



Alienation in Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's poetry

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In this article, I analyse the thematization of alienation in the poetry of the Muvenda poet, playwright, and scholar Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi. Milubi ascribes people's abandonment of moral values to their perpetual frustrations, herein described as alienation. Reference is made to the crumbling African traditional institutions, which, in the past, seemingly functioned as havens for the rehabilitation of alienated individuals in African communities. These institutions are shown to be triggering alienation in the modernising and globalising space, seemingly with no room for recuperation unless one heeds the poet's clarion calls. I restrict my analysis of Milubi's poetry only to social and cosmic alienation, guided by a fixed set of themes, namely, from society, a romantic lover, and God, respectively. The article represents the idea that African-language literatures provide insights into how the indigenes have grappled with the interface between tradition and modernity. The three forms of alienation as treated by Milubi serve as a representative sample of how Tshivenda poetry in particular and African-language literatures in general often register subaltern voices and the ways in which they inscribe their experiences to explain their relationship with God or god(s), society, and intimate partners, among others. This trifocal relationship is essential to the Vhenda and other African communities because it reveals their concept of cosmology, community, and intimacy. **Keywords:** African-language literatures, alienation, despair, modernity, Tshivenda poetry, Tshivenda literature.

Introduction


This article is positioned in the area of Tshivenda literature, which falls within the ambit of what has been termed African-language literatures (Mhlambi 1). It focuses mainly on the selected works of the Muvenda poet, playwright, and scholar Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's poetry works, namely, *Vhutungu ha vhubfa* (The pain of feeling), *Iphi la lurere* (The voice of the buds), *Muimawoga* (Lone-Stander), and *Muungo wa vuhwi* (Echo of silence). Writing in 1996 concerning these literatures, Swanepoel (20) proffers that:

there seems to exist a South African literary history of which African-language literature is not a part, and consequently finds itself in a position of marginality. Put differently, there seems to exist a South(ern) African literature in African languages which is either not (yet) regarded as part of South African literary history, or has (yet) been described sufficiently to fit into the wider South African context.

Although significant strides have been made in drawing African-language literatures, particularly in the South African literary context, from the margins to the 'centre' of discourse, much work remains to be done (see Letlala and Zulu 152–5; Mokgoatšana, "Old Wine in New Bottles: Heteroglossia or (un)conscious (re)production in N. S. Puleng's poetry" 9–16; Nkosi and Zondi 144–51; Ntshangase 37–46; Notshe and Kwatsha 77–92), particularly in terms of "resituating" these "literatures in African literature" (Sithole 222). Sithole (222–8) is not only concerned about the marginal space occupied by African-language literatures in the field of African literary studies, but also about the elevation of African literatures written in European languages above those written in African (indigenous) languages. In this elevation, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that was published in 1958, for example, is treated as a text that marked the birth of African literature even though there were numerous books published before it, Sithole (222) further argues. Firstly, I analyse Milubi's poetry in an attempt to draw Tshivenda literature from the

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periphery to the horizon of postcolonial discourse and literary analyses. Secondly, I read Milubi's poetry in the context of the four historical forces that contributed to the penury of most African-language literatures in South Africa, namely, the marginalization of African culture, censorship, lack of expertise in writing, and, consequently, lack of interest in writing (Sebola, "Agitations for self-identification and (re)presentation in selected Tshivenda poetry" 3–4, 1–10; Khorommbi 7–8). The historical and current marginality of African-language literatures can be viewed arguably either as a myth or a fact due to the "hegemonic considerations operative in politics, literary research programmes and national scholarly circles beyond its own control" (Swanepoel 21). Of course, the latter cannot be divorced from the incompetence, indifference, and even alleged mediocrity of which both writers and scholars have made themselves guilty (Khorommbi 8). In light of the foregoing, I try to show how Tshivenda poetry as a potent imaginative tool assumes its distinctive texture in reflecting alienation and estrangement, as having a significant bearing on the articulations of selfhood and culture. Furthermore, although some scholars (Maḡadzhe 4; Makhavhu 20; N̄emukungwe 1; Ramakuela 86–7, 90; Ramukosi 5; Mafela 126; Sebola, *Tsenguluso ya Vhurendi ha N.A. Milubi yo Livhanywa na Thyiori ya New Criticism* 116; "Selfhood in Tshivenda Poetry: reflections on Vhavenda's identity, culture and ideology" 7; "Selfhood, Identity and Culture in Selected Tshivenda Poetry" 84–5) have recognised Milubi as a bona fide poet, playwright, and literary critic in the Tshivenda literary scene, these scholars have not explored the recurrence of alienation as a theme in his writings. In exploring this phenomenon in Milubi's poetry, I link my analysis to 'a postcolonial condition' which also connects with the concept 'postcolony'. Mokgoatšana ("Identity, from autobiography to postcoloniality: a study of representations in Puleng's works" 8) avers that a postcolonial condition refers "to a place of suffering from a condition, a state of affairs in which colonial subjects find themselves as a result of colonisation. It is basically a difficult stage, for the colonised are trapped in the culture of the colonial power, and the[y] attempt to maintain their own cultural identity".

