WRITERS MOSAIC

***What We Leave We Carry***

Tulela Pea

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>
> — Tulela Pea

[Music]

Presenter: Tulela Pea, a Namibian forensic psychologist, turns a critical eye on the credits and deficits of life in the UK. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Tulela Pea: My name is Tulela Pea, and I was born in Namibia in the northern parts, specifically this town called Ongwediva. Mum and dad, two older sisters, my aunts in the back part of our house, and my grandparents were also just a short drive away, a short walk away. That whole community value, really prioritising elders, respecting elders, things like that. So my dad worked in education for as long as I could remember. My mum was a teacher. She owns her own business, started with tailoring of curtains and stuff like that, and then it branched into food production. She was working with the government producing particular food products for the country. She's doing law now. Yeah, she's about to finish her law degree.

I went to a private school initially, and then I changed schools midway through by choice to learn my language specifically, my native language. It's called Oshiwambo, which is a language of one of the, I think, the largest and majority tribe in Namibia, the Ovambo people.

[Music]

We were quite isolated as kids, and so we'd often be at home, watching television. And I guess that meant us introduced to CBeebies. It's one of my first introduction

to Britain or British ideas, watching CBeebies and sounding British really early on. So I think I picked up English much quicker. And so even though Oshiwambo was spoken in the house, probably speaking back, I'd probably speak in English, even though I understood it.

[Music]

I think I really wanted to go to Canada. I think I wanted to go overseas, and I just thought, *Canada seems great. The snow that looks picturesque.* I don't know what happened to that plan. I don't remember applying. I considered Scotland for whatever reason, probably also picturesque. I think I was like, *yeah, sounds good*. I think I had a cousin actually who studied in Aberdeen. I think I looked at Australia. Yeah, I did.

[Music]

How did I get to England? I really don't—because I know I didn't want to go there. I truly didn't. It was not my first option. I didn't want to come because I think around that time, there were a lot of terrorist attacks happening, I think not just in England, but in Europe in general; London and France had been quite close together. The currency, the exchange rate as well, was not in our favour, so it was very expensive.

So I just thought to myself, *it's just not practical.* But all I know is, yeah, England ended up being offered to me. I've never heard of Nottingham at that point. I had no idea what England was like when I was 17. I didn't even have—I think America is always such a huge influence and a huge culture thing, maybe because it's portrayed so much on television. I guess, I had maybe stereotypical ideas of England at that age about, *they're so posh*, and yeah, I suppose that, *they're just regal, they're pristine*, all these royal terms that you get with this accent. But yeah, that's the only entry point I had to England. But in terms of what the culture's like, what the people are like, what the weather's like, goodness, I had no clue about those things. I think all I had is this probably—Jason Statham or this—what's this man's name? There's just these actors who might speak in a really posh way, and be like, *oh, okay. Yeah, so England is just full of posh people.*

[Music]

So I got the place, and it was like, *okay, we're going to England. So let's make the checks.* And when I got here, yeah, I got here after everything was sorted, my visa was sorted, so it was no going back really. Both my parents were coming with me, which is great.

[Airplane sounds]

I think we landed in Heathrow. It's very busy. Never seen that in my life before. Yeah, I've been in busy airports, like Johannesburg and stuff like that, but yeah, it was very busy. People were running to the immigration spot. I didn't know why. My parents didn't know why. We were just strolling up this plane. And then when we saw the queue, we realised, *oh, that's why*. [Laughs] So that was great. So relatively smooth travel, smooth entry point, being picked up. It was all arranged with the agency and stuff like that. And driving through England and seeing, *oh wow, the trees and the cloudy weather.* And yeah, I think feeling was—I'm trying to—I don't remember feeling anxious. I was being like, *oh, a new adventure, a new chapter.* I probably really felt secure because my parents were with me, and they were there for a whole week or a week and a half. Yeah, so they were with me for a couple of days to really settle me in.

[Vehicle sounds]

I think the first shock was obviously the travel, like the public transport, so getting used to the tram, which is something we're using a lot. I noticed how quickly I grasped that, like how it works. I was then able to instruct my parents, and they, obviously, they were getting lost and ending up in completely different places [laughs]. Like jumping on the wrong tram and such.

For the first eight months, I was doing the foundation thing, and then in September, started the degree. I made friends in the foundation program. I don't know whether it's because internationals, all together in one space, yeah, we just got on well. I still—two of my closest friends, I still talk to from that period. One of them's from Kuwait in the Middle East and then the other is from Trinidad. British people seem quite skittish. Skittish is the wrong word, but they seem quite hard to penetrate, I think. They stick to themselves. Yeah, and so if you're not British in the sense of—even if you are a person of colour in Britain, so if you've grown up here with British people, they're likely to stick together even then. So unless it's an international person, it's like they're just not—I don't know. I just found them so hard to just connect to, British people. I just didn't anticipate that. Yeah, I just didn't anticipate it, that that would be something that wouldn't happen. I think it's different if you don't connect with someone because you're not—you value different things or something like that, but just from the outset that actually you get an air of things never really get deeper. It's like, 'Yeah, how are you? How's the week been?' And that's all. That's where it stays. And just this awkward weather chat, and it never goes deeper. It's quite disarming, so yeah.

