

The Queer Son and the Declining Patriarch in Post-Apartheid South African Literature: The Subversive Symbol of Water in Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water*

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Summary

This article traces how the character of the father in post-apartheid South African literature is symbolic of the spectral yet enduring legacy of apartheid and the types of rigid masculinities which underpinned the oppressive system. I use this framing to demonstrate the conflict between the traditional South African father and the queer son. Queer male characters, and queer identities within South African society, are represented as disruptive to traditional conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood, and act as deconstructionist elements within the home and the family unit. In demonstrating these trends, I analyse Mark Behr's novel, *Kings of the Water* (2009), which focalises a gay Afrikaans-speaking expatriate character who returns to the country and confronts his father at the family farm. The symbol of water in this text allows for the queer character to resist the stifling influence of his father and to queer his environment, renegotiating a connection with the family home as well as with South Africa.

Opsomming

Hierdie referaat speur na hoe die karakter van die vader in postapartheid- Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde simbolies is van die spektrale dog blywende nalatenskap van apartheid en die tipes rigiede manlikheid wat die verdrukkende stelsel ondersteun het. Ek gebruik hierdie raamwerk om die konflik tussen die tradisionele Suid-Afrikaanse vader en die gay seun uit te beeld. Gay manlike karakters, en gay identiteite in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing, word uitgebeeld as ontwrigtend vir tradisionele begrippe van manlikheid en vaderskap, en dien as dekonstruktiewe elemente binne die huis en die gesinseenheid. Ek demonstreer hierdie neigings deur 'n ontleding van Mark Behr se roman *Kings of the Water* (2009), wat fokus op 'n gay Afrikaanssprekende uitgeweke karakter wat na die land terugkeer en sy vader op die familieplaas konfronteer. Die simbool van water in hierdie teks stel die gay karakter in staat om die versmorende invloed van sy vader te weerstaan en sy omgewing te ontwrig, waardeur hy 'n verbintenis met die gesinswoning asook met Suid-Afrika herbeding.

The South African Father and the Queer Son

The father has played a central role in literary representations of power and national identity in South African fiction. In pre-apartheid and apartheid-era fiction, the father is often a highly politicised figure, acting as arbiter of either pro- or anti-apartheid ideologies, and exhibiting centrality and dominance within the home setting (Andrews 2016).¹ In many post-apartheid works of fiction, the role of the father shifts drastically: fathers are no longer central and their ideologies are questioned and resisted by sons and daughters. The father loses his power within these narratives, and there are many examples of the dying or spectral father.²

The queer male character offers a powerful point of tension within the context of destabilised fatherhoods in recent fiction. The queer male character is given a unique disruptive ability because he is constructed as an outsider, and he acts as a symbolic purveyor of repressed identities. Confrontations between queer sons and their fathers in post-apartheid texts render the paternal role ambivalent and further deconstruct the father's habitually central position in South African literature and society. Queer sons also disrupt the transmission of patriarchal conceptions of masculinity and unsettle the father's assumed ability to speak for and represent the family and the home.

Mark Behr's novel, *Kings of the Water*, (2009) focalises the character Michiel, a gay man who leaves South Africa during apartheid and returns in 2001 to attend his mother's funeral. The novel offers an intimate portrayal of how the queer character produces and represents disruptions that require new ways of voicing that which was once suppressed, and thereby challenges rigid patriarchal structures. The disruption of these patriarchal structures is shown in the spectrality and frailty of the once-oppressive father-figure.

In this article, I demonstrate how the symbol of water in this text is used to reflect how the father's power is destabilised. The first section of my discussion traces the ways that post-apartheid literature generally has imagined the father as spectral, destabilised and as associated with the apartheid past. I then show how the emergence of queer male voices and representations of queer identities offer unique disruptive and deconstructionist possibilities in the face of the once-dominant patriarchal role of the father character. Through

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1. The classic example of this idealised father-figure is Stephen Kumalo in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), a novel published at the start of formal apartheid which casts the father as the religious and pious ideologue struggling to reconnect the fractured family.
 2. For a detailed discussion of how representations of fathers have shifted in South African fiction, see my dissertation *Representations of fatherhood and paternal narrative power in South African English literature* (2016).

an extensive analysis of Behr's novel, I show how voicing queer male³ realities offers an important element in renegotiating South African identities when confronted with the legacy of apartheid, represented by the father-figure. The subversive potential of the queer son is linked to the symbol of water in the text, where water not only signals the emerging sense of fluidity around gender roles and expectations, but also the potential for the renegotiation of identities and the washing away of historical boundaries in ways that offer possibilities for change, healing and renewal for the characters and relationships in the text.

