

Reclaiming Masculinities: Migrant Realism in Bheki Maseko's Stories¹

Sope Maithufi

Summary

"[L]ike other phenomena of spiritual culture ... [that] preserve for a long time old forms under new conditions', a Bheki Maseko story reads like "folklore" (Propp 1984: 13). This article considers the significance of storytelling in mediating the de-personalisation that is caused by migrancy in Maseko's *Mamlambo and Other Stories* (1991). The first section considers the interrelatedness between the aesthetic strategies deployed in the stories and their ability to conjure up possibilities of wholeness. Proposing that this narrative style is "migrant realism", the discussion shows that integral to Maseko's stories are the representations of how textures of everyday life are reutilised in projects that critically imagine completeness and its possible reinsertion into the forms of bondedness such as the family. The family is presented as severely affected by apartheid's migrant labour policies. It is interesting to observe that those stories in which Maseko deploys *skaz*,² narrators strongly emphasise the performance of a sense of belonging. The narrators deploy fantasy since, according to Jacqueline Rose, it provides "grounds for licence and pleasure" (quoted in Peterson 2003: 197) allowing the storytellers to regale their mine migrant colleagues with anecdotes of how black men survive repressive apartheid contexts. These "aggregate[s]" and "attribution[s]", according to Ong, are typical of the expressions and values that recur in oral narratives that seek to represent experience (1982: 3839). The second part of the discussion examines five stories from *Mamlambo and Other Stories*.

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1. I would like to thank Bhekizizwe Peterson and Jane Starfield for their constructive feedbacks.
 2. Following Boris Eichenbaum who used the concept of the *skaz* to describe the art the orientation of which is towards the oral form, Mikhail Bakhtin distinguished between two forms of *skaz*. The first, "simple *skaz*", matches Eichenbaum's seemingly "indefinite *skaz*" while, integral to the second, "parodistic *skaz*", is the narrator who foregrounds complexities the essence of which introduces a dialogical interplay with the authorial narrative. The article is concerned exclusively with the "parodistic *skaz*" in Maseko's fiction. For a comprehensive discussion of the *skaz*, see MacKenzie 1993: 1-4

Opsomming

“[[S]oos ander verskyningsvorme van spirituele kultuur [... wat] ou vorme vir 'n lang tyd onder nuwe omstandighede bewaar”, lees 'n storie deur Bheki Maseko soos “folklore” (Propp 1984: 13). Hierdie artikel ondersoek die betekenis van storievertelling in die bemiddeling van depersonalisering vanweë trekarbeid, soos beskryf in *Mamlambo and Other Stories* deur Maseko (1991). Die eerste deel ondersoek die onderlinge verhouding tussen die estetiese strategieë wat in die stories ontplooi word en hulle vermoë om moontlikhede vir heelheid op te roep. Die artikel toon aan dat die voorstelling van hoe teksture uit die alledaagse lewe heraangewend word in projekte wat op 'n kritiese wyse heelheid en die moontlike herinstelling daarvan in bindingsvorme soos die gesin verbeeld 'n kernaspek van Maseko se stories is. Die gesin word voorgestel as ernstig beïnvloed deur die apartheidsbestel se trekwerkersbeleid. Dit is interessant om daarop te let dat dié stories waarin Maseko skaz gebruik, die vertellers die vervulling van 'n sin van êrens behoort sterk benadruk. Die vertellers gebruik fantasie aangesien dit, volgens Jacqueline Rose (aangehaal in Peterson 2003: 197, “[rede tot vergunning en plesier]” verskaf, wat die storievertellers in staat stel om hul trekwerkerkollegas op die myne te vergas op anekdotes oor hoe swart mans onderdrukkende apartheidskontekste oorleef. Hierdie “[aggregaat/[aggregate]]” en “[kenmerk[e]]” is, volgens Ong (1982: 38-39), tiperend van die uitdrukkings en waardes wat by herhaling voorkom in orale narratiewe wat ervaring(e) wil uitbeeld. Die tweede deel van die artikel ontleed vyf stories uit *Mamlambo and Other Stories*.

