

FILM REVIEW

Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, writer/director. *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*. 2019. 120 minutes. Sotho. Lesotho. Urcu Media. No price reported.

This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection was shot by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese in his native Lesotho. The mountainous and landlocked country, entirely surrounded by South Africa, is given an international exposure through the artistic and aesthetic commitment of the film director. The film gained a wide visibility through screening at several international film festivals (including winning the Sundance special jury prize in 2020 for visionary filmmaking) as well as receiving Lesotho's first Academy Awards nomination for Best International Feature Film.

The film is narrated by a lesiba player (the lesiba is an instrument traditionally played by Lesotho shepherds), who starts by telling the story of Nazaretha, called the "valley of tears," prior to the arrival of French missionaries in Lesotho. Nazaretha's story revolves around the pain of its people and their land. More accurately, the pain of the land is materialized through the personal suffering and sacrifice of the main character, Mantoa, an eighty-year-old Mosotho widow who is confronted with her son's death at the beginning of the narrative. But Mantoa's grief is also presented as an integral part of the cataclysmic experiences brought by the processes of colonialism, postcolonialism, and global capitalism and the effects of their extractivist logic on Lesotho society.

The pace of the film allows for a reflective and engaged viewing. The combination of cinematography, mise-en-scène, and dissonant soundscapes interrupts what could have been a traditional linear storyline, creating instead a multilayered and symbolically rich narrative. The narrative devices are open for numerous readings around such themes as identity, death (physical and spiritual), grief, and resilience (but also acceptance and defeat), intertwined into a complex critical ode to the land and a presentation of land as Mother.

One underlying theme that links the land and the pain of the woman is labor migration to South African mines. Mantoa's son never came back from his shift in the mines, and this allows the film to examine a practice that has

deprived the country of a large part of its male workforce since the 1880s. This male oscillating migration caused a prolonged absence of men and a change in family and social structure. Matrifocal households and matrilateral links developed and positioned women as rural household managers. As a surviving widow and mother, Mantoa's role becomes one of guardian of the memory and existence of a community.

As Mantoa experiences suffering that is stripped of meaning—the death of her last child in the mines severs her ties to God and reality—she alternatively expects and prepares for her own death and burial, as her last attempt to find belonging and connectedness. The latter illustrates the irrevocable link between the land, the ancestors, the dead, and the living in Lesotho society. The film explores this link by drawing subtle metaphorical parallels between Mantoa, her spirit, and the land. Her (re)union with the land allows for an interpretation of the one as representative of the other, of land as feminine and as Mother, for example, when Mantoa embraces the soil as she digs her own grave, or when the land is feminized through several shots of Thabana Li Mele, a breast-shaped mountain in Lesotho.

The idea of land as feminine is further developed into one of land as protector, but the land is also in need of protection in order to retain social cohesion. This opens up the second theme of the film, which is environmental destruction, echoing an African ecofeminist outlook on exploitative practices in the name of progress. As it is defined in the film, “what they call progress is when men point their damn fingers at nature and proclaim conquest over it.” These practices are woven into the narrative through various male authority figures, who fill the space and contrast with Mantoa's initial vow of silence and seclusion. But when the construction of a dam threatens her village, its graveyard, and the agency of Mantoa's community, she finds a new lease on life by endorsing the mission to defend the land. She reminds the villagers of how, through the umbilical cords and placentas of their mothers which are buried in the soil, they are all ontologically and inexorably linked to the land and have a mandate to protect it.

Mantoa's role as protector is not surprising, given her position in relation to the matrifocal households previously mentioned. Furthermore, as Lesotho society decrees, her role as a mother is emphasized by the adult name she has been given by her husband's family, both in reference to the name of her child and with a name chosen within the lineage. This new adult name inscribes a Mosotho woman within a family and historical experience, while perpetuating the history and bringing the dead to life again (this is another echo of the title of the film). Her name literally means “the mother of war” (Ma-ntoa). And as her name predicts, she carried the war within herself, literally, just as the land did. It gives meaning to all her internal struggles and a glimpse of her history as an individual in the society she lives in. The loss of her child thus adds to her spiritual (and identity) quest as an individual.

Mantoa's voice and spirit of resilience take over as she becomes the narrator and protector of the community and its memory, leading a spiritual and political awakening. Through Mantoa's struggle, the film subtly

questions individual and collective identity when individuals are faced with inexorable change, including migration, displacement, environmental change, and distance from the mother and the land.

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