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The limits of self-professed hypocrisy

BY

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In 'Revolutionaries' House,' Nthikeng Mohlele explores the moral decay within South African politics through a disaffected politician tortured by his personal indiscretions.

In *Revolutionaries' House*, Nthikeng Mohlele returns to Johannesburg to diagnose the moral condition of South Africa after 30 years of democracy. In early post-apartheid literature, Johannesburg was used as a device through which to explore the challenges of a postcolonial state, forging a new national identity amid political tensions, racial animosities, class disparities, and the onslaught of Western globalization. The city has been the backdrop to all but one of Mohlele's eight novels. His work has explored how the city's legacy as a former mining boomtown, whose wealth was built through the exploitation of black labor, continues to impose asymmetrical realities on its residents. Like fellow Joburg writers Kgebetli Moele, Niq Mhlongo, and Phaswane Mpe, Mohlele is interested in examining the psychological violence of navigating these extremes through characters who make questionable, sometimes even life-threatening, decisions. Of all his novels, *Revolutionaries' House* is the most explicit indictment of Johannesburg as a symbol for a country in decline.

"Everything seems either wrong or woefully inadequate in this metropolis," says our narrator, who is introduced to us as Mr Winston (though this isn't his real name). As a self-proclaimed "vagabond and undecided pessimist," Mr Winston paints a familiarly austere picture of Johannesburg as a place of hardship and bedlam. His houselessness requires him to work odd jobs like washing taxis at the rank on Lilian Ngoyi Street (formerly Bree Street), and hawking

scrap metal sourced on the black market. “The premature and often gratuitous dying around me reminds me that there is, in fact, life to be lived, erratic dying to be dodged,” he declares, recalling Mongane Wally Serote’s poem *City Johannesburg*, where death is an omnipresence that “lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh.”

But life wasn’t always this grim for Mr Winston. Before he roamed the streets of Johannesburg, he was a handsome, firebrand politician in Revolutionaries’ House, the fictional ruling party that he blames for driving South Africa into the ground. Though Mr Winston has been a devoted member of the party since the struggle against apartheid, he is outraged that they’ve presided over decades of rot. He denounces their unabashed corruption, indifference to the living conditions of poor black South Africans, and betrayal of the promises made upon liberation. He claims to have never participated in underhanded political activities, but a part of him wonders whether he is still guilty by association.

On the surface, *Revolutionaries’ House* reads like an indictment of the African National Congress (ANC), the organization that has ruled South Africa since its democratic settlement in 1994. However, the novel is a confusing attempt at social commentary that misses one too many marks. Throughout the novel, Mohlele strives to prove that there is correlation between Mr Winston’s personal hypocrisies and the hypocrisies of the state. But these efforts aren’t fruitful. As a character, Mr Winston is keen to beat the audience to the punch, confessing to perceived sins and wrongs before we even get a chance to know him. Consequently, the reader isn’t able to gain any insights about Mr Winston, the women he believes he has wronged, or the perilous state of the nation.

Like some of the more famous defectors in recent ANC history (former president Jacob Zuma and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema come to mind), Mr Winston is eager—perhaps *too* eager—to let us know that he has a “searing conscience.” He insists that he sympathizes with the plight of the masses, distinguishing himself from the “power mercenaries” and “political degenerates” in his party whom he claims to have “[eaten] alive with [his] wit and composure.” But playground sparring soon proved to be unsustainable. After delivering an impassioned rant at the party’s National Executive Committee meeting, Mr Winston resigns his post and leaves politics indefinitely. He is then hit by a mysterious illness that he blames on the debilitating state of his mind. Deemed incurable, he abandons the life that he once knew, loitering around the city and reflecting on his career, romances, and the state of the country.

Like his previous works *Small Things* and *Illumination*, Mohlele uses an interior monologue to frame the narrative in *Revolutionaries’ House*, allowing Mr Winston’s improvisations to orchestrate the themes in the novel. This approach creates a sense of immediacy that is sustained through Mohlele’s ability to seamlessly move back and forth in time, assembling a world in which the actions of the past feel as proximate as those of the present. According to Mr

Winston, his self-imposed exile spanned nine years, although in another section of the novel, he puts this number at eleven. Nonetheless, the reader does not feel this passage of time until he mentions bodily ailments, mental spirals, or specific events. This suspension of time immerses the reader in Mr Winston's endless neuroses—an experience that can be quite suffocating. Thankfully, Mohlele offsets this claustrophobia with humor. Despite all his moral browbeating, Mr Winston is a rather silly man.

