

WHAT WE LOSE: BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Zinzi Clemmons is an American writer who explores the subject of race, class, gender, family, sex, country and the after effect of apartheid in her first novel "What we Lose". In this book she talks about a girl named Thandi who narrates the path of her life in the context of her mother's death. It is a story which revolves around the illness and death of her mother and is so powerfully expressed that it leaves the readers in pensive mood. The protagonist is searching for her roots and remains restless and helpless in her quest for an identity. This has been the main content of this novel. It is a well written book in simple language but in an impressive way and the story is beautifully told.

WHAT WE LOSE

Book Review

Zinzi Clemmons is an American writer who explores the subject of race, class and gender and the after effect of apartheid in her first novel "What we Lose". In this book she talks about a girl named Thandi who narrates the path of her life in the context of her mother's death. This loss had a strong emotional effect on her. As a reader we follow Thandi in her journey from childhood to adulthood. Love, sex, race mental health, illness and motherhood, get connected in her life at regular intervals and are profoundly expressed in this novel. She is caught between cultures and identities and her quest for belongingness is well expressed.

In the initial part of the book Thandi talks about gruesome stories of violent crime which she had heard in her childhood. She ponders as how dangerous it was actually. She talks about the photograph of the Sudanese child whose picture was captured by Kevin Carter, a professional photographer who committed suicide because of the death of his friend. The friend of this photographer got killed while documenting a violent conflict at Sudan.

In the chapter “Some observations on Race and Security in South Africa”, she writes that the Nigerians are always blamed for spreading the business of drugs. She observed that the feeling of mistrust was there between blacks and whites, black South Africans and Indians and between white, blacks and Indians but one thing was common among these races was that they all did not trust Nigerians. However in the later part of the book Thandi talks about blacks who were residing at America and were successful and enjoying high status. Janet Jackson, Puff Daddy, Martin Lawrence were some of the names she quoted in the book. According to her, these achievements of blacks depicted that there was democracy and political freedom existed.

Thandi faced different reaction from people for having skin which was light in colour. She could not assimilate blacks because of her light colour skin and better financial status compare to other black people. She also talks about the situation at South Africa after apartheid which introduced division, segregation and grouping according to skin tone. All these led to confusion and hostility. She remembers how some of her white friends of her tried to comfort her that she is not real black person. This made her sad rather than happy. She also spoke about lower status of American blacks who were facing high poverty rate, mortality rate, crime among black-on-black and the atrocities in the prison system of America. Her childhood days had witnessed these negative incidences and a feeling of rejection got generated in her towards life.

Amidst all these incidents Thandi wanted to find her identity and was desperately longing to have the belongingness. Her mother cautioned her that she would not be able to make friends with dark skinned women because they would be jealous of her complexion all the time. Thandi desired to have the feeling of being accepted and having a home and root. The sense of having no place which is safe and your own was making her feel miserable. Throughout the novel Thandi is trying to trace her root, to have the comfort of belongingness. Generally Thandi is narrating different instances of life with the feeling of negativity and darkness around her life. She always appeared scared, worried, sad, lost lonely, livid. Her inner fear is getting reflected in her dream where she is losing everything. She paints a sad, depressing and scared picture of herself who because of different childhood memories was not able to live a happy life. She also talked about the insecurity which women feels when they are losing their partner. She wrote that girls make use of their body to lure their boyfriend so that he comes back in their life and stays forever.

Thandi talked only about the negative things of life giving a pessimistic attitudes towards life. Her mother’s illness scared her. She appeared insecure and uncertain. She talks about illness and death of her own mother. The protagonist feels helplessness seeing her mother deteriorate everyday and going nearer to death.

Though it is a fiction but description of the incidents makes the reader feel that it is a autobiography of author where everything is written as first hand information. This book is written in an autographical mode where the significant happenings of day to day life have been added. These incidents have left an impact on author's mind and shaped her personality. The fear, loss of root, post apartheid crimes, discrimination left a scar on her mind. She feels disconnected and dislocated with the present world. In this book Thandi appeared to suffer in her maiden life when her mother was unwell and later her becoming mother and divorce episode has been added. Amidst all the things which happened in her life, she halts, but her mind and heart always goes back to her mother whose loss she could never fill up.

It is a novel about an African-American woman who explores issues of race, sex, family, and country. She is searching for an identity. She remains restless and helpless in her quest for an identity. This has been the main content of this novel. It is a well written book in simple language which will leave the readers in passive mood.