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Quiet Rebellions: An Interview with Gothataone Moeng

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Quiet Rebellions: An Interview with Gothataone Moeng

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Introduction

In “Botalaote,” the opening story to Gothataone Moeng’s debut collection of short stories, we first encounter the protagonist Boikanyo in the warmth of her mother’s presence in the kitchen, where “doors slammed in her wake. In the kitchen, dishes clattered, hot cooking oil splattered, and the aroma of frying potatoes rose” (1). In her old bedroom, her aunt Lydia coughs and sweats her devastating illness: “Above the blanket, her head poked out. What used to be a full head of hair was now just dust-brown and reddish fibers” (6). At the end, Boikanyo reflects on the world of her small rural hometown, its “juxtaposition of school and cemetery” (26), where her “chest ached with the frustration” of not being able to attend a local wedding (8). There is

neither lesson nor catharsis but the ordinariness of a life shaped by contradictions, what remains unsaid, and the ways women must navigate the norms that bear upon their lives.

Published in 2023, Moeng's *Call and Response* contains nine stories that portray ordinary women's lives in rural and urban Botswana. In her centering of women's voices, Moeng belongs to a rich tradition of African women's writing in English that includes an earlier generation of writers such as Bessie Head, Ata Ama Aidoo, Miriam Tlali, and Flora Nwapa, and an ever-growing new group of authors from Africa and its diaspora which includes Petina Gappah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helen Oyeyemi, Doreen Baingana, Lesley Nneka Arimah, Leila Aboulela—among many others. Set in the village of Serowe (where Moeng was born) and the city of Gaborone (Botswana's capital, where Moeng studied and spent time), the stories in *Call and Response* revolve around young girls and women as they move through the events of a life they want to be their own: puberty, friendship, marriage, death. Through vivid dialogues and understated descriptions, Moeng paints a world of characters who feel constrained by place, circumstances, societal norms. They yearn to leave behind what they perceive as the "smallness" of their lives for something bigger and better. However, when they do, they feel the tug of what they left behind. The women struggle with tradition and expectations, and yet find comfort in rituals. As Moeng says in the interview, "These characters strain against traditional ways but feel bereft or adrift without them" (64). There is also the ordinariness of ambivalence and melancholia, which mark these characters and informs many stories in the collection. Throughout, readers encounter the ways tradition, religion, modernity, patriarchy, colonialism, and migration have shaped these women's lives.

Moeng's deft and subtle portrayal of these "ordinary affects" (Stewart) takes form in the small gestures, seemingly innocuous choices, bodies, and dialogues she depicts and, in the ways, her female characters resist norms. As Moeng explains in her interview, they are "quietly rebellious" against "suffocating environments" (64). In "A Good Girl," the main character, Keletso, comes to negotiate the gendered double standards that accommodate male infidelity while insisting on female modesty/chastity as she keeps her own secrets. "You are being a good girl for your brother. We have all been there. Being good for our fathers and uncles and brothers, even our cousins and our boyfriends. They have no idea who we are" (51), someone says to her. While she recalls that, "I exulted in this elusiveness, imagining myself a shape-shifting trickster, legible only as I wanted" (44). In "Small Wonders," a young widow, Phetso, mourns her husband by following rituals such as shaving her head and wearing the midnight-blue clothes of a widow in mourning for a whole year, even when "Many women no longer did it, believing it cruel and old-fashioned" (70). She hopes for these rituals and ceremonies to make her feel that "she was part of something, something ancient and unbroken, steady" (77) and to offer her solace, enlightenment, "a different state of maturity" (89) that might domesticate her grief. Her insistence on wearing mourning clothes for a year is baffling to those around her for it seems to belong to another age. Yet, Phetso muses that, "[It] had its uses, her morning garb [...] its announcement of her grief, its protection" (70) before she dons, once home, her "velour tracksuit, like she would have worn when [her husband] Leungo was still there" (71).

