

Philip Gourevitch and His Work: Scholarly Conversation and the Different Views of Genocide

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The scholarly conversation, revolving around Gourevitch and his work in telling the stories of the Rwandan Genocide, describes his influence as a journalist in reshaping the Western view of violence and war in Africa. In engaging with scholars regarding Gourevitch's work, I discovered numerous scholars who view Gourevitch's work as the beginning of a journalistic revolution. Many scholars cite *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* as Gourevitch using his influence as a notable journalist to change journalism from a statement of facts to a telling of the story of those who suffer from the atrocities. The conversation follows scholars who debate Gourevitch's impact, from who must take responsibility for the genocide, to changing the Western view of Rwanda, and the ability to participate in social reform.

Firstly, I found Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian literary scholar, and his article regarding Gourevitch. He initially depicts *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* as a framework for questioning whether the perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide will be held accountable for the atrocities they committed. He acknowledges Gourevitch's work of keeping accounts of the genocidaires which "closes the habitual avenue of escape - anonymity- for collective atrocities."¹ Soyinka states that when we do not identify the people responsible for these actions, we "immunize them against the moral censure of the world."² He claims that Gourevitch's deliberate identification of these people prevents them from finding refuge or escape in another place. As a result, the community is able to shift the degree of

¹ Wole Soyinka, "Hearts of Darkness," *New York Times Book Review*; *New York*, October 4, 1998.

² Soyinka, "Hearts of Darkness."

accountability to the genocidaires. However, Soyinka finds one major flaw in Gourevitch's work: it does not offer an explanation. Gourevitch details many diverse causes for the occurrence of the genocide. Among them being the feudal relations between the Hutu and the Tutsi, the quickly falling economy, and the indoctrination of the interahamwe in the "divine" mission of the decimation of the Tutsis. However, none explain why benign people turned against their neighbors, friends, and family in a bloodthirsty slaughter.

This, however, is only one perspective on Gourevitch's work in Rwanda. Many of the other scholars perceive his book as a turning point in the way the Western World views Rwanda, as a nation, and its genocide. They find that his book does not simply showcase the trauma and horror, just as much of journalism does. David Rieff, in his article "Hell and Humanitarianism," states, "Gourevitch's book is a powerful antidote: not to the bad news from Africa, but to the ways in which most people in the West respond to that news, to their pity, their incomprehension, their resignation."³ Rieff's article comments on the commonality of the journalistic portrayal of Africa as a land of savages, which in turn, dismisses all atrocities on the continent as mere reflections of this uncivilized African society. He credits Gourevitch with "presenting the Rwandan tragedy in a form in which it might possibly be apprehended."⁴ Essentially, Rieff argues that *We Wish to Inform You* shapes the narrative of Africa and Rwanda in the Western perspective and thus, Rieff believes, acts to inform the Western audience rather than detailing the tragedy.

³ David Rieff, "Hell and Humanitarianism," *New Republic* 219, no. 23 (December 7, 1998): 36–42.

⁴ Rieff, "Hell and Humanitarianism," 36-42.

Tristan McConnell, in his journalism review, argues a similar point to David Rieff. Gourevitch's writing has been greatly influential in the post-genocide world. His crucial work quickly became necessary literature about Rwanda, the genocide, and journalism, around the world. McConnell criticizes Gourevitch, stating that as a result of his idolization of Kagame in his writing, it has allowed Kagame to rise to a great position of power. McConnell asserts that "Gourevitch's influential reporting played a key role in revealing the horrors of the genocide, but controversy over his portrayal of post-genocide Rwanda mean that, for Gourevitch's writing, too, the verdict must still be out".⁵ Gourevitch portrays Paul Kagame, a Tutsi rebel leader and current Rwandan president, as the "savior" of the country, someone who fought against many troubling circumstances to rescue his country and therefore, does not critique his many oppressive politics. McConnell highlights the effect of his writing by saying, "Gourevitch's writing was extremely influential in helping Kagame establish a degree of international traction. It gave Kagame a credibility and a profile, portraying him as a force for good."⁶ McConnell reveals Gourevitch's attempt to shield Kagame from criticism by emphasizing his best accomplishments. McConnell critiques that Gourevitch's journalism has been greatly influential in the telling of Rwanda's story, which, in turn, has given him too great of an ability to manipulate the narrative. McConnell argues that truly unbiased journalism cannot be politically motivated. While, according to many scholars, Gourevitch's reporting has revolutionized

⁵ Tristan McConnell, "One Man's Rwanda," *Columbia Journalism Review* 49, no. 5 (February 1, 2011): 39–43.