Post-apartheid Representations of Fathers

Literature during the transitional period in South Africa, from the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 to the end of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process in 2001, was extremely diverse and offered the possibility for renegotiating ideas of gender, race and national identity. Sam Durrant argues that literatures produced during this period had tremendous "transformative potential, [the] ability to grapple with legacies of oppression and imagine new states of being and even new beings of the state" (2005: 441). National narratives, and by extension the understanding of the nation, could be redefined. Matthys Lourens Crous highlights the shifts after white men were unseated from their assumed positions of power:

In the aftermath of apartheid, white men, and in particular Afrikaner men associated with the National Party apparatus of the state, have lost their privileged positions. [...] a distinct loss of political power (but not necessarily a loss of economic power) is experienced, especially by older members of this group

(2007: 18)

By unsettling understandings of empowered/disempowered, especially in terms of gender and race in South Africa, the positions of fathers were similarly reimaged, both within society and literature.

The transition period relied on many black political father-figures to lead the country into democracy and to oversee new national narratives and identities. The TRC had a major cultural impact on understandings of South African identities. It allowed for marginalised, repressed narratives about

3. While there have been powerful texts on queer female characters in South Africa and how they can potentially challenge patriarchal structures, such as Shamim Sarif's *A World Unseen* (2001), I focus on queer sons since the father-son relationship has been a significant trope in the representations of reproduced ideologies, and the queer son in many ways disrupts this assumed reproduction of patriarchal power and ideologies from father to son.

trauma during apartheid to be voiced, with the promise of amnesty for those who had committed crimes based on political motives during apartheid. The narratives were framed, under the guidance of Desmond Tutu, as restorative justice for South Africa. Tutu's ability to define national narratives is shown in his assertion that South Africa is the "rainbow nation of God" (Myambo 2010: 94). Beyond the TRC, the influence of Nelson Mandela and other political leaders indicated that, at least initially, these black political father-figures could shepherd the nation towards new national narratives. No other figure embodies the emergence of a politicised, symbolic black fatherhood as much as Nelson Mandela whose public appellation, Tata Madiba, signalled his institutionalised social function as public father. The word "Tata" means father in Xhosa, and Madiba is the respectful clan name which belonged to the 18th century Thembu chief, signalling the esteemed, paternal role that Mandela embodied in South Africa. These examples of political father figures reinforce the reliance on symbolic patriarchs as ideological leaders, and echo an idealised conception of the father's authority.

More broadly in South African society, fatherhoods became contentious and both black and white fathers were often represented as distant to the landscape of a "new South Africa". The high rate of black unemployment and the migrant labour system had displaced fathers from their central, authoritative positions in families (Morrell 2005: 89). Social programs were launched to tackle the "crisis of fatherhood" (Richter & Morrell 2006: 6) a fairly recent conception which proposes that the influence of the father is vital in providing stability within the family (Samuels 2003: 103), and that many fathers are no longer successful in fulfilling this role. While many scholars are critical of the conception that fatherhood is necessary for family and social stability (102), and while many researchers show that there are many forms of successful, loving fatherhoods in South Africa (Prinsloo 2006: 141; Richter & Smith 2006: 170), the prevalence of social programs aimed at the so-called crisis of fatherhood shows that this conception still has wide currency.

Many works of fiction during this period explore social and political changes by highlighting attributes such as powerlessness and emasculation through the imagery of failed or threatened fatherhoods. Njabulo Ndebele's *Death of a Son* (1996), J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) offer some examples of this disrupted fatherhood, and demonstrate attempts to repair paternal relationships or negotiate fatherly roles as reflective of a country in transition. Fathers are no longer represented in hyperbolic political terms as they were during pre-apartheid or apartheid era literature, but in many cases even became antagonistic to their sons and daughters and, by extension, to political change. Fathers are unable to negotiate the realities of a changing social and political climate, and are shown to feel threatened by how these changes constitute an affront to their power. The loss of the father's central political role in post-apartheid representations can be linked to the fact that the father is no longer necessary as a symbolic

leader towards liberation. It could also be linked to disillusionment with leadership, in the form of apartheid-era leaders who maintained oppressive structures, as well as leaders who are not adequately addressing current problems in South Africa. The sons and daughters, who are now shown to be much more critical of the influence of their fathers, are also uncertain of their identities when confronted with unstable father-figures. This is reflected in transitional literature where the father-figure is shown to be predatory, violent, or absent, such as Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1993 in Afrikaans; 1995 in English), K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) and Rayda Jacobs's *My Father's Orchid* (2006).

There is a marked split between the public black fathers and the domestic white fathers that are common in newer fiction. Nedine Moonsamy demonstrates that many post-transitional texts refer to ghosts, indicating the spectral and enduring nature of apartheid's legacy: "[t]he pervasive use of ghosts in these texts evoke a desire to learn to live with the unspoken atrocities of history, as well as the spectral, phantasmagoric history of the events that have not taken place in the national imaginary" (2014: 70). Not only are parental or authority figures ghostlike in the post-transitional moment, but the sons and daughters themselves become spectral in the changing South Africa, no longer feeling connected to their history or to the country. Many, especially white, characters in post-apartheid literature are shown to be expatriates, indicating a loss of identification with South Africa (77). Both irreparable distance and intimate, lingering connection with the country are simultaneously present in these characters.

