ARTICLES ON LITERATURE AND ON THE DIASPORA

Witchcraft as a Cultural Phenomenon: African Philosophy in Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to our Hillbrow

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Abstract
Witchcraft, the use of magical or mystical powers to cause harm and influence people negatively, and African philosophy, an understanding of the attitudes behind the ways of thinking and actions in the life situations of African people, have long been discussed in African philosophical and socio-cultural discourses. Studies of Phaswane Mpe’s novel Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001) have focused on thematic preoccupations such as death, prostitution, betrayal, HIV/AIDS, violence, migration from rural to urban areas, and racism, without giving adequate attention to the cultural issue of witchcraft, as this article does. We adopt new historicism as a critical approach to understand the context of the novel as it addresses the cultural concerns of the society that produces it. The operations of witchcraft in South African society, Mpe’s fictional setting, is exposed as the author shows that Refentsé, a character in the novel, dies through suicide, suspected to have been manipulated by his mother using witchcraft powers. Tshepo, another character, also dies through lightning suspected to have been manipulated by a witch. Thus, witchcraft persists as a cultural phenomenon in the socio-cultural context of post-apartheid South Africa, as fictionalised in Mpe’s imagined Southern Africa.

Introduction
Phaswane Mpe was born into a South African family in 1970 during the oppressive peak of apartheid. He died in 2004. A highly talented literary artist who studied at the University of Witwatersrand, graduating in African literature and English, he later emerged as a novelist, poet, and
cultural activist, and was one of the novelists who came to prominence after the demise of apartheid in 1994. His scholarship focused on issues peculiar to post-apartheid South African society and his writing has helped to shape South African literature.

In an introduction to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Chirmai Negesh (2001) writes that Mpe’s writing

is informed by an oral tradition particular to the communal life of the South African pastoral area of Limpopo. This in addition to his modern university liberal arts education; his experience of urban life in Johannesburg; and, ultimately, his artistic sensibility and ability to synthesize disparate elements, has marked him as a truly “homegrown” South African literary phenomenon. (xi–xii)

South African literature before independence in 1994 was one of confrontations and protests and struggles for emancipation from the shackles of apartheid. Nkosi (1981, 76), writing of that time, reminds us that “the literature of Southern Africa is wholly concerned with the theme of struggle and conflict”, and “has always been a literature of protest and social commitment.” Examples of such South African literary writings include Alex La Guma’s fiction *A Walk in the Night* (1967), Dennis Brutus’ collection of poems *A Simple Lust* (1973), and Athol Fugard’s play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1976). There was a shift in style, attitude, and thematic preoccupations as writers, especially emerging novelists, that pointed to a new critical focus in post-apartheid South Africa. This illustrated the hopes and aspirations of post-apartheid South African, as well as obvious xenophobia, fears around the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the cultural influence of witchcraft as the cause of inexplicable phenomena. Phaswane Mpe handles the issue of witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon in the post-apartheid South African world view in an uncompromising manner in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

Culture has been defined as the “customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group ... The beliefs and attitudes about [something] that people in a particular group or organization share”. ‘Cultural’ implies a connection “with the culture of a particular society or group, its customs [and] beliefs” (Hornby 2015, 357). Thus, culture includes a particular people’s or group of persons’ beliefs or customs that influence the understanding of their social and cultural relationships in their society. This is reflected in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which shows witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon in South
African society. In her examination of new historicism as a critical theory, Dobbie (2012, 176) theorises culture as referring to “the sum of the beliefs, institutions, arts, and behaviours of a particular people or time, … cultural studies can be said to address an almost unthinkably broad body of knowledge: language, customs, legal systems, literature, and more.” She argues that the new historicist critic “seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context—the anxieties, issues, struggles, politics (and more) of the era in which it was created”. These critics, she concludes, like “the Marxists who preceded them … assume that literature addresses cultural concerns and can affect society’s attitudes and values” (Dobbie 2012, 181). We argue below that witchcraft is a cultural phenomenon in South African society, as it affects the attitudes and values of South Africans towards their fellows, and our analysis reveals that the cultural beliefs and practices of witchcraft can be considered an African way of thinking and understanding actions in the different circumstances of life.

The concept “African philosophy” originated as a variant of the general idea of the “primitive” philosophy which, in turn, is a part of the European attempts to understand the strange practices of “other peoples” (Urmson and Ree 1989, 3). Such a concept emphasises that a philosophy is an attempt by the European world to inquire into and understand the strange and incomprehensible ways of life of others. Mbiti (1969, 2), in contrast, defines African philosophy as “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life.” He attempts to give his view of philosophy from an African context.