The Quotidian and Alternative Alterities

The argument is that narration in Maseko's fiction portrays authority through images that depict masculinity critically and in ways that surpass the gendered and racial sites within which it is valorised. The extent to which this sense of conflicted acquiescence is recognised in the scholarship on Maseko is considerable. For instance, Njabulo Ndebele ([1991]2006: 46) applauds Maseko's experimentation with folklore and the textures of everyday life that are evocative of the “ordinary”. For Ndebele, this kind of storytelling has made a “break with th[e] tradition of spectacle” (p. 42) and the simplistic reproduction of the antinomies of apartheid, and instead, depicts people who deal with oppression in quotidian ways that privilege “interiority” (p. 23). These individuals create “a semblance[s] of [alternative] meaning[s]” (p. 9) out of a context the data of which overdetermine black Africans in racially demeaning and sometimes emasculating tones. He traces this form of art to the tradition of oral storytelling: “the story as embodying not revealed or confirmed knowledge, but the story as exploration, revealing both the frustrations and pleasures of social ambiguity” and showing the audience how “to arrive not so much at answers as at a knowledge of how to arrive at answers” (in Maseko 1991: 10).

Released via the imagination from the ubiquity of depersonalisation, the subjects are thus free to construct themselves in alternative terms. Of significance is the leitmotif in which the title story's narrator tells the

narrative of a Johannesburg male migrant who is allegedly hoodwinked through magic into marriage by a woman ostensibly desperate for a long-lasting relationship and apparently for a provincial life in his native country in Malawi. As it is the case in this story but also in “The Night of the Long Knives” and in “A Two-Day Adventure”, all discussed in the second part of the article, each migrant *skaz* narrative tends to also define femininities in gendered and heteronormative tones.

Mike Kirkwood’s reading of Maseko also touches on the important ways in which narration, orality and popular discourses allow audiences to develop alternative alterities. According to Kirkwood (1987: 657), Maseko’s narrative style is reminiscent of the late 1980s “popular culture [of] South Africa”, which allowed the re-emergence of “older cultural forms such as story-telling ... a means of transferring personal experience and enriching the collective bond of community” (1987: 659). Kirkwood also notes that popular culture also identified other “social agents” who defined themselves via the everyday practices (p. 669) that “forg[e] new continuities with past epochs of cultural resistance” (p. 657). Invoking Wole Soyinka, Ndebele ([1991]2006: 51) sees these connections as akin to engaging in mythopoesis when he says that Maseko uses “the rational and non-rational [elements in order to] constitute the canvass of completeness”, “a single sphere of reality”, or “the living continuity between the past and the present”.

Therefore, Maseko’s engagement with popular forms of narration and culture and – as will be shown – with gender, indicates that discursiveness is central to a Maseko story. In “Mamlambo”, for instance, the omniscient narrator tells an anecdote of how a male migrant in Johannesburg happily returns home to Malawi with his fiancée after she had allegedly used magic to keep him in a relationship with her. The trope of the odyssey also informs “A Two-Day Adventure”, the story in which the fictional storyteller narrates a biography of his ex-colleague who goes back home after incarceration in a mental asylum. The success of the odyssey as well as therapy is attributed to the fact that the traveller derives a negative form of motivation from the assessment made of him on the insensitive grapevine – that migrancy activates his schizophrenia. Also in “The Darkest Hour of Our Age”, a black male migrant in a Johannesburg mine hostel imagines himself victorious in a traditional Zulu stick-fighting contest over an arrogant policeman who enforces the Group Areas Act.³ In contrast, “Some Breeders for Sure” does not articulate masculinity via the theme of homecoming. Instead, the black male body is shown fatally succumbing to a white racist assault shortly before the victim could return home and learn that he has impregnated his

3. The Act was passed in 1950 by the National Party government of Dr D.F. Malan (elected 1948) and greatly helped to strengthen the existing legal provisions on territorial segregation. It was repealed in 1991, a year after the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC).

wife. The conditional affirmation of male authority as a site of anti-apartheid resistance is further elaborated in “The Night of the Long Knives” through social dialogues and conversations.

In all these stories, narration is intended to avert a “dilemma of discontinuities” or a crisis of alienation that, according to Chabani N. Manganyi (1981: 128), manifests itself even in the migrant’s “dress” of “a motley patchwork of colour”. The oral storytelling context, the image of victory over depersonalisation, and of the trope of the Odysseus figure can thus be considered as “aggregates” and “attributions” that Maseko uses to negotiate the perils and joys of a migrant existence. Given this “enfold[ing of] fragments of the past”, a Maseko story answers to “the pressures of a changing climate” (Hofmeyr 1993: ix). Also, by privileging discursiveness, a Maseko tale is analogous to being devious: “it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (de Certeau 1984: xii). In this sense, Maseko’s alienated protagonists place themselves ingeniously into situations of privilege despite the oppressive and exploitative contexts in which they find themselves. Maseko’s heroes, therefore, suggest through their agency and resilience, that resistance should not be understood according to the dichotomies of power/powerlessness, sanity/insanity, innocence/experience, or centre/margin, because resistance is

necessarily ... caught up in the very metaphysical categories it hopes finally to abolish; and any such movement will demand a difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible double optic, at once fighting on a terrain already mapped out by its antagonists and seeking even now to prefigure within that mundane strategy styles of being and identity for which we have as yet no proper names.

