

The Eternal Audience of One.

Rémy Ngamije.

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Rémy Ngamije's debut novel contributes to a growing body of postcolonial Namibian fiction written in English, a national literary canon that remains somewhat limited in scale (Harlech-Jones 238). *The Eternal Audience of One* depicts the life of a Rwandan-born, Namibian-raised young man who studies law in Cape Town with his "friends in foreignness" (225) as they come up against the concerns of modern youth. The novel is structured into three parts, in addition to a somewhat ill-defined prologue which takes the form of an essay written by the protagonist, which describes in inexplicable detail the changing Namibian weather. Part 1 focuses on his preparations for leaving Namibia and travelling to Cape Town. Part 2 of the novel details his experiences in Cape Town as he makes sense of the intersections of race and nationality while navigating the turmoil of being a young foreign national who is desperate to escape the high expectations of his family and the broader Rwandan diaspora in Namibia. Part 3 of the novel, in an obscure denouement, presents the outcome of his journeys—both geographic and emotional—which leaves the reader slightly confused and disconnected from the character. With very little narrative foreshadowing, Séraphin ultimately finds himself working as an English teacher at a school back in Windhoek, a place where he desperately did not want to end up.

One of the strengths of the novel is the humour that underpins much of the prose. The experiences are

relatable, and the protagonist's quick-witted responses provide a light-hearted air to a novel that confronts the sometimes-harsh reality of being a foreign national in Cape Town. An example of this humour is the narrator's hyperbolic description of the long bus rides between Windhoek and Cape Town which are characterised by Christian entertainment. Finding himself in a "trapped congregation" (9) on a bus, Séraphin watches televised recordings of "pastors [who] preach against evolution, offer post-apocalyptic condolences for man's innumerable follies, and promote limited edition DVDs which, for a fee, could guarantee citizenship in the everlasting Kingdom of God" (9). These descriptions give insight into the playfulness of the character and mitigates some of the overt seriousness of some of the prose. Another comical description focuses on Maxime, a small-framed barber from the Democratic Republic of Congo who has a knack for exaggeration:

The probability of Maxime, a Congolese immigrant who lied to refugee status determination officers about throwing a stone at the president's motorcade during a protest, and subsequently being pursued by the military police from Kinshasa to Lumbubashi before escaping to Zambia, commuting by bus and truck to Cape Town, holding an entire rugby-mad Newlands restaurant hostage on the day the Springboks played the All Blacks was as ludicrous as one ant threatening to storm and take Table Mountain. The opposite was probably true. (374)

However, if not for the humorous moments in the novel, the lengthy and repetitive writing could exhaust the reader. The story of Maxime, for example, spans across an entire chapter despite doing very little to advance the narrative in a meaningful way. Similarly, what is referred to repeatedly as "The Great Séraphin Council" is an imaginary staged dialogue between different iterations of the protagonist which convenes when faced with danger or perceived threat. In the customary chapter-long account, the council of Séraphins convenes to come to a decision, in a round-about way, to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. No clear purpose of the council of Séraphins come into view: while they may ostensibly function to complicate his character, these imaginary avatars are often little more than caricatures.

The important intersecting tensions of racism and xenophobia are explored in significant detail, but sometimes it reads as if the text is overstating the point, at least on a narrative level. This is the case for much of the writing where there is frequent repetition of the protagonist's distressing experiences of prejudice.

On multiple occasions, the protagonist experiences both overt and casual racism in Cape Town, including when a security guard only asks the black and coloured people to sign in and out of a university residence; and when a white friend, Andrew, expresses surprise that it is Séraphin “of all the black guys” (439) who becomes sexually involved with his love interest. As readers of the novel, we feel somewhat disconnected from these experiences, as the novel tends towards a repetitive ubiquity at the cost of affective depth.

While the novel is not quite oppressive to women, the multiple instances where the young men refer to women in derogatory terms have misogynistic undertones. Presented as common-place amongst heterosexual male students, women are referred to as “wenches” and “concubines” (194). The first heartbreak Séraphin experiences at university was at the hands of “a bitch named Angie” (298). Perhaps describing the complicity of heterosexual men in creating sexist spaces, the one character observes that “First comes O-week [Orientation week], then comes whore weeks” (228). While the depiction of these characters may be read as *critiques* of campus culture, the assertiveness with which the protagonist and the many Séraphins ask “Did you see those tits” (242), for example, still make for an unsettling read. The protagonist’s close friend, Bianca, a lesbian woman who is outspoken about the patriarchy and racism she experiences, attempts to neutralise the misogynistic moments in the novel. While the character makes attempts to criticise the group of young men’s disparaging behaviour, this critique recedes into the background, and she later celebrates their apparent objectification of women. While the author may have been attempting to spark dialogue about misogyny among male university students, the narration seems unable to carry this burden. This leaves much of the sexism unchallenged, with Bianca’s feminist interjections sometimes seeming tokenistic.

Despite our concerns over the length of the novel, as well as its problematic representation of women, the novel is effective in depicting a rich network of Africans—including drivers from Benin, close friends from Zimbabwe, teachers from Kenya, and barbers from Congo—who come together in Cape Town. In this respect, *The Eternal Audience of One* brings together experiences and cultures from the African continent and is a truly pan-African narrative. In this, the book contributes to an important body of fiction that emphasises intra-continental experiences of African migration, and which challenge the common-place centrality of destinations in the Global North (Fasselt 70–93).

Works Cited

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