As a writer, Mohlele is fond of long, portentous sentences that can easily seize half a page. The imagery in *Revolutionaries' House* is excessively rich. It is littered with overwrought passages whose observations are too basic to justify the kind of lyricism in which they're written. There are instances in the novel where the flamboyant prose functions as a pretty distraction from an undistilled thought, or beautiful disguise for an absence of insights. This flatulence works best when it's used to accentuate Mr Winston's enormous self-regard and verbosity, which bring to mind the chronic long-windedness of the South African political elite. We can't help but cringe at Mr Winston's pompous and embarrassing manner of speaking, especially when he refers to a woman's eyes as "seduction globes," describes forbidden passion as "interplanetary heat," likens medium brown skin to "two shades of strong coffee prepared without lactose intolerant considerations," nurtures a juvenile obsession with "lace panties" (black and burgundy to be exact), and commiserates with the poor and working-class South Africans by describing how his "ailing soul is no more than that elusive ache in [his] innermost membranes."

As the novel unfolds, Mr Winston delivers observations of the people within the city while contemplating his relationships with women. Of the five chapters in *Revolutionaries' House*, four are named after women who've had a direct impact on Mr Winston. There is Alessandra Pedreira, the smart and accomplished United Nations (UN) envoy who is depicted as the one who got away; Monica (or "Monica of the Baritone"), his straight-talking, former sister-in-law with whom he has a "dangerous and demobilizing" liaison; Meera Chakrabarti, the long-suffering owner of a halfway house whose life ends in tragedy after she makes a request of Mr Winston that he rejects; and Mmalerato, the young nurse whom he crushes on after she tends to him in hospital. There's also Naomi, his dutiful ex-wife whom he betrays with an illicit affair. She doesn't receive a chapter in her name, but Mr Winston's mind often drifts back to Naomi. He admonishes himself for the pain and humiliation that he caused her, yet also justifies stepping into this "intricate maze of pleasure and suffering."

Even after their divorce, Naomi remains honorable and stoic, delivering toiletries and love letters to Mr Winston at his makeshift bed underneath the Nelson Mandela Bridge, the overpass which cuts across the Johannesburg's skyline. When Mr Winston discovers the letters have been taken, he begins a furious search for them, using this time to ruminate on the failure of his marriage, and his middling political career. Mohlele attempts to parallel Mr Winston's romantic indiscretions and his political shortcomings, likening his betrayal of the virtuous Naomi to the

ruling party's betrayal of South Africans. His adulterous behavior becomes a microcosm for the moral cowardice that has not only taken root in him, but in Revolutionaries' House too. This allegorical treatment isn't only limited to his ex-wife though. At various points of the novel, female characters are ciphers for Mr Winston's existential dread, self-loathing, and nihilism. But he is also conscious of the unfavorable optics around this kind of behavior, stating in one passage:

I have not come to a conclusive opinion about whether my vagabond ways amount to anything of moral value and gravitas which can lead cynical and self-preserving party diehards anywhere, or—even if I were to sway popular opinion there—I may be outed as a liar and adulterer, a fornicator. Where is the moral weight in that, in a man incapable of even admitting, fully laying bare the schemes and true reach of his rottenness, a man who by all accounts tells half-truths to save his skin, claims that there was just one erotic encounter when there were seven, then browbeats and threatens his own conscience to confirm this alternative reality?

This is perhaps where the limitations of the novel's stream-of-consciousness approach are most acutely felt. While *Revolutionaries' House* may distort our hierarchy of time by allowing Mr Winston's thoughts to serve as our compass, it leaves the reader with little room to make sense of questions or situations that he appears to have already resolved in his head. Mr Winston tends to anticipate criticism of his actions, providing answers to questions that have yet to be asked, confessing to hypocrisies passingly, and offering rambling explanations that bookend his mistakes neatly. He isn't given a moment to be candid, or vulnerable. He isn't afforded the grace of being in the wrong, or trying to figure things out. While the novel occurs over the span of many years, Mr Winston remains the same person with the same thoughts. Of course, Mohele is not obliged to turn Mr Winston's voluntary excommunication into a contrived tale of self-discovery. But he could have demonstrated how Mr Winston arrived at, questioned, or even debated the long-held beliefs that he monologues about. He could have written a character who reads less like a catalog of ideas, and more like a human.

Revolutionaries' House appears to suffer from what *New Yorker* staff writer Katy Waldman termed the "reflexivity trap." Waldman describes it as the "idea that professing awareness of a fault absolves you of that fault." The reflexivity trap "casts self-awareness as a finish line, not a starting point," creating a group of "protagonists who are to be congratulated for spending enough time contemplating themselves that they can correctly diagnose their own flaws." We

see some of these analytical reflexes when Mr Winston defends, laments, and defends again his objectification of women.

In one of his more defensive missives, he declares that:

In a world of ugliness, of strife and of chronic lack, eyes and hearts must seek beautiful things—in other words, things that birth and multiply pleasurable and heartwarming occasions to thaw the nation’s collective heart from the winter of acute political enslavement. There *must* be beauty, there must be proximity to beauty, there must be ownership of beauty, or at least some license to claim it, to be touched and transformed by its charms.

