

## Unclaimed Voices: A Trauma-Theoretical Reading of Scholastique Mukasonga's

### *Our Lady of the Nile*

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines Our Lady of the Nile (2014) by Scholastique Mukasonga to argue that trauma is represented not as a singular response to catastrophic violence but as an anticipatory and cumulative condition produced through everyday practices of exclusion, ideological conditioning, and institutional control. Set in a pre-genocide Rwandan girls' school, the novel reveals how ethnic hierarchies, discipline, and social division gradually normalize violence, generating a persistent state of psychological distress prior to the outbreak of genocide. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, the study demonstrates how trauma is encoded through narrative fragmentation, silence, and deferred meaning. The analysis is further informed by Sigmund Freud's concepts of Eros and Thanatos, which illuminate the tension between life-affirming desires and destructive impulses within the novel's social and psychological framework. Using trauma-informed close reading and psychoanalytic literary analysis, the paper explores four key dimensions: the construction of Veronica as an erotic-sacrificial figure, the articulation of genocide as a collective death drive, the function of institutional silence as a mechanism of control, and the sexualization of ethnic difference as a form of gendered trauma. It argues that Mukasonga's narrative reconfigures trauma as a gendered and socially embedded phenomenon that precedes and exceeds the event of genocide, thereby challenging dominant trauma paradigms and offering a nuanced understanding of the psychic and cultural conditions that enable mass violence*

**Keywords:** Trauma; Genocide; Gendered Violence; Collective Memory; Postcolonial Trauma; Ethnic violence

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/1002245>

Received: 2026-02-28; Reviewed: 2026-03-20; Revision Submitted: 2026-03-28; Accepted: 2026-03-28.

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## Introduction

The Rwandan Genocide remains one of the most devastating episodes of mass violence in modern history, claiming nearly one million lives within a span of one hundred days (Balorda 244; Bachmann 112). While historical and political discourses document the scale of this catastrophe, they often struggle to capture its psychological and affective dimensions. Literary narratives, by contrast, provide a critical space for representing not only the aftermath of violence but also the conditions that render such violence possible. In *Our Lady of the Nile* (2014), Scholastique Mukasonga foregrounds the subtle processes of exclusion, ideological conditioning, and social division that precede genocide. This raises a central research problem: *how can trauma be understood not merely as a response to catastrophic violence, but as a condition produced through its anticipation, normalization, and gradual social inscription?*

Set in a Catholic girls' boarding school prior to the genocide, the novel constructs a microcosm of Rwandan society in which ethnic hierarchies are normalized through institutional practices. As studies of Rwanda's socio-political and linguistic structures indicate, systems of classification, language policy, and ideological control play a decisive role in shaping power relations and identity formation (Rosendal and Ngabonziza 78; Rosendal 55). Within the novel, these dynamics manifest through surveillance, discipline, and exclusion, particularly targeting Tutsi students, whose presence is framed as a threat. Such representations resonate with anthropological accounts of "genocide-time," where violence unfolds gradually through normalization rather than sudden rupture (Nsabimana 763). Consequently, trauma emerges not as a singular event but as a cumulative condition shaped by fear, marginalization, and institutional complicity.

This study argues that *Our Lady of the Nile* represents trauma as an anticipatory and cumulative process, constructed through everyday practices of exclusion, gendered violence, and ideological conditioning. It aims to examine how the novel encodes trauma through narrative fragmentation, silences, and the symbolic representation of female subjectivity, particularly through the figure of Veronica as both an eroticized and sacrificial body within a system structured by violence.

The analysis is structured around four interrelated concerns. First, it explores Veronica as an erotic-sacrificial figure, revealing how desire and violence converge within a Thanatic logic that reduces the female body to a site of symbolic annihilation. Second, it examines genocide as a collective death drive, where communal hostility and ideological conditioning produce a shared orientation toward destruction, while silence emerges as a strategy of psychological survival. Third, it investigates institutional silence as a form of necropolitical erotic suppression, demonstrating how structures of authority regulate both speech and desire in ways that sustain power and normalize violence. Finally, it analyses the sexualization of ethnic difference, showing how gendered trauma is intensified through the intersection of ethnicity, desire, and symbolic control.

