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Western representation and portrayal of an indigenous narrative: Examining *Hotel Rwanda* as a paradigm

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Abstract

Stories as delicate and grave as genocide require a meticulous and thoughtful approach, one that seeks to document and raise awareness without reviving the trauma endured by survivors. When addressing such themes through the medium of film, practitioners are tasked with balancing the pursuit of truth and sensitivity, avoiding actions that may retraumatize those connected to the genocide. This challenge becomes even more complex when individuals or institutions not directly or indirectly linked to the genocide or its communities attempt to tell these stories. Such efforts inevitably raise questions about authenticity, cultural understanding, and the potential for contradictions or misrepresentation in the resulting films. The intersection of artistic expression and creative liberties further complicates this process, demanding a careful balance to ensure historical accuracy without unintended distortions.

This study examines *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), directed by Terry George, as a case study to explore the tensions and implications of presenting an indigenous narrative through a Western lens. The film, which depicts the Rwandan genocide, serves as a prism for analyzing how authenticity or disparity arises when a historical event is interpreted and reimagined by filmmakers outside the community it represents. The analysis seeks to determine the accuracy of *Hotel Rwanda* in portraying the 1994 Rwandan genocide, as claimed by its creators, while interrogating the broader dynamics of storytelling in nonfictional cinema.

While film offers the flexibility to tell fictional and nonfictional stories, even films rooted in nonfiction often incorporate fictional elements. These fictional components, however, must not undermine the integrity of the overall narrative or dilute the spirit of the events being portrayed. Observations reveal that while intending to produce nonfictional works, some filmmakers diverge from the actual account due to the pressures of commercialization, artistic interpretation, or cultural biases. Such disparities, which are typically influenced by Western ideologies, risk confusing audiences that watch these films to understand historical events.

This study advocates for greater accountability among filmmakers, emphasizing the need of accurately reflecting societal realities rather than changing them to fit external expectations or creative aspirations. By doing so, films can reach their full potential as powerful vehicles for education and commemoration, ensuring that their stories are grounded in truth and respect for those they seek to represent.

Keywords: Fiction/nonfiction; Indigenous story; Orientalism; Rwanda genocide; Western influence

1. Introduction

As a literary form, film offers a complex portrayal of life, whether born from the author's imagination or grounded in reality, much like prose and poetry (Tunmer, 2). *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), directed by British filmmaker Terry George,

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presents itself as a true-life story. However, the question remains: is it honestly based on fact? This question arises because the narrative is told from a Western perspective, a lens that inevitably influences how the story is framed and understood. In this paper, the film *Hotel Rwanda* explores the authenticity and inconsistencies that emerge when an indigenous story is conveyed from a Western point of view. The film, which recounts the 1994 Rwandan genocide, has garnered significant scholarly attention, mainly due to its subject matter and the ongoing debate over the legitimacy of its portrayal. Despite being based on actual events, the Western interpretation of this indigenous story has received less scrutiny. This paper argues that inconsistency is inevitable when an indigenous narrative is filtered through a different cultural lens, precisely that of the West.

To understand this claim, it is necessary first to summarize the film and examine the historical context of the Rwandan genocide, followed by a comparative analysis to highlight the (mis)representations that emerge. One key framework for understanding the dynamics at play is Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, a postcolonial theory that sheds light on how the West has historically constructed false images of the "Orient"—a term used to refer to the colonized regions of the world, including Africa. Said's theory asserts that Western scholars, writers, filmmakers, and policymakers have long fabricated distorted views of the East, Africa, and other colonized regions (Said, 40). According to Said, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' (the colonized) and 'the Occident' (the colonizers)" (Hamadi 47). In this context, the oppressed and colonized are rendered voiceless, their realities and experiences filtered through the perspectives of the elite, such as academics or filmmakers, who shape their portrayal. This dynamic is crucial for understanding the challenges inherent in telling indigenous stories from a Western viewpoint.

2. Synopsis of Hotel Rwanda

Hotel Rwanda is the story of Paul Rusesabagina, a Hutu hotel manager at the Des Milles Collines Hotel in Kigali, Rwanda. Portrayed as a resourceful and capable manager, Paul is initially focused on maintaining the hotel's operations, primarily serving wealthy foreign guests. The film sets its backdrop during the period of Belgian colonial rule, which fostered divisions between Rwanda's majority Hutu population and the minority Tutsi group, with the Belgian authorities favoring the Tutsis. These tensions escalated over time, culminating in the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana in April 1994, an event that triggered the beginning of the Rwandan Genocide.

As Hutu militias embark on a brutal campaign of violence against the Tutsi population, Paul seeks refuge at the hotel with his family. Initially aiming to protect his loved ones, Paul is soon persuaded by his wife, Tatiana, also to provide sanctuary for their terrified neighbors. As the violence intensifies, Paul uses all the resources at his disposal, including bribing General Bizimungu, a senior Rwandan military officer, to prevent the massacre from reaching the hotel. Meanwhile, foreign aid workers are evacuated, but not without heartbreaking discrimination—only the white expatriates are allowed to leave, leaving behind many Africans, including children, to face certain death.

