

# Guardian of Memory

The award-winning French Rwandan writer Scholastique Mukasonga joined us for the first public event in the Hub's new signature series on Literature & Resistance, at the International Literature Festival Dublin on 21 May.



'National Memories, Personal Stories' centred on Mukasonga's memoir *The Barefoot Woman*. The book is a loving portrait of Mukasonga's mother, Stefania, which celebrates the courage, resilience, wisdom, and good humour with which she raised her seven children during the long years of internal displacement and violent oppression they endured as members of the Tutsi people in Hutu-dominated Rwanda. While *The Barefoot Woman* is, in the words of the *New York Times*, "radiant with love", it emerges from the shadows of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which 37 members of Mukasonga's family, including her mother, were killed.

This event also initiated an exciting new partnership between the Centre for Resistance Studies and ILFDublin, and it was generously supported by the Embassy of France in Ireland. Mukasonga was in conversation with Dr Théophile Munyangayo from the Trinity Centre for Global Intercultural

Communications, an expert in Francophone African literature. Their discussion addressed issues including the evolving role of women in Rwanda before and since the genocide; writing, memory, and social responsibility; and education and modernisation. *The Barefoot Woman* engages with all these subjects. It honours women's work, knowledge and traditions, and celebrates the compassion and pragmatism of female networks of families and neighbours.

Two factors shaped Mukasonga's life and set her on a path radically different from Stefania's: her academic success, which sent her to secondary school at a time when only 10% of school places were granted to Tutsi children; and her exile to Burundi in 1973, at the age of 17. These are the experiences which left her, as she put it, destined to be the "guardian of memory" for her people. By the time of the genocide, Mukasonga was living in France. The trauma of 1994 left her unable to contemplate returning to Rwanda for another decade. She did return in 2004, and two years later her memoir *Cockroaches*, a powerful account of the background and aftermath of the genocide, was published.

The event began with Mukasonga's very moving reading, in French, of the opening pages of *The Barefoot Woman*. Here she recalls the solemn promise her mother often extracted from her and her sisters, during otherwise mundane chores, to ensure that after her death they follow custom and cover her body from view. It is a promise which, tragically, proved impossible to keep. But, she told her audience in Dublin, she believes that through her writing she has accomplished what her mother asked of her. With words, she said, she had woven the *pagne* to cover Stefania's missing body.

Scholastique Mukasonga's many awards include the Seligmann Prize from the Chancelleries des universités de Paris, which honours literary works which contribute to the fight against racism and prejudice, and, in 2021, the Simone de Beauvoir Prize for Women's Freedom. *Our Lady of the Nile*, the English translation of her debut novel *Notre-Dame du Nil*, was shortlisted for the Dublin Literary Award in 2018. *The Barefoot Woman* was first published in French in 2008, translated into English by Jordan Stump in 2018, and published in a new edition by Daunt Books in April 2022.