

The Pride of Noonlay.

Shanice Ndlovu.

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Speculative fiction can be regarded as one of the most diverse and complex genres in African literature, a reasonable reflection when you consider the *Collins Dictionary* (2021) definition of “speculative fiction” stating that it is a “broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural, fantastical or futuristic elements”. So broad is its nature, Bibi Burger (2) goes as far as including the “long tradition of African literature (including oral literature) dealing with the wondrous and imagined” in the genre. This is indicative of a genre that is deeply entrenched within the fabric of the continent’s literary history—including writers in the diaspora. Despite all of this, it is important that one remembers speculative fiction’s long and problematic history of glorifying colonialism and conquest, as is pointed out by Nalo Hopkinson (7) in the introduction to the edited anthology, *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* (2004). Recently, there has been a surge of African writers excelling in the genre, writers that offer unique perspectives that either reject the colonial or explore a postcolonial Africa that is free from coloniality.

Zimbabwean writer, Shanice Ndlovu, may just fall under this category. Not only has she written numerous short stories in the genre of epic fantasy, she has stories published in anthologies such as *Botsotso* and the *K&L Prize*. Her other achievements include being on the long

list for the NOMMO award for her short story “A Water Heart” as well as being crowned the 2020 Hadithi ya Africa Ultimate Storyteller (Modjaji Books).

In her debut short-story collection, *The Pride of Noonlay* (2020), Ndlovu introduces us to seven fantastical tales, exposing an imagination that might leave the reader at a loss for words. While these stories share the same universe and complement each other perfectly, they remain self-contained. Ndlovu takes us on an epic journey, as the reader is transported from the Seasones, known for its magical tribes, to the cold deserts of Lyringa. One almost wishes that there was a map to better situate the reader in the world. In these exciting new worlds, skilfully written by the author, we meet characters like Alova, a fierce Malajan warrior who, after escaping her uncle’s attempted rape, finds herself working as a cook for a noble family living in the Highlands (12). There is also Faenuni, a stone thrower from the Seasones, who unbeknownst to her escapes persecution, and finds herself in Peresia, where she serves a noble family but is later punished for her mistress’ betrayal (48). And then there is sweet brave Oshinia known for her “ravenous hunger for words” (116) who softens even the hardest of hearts. These women represent sheer strength; these are stories of women battling and overcoming their insecurities, women who have been displaced from their homes due to violence, women who still manage to love in spite of the immense loss that they have faced. And while some of their stories are triumphant in nature, they are still cognisant of, and entrenched in, the reality that these women exist in societies that reflect ideologies reminiscent of colonial practice.

In the opening story, “The Walking Fish”, the words of Lady Stounel, Alova’s employer, reflect racist beliefs as she tells her son that “witchcraft has burned all the purity from your [Alova’s] skin, and that’s why it looks like strong coffee” (5). She also believes that the Arctuose language is the only connection to God. This sense of exceptionalism continues when the lord of the house calls Alova to read one of his letters and she mentions her inability to read his language called “The Only Tongue” (14) and later comments on this conceit stating, “Only the Arctuose would ever be arrogant enough to name their tongue the only tongue when it is only one in a few hundred thousand” (15). In “The Stone Thrower”, Feanuni is referred to as “the filth of life” (47) and worthy of death by the master of the house, due to her being from the Seasones. However, there is a shift that takes place once the reader is introduced to the cold deserts of Lyringa, where the last three stories are set.

In Lyringa, we are introduced to the Warms royal family, Niva of Monti, Oshinia, Cories and his brother Gaies. There we are familiarised with this community’s royalty, their customs and beliefs. It is also revealed that the people there are often ogled at by outsiders because they have “skin that varied through different shades of nighttime,” with eyes “the different clutches of a sea storm” (105–6). It’s a community that is stuck, because “the last time a Lyringa set sail and lived to speak of it was a hundred years ago” (140). You read these stories and for the most part find yourself unable to firmly place it on the African continent, while still feeling like they are rooted in the familiar. And in some ways, these stories may just carry the possibilities of what the imagined future of speculative fiction could be; a future that is not fully situated in Africa in terms of the images used but that, in some ways, still reflects issues reminiscent of Africa’s current and past experience. Ndlovu’s ability to conjure up these worlds is thrilling and speaks to the future of speculative fiction on the African continent.

Works cited

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