnic tensions of the school will culminate in the mass murder of Tutsi people. This dramatic irony gives the novel its haunting, prophetic quality, transforming a story about adolescent schoolgirls into a meditation on the origins of mass violence. The novel does not simply reflect history; it intervenes in historical memory, showing how the past contained the seeds of the catastrophe and how those seeds were nurtured by institutions like the school.

7.2. The Double Burden: Intersectionality in Practice

The concept of intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw, helps illuminate the specific form of oppression experienced by the novel's Tutsi female characters [11]. These characters do not experience ethnicity and gender as separate, additive forms of oppression; they experience them as intersecting, mutually constitutive forces that produce a unique form of marginalization. A Tutsi woman in the novel is not simply a woman who happens to be Tutsi, nor a Tutsi who happens to be a woman; she is a specific kind of subject whose oppression is produced through the intersection of ethnic categorization and gendered control. This is precisely the operationalization of intersectionality that Section 2 identified as underdeveloped in the existing scholarship, and it is where the present reading departs most clearly from prior criticism.

This intersectional perspective challenges both ethnic-only and gender-only analyses of the novel. An analysis that focuses only on ethnicity would miss the specific ways in which gender shapes the experience of Tutsi students, from the sexualization of their bodies to the institutional abandonment that follows gendered violence. An analysis that focuses only on gender would miss the specific ways in which ethnicity amplifies and complicates gendered oppression, from the ethnic targeting of sexual violence to the way ethnic hierarchy divides women from each other. Only an intersectional analysis can capture the full complexity of the characters' experiences.

The novel also shows how intersectional oppression produces intersectional forms of resistance. The Tutsi female students' strategies of resistance, from edu-

cational aspiration to women's solidarity to the search for voice, are shaped by the specific intersection of ethnicity and gender that defines their oppression. Their resistance is not simply ethnic resistance or feminist resistance; it is a specific form of postcolonial feminist resistance that addresses the simultaneous operation of ethnic and gendered power. This intersectional resistance, though often subtle and limited in its effectiveness, represents a genuine challenge to the structures that seek to contain and control the subaltern woman.

7.3. The Ethical Imperative of Testimony and Literature as Memory

Our Lady of the Nile participates in a broader tradition of testimonial literature that emerged in response to the Rwandan genocide and other atrocities of the late twentieth century. The novel's function as testimony is not simply to record the facts of the past but to bear witness to the subjective experience of those who suffered, to preserve the emotional and psychological truth of events that official history has often simplified or erased. As a work of fiction, the novel has a unique capacity to represent the inner lives of its characters, to show how trauma is experienced, remembered, and transmitted, and to create a space in which the reader can encounter the suffering of the other.

The concept of postmemory, as developed by Hirsch, helps explain the novel's relationship to the past, provided the term is used precisely [17]. Mukasonga herself is a survivor: born in 1956, she attended a Catholic girls' school in Kigali under the same ten-percent quota her novel dramatizes, and in 1973 she was forced into exile in Burundi after anti-Tutsi violence swept the schools [34]. In the 1994 genocide she lost the great majority of her family, both of her parents and most of her siblings; she did not lose her "entire family," since she herself survived [34]. Her writing is informed by both lived memory and the postmemorial transmission of family and collective trauma through stories, images, and silences [34]. The novel's depiction of the pre-genocide period is not based on direct experience of the fictional lycée but on the author's knowledge of the social and political conditions that produced the genocide, filtered through the lens of personal loss and collective trauma. It is this combination of lived experience and inherited memory, rather than the anticipation of future catastrophe, that grounds the novel's postmemorial dimension [34].

The ethical imperative of testimony, as described by Felman and Laub, involves a responsibility to listen to and preserve the truth of the other's experience, even when that truth is painful, fragmented, or difficult to bear [33]. The novel fulfills this imperative by creating a literary space in which the voices of marginalized Rwandan women can be heard, not as abstract categories but as concrete individuals with their own desires, fears, and struggles. The novel's commitment to representing the specificity of these characters' lives, their individual personalities and relationships, is itself an ethical act, a refusal to reduce the victims of genocide to statistics or stereotypes. In this sense, Our Lady of the Nile is not merely a historical novel or a political allegory; it is a work of literary testimony that bears

witness to the humanity of those whom history has sought to erase.

8. Conclusions

Our Lady of the Nile is a novel that rewards sustained critical attention. What appears at first to be a modest coming-of-age story set in a Rwandan girls' boarding school reveals itself, upon closer examination, to be a complex meditation on the intersections of colonial power, ethnic division, gendered violence, and the possibilities of resistance. The school at the center of the novel is both a product of Belgian colonialism and a microcosm of Rwandan society, an institution where the dynamics that will later produce the genocide are already visible and operative. The novel's female characters, particularly the Tutsi students Virginia and Veronique, inhabit a space of double marginalization, subjected simultaneously to ethnic discrimination and patriarchal control. Yet they are not passive victims. Through educational aspiration, women's solidarity, and the persistent struggle for voice, they carve out spaces of agency within the oppressive structure of the school, even though the novel's ending distributes survival and death unevenly: it is Virginia who escapes and Veronique who is murdered, a distribution that refuses any easy redemptive reading [19].

This article has argued that a postcolonial feminist reading of Our Lady of the Nile, complemented by feminist trauma theory and the concept of post memory, and grounded in sustained dialogue with the three axes of existing scholarship, gendered trauma, colonial education, and subaltern resistance, reveals the novel's significant contribution to our understanding of how gender, ethnicity, and colonial power intersect in the production of trauma and resistance. The novel demonstrates that colonial education systems are not neutral institutions but apparatuses of dual oppression, simultaneously ethicizing and gendering the bodies of young Rwandan women. It shows how gendered violence operates through institutional structures, from the ethnic quota system to the institutional abandonment that leaves the Tutsi girls unprotected, and how this violence functions as a mechanism of silencing. And it reveals the subtle, often overlooked forms of resistance that subaltern women employ, from the pursuit of education to the creation of alternative communities based on solidarity and mutual recognition.

The novel's significance extends beyond its literary merits. As a work of testimonial fiction, it serves as a site of memory and historical consciousness, preserving the experiences of Rwandan women whose stories have been marginalized or erased by official narratives. Its depiction of the pre-genocide period, informed by the author's post memorial consciousness, offers valuable insights into the origins of genocidal violence and the role of institutions in normalizing ethnic division. And its commitment to representing the individuality and humanity of its characters, even in the face of dehumanizing violence, represents an ethical act of witness that challenges the reader to confront the humanity of those whom history has sought to reduce to statistics.

There remain avenues for further research, several of which this review of the

field has helped to specify. A comparative study of Our Lady of the Nile alongside Mukasonga's other works, particularly Cockroaches and The Barefoot Woman, would reveal how the author's representation of gendered trauma and resistance evolves across her oeuvre. A study that incorporates oral histories and testimonies from Rwandan women who lived through the pre-genocide period would provide valuable context for the novel's depiction of the school and its students. A translation-critical reading of Mauthner's English version remains conspicuously absent from the field despite its status as the near-exclusive basis for Anglophone criticism. And a theoretical engagement with the concept of implicated subjectivity, as developed by Michael Rothberg, would help illuminate the ethical position of the novel's shifting focalization and the reader's relationship to the suffering depicted in the text [35]. These directions, among others, attest to the richness of Mukasonga's novel and its ongoing relevance to contemporary debates about gender, colonialism, trauma, and the ethics of literary representation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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