

FILM REVIEW

Mmabatho Montsho, director. *The Groom's Price*. 2017. 25 minutes. English/Zulu. South Africa. The National Film & Video Foundation. No price reported.


The Groom's Price, directed by Mmabatho Montsho, offers a thought-provoking insight into contemporary, “wishful” thoughts on traditional matters such as gender roles and responsibilities and the *lobola*—a term used in Southern Africa to denote the customary payment made by a groom's family to the bride's family before a marriage. The short film can be perceived as a metaphor capturing an emerging but subtle rebellion against existent norms and cultural practices. It represents women's participation in a discourse about them, a discourse that is, however, reserved for men. Women contend with having their issues discussed from perspectives other than theirs because of a lack of representation. In film industries across Africa, women are encouraged to make films in order to contribute female points of view to the plethora of issues being explored. In the Nigerian film industry, women such as the late Amaka Igwe, Mildred Okwo, Emem Isong-Misodi, Kemi Adetiba, and Stephanie Okereke-Linus, among others, have contributed to gender debates. Mmabatho Montsho is one such filmmaker, committed to representing women and their place in the society.

A South African entrepreneur and seasoned filmmaker, Montsho is a self-described feminist—strong, vocal, and non-conformist. Montsho is multi-talented, having had a successful career in fashion, acting for film, presenting for television, writing, directing, and producing. She is driven by excellence, having proven her capabilities in each career path before progressing to another. The award-winning filmmaker is unfazed by difficult topics. Her *Women on Sex* (2015) web series interrogates the politics of sex and gender in Africa. Montsho's cinematic oeuvre contributes to the narrative on women and their struggles. This theme is also explored in her award-winning film *The Award Ceremony* (2019).

In *The Groom's Price*, Montsho takes on the complex and traditional topic of *lobola*, which involves the exchange of cattle or cash for the hand of a woman in marriage. Set in contemporary South Africa, *The Groom's Price* trails a perfectly happy couple who are burdened with questions of gender, gender roles, and responsibilities in contemporary South Africa. Meme

(Tumie Ngumla), a successful 33-year-old hairdresser, is in a 9-year relationship with an equally young Musa (Wandile Molebatsi), a postgraduate student discouraged from further financial commitments by his huge student loan. Meme and Musa are perfectly happy, save for occasional disagreements which they settle by the toss of a coin—a coin which never falls in Meme's favour. Living in a society where every responsible young lady is expected to be eventually married to a man, Meme becomes uneasy about the direction of her long-term relationship with Musa. She expresses her fears and worries over being dumped by Musa, who may find a younger girl to marry. At the toss of the coin to resolve a nagging argument over who pays the *lobola*, Meme experiences a miracle, as the coin finally falls in her favor. However, Musa's uncle, Jackson (Luthuli Dlamini), is displeased by the arrangement and attempts to frustrate the young couple. Meme is resilient, bribing her aunties Tutu (Thembi Nyanddeni) and Winnie (Noluvo Gloria) into negotiating the groom's price for her and agreeing to Uncle Jackson's inflated *lobola* on Musa. The conflict between Jackson's and the couple's perception of marriage and gender roles within a marriage forces Musa and Meme to re-evaluate their marriage plans.

Montsho uses various filmmaking techniques to introduce and contribute to this conversation about the possibility of women paying *lobola* on men. Although very untraditional, it raises the question of how authentically traditional the contemporary South Africa is. Montsho employs close-up shots to bring the audiences into the insecurities women experience, having to wait upon men to pay bride price on, and thus own, them. Despite advocacies for gender equality and the fight for women's emancipation, patriarchy in Africa remains deeply rooted, especially within the marriage institution. Montsho's use of tight spaces throughout the film indicates how intrusive marriage, marriage rites, and expectations in African society have become. Although Montsho does not make a definite statement regarding the *lobola* and who should have to pay it, she opens up a conversation on marriage in contemporary Africa. *The Groom's Price* equally raises some pertinent questions: will paying *lobola* on a man make a union any less South African? Will it redefine gender roles and responsibilities within the home? Will it lead to any liberation for the woman within the marriage? This short film attempts to counter the single-story narrative existing about women—which depicts them as docile and voiceless. Montsho's struggle for women's emancipation within the South African film industry is reflected in *The Groom's Price*, which urges women to engage themselves in crucial conversations about their existence, goals, and desires. It is a call to women to challenge the existing status quo and redefine their existence. Although Meme eventually backs down from her quest to pay *lobola* on Musa, she earns the respect of the men and inspires doggedness in her aunties.

Ezinne M. Ezepue 
University of Nigeria
Nsukka, Nigeria
emichaelia@yahoo.com

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