

AMBIGUITIES OF FORGIVENESS IN *LEFT TO TELL: DISCOVERING GOD AMIDST THE RWANDAN HOLOCAUST* (2006)

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ABSTRACT

To interrogate the ambiguities of forgiveness it is important to understand the historicity of the Rwandan genocide and the complexities of the interchanging roles of victim/perpetrator and 'the enemy other'. Ilibagiza is credited for including the historicity of the ethnic animosity in her memoir, as she acknowledges that the 1994 genocide did not just suddenly erupt, but the work will be critiqued for its persistent portrayal of the Tutsi as victims and the Hutu as perpetrators, and for not acknowledging that the Tutsi were a 'historically privileged' (Mamdani 2001) group before the 1959 revolution. This article interrogates Ilibagiza's comprehension of forgiveness and its importance during the genocide and in post-genocide Rwanda. *Left to tell* centres on the power of religion, positive thinking and compassion as major steps towards forgiveness on an individual level, but shows limitations concerning justice after the commission of 'crimes of state', as Orentlicher (1991, 44) notes. Forgiveness is necessary in the healing process, but justice is a crucial component of national reconciliation. Forgiveness is only the first step towards restoring the humanity of the victim/perpetrator, and should be followed by restorative justice.

Keywords: genocide; *Left to tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan holocaust*; perpetrator; restorative justice; victim

THE 'ENEMY OTHER' AND FORGIVENESS

Due to the historicity of cyclical massacres and wars, during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda the Hutu and Tutsi each became the 'enemy other', as they were both victim and perpetrator. Zembylas (2011) points out the complexity of dealing with the 'enemy other', which hinges on a realisation that 'the other', who is from the other side, 'has also suffered in a more complex way' (ibid, 262). The need to acknowledge common pain is an important aspect in rehumanising the 'enemy other', with mourning and forgiveness constituting valuable sites of reconciliation.

The suffering of the 'enemy other' – in this case the Hutu – is not acknowledged in the memoir *Left to tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan holocaust* (Ilibagiza 2006), as the Tutsi are consistently portrayed as 'blameless' victims. What is not projected in this memoir is that prior to the 1959 revolution in Rwanda, the Tutsi were a 'historically privileged minority' (Mamdani 2001, 138). In the 1960s the Belgian colonialists had racialised Rwanda's indigenous people along ethnic lines, with the Hutu constructed as a subject identity, alongside the Tutsi who were imbued with an identity of power (ibid, 102). Mamdani further discusses the disparity in terms of university enrolment in Rwanda in the middle and late 1960s: this cohort comprised nearly 90 per cent Tutsi, so that they dominated the education system (ibid, 136).

Ilibagiza projects her parents' positive contribution to education and the community, but fails to acknowledge that this was a result of the privileges of wealth and education which the Tutsi minority enjoyed. This privileged position fuelled resentment amongst the 'enemy other' – the subjugated, underprivileged majority Hutu – who endured forced labour until it was abolished during the 1959 revolution (ibid, 134).

In consistently portraying herself as a victim, Ilibagiza (2006, 18) describes the weekly ethnic roll-calls in schools as 'serving a sinister purpose to segregate Tutsi children as part of a master plan of discrimination known as the "ethnic balance" ... ensuring Tutsi status as second class citizens'. Though in *Left to tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan holocaust* (hereafter *Left to tell*) the author acknowledges the reality of Rwanda's ethnic population which was roughly comprised of 85 per cent Hutu, 14 per cent Tutsi and one per cent Twa, she can be criticised for distorting the country's historicity by stating that most jobs and school placements went to Hutus (ibid.).

Ilibagiza's exclusion of the historical background to the use of an ethnicity-based roll call in schools, along with the labelling of it as 'sinister', further perpetuates and reinforces the stereotyping of the Hutu as perpetrators and the Tutsi as 'blameless' victims. The 'Hutu-ising' of the education system helped fuel ethnic animosity, being directed at the 'enemy other' – the 'privileged' Tutsi.

The ambiguities of selective memory play a pivotal role in the memoir, since literature is a reflection of the socioeconomic historicity of a particular narrative.

