

BOOK REVIEWS

Isabella Pupurai Matsikidze. *Zimbabwean Collectibles*. Stone Mountain, Georgia: Linwood Publishers, 1990. 80 pp.

Linguistic discourse has more often than not been used to construct demarcations/parameters which become off-limits to people who belong to one or all categories which Trinh T. Minh-ha calls "woman, native, other." It is in light of this that Ms. Matsikidze's poems could be explained. The first poem in her *Zimbabwean Collectibles*, "The Mothers I Have Seen, Zimbabwe," could be interpreted as the plight of women in patriarchal societies or as the exploitation of "natives" in the periphery. (Needless to say, exploiting the "native" isn't the exclusive property of those of the "Metropole.") In this poem a group of five women, their head-scarves made of "Red, yellow on black," are tilling the land. The symbolic colors of the African continent (red for blood, yellow for wealth, and black for the race) are seen through a synchronizing image of "a row of five women" with hoes in their hands. The women are from a polygamous household. At the end of the day's work, the youngest of the wives wonders if the husband will succeed in marrying "wife number six." "Four voices/Mumble appreciation/And discuss the portion/To be worked late afternoon" (p. 9). The absence of rancor towards the would-be new wife, at least on the part of the four senior wives, is necessitated by the prospect of a sixth peon about to alleviate the burden of farm work. Rather, their hatred is directed at the absentee landlord: the husband.

Lest one is tempted to assume that polygamy is sanctioned by the women in the *Collectibles*, we read in "The Snake, The Mouse, and the Woman" about a hatred between two co-wives which spills into all facets of life. In "Who Do You Say I Am?" the crisis of identity of those in the periphery is given shape by pointing out a multiplicity of cross currents which shape their psyche. The traumatic experience of people with, to borrow from W. E. B. du Bois, "double consciousness" and "double vision" is depicted through an intricate system of imagery. The crisis of identity is not only an existential, who-am-I? issue, but also gets concretized in the hybridization of space and time. Diverse objects both foreign and indigenous, such as "goatskins and oriental rugs; gourd cups and wine glasses"; the affluent and the pauper as a tale of two horns on the same cow; and the so-called modern and the traditional (both as structure and ideology) live contiguously, not necessarily harmoniously, with one another. The poems also depict rural life ("Makuhwe Mountain," "Sowing the Seed," "Doing Laundry in the River," etc.); or poverty, as when tears are shed "for a

dress/caught in brambles" (p. 27). To accentuate the correlation between poverty and prostitution, "What the Child Told Me" gives a graphic description of child prostitution. The trials and tribulations of going to school amid such squalor and deprivation is given expression in "Attending a Village School: an Ordeal in Education" (p. 29). Advocates of population control find a sombre note in "The Death of Ambrose" (p. 37) which deals with children dying before their first birthday.

It is in "Between the Nations" that the "woman, native, other" paradigm is most eloquently expressed. The poem explains the many levels involved in the appropriation of the people's material and cultural production. On the national level, patriarchy (read: ruling class) is seen through the representatives sent by the state to attend conferences: "ninety-nine percent of the time/it's men/in the nation's one quality suit/to impress the moneyed world" (p. 53). On the international level, the denizens of the periphery are robbed of cultural systems which emanate from their sweat. In this instance, the industrialized center repackages products grown in the old empire. Thus, "There is a miracle of selling/English tea when Britannia/doesn't have tea plantations" (p. 55). The appropriation of the culture of tea by Britannia reveals the importance of information which can shed light on cultural thievery. Ms. Matsikidze's poem takes cognizance of the need to reclaim the alienated, "stolen" property. Yet, her poem transcends the usual Calibanic wisdom of cursing the Master by using the latter's language. And while "cursing" is one step closer to de-fetishizing the master's power, her verbal assault is a multi-pronged attack on the edifice that supports the perpetuation of the oppressor's ways in society. In this sense, her poem also gives voice to many other causes. So do the other forty-one poems in this collection. In short, she sings of the agony of exile, of the voice of women kept outside the parameters of discourse, of sorrow, of pain, of love, of fear, of dashed hopes. She also shows how these feelings could accompany us across time and space. These poems, some of which are in polyphonic prose, are true collectibles.

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