The study is grounded in trauma theory, drawing on Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, who conceptualize trauma as a belated and fragmented experience that resists direct representation (Caruth 4; LaCapra 70). In addition, the paper incorporates Sigmund Freud's concepts of Eros and Thanatos to examine the tension between life-affirming and destructive impulses within the novel's psychological and social

framework. These theoretical perspectives are further contextualized through historical and cultural analyses of Rwanda's institutional and ideological structures (Newbury 624).

Methodologically, the study employs a trauma-informed close reading, supported by psychoanalytic literary analysis, to examine how narrative form, imagery, and characterization construct trauma as both a personal and collective experience. By situating textual analysis within its historical and postcolonial context, the paper demonstrates how Mukasonga's narrative reconfigures trauma beyond individual pathology, revealing it as a gendered and socially embedded phenomenon that anticipates and exceeds the event of genocide.

## **Literature Review**

Trauma theory has been fundamentally shaped by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, who conceptualize trauma as a belated and fragmented experience that resists direct representation. While Caruth emphasizes the unspeakability of trauma, LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" introduces the possibility of ethical engagement and narrative mediation (Ludin 129; Bettelheim 73). However, as later critics note, these psychoanalytic frameworks remain largely abstract and insufficiently attentive to historically situated and culturally specific forms of violence. Recent scholarship has expanded trauma beyond individual pathology to encompass collective and cultural dimensions. Seth Abrutyn conceptualizes trauma as socially rooted and culturally mediated (Abrutyn 242), while Adam Blehm critiques the conceptual ambiguity that continues to define trauma studies (Blehm 296). Interdisciplinary approaches, such as Kazuma Matoba's attempt to "measure" collective trauma, further expand the field but risk reducing complex affective experiences into quantifiable models (Matoba 415). These approaches, though valuable, often fail to capture the narrative and representational dimensions of trauma central to literary analysis.

Memory studies have further complicated trauma discourse through the concept of multidirectional memory. While Michael Rothberg's model has been extended by Zoltán Kékesi and Máté Zombory to foreground political solidarity (Kékesi and Zombory 1666), critics argue that such frameworks often remain at the level of theoretical abstraction. Similarly, Magda Schmukalla reframes memory as an ethical and affective "wound in words," emphasizing transgenerational trauma (Schmukalla 27). Yet, despite these advances, there remains limited attention to how such theoretical insights are embodied in literary texts, particularly through voice, silence, and narrative fragmentation. In the context of genocide and postcolonial studies, scholars such as Jasna Balorda and Jack Palmer situate the Rwandan genocide within broader frameworks of modernity and colonial violence (Balorda 244; Palmer 128). Pierre Boizette further highlights the role of language and ethnicity in shaping postcolonial imaginaries (Boizette 185). While these studies offer crucial historical insights, they often marginalize the affective and gendered dimensions of trauma. Feminist interventions by Lydia Gitau and Rachel Pain foreground resilience and gendered violence (Gitau 930; Pain 1792), yet remain largely sociological in focus, with limited engagement with literary form.

Other interdisciplinary studies extend trauma analysis into digital, ethical, and transitional contexts. For instance, Kaihang Zhao, Lili Wang, and Meng Yuan examine trauma narratives in online discourse (Zhao, Wang, and Yuan 460), while Joana Mostafa warns against the ethical risks of reproducing inequality through representations of suffering (Mostafa 1087). Despite their scope, these studies largely overlook literary texts as sites where trauma is not only represented but formally constructed. Thus, a critical gap emerges at the intersection of trauma theory, gender, and post-genocide African literature. While trauma has been extensively theorized and the Rwandan genocide widely studied, there is insufficient attention to how trauma is narratively mediated in fiction, particularly through gendered voices and silences. This gap is especially evident in readings of *Our Lady of the Nile* by Scholastique Mukasonga, which have largely emphasized memory and testimony without fully interrogating narrative form and affect.

This study addresses this lacuna by offering a trauma-theoretical reading that foregrounds narrative fragmentation, silenced subjectivities, and gendered experience. It argues that *Our Lady of the Nile* not only represents trauma but reconfigures it as a collective, gendered, and culturally embedded phenomenon, thereby challenging the limits of Eurocentric trauma models and advancing a more context-sensitive literary framework.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodological framework to analyze *Our Lady of the Nile* by Scholastique Mukasonga, drawing on trauma theory while explicitly grounding its analytical procedures. Although the study is theoretically informed by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, its primary methodological approach is trauma-informed close reading, supported by psychoanalytic literary analysis and contextual interpretation.