Despite the overwhelming odds, Paul and Tatiana manage to survive, and, with the assistance of the United Nations, they are eventually evacuated to a refugee camp in Kabuga, marking a rare moment of hope amidst the chaos and destruction of the genocide.

3. The Rwandan genocide: A historical overview

The Rwandan Genocide, which unfolded between April 7 and July 15, 1994, during the Rwandan Civil War, is one of the most tragic chapters of the 20th century. In this period of horrific violence, extremist Hutu militias targeted not only the Tutsi minority population but also moderate Hutus and members of the Twa ethnic group. Although the Hutus outnumbered the Tutsis, the Tutsi minority had historically held political power, and in 1959, the Hutus overthrew the Tutsi monarchy, forcing many Tutsis into exile.

The genocide was precipitated by the assassination of the Hutu President, Juvénal Habyarimana, on April 6, 1994, when his plane was shot down under mysterious circumstances. Hutu extremists quickly blamed the Tutsis for the attack, and this set off the systematic massacre that lasted for 100 days. During this period, a government-backed radio station, RTLM, broadcast hate-filled messages, inciting violence and calling for the extermination of the Tutsis. Prominent individuals, including political leaders and community figures, were publicly listed on the radio, with calls to "weed out the cockroaches," a term meaning kill the Tutsis.

Despite the presence of both Belgian and UN peacekeepers, the international response was disastrously inadequate. According to reports by BBC News, "the UN mission was not given the mandate to stop the killing. A year after US troops

were killed in Somalia, the US was determined not to get involved in another African conflict. The Belgians and most UN peacekeepers pulled out after ten Belgian soldiers were killed" (BBC News). In contrast, the French, who had allied with the Hutu regime, sent troops to evacuate their citizens. Meanwhile, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi rebel group with support from Uganda, gradually regained territory and, on July 4, 1994, seized the capital, Kigali, effectively bringing an end to the genocide. The Rwandan Genocide resulted in the deaths of an estimated 800,000 people, most of whom were Tutsis, marking it as one of the most devastating episodes in modern history.

4. Western misrepresentation in Hotel Rwanda

This paper examines the discrepancies and issues arising from the Western portrayal of the Rwandan Genocide in *Hotel Rwanda*, using the film as a lens through which the international narrative of Africa is shaped. While the film is undoubtedly a powerful and impactful creation by Terry George, it reflects a Western perspective on the events of the Rwandan Genocide that fails to accurately represent the historical, political, and cultural complexity of the situation. As Burton notes, "Whether it be through literature, news, or the filmed adaptations of a certain event, discrepancies are bound to be discovered when pulling from multiple sources to create an American-approved version of events" (154). This observation is particularly relevant in *Hotel Rwanda*, where historical inaccuracies are embedded in the story.

4.1. The Rwandan Genocide: A complex history oversimplified

The portrayal of the Rwandan Genocide in *Hotel Rwanda* hinges on the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana as the catalyst for the violence that followed. However, this oversimplifies a much deeper, more complex political and ethnic struggle spanned over a century. The conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi groups did not begin with the assassination in 1994; instead, it was rooted in colonial-era divisions and exacerbated by the political and economic tensions that festered in Rwanda long before the genocide. The colonial legacy, particularly that of the Belgian colonialists who favored the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority, played a crucial role in creating the ethnic tensions that led to the genocide.

Historically, the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa groups coexisted peacefully on the same land, sharing the same culture and language, *Ikinyarwanda*. The distinction between the Hutu and Tutsi was not based on ethnicity but rather on social stratification, with the Tutsi historically holding more political power due to colonial preferences. The Belgian colonizers formalized this distinction by issuing identity cards that classified people as Hutu or Tutsi based on superficial physical traits, further deepening divisions between the two groups. This colonial policy set the stage for decades of ethnic tension, culminating in the 1994 genocide.

While *Hotel Rwanda* focuses on the events surrounding the assassination of President Habyarimana in April 1994, it overlooks the centuries of history that led to the eruption of violence. The film's focus on ethnic resentment as the primary cause of the genocide neglects the critical roles played by colonialism, the Cold War, and the failure of international intervention. In doing so, it offers a reductive, one-dimensional explanation of the genocide that does not do justice to the historical complexities involved.

4.2. The heroization of Paul Rusesabagina: A Eurocentric narrative

One of the most contentious elements of *Hotel Rwanda* is its portrayal of Paul Rusesabagina, the Hotel manager who became a symbol of heroism for his efforts to protect refugees during the genocide. While Rusesabagina's actions were undoubtedly brave, the film's emphasis on his heroism reflects a Eurocentric narrative that elevates the exploits of a single individual above the collective heroism of many. In this sense, *Hotel Rwanda* follows the familiar Hollywood formula of individual triumph over collective struggle. This narrative is more palatable to Western audiences but distorts the reality of the genocide.

