

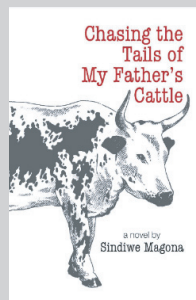
A father's legacy ignites a daughter's fire



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Chasing the tails of my father's cattle

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A father's legacy ignites a daughter's fire

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Award-winning author Sindiwe Magona has created yet another masterpiece of South African literature as she takes the readers into the country's heartlands. Crafting a novel rich in linguistic brilliance, she embeds isiXhosa phrases and cultural traditions through a captivating oral narrative style, revealing the human sorrows and successes specific to the region but universal in flavour. Through these multifaceted, imaginistic formats, she weaves the tale of a father's unbounding love for his daughter. It is a novel significant for its time when the ravages of fatherless children plague South Africa.

Magona, who published her first work, the autobiographical *To My Children's Children*, in 1990 has consistently taken her readers into the villages, homes, huts and hearts of the black South African labourer caught in the whirlpool of poverty, yet overcoming with the indomitable spirit of resistance and determination. Her first novel, *Mother to Mother* (2000), explored the anguish of an impoverished South African mother whose son murdered a white American aid worker, and through its artful prose Magona attempted to unite grieving women separated by language, culture, class and geography and elucidate the political, social and spiritual reasons for such a tragedy. That novel created a narrational bridge between women separated by seemingly insurmountable racially constructed barriers. The novel's international success and translation into multiple languages and dramatic interpretations illustrate the emotional resonance the text created with readers from around the world.

Magona's second novel, *Beauty's Gift* (2008), brought us to the townships and into the lives of professional black women traumatised by the death of their close friend from AIDS. Impacted by this loss and the marital infidelity which caused it, the women commence a campaign to take back their bodies and their lives from the men who carelessly endanger them with their faithlessness. Magona's rage at the South African male who ignores the risk of transmission is evident throughout and her mantra to women like herself 'Not to die a stupid death', 'Get tested' and maintain monogamy is a clarion call to women's freedom and independence from patriarchal domination.

Through *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle* (2015), Magona transports the reader into the rural villages of the Eastern Cape, but unlike the earlier two novels which depict the simmering anger against the selfishness of black men, she gives us a father who dearly loves his wife and adores his daughter, the first living child after years of inexplicable loss. Jojo is unlike any male character yet portrayed in African literature and through him it is as if Magona desires to compose a new script for future generations, encouraging African men to re-create the close family unit for which the isiXhosa were once known.

Although the mines have always been blamed for apartheid's attempt to destroy the black family, Magona writes of a father who resists this monetary lure and returns to raise and care for his daughter. The new chant, spoken as the dying request of Jojo's wife Maseka, *Please look after my baby*, is repeated throughout the text and not only guides but compels the father to fulfil his nurturing role.

In the isiXhosa culture, the naming ceremony is sacrosanct, signifying a declaration and enunciation which speaks into and over the life of the child. As the child's birth ushers in her mother's death, the maternal grandmother, Manala, titles the infant Nokufa, Mother of Death. Yet, her mother Maseka intended space and place for her last born and, even while she was sprouting in her womb, named her Shumikazi, a name signifying the tenth child, remembering the nine children who had not survived, while celebrating the life and significance of the tenth.

The community felt that Nokufa was a more appropriate name and murmured their complaints that this child carried death with her. In fact, the child escapes death numerous times, first when her mother dies in childbirth, then when as a toddler a snake swirls itself around her, next when

her cousin drowns while saving her and finally after three young cousins die following a lethal meal she should have also eaten. But her father refuses to accept this moniker for his beloved child and when he leaves the mines to take his child to his paternal homestead, establishes her as Shumikazi, his tenth and living child.

Before her granddaughter leaves her, Manala delivers profound advice reminiscent of words Magona herself may have uttered: 'May all your mistakes be those you are able to correct', 'Never go to bed harbouring anger in your heart' and 'Don't ever forget yourself, who you are'. It is with this last proverb that Nokufa sheds the stigma of that name, abandoning the taint of death it carries to embrace the baptismal name bestowed by her prescient parents, 'Shumikazi', acknowledging her invaluable worth.

