

**INTERPLAY OF VOICES**

## Gothataone Moeng brings stories from Botswana to a wider audience with 'Call and Response'

By Olivia Snaije

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Motswana novelist Gothataone Moeng. (photo: Kieron Walquist)

**Tensions between past and present, tradition and modernity, and urban and rural spaces provide the basis for the debut collection of short stories by the thoughtful, young Motswana writer.**

The title refers to a conversation in music, and Moeng chose it, she says, because it was initially the title of one of her stories which was a dialogue between the past and present, but that it worked for many of the stories in the collection.

Although Moeng is young, her prose is mature – spare and subtle, with both universal and local appeal. Beautifully crafted, they somehow echo US author Elizabeth Strout's

stories. They pull the reader, seemingly effortlessly, into the **intimacy of a character**, focusing on details and everyday life which open onto wider issues, whether rural Botswana, or in Strout's case, rural Maine in the US.

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Moeng grew up in Serowe, a large traditional village immortalised by the late South African-born writer **Bessie Head**, in her 1981 novel, *Serowe: Village of Rain-Wind*, where she settled until her death.

Speaking to *The Africa Report* from Serowe, Moeng says that Head had been a great inspiration to her; when she discovered Head's work as a teenager, she realised that her village could be an interesting subject to write about.

## Honing her voice in Botswana and the US

She had been writing since primary school when she emulated Enid Blyton and *The Famous Five* series that she was reading. "In my childish attempts, I was writing about snow, but I had never seen snow."

Still, she didn't think that writing fiction could be a viable career path and studied journalism instead. "Based on where I was, in Botswana, I thought it was the most reasonable and legitimate way I could write."

Unlike South Africa, its significantly larger neighbour, Botswana with a population of less than three million doesn't have a publishing infrastructure. Besides branches of international houses that publish academic books, there aren't editors working in literary fiction says Moeng, adding that **many local writers self-publish**.

Wanting to polish her craft after attending university in Gaborone, Moeng looked further afield, moving to the US to enter an MFA creative writing programme, which was followed by several fiction writing fellowships.

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Spending time away from Botswana gave her "the gift of clarity, in terms of how to approach certain subject matters, and has, at times, made me bolder in terms of what [she] would write about," Moeng said in an interview in 2020 when she first published "Small Wonders", one of her short stories about a young widow, in the literary magazine *One Story*.

Growing up in Botswana in the 1990s, Moeng observed her country's evolution from coming out of an HIV/Aids crisis to a remarkable public health policy that includes an efficient antiretroviral (ARV) treatment regimen, **the co-existence of traditional cultures alongside contemporary global culture**, the importance of cattle and cattle posts in Botswana, and women's questioning and desires in a changing society.

## Her life reflected in her writing

Two of her stories feel like chapters taken from a novel. "I'm not interested in a singular moment in a character's life. I'm interested in what comes before and after," says Moeng.

"It's generous to look at a character's **life in a transformation** that comes from many different moments."

In the last story of the collection, "The First Virginity of Gigi Kaisara", the protagonist, who Moeng says is the most autobiographical, is given a government bursary at age 13 to attend a private boarding school in the capital, Gaborone, where she becomes acquainted with girls from the upper-middle class. Gigi's desire for transformation – changing her name, cutting her hair, and deciding to fall in love – is perhaps indicative of Moeng's determination to become a writer.

In several stories, Moeng's characters travel abroad to study and are deeply homesick. In "Dark Matters", when Nametso returns to Botswana from the US, she **takes a handful of earth, inhales it deeply**, craving its "grainy creaminess".

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"When I'm away I get very homesick," says Moeng. "Serowe is a place that I really love. I feel different, grounded. I feel part of a whole, part of a community. But when you're from such a small place ... I felt like I needed to leave because of the difficulties of publishing here and I wanted to go get into an MFA programme."

Moeng returned from the US to Serowe during the pandemic and stayed to care for her mother who has Alzheimer's. In "Homing", three sisters discuss what to do with their mother who is becoming senile.

In a seamless transition, Moeng switches to the mother's thoughts.

"Once in a while, she was stunned at how much life had changed. With tender affection, **she remembered the girl she had been**, who had been fierce and loud at all the games of *batho-safe* and *skontiball*, dress tucked into her panties. Days spent outside, undeterred

by the heat. Her grandsons were indoor creatures, scuttling over phones and television games. Now and then she tried to trace the meaning of her life.”

## The politics of writing in Setswana

Moeng deftly includes words in Setswana here and there in her dialogue, which the reader easily intuits. Incorporating non-English words without italicising them into writing is a subject that Moeng says she examined often during workshops in the US.

“It’s a question of audience. Do I write for an American audience, and do I have to explain everything? It’s a very political question. **Is the American audience the centre of the publishing world?** I understand my publisher is American and that they’re going to publish my book within the US, but I think of my real audience as the Botswana audience.”

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Moeng adds that she explained her thinking to her editor, who sometimes asked her to clarify certain words but otherwise understood.

“The onus lies with me. I have to figure out if something is a failure of craft or if it is too opaque. I think it’s a case-by-case situation and a question I’ll be dealing with for the rest of my career. **I write in English, but I write from a very specific place.**”

Moeng is at work on a novel set in Gaborone while the main character is from Serowe.

Serowe, the birthplace of two of Botswana’s five presidents, is “a fascinating place”, says Moeng. “I’m interested in its history and how that history is exerting pressure on the present.”

As a young writer who is inspired by African authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Wame Molefhe, it’s an exciting time to be a writer in Botswana, says Moeng.

She mentions a **forthcoming African futurist horror** novel by Motswana author, Tlotlo Tsamaase, to be published in the US, and adds that Western readers have access to books written about Botswana by authors from the country itself.

Moeng’s UK publisher, One World, holds Commonwealth rights and will be distributing *Call and Response* via the South African publisher Jonathan Ball. There was a celebratory book launch held for her in Gaborone at Exclusive Books, a South African-owned bookshop.

“I’m curious about the understanding that readers in Botswana will have.”

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