These acts of defiance, transgression, and rebellion are embodied in varying ways. For instance, hair and fashion paint this for us in different stories. In "A Good Girl," Boitshepho, the protagonist's sister, is a rebellious teenager with purple hair who irons church dresses and school uniforms and, once an adult, leaves for Johannesburg. The protagonist muses, "Every gesture concerning her hair was new—gathering the braids into a bun at the back of her head, tucking them behind her ears, shaking her head to loosen them into a purple waterfall" (30). In "The First Virginity of Gigi Kaisara," names as well as hair become tied to self-definition as the protagonist, Gagontswe Kaisara, turns fifteen and comes of age. She seeks to assert her own identity through selecting a new name for herself ("Gigi"), instead of the different ways she has been named since birth. She then chops off her long hair, supposed to be her crowning glory. Her

mother is “pissed” at her since she had spent a lot of money over the years on “relaxers and conditioning treatments, trims and steams, braids and blowouts, cornrows.” Gigi tells her mother that “Steve Biko said we’re trying to be white women when we relax our hair” (275). Gigi’s act of cutting off her hair is a declaration of independence as part of her growing personal and political consciousness, a rejection of gendered norms as well as Eurocentric beauty standards, inspired by the writing of Black South African writer and activist Steve Biko.

This journey of growth and maturation, of struggling with tradition and modernity or societal norms or conventions, is not restricted to female characters alone, as we see in the longest story in the collection, “Early Life and Education.” The story, which reads like a novella of sorts, spans three decades in the life of Lerako Mminapelo, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The only story to feature a male protagonist, it traces, through time jumps, his evolving ideas and changing perspectives about religion, gender, class, history, and his family (uncle, mother, grandmother), over many years. In her interview, Moeng states that this story “came out of many different impulses,” one of which was an interest “in following a character over a long period of time, and seeing how they change depending on what kind of social forces they come into contact with” (63).

A graduate of the University of Mississippi’s MFA program, Moeng has received several fellowships: Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, Tin House, and A Public Space. Her stories have appeared in prestigious venues such as *Ploughshares*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *One Story*, *A Public Space* and *The Oxford American*, among others. In her interview, Moeng offers her thoughts on the nature of the short story; the genesis of the stories in her collection; her own literary choices, references, and genealogies; the topics and lives she sought to portray; and the meaning of writing about Botswana.

Story-telling and the Narration of Time

Anupama Arora and Sandrine Sanos (JFS): We wanted to begin by asking you about the genesis of this book. How did it come about? We would also love to hear why you chose the genre of the short story. Scholars have noted that the short story is a neglected form compared to the novel, especially within African literature. What was it that especially drew you to this form as opposed to other genres such as the non-fiction essay, poetry, drama, or the novel? What was the first story in the collection that you wrote?

Gothataone Moeng (GM): To me, the short story seems humble and inward-looking, but also capacious, with the ability to contain the world. As a beginning writer, I think I was drawn to it first by this sense of its humility and smallness. It felt accessible and surmountable, something that I had the ability to complete. So, I suppose my early affinity to the short story was pragmatic. But as I have grown as a writer and reader, I am drawn to the short story’s mysterious capaciousness, which, to me, exists alongside its inwardness and its restraint. On some level, I believe I am more temperamentally suited to the short story. It feels more private and satisfied with taking up less space and attention but is also serious. I love the fact that a singular short story, as humble and small as it may appear, demands serious consideration from a reader, and has its own meaning and place, and that meaning may reverberate or maybe be magnified when taken alongside other stories, but also may not. With my collection, I didn’t really set out to write a cohesive or linked or themed collection, I was mostly writing singular stories, following characters or scenarios or situations I was interested in. A number of the stories were written during my MFA program, a number of them were written in other fellowships post-MFA. It was only afterwards, when I was putting them together, that I realized the stories shared thematic preoccupations. The oldest story in the collection, whose first draft I wrote just before my MFA, was “Bodies,” which was published by *A Public Space* in 2016. The

version in the journal looks very different from the version in the book though. I made some big changes, which I now feel uncertain about. The most recent story is the last story in the collection, “The First Virginity of Gigi Kaisara,” which I finished some months after the book was acquired by my publisher.

JFS: Many other short story volumes are titled after one of the stories from the collection. We’re thinking of collections such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), books that your work has been compared to. Your collection *Call and Response* is not titled after any single story from the book, but rather after a technique which has roots in traditional African music. Could you tell us a bit about how and when you came upon the title for your collection (or how the title came to you!), unless it was your publisher that made the decision for you? Were there other possible titles that you toyed with before deciding on *Call and Response*?

