

“You Are Suffering from Literary Kwashiorkor”: Transculturation at the Confluence of African Literature, Vegetarianism and Indigenous Ritual Practice in Nape ’a Motana’s *Son-In-Law of the Boere**

Dave Nel

Summary

On the surface, Nape ’a Motana’s fictional work *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (2010) is a tale of love between a black “Jim-comes-to-Jo’burg” stereotype and a white Afrikaans female teaching colleague during a transitional era in South African political and social history. However, as this article will reveal, the text is a compelling and transformative narrative which should be read as a literary transculturation of three veins of social discourse: (1) the literary historiography of African literature and the provision of access for contemporary readers to the African literary archive, (2) vegetarianism as a metaphor for transformation in a postcolonial and post-apartheid society, and (3) the representation of indigenous ritual practices in the modernity of liberation-era South Africa. Furthermore, the novel suggests that access to African fictional texts and a corps of motivated educators in South African schools would go some distance toward developing the necessary literacies to overcome the “literary kwashiorkor” referred to in the title of this essay.

Opsomming

Nape ’a Motana se fiksieverhaal *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (2010) lyk op die oog af na ’n liefdesverhaal tussen die stereotipiese swart “Jim-van-die-platteland-in-Jo’burg” en ’n Afrikaanse blanke vroulike onderwyskollega tydens ’n oorgangstyd in die Suid-Afrikaanse sosio-politieke geskiedenis. Nogtans, soos hierdie artikel dit na vore bring, is die teks ’n meesleurende en transformerende verhaal wat gelees behoort te word as ’n literêre transkulturasie van drie modusse van sosiale omgang: (1) die literêre historiografie van Afrika-literatuur en die eienaarskap daarvan, (2) vegetarisme as ’n metafoor vir transformasie in ’n postkoloniale en postapartheid samelewing, en (3) die voorstelling van inheemse rituele praktyke in die moderniteit van bevrydingsera Suid-Afrika. Verder suggereer die roman dat toegang tot Afrika-fiksietekste en ’n korps van gemotiveerde opvoeders in Suid-Afrikaanse skole grootliks sal bydra tot die ontwikkeling van noodsaaklike geletterdheid en om “literêre kwashiorkor” waarna in die titel van hierdie artikel verwys word te oorkom.

Transculturation as a Theoretical Framework

The term transculturation, according to David Attwell (2005), “suggests multiple processes, a dialogue in both directions and, most importantly, processes of cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms” (p. 18). Such processes arise out of the historical collision of vastly differentiated civilisations, and inevitably, would affect all aspects of public and personal life. “The demons and angels of history unleashed by transculturation are the product of asymmetrical power relationships” (West-Durán 2005: 968); yet transculturation as a critical discourse and transformative modality in a contemporary reading of texts and cultural performance is a powerful non-linear methodology of analysis which produces an enabling effect in the creation of new knowledge. Transculturation, in this application of the concept, is defined as a literary process which incorporates elements of rural indigenous cultures, both traditional and popular, in conjunction with literary techniques of the modern urban novel; furthermore, transculturation is a counter-current to dominant homogenising global processes of cultural exchange. Transculturation emphasises sociocultural plurality and diversity while resisting a fetishisation of difference, working towards the heterogeneity of literary expression in opposition to a homogenous unified South African literary field. The concept implies, firstly, a fluidity of boundariness, liminality, cultural circuitry, border crossings and contact zones. Secondly, there is a theoretical implication that transhistorical, translingual and transcultural processes are circulating between communities, cultures and nations. These complex processes are characterised by historical contestations over place, resources, ownership, gender, authority, authenticity and power (Ortiz 1947; Hicks 1991; Pratt 1992; Rama 1997; Rogers 2006; Archibald 2007; Arnedo-Gómez 2008; Nyman 2009). This article presents the outcomes of a reading of *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (Motana 2010), through which the “multiple processes” of transculturation are explored and critiqued.

Reclaiming the African Literary Archive for a New Generation of Readers

The roots of literary-historiographical literature in South Africa reach back to the nineteenth century, and notably the research into indigenous orality by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd. However, in the years following the dismantling of apartheid legislation and the subsequent democratic government elections, several projects to conceptualise South African literature under one collective umbrella have been undertaken, especially in the past decade, with *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Attwell & Attridge 2012) being one of the most recent.

Geoffrey Davis (2003) illustrates the historical reasons behind the pressing need for the reclamation of marginalised, outlawed and fugitive literary texts when he states:

The effect of government-imposed bans and of writers being forced into exile was to dismember the black literary tradition, to cut off younger writers from their cultural history, to create an “arrested image” of black culture. Many writers thus had to begin their careers without any knowledge of the work of previous generations. Matsemela Manaka, for example, could not know the work of La Guma, Mphahlele and Serote; Siphosiphiso Sepamla was denied the opportunity to read the work of Mphahlele, Nkosi, La Guma and Can Themba.