Selective memory in this memoir projects the negativity of the ‘enemy other’ and a crisis arises when that ‘enemy other’ – the Hutu government – acts positively by awarding Ilibagiza a scholarship to one of the best high schools in Rwanda, *Lycée de Notre Dame d’Afrique* and a further scholarship to the National University in Butare. This ‘crisis’ is due to socialisation: as Zembylas (2011, 258) states, growing up to expect such anger and resentment against ‘our’ perpetrators was not only legitimate, but also the ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ response.

Left to tell can be credited for narrating the horrors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and portraying people’s perceptions of the ‘enemy other’ Hutu, as viewed by the Tutsi. The memoir portrays the suffering of the Tutsi, but Zembylas (2011) enhances our understanding of the ‘enemy other’ by conceding that suffering is, indeed, experienced by all communities. *Left to tell* aids in deconstructing the anger and resentment felt against ‘our’ perpetrators, thereby enabling what Zembylas (ibid, 258) describes as ‘small openings’ which create conditions for solidarity and the conceptualisation of forgiveness.

Given the cyclical nature of massacres and wars, the Hutu and Tutsi were both in the position of ‘enemy other’, having both been victim and perpetrator at some stage. *Left to tell* portrays the complexity of these interchanging roles, as Ilibagiza (2006, 172) narrates how, in August 1994, the RPF advanced into Kibuye and the Hutu Interahamwe immediately became the victim ‘other’, fleeing from the RPF perpetrator ‘other’.

Buckley-Zistel in refs (2006, 147) further discusses the ambiguities of the ‘enemy other’ and how Tutsi soldiers killed Hutus in revenge murders after the 1994 genocide. Hutus who had lost family members during the genocide felt excluded from national commemorations and mourning (Lemarchand 2008, 73) as expressed in the following comment:

To remember is good, but it should be inclusive. For instance, my parents have been killed during the genocide. But when they [the public] remember they remember only Tutsi, so I am frustrated because they don’t remember my family (Young rural woman, Nyamata).
(Buckley - Zistel (2006, 147)

The exclusion of the Hutu from commemorations further complicates the concept of the ‘enemy other’ and labels the group as perpetrators, yet they, too, were victims who needed to remember and mourn their dead. According to interviews conducted by Buckley - Zistel (2006), these prejudices and feelings of antagonism have not changed – in fact, given the experiences of the past decade, ethnic cleavages are even deeper than they were prior to the genocide.

The concepts of ‘social amnesia’ (ibid, 132) and the ‘enemy other’ add another dimension to the politicisation of Rwanda’s national commemorations. Collective identity is not, however, merely produced through remembering but also through forgetting, in the form of “social amnesia” where whole societies may choose to

forget uncomfortable knowledge from its discreditable past records, “open secrets” which are known by all, and knowingly not known’ (Buckley - Zistel2006, 132).

Ilibagiza can be credited for portraying her father’s ‘social amnesia’ towards the cyclical ethnic violence in Rwanda. In the memoir her father, Leonard, exhibits ‘social amnesia’ when he is arrested and jailed during the 1990 war. He dismisses the arrest as a political misunderstanding, and when his sons suggested they leave Rwanda until the war has ended, he defends his Hutu jailer, Kabayi, the district burgomaster, by saying: ‘It was a mix up. Kabayi was just acting on orders; it wasn’t anything personal. These things are very political, and it’s best you kids don’t get mixed up in them. Let’s forget about the whole thing’ (Ilibagiza 2006, 28). The father downplays the seriousness of the war, choosing to forget that he had previously been targeted in similar anti-Tutsi violence in 1959 (ibid, 16). Just before the start of the 1994 genocide, Ilibagiza (ibid, 46) stated that her father remained in denial, hoping that the RPF would come to their rescue within a matter of days. The height of her father’s ‘social amnesia’ occurs during the genocide, when refugees flock to their homestead and her father goes to ask for protection from Kabayi, the same Hutu burgomaster who had previously jailed him (ibid, 61).

