

***Searching for the rain: An anthology of verse by
Axaro W. Thaniseb. Windhoek: Macmillan Education
Namibia Publishers, 2011; pp i-xiv + 80***

Reviewed by Selma Ashikuti
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Searching for the rain is an anthology of verse by Namibian poet Axaro W. Thaniseb who currently directs the National Theatre of Namibia (NTN).

In this anthology, Thaniseb dares to address issues in post-independence Namibia that many would rather not hear nor talk about. He demonstrates bravery as he calls a spade a spade as he explores different controversial themes. The same bravery is shown when he intelligently uses vernacular languages when he switches between languages in the book. In this realistic contemporary work, he shows both his great talent in writing and also his understanding and analysis of Namibian society, its passions, struggles and achievements and manages to do so impartially.

Thaniseb's style of writing is not only easy to read and thought provoking but it is also realistic. In this 46 poem anthology, Thaniseb covers themes raging from dreams, social inequalities, love, self-discovery, fear, pain, war to nationalism. As he travels not only across Namibia but across the world, he pens the poems we find in *Searching for the rain*, the reader is therefore taken on a journey and into the thought life of the author as he writes with brutal honesty about his feelings, observation and judgements on life especially within Namibia. In this dominantly post-independence Namibian poetry, Thaniseb intricately uses many voices and as a result allows the reader an opportunity to hear not only his voice but many others' such as that of a man in post-independence Namibia, a young man from the *kasie*, a man in love and a father who adores his daughter.

In part one termed *of love and dreams*, we get into Thaniseb's world and understand him as a father, author and a Namibian citizen. Part two, *the journey of a man*, is just that, a journey of man on a quest to understand the past, find meaning in the present and be courageous enough to hope and dream in a new Namibia. The third part, *of hope and faith*, introduces the reader to the people searching for the rain in their work, personal, social lives and struggles. Finally in part four, *places and memories*, the journey in search of the rain continues as Thaniseb takes us to different places as he tells the stories of the people of places such as Katutura, Arandis, Uis, Luderitz and Cape Town. The four parts that make up *Searching for the rain*, therefore take us on a journey on and during which we uncover the emotions of different people in different places as they *search for the rain*. Also, by the end of the four parts, we discover Axaro W. Thaniseb as an author, family man, and a proud citizen of Namibia.

Selma Ashikuti is an English Lecturer at the University of Namibia. She holds a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Her areas of interest include sociolinguistics and Namibian literature. E-mail address: sashikuti@unam.na

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From the man in post-independence Namibia in *A black man's burden*, we hear the disappointments resulting from broken promises, lost dreams and a realisation of the mismatch between what was hoped and fought for and what eventually became of it. See excerpt from *A black man's burden* below.

In 1988, he went to war with the enthusiasm
Of the young, the restless and the innocent
To liberate his country, He said
He returned in 1992, with little more
Schooling than his comrades (from the frontline)
To develop his people, He said
He builds a house on the hill next to *the evil white man*
He so much scorns- the world he so dearly
Embraces.

In the same thought provoking poem, we also learn of the change in "burdens" as faced by the *black man* (a metaphor for post-independence Namibians). We learn in this poem that, the burdens in post-independence Namibia, although different, are nonetheless still burdens. See excerpt below.

The struggle is over, he beams.
Shooting the breeze about shares, quotas,
Property investments and land expropriation
For hobby farming;
And,
Of late-
Black Elite Empowerment
And intervals,
Complaints of all ills of a *modern black man*;
Ulcers...
Hypertension...
Gout and
Affirmative action!!

The anthology presents various types of poems, with most being free verse, one stanza poems but Thaniseb none the less does not fail to explore different forms of poetry to send his message across. In *of thieves and heroes* we observe an interesting and intelligent use of form, sound devices and punctuation to create a rhyme scheme and to bring to the fore the tone and mood of the poem.

... The children and the children
are all out in the streets
wondering
wandering
wanting
nowhere to go
... The streets are empty
in our land of plenty
that is
... The young men and women, the young women and men
shouting
screaming
wanting
caught in the grip of the ever spiraling ignorance

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In this poem, the author allows the reader to read the poem at the pace set by him (the author). In addition, the use of irony calls on the reader to pause and ponder on the meaning of the irony. The use of the refrain *young men and women* further emphasises the theme of the poem.

