

The Activist Girl Shaped by Western Colonialism: Gloriosa in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil*

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Abstract

Notre-Dame du Nil (2021), written by Scholastique Mukasonga (1956–), is set in Rwanda in the early 1970s. It describes a boarding school modeled after the one where the author Mukasonga actually went. The students are composed of two ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi: there are divisions among them, which are rooted in western colonialism. This paper focuses on an antagonist, Gloriosa, a Hutu student whose father is a great Hutu-supremacist politician. Gloriosa acts as a *boss* at school, looking down on the Tutsi students. Gloriosa's character is shaped by her father's ideology. The father's generation experienced the period when Belgian colonialists favored Tutsi over Hutu. Hutu later achieved a rise in status, which they consider as a result of emancipation from this hierarchy. Belgium came to favor Hutu over Tutsi; the school's atmosphere reflects this new hierarchy. Gloriosa destroys the Virgin statue because of its *Tutsi-like* features, while fabricating accusations against Tutsi, which triggers chaos both inside and outside the school. Gloriosa justifies her behavior as a legitimate act to defend Hutu-supremacy like her father does in society. This chaos appears the prelude to the genocide in 1994, when Hutu committed mass violence against Tutsi. Rather than viewing the genocide through simplistic moral binaries, this presentation investigates how Belgian colonialism brought Hutu and Tutsi into long-standing conflicts, as well as producing a radical *activist* like Gloriosa who lays the groundwork for the 1994 genocide.

Keywords: Scholastique Mukasonga, *Notre-Dame du Nil*, Hutu, Tutsi, genocide

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Introduction

How western colonialism brought Hutu and Tutsi, the two major ethnicities in Rwanda, into long-standing conflicts, which laid the groundwork for the 1994 genocide, can be investigated by *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012) [*Our Lady of the Nile*] written by Scholastique Mukasonga (1956–). The novel does not depict the genocide itself but portrays the previous tensions that foreshadow it in 1972. The genocide cannot be understood as a simple moral binary, because it is entangled with Belgian colonialism. Therefore, this paper considers how colonialism created such conflicts between these ethnicities in the long term.

The novel portrays the female boarding school, named the Lycée of Our Lady of the Nile, which shares the novel's title. This school is built by Belgian Catholics, permitting the most brilliant students in Rwanda to enroll. The Belgian Catholics also function as the economic foundation of Rwanda, which shapes the school's various hierarchies. This school is modeled after the one where the author Mukasonga actually went as a student. It enrolls students belonging to both the ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi: Hutu is the majority, while Tutsi the minority. The Tutsi students are allowed to enroll through the quota system. This school eventually describes disputes between Hutu and Tutsi students, which reflects Rwanda around 1972 as a microcosm of Rwandan society.

Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Rwanda in 1956 as Tutsi, beginning to write in 2006. In light of her birth year, Mukasonga herself experienced the 1994 genocide—in her case, she lost more than 30 members of her family and relatives while being outside Rwanda. Although this novel is narrated in third person, it appears to be described from the viewpoint of a Tutsi student, compared to Mukasonga.

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Hutu extremists killed a vast number of Tutsi; here it is important to note that the ethnic hierarchy between Hutu and Tutsi were constructed and institutionalized by Belgian colonizers. In other words, these two ethnicities should be understood as colonial constructions rather than primordial ethnic groups; the 1994 genocide originates in Belgian colonialism. Rwanda was colonized by Belgium in the early 20th century. As a matter of fact, Belgium initially favored Tutsi, because they formed the ruling elite in those days, but there was no essential hierarchy between the two ethnicities before the colonization. In 1959—about half a century after the beginning of Belgian colonization—Hutu rebelled against Tutsi and Belgium, achieving independence from their ruling. As a consequence, Belgian colonizers came to favor Hutu, trying to dominate Rwanda together with them: Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* describes Rwanda when it was dominated by Hutu elites under Belgian support.

Here turning to Gloriosa, the central character of this paper, Gloriosa is a Hutu student, whose father is a Hutu-supremacist politician. Throughout the narrative, she is described as an antagonist, which is from Tutsi's point of view. Her father took part in the Hutu independence movement around 1959, respected like a hero by the Hutu-supremacist group. Her father's authority makes Gloriosa act as a *boss* figure at school, often looking down on Tutsi students.

There is a statue of the Virgin in the vicinity of the school; in the climax, Gloriosa destroys the statue because she believes that it resembles a Tutsi woman. This act triggers chaos inside the school; Gloriosa escapes responsibility by fabricating a rumor that some Tutsi committed the act. In the meantime, she justifies her behavior as a legitimate act to defend Hutu-supremacy

like her father does in society. This chaos suggests a prelude to the genocide happening in about 20 years, foreshadowing Hutu extremists' violent domination of Tutsi.