‘Social amnesia’ complicates the concept of the ‘enemy other’, as the origins of the animosity are not addressed and ‘open secrets’ are known by all, and ‘knowingly not known’ (Buckley 2006, 132). In dealing with the ‘enemy other’, for Ilibagiza’s father remembering to forget is thus essential for coexisting with locals and avoiding antagonism (ibid, 134). The potential danger in ‘being nice’ towards the ‘enemy other’, is that there is no closure: emotions such as anger, resentment and fear remain bottled up in people’s hearts (ibid, 145).

Ilibagiza (2006, 210) concludes her memoir with a simplistic view of forgiveness when she states: ‘I know that Rwanda can heal herself if each heart learns the lesson of forgiveness.’ Her individual act of forgiving her family’s killer, Felicien, is noble (ibid, 204), but on a national scale forgiveness requires the deconstruction of the ‘enemy other’, which implies dismantling ‘social amnesia’ and acknowledging common pain.

THE ‘PRESENCE OF THE DEPARTED’ AND MEMORY

‘But still, after more than a decade, we never talked about our family in the past tense. I suppose it’s our way of keeping their memory alive’ (Ilibagiza 2006, 206). Ilibagiza was brought up in a close-knit family which revered the values of love, compassion, forgiveness and spirituality. For Ilibagiza, the significance of the self as a member of a ‘civilised society’ became even more imperative in the aftermath of the genocide, as she faced the trauma of having lost family members. Preserving the identity of those who had ‘left’ during such devastation, meant that the departed remain embedded in the memory of those who stay behind. Culture filters what is

remembered, and new information is unlikely to challenge a survivor's ingrained preconceptions, since memories will only be retained in a form that accords with these preconceptions. Therefore it can be argued that despite the devastation of the genocide only positive family values ('culturally filtered') were retained in Ilibagiza's preconceptions and subsequently portrayed in her representations of forgiveness (i.e., the difficult choice of forgiving her family's killers).

Nora (1989, 8) discusses the dynamics of memory by stating that it only accommodates those facts that suit it. Human beings are interdependent and more so in the family unit, which forms the crux of an individual's identity. In a state of 'loneliness and abandonment' Laub (2009, 389), the memoir *Left to tell* paints a nostalgic picture of family members who were caring, loving victims of the 1994 genocide, thus justifying the notion that an individual's memory accommodates facts that suit it. A memoir in narrative form is 'rocked by the selective process of memory, mediations of ideology and culture, and demands of the "present circumstances"' Javangwe (2013, 8). 'We mentioned everyone by name, but spoke about them as if they were still alive – it was the only way we could cope. We carried on like this for the next two years' (Ilibagiza 2006, 206). The decision by Ilibagiza and her remaining brother, Aimable, to talk of the departed in the present tense is a reflection of the selective process of memory and portrays the vulnerability of those 'left to tell'. The 'self' is thus rooted in the 'presence of the departed', in that sense the departed serve the crucial purpose of providing a premise for the 'self' to venture into the future.

In his writings, one of Laub's (2009) popular themes is the loneliness experienced when a victim feels there is no longer anyone on whom s/he can count. As Laub (ibid, 389) states, 'for survivors to use "I" feelingly is to acknowledge the profoundness of their sense of abandonment and loneliness as it can lead to despair and surrender'. What runs through this memoir is the strong 'presence' of the departed family members, which serves to affirm Ilibagiza's sense of 'being' and being significant in life, thereby dispensing with 'despair and surrender' as she fixes herself in the memory of the 'presence of the departed' Laub (2009).

The psychologisation of memory thus gives every individual the sense that his or her salvation ultimately depends on the repayment of an impossible debt (Nora 1989, 16). If the 'impossible debt' is understood to be what the 'self' owes the departed, then the act of narrativising their story and their legacy of love, forgiveness and spirituality through a memoir is a part repayment of this 'debt'. The narrative process is therapeutic, as it benefits the 'self's' sense of being and significance, while lessening the sense of 'abandonment and loneliness' for the survivor who is 'left to tell' (Ilibagiza 2006, 161).

