# Memorable Moments in ‘This September Sun’

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Title: This September Sun
Author: Bryony Rheam
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Bryony Rheam's first novel, "This September Sun" was published as a mystery/romance, which means that it is not literature,but genre;however, the novelhas features, or, to use E.M. Forster's word, "aspects" of literary fiction. In an interview with me, Bryony said she still would rather see it as genre, but readers are free to categorize it as they wish. I read it as a work of literary fiction.

The novel has strong characterization, and it explores beyond mere genre into the complexity of human existence; it's a work that leaves you thinking. Not that genre does not leave you thinking, but this work leaves you thinking for a long time. Because I am still thinking about it, I have decided to discuss some of the key moments I found interesting. The blog will also be posted at Moments in Literature.

Here are some of the key moments of "This September Sun":

1. The first sentence: "On the 18th of April 1980, my grandfather burnt the British flag." The sentence drew me in with its strong political statement, its inevitable symbolism. That flag burning, which happened on her sixth birthday, was memorable to Ellie, the protaginist, just as it will be memorable to the Zimbabwean reader who remembers the date. To readers not familiar with the context, the sentence is an invitation (flag burning is always an act of defiance and of self-expression, but happening in a work of fiction, it draws much attention, hence its effectiveness as an opening line). The pathos raised by the scene (they all must be celebrating a child's birthday)and the mood it creates arouse reader interest. But this act of defiance marks a time of change. Zimbabwe has just attained its independence, but to die-hard Rhodesians like the grandfather, it's not independence. To people like the grandfather, whatever the Zimbabbwe is transforming into can be blamed on British intervention

(Lancaster House, etc). Of course, Ellie is too young to understand all this, yet when she reflects years later, she chooses the moment as the beginning of her story. I was hooked by the first sentence, and moved even more by this one: "The day of my sixth birthday was the day Zimbabwe got its Independence...."

2. "Tea, my grandmother always maintained, was one of the great benefits of colonialism. In fact, she said, it was the one thing in the world that kept everyone together, the one thing everyone shared...." (10). The novel raises more questions like this, questions about the benefits of colonialism. If you were educated in the school of Chinua Achebe, you were made to see how colonialists justified their actions in Africa, offering development while underdeveloping the continent (Walter Rodney), asserting that they brought real culture to Africa, that they civilized, enlightened the Africans...and brought tea. You will be sensitive to some of the grandmother's sentiments throughout the novel, and you might even resent what she says about black Africans, but you also realize, without excusing her, that she is a grandmother educating her granddaughter...a duty she should play, yet in so doing, she might instill in the same child she loves her biased, rather affected view of the world. Ellie is exposed to the rhetoric of the colonialist mindset at an early age, colonialism being the context in which she was born, which has defined the lives of her parents, and continues to affect them. Very much in the present, Ellie is also deeply steeped in a past she cannot escape, and her attempts to escape that past have been disastrous.

The colonial drama that played out in Zimbabwe cannot be ignored, and often, it manifests itself through the country's literature. In an interview with Ambrose Musiyiwa of *Conversations with Writers*, the Bryony Rheam states that she did not intend the novel to be read as a work of post-colonial literature, but that's exactly one way to read it, and interestingly, it covers an approach to post-coloniality that's often not heard, as the bulk of post-colonial literature in Africa is often by black African authors, tangentially featuring white characters who are seen only from the outside. It seems then, as the author confirmed in my interview with her, that the novel delves deeper into the personal and public lives of its white characters. It is as much a novel about

their individual lives as it is about Zimbabwe.

3. The novel touches on the exclusionary sports clubs the white Zimbabweans (those who became Zimbabwean after independence, because, as the novel reveals, some remained Rhodesian): "clubs whose bar counters were weighed down with the beers of their die-hard Rhodesian clientele, those who would've won the war [in the 70's]if only Smith had not given in to Nationalist aggression, those who had always been on the brink of victory when Smith had surrendered." Here the narrator reveals a neo-Rhodesian sentiment: Africans could not rule them, but worse, could not rule themselves. They could easily argue that they were right, given the direction Zimbabwe has taken, and can easily claim that Zimbabwe was better in its Rhodesian days than it is today. But as the novel reveals, this sentiment was driven more by a die-hard spirit of resistance than by any proven failure of the new system. I am fascinated by this argument that results from people choosing to live in the past, but there is no disputing the fact that independence from the Smith regime was necessary, and it brought with it many benefits and disasters.