⁶ McConnell, "One Man's Rwanda," 39-43.

journalism, McConnell argues the fact that this does not detract from his influence in Rwandan and Western political views of Kagame.

Where McConnell criticizes, another scholar, Susan Spearey, compliments Gourevitch's journalistic writing as an avenue through which readers can actively participate in social reform rather than simply be bystanders as these issues persist. The author talks about how Gourevitch "uses the memoir form to challenge certain conventions of journalistic reportage as well as the practice of reception that it typically assumes..."⁷ Previously, the goal of journalism has been to convey information and empirical evidence. According to Spearey, Gourevitch has flipped the script and allowed emotion and real experiences to permeate his work. He sought an alternative to the routine reportage of media which no longer mourns the inevitability of these conflicts and considers material aid the only viable contribution. Spearey comments, "By drawing attention to the intersubjective processes according to which complex and fraught histories begin to be assimilated; by staging and often belatedly producing crises of witnessing."⁸ Spearey maintains that Gourevitch's book calls for and takes the first step in the transformation of tragedy-centered journalism. His book incorporates the personal narratives of survivors of the genocide and the

⁷ Susan Spearey, "Affect and the Ethics of Reading 'Post-Conflict' Memoirs: Revisiting Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*," ed. Bill Ashcroft et al., *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, Cross/Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English: 145, no. xxxv, 665 (2012 2012): 523–46.

⁸ Spearey, "Affect and the Ethics of Reading 'Post-Conflict' Memoirs," 523-46.

Rwandan perspective of the brutality rather than simply as numbers to record on a list, forgotten by the world.

Further, I found Graham Huggan, who corroborates many similar claims of Gourevitch's journalism and its revolutionary aspects. Gourevitch, as Huggan describes, insists that the Western World views the Rwandan Genocide as a direct result of old tribal feuds, and whose origin does not stretch outside the confines of Africa. However, Gourevitch conveys, in his book, the true causes of the conflict, including "precolonial inequalities exacerbated by self-serving European colonial regimes, heightened fear and insecurity in the postcolonial era as a result of political extremism, ethnic absolutism, and near-total economic collapse; and the indifference of an outside world..."⁹ Huggan draws attention to the fact that Gourevitch's influence as a journalist allows him to make known how the Western world enshrines this image of the victim of disaster as politically-veiled ignorance. The critical takeaway, Huggan claims, is that journalists have a choice to follow convention or choose to use their authority to break down barriers and reject stereotypes, just as Gourevitch has done with his retelling of the Rwandan story.

Zoe Norridge summarizes much of the scholarly conversation in her analysis of Gourevitch's observations of Rwanda. She praises Gourevitch's style of writing: "Gourevitch's genius lies in presenting the context and human detail for these stories, alongside probing

⁹ Graham Huggan, "Imagining Disaster in the African Postcolony," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (January 2009): 315–29.

questions and observations, but without spelling out any simplistic interpretation.”¹⁰ Gourevitch reports testimonies, real experiences of real people, and Norridge feels that he draws readers to see the issue from human rights and historical perspectives. Norridge finds the most compelling aspect of Gourevitch’s work is the use of his voice to speak about the oversimplification of genocide in international media. Norridge perfectly encapsulates this by proclaiming that his work, “places human rights at the center of the discussion of genocide, but it does so with careful reflection on what global articulation of rights - particularly the failure of global articulations of rights - mean for the legitimacy of the discourse in a post conflict African country.”¹¹

There is a certain view of genocide held by the Western perspective. An automatic response blaming genocide and violence on the people of the country. This view ignores the obvious issues in the government itself. Many of these countries suffer from political instability, economic struggle, or corruption. It becomes simply and easy to place the blame on the people, linking the violence to their “savage nature” and moving on to the next thing as if this injustice never occurred. Gourevitch takes the time to document these events differently. He listens to the people, hearing their stories, their struggles, their cries for help, and uses that as fuel for his writing. In the discussion of his work, some scholars view his work as a radical change from the traditional form of journalism. They list his work as flipping the narrative in journalistic writing.

¹⁰ Zoe Norridge, “Journeying into Rwanda: Placing Philip Gourevitch’s Account of Genocide within Literary, Postcolonial, and Human Rights Frameworks,” ed. Sophia A. McClennan and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, no. xxi, 528 (2015 2015): 341–50.

¹¹ Norridge, “Journeying into Rwanda,” 341–50.

He invokes the reader's sense of empathy by including stories of survivors from the genocide, rather than simply stating facts read off a sheet of paper. Some scholars also applaud him using his influence as a well-known journalist to tell the stories that often go unheard. His international reach allows him to influence the readers and make an impact on their view of the genocide.

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