Idza Luhumyo’s Hair Politics

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Certain trends have emerged on the AKO Caine Prize For African Writing shortlists over the last decade. One of the more productive ones is its affinity with the Short Story Day Africa (SSDA) shortlists, stories from the latter showing up on the former four times over a nine year period—one in 2018 and 2022, two in 2014 and 2019—and going on to win once, in 2014. For a casual understanding of the SSDA’s success at the Caine, one only needs to look at the contemporaneity of its annual themes, its irreverence towards genre, and the attention to language and style in its published anthologies. These three things taken together offer SSDA hopefuls a generous allowance for narrative and formal experimentation with at least half of its stories which have proceeded to the Caine leaning variously into the speculative. This is the context within which Idza Luhumyo’s story, “Five Years Next Sunday,” exists on the 23rd Caine shortlist: a piece of intrusion fantasy, its prose carefully measured, tied to a Black woman’s hair.

“Five Years Next Sunday” opens with a paragraph of twelve varying sentences and an abrupt page break. Its first sentence—“My locs are just shy of five years”—is immediately recognisable; it is the familiar dating of an appendage deeply linked to personality, used as shorthand for the bohemianism of creatives and as a touchstone for conversations around Blackness. And sure enough, the succeeding sentences texture the protagonist’s hair—“black,” “dark,” with “a black scarf to cover them.” Then the paragraph turns mid-sentence on her, pulling out into the more harrowing concerns of a drought and famine before settling, finally, into her quotidian life on “an afternoon when Neema calls me to her side…”

In this quotidian life, injustices sometimes refract each other but mostly they intersect and interact, distinct threads of conflict becoming layered and complementary. An apparent gender divide is softened by the presence of the almost divine in Pili. A budding queer intimacy is nipped by an

allegiance to race. Familial tensions are both complicated and tempered against the communal: the mother, fearing something unnamed, sends her twin sons with whom Pili has "never exchanged more than a few sentences in all our lives" with her on an errand to *buy* water.

Here, the white gaze enters the page and is called out for what it is in a brief, truncated sentence, "A white man," an effective mnemonic for the West, bringing forward the weight of colonisation and its innumerable atrocities before circling back to the colloquial "mzungu." She says, "He says his name is Seth. I don't believe him," refusing the concretisation of the man, resisting his separation from what he represents, what Claudia Rankine in *Citizen: An American Lyric* references as the "historical self". Both Pili and Seth are thespians in a play that predates them by centuries, aware of the limits set on any connection between them by the historical relationality of their racial identities such that later, when Honey, the object of her queer desire—and Seth's white associate—tells her, "He only loves the hair, not you," Pili replies, "I know that."

Although he thinks whiteness is "the perfect backdrop for the display of black skin," it is Seth's white skin which is, in fact, odd and misplaced in the in situ Blackness around him, his visibility correlative to "something parched about him." With his interiority off the page, his dialogue a constant allusion to Pili's hair and the dissonance of their social statuses, and the obscurity of his motivations, his character is an untenable accident of his whiteness.

True to function, whiteness annexes and subsumes everything else. Seth is obsessed with Pili's locs and, in his bid to possess them, goes all out. His fetish temporarily isolates her from the peculiar patriarchal dangers of her situation and elevates the family from people who buy water in a drought to people who *sell* it, their proximity to whiteness in effect transplanting them from the rank of the oppressed to the class of the oppressor. Incentivised by the same fetish, the family's dread of the locs becomes a love predicated on a capitalistic gimmick, they ask Pili not to trade them in for rain when the time comes.

Pili's locs belong to a tradition of callers, women who make rain by cutting their locs. Despite her people's existential thirst, the repercussion for exercising this power is banishment to "the quarter of witches" to be garbed, in and out, in black. Even her queerness which promises her salvation turns out in the end to be just a soft underbelly. After all, across histories and geographies, powerful women are anomalous within the patriarchy, Blackness is its own punishment, and to be queer in a homophobic society is to be perenially endangered. Pili is, thus, trapped between the oppressive force of her community and the rather insidious oppression of her moral responsibility to the same community. Her situation is consistent with what feminist philosopher, Marilyn Frye, describes as "the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby-trapped."

Still, one wonders what it means that Luhumyo's Pili exists at the nexus of Black, woman and queer? What combination of her identities have made the rainmaker possible: Black womanhood, queer womanhood or queer Black womanhood? Does every woman with locs partake of this power? Was her "sangazimi"—her aunt, the rainmaker before her—queer as well?

While she is an active and generous narrator, making available to the reader what she doesn't share with Honey, Pili is ultimately a passive character. The most expressive of her emotions is desire and this depends on others for movement. She yearns for her mother's love until she becomes enslaved to the rationing of it. She longs for Honey but leaves the realisation of it in the white woman's hands. She is so romantically absent from her courtship with Seth that her continuous appearance in his "apartment by the beach" is jarring each time. She is able to observe the many betrayals that line her life but unable to feel them. Even after she sees photos of other women—"…all black, African. And they all have dreadlocks,"—alongside hers, "taken surreptitiously," hanging in Seth's secret room, her emotions are absent. It takes Honey to set her in motion, tricking her into cutting her hair,

incurring rain and the wrath of the patriarchy. And in the coda of the story, when she sees Honey escaping with her freshly cut hair “coiling and coiling and coiling” in her hands, the story simply ends, outsourcing the accumulated burden of emotions to the reader.

Yet again, a story brings the oft-cited passage from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to mind: “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably… We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won over our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

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