

Migration and Diasporic Identity in Scholastique Mukasonga's  
*Un si beau diplôme!*

Marda Messay  
*University of Dayton*

Franco-Rwandan author Scholastique Mukasonga has written several novels and memoirs on the ethnic tensions in Rwanda and the events leading up to Rwandan genocide of 1994. *Inyenzi ou les Cafards (Cockroaches)* (2006), her first memoir, describes her troubled childhood and early adulthood in Rwanda including her family's internal displacement from Magi (South of Rwanda) to Nyamata (Southeast of Rwanda) in 1960, her subsequent exile to Burundi in 1973, the loss of her family during the genocide in Rwanda, and her return to Rwanda in 2004. In 2012, with her first novel, *Notre-Dame du Nil (Our Lady of the Nile)*, she recreates the ethnic tensions and the context of the Rwandan genocide within the domain of an all-girls boarding school in the 1970s. While her work in the last decade, *Ce que murmurent les collines* ('What the Hills Murmur') (2014), *Coeur Tambour* ('Pounding Heart') (2016), and *Kibogo est monté au ciel (Kibogo)* (2020) engage with a precolonial and colonial Rwanda not yet defined by the genocide, she returned to writing about her life before and after the genocide with her 2018 memoir *Un si beau diplôme!* ('Such a Beautiful Diploma'). Much like her other memoirs, (including *La femme aux pieds nus (The Barefoot Woman)* [2008]), this text was written to pay tribute to and memorialize her family. As she explains in an interview, she wrote this text for her father, who is comparatively absent in her previous works and who was the one who encouraged her to pursue her education: "en effet, si je suis arrivée là où je suis aujourd'hui, c'est essentiellement grâce à mon père [...] C'est par le savoir que j'ai pu échapper à la machette. C'est aussi par ce savoir que je peux faire survivre la mémoire" (Mukasonga, "C'est par le savoir") 'in fact, if I got to where I am today, it is mainly thanks to my father [...] It is through knowledge that I was able to escape the machete. It is also through this knowledge that I can make memory survive.'<sup>1</sup>

*Un si beau diplôme!* is a first-person retrospective narrative composed of memories related to Mukasonga's pursuit of a degree in social work and the barriers she faces in finding employment. It consists of nine chapters that can be divided into four distinct parts based on Mukasonga's experiences in four different countries. The first six chapters focus on her experiences as a refugee in Burundi. In addition to recounting her efforts to obtain her degree and find a job, they highlight the complex emotions and realities of the refugee experience, especially those of a Tutsi woman. The seventh and eighth chapters describe the challenges

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations of interviews are mine.

she has to overcome to get her foreign degree recognized and to be able to practice her chosen profession when she and her family immigrate to Djibouti in 1986, and then to France in 1992. Mukasonga concludes her text with a final chapter in which she narrates a recent visit to an economically and socially transformed Rwanda. Mukasonga situates her migratory experiences within complex racial, ethnic, national, international, and gender power dynamics and discloses not only how she navigates these challenging landscapes but also the effects on her sense of self. As Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed notes: “For uprooted people, every new situation and location deeply (re)shapes their identities, their sense of self, their agency, and their well being” (28-9). I begin my analysis with Mukasonga’s experiences as a female refugee in Burundi. I analyze how she was able to navigate the perils of exile by developing her professional identity as a social worker, by refusing to be immobilized by her refugee status, and by engaging the support of other female refugees. I then study her experiences of inclusion and racial exclusion in Djibouti and France and reveal the ways they allowed her to develop and affirm a more expansive and inclusive sense of identity, that of an African and a French woman. Finally, I examine how Mukasonga’s return to a changed Rwanda altered her perspective but nonetheless allowed her to reconnect with her homeland. I argue that Mukasonga’s experiences in these foreign countries and her return “home” expand our understanding of migratory experiences by engaging with issues of gender, hegemony, belonging, otherness, exclusion, and diasporic identity.

It is important to note that even before becoming a refugee in Burundi, Mukasonga’s experiences in Rwanda are defined by exclusion and resistance. She begins her studies in social work at the School of Social Work in Butare (a city in the southern province of Rwanda) “contre toute attente” (13) ‘against all odds,’ as it is reserved for elite women.<sup>2</sup> She knows that her Tutsi identity will most likely hinder her entrance to the school (quotas were established limiting Tutsi access to education), but she is committed to receiving a degree that will allow her to return and help the women farmers of her community in Nyamata. Unfortunately, Mukasonga only spends a year and a half at this school before being driven out of Rwanda with other Tutsi students to Burundi in 1973. Fortunately, after taking an exam, she is able to enroll in the Gitega School of Social Work (located in the capital of Burundi) and continue her studies. At first glance, it may seem like Mukasonga’s seemingly easy integration into a school system in a foreign country as a refugee differs from the typical refugee experience, which Hajdukowski-Ahmed describes as “a constant process of ‘de-selving,’” as refugees are “depriv[ed] of their agency in various forms, extending even to the extreme of physical annihilation,” “dispossessed, disoriented, dislocated, dismembered; stateless, nameless, landless, homeless, and powerless” (38). This “discrepancy”

---

<sup>2</sup> All translations of *Un si beau diplôme* are mine.