(Eagleton 1990: 24)

“Mamlambo” (Maseko 1991)

The opening paragraph of the title story, “Mamlambo”, forcefully dramatises the “double optic” or paradox in the notion of resistance that Eagleton emphasises in the previous quotation and the preceding emphasis on discursiveness.

Mamlambo is a kind of snake that brings fortune to anyone who accommodates it. One’s money or livestock multiplies incredibly. This snake is available from traditional doctors who provide instructions regarding its exploitation. Certain necessities are to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. Sometimes you may have to sacrifice your own children, or go without a car or clothes. It all depends on the instructions of the doctor concerned

(Maseko 1991: 133)

In this story, the protagonist, Sophie Zikode, is battling to keep a boyfriend and so decides after finding one, Jonas, to consult Baba Majola. He offers her a “sticky concoction” and instructs her to “rub her whole body with it before her boyfriend call[s] on her”, and “to put [this concoction] under her pillow when they [sleep] together” (p. 135). Later that night, Jonas “[is] awakened by something peculiar”, and both are shocked to discover a snake “under the pillow” (p. 135). Having accepted responsibility for this embarrassment, and after confessing to her boyfriend that she intended to keep him forever in love with her, they decide to consult a diviner. After identifying this snake as *mamlambo*, the seer instructs her to dispose of it to any naive or innocent person. It is mere coincidence and also, therefore, “poetic justice” according to Kirkwood (1987: 668), that she passes the serpent on to her ex-boyfriend’s mother. When the story concludes, Sophie is on her way to Malawi with Jonas (p. 142) after getting rid of *mamlambo*. Presumably, her experimentation enabled her to achieve her goal. At first glance, the theme of self-reclamation via narration does not seem to be apparent in this brief summary of “Mamlambo”.

Consistent with this story, and indeed with the focus on masculinities in all the stories, the excerpt quoted above shows storytelling covertly as restorative in orientation by virtue of being a reason for social gatherings, and for crystallising the different audiences’ desires. This significance is evident in the details about the different ways in which people perform various ritual sacrifices whether to invoke emancipation or redeploy the regular (or established) rites dealing with a range of adversities. In this oral storytelling tradition, textual material is continually altered in the sense that recalls Ndebele’s the “ordinary”. Integral to this idea is discursiveness and popular intellectualising, key elements that a Maseko narrator uses to express fantasy. This obviousness is emphatic in the fact that the tale is told by a “homodiegetic narrator”, that is, one who exists within the cultural setting that the story sketches (Bal 1991: 89). The existence of the interlocutors, suggested in “you”, strengthens the credibility of the life that the story portrays. Hence, the storyteller remarks that the myth of *mamlambo* is accessible through dialogue and conversations as well as the oral milieu the narrator refers to in the time-honoured phrases “Some say”, “It is said” (p. 133). In other words, a retelling of a well-known legend is suggestive of a discursive redrawing of the migrant and rural spaces. The critical purpose of this *re-presentation* is to alleviate the narrator’s alienation that results from knowing that migrancy threatens his conception of masculinities and femininities.

For instance, the narrator’s voice is a mere conduit for an intention that becomes apparent in a strategy that is reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “parodic stylization” (1981: 312). From this perspective, gender is constructed in line with a sense of moral rectitude which the black (neo-) traditional patriarchal order valorises and from which difference is sought. It

seems that the migrant *skaz* in this story has turned to the ingenuity that he assumes to be pervasive in a black woman who, he fancies, will always keep the home fires burning and, by implication, also affirm what he regards as his legitimacy as the family head. This is because he implicitly sees her innocence as ethically convenient (if not superior), that is, compared to the weight of experience that his departure from home has engendered in him. Whether in the rural outpost or in the formal modern industry, the male migrant seems to reason that a black woman is likely to manoeuvre the social practices ingeniously to define a more healthy self. In this enterprise, he projects his ideal of a nuclear family through what he sees, indirectly, as her willingness to fight and to keep her family intact. This suggests that “the figure of woman is both the necessary object of his desire ... and the necessary object that disguises – masks – the real object of that desire, the utopic [family] defined by the absence of any sexual ... difference” (Counihan 2007: 164).