Ilibagiza's parents were ardent Catholics and the last gift her father gave her before he was killed was his black-and-red rosary (ibid, 52). Throughout the 91 days during which she hid in Pastor Murinzi's closet-sized bathroom with seven

other Tutsi women, Ilibagiza said she clutched her father's rosary as though it was her lifeline to God (ibid, 78). The rosary was symbolic, as it embodied the family's spiritual values and a physical attachment to the departed. The trauma of the genocide did not challenge the 'self's' ingrained preconceptions (Rasmussen 2002) and, in fact, contributed to Ilibagiza's spiritual growth. Therefore, her promise to her father to always keep the rosary can also be perceived as her commitment to continue her parent's legacy of treating neighbours with kindness and respect (ibid, 7, 52).

Selective memory is also evident in Ilibagiza's description of her older brother, Damascene, whom she describes as 'the light of her life' (ibid, 11). According to her he was the ideal big brother – loving, protective, an all-rounder in sporting activities and intelligent. He later became the youngest person in their entire region to earn a Master's degree (ibid.). The tribute Ilibagiza pays to Damascene is reminiscent of a lament for a life cut short and is an indirect criticism of the devastation of genocide. Damascene wrote a heart-breaking letter the night before he was killed and gave it to their aunt, Esperance, who had been hiding in the forest for weeks. The letter, like the rosary, represents a tangible attachment that serves to keep alive the memory of the 'presence' of the departed. Damascene, like Ilibagiza, portrayed the family values of spirituality and forgiveness with his final words: 'I pray that you see the evil that you are doing and ask for God's forgiveness before it's too late' (ibid, 154).

The values of the departed serve to 'unite' Ilibagiza with them, as their legacy of forgiveness lives on through her. Some secular philosophers believe the Christian concept of forgiveness is moralistic and simplistic. According to Derrida (cited in Verdeja 2004, 27), forgiveness must announce itself as an impossibility, and can only occur in the realm beyond that of human affairs. Derrida's (2001) view that Christian forgiveness is simplistic is interrogated through representations of forgiveness in *Left to tell*: Ilibagiza's father endured hunger and suffering in the two weeks he was jailed by the Hutu burgomaster in 1990. Damascene forgave his killers during the 1994 genocide before dying a gruesome death. Derrida's (ibid.) view of forgiveness as moralistic and simplistic is open to discussion, because the decision to forgive – as made by Ilibagiza's father and Damascene – despite being guided by Christian morals, was far from simplistic as lives were lost. Representations of forgiveness on the part of the departed play a pivotal role in forming Ilibagiza's identity as she, too, made the choice (though difficult) to forgive Felicien, one of her family's killers in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

The 'presence of the departed' is further reinforced in the memoir's centre pages, which features family photographs that survived the genocide. These are valuable visual links between the 'self' and the departed, as they preserve her memories and are 'her only mementos of their life together' (Ilibagiza 2006, 186). Socialisation takes place in the family unit, where family values create an individual's identity and give him or her a sense of belonging. In the face of the devastation of the genocide, the mementos that Ilibagiza has held onto – the rosary, the letter from Damascene and

the family photographs – heighten the significance of ‘the presence of the departed’ Laub (2009).

REPRESENTATIONS OF [IN]JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF FORGIVENESS IN *LEFT TO TELL*

Forgiveness can be perceived as a beneficial component of the justice system, as it assists in restoring the humanity of both victim and perpetrator, where ‘crimes of state’ have been committed (as was the case in the 1994 Rwandan genocide). According to Enright (2001, 25), showing forgiveness to the offender involves a decision to change a relationship and deciding, henceforth, not be controlled by resentment or anger towards him or her. One of the major strengths of the memoir *Left to tell* is its focus on the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness, but Orentlicher (1991, 44) complicates the concept by stating that justice is a necessary requirement so that memories do not fester. In the memoir Ilibagiza stresses forgiveness, but does not address the issue of justice. In contrast, her aunt Jeanne, who represents the victims of previous massacres as well as the 1994 genocide, requires justice so that ‘memory does not fester’. In anticipation of another cycle of violence, Ilibagiza’s aunt assured her that she will be getting a gun and learning to shoot, so that *next time* she will be ready to defend herself (Ilibagiza 2006, 202). This state of existence in post-genocide Rwanda is aptly summarised by Tadjó (2002, 27), who states that ‘all crimes that go unpunished will engender other crimes’. The absence of justice heightens fear and mistrust among the populace.

