

Brutes, demons, and
ominous imagery: the
prevalence of evil in
left to tell



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The autobiographic novel, *Left to Tell* composed by Immaculée Ilibagiza, is punctuated by legions of demonic allusions and enveloped in an almost impenetrable shroud of evil. Although Immaculée's halcyon childhood days appear untarnished and completely innocent, she recalls "the forces of evil that would give birth to a holocaust that set my beloved country awash in a sea of blood were hidden from me as a child" (Ilibagiza 3). The shelter of her Catholic home and pious upbringing for a period keep her in blissful ignorance until the moment when darkness becomes unleashed and anarchy reigns. She depicts the massacre of hundreds of thousands closely resembling a cataclysmic plague of the transformation of the sea waters into blood. An unredeemed Rwanda degrades into a land 'awash in a sea of blood.' Evil omens, animalised demons, dehumanised victims, devilish torment and mysterious presences emerge in her account attesting to the prevalence of evil as a macabre and mammoth holocaust sweeps Rwanda in April 1994.

Prior to the outbreak of the genocide, eerie omens point towards a lurking destruction. A psychic augurs, "I see thunderstorms around us now ... 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. The storm will last for three months and many will die" (Ilibagiza 29). True to her ill-fated prediction, the virulent and relentless mother storm ravages the land and devours her sons and daughters. Ironically, many of the signs pointing towards the approaching storm go unheeded as tensions escalate, parties are envenomed as victims perish in its fury. The stalwart structures of family, religion, community and government crumble and are engulfed in the

currents of destabilising chaos, warped prejudice and raw hatred. The inhuman genocide swallows whole multitudes in a tsunamic tide of tyranny, malice and hellish hostility.

Another evil harbinger announces an approaching genocide when peacetalks collapses, further inflaming the already brewing storm. Immaculée observes that “ one of Rwanda’s most powerful military officers, a scary-looking [Hutu] colonel ... who was also the chief leader of the Interahamwe stormed out of the talks and promised to return to Rwanda to prepare an apocalypse” (Ilibagiza 36). The chiefs of both ethnicities and political parties, Tutsis and Hutus, are hellbent on keeping the fires of strife burning and retaining the reins of power. The Hutu colonel’s vehemence and his awful resolution for revenge are fulfilled in the eruption of the apocalyptic mother storm.

Black, threatening clouds gather around Rwanda as Immaculée also realises that no one stands up for truth, liberty and justice. After witnessing a terrible robbery on the city streets by a young Interahamwe gang, Immaculée ponders that, “ if we let devils like these control our streets, we’re in deep trouble” (Ilibagiza 34). Precociously wise in her youth, she discerns the danger of volatility, uncontrolled delinquency as violence transforms to a normal affair. As a matter of fact, rebel groups mushroom under the auspices of a weak and corrupt government. The spirits of hatred and bloodlust demonise the cities and towns in human garb. Numberless, unnerving rumours circulate about the proliferation of evil and daily life becomes harrowing to the residents.

While at university, far away from home, a traumatic experience presages Immaculée's encounter with the Holocaust. Crazy and agitated by rumours of a looming army, a screaming girl provokes the school's emergency response: "the school's biggest security guard was charging toward me in the dark, holding a spear levelled directly at my heart" (Ilibagiza 25). This occurrence sheds light on an impending terror in which her life would again be endangered and almost sacrificed due to misplaced fears. This situation forecasts the brutal Hutu powers she must face as they hunt her for the kill and the miraculous providence of her spared life. It succinctly explains the vulnerability of the Tutsi tribe and, under a dark cover, the cruel intent to exterminate.

Immaculée permeates the entire narrative in animalising metaphor as men become more brutish, demonic and inhuman(e). The heinous descriptions of the bloodthirsty extremist soldiers rumoured around the towns also stress the bestial natures of the murderers. It is alleged that "the rebel soldiers lived in the forest like animals, ate human flesh, consorted with monkeys. They said that the rebels had become so evil that horns sprouted from their heads" (Ilibagiza 25). Conditioned by the forest environment, governed by animals and dictated by animal passions contribute to the degeneracy of the killers to heartless cannibals. These stories of blood-drinking rites, goat-horned gangs and vicious killings, typify the call of the wild and the Hobbesian state of nature in which the only law is survival and the sole action is war. Her animalisation technique proves effective as Rwanda's local terrorists dehumanise themselves and intimidate their fellow citizens.

In the midst of the genocide, Immaculée observes clouds of animalisation befogging Rwanda, robbing the killers and victims of every ounce of human quality. She sees the murderers, “ dressed like devils, wearing skirts of tree bark and shirts of dried banana leaves, and some even had goat horns strapped onto their heads ... and murder in their eyes” (Ilibagiza 77). The anarchic law of the wild governs the land for the three-month period as vile instinct directs a senseless carnage. Even the victims of the genocide are portrayed as animals. From the beginning to the end of the novel, radio propaganda saturates the airwaves, labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches and snakes and other beasts. She concludes later that “ they were taught to dehumanize us [the Tutsis] by calling us snakes and cockroaches. No wonder it was so easy for them to kill us” (Ilibagiza 86). Hence, animalisation justifies the genocide before the eyes of the killers. It equates their homicidal acts to a simple hunt and the three months of the genocide, a hunting season.

An invasive presence of darkness also cloaks Immaculée and the entire land in the narrative of *Left to Tell*. She has “ never been so keenly aware of the presence of darkness ... and had felt evil around me” (Ilibagiza 68). Without the family haven, she is disarmed and exposed to direct malevolent attack. In the bathroom, which serves as her sanctuary of refuge, she feels a palpable “ negative energy (that) wreaked by my spirit. The voice of doubt was in my ear again as surely as if Satan himself were sitting on my shoulder” (Ilibagiza 78). She employs all her energies to pray and focus on God during this time of immense turmoil. Prayer sustains Immaculée’s faith, giving her courage and inspiring her with hope. However, her peace is

broken as her ardent prayers are chequered with dark voices howling doubt and despair.

The aftermath of the genocide supremely horrifies Immaculée as she witnesses the baneful effects of the Rwandan storm. Her colleague leads her “ behind the church. It was an image from hell: row upon row of corpses, hundreds and hundreds of them stacked up like firewood. A black carpet of flies hovered about them ...” (Ilibagiza 179). Every sacred institution, family, church and even school is sacrilegiously overthrown as millions of innocents are mercilessly slaughtered. Their bodies are amassed on a church’s compound as a bizarre altar of sacrifice.

Undoubtedly, the prevalence of evil wreaks an unnatural havoc that not only devastates an entire country, but also impacts the world. Despite the harsh realities of evil, Immaculee manages to light a candle of hope and healing for her deceased family and other sufferers of the genocide. By God’s help, she is empowered to forgive her enemies and move forward in life.

Works Cited:

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