



AN INTRICATE MEDITATION ON IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Book Title: *Scatterlings*
Author: Rešoketšwe Manenzhe
Publisher Jacana Media (2020)



Reviewer: Gogontle Mosiakgabo

Rešoketšwe Manenzhe's debut novel, *Scatterlings*, is a beautiful yet harrowing reflection on notions of race-based generational trauma, migration and belonging in the midst of discriminatory laws in South Africa.

Set in 1927, *Scatterlings* follows the journey of an interracial family – the Van Zijl's – spearheaded by Abram, a man of Dutch and English descent, and Alisa, a black woman from the Caribbean who has been adopted by an English couple. Upon the passing of the Immorality Act, which prohibited “illicit carnal discourse between Europeans and natives”, the family is thrown into chaos as it attempts to navigate its future in the face of this constitutional change. Alisa's unending quest for belonging collides with her battle with depression, culminating in her tragic death by suicide and a fire that also claims the life of her youngest daughter, Emilia and almost takes that of her eldest, Dido. Consequently, Abram, a White man not privy to the personal complications of race, must traverse a South Africa that no longer recognises his daughter as a citizen on the basis of her colour despite her origins.

The novel explores the intricacies and complexities of identity and belonging primarily through Alisa's character. Having been born to West Indian slaves and adopted by an Englishman in her youth as a result of her father's death, Alisa is transplanted to a context where she is not only a minority but an anomaly in her most formative years. This yearning for a home space and community is emotionally articulated later in the novel via Alisa's diary entries. The generational yearning for this belonging is passed down to Dido, who, like her mother, must reckon with the death of a parent, a country that does not want her and a father who, despite his love, will never fully understand her.

The use of myths and symbols in this novel is particularly interesting as it not only illustrates the connections among communities across the African continent, but also demonstrates the transnational and trans-generational capacity and endurance of storytelling, custom and the ways in which Africans and people of African descent in the diaspora make sense of the world.

Manenzhe's prose is elegant and almost poetic. Its sophistication, however, is slightly undermined by a sometimes overly lyrical tone, which made it difficult at times to ground oneself in the foundational facts of the plot. Because the prose is so lyrical in nature, it tends to focus more on world building rather than character building at the beginning. The unfortunate result is unclear introduction of the characters and the connections they share with one another. The use of multiple points of view results in an incomplete understanding of most of characters' identities and motivations (except for Alisa by way of her diary entries). However, this may also be due to the fact that the novel takes place in a relatively short space of time and is centred around significant catastrophic events.

Overall, *Scatterlings* skilfully explores the complex realities of identity, race, love, transgenerational (forced) migration and return, as well as those of the quest for belonging. It truly shows generational reverberations of the trauma inflicted by racist imperialism.



Gogontle Mosiakgabo is an English Literary Studies student at the University of Cape Town. She is interested in the way in which issues of gender, sexuality and race are (re)presented and explored in Queer Literature.