Forgiveness is an individual choice which benefits both victim and perpetrator (Enright 2001). When Ilibagiza forgave Felicien she says her ‘heart eased immediately’ and she saw the ‘tension release in Felicien’s shoulders’ (Ilibagiza 2006, 204), physical signs of the immediate therapeutic impact of forgiveness. Unfortunately, the above interaction was within the context of retributive justice which is punitive in nature. Restorative justice would have complemented Ilibagiza’s act of forgiveness and would have had the possibility of making a more positive impact, due to the historicity of the interchanging role of victim/perpetrator in Rwanda.

Retributive justice, as portrayed here, places one ethnic group (either Hutu or Tutsi) in a socially subservient and vulnerable position, and as a result perpetuates fear and insecurity in the population. During the 1990 war, Ilibagiza’s father was jailed for two weeks. The guards were ordered not to feed him and half a dozen of his Tutsi friends or give them water for several days (Ilibagiza 2006). The above depiction portrays retributive justice as practised by the Hutu government during the 1990 war – something which was replicated by the new Tutsi government after the genocide. Ilibagiza describes Felicien’s humiliation and his deplorable state while in prison in 1994, as he suffers at the hands of Semana, the new Tutsi burgomaster. The victim/perpetrator stereotyping is very pronounced when Semana orders Felicien:

‘Stand up, killer!’ – this, to a once powerful Hutu who is now emaciated, with his spirit broken (ibid, 203–204). It is in these circumstances of retributive justice that the effectiveness of forgiveness is debatable. Forgiveness complements restorative justice, as it offers the possibility of reconciling survivors in post-genocide Rwanda.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to explore ambiguous representations of forgiveness in *Left to tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan holocaust* (Ilibagiza 2006) during and after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Trauma theories were used to analyse the identity of ‘self’ as embedded in the ‘presence of the departed’ after traumatic events. The article has shown that selective memory positively shaped Ilibagiza’s life, allowing her to open the ‘unforgiveable’ wounds of the genocide and narrate this memoir which represents a triumph of the human spirit in the face of extermination.

Left to tell is complicated by the absence of restorative justice. This is a major shortcoming, as the author assumes that forgiveness is the solution to existing ethnic animosity which is what caused the 1994 genocide in the first place. The memoir has been critiqued for its partial distortion of history, as it perpetuates the stereotypical projection of the Tutsi as victims and the Hutu as perpetrators, without acknowledging the Tutsis’ privileged position in Rwanda prior to the 1959 revolution. Mamdani’s (2001) historical approach to the complex, interchanging role of victim/perpetrator in Rwanda was used to critique the ambiguity of forgiveness within the context of ‘the enemy other’.

Left to tell can be credited for offering an insight into the ‘enemy other’, so as to enhance our understanding of the suffering of the ‘other’. The article suggests that the individualistic portrayal of forgiveness depicted here is nonetheless important, as it creates what Zembylas (2011) terms ‘small openings’ for communication between ‘enemy others’. However, these ‘small openings’ are complicated by the rigid nature of retributive justice after the commission of ‘crimes of state’, as portrayed in the memoir. The author proposes that restorative justice benefits from forgiveness, as it paves the way for reconciliation. The portrayal of retributive justice in the memoir is problematic in that the effectiveness of forgiveness remains debatable, given deepening rifts in post-genocide Rwandan society.

The conclusion arrived at is that forgiveness on an individual level is commendable, but political will on a national scale is required to deconstruct the ‘enemy other’, dismantle ‘social amnesia’ and acknowledge common pain so that reconciliation can take place after ‘crimes of state’ have been committed.

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

Shingirirai Gabi is completing a Master’s in English Studies at the University of South Africa. The title of the dissertation is ‘The ambiguous space: Representations

of forgiveness in *Left To tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan holocaust* (2006), *Inyenzi: A story of love and genocide* (2007) and *God sleeps in Rwanda: A journey of transformation* (2009)'.

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