Stolen Rivers by Phillippa Yaa de Villiers

The poem, Stolen Rivers, by Phillippa Yaa De Villiers, is a eulogy, dedicated to Chiwoniso Maraire, who was well-known as a Zimbabwean singer, songwriter, and an exponent of Zimbabwean mbira music. De Villiers was immensely inspired by Chiwoniso whose songs too like Phillippa Yaa De Villiers’s poetry revolved around politics, colonialism, and racism, and among other heavy topics. Chiwoniso died at 37 on 24 July 2013, in South Medical Hospital in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, but De Villiers is still alive and lives with an assortment of animals and a son. However, the one similarity between these two great personalities is that they both are black and live in abroad.

Where Phillippa grew up black in white South Africa as a poet, Chiwoniso was a singer. But the sole purpose of both was to achieve great things for themselves. De Villiers tells us that they both wanted to be the greatest at what they were doing, be it singing or poetry.

Their singing and poetry not only brought great joy to them, but also brought hope and happiness to them. Both the personalities of African-origin were very happy in what they had chosen to do, but they still had to face racism. While they both were abroad, their hearts and minds still belonged to Africa and wherever they were in the world, they always represented Africa. In all their main agenda was to sing songs and recite poetry and inspire as well as revolutionize the Africans wherever they were in the world. Thus, the poem under is written in memory of Chiwoniso, and it tells how they both including Phillippa Yaa De Villiers struggled to get what they wished for. Both of them though have different professions, their aim was to achieve the greatest and satisfactory.

Stolen Rivers Analysis

The very first line of the poem, which can be read in full here, and the use of first person “We” themselves suggest that the poet and to whom (Chiwoniso) this poem is dedicated both came to Berlin from Africa to do their jobs like singing songs and reciting poetry. The “We” also represents the whole Africans community, who shift to different parts of the world to earn their livelihood. Since, with “We” she is representing the whole community of Africans; this first person pronoun can be understood as a representative of all those Africans who live in different parts of the world.
The poet further says that they both had the same agenda, that is; singing and reciting poems. But how can they both forget their anthems of loss, like galloping, consuming, the pillage, the cries, like forest fires, like haunted children that they had to face due to racism, how can they forget the loss they had to bear due to racism, and how can they redress the loss caused by this apartheid—a system of segregation or discrimination on the grounds of race in South Africa.

In further lines, when the poet says: “Enraged, we wanted revenge”, it means that not only they both (Chiwoniso and Phillippa Yaa De Villiers) were enraged at what they had to face for being black in colour, but they too experienced a great loss of their properties and personal belongings. However, when, the poet says, Chiwoniso stepped on the stage and opened her mouth that is; started singing beautiful songs with great and revolutionary lyrics, the people of Africa were highly impressed and inspired. Every stolen river of platinum and gold poured out of your mouth in song was like an inspiring and revolutionary message for all Africans living in different parts of the world.

The poet says that your voice (Chiwoniso’s voice) not only brought them out of the night or the darkness of discrimination and racism, but it also doubled the light in each of them, that is, all the Africans became more enlightened, and aware of their rights. The poet says that from Benin to Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe to Cairo all got mesmerized, enthralled and impressed by Chiwoniso’s singing, they were restored with all the treasure-houses.

With the presence of Chiwoniso, Africa not only moved its golden bones, but it also broke free from its heavy chains or shackles of racism. As Chiwoniso came into their lives with her singing, Africa also started dancing again. The last lines of the poem are very poignant, and they really touch hearts when the poet says: “love could purchase bread, Africans would not be hungry,” which shows that on the night when the poet was writing this poem, she was very sad, and feeling dejected to the rampant racism, remembering the past loss she had to bear.

Through the last two lines, the poet also gives message, by saying if the whites had love, respect in their hearts, and had not discriminated them on the basis of their colours, neither the Africans had to stay hungry, nor they had to experience the loss, caused by racial discrimination. That night could either be the night when the poet wrote this poem, or this night could also be the night when the great soul of Africa, Chiwoniso Maraire died. Thus, the poem, Stolen River, is a masterpiece by Phillippa Yaa De Villiers, who was a well-known writer at her own age.

About Phillippa Yaa de Villiers
Born 17 February 1966, adopted and raised by a white family in apartheid South Africa Phillippa Yaa de Villiers is an award-winning South African writer and performance artist who is noted for her poetry. After growing up black in white South Africa, de Villiers internalised so many negative ‘truths’ of what black people are like. Much of Phillippa Yaa de Villiers’s work relates to the race, sexuality, class and gender within the South African context.

All through her work, De Villiers has been raising questions of heritage, exclusion and identity, in the most personal, urgent way. Her poems are melancholic and enraged, but also humorous, and often self-deprecatory in their social criticism.

De Villiers’ readings lay emphasis on the concern which orients much of her work: an elusive ‘between-ness’ that equivocates easy categorisation, and includes her poetry to undermine simplistic cultural perceptions. Her delivery adds to her work’s swift, unpredictable qualities, integrating several apparently contrary components – her poems accept and reject a traditional, almost demure, English enunciation for African inflections, and are at once determined and humorous, frustrated and reasoning, musical and thoughtful, long-lasting and fast-moving.