This leads to a trend, articulated by Dirk Klopper, where characters in several recent novels are often looking back as well as physically *going* back, often to the farm setting. Klopper explains: "Much recent South African narrative fiction deploys the motif of a return to a place associated with the past, specifically a home town, family farm, childhood landscape or ancestral site. [...] [T]he homecoming involves a return to apartheid-era South Africa" (2011: 147). In the return to the setting associated with childhoods in these texts, there seems to be a necessary engagement with the father. The father represents the apartheid past, especially for white characters, and he also inhabits the spectral position, the haunting reminder of a time that the characters, and society, would seem to prefer forgetting.

These recent South African novels, constituting what Ruth Frenkel and Craig Mackenzie label "post-transitional" (2010) literature, show various shifts in the representations of fathers. The texts in this period call into question the paternal narratives which earlier novels presented, and look at them in highly critical, postmodernist ways. The sons and daughters, focalised in these novels, are given narrative power and use it to disrupt the simplistic narratives of their fathers: in Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2009), Michiel challenges his father's ideas of masculinity by embracing the fact that he is

gay, and is able to be critical of the nexus of military/ country/ heterosexuality/ religion by being an outsider to all four constructs. Marion, in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), challenges her father's construction of whiteness and his distance from his past by engaging in her own journey of self-discovery and confronting her father with the truths he wishes to forget. In Zukiswa Wanner's *Men of the South* (2010), traditional ideas of fatherhood are challenged by a series of "failed" or resisted fatherhoods: a stay-at-home father, a black gay father, and a Zimbabwean immigrant who conceives a child with a South African character to gain citizenship.

In many ways, contemporary texts destabilise the concept of fatherhood and strip it of its authority. Fathers, in these novels, become relics of the past. They are shown to be ghostly figures, often dying or associated with death. The dying father means that the sons and daughters are left without the certainty and authority of familiar paternal narratives. They abandon or reimagine ideologies which the father is often tasked to propagate: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, violence, history, tradition and law. Through their discovery of new narratives, the sons and daughters in these novels offer hope of transcending the limiting paternal narratives associated with the apartheid era.

Queer Male Characters in Post-Apartheid Literature

While this discussion shows that fatherhoods are generally destabilised in post-apartheid literature, the increasing emergence of queer voices serves as a point of even more radical disruption of paternal power. In many texts that represent the queer character, the father's position as arbiter of masculine ideals and his role as symbol of the oppressive force of the spectral apartheid legacy are highlighted and, importantly, resisted.

The term "queer", as employed in this article, refers to those who identify as sexual or gender minorities or those who experience non-heteronormative desires. Its academic use derives from queer theory, which is rooted in poststructuralist theories such as feminist theory and gay and lesbian studies, where binaries and categories of sexuality and gender are challenged and deconstructed (Goodrich, Luke & Smith 2016: 614). The works of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) have been instrumental in conceiving of gender and sexuality as "performative" and in offering a critical lens with which to examine issues of power within societies as reflected through the queer perspective. Gender and sexual categories are not merely innate and unchanging realities, but are embodied and reinforced through everyday performative acts. Within this framework, the queer individual offers deconstructionist potential, disrupting simplistic patriarchal conceptions of gender and sexuality and challenging the systems which are founded on these constructions.

The queer character in South African literature is often constructed as an outsider who is difficult to understand by other characters, and simultaneously a character wrestling, in unique and dynamic ways, with the complexities of a country in transition. There were some instances of queer representations in South Africa during apartheid,⁴ but queer characters in post-apartheid works like J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Nadine Gordimer's two works *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and *The House Gun* (1998) demonstrated a more mainstream representation of queer realities. Earlier writings on queer experiences in South Africa had mostly been produced by queer men, but Gordimer's work "open[ed] up the panorama of the mainstream South African novel" (173) and she also expanded the limits of representation of "the families within those novels [...] to include gays and lesbians" (173). Queer characters were a part of South African families within these texts (at least white families), even though representations were still sparse.

While white queer characters were emerging, black queer characters were and still are mostly absent from South African literature. Duiker and Wanner's novels are two prominent examples, as well as Fred Khumalo's *Seven Steps to Heaven* (2008). In addition, black queer voices have emerged which challenge heteronormative and Eurocentric constructions of gender and sexuality in South Africa, such as the work of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, whose memoir *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008), details the complex gender and cultural dimensions of Nkabinde's life and the figure of the sangoma. However, these representations are still sparse and in many cases socially stigmatised.⁵ Even though in 1987 Thabo Mbeki, then Director of Information for the ANC, stressed the party's full support for gay rights (2005: 149), sodomy laws were only ruled unconstitutional in 1998, and same-sex marriage, under the banner of the Civil Union Act, only became legal in 2006. These relatively recent changes in respect to queer identities indicate why these characters can still be so controversial and why (especially black) same-sex desire is still constructed as taboo and is "silenced" in literature. Homosexuality has been socially viewed as "un-African" (Stobie 2009: 322) and in many cases individuals with variant sexualities are targeted with rape, beatings and murder in South Africa (322), especially in black townships and rural areas. Even previous South African President Jacob Zuma publicly expressed homophobic sentiments, calling same-sex marriage "a disgrace to the nation and to God" (Pucherova 2009: 937).

