

# Resettlement is Burial, Resistance is Resurrection

Contextualizing *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*

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Mantoa, an octogenarian Mosotho woman living in a remote mountain village in the Lesotho Highlands region, calmly listens to obituaries on the radio every night, hoping to die. "Death has forgotten you," the raconteur reminds her. She lost her parents, their predecessors, husband and other relatives. The death of her daughter and grandchild had a traumatic effect on Mantoa. She wept for days and days. On Christmas day that year, Mantoa, expecting her son's return from the mines in South Africa, received two briefcases. This time, she did not lament or wept for days.

Death is a dominant motif in the Mosotho film *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*,<sup>1</sup> directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, which recently won the Golden Pheasant Crow Award for Best Film at the 25<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival of Kerala.<sup>2</sup> Mosese, who splits his time between Berlin, Johannesburg and Lesotho, won a Special Jury Award for 'Visionary Filmmaking' at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival for his sophomore feature. The film received four African Movie Academy Awards, including Mosese's win in the Best Director category. *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* made history as the first Lesotho film ever to have submitted to the Oscars for Best International Feature Category.

On the one side, the film chronicles the present-day incidents beginning with the death of Mantoa's son to the death of her beloved village, where people are evicted in the background of the construction

of a new dam. Simultaneously, on the other side, taking cues from the Basotho histories, Mosese intertwines the Lifaqane wars, the Black Plague, Boer Wars, imperialism, colonial modernity, religion, neo-colonialism, and oppression of dominant-ruling classes with the audiovisual narrative of the film. The fictional village in the film is named 'Nasaretha', though it was shot in Ha Dinizulu. When the proposed dam becomes a reality, the village will be submerged. People in the village, who have been following, and are only familiar with, the agricultural way of life and engaged in allied occupations for centuries, will be 'rehabilitated' to the outskirts of Maseru city. For them, 'rehabilitation' is tantamount to death. How do they move their cattle and sheep into the city? What job can they do for a living?

Besides these concerns, Mantoa is deeply worried about her go-to space in the village – "what about graves?" she asks. Her family rests there in the village cemetery. In other words, as the film conveys, each graveyard embodies the memories of a particular place. People in 'Nasaretha' have a spiritual connection with the soil; how can it be separated? The umbilical cords and placentas of those people born there were buried in that soil. Every nook and corner of the plains carry their personal and collective memories. When the official spokesperson says, "We're going to be resettled. This place is going to be flooded. A dam will be built here", someone asks, "Do we have a choice?" These questions shape the foundation of the socio-political reading of *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*. The resistance begins with Mantoa saying, "My only wish is to be buried here."

The film begins with an older man narrating a story while playing the traditional Basotho instrument called *Lesiba*. The raconteur's monologues, a nod to the oral storytelling traditions, combined with the film's audiovisual narrative, takes us to the magical realm of African cinema and its distinctive aesthetics. Let us start with one such

narration by the *lesiba- raconteur*, which embodies the spirit and essence of *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*,

This place. Legend says it used to be called the plains of weeping. Long before the arrival of Eugene Casalis and Thomas Arbousset. They named the plains Nasaretha; "Nazareth"; after their faith. The people just called it home. They say if you go a little further to the edges of the dam, you can still hear the church bell tolling beneath, under the waters. Take a walk closer to the dam, you'll hear for yourself. The Church bell speaks, tolling beneath, under the water. Tolling. In the deep, bells speak when people cannot. I saw with my own eyes, in the years of the Red Dust, following the arrival of the men with iron cups. Cups that could never be filled. I saw it with my own eyes, the dead burying their own dead. Gather around little children, cheer up. For this is not a death march, nor a burial. This is a resurrection. Genesis. The dead buried their own dead. You, you shall follow in the future. They say in Nasaretha: if you place your ear to the ground, you can still hear the cries and whispers of those who perished under the flood. Their spirits hallowing from the deep.