**Literature Review**

Akin Omoyajowo (1983) sees a witch as a woman who was supposed to have magic powers especially one who used these powers to do evil. Witches are said to be helped by devils or evil spirits … It is generally believed in Africa for example traditional Yoruba belief shared also by the Shona people of South Africa is that witches are mostly women flying about at night through bird familiars especially the night jar; while the Nupe believe that although there are male witches, women witches are more dangerous. (317)
Thus, Omojajowo concludes that witches are mainly women, and are usually more dangerous in their witchcraft operations than male witches. Mbiti (1969) reminds us that diviners “are concerned primarily with acts of divination” and that they are

the agents of unveiling mysteries of human life. This is done through the use of mediums, oracles being possessed, divination objects [such as bone used by the bone thrower in Welcome to our Hillbrow] common sense intuitive knowledge and insight, hypnotism and other secret knowledge. (177)

According to Orubu (2001, 116), “belief in witchcraft is worldwide. While this has disappeared in many countries, it still exists in some African territories. The fear of witchcraft has made dramatic changes in the lifestyles of many Africans.” Orubu contends that the practice has disappeared in many countries but persists in the African society. Such persistence informs our critical interest in Mpe’s Welcome to our Hillbrow.

The novel has attracted some critical attention. Pieterse (2014, 47–48) argues that in it, the reader “confronts a specifically urban context, … which takes as its time frame the period of the interregnum in South African politics. However, this novel … takes an African spiritual worldview as a central narrative principle.” Pieterse’s argument that the text focuses on African spiritual worldview is well justified. Barris’ (2009, 41) examination of the novel emphasises the author’s use of the second person narrative form and argues that “the novel is even more intensely destabilised by being written in the second person” as against the generally and often used third person or the first person narrative points of view. He notes that “the ‘you’ of this narration principally addresses the focaliser Refentsé” (41). Dass (2004, 168) concurs when he concludes that Refentsé “is the focaliser of the novel [as] we see the world through his eyes.” No wonder Dannenberg (2012, 46) concludes that at the heart of Welcome to Our Hillbrow’s innovative and original style “is the use of second-person narration … ‘You’ narration challenges the traditional predominance of first-versus third-person narration and constructs a bridge between the two conventional discourses of narration which polarize character and narrator identities into ‘I’ or ‘he/she/they’ groups.” Barris (2009, 49), however, argues further that Mpe “reveals no ideological urgency to develop the community about which he writes. Instead, he focuses on the disintegration of communal values and on the
degradation and destruction of individuals trapped in colliding, hybridizing worlds.” This is apparent in a critical reading of the novel: it is an attempt to redefine the community. Barris concludes, as there is evidence of colliding physical and spiritual worlds within it.

Fai (2014, 157) comments on the novel that “prostitution, betrayal, rape and the contraction of HIV/AIDS are the modus operandi …. Broken relationships, rape and betrayal go along with the spread of HIV/AIDS and death.” Indeed, one finds incidents of rape, prostitution, betrayal, and HIV/AIDS, as observed by Fai, in the novel. Continuing this theme, Dass (2004, 171) concludes that the novel “is a response to the traditional South African novel in which a protagonist moves from the purity of peace of rural life to the corruption, degradation and squalor of the city.” This conclusion is observed in the novel as one finds the protagonist migrate from the rural to the urban or city centre. This gives the novel the shape of a migratory novel. But Rafapa and Mahori (2011) look at the novel differently, concluding that it is one that reconstructs the ordinary experiences of post-apartheid South Africans who are confronted with issues such as crime (159), HIV/AIDS (166–68), xenophobia, and prejudice (164). Trengrove (2015, 45), looking at lightning and fiction, argues that “Mpe’s story must be seen as a commentary or reflection on current beliefs regarding witchcraft in general and the link between witchcraft and lightning in particular.” He adds that the story itself “takes up the idea of lightning on different levels as a widely-held belief in rural societies, as a structural literary device, as a way of commenting on social issues and problems” (46). Trengrove’s view is critical as it links fiction with the science of lightning. By so doing, he tries to argue that, inasmuch as lightning is a scientific phenomenon, it is believed to have links with witchcraft in Mpe’s novel. The novel indeed focuses on these issues that confront the society of Mpe’s creation. But none of these critics has dared tackle the issue of witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon, as Mpe portrays in the novel.