GM: The story “Dark Matter” was initially called “Call and Response.” The story has two timelines, a past, which explores the contours of the main character Nametso’s indelible, life-changing friendship with Tumo, and a present. The present timeline follows Nametso as she returns to Botswana after years in the U.S., struggling to acclimate to life with her family as she comes to terms with the choices that she has made throughout her life (over which Tumo has consciously or unconsciously had an influence). In this story, I was interested in the way that the present responds to the past. How the past may exert pressure on the present, even when, technically, the past is past and should be gone. I ended up scrapping the story title because I was convinced the dual timelines felt a little heavy-handed (my agent and editor did not see it that way). I did actually end up with the phrase or the idea in a literal way, in this same story, when the narrator hears somebody calling her name and knows the only response is to return home. Even though I scrapped the title for the story, I really liked the phrase “call and response” and thought it would work well as a title for the collection. It felt apt and familiar and true and resonant for the rest of the stories in the collection, which were also interested in the tensions between the past and the present, tradition versus modernity, urban versus rural, family duty/obligation versus individual accomplishment etc. Very literally, if the past calls, in the form of memory, traditional rituals and ceremonies, certain ways of living, how is the present responding to those calls.

JFS: Similarly, we were also wondering about how you decided on the arrangement or order in which the stories appear in the collection, especially your decision to choose which story would open it and which story would serve as the concluding one?

GM: I was most concerned with the opening story, for the obvious reason of getting readers interested enough to keep reading. Further than that, I think that the story “Botalaote” introduces readers to a specific world, the world of the book, which is the ward, Botalaote, where many of the characters originate, and the village of Serowe, of which Botalaote is a part, and obviously to Gaborone, and to Botswana. Within the village of Serowe, Botalaote Ward is where the Botalaote ethnic community, which is one of the “minor” ethnic groups, lives. Serowe is the capital of the Bangwato, a major, influential ethnic group. I know that the average reader will not understand some of these distinctions, but it felt important to me to open the collection with a story that evokes this “minor” ethnic group, in a village that, in Botswana, is so overtly associated with this larger, more influential community, whose influence is still felt in contemporary politics today. So, I liked that the story introduced a world, a ward, a village, a community, but also a lot of the thematic concerns that are found in the rest of the collection, such as a female protagonist yearning for something more, feeling thwarted by duty and obligation to family, a female character who is quietly rebellious while striving to maintain a façade of goodness and obedience, the idea of travel as a way to access more education, more knowledge, more sophistication. Beyond that, I relied on my editor and agent to assist me in the arrangement of the stories. I do remember that we settled on “The First Virginity of Gigi Kaisara” as the closing story because my editor liked the idea of ending the story collection with “I feel just fine.” Because of that, I spent some days trying to figure out if the last sentence

of this story, and the collection, should be “I just feel fine” or “I feel just fine.” I think I ended up going with the latter because it felt more hopeful.

Genealogies, Place, and History

JFS: For readers of a particular generation (at least from outside of Africa), the Southern African writer Bessie Head and her work (for example, the short story collection *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, 1977; her novels *Maru*, 1971; *When Rain Clouds Gather*, 1968; *A Question of Power*, 1973—among others) was probably their first introduction to a writer from Botswana. How would you introduce Bessie Head and/or what she means to you? Is there a particular work—story, collection, novel—of Bessie Head’s that especially resonates with you and that was an influence?

GM: Bessie Head is definitively the writer most influential and most important to me. I discovered her (but not her work) in my last year of primary school. The Khama III Museum, here in Serowe, which houses her papers, ran a writing competition for primary schools in the village, to coincide with one of the anniversaries of her birth. The prompt was to write about a Motswana writer, and I think that they expected that some of the students would write about Bessie Head, but actually not a single one did. On my part, it was simply because I did not know about her at all, and I suspect that was the case for the other students. (Her novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* was a required text, but only in secondary school.) When the curator at the museum told us about Bessie Head, I was stunned to learn about a writer that had lived in our village, literally a ten-minute drive from my mother’s house. At this point, I was already interested in writing, but mostly writing facsimiles of Enid Blyton’s work.

I started reading Bessie Head in secondary school and of course learned that I could just simply write about my own life and my own experiences. I love her short stories—her village tales—where she writes about ordinary people in the village, and love that she captured the village and its people with so much love, dignity and wit. I also really love her novel *Maru*, for its convictions and its condemnation of discrimination and prejudices along ethnic lines, which are pernicious and continue today. I was inspired to, in a smaller way, explore that particular theme in one of my stories.