4 Regarding her memory of growing up in Zimbabwe, Ellie says, "When I look back on my life, the thing I notice most, and now miss in my present life, is the pattern. Predictability, maybe? The way one year rolled smoothly into the next. The way we didn't think of the future or question it, or feel separated from the time that had passed." But when she returns to the country after years in the UK, Ellie cannot see those patterns anymore as she now looks at the country like an outsider, unable to fit in. The point she makes about patterns sounds familiar; it's what I remember too about growing up in Zimbabwe, but especially the way time progressed, as if there was plenty of it, long days, long nights, vast life...something sharply contrasted to the thin veneer of the days here. But again, that must be the effect of age.

5. "In 1980, many people left Zimbabwe for places such as South Africa, Australia and England, and, in the absence of skilled labour, many of those white people left made their way swiftly up the ladder of success. They bought property in Bulawayo's sprawling eastern suburbs with swimming pools and tennis courts....They were the new

white elite and their children were my classmates" (34).

This addresses the reality in Zimbabwe at independence, the rapid disappearance of whites, who, looking at historical trends in other African nations like Uganda, Zaire, saw the urgency to leave, but the novel successfully points out that most whites were not ready to be ruled by blacks, which makes one speculate that perhaps that early it wasn't the impossibility of black governance that most feared, but a fear from within, of their being not ready to be ruled by Africans.

Growing up, I quickly became aware of the disappearance of whites from literature, the writing of the country...and I never understood what the problem was. Were there new publishing policies that discriminated against a white sensibility in the country? Were they choosing not to participate in the new literary direction of the country? It was not until I reached the University of Zimbabwe that I learned that there were some Rhodesian literary works which were no longer studied, but they were there: you could write a thesis on Rhodesian poetry of the 70s, for instance. But it was clear, as Ellie points out here, that a lot of the white families were sending their children to school in South Africa and overseas, since most of the private schools in the country were finally invaded by black children, and the numbers of black students increased, those of whites shrunk, or where there was no change in numbers, the fees kept going up. Of course, this happens even in places like the United States too, where once black families start entering a suburb, white families start moving away.

6. Over and over again new Zimbabwean writing keeps gesturing towards the Gukurahundi issue, and there is a reason readers of my generation would be interested in this disturbing time of our history: some of us were very young when Gukurahundi occurred, which means even though we heard it discussed, if we were lucky to hear it discussed, we would not have understood what it was all about. I grew up in an area not very far from Matebeleland, an area which mixed intense celebrations of independence by day and dreadful whispers of Gukurahundi by night; in other words, some families in the area were affected because of their strong ties to Matebelaland...but we were

too young to understand the exact nature of the conflict. Likewise, Ellie has heard the adults in her life talking about dissidents and farm invasions, but she does not quite comprehend the source of the fear that gives her nightmares when she and her grandmother visit a farm outside of Bulayawo. She says:

"I started to feel afraid and all the stories I had heard about dissidents came to mind...what if they murdered Gran and Miles? ...Who would find our bodies?" In her childish way, she thinks of an escape plan. The deep sense of fear she feels is similar to other forms of fear we all felt amidst celebrations of a new era. On one hand, there was celebration of independence, but there were also occasional witch hunts in the villages; we sang songs of celebrations, but we the young were terrorized by former mijibhas (youth leaders) who demanded that we attended allnight party meetings.

7."My gandfather was a difficult man to get on with...He was a hard man formed out of the place that had made him: Matebelaland. Land of stone and rock and dust. He was carved from its heat, country of kings, of wars, of truimph, of splendour...A land tamed by colonial subjugation and tribal retaliation, a land whose heart beat in time to its smarting pride" (84).

