

## She who remembers: Gendered trauma as survival and resistance in Scholastique Mukasonga's writing



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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates how Scholastique Mukasonga's fiction articulates gendered trauma not merely as a psychological or historical condition but as a multifaceted narrative of survival, resistance, and cultural resilience. The purpose of the research is to explore the representation of gendered trauma in her works, focusing on how women, as central characters, endure and respond to the devastation of violence, forced displacement, and profound personal loss. Through a feminist trauma lens, the study employs Judith Herman's theory of trauma and Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory to analyze how the narratives embody both personal and collective memory. Methodologically, the research offers a close textual analysis of Mukasonga's selected works, with attention to the ways in which silence, memory, rituals, and the mother-child bond are employed as coping strategies by female characters. It further investigates how oral tradition, cultural memory, and inherited rituals become tools of both resistance and recovery. The findings reveal that Mukasonga's narrative strategies reclaim women's agency and voice in the aftermath of historical atrocities, portraying them not solely as victims but as active participants in cultural preservation and healing. This study contributes to trauma studies by expanding its scope through a postcolonial and gendered perspective, highlighting how literature serves as a space to record, transmit, and transform collective trauma. Ultimately, Mukasonga's fiction becomes a powerful literary intervention that safeguards erased histories and affirms the resilience embedded in Rwandan women's lived experiences.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study offers an original contribution by analyzing Mukasonga's portrayal of gendered trauma through a combined lens of feminist trauma theory and postmemory, emphasizing women's agency, resilience, and cultural survival that have not been previously applied to her works within this specific theoretical framework. By focusing on the coping strategies of women such as silence, memory, ritual, and the power of mothers, this research reveals Mukasonga's literary reconstruction of historical loss and her reimagining of women as agents of transformation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trauma, in its most fundamental definition, is a significant emotional reaction to a severely troubling or disturbing situation that overcomes (Garland, 2018) an individual's capacity to respond, leaving a person feeling helpless and losing the sense of self and the capacity to feel a full scope of emotions. In literature, trauma is not only a subject (Hartman, 2003).

But also, a narrative frame that uncovers the psychological, cultural, and historical wounds inflicted by violence, war, genocide, and individual loss. Trauma theory in literature (Heidarizadeh, 2015) examines how such

experiences are framed through narratives, particularly when the trauma refuses to be explicitly articulated. Therefore, trauma in literature tends to appear in the form of fractured narratives, silence, repetition, memory loss, and symbolic language, conveying the unutterable pain of characters and communities.

Several forms of trauma are routinely analyzed in literary works, including individual trauma (grief, abuse, or displacement), collective trauma (shared by a community because of events such as genocide, war, or colonialism), and intergenerational trauma (transferred from survivors to subsequent generations).

In postcolonial and genocide fiction, (Visser, 2011), trauma becomes the dominant mode of narration, as authors grapple with how to depict both the violence of past atrocities and their lasting impact on survivors and their descendants. Trauma fiction tends to Robinett (2007). disrupt linear time and coherent narrative, reflecting the psychological chaos of the traumatized.

The effect of trauma in literature (Marder, 2006) is political and emotional. It makes readers confront the reality of suffering and also functions as a form of testimony and resistance. Trauma narratives can reclaim (Borg, 2020) suppressed histories, subvert dominant narratives, and foster collective memory and healing for communities subjected to mass violence.

Specifically, gendered trauma (Segalo, 2015) experienced by women due to gender-based violence, social exclusion, or cultural silencing adds to the complexity. Female survivors have endured unique forms of suffering before, during, and after events such as war and genocide, and their experiences have often been silenced or trivialized in the past.

But trauma is not just about pain but also unlocks a doorway to survival and resistance. Literary fictions offer characters and authors a realm in which to work (Schreiter, 2016) through suffering, to speak about memory, and to reassert identity.

Practices of healing presented within trauma literature can be found in such forms as storytelling, remembering, witnessing, staying connected to the community, participating in cultural rituals, and rebuilding fragmented identities. These actions become therapeutic (Brunner & Plotkin, 2019) as well as political, making the weight of memory a source of resilience.

Against this backdrop, the Rwandan-born novelist Scholastique Mukasonga appears as a strong literary voice who writes from the peripheries of memory, displacement, and loss. Her novels *Cockroaches*, *The Barefoot Woman*, *Our Lady of the Nile*, and *Kibogo* are infused with personal and shared trauma centered on the 1994 Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi.

Nevertheless, in her writing, trauma is not merely told but translated into survival and resistance. Through gendered frames of reference, especially the lives of mothers, daughters, and schoolgirls, Mukasonga examines how memory, culture, and women's solidarity are used as weapons of survival against extinction.

Gendered trauma is an important paradigm that distinguishes between (Iantaffi, 2020) collective historical trauma and the unique experiences of women in such traumatic events. Caruth (2016), a prominent theorist of trauma, has explained trauma (Caruth, 2016) as "the response to an overwhelming event or events that cannot be fully grasped at the time of occurrence."

Gendered trauma, however, broadens this explanation by understanding how cultural, social, and political frameworks construct women's experiences of trauma, especially in the wake of genocides and wars. Trauma is not merely a psychological injury (Field & O'Keefe, 2004), but also a profoundly gendered experience rooted in patriarchal oppression and structural violence.

Gendered trauma theory is employed in this research to analyze the works of Scholastique Mukasonga, including *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Cockroaches*, *The Barefoot Woman*, and *Kibigo*. Mukasonga's stories reveal how women's suffering during the Rwandan Genocide was not only a consequence of ethnic violence but also an extension of gendered oppression rooted in colonial histories and social structures.

