

Mary Dundon

When Victims Become Killers
Mahmood Mamdani

When Victims Become Killers details the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and is written by Mahmood Mamdani, who went to Rwanda one year after it occurred. Mamdani introduces the book by outlining what genocide is in the broader sense, and why what happened in Rwanda is considered genocide.

“Whereas the Hutu were killed as individuals, the Tutsi were killed as a group, recalling German designs to extinguish the country’s Jewish population. This explicit goal is why the killings of Tutsi between March and July of 1994 must be termed ‘genocide’”.

He then goes on to discuss how this genocide was different from the Nazi Holocaust, namely because this genocide was carried out in the streets, by the hands of neighbors and even family members, rather than in remote concentration camps by agents who barely got their hands dirty while murdering thousands.

Mamdani points out that accounts of the Rwandan genocide “suffer from three silences”: History, Agency and Geography. The accounts often imply that there was no historical precedence for what occurred in Rwanda, that despite all of the other political violences around the world in the past century, this was some kind of “anthropological oddity”. The political analyses of the events are often one-sided and do not address the any participation or initiative on the ground level. Geographically, because everything occurred within Rwandan borders, it is often assumed that it grew from local, community issues - with no regard for any regional processes.

Mamdani addresses why these silences are erroneous by relating genocide to colonialism. He states that the impulse to “eliminate an enemy may be as old as organized power.” What has changed throughout history is the technology and how the “impulse is organized and its target defined.” According to Mamdani, colonialism has led to two different types of “genocidal impulse”: Settler’s Genocide and Native’s Genocide. As you can imagine, the first implies the desire for a group to descend upon a land they wish to colonize and exterminate its native inhabitants. This has occurred countless times throughout history. The latter has actually never occurred in colonial history but it “always hovered on the horizon as a historical possibility.”

While it has never actually occurred, the possibility of native’s genocide is important to recognize as Mamdani approaches the Rwandan genocide as an act of native’s genocide. He quotes Franz Fanon regarding this type of genocide:

“The settler’s work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible to the native. The native’s work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler... For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler.”

Mamdani argues that the Rwandan genocide should be viewed in this way because it was brought upon by “those who saw themselves as sons — and daughters — of the soil.” It is a racial cleansing, not an ethnic cleansing — the Hutus viewed the Tutsis as foreign settlers, not neighbors.

Throughout the book, Madmanis uses political and historical analyses to create a visible structure and timeline for the genocide in 1994. In his words, the book is how he makes this travesty “thinkable” for those uninvolved, allowing us to imagine how something so terrible can actually happen, rather than write it off as mindless, psychotic killings. In a sense, this is how he breaks the three silences.