

As Honest and Realistic as Possible

Helen Fallon

Neshani Andreas, the second eldest of eight children, was born in 1964 in Namibia, then a colony of South Africa. Her parents worked in a fish factory. Neshani wanted to be a writer from an early age, although such an occupation was unheard of in her community. At school she read everything she could get her hands on and wrote secretly.

After training as a teacher, Neshani taught English, history and business economics from 1988 to 1992 in a school in rural northern Namibia. While there, she became immersed in the rural culture and developed a profound respect for the women she encountered. This experience found expression in her novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*.

SILENCE AND SUSPICION

Set in the fictional rural village of Oshaantu, this is the story of the friendship between two women, Mee Ali and Kauna, narrated through the voice of Mee Ali. While Mee Ali is happily married to Michael, Kauna is trapped in an abusive marriage to Shange. While her neighbours and family are aware that Kauna is being treated brutally by her husband, social custom dictates that they should not intervene.

After Kauna has been brutally beaten by Shange, Mee Ali visits her in hospital as frequently as she can. "The nurses were not always sympathetic. In our presence they would talk about how village women get beaten up by their husbands; and how they lie to the doctors,

saying that some cow had kicked them in their faces while they were milking; and that treating these women was a waste of time because they always return, worse."

When Shange dies suddenly, Kauna is suspected of having killed him with witchcraft or poison. Rumour circulates through the rural community. "She got tired of his abuse and poisoned his breakfast." "She was jealous of his girlfriend and bewitched him." "She wanted to inherit his wealth and ate him up." "She wanted another man and killed this one." "Her parents on her mother's side are well-known witches. It runs in her clan."

Shange's family come to Kauna's compound claiming his home, his land and his animals; "greed demonstrated equally among them". Anxiously, Mee Ali watches Kauna's failure to shed tears, aware that this will heighten bad feelings between her and Shange's family.

The confrontation reminds Mee Ali of the situation she encountered when her husband's cousin Victor died suddenly. Mee Sara, Victor's wife, denied causing his death but his relatives did not believe her. Her uncle asked to meet with Victor's family and explained, "Victor was not bewitched by his wife or anybody else. Victor was sick. He had this new disease called AIDS... We are told that this new disease makes people look different. Something none of us has seen before."

RESISTING INJUSTICE AND PREJUDICE

As the time for the funeral approaches, Kauna continues to refuse to shed tears for her cruel husband and will not make the traditional speech praising him. "‘You don’t want to say goodbye words to your husband?’, Kauna’s mother asked, raising her voice... ‘Why are you doing this?’ she continued, lowering her voice. Kauna did not answer her mother. Mee Fennie queried gently, ‘Are you sure? I mean, are you quite, quite sure you don’t want somebody to say a few words on your behalf, even goodbye words? All widows do this, you know.’ "

Kauna cannot be persuaded and her uncle makes the funeral speech, praising Shange as a father and husband.

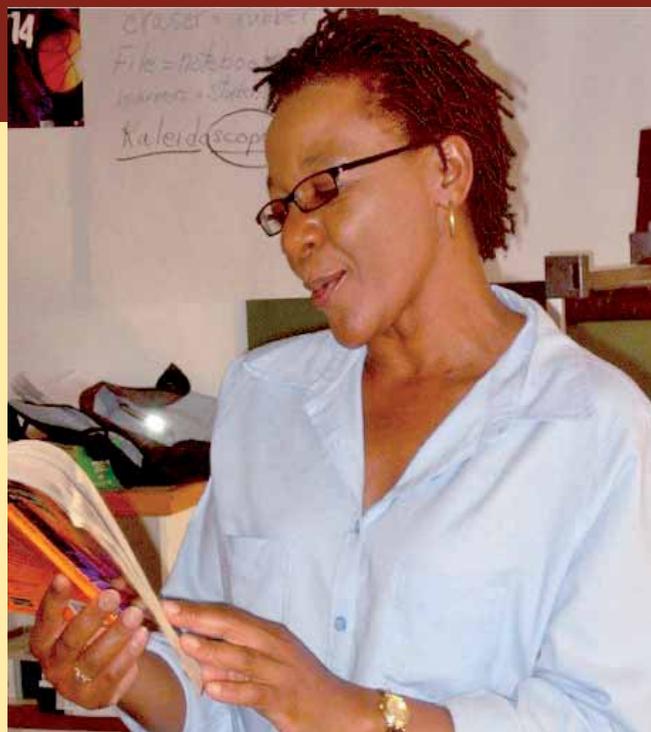
Shange’s relatives lay claim to the home he shared with Kauna and order her to leave: "Why do you want to stay here and enjoy Shange’s wealth? You didn’t even shed one tear for him." When the time comes for Kauna to go, it is Mee Ali who accompanies her friend and children to the road to catch a lift. "They looked like people who were going away for a weekend, they had so little luggage."

Kauna remains defiant and has hope for the future, declaring "You know what happens to the mahangu millet. After it has been knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle, it finds the strength to repair itself and grow better."

Using simple language, Neshani Andreas explores friendship, marriage, widowhood, crop growing, witchcraft and AIDS through the rhythms, rituals and duties that are particular to women’s experience. Her novel exposes many of the injustices, particularly those regarding women, that are part of rural life. It was completed after Neshani moved to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, in 1993 to undertake a degree in education. While working on a part-time basis for the American Peace Corps, she learned how to use a computer and encountered the first person to encourage her in her writing, a volunteer called Reed Dickson.

TELLING IT AS IT IS

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu was published in 2001 in the Heinemann African Writers Series; Neshani



"Writing is a lonely business," says Neshani Andreas, one of Namibia’s most successful but unsung authors. "You write alone, and you never know if anybody will ever read what you write." Andreas, however, remains passionate about the written word.

(Photo: www.usaid.gov)

is the first Namibian author to be included in the series. Talking about the novel in an interview she said, "I did not want to be insensitive to my culture, I did not want to be insulting, but I wanted to be as honest and realistic as possible." Noting that, in post-independence Namibia, many writers want to focus on the South African military occupation, return from exile and political events, Neshani said, "I had to write about other things; travelling in overcrowded minibuses, selling and buying at markets, about sickness, witchcraft and church, about ordinary things."

Neshani Andreas continues to live in Windhoek and works as a programme officer for the Forum of African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA), an organisation that creates educational opportunities for girls and women. She continues to write. "Writing is still not encouraged by Namibian society, it is not regarded as a respectable job, as something that has any benefit. It is my dream to write full-time, to wake up every morning and to know that this is my job, my life, just to write." ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.
The Purple Violet of Oshaantu is published by Heinemann.