In articulating their marginality, which mainly occurred "by coercion, inferiorisation, tabooing certain political and cartographical spaces, harassment, torture and imprisonment" (Mokgoatšana, "Identity" vi), the colonial subjects inevitably deal with a sense of alienation. Given that alienation "forms the subject of numerous sociological, psychological, philosophical and literary studies" (Saleem 67), I thought it fit to explore its manifestations, both nuanced and blatant, from a literary perspective, relying on Milubi's poetry. There are seven basic forms of alienation: (a) from oneself, (b) from the opposite sex, (c) from fellow human beings, (d) from society, (e) from work, (f) from nature, and (g) from God (Winthrop 290–2). However, in this article I focus on only three forms of alienation apparent in Milubi's poetry: from the opposite sex, from fellow human beings, and from God. Milubi's poetry thematises these forms with reference to the prevalence of superficiality and cruelty in social and cosmic relations. Milubi's poetry also relates the theme of alienation to what he (Milubi) views as people's oppression (Makhavhu 8–9). Concerning this, Maḡadzhe (4) proffers that, "there is nothing which affects him [Milubi] more than human suffering and the dark confusion of mankind as well as the hazy spiritual values which he finds in the world. Most of his writings, which include poetry and drama, are infused with a sense of human suffering". In accord with Maḡadzhe, Ramukosi (5) says: "suffering, life affliction and sorrows of existence are the main concerns of Milubi's tragic literary art works. In this way he shows concern for evils that are destroying human values". On the other hand, Mafela (126) says: "In [Tshivenda] literature, Milubi [...] risked his life by writing about topics that most writers and nearly all publishers did not dare to touch. In his writing, he reflects on the various forms of oppression inflicted on the poor". Clearly,

[i]n Milubi, then, we see a meeting point of two opposing forces. While his poetry is sometimes politically committed, it does not lose its aesthetic hold [...] Milubi also comes as someone who sees in the past a memory which can construct the present. *This post-colonial aspect of Milubi is also combined with postmodern ideas of despair, lack of hope and the total chaos that this world is in.* (Ramakuela 86–7, italics added)

Milubi's biographical background and intellectual history

Born in Venda in 1954, Milubi received his primary education at Nzhelele Primary School and his secondary education at Mphephu High School from 1969. It was during his post-primary education that he tried to write a radio drama titled "Naa uyu Selina". He passed his Standard 10 in 1973, after which he went to the University of the North (now University of Limpopo). As a student, he tried to write prose but, due to his studies, left these works incomplete. His inspiration to write seriously came in 1976. His writing at the time was primarily poetry. Eventually, his prose developed but poetry was still his major concern. In 1979, Milubi began his employ with the University of the North as a lecturer. He obtained a B.A. Paed. in 1979, B.Ed. in 1980, B.A. Hons in 1981, M.A. in

1984, and D.Litt in 1988 at the University of the North (Milubi, *Vhutungu ha vhupfa*). At the time of his retirement in 2020, Milubi was a full professor of Tshivenda at the University of Limpopo. His first publication was a collection of original poems published by Van Schaik titled *Muhumbuli-Muhumbuli* (Thinker-Sufferer, 1981). Apart from his scholarly publications, his creative oeuvre includes poetry, prose, drama, and Tshivenda grammar manuals.

Milubi's poetry intermittently thematises alienation, which manifests in the form of despair, hopelessness, and total chaos, and typifies summarily as malaises of society—infirmities which, in his view, add to the animosities and frustrations of human life (see Winthrop 290). Put succinctly, most of his allusions to alienation portray the idea that some natural, desired, or good relationship or connection that once existed has vanished. Milubi's thematizations of these forms of alienation are presented as emanating largely from separation from society, romantic lover(s), and God, with these forms characterised by a failure to experience an emotion of organic affinity to any of the foregoing entities. Although Milubi's thematization of alienation appears on the surface level to be mainly about alienated individuals, a deeper look into his poetry, however, reveals that the alienation he writes about also extends to South African people in general, both in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa—an era in which Milubi produced the three anthologies analysed here.