“The Darkest Hour of Our Age” (Maseko 1991)

While the reclamation of masculinity in “The Darkest Hour of Our Age” also echoes a gendered form of socialisation, the nature of this self-assertion is not pursued through an imagined voice of a woman, as is the case in “Mamlambo” (Maseko 1991). Perhaps this is why, in contrast to “Mamlambo”, the authority that “The Darkest Hour of Our Age” envisages is explicitly shown to be brazen despite being at the same time cautiously affirmed as a dialectical response to the nature of apartheid violence that is represented as emasculating. But first, a summary of this story is necessary. When “The Darkest Hour of Our Age” begins, the first-person narrator introduces the *skaz* storyteller as Bafana Nkhonza, “a ... hostel dweller from Block 8” (p. 120) who tells a story to his fellow hostel occupants. Prior to Bafana’s narration, these hostel dwellers are described as a horde of men severed from their traditional background because they are “doing their [own] washing, or preparing their breakfast, while others are already drunk, having started on the bottle since the early hours of the morning” (p. 119). It is suggested that the state of being inebriated in “the early hours of the morning” as well as cooking and doing laundry are inconsistent with the migrant’s sense of how he sees/wants to see himself. Also, according to the first-person narrator, the hostel context intensifies this humiliation by accommodating in each house “sixteen men”, and denying them privacy so that they “strip in full view” (p. 119) of one another.⁴

4. The reader is invited to compare Maseko’s depiction of the depersonalising circumstances of the hostel with Mamphela Ramphela’s analysis of the ideological constructedness of hostel life and relationships (1993: 1-14).

It is therefore not coincidental that, when the story opens, a group of migrants argue about the value of carrying an “ID” or identity document (p. 119). This debate is then interrupted by Bafana who proceeds to tell of his encounter with the apartheid police in their violent enforcement of the “pass system”. None of the inmates interrupts him throughout his narration as he details a typical biography of a black man who, at the age of 18, drops out of high school and swells the ranks of the exploited black labourers in the metropolitan areas of Johannesburg or other major city centres. When the story closes, Bafana responds with glee to his audience’s inquiry of the outcome of his brush with the law by saying “[H]ere I am, alive and kicking” (p. 130).

Three key episodes in this story foreground masculinity as “dynamic”, “relational and conditional” (Newell 2009: 247). The first is an incident where Bafana consents to his father’s plea to enter the police van to be arrested for not having permission to be in a designated area in terms of the Pass Laws (Maseko 1991: 123).⁵ The second event is a sequel to an act of bullying and aggression in prison by a gang leader whom Bafana describes as a “small [arrogant] fellow who went around the cells looking at us as if we were some cheap material” (p. 124). After being bailed out by his father for contravening the Group Areas Act,⁶ and once “[o]utside prison”, Bafana bursts into tears on “thinking of what I could’ve done to [this fellow inmate] if I could’ve laid my hands on him” (p. 125). The third occurrence concerns Bafana’s encounter with a person whom Bafana describes as an “arrogant white boy” who “must’ve grown up with girls or behind his mother’s apron” and threatened to “send [Bafana] back to the homelands” if he did not “find work in three days” (p. 127). In Bafana’s view, the official “should still have been at school”. Bafana further notes that he wished they were “back at Inkandla where a boy could challenge any other boy to a two-stick fight to settle a score”, and vows that he “would’ve taught [the white boy] not to take other people for his grandmother ... [by] knocking the bad blood out of his silly head and taught him respect!” (p. 127). The weaving together of the

5. “While Pass Laws had been enacted long before 1910, those that affected the urban proletariat were introduced in 1923 and were designed to curtail the movement of people classified as non-white to and from those areas that the apartheid government had declared ‘white’. In terms of these laws, ‘non-white’ people were required to carry ‘Reference’ or ‘Pass Books’ showing that such bearers were permitted to be at the ‘white’ areas. These Laws were repealed in 1986 shortly before the official dawn of non-racial democracy” (Davenport 1991: 441-442).

