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Wayétu Moore
The Dragons, the Giant, the Women

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Review of Moore, W. (2020). *The Dragons, the Giant, the Women*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 250 pp.

This powerful and rich memoir depicts the author's escape from the Liberian civil war in 1990. As stated by the author herself, the reality-based events in the novel are reconstructed from the memory she has of them, taking us readers to one of the cruellest pages of Liberian history. This civil war, the bloodiest on the African continent, broke out in 1989 and lasted until 1997, causing the death of more than 200,000 people, as well as millions of refugees in Africa and around the world.

The book, which follows Moore's debut novel, *She Would be King* (Greywolf, 2018), was acclaimed by critics and became a nominee for the National Book Critic Circle Award and the Reading Women Award for Nonfiction. It was also translated into Italian in 2022 *(I Draghi, il Gigante, le Donne*. Edizioni E/O, 2022).

When Tutu (Wayétu) turns five, the excitement of being able to access new experiences of life vanishes with the outbreak of a civil war that forces her family to flee from Monrovia. The girl describes the journey through the sugar canes from her point of view: how she missed her *Mam*, who was in the US on a Fullbright Scholarship and had to leave her family behind and how her *Ol'Ma*, the elderly grandmother, made great efforts to ease the journey for her and her sisters.

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The title refers precisely to how Tutu visually elaborates the circumstances she is forced to face as a child. The Dragons represent the politicians competing to gain power by force in Liberia; the Giant is her father, a man who "had the incredible power to transform into a giant who could protect us" (69); and finally, the whole group of Women, those who led the family to salvation. Firstly, *Mam* who embarked on a perilous journey to send them help; then *Ol'Ma* who kept the family healthy; her sisters and the two adolescent girls who shared house with the Moores' and finally Satta, the woman soldier who is going to rescue them, a key figure that keeps emerging in the protagonist's dreams.

The first part of the novel focuses on the historical events, but the choice of a very specific point of view is crucial and opens new spaces of reflection that include very clearly the categories of class, race and gender. The novel is divided into four different sections, two named "Rainy Season" and two named "Dry Season", and every section is divided in chapters. In between there is one extra section, called "Aside: When the Therapist Suggests I Start Dating Again". The description we get in the first section of the book, though simple, is far from naïve.

> Before the dragon came – a thing, not a person – before Hawa Undu was born, humans ruled the forest. Gola people and Kissi people and Loma people and Gio people. Vai people and Kpelle people and Kru people and Mano people. Bassa people and Krahn people and Grebo people and Gbani people. And these groups, they all ruled in their own way, prayed in their own way, told stories in their own way, loved in their own way […] But the dragon said the forest was too small […]. There is one correct way to tell a story, the dragon said. (31)

Here, young Tutu describes the consequences of the regime and all the impositions and international pressure put on the Liberian government. During the first "Rainy Season", Tutu's dragons slowly turn into real politicians; she also starts mentioning the shootings and describing the brutality of what she is witnessing. Both the language and the syntax change with her, becoming a stream of consciousness written almost without punctuation that depicts how she left her childhood's innocence behind throughout the escape:

> Papa was moving so fast and pulling my hand that the muddy waters were now my pool my baptism into one second past girlhood past innocence past things the clouds never made and my feet lost the ground beneath me so my knees now ran along with Papa and water ran along my face and the lace at the bottom of my dress got left somewhere behind me with my shoes and the tank

> and my girlhood and the shooting that did not stop but came toward me under the open orange suns and clouds that said nothing more than rain. (56-7)

After the eventful and dramatic "Rainy season", a "Dry season" begins, far from home. Tutu is now a young woman who spent the rest of her childhood in the US and yet is still hunted by the memories of Liberia. In the chapters describing the family living abroad episodes of racism come up, together with episodes illustrating a subtler, maybe unconscious discrimination. They inform the reader about how the intersection between race and gender affects a woman's perception of herself. While in Liberia Tutu was a young girl with a caring family and many people to shield her even during the war, now that she is living among whites, she must learn what it means to be black, to date someone as a black woman, to tell a story as a black woman, even to go to therapy as a black woman who escaped from a civil war.

