

My Silver Stripes and Other Poems, by Maletšema Ruth Emsley

2023. Staging Post. pp. 179.

ISBN: 978-1-991220-47-9

Reviewed by Naomi Nkealah

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7953-9663>

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

naomi.nkealah@wits.ac.za

My Silver Stripes and Other Poems by Maletšema Ruth Emsley vividly embodies the expression “poetry for life.” It is poetry for life because it speaks about everyday living: the pain, joy, laughter, memories, disappointments, peace of mind, excitement, sorrow, and hope that we experience every day as we navigate life and its offerings. It is poetry for life because it offers its readers suggestions for dealing with life’s challenges, such as the loss of a spouse. Moreover, it challenges us to rethink our biased attitudes and prejudices that may create unhealthy relationships with those whom we love or share our spaces with. Then too it is poetry for life because it is memorable poetry; it remains etched in our minds even after we have put down the book. The language is simple but simultaneously sophisticated. Emsley’s poetry transmits life lessons without being overtly didactic. It is poetry that uncovers emotions we would otherwise want concealed, and compels us to confront these emotions, with the assurance that it is okay for us to feel the way we do.

The poems in *My Silver Stripes* are frank, honest expressions of human desires, but especially women’s desires, which are so often self-repressed as a result of our patriarchal upbringing. Reading through the poems about love, I was reminded of the poetry collection *Beautiful Fire* by Cameroonian writer Joyce Ash (2018), which captures some of the raw emotions women in heterosexual relationships experience when in close proximity to their male partners, either in a sexual encounter or just one of desire for the other. Like Ash, Emsley conveys in crisp language the “fire” that burns within these women. Whether it is in terms of love, sexual desire, feminist rage or something else, the fire is intense, purposeful and self-emancipatory for the women personas in the poems of Ash and Emsley.

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 40 | 2024 | #15643 | 1 page

LASA 

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/15643>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2024



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

The debut poetry collection contains 122 poems divided into 8 parts. The poems under each part vary in number as some parts have many more poems than others. Part One has 11 poems, Part Two 7 poems, Part Three 25 poems, Part Four 26 poems, Part Five 22 poems, Part Six 21 poems, Part Seven 5 poems, and Part Eight 5 poems. The poems are organised according to themes that the author obviously saw fit for the poems, though there are overlaps as some poems could easily fall under several themes. For example, the poem “Mutualism” about how the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet at Cape Agulhas and, despite their difference (one being warm and the other cold), “allow each other space to live” (41) could fit under Part One on Nature but appears under Part Three on Gender. The themes from Part One to Part Eight are as follows: Nature (Part One); Love (Part Two); Gender (Part Three); Society, Politics, Lawlessness (Part Four); Covid-19, Death, Sorrow (Part Five); General (Part Six); Spirituality, Religion, Culture (Part Seven); and Tribute (Part Eight). Organising the poems into these themes could not have been an easy task for Emsley. The huge number of poems (122) would have made this quite a difficult job, coupled with the fact that the poems were written over a very long period of time. As Emsley states in her Preface, “some of these poems are as old as my secondary school years; others as recent as Covid-19” (1). It is no small task to compile a poetry anthology with poems written over several decades and still be able to find common threads among them.

Emsley writes with a poignancy that cannot evade the reader; her words paint vivid images that readers can very quickly identify. In “Filicidal Fires,” she speaks about veld fires “burning at a distance,” which later yielded to apartheid-induced fire or violence that saw lots of black people “torched for telling the truth,” and now there are new fires resulting in “children charred to death ... / by jilted fathers!” (18). These are jolting images that achieve the desired effect in the reader: to jolt them to the precarious reality of metamorphosing violence in South Africa. That Emsley chooses poetry as a platform to express her feminist ideas about gendered violence is significant. Canadian black feminist poet Lillian Allen states in her poetry book *Make the World New* that “writing poetry is the work of the soul” because “poetry is that dialogue between the world inside of us / and the world outside” (Allen 2021, 52). Allen’s words are an apt description of the critical work that poetry does, especially for feminist poets. Emsley’s poetry does exactly this: it gives her the platform to have a conversation with herself and with the world around her. With its allowance for imagery, satire, economy of words, as well as structural innovations, poetry gave Emsley a most effective tool to express feminist rage at the patriarchal atrocities plaguing contemporary South African societies across racial, class and ethnic divides.

