

## Lending a Voice to the Voiceless: The Quest for Justice in Umutesi's Narrative

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*Surviving the Slaughter* is a powerful narrative that takes us into one of the many tragedies of the African Great Lakes region that affected tens of thousands of helpless Rwandan civilians in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide inside Rwanda. Through the eyes of an ordinary, but also remarkable, woman, we learn the horrifying details of the ordeals that Rwandan refugees in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) went through after their camps were destroyed *manu militari*. The value of this book goes beyond that of a simple narrative. As we read it, we are absorbed by an account of a breathtaking and excruciating journey of tens of thousands of people as they are hunted down in the dense rainforests of the Congo. At the core of this account is one woman's protest against the absurdity of mass violence and the inhuman brutality of military regimes.

At first glance, the book stands out as a strong stand against the corrosive tradition of silence that often accompanies gross violations of human rights, especially those unfolding beyond the scrutiny of the major world media. In a simple but engaging style, Umutesi strips off the usual veneer of reserve that characterizes Rwandans in general and Rwandan women in particular. Rwandans don't usually talk about their experiences, let alone write about them. And writing about the plight of people whom the world has often considered pariahs since the 1994 genocide requires a strong personality.

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Umutesi offers us a vivid account of the grueling nightmare experienced by tens of thousands of Rwandan civilians whom the world had deliberately forsaken. They are on a trek that seemingly has no end, heading for a destination unknown to them, with only a glimmer of hope that the sun of peace will rise once again. They endure countless death traps that no one will ever bother to denounce. Umutesi struggled to survive so that she could shame the insensitive world for its complacent attitudes in the face of human tragedies. She was spared by the forces of fate to tell the story of world complicity and cry out against one of the most scandalous humanitarian failures.

Those who dared raise their voices were few. A Rwandan proverb reminds us that “the hardship of the night can only be highlighted by a night-walker.” No one could have better described what became of the “U.N.-protected” camps of Bukavu and Goma than a former dweller in one of these camps. Umutesi’s experience as a survivor who never gave in to feelings of abandonment and despair leaves us with an important lesson: Evil can be challenged, even when it operates under the cover of the world’s indifference. But struggling to survive was one thing and writing about the lived experience was another. One should not doubt that Umutesi faces great personal risk by writing a memoir about an episode of the Rwandan tragedy that was meant to decompose in the depth of Congo’s forests like the many victims the tragedy had buried there.

The absurdity of the killings Umutesi writes about is reflected in the human tendency to place the label of pariah on a whole refugee population and then turn a blind eye on the inhuman treatment they are forced to bear. Umutesi does not deny that those fleeing the slaughter included criminals close to the Interahamwe militia who a couple of years before had been instrumental in executing the most horrendous genocide of the twentieth century in Rwanda. Nonetheless, by promoting the lie that all genuine refugees had returned to Rwanda and that only gangs of *génocidaires* were wandering in the rain forests of the Congo, the advocates of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which was the major force attacking the refugees, managed to keep at bay any possibility of humanitarian intervention. As Umutesi’s narrative makes clear, those caught up in this slaughter, much like the victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, were mostly ordinary peasants and helpless women and children who had no criminal history at all, whose only sin was to have been in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong people.

What accounts for this ruthless behavior on the part of the Tutsi-dominated RPF army in the wake of the Rwandan genocide in which the RPF and their families were victimized? Psychologists would describe their actions as a product of “the victim mentality phenomenon” or in lay terms, as a deliberate exploitation of one’s plight as a victim to carry out unacceptable deeds. Drawing most of its legitimacy from an antigénocide stance, the RPF-dominated government of Rwanda has repeatedly bran-

dished the “genocide threat” to justify excesses that often culminated in gross human rights abuses both within its territory and outside its borders, as in the case of the slaughter of Rwandan refugees in the DRC. It is unfortunate that with each episode, from the massacre of internally displaced people of Kibeho (Rwanda) to the frenzied manhunt of refugees in the former Zaire, the so-called international community has shown up too late, if at all, and only then to count bodies.