6. According to John Pobee (2001: xi), African Initiated Christianity grew out of “one style of African theology ... formed in the relevance to the felt needs and questionings of [African black] people” to deploy Christianity for Black Consciousness- and Pan-African ideals.

three incidents serves to highlight the inequities of the apartheid system which effectively emasculated otherwise virile young black men. In all three, the challenge to the Afrikaner nationalist hegemony is, at once, retrospective, contingent and imagined.

Bafana fully understands the manifestation of his dehumanisation as a migrant, and that brute force, albeit brazen, is the only fitting response to being bullied. This awareness is implicit when he sheds tears on contemplating what he would have done had he pounced on the arrogant fellow prisoner (p. 125). The irony in his narration is that he indirectly invites his audience to appreciate the contradictions involved in negotiating apartheid more fully. For instance, his allusion to stick fighting constitutes a paradox that he implicitly feels he must insist on, because it helps him to visualise a nuanced portrait of the terms that spell out his sense of depersonalisation and also deliverance. His father (and, by extension, all black father figures as well as the other male migrants) enters the contest through Bafana's reconceptualising of the black family. In contrast with the nakedness to which the hostel environment reduces them (p. 119), the migrants who are listening to Bafana's story find an alternative existence through his biography of chivalry. However, this invocation ironically brings into sharp relief the intellectual deficiency of the sense of power that Bafana mobilises. In the place of aggression, he thus develops a self-critical and therapeutic orientation where, for example, he experiences catharsis at the thought of his ability to express his justifiable outrage through an imaginary meting out of grievous bodily harm.

“Some Breeders for Sure” (Maseko 1991)

Of all the stories in Maseko's *Mamlambo and Other Stories*, “Some Breeders for Sure” is the only one that portrays masculinity in terms of the configuration of the body, locating and depicting it as irreducible within the history of apartheid brutality. In this story, the narrator tells an anecdote of how Witbooi, a black migrant on a visit from Venda (p. 89), dies after an assault at the hands of white racial supremacists. Witbooi declined to confess to alleged stock theft and he refused to fight back in defence of himself. Despite the representation of the body via the “tradition of spectacle” (Ndebele 2006: 42), the story's allusion to how Jesus Christ defeated His persecutors enunciates the “ordinary”. The evocation of the parallels between Witbooi and Jesus is consistent with Mbembe's explanation that the ability of Christ to withstand “pain, suffering and unhappiness” suggests “ecstasy in suffering” (2001: 212). Mbembe elaborates that this “ecstasy” “free[s] the subject from various kinds of inhibition”, and “allow[s] him/her to achieve ecstasy inachievable under ordinary conditions” (2001: 212). The ratification of the body in this way

also resonates with the Africa Initiated Christians' belief in Christ's ability to defeat evil through anathema. The body in this case is understood as a metaphor for the fundamental impurity that the worshippers perceive to be out of kilter with the mind which they sometimes use as a synonym for the spirit (Maithufi 2004: 139-140). In contrast to the quest for authority evident in the narrative voices of "Mamlambo" and "The Darkest Hour of Our Age", "Some Breeders for Sure" suggests an image of masculinity that is mytho-poetic.

When this story opens, the omniscient narrator presents Koornhof, apparently a man who espouses the ideals of some Afrikaner rightwing group, who violently interrupts "Piet and Witbooi, his brother-in-law" while they are having a "contented chat over a calabash of sorghum beer" in "Piet's shack" (p. 83). This disruption of a moment of storytelling appears to be a metaphor for the larger societal demolition of occasions where black people can perform fantasies of power. Furthermore, the fictional audiences to whom the *skaz* storyteller narrates implicitly understand brutality in religious terms, that is, as a reminder of racial violence, the terror of which the narrator lessens through storytelling.

According to the narrator, Koornhof attributed the disappearance of his goats to Witbooi as soon as he came to Koornhof's notice. On the basis of this allegation, Koornhof enlisted the help of one Willem, ostensibly another racist Afrikaner, and together they beat Witbooi until he died. Throughout the physical attack, Witbooi professed his innocence in vain and not once did he retaliate. When the story concludes, Piet, armed with a shotgun, waylays Koornhof and kills him. In what is evidently a postscript according to which the story is to be interpreted, the narrator suddenly introduces dramatic irony. He remarks that Witbooi's pregnant wife "[s]omewhere in a rural village of Venda" is "anxiously awaiting the return of her husband [the] next weekend". Not knowing that he is dead, she is anticipating that "the baby would be born" when he comes home at the end of the month (p. 89).