Recent scholarship and survivor testimonies reveal that many Hutus and Tutsis helped each other during the genocide, yet *Hotel Rwanda* largely ignores this collective solidarity. Instead, the film focuses on Rusesabagina as the sole hero, embodying the Western trope of the individual hero whose actions stand above the broader context of community solidarity. As Adhikari argues, "Rusesabagina, *Hotel Rwanda's* narrative promotes a Eurocentric stereotype in which an individual is raised above the community" (127). This individualistic portrayal not only simplifies the historical complexity but also undermines the collective heroism displayed by many Rwandans during the crisis. Recent literature shows that many Hutus and Tutsis helped each other to survive the genocide but, *Hotel Rwanda* copies the format of Hollywood, which "emphasizes the existential exploits of an individual hero at the expense of a collective heroism thereby, resulting in an epic story in which the commercial considerations to make it at the box office' in America" (Rwafa 76) disregarding the nature of heroism practiced by Africans.

Furthermore, Rusesabagina's character in the film is not entirely faithful to his real-life counterpart. Survivor testimonies suggest his actions were not as selfless as the film suggests. Rusesabagina has been accused of exploiting refugees in the hotel for financial gain, a claim that adds nuance to his portrayal as a hero. This discrepancy between the film's depiction and reality raises concerns about the ethical implications of presenting a sanitized, Western-approved version of events that serves to enhance the commercial appeal of the film rather than reflect the truth.

5. The Role of Westerners in Hotel Rwanda: Colonialism and Orientalism

Hotel Rwanda also perpetuates the idea that Africa needs the intervention of Western powers to survive and resolve its crises. The film's portrayal of the United Nations and foreign soldiers coming to the aid of the Rwandans echoes a colonial mindset that sees Africa as incapable of solving its problems. For instance, in the film, Rusesabagina offers a bribe to General Bizimungu, a military leader, to protect the refugees in his hotel. This scene subtly reinforces the idea that Africans are willing to compromise their moral integrity for survival, presenting a negative stereotype of African people as primitive and unscrupulous.

The film also portrays the soldiers from neighboring African nations, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and Uganda, as incompetent. In contrast, the Western military forces are depicted as the only ones capable of bringing order to the chaos. This reinforces the notion of Western superiority and the infantilization of Africa, an idea central to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism; "the Occident as highly biased, depicting the Orient as irrational, strange, and weak, contrasted with the rational, familiar, strong, European masculine West. He affirms that the West needs to show this difference so that it would legalize the domination of the superior 'civilized' West over the inferior primitive East/Africa"(40-41), in contrast. The portrayal of the international community's intervention in the genocide is thus framed within this dichotomy, suggesting that only the West can effectively address Africa's problems.

5.1. The historical inaccuracies and narrative control

Finally, the film's handling of historical events and omission of key details is problematic. The film claims that Paul and his wife were evacuated to a well-organized refugee camp. Yet, Rusesabagina's memoir reveals that the Rwandan Patriotic Front transported them, not the United Nations and that the camp was far from well-organized. These discrepancies highlight the film's desire to craft a narrative that fits Western expectations and sensibilities while glossing over the uncomfortable reality of Western involvement in the genocide's aftermath.

Moreover, the film's omission of the Belgian role in the genocide and its failure to address the broader political context perpetuate a colonial narrative that reduces Africa to a place of senseless violence and ethnic conflict. As Dokotum argues, "the lack of historical context for the Rwandan genocide in Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda* makes the violence meaningless and reproduces the 'Dark Continent' narrative trope of Africa, where violence is portrayed as a way of life" (130). This portrayal not only misrepresents the genocide but also reinforces harmful stereotypes about Africa's inherent violence and instability.

6. Conclusion

While *Hotel Rwanda* is a well-crafted film, its representation of the Rwandan Genocide is far from universally accepted. By focusing on the heroism of Paul Rusesabagina, simplifying the complex history of ethnic conflict, and overlooking the involvement of Western powers in the genocide, the film perpetuates a distorted view of Rwanda's tragic history. As Kayihura and Zukus argue, the film is "wildly inaccurate" for many survivors and fails to reflect their lived experiences (xxxii). The film's success in the West, with numerous awards and positive reviews, reveals the power of narrative control in shaping public perceptions of historical events. However, it is crucial that we critically engage with *Hotel Rwanda* and its portrayal of the genocide, as it reflects broader issues of misrepresentation and the imposition of Western narratives on African history.

In conclusion, *Hotel Rwanda* exemplifies the challenges of telling African stories through a Western lens. While it may have succeeded in drawing attention to the genocide and sparked important conversations, it also risks distorting history and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about Africa. To truly honor the memory of the Rwandan Genocide and its survivors, we must move beyond simplistic narratives and engage with the complexity and nuance of the historical reality.

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