

## FOREWORD

It would not be an exaggeration to describe Lindisa Mathabela's poetry collection, *girl-child woman*, as a work of a budding genius eager to express itself, infused with a deep sense of independence of mind, unbending individuality and unshakeable love for Africa. It is the work of a deeply insightful writer caught between the worlds of a teenager and of a grown woman.

As the title itself indicates, the anthology ably captures the insights and tribulations of a teenager who is making the transition to womanhood. In many ways the book tells the story of a transition, both physical and psychological, and Mathabela's precocious brilliance shines very brightly throughout it. Not only is her writing powerfully evocative and lyrical, as tends to be the case with poetry that remains relevant throughout the ages, but it is also very impressive in terms of the breadth of its subject matter.

While we are all creatures of our times, with our observations confined to our immediate vistas, Mathabela's incisive mind goes far beyond events and experiences that would be expected of somebody of her age. Instead, her observations of and commentaries on human beings and their foibles are more generic rather than specific to a particular country, region or era.

While written by a young woman in South Africa, Mathabela's *girl-child woman* is as relevant and no doubt as pleasurable to read to an African as it is to people in any part of the universe – so strong is her sense of universal citizenship. She accomplishes this feat while remaining very conscious of and deriving pride in her African-ness, which comes through very strongly in her poem "We Are African", she describes movingly as "The Land of the First Trumpet / Where the first Heartbeat was heard / Where the first Sun rose and birthed the first horizon".

Her strong faith Africa, the cradle of mankind, is re-affirmed in the poem "Last night I went on a journey", in which she describes the continent movingly as "tomorrow's freedom...tomorrow's glory...tomorrow's sunrise".

Mathabela has a very strong sense of her identity, a strong sense of her independence of mind and a strong sense of her individuality. Not for her conforming to others' expectations in order to fit in or to win ephemeral popularity. Instead, she is proudly who and what she is: an intelligent young woman with a mind of her own, who cherishes her own company and delights in the quiet of the night.

Her strong sense of independence shines through in a number of poems. “Zeus himself could not stop me as I am more powerful than time” and “In the end accepting what must be accepted is a form of surrender”, she writes in the poem “And then there was silence...” In the poem “the gradual” she avers thunderously that she will not allow herself to be reduced to be anything less than what or who she is: “And soon we will see / That we are destined to be free / Destined for oneness / Peace and Harmony”.

That strong sense of the poet’s independence of mind and her dogged refusal to fit it come through strongly in the poem “Defiance”, and in “Free” she makes known her longing for true, boundless freedom that would enable her not to worry about others’ myopia and prejudice. In the latter poem she writes: “The ability to overcome the stares and glares of judgment and see far ahead of and beyond them / Further than their ignorant minds would ever care to see...../ .....If you and I were as free, stereotypes and prejudices alike would cease to exist”.

In a poem whose title is a bullet point, she writes movingly: “I refuse to be imprisoned / By their labels and guns. / I am part of NO category. / I am NO statistic. / I am HUMAN. / I AM ME. / Tired of following the misled.”

Another unmistakable sense that comes through strongly in Mathabela’s poetry is her admirable confidence in herself and her abilities, at a time when some of her peers may be afflicted by self-doubt. In “We Are African”, she says that she was destined for greatness:

*Infinitely.  
Her life was breathed into me and so I am abundant.  
Every part of me was chosen for greatness.  
Delicately, I was created  
With perfection  
And finesse.*

Mathabela comes alive at night when alone in her room (“Suddenly I realize that I am at my best when the powerful voice of silence washes through me”), where she enjoys her solitude:

*My room, plain by day; magical by night, is the reason I stay awake at twilight.  
A haven where my spirit freely soars as my body gracefully rests.  
My systems in sync, my thoughts at ease.*

Her love of nature, her empathy for those less fortunate than herself (“He looked at me, / Broken and senseless, / And taught me a truth / That no man should ever learn”) and

her powers of observations are legendary. A precocious talent, her understanding of human beings and their foibles is nothing short of astounding. It comes through very strongly in the opening and closing stanzas of her poem "HIT":

*In this world.  
Hate-driven acts are applauded  
And the hunger for power  
Remains deep-rooted in our hearts.*

.....  
.....  
*There is no history; only history's repetition.  
Let the story  
Of our ruthless ruin  
Be known.  
How We Have All Been HIT.*

Lindisa Mathabela's voice is more than a welcome addition to the canon of great poems that originated in Africa. Hers is a writing that speaks to all the peoples of the world about many things that many take for granted. Hers is a voice that needs to be heard, and I commend her inaugural anthology, *girl-child woman*, without reservation to all who treasure great poetry.

Kaizer Mabhlidi Nyatsumba  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
21 April 2014

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