

Book Reviews

Mother to Mother's Moral Ambivalence

Mother to Mother

by Sindiwe Magona:

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In August, 1993, an American exchange student, Amy Biehl, was murdered in a vicious, racially motivated attack in Gugulethu, a sprawling, impoverished African township in Cape Town. It was an incident that precipitated both national and international outrage and evoked widespread demands for swift and severe retribution. In presenting an exploration of the possible circumstances surrounding the killing of Amy Biehl and in attempting to give Mxolisi, the fictional killer, a 'human' face Sindiwe Magona has undertaken a particularly difficult task. Apart from dealing with an unsympathetic literary construct in the form of Mxolisi, the subject of the killing within the South African context is fraught with political, emotional and moral ambiguities, and cannot be justified or understood in neat, absolute binary categories of right or wrong, good or evil, or guilty or innocent. It is perhaps more comfortable for the observer to maintain the commonly-held public perception of the perpetrators as inhuman, ruthless, cold-blooded killers, and stand in unequivocal moral judgement of them, rather than aspire to explore or understand the material circumstances around the brutal assault. In this regard, Magona astutely attempts to adopt a non-judgemental stance, allowing Mandisa, the narrator and mother of Mxolisi, to relate her story, though the level of authorial intervention is clearly apparent in the sophistication of the narrative voice. This eloquent, poignant prose is charged with emotion and an overwhelming sense of remorse for the numerous lives rent apart and irrevocably altered by this terrible tragedy.

Mandisa's narrative is a far cry from the standard media outrage and public recriminations that followed the killing: it is a brave and ambitious attempt to present a story of strife, suffering, impoverishment and human degradation, outside of the party political sloganeering and rhetoric that raged at the time of the killing. The association of the killers with the racially-bound ideologies of the Pan-African Congress (PAC), whose members openly and unapologetically chanted 'One Settler, One Bullet', roused much racial tension and brought to the surface many of the undercurrents that course through contemporary South African society. Magona, however, does not seriously engage the role of party political culpability in the incident. Though the narrative broaches the subject of racial polarisation, Mandisa herself displays no overt political allegiance: her commitment and energies are clearly directed towards ensuring the survival of herself and her family. It is her personal history and daily struggle that are foregrounded against the wider canvas of racial oppression in South Africa. Mxolisi is an integral part of this struggle, from his inauspicious beginnings, to his fractured, unstable childhood and eventual involvement in the senseless killing of a defenceless young woman - the mother is inexorably bound to the ill-fated son. There is also the sense, however, that the political developments of the day resulted in estranged and dislocated relationships between parents and children, where the latter were more likely to fall under the jurisdiction and control of the liberation movements rather than heed the counsel of their parents or custodians.

The presentation of Mandisa and Mxolisi as victims of institutional oppression and dispossession, tests the moral sensibilities of the reader. While the mother's plight clearly evokes a sympathetic response, to what extent is the reader expected to sympathise or identify with the perpetrator of this heinous act? Though, as a young boy, he had been witness to a horrifying act of brutality, had he not been nurtured and sustained by a caring and dedicated mother? To what extent does the narrative's focus on the mother's story eclipse the son's culpability in the murder? Though her tone is largely plaintive, the mother does not intercede on her son's behalf: she does not plead his innocence nor does she excuse his actions. She is presented as a voiceless subject who asks merely for the opportunity to be heard, to attempt to explain the circumstances that surrounded this apparently senseless termination of a bright and promising young life. Still, though there is no overt endeavour to justify or excuse his actions, through the process of 'humanising' the killer, the narrative attempts to shift the reader's moral perspective - to view all the parties involved in this terrible incident as victims at some level.

Magona avoids direct confrontation with the abhorrence of the action, and focuses instead on the mother's acute and overwhelming sense of grief. But what then of the murdered Amy Biehl? In view of her parents' decision to condone the granting of amnesty to their daughter's killers, it would appear that there is space for dialogue

and healing beyond the malicious act. This therapeutic element is very much present in Magona's writing. It is a painful exposure of the most intimate of details to which a scandalised public have had no access. Yet, in spite of a context that frames much of the boy's actions, for the reader, particularly one with prior information of the murder, his participation in the killing remains a reprehensible deed, for which, regardless of any extenuating circumstances, he must assume responsibility. Magona makes clear in her preface that there is only one killer, and that is the abhorrent system of racial discrimination. Yet, while Mxolisi is undoubtedly presented as a product of apartheid's inhuman policies, the narrative ultimately fails to detract from the boy's culpability in the killing. The narrative battles with this moral question and ultimately refrains from offering any judgement, leaving the reader more enlightened as to the possible events preceding the killing, but less assured of moral certitudes. In spite of this moral ambivalence or perhaps because of it, the novel makes a very useful intervention at this time in South African history as it contributes to the processes of open discourse and debate that are currently taking place in the country. The work pointedly illustrates the complexities and incongruities that will continue to dominate the South African political landscape for some time to come.

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