

## Common Ground

**ITSHWELE LEMPANGELE**

by Vusumuzi Maurice Bhengu

Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1998, 128pp.

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The novel tells the story of Ndelebuli. With his B.Com, he gets a job at Richards Bay which involves much travel. One day, on the return flight from a meeting in Johannesburg, he meets Shantha, a young woman, and Paul. Ndelebuli innocently asks Paul about his family. He is told that the boy has just lost his parents and sisters and is being transferred to a Durban orphanage. This disclosure triggers a strange relationship amongst the three. Shantha is deeply moved by the talk and when she realises that Ndelebuli is equally moved, she understands that although they are different, their reactions are not.

Later, Ndelebuli finds it impossible to forget Paul's sad story, and he traces both Shantha and Paul. His visit to Paul is upsetting for all: the authorities will not allow the weeping Paul to keep Ndelebuli's presents. He realises that Paul needs a real home where he is going to be given the love he deserves as a child.

He invites Shantha to accompany him on his second visit. Shantha feels strongly that Paul needs a mother, and she is seemingly his God-chosen one. Since Ndelebuli feels similarly drawn to making the child a part of his life, the grounds are being levelled for a future marriage.

When they finally decide to commit themselves to providing Paul a real home, they find that their parents still consider the man-made racial and socio-cultural barriers as insurmountable. Shantha's grandmother is, however, different. Surprisingly, she shares their sentiments and openly supports the relationship. Paul, being a strong force, eventually forces a perfect union between the people of different kinds, that is, an Indian and an African, and this is no offence since the laws of the new democracy allow them to do so. The ancestors, God and Allah bless and seal this union by giving them Thandeka, Paul's new-born sister. The novel closes with the families having been reconciled by the union.

Most characters are convincingly portrayed. The conservativeness of Ndelebuli's father and the Indian family's resistance are plausible, as is the subsequent change of heart. The novel is set in a modern milieu in which the social,

political, physical and cultural environment is shown to have affected characters differently. The transition to a non-racist dispensation is explored through the characters and their experiences. The sharing of facilities, for example, of the different forms of transport amongst previously segregated race groups and the much improved situation of the roads makes interaction easy.

The plot is skilfully manipulated. Coherence and the creation of suspense are achieved mainly through the employment of flashback as a narrative technique. A number of crises weave towards the highest point of tension. These include the episode where Shantha's family is told of her intimate relationship with an African man. At issue is the potential desertion of the Indian lady by Ndelebuli should she fall pregnant as African men are said to be notorious for this. Suicide is a possibility should Shantha's parents insist that she distances herself from Ndelebuli. Tension is compounded by Shantha's sudden disappearance. The relaxed attitude of the police when they find her with Ndelebuli, brings the tense situation under control. This change of attitude on the part of the police depicts some sound permanent normalization of the situation in a country formerly torn by racial divisions.

The novel ends shortly after the first visit of the two families at Ndelebuli - Shantha's house and this is the denouement. Here we get the impression that the author has successfully made the different communities shed individual differences and see only common good.

The author successfully deals with the crucial issues of individuality, sole ownership, ethnic and cultural stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes:

Angithandi uNdelebuli aganwe iNdiya. Angizenzisi ...

.... Iganwe yintombi yeNdiya impela, madoda?

I do not want Ndelebuli to be married by an Indian. I am not pretending ....

.... To be married by a true Indian girl, man?

This is a display of bias on the part of Ndelebuli's father. Salim Naicker, Shantha's father, differs little from him in this regard. But the narrative foregrounds the universal and the communal. The negative attitude to mixed marriages and socialising with other ethnic groups (supporting the Group Areas Act) is going to be forgotten. This new synthesis levels the grounds for the new rainbow nation to be constituted. Bhengu has used Paul, the white boy, to tie Shantha and Ndelebuli with an unslipping knot. Whiteness, the race which has been notoriously strong in policies and practices of divide and rule, is used to dispel hate and create lasting harmony. With the forces of darkness being dealt a severe blow by the power of love, the mental and socio-political barriers break down and good triumphs over evil. The novel addresses the need for the healing of souls as well as articulate previously

unacknowledged forms of politics and identity. Their union marks the end to parallel journeys amongst the three Gods—that is, Mvelinqangi, Allah and God, the Father of Jesus. Gogo, Shantha's grandmother, is a sacrificial lamb that dies for the sins of the different communities. Her death initiates the breaking down of the wall that has for centuries kept the different races separate. The power of love (positive sentiment) has been skilfully shown to rise triumphant over racial divide and enmity.

This novel is one of the first stimulating works in Zulu to touch on racial and socio-cultural reconciliation and to reflect the changing relations and attitudes between parents and children in a period of transformation. There are minor pitfalls, such as mixing the Hindu and the Muslim surnames and names: Naicker is a Hindu surname and Shantha a Hindu name while Salim is a Muslim name. But these features do not mar the good quality of the work and, in this case, already suggest an intermarriage between the two Indian groups. The novel will appeal to scholars and a general adult readership.

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## Gender

### *Changing Men in Southern Africa*

Morrell, Robert (ed)

Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000. pp. 356

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*Changing Men in Southern Africa* employs a social constructionist approach to gender analysis. As characterised by J. Stacey and D. Richardson in *Introducing Women's Studies* (in Richardson and Robinson 1993:68 and 78, respectively) social constructionism claims that gender and sexuality are social constructs, shaped by context and time. Gender is thus not conceived of as biologically or genetically determined, universal and unchanging, and 'our sexual feelings and activities, the ways in which we think about sexuality, and our sexual identities, are not biologically determined but are the product of social and historical forces' (Richardson, in Richardson and Robinson 1993:68). This theory of gender informs the work of many other scholars in the field, scholars such as Rajend (2000), Penvenne (1998).