can partly be explained by the fact that Burundi had accepted Rwandan refugees since 1960, which included provincial chiefs, members of the royal family, and some diplomats, who established businesses and rose through Burundian society. As Jimmi Adisa explains: “Burundi, appeared as a natural haven for the Tutsi, given their similar historical background, geo-ethnic configuration and the fact that the Tutsi were the ruling elite in Burundi” (47). Mukasonga does not detail her arrival in Burundi, but she does mention a stay in a hangar and its unsanitary conditions, establishing some initial difficulties (74). Instead, Mukasonga focuses her narration on her painful experiences at the school: “C’est pendant ces deux années passées à l’école d’assistantes sociales de Gitega que j’ai ressenti vraiment la lancinante désespérance de l’exil” (15) ‘It was during these two years spent at the Gitega social worker school that I really felt the haunting despair of exile.’ Mukasonga expresses her isolation and her alienation by describing her lack of friends and family: “Solitude et Tristesse étaient mes seules compagnes” (19) ‘Loneliness and Sadness were my only companions.’ Her experiences in this school and the emotions she evokes are not surprising, considering exile is a traumatic and disorienting experience that, according to Khatharya Um, can incite an existential crisis, “a physical uprooting and a psychical and spiritual disconnect from land, history, and identity” (835). Mukasonga stresses the affective dimensions of her experience in order to magnify the turmoil that displacement can wreak on the self. As Vinh Nguyen argues, it is important to recognize that, in conjunction with “the parameters of the legal definition or juridical-political form” (*Lived Refuge* 109) of the refugee category, displacement and refuge are experienced by a “breathing body exposed to life’s dizzying array of impacts and intensities,” “tiny and fragile, standing unprotected in the field of ‘destructive torrents and explosions’ that humankind has created” (*Lived Refuge* xiv).

In addition to the loneliness, Mukasonga’s narration also reveals the challenges she navigates specifically as a Tutsi woman in exile. For instance, she mentions being aware of her appearance and of her selection of clothing so as not to attract “les remarques acerbes des camarades burundaises prêtes à critiquer l’arrogance bien connue de ces Rwandaises que le Burundi avait eu la charité d’accueillir et qui, nourries et éduquées aux frais du pays, prétendaient rivaliser de beauté avec elles” (47) ‘the sharp remarks of Burundian classmates ready to criticize the well-known arrogance of these Rwandan women whom Burundi had charitably welcomed and who, fed and educated at the expense of the country, claimed to rival them in beauty.’ Mukasonga’s fear is understandable given how Tutsi women’s appearance is politicized and weaponized in Rwanda. As Jennie E. Burnet states in her study of sexual violence in Rwanda: “Since colonial times, Tutsi (or Watussi) women were heralded as great beauties by European colonizers. Beauty as a marker of Tutsi-ness was so strong in the popular imagination that Hutu women and girls who were considered beautiful risked being mistaken for Tutsi

and raped, sexually tortured, or even killed” (109). Tutsi women were labeled as temptresses and arrogant in Hutu extremist propaganda. Although Mukasonga never experiences “le moindre signe d’hostilité” (16) ‘the slightest sign of hostility’ from her Burundian classmates and is in a space where Tutsis are the elite, her fear, which is rooted in gender stereotypes about her ethnic identity and in the violence Tutsi women were subjected to, persists. As Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya writes in her analysis of the impact of the politics of othering on Mukasonga in *Inyenzi ou les Cafards*: “The violence of representation through cultural stereotyping appears to have created a climate in which young people like Mukasonga were no longer impassive to the propaganda of the ‘non-Bantu’ physical characteristics of the Tutsi, but recognized them in themselves as a kind of self-fulfilling validation” (91).

Mukasonga also explains how her gender and ethnicity impact her interaction with Rwandan men in Burundi. She reveals that the men are only willing to share their bed with her and do not see her as a possible wife since she is alone in Burundi and no one knows her family or her lineage: “On ne savait pas d’où je venais, ni surtout de qui j’étais, j’étais seule, sans appui notoire, on n’avait jamais entendu parler de ma famille. À qui auraient-ils pu demander ma main? À moi-même? Personne n’aurait eu l’audace de se lancer dans l’aventure d’un mariage avec une fille dont on ne connaissait que si peu de choses et qui en cachait peut-être beaucoup” (33-4) ‘They didn’t know where I came from, or especially from whom I came. I was alone, without any significant support, they had never heard of my family. Who could they have asked for my hand? Me? No one would have had the audacity to embark on the adventure of marriage to a girl they hardly knew and who was perhaps hiding a lot.’ This apprehension is explained by Mukasonga, who attributes it to traditional patriarchal gender relations, where a Rwandan woman’s worth and marriageability are based on the wealth and power of her family, as well as her capacity to bear children and continue her husband’s patrilineage. Since the men are unable to confirm her “worth” through these traditional parameters, especially what they can gain from her family, they are not willing to marry her. It is also possible that the men’s apprehension, especially the fear of what she is hiding, could be tied to ethnic tensions in pre-genocide Rwanda. As Christopher C. Taylor explains, bearing in mind that women are considered “cultural gatekeepers” and “socially situated at the limen of groups,” Tutsi women were “potential mothers of ethnically anomalous children” and “because of [their] sexual relationships with Hutu, possessed the capacity of undermining the categories ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ altogether” (43).

