

Late “Arrivants” to Creative Writing: An Interview with Lucy Dlamini

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Abstract: Lucy Dlamini is a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Swaziland. She has published drama and fiction in English and siSwati. Dlamini’s English language fiction includes the novel *The Amaryllis* (2001), as well as short stories that explore how local patriarchal structures exploit tradition and culture to subjugate women. She has also written a play in siSwati, *Kuba Njalo Nje* (1995), and edited two poetry anthologies, *The Soul Selects* (2008) and *When Fishes Flew & Other Poems* (2009). In the interview, Dlamini discusses early influences on her writing, local Anglophone and siSwati writing, censorship, and the publishing industry in Swaziland.

Keywords: Swaziland literature, tradition, patriarchy, publishing, censorship, romance

Writers in Swaziland have received negligible attention from southern Africa and the rest of the world, and there has been little critical response to their works. Relatively brief interviews with writer Sarah Mkhonza and actor and playwright Sibusiso Mamba have been posted on the Internet, but otherwise one must go back to Lee Nichols’ *Conversations with African Writers* (1981), which includes an interview with J. S. M. Matsebula, to find any substantial dialogue with a Swazi writer. The following interview seeks to discover possible reasons for this neglect, as well as introduce the writings of a prominent literary figure in Swaziland. Lucy Dlamini is a Swazi writer, editor, and academic who is a Senior Lecturer in and Head of the Department of English Language and

Literature at the University of Swaziland. She has published drama and fiction in English and siSwati. Throughout the interview, Dlamini discusses early influences on her writing, the state of writing in English and siSwati in Swaziland, the role of publishers in shaping that literature, and her responses to local traditions and patriarchal authority in her fiction.

The interview took place at the University of Swaziland on 8 November 2012.¹

You have been actively involved in shaping the literature of Swaziland in your role as [an] educator, writer, and editor. Your English language fiction includes the novel The Amaryllis, as well as short stories such as "Dirt to Dirt," "The Chief's Bride," and "The First Christmas Without My Mother." You have also written a play in siSwati called Kuba Njalo Nje and have edited two poetry anthologies, The Soul Selects and When Fishes Flew. I believe you've also acted as advisor to a former student at the University of Swaziland, Velaphi Mamba, who edited Africa Kills Her Sun and Other Stories. With such diverse experience, could you comment on the state of Swaziland literature at this time?

Dlamini: What I know is that in terms of development, or in terms of numbers, there's more siSwati literature available than Anglophone literature. The little I know of both, though, is haphazard because until you came, no one actually had compiled this literature, and it's exciting to know that you are doing something about it, along with Dr. Jessie Furvin.²

And what should be noted is that one of the poetry anthologies was actually commissioned from South Africa and therefore it's a textbook in some South African schools. Also, the system in South Africa is the tender system, where a number of publishers have to submit their manuscripts and then some are chosen. It is then up to the publishers to market their books, so the first poetry anthology actually is not as widely used as one would have liked. The second one, whose working title was *Getting to Know Poetry*, is *When Fishes Flew & Other Poems*.

Let me ask you a really broad question: What do you think is the role and function of the writer in Swaziland? You mentioned in your previous com-

ment that the writer and the local publishers interact quite closely, so I suppose one role or expectation of the writer in Swaziland is to write for the education market, but do you think there are others?