[Music]

So I decided to stay to continue my studies because I was interested in forensic psychology. So I then started looking at master's degrees as to how to qualify to become a forensic psychologist at the time. That was like, *yeah, this is clear. That's what I want to do. I want to qualify and become chartered.* Part of that process is the stage of getting a master's degree. So I started looking around, started applying. Fundamentally, I ended up choosing Liverpool, which I've never been to again [laughs]. There's a pattern here.

[Music]

Liverpool's great. I would come to learn that the Northern hospitality is a different level of warm [laughs], different level of hospitality, and yeah, people just having a chat in the street. Like, 'Yes, how are you? What do you do?' It's like, *oh, wow, this is interesting.*

[Music]

So when I was growing up in Namibia, Christianity is the predominant religion there. In retrospect, as I live now, I see that I didn't really see the Christian life lived out for the six days of the week. It was just a Sunday thing, a traditional cultural thing, as opposed to a personal life lived. Moving and moving by myself and moving to a

whole new country across the continent, outside of the continent, meant that I need to stand on my own. I remember making a real decision to yeah, to stand, basically, and to not get tossed to and fro into, *oh, this is what this crowd is doing, and this is what they're doing.* I remember that being instilled in me as a child.

Even when I'd call my grandparents to say hello, to just greet them, and they'd be like, 'So when are you coming back?' and having this awkward dance of, 'Well, yeah, I'm just seeing', or something. And with our parents specifically being around the dinner table and eventually all together and them being like, 'So how—when are you—what's the plan? What's the roadmap for you guys coming back home?' And I think for me specifically because of my field—my sisters are different. My older sister's a doctor; my sister's like trying to train to become a lawyer. And I feel those are very applicable or easy fields that are quite direct. You just type in 'lawyer jobs' [laughs] and things happen. We'll always need lawyers and doctors.

I found my position particularly unique that it's forensic psychology that's not a field that exists explicitly in—I'll say Southern Africa. I can't speak for Northern Africa, but I don't imagine it's up there. So psychology itself as a field is very new, I think, in Namibia, where people are only starting to grasp the idea of mental health and how that's impacting people and their ability to engage in society and their well-being. I think that's a discussion that's only growing around depression, let alone how that

connects to crime and society and structures like that. So I think we're a bit of a way from that conversation. So then explaining that to them that realistically, it doesn't make sense for me to come back with this whole degree with no experience to back home, I'll have no job, and employment rates are just sky high in Namibia as well. It's not looking great there.

[Music]

Them seeing how we get to have jobs here where we're stable and have an income, they're like, 'Okay, well, there's nothing here. Our young people here in Namibia are really struggling, so we don't want to bring you guys back to that. And so if that means that you guys stay away, then—' just that reluctant acceptance.

I've been in the UK for about six years now. I was teasing my sister probably a couple—probably a month ago or so, like, 'Do you fancy a cuppa?' And she wanted no parts in that. She was like, 'What British behaviour is this? Having a cup of tea and biscuits? Absolutely not.' [Laughs] So do I feel British? I think there's certain influences, probably in terms of behaviours of going out and queuing, very polite, even polite behaviours of how people speak to each other, I find that, yeah, that's worn on me, I mean, in a positive way. But yeah, I'll probably never really feel British.

It feels like home here, but yeah, I'll probably never fit in whatever British means anyway [laughs], so yeah.

[Music]

My sister was in Manchester, my middle sister, and she offered for us to live together again, and it's been great. It exceeded my expectations. I had low expectations of Manchester [laughs], so yeah. Yeah, and then finding another church community has made it all the better. Like, *oh wow, this is great. I've got people my age, people I can, well, yeah, in that same life stage, I can kind of do life with, and yeah, hang out with.* So yeah, less isolating than I thought it would be. There are moments where I miss home, and it's usually times when I see photos of people together, like all the aunts and uncles and people at family gatherings and people having fun. Throughout my time being in the UK, I've missed three really important weddings that I thought I'd be able to attend but I didn't get to. So times like that were very difficult. Yeah, when I think of those relationships and how distance makes them harder, then yeah, it makes me miss being at home more. Of course—and if I'm seeing people eat a particular food, I'm like, *okay, I'd really like to be home now* [laughs] because that's not available here or stuff like that. Yeah, this type of flour that makes a stiff porridge as part of our traditional cuisine, at least for the Ovambo culture, that flour is not available. Yeah, even our chicken, spinach,

stuff like that, it's just made a particular way or grown a particular way, so it's not here. We have people secretly bring it in [laughs], which is great. We were thoroughly surprised when that happens, when people bring stuff in. It's like, *oh, you can have a little taste of home.*