Like other post-independence poets before him such as Mvula ya Nangolo and Keamogetsi Molapong Thaniseb pays close attention to the theme of *independence* and what it means to an average Namibian. He however explores many other contemporary themes. Whilst clearly showing his patriotism, Thaniseb does not hold back when addressing controversial themes and issues such as tribalism, ignorance and corruption. For example, in *In the land of the brave and the free*, he talks, with what may be considered brutal honesty, about the *ignorance that has taken root in the minds and heart of our people*. Below is an excerpt from the afore mentioned poem.

I search for words like the wind
to ignite the spirit and the soul of our people
but fall spent and wanting,
for in the minds and hearts of our people
Ignorance has long taken root...

Thaniseb's ability to tell multiple stories in one poem is demonstrated in *The Kasie boitjie* which tells stories of broken promises and the resulting struggles of young men, women and children. In *Nine and thirty going on forty* the reader meets a witty, laid back yet vulnerable Thaniseb as he sincerely addresses his fear of ageing as seen in the excerpt below.

I met this young man at the gym the other day
"I am going to Cape Town... a job placement"
He beamed bright-eyed. "Hah", grunted I
Amidst my huffing and puffing on the treadmill.
He quizzically glanced at my jolly beer belly,
"Huh", said I peering at my image reflected in the mirror,
"I am going forty, it is a scary thought for a man."
"Hmmm it is ok" he smiled less enthusiastically.
I sat amidst the gay chatter and spring bloom of the park
Next to the August house and read:
"The One Hundred And One Things To Do
When You Are Thirty Something Going Forty",
But found no solace but more questions,

In this humorous poem, Thaniseb deals with a lighter theme compared to all other themes throughout the book. It is worth noting that in talking candidly about his fear of aging he not only allows the reader to see a more personal side of him but, very importantly, he lifts the lid off a common myth that only women are concerned about ageing and therefore opens the topic up for debate. Thaniseb further then shows a tender side and allows the reader to do some introspection in *Ti khoen* in which he poses poignant rhetorical questions to those that he calls *my people*. In this poem, Thaniseb carefully yet purposefully chooses a refrain in his first language namely Khoekhoegowab, *matisa maba tu ha (?)* which translates as *how are you, where are you?* The use of the vernacular as opposed to English as a language of choice in the refrain allows the poet to stress the rhetorical question, its importance

and allows him to talk directly to his people, in this case speakers of the Khoekhoegowab language.

Another applaudable aspect of *Searching for the rain* is Thaniseb's use of vernacular languages in the anthology. Throughout the book, he switches between English and vernacular languages such as Khoekhoegowab, Oshiwambo, Afrikaans, German and even Namibian slang English and Afrikaans. Consequently, poems such as *The invisible*, *Ti Khoen*, *Katutura*, *Jannie Pos* and *The Loyal cadre* allow Thaniseb to engage not only English readers but any multilingual Namibian reader. The glossary of non English terms provided means that the monolingual reader is never left to their own devices in understanding the poetry in which vernacular languages are used.

Notably, throughout the book took, Thaniseb took a bold step as he forsakes some conventions of poetry and therefore assumes poetic license especially because he seldom writes in verse. This is despite the fact that *Searching for the rain* is classified by the author as *An anthology of verse*. In fact, in the opening lines of the poem *Writing a love poem*, which is of course a free verse, Thaniseb sarcastically addressed the lack of a rhyme and rhyme scheme in his poetry or more specifically the said poem when he begins with *This is not a love poem for it has neither rhyme nor rhythm*. In exercising his poetic license, Thaniseb therefore had the liberty to pen poetry without having to conform to conventions such as the use of sound devices and the overbearing need in poetry to create a rhyme scheme. It is commendable that Thaniseb's nonetheless succeeds in addressing the themes with no less success, conviction nor eloquence.

In short, *Searching for the rain* is a great anthology that covers very important themes many of which had not been covered much in post-independence Namibian poetry. This rich and invaluable edition to Namibian literature informs and inspires and should therefore be read and studied at great lengths by all generations.

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In this anthology, Thaniseb dares to address issues in post-independence Namibia that many would rather not hear nor talk about. He demonstrates bravery as he calls a spade a spade as he explores different controversial themes. The same bravery is shown when he intelligently uses vernacular languages when he switches between languages in the book. In this realistic contemporary work, he shows both his great talent in writing and also his understanding and analysis of Namibian society, its passions, struggles and achievements and does so impartially.

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