

Book Review: “When the canons killed a people”

THE SCATTERING: BY LAURI KUBUITSILE

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Lauri Kubuitsile’s *The Scattering* is a tale of unbearable loss tinged with an elusive hope of renewal. This is the author’s first writing for an adult audience as most of her previous work has been in the realm of children’s literature. However, readers will be surprised by the scope and depth of this book. Wellington (1967) states that land appropriation was one of the main causes of the genocide. He makes reference to *The Deutsch Sudwestafrikanische Zeitung* of January 22, 1901, which reads,

the land of course must be transferred from the hands of the natives to those of the whites, [this] is the object of colonization in the territory. The land shall be settled by whites. So the natives must give way and either become servants of the whites or withdraw... (Wellington, 1967, p. 194).

Madley (2004, p.182) underlines this view by asserting that “the economic basis of the Herero uprising was conflict over land”. The losses suffered by the Herero were staggering. Kossler and Melber (2012) believe that from a population of around 100 000 Herero, only about 20 000 survived. The killings were indiscriminate and sanctioned by General Lothar von Trotha, commander of the German troops in Namibia. Rust (1905, p. 385) quotes von Trotha as saying, “All Hereros must leave the country. If they do not do so, I will force them with canons to do so. Within the German borders, every Herero, with or without a weapon, will be shot.”

The novel is not written in a linear manner and this is a redeeming aspect given the atmosphere of violence and dejection that peppers the book. There are multiple timeframes and character perspectives focusing on the married Herero couple Ruhapo and Tjipuka and also on Riette, the other character who gives a white perspective to the mayhem in the text. The title echoes the chaos of displacement that the German settlers cause on the Herero in colonial Namibia. There is a sense of the African idyllic setting at the onset of the novel where the protagonist, Tjipuka, finds love in the form of the community’s warrior, Ruhapo. There is in this framework an uneasy relationship that the natives have with the Germans who are led by the colonial governor, Leutwein.

One thing the book avoids is idealization of Herero society where there is a universal love for kin. Even though the Herero have legitimate concerns about their land, there is also a lot of betrayal from within their own society. The local chief is seen as complicit in unravelling the community’s identity and sense of ownership of the land. Furthermore, there are many examples of marauding local bandits, working on behalf of the Germans to round up the fleeing natives for transportation to concentration camps.

The novel covers a span of fourteen years, 1894 to 1908, and in that period the Herero are routed by the German colonial presence, leading to untold suffering, especially at the level of the family. Rapes, looting, starvation and forced labour characterise this period. The narrative makes for some uneasy reading in places. “They shot his feet so he could not move. Then they took turns on his mother. No one in our group raised a voice to help her...I covered

Tjirwe's eyes, but he knew what was happening. Everyone knew. When they were done with her, they shot the boy in the eyes" (Kubuetsile, 2016, p. 138).

The author paints a dismal picture of the impact of war on the family structure and this is replicated on two fronts. On the one hand, Tjipuka and Ruhapo lose and find each other only to learn that the war has broken whatever trust and love there was between them. On the other, Riette, an Afrikaner girl, loses her loved ones in the war against the British. Readers will find a lot of attention to detail especially in the relationship that Tjipuka has with her husband. It is a relationship with what has become unfamiliar due to the ravages of war:

She hates his shut-off eyes, his untilted head, his hard, unyielding mouth. Let the man who owns these things come and fetch them, she wants to scream. Take these strange pieces away. She isn't sure she can love a man with these bits of a stranger about him. But how can she tell him, stop being you?" (Kubuetsile, 2016, p. 11)

Kubuetsile's characters have had the joy of life squeezed out of them and some readers may find the characterisation depressing, especially in the encounters between husband and wife. There is the suggestion that the effects of war has killed the romantic appeal of family life and replaced it with anguish and hatred. This is not a novel that broods on the past or glorifies a future of hope and goodwill. It situates the reader in the uncompromising reality of genocide and the emotional and physical scars it leaves behind. The depiction of the concentration camp where the women are kept shows a place devoid of hope. "They were constantly hungry, always exhausted and permanently cold. Each morning before leaving for the dockyards, the dead needed to be collected. On a good day there would be one or two, but most days they were five or six." (Kubuetsile, 2016, p.180).

The Scattering is a book that will appeal to lovers of history as it touches on a neglected part of Herero history, particularly with regards to narrative fiction. However, the content is not for the squeamish as there is plenty of physical and sexual abuse throughout the novel. This is not to imply that the book glorifies violence but readers in search of a happy ending will be disappointed.

Lauri Kubuetsile has written over twenty books, mostly in the realm of teen literature such as *The Fatal Payout* (2005), *Anything for Money* (2011) and *Thato Sekoko: Superhero* (2015). She has twice won Africa's premier prize for children's writing, The Golden Baobab. She also won the creative writing prize sponsored by Botswana's Department of Youth and Culture. In 2011, she was shortlisted for Africa's most prestigious short story prize, The Caine Prize.

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