

## Book review

Justice Segomotso Motlhabani, *Why I Didn't Kiss Tatiana: 21 Days in the Big Brother Africa House*. Gaborone: Motlhabani, 2013. Soft cover, xii+168 pages. ISBN: 978-99968-0-009-2.

The author, Justice Motlhabani was a contestant in the popular but morally compromised Big Brother Africa reality show in 2007. His book is a manual that provides tips to those aspiring to become housemates at the Big Brother competition but 'African theatre and performance' researchers can also glean important insights from it. The show draws its participants from urban middle-class youths in 10 or so sub-Saharan African countries. According to Motlhabani, the show is nothing but three months of vice in the form of drunkenness, smoking, occasional risky causal sex, betrayal, swear words, hypocritical double-standards, and general decadence. He describes the Big Brother facility in Johannesburg as 'a modern-day Sodom-and-Gomorrhah house' (p. 9).

More pointedly, Motlhabani also claims that while fans from countries represented by housemates in the show are made to believe that their votes are critical in terms of who gets evicted from the house, those managing the show manipulate the votes to ensure that their favourite housemates remain in the house. There is also an allegation that Nigerians, in addition to their numerical superiority manipulate the internet voting system to the advantage of Nigerian housemates (p. 58-59). Motlhabani tells the reader that whereas he wanted to leave the show after the first 21 days there was a possibility that he could have remained had it not been for the show organisers tampering with the voting method. He says that he learned this from the South African show presenter, Kabelo Ngakane whom Motlhabani had conversations with in Setswana language. One wishes that the author could have informed the reader why Ngakane was soon replaced by a Nigerian presenter.

We are told that the organisers and producers also train cameras more on their preferred candidates than others. It is also claimed that a lot of attention is given to housemates engaged in negative but exciting activities and less on constructive matters. For instance, Motlhabani says that 'I was only shown when arguing and sleeping and many people who don't know me now think that this is who I am. A loafer and argumentative drunkard!' p. 64). In this respect Motlhabani's publication gives the reader some insight into how the show operates in terms of the constructedness of character or television practices of identity construction.

While the show organisers rake in millions, the housemates are exploited because they do not get anything; only the eventual winner is paid. He also complains that he has nothing to show for the fame or notoriety he attained from participating in the show. However, it is clear that housemates from other countries, who also left the show 'empty-handed', used it as a springboard to launch careers in show-business in their countries and elsewhere.

In the book Motlhabani is full of regrets, and states that he had entered the show psychologically unprepared for the encounters in the show house. He had to suspend his studies at the University of Botswana to pursue a dream of fame and fortune. However, the show proved to be a nightmare for him, and the 'fame' he attained only led to unscrupulous nightclub owners and concert promoters exploiting him. He also claims that some Botswana journalists wrote untruthful and hurtful stories about him. 'Every time I was in South Africa, I felt more appreciated there than at home in Botswana. There was also some jealous people who went out of their way to both frustrate me and pull me down' (p. 73). This is a common refrain from people associated with success in Botswana.

Motlhabani candidly relates how fame led to him taking to a life of excessive drinking and general irresponsibility, which led to his life spiralling out of control for a few years. 'Fame is like a drug and dealing with its side effects is not an easy thing' (p. 67), he points out.

The Big Brother show mainly attracts participants who seem to be mentally colonised African middleclass youths. Therefore, Motlhabani raises an interesting debate at the beginning of chapter nine entitled 'Is Big Brother Africa African?' He observes that the show has been controversial and seen as morally corrupt in some societies in Africa and the Middle East. 'Back when it started in 2003, the show was provisionally banned in several African countries like Malawi and Namibia. The former Namibian president, Sam Nujoma, is said to have ordered the state-owned Namibian Broadcasting Corporation to show documentaries of the country's history in its place' (p. 79). Motlhabani's argument is that 'African values, morality, ethics and cultures have over a long period of time been systematically swallowed by the powerful tide of globalisation and western-driven modernisation. Some people argue that globalisation is actually colonisation repackaged' (p. 79-80).

He suggests that people from traditionally marginalised ethnic groups such as Basarwa in Botswana and Masaai in East Africa, among others be represented in the show as a form of 'empowerment'. While the argument for inclusion of ethnic 'minorities' is welcome advice, it is doubtful whether these people, most of whom have a very long history of being alienated by all social classes in their countries, would appeal to the tastes of the mostly middle-class viewers of the show.

While in some quarters it is believed that the show was capable of uniting Africans, it is worth noting that in some countries this has not been the case. For instance, the Kenyan housemate reported that 'My home coming was far from happy. Instead of being viewed as a Kenyan, throughout my time in the show, some of my compatriots saw me as part of a Luo project that had gone to the house for political reasons. I found this very disturbing... Just as crooked was the media which ended up spreading words of hate along tribal lines' (p.104).

Whereas Motlhabani dismisses the Big Brother show's voting system as a waste of time and money because it gets rigged by the organisers and Nigerians, he says to potential participants: 'Be good to your country, be a good ambassador. After all you need their votes to win the show' (p.94).

Generally, the book is just too rushed and could have been organised better. For example, the text could have benefitted from foregrounding the background material labelled 'Appendix Five: Crazy Big Brother Facts' that appears towards the end of the book. His explanation of the origin of the name 'big brother' as 'coming from George Orwell's 1949 novel *1984*, a dystopia in which Big Brother is the all-seeing leader' (p.146) should have been elaborated, and not left as a short sentence in a bullet form. The political and historical context in which this took place should have been interrogated in more detail, including a discussion of how the term got used or abused in different contexts over time.

At any rate, Motlhabani has provided aspiring Big Brother housemates with a manual which should be useful in dealing with pressure in the house and life after the show. Serious researchers and scholars interested in interactive television may also find it worth consulting. In addition, those who are interested in African theatre and Performance Studies can also find useful materials for analyzing notions of reality performance, interactive reality television drama, performance ethnography, acting for the screen, character construction, mediatized performance and the constructedness of African identities.

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