*This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* demands layered and nuanced engagement with the audiovisual narrative to understand its subtexts and complex themes. This article focuses on the socio-political and historical contexts to critically review the film. The first part gives a brief historical overview of Lesotho, the second part explains how the socio-political past and present are reflected in the audiovisual narrative, and the article concludes with an analysis of Mosese's cinematic universe.

### Lesotho: Past and Present

The Lifaqane Wars (1815-1840),<sup>3</sup> conflict and warfare among different ethnic groups, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a crucial role in the formation of nation-states and borders in the Southern African region. Zulu dynasty came into existence during this period. Moshoeshoe I established Basutoland by uniting the Basotho ethnic people to form resistance against Shaka Zulu. The highlands of this kingdom later became present-day Lesotho over the centuries. The history of Christianity and institutionalized religion in Lesotho<sup>4</sup> begins

with Moshoeshe I inviting missionaries from the Society of Evangelical Mission of Paris to Basutoland. Jean-Eugene Casalis, founder of Protestant missionaries in Basutoland, and Thomas Jean Arbousset, a Protestant missionary who worked with the Society of Evangelical Mission of Paris, played a pivotal role propagating religion. Their names are mentioned in the earlier narration by the *lesiba-raconteur*. Mosese named the fictional village in the film 'Nasaretha', hinting Nazareth in present-day Israel, considered a holy place where Jesus Christ is believed to have spent his childhood.

Colonial modernity, imperialism and capitalism reached the highlands inhabited Basotho people following the arrival of religious institutions. Boer wars between Moshoeshe I and the European settlers (Trekboers) resulted in not only significant loss of territory and partition of the kingdom but also the beginning of British colonial influence. The 'Free State' in present-day South Africa was formed, and the remaining territories of the kingdom became the British Protectorate of Basutoland. By the end of the nineteenth century, unsurprisingly, Basutoland became a British Crown colony in the Southern African region. "If you dig the soil of these plains, you can still find the remains of all those who perished in the Lifaqane wars and Boer wars, and those who perished in the black plague," says Mantoa in one scene, which hints at the colonial-imperial past of the highlands. Lesotho gained political independence from Britain in 1966. During the post-independent decades, the country witnessed civil strife, military rule, coups, internal crises and political instability at different junctures, which affected Lesotho's growth and development.

Mantoa explains to Lasaro the story behind their village's name, 'Plains of Weeping', in one memorable scene. During the plague years, people travelled to the capital city, passing through these plains. Due to severe health conditions, people often died en route to the city, and the family members buried their loved ones in the plains. Most of them

settled there in the village. Mantoa repeats what the *lesiba- raconteur* said earlier, “then the missionaries came and named it “Nasaretha”; for us, it is always the ‘plains of weeping’”. Lesotho is a landlocked country, geographically located like an enclave within South Africa. The total population of the country is less than two million. Apart from diamond mines, water export is a major source of income for this small country. Lesotho highlands region, rich with rivers and other water sources, supplies water to neighbouring Free State and the greater Johannesburg region. About 780 cubic meters of water is exported to these areas from the Orange River system.

Lesotho Highlands Water Project, launched in 1986, is the largest bi-national water transfer project in Africa. Initiated by the World Bank, this multibillion-dollar scheme is criticized as a neo-imperialist project signed during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Several dams and reservoirs have been built in Lesotho, especially in the highlands, as a part of this large-scale project which led to the submersion of many villages, and people were 'displaced' to nearby cities. This is an on-going process that affects thousands of people and their livelihoods. Recall the Amnesty report,<sup>5</sup> which came out last year, against Polihali Dam's construction in the Mokhotlong district, built as part of the second phase of the Lesotho Highlands Water project. Eight thousand people living in thirty-five villages are at the risk of forced displacement due to this expansion. The report says, "Displaced people were given merely \$1 as compensation." As usual, people at the bottom of the class hierarchy are exploited to protect big corporates' and state interests.