By the noun Vhavana, it is meant here the aboriginal and naturalised people who occupy the land of Venda in South Africa (Neluvhalani 180). Most Vhavana currently inhabit the north-eastern part of the Limpopo Province in the Vhembe District along the Soutpansberg mountain range, northwards into the southern part of Zimbabwe (Hanisch 119; Sebola, "Selfhood, Identity and Culture" 16). The Vhavana are "a people who choose to respond to life albeit at times with fear, to take their powerlessness as a cue, to create a new structure of power within them, confronting their own humanness and that of their neighbours, people who choose the womb from which life, hope and decency might issue" (Khorommbi 13). Therefore, Tshivenda literature, including poetry, is "so close to the Vhavana's soul that to reject their works is to reject their experience" (Khorommbi 13). Implied here is that a work of art mirrors the lives of people in a given context; it is the Vhavana's life situation that is reflected in Milubi's works. For this reason, Milubi's poetry is read here not only as a representative sample of an alienated individual or society, but also as that of a collective quest for identity and recognition by Africans in general. In this article I premise this quest in the analyses of Milubi's poetry on three dimensions: (a) the poet's articulation of identity as encapsulated in a network of collective identity or identities; (b) an assertion, recreation, and discovery of self-identity in a repressive context that perpetuates alienation and cultural schizophrenia (i.e. apartheid and neo-colonialism); and (c) a broader (African) articulation of (African) identity in its own individually unique ways, which denotes the collective Africans' search for autonomy and recognition in an oppressive context that propounds the coloniser's narrative and thus controls the central space (see Mokgoatšana, "Identity" vi).

The article contributes to Tshivenda literary studies by exploring and exposing themes such as alienation as a mode of suffering expressed in Milubi's poetry. In this way, it helps to enrich the area of Tshivenda literature and studies of African-language literatures by providing a contrastive dimension of an individual living outside the expected social parameters, and concurrently with a group, forced by modernity and globalisation to live in opposition to its traditional norms that once served to sustain cultural identity and rehabilitate alienated individuals back into the society. The article is relevant not only to the Vhavana community in which the traditional approach to life has been failing, but also to the ongoing discourse on identity politics, being and belonging, locations of culture, etc. On the one hand, the article sheds light on the challenges faced by an individual and a group in a new search for belonging and cultural sanity. On the other hand, it considers Milubi's depiction of society as sometimes uninhabitable to the people who have been pushed out of the very society as it redefines its social parameters. Milubi's poetry is thus read as reflective of the kind of alienation that results when one is chucked out of society and subsequently withdraws from it after failing to subscribe to its social demands and milieu.

I consider how Milubi uses his poetry to articulate a sense of alienation among Africans in the modern spaces as it emanates from a range of phenomena. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (12) describes alienation as "a massive psychoexistential complex", that is, a chain of inferiority complexes that reveal themselves in the existential state of identity and meaning in/of life. Secondly, Fanon (12) says alienation may manifest as the condition of separation or attempted separation of the individual from the existential self or an aspect of it. Thirdly, alienation may be depicted by a condition of neurosis, of mental disorder, a nervous condition characterised by anxiety, hysteria, and depression. In essence, alienation represents the split between the self and other, where it is the self that becomes *other* (Taitz 37), manifesting when the self is *othered* by society or when the self *others* society. Either way, this

othering culminates in *alienation from society*. Such a form of alienation is attributable even to liminal spaces where two cultures interface, the result of which is often a sense of a hybrid(ised) identity and of living “in-between spaces” (Mokgoatšana, “(De)scribing home in apartheid South Africa: locating Sepedi literature in the discourse” 36). Such spaces might further shore up the tension between tradition and modernity, or “Afropolitanism and alienation” (Fasselt 119), especially in spaces like South Africa where the colonial effects of ethnic exceptionalisms still linger even in the postcolonial context. Hence, in the subsequent sections, I read Milubi’s poems with the intent of showing that African-language literature cannot be adequately contemplated without recourse to alienation, given the multifarious socio-political situations of African society and their attendant alienating trends. I foreground three forms of alienation as arising from the tension between the poet’s desire to revisit the supposed pristine life once enjoyed prior to colonial modernity and the need to embrace a hybrid identity and culture in order to ‘survive’ in both colonial and postcolonial spaces.