4. See Brenna M. Munro (2012) for a lengthy discussion on queer representation in South Africa during apartheid and the transition.

5. The photography of Zanele Muholi offers an example of how queer representations are socially stigmatised. In 2010, Minister of Arts, Lulu Xingwana, who was due to deliver remarks at one of Muholi's exhibitions, walked out of the event stating that the images of lesbian intimacy were "immoral" and "against nation-building" (Smith 2010).

This notion of homosexuality as un-African and “foreign” to the South African nation, especially in black communities, is one which the protagonist Tshepo in Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* challenges.⁶ Societal disapproval of his same-sex desires becomes entrenched and internalised for Tshepo. This can be seen when he is about to have penetrative sex with a male client for the first time at the massage parlour where he works, and his father, representative of broader homophobia, enters his thoughts: “I think of my father and it is enough to make me wish for death” (2001: 314). The act of anal penetration becomes an important one for Tshepo, and he says: “It all comes down to that: penetration [...] It’s also what they persecute us for, that unspeakable thing that men do together, corrupting nature. That final act” (314). Anal sex is a rite of passage for Tshepo, a way of moving beyond societal conceptions of hegemonic masculinity which are expressed in conjunction with violence by his father. By linking this moment with thoughts of his father, Tshepo shows how transgressive the act becomes – he is taking the uncomfortable step of moving outside of the limits placed on his masculinity and creating an alternative understanding of sexuality for himself. He is finding intimacy with a man when his father and most other men only exhibit violence and cruelty to him. He is betraying the strict heterosexist ideologies associated with the father’s dominion, going against cultural, racial and gender expectations, and what he encounters is uncharted, threatening new territory which he needs to navigate.

Importantly, the queer character disrupts the traditions and ideologies espoused by many father-figures. This is a theme often explored in South African literature with queer characters. Parental figures wrestle with the idea that their children are same-sex attracted. The queer characters, like Lucy Lurie in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* or Tshepo in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, are either recognised or recognise themselves as outsiders. There is a trend in some texts of portraying, as in Coetzee and Gordimer’s cases, “queer through the eyes of parents, suggesting that the new queer generation should be perceived as having been produced by the heterosexual family, and that these individuals need to be embraced by the family and its macrocosm, society at large” (Stobie 2009: 338). Acceptance of the queer character by straight parents is likened to societal acceptance of alterity, the othered figure who has been present all along but never fully embraced or recognised. Socially, it signifies a greater emergence of discussions around sexual and gender diversity. Within literature, this recognition and engagement offers new possibilities for representation that challenge dominant patriarchal depictions of familial and social relationships. Significantly, and unfortunately, parental

6. It is important to note that this notion is not supported by historical data of African intimacies, where many same-sex relations were socially permissible, and does not critically examine how Western ideas impacted on Africa’s reactions to homosexuality. See Hoad (2007) for a fuller discussion.

acceptance is almost never depicted between fathers and their gay sons in South African fiction.

There has been an effort to locate the queer character within the “home” of South Africa in post-apartheid literature. This character is constructed as a part of the fabric of South African society, albeit ambivalently. These texts can offer a “retrospective cartography of the previously occluded queer nation” (Stobie 2009: 320-321), showing how queer identities were present within apartheid South Africa even when they were silenced. Notable examples include André Carl van der Merwe’s novel *Moffie* and Gerald Kraak’s *Ice in the Lungs*, both published in 2006 and depicting gay men’s lives during apartheid.

Queer characters can also renegotiate a home in postapartheid South Africa. In Duiker’s novel, for example, “Tshepo views the height of a gay man’s passion as possessing a lyrical voice of patriotism” (Stobie 2009: 331), as when he discusses male orgasms, he says it is like singing the national anthem or a patriotic song. This indicates that perhaps even because of his same-sex desires, Tshepo’s South African identity can be reinforced. Andy Carolin also notes that in Kraak’s *Ice in the Lungs*, portraying two gay students in 1976, “not only are same-sex desires and antiapartheid political activism compatible, but they also come to be mutually defining” (2015: 60) for the characters. Reclaiming South Africa as home, for both black and white queer characters who are excluded in different ways, becomes possible in post-apartheid South African literature. It requires challenging the dominance of patriarchal, homophobic conceptions, and in many texts it involves challenging the father. Behr’s *Kings of the Water*, one of the most celebrated and influential recent novels about queer identities, will be analysed to show how the symbol of water in the novel acts as reflective of the queer character’s ability to disrupt ideas of hegemonic masculinity and to subvert the father’s dominance.

