



Mothering in the Face of Genocide: A Maternal Theory Approach to *The Barefoot Woman*

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Abstract

Scholastique Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* is a powerful testimony to the resilience of Rwandan mothers who, in the face of genocide, upheld their roles as protectors, nurturers, and preservers of cultural memory. This paper applies maternal theory to examine the ways in which Mukasonga portrays mothering as both an act of resistance and a means of cultural survival. While existing scholarship on *The Barefoot Woman* primarily focuses on themes of trauma and loss, there is a critical gap in exploring how maternal practices serve as a form of agency in the aftermath of violence. By analyzing the text through the lens of maternal theory, this study highlights the intersection of motherhood, survival, and cultural preservation in post-genocide Rwanda. This paper addresses this gap by applying maternal theory to Mukasonga's portrayal of motherhood, emphasizing resilience, protection, and continuity as acts of defiance. The analysis reveals how maternal figures in *The Barefoot Woman* become symbols of both survival and cultural preservation, offering a poignant counter-narrative to the overwhelming violence. Through this theoretical approach, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between motherhood, trauma, and resistance in post-genocide literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a central theme in literature, embodying resilience, sacrifice, and love. In postcolonial and trauma literature, the concept of motherhood extends beyond biological and emotional dimensions to become a site of resistance, cultural preservation, and identity formation. Scholastique Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* (2018) is a poignant memoir that pays tribute to the enduring spirit of her mother, Stefania, while simultaneously offering an intimate exploration of motherhood in the context of the Rwandan genocide. Through maternal theory, which examines the roles, representations, and socio-political implications of motherhood, this study delves into the ways Mukasonga portrays maternal resilience as a means of survival and cultural continuity.

Mukasonga's memoir is more than a personal recollection; it is a testament to the collective memory of Rwandan women who bore the weight of history through caregiving and cultural transmission. Stefania, as depicted in *The Barefoot Woman*, embodies the archetype of the nurturing yet fiercely protective mother, ensuring her children's survival despite the looming threats of ethnic violence. By employing maternal theory, this paper seeks to analyze how Mukasonga redefines motherhood as both a personal and political act, reflecting the intersection of gender, trauma, and cultural heritage.

The maternal theory framework allows for an examination of motherhood as a complex social construct influenced by historical trauma and displacement. This study will draw on the works of scholars such as Sara Ruddick, Adrienne Rich, and Patricia Hill Collins, who have explored maternal thinking, mothering as a political act, and the role of mothers in marginalized communities. In doing so, this paper will argue that Mukasonga's depiction of Stefania challenges conventional narratives of motherhood by portraying it as an act of defiance and cultural preservation in the face of genocide. By engaging with *The Barefoot Woman* through the lens of maternal theory, this research highlights the essential role of mothers in sustaining cultural identity and resisting erasure. The study aims to contribute to the discourse on Rwandan literature and trauma studies by shedding light on the nuanced portrayal of motherhood as a site of memory, resilience, and resistance in Mukasonga's work.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994, which resulted in the massacre of nearly one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu, remains one of the most extensively studied genocidal events of the twentieth century (Des Forges, 1999). In this context, women played a dual role as both victims and survivors, navigating the destruction of their communities while assuming the responsibility of preserving cultural memory and family structures (Burnet, 2012). Scholastique Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* (2018) serves as a literary testimony to this resilience, emphasizing the centrality of maternal figures in post-genocide recovery. However, to fully understand the maternal narrative in Mukasonga's work, it is essential to engage critically with maternal theory, particularly the perspectives of Sara Ruddick, Adrienne Rich, and Patricia Hill Collins.

Sara Ruddick's concept of *maternal thinking* argues that mothering is a practice shaped by social and historical contexts, rather than an innate biological trait (Ruddick, 1989). Ruddick outlines three key dimensions of maternal practice: preservation, growth, and social acceptability. Mukasonga's depiction of Stefania, her mother, aligns with Ruddick's first

dimension, preservation, as she struggles to safeguard her children from both direct violence and cultural erasure. However, Ruddick's framework, which emerged in a Western feminist context, does not fully capture the racialized and genocidal pressures placed upon Rwandan mothers. In *The Barefoot Woman*, Stefania's mothering extends beyond individual survival to the communal duty of passing down traditions, suggesting that Ruddick's theory requires expansion to encompass the maternal role in collective cultural preservation under extreme violence.

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) critiques the institution of motherhood as a patriarchal construct while advocating for an empowered, self-defined maternal experience. Rich's distinction between *motherhood as an institution* and *mothering as an experience* is particularly relevant to Mukasonga's narrative. While Rwandan women were often positioned as caretakers within a patriarchal society, genocide transformed maternal roles into acts of political and cultural resistance. Stefania's efforts to preserve rituals—such as teaching her daughter the significance of traditional foods and burial rites—exemplify a maternal defiance that resists erasure. Unlike Rich's critique of patriarchal motherhood, Mukasonga presents motherhood as a space of agency, suggesting that maternal resilience in post-genocide Rwanda operates outside traditional feminist dichotomies.