At its core, the study employs close reading as a method of textual analysis, focusing on narrative structure, language, imagery, and characterization. This approach enables a detailed examination of how trauma is formally constructed through fragmentation, repetition, and silence. Rather than treating trauma as a transparent representation of historical reality, the analysis attends to the ways in which the text mediates and reshapes traumatic experience through literary form, aligning with the view that trauma resists direct representation and emerges through narrative disruption (Caruth 4). The study further incorporates psychoanalytic literary analysis, particularly through the concepts of “acting out” and “working through.” Drawing on LaCapra’s framework, the analysis distinguishes between repetitive, unresolved engagements with trauma and moments that gesture toward critical processing or transformation (LaCapra 70; Ludin 129). This distinction is used to interpret character behavior and narrative patterns, while remaining attentive to critiques that such models may oversimplify culturally specific experiences (Bettelheim 73).

In addition, a trauma-informed textual analysis is employed to foreground the ethical and affective dimensions of reading trauma narratives. This involves close attention to silences, narrative gaps, and marginalized voices especially those of female characters—while maintaining critical awareness of the risks

of appropriating or over-interpreting suffering (Mostafa 1087; Pain 1792). Such an approach recognizes trauma as both a representational and ethical problem, requiring sensitivity to the limits of narrative articulation.

Finally, the analysis is situated within a historically informed postcolonial framework, drawing on genocide and memory studies to contextualize the text. Insights into collective trauma and cultural memory (Abrutyn 242; Schmukalla 27) are used to avoid decontextualized interpretation, while still prioritizing the literary text as the primary site of analysis. This integrated methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how *Our Lady of the Nile* constructs trauma as a collective, gendered, and culturally embedded experience. By combining close reading, psychoanalytic interpretation, and trauma-informed analysis, this methodological framework ensures both analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity, addressing the limitations of purely theoretical or purely historical approaches.

## **Summary of the novel**

Set in a Catholic girls' boarding school near the legendary start of the Nile River, *Our Lady of the Nile* serves as a dark prelude to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. The school, shaped by colonial history and strict religious views, reflects the deep divides in a nation grappling with ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis. The story follows young Rwandan girls, particularly Veronica and Virginia, whose lives show the hidden pain of the Tutsi minority. Veronica, a faithful Tutsi student, faces false accusations, sexual abuse, and expulsion, with her struggles largely ignored by those in power this represents the story's theme of voices that go unheard. Goretti, a moderate Hutu girl, illustrates a kind of passive complicity, caught between friendship and fear, while Gloriosa, a militant Hutu, displays the influence of violent ideologies passed down from her father and the state. Mukasonga shows how religious and educational figures, like Fr. Herménégilde and the Mother Superior, play a role in upholding patriarchal and colonial norms, stifling the girls' identities instead of protecting them.

The school enforces strict limits on Tutsi students, allowing only ten percent of them, which mirrors the broader discrimination against Tutsis in Rwanda. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth notes that trauma often resists clear representation and can return in fragmented ways this is clear in how Veronica's story ends with no acknowledgment of her disappearance. Mukasonga's storytelling fills the gaps with silences and unspoken pain. The usual view of the Nile as a symbol of purity is turned into a site of betrayal and complicity. The title character, "Our Lady of the Nile," is meant to symbolize protection but appears powerless against the injustice. Characters like Virginia attempt to connect with Rwandan oral traditions and spiritual histories, hinting at resilience, yet even these ties feel fragile under the weight of colonialism and genocide. By not giving tidy endings to these characters' stories, Mukasonga avoids the neat resolutions found in many traditional narratives. Instead, she emphasizes the emotional fragmentation and denial that often come with trauma. The voices of the girls, especially those from Tutsi backgrounds, are left unheard lost amidst institutional silence, religious complicity, and state violence. Thus, *Our Lady of the Nile* becomes more than just a coming-of-age

story; it stands as a powerful act of witnessing, urging readers to confront the realities of unacknowledged trauma and the legacy of those voices' history tries to erase.