Analysis

A critical study of the novel reveals that Mpe foregrounds two characters for whom witchcraft is an element in events important to them in the narrative. A context of witchcraft beliefs and practices in the novel surrounds the death of Refentsé and Tshepo, and belief in witchcraft is widespread in the fictional society Mpe creates. Similarly, Mpe’s witch character is a woman. Since witchcraft involves the use of magic powers, it thus means that the activities of the male bone thrower in Mpe’s novel is magical, as the author employs him to unravel the mystery behind the
frequent cases of sudden deaths either through lightning or disease (2001, 45). The bone thrower, by his activities, is a diviner who invokes magical powers to ascertain the unknown or to unravel perplexing issues. This is evident in the novelist’s representation of his activities, as he is the one engaged to unravel the mystery behind the regular cases of “sudden deaths”.

In narrating the death story of Refentsé, Mpe reveals that he died through suicide, manipulated by his mother, as the mother invokes the magical powers of witchcraft. The narrator tells us that us that Refilwe

rewrote large chunks of the story that Tiragalong had constructed about you, which was that you committed suicide because your mother had bewitched you … Tiragalong’s story was constructed when your mother slipped and fell into your grave on that hot Saturday morning of your burial. As Tiragalong believed, only witches could fall into a corpse’s grave on burial. Medicine men had confirmed that, in the good old days, such things only happened to witches after they have bewitched the deceased. (42–43)

The novelist thus includes the South African belief in witchcraft as part of the cultural context of his spatial setting. A critical examination of the quotation reveals that witchcraft is a cultural phenomenon among South African people. Mpe says that in Tiragalong, a fictional locale in South Africa, only witches fall into a corpse’s grave during burial.

Besides, Refentsé is presented as one who dies through suicide. Refentsé’s suicide is claimed or believed to have been influenced through the use of mysterious powers by the witch. Thus, Refentsé’s mother is accused of possessing the powers of a witch to cause harm and subsequently the death of her son. It is intriguing to note that the people of Tiragalong employed an unscientific mode of investigation of the unknown to ascertain the cause of the death of Refentsé. That they conclude in their investigation that Refentsé’s mother is a witch, and she killed her son, shows that they have employed what Orubu (2001) calls divination. Orubu says that a witch or wizard

can be known through divination. In a simple sense, divination means the discovery of the unknown (events, circumstances) and the future through supernatural
techniques. Divination seeks to find out things which are otherwise hidden. Divination has existed for ages. (127)

Orubu’s reminder authenticates what Mpe narrates as he, Mpe, confirms Refentsé’s mother’s guilt in Refentsé’s bewitchment, through divination. The novelist, in his narration, shows that belief in witchcraft is very strong in his fictional South African setting. Some members of South African communities represented in Mpe’s novel are seen to take seriously the issue of witchcraft wherever and whenever mentioned, or whoever is suspected to be a witch or wizard. Pieterse (2014) confirms this awareness and seriousness when he argues that people tend to talk around witchcraft—it is not repressed but avoided. Everyone in the community is aware of it, but it is not treated as a topic that should be allowed a public space. By its very nature, it is occult, secret knowledge, the world of shade … However, accounts of witchcraft can at times, paradoxically, be associated with a mixture of both secrecy and publicity and in contemporary South African life it attracts [both avoidance and attention]. (31)

When Mpe refers to his character who visits a bone thrower, he enlightens the reader on the mystical powers of the bone thrower by writing that he went to visit the bone thrower. This bone thrower was one of the most famous—or notorious—in his region. He had a nose for witches that was truly impressive. He was the same bone thrower who had helped to sniff out the witch responsible for sending the lightening to strike Tshepo. It was only after the Comrades had burned her that it became apparent that they had burned the wrong person. (2001, 74)

Mpe makes a cogent point on the culture of witchcraft in South African society. That the suspect has been wrongly accused, is a miscarriage of justice. Pieterse (2014, 50) argues that “Mpe is at pains to show consistently how gossip and jealousy fuel accusations of witchcraft, how bone-throwers and medicine men exploit their intimate knowledge of village politics.” But Mpe’s critical focus, this study reveals, is on the fact that belief in witchcraft is real in his imagined South Africa society. Hence the bone thrower (a diviner) is called upon to employ his mystic
powers to unravel the mysteries behind the death of Tshepo through lightning. Indeed, the bone thrower is famous in his community. But his divination in the case of the death of Tshepo is wrong as the community realises that he has divined falsely, having set a wrong person ablaze.