***Kings of the Water* and Queer Disruption of Paternal Power**

Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water* depicts the story of a queer, expatriate South African character, Michiel, who returns to the family farm in 2001 after his mother dies. In his youth, Michiel struggles with his sexuality and the expectations that his father places on him to “perform” masculinity: he joins the navy, impregnates a young woman Karien, and never speaks about the fact that he is gay while living in South Africa during the formal apartheid years. This silence about his sexuality also impacts on the relationship between Michiel and his brother Peet, who commits suicide because he, too, is gay. Eventually, Michiel is caught having sex with an Indian lieutenant and discharged from his military service, and he decides to leave the country against his father’s wishes. Once Michiel leaves the country, his perspective

changes, and his later return allows him to queer his environment, asserting himself as a gay man but also constructing his surroundings differently and disrupting the father's unilateral and unquestioned control of the family farm, Paradys. Michiel challenges the patriarchal ideologies underpinning relations within the farm setting and within the country at large. This queering process is often linked to the evocative symbol of water. Pivotal scenes are set around water, and the fluidity and instability inherent in this symbol allow for Michiel to challenge, disrupt and reinterpret the power of the father which had once caused him anguish and self-doubt.

Behr's novels all represent white male characters who disrupt tradition and unsettle patriarchal cultural assumptions. In *The Smell of Apples* (1993), Behr represents a young white Afrikaner son, Marnus, who witnesses the same-sex paedophilic sexual abuse of his friend Frikkie by Marnus's father Johan. The novel unearths the intimate mechanisms for perpetuating apartheid ideology by showing how the family unflinchingly reproduces the oppressive system through their rituals, thoughts, silences and everyday interactions. This representation of the matter-of-fact reproduction of apartheid ideology could be linked biographically to the author Mark Behr's own role as a spy for the security police while a student at Stellenbosch University in the 1980s, a role which an older male relative secured for him. Behr's history indicates that the novel might be, as Rita Barnard puts it, "some sort of carefully masked confession" (2000: 211).⁷

In *Kings of the Water*, Michiel is an out gay man returning to South Africa after the end of formal apartheid. Even though he had witnessed homophobia in the liberation movement before (132), he learns that the new constitution "contains a clause protecting people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" (2009: 180). The end of apartheid seems to offer the possibility that Michiel can negotiate a new place for himself in South Africa as a gay man, but he recognises that homophobia would not simply have disappeared with a new constitution, and he acknowledges that most South Africans would not have agreed with the legal protections for sexual minorities (180).

7. Barnard's critique of Behr's first novel also highlights how homoeroticism in South African literature is often much more complex than many of the texts under discussion seem to suggest. Barnard notes that Behr's novel differs from other gay writers who often depict homoerotic desire as liberatory or "the obvious alternative to the 'male mythology' of apartheid" (210), and instead becomes "collaborative rather than oppositional" (210) for Marnus and Johan. This can also be linked to moments that are read as reinforcing misogyny in Duiker's novel, where the sex worker Sebastian constructs male-male sex as a rebellion against the "oppressive" influence of women, which "problematically confirms patriarchy and misogyny" (Ten Kortenaar 188). Nevertheless, the subversive potential of queer sons in many texts is still a dominant, recurrent theme.

Being gay is an exclusionary factor for Michiel; it is the reason he is discharged from the military and why he leaves the country.⁸ Michiel is also an outsider to his family and within the farm setting as a gay man, most vividly demonstrated through the revulsion of Michiel's father towards him. His brother Peet's suicide acts as a powerful indicator of the smothering environment and lack of acceptance which Michiel would have faced if he remained in South Africa as a gay man during apartheid.

For the queer South African character, "home" is hostile terrain. Heteronormativity was an important component of white, hegemonic masculinity during apartheid, and it was intrinsically linked to military participation (Mbao 2013: 81). The maintenance of power is also situated within the domestic setting, where "obedience to the father and not showing weakness were of paramount importance" (81). The home becomes a central site of embodying patriarchal power structures, the same structures which maintained the apartheid state. By returning home, Michiel can challenge these structures which had informed his sense of being an outsider. Sara Ahmed, in her analysis of queer phenomenology, explains that sexual orientation is also a product of phenomenological disorientation, and that the idea of home and "feeling at home" often plays an important role in this process (9). Ahmed's analysis is particularly fitting to Michiel's journey, as she holds that migration offers the possibility for this disorientation which then needs to be reorientated within the home, or "[t]he queer subject within straight culture [...] deviates and is made socially present as a deviant" (21), returning to the home both being perceived differently and with an altered subjective perspective. This perspective, I argue, allows Michiel the capacity to "queer" his environment, to resist the orientations which had supported the power of his father, and to reimagine his relationship with "home".

