



Book Review: *Scatterlings* by Rešoketšwe Manenzhe. Kristien Potgieter

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***Scatterlings* by Rešoketšwe Manenzhe (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2020)
Reviewed by Kristien Potgieter**

Scatterlings, the debut novel by South African author Rešoketšwe Manenzhe, starts with the passing of the Immorality Act of 1927, which wrote the prohibition of sexual relations between “Europeans” (white people) and “natives” (essentially anyone deemed not white) in South Africa into law. This law unravels the already fraying threads of the lives of Abram and Alisa van Zijl, an interracial couple with a strained marriage living on a farm in the Constantia Valley near Cape Town with their two young daughters, Dido and Emilia.

The couple senses that the passing of this law does not bode well for their family’s future in South Africa; to Abram, “It was clear that something had gone terribly awry and worse things would follow” (22). The 1920s and 30s in South Africa were, as historian Hermann Giliomee puts it, a “testing time”, a time of political and economic crises when boundaries between ethnic groups were still somewhat in flux and before racial segregation crystallized fully into the formalized system of apartheid. Manenzhe’s choice to explore this period, rarely before examined in South African fiction, is an inspired one, because it reminds us that history is not demarcated into eras with clear start and end dates as easily as we are taught in classrooms.

The Van Zijls are a family thus caught between eras, cultures and nationalities: Alisa is black, with ancestry reaching back to West Africa, parents who were enslaved in the Caribbean and white adoptive parents in England, where she has spent most of her life; Abram is a white man born in Amsterdam who for most of his life has called the Cape of Good Hope home. Dido and Emilia are the products of this union. After 1927, the family’s very existence is criminalized. Apartheid, with its system of rigid racial categorizations – which were “the fundament upon which an entire edifice of racialized society could be constructed” (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2) – would not allow for the existence of a family such as the Van Zijls.

Manenzhe’s lyrical style of writing accords well with this transitional period. She avoids padding the novel with heavy-handed details about the era that historical novelists sometimes rely on to show off the depth of their research. She evokes the setting and time period with a light and often witty touch: Cape Town “unfolded itself like a history book. The buildings were like chapters, each telling of a different era of immigration or fashion” (12). In Pretoria, “the

architecture assumed a Dutch identity, but with flecks of something foreign in the buildings, as though the architects had created rebellious children” (91).

Landscapes and natural phenomena are also described in vivid, kinetic imagery that often grants a sense of agency, even personality, to nature, perhaps as a reminder of the smallness of the human history in progress, a steady counterpoint to petty human drama. “It had rained in the night, and in the sky, there were still clouds lingering as if unsure of whether to shake off their burden or pass on” (19), Manenzhe writes, and, “If the sun became lazy or unwilling or shy to shine, the sky yielded; it quickly summoned such gloomy things as rain” (20).

Where *Scatterlings* perhaps falters is in the stiltedness of its dialogue, which sometimes feels like it is trying a touch too hard to sound prim and old-fashioned. The unnatural-sounding speech thus becomes an unfortunate distraction from the otherwise beautifully written narration. The speech of the two girls, Dido and Emilia, feels particularly unrealistic, and the wonderful playfulness and energy of a scene where the girls chase each other in the garden is somewhat undermined by lofty dialogue supposedly spoken by the seven-year-old Emilia, such as, “See, if you don’t catch me in the next minute, I win. There must be a reward for the winner” (30).

A major incident early in the novel involving a fire and which leads to the deaths of more than one central character is also somewhat clumsily written. The erratic skips in time and muddled point of view are perhaps a deliberate choice in an attempt to depict the incoherence of how Dido – meant to be the focalizer in these scenes – experiences the events, but the narration is murky and imprecise exactly when it requires intense clarity, even within Dido’s perspective of confusion and shock. The hazy writing therefore does not serve the importance of these scenes, which provide the dramatic and emotional centrepiece of the novel.

And yet, Manenzhe’s writing has a cumulative emotional heft that affirms her tremendous talent as a writer and makes the novel an unequivocal success. The relationships in the novel are nearly universally portrayed with convincing depth, from Dido and Emilia’s sisterly bond, to the tenuous relationship between Dido and her father, to the layered relationships the housekeeper Gloria has with each member of the family.

The author also weaves complex thematic material into a fairly straightforward plot. The overarching theme of belonging is explored in the later sections of the novel through extracts from Alisa’s journals, of which only fragments remain after the fire, making her tale “a fractured story” (127), literally as well as figuratively. After the death of her father in the Caribbean, the young Alisa’s adoptive father takes her to England, where “few welcomed and none loved me” (136). Alisa longs to travel to Africa, hoping to find the mythical home she has always longed for and been unable to find elsewhere in the world.

It is during her eventual voyage to South Africa where she first meets Abram, as well as Yuri Ivanov, a Russian naturalist on his way to the Transvaal. They are the only people on the ship who show Alisa any semblance of kindness, the rest of the passengers shunning her because of her dark skin. Ivanov and Alisa discuss Darwin and the theory of evolution, with Ivanov telling her that “In

a sense ... this was a journey home for all of us, because we all scattered from Africa to fill the world” (154).

This statement is certainly true for Alisa, whose ancestors lived in West Africa before they were enslaved and taken to the Caribbean. Although she has never been to Africa, she is, in a certain sense, returning home when she travels there.

Yet ultimately, it is Abram and Ivanov, the white men, who can confidently claim identities as Africans and gain both power and belonging there. They are the ones most unbounded by national borders, because they have both a clear place of origin to which they belong and the freedom to seek belonging elsewhere. They benefit from a type of transnationalism that is fundamentally inaccessible to someone like Alisa, who consistently remains an outsider with access to little power or belonging, even after she marries Abram. Alisa reflects on the differences between her and Abram:

To belong to the world seems simple to him, something he chooses for himself. I wonder: are his freedoms afforded to him by his skin, that skin having been denied to me by the circumstances of my ancestry? If so, are the same freedoms, as an extension of my birth, denied to me? (157)

By contrasting Alisa’s position with Ivanov and Abram’s, Manenzhe effectively demonstrates the flow of systemic power onto the African continent at the time and who it belonged to. By the end of the novel, Abram’s sense of belonging in South Africa might be taken away from him by a system hostile to his black wife and children, but he had an opportunity at belonging – at abandoning his status as a scatterling – that was never truly a possibility for Alisa. This is a harsh historical reality that still resonates today.

To make the observation that *Scatterlings* is a novel about belonging is perhaps obvious, as well as being an oversimplification of this excellent novel’s complexity and impact. It is such a powerful novel not because it is simply about belonging, but because it is exceptionally astute about the many different shapes of belonging, about who has the power to claim, seize and revoke belonging, especially from others, and about what is lost in the quest for and often violent pursuit of belonging. It shines a piercing light on unexplored, dusty corners of history, and certainly deserves all of the accolades the author will receive.

Works cited

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