When he was a kid, Mosese experienced eviction when his family was forced to vacate their home. His grandmother's village is currently undergoing resettlement and forced displacement. These personal experiences of the filmmaker influenced the narrative of *This is Not a*

*Burial, It's a Resurrection.* In his film, Mosese visualizes the psychological, spiritual and socio-political dimensions of displacement through subtle aesthetic interventions. When he attempts to understand the different social and political issues in-depth and approaches them critically, the colonial-imperialist past of Lesotho is staring at him. In such a situation, how can he criticize his country and its flawed system through the medium of cinema? In an interview with Film Comment,<sup>6</sup> Mosese shared his childhood memory of enthusiastically shaking hands with Nelson Mandela, who came to inaugurate one of the dams in Lesotho built as a part of the LHW Project. It was not a surprise to know that the ruling class has always had the same position regarding issues affecting the lives and survival of the people in lower strata. The dominant class and religious institutions work hand-in-hand with the state in legitimizing and justifying these projects and its 'good intentions'. No matter what changes have taken place in society, this power axis and its equations remained the same. Mosese's film shows how these forces rally against people living in the social margins. He adopts distinct and provocative methods in audiovisual narration to criticize religious institutions, the bureaucracy, and the system that follows the colonial administration's policies. When Mantoa refuses to take off the black mourning dress, and when she leaves the Church during a prayer, the underlying decolonial politics is revealed and foregrounded to the centre of the narrative.

### **Burial and Resurrection**

At the beginning of the film, we see the *lesiba- raconteur* for the first time when the opening circular pan shot, lit in blue-incandescent lights filled with smoke, covering a bar, ends with an older man in the frame. The camera zooms in on the raconteur as he begins his monologue, sitting in a background that gives the impression of fog flowing around him. The people in the bar, where the artificial city lights enter through windows and air holes, seem lost and trapped. In

a later scene, when a man, who has experienced displacement, talks about his internal struggles to adjust with the 'City Lights', we realize the significance of the circular pan shot. We often hear the narrator's 'voice overs' later on in the film, beginning with the powerful opening monologue. Kerosene lamps and blue-black colours dominate the frames, both established in the opening sequence.

Cinematographer Pierre de Villers and Mosese focus on the precariousness of ensuing displacement rather than aestheticizing the picturesque highlands. It is understood from the choice of shooting in the Academy aspect ratio (4:3). Lesotho was an inspiration for creating the Afro-futurist kingdom of Wakanda in the blockbuster superhero film *Black Panther*, and the costume designer of that film, Ruth E. Carter, used the iconic Basotho blankets. Though de Villers includes a series of shots that establish the region's geographical landscape, in the beginning, once Mantoa enters the frame, we travel with her throughout and invest our attention in her thoughts, pain, and struggles, which represents the larger society. Mosese's film looks like a restored film print, which technically contributes to the timelessness of the narrative.

Mosese enhances the immersive cinematic experience and registers dissent through striking visuality and compelling narration. One of the most intriguing elements in the film was the metaphor of the 'kerosene lamp'. They illuminate the rooms when darkness dominates the sky and, in one sense, represents the village itself. The 'kerosene lamp' covered with ashes, seen when Mantoa's house was burnt to the ground, foreshadows her village that will be submerged eventually. A flock of sheep gathers around her in an unforgettable scene, shot from a top-angle view while sitting alone on the ashes. One thing was made evident in that scene; when the water recedes, Mantoa and those sheep are there to stay. She used to wear a personal favourite dress only at



nights, awaiting death. The scene where Mantoa grabs the buttons of that gown from the ashes, which she fondly used to touch, is heartbreaking. In one scene, Mantoa expresses her ideas about funeral arrangements. She says, "Immediately bury me, don't cover me with the church dress, I prefer a simple coffin, and our own songs." Mantoa's words reflect the anger arising out of disappointment with religion and God; both left her to dwell in darkness.

