

HAKAHANA

ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY BY HUGH ELLIS

Windhoek: Wordweaver Publishing House. 2012

A Book Review by Dr. Sarala Krishnamurthy

A superb publication, with a thoughtful juxtaposition of brilliant photo-graphs and refreshing lines of poetry, the slim anthology ***Hakahana*** by Hugh Ellis is one that you will feel like dipping into often because the images and words reverberate with music and feeling. This collection of poetry is the ruminations of a young white Namibian, who comes to settle down in his motherland after growing up in the UK. As such, his poetry spans a period of nearly 15 years and speaks of issues and concerns which are intensely personal to the poet. All the poems express Hugh's engagement with his surroundings. "Hakahana" is an Otjiherero word meaning, "hurry up", and that is what the poet is urging all Namibians to do in his poems. In ***Hakahana***, the poems depict various moods; they are lyrical, inspiring and melodious at the same time. Reading the poems one catches a glimpse of a sensitive spirit, of a soul in transition, fleeting, delicate, but with a strong presence.

In Namibia, the father of Namibian poetry, Mvula ya Nangolo is writing his poetry even today. Ya Nangolo's poetry can be described as the first stage in the development of creative writing in Namibia. The themes that he explores are mainly those of struggle and independence, and a desire to return to his motherland from exile. Twenty years down the line, poets are comfortable with their new found freedom, but the issues that concern them are those of poverty, corruption and discrimination. Hugh Ellis belongs to the new generation of Namibian poets who ponder upon things that are happening around them. To transform everyday reality into something poetic is a rare talent and Ellis is suffused with an ability to transmogrify a quotidian occurrence into words that sing and echo a sentiment that an ordinary lay person can identify with. But that is what poetry does. Poetry helps you to see the world better and in a new way. Formalists called this technique, "defamiliarisation".

If I could identify an overarching theme for this collection, I would most definitely say that it is Loneliness. This loneliness arises because the poet suffers an identity crisis being a white Namibian in post independent, post apartheid

Namibia. He writes as an insider, but at the same time, he feels alienated from his surroundings and the people, therefore his feelings towards his motherland are ambivalent. Riding on the cusp of this ambivalence he says:

*"I used to want to be black,
But now it is ok to be red
You see, my great, great grandfathers were workers
They struggled as much as anyone else
...That is how independence came
My father wrote books about repression and liberation
But that's all his story, not mine."*

His anguish in not being able to fit into an all black society and culture leads him into exploring indigenous language and culture:

*"I tried to learn all the languages and culture
But I almost forgot my own."*

The poet has a desire to overcome the loneliness that tears his inner being, therefore he seeks solace in discovering nooks and crannies in his country, which will fill the emptiness within. But he is not a creature of nature; rather, he is an urban animal. The poems evoke his surroundings in a unique way. He does not describe the landscape as poets usually do. Rather, in his perorations, he explores the urban jungle which quickens his response to life itself. He states:

*"I wish at times my vehicle had wings
So that I could rise above this mess
And see things in a bigger frame
Like presidents in their executive jets."*

The beautiful and magnificent landscape of Namibia, the land of the brave, escapes him completely because he is trapped in the notion of the metropolis.

He says:

"They say that once, leopards lived here

And chiefs made their skins into royalty coats

Now the chiefs are getting back what was always theirs

What, I wonder, will be for those of us left behind?"

This movement into the past and its constant presence is all pervading in Ellis's poems. His poems are evocative of memories of his youth, but they do not distract him from his vocation.

Strangely, for a young poet who is also an activist and a journalist, his poems are mostly apolitical. Nevertheless the subtext of his poetry draws your attention to violence and discrimination in his society:

"My story is about the boy who craved the friendship of girls

And saw that they are almost always mistreated."

While he claims to be outside the ambit of the political process and the shenanigans that trouble the youth of this country, he protests:

"It is hard to keep your mouth shut when things are out of control

I didn't believe it when they told me that I am nobody's slave

I feel society is sentencing me, to life without parole."

His favoured form is the three line villanelle, which suits his style very well. Strangely bereft of poetic diction as has been defined by critics of yore, his poetry speaks simply and directly about things that concern him. He aspires to a notion which does not exist in the vocabulary of young people today: decency. He proclaims:

"I am sitting here, reading books and trying to make a plan

Human history is only a story of robbery, murder and hate

I am trying to be that rare thing that is called a decent man."

The anthology has many poems which are concise and beautiful. Simply written, they are at the same time not simple poems. The emotions evoked through reading them are complex and reflect the age that we live in. Almost symptomatic of what the poems are trying to say, the pictures in the volume are black and white photographs with many shades of gray. The photographs capture Namibian life just as the poems do.

The anthology ends on a positive note giving hope and courage, inspiring its readers to believe in themselves and plough on. Truly with this collection, we can say that Namibian poetry has come of age.

Dr. Sarala Krishnamurthy has a Phd in Stylistics from Bangalore University, India; MA in English, Post Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English and, Certificate in Online Education and Training from the Institute of London. She has taught at the Post Graduate level for twenty-five years and supervised the research of about 20 Masters and eight Phd Scholars in the areas of Stylistics, English Language Teaching and Post-colonial Literature. She has published widely in several international journals and books in Post-colonial literature, Stylistics and English Language Teaching. She has presented papers at several international conferences world-wide. She is an examiner for International English Language Testing Services (IELTS) which is a University of Cambridge Exam held world-wide. Currently she is the Dean of the School of Humanities at the Polytechnic of Namibia. Last year she received an award for being the best researcher in her faculty at the Polytechnic of Namibia.