The anthology fits seamlessly into the body of work on black feminist poetry from South Africa, which has been championed by poets such as Lebo Mashile, Malika Ndlovu, Phillipa Yaa de Villiers, Koleka Putuma and Ntsiki Mazwai. This body of knowledge centres on black women’s experiences of everyday injustices, whether individually or collectively (Gqola 2011). Emsley’s poems provide insights into women’s individual and collective experiences of fear, shame, social stigmatisation, domestic violence, rape,

loneliness, and all kinds of discrimination. Her poems extend knowledge on subjects such as widowhood, as addressed in South African and African women's literature. To illustrate, widowhood has typically been represented to show the ways in which women who become widows suffer molestation and exploitation at the hands of male and female family members of the deceased husbands' families. In South African literature, the Zulu novel *Umshado* portrays this oppression of widows and the various punitive measures taken against them if they transgress what is seen as appropriate widowhood behaviour (Masuku 2023). Emsley's poetry vividly presents widowhood experiences as she herself became a widow with the passing of her husband during the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world in early 2020. However, her poems on widowhood do not foreground what I call the victim image; what she presents instead are the feelings of nostalgia and ethereal connection that the widow experiences and a very strong sense of injustice that the widow feels for not knowing how her husband died owing to the dysfunctionality of hospitals where accountability is absent. In a series of poems, Emsley expresses her disgust and strong disapproval of the medical system, condemning in no uncertain terms its lack of humaneness. In "The Last Room" the speaker narrates how her husband went in for a simple doctor's visit but ends up in hospital and then in ICU a few days later, and she is simply called to come and collect his belongings. Before she knows it, he is declared dead. The last stanza of the poem captures the speaker's demand for justice: "we want to know the details, to understand how they died / so that we mourn like people who have hope" (123). In these lines, Emsley speaks for all women who lost family members during Covid-19 and got no explanation of what led to the deaths of these beloved ones. In "Upon Your Arrival," Emsley conveys the widow's pain of loss of a husband whose death she never understood but simultaneously shows how the widow pays tribute to the now-gone husband as a man who truly loved his wife. In "Epitaphs on Their Graves," she speaks of how, owing to the restrictions during Covid time, families could not even do epitaphs for the loved ones buried in mass graves "labelled Covid-19 cases" (117). She however subverts the handicap by proposing an epitaph written "on our hearts," which "the world will not see" (119). In all these poems, it is evident that Emsley has written about widowhood in a very specific context, that of Covid-19, and she also projects the toll of loss on the women who lost husbands during this time but without dressing them up in garments of pity, victimhood or powerlessness. This is what makes her poetry fascinating to read. Her poetry suggests that widowhood is a time to confront social injustice, to discover the self, and to experience new transitions in life. These ideas greatly enrich feminist understandings of African widowhood.

Emsley's poetry addresses key concerns in contemporary South African feminism, especially the issue of gendered violence, which is currently a pandemic in itself. Acclaimed feminist scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola has called rape "a South African nightmare" (Gqola 2015), and in her latest book, *Female Fear Factory*, she also writes about the various mechanisms that patriarchy uses to create a language and a life of fear for women (Gqola 2021). Emsley's poems echo many of the sentiments in Gqola's books. Her poems demonstrate her critical connectedness to knowledge on gendered

violence as much as she offers her own perspectives on the violations wrought on women's bodies by patriarchy's ever-active machinery of abuse. The poem "The Cry of a Woman Who Was Gang Raped," by its very title, tells a horror story about the rape of women in South Africa. The speaker laments not just the gang rape but also the pregnancy that may result from it as she ponders "which father owns the sperm? / A whole army of them got into you" (35). The poem that follows it in the anthology, "Form One Class, 1981," also speaks of male violence inflicted on the bodies of young girls in a Form One class by a male teacher who takes out his anger on the girls in the class "because Mary denied his love advances" (36). Following this poem is "I Knew Later He Was Mad," which also projects male violence, this time in the context of taxi travelling, where the speaker is given "the beating of [her] life" (37) by a taxi driver after she alights from the taxi and requests for her change. The many poems on male violence in this anthology point to Emsley's acute awareness of a deeply rooted problem in South African society, and like many African feminists, she offers insights into the multiple layers of the violence. But most significantly, she highlights the reason for its perpetuation. In "Still Planning," she offers a satirical commentary on the lethargy of the state in ending gendered violence. The poem shows that while femicide is on a massive increase as "we count and count the coffins," the state takes its time with investigations as "the law is looking for evidence, still. / The government is still planning to plan to reduce GBV" (34). These last two lines of the poem are the most poignant indictment of state sluggishness in addressing a gender crisis that I have ever read in a poem. That the state "is still *planning to plan* to reduce GBV" suggests a hopeless situation, one that places the burdens of finding solutions to gendered violence unfairly on ordinary citizens, and worse still on the very victims who need help. Gqola in *Female Fear Factory* clearly denounces African university authorities for their failure to conduct proper investigations of university female students' sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of promiscuous lecturers and for leaving the burden on these girls to prove that they had truly been sexually harassed, raped or exploited (Gqola 2021). Like Gqola, Emsley lashes out unapologetically against the state and its various organs—the law, the medical system, the education system—that continue to fail women in South Africa by not taking on the responsibility of calling violators to book and rooting them out of sane society.