Patricia Hill Collins' concept of *motherwork* (1994) expands the discourse on mothering by incorporating race, class, and political struggle. Collins argues that Black motherhood is inherently tied to social activism, as Black women historically have had to mother under conditions of systemic oppression. Mukasonga's portrayal of Stefania resonates with Collins' notion of motherwork, as Stefania's mothering is inseparable from her efforts to resist colonial displacement and genocide. However, while Collins focuses on African American motherhood, Mukasonga's narrative extends this idea to a postcolonial African framework, where mothering is not only a form of survival but also an act of historical resistance against neocolonial narratives that marginalize Rwandan history.

Despite these valuable theoretical contributions, there remains a significant research gap in applying maternal theory to narratives of genocide. Existing literature primarily addresses motherhood in the contexts of colonialism, slavery, and racial oppression, but does not adequately theorize how mothering operates as a form of resistance in genocide literature. Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* offers a unique perspective where maternal agency is not only about physical survival but also about the preservation of historical memory and cultural identity. This study aims to bridge this gap by critically engaging with Mukasonga's work

through a maternal theory lens, situating it within broader discussions of trauma, resilience, and post-genocide cultural reconstruction.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section outlines the methodology adopted for the study of *The Barefoot Woman* by Scholastique Mukasonga, focusing on motherhood and maternal theory. The research is qualitative and interdisciplinary, employing textual analysis and theoretical frameworks to investigate maternal themes and representations in Mukasonga's work. Additionally, contextual readings of Rwandan traditions were conducted to situate the texts within broader socio-cultural discourses

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Scholastique Mukasonga's memoir *The Barefoot Woman* is a poignant tribute to her mother, Stefania, who emerges as a symbol of maternal resilience amidst the harrowing experiences of the Rwandan genocide. Through Stefania's life and actions, Mukasonga weaves a narrative of strength, sacrifice, and enduring love that characterizes the role of mothers during times of extreme adversity. This discussion examines Stefania as a maternal archetype, maternal care as an act of resistance, and the interplay between trauma and maternal stability.

Stefania as a Maternal Archetype

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Mukasonga's mother, Stefania, emerges as a symbol of matriarchal resilience. The memoir highlights the everyday struggles women faced as they sought to protect their homes and families from ethnic violence. Stefania's efforts to maintain cultural practices, such as traditional home keeping and the preservation of Rwandan customs, are central to the narrative. Despite the looming threat of violence, she remains a figure of quiet strength, ensuring the survival of her family and traditions.

From a feminist perspective, Stefania's character embodies the concept of "domestic resistance," where the private sphere becomes a space for defiance and cultural preservation. In the face of political chaos and gendered violence, "They didn't aim for her heart," Mama said again and again, "they aimed for her breasts, only her breasts. They wanted to tell us Tutsi Women, 'Don't bear any children, because when you bring them into this world you're giving them death. You're not bearers of life anymore. You're bearers of death.'" (22) Rwandan women like Stefania use their roles within the home to ensure the continuity of their culture. By safeguarding their children and maintaining traditional practices, they resist the erasure of their cultural identity.

Stefania embodies the archetype of the resilient mother, whose actions are guided by a profound sense of duty to her family and community. Her everyday practices, such as maintaining traditional rituals, weaving mats, and preparing meals, transcend mere caregiving. These acts symbolize a deliberate effort to preserve cultural identity amidst the erasure brought by genocide. “How to satisfy a Rwandan’ appetite without his daily plate of beans? I was greatly surprised when I heard sweet potatoes corn and beans had come to us from America. What roads had those plants to get all the way to Rwanda? But sorghum was a true Rwandan.” (40) Stefania embodies the archetype of the protective and nurturing mother, a figure deeply rooted in both Rwandan cultural traditions and universal maternal roles. As a maternal archetype, she represents more than an individual; she becomes a symbol of survival, community preservation, and cultural continuity.

Maternal Care as Resistance

In *The Barefoot Woman*, Stefania’s maternal actions are not only driven by love but also represent her determination to shield her family from the physical and psychological impacts of the Hutu-led genocide. Her care extends beyond providing food and shelter; it includes instilling a sense of identity and belonging in her children. Stefania’s maternal care is deeply intertwined with her efforts to safeguard cultural memory. For instance, the weaving of mats, an activity Stefania teaches her daughters, becomes a metaphor for resilience. Mukasonga recalls how her mother insisted on maintaining these traditions, even as their lives were under constant threat. “Women were proud to have children. Especially boys. But in Nyamata they tremble in terror when they give birth... They know they’ll be killed... She has seven children. Seven sons. What more could a mother want? And still, she looks at her sons with sadness and despair. She never lets them out of her sight.” (20). By doing so, she not only resists the genocide’s intent but also empowers her children to hold on to their identity amid chaos.