Dlamini: I don't think I can come up with one role. For instance, if you take this young lady who presented during the seminar held on the 26th of October³—it's like there was this inner need to express herself and she may have had a specific audience, but definitely I don't think it was for schools. But some of us, I speak of myself, I've wanted to write from a very early age. I would read, for instance, the nineteenth-century novel [that] was then offered in schools. I would tell myself I also want[ed] to write. But then I didn't even know where to start. So, when Macmillan offered a writing competition, I entered two novels and Dr. [Lekan] Oyegoke was one of the judges, and both my novels won.⁴ But one of them he actually recommended for publication. That is how *The Amaryllis* was published. Then, Macmillan being Macmillan, supplying schools, the novel therefore had to be prepared for the market. I should say this: when you are looking from outside, as you are, you would say that the publisher is actually controlling what people should write. I would say the writer in southern Africa finds that there is a mutual relationship between the publisher and the writer. The publisher needs the writer and the writer needs the publisher. Because if you are to write just for selling to the public you'll find you wouldn't sell much because people just don't buy books. I don't know about Botswana or Lesotho, but I've lived in South Africa for six years and where I was in the northern part, bookstores were closing down because they may have opened thinking that there is a university nearby—and also branches of tecknikons—but books were not bought. In this country, I find the same thing—there are very few who actually read. When one, of course, even gets a commission from South Africa, you are hopeful. But, by the way, you'll find that you will sell better in Swaziland than you will sell in South Africa because of the tender system. So, that is what I can say. By the way, I like the tender system—that schools should have a broad spectrum to choose from.

Who has influenced you as a writer? Are there any writers, whether from Africa or elsewhere, who have influenced you in your own writing?

Dlamini: I would say my writing targets a high school audience, and definitely there was this Zulu writer, Sibuso Nyembezi [who influenced my work]. I've hinted that much in *The Amaryllis* by including an episode where the main character, Tana, encourages her sister to read the Zulu novelette. You see, at the time when I read it I was in Standard Four (or grade six). This was before Swaziland became independent and schools in the country were teaching Zulu; siSwati came with Independence. The novelette was about Nompumelelo (meaning mother of success or born to succeed), the only child of an elderly couple who raise her up very well, taking her to school and teaching her good morals. The story begins with Nompumelelo doing Standard Six (grade eight) since in those days primary went up to grade eight or Standard Six. Once a learner passed Standard Six, he/she could think of training for a career. And Nompumelelo was thinking of going to train as a nurse. The moral lesson for the youth was partly in Nompumelelo's reaction when boys began paying her attention. She would send them off, telling them, in idiomatic Zulu, to cease behaving like farmers who rush to cultivate their fields after the first rains, fearing that the ground will harden before they sow their seeds. The story of Nompumelelo had a powerful moral lesson for me personally as I never forgot it or the story itself. At the time I told myself: I want to be like Nompumelelo. I want to focus on my education—finish my schooling, go for training—*then* I can think of marriage afterwards! And so on. But times change. As I pursued my schooling I soon found out that Standard Six was not enough for me, or Form Three. I wanted to finish whatever grades there were before me. I had this unquenchable thirst for education. I wanted to finish high school and proceed to university. Yet there were no role models in my family. What I knew about university was from friends and classmates at Mbabane Central and St. Michael's, especially the latter where I did my high school. Hence, if there was a university, I *wanted* to go to university, too.

That character, Nompumelelo, reminds me of your character, Tana, in The Amaryllis.

Dlamini: Yes, I would say actually there is a direct influence there, because through Tana I am trying to educate young people. By the way, when I was attending and running the workshops in Botswana on this novel, *The Amaryllis*, the feedback I received from the teachers was that most of the students, the intelligent ones, reject Tana. They say, “She is not interesting. She is too flat; she is uninspiring or outright boring.” Instead, they identify with the rebel, Zakhe, who is Tana’s foil. They applaud Zakhe for being more interesting, and a full-bodied and live character—[a] believable or plausible character.

Because she is a rebel?

Dlamini: Because she was a rebel. They identify with her kind.

Still on that same question of influences, you recently told me that you are at work on a siSwati novel or short story?

Dlamini: Novelette.

Novelette. And you mentioned that one of the stylistic strategies you are using is siSwati proverbs and we talked a little bit about Things Fall Apart . . .

Dlamini: SiSwati idioms.

Idioms, yes. We talked about Achebe’s use of proverbs in Things Fall Apart. Would you say that Achebe is also an influence?