Through the paradoxes in the conclusion, Maseko undermines the perspective that appears to make the emasculated black migrant reclaim authority in non-reflexive terms. This is because the manner in which Witbooi is portrayed implies that Maseko does not insist on a masculine identity in narrow-minded terms. Such insularity might have been suggested had Maseko portrayed Witbooi as believing that his virility – evident in the fact that his wife is pregnant with his child – would have ratified him as a subject. Seen from this perspective, Witbooi might have claimed that his ability to impregnate (re)actualised the humanity that he had lost as a result of being attacked by Koornhof and Willem. It may also be concluded that Maseko depicts Witbooi's death in order to mock Koornhof's attempt to ratify his superiority complex. This critical representation of Koornhof is also made evident in Maseko's suggestion that Koornhof is merely a

sadistic character, more concerned with pursuing his racist agenda than with actually proving that Witbooi is a thief.

“A Two-Day Adventure” (Maseko 1991)

If masculinity is affirmed in “Some Breeders for Sure” via an Africa-initiated Christian allusion that foregrounds the black body as irreducible, another story, “A Two-Day Adventure”, explicitly explores how this form of authority is mediated through heteroglossia. Here, local imaginaries play a paramount role in emphasising the “porosity of discursive boundaries between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’” (Musila 2008: 37) – this time in regard to what constitutes sanity and madness. In this collection of short stories, “a Two-Day Adventure” is the only story that makes its central focus the way in which the black peasants and proletarian people draw on these seemingly diverse traditions to explain madness, provide therapy and also prepare for the (ethical) dilemmas that the improvised healing involves. Also, “A Two-Day Adventure” is the only story that does not depict black masculinity as a stable given. Instead, black masculinity is shown to be subject to psychological privation and, consequently, this authority’s form and power are bound to be negatively affected in contesting apartheid. Central to the story is a concern with a black migrant, Vuma, whose schizophrenia is aggravated by his experiences of repression and alienation. In Vuma’s understanding, apartheid modernity is “a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity” (Fanon 2001: 200). Vuma’s endeavour to find solace by relying on his sense of belonging to his nuclear family hence does not guarantee him success. This is because, as Fanon also observes, “colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Fanon 1967: 200).

But first, this is how the first-person storyteller of “A Two-Day Adventure”, the frame narrator who introduces the *skaz* in the form of Vuma’s “*Bildungsroman*”, opens up his biography:

Vuma and I had grown up together. He dropped out of school while we were still doing our primary education and went to try his luck in industry. He did not work for very long before he became mentally disturbed. Many believed that Vuma had been bewitched by people who were jealous because he had a steady job and wore expensive clothes.

Vuma’s problem was not a permanent one. Sometimes he became normal and went back to work. But no sooner had you grown used to his sanity than you would come across him in tattered clothes, his hair unkempt, mumbling away to himself.

Vuma lost his mind in autumn when the leaves fell from the trees. This meant that whoever had bewitched Vuma had used the power of leaves. And when trees shed their leaves in winter Vuma also shed his sanity.

(Maseko 1991: 103-104)

An erroneous inference can be drawn from the above quotation, in that the elements are conspiring with humans against the individual's health and bewildering the people as to what the appropriate choice of therapy is. Interestingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the mental problems that Vuma experiences may be present among people who live at comparable high altitudes. The suggestion is that common denominators such as the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine in the body fluids of the residents in question affect their emotions differently, that is, intensify either their happiness or their depression (Frith & Johnstone 2003: 84). This is why Vuma, in his "*Bildungsroman*" and as the *skaz* narrator, mentions that, during his relapses, his family takes him to Vendaland (Maseko 1991: 104) in the tropics and away from the relatively high altitude of his home in "Chiawelo in Soweto" (p. 115), Johannesburg. In other words, the story that he tells is representative of the histories and dilemmas of other migrants.