(Davis 2003: 209-210)

This declaration is the clarion call for writers, readers and critics to redress the disembodiment of the black literary tradition brought about by systemic apartheid violation. Retrieval of the autochthonous archive from its fugitive past (Attwell 2005) will require transculturation and the renegotiation and reinscription of modernity in liberation-era South Africa. A literary process of crossing back and forth across borders once concretised by legislation, but now fluid and liminal, is required for the re-embodiment of black literary history and the creation of a “third space” (Bhabha 1994) out of which a contemporary authentic and heterogeneous literature will emerge.

The process of reclamation and the regular appearance of intertextual African literary referents in *Son-In-Law of the Boere* constitute a writing back to the canon of literary-historiographical literature and a foregrounding of the urgency for transformation within the education system in South Africa; furthermore, it could be argued that the novel posits the suggestion that emerging writers and contemporary readers who are now afforded access to the literary archive are possibly *ethically obliged* to familiarise themselves with the earlier works once denied to so many for so long, and which now exist as highly significant artefacts of the cultural resistance to colonial and apartheid oppression.

The text contains several allusions to African writers and literary works which constitute a group of “referents”, with each referent signifying an African literary-historical and thematic marker. The list of referents in *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (Motana 2010), in order of appearance includes: André Brink: *A Dry White Season* (p. 12); Can Themba: “The Icon and His Writing” (p. 13); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o: *The River Between* (pp. 18, 157) and Ngũgĩ’s ideological “Africa’s Cultural Revolution” [sic] (pp. 144-145); Chukwumeka Ike: *Toads for Supper* (p. 83); Frantz Fanon: *Black Skins, White Masks* (pp. 121, 172); and Alan Paton: *Too Late the Phalarope* (p. 215). Although the referents do not dominate the narrative, their regularity of appearance and persistent framing of the text, provide the reader with an attractive new methodological approach.

In the first section of this article I examine two of the referents, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Can Themba, giving consideration to two research questions. Firstly, what thematic, conceptual or narrative interconnectivity exists between the referent and the text? Secondly, if each referent were used as an epistemological portal through which the reader could access multi-sited literary discourses, what might an "experimental" rereading of referent texts and associated critique offer towards the analysis of current writing? In other words, is it possible to apply new methods of reading, and what new knowledge could be rendered through this process? The responses to these questions should provide the critical reader with evidence of the dialogue between the referent and the text; and by extension, historical and contemporary African literary critique. Depending on the reader's academic purpose the recovered bounty will vary, but an important repository of knowledge will have been accessed and ethically "dusted off and put back to work".

In *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (Motana 2010), Kgoroto Mashoboleng (commonly referred to as KK) is an educated man from a traditional rural background, who accepts a teaching post at a formerly all-white school. HF Verwoerd High School in the city of Pretoria is both geographically and culturally distant from KK's village. The year 1995, in which the narrative is set, is however, one of transition and transculturation. The most significant attributes KK brings with him to the city are his love and enthusiasm for African literature, which have been instilled in him by a learned mentor who had kept a small library in the village containing books "that [had] at one time [been] banned by the philistine apartheid lawmakers" (2010: 9). KK champions the cause for the school library to acquire a wide selection of African literature, and for the formation of a school debating society. The narrative that follows speaks to the difficulties and contradictions in personal and public transition, straddling the rural/urban, traditional/modern, African/Western binaries. However, we discover that KK's acumen as a border crosser, his empathic embrace of both self and other, often collapses the space between binary opposites. In his narrative transculturation, tradition and modernity, although challenged and interrogated, can ultimately bend down side by side. In brief, KK's appointment to teach at a school named after one of the main architects of apartheid, places him within a contact zone (Pratt 1992) in which transformation is achieved through an engagement with processes of transculturation (Attwell 2005: 18).

In a Mamelodi township tavern, KK is introduced to a man known as Can Themba. When KK asks rather naively whether "Can Themba" is his real name, his question is responded to with "peals of laughter" (Motana 2010: 13), and he is promptly informed by the woman in the group that the man is so named because "[h]e's a lover of Can Themba's writings. He's an English master at Tsako-Thabo High" (p. 13). The role of educators is central to the text as it reflects upon the severe dysfunction in the majority of

public schools in this country, and it is within this system that a large portion of the narrative is set. The “school” is presented as a post-apartheid space in which the possibilities for transformation are foregrounded, and where the main protagonists, KK and Katryn van der Merwe, are destined to meet.