Dlamini: Oh, very much so. You recall what we said with Clara [Tsabedze], that when we read Chinua Achebe in secondary school (by the way it was the abridged version), we found ourselves inwardly saying, “Ah! I recognize this world.”⁵ But when I met Achebe later, especially at the University of Nairobi, where Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was the dominant figure both as lecturer and writer, I still felt that I liked Achebe’s writing better. I like for a writer to tell a story. Any didactic message must be sort of suppressed, and I must be interested in the story per se, and then whatever comes with it should be part of the package, skilfully interwoven, that is. I found that in Ngũgĩ’s writing there is a strong ideological slant, and it hits you in the face, and the characters are sort of mechanical figures, manipulated from a distance,

you see, and someone is making them do things; they have no life of their own. So Achebe definitely influenced me a lot. But of course, all this is my personal bias. These two writers are giants in their field and each has his followers, and each has taught the aspiring African writer something.

Okay. That's interesting, your appreciation of Achebe's storytelling, because certainly in his well-known essay, "The Writer As Teacher," he compares African writers to Western writers and emphasizes the African writer's role as teacher, rather than the Western notion of art for art's sake.

Dlamini: Let me address this for a minute. This "art for art's sake"—I don't believe it. Because if I read [Charles] Dickens, or I read [Thomas] Hardy—and these are writers that I admire a lot, by the way, because I met them when I was young and yet I still teach them. When I read Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, or Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which many people dismiss, there is some didactic message there. As for *Great Expectations*, it has served as a mirror through which I see myself in my years of maturation—the foolish mistakes I made, trying to run away from my background, as Pip, the main character, does. By the way, I do believe that every young person should read *Great Expectations*. It's a great story and it imparts a strong moral lesson, like many of these nineteenth [-century] novels. Except for, well, *Hard Times* where the story is too weighed down by the palpable ideology. As for *Great Expectations*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and a few others, I see a great story, but at the same time, you cannot ignore the didactic message there. So, it appears to me that the Western critics have to revisit this issue of "art for art's sake" because I haven't seen anything resembling pure art in the literary works I have read. What I've always observed is that each time someone writes a novel—and this idea is echoed by the critic David Caute—they actually express a personal view about the disharmony they observe in their respective societies, or discontent with society. As they write, they capture the present status quo but then move on to chart a way out or [a] solution. One notices this trend in all literary art, be it African or Western. That to me is committed art, not art for art's sake, unless there's something I'm missing.

My impression of Anglophone Swazi literature is that very few Swazi writers tackle contemporary political issues in their fiction. A story like Sarah Mkhonza’s “No Place to Die” does introduce some veiled criticism of the current monarch and of issues around the distribution of land. So she’s dealing with contemporary issues, very real issues that one reads about in the Times of Swaziland, which she’s translated into fiction. But I don’t see that in much other Swazi-Anglophone writing. They tend to be more distanced; they’re writing about the impingement of modernity on the individual, on the family. They’re writing about, as Jessie Furvin told us in the seminar last week, polygamy and . . . the subordination of females in a patriarchal society, and so on. But they tend to be fairly general and I see less the sort of fictional critique of the here and now of Swaziland.

Dlamini: For instance, the monarchy? The materialistic outlook of Swaziland, the corruption, and so on?

Well, yes.

Dlamini: Could it be that for a long time, maybe up to the early 1990s, it never occurred to many Swazis that there was a problem in Swaziland. We were this one big family. Problems were there—rural and peri-urban poverty, migration, subordination of women, crime, etc. But the writers of the time tended to look on the positive side, celebrating this “unique oneness” of the Swazi. Presently, though, it looks like right now the story is different. The simmering discontent is reaching [a] boiling point. A lot of things are going wrong in this country. *Wrong.*

And we now have exiles and [we] have people writing from Canada saying “Swazi by birth, Canadian by choice.” Here in Swaziland there’s so much discontent. It makes one curious about the orientation of the writing that will emerge in the second decade of the twenty-first century. To me, that is what I feel is happening. That is, things have been kind of okay in this country: students were getting scholarships, and then afterwards they would get jobs. All these things have disappeared! No scholarships, no jobs. So many orphans, but this disparity between the well-to-do and the poor is just too much.