Alienation from society

In Milubi’s poetry, alienation from society occurs largely at the first and third dimensions of Fanon’s (12) explanation of the term. That a person’s alienation from society can significantly result in their melancholic sense of alienation is evident in Milubi’s poem “Vhuthuru haṅu” (Your wickedness):

*Ndo ima nda sedza
Nda vhona vhuṭhuru ha zwiito zwaṅu
Sa vhana vha itaho kabwa-kabwa kudivhini
Nda vhona ṭhoni ni si na
Ṭhoni dza vhuṭhuru haṅu
Vhu vayaho mbilu dza vhaṅwe
Nda vhona mivhili yo kunaho
Luroṭheni i tshi khou lovhewa
Nda vhona lwonolwu lubombelo lwa zwiito zwaṅu
Lu tshi khou tanya vhutshilo ha vhanzhi*

I stood and looked
And saw your wicked deeds
Like children frolicking in a small pond
And see that you have no shame
The shame of your wickedness
That grazes others’ hearts
I see clean bodies
Submerging in the mud
And see the inhumanity of your deeds
Snatching away the life of many (12)

In the poem, Milubi metonymically articulates a sense of marginality emanating from society’s moral decay. The poet gives the impression that he can only be reintegrated into and perhaps even reconcile with his society if his society heeds his pleas for social and moral renewal. Although the poet does not come out clearly on this, he implicitly nudges the reader towards a conception of what comprises a true and pure sense of community—one that values good morals and human life. Thus, in Milubi’s poetry, human callousness that promotes injustice, malice, and unconcern in relations among persons is seen as the underlying reason for alienation from society. Based on the poet’s isolation from society on account of their inhumanity, one can argue that in the interplay of self and society, individuals may deliberately alienate themselves from their society and still speak to that society from a position of social estrangement in hopes of effecting some form of moral transformation. The noun *vhuṭhuru* (wickedness) is used recurrently in the poem to emphasise the idea that the poet is not only appalled by the nefarious deeds he observes, but his perception of humanity has also been negatively affected. He is anguished by the minimal, if any at all, value placed on human life in the modern world. Feeling all alone in his quest for justice and the restoration of respect for human life, he castigates his society for taking human life for granted by announcing the death of their naked *mimuya* (souls/spirits).

By inferring to a somewhat theological or cosmological inclination in his allusions to naked souls/spirits, the poet suggests that there is a covering that a human soul or spirit requires in order to live not only a meaningful, but also a morally grounded life. Although God is not mentioned in the poem, the poet points the reader to the possibility of people receiving the clothing of their souls/spirits from some form of cosmic dimension. To the poet, the people in question cannot do anything about their 'normalised' wickedness because they are estranged from God. In the poet's mind, society can best exhibit righteous behaviour when they live with 'clothed' souls/spirits, that is, according to God's moral requirements, whatever they may be. Other than that, the wickedness that abounds in the human world will constantly have one asking: "Ndi wanafhi khonani?" (Where do I find a friend?):

*Ndi wanafhi khonani?
Khonani vhukuma
I sa vindukani
Sa shonzha Ia mpani,
I sa shanduki sa luaviavi
I sa tshimbili nga fhasi
Sa maqi a thangasi,
Ndi i wana ngafhi?
Namusi kha fino
Ho dalaho idzo
Dza tsiku huvhili*

Where do I find a friend?
A true friend
That does not wriggle
Like a *mopani* worm,
That does not change like a chameleon
That does not travel underground
Like subterranean water
Where do I find him/her?
In today's world
Where there is a multiplicity
of the two-headed [snakes] (*Vhutungu ha Vhupfa* 5)

In a society without values, religious and otherwise, a sense of alienation from society is further compounded by people's untrustworthiness, so much so that it becomes almost impossible to find a true friend. The nouns *shonzha* (*mopani* worm), *luaviavi* (chameleon), *maqi a thangasi* (subterranean water), and *tsikuhuvhili* (two-headed snake) serve to augment the instabilities of modern relationships, which in the poet's view, are characterised by disloyalty, betrayal, deception, cruelty, and selfishness. In essence, the poet laments the loss of what Mogoboya (123) calls "the essence of [...] African identity enshrined in *ubuntu*" (original italics), or "Afrikan Humanism" (Rafapa, *Es'kia Mphahlele's Afrikan Humanism* viii). African Humanism is essentially a premise upon which Africans in general display their completeness as humans (Rafapa, "The Representation of African Humanism in the Narrative Writings of Es'kia Mphahlele" 2). Thus, to abandon it in favour of those guarantees that encourage individualism instead of communalism results in an excruciating sense of alienation from society. Individualism, as a modern trend, is formatively influenced by greed, as attested by Milubi's poem "Tseḁa yo fhirisa" (Greed has exacerbated):

Musi gukwana lo fara
Li a mona-mona
Murahu ndi mmbi
Mukovho fi a u shavha.

Shambo la wela hayo
Mmbwa ya fi doba,
I shanduka ndau
Maño ya a sema,
Mukovho a i u funi.

When a chick has found [food]
It goes round and round
Behind it is an army
Sharing frightens it.

