Juliane Okot Bitek, *100 Days* (University of Alberta Press, 2016)

*100 Days* by Juliane Okot Bitek is a collection of 100 poems based on the 100 days of ethnic cleansing that happened in Rwanda in 1994 claiming over 800,000 lives. The poems, originally written as part of a partnership with another artist and shared via social media, engage traumatised personal memory, suspect the objectivity of official discourse and explore the complications involved in forging a new future. This collection, therefore, does not only add to the ever-growing library of contemporary African poetry, but it does so in ways that will further the postcolonial conversations around nationhood, security and interethnic conflicts as they cross paths with ideas of autochthony, place, displacement and ecological interests in twenty-first century Africa.

The speaking voice in this collection, mostly represented as ‘we’ and shifting occasionally to ‘I’ in the negotiation of space within the convergence of the public nature of the genocide and its personal dimensions, comes across mostly as ironic. The motif of betrayal is, for instance, quite strong in the collection, but the allegations of betrayal are levelled against nonhuman witnesses supposed to have suppressed or distorted the story instead of against the perpetrators of the genocide. In ‘Day 100’, we read the following lines:

> It was earth that betrayed us first
> it was earth that held on to its beauty
> compelling us to return (1-3)
> as if nothing was different
> as if nothing changed (8-9)

The motif of betrayal is generally built around nature, as in the lines above, and religion. This can be assumed to be the poet’s mockery of how humanity would blame its inhumanity on others instead of taking responsibility for their action. That way, the poet is able to deliberately downplay the political dimensions of the massacre appearing to focus more on the psychological and existential aspects. This conscious avoidance, however, does not render the poems any less political, nor does it erase the apportionment of blame; the ironic silence only serves to make the politics that led to the tragedy even louder.

Matters relating to official arrangements of reconciliation and commemoration are also raised in the collection. The poetry treats them with suspicion as they might be ignoring the complexities of personal memory and trauma. This easily calls to mind the numerous critical voices that have commented on the Rwandan reconciliation process, also reminiscent of criticisms directed at South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the 1990s. Bitek captures this hypocrisy in these lines from ‘Day 90’:

> ultimately
> commemoration is a crafted affair
> a beautiful thing
> a symbol of power & resonance
> in the everlasting flame (10-14)

About the reconciliation process she writes that,

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Reconciliation is a grand thing
reconciliation photographs well
reconciliation makes people smile
reconciliation feels good  dresses well
writes well  conjures good dreams (‘Day 87’, 1-5)

The poetry shows that these artificial activities do not necessarily bring healing, and might even subvert justice. The insensitivity of such arrangements is expressed in the lines that say artificial reconciliation ‘wants me to forget my first born daughter / the one I could not bury’ (‘Day 87’, 14).

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the poet is preaching vengeance; she seems rather to be advocating a more sympathetic, sensitive and just approach to the handling of public reconciliation.

Bitek’s poetry, in terms of aesthetics, thrives on its lyricality, achieved through the use of repetition, conversational tone and sometimes the flow of raw thought usually associated with the stream-of-consciousness technique. It is tempting to compare the poet’s exploration of African orality with that of the older generation of poet’s, especially her father’s, who has left a mark on the African literary landscape as a poet of African oral aesthetics and simple everyday diction. The voice, however, remains confidently hers as an artist belonging to a different generation faced with different issues and access to new media. She does not return to the local epics and folklore of the older generation; rather, it is again tempting to think that the original medium through which the poems were created and disseminated, i.e. the social media, must have also contributed to the conversational and condensed nature of the poems. The recurrent use of the ampersand in place of ‘and’ signals that. Some formalists may want to view the poems as fragmentary and sometimes meaningless. While such views can be justified by referring to recurrent use of repetition and phrases with elusive meaning, that, apart from forming an aspect of the poet’s technique, could be the poet’s exact point: the different forms of fragmentation experienced by the living victims of the genocide and the existential crises that have resulted from such an experience.

On the whole, Bitek’s new collection has provided yet an additional voice to contemporary African literature to not only document or reimagine history or continue the conversations on intersections of the public and the personal, the natural and the spiritual, and the ecological and the political in postcolonial literary studies, but to also encourage discussions on matters of ethnic and religious clashes in an age of increasing security threat on the continent and beyond.

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