But the Bessie Head book that is most important to me is *Serowe: Village of the Rain-Wind* (1981), which is often billed as a social history and which really gives one a window to life in Serowe at a particular time that has not been well documented or well archived. I love that she interviewed people in the village and allowed them to talk about their own lives and occupations. I also really love her essay “Why Do I write,” which contains the profound sentence, “I write because I have authority from life to do so.”

JFS: Besides Bessie Head, how do you see your relationship with your literary antecedents, especially African women writers that have come before you, all of whom wrote stories and novels, writers such as Ata Ama Aidoo (Ghana), Miriam Tlali (South Africa), Flora Nwapa (Nigeria), among others? Do you see more continuities or more disjunctures between their work and yours?

GM: I see mostly continuities between their work and mine. They wrote at a particular time and within specific environments, but I see that their work and my work share an interest in the lives of women, in women’s struggles to assert their identities and agencies in often traditional societies, in patriarchal societies and in discriminatory societies. I see also that there is a similarity in the interest in women in rural areas, but also women that are living in modern cities, navigating more modern concerns versus the traditional expectations placed on them. For example, modern, educated, ambitious women who may be thwarted by expectations to adhere to ideas of traditional wifedom or motherhood, etc. So even though these writers wrote at a time quite different from mine, it is interesting that we seem to share similar concerns.

JFS: We love the longest short story in your collection, “Early Life and Education.” It reminded us of Adichie’s story “The Headstrong Historian” to an extent because of what it seems interested in terms of form and content: the ambitious scope, experimenting with the depiction of time, history, intergenerational relationships, religion, etc. Could you tell us about your goal in writing this story?

GM: Thank you. This story came out of many different impulses. One of them was a desire to write about the cattlepost, and about Botswana men’s relationship to cattle. I had tried to do so in the story “When Mrs. Kennekae Dreamt of Snakes,” but it ended up being from a woman’s point of view, and with the woman having very interesting ideas about what the cattlepost is like. I find the cattlepost to be such an interesting and mysterious space that I wanted to consider it in a more serious way. I am interested in the cattlepost being a mostly male domain (historically, not so much anymore), being outside of “civilization,” that is, outside of the village and what I think is a more “civilizing” domestic world and a social world of weddings and funerals and other events in the village. I was interested in what that space is like, being male-dominated, being outside of “civilization,” and having the master-servant relationships between cattle owners and cattle herders, what it would say about ideas of personhood and who is deserving of dignity etc. Writing about the cattlepost in this way meant that I needed to have a male character, which I also felt was necessary for the collection. I also wanted to write a story about the tension of religious faith, and particularly traditional religious faith, versus scientific rationale, I guess. When I am in Botswana, I live in my home village of Serowe, and every day I am confronted by perfectly intelligent and rational people talking about the most supernatural matters in the most ordinary and fact-based way, and now that I am older (and with perhaps a little too much Western education), I really struggle with how to respond to it. I can’t bring myself to completely dismiss it, but I also cannot really bring myself to believe it completely. I think I was interested in a character who had the same struggle—in this case, it’s a character who, throughout his life, struggles with abandonment, by his mother, and later his grandmother and his uncle through death. I was thinking about the very comforting Tswana idea that your deceased relatives don’t abandon you upon their death but continue to guide you and look out for you from a different realm. With this character being an educated man, but also struggling with these ideas of abandonment, I was interested in what he would do with that idea. I was also interested in following a character over a long period of time, and seeing how they change depending on what kind of social forces they come into contact with.

JFS: In some of your interviews, you’ve spoken about reading British writers, such as Enid Blyton (and her immensely popular *Famous Five* series), as a child, a typical experience for anyone who grew up in the former British empire. Writers like Blyton, however, have fallen out of favor with many contemporary readers who are disturbed by the troubling and casual overt and underlying racism or xenophobia or other outdated views in her works. We’d love your perspective on this.