If a bone falls its way
And the dog picks it,
[That dog] turns into a lion
And shows its teeth [growling]
It does not like sharing. (*Vhufungu ha Vhupfa* 9)

To enunciate greed as a contributory factor to alienation from society, the poet likens some modern people to a chick that has found its feed and a dog that finds a bone, none of which demonstrate intentions to share with others. Greed and self-interest as perceived by the poet are the vices that stand antagonistically to the long-standing (traditional) values, i.e. communality, interdependence, humanity, etc., of African communities. In the modern world, those who stumble into some form of fortune lock themselves within enclosures that restrict other people in their social space to partake in the spoils; even dogs turn into lions when they find bones to gnaw. In a world where a dog-eats-dog, that is, where it is everyone for themselves, the poet is left asking, “Wanga ndi nnyi?” (Who is for me?):

Wanga ene ndi nnyi?
Kha jino shango jino,
Kha la vha sa mpfuni,
Nhe wanga a thina.

Who is for me?
In this world,
Of people who abhor me
I have none. (*Vhufungu ha Vhupfa* 28)

The term *ubuntu* as implicated in Mogoboya (123) earlier entails the “African sense of respect for the human person”, which is supported by “the traditional values of hospitality, primacy of the person, respect for life, sense of the sacred, [familial responsibility], brotherhood, solidarity and other characteristic features of the communalistic life of an African person” (Elejo 297). *Ubuntu* is “an ethical philosophy which is centred on the people’s allegiances and relation with one another” (Edeh 206). Thus, appended to this ethical philosophy is the belief that a human being is primary in all ranges of importance in human life and living (Edeh 206). In attempting to provide an African psychological rendering of “African personhood” or “human personhood”, Nwoye (42) views *ubuntu* as that indigenous African assumption made popular by the Nguni proverb, “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person through other persons). In the above poem, the poet laments the loss of this ethical philosophy in the modern world, the result of which has been the perpetuation of greed and dehumanisation. Consequently, he has no one to look out for him. In the modern (capitalistic) world, the poor are essentially sub- or non-human, spoken of through a dehumanising discourse, as the poem “A si na tshawe” (One who is poor) from the anthology *Vhufungu ha Vhupfa* attests:

A si na tshawe
U shanduka mmbwa,
Ndi mushayadzina,
Tshawe ndi u nyalwa,
Ndi nama i sa lei,
Ndi nama ya mbungu.

One who is poor
Turns into a dog
Such a person is nameless
Their lot is to be loathed
he/she is inedible meat
Meat full of worms (1)

Metaphorically, there is a level at which a dog in Tshivenda culture represents poverty (Nengovhela 34), resulting in people's disdain. Such a person rarely receives help from people, and if they do receive it, they must be willing to be treated, for lack of a better rendering, as a mangy dog. Modern people, according to the poet, treat each other thus because in the modern world, "Muvhuya a hu na" (There is none righteous):

Muvhuya ndi myi?
Ri tambelani tshikha?
Tshikha arali ri si na,
Muvhuya a hu na.

Who is righteous?
Why do we wash off dirt?
if we are not dirty
There is no one who is righteous. (*Vhuzungu ha Vhupfa* 8)

Milubi's foregoing poems largely depict the individual as alienated, with linkages of alienation to a sense of despair, a loss of hope in humanity's capacity to be good and right. The nature and extent to which a sense of alienation can affect a human being, at least as Milubi thematises it, is also evinced in his assessment of how African traditional institutions undergirded by the ethical trope of *ubuntu* play a role in keeping the society intact, selfless, and harmonious. In the same vein, Milubi also implicitly prods the reader towards a reflection on the extent to which the institutions can be prescribed as capable of saving an individual from despair in the modern world, particularly where people have incrementally adopted an individualistic approach to life, and thus have become self-centred.

Alienation from romantic love

Another aspect of thematic interest in Milubi's poetry, in as far as alienation is concerned, is *alienation from romantic love*. In Milubi's poetry, this form of alienation occurs when a member of either sex not only fails to understand the psychology and needs of their romantic partner, but also when they terminate that relationship, much to the despondence of their partner. Put another way, this kind of alienation is caused by the love from which one anticipated to find happiness. Here, one realises that romantic love when terminated not only brings about alienation, but also, when found, does not necessarily mediate to bring life and light to the human heart. Romantic love may be found and yet remain unrequited, resulting in the finder's inability to acquire lasting satisfaction from it. When love fails, a poem such as "Lufuno" (Love), might be conceived:

Lufuno lwashu ndi lufuno-*de* hohwu
Lu no hwetekana
Lwa fovhela khambani sa khumba
Ndo vhona u tshenduka
Nde lufuno lwashu lwo vhibva
Sa thawi lwa mbo kunga
Nga vhutswuku ha nga nnda
Nga ngomu lwo khuba hone u *jamara*.