This connection to the land, depicted here in the context of the 80s, is very important in Zimbabwean literature; it has been a sight of ongoing conflict, and the beauty of this passage is in how it depicts an identity formed by the landscape, hardened, so to speak. No wonder as the belated land distribution would take off a decade later, arguments would spring up about who truly belonged to Zimbabwean land; and the answer, as this passage reveals, is not as easy as just simply saying the land belongs to the blacks; the issue is elevated to the meaning of the word belonging itself. Then, again, we haven't quite reached the complexity this issue demands, distracted as we are, by many outside and inside forces of the argument, yet, what complexity exceeds a heart attuned to the soil, and as Hove says in one of his poems, a heart attuned to the sound of the owl.

8. "White Zimbabwean society became less cohesive, more

fragmented and unsure of itself, more paranoid, more watchful. It hid itself at the sports clubs...it counted its pennies from the distance of its suburban homes and every so often looked out to shake its head and feel better for its reclusive choice. Gradually it settled down to an all too comfortable snooze as teh world passed by." This is self-explanatory, and elaborates on the issue of those who chose to leave. If one lived in a place like Highfield, Harare in the 80s and 90s, growing up there, going to school there, one could almost not be aware that one lived in a city shared by white people; not that one would have missed that aspect of one's life that much, but one might wonder where all the whites people were? And now picture one growing up and going to school in Mazvihwa, Zvishavane; the presence of white people was like a disappearing act, with the exception of a few expatriates who roamed the rural areas for one cause or another, often working for NGOs and occasionally teaching at a rural uppertop school. Such situations didn't just paint a fuller picture of a new Zimbabwe that everyone was attuning their hearts to; or were they, the whites and the black elite (page 89), equally distancing themselves from the ordinary people?

The novel points out: "The worst aspects of white society were also evident in the worst of black society, the new elite...often insensitive to the plight of others and never [thinking] of helping anyone who was less fortunate than themselves."

9.I loved this moment in the novel, when Ellie writes about September. The prose begins to sing, and every word becomes pure poetry. That's just because September "speaks of a new beginning", "it heals and soothes", and ultimately, words are not enough to to explain September. A bit sentimentalized? Yes, but I didn't mind. My birthday is in September. Ellie mentions that September feels only this way in her hemisphere, in this specific place Zimbabwe.

10. At the end of Chapter 19 Ellie leaves for England. It is a moment of ambivalence. She is pursuing her dream, and with the encouragement of her grandmother, this journey is the beginning of many to come, many that will fullfill, yet also fructure her dream: "Through my happiness I could feel the beginnings of sadness. I wanted

to leave but I didn't want to. I wanted to go to England and yet forever live in Zimbabwe" (120). It's an important moment because she is leaving the country when at a time in Zimbabwean history when staying was still a good choice. Years later those leaving the country would not think twice about it...leaving had become the most logical thing to do, especially if you had the means to leave. HEr doubts of course never leave her, and she later she will struggle with whether to leave England for Zimbabwe or not.

11. "[In England]I felt awkward, clumsy, afraid sometimes to open my mouth lest my accent gave me away...I answered all the patronising questions about Africa, about droughts and cannibals, lions and giraffes...Here my life was open to scrutiny and dissection" 9126-27). This moment is very important to anyone who has been an immigrant, but most importantly an African immigrant in the West. First off, there is a tendency to homogenize the experiences of all Africans, to see them, as Chimamanda Adichie has pointed out, in the lenses of the single story...,even for a white character like Ellie, who may not be distinguishable from the English at first, but once she opens her mouth, stereotypes about Africa pour in. The most challenging and damaging of aspects of the stereotyping of Ellie is her being associated with the stigmas about white Africa, as we see in the case of the South Africans white characters of the novel, who are always seen through the prism of apartheid.

Her experiences in England would form the basis for Ellie's disillusionment, that which ultimately made England unbearable and made home more appealing. In issues of home, identity and belonging, Ellie faces challenges similar to those faced by other Africans, black or white. But hers is a deeper dilemma because she had thought an easy passport switch or update (from a Zimbabwean to a British one) would turn England into her home.