As a survivor and daughter of genocide victims, Mukasonga's writing serves as both a means of personal healing and a form of public testimony. Her writing blurs the boundaries between fiction and memoir, suggesting that recovery is a recursive process rather than a linear one, continually revisited through words, memory, and ritual. Her gendered voice, expressed through her writing, embodies quiet strength neither overtly militant nor passive. Instead, it is reflective, mourning, and acutely aware of the political and cultural stakes of remembrance.

### 1.1. Motivation Behind the Research

The decision to focus on research: Gendered Trauma and the Art of Survival: Coping Mechanisms in Scholastique Mukasonga's Selected Works, stems from a personal experience during the author's time in Rwanda from 2021 to 2022.

While she valued the chance to experience Rwanda's beautiful scenery and culture, her relationships with local people and their stories highlighted the impact of the Genocide. Even thirty years after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, its scars remain among the lives of survivors. One event gave her a sense of how lasting trauma can be. A young woman who worked in the house reacted strongly to the sound of a pressure cooker. She started to yell and run from the room.

Although the whistling sound from the pressure cooker was not violent, it brought back her memories of the genocide from her childhood. As their conversation continued, she began to share her story. She spoke about how noises still bothered her and about the loss of her family, especially her brothers, who were never found. She opened up emotionally during their evening talks.

In reminiscence, she told the author that she was blessed to live in a safe country and to have a peaceful family. Her words showed how much she had been hurt, yet her grace and strength, which enabled her to endure panic attacks, left the author awestruck.

Since the author's time in Rwanda ended, she told her that she needed to return and that the country would miss her. It demonstrated the warmth and resilience of the Rwandans.

This experience inspired the research to bring the anguish of the Rwandans to light through her study. It showed how gendered trauma is often not discussed but remains a constant part of life. It also demonstrated how healing grows through empathy, community, and remembrance.

The strength the author observed in Rwandan women led her to study Scholastique Mukasonga's work, where loss, survival, silence, and cultural memory reflected what life was like in Rwanda after the genocide. This research is a study of literature and a tribute to the women who embody strength and grace amidst their painful experiences. Rwanda is a land of humanity, where healing comes slowly through care, community, and a resilient spirit.

### 1.2. Objectives

- To explore how Mukasonga depicts the experiences of gendered trauma in her works, *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Cockroaches*, *The Barefoot Woman*, and *Kibogo*.
- To examine the coping mechanisms employed by female characters.
- To analyze the role of storytelling, cultural memory, and resilience in overcoming trauma.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There has been considerable discussion about postcolonial patriarchy and gender trauma in Scholastique Mukasonga's work, particularly in relation to the Rwandan Genocide and its aftermath. This review explores significant themes within her writing.

In this section, [Table 1](#) examines gender trauma, genocide, memory, and resilience in literature. Scholars have been investigating trauma theories, feminist perspectives, and how literature can reflect the impact of genocide on women's lives.

Table 1. Related literature

Author(s)	Research article	Analysis
Jones (2002)	Gender and genocide in Rwanda	Analyzes the genocide through a gendered lens, discussing gendercide against men, mass sexual violence against women, and women's roles as perpetrators. Emphasizes the need for gender analysis in genocide studies to understand the complex consequences.
Hron (2009)	Translating pain: Immigrant suffering in literature and culture	Explores trauma in postcolonial literature; highlights how African women writers like Mukasonga use storytelling to resist victimhood and reclaim agency, emphasizing resilience in the face of historical atrocities.
Brown (2017)	Gender and the genocide in Rwanda: Women as rescuers and perpetrators	Critiques the neglect of gendered violence in mainstream genocide narratives. Highlights how Mukasonga's <i>Our Lady of the Nile</i> addresses institutionalized misogyny and ethnic discrimination, reinforcing the value of a gendered trauma perspective.
Dushimirimana, Sezibera, and Auerbach (2014)	Pathways to resilience in post-genocide Rwanda: A resources efficacy model	Explores collective trauma and resilience through social, spiritual, and psychological resources. Highlights the role of Gacaca courts, faith, education, and self-efficacy in survivors' recovery and future-building.
Fox (2019)	Memory in interaction: Gender-based violence, genocide, and commemoration	Investigates how gender-based violence is remembered or silenced in Rwandan memorials. Argues that women's traumatic experiences are often marginalized, despite increased female representation in governance.
Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie (2022)	Mobilising affect and trauma: The politics of gendered memory and gendered silence	Analyzes how women's traumatic pasts are remembered, silenced, or reshaped. Emphasizes the emotional and political power of memory, offering insights into gender, agency, and the politics of remembering and forgetting.
De Beer (2024)	Trauma and storytelling in Rwanda	Explores how Rwandan oral traditions (myths, proverbs, storytelling) were historically used to build community and memory but were later manipulated during the genocide. Post-genocide, these forms reemerged as healing practices.

### 2.1. Research Gap

Although an increasing amount of scholarship has considered gendered trauma and the general psychological aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, there continues to be a significant lacuna in the critical analysis of literary representations of coping strategies specific to Rwandan women's experiences, in the context of fictionalized personal and communal memory. Mukasonga's novels such as *Kibogo*, *The Barefoot Woman*, *Cockroaches*, and *Our Lady of the Nile* remain fertile ground for further textual analysis on how women's trauma is not only endured but also reworked through narrative, cultural memory, and resistance.

Thus, this research fills the most urgent gap by analyzing the narrative representation of gendered trauma and survival in Mukasonga's chosen works and the coping strategies used by women characters. This is a literary intervention that merges trauma theory, feminist critique, and postcolonial critique to highlight how narrating itself emerges as an effective act of healing, resistance, and cultural continuity.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative analysis method to examine the gendered representation of trauma in Scholastique Mukasonga's writing. Using close reading and textual analysis, the article explores how Mukasonga depicts the traumatic experiences of women during and after the Rwandan Genocide. Trauma theory will be applied to interpret her stories, aiming to highlight the intersection of gender, memory, and historical violence.

### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the researchers focus on a feminist trauma approach, drawing mainly from Judith Herman's ideas and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. This approach is important for examining how trauma, memory,

and resistance interconnect in women's experiences, especially following events such as genocide and patriarchal violence. Feminist trauma theory challenges the notion that trauma affects everyone equally, emphasizing instead how women's suffering and resilience are shaped by systemic oppression and historical silencing (Herman, 1992).

Herman (1992), a psychiatrist and trauma expert, pointed out that trauma isn't just a personal wound; it disrupts human relationships, trust, and personal agency, often due to violence and betrayal in both public and private life. Herman (2015) describes trauma recovery as a process with three stages: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. She notes that trauma can never really be cured, especially when justice and recognition are lacking. Her work underscores women's roles as survivors of both political and domestic violence, suggesting that sharing trauma is a way to stand against being forgotten.

Feminist trauma theory questions the way trauma is often medicalized and instead emphasizes storytelling, memory, and personal experience as ways to survive and find strength. In the writings of Scholastique Mukasonga, especially in works like *Cockroaches*, *The Barefoot Woman*, and *Our Lady of the Nile*, women not only suffer from trauma but also resist being silenced by keeping memories alive, reclaiming language, and honoring maternal legacies. These actions align with Herman's idea that recovery from trauma often requires the presence of someone who listens and supports, which literature and storytelling can provide.

This combined approach helps the study examine how Mukasonga writes not just as someone who has survived but also as a keeper of memories, merging personal and collective trauma and lived experiences with imaginative remembrance. Both Hirsch and Herman emphasize that storytelling can be a healing process, especially when there is a lack of justice in the world. This framework is essential for understanding how Mukasonga's work not only mourns those who have died but also empowers the living with memory, serving as a clear act of resistance.

## Tracing the evolution of feminist trauma theory

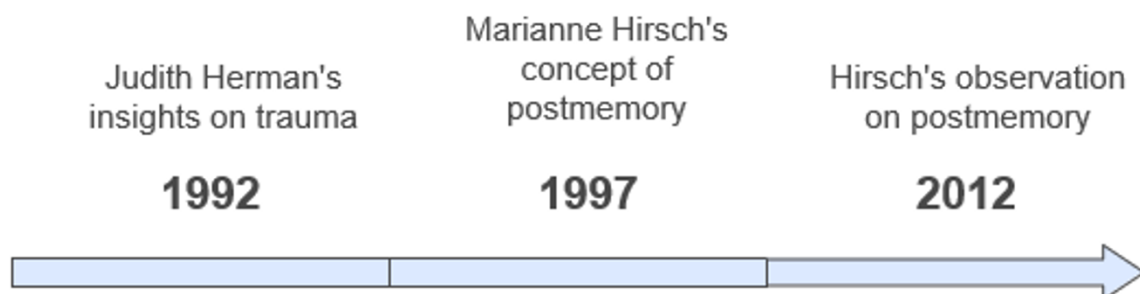


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1 illustrates how feminist trauma theory and postmemory connect to demonstrate the gendered transmission of trauma, showing how memory can be both a burden and a form of resistance after collective violence. This blend of theories, from Herman's insights about trauma to Hirsch's focus on memory across generations, shows how trauma is gendered and carried on. Mukasonga's female characters balance being victims and having their own agency. These characters grapple with the tension between remembering and forgetting, choosing to remain silent or to speak out, and finding both pain and strength. This aligns with Hirsch's idea that postmemory is not about overcoming trauma but about keeping memories alive, even amid loss. Hirsch's concept of postmemory helps explain how trauma is passed down within families, illustrating how children of trauma survivors connect to experiences they never directly lived through but still feel strongly because of their shared history. Hirsch also notes that these memories are shaped by imagination, storytelling, and artifacts such as photographs and traditions. In Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman*, the daughter's effort to remember her mother becomes a form of postmemory, transforming remembrance into an act of survival.



Overall, this study examines how gendered trauma and survival are portrayed in Mukasonga's stories, demonstrating how personal and passed-down memory serve as means to reclaim voice in political and literary contexts. Through the interconnected theories of feminist trauma and postmemory, the paper argues that Mukasonga's writing not only witnesses genocide but also builds a lasting archive of female strength, where trauma does not end in silence but continues through memory, rituals, and storytelling.

### 3.2. Research Design

The study employs a descriptive and analytical approach, focusing on Mukasonga's major works, which include *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Cockroaches*, *The Barefoot Woman*, and *Kibogo*. These works have been selected for their thematic engagement with the Genocide and for their portrayal of female resilience, suffering, and memory.