I think you're right, and if we try to categorize Anglophone Swazi writing, we might identify a first generation of writers; you are probably one of the most prominent second-generation writers. But it seems to me that third-generation Swazi writers haven't fully come into their own yet. I would suggest that the young poet Bonsile Nxumalo is a third-generation writer, and I don't really know of any others.

Dlamini: Well, let's hope that the young man you interviewed last time

...

Velaphi Mamba. Oh, you're right, you're right.

Dlamini: Because he also tackles contemporary issues such as the endemic problem of teenage pregnancy and some really political stuff. As a new writer, we hope that more of the latter themes will feature in his writing. Let's also wait and see who will publish this kind of work because I don't see Macmillan publishing a piece of work that is directly critical of the status quo.

You have written in English and siSwati, and you continue to write in both languages. Would you describe the particular challenges of writing in each language?

Dlamini: Well, I don't know if it will sound strange to you [but] because I function in English most of the time, I find that writing in English is easier for me, probably because I teach literature in English and English literature. As for siSwati, one may think it is easy since it is my mother tongue. But I discovered that spoken siSwati and written siSwati are two different things. There are also these variations in the use of the same word! However, when I wrote my play, *Kuba Njalo Nje (That's How Things Are/Turn Out to Be)*, I had all the time. But now, when I was asked to write the novelette of about thirty pages we mentioned earlier, I struggled a lot. This is because one never knows which one is the accepted version. And then there is also Zulu interference. So each time I write a paragraph or episode, I have to go over it carefully, re-reading it for its language correctness. Of course, even when writing in English one does that, editing, but it's a frustrating process when it's your own

language as you feel you should know better, be an expert. But you find yourself asking: “Is this how we say the word in siSwati—is it *koje* or *konje*?” Now you have to struggle with just one word, and then also, the words tend to be long and you never actually know where to cut, since some fuse the concord and the stem. . . . It’s tricky writing in siSwati. It’s nice speaking it, but using it to write, it’s a different story.

Does your choice of language in any way influence your choice of themes? (The themes that you introduce in your siSwati writing as opposed to your English writing?) Or do you tend to deal with similar concerns?

Dlamini: Actually, the themes are similar. But concerning the language, in my novelette I was consciously trying to use idiomatic expressions to capture the sense of the thing and to enrich and adorn the language. By the way, siSwati, like any other language, is rich in idiomatic or metaphorical expressions. I was also trying to make my writing respectable as a written text. I enjoyed the challenge I set for myself and want to do it again when I have the time, instead of actually doing it in haste. I believe there’s a difference when you’re writing from the position of a literature scholar than someone writing just like that. As I write, I’m also my own critic. I feel that there is a difference. As I was writing this novelette, I was asking myself: “Am I actually trying to follow the classical version of a plot with its exposition, rising action/complication, climax, reversal/falling action, and dénouement? What should be the climax here?” And so you see, I feel my being a literary scholar contributes a lot to my writing. Choice of theme and shape of plot are influenced by the training I received as a literature scholar. So my writing is informed by a conscious effort. But this was not the case with my writing of *The Amaryllis*, the reason being that I was still an inexperienced literary critic then. All I was concerned with was writing for a competition.

You wrote The Amaryllis for a competition. More generally, do you write for a particular audience? Are you writing for a secondary school audience, are you writing for a Swazi audience, are you writing for an international audience, are you writing for a female audience? In short, is there any specific audience that you tend to target?

Dlamini: Well, I think so. Like with the siSwati novelette, the audience was defined. We were writing for a higher primary and lower secondary audience. So it was specific and one had to even scrutinise one's choice of themes. In my case, for example, while we were given a whole list of themes from which to choose, I felt that I could not focus on one theme. There had to be a fusion or interlinking of different concerns. However, it also happened that I had something definite that I needed to express about my grief over the death of my beloved cat, Kim. So I had something to write about and try to generalise my writing about pets and so on. The topic about pets was on the list. So, it was a fusion of my reaction to the loss and a social lesson on the importance of loving and caring for our animals. I was in Durban attending a wedding when my cat died, so I actually began the novelette with that trip to Durban. And then, as I'm writing, I'm telling myself that I must also describe the scenery, the places we passed through, the conversation, and so on. To give the story some interesting and vital dimensions, as well as a certain direction, I decided to include my helper and her big family. So it was a fusion or interlinking of a number of concerns, but the main one was just to pour out my feelings on the loss of my treasured cat.