The yellow-capped bureaucrats and Chief Khotso symbolically represent the oppressive state. When we see the 'yellow cap officials' engaged in land demarcation measurements, it feels like the village is being torn apart in a 'post-mortem' process. We are familiar with films that narrate the stories of human societies caught between the agricultural past and future development prospects. However, most films invest heavily in the dramatic and emotional quotient of displacement and loss at the cost of delving deep into the socio-political and historical realities and experiential conditions associated with these issues. Mosese intertwined his comprehensive creative and artistic inquiries into the narrative, exploring multiple dimensions of human-land relations. After examining the Church records, in one scene, the priest tells how the Church came into existence. The history written in the Church records by people in power goes like this, "In 1850, the French missionaries built the Church. It took twenty years to build it, and fifteen years to forge the church bell... People surrendered their spears for the construction of the Church..." The priest is shown in a mirror, and Mantoa listens to the distorted historical narrative calmly without expressing her objections.

'This is not a Burial' shows how inhumane the colonial-religious narratives are, even though we are not expecting a different historical narrative in the official records. In the background, the *lesiba-raconteur* adds a line: "Not only spears and other weapons, but people surrendered their gods too" That one line carries the weight of unheard

and unwritten histories of Basotho people. These scenes are not declarations of war against God or religion. Instead, Mosese shows how religious institutions, aligning with the ruling class, makes the lives of ordinary people miserable under an unequal system that prioritizes the dominant class interests. The questions of who inherits and who owns the land also arise at some point in the film. Chief says, “Technically it is owned by the King and according to the Land Act, our claim for ownership expired after 90 years... We don’t have the papers.” Without the help of any ‘papers’, Mosese visualizes the relationship between human beings and soil and nature, foregrounding social spaces, harmonious and spiritual coexistence, and sustainable lifestyle in the vast plains.

Mosese’s film also discusses the impact of 'development exploitations' on nature, the loss of biodiversity and human encroachment on the environment to protect the vested interests of the elites. The close-up shot of a bird’s nest which fell before cutting the trees can be read in conjunction with these thoughts. A villager recalls his father's words when they saw the boliba forests getting destroyed for constructing a road leading to the dam: “Son what they call progress... it is when men point their damning finger at nature and proclaim conquest over it.” 'This Is Not a Burial' is cinematographer Pierre de Villiers’s debut film. He uses the 'Sony Venice' camera to capture sequences in low and dim lights. Most of the frames painfully depict how people are slowly embracing the death of their village. The scene showing Mantoa digging a grave in the backdrop of dim blue sky in twilight resembles a painting with silhouette design. The image of Mantoa wearing the black mourning dress, which she refuses to take off, and sitting on her bed, in the backdrop of the sky blue wall, is one among the many arresting frames in the film that expresses the internal thoughts, desperation, and vulnerabilities of the character.

In an interview, Mosese revealed that his artistic expressions are inspired by the works of German painter Kathe Kollwitz, Anna Akhmatova's poems, and the usage of close-ups in Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 classic film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The close-ups in Mosese's 'This Is Not a Burial' will tear you apart. Leila Walter, art director of the film, contributes significantly to the immersive visual narrative by authentically imagining the social space of the village, placing Mokhoru huts (traditional houses in Lesotho highlands), rugged geographical terrain and the agricultural way of life at the centre. Nao Serati chooses costumes that reflect the social and cultural way of life in the village, including the 'Basotho blankets'. Jia Zhangke, in his 2006 film *Still Life*, set in the Fengjie County near Yangtze River, explores life in a village that is slowly getting destroyed, due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, through the experiences of two people who are in search of their spouses. What sets *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* apart from Zhangke's much-appreciated film is the declaration of decolonial political statement in the powerful climactic sequences of Mosese's poignant film. The scene shows Mantoa (the Basotho people) moving forward with both arms raised skywards, stripping off all clothes (past and present histories written, imagined and constructed by others) towards the officials speaks volumes and sow the seeds of resistance. When the villagers are forced to flee from the plains, we see Mantoa and Ke'moralioamong, a young girl, walking in the opposite direction back to their homeland. "When people gathered there saw death, she, the daughter of no one, saw a resurrection; it wasn't for the dead, but for the living," says *lesiba-raconteur*, and it is the film's message to present and future generations. The final scenes also proclaim that the only way forward, the only resistance, is to resurrect from the colonial past.

