

### **Ilifa.**

Athambile Masola.

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Athambile Masola's *Ilifa* is a refreshing compilation of poems written in everyday isiXhosa. The choice to use an urban, everyday dialect with the occasional splash of English phrases is typical of the language use of the modern black South African, especially in urban areas. Thus, the choice of language and the particular dialect is inviting and lends a sense of familiarity and earnestness to the poetry. The compilation is divided into three parts: "Umyalelo Wentombi" (Instructions for a girl), "Uthando" (Love) and "Apha" (Here).

"Umyalelo Wentombi" can be read through the lens of an Afro-feminist critique of the circumstances of black South African women's life worlds; however, the poetry throughout the book also presents us with a postcolonial reflection upon the identity and the circumstances of the lives of ordinary black people who continue to live within the advent of coloniality in South Africa. The poems have a personal tone that reminds one of storytelling. Rather than using abstract or academic language, there is something about the style of writing that is therefore reminiscent of listening to *iintsomi* (folktales). This section is characterised by

emotions of pain, loss, grief and disappointment, as well as a sense of raging against the oppressive expectations laid upon this group of women. Throughout the first section, the issue of the silencing of black women's voices, the cost of that silence and the price of speaking up comes through in several poems. In "Igazi" (16) the speaker interrogates the social expectation for a young lady to not speak out of turn. She asks what happens when we continue to bite our tongues and our mouths are then filled with blood. The concept of the mouth filled with blood invokes another idea, that of the culpability of those who fail to speak up in the face of injustice. The speaker points to the fact that ultimately the blood causes a feeling of sickness from within, and what then do we do? How shall we continue in the face of the sickness caused by the sanctioned silence of women?

The section is not just about pain and silencing, however—there is also present in it a celebration of coming of age, coming to know oneself, one's culture and the legacy from which one comes. "Umyalelo Wentombi" is also a celebration of the legacy of black women who were courageous and stood against injustice; women who wrote and spoke truth to power in their day, but now stand almost buried in the margins of our history and our academics—women like Nontsizi Mqgwetho, Noni Jabavu, J. Nozipo Maraire, Sindiwe Magona and others. It is a call to remember them; to keep their names and teachings alive. These poems point to the fact that these women provide an inheritance and legacy upon which today's young black women may come to know themselves and find the courage to stand and make their voices heard.

The second section, "Uthando", explores the theme of love in its different forms. Love expressed in sensuality and longing. Love explored in its ordinariness and everydayness. Love's losses as well as its capacity as healer demonstrated through the bonds of kinship.

In both the first and the second sections there is a recurring reference to Christian spirituality and a use of biblical phrases. In the first section the Christian symbolism such as in the poem "Warkazulwa" (23) often points to the pain of the defilement of that which is sacred. In "Uthando" the biblical phrases continue, but the tone is more hopeful, as in the poem "Izwi elidala" (38). Along with the Christian spirituality there is also a continued reference to one's ancestors and the importance of such connections.

Masola writes odes to the traditions of Xhosa women in poems such as "Iinyawo Zinodaka" (14). The title of this poem is taken from a song sung by women during particular traditional ceremonies; the

phrase “iinyawo zinodaka” speaks of the experiences the women have walked through, particularly as it concerns the roles they play in being wives and mothers. Masola does not attempt to translate for us the wisdom embedded in certain isiXhosa idioms she employs in the poetry, or the meanings of the different textures of Christian religiosity in her poems. However, this form of hybridity echoes and mirrors the identities imbued upon many of us, as black people of this place and this time.

In the last section, “Apha”, the poetry speaks to the socio-political circumstances that characterise the life worlds of the black people of South Africa. Some of the poems in this section pay homage to the fact that while people live in a disenfranchised state, they still live—they still dream dreams of a better future. Most of the poems in this last section, however, represent an unflinching indictment of the quality of freedom that contemporary black people in post-1994 South Africa experience. The opening poem, “Ikaka” (64), which translates as “Shit”, voices bold commentary on the indignity that black people are subjected to in South Africa. The basic point being made is that the freedom that black people have today is shit! The writer also critiques South African politicians. In the poem “Rayi-Rayi” (66), the writer uses a children’s game called “rayi-rayi” to frame her critique. The game is commonly played in townships and villages by old people with the young to teach them idioms. It is a guessing game where one aims to solve riddles by putting together obfuscated clues to uncover the true identity of the thing in question. The use of the structure of this children’s game emphasises the games that are played in our society with people’s lives. It also points to the obfuscating nature of the of politics and the failure of our political leaders.

Masola’s *Ilifa* is a delight to read. In many ways, the way it is written can be judged as unsophisticated, but therein lies its winning card. It is completely unpretentious, simple in its unrefined isiXhosa and yet, at times as the reader, all one can do is exclaim “iyoh!” and then put down the little book and just selah! *Ilifa* showcases the need to write in our languages, not because one is an isiXhosa scholar, but because of the fact that to write in one’s own language is to exercise and increase the collective power and voice of one’s own people.

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