In my reading of Anglophone Swazi literature, one absence that I note, as well as that of there not being any real attempt to address current issues, is that there doesn't seem to be any sense of "writing back to empire," no sense of Swazi writers trying to engage with Western writing, to challenge the way[s] in which Western writers have represented Africa—or Swaziland more specifically—in their writings. The only novel I can think of [that] might possibly address that kind of thing is a novel by E. A. S. Mkhonta called Ubolibamba Lingashoni, which includes a Swazi female character who marries a German and moves to Germany with him. She is later abandoned by the German character and returns to Swaziland, where she is left practically destitute. So my question is: Why do you suppose no Swazi writers have really attempted to engage with the ways in which Europeans have represented Africa in often such negative terms?

Dlamini: Maybe lack of exposure to that kind of writing. Secondly, we are late "arrivants" to creative writing as compared to the rest of

Africa. It could also be because of the country’s experience of colonialism, by being a British protectorate, which was different because it was indirect. So, there wasn’t actually this brutal treatment of locals as observed in the former English, French, and Portuguese colonies—or next door in South Africa. I include references to the Nazarene church in *The Amaryllis*, but some of the aspects [that] I highlighted were cut off because they were deemed unsuitable for the schools. So, maybe had that novel been published in its entirety, your question wouldn’t arise. That was, at least, one of the main contacts that we had with the West, and I had a lot of reservations about the Church of the Nazarene, under which I grew up, and it featured a lot in *The Amaryllis*. So the church, I would say, constituted, at least for me, the main avenue through which I approached the colonial experience. But my criticism is now watered down. That is maybe where the impact of the school audience and the publisher is felt, with the latter saying, “We want to publish this book for the schools.”

Your comments remind me of the publishing history behind Eric Sibanda’s short story “Sagila Semnikati.” He told me that his original story, written in siSwati, was translated into English and read on the BBC. But then the siSwati version was rewritten by . . . Swazi writer Modison Magagula, who was commissioned by Macmillan to make substantial revisions because, Sibanda speculated, it was felt by the publisher that the story was critical of the incwala.⁶ So when Magagula rewrote the story, he wrote the incwala out of the story, replacing it with a traditional wedding scene . . .

Dlamini: Censorship.

I suppose that’s what you’re suggesting as well with the removal of some sections from your novel on the Nazarene experience.

Dlamini: Yes! It was watered down quite significantly.

That’s very interesting.

Dlamini: That is why, for instance, if one were to tackle the contemporary themes as they exist now in Swaziland, one may worry about finding a publisher. This is because I don’t see Macmillan willingly publishing

it. No publisher in Swaziland would want to touch the book, and while that manuscript may have a chance in South Africa, who would buy it? Maybe the international publishers like Macmillan International, Longman, or Heinemann would publish it, but the question remains if it would have a market in Swaziland. Still, some people would buy it because they are sick and tired of what is going on in the country. This is the time when some people actually would want to see writers taking the lead in addressing the social wrongs, because these writers can see from the newspapers that people are sick and tired and they are expressing themselves and want someone to synthesize their feelings.

Your concern with social and political issues in Swaziland is certainly felt in a poem you showed me some time ago called simply, "A Poem," which you had submitted to The Times of Swaziland for publication and which was rejected.

Dlamini: Because they were rightly scared of being sued.