Even though physical violence is not threatening her, this part feels denser and more problematic than the first one. Tutu's story intersects with the reality of a country that conceives her in a stereotypical way and expects her to feel and act in a certain manner. The real trauma, aside from the brutality of war, comes from the paradigm she is confronted with every day in her new life as a refugee. Tutu's voice is confronted with other black women living in the US who are tracing back their African ancestry, while she is aware she lost her home forever, as it has ceased to exist the way she knew it. The memoir here almost converts in a very intimate and straightforward reportage, in which a feeling of displacement forcefully emerges, along with the difficulty of expressing it:

> And Mam could not understand this feeling, the heaviness of it, to be loved as resistance, as an exception to a rule. To fight to be seen in love, to stay in love throughout the resistance. This was my new country. […] And if my childhood dragons wanted me to believe that I had no home, no country, no place in this world, the monsters in my new home, in that statement, consented, complied: I could be beautiful in a place and still not enough, not because of who I was or anything I had done, but because of something as simple, and somehow as grand in this new place, as the color of my skin. […] Mam never feared blackness. So I never feared my blackness, until the men. How does it feel to be an exception? They taught me. They then led me to that conversation. […] "Honestly, I had an experience in Texas that was more traumatic than the war", I said quickly, casually. (120-1)

References to her body and how it is generally considered a beautiful one, "even being dark-skinned", are made throughout the sto-

ry. The protagonist implies she is aware of awakening men's curiosity because of her black body and entails she is always being judged, while being morbidly observed.

Unexpectedly, at the beginning of a new "Rainy Season", it is *Mam*'s turn to speak: she becomes the narrator and resumes the whole story. She was living in the US when the civil war forced her family to flee and she reconstructs here the whole journey which led her to save them, taking many risks along the way. Love, desperation and fear are the focus of those chapters, but they also trace a parallelism between her story and that of her child. She was also a black woman in the US, where she is a student, but she does not perceive herself as a displaced person. It is very clear for her where she belongs to and, when her home is in danger, she does not hesitate to go back. The novel closes with the new trip to Liberia made by Tutu to visit her parents who have moved back, as part and parcel of her personal healing process.

In locating the typical traits of the displacement literature, Azade Seyhan (*Writing Outside the Nation*, 2001) observes that, when a place to identify with is lacking, the displaced make home in the feeling of estrangement, or even in a nostalgia that can never be healed. This is indeed Tutu's experience, and those feelings are worsened by a context in which the black woman is either discriminated or considered an object of desire because of her skin. She is in both cases socially constructed as an unfamiliar 'other', even though the whole story takes place in a contemporary society that has apparently come to terms with the idea of multiculturality. In many passages the narrator refers to people saying that, in the end, we are all equal. Compared to the narrator's experience, this sounds a rather superficial statement: she does experience a different treatment that goes unnoticed by most people around her.

As Hélène Cixous wrote, "all biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story".[1] In this case a story stemming from Liberia addresses explicitly our Western societies and their (in)capability of overcoming stereotypes. Tutu comes from a privileged family, her parents being both academics, but, even though they managed to spare her the horrors of the war, she is confronted with a society that depicts her as a victim. As the novel clearly shows, the question of race is far from sorted out and a veil of prejudice and even fear is still present and prominent in our communities, especially when it comes to women. This memoir sheds light on the true costs of salvation, without making concessions to any of the characters. The honesty of Tutu's voice strikes the readers of this bittersweet tale. In describing her life when her

1 Cixous, H. (1997). *Rootprints*. Paris: Edition des Femmes.

family was fleeing from the war, she talks about a specific patriarchal structure in which men are busy discussing politics and deciding how and where to hide, without considering the women's needs and opinions. Moreover, they are the ones who make war, who decide about people's lives. Women, on the other hand, always show a great sense of solidarity and mutual care, which, impressed in the child's memory, are acknowledged as the actions that actually protected her, even more than having a shelter to hide in:

> Men were talking plenty during this war. […] They were deciding who would be killed and who would live. […] Why hadn't they just asked a woman, one like Mam, one of those women who could do anything, and go anywhere, to just go inside the forest and talk to Hawa Hundu in a nice voice? […] And she would no fight him. She would just hold Hawa Undu's hand and lead him outside. (63)

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this vision, the most striking one being Satta. She is a woman soldier who risks her life to help people escape and we see how she has a hard time being considered on the same level as all her fellow soldiers, despite her great courage. Even Tutu's father is obliged at some point to overcome his distrust and commit his life and that of his daughters to a young woman sent by his wife. The story of Tutu's parents and of their efforts to reunite the family is one of true resistance ending up in the life they always dreamt of. How much it will cost them and their daughter we do not know yet, but we find hope there, together with Tutu.