It is interesting to know the pain of the loss of Tshepo in death, which necessitates the invitation of a diviner to ascertain the cause of his death. Through this knowledge, it is intriguing to note that the South African in Mpe’s imaginative novel sees any unfathomable phenomenon as having been caused by a witch. In Welcome to Our Hillbrow, the narrator tells us that

Tshepo, your friend and role model had been the first person in Tiragalong to go and study at the University of the Witwatersrand. Tshepo was the one who encouraged you to act on your dreams of higher education and writing success. You had never really got over his untimely death, after he was struck by lightening in January 1991, just after receiving his university degree. His mother on hearing the news of his calamity choked to death on her grief. … Tshepo’s neighbor, one of the oldest women in the village was accused of having sent the lightening to strike him … A bone thrower confirmed that the woman was indeed a witch. She was even said to have bewitched her own husband … Mysterious diseases, in Tiragalong’s view, could only result from a mysterious cause: witchcraft. It was only after the witch had found her punishment by necklacing, that Tiragalong was given cause to realise its mistakes in concluding the book of her life in that manner. (2001, 45)

The excerpt above reveals painfully that Tshepo, a role model to Lerato, another suicide victim revealed in the novel, is struck by lightning immediately after receiving his university degree. His death is concluded to have been manipulated from the spirit realm through the mystic powers of a witch. In his critical essay, Trengrove (2015) concludes that

although the basic physics of lightning is well understood by scientists and engineers and has been confirmed by a variety of experiments, to many people lightning remains a mysterious phenomenon. Mpe’s story is an important
source in understanding the belief that witches can control lightning. (47)

Trengrove’s argument above concurs with the idea that many South Africans believe that witches can employ witchcraft to manipulate lightning, as Mpe fictionally enacts in his novel. In Tiragalong, it is also believed that any unexplainable disease is caused by a witch. Witchcraft is culturally important (a way of life, belief, attitude) in fictional South Africa. The novelist says that even mysterious diseases, in Tiragalong’s view, could only be caused by witchcraft. This is a very strong belief, the author suggests. No wonder, Orubu (2001) confirms this, saying

stories of lynching, maiming, beating and ostracising of persons suspected to be witches and wizards are very common in Africa. The belief in witchcraft rests on the assumption that spirits of living human beings (probably the ethereal) can be sent out of the body to harm other persons. It is assumed that witches and wizards are next to the gods in terms of their capability to manipulate the future of members of the community. (117)

Orubu’s conclusion confirms Mpe’s preoccupation. The art of inquiring into the unknown through divination is part of the culture of the people as Mpe demonstrates in the novel. Indeed, Mpe helps the reader to understand that the result of a diviner’s mystical inquiry into a phenomenon can be wrong as in the case of Refentsé’s mother, and the accused in the death of Tshepo.

Mpe thus sees witchcraft as part of the context of his novel, and a cultural phenomenon. Looking at the circumstances surrounding the death of the two characters suspected to have been killed through witchcraft, one notes that the circumstances are most likely suicide in Refentsé’s case and unlucky but natural causes in Tshepo’s case. In both instances, Mpe gives us an insight into the cultural norm of witchcraft in South Africa in particular, and Africa in general. Belief in witchcraft is part and parcel of the African way of life. Little wonder Mpe, writing on the punishment meted to Refentsé’s mother for her supposed involvement with witchcraft, writes:

So the comrades of Tiragalong, in order to cleanse the village, had necklaced your mother to death. They put large tyres round her neck and poured generous quantity of petrol
onto them and onto her whole body [... and set her ablaze].
(2001, 43)

A critical examination of this event related to witchcraft suggests that Mpe artistically weaves it in to show the belief in witchcraft in this contemporary time of western education and enlightenment. Gilbert Hieghet (1962, 8), writing on the anatomy of satire, says that “everywhere one looks, every day we live, we see and experience evil. Pain and suffering seem to be built into the very structure of the universe.” He adds that a satirist tries to

describe a painful or absurd situation, or a foolish or wicked person or group, as vividly as possible. The satirical writer believes that most people are purblind, insensitive, perhaps anaesthetised by custom and dullness and resignation. He wishes to make them see the truth—at least that part of the truth which they habitually ignore. (18–19)

Indeed, the part of the truth of belief about witchcraft which Mpe’s created South African society tends to habitually ignore is that it is not possible to attribute all cases of inexplicable occurrence or sickness to witchcraft. While this study does not focus on satire, as Hieghet argues, in our human existence, there is evil and pain. There are situations necessitated by custom. This evil, pain, and situations “anaesthetised by custom”, to use Hieghet’s phrase, is the culture of witchcraft in fictional South African society, as Mpe demonstrates in his novel, attributing natural phenomenon or occurrences and unexplainable diseases to witchcraft induced causes.