## **Analysis of Key Characters and Events**

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Scholastique Mukasonga portrays a group of schoolgirls whose experiences reveal trauma as a collective and anticipatory condition. Rather than depicting the genocide directly, the novel traces how fear, exclusion, and violence are gradually internalized, especially by Tutsi students, before the outbreak of mass violence.

*Veronica: The Erotic–Sacrificial Figure;* Veronica, a Tutsi student, embodies both beauty and vulnerability within a racially stratified society. Admired for her appearance yet marked as “other,” she becomes a target of hostility. Her eventual murder by her classmates under the guise of religious devotion—transcends individual violence and symbolizes the erasure of Tutsi identity. The transformation of the Virgin Mary’s image into Veronica’s likeness (“The Virgin... looked just like Veronica” [Mukasonga 176]) reveals the disturbing fusion of religious symbolism and ethnic hatred. This moment reflects Cathy Caruth’s idea of trauma as an event that is not fully recognized in the moment; the community reframes violence as a sacred occurrence, thereby evading its reality.

*Virginia: Silent Internalization of Trauma;* In contrast, Virginia represents a quieter mode of survival. She withdraws into silence, ritual, and memory, internalizing rather than expressing trauma. Her visits to the source of the Nile (“Virginia knelt... in silent prayer” [Mukasonga 101]) suggest a search for continuity and healing through cultural roots. Virginia’s silence illustrates how trauma can be endured through inward resilience, highlighting the psychological dimension of collective suffering.

*Gloriosa: Trauma as Internalized Violence;* Gloriosa, a Hutu student shaped by state ideology, demonstrates how trauma can be transformed into aggression. Influenced by political propaganda, she reproduces ethnic hatred and leads acts of violence against Tutsi students (“There are too many Tutsi girls...” [Mukasonga 29]). Her character aligns with Dominick LaCapra’s notion of transferred trauma, where unresolved historical tensions are redirected toward others. Gloriosa reveals that trauma is not confined to victims but also operates through perpetrators, sustaining cycles of violence.

*The school: Institutionalization of Trauma;* The school functions as a microcosm of Rwandan society, where trauma is embedded within institutional structures. Educational authority, religious discourse, and administrative indifference normalize discrimination and suppress dissent. When harassment is dismissed as “just childish pranks” (Mukasonga 113), it reflects a broader culture of denial that enables violence to escalate. Thus, trauma is not merely experienced individually but produced and maintained through systems of power.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Looking at *Our Lady of the Nile* through trauma theory shows a lot of psychological, cultural, and historical trauma woven into the story. While the novel doesn’t directly show the Rwandan Genocide, it clearly

demonstrates how trauma plays a role before and after violence, shaping who people are and how communities remember. Mukasonga represents trauma as something that goes beyond a single event; it's a common issue that's part of daily life, expectations, and deep-rooted oppression.

## **Veronica as an Erotic–Sacrificial Figure and the Logic of Thanatos**

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Scholastique Mukasonga presents trauma not as a reaction to violence alone but as a psychological condition shaped long before catastrophe occurs. Through the lives of Tutsi schoolgirls such as Veronica and Virginia, the narrative constructs an atmosphere of fear, exclusion, and latent hostility that produces what may be termed pre-traumatic tension. Although the Catholic boarding school appears to function as a space of discipline and moral order, it operates as a microcosm of Rwanda's ethnic hierarchy, where institutional mechanisms such as the quota system continually mark Tutsi bodies as surplus and expendable. This normalization of exclusion reveals the gradual emergence of what psychoanalysis identifies as a destructive psychic orientation.

Veronica's body becomes the primary site upon which this destructive impulse is enacted. Her refusal to conceal her Tutsi identity renders her hyper visible and transforms her into an object of collective hostility. Gloriosa's declaration "There are too many Tutsi girls here. This place is supposed to be Hutu land now!" (91) articulates a logic of elimination rather than coexistence. From a Freudian perspective, this logic corresponds to Thanatos, the death drive, which manifests as a compulsion toward aggression, domination, and ultimately annihilation. Rather than functioning merely as political hatred, the violence directed at Veronica is structured by an unconscious drive toward destruction that seeks to erase the disturbing presence of the "other."