Gloriosa's Original Name, Nyiramasuka

Turning to the characterization of Gloriosa, earlier in the narrative, she is described with expressions such as "well-built and big-boned," "Mastodon" and "muscular calves," all of which may present her image as a physically imposing girl. Therefore, Gloriosa is regarded as "the spitting image of her father" (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 20) by her surroundings; her name is even more significant than her physical appearance.

Gloriosa has another name "Nyiramasuka," given by her father, which signifies "She of the hoe" (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 20), or the woman of the hoe, in Kinyarwanda, the original language in Rwanda. In Rwandan history, the hoe symbolizes Hutu identity as agricultural workers; her original name thus can be interpreted as representing her ethnicity. Regarding Gloriosa's original name, Rey claims, "she has a European name...but the one at her birth is even more significant" (Rey, 2016, p. 9). Not only Gloriosa but all the girls in the school have European names, such as Veronica, Virginia, Imaculée and Gloriosa, all of which originate from Belgium. Although they are addressed by European names throughout the narrative, it is noted that they have original ones, like Nyiramasuka for Gloriosa.

The importance of their original names is evident in Gloriosa's statement: "It's not for nothing my father named me Nyiramasuka" (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 24), which clearly indicates her Hutu identity. As Reyntjens states, "This culture of conformity is shared by most Rwandans, Hutu and Tutsi, peasants and urban dwellers" (Reyntjens, 1996, p. 245), Hutu historically engaged in agriculture, while Tutsi were linked to urban life and pastoralism, which is repeatedly emphasized even in the narrative. In 1972, when Hutu was dominating the country with Belgium, it was easy for them to take pride in their agricultural identity, while looking down on Tutsi as lazy urban dwellers. Arsène and Augustin similarly argue that Nyiramasuka suggests "the food activity of a community" and "the activity of agriculture" (Arsène & Augustin, 2023, p. 195). These previous studies thus consider the significance of Gloriosa's original name Nyiramasuka, given by her father, in terms of history and identity.

Gloriosa's Influence of Her Father

Moreover, turning to Gloriosa's relationship with her father, her character is deeply shaped by his ideology. She frequently invokes her father in statements:

My father says we must repeat, again and again, that the Inyenzi are still there, that they're always ready to return, that some do still get out and are among us, that the Tutsi who stayed behind eagerly await them...My father says we must never forget to frighten people. (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 155)

Here she says "my father says" twice, as well as using four *that*-clauses—Inyenzi is a derogatory term for Tutsi: Hutu used to call them like this by likening them to cockroaches. Coste points out that Gloriosa's character is shaped by her father's authority, rather than her own agency (Coste, 2013). In other words, her father's influence leads Gloriosa to look down on Tutsi students, as well as acting as the boss at school. Coste also argues that Gloriosa displays Hutu-power in a rhetorical manner (Coste, 2013), which appears to portray Gloriosa almost as her father's extension or instrument. Even considering that Gloriosa repeats "my

father” in her statements, she behaves at school as her father does in society. Furthermore, Coste identifies, “this process of reiteration is taken in Mukasonga’s language” (Coste, 2013, p. 9): in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, Gloriosa’s repetition of “my father” functions as this narrative device.

The climax portrays chaos both inside and outside the school as a consequence of Gloriosa’s destruction of the Virgin statue: “There’s been a coup d’état. The army’s taken over. The former President is under house arrest...Nobody knows where Gloriosa’s dad is, perhaps he fled, or else he’s in prison. Everyone turned against Gloriosa, and started cursing at her...” (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 195). Gloriosa’s father consequently loses his authority under the *new* regime, leading Gloriosa to bear the brunt of blame and criticism from everyone at school—she, too, loses her authority within the school.

Alongside Gloriosa’s original name, Nyiramasuka, which represents Hutu identity and their historical background, previous studies focus on Gloriosa’s repetition of “my father” suggesting that she functions as her father’s extension, who behaves at school as he does in society. This second aspect is especially clear by focusing on Gloriosa throughout the narrative.

