

Critical Moments: A review of *Unimportance*

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REVIEW

Unimportance

Thando Mgqolozana

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Unimportance is the third novel of South African born writer Thando Mgqolozana. Set at The University of the Western Cape (UWC), the novel is about Zizi, a popular university student and SRG presidential candidate. The entire novel takes place within twelve hours, each hour proving harder than the previous one. Zizi is about to give a speech to his fellow students who, should they choose to elect him as the student president, will change Zizi's life.

The novel begins with Zizi and his girlfriend Pamodi. The couple stay on the campus residence and often meet up in Zizi's room. On this particular night Pamodi visits Zizi and they have a fallout. When Pamodi leaves his room, Zizi waits patiently for his girlfriend to return. After some time passes, Zizi decides to look for Pamodi, and suddenly he cannot find her anywhere. He ends up searching the entire campus, he has encounters with various odd students. He struggles to remain calm. He begins to worry about her. Simultaneously, he thinks about the speech he must still write and how he is going to win the students over whilst trying to locate his missing girlfriend.

On the surface, the novel seems to be a day in the life of Zizi, yet as you delve deeper into the story, one common theme associated with South African literature starts to emerge – politics – one of the most discernible topics to have in a South African novel. Mgqolozana, who was a student at UWC, writes the novel in a way that the theme of politics is evident in the novel. Yet the entire novel is not filled with constant references to the struggle, racism, or South African politics. The novel is refreshing in that one is not reminded of Apartheid and its aftereffects.

The novel exposes what life is like after-hours on campus. It is written in a compelling and intriguing way. As the reader, I wanted to know what was going to happen to Zizi. It was intriguing as I felt time pass for Zizi, every hour was written with such intensity. Mgqolozana crafts a character that you are not quite sure whether you like him and are rooting for him, or whether you despise him and the choices he makes throughout the novel.

Zizi also appears to be a sexist, hormone filled young adult. He has an incredibly lustful and testosterone-infused sexual appetite which is one of the key elements to his current predicament with Pamodi. The way Zizi describes his surroundings and the people he meets seems surreal. However, one is not quite sure of his ability as a narrator. His character seems suspicious although his genuine love of politics is clear. Hence, one is not entirely sure of his true motives.

His integrity is questionable and by the end of the novel, he does not appear to be as innocent as one previously thought. The novel is peppered with references to and incidents of sex on campus and even details of his first sexual experience at age eleven with his aunt Rita. These stories are told in a somewhat explicit yet enduring way. If you are a student living on the campus or a student at UWC, you will appreciate the references to lecture venues, food vendors and the general locale of the campus. As Zizi strolls around on campus, he walks by many of the campus residences such as Ruth First and Colleen Williams. The novel highlights the rich political history UWC has with South Africa.

The novel appears to capture twelve hours of Zizi's life perfectly. It seems to be rather crude at times, yet this is necessary to capture the character of Zizi. He goes through various emotions from beginning to end, where we as the reader feel like voyeurs into his mind. The end of the novel is undeniably a reason to read the novel in its entirety. It offers literary characteristics that are not often seen. The end of the novel makes one question the entire novel and Zizi's character as a whole.

One of the main motifs in the novel, which I think Mgqolozana highlights, is the power of an individual. Mgqolozana reflects on the power people have to control others and manipulate a vote. This book may be about the politics on a university campus, but it speaks to the politics of our country. We have to ask whether voters understand the power of a vote, do they actually care, and are they genuinely interested in the leaders and what they stand for. As mentioned earlier, the character Zizi is a favourite among his peers, as some of them actually refer to him as 'president', but one could question that as voters, do they truly know his character and his intentions? This is what the novel seeks to ask. However, the outcome of these prevailing events are revealed at the end of the novel.

This novel is a must-read for those who enjoy political fiction and are looking for a South African novel that truly feels South African.

- Kareesha Naidoo