Mukasonga also describes how she navigates Rwandan class dynamics in Burundi. Mukasonga expresses her hesitation to cross into an exclusive Rwandan neighborhood populated by refugees from 1960: “Les exilés récents étaient, comme moi, des Tutsi modestes et ne pouvaient prétendre descendre du roi Ruzanzu, le

souverain fondateur du Rwanda, ni même se prévaloir d'un chef dans sa parentèle [...] Nous évitions donc soigneusement ce quartier réservé, ne voulant pas ajouter au malheur d'être exilés l'humiliation de subir le mépris de nos compatriotes" (79-80) 'The recent exiles were, like me, middle-class Tutsi and could not claim to be descendants of King Ruganzu, the founding sovereign of Rwanda, nor even claim to have a chief among their relatives [...] We therefore carefully avoided this exclusive neighborhood, never wanting to add to the misfortune of being exiled the humiliation of suffering the contempt of our compatriots.' While we would assume that refugees navigate mainly the host country's systems and politics, Mukasonga's experiences with members of the Rwandan community in Burundi underscore the extent to which uprooted people bring history, culture, intragroup and intergroup dynamics with them. Mukasonga continues to expand on the Rwandan refugee experience in Burundi by bearing witness to how some of the poorer and more isolated Rwandan women turn to prostitution to survive (76). As Serena Parekh explains: "Because of their total dependence on international institutions for their survival and often inadequate access to their resources, in order to survive, many refugee women are forced to prostitute themselves to other refugees, local residents, the police, and men who work for international humanitarian agencies and NGOs" (34-5). Mukasonga also describes how the uneducated and married Rwandan women maintain a home, sustain a semblance of a community, and take care of the children while their husbands work menial jobs or turn to alcohol to cope with their "défaite ...hont[euse]" (72) 'shameful defeat.' Their shameful defeat stems from the loss of their role as providers, their inability to conform to and uphold hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Correspondingly, patriarchal ideologies place the burden of the domestic sphere on women, continuing to limit their autonomy and mobility within a refugee space. Through this description, Mukasonga illustrates how the Rwandan refugee experience is not homogeneous and how identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, social class, civil status, and level of education play a role in the experience. Mukasonga also complicates our assumptions of mutual cooperation within refugee communities by illustrating the extent to which these identity markers can play a divisive role, even in migration.

While Mukasonga's narration touches on the complications related to gender, ethnicity, and class that surface within a refugee community, she also highlights the importance of other Rwandan refugees, especially women, in mitigating the loneliness and isolation of exile. For instance, she mentions her best friend from Rwanda, Mélodie, who arrives two years after Mukasonga and provides much needed moments of joy with afternoon picnics: " Pour quelques heures, mon vieux pagne s'était transformé en un tapis magique qui nous avait transportées loin de cette terre d'exil en un pays merveilleux où des jeunes filles insouciantes pouvaient rire de tout et de rien" (37) 'For a few hours, my old wrap skirt was transformed into a magic carpet that transported us far from this land of exile to a

wonderful country where carefree young girls could laugh at everything and nothing.’ Mukasonga also finds temporary comfort with the Rwandan women of a small community in Burundi, dubbed “Little Rwanda.” The women dance and sing while cooking: “C’était le moment attendu qui transportait les exilés au pays perdu [...] Tel était le pouvoir du chant et de la danse qui, seuls, pouvaient ménager dans les tourments de l’exil une trêve d’innocence” (66) ‘It was the awaited moment which transported exiles to their homes [...] Such was the power of song and dance which, alone, could create an innocent respite from the torments of exile.’ The food, the songs, and the dances allow Mélodie and Mukasonga to connect temporarily with “la hutte ancestrale” (68) ‘the ancestral hut’ and to not feel like “des orphelins sans abri” (68) ‘homeless orphans.’ Perhaps the most important element for Mukasonga in coping with her condition of exile is her quest to complete her degree: “Je le voulais de toutes mes forces, ce papier magique qui, même dans l’éloignement de l’exil, me permettait d’être encore présente au milieu des miens, d’être garante de leur survie” (28) ‘I wanted it with all my strength, this magic paper which, even in the distance of exile, allowed me to still be present among my people, to be guarantor of their survival.’ This identification of her role of ‘guarantor of their survival’ is notable as it underscores the burden that Mukasonga carries and the strong sense of responsibility that drives her. Mukasonga presents her degree as life affirming and transcendent. It is a ‘magic paper’ indeed: it plays an important role for the family members who remain in Rwanda; it gives her a purpose and a certain privilege by helping her avoid some of the terrible conditions of exile; and it represents the development of a professional identity and the refusal to be categorized as a refugee, a Tutsi, or a victim.

This refusal can also be seen when she receives her degree but is not assigned a job in Burundi after graduation. She roams around the ministries and international organizations explaining to well-dressed passersby that she has a diploma in social work and needs a job. She refuses to be relegated to the margins of Burundian society and to be stuck in a cycle of unemployment and precarity: “Je ne pouvais pas m’offrir le luxe d’être timide” (86) ‘I couldn’t afford the luxury of being shy.’ While some see it as a new method of begging and others proposition her, a Dutch businessman offers her a job as a secretary. While working for him, she reconnects with her internship director and is offered a job in his UNICEF project improving the conditions of women and children in the countryside. This display of agency and voice is an act of transgression against the limits imposed on refugees who are expected to be pitiable and needy victims, who are expected to “perform fear” (Espiritu et al. 61) and “profess eternal *gratitude* as tribute to their rescuers” (Espiritu et al. 78; emphasis in original). Mukasonga also exercises agency when she is unhappy with her lodging in Burundi. She goes to see the governor of the province, named Septime the Terrible, in person and without an appointment to demand better lodging. She stresses the scandal that would unfold

if people knew a well-educated woman working for UNICEF was living in these conditions. The governor agrees, and offers her a house: “Eh bien, nous allons faire quelque chose pour veiller à votre vertu et à la dignité due à votre diplôme. Sachez qu’au Burundi on a toujours protégé les femmes évoluées qui, comme vous, ont acquis un certain savoir” (94) ‘Well, we will do something to ensure your virtue and the dignity due to your degree. Know that in Burundi we have always protected civilized women who, like you, have acquired a certain level of education.’ The use of the colonial term “évolué,” which was used, according to Nancy Hunt, for those who “served as a model for less privileged Africans,” points to the interiorization of colonial hierarchical standards (Hunt 452). Mukasonga wields her professional identity and, perhaps more importantly, uses her position within a hegemonic international power structure entrenched in colonial history to demand more. As Yên Lê Espiritu et al. state, “refugees exercise their agency by navigating, negotiating, and at times circumventing existing legal, political, and definitional constraints” (53). Mukasonga displays agency by understanding how her professional identity can bypass the limits imposed on her and by leveraging the part of her identity (educated, working for a powerful global organization) that will be advantageous in this situation. However, this unexpected and quick acquiescence does not relieve Mukasonga of her refugee status. The housing she is given is a run-down old colonial building. Mukasonga initially refuses but is told she cannot refuse what is given by the governor, which underscores the limits that still exist for her.