By way of introduction to the referents, we examine the following seminal passage in the text. KK and Makompo (fellow teachers and former comrades in the fictitious revolutionary organisation, Union of Pan-African Students (UPAS)) are discussing South African literature with a group of pupils at HF Verwoerd High. KK states:

“You are suffering from literary kwashiorkor, and this must come to an end. I’m concerned that five years after Mandela was released from prison and we are a free nation, you are still primed with a literary diet that doesn’t include our own writers!” KK’s avid listeners applauded enthusiastically.

“I’m proud of you Panther!” said Makompo.

“Thanks, Tiger!” appreciated KK.

“We were together in the militant UPAS, the Union of Pan-African Students!” boasted Makompo, “He was a fire-eater! He’s a deep-rooted African who still slaughters chickens and goats for his ancestors.”

“I’m also proud of you, Tiger!” responded KK. “And I’ve no doubt that your presence here will motivate the students to eat, drink and sleep Africanism.”

Makompo nodded with a smile. “These privileged students should go and liberate their peers, who are slaves of the pervasive American influence.” The students applauded Makompo.

(Motana 2010: 41-42)

Of the many motifs suggested by this passage, one is that the language of “the struggle” for liberation “fights on”, and another is the idea that literature should provide cultural nourishment, which stages the referents discussed below as agencies of literary and cultural nurture. *Son-In-Law of the Boere* suggests that the passion for African literature could be transmitted from teachers to students if the lack of resources in schools could be addressed and if the participants in the teaching-learning process embraced meaningful education as one of the rewards of the liberation struggle (p. 288).

Michael Chapman poses the question: “What credence may we grant the literary sensibility in a society of narrow political tolerances?” (Chapman 2006: 47); it is a question which carries as much validity of enquiry regarding the literature, arts and culture of the 1950s as it does of present-day South Africa. As an intertextual referent, “Can Themba and His Writings” links *Son-In-Law of the Boere* and contemporary South African popular writing in general to an iconic decade in fictional and journalistic writing history through several key elements, allowing for a retrieval and analysis of a “literary past” within a “literary present”. Politically, the

reading and writing context of the 1950s was a period of resistance to the harsh realities of apartheid life, in which the white government's ideological blueprint for retaining power and control entailed the strictly enforced separation of racial and ethnic groups and the forced removal of Africans from residence within urban areas to the peripheral townships or to ethnically designated rural homelands. Sophiatown, a multiracial lower-income suburb, which displayed overt signs of transculturation, exemplified by illegal shebeens, jazz music and mixed-race relationships, was the epitome of evil from the Afrikaner Calvinist viewpoint, and Can Themba was a writer who strongly signified this "thorn-in-the-side" bohemian existence through his lifestyle, short stories and investigative journalism for *Drum* magazine between 1953 and 1959. The iconography of Can Themba is imbued with the hard living, stylish dressing, prohibited alcohol consumption and jazz music of North America a decade or so earlier; it is, however, a frame-within-a-frame, with apartheid policing violently constricting the life out of the party.

By contrast, when KK arrives at "Die Mooi Auntie" shebeen, it is a liberation-era space, but the jazz plays on and the ghost of Can Themba is evoked (Motana 2010: 13). This is a signification of a convergence of literary elements from two distinct temporalities. The first element concerns the literary voice of black urban modernity. The narrative of modern urban existence was emerging strongly in the 1950s, and Chapman tells us that "Themba helped to record and create the voices, images and values of a black urban culture which, in the aftermath of wartime industrial expansion, was struggling to assert its permanence and identity" (2006: 47). It was to be a "permanence and identity" deferred, however, as apartheid held black urban modernity at a desirable distance and the cultural work by black writers and artists found a direct focus in the struggle for liberation.

The second element of convergence between "Can Themba and his writings", as referent, and the text, is symbolic. Like the fictional KK, the real Can Themba and the fictional Can Themba have studied to be teachers, which, as Chapman points out, is a profession often romanticised as a symbol of the "New African". Included in this category of aspirational professions would be the journalist, the writer, the musician and the gangster (Chapman 2006: 49). It could be argued that to become a "New African", one would have to relinquish part of an "old" indigenous cultural heritage to embrace Western modernity and its cultural modes: a "selling out" of indigeneity, and a "buying into" the capitalist project of materialism. However, Chapman, and later Rosalind Morris (2010), argue strongly that the process at hand is far more complex and subversive than an acculturation of Western values of consumption. Can Themba was known to role-play "the Englishman" to a point of excess. He was often observed carrying *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* around with him and stated that he spoke no African language; but Chapman presents the argument that Themba

“affected a style of coinages and idiosyncratic turns of phrase, in which English was wilfully distorted and made to mock and challenge any conforming view” (Chapman 2006: 52).