Zwothe zwe ra *didina* ngazwo
U bva kale u swika zvino
Zwo no shanduka ndongwana
Ye ya vhumbwa mafo o sedza
Khathihhi fhedzi mutwe wa thethenyea
Ha vha u fhalala ha ndongwana
Yawee, o tevhuwa ma^{di}
U a a kumbela wa dovha wa *dadza* naa?
Ndi gavha hani tsho fhufhaho tshinoni
Tshitahani tshatsho tsha mbo vhuvelela tshinoni

What kind of love is our love
This one coils
Disappears into a shell like a snail
I saw all the external signs
And thought that our love was ripe
Attractive like mountain water-berries,
Because of its redness on the outside
Whilst full of sourness inside.

All our efforts
From then until now
Have turned into a clay pot
That was formed while eyes were staring
All of a sudden a crack broke open
And that was the end of the clay pot
Oh, the water has been spilt
Will the pot be filled ever again?
How do I catch a bird that flew away
It went back to its nest (13)

The poem is produced, or at least rendered, on behalf of a lonesome or estranged personality, one who suffers the consequences of lost love. The bleakness characterising the entire poem suggests that the persona's existence has, since the loss of a lover, become unbearable. Starting the poem with a rhetorical question foregrounds not only the persona's hurt, but also an immediate attribution of blame to the ex-lover. In the second stanza, the persona speaks about, though unspecified, the (mis)read 'external' signs (of love), which looked like 'real' love. The verb *jamara* (sour) is used to describe the bitter feeling(s) that often emerge when what was initially thought to be true (i.e., love) ultimately turns out to be false.

The persona's alienation is so intense that he now speaks with a sense of total resignation from matters of love, with no indication in the poem that there is hope to love or be loved ever again. The poem presents a paradoxical interface between loneliness and love in the modern world. The central theme of the poem is that alienation through love and its consequent pain and suffering generally result from failure to consummate love on a permanent basis due to rejection by a lover. This rejection can disintegrate a human being's zest for life. When the persona speaks of *lufuno lwashu* (our love), and not *lufuno lwanu* (your love), the impression is that at some point there was reciprocity in the duo's expressions of love towards each other. The persona likens the cessation of their love to a bird that took flight back to its nest. It is unclear in the poem whether the nest referred to is an ex-

lover or just her departure. Seemingly, the reader is informed that they should not expect to find salvation in love, suggesting that love is either temporary or non-existent. To the persona, to love somebody and even to be loved serve only to increase one's sense of alienation. What makes the persona's alienation seem unbearable is that he could not think beyond the moment of ecstasy once shared with his lover. He seems to be trying to find meaning in the meaninglessness of their love affair but finds none. Thus, a sense of alienation can make persons search for something that they cannot categorically pinpoint and possibly never find; the object for their futile pursuit being that they feel conquered, in this case, in romance.

In Milubi's poetry, then, a sense of alienation can emanate from a painful parting with a person with whom one might have had the privilege to feel kinship. I have here in mind the idea of unconditional and lifelong acceptance by another person. That the persona does not mention the ex-lover by name could either be to emphasise the homelessness of his soul due to being alienated in the space where he thought he belonged or it could be to establish an amply remote fellow-feeling of aloofness in the reader's mind. The use of names generally implies some sort of figurative import, an idea so perceptibly and clearly linked to the essence of an object or subject, invented to habitually 'mean' something. Therefore, by not naming the ex-beloved, the persona not only wants to highlight his alienation from the lover, but also wants to win the reader over to join him in his internal agony. He wants to at least maintain control over whatever interpretation will be ascribed henceforth to the expired love affair in question.

The poet's use of *ndongwana* (Tshivenda clay pot), *thawi* (water-berries), and *tshitahani* (in the nest) as homespun imageries could yield material for an independent study. However, they are mentioned here to uncover at least a cognisance of human emotions that highlight the persona's alienation. The art of pottery takes not only time, but also diligence, commitment, and the desire to produce something of beauty from the clay. Seen in the light of the poem, the laborious and time-consuming formation of *ndongwana* is equated with the formation of the love now lost. *Thawi* is not only an ever-green, fleshy, and edible fruit, but also pleasant to the eye. The fruit is essentially water-loving and is often found near brooks, on forest margins, or in marshy spots. It actually grows best in humid to wet soil. In describing their love as *thawi*, the persona intends to create in the reader's mind the ambience within which a water-berry tree grows—it is one full of life and freshness; one can barely assume that the tree will ever wither. The persona never thought his relationship with his partner would end.