[Music]

My mother, when she came for my graduation, we made a trip of it, like where we're going around the different cities in the UK. And when we went to London, she was like, ‘Yeah, it'd be great if we just had a Namibian restaurant in London where we just did cuisine. They would love it here. It'd be great.’ And I'm like, ‘Mum, I'm sure the Brits would love another cuisine to add to the list of cuisines that they love.’ But yeah, I guess there are a few Namibians in the UK. We're such a small population as well. We're now three million people, so the size of Manchester is such a huge country. So it's like, well, how many people are going to be ordering from this business? [Laughs]

[Music]

I do love it here. I really do. I think I would want to stay here for maybe a couple of years. Of course, that will be a faith decision about, *okay, maybe God's prompting me*

*to move somewhere else or he's prompting me to move back home*. And so those conversations, I'm sure, are happening in the heavenly realm.

[Music]

Part of my heart does ache for the state of my country, I think especially in terms of crime, which is my key passion, key interest. Yeah, a large part of my heart aches. And so I just don't think it's right to complain and moan about my country and yet do nothing about it. And so I think part of me feels really passionate about going back home at some stage, whether it's 10 years down the line or three years down the line, to go invoke changes within our justice—or not even justice system, but within our policing, advocacy, victim services there, so that crime is just reduced, that vulnerable people are protected. I think I do, yeah—I think that is in the long-term concerns I have for my life and what I want to do with the time I've been given.

What probably made my transition into living in the UK really easy or easier than some would expect is I felt really comfortable, I think, with the ideas I've already had growing up. I felt less like an outsider, less strange for either being more liberal or being more out of the box. Here in the UK, where there's just a culture part—there's so many thoughts and people are so open. People are just, yeah,

seemingly allowed to think and think out loud and express themselves, which isn't something that is the experience in Namibia. So part of that ability to freely express myself and dress how I like and leave the house and, yeah, just be myself is a large—is a driving factor of me umming and ahhing about going home. It's that freedom of expression, really.

I think doing this degree, having this interest, has opened me up to the reality that the UK—yeah, I see the crime rates. I see something like domestic abuse and some of the drivers being football, like someone losing—someone's football team losing and how that can increase rates of domestic violence. It's this perception of them being perfect and powerful, it falls apart. That actually, when you get into the nitty-gritty of any culture, but in this specific case about the UK, they're not all that great. I think that's something that, yeah, I've learned, that's been deconstructed over time, that this place isn't—it is fantastic. I cannot take that away, especially from my own background. I know Brits complain about certain things that I'm just like, *you guys don't know anything*. Your transport system is great. There are faulty things, but I've never seen anything like this. This is amazing. This is a blessing. And so, yeah, there are amazing things, but the bad things are bad. They're not little tiny minors, they're actually major problems here that actually show that, *oh, they're the equivalent to anybody else.*

When I was in Namibia as a young teenager, I wasn't the typical Ovambo child. I was really different. I could challenge my parents. It wasn't always in the best way [laughs]. That's not quite—that's not a usual thing. As a teenager, I saw myself being quite defiant to that and finding ways to challenge it. Some things I see in my parents, I'm like, *no, that's wrong*. And that's quite unusual, and me getting some flack for that. And me having just this really strong sense of justice, of right and wrong, and just challenging people I felt may have been bullies. And when I look at those behaviours at the time and what I thought about the world, I felt, *yeah, I was just standing out*. So coming to the UK was a breath of fresh air where I was like, *oh, people who get it, people who are kind of more like me*. And so I felt really at home here, and I still do, but I think over time, I've started to grow. And it's probably because of when I go back home and then I come back, over time I've started to feel like, *actually, I still don't quite fit in here in the UK*. There's still pockets of things. I'm just like, *oh, I don't quite connect with people or things like that*. So I fit in in some ways, but I still don't. And so I think a couple of months ago, I came across this—I don't know if it's part of a poem, of a larger poem, but it's called *Diaspora Blues*. I can't say her name, but she's basically a Nigerian poet, Ijeoma. And it basically says, [Music] 'So,/here you are/too foreign for home/too foreign for here./never enough for both.' And that really spoke to me and where I've been—probably where I am right now. I love my culture, but I am different; I stand out. So I'm foreign there, in a place where I'm supposed to belong. I don't really feel like I belong there, which is

painful in its own ways. And then I'm like, *well, I belong here, I feel*. And then I get here, and I'm like, *well, actually, no, not quite. Still too foreign for here. I don't belong here. This isn't my country.* At the end of the day, I could be deported [laughs]. I could be banned from coming back here. This isn't my home. But it is good. I do love being here. That's all.

Presenter: Tulela Pea was talking to Ellie Dobbin.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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