In the *Son-In-Law of the Boere* narrative, KK is astounded when he meets fellow teacher Katryn van der Merwe and she requests his assistance in learning his mother tongue, as she is studying Northern Sotho. A bombastic utterance (recalling Themba’s “idiosyncratic turns” perhaps) escapes his lips “from the depths of my medulla oblongata ... I think ... I’m completely convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that you’ve good intentions” (Motana 2010: 19). Language is here being used as symbolic resistance to an embedded order of dominance. Likewise, the haute couture displayed by Can Themba and the subcultural tsotsi of the 1950s was a symbolic counterpunch to the repression of the day. Rosalind Morris theorises this point in terms of the refusal to not desire and its symbolic subversion of power (Morris 2010: 99).

Negotiating Modernity

The Transculturation of Belief Systems

Despite being on the brink of a new life in the city, KK is still culturally deeply influenced by the traditions and authority of his village existence. In terms of narrative, a disjuncture from gerontological authority facilitates KK’s rite of passage from the “old” into the “new” South Africa; and this new space is presented as one of sensual pleasure. In both of Motana’s novels, *Fanie Fourie’s Lobola* (2007) and *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (2010), the theme of love and sex between persons of different races is explored and explicitly narrated. Given its historical and ideological construction as immoral and legislated as such by the white government under the Immorality Act of 1950, the interracial relationship is textually symbolic of the overthrow of apartheid in both the personal and public spheres. The greatest taboo, “forbidden by God”, and by the law, returns in the second novel to challenge any remaining structural edifices of white Afrikaner nationalism; in fact, the black man KK will become, as the narrative unfolds, literally a son “in law” of the *boere* (white South Africans), whether they want him or not:

The marriage officer turned his face towards Katryn. “Do you, Katryn Marieke van der Merwe, declare that as far as you know, there is no lawful impediment to your proposed marriage to Kgoroto Daniel Mashaboleng, and that you call all here present to witness that you take Kgoroto Daniel Mashaboleng as your lawful husband?” ... The marriage officer concluded with a smile, “By the powers vested in me in terms of the Marriage Act of 1961, I declare in front of these witnesses that Kgoroto Daniel Mashobohlang

and Katryn Marieke van der Merwe, here present, have been lawfully married.

(Motana 2010: 284-285)

At this point in the text, the repetition of the Afrikaans and Sepedi names together within a limited textual space, and the invocation of a law dating back to 1961 causes an implosion of the Afrikaner fetishisation of difference. This civil marriage ceremony between KK and Katryn is part of a wedding en masse with “twenty strangers ... people who had chosen to marry in a group rather than pay the extra R50 for the privilege of individual treatment” (p. 284). There is solidarity of “ordinariness”, as opposed to “privilege” which emerges, yet they are “strangers” (p. 284). This recalls perhaps, the title of Can Themba’s short story “Passionate Stranger” (2006), a story which is intertextually linked to both *Son-In-Law of the Boere* (Motana 2010) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* (1965) through the motif of forbidden love and organised marriage, in addition to the development of a character archetype of “the rebel”.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s seat among the pantheon of African literary icons is assured by virtue of his prodigious and acclaimed corpus of work, his strongly worded dissertations on the politics of language in African literature and his outspoken resistance to colonial and neocolonial state oppression; which, as Oliver Lovesey suggests, “garnered him a kind of radical cultural capital, his authorisation as the subaltern speaking” (2002: 142). His exile from Kenya, and subsequent position of privilege in the Western academy, have however, implied a contradictory and enigmatic positionality.

As a referent in the *Son-In-Law of the Boere* text Ngũgĩ’s writing on culture, politics and social change serves as an epistemological entry point into the discourse on the writing and reading of literature as agency for transformation in postcolonial societies. Fictional writing is an art which can carry the writer’s “ideological convictions”, in Ngũgĩ’s terms, but these should emerge with subtlety from the text (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o & Rao 1999: 162-168). A reciprocity exists between the text and the social or political conditions which motivated the writer to produce the text. In terms of fictional narratives, the ethical concerns should emerge from the aesthetic properties and dynamics of textual performance in such a manner that the reader’s attention and interest are engaged and sustained, at the front door so to say, while the “message”, the teaching, slips in through the back. The *Son-In-Law of the Boere* text invites the reader to explore beyond the narrative form of the novel through textual association of the protagonist KK to his literary antecedents in Africa, as illustrated in the following passage:

“Ke yeo e a tsena Kgoroto!” (“Behold a champion entering!”), Makompo greeted KK in a literary style, befitting a man whose passion for African

literature earned him the nickname of “Waiyaki”, the central character in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*.

