



## ISTRAIGHT LENDABA

Author: Mmatshilo Motsei  
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Reviewer: Danyela Dimakatso Demir

**W**hile many readers are familiar with both Mmatshilo Motsei's non-fiction works *Hearing Visions*, *Seeing Voices* and *The Kangaroo Court* and her work as a healer and social activist, she is perhaps less known as a storyteller and poet. In 2020, Motsei self-published not only her previous works but also a collection of short stories entitled *Istraight Lendaba and Other Stories*.

The short story collection is intriguing both on a formal as well as content level. Much like looking at a photo album with snapshots from different lives, the book offers glimpses into the lives of various characters. These characters often emerge onto the page from the most marginalised communities for whom 1994 has changed virtually nothing. Often, as Motsei poignantly states during our conversation about the book, "The stories reveal women's pain".

*Istraight Lendaba* is inspired by both Brenda Fassie's eponymous song and her life in general. Motsei says that: "Brenda carried her wounds on her sleeve. Freedom comes with pain." This reflects in her short story collection. Many women characters who break out of patriarchal, religious and cultural confinement are scarred, traumatised and yet defiant.

The stories frequently incorporate local township language, something which is not typical for contemporary South African women's writing. One of many examples is an excerpt of "Kasi Crossings", a snapshot-like story at a taxi rank: "Eish, letjatji le ntsha noga mo mosimeng," says a man waiting for the taxi. Wat se slange, daar's mos nie slange hierso. If you want to take snakes out of their holes, gaan platteland toe,' says another." Usually, this linguistic amalgamation of several (South) African languages is prevalent in works by male South African writers, such as Niq Mhlongo, Thando Mgqolozana (particularly in *A Man Who is not a Man*) and Kgebetli Moele. Thus, Motsei often writes, as Makhosazana Xaba remarks about poet Isabela Motadinyane's work in a different context, in "men's lingo". I read this stylistic choice as a form of subverting, intruding into a male-dominated area, a deliberate intrusion of sorts, a powerful way of claiming language and breaking with literary convention.

The themes, though held together by an overarching thread of the characters' various journeys of struggling to overcome different forms of oppression, are manifold: they range from the portrayal of broken relationships between husbands and wives, mothers and children, to socio-economic struggles, sexual violence, abuse, resisting patriarchal, religious and cultural forms of oppression and, ultimately, the quest for love, sexual liberation and different forms of desire and spirituality.

Photo: Victor Dlamini



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“Two Cocks on the Same Roof” follows a woman who, attracted by a handsome man she spots at a conference, decides to have a one-night stand with him. The woman and her one-time lover, whose name she cannot remember, walk, after several drinks and flirtations, up to her hotel room. An internal conflict is portrayed throughout the first half of the story as to what a “proper” woman should or should not do. Though she is bold and open about her sexual attraction towards the man, internalised, normative voices berate her for her daring behaviour: “*Head Voice 2: Jesus Christ of Nazareth, a woman is not supposed to smoke, especially if the man is not smoking*”.

Motsei says she had to battle her inner conditioned child while writing the story. And even as a reader who claims to be supposedly liberated, I found myself hoping that she decides to go home on her own after the drinks, that she certainly does not hand her key to the man when they are outside her door. However, in what, in a normal world, should not be, but in our world certainly is an unexpected twist, the narrator is in full control of the actions and her body the entire time.

This narrative of women’s quest for sexual liberation and the freedom to live out and experience our own desire and pleasure is remarkable because it subverts patriarchal and heteronormative rules of women as being “submissive” and good through simple but very effective tools. Some examples here are that firstly, in a stereotypically “male” move, the narrator begins her flirtation with the stranger by sending him a message written on a serviette, which is accompanied by a drink. Secondly, it is not, as one would perhaps expect, the man who leaves the room the next day, but her after scribbling a short note that makes clear that she enjoyed herself, but that there are no strings attached.

Although this is undoubtedly Motsei’s most powerful story about sexual liberation and desire, “Borrowed Time” and “Secret Weapon” portray women’s sexual desire and liberation within the confines of unhappy marriages and the characters’, albeit temporary, breaking away from these oppressive and unfulfilling constraints.

Perhaps one of the most heart-breaking stories in the collection is “The Keeper of Secrets”. A girl is gang raped by her fellow schoolmates. She, like so many other characters in *Istraight Lendaba*, is vulnerable, alone and unprotected by society. She has no one to turn to after the unspeakable violence that has happened to her. Added to that, she carries the burden of caring for her ill mother. And yet, her humanity, her deep love for other beings remains intact. Moments after the gang rape, she finds a trapped and hurt dog, which despite her own pain, she proceeds to free: “I was almost done unrolling the wire when it started to wag its tail. With the palm of my hand, I rubbed the paw which had been pierced by the wire. It licked my hand a few times and hopped away with three legs on the ground and one hanging.”

She knows that neither her nor the injured dog will get help in her community for she states, matter-of-factly: “There are no clinics for dogs where I live. There are no clinics for girls either”. But her strength and ability to show deep compassion and love for another being in the darkest moment of her life is a powerful symbol in the short story collection that perhaps points to love and human compassion as a remarkable tool of resistance, rebellion and potential for change of a cruel world.

I asked Motsei about this during our conversation and I shall leave you with her words: “This reflects my longing for a different kind of world. The thing about writing is that it can help you to create your own world. To master the art of loving deeply. And I’m not talking about erotic love. I mean loving who you are in an intense way, and when you step into that kind of love, you will see other people with a different eye. This is the core of my calling.”



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