Many in her maternal village of Khubalo reviled Shumikazi as a harbourer of evil and rejoiced to see her leave. Yet for the youngster, her departure heralded a fresh start as she was now numbered in a family that loved her, by a father who adored her. No longer would fat be smeared around her mouth in a ploy to suggest she's eaten a meal that her mouth never tasted, a fact which probably saved her life when death was carried in the pot from which her cousins ate. Now living with her father, she would be an integral part of a cohesive family unit.

Just as with the power of names, the influence of words is illustrated in the refrain CLUCK, CLUCK, CLUCK, that appears in almost every chapter. It reflects the fire of gossip that sweeps across and between every village, carrying, initially, the debris of unkindness. Many times, it is believed that witchcraft has something to do with the events that surround Shumikazi – whether the numerous inexplicable and tragic deaths or the amazing good fortune enjoyed by her father. Jojo insists that witchcraft has nothing to do with the wealth of his homestead, declaring it was his own sweat-filled labour and shrewd business sense that produced those results. Magona creates a male protagonist whose diligence and dedication set him apart from the other disreputable male characters that she has created in previous novels. By fashioning a man of such substance, she heralds a new vision and voice that subverts essentialist feminist notions that men are generally self-serving bullies.

Written within the bildungsroman's motif, *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle* explores the emotional and spiritual development of an impoverished African girl, who grows into a mature and autonomous woman in spite of and because of the dynamic interaction of an engaged external family and community. Their integral shaping and moulding of her character and her resultant acceptance and resistance establish her self-actualisation.

Although the novel heralds her success, it comes from witnessing the bruises and brokenness of women such as her aunt Funiwe who succumbs to the cruelty and indifference of males who have completely abandoned their African

traditional role of nurturer and protector. Battered by an abusive husband, Funiwe is utterly dependent upon her brothers to rescue her from this violent marital relationship. Yet it is only Jojo, her youngest brother, who exerts persistent effort to free his brutalised sister, taking her case to tribal court for recompense and relief. Although the court agrees to the payment of five cows for damages and allows her respite in her paternal home, she is charged with returning to her husband once her physical recovery is complete. Although Funiwe is appeased by the required bovine payment for her suffering as it appears to acknowledge the court's support for beaten wives, she rages at the ruling requiring her to return to the site of repeated abuse.

This watershed event solidifies for Jojo the importance of education in guaranteeing financial independence for his beloved daughter and he actively pursues this. Because of Shumikazi's academic brilliance, she is the first in her extended family to study beyond primary school, a feat achieved despite the disdain of her uncles, who believe the 'wealth' of her education will be lost to her husband's family. Yet Jojo is adamant that his daughter will get an education in case he is not around to care for her, already suspecting that his male siblings may fail in their duty to provide for his daughter. His paternal dedication raises further indignation when he bequeaths his entire legacy of vast herds of cattle, sheep and alpacas to his only surviving child. Although his generosity is applauded by the white magistrate, members of her village vocalise their contempt and his brothers are outraged.

When Jojo's health deteriorates, evidence of the ravages of his years in the mines, he worries again for the care and comfort of his daughter, concerned that his brothers may abdicate their responsibility for his beloved child. Thus, when a marriage offer is presented from a clan in the nearby village, he negotiates the lobola contract with the express condition that Shumikazi be allowed to finish school. Unfortunately, his passing removes the paternal protection that he so lovingly provided, and his brothers, offended that he gave all his resources to his female daughter, abandon her. Thus, despite her brilliant academic results and the wealth of her kraal, her uncles refuse to sell any of her animals to pay for her continued education. They make it clear how ridiculous and wasteful it is to educate a girl child and their patriarchal miserliness forces Shumi to leave school.

Emotionally fragile from her father's death and cognizant of her vulnerable position within both her and her fiancé's clan, Shumikazi bestows her father's inheritance to his brothers, believing that her generosity will ensure her security. Even the villagers see this act as an unspoken but binding reciprocal agreement of familial love and responsibility. But Shumi's meager wedding preparations illustrate how short-sighted her uncles are. Not only do they shame Shumi, but they enrage her groom's family who were already angered at the wealth lost by her lavish endowment. Their displeasure is evident in the marital name they confer on her. Although a bride's name is designed to reflect on the family's delight in their new 'daughter', Shumi is assigned No-orenji

(the orange one), a name indicative of the indifference and disdain they feel toward her. Fortunately, she is a loved bride and the delight of her husband, Sandile, a mine worker who spends only 1 month a year at home with his wife. Despite their months of separation, their early years of marriage are blessed with three children, and later, with the arrival of two grandsons, Shumikazi earns the grudging but appreciative respect from her in-laws for producing male heirs. Moreover, No-orenji's tireless and sacrificial efforts as a makoti (son's wife) to her extended family further elevates her in their eyes and they joke that they should have named her Nokwakha (builder) because of her industry.

