

Book Review: Undisciplined Heart

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Author: Jane Katjavivi

Publication Date: 2010

Publisher: Modjaji Books: ISBN 978-1-920397-04-3

Tigereye Publishing: ISBN 978-99945-71-06-2

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Jane Katjavivi's autobiography, *Undisciplined Heart* (2010) is an intensely perceptive Afro-centric memoir filled with a vivid personal and a Pan-African ethos. As a form of creative non-fiction, an autobiographical recreation of a woman's resilient journey in life, the book is flavoured with a feminine sensitivity and a more eloquent and deeply engaging narration of Namibia's journey to freedom as well as an exploration of the "unsaid" and tangible connections of humanity across cultures. It is a pleasurable, purposeful and insightful piece of art that communicates issues central to life, politics, development and cultural diplomacy.

Right from the first page of the 300-pages-long book, one of the most striking features is the author's love for Africa. She writes with a passion about African states and gives her book a sense of the collective voice that renders her book accessible and meaningful to diverse, local and international readership and this universalises her experience. There is an attempt in her book to show the harmonious cross-cultural sense of sharing in the African states as indicated by the cultural artefacts on sale in Windhoek, "Wooden masks with raffia hair and teeth, from the Congo. Green malachite bowls and bracelets from Zimbabwe. Brightly beaded necklaces from Kenya" (1). What the novel further demonstrates is a Pan-African engagement to "... reflect the culture and history of the whole continent, with a specific focus on Namibia" (1). Her specific rootedness to Namibia marked through her emotive descriptive language of its people, culture, and physical grandeur is quite enlightening and a highly cherished treat for the reader. And throughout the novel, this rigorous sense of registering an intense affinity for articulating her love for Africa makes her novel a remarkable contribution to African and post colonial literature.

One of the outstanding issues that Katjavivi articulates so eloquently in her novel is the spirit of "womanism" and the power of unity in love. Reading through the whole novel, one is constantly made conscious of how life gets constructed and finds meaning through an intricate web of alliances, associations and what one may

call the African concept of "ubuntu" (you are, therefore I am). Katjavivi's novel has words of wisdom for the feminist, the development activist, the politician and the philanthropist who seeks to understand the power of love, resilience and endogenous development. Her characters, both male and female, are real people and Katjavivi is keen on exploring the positive rather than emphasising the negative. In other words her novel can be read as an activism, eloquent and diplomatic, seeking to articulate the codes that bind people together. This activism, which we see through her characters/friends like Dorris, Bente and Isobel is a form of measured and unifying feminism, laced with progressive wisdom and also one which escapes the "anti" binarisms which tend to pit men against women in most feminist discourses. The novel is indeed an interesting study for feminist literature and feminist activism.

In *Undisciplined Heart*, Katjavivi also demonstrates how change is a progress force that is part of life. Through her life experiences and the journey motif, the novel shows how she manages change and her story is that of hope, resilience and survival. As a reader one travels with her and lives in all the generations as she talks about the stark realities of life from her days as a young girl in Leeds. It is also a historical story about the political change in Namibia. On reading the novel one learns about how to cope and find the spiritual malleability to flow with dignity and inner contentment in the flux and fluidities that are representational of her life. In all this, she finds support and encouragement from her husband and children, thus celebrating the family as a functional unit. Also through her women friends, the writer manages to embrace change and to journey through the terrains that life has to offer to her. Significantly throughout all the different places she journeys, one feels the patriotism she has towards Namibia in the pulse of her blood.

Perhaps equally insightful is the sense of social commitment that is evident in her book. The writer does not merely catalogue events as they happened but dares to ask questions which are central to life. Writing gives Katjavivi the voice to articulate serious matters and this gives the novel a certain authenticity and a sense of advocacy. The novel bears a compendium of social ills, the "unsaid" and "not-yet-said" facts about life which include HIV/AIDS, gender issues, the fact that "[t]here is no monument to the estimated 60 000 Hereros and the 10 000 Namas who were slaughtered ... nor to the survivors of that massacre..." (69), and also the economic disparities between the races in present-day Namibia. In addition, it helps illuminate the challenges of an "ambassador's life" hence deconstructing the misconceptions that people generally associate with ambassadorial missions. The novel makes a passionate and emotional plea but without sentimentalism for the women who fought in the liberation struggle, the challenges that NGOs face and concerns with book development and a need to inculcate a reading culture

in the young generation. A remarkable sense of the collective makes the novel more representative in communicating truths about people and life. It is indeed an illustration that "...literature contains life's great truths" (51).

However, it can also be argued that because she uses the autobiographical rhetoric, she heavily relies on memory and memory is subjective. This can only be authenticated and ascertained by the writer's authority. There is always a nagging suspicion that Katjavivi only wrote and projected a selective view of issues, and after reading the novel one is tempted to ask if there is any other hidden or "unsaid" dimension worth knowing. A word of caution to the inexperienced reader also is that the opening pages in *Undisciplined Heart* can be a daunting feat. The writer seems to have packaged her characters in a complex manner which renders comprehension and differentiation of their individuality a nightmare. The fact that this is an autobiographical novel probably made the writer take her characterisation for granted. In addition, some readers may find the coverage of her novel to be too ambitious and too wide in nature, which could have been split into two different novels for greater depth and easier understanding, especially for young minds. This is what the prospective reader of her book may want to ponder about.

Finally, Katjavivi's narrative craft makes her one of Namibia's contemporary iconic writers. Her descriptive language, the lyricism with which she praises people, places and culture, the immediacy and liveliness of her dialogue, attention to detail and how she interweaves the personal and public all make her novel a must-read. The novel is quite eloquent and pregnant with meaning and is illuminating; it validates the "unregarded" cultural and historical issues of Namibia and has a multi-voiceness which seeks to speak out the silences in life. On the whole it is a remarkable novel which comes highly recommendable.

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