### **Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese: The Making of a Rebel Voice**

Mosese was born in Hlotse, situated in the Lesotho-South Africa border regions. In a country with no independent film industry,

production companies, or state-of-the-art cinemas, Mosese grew up watching films<sup>7</sup> whenever it was screened at random places where someone owned a projector. "I watched *Platoon* and the scene where William Defoe is dying with his hands raised skywards moved me profoundly. I became curious about making films," he said in an interview.<sup>8</sup> Mosese is a self-taught filmmaker who learned the technical and artistic aspects of filmmaking through practical and independent experiments with the medium. The strength of Mosese's stories is his thoughts and ideas derived from years of travel, research, and reading experiences. He added, "Where I grew up there was nobody who made films. So you don't have a reference of someone who can actually make you dream of making movies." From there, the Mosotho filmmaker became one of the unique artistic voices in contemporary world cinema. He has been living in Berlin for the past eight years. His exile from Lesotho influences the recurrent theme of 'liminal spaces' in his films. In an interview with *Variety*, Mosese says: "I am a part of Berlin, but I know I don't belong there. I belong to Lesotho and yet I am not a part of it. I am spaceless. My films and stories originate from that space of spacelessness."

*This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* is considered the first feature film entirely shot in Lesotho with a predominantly local cast speaking the Sesotho language. Mosese made a film titled *Tears of Blood* in 2007, which he disowned later and his short *For Those Whose God is Dead*, made in 2013, is also not available. The two shorts he directed after that marked a solid filmmaker's arrival with compelling artistic and creative talent. In *Behemoth: Or the Game of God* (2016), we see a preacher dragging a coffin to attract followers in the street. Mosese criticizes religious institutions' radical tendencies and their followers who can go to any extreme to protect their interests and sustain power. In *Mosonngoa*, he questions the patriarchy inherent in the male-dominated society. The film's narrative is inspired by the stories shared by Puseletso Seema,<sup>9</sup> the only female stick fighter in Maseru. In the

film, Mosonngoa is forced to attend a stick-fighting competition to raise money. Her father's cows are in the custody of the village shepherd who seized them for grazing in his field. Critique of institutionalized religion and opposition to the patriarchal and gender discriminatory society becomes dominant concerns in Mosese's subsequent films. Mosese received critical acclaim for his feature-length docu-fiction essay film *Mother, I am Suffocating. This is My Last Film About You*, which he describes as "lament". Mosese talks about Lesotho through a woman walking down the street carrying a cross. The haunting close-up scenes of the woman freeze the minds of the viewers. In one voiceover, we hear a powerful statement that summarizes the political subtext of the film effectively: "Mother, you want to know something? I saw you through the white man's eyes; you deserve your war mother, you deserve your war. I saw you. I saw what a white man sees, you deserve your war."

Abderrahmane Sissako, in his films *Waiting for Happiness* and *Timbuktu*, explores liminal spaces and identity crises of Sahel people, the influences of which are evident in Mosese's audiovisual narratives. Djibril Diop Mambety, in his 1992 film *Hyanas*, offers a critique of neocolonialism and consumerism in Senegal through the experiences of Linguere Ramatou, an older woman who returns to Colobane commune near Dakar. Pedro Costa examines the internal struggles of Cape Verdean immigrants living in the impoverished Fontainhas neighbourhood of Lisbon through Vitalina Varela's monologues, who returns to Portugal following the death of her husband in the 2019 film of the same name. These are different people, and their struggles are not the same. In many ways, Mantoa reminds us of Linguere Ramatou and Vitalina Varela. *This is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*, Mosese's excruciating feature, is one of the best films made in recent times. When Mosese leads the 'Barefooted cinema' movement, inspired by Third Cinema in Africa, and the 'Mokoari Collective', a group of young filmmakers, writers and artists, the future of Basotho Cinema looks bright and hopeful. Mosese proves that sometimes all you need,

to see the inequalities around you, to understand how dysfunctional the system is, and how it systematically oppresses and silences the people in lower strata, is to become an artist. We need more such provocative, personal, and political voices in contemporary world cinema.

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