
Mothers and Children

An essay by Ashraf Jamal

Mothers and children are iconic themes in the history of painting, the embodiments of grace, purity, and sanctity. One need only consider the staple of Christian faith, the Madonna and child. But like all objects of sentiment, and sentimentality, mothers and children, throughout history, have always also been the victims of abuse. It seems that we cannot separate the light from the dark, adoration from hatred. It is the perversity of this axis that deserves our attention, particularly today, in South Africa, in which abuse is pathological. There are innumerable reasons for this, most notably colonization and apartheid, two related systems of oppression founded on the enslavement and bondage of black life and, subsequently, the devastation of family, community, custom and tradition. The subsequent alienation proved not only materially destructive, but psychically too. The root of abuse, by men of women and children, is deeply connected to disempowerment and rootlessness. However, to solely assign blame to the destroyed black man is to miss the mark. The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, in which sixty-nine people were murdered, including eight women and ten children, was designed to quell protest against the passbook or 'dompas' – the most despised symbol of apartheid. Abuse, therefore, is complex. But it is its endemic nature, its perverse normativity, that remains concerning thirty years after the inauguration of South Africa's democracy. The cycle of light and darkness, sentiment and hatred, prevails. It has become monstrously natural.

In the same year, in reaction to the Sharpeville Massacre, Ingrid Jonker penned the poem which Nelson Mandela would read in his inaugural speech. It is a poem about freedom from enslavement: ‘

The child peeps through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers the child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere the child who became a man treks through all Africa the child who became a giant travels through the whole world Without a pass.

If utopian, Jonker's vision remains just. All those who have been oppressed must be freed, no matter the perversity and damage that would wish it otherwise. It is this principle that runs through the paintings by Andrew Ntshabele. A deeply spiritual humanist – a painting begins with a prayer – Ntshabele's work is devotional. His visions of mothers and children are observed at a distance, at play, in repose, in joy and in rest. As such, the paintings are consolatory – their purpose is to ease the soul. Caught between sepia and bright colour, they are both earthen and ordinarily ceremonial. And it is pointedly, and poignantly, their ordinariness that matters. Ntshabele is unconcerned by the rictus of extremes that holds the country in its thrall, the pornographic spectacle of pain, or the morbid entitlement that comes with the extortion of an historical burden. It is not justice Ntshabele seeks but peace and atonement. This, for the artist, is achieved counter-intuitively, by refusing to fall prey to systemic abuse.

Three barefoot children walk away from the viewer, arm in arm. Four young girls, again turned away from the viewer, perform a dance with arms upheld. Young children race from a scene in some excited anticipation. Children sit cross-legged in a circle, rapt in deep mutual attention. Mothers sit in a separate gathering from the faintly outlined men in the near distance. These are not paintings which force a reckoning. Ntshabele's deliberate refusal to produce an engaging sightline, in which the viewer meets the eyes of the painter's subject, resists complicity. 'Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant', Henry David Thoreau asked. 'We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages'. It is the wonder on mutual insight that compels Thoreau. Not so Ntshabele. If his worlds are seen askance, it is because a deeper wonder in humanity is possible through vicarious observation. Given the historical objectification of the black body – black life – all the more does the artist seek the sanctity of the prosaic and unremarkable. In this regard, Ntshabele concurs with the view of the celebrated cultural thinker, Njabulo Ndebele. 'The ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not as abstractions. If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live'. Ndebele's view underscores Ntshabele's vision. For both the painter and writer, it is the miraculous nature of the everyday that is the greater boon.

Ntshabele's paintings, however, are not merely documentary records of everyday life. The naturalistic depiction of his mothers and children is certainly the key, but their location and framing signals a parallel conversation. Against a wall, just beyond a gathering of children, we see a dense collage of layered newsprint and images. A dense colonial-historical timeline? A counterview to the innocent grouping at the fore? 'History hurts', Frederic Jameson remarked. But what is the nature of Ntshabele's relationship with history? Is it ever-present? And if so, is there in fact no redemption? Is black life forever shadowed by its oppressor? Given that the mothers are seated on a mat of shredded newsprint – the words 'racism' and 'flames' glaringly in our sightline – supposes that the vaunted quiet and calm the figures emit, is also transected by a violent history. Is there no escape? Is innocence an illusion? Or is innocence not all the more vital despite the reality of embedded pain?

How one reconciles this tension in Ntshabele's collaged paintings is critical – it will determine their reception and its outcome. What cannot be ignored is the complexity of the fate of mothers and children. To idealise someone is also to diminish them. The sacred and the profane are inextricable. However, what matters in this fathomless realm of wrong is how and why one prevails – the goodness that remains, the beauty too. Andrew Ntshabele is no sentimentalist. However, like the celebrated poet, Ben Okri, he understands the enduring power of prayer and sacrament. In the poem he penned in honour of Martin Luther King's famous speech – 'Children of the Dream' – Okri writes:

They want the earth and the stars
And the beautiful heavens.
They want to be free
And they want the possibilities
That freedom brings. And also
Freedom's weight and dark side.
They want to love who they want.
They do not want to be defined.
They do not want to be limited.
They do not want to beg for
Their humanity, or the right to be
Creative, or different, or unexpected
Or wild, or surprising, or defying
Of boundaries. They do not want
Condescension, or assumptions.
They want to rebel, even against
Themselves. They want to celebrate,
Even that which didn't celebrate them.

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