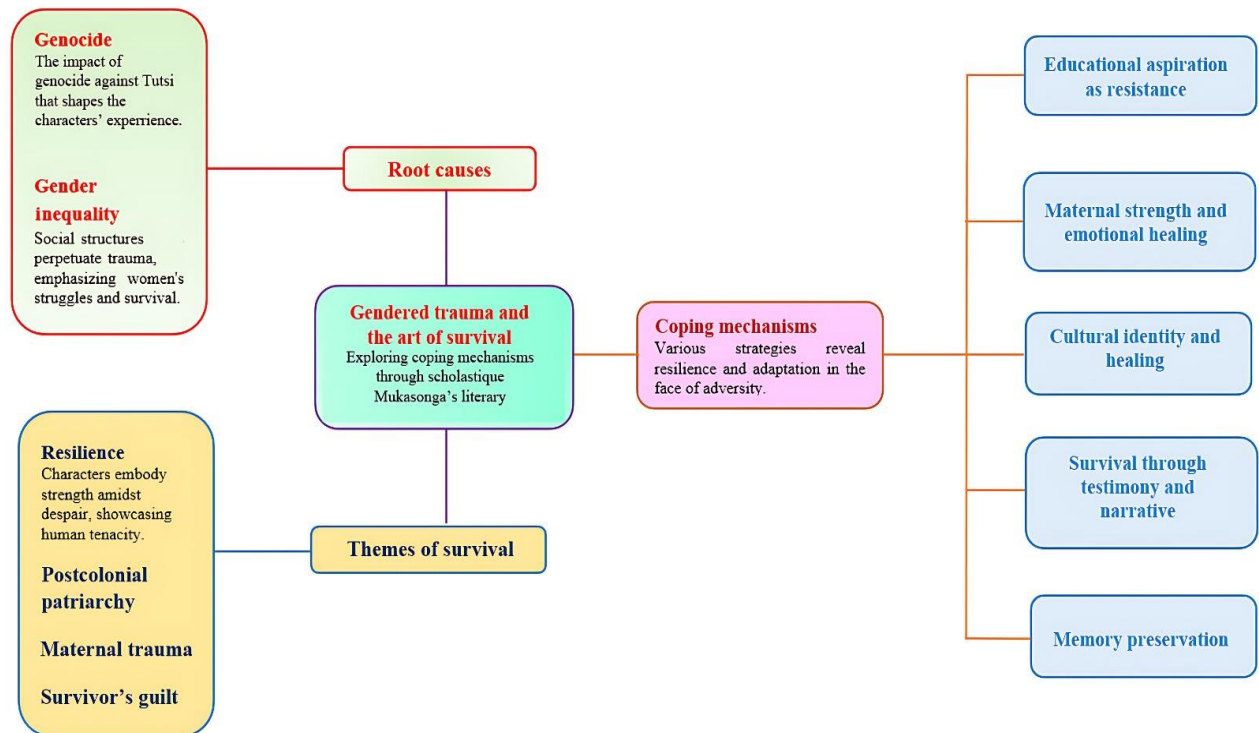


Figure 2. Research flow.

Figure 2 Research flow illustrates how gendered trauma and survival are depicted in Scholastique Mukasonga's books. It begins with the fundamentals: the genocide and the injustices faced by women during that period. These events influenced the experiences of women in her stories. The main idea is that trauma is not solely about suffering; Mukasonga demonstrates that it also involves resistance and resilience. From there, two primary themes emerge. The first concerns survival—such as resilience, navigating traditional power structures post-colonialism, maternal trauma, and survivor guilt. These themes highlight how women cope with the enduring effects of violence and loss. The second theme focuses on how women in Mukasonga's stories resist and cope. They do this through education to empower themselves, finding strength in motherhood and emotional healing, preserving their cultural identity, sharing their stories, and keeping memories alive. These actions exemplify how they transform trauma into means of survival, cultural preservation, and remembrance.

Basically, Figure 2 provides a comprehensive overview of how Mukasonga's characters exhibit trauma but also take control of their lives. They link the pain of the past with their strength in the present through memories, culture, and storytelling.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The decisions of this study establish the manner in which Scholastique Mukasonga's novels beautifully depict gendered trauma experienced by Rwandan women before, during, and after the Rwandan Genocide. Discourse analysis of *Kibogo*, *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Cockroaches*, and *The Barefoot Woman* identifies various key findings related to recovery, coping, and the overall implications of women's suffering and resilience.

##### 4.1. Educational Aspiration as Resistance

In Scholastique Mukasonga's novel *Our Lady of the Nile*, educational aspiration is one of the main forms of resistance for the young female protagonists in the repressive socio-political environment of pre-genocide Rwanda. The novel itself portrays a girls' Catholic boarding school where school becomes a sanctuary for the girls, particularly for the female protagonists, allowing them to exert some degree of control and resist some of the constraints imposed upon them by both the colonialist state and patriarchal Rwandan society.

The personality of Veronique, who is one of the core female students in the school, is a perfect representation of such pedagogic resistance. Her search for knowledge and a prosperous future is a symbol of her need to escape the limits of gender and ethnicity. Veronique's ambitions are juxtaposed with the cultural expectations for females, especially females who are Tutsi, throughout the novel. She refuses to be contained by the limitations set by the social order and the escalating ethnic tensions.

"Veronique's desire to learn was her refusal to play the roles society had allocated to her" (Mukasonga, 2006).

This argument describes the manner in which Veronique uses her privilege of education as a resistance to the social norms that contain her within gendered roles. Education is utilized as a strategy of self-empowerment and resistance against violent colonial and patriarchal regimes.

The location of the novel in a posh Belgian-nun-run school is one aspect of the theme of the utilization of education in opposition to repressive systems. While the school is a place of colonial excess, it is also where the students, especially the girls, learn to resist and subvert the limits of their roles. School life is characterized by rigid discipline, but within the structure of this system, there is a subtle opposition, especially among the women, who learn to voice themselves and utilize their reason and intelligence to chart their own courses.

The trauma experienced by the characters, particularly the female students, is directly proportional to the gendered experience of oppression. The characters' educational aspirations serve as a means of coping with and resisting the traumatic experiences of ethnic violence and patriarchal oppression. Such characters illustrate how education offers a form of hope, providing a temporary respite from the shadow of violence and exploitation to which their identities are exposed.

"There, in their books, they discovered a haven, a future beyond the horror they were experiencing, and an opportunity to create a space for themselves in the future" (Mukasonga, 2006).

This section highlights how educational ambition acts as a bulwark against the impending danger of trauma. It brings out the girls' attempts to employ education as a weapon against violence and destruction that surrounds them.