Veronica's murder enacts this death drive in ritualized form. Her killing is not random but symbolic: the Tutsi body must be expelled in order to stabilize the imagined purity of the group. Freud describes Thanatos as operating through repetition and compulsion, pushing individuals and collectives toward acts that undo life rather than preserve it. Veronica's gradual isolation, followed by her violent death, reflects this repetitive psychic movement toward extinction. Her body becomes the medium through which destructive desire is discharged, revealing how genocide is preceded by a psychic rehearsal of death.

The erotic dimension of Veronica's sacrifice further intensifies this dynamic. Her body is not only destroyed but also transformed into an object of mythic reverence when villagers claim she has appeared as the Virgin Mary: "They said she had appeared to them as Our Lady. They'd built a shrine for her by the river" (154). This conversion of a violated body into a sacred image reflects what Freud identifies as the paradoxical coexistence of desire and annihilation within the death drive. The same body that provokes fascination and rivalry is offered up as a sacrificial figure, suggesting that destruction is masked as transcendence. Rather than mourning Veronica as a victim, the community sublimates her death into religious symbolism, thereby displacing guilt and repressing historical responsibility.

This transformation also exemplifies Thanatos operating at the cultural level. The community's mythologization of Veronica's corpse replaces political murder with spiritual narrative, enabling collective

denial. Freud argues that the death drive seeks a return to inorganic stillness, a state free from conflict and tension. By converting Veronica into a static religious icon, the community symbolically neutralizes the disruptive force of her death. The violent act is thus stabilized through ritual, allowing social order to continue without ethical reckoning. Trauma is not resolved but aestheticized.

Virginia's contrasting response reveals another manifestation of Thanatos: psychic withdrawal. While Veronica's body is annihilated, Virginia's subjectivity retreats into silence and spiritual absorption "She knew the spirits of her ancestors would be with her" (145). Freud associates the death drive not only with outward aggression but also with inward turning forces that produce numbness, muteness, and dissociation. Virginia's retreat illustrates how Thanatos can operate internally as a movement toward psychological extinction. Her silence becomes a living symptom of trauma that cannot be articulated, aligning with Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" (5).

Institutional silence further entrenches this destructive logic. When Virginia attempts to speak about Veronica's disappearance, she is told, "There are things we just don't talk about. It's better that way" (149). This suppression mirrors the death drive's resistance to meaning and testimony. Instead of enabling mourning or justice, the school enforces repression, allowing the compulsion toward destruction to persist unchecked. Violence thus becomes structurally embedded rather than morally confronted.

Through Veronica's erotic-sacrificial death, Mukasonga dramatizes Thanatos as a collective psychic force that precedes genocide. Her body is transformed into a site where aggression, fear, and myth converge, illustrating how societies rehearse annihilation before enacting it politically. The novel therefore reframes genocide not only as a historical event but as the culmination of a long psychic process driven by repetition, exclusion, and symbolic erasure. Veronica's fate exposes how the death drive operates beneath ideology, converting ethnic difference into a target for ritual destruction. Trauma, in this sense, is not simply produced by violence; it is generated by the slow triumph of Thanatos over the life-affirming impulses of empathy, connection, and recognition.

## **Genocide as Collective Death Drive and Silence as a Mode of Survival**

The analysis of Scholastique Mukasonga's *Our Lady of the Nile* reveals that genocide is not represented merely as a historical event but as the outcome of a collective psychological orientation toward destruction. Drawing on Freud's concept of **Thanatos**, or the death drive, the novel suggests that ethnic hatred is sustained through repetitive practices of exclusion, humiliation, and symbolic elimination long before physical violence occurs. The institutionalization of ethnic quotas, the normalization of verbal aggression, and the ritualized silencing of dissent collectively function as psychic rehearsals for genocide. These mechanisms demonstrate how destructive impulses become socially organized, transforming individual prejudice into collective annihilatory will. Genocide thus emerges as the political realization of a deeply embedded psychic logic oriented toward death, erasure, and purification.