Some of the poems illuminate the lives of rural women in the past—what kept them busy, what they took pride in, how they related to others, and how they made sense of their rural environment. The poem "Routine of a Rural Woman" is partly a praise poem for the rural housewife who spent her entire day sweeping her yard, "moving round all the muddy / huts, creating patterns of curved lines and crosses" (44) and partly an indictment of the rural husband who, in contrast to his hardworking wife, "continues to move around the village, / searching only / for the free, homemade sorghum beer" (44). The stark contrast between enactments of femininity (women taking pride in keeping a clean home) and masculinity (men exiting the home in search of personal pleasures) in this rural context illustrates the gender injustice that has outlived precolonial and

colonial societies into the present day. This is one beautiful poem that shows how men still dominate women in the family despite doing very little to maintain the home.

As an African feminist, I am drawn to Emsley's poetry because she writes about African women and the challenges they face within their cultures, families, and communities—all superstructures that are sustained by patriarchal ideals. Emsley writes about African women's oppressions with a candidness that bespeaks the need for social redress in how they are treated by their extended families and society at large. In the poem "Life of a Widow," she writes about the oppressions of widowhood: the loneliness, the aloneness, the feelings of loss, and most importantly the victimisation of widows as society assumes a widow to be the killer of her husband. She questions the social stigmatisation of widows as husband "terminators" and then offers the sane advice: "learn to do things your own way; / make good mistakes, trust your instinct" (51). In this way, she not only points out a problem but also offers a practical solution. This is what I call practical African feminism (Nkealah 2017), because the knowledge offered has a utilitarian value for everyday survival in patriarchal societies.

This book is an excellent work that combines beauty in creativity with intellectualism to give its readers food for the mind. I read the entire book with relish. Its language is crisp, its humour is piercing, its knowledge is abundant, and its vision is inspiring. Silke Heiss states in her Foreword that "Emsley knows how to craft poetry according to traditional standards, showing originality and a fine sense of rhythm" (xiv). I echo these words and add that Emsley writes like she's "got oil wells / Pumping in [her] living room," to borrow the words of Maya Angelou in her famous poem "Still I Rise" (Moffett 2013, 200). I see myself using *My Silver Stripes and Other Poems* in my gender course and I can see my students loving the poems because of the way in which they capture our fears and expectations as women living in times of unprecedented male violence and violations, but also because of the way the poems give us courage to speak up, speak out, and speak with each other about our feminist concerns. This is a poetry book for every African feminist.

References

- Allen, Lillian. 2021. *Make the World New: The Poetry of Lillian Allen*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Ash, Joyce. 2018. *Beautiful Fire*. Denver: Spears Media Press.
- Gqola, Pumla Dineo. 2011. "Whirling Worlds? Women's Poetry, Feminist Imagination and Contemporary South African Publics." *Scrutiny* 2 16 (2): 5–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2011.631823>
- Gqola, Pumla Dineo. 2015. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: Melinda Ferguson Books.
- Gqola, Pumla Dineo. 2021. *Female Fear Factory*. Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson Books.

- Masuku, Norma. 2023. "Cleansing Rites: An Erstwhile Practice or an Imperative? A Revisit of the Novel *Umshado* (The Wedding)." *Imbizo* 14 (1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6565/11364>
- Moffett, Helen. 2013. *A Poetry Anthology for Southern African Students*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Nkealah, Naomi. 2017. "Cameline Agency: A New Agenda for Social Transformation in South African Women's Writing 2012–2014." In "Facing the Future: Writing Transformation and Social Justice," edited by Cheryl Stobie, special issue, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 29 (2): 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2017.1347426>