It appears that Vuma is expected to reutilise his physical and social ostracism – indeed, part and parcel of his culture's treatment of his order of schizophrenia – as a "heuristic device" (Appadurai 1996: 13) to rehabilitate himself into being "sane", fitting to be categorised as a legal persona and – ironically – subject to being discriminated against and exploited. Implicitly, it is known that he is not impaired, at least not in the classical grasp of mental derangement where the distressed person "los[es the] mind" as well as "those faculties that distinguish us as humans from other animals – the ability to think rationally, the ability to distinguish the true from the false ... right from wrong ... to share experiences – everything really that makes us ourselves" (Frith & Johnstone 2003: 146). This is why, in his narration of his "*Bildungsroman*", Vuma admits to his plight of suffering what his people term "mental illness" (p. 104) without being angry at this diagnosis. This is because his recovery depends, firstly, on his willingness to re-establish himself in line with what his people define as sanity. Secondly, he is also convinced that the appropriate therapy for him is a temporary confinement in Venda, the primary objective of which is to help him return and temporarily entrench himself in the black "here and now" (Eagleton 1990: 24).

There is evidence that suggests that Vuma relishes his seclusion in Venda. For instance, while in Venda, he observes that his sense of temporality and reality is distinctly different from the units of time and space known in the city that regulate migrancy in line with the seven-day week apartheid labour roster: "The place [Venda] was so quiet that one could not tell Sunday from Monday" (Maseko 1991: 104). His clear-headedness is further intimated in the way he portrays his reliance on the sound of the train – the quintessential

metaphor of the uprootedness and exploitation experienced under apartheid – to locate the railway station. This, paradoxically, prepares him for his eventual escape from the mental institution in Venda a day later (p. 105).

Vuma's migrant audience is not apprehensive of rejoining their nuclear families as, according to Vuma, the home is a site of stories, whose purpose is to reclaim sanity. In other words, he is grateful to the significance of kith and kin in redressing psychological imbalances, especially when he notes that the quality of the therapy that the family and social psychiatrist provides depends equally on a patient's blind appreciation of such interventions. Hence, he narrates his parents' sending him to Venda in a way that suggests that they know that "strange powers not held by any other may be attributed to the madman's speech; the power of uttering truth ... of seeing in all naïvety what the others'" wisdom cannot perceive (Foucault 1981: 53). Thus, after his mother asking him where he has come from when he arrives home unexpectedly and if he is "all right", Vuma observes that "[s]he embraced me for a long time. I felt her chest pulsating and knew that she was crying" (Maseko 1991: 116). Her anxiety is further expressed when she goes to "forewarn" (p. 116) her husband of their son's return. It seems she reasons that her son, who has arrived unexpectedly, is angry that his parents sent him to Venda, possibly against his wish. Indirectly, she therefore intends to prepare her husband to treat their son with diplomacy.

"The Night of the Long Knives" (Maseko 1991)

"The Night of the Long Knives" is another story that utilises popular lore to explore masculinity without valorising it in racial and gendered terms. This is a story about four women and a child involved in a confrontation with a group of black male "beheaders" (Maseko 1991: 50) who terrorise children and women while their fathers and husbands (respectively) are away on migrant labour contracts. It is said on the grapevine that the perpetrators "give these heads to ghosts who promise to give them [perpetrators] money in return". Also according to rumour, however, the "ghosts never give [the assailants] money but demand more heads" and as a result the beheaders "go on killing people" (p. 51). The storyteller convenes a multiple and divided audience by constructing the plot in a way that bears evidence to this audience's vocal disagreement as to the reality of ghosts, as to the relationship between a belief in ghosts and the possibility of its reality, and as to whether the act of beheading suggests people's covenant with ghosts (pp. 51-52). The narratorial intrusions resonate with the audience's intimate knowledge of the personality traits that are revealed about the beheaders. These interruptions also provide an index of how local belief is adapted in terms that reclaim masculinity without glorifying it as mere brute force.

For example, one of the perpetrators, Dambuza, conjures up deadly terror, because, as the narrator remarks, “if the victim knew Dambuza he wouldn’t have bothered crying his head off” (p. 47). Being aware of his/her audience’s familiarity with the popular construction of ogres or anti-human figures, the storyteller implicitly expects the listeners to enter the consciousness of the victim in question vicariously, and then act out an appropriate response. This rhetorical stance is also suggested in the narrator’s comment that “butchering a man was to Dambuza the same as slaughtering a goat” (p. 47). In all ritual sacrifices, human beings are not expected to feel sorry for the animal offering, but to be grateful that it is presumed to be accepting of its fate and role in the performance of the ritual. However, in this story, the audience of this story is expected to sympathise with the offering, that is, with the goat, rather than with the “beheaders”, whose cruelty is represented as being too excessive and gross to be propitiated. The shedding of blood is thus revealed to be a part of a male (and colonial) process of socialisation. It stands in contrast, in the second section of the story, where the omniscient narrator presents women in the story as the custodians of family and cultural values as well as the agents through which these standards are best negotiated and communicated.