(Motana 2010: 18)

Firstly, the Sepedi greeting which Makompo offers KK creates intrigue; although a brief translation is provided as co-text, it comes with no explanation, and the reader’s curiosity will only be quenched much further into the novel (pp. 260-261), when KK shares with Katryn the source and meaning of his name. Secondly, for the reader of this passage, who may be unfamiliar with Ngũgĩ’s early fiction (*The River Between*, first published in 1965), the question is raised as to the reason why KK is textually linked to Waiyaki. What attributes do the two characters have in common? Is this connection based on an intertextually stable concept, given the geo-temporal distances between the two novels? In order to address such enquiries, the analytical reader would have to return to the earlier work. Again I would argue that this insistence on the retrieval of past texts serves two functions. On the one hand, the reader encounters a fictional writing back to the literary and historiographical projects, the book histories of African literature in general and South African literature more specifically. Importantly, the text asserts that its own loci of genealogy are in pan-African words and ideas. The second function of the retrieval is to initiate a dialogue between the two texts, which provides the reader, as analyst, a richly embroidered intertextuality, the transculturation of epistemologies with which to work. One imbued with the fear of colonial contamination, yet recognising the empowerment which written literacies and numeracy can offer a community; the other shifting between a burdensome colonial past and the potential opportunities of liberation.

Son-In-Law of the Boere and *The River Between* both interrogate the impact of colonial Christianity upon indigenous African spiritual belief systems. In the Ngũgĩ work, Muthoni’s search for a more holistic self and the need for “something more” is a personal manifestation of the contradictions embedded in the first wave of missionary virulence in Africa. Comaroff and Comaroff (2008) make a compelling case for the argument that “colonial evangelists” such as David Livingstone represented the vanguard of religious, cultural and economic enterprise; and furthermore, in late-capitalist modernity there is a revitalisation of Pentecostal faith born of the kinship between evangelicalism, capitalism and power (Comaroff & Comaroff 2008: 100-101). The power of the fictional Livingstone in *The River Between* to influence Muthoni’s construction of her personhood cannot be underestimated. It is to her Kikuyu ancestral ritual of “circumcision” that she turns for fulfilment; however, it is with the proviso that Livingstone’s own wives must surely have been circumcised, because he as a man would not marry an “uncircumcised” woman (Ngũgĩ 1965: 26). Muthoni’s position, as colonised female autochthon, prevents her from reaching any other conclusion: the ritual of transformation to “womanhood”

must be undertaken. With a sprinkling of intertextual reflexivity, the liberation-era Motana text describes the spiritual conditions in the rural community from which KK emerges:

KK's people were double-barrelled Christians who had not thrown away their indigenous African rites, such as libations and slaughtering to appease the ancestors. About 95 per cent of the villagers were regarded as pure pagans or pitch-black heathens who had never entered a church building. Some entered the holy building only during a relative's funeral service. KK's parents were among the five-per centers whom people called "Badumedi" – those who believe.

(Motana 2010: 7)

This "double-barrelled" spirituality exemplifies the transculturation of belief systems evident throughout the text. Annual feasts for the ancestors are organised and performed with due diligence and the Easter church service and communal dinner afterwards are especially important occasions.

Contamination or Transculturation? Vegetarianism as Metaphor for Transformation

By Easter, the grapevine of information between city and village has spread the news that KK is not only in a relationship with a white woman, but that "the woman is pulling him by the nose and has influenced him to abstain from eating meat" (p. 143). Katryn van der Merwe is a vegetarian, but not affiliated to any religious group. A book she has lent KK entitled *The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking* is espied by one of his relatives, setting in motion a farcical entanglement of spiritual discussion which echoes the fears of cultural degradation encountered in the Ngũgĩ work. The village priest, Pastor Mateu, is informed of KK's situation:

"Yes, Moruti! The woman is a member of the church of the Chinese What do they call it? Hare-Kristo?"

"It must be Hare Krishna. I read about it when I studied Comparative Religions. *Eeya!* Is he involved with Hare Krishna? I must speak to him."

(Motana 2010: 143)

The irony that Christianity is as exotic to the Bapedi people as "Hare Krishna" could possibly be is lost on Pastor Mateu. When he later visits KK and his family, the textual imagery is woven with motifs of religion, food, the body, books and liberation, providing the reader with a rich collage of the representation of transculturation. Pastor Mateu is pampered with food at every home he visits. On this occasion "brown-fried half-chicken ... served with custard and jelly and tea with six jumbo muffins" (p. 144) has the

pastor being led to KK’s room exploring “his overloaded stomach with his left hand, clutching the pitch-black hardcover Sepedi bible with his right hand” (p. 144).

By contrast, KK, a man in the process of transformation, has “lost a few kilos” (p. 144) since becoming a vegetarian, but the pastor is not impressed and “exuding ecclesiastical authority” (p. 144) proffers this advice:

“Let me tell the truth in front of God, being a vegetarian doesn’t suit you. ... Look at yourself in the mirror. You’ve lost a lot of weight You don’t look prosperous, like a well-paid professional As a shepherd of God’s flock I can tell you straight, you really don’t look well.”