Then in another passage, he provides an appraisal of this defensive missive:

I should have made a much greater effort to see beyond physical beauty and make a much deeper inquiry into women themselves, observed something much more delicate yet still strong, the inner blue flame of their being that hides their wretchedness and splendor, something much weightier than flirtatious, laughter, and moist panties.

Toward the end of the novel, Mr Winston concludes that while he may not have understood women, he has “experienced them in profound and transformative ways.” Yet there are no fingerprints pointing towards this profundity or transformation. We cannot testify to the brilliance, hurt, joy, or humanity of these women, either. It’s as though Mohlele expects us to believe Mr Winston on this because he has told us so. While the women are furnished with middlebrow cultural signifiers, sensible hobbies, vivid physical traits, or snippy one-liners, we have no real sense of engaging with *actual* people.

Most notably, for a novel that focuses so much on politics, there is very little of it in *Revolutionaries’ House*. There is no mention of policies, bills, or organizational structures. No tales of subterfuge among candidates vying for party presidency, overworked technocrats dreading another round of budget cuts, or strategic tantrums in parliament. Social issues are described in fairly awkward metaphors: The lives of the “hungry, the sick, the betrayed, citizens to whom promises have been made for decades” are described as “leaking buckets [that] lose their life force and purpose, one drop at a time.” In place of political insights are feel-good

platitudes that are void of any sincerity or meaning: “I learned that power, of whatever nature, does not reside only at Revolutionaries’ House, that power exists even among the seemingly powerless.”

Often, Mr Winston sounds more like a jaded politics student than a principled civil servant who lost the will to change the system. We don’t get a sense of the scope of his career or his track record as a politician. We aren’t told about the roles that he occupied in government, his technical expertise, or ideological leanings. And despite his excoriations of his comrades who ransacked the country’s coiffures, we don’t know how proximate he was to the scene of the crime. The only indication of any potential misgivings—to put it generously—is the private income that he generates from Azania Foods, a small chain of fast-food stores in the suburbs of Sandton City, Hyde Park, and Rivonia. We soon learn that it’s not so much the ownership of a business that bothers Mr Winston, but the “compelling profits and a solid contribution to making society fat and unhealthy” that causes him concern.

These dealings don’t seem grave enough to warrant the intense guilt that propels Mr Winston’s narrative. Perhaps the reader is meant to see him as a representation of the broken promises of South African democracy or maybe his feelings of ineptitude represent the challenges that arise when a liberation party ascends to the power structures that they once decried. Still, a lack of specificity makes it difficult to believe that guilt by association would trigger a condition so severe that it would drive someone to withdraw from society. Mr Winston’s hypocrisy feels remote and abstract. Could Mohlele have banked too much on the real-life frustration towards the ANC to lend this far-fetched narrative some credibility?

Revolutionaries’ House has arrived during one of the most pivotal national election years in South Africa’s three decades of democracy. Mohlele has packed the novel with the kind of grievances that might resonate with readers who have read the scorching anti-ANC op-eds in newspapers, tuned into the broadcast debates, participated in the gloomy conversations about the future of the economy, and engaged in online discourse led by disgruntled middle-class professionals who believe their taxes entitle them to a better-run country. These readers might feel seen when Mr Winston proclaims that “Cuban and Russian politics are in many ways outdated and irrelevant to South African problems.” They might feel pleased when Mr Winston compares elderly politicians in the party to “old horses that [can] no longer run at gallop.” They might even relate to him when he commiserates with “citizens burning tyres in the townships, stoning the police vehicles, [and] littering city streets with blood and dirt.”

But Mr Winston’s views also capture how superficially the South African public has been conditioned to engage with politics. While *Revolutionaries’ House* may have been billed as a not-so-veiled critique of our current political system, it also exposes—however unwittingly—the vacuousness of mainstream political engagement. The belief that muscular pragmatism is key to

unlocking the potential of the country not only illustrates the shortcomings of grievance politics, but reveals the limits of self-awareness in a country that has long been at ease with its alarming inequities. *Revolutionaries' House* proves that these criticisms will be perpetually useless if they avoid any meaningful examination of whether the machinations of our political economy could ever foster equality for all. Even if South Africans had a clean and effective government into power, there is no guarantee that this would rehabilitate a country whose economic system has been predicated on the exploitation of cheap labor, whose overlords have resembled and originated from the same places as the oppressed black majority. Perhaps the best way to summarize the existing state of affairs is to borrow one of the more salient lines from Mr Winston: “And all of it—all of it—seems like musical accompaniment to a tragic and amusing period drama.”

About the Author

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