The novel further demonstrates that this collective death drive is accompanied by a culture of silence that both conceals and sustains trauma. Silence operates on multiple levels: personal, institutional, and communal. For the Tutsi girls, silence becomes a survival strategy in an environment structured by hostility and surveillance. Cathy Caruth's theory that trauma resists direct articulation is reflected in the characters' withdrawal from speech into dreams, rituals, and fragmented memory. Trauma manifests not as narrative coherence but as interruption, repression, and repetition. Virginia's reliance on spiritual visions and ancestral beliefs exemplifies how traumatic experience is displaced into symbolic and non-verbal forms. Her silence does not signify passivity but rather functions as a psychic shield against overwhelming threat.

At the institutional level, silence becomes a mechanism of power. The school authorities' refusal to acknowledge Veronica's disappearance illustrates what Dominick LaCapra identifies as the failure of "working through," whereby trauma is not processed but denied and normalized. This enforced silence prevents mourning and accountability, transforming atrocity into myth and rumour rather than history. The community's conversion of Veronica's murder into a sacred narrative exemplifies how trauma is displaced through symbolic substitution. By sanctifying the victim, the society represses the political meaning of her death and avoids confronting its own complicity. Silence thus becomes a cultural technology that stabilizes violence by aestheticizing it.

The contrast between Veronica and Virginia reveals two divergent responses to the same traumatic environment. Veronica's refusal to remain silent represents a challenge to the collective death drive, asserting identity and visibility in a system built on erasure. Her violent elimination illustrates how speech and resistance threaten the psychic economy of genocide. In contrast, Virginia's inward turn reflects what Dori Laub describes as the early stage of trauma processing, in which survivors lack the conditions necessary for testimony. Her silence is not simply the absence of language but the presence of an alternative archive preserved through ritual, memory, and ancestral continuity. This suggests that trauma may persist not only through narrative but also through embodied and spiritual forms of remembrance.

The findings indicate that silence in the novel functions paradoxically as both a protective mechanism and a symptom of psychic injury. While silence offers short-term safety by avoiding confrontation, it simultaneously perpetuates trauma by preventing recognition and justice. This duality reflects the broader historical condition of pre-genocide Rwanda, where repression of difference and suppression of dissent enabled the death drive to operate without interruption. Mukasonga's narrative thus exposes how genocide depends not only on weapons and ideology but also on habits of quietude, denial, and symbolic displacement.

Ultimately, the novel reframes trauma as a condition that precedes mass violence rather than follows it. By representing genocide as the culmination of collective psychic disintegration, *Our Lady of the Nile* challenges linear models of trauma that privilege aftermath over anticipation. Silence emerges as both an index of fear and a mode of endurance, revealing how subjects negotiate survival within structures of annihilation. The study therefore finds that Mukasonga's text presents genocide as a convergence of Thanatos-driven social logic and institutionalized muteness, demonstrating how violence becomes imaginable through repetition,

repression, and ritualized forgetting. In this way, the novel not only documents suffering but also theorizes the psychological conditions that make historical catastrophe possible.

## **Institutional Silence as Necropolitical Erotic Suppression**

The findings demonstrate that institutional silence in Mukasonga's novel operates not merely as neglect or moral failure but as a form of necropolitical regulation that governs which bodies are protected and which are rendered disposable. The Catholic girls' boarding school, ostensibly designed as a space of moral formation and safety, becomes a disciplinary apparatus that manages life and death through silence. By refusing to intervene in ethnic harassment and by enforcing quotas that marginalize Tutsi students, the institution implicitly authorizes their vulnerability. Silence thus functions as a political technology that determines whose suffering can be ignored and whose existence is expendable. This necropolitical logic is inseparable from the sexualized control of female bodies. Tutsi girls are not only ethnically marked but also erotically charged as dangerous, disruptive, and morally contaminating figures. Institutional silence enables what may be termed erotic suppression: a regime in which the female body is both monitored and sacrificed. Veronica's harassment by Gloriosa is not treated as a disciplinary crisis but as a tolerable expression of social order. The staff's inaction converts her body into a target whose violation is permitted by institutional passivity. The erotic dimension of this violence lies in the transformation of the female body into a symbolic site of conflict—desired, feared, and ultimately eliminated. Silence, therefore, becomes the mechanism through which destructive power is exercised without appearing as overt coercion.