Much like her experiences with female companionship at the Gitega School of Social Work, another group of refugee women helps Mukasonga navigate this period of her life. Once other refugee women hear of her lodging, they also ask for better lodging and are referred to Mukasonga, who allows them to move in. She finds solidarity and community with these women, who like her, had developed their professional identities as secretaries, nurses, teachers: “C’est donc une véritable république féminine [...] au retour du travail, la cuisine se faisait en commun et la soirée se prolongeait par des chants et des danses. À la clarté vacillante d’une lampe tempête, nous échangeons nos rêves de jeunes filles” (98) ‘It is therefore a true feminine republic [...] when returning from work, cooking was done together, and the evening continued with songs and dances. By the flickering light of a hurricane lamp, we shared the dreams we had as young girls.’ Mukasonga presents this “feminine republic,” which lasts five years until she meets her French husband, in a very positive light, and even seems to laud the capacity of uprooted women to recognize their rights, to build community on their own terms, to be protagonists of change, and to create a better “home” out of the vestiges of colonialism. However, it is important to note Mukasonga’s specific selection process for any incoming female refugee: “j’examinais soigneusement chaque candidate au logement, qui devait présenter toutes les garanties de bonne vie et

mœurs [...] La postulante dont la réputation douteuse pouvait nous attirer des visiteurs indésirables était fermement refusée” (97) ‘I carefully examined each applicant for this housing, who had to present all the guarantees of good character and morals [...] Any applicant whose dubious reputation could attract unwanted visitors to us was firmly refused.’ While this could be viewed as Mukasonga’s strategy for the protection of a female space, it does raise questions about solidarity, exclusion, and privilege within the refugee community itself. Mukasonga’s exclusionary practice can be explained by the ongoing vulnerability of her refugee status. Mukasonga’s careful examination of her housemates’ reputations, based on patriarchal ideology and paternalism, is necessary to maintain her “good refugee” status, characterized by “passivity, vulnerability, gratitude, compliance and productivity” (Clark et al 150).

Despite the challenges she faces, Mukasonga is able to construct a strong sense of self and a well-balanced life in Burundi. Her memoir shows how she assumes the professional identity of a social worker and then that of a mother and a wife. She even returns to Rwanda with her husband and children for a visit. Thanks to her husband, who is French and an ethnologist, she makes friends with Rwandan women with more privilege and a higher status. Her experiences in Burundi end on a very positive note: “Je ne regrette pas cette étape d’insouciance, je n’en ai pas non plus de remords” (110) ‘I do not regret this stage of carelessness, I have no remorse either.’ However, it is also clear that Mukasonga still has unresolved trauma when she refuses to teach her children Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda: “À cette époque, j’avais peur pour mes enfants. La langue est une identité, et cette identité, on me l’avait niée. Elle était devenue une menace de mort. Je voulais leur épargner cette menace, qui semblait planer sur eux comme elle planait sur moi. Je voulais les éloigner de mes cauchemars. Je ne voulais pas qu’ils soient tutsi” (106) ‘At that time, I was afraid for my children. Language is an identity, and this identity had been denied to me. It had become a death threat. I wanted to spare them this threat, which seemed to hang over them as it hung over me. I wanted to keep them away from my nightmares. I didn’t want them to be Tutsi.’ Although Mukasonga’s narration recognizes and stresses how being in Burundi provides “l’opportunité d’accéder à des études supérieures qui leur étaient refusées au Rwanda parce que Tutsi” (29) ‘the opportunity to access higher education which was refused to them in Rwanda because they were Tutsi,’ it draws attention to the breadth and complexities of the refugee and exile experiences by tackling issues of power, privilege, gender imbalances, agency, division, exclusion, and solidarity. Mukasonga’s refugee experiences are noteworthy as they engage, counteract, and transcend expectations of the refugee experience shaped mainly by humanitarian discourses, political discourses, and media representations, which tend to depict refugees as “depoliticized, dehistoricized and universalized” (Rajaram 248), as “helpless victims,” “speechless

and without agency, a physical entity, or rather a physical mass within which individuality is subsumed” (Rajaram 251).