Michiel's ultimate renunciation of his father's patriarchal control is the intimacy he finds with his partner Kamil when he lives in San Francisco. Because Kamil represents everything outside of the expectations of Michiel's father, as an effeminate, areligious, gay man of colour, genuine intimacy with him will constitute the ultimate betrayal of his father (and by extension, of hegemonic masculinity) for Michiel. His relationship with Kamil alters Michiel's perspective when he returns to Paradys, informing how he understands the space and interacts with others. Due to the changes in the country, Michiel's father has also lost the rigid patriarchal dominance which he

8. This notion of the liberatory potential of the "West" is criticised by many African queer scholars such as Keguro Macharia, who argues that certain queer people "fetishize the 'freedom' enjoyed by 'gays abroad', paying little attention to the race, gender, and class politics of those 'gays abroad'" (2014 [online]). Macharia highlights the important elements of heteronormativity and Eurocentrism in understanding the queer rights movement in Africa. However, it is obvious that for Michiel, the personal exclusion which he experiences is lessened when he leaves South Africa.

possessed as a white male during apartheid, and queer identities are no longer repressed in the same ways. All of these factors give Michiel a new sense of disruptive power in the face of his father.

One of the most important factors which Michiel disrupts is the role of violence.⁹ In the novel, as in many aspects of South African society, violence is often presented as a marker of masculinity (Coetzee 2001: 303). In fact, violence in the novel is gendered through the father, Dawid, represented through his conflict with his sons as well as Dawid's demand for Michiel to complete his military service. Tanya Gruber argues that "aggressive and suppressive patriarchal structures which rule life on the farm in *Kings of the Water* can also be seen as a microcosm representing the suppressive macrocosm of the apartheid regime in South Africa" (2014: 39). As a child, Michiel witnesses a physical fight between his brother Benjamin and his father, and reflects that this is a moment of bonding for them as the son is replicating patriarchal power by challenging the father, a type of "violent camaraderie" (Behr 2009: 77). Michiel's resistance to violence indicates his ideological disjuncture from his father. Unlike his father, Michiel seeks to find intimacy with men rather than engage in the violence expected of him by his father and by the apartheid state.

Michiel can return "home" as both insider and outsider, someone who is a part of the family and born in the country, and as a white man, someone complicit in the histories of violence, but someone who was never fully accepted within apartheid systems. In this moment of return, not only is Michiel different, but his presence necessitates the acknowledgement of what was once repressed by his family and country, the queer realities which Michiel and his brother Peet represent. Dawid is highly resistant to what Michiel represents, and as father and son encounter each other once again, in a very different South Africa, they reconfigure power dynamics on the family farm.

The Subversive Symbol of Water

The confrontations with the father become powerful moments of subversion by the queer son. Interestingly, Michiel leaving the country and returning to it are both marked by nakedness and water in scenes involving him and his father. In a scene at the dam on Paradys where Michiel contemplates leaving

9. The trend of queer sons in the military is found in various South African texts such as the works of Koos Prinsloo, Tatamkhulu Afrika's *Bitter Eden* (2002), Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991) and André Carl van der Merwe's *Moffie* (2006). Michiel's position as a gay man conscripted into military service can be seen as a continuation of this strain in South African fiction, and speaks to my analysis of ideologies of violence which the queer son often disrupts or deconstructs through male-male tenderness.

South Africa, Michiel is the one who is naked as his father looks down at him sternly. During the scene, Michiel shows how the titular “king” of the water is effectively his father: “[Michiel] was naked on the dam wall, legs dangling in [...] This is where Oubaas found him [...] looking down on his son’s head of short army hair. Michiel dropped his hands to his crotch, vulnerable below the man who owned the dam, the orchard, the farm. The world” (58). Michiel’s nakedness indicates his vulnerability and relative subordination to his father, and his father positioned above him shows his power over Michiel, a part of what Michiel needs to escape. The coldness and distance between them is apparent.¹⁰

The scene highlights the powerful role that the symbol of water plays in the novel. Within both queer theory and literature studies, water has emerged as an evocative symbol for ideas of power, identity and resistance. The concepts of gender and sexual “fluidity” (Diamond 2009) emphasise the fact that identities are not fixed or essentialist in nature. As a literary trope, the symbol has held currency for its dual role of being a powerful force of nature and a symbol of change and renewal. Harry Tucker Jr.’s analysis of the symbol of water focusses on the element of “instability” (320) and the “transitory quality of water” (320). He also notes how the “danger, the threat of drowning” (321) is interwoven with the “refreshing and life-giving” (322) element. Larry Paul Jones explains that biblically, “water stands for [...] new birth” (29) and “purification” (29). Jones also notes that “water clearly points to a reality beyond itself” (29), a “transferred meaning” (29) which offers transformative potential.

Initially in the novel, water seems to signal the father’s influence and dominance over Michiel. Michiel’s choice to join the navy, the military body of the ocean, indicates how water is associated with the father’s power and with patriarchal structures of violence generally. Michiel has sex with the Indian lieutenant on a “whites-only” beach, another scene near water, resulting in his discharge from the navy. Peet’s suicide by drowning, and a scene where Michiel witnesses a woman being tortured by holding her head under water while he is an officer, seem to reinforce how water is initially a conduit of the father’s (and the apartheid government’s) power, violence, and control over Michiel’s life. However, when Michiel returns to the farm, after the end of apartheid and once he has accepted himself as gay, his perspective changes dramatically, and the role of water is similarly very different in the novel.

