

# Religious symbolism in left to tell



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Impregnating her narrative with rich symbolism, Immaculée Ilibagiza gives birth to the *Left to Tell* novel. She employs prolific imagery to clarify on the tenor of events during the Rwandan genocide. Descended from an inveterate Catholic home, Immaculée liberally infuses sacred symbolism from Catholic theology, Biblical references and death imagery in her autobiography, painting in vivid colour intertribal relations, collective suffering and a miraculous deliverance.

According to the Catholic belief system, the rosary represents peace, comfort and divine protection especially for Immaculée and several victims of the genocide. She remembers reaching “ into her pocket for her father’s red and white rosary and asked God to give her strength” (Ilibagiza 144). Her times of spiritual torment in the bathroom and even at the refugee camp are occupied in fervent prayer and deep meditation on God’s love and grace. During one of her episodes of intense anguish, she clings to “ the rosary as though it were a lifeline to God” (Ilibagiza 78). These instances underline the critical significance of the rosary, functioning as a symbol and source of life support to Immaculée.

Catholic theology in symbolism continues to abound in the *Left to Tell* novel as Immaculée utilises Marian paragons of virtue to mold her story. Immaculée’s French first name, translated immaculate, flawless or unspotted, directly derives from the catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the veneration of the virgin Mary. Catholicism teaches that the virgin Mary is conceived sinless and stands as a heavenly mediatrix as she petitions God for her people on earth. Deified as a holy maiden, Immaculée and many other Catholics devotedly magnify the virgin Mary with

prayer. Immaculée even references to her as her favorite saint. She “ especially loved the virgin Mary believing that she was (her) second mom, watching out for (her) from heaven” (Ilibagiza 6). In parallel, throughout the harrowing holocaust, Immaculée ends up feverishly praying for the life and peace of her people including her family and fellow citizens. Here she too portrays herself as a Marian representative interceding for her people.

Equally, Immaculée’s last name, Ilibagiza in her native Rwandan tongue signifies “ shining and beautiful in body and soul” (Ilibagiza 5). A prominent Bible character is also called “ the shining one.” Esther or ‘ bright and shining star’ intercedes for her Jewish people also facing a genocidal decree. As queen, she resolutely determines to do in her all her power, to save them and if she must perish, she must perish (Esther 4: 16). Although the enemies of the Jews are poised to annihilate them, Esther approaches the King to beg for her life and the life of her people. Likewise, Immaculée easily twins her narrative with the Biblical account of this Jewish queen as she stands in the gap for her people doomed to extinction by their wicked enemies.

Recorded in the Bible, the murder of Abel at the hands of Cain crowns the first sibling rivalry. This story also symbolizes the enmity between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. Brother tribes, cohabiting the same territory, speaking the same language and sharing the same culture, jealously competing against one another for favours. The fraternal strife spills the blood of an innocent on the ground to the point that the blood cries out to God.

Immaculée captures this brotherly relationship between both tribes when she states that “ Hutus and Tutsis spoke the same language ... We had virtually the same culture: we sang the same songs, farmed the same land,

attended the same churches, and worshiped the same God. We lived in the same villages, on the same streets, and often in the same houses” (Ilibagiza 17). Yet, envy intercepts any harmony until one brother opposes and kills the other.

Immaculée also utilizes the betrayal, isolation, crucifixion and forgiveness of Jesus Christ as a mirror to explain the trauma of the Tutsis, thus underscoring the redemption theme. In the hour of adversity, Damascene, Rose [Immaculée’s mother] and thousands of Tutsis are betrayed by their friends into the hands of their murderers, just as Judas betrays his Friend Jesus into the hands of his Jewish enemies for thirty pieces of silver. As Jesus faces universal scorn, derision and isolation during His Passion, similarly, Tutsis face universal execration and neglect from their families, friends and even the international community. This lack of support mirrors the Gethsemane experience of Christ in which his own disciples scatter and disown him. In Rwanda, this astonishing lack of solidarity causes the Tutsis to despond as they bear a symbolic cross of shame. Nevertheless, in their death throes, many of them, especially Damascene, forgive and pray for their enemies. His last resonating words: “ But I am praying for you ... I pray that you see the evil you’re doing and ask for God’s forgiveness before it is too late” (Ilibagiza 154).

The symbolism surrounding the deliverance of the Messiah, Jesus Christ frequently recurs in *Left to Tell*. Captain Paul Kagame, leader of the Tutsi-led RPF, embodies a savior, emancipating Immaculée and thousands of surviving Tutsis. Kagame and his army tears through multiple defences to repel massacring Hutus to deliver their tribesmen from certain extermination. The <https://assignbuster.com/religious-symbolism-in-left-to-tell/>

unravelling of the story occurs with the reestablishment of order and new government in Kigali. This religious imagery enlivens survivors with precious hope that a godsent savior can always deliver his faithful people. The reinstatement of a new 'kingdom' of truth and justice appears at the end, as hiding and distraught Tutsis are finally liberated and an international tribunal incorporated to judge the crimes against humanity.

The storm illustrates the catastrophic period of upheaval as the winds of strife are unleashed against Rwanda. The irony of the storm symbolism lies in the fact that Rwanda means 'land of eternal spring,' (Ilibagiza 3); however, it is during the springtime of April 1994 that the genocide befalls the nation. In the beginning, Rwanda is described as an idyllic, pastoral paradise but the ravages of the holocaust alter it to a land beaten by a violent, tempestuous sea, inciting a conflict that results in the self-destruction of a nation. In the springtime of her life, Immaculée has nothing about which to worry. In counterpoint, as war emerges, a psychic forecasts: "I see thunderstorms around us now, but these are just baby storms ... The mother storm is coming. When she arrives, her lightning will scorch the land and her thunder will deafen us and her heavy rain will drown us all." (Ilibagiza 29). The evening before the genocide bursts on them, Immaculée discerns that even the sky wears a sickly yellow haze beclouding her entire village.

At the end of the genocide, a symbolic transformation occurs in Immaculée and her other fellow surviving Tutsis which palpably communicates the effects of the plague on people and landscape. As the storm blows over and they reappear from their sanctuary in the bathroom, Immaculée and her

colleagues stare into the mirror. With one penetrating gaze, she comments that they “ looked like the living dead, our cheeks had collapsed ... our heads looked like empty skulls, our ribcages jutted out and our clothes hung on us as though they’d been draped over a broomstick” (Ilibagiza 133). As they are transported from the Pastor’s house to the camp, thousands of dead and rotting corpses littering the land greet them.

During the genocide, the machete, an agricultural tool to cultivate and clear the land devolves into a primitive weapon, slaughtering millions. This symbol is full of irony as Rwanda is literally cleared of Tutsis in a merciless decimation. Also, the machete serves as an implement to butcher animals. In the same way, the Tutsis, who are animalized as ‘ snakes’ and ‘ cockroaches’ are brutally slaughtered. Myriads of gangs, armies and crazed citizens kill their families, friends and neighbors in the name of politics. Time and again, the mobocracy brandish the machete as a symbol of conquest, accomplishing the subjugation of the masses. Iconic of Hutu dominance, the machete may be equated with the sword or even the modern guillotine as cold-hearted beheadings, dismemberment and mutilations are executed.

In all, Immaculee intricately weaves a poetic and eloquent symbolism into her work to elucidate on events of the Rwandan genocide. Catholic, biblical and death imagery permeates the story to articulate the experience of the Rwandans as in that unforgettable day in April 1994, they all walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

## **Works Cited**

Ilibagiza, Immaculee. *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* with Steve Erwin, Hay House Publishers, 2006.