Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire

By Marie Béatrice Umutesi (translated by Julia Emerson), Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. xvi+258pp. ISBN 0-299-20494-4.

In her account of her experience as a Hutu refugee, Umutesi speaks from a precarious position in the wake of the binary politics (Hutu/Tutsi) of the 1994 Tutsi genocide. Yet, it is precisely the position from which she writes that makes Umutesi's memoir so powerful.

Surviving the Slaughter is written from a perspective that is often absent in mainstream representations of the refugee experience, namely that of the refugee herself. In distinction, for example, to media portrayals of refugee populations as masses moving across the landscape with an imperceptible agenda, Umutesi's account begins by personalizing the experience of being a refugee in such a crowd. In her prologue, she explains: "I am rather small, and I had to use my elbows to make a little breathing room, or I would have fainted" (3). In writing these words, she offers the reader a rare glimpse into the corporeal experience of being a refugee - an experience that often remains invisible in legal texts.

In her memoir, Umutesi narrates the history of her own life and of her country in tandem.

She describes her growing awareness of the divide between Hutus and Tutsis as a child, in the context of the civil unrest that marked Rwandan life during the 1960s and 1970s. Traveling forward in time, Umutesi documents the escalation of governmental repression and societal fear in the early 1990s, which followed the invasion of Rwanda by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (an army of Tutsi refugees). In her account of the years leading up to the 1994 genocide, Umutesi paints a vivid picture of the violence, discrimination and uncertainty that shaped Rwandan society by demonstrating its impact on individual people.

Most of her book, however, is devoted to recounting her life as a refugee in (what was formerly) Zaire, in the four years after the genocide. She describes the sheer panic that led her, and the majority of the Rwandan Hutu population, to flee the country in fear of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, who were fighting against the genocidal government. Umutesi writes of her daily life in the refugee camps, which were under-resourced, unsafe and dehumanizing places. The unbearable conditions of the camps were only qualified by the fact that the camps provided a period of respite from the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion that characterized her path of flight across Zaire. As she details her years as a refugee, constantly fleeing from threats to her safety, the reader follows her journey across hundreds of miles of difficult terrain.

Umutesi's memoir is one of the few internationally available accounts of these events

penned by a Rwandan author. Although she writes as a Hutu, her book does not offer an opposing perspective to dominant or Tutsi depictions of the genocide and civil war.

Rather than presenting the 'other side of the story', Umutesi's account adds depth and complexity to existing literature. Her depiction of the suffering of both Hutus and Tutsis highlights the fear and hardship experienced by all Rwandans during this historical period. It was their lives and living conditions that were compromised in the symbolic and physical battles for power that took place. By demonstrating that "life isn't worth much when power is at stake" (19), *Surviving the Slaughter* makes it possible to see the human 'cost' of civil war and political divisionism.

As Newbury notes in her foreword to *Surviving the Slaughter*, by writing as a refugee and as a female refugee, Umutesi's memoir enables "certain voices [that] were missing" (xi) to be heard. Her story is a first-person account of the uncertainty and vulnerability that characterizes life as a refugee. Umutesi shows how she must depend on others for food, money, transport and shelter – she never knows how or where she will source the money necessary to feed herself and her companions for the next week. Her vulnerability is traceable to the threat posed by the armies and rebel groups within Zaire who were seeking to gain, or exercise, control over certain territory through the use of force. Umutesi's narrative also highlights the double vulnerability of female refugees, as both women and refugees. The civil violence in Zaire and Rwanda created an environment in which sexual assault was an enhanced risk for women and girls. Moreover, as a refugee,

the assistance that Umutesi received from Zairean men was sometimes accompanied by the threat of sexual coercion.

Yet, Umutesi resists characterization as a victim. A member of Rwandan civil society before the genocide, Umutesi remains an active community member during her life as a refugee. She organizes activities and initiatives within the refugee camps, as well as emphasizing the importance of the voices of refugees (especially refugee women) being heard outside the camps. In her memoir, Umutesi portrays both the suffering of her fellow refugees, as well as the charity they shared and received – testifying to the numerous occasions where people helped each other to survive. Thus, her story attests to the simultaneous strength and vulnerability inherent in the struggle for survival for people who are not passive victims, but still in need of external assistance. However, just as the personal experience of refugees is often invisible in legal texts, so too is the law absent from Umutesi's story. Law does not respond to her need for assistance, failing to offer protection from the vulnerability and violence that characterized her life during this period.

At times, Umutesi's account lacks the introspection or description that would have facilitated a greater identification between the reader and her 'character' and the other 'characters' in the story. The narrative of the book is driven by the events that are described, rather than by the development of the characters, for example. The strongest

segments in her story are situated where she departs from her factual and efficient writing style to describe and reflect on an experience in more detail. The moments in which she expresses her frustration at her own inability to adequately help those who are dying in front of her are particularly powerful.

Surviving the Slaughter bears witness to the experience of Hutu refugees following the genocide and civil war, as well as being a testimony to the power of representation.

Umutesi describes this documentation of her experience as both a form of catharsis for her and a tribute to the memory of those who died in their journey across Zaire. In *speaking of* this experience, Umutesi also *speaks to* her reader. With each description of the horrors that she witnessed, Umutesi repeatedly asks: what have these people done to deserve this life and this death? Through this inquisitive refrain, she compels the reader to acknowledge the injustice that is constitutive of refugee life. More than simply acknowledge this injustice, Umutesi also challenges the reader to respond to it. In concluding her story, she resists the temptation of closure, demanding that her voice is not only heard, but that it receives a reply - inviting legal scholars to consider whether law has the ability or will to provide one.

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