*Un si beau diplôme!* continues to add to our understanding of migratory experiences when Mukasonga, her husband, and children immigrate to Djibouti in 1986 upon her husband’s work transfer. Her narration addresses the very clear differences between Djibouti and Burundi, like the stifling heat, the use of Khat, and the importance of Islam. While she initially struggles with these differences, she appreciates seeing another side of Africa: “Djibouti n’était peut-être pas un morceau détaché d’une autre planète, mais c’était pour moi un autre monde, une Afrique comme je ne l’aurais jamais pu l’imaginer” (113) ‘Djibouti may not have been a piece of another planet, but for me it was another world, an Africa like I could never have imagined.’ Once her children are enrolled in a French school, Mukasonga looks for a job, armed with her degree in social work and perhaps more importantly with her French passport, “le sauf-conduit qui me permettait, où que je sois dans le monde, quels que soient les aléas de la vie, de préserver ma dignité, mon indépendance et d’assurer la protection de mes enfants” (115-16) ‘the safe conduct which allowed me, wherever I am in the world, whatever the vagaries of life, to preserve my dignity, my independence and to ensure the protection of my children.’ Just as she does in Burundi, she roams administrative buildings and knocks on random doors. Unfortunately, not only does one administrator not know Burundi, he does not understand her degree: “Cette profession ne lui disait rien non plus. À Djibouti, on n’en avait pas vraiment besoin. Les femmes étaient dévouées à leur mari, savaient faire la cuisine, élevaient correctement les enfants. Qu’est-ce qu’on pouvait leur apprendre de plus?” (117) ‘This profession meant nothing to him either. In Djibouti, they didn’t really need it. Women were devoted to their husbands, knew how to cook, and raised children correctly. What more could they be taught?’ Mukasonga tries different spaces, including the French military, the French school, the French consulate, and private French and Djiboutian businesses. She discovers the limitations of her French passport since French military officers prefer to hire their wives, local and French administrative jobs are given to acquaintances, and private Djiboutian businesses prefer to hire white French women who are considered “more prestigious” (117-18). This valorization is consistent with Franz Fanon’s description of the colonized subject who “wants to be white” (*Black Skin* xiii) and of the colonized bourgeoisie, who “utilizes the aggressiveness of its class to grab the jobs previously held by foreigners” and whose “actions become increasingly tinged with racism” (*Wretched of the Earth* 103). Mukasonga is confronted with white hegemony and a different social stratification rooted in colonial ideologies. She needs to figure out yet again how to position herself and which aspect of her identity to use in relation to the dominant Other, since her French passport and her degree do not yield the mobility they did before. As she wanders around town, by chance, Mukasonga finds a Catholic elementary

school. Mukasonga is initially intrigued by this school as it is Catholic and female-run in such a patriarchal and Muslim nation. However, when she discovers that they also teach illiterate young Djiboutian women to read and write, she agrees to work as a volunteer. Over time, her training as a social worker and, more importantly, her identity as an African woman encourage these Djiboutian women, who bring their female friends along, to share their struggles, their hopes, and their anger: “Je découvrais avec horreur ce qu’au nom de la coutume on faisait subir aux femmes: excision, infibulation [...] Les écouter, c’était tout ce que j’avais à leur proposer. C’était d’ailleurs tout ce qu’elles attendaient de moi” (120) ‘I discovered with horror what, in the name of custom, women were subjected to: excision, infibulation [...] Listening to them was all I had to offer them. That was all they expected of me.’ It is yet again thanks to another group of women that Mukasonga finds purpose and can handle the burdens and limitations of this migration. Although Mukasonga is excluded by the main social and cultural structures that exist in Djibouti and has obtained French citizenship through her marriage, her experiences in this space demonstrate the continued relevance and importance of her identity as an African woman.

This is further reinforced by her description of a dinner with a French man and his Djiboutian wife. When Mukasonga makes the mistake of referring to Djiboutians as Africans, the wife denies their African identity, stating that they are Djiboutian and more civilized than other Africans. As Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains, this type of nationalism and xenophobia can be traced to colonialism, just like the preference for whiteness: “The colonial state on which the postcolonial state one is based was deeply racist and xenophobic. African nationalism in principle sought to represent what was considered authentic national subjects and it inevitably proceeded through exclusion of those considered as outsiders” (293). Mukasonga, who has had her own struggles with her identity and has assumed multiple ones—Tutsi, exile, refugee, naturalized French—proudly declares her belonging to the African community: “Eh bien moi, je suis africaine, je me sens profondément africaine. Je viens du centre de l’Afrique, et je suis parfaitement en accord avec ce que je suis. Ni rien ni personne ne pourra me faire renier mon identité. Et je suis civilisée” (123) ‘Well, I am African, I feel deeply African. I come from central Africa, and I am perfectly in tune with who I am. Nothing and no one can make me deny my identity. And I’m civilized.’ In some ways, Mukasonga’s reaction could be attributed to her experiences of rejection as a Tutsi in Rwanda, which have made her more sensitive to exclusion and repression. However, I would argue that, in her memoir, Mukasonga showcases the development of an expanding sense of connection to a larger community and highlights her willingness to embrace a more inclusive identity. These experiences of exclusion and belonging in Djibouti are fruitful as they continue to expand our perspective on the notion of

migration by illustrating the continuous shaping and reshaping of identity through migratory experiences.

While her experiences in Djibouti affirm her identity as an African woman despite her French citizenship, Mukasonga has to navigate another identitarian minefield when she immigrates permanently to France with her husband and children in 1992 upon the end of her husband's work contract. At the beginning, Mukasonga is quite optimistic about this space as she is French, knows French, holds a degree that has value in France, and has excellent references from international organizations (124). However, it is also clear that some of her previous privilege no longer applies in France, as she has to earn a salary and cannot simply work as a volunteer like she did in Djibouti (125). Mukasonga is informed that her degree is not recognized in France, and that she will need a degree from France in order to practice her profession. In addition, as she missed the date of the national exam, she will have to wait an additional year to register. Mukasonga is referred to a job counselor who recommends that she become a home care attendant: "Mais savez-vous au moins ce qu'est une assistante sociale? Vous pourriez envisager quelque chose de plus accessible pour vous [...] Vous n'aurez pas trop de difficultés à trouver une place, vous semblez être motivée pour travailler, vous êtes, avez-vous dit, mère de famille, vous maîtrisez assez bien le français" (133) 'But do you even know what a social worker is? You could consider something more accessible for you [...] You will not have too much difficulty finding a place, you seem to be motivated to work, you are, as you said, a mother, you have a fairly good command of the French language.' This "evaluation" of Mukasonga is worth unpacking as it touches on several elements used to judge the exclusion or inclusion of an "Other." Specifically, the assessment of her linguistic abilities is significant because language can serve as a means to exclude someone from mainstream society. As Maya Smith explains, language is a "gatekeeping mechanism" that can "confirm or deny legitimacy" and is connected to race: "Questioning someone's linguistic competence may be not so much about the way the person used language as about who is using the language and that person's perceived right to this language" (67-8). Although Mukasonga is a French citizen and speaks French, she is marked and evaluated as an outsider. Second, this valorization of her motivation or her attitude is not surprising given the political and media discourses that highlight the economic burden that migrants and racial minorities pose (Beauzamy and Féron 75). Third, the job counselor focuses on Mukasonga's motherhood and automatically relegates her to caretaking roles. As Mirjana Morokvasic and Christine Catarino argue, immigrant women are often viewed as "passive victims" (52) and are reduced "to their reproductive role" (60), which limits their opportunities to feminized occupations such as care work and domestic work (52). Lastly, the job counselor questions Mukasonga's intelligence by asking "But do you even know what a social worker is?", a question that points to colonial