(Motana 2010: 146)

This “Christian” assessment of KK’s new lifestyle is cloaked in a roguish humour, a transformational mode suited to the negotiations between text and reader, in relation to the contradictions inherent in liberation-era South African experience. The text can be read as transformative and redemptive in that the novel transcends the seriousness of “it all”. Ashraf Jamal critiques South African literature for its “facile love-affair with seriousness ... which stems not from the moralism that distinguished the classic realist text of the nineteenth century; rather it stems from the disjunctive and traumatised seriousness of high modernism” (Jamal 2010: 16). Jamal adds that the core of South African literature “remains writing dominated by the ideational – by the *idea* of justness, the *idea* of redemption” (p. 17; italics in original). One could argue that literature should be less passive and more engaged with the practicalities of social transformation.

The concerns regarding cultural degradation, so tragically expressed by the Kiama, the council of elders in *The River Between*, are reimagined in the *Son-In-Law of the Boere* text. Moswane, at one time KK’s fellow herd boy, asks KK on Easter Monday:

“Roto, I hear that you are in love with a white woman And that the woman has stopped you from eating meat. Now what will you slaughter for our ancestors? Will you kill a cabbage?” Moswane quaked with laughter.

(Monata 2010: 150)

It is a delicately balanced piece of text which raises difficult questions regarding postcolonial and post-apartheid identities and the tensions set between oppositional belief systems and the presentation of an ethics for critically reading cultural practice. In order to overcome the “literary kwashiorkor” at the centre of this essay’s concerns, teachers, as metonymically represented by Waiyaki and Kinuthia in *The River Between* and KK and Makompo in *Son-In-Law of the Boere*, need to develop their students’ critical literacies by reading and debating literary (and other media) texts. Yes, cultural initiation rituals do fulfil significant functions in

the conception of personhood and self-knowledge, as Mkhize asserts: “initiation represents a process by which people discover themselves (who they are) through others and their communities” (Mkhize 2004: 78). This process represents “a slow transformation of the individual, a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority” (Zahan 1979 quoted in Mkhize 2004: 78), which entails a journey toward self-knowledge. However, when we critically read texts (such as *The River Between*) from the vantage point of a society in which gender equality, social justice and human rights are constitutionally protected, Muthoni’s clitoridectomy is to be viewed in a new light. Likewise the circumcision of young males in the traditional Xhosa rite of manhood in *A Man Who Is Not a Man* (Mgqolozana 2009) and the slaughtering of cattle and goats to appease the ancestors in other texts (Motana 2010). There is a need to read and research with what Mkhize terms “a vigilance regarding oppressive ritual practices” (2004: 78). If one of literature’s main functions is to facilitate enquiry into the human condition, I would argue that an ethical reading of South African texts requires a conceptualisation of “personhood” in terms of a process of “becoming” which in turn entails liminality and border crossings as modes of transculturation. Our main protagonist, KK, in *Son-In-Law of the Boere* is experiencing a multi-sited transfiguration of personhood; his becoming a man, the emergence of his adult masculinity, requires him to journey along several psychosocial paths simultaneously. He needs to play the role of the hero, the champion of African literature as the translation of his name suggests: “behold the champion entering” (Motana 2010: 261). He also needs to assume the role of the teacher connecting him to his intertextual nickname Waiyaki, better known to the Kikuyu people in *The River Between* as “The Teacher”, a man who could bring them “wisdom and strength, giving (them) new life” (Ngũgĩ 1965: 91). Perhaps the most important role for KK, in the context of transcending the limitations of the past, is for him to become the translator. Here I am following Stephen Gray’s idea that cultural translation “is more than the technical transposition of a work across from one language to another. It is an act of unblocking channels of communication to insist on the reciprocity of human feelings ... the arrangement of the work foregrounds translation itself as a major, life-sustaining activity” (Gray quoted in Attwell & Attridge 2012: 7).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as referent to African literary history is conjoined to vegetarianism as metaphor for transformation in Motana’s novel. Returning to the Easter visit by Pastor Mateu to KK’s home, the enmeshment of religion (by default as “vegetarian” and “Hare Krishna” have been conflated), literature and ideology is revealed in the following passage:

The pastor’s eye was drawn to a book in front of KK. He wondered if it was a book about Hare Krishna. “What are you reading?” asked the curious priest.

“African literature,” answered KK.

“What is the title?”

“*Africa’s Cultural Revolution*”

“Who’s the author?”

“Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o”

Pastor Mateu inspected the book and flipped over a few pages. He looked KK in the eye. “Be careful Mr Mashoboleng,” he said, “This kind of book can contaminate you.”

KK grinned. Pastor Mateu added “Maybe it has already contaminated you?”

KK smiled and chuckled. “I can’t be contaminated, Pastor Mateu!”

