



Review

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Tropical Fish: Stories out of Entebbe.

Doreen Baingana. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005; Cape Town: Oshun 2006.

Like the child lured, again and again, by the mysterious intimacies of her parents' bedroom in Doreen Baingana's opening short story, "Green Stones," so too is the reader drawn to savour, again and again, the subtle delights of this collection of interlinked short stories.

Set in Uganda in the aftermath of the rule of military dictator Idi Amin, *Tropical Fish: Stories out of Entebbe* charts the coming of age of three sisters – Christine, Patti and Rosa – in the middle-class city of Entebbe. Together, the stories form a *bildungsroman*, providing vignettes from each girl's life. The youngest sister, Christine, eventually immigrates to the United States, and her experiences and subjectivity take centre stage toward the end of the collection.

Consciously writing against the stereotype of African woman as victim, Baingana's short stories – "linked like sisters, forming a family that is stronger than its individual parts" (Preface to Harlem Moon edition, xiii) – alternate between the narrative voices of the three sisters, providing a variety of perspectives on growing up African, Ugandan, and relatively privileged. The multiplicity of viewpoints is reinforced by the varying forms Baingana chooses to employ throughout the collection: some stories are first-person accounts, others have an omniscient narrator; "Hunger" is a diary entry, and "A Thank-You Note" a letter. This form and narrative technique is a departure from traditional, postcolonial women's coming-of-age novels, such as Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, in that it provides the perspectives of three very different young women at different developmental stages. In this way, *Tropical Fish* works to undercut monolithic notions of African female experience or womanhood.

In describing the ordinary, everyday rhythms of the girls' lives, Baingana provides a textured and complex picture of middle-class African womanhood

within a specific urban location. As the children of government bureaucrats, the three sisters attend the best schools in Entebbe, are sent to prestigious private boarding-schools, and are part of the elite at Makerere University. In the words of Rosa, one of the sisters, the girls are "... the cream of the crop. We had dodged the bullets of Amin, Obote, all the coups, the economic war, exile and return, and here we were on the road to success. We were the lucky ones, the chosen few" ("A Thank-You Note," 71–72). Yet their lives are dotted with periods of instability: Patti bears months of starvation at her boarding-school in the story, "Hunger," and the girls stand in line for hours to get their rations of basic foods like sugar.

The opening story, "Green Stones", takes the reader into the private world of a successful, middle-class Ugandan couple via the youngest sister's voyeuristic visits to her parents' bedroom. Here Christine samples – through taste, touch and smell – an array of jewellery presented by her father to her mother. Draping herself in these beads while posing in front of her parents' mirror, the young Christine envisions the kind of femininity she is preordained to inherit from her mother:

When I grew up, I would use lots of cool white cream like she did: Ponds, Venus de Milo, cocoa butter, perfumes called Lady, Chanel, Essence. I'd paint my fingernails and toenails with designs in glaring red, and fling my hands around dramatically like a conjurer. Wear lots of lacy panties, petticoats, bras, and stockings, all in frilly white and pink, with flowers and sequins, and become Maama. Women were nice and pleasant and sweet, like a bowl of fruit or fresh flowers (7–9).

Christine's mother's status as woman is reiterated each time her husband performs the intricate ritual he uses to present his wife with various types of jewellery. "For you," says Christine's father, solemnly, as he presents her mother with the green necklace of the story's title. Her mother, in accepting his gifts, is "crowned; he was her humble subject. She accepted his adoration with a smile in the silence" (9). The conferring of jewellery from the father to mother is almost ceremonial; observed by the three girls, it establishes a template for the type of womanhood Christine, Patti and Rosa should aspire to, and a guide to intimate relations between the sexes. Their parents' bedroom, with its aura of "sacredness" – "as if it was a quiet, empty cathedral or mysterious fortune-teller's den" (1), comes to symbolise, for Christine, her parents' union – an impenetrable, alluring force. It is against the family's model of femininity and heterosexual relationships that we track the development of the three

girls into women. None of the girls, however, choose this ordained path into womanhood: by the end of the anthology, they have all digressed from the performance of gender presented to them during their childhood.

“Hunger” is written from the perspective of Patti, the oldest sister, and documents a period of severe deprivation at the exclusive boarding-school, Gayaza. Because of food shortages, the girls subsist mostly on black tea, dried bread and rotting vegetables, and Patti’s hunger forces her to beg for food from wealthier girls. Nominated for the Caine Prize for African writing in 2004, “Hunger” demonstrates a range of subjectivities and experiences among adolescent, middle-class girls – a group that might seem fairly homogenous at first glance. Linette, the daughter of a Minister, makes *kotys* or servants out of the other girls in exchange for food. The less privileged girls are forced to groom and serve Linette, or go hungry. Patti fetches her tea in exchange for some sugar, and is humiliated. Throughout the story Patti, who is “saved” by becoming a born-again Christian, comforts herself with the knowledge that it must be God’s will for her to starve. “Why couldn’t I see the glory of God, instead of concentrating on my stomach?” Patti chastises herself (25). Patti finds solace for her unrelenting hunger in religion, and the story’s dramatic climax sees Patti tearfully releasing her anxiety about starving at a prayer meeting. But while Patti finds temporary relief in casting her troubles before God, her lack of political action means that her situation remains the same, and she is left to face yet another day without food.

