

Book Review

The Great Agony and Pure Laughter of the Gods

Author: Jamala Safari

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Distant, complex and underreported, the nearly two-decade-old conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has claimed the lives of more than five million people and left countless more raped, mutilated, displaced and traumatised. With thirty years in office and billions of dollars stolen, Mobutu Sese Seko's kleptocracy (1965-1997) left the country wide open to war and exploitation. To this day Congolese militia deal a deadly trade in tantalum, widely used in electronic devices and comparable to a similar trade in blood diamonds.

The violence is not only social and physical, but also cognitive. Far from the eyes of media representatives, thousands of deaths from disease and malnutrition lose the potency of a clear narrative with victims and oppressors. The actors are a "curse and chaos" of multiple warring factions: "the Movement of Liberation from This, the Movement of Liberation from That; Patriotic Front for This, Patriotic Unity for That", in Safari's dry estimation. Statistics often seem a matter of guesswork and approximation. Without investigative, independent coverage, the suffering in DR Congo is regularly reduced to fragmented reports and pessimism about "the state of Africa".

Jason K. Stearns, an American writer and UN representative in the Congo region, composed a painstaking, fact-by-fact assessment of the land's history, its shaky relations with its neighbours, and in particular its ethnic makeup and the fallout from such racial designations, especially in the region surrounding Bukavu, the city at the centre of Safari's tale. Rwanda and its infamous genocide are tightly bound to struggles across the border in the Congo, where further unseen atrocities were committed against fleeing refugees.

Stearns writes that the search for those responsible, the murderers, the rapists, is a blinkered and idealised approach to justice. The kinds of systematic violence expressed in Jamala Safari's book are symptomatic not of individual evil, but of a failed political system. Still, the drug- and alcohol-fuelled viciousness of the guerrilla forces living in national parks and terrorising villages raises questions about individual responsibility and the lingering impact of guilt. With a tone both compassionate and matter-of-fact, Safari captures the horror of children forced to confront impossible ethical dilemmas.

Great Agony begins with a scene of terrible violence: a soccer game blown apart by a stray missile from across the Ruzizi River. Risto Mahuno lies with ringing ears near the dismembered bodies of his two close friends. These were the boys with whom he swam in the rivers, herded cattle and wandered through the forests, and in one blow he is parted both from them and his own playful youth.

Already he has taken the first step of a journey that will take him perilously close to insanity, leaving innocence far behind.

Shortlisted for the Citizen Book Prize in 2011, this book bears the weight of its dark words well. It explores the forced violence and violation of becoming Kadogo, child soldiers, bludgeoned into fearlessness and an absolute lack of empathy. Captured from his grandparents' village along with his cousin Benny, Risto is at once victim and perpetrator, mired in a bog of infighting. Terrified, silent, Risto watches as his sweetheart, Néné, is bartered "like a cheap piece of goods" amongst the soldiers. His own powerlessness overwhelms him. The only way to adjust and survive is to set aside his humanity and become one of the "young lions", ready to kill any stranger on sight. Risto chooses viciousness as self-defence, all the time aware of his self-betrayal and the hurt in the eyes of the gentle-spirited Benny. Safari unfolds the layers of trauma that swaddle the Kadogo, who live in shock, carrying "that evil spirit within them", and receive punishment and praise in equal measure from their capricious superiors.

The tide turns when Risto finds himself in hospital, miraculously free of the camp's horrors and deprivations. He aims to become a mechanic, to be a part of his family and community again, but he fears that his crimes will be exposed. Inwardly, they taunt him daily. At last he feels driven to flee altogether, through Burundi, across Lake Kivu on a raft, through Tanzania and down into Mozambique. He faces hunger and hostility along the way, but also moments of compassion, and comes to rest at last in an arid refugee camp near Nampula where he gradually retreats into himself. His memories of his beloved Néné and his self-hatred deny him even a moment of peace.

The greatest triumph of this story is that Safari dedicates so much time to the painful aftershocks of Risto's trauma. His actions, his loss, and his fear follow Risto wherever he goes, shadowing him like a malicious watcher. Too often, the tortures of post-traumatic mental disorders find only limited expression in tales of injustice. Readers may prefer characters who overcome personal difficulties in a pleasing story arc of conflict and resolution, but Risto's everyday reality of inner torment has a sincerity to it that speaks at a deeper level of refugees' experiences.

Often, it is only through fiction that such agonies reach a literate, privileged audience. The hint on the cover that Risto's life reflects real events empowers the novel further as a vessel of truth and memory. Carefully edited and conceived in lyrical prose, Safari's story holds us like a news article or a stats report won't. But it's still brave of Safari to submit such intimate pain to critical review, especially when most readers will consume it as a product of African literature without taking any of its themes to heart or being prompted to action. Writers in Africa are continually faced with the question of social responsibility: how relevant is this novel? How truthfully does it present suffering? What is its global impact? Often, creativity and imaginative licence are not the first priorities of authors or critics when a new work of fiction comes out of an African context. Selective international attention pressures writers from this continent each to be more

visceral, more emotionally vulnerable than the last. The bureaucracies of states are slow and grudging; sometimes the strongest means of making oneself heard is via fiction or semi-fiction, in literature or film. This is the arena in which the events of Safari's novel play out, almost in competition with similar texts from around the world. It is to be hoped that narratives like these will somehow draw the critical and humanitarian attention they deserve, without devolving into one homogeneous genre of agony unaddressed.

Safari's own journey from the DRC to South Africa, where he taught himself English and earned a degree in biotechnology, foregrounds his awareness of the struggle for survival across Africa. His depictions of communities, coming together both to include and to exclude, have a particular poignancy. Yet the beauty of this novel lies in its realism explored through rich writing, whether a group of boys are harvesting mushrooms at dawn or a church in a refugee camp is resonating with voices raised in worship. This is writing that grows out of poetry, and deserves to be read as such, even as the pathos of Risto's pilgrimage deserves to be recognised as something more than entertainment.