The school's response to Veronica's disappearance further reveals how necropolitical authority disguises itself as moral neutrality. Virginia's attempt to testify is met with indifference, reinforcing a hierarchy of credibility in which Tutsi voices are rendered inaudible. Rather than initiating mourning or justice, the institution permits a symbolic displacement of violence into religious myth. Veronica is elevated into a saintly figure, which transforms her political murder into a spiritual narrative. This sanctification does not honour her life but neutralizes the disruptive force of her death. Her body is converted from evidence of crime into an object of reverence, allowing the institution to evade responsibility. Silence thus performs an ideological function: it converts trauma into transcendence and erasure into sacredness. These findings support Dominick LaCapra's claim that institutions that refuse confrontation obstruct processes of "working through" and instead perpetuate cycles of repression and repetition. The school embodies what may be understood as structural trauma, produced through sustained inequality and colonial legacies, while Veronica's murder exemplifies historical trauma as a singular act of violence. Mukasonga's narrative reveals how the two are inseparable: institutional practices normalize discrimination until catastrophic violence appears as its logical extension. Trauma is not introduced by the murder alone; it is cultivated by the daily routines of silence, discipline, and exclusion. The eroticized dimension of this necropolitical order is crucial. Female bodies are regulated through both visibility and disappearance. Tutsi girls are scrutinized as dangerous presences, yet their suffering is rendered invisible once it occurs. This paradox exposes how institutions manage femininity as a site of

ideological control. Religious authority, rather than protecting the vulnerable, functions as a screen that conceals violence beneath rituals of purity and obedience. The novel thus reveals how gendered bodies become instruments through which political fear is displaced and stabilized.

In discussion, the novel reconceptualizes institutional silence as an active force in the production of trauma rather than a passive absence of care. Silence operates as governance: it structures emotional life, legitimizes exclusion, and prepares the ground for annihilation. By eroticizing ethnic difference and suppressing dissent, the school enacts a necropolitical economy in which trauma is not merely experienced but administratively produced. Mukasonga's critique extends beyond the school to broader religious and political structures that normalize suffering through inaction. Trauma emerges not only from overt violence but from the systematic refusal to recognize injustice. The novel demonstrates that genocide is preceded by bureaucratic habits of silence and symbolic displacement, through which bodies are first regulated, then erased. Institutional silence thus appears as a form of necropolitical erotic suppression, governing female bodies through fear, sanctification, and expendability. In doing so, Mukasonga redefines trauma as a socially produced condition embedded within structures of authority rather than merely an individual psychological wound.

## **Sexualization of Ethnic Difference and Gendered Trauma**

The analysis of Scholastique Mukasonga's *Our Lady of the Nile* reveals that ethnic conflict is inseparable from the gendered regulation of bodies. Tutsi girls are not only marked as ethnic outsiders but also sexualized as dangerous, seductive, and morally suspect figures. Their bodies become symbolic sites upon which political fear and cultural anxiety are inscribed. Ethnic difference is thus transformed into a visual and sexualized marker, producing a form of symbolic violence that precedes and prepares physical annihilation. This process demonstrates that genocide operates not solely through ethnic categorization but through the eroticization and demonization of the female body. The murder of Veronica exemplifies this intersection of ethnic hatred and patriarchal control. Her death functions not only as an act of ethnic elimination but also as a gendered punishment directed at a young female body that refuses submission and silence. The violence inflicted upon her reflects an effort to regulate female presence within a space dominated by nationalist and masculine authority. Her body is first rendered hyper visible through objectification and then erased through murder and mythologization. This dual movement exposure followed by obliteration illustrates how sexualized difference produces trauma through both surveillance and annihilation. Trauma here is not only psychological but also corporeal, inscribed directly onto the female form.