Baingana’s focus on the minutiae of the girls’ lives, rather than larger political themes in the volatile period after Amin’s dictatorship, is a strategic choice. The stories in *Tropical Fish* are not overly concerned with pontificating or demonstrating the hardship of economic instability. Rather, they aim to show subtly how the personal is always political. The stories demonstrate the ways in which ordinary people go about living their lives, surviving political repression and economic decline. Baingana deftly evokes the way in which despotism at first induces fear, then soon becomes normalised as individuals adapt in order to cope and survive. It is the texture of such warped “normality” that Baingana expertly evokes in many of her stories; this is the anthology’s strength.

Through the unselfconscious eyes of Christine in “First Kiss” – on the surface, a story about a young girl’s first romantic encounter – the reader is transported into a scene of insidious decay, when Christine surveys her old school yard after a few years’ absence:

Things must have started falling apart years ago. She hadn't noticed it then, probably because she was here every day. The change was gradual and the result normal, like many other things about Amin's time, including the everyday fear in the air. She remembered how everyone had laughed in astonishment, then got used to it, when Amin by decree banned minis and wigs ... (39).

Amin's presence and legacy in the family's life is muted, but still palpable; it creates a world where the threat of persecution always hovers, and becomes normal. This presence is not unlike Christine's Taata in "Green Stones," a patriarch who "held himself in all day like an ever-present threat, and then at night unleashed himself and his whole tight day on Maama" (10). Baingana does not need to make explicit the parallels between a controlling, alcoholic father and an autocratic, punitive political regime. A sense of the ordinary imbued with the vague, pervasive threat of terror becomes the norm for the girls in *Tropical Fish*, and is Baingana's oblique comment on life in a political dictatorship.

A complex and contradictory picture of the concept of "home" emerges through Baingana's fictional portrayal of the girls' everyday lives. Home, for the sisters, is a space of relative privilege; yet the threat of instability and violence always hovers. As the meaning of "home" changes within the postcolonial political context, the girls renegotiate their relationships to their home and concept of place. In this process, their subjectivities are also renegotiated. As bell hooks has noted, home is often a disjunctive location for the postcolonial subject: "At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations" (hooks, 1984: 19). As the girls enter adulthood, their relationships to home are often fraught. Christine, in particular, undertakes a diasporic journey to the United States of America, where her understanding of what it means to inhabit a home is radically altered.

Christine's migration to the United States, where she eventually becomes a poet and writer, brings to mind Carole Boyce Davies' concept of black women writers' "migratory subjectivity". For Davies, black women's writing can be likened to a migratory experience, since both the acts of writing and migration involve boundary-crossing, and the constant renegotiation of identity. Christine, in migrating to the United States and starting to write poetry, performs a double migration – both into a foreign country and the realm of authorship.

This refashioning of the individual as writer, and the subsequent claiming of the US as a home of sorts, is the subject matter in the short story "Lost in

Los Angeles.” Here Christine becomes part of the Los Angeles poetry scene, and begins to find acceptance and a feeling of belonging through writing. Christine visits a poetry café and decides that she, too, could write poetry if she wanted to. She settles on the following topic: “I decided to write a poem, to clarify things, to try, anyway. Not about home No. Maybe something about the adventure of being lost and what I can find” (117–118).

Christine befriends a white American poet, Feather, who claims to be part Native American. At the end of the story, Feather and Christine sit on a hill overlooking Los Angeles as Feather declares: “This is my people’s land, you know All this.” In the last line of the story, Christine retorts: “‘Mine too,’ I say. What the hell” (119).

It seems that the act of writing and putting her poem into the public domain entitles Christine to lay claim to this new land to which she has immigrated. However, Baingana qualifies Christine’s claim; during an interview, she notes that a fine line exists between carving out space for oneself in a new place, and appropriating someone else’s space. If leaving “home” has been crucial to finding the writer inside of Christine, the act of writing, in turn, has helped inscribe a new discursive space to call “home.” Through the act of writing, Christine is able to claim and inhabit a new home she has created for herself through her writing. This new home inevitably complicates her relationship with Uganda and Entebbe.

When Christine returns to Uganda in “Questions of Home”, she struggles to adapt to her former home and the perceived inefficiency in the government department where she finds a new job. As she struggles to rekindle her relationship with her mother, Christine realises that for her, “home” does not exist, and that her fantasies were home:

Back in the States after a hard day of fake smiles and isolation, alone in her apartment at night, Christine had imagined the three of them, with Patti, as close companions growing older together The proverbial strong African family The dream itself was home (145).

Christine realises that to feel a sense of belonging in Uganda, she will need to learn to speak a new language: “a new language formed by old ones running underneath and over one another. An ever-changing in-between” (147). With *Tropical Fish*, Baingana has also started to create a new language for exploring black female subjectivity. Though some stories will grip the reader more than others, the collection gives singular insights into women’s lives on the African continent and in the diaspora, and will be useful for exploring race, class and identity in a women’s studies classroom.

References

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