Most importantly, Mukasonga reorients the idea of survival not just as bodily but as moral, cultural, and intergenerational. In *Our Lady of the Nile*, the girls' longing for education in the face of encroaching violence is a politicization of hope. Education is not simply a route to advancement but a protest against gendered and ethnic repression here. This is a departure from most of the trauma literature, which lingers over rupture and psychic fragmentation; Mukasonga's characters are traumatized, but they also create something else from it. Their pursuit of education allows the girls to defy the scripted traditional roles and push against the political and social forces that attempt to constrain their lives. Despite the imminent genocide, their dreams of a better life are a testament to the long-term power and resilience of women in the face of extreme suffering.

#### 4.2. Maternal Strength and Emotional Healing

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Scholastique Mukasonga elaborates on the theme of maternal strength as the unifying force of healing and resilience in the gendered trauma of the Rwandan genocide. Through the mother figure of Stefania, Mukasonga narrates how mother figures are required not only for the survival of the family but also for the psychological healing of women who have suffered violence and loss. That resilience is multi-dimensional, including emotional support, survival strategies, and the maintenance of cultural identity, specifically through the preservation of traditional rituals and nurturing practices + Emotional recovery of the characters and protagonist is greatly dependent on the healing power of mother figures.

The narrator's mother, a classic example, is a figure of strength through her emotional resilience, offering comfort and consolation following trauma. Her support is a source of protection from the stifling grief caused by the genocide, demonstrating how maternal love is a form of emotional healing that enables one to recover from the horrors of war. For instance, when the mother consoles her children during their worst moments, offering them a sense of continuity and security.

The mother's strength is also demonstrated through her sacrifices, always prioritizing the needs of her children and community over her own. These qualities are culturally rooted in the Rwandan understanding of *umugore*, where the woman is viewed as a family caregiver, a caretaker, and a moral guardian. Despite being subjected to violence and trauma, the mother in *The Barefoot Woman* never departs from looking after her children and from upholding the morals of her people, and thus remains a force against war dehumanization (Mukasonga, 2006).

The theme of maternal strength in *The Barefoot Woman* highlights the significant role of women in the emotional and psychological recovery process in post-genocide Rwanda. Through sacrifice, maternal love, and the preservation of culture, Mukasonga emphasizes gendered resilience that supports recovery and survival. Preserving cultural identity through maternal functions is also essential. In a post-genocide environment, where the Rwandan collective memory is traumatized, the mother in *The Barefoot Woman* plays a vital role in ensuring the preservation of cultural practices that reconstruct the community's psychological and emotional life. Through the transmission of old stories, rituals, and customs, mothers such as the narrator reconstruct a sense of normalcy and continuity, serving as resistance to the trauma of the genocide. This maternal passing on of culture is critical in healing both individuals and the community at large. Memory is central to resilience in Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* and *Cockroaches*. In these autobiographical and semi-autobiographical novels, Mukasonga offers remembrance as a form of resistance to erasure. Her act of writing is itself a coping mechanism, an attempt to preserve the lives, values, and histories of the lost. The protagonist's persistent remembrance of her mother Stefania's practices, rituals, and sayings functions as an intimate cultural survival archive.

"I wrote this book because I don't want my mother to be buried in silence and forgetfulness." (*The Barefoot Woman*, p. 3).

This active remembering becomes a gendered performance of mourning and survival. Women, through domestic rituals, oral narratives, and care work, preserve community history as there are no official records. Memory then becomes a shield against the void of trauma. Mukasonga's portrayal of mothers, particularly in *The Barefoot Woman*, highlights motherhood as both a burden and a source of solace. Stefania's careful preparations for death constructing a safe space, storing food, and preserving rituals reveal the calculated emotional and material work that women undertake to protect their families against genocidal threats. These actions serve as survival strategies for maintaining some semblance of normalcy and order amidst chaos.

This maternal strength is not romanticized; it is rooted in the day-to-day reality of survival. The mother's body is at once a site of trauma and a source of strength, nourishing life and marked for death.



#### 4.3. Cultural Identity and Healing

In her memoir *Cockroaches*, Scholastique Mukasonga explores themes of cultural identity and healing, particularly through the lens of trauma experienced by women. She shares her personal experiences of loss and survival during the Rwandan genocide, illustrating how cultural memory aids in the recovery process. Mukasonga reflects on her childhood, which, despite being marked by trauma, is also filled with rich traditions that provide her with a sense of normalcy amid chaos. She discusses her mother's teachings, the process of making banana wine, and the joyful gatherings in her village. These memories demonstrate the importance of cultural roots in maintaining identity during difficult times. The memoir also examines how cultural identity intersects with gendered trauma. As a Tutsi girl, Mukasonga faced bullying and threats of violence, highlighting the additional challenges faced by Tutsi women during the genocide. Nevertheless, she finds strength in her culture and her bond with her mother, who embodies the nurturing aspect of Rwandan womanhood.

Mukasonga's trauma extends beyond physical pain; it deeply affects her sense of community and home. However, she demonstrates how reconnecting with cultural traditions and family ties can facilitate healing. After being exiled to Burundi, she and her brother André develop a survival plan based on their upbringing, exemplifying resilience in the face of trauma. Ultimately, *Cockroaches* illustrates that cultural identity is essential for survival and recovery. Mukasonga fondly recalls the bright nights of her past, reminding readers of the joy and sense of belonging that can still be found amid devastation. The cultural practices rooted in shared memory become vital for survivors as they process their grief and work toward a future beyond their trauma.

#### 4.4. Survival Through Testimony and Narrative

In *Kibogo*, Mukasonga illustrates how survival through testimony and narrative serves as a necessary mechanism for resisting colonialism and maintaining cultural identity. Mukamwezi and Akayezu, the novel's characters, exemplify the survivalist spirit of the people of Rwanda under the onslaught of Christian colonialism and cultural obliteration. Given her status as a woman marginalized both by the church and her own society, Mukamwezi's survival rests on her storytelling. Her testimony, grounded in the legend of Kibogo, permits her to establish herself and agency within an otherwise coercive space. Mukasonga depicts her not as a mere victim but as an active resistor of assimilation through her adherence to precolonial Rwandan beliefs (Mukasonga, 2006). The *Kibogo* myth, as presented in the novel, is a platform for both survival and testimony.