The biography of one of the “beheaders”, Jan (nicknamed Slang, which is Afrikaans for snake, “because of his snakelike eyes” (p. 48)), provides insight into the way the story mediates the tropes of power that Maseko uses to imagine a sense of victory over migrancy. It is said that he “left the farm [his home] and went to Newcastle” after being beaten by his mother “for playing with the ‘native’ Vusi against her wishes” (p. 49). Ostensibly hardened by his mother’s racist attitude, Slang joined a gang of dagga-smuggling black men, was arrested, convicted and served a sentence for this crime. On being released, he returned to the farm to find that his parents had passed away. His only remaining relative, “Oom [Uncle] Hennie”, “bluntly told Slang that he was old enough to look after himself” and so he “never saw Oom Hennie again, or his two cousins” (p. 49). Thus, the childhood in a nuclear family from which Slang is alienated and his strained relationship with his mother, come to constitute a crisis in his life. His estrangement from his mother is analogous to that of the black migrants who experience a sense of rupture from forms of familial bondedness (p. 49). In other words, Slang is a fit candidate for ritual cleansing, because he needs to be reconciled with the family and with childhood innocence in the same way as was expected of Vuma in “A Two-Day Adventure”.

For instance, while he and his colleagues are waiting for the suitable moment to pounce on a group of “four women and a child”, the narrator remarks that “Mehl’emamba [“Mamba eyes” – nickname given to Slang] desperately wanted a baby and the price was high” (p. 53). Slang’s aim is also apparent when the storyteller notes that Slang was devastated when Dambuza, one of the beheaders, suggested that, seeing that “there are four

women and we are four”, “each of us can get rid of one” (p. 53). Slang seems set on murdering the child, not only because this might be a physically less demanding task, but also because he wants to put a symbolic end to a childhood that encapsulates terror because of the memory of a harsh and racist mother. This is why motherhood seems for Slang an indomitable menace that he would rather not confront. As it happens, the beheaders manage to kill all their targets except MaMbokazi, who survives the attack because she is carrying her baby strapped to her body. In other words, her relationship with the child “pressed on her breast” (p. 56) mirrors through irony a fundamental principle that Slang is set on violating, albeit at his own peril. Just before the attack, her baby begins to fiddle and cry intermittently and will not rest until its mother goes to sit outside the hut. The other female victims do not heed the baby’s unease to be a premonition as the mother seemingly does. Hence, they are caught and killed while they are inside the hut. Throughout the assailants’ subsequent search for MaMbokazi, her baby remains quiet.

The image of a child “pressed on her breast” is suggestive of the innocence that the storyteller actualises on behalf of the anguished black migrants. Reunification with the mother spells security in Maseko’s story. This is why one of the women comments, “Children have an instinct for feeling things we cannot see”, “and they react to it by crying” (p. 54). Without the advantage of a sound relationship with a mother or woman figure, Slang and, by implication the other migrants, degenerate into mere instruments of torture. The heteroglossia of “The Night of the Long Knives” contains insightful narratives that Maseko attempts to foreground in his vision of the family within the violent setting of apartheid. Apart from defending masculinity and the family as tropes of power, these narratives caution against essentialising these discourses of authority.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to argue that a Maseko story reads as folklore that depicts power in terms of its own awareness of the fragile make-up of masculinities and the need to redeem them. Throughout this discussion, the focus has been on showing that Maseko acknowledges that the genre that he uses is an “[i]deological-intellectual space” that “relates to the symbolic framework within which social interaction is conducted, and [to] the space within which norms are set for ‘legitimate’ purposes” (Ramphela 1993: 5). However, the preceding close analysis of the ways and moments when Maseko achieves the reclamation of black masculinist authority has drawn attention to the significance of the quotidian. The article has also revealed instances where masculinity is interrupted, ruptured and critiqued as being reliant on alternative voices and paradoxical strategies for its articulation.

This complexity underscores the imagined nature of the power that the male characters in these stories imagine and seek to actualise. It is also hoped that this discussion intimates the post-apartheid intricacies that continue to subject and demand from ordinary, poor and marginalised citizens similar experiences and ways of resistance.

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Sope Maithufi

University of South Africa

maiths@unisa.ac.za