stereotypes of the intellectual inferiority of Black people, which were used to justify slavery and colonization. Mukasonga is confronted with France's exclusionary discourses, structures, and ideologies.

However, Mukasonga refuses to be relegated to the margins of society and displays not only agency, but also a continued negotiation of identity. As Daniela Ricci writes, migrants "continually 'negotiate' their identity within [a] new sociocultural framework [...] Migration is not just about territorial and cultural positioning but also about ways of thinking and its effects on one's subjectivity" (69). This negotiation can be seen in how Mukasonga assumes her French identity and accepts that attending a school of social work in France is an integral part of her integration: "Je pensais que ce serait la bonne façon de m'intégrer, comme on dit si facilement en France et de prendre le temps de connaître d'abord le public auprès duquel j'exercerais ma profession" (131) 'I thought it would be the right way to integrate myself, as they say so easily in France, and to take the time to first get to know the public with whom I would be working.' This negotiation is followed by an act of agency and resistance. Mukasonga writes a letter to the Minister of Social and Health Affairs asking for help, explaining her dedication to the profession, and detailing her experiences in international organizations. Because of her letter, she is given a special date to take the national exam, as well as the oral and psychological exams. Upon passing the exams, she is accepted to an Institute of Social Work in 1993. We could see this letter as "strategic performativity" (Espiritu et al. 94). Mukasonga is "hyperaware of the need to perform vulnerability and gratitude" (Espiritu et al. 93) and "playact[s] the relationships and affects required of [her] to survive and to thrive" (Espiritu et al. 94-95). It is clear at this point the extent to which Mukasonga's identity is malleable and open to transformation under various contexts.

This malleability can also be seen in several interviews where Mukasonga expresses the connection between her African and French identities: "Bien se sentir dans son statut d'Africain permet d'épouser une autre identité. Je suis entièrement française, je pense et je rêve en français, mais en même temps, je suis arrivée dans ce monde en tant que Tutsi, mon nom me le rappelle en permanence. Je suis à l'aise dans cette double identité et dans mon bilinguisme" (Mukasonga, "Leur Parole est d'or") 'Feeling good about your African status allows you to embrace another identity. I am entirely French, I think and I dream in French, but at the same time, I arrived in this world as a Tutsi, my name constantly reminds me of that. I am comfortable in this dual identity and in my bilingualism.' This ease of living with two identities is a testament to her diasporic identity, "link[ing] herself not only with one transnational community but with several, crossing national boundaries and accepting the possibility of home other than the originary one" (Nyman 32). It is important to consider how Mukasonga's ongoing successes, resilience, and integration of her French/African identity contribute to our understanding of

migration and the concept of a “model” migrant and/or naturalized citizen. As Nguyen remarks, narrations of success can be seen as “proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally non-racist constitution” of the destination country (“Refugee Gratitude” 18). As such, they can be dismissed as “automatically playing into nationalistic, multicultural, and assimilationist agendas—that is, to accept the common perception that success breeds compliant, normative ‘good’ subjects and vice versa” (“Refugee Gratitude” 19). However, Nguyen also argues how in the case of narratives of Asian North American migrants, success is “a node in the continual process of survival and subject formation” and that their stories actually engage with how these refugees “embody and live multiple oftentimes discrepant meanings, memories, and histories” (“Refugee Gratitude” 20). This perspective on reading a narrative of success is useful in our reading of Mukasonga’s memoir. While we may want to discount this text because of the linguistic privilege that Mukasonga possesses and how quickly she seems to adapt when compared to existing dominant stories and discourses on the difficulties of migration, it is essential to acknowledge the extent to which this text not only engages with the burdens of being a migrant but also centers identity formation and transformation through migration. The malleability of her identity and her privilege in crossing physical, linguistic, cultural, and economic borders challenge the oversimplified dichotomy of “citizen” and “migrant” and advance the conversation on the spectrum of migration.