It is commonly known in Venda that *thawi*, as a fleshy and edible fruit, also attracts small wildlife and birds. Furthermore, *thawi* also has a tart taste, despite being pleasant to the eye. The poet's choice of the fruit as a symbol of the love relationship in question is aimed at emphasising the point that the relationship was attractive to the eye whilst acerbic inside; hence his use of the word *tamara* (tart taste). He likens their love gone wild to the *mutawi* (water-berry tree) because it is ornamental and produces masses of flowers and luminously coloured berries throughout the summer, all of which attracts numerous birds (enemies). The beauty of their love attracted birds, resulting in the 'beauty' of their love 'snatched away' by *tshinoni* (bird), an allusion to someone else who might have come between them. It could also mean that their break-up was caused by jealous people who could not stand to see them 'madly' in love. Reading the poem with this in mind makes the reader somewhat more sympathetic to the speaker. He has experienced 'a dark night of the soul' in his alienation and has not emerged from it with anything meaningful. As readers, we do not know if this was his first and only 'real' love, but, seemingly, his beloved has at least given him a present: the truth about their love, and possibly about herself, to put a stop to the 'fake' love.

Through this poem, Milubi suggests that the modern world is populated by alienated people who spend their lives hurtling after love only to realise in the end that the reverie has vanished into vapour. He also wants to show that the ironies that come with this are often difficult to bear. To allay his and the reader's feelings of alienation and frustrated isolation, the poet further wants his reader to know that the human emotions shared in the poem are those which may belong to anyone, anywhere. Although falling in love can present an escape from loneliness, the poet is discerning enough, however, to distrust that this type of love will exist forever. He is alienated and hopeless because of giving himself over to love, and the resultant inner isolation can currently not be remedied.

Alienation from God

Milubi's poetry also thematises *alienation from God*. This is seen as largely emanating from contrastive belief systems in society. In this instance, one notes religion as one of the factors that not only brings about conflict, but also a sense of alienation. At its core, religion is generally a belief in the superhuman or divine, which is viewed as a force, power, or influence behind the material world and the general course of events. The religion overtly endorsed in

Milubi's poetry is Christianity, although there are instances in his poetry that implicitly symbolise yearnings for the return to Tshivenda Traditional Religion (TTR), thus exhibiting a sense of dual consciousness. The contrast and incompatibility between Christianity are evinced mainly by the fundamental beliefs, principles, and approaches espoused by these religions' adherents. For instance, Christianity, succinctly put, is a belief in a deity that can be approached and accessed through Jesus Christ, whereas TTR encapsulates numerous aspects, some of which are viewed as antithetical to Christianity, i.e. ancestor veneration, rituals, and ceremonies. Throughout his poetry, Milubi makes serious and rarely superficial reflections about God, the Christian God, which he foregrounds as indices into his deepened sense of spiritual experience.

Notwithstanding, in the study of Milubi's poetry, one still sees his desire to attain some sense of spiritual reality, or gratification. In the process, he cajoles his reader towards agreeing with him about his concept of spiritual reality and fulfilment. For Milubi, an awareness of the impending future, and his 'enlightenment', cause him to receive and promote a totally different concept of life from his fellow people who adhere to TTR—his is a life which is comparatively free from cosmic alienation. In Milubi's poetry, then, the cosmological argument is that human beings may be lost but can still reorient themselves and learn about God and themselves, to the degree that they will be able to raise themselves from the debris of 'lostness' and lead a telling life in and with God. The perspective and approach advanced here are basically that of a (Christian) modernist. In the poem "Muvhuso wa nama" (Kingdom of flesh), Milubi thematises alienation from God thus:

*Muvhuso wa nama
U kukuṭa vhawo sa ndungula
Vha vho mangala vho no vha maḍa muṭavhani
Sa khovhe vha tshi khou ratha-ratha nga mitshila
Vha tshi lilela u vhuedzedzwa maḍini.*

*Yawee! ndi ngani hoyu muvhuso wa nama hoyu
U tshi fhuredza wa kukuṭa vha maḍana na maḍana
Ngeno muvhuso u ḍaho
Sa vhulungu ha maḍi
U tshi dobedza vha si gathi.*

The kingdom of flesh
Gathers its own like sardines
Who are surprised to find themselves on the sand
Like fish flapping their caudal fins
Longing to be returned into the water.