The myth of *Kibogo* in the novel is not just a story of cultural survival but also a vehicle through which characters experience and deal with trauma. *Kibogo's* legend of bringing rain in the midst of a drought becomes a reference point for the community's resistance to colonialism. The resistance to foreign religious ideologies is not just an ideological form of resistance but an embodied one, as expressed in the words of people like Mukamwezi, who hold on to their cultural stories despite rejection.

Akayezu, the "Little-Jesus" of the story, further explores Rwandan identity and survival through the syncretism of Christianity and indigenous legends. Akayezu, a disloyal priest who holds faith in the Kibogo return, becomes a symbol of the blending of Christianity with native Rwandan beliefs. His rejection by the church reflects the broader exclusion of Africans who challenged European-imposed systems of belief. Mukamwezi's actions become a form of resistance through which he regains authority and a sense of identity (Mukasonga, 2006).

Mukasonga's employment of oral tradition in *Kibogo* emphasizes the centrality of storytelling in the preservation of cultural memory. The hillside, on which the native people keep their stories, becomes a symbol of the Rwandan people's resilience. The white researchers' efforts to invalidate these oral histories demonstrate a colonial mentality aimed at erasing indigenous knowledge. Yet, the youth's consumption of these tales signifies a continuation of resistance, with the future generation of Rwandans poised to secure their cultural existence. The story becomes a witness not just to individual survival but also to collective memory and resistance against colonial forgetfulness (Mukasonga, 2006).

Throughout *Our Lady of the Nile* and *Kibogo*, Mukasonga constructs webs of women's solidarity as tools of psychological resistance. Young girls such as Virginia and Veronica navigate institutionalized racism and misogyny within the boarding school regime. Their shared experiences of marginalization and violence foster silent forms of resistance—solidarity in silence, secret prayer, and subverting imposed identities. These actions, though often subtle, exemplify a gendered resilience strategy: creating safe spaces and emotional sanctuaries through sisterhood. Mothers and older women frequently serve as cultural mentors, sharing their knowledge with younger women through stories and advice, helping them preserve their identity and self-respect, even in difficult times.

In *Kibogo*, Mukasonga demonstrates how cultural and religious ceremonies help individuals reclaim their identities. Women play a significant role in maintaining these spiritual practices and often oppose external influences. Through storytelling and symbols, they resist and reconnect with their heritage. These rituals become acts of resistance, with women considering storytelling an essential duty. By preserving their myths and traditions, they link the past with the present and honor life and death. In *Kibogo*, storytelling also functions as a means to address the pain caused by colonialism and its aftermath. The characters share local stories that criticize colonial powers and the influence of the church on Rwandan culture. By keeping these oral histories and cultural tales alive, Mukasonga ensures that the voices of those often overlooked are remembered despite the hardships they faced.

#### 4.5. Coping Strategies and Recovery

This research examines how people recover and cope, highlighting their personal journeys while also suggesting broader implications for peace in society. The resilience and recovery of Rwandan women in Mukasonga's novels demonstrate that when individuals and communities work together to heal, there is a possibility for peace in conflict-affected areas.

In terms of global peace efforts, the study emphasizes the importance of empathy, storytelling in conflict resolution, and education in fostering mutual understanding. By focusing on resilience and collaboration in recovery, societies worldwide can learn to address past traumas, implement fair reparations, and build a future rooted in peace, understanding, and respect.

In summary, the research argues that recovery is not just about individuals; it is about communities. It calls on us to support cultural strength, community unity, and educational programs as key parts of healing and achieving peace in the world. Mukasonga's stories serve as a guide for recovering after conflict and inspire hope for a more peaceful and connected future.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The subtitle *She Who Remembers* primarily emphasizes the act of remembering. Mukasonga's autobiographical and fictional protagonists serve as witnesses, supporting Felman and Laub (1992) conception of testimony as both an ethical act and a performance. Unlike state-sponsored memorials, which often perpetuate nationalist or patriarchal histories, Mukasonga's narratives highlight marginalized memories, especially those of rural, illiterate Tutsi women.

The investigation of gendered trauma in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Kibogo*, *The Barefoot Woman*, and *Cockroaches* reveals deeply entrenched patriarchal oppression, colonial violence, and genocide's long-term impact on Rwandan women. From a feminist and trauma-theoretical perspective, particularly the works of Caruth (2016), Judith Herman, and Marianne Hirsch, Mukasonga's works show the specific manner in which women experience and cope with trauma in post-genocide Rwanda.

The idea of gendered trauma has been extensively researched in recent times, especially concerning literature that represents the lived experiences of women in post-conflict societies. Researchers have increasingly discussed how trauma impacts women differently as a result of gendered violence, cultural expectations, and historical

marginalization. Current research stresses that gendered trauma encompasses not only direct physical violence but also structural and psychological aspects (Hirsch, 2023; Kaplan, 2023).

Drawing on Caruth (2016) theory of trauma, according to which trauma is an unassimilated event that comes back in narrative form, Mukasonga's text is a belated reaction to both collective and individual disaster. But unlike most models of universal trauma, which tend to privilege Eurocentric, male-dominated frameworks, Mukasonga focuses on the gendered construction of trauma. Her female characters bear trauma in forms embedded deeply in embodied experiences of motherhood, domesticity, menstruation, violation, and silence. This is in accordance with the scholarship of Herman (1992) and Tal (1996), who emphasize contextualizing trauma within socio-political frameworks that specifically impact women.