Gloriosa’s Own Agency: Resistance to Belgium

Although Gloriosa can surely be understood as her father’s extension, it is impossible to conclude that she does not have her own agency at all. For example, Gloriosa complains about the quotas for Tutsi students: “Two Tutsi for twenty pupils is the quota...As my father likes to tell me, we’ll really have to get rid of these quotas one day, it’s a Belgian thing!” (Mukasonga 2021, p. 25). While Gloriosa definitely says “my father” here, she emphasizes that this system is a “Belgian thing,” which suggests her own agency. During the period of Belgian domination, Rwandan adults were unable to openly oppose Belgium, which would have been the same for the ones like Gloriosa’s father. Even considering that the school’s institutional and economic structure depends on Belgian Catholic orders, they were structurally discouraged from criticizing Belgium, the colonizer, as well as their economic foundation. However, Gloriosa shows a sense of opposition to Belgium that adults in Rwanda cannot articulate.

In addition, when the Queen of Belgium visits the school, the teachers compose a song; Gloriosa, acting as the *boss*, is in charge of censorship. Here Gloriosa gives her opinions to the teachers, criticizing “heavy praise of kings and queens unbecoming to a Republic” and instead insisting on “celebrat[ing] the farmer’s hoe and the peaceful development of the country” (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 133). Rwandan adults are required to show loyalty to Belgium for the economic foundation grounded in their relationship—the *colonizer* and the *colonized*. However, Gloriosa refuses to conform to this colonial dynamic, which marks her own stance. Gloriosa believes that Hutu should be superior not only to Tutsi but also to Belgium, showing her desire as a daughter to accomplish what her father cannot even achieve.

The most significant and symbolic part throughout the narrative is Gloriosa’s destruction of the Virgin statue. Her father has an ambition to “de-Tutsify schools and government” (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 151), or expel Tutsi out of them, for which she plans to destroy the *Tutsi-like* Virgin to fulfill his ambition. Here Gloriosa emphasizes the Virgin’s Tutsi-like appearance, which is, however, her excuse for opposition to Belgium. In other words, this claim functions as a rhetorical justification rather than her own motive.

The Virgin originally symbolizes Christianity, introduced in Rwanda by Belgium, functioning as an emblem of Belgian colonialism. Rwandan adults, including the ones like Gloriosa's father, must not have been able to easily touch anything associated with Belgium, but Gloriosa attempts to destroy the statue, expecting her father to "congratulate" (Mukasonga, 2021, p. 151) her. This suggests that Gloriosa is not merely her father's extension but portrayed as a *small activist* within the school—the *small society*—aiming to advance Hutu-supremacy through her own resistance to Belgium, the colonizer.

Since the Virgin statue symbolizes colonialism, its destruction carries broader significance. Despite Gloriosa's bold and authoritarian attitudes, she firmly belongs to the *colonized* side in Rwanda for Belgium, the colonizer. Therefore, her act represents a form of resistance of the colonized people against the colonizers. Belgian colonialism produced the ethnic hierarchy between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, later leading to the 1994 genocide. Although Gloriosa is portrayed as an antagonist throughout the narrative, she functions as an agent of decolonial resistance who disrupts the colonial legacy that permeated Rwandan society in 1972.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Belgian colonialism brought Hutu and Tutsi into long-standing conflicts, as well as how it contributed to the emergence of a radical *activist* like Gloriosa, who lays the groundwork for the 1994 genocide. Previous studies analyze Gloriosa as a rhetorical extension of her father, whose disappearance by a coup d'état ultimately made her, too, lose authority at school, which mirrors his fate. In the meantime, Gloriosa is not his complete extension, but holds her own agency: opposition to Belgium, the stronger power that Rwandan adults cannot resist. Gloriosa believes that Hutu should be superior not only to Tutsi but also to Belgium, which shows her ambition as a Hutu-supremacist's daughter to fulfill what her father cannot accomplish.

In addition, Gloriosa cannot be interpreted as a perfect antagonist, but a small activist in the small society, the school, who is radicalized by her father's Hutu-supremacist ideology. Her radicalization ultimately exceeds mere imitation of her father, marking a shift from his extension to autonomous political agency. The father's ideology reflects his opposition to domination by Tutsi and Belgium, further intensified by the history that Belgium colonized Rwanda, which ethnically divided Hutu and Tutsi. Moreover, the Virgin statue symbolizes Belgian colonialism, and Gloriosa's destruction of the statue represents the disruption of colonial legacies. Here Gloriosa performs a form of resistance to colonialism throughout the narrative.

In reality, as school is frequently considered to be a small society, this boarding school also functions as a microcosm of Rwanda in 1972. The conflicts among the girls mirror those of the adults, especially their parents. Children often reflect the dynamics of adults—and like Gloriosa's case, they can be more radicalized by and than their parents—this likelihood can be discovered regardless of time or location.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Copilot, a generative AI, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from

Copilot, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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