Oh! why is it that this kingdom of flesh
Deceives and draws multitudes upon multitudes
While the coming kingdom
Like translucent beads
Gathers only a few. (24)

The poet argues that people who do not believe in the Christian God are alienated from Him, live in spiritual exile, and are, as a result, constantly fraught with despair. In showing himself to be a poet earnestly concerned about Christianity, Milubi's purpose in holding up to disparagement any individual who does not believe in his God is to 'expose' their pious alienation from God. That he views life and people from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy further implies that, for him, life's meaning is centred in people's salvation in Christ and much of what he sees in life is in relation to that. As a poet with Christian interests, he finds in contemporary life distortions which are distasteful to him, and his aim is to reveal these as distortions to people who are used to treating them as normal. Since the poet makes no concession to a non-Christian perspective in the above poem, alienation from God becomes even more significant than it otherwise is; here the reader deals numerous times with the so-called 'righteous' person who can be so influenced by inflexibility that they alienate themselves from other people and from the very God they talk about. In the poem, people perceived as outside God's grace are seen as spiritually

alienated and are recurrently spoken of as souls in torment. Hence, the poet likens non-Christian people's need for God to fish outside their natural habitat, water.

These people's alienation from God, according to the poet, originates from putting their faith in the wrong thing, that is, 'the kingdom of flesh' (Satan's kingdom). In the poet's mind, people need faith in Christ to overcome the frustration they currently experience due to their alienation from God. That these people are compared to fish struggling for life outside water depicts the type of spiritual wasteland in which non-believers exist, in the poet's view. At any rate, as evidenced in the poem in his treatment of the subject of alienation, is a recurrent confidence in the creeds articulated by Christian existentialists such as *muvhuso u qaho* (the coming kingdom [of Christ]), endurance as a mark of faith, prioritisation of the kingdom of God over 'carnal' pursuits, etc. This is particularly evident in yet another poem, "Vhatendi" (Believers) where he says a true believer is "*o tokaho sa tshifhambano midzi ya mbilu yawe Golgotha*" (one whose heart's roots are firmly grounded like the cross in Golgotha) (*Muungo wa Vhuhwi* 14). The nouns *tshifhambano* (the cross), *mbilu* (heart), and *Golgotha* are used intentionally to bolster the view that total and genuine belief in Christ gives meaning to the believer's life. Milubi thus prescribes faith in Christ as a solution to humans' despair as he mediates on cosmic alienation. To make more poignant these aspects, the poet likens seeking the kingdom of God in *Muvhuso wa nama* ([A] Carnal kingdom) to the weaving of *vhulungu ha maqi* (transparent beads), which in Tshivenda culture is known to be quite a daunting task, especially when one has eye problems or is impatient. This perhaps explains why, according to the poet, innumerable multitudes opt for the path of least resistance whose gate is wide and yet leading to destruction.

Interspersing the poem with *yawee* (oh!) denotes the overflow of human emotions and feelings to emphasise the perception that the people who do not believe in Christ experience a sense of desolation, terror, and despair. These interspersions are meant to vicariously reveal to the reader the dilemma that people without God are living in a spiritual void. The poet is thus interested in arousing the reader to these people's spiritual struggle because of their alienation from God.

Alienation from God essentially, albeit arguably, refers to the inability of modern people to experience the 'divine'. According to the poet, it occurs whenever people lose their ability to desire God—predominantly a concern of the modern cosmologist. It is also evident when people lose the ability to witness with respect people's capacity for self-transcendence. This form of alienation also includes the inability to experience or understand the religious impulse in others—those invisible bonds of sentiment and fellow-feeling which prompt people to be concerned with and underwrite one another's welfare.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show that the modern Muvenda poet Milubi gives vent to feelings of alienation that arguably characterise the life of modern people. A representative sample of his poetry reveals that he is particularly concerned with his own alienation from society, alienation from romantic love, and people's alienation from God. Throughout his poetry, Milubi positions himself as a person who is constantly faced with the existential dilemma: what can people do about their feelings of alienation? As a remedial intervention, Milubi's poetry suggests to the reader that adherence to good morals; avoidance of romantic love altogether, or at least taking it with a pinch of salt; and genuine faith in God can help one avoid the predicament of human isolation and alienation. That I merely scratched the surface of the subject of alienation in selected Tshivenda poetry in this article shows that this theme is yet to be sufficiently studied in Tshivenda literature and in the whole gamut of African literature in general. This article attests to the growing realisation that African-language literatures can be read beyond the parochial and ethnic exceptionalisms entrenched on Africans' psyche by coloniality and apartheid. Further, the discussions herein represent ideas that these literatures can be examined more profitably from the perspective of multiple disciplines rather than one. African-language literatures exhibit a basic and complex interest in how people express their identity, culture, and philosophy beyond and in spite of the liminal spaces that confine and alienate them. Therefore, it seems that multi- and interdisciplinary approaches might be usefully combined to illuminate these literatures' common interest effectively.

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