But the mines, ever a spectre of death, claim the life of Sandile and once again No-orenji is thrown into the defenceless position of an unprotected woman in a patriarchal culture. In this time of grief, when familial comfort is expected, No-orenji must face further pain when her paternal family fails to even share in her tears. To worsen matters, within a week of the funeral her husband's male relatives begin to offer sexual comfort for her sorrow. Mortified by their persistence and concerned that village women will see her widowhood as a sexual threat, No-orenji must then face the untenable situation of remarriage to her husband's youngest brother. With determined desperation, she appeals to her in-laws that she be allowed to return to her father's homestead, hoping it allows her to escape the inevitability of sexual assault or unwanted marriage.

When finally released, she discovers that her paternal home and gardens have been decimated by neglect and the kraal, once teeming with healthy animals, lies empty. Her uncles view her return with guilty suspicion, for they have swallowed Jojo's wealth and reduced the rondavels to ruin. Despite efforts to have her uncles assist in restoring her father's home and returning even some of the herds, Shumi meets fierce resistance from her wastrel eldest uncle. Her scathing rebuke of his appalling lack of familial responsibility rings in the villagers' ears: 'I should blame my stupidity in trusting you ... trusting custom'.

Her uncles' self-inscribed tradition of negligence and indifference has spanned decades. From their lack of protection for their abused sister Funiwe, to their craven silence in revealing an offered bursary, to their miserly bridal gifts, they reaffirmed their deliberate ignorance of tribal traditions of family support and concern.

Ever tenacious, Shumi throws herself into re-establishing her paternal homestead and her dedication inspires villagers to reach out. This is Xhosa tradition of Ubuntu working as it

was intended, united sharing and caring until the one suffering is restored. Their united labour represents life's generous circle of giving, an acknowledgement of Jojo's investment in village life and Shumi's stalwart kindness to her family. Shumi's heartache is soothed by their expressions of support and her sense of aloneness and abandonment dissolves. Further she realises that, although his sacrificial industry was important, her father's 'wealth, his real cattle: [is] the kindness of his heart'. And she no longer has to 'chase the tails of her father's cattle' at the homesteads of her uncles; instead she discovers she is an integral part of a living community who breathes solidarity and commitment to one of their own.

Like her father, Shumi carries on their family tradition, rebuilding her homestead, gardens and kraals for the heritage of her own offspring. Moreover, she educates her children, enabling them to achieve university degrees, an accomplishment she assimilates through their success. Further, her investment in the next generation extends to the training of women and she establishes a factory which ensures other women are not impoverished by male selfishness or greed. Through it all, Shumikazi is a victor.

Magona's novel takes us on one African woman's life journey, as she faces the dangers of patriarchal neglect and abuse. Yet it illustrates the tenaciousness of an indomitable woman who reaches beyond mere survival and grows past the bile of bitterness to embrace her obstacles with vigour and creates opportunities from the dust and dung of the soil. In her veins flows the blood of a father whose parenthood demonstrates the potential of every African male, one who casts his heart and not just his seed, to implant a fierce love, building in his daughter a secure identity and self-sufficiency. Further, her mother's otherworldly visitations offer indispensable guidance and comfort, reassuring her that maternal love is transcendent. *Chasing the Tales of My Father's Cattle* reveals the ferocious spirit of an African woman who, steeled by parental devotion, is enabled to overcome every obstacle cast by various family members' jealousy seeking to prevent her progress.

This inspiring novel unwraps the intricate warp and weave of isiXhosa traditions and African spiritualism to enrich the global reader with the multi-layered depth and inter-relational wealth of African rural life. For the national reader, it paints a clear picture of what fathers, family and community should do to ensure that a future generation carries the legacy of genuine Ubuntu. It is a must read for all who wish to experience the complex beauty and harsh reality of lives intertwined by blood and humanity.