From a feminist trauma perspective, such representation exposes how women experience violence in layered and unequal ways (Gowsalya 2025). Tutsi girls are doubly marginalized: ethnically targeted and gendered as vulnerable, expendable, and blameworthy. Their suffering is shaped by cultural narratives that frame female bodies as bearers of communal honor or contamination. As feminist trauma theory suggests, women are often subjected to violence that is simultaneously physical and symbolic, involving silencing, erasure, and the denial of testimony. In the novel, this silencing is institutionalized through the school's refusal

to acknowledge injustice, thereby reinforcing a gendered hierarchy of whose pain matters and whose is erased. Mukasonga's focus on adolescent girls further intensifies the gendered dimension of trauma. Youthful femininity becomes a site of ideological struggle, where ethnic identity is read through the body and disciplined through humiliation and threat. The school environment, though framed as moral and religious, reproduces colonial and postcolonial systems of control that associate female sexuality with danger and disorder. Trauma is therefore not only the product of violence but also of continuous regulation, scrutiny, and fear imposed upon female bodies. The novel suggests that patriarchal and ethnic power structures converge to produce a climate in which girls' bodies are both desired and destroyed.

The findings indicate that sexualization itself functions as a preparatory stage of violence. By transforming ethnic difference into a bodily spectacle, the narrative shows how dehumanization becomes normalized. The female body is made to carry the symbolic burden of political conflict, allowing aggression to be displaced onto gendered targets. This mechanism explains how genocide is culturally rehearsed through everyday practices of looking, judging, and excluding. Trauma, in this context, is generated not only by acts of killing but by the prolonged exposure to being seen as an object of suspicion and desire. The novel thus contributes to trauma studies by revealing how gender mediates suffering, memory, and survival in colonial and postcolonial Africa. It affirms that trauma is not merely the aftermath of violence but an embodied condition shaped by how bodies are seen, named, and disciplined within systems of power.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that *Our Lady of the Nile* by Scholastique Mukasonga redefines trauma as an anticipatory and cumulative condition, rather than a purely post-event response to the Rwandan Genocide. By shifting the analytical focus from spectacle to process, the novel reveals how violence is gradually produced through everyday practices of exclusion, ideological conditioning, and institutional silence. This aligns with broader understandings of anticipatory frameworks, where future violence is prefigured through present conditions and social structures (Chaves-Gonzalez et al.). In doing so, the novel challenges dominant trauma models and foregrounds the slow formation of psychic and social rupture.

The analysis has been structured around four interrelated dimensions. First, it examined Veronica as an erotic-sacrificial figure, showing how the female body becomes a site where desire and destruction converge within a Thanatic logic. Second, it interpreted genocide as a collective death drive, demonstrating how accumulated fear and ideological hostility are transformed into organized violence, a process historically documented as both gradual and systemic (Onay 18). Third, it analysed institutional silence as a form of necropolitical erotic suppression, revealing how systems of authority regulate both speech and desire to sustain power. Such silencing mechanisms resonate with studies of epistemic exclusion, where marginalized voices particularly those of young women are systematically suppressed within institutional spaces (Kuchah et al. 4305). Finally, it explored the sexualization of ethnic difference, illustrating how gendered trauma intensifies through the intersection of ethnicity, desire, and symbolic control, echoing findings on the role of sexual

violence and intersectionality in the genocide (Shaker 70). Together, these strands establish that trauma in the novel is not incidental but structurally embedded in social, cultural, and psychological formations. Moreover, the analysis underscores how silence operates not merely as absence but as a performative structure that sustains power and invisibilizes suffering, akin to broader critiques of institutional oversight and spectacle (Ghattas et al. 770).

Despite these contributions, the study remains limited in scope. Its focus on a single text restricts the broader applicability of its claims, and its reliance on trauma theory and psychoanalytic frameworks may underrepresent material, political, and socio-economic dimensions of the genocide. Additionally, the absence of comparative literary or testimonial analysis limits the generalizability of its findings.

Future research can extend this work by adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, incorporating multiple literary texts, survivor testimonies, and historical analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of anticipatory trauma. Greater engagement with marginalized voices and narrative forms would further enrich this field, particularly in light of growing scholarly emphasis on inclusivity and representation in knowledge production (Alm and Guttormsen 305). Beyond its academic contribution, this study holds significant societal relevance. By exposing how discrimination, silence, and the sexualization of difference function as precursors to violence, it highlights the importance of recognizing early warning signs in contemporary societies. The findings reinforce the role of literature as a space for ethical reflection and as a medium for amplifying silenced voices. In doing so, the paper contributes not only to trauma and literary studies but also to broader discussions on memory, justice, gender equality, and the prevention of collective violence, offering critical insights into how cultures of exclusion may be challenged before they culminate in catastrophe.

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