Inasmuch as Mpe narrates the cultural phenomenon of witchcraft in his feigned South Africa, it must be noted that he tries to demonstrate the existence of, and belief in evil forces, and their abilities to unleash pains and losses in the affairs of man. In Africa, this is very prominent. In fact, Omoyajowo (1983) concludes that evil forces and mysterious beings and powers (witchcraft) exist in Africa. He does not deny

the existence of evil forces and mysteriously mischievous beings or powers whatever they are. To do that would mean being more unrealistic as an African. I recognize the fact that there are mysteries in the world. Science, in spite of its enormous successes has not unfolded all the mysteries. (329–30)
A scholar like Omoyajowo strongly believes that the existence of evil forces and witchcraft is real in Africa. Mpe, our focus in this essay, deems it fit and sees it as a responsibility, as a member of his post-apartheid South African society, to fictionalise the belief in, and the potency of, the powers of a witch or a wizard as evident in the study so far. As a novelist, Mpe has strongly and convincingly carved out a niche for himself in post-apartheid South African literary expressions as he picks up an age-long sensitive issue, and presents it fresh in post-apartheid South Africa times as a reminder of the fact that in South Africa, witches and wizards are believed to exist, and are believed to cause inexplicable and mysterious circumstances that enmesh South Africans. Moreover, the author shows that witchcraft is a cultural phenomenon in South African communities. Thus, one can conclude that it is a socio-cultural phenomenon, and an important philosophy in Africa generally. Elechi Amadi (1982, 21), writing on witchcraft, argues that: “man has believed in and has practised witchcraft for nearly as long as he has been a thinking creature” and concludes that

witches and wizards were accused of a wide varieties of offences. Indeed, in societies in which belief in witchcraft was strong nearly the whole gamut of life’s misfortunes was blamed on them. Witches were believed to have the power of metamorphosis; that is, it was thought that they could change at will into nonhuman creatures like bats, leopards, mosquitoes, crocodiles. While in these guises, they could harm their neighbours. (22)

Onabamiro (1980, 151–52), writing on witches and witchcraft (European practice), concludes that witchcraft, “as understood by the Europeans died off about 260 years ago. Before that time, Europeans believed in witchcraft and their conception of it was conditioned by their Christian religion.” He adds that “among Europeans of modern times therefore there is no such things as witches or witchcraft” (155). Be that as it may in European society, Mpe’s post-apartheid South African society, his setting in his novel, still carries and bears the burden of unscientific belief in witchcraft. This is because, as Onabamiro (1980, 159) argues, “African witchcraft is … an organised element in the traditional set-up of the African society. Its main purpose is to safeguard the stability of society by discouraging deviation from the normal.” In Welcome to our Hillbrow, Mpe imaginatively creates for us a South African society where the culture of witchcraft is prevalent. By so doing, he has been able to
realistically portray a South African world where witchcraft is part of the way of life of the people.

This South African setting, in terms of locale and cultural affiliation, strengthens Mpe’s preoccupation with witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon, and an African philosophy. Setting, according to Abrams and Harpham (2012, 363) is “the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which [the] action of a literary work occurs.” Mpe has artistically situated his narrative in South African socio-cultural environment where the culture of witchcraft is seen to have existed in times past and still persists until now. Ogungbesan (2004) reminds us that the writer

is a member of society and his sensibility is conditioned by the social and political happenings around him [witchcraft being one of them]. These issues will, therefore, perforce be present in his work, but they must be implicit than otherwise. (7)

He concludes that “if literature is relevant at all it is because we can obtain some pictures of society and of life from it” (26). No wonder Dobbie (2012, 181–82) concludes that “according to the new historicists, all texts are social documents and, as such, they both reflect and affect the world that produces them,” and this surely applies to Welcome to Our Hillbrow. The issue of witchcraft, as Mpe demonstrates, reflects a South African world view, as well as affecting the people’s attitudes in the South African socio-cultural context. Though witchcraft is a culture, it impinges on the people’s socio-cultural well-being or otherwise. It is imperative to understand that Mpe’s novelistic focus is influenced by his environment—rural and urban South Africa.

**Conclusion**

A critical reader of Welcome to Our Hillbrow can obtain some picture of South African life from it as it pertains to the cultural phenomenon of witchcraft in the rural and urban communities. Mpe’s art is timely, and of artistic relevance, not only in post-apartheid South African fiction, but also in post-colonial African novel generally as the author skilfully narrates witchcraft as a cultural, and an African, philosophy. This he does to show that as a cultural phenomenon and aspect of African philosophy, belief in and fear of witchcraft is still very strong as portrayed in his fictional South Africa.
References