(Motana 2010: 144-145)

The reasons for KK’s confidence in reassuring Pastor Mateu that he is immune to contamination are twofold. Firstly, in subconsciously assuming the roles of hero, teacher and translator, KK is well into his journey, his movement toward self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, as Mkhize argues, “does not result from the maturation of internally held principles ... [but] moves from the direction of the social environment (social relationships and practices) to the internal world of the individual” (Mkize 2004: 78). KK has been awarded for his library endeavours, facilitating the acquisition of African literary works and encouraging students to overcome their “literary kwashiorkor” by reading African literature. Following his award, the teacher returns to school a hero (Motana 2010: 107).

The second reason why KK is able to smile at Pastor Mateu and state “I can’t be contaminated” (p. 145) is his resistance to the fetishisation of difference, in transculturation terms a border crosser, which he achieves through his role of translator. Contamination for the Kiama elders in *The River Between* is constructed in terms of the purity or impurity of the Kikuyu tribe, and is seen as any challenge to the ontological foundations of the group. The strength of the community lies in the ancient rites of passage through the processes of being, believing and becoming. The arrival of the white Christian missionaries in the geographical space of the community, who bring with them a different ontology and sources of power and magic, is seen not only as an external threat, but through the conversion of other neighbouring Africans, as a potential poison to the internal philosophy of Kikuyu personhood (Ngũgĩ 1965: 109). However, KK in the *Son-In-Law of the Boere* narrative has read *The River Between* and can translate Pastor Mateu’s use of the term “contaminate” into its various connotations according to context. Firstly, KK would understand the irony of Pastor Mateu using the term in the first place. Pastor Mateu is, as an African Christian with “ecclesiastical authority” (p. 144), the intertextual equivalent of Joshua in *The River Between*, whose adoption of the “white man’s religion” and efforts to eradicate tribal practices such as female “circumcision” have made him the “enemy of the people” (Ngũgĩ 1965: 143), and while this may have destabilised Pastor Mateu’s own standing in an earlier

colonial period, the Mashobolengs and the other “five-per centers” have reconciled their double-barrelled Christian status in a postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa, thus explaining KK’s perceived immunity to contamination. Secondly, KK as translator is able to locate the syncretic connotation of the term, which is cleansed of its poisonous and polluting properties. Contamination, in the negative sense of anger, fear and illness, can be transcended through a new translation, which foregrounds trans-lingual and transcultural elements of compassion, healing and communality. Helize van Vuuren defines the transformation in Antjie Krog’s poetry in similar terms (in Chapman & Lenta 2011: 231).

KK’s so-called “contamination” in the narrative is the result of his relationship with his white female colleague Katryn van der Merwe. Katryn introduces KK to the very “un-African” (Motana 2010: 69) vegetarian diet, and his guided experimentation takes on the appearance of an initiation ritual into a new phase of life. KK’s choice in the matter is never forced, but through gentle persuasive techniques of providing KK with meaningful literature on vegetarianism and preparing delicious meals for him, Katryn encourages KK to take up the challenge. KK’s “giving up” meat-eating is reciprocated by Katryn’s “giving up” smoking, and her learning the Sepedi language. This indicates a form of blending of binary components in what Laura Wright terms “the search for the third place of identification”, which is ultimately achieved through a “symbiotic arrangement dependent on a shared language and diet” (2010: 69).

Wright has delineated a substantive theory for the study of vegetarianism in literary texts which collates her own points and counterpoints with those of other theorists such as Carol J. Adams (1996) and Deane Curtin (2005). In terms of the vegetarian theoretical framework presented by Wright (2010: 57-62), the *Son-In-Law of the Boere* text provides the reader with the narrative material to interrogate seven main issues: vegetarianism as an un-African practice (Motana 2010: 69); the sacrificial slaughter of animals as a culturally significant ritual practice (p. 174); vegetarianism and personal health (pp. 104-105); compassion for animals (pp. 176-177); the intervention of Western animal rights groups in local indigenous affairs (pp. 174-175, pp. 180-181); the possibilities for a “contextual moral vegetarianism” model of cultural interpretation (p. 90); and the patriarchy of meat-eating (pp. 38-39).

Vegetarianism as a lifestyle can be read as an extended metaphor for personal and societal transformation in the text. This is exemplified by the metamorphosis of KK as he migrates in the narrative between being the meat-eating rural “Africanist” (p. 21) the reader is first introduced to, and the urban award-winning educator who accepts that being a vegetarian is a matter of personal choice. Furthermore KK is able to make such a choice, and accept that for many people the slaughtering of animals is a significant cultural practice connected to indigenous belief systems. KK’s physical and psychic journeys circulate between village and city. KK is the border crosser

of the liminal space between past and present, the here and there, becoming in the process both the self and the other (Hicks 1991; Nyman 2009).