When Michiel arrives at Paradys for his mother’s funeral, the first request which his father makes is for Michiel to bath him. In analysing this very important bath scene in *Kings of the Water*, it is useful to draw a comparison with a water scene in *The Smell of Apples*, where father and son also share the

10. The biblical allusions here are obvious. Michiel, the disobedient son who challenges the father’s authority, is expelled from paradise (*Paradys*), his naked innocence lost as he gains sexual “knowledge” with the Indian lieutenant, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

space of the bathroom in a cleansing ritual. In the earlier novel, Johan and his son Marnus shower together, and the moment becomes a time of sexual instruction as well as a moment of perpetuating masculine ideals.

The young boy Marnus reflects on the body and phallus of his father in an admiring way: “Dad’s whole chest and stomach are covered with hair and his John Thomas [penis] hangs out from a bushy black forest” (1993: 63). His father introduces a sexual element to the showering, and Marnus implies that he has been asked about his sexuality before in the shower: “Between soaping and washing our hair, Dad asks: ‘so tell Dad, does that little man of yours stand up yet sometimes in the mornings?’” (63). The phallus becomes the focus of these moments between father and son, Marnus’s “little man” (63) indicating a developing masculinity. Marnus’s fascination with his father’s body demonstrates his admiration for what makes his father a man, and simultaneously foretells Marnus’s reproduction of these “masculine” characteristics: like his father, Marnus will join the military and reproduce forms of violence which support the apartheid state. In light of the father raping Marnus’s friend Frikkie later in the novel, the shower scene also offers foreshadowing of the father’s ominous and threatening sexuality, and the destructive force that he represents.

Immediately following the shower scene in the text, Marnus reflects on his penis as an adult in one of his meditations when he is fighting in the South African Border War. The symbol of the phallus again connects him to the moment of closeness with his father, and shows that he has “become a man” like his father whom he respected before; his “little man” has matured, and now resembles his father’s. The reflection on his phallus is symbolic of how he has been enshrouded within the paternal ideologies which his father has introduced to him, and indicates that it is Marnus’s imperative to perpetuate the system of apartheid through violence and the racist, patriarchal ideologies of his father.

In contrast, Michiel in *Kings of the Water*, because he is gay, will never be able to have this type of closeness with his father or mirror him the way Marnus mirrors Johan. In the cleansing scene in *Kings of the Water*, the conflict of father and son is highlighted in a similar almost-sexualised manner, but this time Michiel’s position is the one of power. He is positioned higher, looking down at his father’s naked and frail body, now unwilling to accept the scorn which his father shows him. His father is aged and frail, relying on Michiel to bath him. The conflict between them quickly surfaces as his father says: “‘I asked you here because [your mother] loved you! Perversions and all [...]’ [Michiel asks:] ‘Is there no mercy in you?’ ‘Mercy! You sound like a woman, for Christ’s sake. If you must be this thing you are, can’t you at least pretend to have balls?’” (35). By shaming Michiel and simultaneously linking him to being “like a woman” and not “hav[ing] balls”, his father demonstrates Michiel’s deviation from the idealised masculinity which he espouses. Unlike Marnus who later inspects his penis and describes it in

similar terms to his father's, Michiel is emasculated and accused of not "hav[ing] balls" (35).

Within these scenes of nakedness and water shared between father and son, once sites where the father's power and masculinity could be perpetuated, the gay son is an affront which is ironically already inscribed in these moments of masculine performativity. The moments are ostensibly tender, even somewhat sexualised in both novels, with the focus on the phallus. The very moments of masculine instruction are encoded with taboo same-sex tenderness and subtle homoeroticism, creating the abstract space for queer desires and male-male closeness. In the bath scene, Dawid instructs Michiel on how to groom him just as his dead wife used to (31), placing Michiel in the position of surrogate wife and caretaker. Michiel even reflects that the gentleness he witnesses in his father might have been reserved for his lovemaking with his mother: "[f]rom the first courtship to the later routine of their Sunday afternoons, had gentleness been reserved for her, to be part of their lovemaking, or in the calm lethargy of afterwards?" (31), a reflection which again likens the bath scene to sexual intimacy. However, when Michiel is about to wash the father's penis, the intimacy between them is broken. Dawid says: "I manage my own private parts" (33). Instead of the father's penis being the connective symbol as it was for Marnus and Johan in *The Smell of Apples*, in this novel, the penis is the site where friction is caused between father and son, as the moment of almost washing his father's penis causes an even stronger divide between Michiel and Dawid.

The sexual elements in both scenes are significant. Male to male tenderness is of course the ultimate disruption of patriarchal domestic power as it is constructed in the novel, that power which relied on violence, and Dawid resists the potential closeness with his son. The bath scene is where the son gains a form of power over the stifling influence of his father. Michiel can closely scrutinise his father's body and sees in it only fragility and brokenness, a "declining patriarch" (30), not the heightened masculinity which Marnus sees in Johan. The domain of the father's patriarchal power, the phallus, is still that inaccessible realm for Michiel, a signal that he will never have access to the father's approval and the form of masculinity which affords it.