At the center of the debate is the double role of trauma in creating both the Adams (2010) psychic topography of the individual and the collective psyche of a community. Mukasonga's stories speak of a multifaceted tension between suffering and resilience, wherein the act of remembering itself constitutes resistance. The representation of trauma is not frozen; it moves through the mechanisms of recall and reinterpretation as a dynamic process by which past and unpleasant experiences are rewritten into sources of resilience. This transformation of hurt into usable knowledge matches wider (George, 2010) theoretical understandings of trauma that insist upon the cathartic and subversive potential lying within acts of narrative. Mukasonga shows that survival is not only a question of endurance but also through the intentional redefinition of trauma as a storehouse of resistance against cultural erasure and patriarchal control.

### 5.1. Gendered Trauma and Postcolonial Patriarchy

Gendered trauma theory examines the specific ways that trauma occurs and is experienced by gender. Mainstream trauma theory, drawing on the ideas of thinkers like Felman and Laub (1992), tends to concentrate on individual psychological reactions to traumatic events. Nonetheless, gendered trauma theory takes these foundations a step further by integrating feminist and sociocultural views, focusing on how structural oppression, sexual violence, and patriarchal systems amplify women's trauma. Important theorists like Herman (1992) and Root (1992) have considered how trauma is not only psychological but also a social and political problem. Herman's (1992) work, specifically Herman (2015), also points to how trauma, and in particular gendered violence, is influenced by power relations and social structures. Root's (1992) concept of insidious trauma further identifies how quotidian oppression and discrimination result in chronic psychological damage for oppressed groups, in this case women in postcolonial nations.

Postcolonial patriarchy is a term that denotes the overlap between colonial inheritance and classical patriarchal values that still oppress women in societies formerly colonized. Scholars including Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak believe that colonialism not only reinforced pre-existing gender hierarchies but also produced new patterns of gender-based oppression Spivak (1988) theory of the subaltern in Can the Subaltern Spivak (1988) highlights how women, especially in postcolonial contexts, are doubly excluded first by colonial institutions and then by local patriarchal norms. In most postcolonial states, the gendered trauma is rooted in the historical and the present-day exercise of power. Colonial violence, coerced assimilation, and institutional sexual violence have created indelible scars that are transferred through patriarchal customs. The trauma in postcolonial nations is therefore not only direct violence but also the erasure of culture, economic marginalization, and exclusion within society.

The manner in which postcolonial patriarchal laws and gender trauma blend is quite evident in the works of authors such as Scholastique Mukasonga. She discusses the visible suffering of Rwandan women coping with both patriarchal authoritarianism and colonialism. She presents, in her novels such as *The Barefoot Woman* and *Our Lady of the Nile*, how women's suffering frequently originates from the brutality of the colonial era and the pressures of traditional Rwandan society. In societies with patriarchal systems, women often cannot share their stories, which

perpetuates the cycle of oppression. For example, the shame placed on rape survivors stems from colonial dehumanization and local cultures that prioritize honor over justice. Women also face economic challenges and a lack of education, which limit their freedom and pass trauma down through generations.

Judith Herman's ideas about trauma align well with *Our Lady of the Nile*. The story follows Tutsi girls in high school who face discrimination and violence, reflecting the tensions in Rwanda before the genocide. The brutal attack on the main character, Virginia, illustrates the clash between gender roles and cultural norms during traumatic events. These girls are unable to find justice, which relates to Herman's assertion that political and social systems often overlook victims, thereby exacerbating trauma. The novel also critiques patriarchal systems in educational institutions. Instead of supporting young Rwandan women, the Catholic institution inadvertently increases gender violence and discrimination. Mukasonga demonstrates how colonial perspectives combined with traditional patriarchy restrict women's freedom and maintain their physical and mental subjugation. She depicts how young Tutsi women are silenced, objectified, and ultimately persecuted, highlighting broader social issues in Rwanda. Similarly, Kibogo examines how colonial and post-colonial power dynamics generate gendered trauma through myths, beliefs, and social oppression. Female characters like Mukamwezi preserve oral traditions but remain vulnerable to religious and patriarchal structures that limit their societal roles. Their exclusion from historical narratives supports Spivak's concept of the subaltern and their silence, illustrating how gendered trauma manifests in postcolonial contexts.

### 5.2. Maternal Trauma and Memory in *The Barefoot Woman*

Marianne Hirsch's post-memory concept examines how trauma is passed on across generations. The concept is pervasive in *The Barefoot Woman*. Mukasonga's memoir celebrates her mother, Stefania, whose coping and resilience demonstrate the weight of trauma on women. Camouflaging and shielding children prior to the genocide show an intensely maternal response to trauma, supporting Adrienne Rich's concept of "motherhood as experience and institution" (Herrmann-Rafferty, 2025). Mukasonga remembers the traditional coping strategies of her mother as a means of resisting and reinventing a shattered past. The book shows that Rwandan women bear the heaviest emotional weight of historical suffering as they maintain cultural and family identity. In *The Barefoot Woman*, remembering the mother is both a source of emotional resilience and a means of maintaining culture (Gowsalya & Jothi, 2025). The mother's body, routines, and narratives assist in resisting being erased by the forces of genocide. Therefore, Mukasonga offers a feminist response to trauma where survival is not just surviving but positively preserving what has a tendency to be dismissed as inconsequential: women's work, care, and narratives.

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Mukasonga emphasizes the pain that Tutsi mothers endured as they tried to protect their families from violence and exile. The novel is a tribute to her mother and explores how motherly grief intersects with women's trauma. It shows how the voices of women are silenced and how they must exist in compliance with rules dominated by men, which emphasizes how trauma is passed along and manifested in the lives of Rwandan women daily.