Stefania’s maternal care lies in her efforts to ensure her family’s sustenance. Food, often scarce during the genocide, becomes both a physical and symbolic form of resistance. Stefania meticulously hides grain, tends to her garden, and finds ways to provide for her children even when the Hutu militias systematically destroy Tutsi crops and resources. Her ability to feed her family becomes an assertion of agency in a system designed to starve her people into submission. The act of preparing food, especially traditional dishes, also connects her children to their heritage, reinforcing their cultural roots despite attempts to sever them.

Through maternal theory, Stefania’s caregiving emerges as an act of resistance. For example, her insistence on teaching her children traditional practices, even under the shadow of violence,

highlights her defiance against cultural annihilation. Stefania's actions underscore the maternal role as a guardian of cultural memory, transforming routine activities into acts of cultural preservation.

Trauma and Maternal Stability

Mukasonga portrays Stefania as a silent bearer of suffering. Despite the profound emotional turmoil, she continues to shield her children, creating a semblance of normalcy amidst chaos. The memoir highlights how silence becomes a coping mechanism, allowing Stefania to endure her trauma while focusing on her maternal responsibilities. As a mother, Stefania witnesses the systematic marginalization and eventual destruction of her family. Her trauma is not only rooted in personal loss but also in the cultural erasure and societal displacement faced by the Tutsi people. Stefania always used to say "When I die, when you see me lying dead before you, you'll have to cover my body. No one must see me. A mother's dead body is not to be seen. You'll have to cover me, my daughters, that's your job and no one else's. No one must see a mother's corpse." (9, 10) The narrative also captures how trauma is transmitted across generations. Mukasonga's reflections underscore the lingering psychological wounds that extend beyond her mother's life, revealing how maternal resilience attempts to buffer, but cannot fully shield, children from the horrors of genocide

Stefania's role extends beyond physical caregiving to providing psychological stability. Her ability to create a semblance of normalcy for her family, despite the chaos, underscores the emotional labour inherent in maternal resilience. This dual role - caregiver and protector highlights the intricate interplay between maternal strength and vulnerability. Mukasonga positions Stefania's maternal resilience as an act of defiance against the forces of genocide. By nurturing her children and safeguarding their cultural identity, Stefania transforms motherhood into a form of resistance. Through Mukasonga's narrative, Stefania's resilience becomes a lasting legacy, inspiring future generations to confront trauma with strength and dignity.

5. CONCLUSION

Scholastique Mukasonga's *The Barefoot Woman* serves as a poignant testament to the enduring essence of motherhood, especially within the context of displacement, loss, and cultural erasure. Through the narrative lens of the protagonist's mother, Stefania, the text portrays motherhood not merely as a biological or social role but as an act of resilience, preservation, and love in the face of unimaginable adversity. Stefania emerges as a symbol of strength and sacrifice, embodying the profound connection between maternal care and the sustenance of familial and cultural identity.

Mothing in the Face of Genocide: A Maternal Theory Approach to The Barefoot Woman

The maternal essence in Mukasonga's work transcends the individual to encapsulate a collective experience one that bears witness to the atrocities of the Rwandan genocide and the fragility of cultural heritage amidst displacement. Motherhood, as represented in the novel, is an act of defiance against the forces of destruction, wherein the act of feeding, nurturing, and protecting becomes a form of resistance. Stefania's rituals, traditions, and daily acts of caregiving ensure that even in exile, the family's roots remain tethered to their heritage, creating a bridge between the past and the future.

Moreover, Mukasonga's depiction of motherhood underscores the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma. By chronicling her mother's life, the author not only honors Stefania's sacrifices but also preserves the stories, values, and traditions that define her identity. This literary act of remembrance becomes a maternal gesture in itself a nurturing of the collective memory of the Tutsi community.

In conclusion, *The Barefoot Woman* captures the multifaceted essence of motherhood as a cornerstone of survival, resilience, and cultural continuity. Through Stefania's character, Mukasonga illuminates how mothers become the keepers of memory and the guardians of tradition, even amidst chaos and suffering. The narrative reminds us that motherhood, in its truest form, is an enduring force that sustains life, preserves identity, and offers hope, even in the shadow of loss.

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Mrs. P. Gowsalya has completed her Master Degree in English Literature. Now she is doing her research journey on Rwandan Genocide Literature to obtain Degree in Doctorate of Philosophy. She had an opportunity to stay at Rwanda for some time. During the stay, she had a chance to listen the pathetic experience of the people of Rwanda, Post- Genocide. Yielded to it, she started her research on the anxiety and loss of the people of Rwanda and wished to expose how they try to reclaim their status.

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