Despite this, Michiel can find the intimacy he craves. In San Francisco, Michiel can perform a similar cleansing ritual in a very different way, lovingly bathing his partner Kamil when he is sick with complications from AIDS. These contrasting bath scenes show how Michiel can still find the tenderness with a man which his father denies him, and resists the violence his father calls for when Dawid suggests that the bath scene is Michiel's opportunity to kill him (31). Michiel reimagines his father as loving, and when he is ultimately rebuked, Michiel acknowledges that he still finds the space for male-male tenderness with Kamil, outside of the home and the father's influence.

Other Images of Water: Rain, Storytelling and Swimming

In addition to the bath scene, many other activities within the home also become queered through the way that they are enacted as well as through the way that Michiel perceives them, and the subversive symbol of water is present throughout. Michiel's perspective has become altered due to his position as outsider, and he is able to appreciate the tangible changes which have taken place in Paradys and South Africa, while concurrently being critical of just how little has ultimately changed since he left despite the narrative of a "new South Africa".

One of the most striking symbols of change to Michiel is the family dinner. After his mother's funeral, the family gathers for the meal at Paradys. Because of a hailstorm and heavy rain, the farmworkers and Lerato, the housekeeper's daughter who has now become a wealthy businesswoman, are unable to leave the main house, so they gather for the dinner as well. Dawid looks seemingly uncomfortable with the arrangement (127), and Michiel reflects on this unusual gathering by thinking of his mother: "Ounooi, are you here [...] to witness this? Face to face, side by side, yesterday today and tomorrow" (127).

The ritual of the bedtime story is also queered in the text by Michiel in a poignant scene which calls back to Peet's death. Michiel tells the story of the pied piper to Benjamin's daughter Bianca when she struggles to fall asleep. When the piper in his story leads the children out of town after not being paid for clearing the rats, Bianca assumes that he leads them "[b]ack to the river, where they all drown" (185), but Michiel responds that this is not how his narrative ends: "No, he says. No one drowns because of what grown-ups who always think they know better did or didn't do" (185). The change in the story is an obvious reference to his brother Peet, who drowned because of the silence surrounding him as a queer character and the rejection of his family and country. By shifting the narrative, where the sins of the father are not visited on the children, Michiel ends the novel on a note of hope for the democratic South Africa. Michiel, as the symbolic son and a new form of father-figure to Bianca in the novel, can alter the narrative as he chooses. The story is no longer given a tragic ending, and Michiel can liberate himself not only from the oppressive influence of his father, represented by the symbolic drowning, but also gives himself license to see beyond the legacy of apartheid South Africa and envision a different future. The symbol of water here, in the river which does not drown, is one which highlights the possibility of change and redemption. No longer is water linked to the oppressive influence of the father. No longer is violence and death the ending to the story.

The final example of water allowing for the queering of home is when the children play a game called "kings of the water" with their mothers in the dam on Paradys, the same dam where Michiel's father had confronted him before he left South Africa. Here, mothers and daughters are given the ability to shift power hierarchies. Significantly, the scene recalls the fact that Michiel's

mother Beth was also attempting to reopen a community swimming pool before her death, as she believed “that the younger our children play together and learn to swim together, the sooner the town will heal” (93). Playing together in the dam is similarly a symbol of reconciliation and healing. Michiel, as the only adult male at the scene with the mothers and children, represents the outsider figure in various ways. He is a representative of patriarchal power that the children and mothers are resisting in their different kind of “war”, but his sexuality also makes him an outsider to these patriarchal structures, and he can bring a queer perspective to these moments as well. The symbol of water in this scene allows mothers and daughters to assert their own power, without the stifling presence of the father-figure and what he often represents in the post-apartheid novel. Indeed, it is one of the few scenes in the novel involving water where Michiel’s father Dawid is absent or his patriarchal influence is not implied. There seems to finally be freedom from the “declining patriarch” for Michiel, and his perspective on Paradys and on South Africa have shifted.

Conclusion

Michel’s disruptive power demonstrates an important element of the South African post-apartheid literary landscape. The queer character has the potential to act as a powerful reminder of the silences inherent in apartheid, and the layers of victimhood and complicity which exist with white male queer characters. Behr’s voice was vital in bringing to light these silences, and his controversial history is illuminating of the mechanisms of oppression. Showing the conflict of the queer son and the oppressive father, spectral representative of apartheid, allows for new possibilities for change in the literature of democratic South Africa. Sadly, in a country with such a dearth of queer voices, both Duiker and Behr’s talents have been lost in the South African literary landscape with their respective deaths in 2005 and 2015. Their important, indeed vital contributions will have lasting impacts. However, it remains unclear how queer voices will continue to offer new visions of resistances to patriarchal power structures once the post-transitional moment ends. New literary fatherhoods, and new queer representations, especially for black queer characters, are desperately needed in South Africa.

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