Conclusion

The text reveals the ideal occasion which will lead to the consummation of the passion which has been building up between Katryn and KK. KK is nominated for a school libraries' award; the event is to take place at the “Sandton City Conference Centre” and Katryn makes the proposal, “Why can't I meet you there on Friday at the vegetarian restaurant, next to the bookshop? From there we can drive to my flat” (p. 93). Libraries, vegetarianism and a bookshop: the tripartite alliance of literature, repositories of knowledge, and the path to compassion converge, from which point the text soon leads the reader into the contact zone of a responsible (read condom-use), yet highly charged, sexual encounter, described in language which during apartheid would have been banned (pp. 96-97). KK's symbolic role of translator and the transformative significance of Katryn's formal studying of the Sepedi language have been discussed; it is, however, literally from one mouth to another that cultural transmission from the “Professor of Kissology” (p. 84), aka “Professor of Sexology” (p. 91) to the “settler girl” takes place. This transculturation occurs, as Katryn informs us, because KK “spat the language” into her mouth (p. 99).

*Acknowledgement

This research was supported in part by a grant from the National Research Foundation. The research was supervised by Professor Cheryl Stobie at the University of KwaZulu-Natal during the author's doctoral studies.

References

- Adams, Carol J.
1996 *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Archibald, Priscilla
2007 Urban Transculturations. *Social Text* 25(4): 91-113.
- Arnedo-Gómez, Miguel
2008 Notes on the Evaluation of Angel Rama's Concept of Narrative Transculturation and Fernando Ortiz's Definition of the Term “Transculturation”. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia* 17(2): 185-202. Online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569320802228039.pdf>.
2 November 2012.

- Attwell, David
2005 *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Attwell, David & Attridge, Derek (eds)
2012 *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi
1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge
- Chapman, Michael
2006 *Art Talk, Politics Talk*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Chapman, Michael & Lenta, Margaret
2011 *SA LIT: Beyond 2000*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John L.
2008 Faith. In: Shepherd, Nick & Robins, Steven (eds) *New South African Keywords*. Johannesburg: Jacana; Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 91-103.
- Curtin, Deane
2005 *Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Davis, Geoffrey V.
2003 *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and beyond in South African Literature*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Hicks, Emily D.
1991 *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jamal, Ashraf
2010 Bullet through the Church: South African Literature and the Future-Anterior. *English Studies in Africa* 53(1): 11-20. Online: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2010.488332.pdf>>. 17 April 2012.
- Jansen, Jonathan
2011 *We Need To Talk*. Northcliff: Bookstorm & Northlands: Pan Macmillan.
- Lovesey, Oliver
2002 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Post-Nation: The Cultural Geographies of Colonial, Neo-Colonial, and Post-National Space. *Modern Fiction Studies* 48(1): 139-168. Online: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v048/48.1lovesey.pdf>. 2 November 2012.
- Mgqolozana, Thando
2009 *A Man Who Is Not A Man*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mkhize, Nhlanhla
2004 Dialogism and African Conceptions of the Self. In: Hook, Derek (ed.) *Critical Psychology*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, pp. 53-83.

- Morris, Rosalind C.
2010 Style, Tsotsi-style, and Tsotsitaal: The Histories, Aesthetics and Politics of a South African Figure. *Social Text* 28(2): 85-112.
- Motana, Nape 'a
2007 *Fanie Fourie's Lobola*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
2010 *Son-In-Law of the Boere*. Cape Town: Umuzi.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo
1965 *The River Between*. London: Heinemann African Writers Series.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo & Rao, Venkat
1999 A Conversation with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Research in African Literatures* 30(1): 162-168. Online: <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/v030/30.1rao.pdf>>. 29 November 2012.
- Nyman, Jopi (ed.)
2009 *Post-National Enquiries: Essays on Ethnic and Racial Border Crossings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Pratt, Mary Louise
1992 *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Rama, Angel
1997 Processes of Transculturation in Latin American Narrative. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia* 6(2): 155-171. Online: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569329709361909.pdf>>. 29 November 2012.
- Rogers, Richard A.
2006 From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualisation of Cultural Appropriation. *Communication Theory* 16: pp.474-503.
- Themba, Can
1972 *The Will To Die*. Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Philip.
1985 *The World of Can Themba*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
2006 *Requiem for Sophiatown*. London: Penguin.
- West-Durán, Alan
2005 Nancy Morejón: Transculturation, Translation and the Poetics of the Caribbean. *Callaloo* 28(4): 967-976. Online: <<http://www.jstor.org.dutlib.dut.ac.za:2048/stable/3805572.pdf>>. 31 March 2013.
- Wright, Laura
2010 *Wilderness into Civilised Shapes: Reading the Postcolonial Environment*. Athens & London: University of Georgia Press.

Dave Nel
Durban University of Technology
daven@dut.ac.za