

[Review] Baingana's Memories of War

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"Lucky," by Doreen Baingana, is a historical-memoir short story that addresses the subject of war and its devastating effects on human society. The immediate allusion to "Gulu District, West Nile" paints in the reader's mind the impression of the 1980 insurgency—which occurred after Idi Amin was toppled a year earlier—and places the story perfectly to the period during the Uganda Bush War, which lasted for nine years from 1980. The story is set in a school that has been abandoned by a majority of teachers and students and now has eleven boys as the frightened occupants together with their only teacher, Mr. Komakech.

The protagonist, who is also the narrator, has been involuntarily locked up in a school environment for a couple of reasons. First, he has nowhere to go, as Auntie Joyce, who lives in Kampala, and his father, who lives in Aboke, are unreachable. Second, the fear of the marauding Lakwena rebels has engulfed them, to a point they are frozen in the school grounds. The imagery reveals to the reader the inevitable truth about war: that it is a tool used by the lawless to stagger and scatter and destroy human connections and societal ties.

The headteacher, "whose job is to take care of the school, took off with the rest and left us!" This happened when the helpless students needed leadership, a sense of security, and reassurance. To their disbelief, everyone seems to be running to where they imagine safety beckons. Hence, much of what Mr. Komakech does through the story until he is shot dead is to hide in solidarity with the boys and reassure them that the phase of the war will pass until he doesn't live long to witness its end.

Through the fate of Mr. Komakech, the writer shows that war reduces people's sense of self by taking away their accolades, identities and equalizing the victims by encompassing them with fear. It takes away everything so that all the familiarity of place and life is reduced to nothing. "Here we are, no assembly, no teachers except one, no cooks or cleaners, no sports, nothing. Free term? How about 'prison'?"

The image of Mr. Komakech's fall—after being shot by the rebels—"The heavy thump and clumsy shape of his fall will repeat itself behind my closed eyes for years." Again, the writer emphasizes the

permanence of war memories and the trauma they impact on the innocent victims, most of whom are helpless children. They grow up with the experiences etched in their young minds, robbing them of their irreplaceable innocence.

The writer generously utilizes narrative techniques, which would make for an otherwise dull read. But, she masterfully and cleverly employs rhetorical questions to engage the reader and give a feel of oral narration. For instance, when painting the image of a deserted school in the middle of the war, the narrator poses: "Even the cooks left us, can you imagine?" This question serves to engage the reader and portray the helplessness into which the narrator has sunk.

Or, when talking about the Lakwena rebels, the narrator asks, "So that's them? The powerful, magical, spirit-possessed army? So the rumors are real?" One can hear the trembling voice and feel the fear that has engulfed the young schoolboys to the extent that they only use pronouns to talk about the rebels—and to ascertain that they can still engage with the reality they dread, use rhetorical questions.

Or, when indirectly questioning authority, the narrator proves that rhetorical questions can be a perfect strategy to advance one's argument. "Now, all of a sudden, because he's a teacher, he's become a prophet? Now that he has called death out loud, won't it come?" Hence, rhetoric becomes the narrator's way of exercising freedom of thought and expressing unconventional arguments that would be unacceptable in normal situations, away from war.

As the primary technique to advance the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that one feels reading through the lines, rhetorical questions seem to be consciously chosen to the writer's success.

Humour, too, has been exploited to make an otherwise severe subject of war considerably readable. For instance, the narrator sets to describe the head teacher's head, comparing its large size to that of the hippo. In fact, the headteacher has gained a nickname, the "Big Head." This jest directed towards a figure of authority can be fathomed in a couple of ways. First, it is the narrator's coping mechanism, one that enables him to look at trouble through the bearable eyes of humor. Second, it is a way of criticizing the headteacher, who has involuntarily absconded from his duty of ensuring the safety of all the students in school and under his watch, even during the unlikely times as wartime. Instead, the headteacher is portrayed as one who works with the convenience of events and not call of duty. Even to the reader, the heightened tension is lessened to manageable levels. Humour, as it is, makes the story enjoyable to read.

The other technique that the writer uses effectively to narrate the events is the story within a story. The reflection on Old Okiror's war stories advances the thematic concern in "Lucky." Through the protagonist's mother's observation, Old Okiror came back from the war in Burma with nothing other than stories and experiences of traveling around the world. He is an epitome of how Black people are recruited into the armies to fight and advance the interests of others, especially the colonizers and neo-colonizers, without them getting any reward for their misguided efforts. Somehow, the analogy foreshadows how war robs one of their younger years and lets them free at old age.

Noting the age of characters in the story, the war, and the devastating effects it has on the society in which the narrator in "Lucky" lives, one gets a similar impression that Ishmael Beah's memoir, "A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier" gives. And given that Doreen Baingana was of school-age when the Uganda Bush War was fought, I have no reservations that there is a part of her history in the short story, hence a historical-memoir short story.

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