The last chapter of *Un si beau diplôme!* deals with one of Mukasonga’s return trips to Rwanda. Mukasonga narrates the trauma inflicted by the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, which unfolds while she is in France, and her 2004 return to Rwanda in *Inyenzi ou les Cafards*. In *Un si beau diplôme!*, she narrates a recent undated return to a healing post-genocide modern Rwanda and how she was able to reconcile and reclaim her Rwandan identity. As Gerise Herndon contends, return is a common motif in migrant narratives and is depicted as a destabilizing and alienating experience: “On returning home, the native undergoes a re-migration, not home, but to a state of liminality” (1). Return is a “perilous negotiation of guilt, grief, and nostalgia” and return narratives can be “acts of self-revelation, cultural translation, and political witnessing” (Ravi 296, 298). Mukasonga expresses how difficult it is to visit places from her childhood and adolescence as they are filled with memorials and memories of her murdered family and friends: “Je sens à nouveau peser sur mes épaules et ma poitrine le poids d’un deuil inaccompli. Mes livres, grâce auxquels j’avais cru ériger pour les miens un tombeau de papier, me semblent soudain futiles” (179) ‘I once again feel the weight of unfulfilled mourning weighing on my shoulders and my chest. My books, which I thought erected a paper tomb for my loved ones, suddenly seem futile to me.’ The text reflects this haunting as memories from different periods in her life (including visits in 1986, 2004, and 2014) constantly interrupt the narration and the description

of this visit. She also includes several reflections on her father and his life in this “pèlerinage” (169) ‘pilgrimage’. This “uncontrollable, intrusive and frequently somatic” intrusion of memories is not surprising as it is one of the symptoms experienced by traumatized individuals (Brison 40).

While she stresses the continued remembrance of the genocide and her family and the survivor’s guilt she feels, she also underscores the changes that Rwanda has undergone spatially and socially. This is especially important given the significance of the Rwandan genocide and the worldwide reach of the atrocities that occurred. While one might have expected a visit to a site of “grief and perpetual trauma”, marked by “infrastructure failure (governance, security, and education),” “disrupted urban centers of unbridled violence and extreme poverty,” “never-ending social, economic and political crises,” we discover a Rwanda that is not immobilized by its trauma (Ravi 296). During this more recent visit, Mukasonga has the chance to look at Rwanda in a different light and recognize, even appreciate its current state and the speed of its transformation. For instance, she notes the presence of new constructions of hotels, businesses, restaurants: “Projets, perspectives, spéculations.... Suis-je entrée en Utopie?” (147) ‘Projects, prospects, speculations.... Have I entered Utopia?’ She also describes how children, young men, and women are going to school and how women have assumed men’s jobs. As her chauffeur explains to Mukasonga when she expresses her surprise: “Tu vois, Mama, maintenant au Rwanda, les femmes sont des hommes, elles sont partout [...] Je crois qu’elles ont pris le pouvoir partout” (181) ‘You see, Mama, now in Rwanda, women are men, they are everywhere [...] I believe they have taken power everywhere.’ While Mukasonga’s Rwanda was defined by exclusion, repression, and violence, the new Rwanda is defined by inclusion, cultural, social, and economic mobility. Surprised by all the changes, Mukasonga asks: “A-t-on oublié le génocide? Est-on déjà au-delà de la réconciliation?” (146) ‘Have we forgotten the genocide? Are we already beyond reconciliation?’ This tension between feeling like a tourist and native, which is a common experience for returnees, can also be seen when she goes outside of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. For instance, when a young man treats her as a foreigner and tells her where to find her family’s parcel of land and who her neighbors were, she gets irritated: “Ce n’est pas un gamin que je ne connais pas qui va m’apprendre qu’a été Gitagata!” (164) ‘This kid I don’t know is not going to tell me what Gitagata was!’ Through another type of mobility, that of her return, Mukasonga sheds light onto the breadth of emotions related to the diasporic returnee’s experience such as (un)belonging, guilt, and nostalgia. While this chapter is about Rwanda’s transformation and her reconciliation with this transformation, it also demands that the world change its perspective on Rwanda. The text ends with the chauffeur’s last words to Mukasonga before her departure: “C’est ça, le Rwanda nouveau, mama!” (186) ‘That’s the new Rwanda, mama!’

Ultimately, by the end of the text, we are asked to think differently about migrants, their mobility and immobility, their possibilities, and their homes. Mukasonga refuses “the refugee story, one that is synonymous with violence, crisis, and disasters” and presents migrants as “agents of their own making” (Espiritu et al. 99, 109; emphasis in original). In a similar way, Mukasonga refuses to depict a Rwanda that “has been overdetermined by the Genocide against the Tutsi, fixed in the global imagination as the place where 1 million people were brutally massacred in just 100 days; a dark, dangerous, uncivilized place prone to spontaneous outbreaks of interethnic conflict of so-called ‘tribal’ warfare” (Hitchcott 127-28). The different identities and migratory journeys in the text continue the “shift from the retrospective status of mourning and remembrance towards a dynamic forward-looking process of reconnection and understanding” that Mukasonga exhibits in her writing trajectory (Hitchcott 145). Mukasonga engages in a process of “recuperation after the genocide” to restore “a sense of well-being and reconnection with the world” which “compel[s] us to think about twenty-first century Rwanda as ‘more than just a genocide country’ and, in doing so, promotes the agency and dignity of the people of Rwanda” (Hitchcott 139, 131). I would argue that there is a similar “recuperation” in *Un si beau diplôme*, as Mukasonga tells a story beyond the genocide, a story of agency, resilience, resistance, success, mobility, and transformation. While her writing was initially prompted by the genocide and the need to memorialize her family members, in interviews she notes that she now considers herself a storyteller, like her mother : “j’aime me dire conteuse et j’imagine que c’est elle qui se penche à mes côtés sur l’ordinateur” (Mukasonga, “Celle qui conte”) ‘I like to call myself a storyteller and I imagine that she [her mother] is the one leaning next to me on the computer.’ As such, this memoir of self-discovery and reconciliation could be seen as a sign of her evolution as a storyteller. It also honors her social work profession, which helped her feel “utile à l’autre” ‘useful to others,’ which in turn helped her bear the weight of being a survivor (Mukasonga, “Celle qui conte”).