Yes, and because it was very critical of certain trends happening in Swaziland today. Allow me to quote the last lines:

*I mourn the demise of Justice in the land.
I mourn the daily soiling of beloved Swaziland
Of glorious mountain peaks and ranges,
Of lazily meandering and life-giving Great Usuthu,
Nkomazi, Mbuluzi, Mlumati, Mkhondvo.
You illustrious ancestors in your eternal sleep
You are the lucky ones. ("A Poem")*

Dlamini: Yes, things are happening here like we never dreamt of.

I'd like now to turn to the Pacesetter series. This series of course was wildly popular in Nigeria, whose writers, I believe, made up the majority of the authors also. Here in Swaziland, two writers, Sarah Mkhonza and Senzenjani Lukhele, published in this series. Another local teacher, Kenneth Rowley, also published at least one novel under Pacesetters. Could you give me a list of any expatriate writers who wrote Pacesetter novels that were set in

Swaziland? Also, do you have any thoughts on why more Swazi writers did not contribute to the series?

Dlamini: I wasn't even here when that happened. And I don't know of any other expatriate *Pacesetter* writers. Maybe at the time there weren't that many local writers, except for Mkhonza and that other writer. . . . Maybe they were the ones who responded to Macmillan's writers' competition.

It seems to me that Macmillan's more recent series, Fiction for Afrika, attempts to bridge the divide between educational publishing and popular fiction. Your own novel, The Amaryllis, was published under this imprint. I'm aware that it was a set text in the Botswana secondary schools. I believe it's now included [i]n the Swaziland secondary school curriculum.

Dlamini: High schools for Swaziland, but secondary schools for Botswana.

High school curriculum. How would you position Fiction for Afrika, more particularly because you've written The Amaryllis, in comparison to the Pacesetter series?

Dlamini: The *Pacesetters*? I feel like *The Amaryllis* is a relatively more mature novel than *The Pacesetters*. [Laughs.] Those *Pacesetters*, they would thrive in a place like Swaziland where students don't want to read. *Pacesetters* are shorter, with a simple storyline and plot structure. It has to be at the level of a teenage readership, [it] must have a strong romance theme, and so on. With *The Amaryllis*, I felt that it should tackle some problems at a relatively higher level—social issues that I felt needed to be addressed—but still manage to narrate an interesting story.

In The Amaryllis there is one moment when you have Tana thinking about Mills and Boon novels. Or perhaps it's the narrator talking about Mills and Boon romance novels. And it seems to me . . .

Dlamini: She reads them.

She reads them. But it seems to me that she, too, is almost a character from a Mills and Boon novel. I'm not being critical like your Botswana students,

but I'm wondering how self-conscious you were with that kind of intertextual reference.

Dlamini: What I was saying was that reading is part of the development stage. And at some stage, around twelve to fifteen or even older, you read that kind of literature and there are certain expectations that are met, but as you grow up you need something more mature.

In the novel, it seems to me, Tana upholds traditional values as she resists the advances of her boyfriend and acts as a sort of moral compass, while her headstrong sister, Zakhe, goes astray and is expelled from home by her father, ultimately entering into an abusive relationship only to return home, repentant and reformed. Nonetheless, while you use various means to question paternal authority throughout the novel, at the same time male promiscuity is excused, or at least tolerated. For example, Tana's acquaintance Mr. Bhembe counsels: "When a man truly loves a woman, LaBhekiswayo, his heart stays with her. He may frolic with many other women or with one other woman as your young man has done, but his heart remains true"(129). The novel, therefore, seems to reinforce Stephanie Newell's claim for popular fiction by female writers. Newell writes:

Rather than overthrowing existing gender ideologies, these writers—meaning a lot of African writers writing romances—these writers work within them and rewrite the rigid beliefs about the moral qualities that make women good wives, spiritual mentors into good girls. They might problematize the figures of the ideal wife, the rural mother, or the good-time-girl, but they do not necessarily reject these popular constructions of femininity. (8)

Newell is suggesting that the romance as a genre, written by African female writers, differs from romance written by Western female writers. But, even as it's different and even as it subverts the Western romance to some extent, it's still very conservative and it still doesn't reject popular constructs of femininity. So, the male can be promiscuous; the female must know her place.