Most analysts have envisioned this case of humanitarian failure as a reflection of the extent to which the “good guy/bad guy” dichotomies continue to haunt the landscape of international relations (see French 2004). If this is true, then the situation Umutesi describes unfortunately suggests that the world is increasingly falling short of the very ideals of justice and human rights.

The principle of “presumption of innocence” seems to lose its meaning as long as “punitive” or “surgical” strikes—a euphemism often used in reference to the abominable military incursions of the Rwandan Army into the DRC—continue to be condoned by the international community. One must understand that even those among the refugees who are charged with criminal acts need to be treated as innocent until a court of law has established their guilt (see Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 11). Moreover, indiscriminate attacks against noncombatants does not only reinforce a culture of illogical violence that has long stained the social environment of Rwanda. It also calls into question the Rwandan government’s commitment to comply with international standards of human rights, especially those stipulated in the 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The world of refugees that *Surviving the Slaughter* presents to us is, in fact, a historical case that highlights the myths and realities of the modern human rights discourse. Despite official adherence by both the Congolese and Rwandan governments to an array of international human rights instruments, including those mentioned above, and most deplorably, despite the physical presence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a U.N. body mandated to “lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems,” the picture of refugees that comes out of Umutesi’s honest account is that of people living in extremely precarious security conditions. We learn much about the perils these refugees faced in their fiercely pursued havens (refugee camps) and the actions some of them took to make life at the camp bearable. The major concern of the UNHCR was the arrangement of as many repatriations as possible, a policy that is portrayed in Umutesi’s book as a dangerous obsession that casts doubt over the organization’s commitment to its most basic principles, such as the principle of voluntary repatriation and the principle of nonrepression (“*non refoulement*”). And as if this were not enough, when the situation was at its worst, the supposedly

protective U.N. body was nowhere to be found. Refugees were left on their own to fend for themselves, serving as shooting targets at times and always as human shields.

With respect to refugee-related policies, the book presents in explicit detail the unbelievably crude methods used by the Zairian government, which had “the sympathy of the U.N.,” to force people to return to all-too-dangerous Rwanda. The government dismantled schooling activities, reduced food rations, and ordered soldiers who ostensibly had been deployed to protect the refugees to beat them and frog-march them to the Rwandan border. As the book reveals, these activities intermittently led disoriented and panicked refugees to take off in helter-skelter dashes in different directions, thus putting their hope for survival to an even greater test. The reader notices with disbelief the complicity of the UNHCR with both the governments of Rwanda and former Zaire in the brutal and forced repatriation of the refugees with no regard whatsoever for their safety. One is left to wonder whether outside of the rhetoric of international treaties and conventions refugees are still considered human beings with rights.

Probably the most important fact to note is that the book formulates a strong indictment against institutions, governments, and specific individuals for their political or criminal responsibility for the extreme suffering that Umutesi and fellow refugees underwent for several months. Umutesi’s explicit determination to provide even the smallest details about the crimes (whether she personally witnessed them or they were reported to her by other survivors) makes this book an implicit but strong testimony on behalf of the lives and humanity lost. It would not be an overstatement to say that the book is in itself an outstanding call for justice.

An invaluable tribute to those people whom Umutesi knew and whose life journeys ended during the escalation of a conflict they understood little about, the book has done well by mentioning several victims by name. It is unlikely that any of these victims will ever have a proper burial; their bodies have not been found, and to their remaining family members they remain in the indefinite state of “declared missing.” The burden of grief and false hope that weighs heavily on the bereaved families might be made lighter if politicians, military personnel, and all those responsible for the atrocious crimes—and also for the devastating silence—could in some way be held accountable. They simply should not get away with such heinous acts. Should this dream of justice come true one day, then the rhetorical question that ends Umutesi’s book, “Is this the end of the nightmare?” will at least have received an answer.

## Reference

French, Howard. 2004. *A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.