

If You Keep Digging.

Keletso Mopai.

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Keletso Mopai is a South African writer who was born and raised in Lenyenye Township, Limpopo. *If You Keep Digging* is her first short story collection. The collection is both brave and ambitious, covering pertinent themes of race, racism, class, migration, domestic violence and sexuality, among others. The book sets its thematic tone with a quote from the Egyptian radical feminist, Nawal El Saadawi: “Nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies”. Right from the outset, Mopai’s intentions are clear—it is to follow in the footsteps of Nawal El Saadawi and venture into the dangerous territory of telling the truth to a lying world. One wonders if, through the twelve stories collected in this book, Mopai succeeds at uncovering these hidden “truths”. The title *If You Keep Digging*, is tantalizing to the reader and leaves him/her in a state of suspension, curious, and looking forward to ‘uncovering’ something if they keep on digging. The central aim of these stories is to illustrate what we can uncover if we dig beneath the surface of narrative.

The stories, all set after 1990, offer the reader a post-1994 reflection of the state of South African political, social and cultural landscapes. Although *If You Keep Digging* is a collection of short stories, it is interwoven with themes that flow into each other from one story to the other. The opening story, “Madness”, sets a tone of disorder that becomes an underlying thematic refrain. It literally and metaphorically fictionalises the madness of the postcolony, which can be understood

as having “specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from experience of colonialization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves” (Mbembe 102). South Africa is one country exhibiting the madness of the postcolony, one among many. “Madness” opens with the funeral of a character named Lucky who has succumbed to death in unknown circumstances. It is narrated by his younger sister, Dikeledi. We are told that Lucky is fortunate in death because he “doesn’t have to deal with this ugly world anymore” (1). Indeed, the events in the story are ugly: Dikeledi is raped and impregnated by an unknown man when she goes out one night to look for her brother in the streets. Lucky’s funeral coincides with another funeral—that of a four-year-old boy who “died in a fire” (3). Madness in its literal sense is similarly experienced by other characters in the story. Aus Thembi “shows up at people’s homes demanding a plate of food” (2), and Dishembe spends his life drunk and “pissing on himself” (2) and dies “after drinking paraffin confusing it with alcohol” (2).

The acrimonious theme of the re-distribution of land or what has become known as ‘the land question’ is explored in “Monkeys”. Although the narrative is multi-layered and offers glimpses of the social and class differences between Blacks and Whites in post-apartheid South Africa, the issue of the unequal distribution of land is delicately weaved through the thematic fabric of the story. The father of the protagonist, a farmer and owner of the land he inherited, agonises over the changing political milieu, saying, “they want the land, they want the mines, and now they want our farms” (15). This is juxtaposed with the Black community that lives in shanty towns where the “roads are a mess!” (21) and kids wear “ripped [clothes] full of holes” (21). Although the Balobedu people who live in this area remember that “their ancestors lived here a long, long time ago” (15) they continue to live in crowded townships. Through the divergent views and positions of the speaking subjects, the reader gets a glimpse of the racialised politics of land and ownership. The story “In Papa’s Name” shifts the focus to the violent heritage of Apartheid through the truth-seeking innocence of the child’s view narration. The child characters lament the sad fate of their father who died “fighting Apartheid” (25). It is ironic that although the father is a struggle hero, his children do not have anything valuable in their lives to show for his heroic deeds. One of the children laments how she “should be rich [and] living in a mansion” (29) instead of sharing a two-roomed house with her aunt and five cousins. Although “Papa has a street named

after him” in memory of his sacrifices, his children, like the majority of Black children in South Africa, live in “house[s] of hunger” (26), where they “sleep on empty stomachs” (27).

“Hair Tales” successfully transports the reader into the ways in which race and language play a role in identity-making in South Africa. Three Black girls, separated by three decades, struggle to belong to predominantly white post-apartheid spaces dominated by aesthetics of hair and the politics of language. The author sets three short stories within one short story to illustrate how structures of domination are maintained in the society through bodily aesthetics such as hair. It is 1998 (four years after the official demise of apartheid) and Tshepo’s teacher, Mrs van der Walt, writes a letter to her mother asking the child to comb her afro, claiming it is “untidy [and] against school policy” (57). In 2007, Rosina, a teenager is told by her school principal that her natural Black hair is “destructive” (61) and, thus, implores her mother to resort to relaxing her hair into a ponytail using chemicals in efforts to make her belong to a school that refuses to transform. Decades after the end of apartheid, the school continues to teach only in English and Afrikaans. Set in 2018, Lisakhanya’s story dialogues with the previous stories by exploring how institutionalised racism functions. Armed with her Master’s degree, Lisakhanya attends an interview at a company where the potential employer expresses skepticism that she “might not fit in here” (70) “with [her] rough dreadlocks and non-Afrikaans speaking tongue” (70). In this way, the author makes a point about the prevalence of covert and overt forms of racism in ‘post-apartheid’ South Africa.

The theme of marginal identities comes out strongly in “Growing Caterpillars” and “Blood Filth” where Mopai grapples with issues of sexuality and the challenges facing the LGBTQ+ community. In “Growing Caterpillars”, Thuso is engaged to Keke although he is romantically and sexually involved with another man. Thuso chooses to live a lie because his “mother would [...] detest [him]” (101) if she knew of his queer sexuality. His mother’s death becomes “freedom” (101) as it empowers him to break off the engagement with Keke. In “Blood Filth”, the horrific gang rape of a lesbian named Tebogo, which ultimately makes her commit suicide, is a fictionalisation of the constant fear and violence that haunts the South African LGBTQ+ community, as national statistics and news headlines constantly show skyrocketing rates of femicide and homophobia. The narrator tellingly concludes: “there is no justice. Not in this country” (157).

Work Cited

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