Dlamini: Actually, the teachers and also the reviewers, that is, Macmillan's reviewers, highlighted that slant in the novel. So it looks

like I was responding somewhat uncritically to my immediate socio-cultural environment. I was amazed at this revelation; that, instead of rejecting this female subordination, I'm cautiously embracing it, saying that this is what happens. With this new awareness, when I critically examined my writing, it looked like I was saying: "This is the situation in Swaziland," full stop. I painted a situation where the reader perceives that a girl cannot tell her young man: "I'm not interested in consummating our relationship right now; so, let's just keep ourselves pure." It was like I was actually saying: "[T]here is no escape from this. If you're the girl, and you want to keep yourself pure, expect that the man will find his pleasure elsewhere. But later in life he will propose marriage to you, when you are ready for it." So this is what it looks like I'm saying, I have no defences on that one. I'm ashamed, though, of this limitation, this naturalistic approach to "writing Swaziland," as you would put it.

Again, I want to talk about your short story "Dirt to Dirt." The narrator relates the story of her sister Hleziphi, who is abused and impregnated by her employer's husband. When Hleziphi loses the baby, her father whips her and her male relatives arrange a forced marriage with a wealthy neighbour, who continues the abuse and ultimately kills her. But more than simply a story of female victimhood, it depicts male violence, along with the whole community's collusion in the suffering and eventual death of the victim. I want to read the passage where the first person narrator, who is sister to Hleziphi, recalls the events leading to her death as she stands apart at the grave site, while relatives have converged at the homestead, participating in the cleansing ceremony. She remembers her brothers banding together to avenge the death: "They looked marvellous with their tall, stiffened torsos. It was as if they were going to war, putting on their best regalia or loin cloths topped with leopard skins" (57). Meanwhile, the narrator's mothers begin a traditional chant in praise of these warriors, and the narrator recalls: "I was stirred and suffused with a prideful feeling of family togetherness which washed over me like a warm current" (57). The narrator's admiration for this display of masculine power seems to make her complicit, along with the other females, in the tragic death of her sister. What were you trying to do there?

Dlamini: Are you sure you're not maybe missing the point? This is the true version: when the narrator saw them in battle formation, marching out to confront the murderer, she felt that something good was going to come out, only to be disappointed later on when they came back with the herd of cattle. First they went to Mbabane to confront the sexual abuser, only to return loaded with gifts and now speaking another language. What am I, the writer, saying? I'm talking about what happens sometimes in Swaziland. The case may be illustrated with the prevalent situation where, for instance, a teacher impregnates a schoolgirl, as is happening—one reads about it in the papers every day. And then the Ministry of Education has its own idea of how to tackle the situation by firing the culprit. Meantime, the erring teacher has approached the family with groceries and introduced himself as Father Christmas. Where[as] the Ministry of Education expects the girl's parents to run to them for solutions, the family thinks otherwise and is even blocking the whole disciplinary action. Because this man is buying groceries and promising more (the girl may be fourteen), the family is ready to sell her to her abuser. So even in situations when everything is normal, the female may think that she is protected within the traditional setting—she has brothers, and so on and so forth. But once that abuser mentions cows, or once the cattle byre is bursting at the seams with cows, then the male relatives already know what the solution will be. They would never say no to those cows. So in the short story I'm highlighting the disillusionment of this girl narrator. At the outset it looks like the family will deal with this murderer, only to find that the only thing they're about is enriching themselves and that is the end. The female is sold.

And at the end of the story with that character (narrator) standing on the margins of the cleansing ceremony, in the distance watching the feasting taking place, this suggests a kind of ambivalence about what's going on. The cleansing ceremony itself is a very important and honoured ceremony, but what's been missing here is what has happened in the name of tradition and in the name of these male characters.

Dlamini: So the cleansing also becomes a feasting, an organized feasting and so on. So, that is why the narrator is distancing herself by saying, "It

looks like I’m still the only one mourning my sister. Now relatives are more concerned about the feast and so on.”

