

Sydney Terris

October 20th, 2016

Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide

Sexual violence and rape culture pervade militant environments globally, serving as a sexual representation of masculine dominance over a space through the physical control of women residing in that space. Notably, the Rwandan Genocide of the 1990s epitomizes the use of sexual and reproductive violence against women in order to establish socio-cultural authority over a cultural minority. To this point, Rhonda Copelon's *Gender Crimes as War Crimes: Integrating Crimes against Women into International Criminal Law* and Patricia Weitsman's *The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda* explore the objectification of women through identity politics during the Rwandan Genocide as it ultimately precipitates permissible sexual violence against women in militant environments.

To begin, characterizations of Tutsi women as inherently deviant sexual beings highlighted by Copelon posit women ethnically identified as Tutsi as reproductive objects to be subdued through sexually based violence. Narratives of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide emphasize "the ethnic targeting produced by the sexualized representation of ethnic identity, such as Akayesu's statement 'let us now see what the vagina of a Tutsi woman tastes like', and parenthetically note here the notion of a woman's body as itself an instrument of genocide. The judgment characterizes these crimes as infliction upon women of serious bodily and mental harm, as they were charged, and also as an 'integral part of the process of destruction, specifically targeting Tutsi women'" and their ability to achieve reproductive self-determination (Copelon 227). Essentially, the hyper sexualization of Tutsi women's reproductive capacity to perpetuate culture established societal perceptions of Tutsi women's bodies as representative of

Tutsi patriarchal domination of Hutu communities. Consequently, exerting dominance over a Tutsi woman's body through violent sexual acts such as rape and genital mutilation came to personify the symbolic castration of Tutsi men. Centrally, the objectification of Tutsi women's bodies through the association of the physical body with the Tutsi-dominated patriarchy pervading Rwanda pre-1994 established an environment in which militant violence committed against women represents permissible sexual behavior rather than a violation of inherent human rights.

Moreover, Rwandan identity politics illustrating Tutsi women's sexuality as intrinsically emasculating to Hutu men in the context of the Rwandan Genocide further incited violent sexual crimes against women condoned by Hutu leadership. To this point, "the identity politics underpinning the mass rape in Rwanda derived from two principal sources: the view of Tutsi women as sexual objects requiring subjugation and the patriarchal structure of society" in which women's lives "centered on their roles as wives and bearers of children. Prior to the genocide, women were most valued for the number of children they could produce," such that once rendered unmarriageable by genocidal rape, Tutsi women possessed little agency and were characterized in societal discourse as disposable objects rather than as conscious humans (Weitsman 576). In other words, identifying Tutsi women's bodies as the primary source of Tutsi cultural propagation inherently objectified women's bodies, associating feminine agency with reproductive capacity. As a result, genocidal sexual violence disrupting Tutsi women's reproductive capacities represented Hutu domination of Tutsi cultural spaces while rendering the victims of rape either unmarriageable or infertile and, therefore, incapable of achieving self-determination within the patriarchal Tutsi society. At the crux, objectifying societal portrayals of Tutsi women's bodies as symbolic of cultural perpetuation cultivate an environment in which

militant acts of sexual violence against culturally identified women embody permissible violence against objects rather than abhorrent violations of women's intrinsic human rights.

In conclusion, both Rhonda Copelon's *Gender Crimes as War Crimes: Integrating Crimes against Women into International Criminal Law* and Patricia Weitsman's *The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda* delve into the identity politics motivating sexual violence against Tutsi women during the Rwandan Genocide of the 1990s. By paralleling women's bodies with representations of Tutsi culture while further centralizing women's agency on their reproductive capacity, patriarchal Hutu discourse objectified women's bodies to create an environment in which rape and other forms of sexual violence symbolized permissible militant acts. Most importantly, the identity politics of the Rwandan Genocide portraying Tutsi women as objects requiring subjugation precipitated widespread sexual violence committed against Tutsi women that was societally characterized as an expression of Hutu dominance over Tutsi men rather than as a fundamental violation of Tutsi women's human rights.