GM: I loved Enid Blyton’s work when I read it as a child. I have not read her work since then, but I do retain a fondness for it in the nostalgic way one remains fond of a childhood friend they haven’t kept in touch with. As a child, I obviously did not have any sense of racism or prejudices in her work, and I don’t care to go back to examine her work with more adult eyes. My personal relationship with her work, which is, again, a very nostalgic one, feels unaffected by the racism and xenophobia that do exist in her work. I do think it’s particularly interesting and complicated that she is a children’s author, since it’s possible children may not necessarily have the critical skills both to pick up the prejudices and to push against them when they are reading. I support and appreciate what organizations such as English Heritage do by acknowledging and disseminating information about these authors’ racism, antisemitism, xenophobia. Rather than outright bans or taking the books out of circulation, having the work accompanied by these statements or introductions that explain why the material is offensive seems the best way to handle it. That places the onus on the reader (maybe in this case the parents?) on whether they want to go ahead and read those books anyway. I think it’s completely fine for readers to choose not to read her work anymore because

they find it offensive. Readers can make choices about the books they want to read. She is not the only children's author to exist in the world.

“Quietly Rebellious” Women

JFS: Your collection is peopled with wonderful female characters—as friends, sisters, wives, grandmothers. Many of the stories portray the rituals, transgressions, and defiance of social norms of femininity or womanhood. For instance, this appears strikingly in “The Good Girl” when a character says, “you are being a good girl for your brother [...] They have no idea who we are” (51). Similarly, in “Small Wonders,” the main character resists expectations; her defiance is keeping her mourning clothes beyond what is expected, to mark her place and her loss. In “The First Virginity of Gigi Kaisara,” Gigi’s act of cutting off her hair is an assertion of identity. How did you think about tracing this, or did this emerge as you imagined these individual stories?

GM: These ideas mostly emerged as I was writing the individual stories. I think of my female characters as people plagued by the pressure to be good and obedient. Quite a number of my female characters are also basically “good” girls/women, they are mostly quiet and reserved and inclined to dutifulness and a desire to be liked. I was interested in the ways that characters who are not naturally rebellious or assertive may stage their quiet rebellions against the suffocating pressure to conform and to behave in socially sanctioned ways. Some of the characters—such as Keletso in “A Good Girl”—tend to be deceitful, presenting a more socially acceptable façade for their families but behaving in a way that is more suited to them outside the family space. Part of their “rebellion” is exercising agency over their bodies in ways that perhaps feel manageable—cutting off hair, refusing to take off the mourning clothes etc. Some of the characters’ desire to escape what they feel are suffocating environments is also sometimes expressed in their daydreams, fantasies, playacting, which allow them to act in ways that may not be socially acceptable.

JFS: You write so vividly of the ways these bodies occupy space: through fashion, make-up, illness, moving from the village to large cities (from Serowe to Gaborone or Johannesburg). Journeys or journeying overall appears as a central motif in your stories. They feature characters who leave (in fact, are desperate to leave where they are or who they are, and so on) but also characters who return, whether it is a physical or an emotional or symbolic coming back. How do you see this issue of space or movement in your stories? What does it allow you to do?

GM: On a basic level, it allows me to think about these tensions that I mentioned between tradition and contemporary life, about community versus individualism, duty versus desires for individual accomplishments, especially when thinking about the characters who venture much further than Gaborone. But I think that this movement, particularly between Serowe and Gaborone, feels very accurate, especially for a certain generation of Batswana. There is a generation of people that were raised in largely traditional ways who now live very sophisticated and modern lives in Gaborone, but also retain very strong roots in their home villages. The village retains a strong spiritual and grounding pull for a lot of people. In my family, for example, people generally did not go on vacations/holidays other than coming back home to Serowe, even when they could afford it. I know that this is maybe the case in a lot of countries, but it feels particularly so in Botswana, which is still a very small country in so many ways. The other thing about this journeying and movement is that it is about characters trying to figure out the right way to live within the era in which they are living. These characters are caught between ideals and cultures and ways of living. Again, these are not new ideas, but they do feel very real and accurate to what people in Botswana are experiencing right now. These characters strain against traditional ways but feel bereft or adrift without them.

JFS: And, lastly, we’d love to know what are you’re reading right now, as well as what project(s)

you're working on?

GM: I am working on a novel. I have been reading Jamaica Kincaid. I went through *Lucy, At The Bottom of the River*, I am working through *The Autobiography of My Mother* right now, and I am planning to read *Annie John* next.

JFS: We look forward to this novel! Thank you so much for taking the time to engage with our questions.

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