It seems to me that this story in particular, but also the story “The Chief’s Bride” and your other short stories, are very different from The Amaryllis. They’re more critical of Swazi culture and tradition, and I’m wondering if that’s because you wrote those for the journal Turfwrite or you published some of them in Turfwrite from Polokwane, South Africa, and you weren’t targeting an educational publisher?

Dlamini: I think the stories are merely a spontaneous outpouring from within. They were just coming. “Dirt to Dirt” is based on a truthful incident. Earlier versions reveal that in a subscript that I later removed. The story is actually a fictionalised biographical account. I come from a traditional background myself. My father had many wives, I had many sisters; some were forced into arranged marriages. Even as I was narrating the story, I would wonder how I escaped a similar fate. A number of my sisters were subjected to this kind of violence. So they would even be whipped to force them to accept the chosen man. And, yes, the subject of the story was killed by her husband while she was carrying her baby on her back. Luckily the baby was unharmed. The baby was raised by the co-wives, and indeed my brothers went to collect thirty head of cattle from that man.

My final question then is related to something the University of Swaziland librarian, Makana Mavusa, wrote as part of [a] longer investigation of the book chain in Swaziland. She concludes her article with this:

The book industry in Swaziland is very small, considering the fact that the country and its population are small and that the reading habit is not well developed. The high rate of unemployment further reduces the chances of the industry to thrive. Local publishers are almost non-existent: there is a very high mortality rate because of the lack of a continuous flow of material to be published. Local printers are shunned by the only major publisher, which uses printers outside the country to bulk-print at a cheaper rate. . . . Not many Swazis are interested in becoming writers, as it is not seen

as a full-time occupation. The book-sellers' market is education-based, as only textbooks will be bought in reasonable quantities at the beginning of each school year. (86)

You've covered some of this with your comments about your own writing. Is there anything else that you would add to that?

Dlamini: I think I agree with what you, and with what Mavuso is saying. The readership is not well developed. For instance, there used to be Dr. Lazarus Miti here, a linguist and lecturer. He was also a writer, and was from Zambia. He told me that on the day his novel hit the market in Zambia, it was announced on the TV and in the print media, and so on. People were queuing to buy that novel the next day. That does not happen in Swaziland. Unless the book was said to be controversial or critical of the status quo, people wouldn't be interested. Reading for pleasure has not been developed in our society. I remember, for instance, when I started teaching, my first stop on payday would be CNA [a South African bookstore chain] to buy a novel. But some people ridiculed me for that, with some even calling me a bookworm. Initially, I would be hurt by that label, but later I accepted it and told myself that, indeed, that's what I am and I'm proud of it. But not many people find pleasure in reading, and this includes students. I've known colleagues who would boast that they don't read books!

Notes

- 1 A grant from the Acadia University Research Fund and a Harrison McCain Visitorship for Acadia Scholars Award enabled me to travel to Swaziland and South Africa to conduct research and to meet with Dlamini. I also wish to thank the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) Department of English Language and Literature for their support during my residence there as Visiting Scholar.
- 2 Furvin is a Lecturer in the Department of African Languages and Literature at the UNISWA.
- 3 The English Language and Literature Department at the UNISWA hosted a one-day seminar titled "Reading and Writing Swaziland" on 26 October 2012. Dlamini is referring to Bonisile Nxumalo, who read from her poetry collection *River in My Soul*.
- 4 Oyegoke was a Senior Lecturer with the UNISWA Department of English.

- 5 Tsabedze is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature at the UNISWA.
- 6 The *incwala* ceremony is Swaziland’s most prominent public ritual, parts of which are tightly controlled by the monarchy. Mamba, a Swazi actor and playwright, wrote a radio play script in English that was “inspired by” Sibanda’s story and aired on BBC World Service in 2006. His version makes use of the *incwala* setting to stage a critique of traditionalist behaviour that particularly exploits women. I am grateful to Wandile Mathonsi for translating the siSwati versions. Sibanda related the information about revisions to his story during a personal interview.

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