### 5.3. Survivor's Guilt and the Burden of Memories in *Cockroaches*

Survivor's guilt is a key concept in trauma theory. It is when survivors of horrible things feel guilty, ashamed, and blamed for those who have died. Caruth (2016) posits that trauma is not the event but the enduring effect that the event has on the survivor. LaCapra (2001) examines more precisely the power of memory over individuals following trauma. He distinguishes between acting out, reliving the trauma constantly, and working through, trying to understand and make sense of the past. In *Cockroaches*, Scholastique Mukasonga portrays survivor's guilt as a crushing psychological weight that follows her fictionalized self through her exile and her return to face Rwanda's genocide. This guilt appears as shattered memories, self-blame, and an enduring sense of distance from the dead and the living.

Rwandan genocide in 1994 saw brutal acts against women, such as mass rape, employed as a weapon of war. This resulted in embedded trauma that has impacted several generations. Mukasonga talks about how women's bodies became targets during a difficult time, linking personal pain to the heartbreak felt across the country. In her work, *Cockroaches*, she shares her story of survival and losing loved ones. She engages with Caruth (2016)'s idea that trauma isn't just about personal suffering; it's also about how we share that suffering. Mukasonga provides raw accounts of her family's murder and her own struggles with survivor's guilt, illustrating how trauma can affect us profoundly and suddenly, making it difficult to cope immediately. Writing becomes a way for her to process her pain and piece together memories of her lost family.

In *Cockroaches*, she uses a mix of storytelling styles that align with LaCapra (2001) thoughts on dealing with trauma. The jumbled storylines she employs reflect (LaCapra, 2001) ideas about acting out instead of processing trauma. Her repeated mentions of the past show the difficulty of coping with the widespread loss, which is often tied to unresolved trauma. The insights from trauma scholars like Caruth (2016) and others highlight how Mukasonga's writing serves as both a witness and a means to work through history. Through her female characters and her own experiences, she emphasizes the need to acknowledge women's suffering in the history of genocide. Her work challenges the notion of trauma as something that occurs in isolation, showing it as a continuous experience shaped by memory and survivor's guilt. By elevating Rwandan women's voices, Mukasonga resists the historical erasure of female suffering, making their trauma and resilience a part of Rwanda's post-genocide narrative. Therefore, Mukasonga's literary work not only provides a poignant depiction of gendered trauma but also makes an important contribution to trauma studies, memory studies, and feminist literary criticism.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research paper makes an important contribution to the understanding of gendered trauma as depicted in the selected books of Scholastique Mukasonga – *Kibogo*, *Our Lady of the Nile*, *Cockroaches*, and *The Barefoot Woman*. Analyzing the chosen books in depth, the paper offers insights into the confluence of trauma, gender, and cultural identity, highlighting the particular suffering of Rwandan women during and after the genocide. The main contribution of this research is the specific attention given to how Mukasonga's literary stories uncover coping strategies, resilience, and the restoration of culture among women who experienced unimaginable atrocities. Through its illustration of how women cope with trauma, regain their voice, and hold on to cultural heritage, this research broadens the parameters of trauma theory by emphasizing the gendered aspects of trauma that tend to be overlooked in generalizations regarding genocide and conflict literature. The representation of gendered trauma through Mukasonga's writing showcases the complex and multiple forms of coping and healing. Through memory, spiritual practice, solidarity, and reclamation of agency, the women in her stories demonstrate resistance that goes beyond mere survival. Rather, they remanufacture themselves and their communities, transforming trauma into a force for personal and collective change. In Mukasonga's work, gendered trauma is not a destination but a moment within a larger trajectory of survival, resistance, and recovery. In these stories, she powerfully illustrates how, even after devastating violence, the human spirit can survive, evolve, and ultimately recover.

In addition, the paper fills a gap between feminist theory and trauma theory by presenting a rich conceptual framework for understanding how gendered violence, social norms, and cultural dislocation exacerbate women's suffering. The paper also illustrates how Mukasonga's works function both as testimonials and acts of resistance to the silencing of women's experiences in historical narratives. The study contributes to broader discourses on post-genocide reconstruction and feminist memory work. While most Rwandan genocide discussions focus on political roots and ethnic divisions, Mukasonga encourages us to consider the past through the lives that women have historically kept hidden. The intimacy of Mukasonga's writing creates an intimate counter-archive, bodily and affectively immersed, which contrasts with the dominant genocide narrative. Mukasonga invites alternative



pathways toward healing and understanding history by situating trauma within domestic, cultural, and gendered contexts.

Additionally, the research benefits postcolonial scholarship by discussing how Mukasonga's fiction challenges colonial and cultural suppression legacies that impact Rwandan society. This research asserts that her writing functions as a form of decolonial healing through storytelling, which is used to reclaim identity and foster resilience. Finally, this paper contributes to discussions on Rwandan literature, gendered trauma, and offers a valuable resource for scholars and readers interested in African literature, genocide studies, gender studies, and trauma theory. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing women's voices and experiences in healing and cultural renewal, which remains a vital aspect of Rwanda's post-genocide identity.

### 6.1. Limitations and Further Recommendations

This study focuses on Mukasonga's fiction, which is rooted in real events but does not cover the wide range of experiences that all survivors went through. This research concentrates on specific works, leaving space for further investigation into her less-known pieces and their connections to trauma and survival. It primarily employs literary analysis, which is useful but could be enhanced by incorporating ideas from psychology, anthropology, or gender studies. Future research might involve collecting oral stories from Rwandan women or comparing Mukasonga's work with that of other African women who explore themes of trauma and resilience. Examining her language and storytelling techniques more closely could add depth to the discussion. Additionally, comparing literature from before and after the genocide might reveal how storytelling can contribute to community healing.

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