In conclusion, Mukasonga’s *Un si beau diplôme!* not only honors her father who encouraged her to pursue her education, it celebrates her resilience, her connections with others through her professional development as a storyteller and social worker, and her migratory journeys. Her memoir documents her experiences with different types of migratory experiences and engages with questions of identity, inclusion, exclusion, gender, power, and transformation. While Mukasonga does address the negative and traumatizing aspects of migration and the struggles of being an “Other,” she also recasts and reorients migration as a space for opportunities, change, connections, potential, resistance, and dignity, a perspective missing from existing dominant discourses and policies. Through the personal journey and struggles of a Franco-African woman and through its portrait

of a transformed modern Rwanda, the text professes that an individual's identity and a nation's identity are ever-evolving, constructed by time and movement.

#### Works Cited

- Adisa, Jinmi. *The Comfort of Strangers: The Impact of Rwandan Refugees on Neighbouring Countries*. Ibadan: IFRA, 1995.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.554>
- Beauzamy, Brigitte, and Elise Féron. "Otherism in Discourses, Integration in Policies? Comparing French and Danish Educational Policies for Migrants." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 66-77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0028-7>
- Bhattacharya, Mrinmoyee. "Postcolony within the Shadows of Its Past: Genocide in Rwanda through the Works of Scholastique Mukasonga." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2018, pp. 83-100.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.49.3.06>
- Brison, Susan. "Trauma narratives and the Remaking of the Self." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leon Spitzer, Dartmouth College Press, 1999, pp. 39-54.
- Burnet, Jennie E. "Situating Sexual Violence in Rwanda (1990-2001): Sexual Agency, Sexual Consent, and the Political Economy of War." *African Studies Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2012, pp. 97-118.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/arw.2012.0034>
- Clark, S., Haw, A. & Mackenzie, L. "The 'good refugee' ideal: How discourses of deservingness permeate Australia's refugee and asylum seeker narratives." *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 59, no. 1, Mar. 2024, pp. 148-163. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.255>
- Espiritu, Yêñ Lê et al. *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*. University of California Press, 2022.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vr8vfw>
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2008.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2004.
- Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Maroussia. "A Dialogical Approach to Identity: Implications for Refugee Women." *Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices*, edited by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou and Helene Moussa, Berghahn Books, 2008, pp. 28-54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9780857450265>

- Herndon, Gerise. "Returns to Native Lands, Reclaiming the Other's Language: Kincaid and Danticat." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, Nov. 2001, pp. 1-10
- Hitchcott, Nicki. "'More than Just a Genocide Country': Recuperating Rwanda in the Writings of Scholastique Mukasonga." *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 127-49, <https://dx.doi.org/10.3828/jrs.2017.14>.
- Hunt, Nancy Rose. "Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Africa: Usumbura's Foyer Social, 1946-1960." *Signs*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1990, pp. 447-74. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494605>
- Morokvasic, Mirjana and Catarino, Christine. "Women, Gender, Transnational migrations and mobility in France." *Women in New Migrations: current Debates in European Societies*, edited by Krystyna Slany, Maria Kontos and Maria Liapi, Jagiellonian University Press, 2010.
- Mukasonga, Scholastique. "Celle qui conte n'a pas de haine dans son cœur », une conversation avec Scholastique Mukasonga." Interview by Déborah Lévy-Bertherat. *Le Grand Continent*, 6 Apr. 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/04/06/celle-qui-contre-na-pas-de-haine-dans-son-coeur-une-conversation-avec-scholastique-mukasonga/>
- . *Inyenzi ou les Cafards*. Gallimard, 2016.
- . "Leur parole est d'or." Interview by Marianne Payot. *L'Express*, 30 March 2018. [https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/une-parole-en-or\\_1995983.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/une-parole-en-or_1995983.html)
- . "Scholastique Mukasonga: 'C'est par le savoir que j'ai échappé à la machette.'" Interview by Catherine Calvet. *Libération*, 22 Aug. 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/08/22/scholastique-mukasonga-c-est-par-le-savoir-que-j-ai-echappe-a-la-machette\\_1673928/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/08/22/scholastique-mukasonga-c-est-par-le-savoir-que-j-ai-echappe-a-la-machette_1673928/)
- . *Un Si Beau Diplôme !* Gallimard, 2018.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. "Do 'Africans' exist? Genealogies and paradoxes of African identities and the discourses of nativism and xenophobia." *African Identities*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2010, pp. 281-295. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2010.491972>
- Nguyen, Vinh. *Lived Refuge: Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience*. University of California Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520397279>
- . "Refugee Gratitude: Narrating Success and Intersubjectivity in Kim Thúy's *Ru*." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 219, 2013, pp. 17-36.
- Nyman, Jopi. *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing*. Brill / Rodopi, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004342064>
- Parekh, Serena. *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*. Routledge, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883854>

- Rajaram, Prem Kumar. "Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol.15, no.3, 2002, pp. 247-64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/15.3.247>
- Ravi, Srilata. "Home and the 'Failed' City in Postcolonial Narratives of 'Dark Return.'" *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, Sept. 2014, pp. 296-306.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.987900>
- Ricci, Daniela. "Migrations and Representations: The Cinema of Griot Dani Kouyaté." *African Migration Narratives: Politics, Race, and Space*, edited by Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor, Boydell & Brewer, 2018, pp. 68-84.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb6v7qk>
- Smith, Maya Angela. *Senegal Abroad: Linguistic Borders, Racial Formations, and Diasporic Imaginaries*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2019.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvfjcz3b>
- Taylor, Christopher C. "A Gendered Genocide: Tutsi Women and Hutu Extremists in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 42-54.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/pol.1999.22.1.42>
- Um, Khatharya. "Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 2012, pp. 831-50.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1593564>