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Topic:

THE TEASPOONS OF SWEETNESS:
UKUTHWALA CUSTOM

Speakers:

Tim Huisamen
Bulelwa Nosilela
Russell Kaschula

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

**“SIX TEASPOONS OF SWEETNESS”: THE UKUTHWALA
CUSTOM (AMAXHOSA LEGAL MARRIAGE “ABDUCTION”) IN
FACT AND FICTION**

PRESENTED BY:

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ABSTRACT

This presentation involves both fact and fiction. The concept of UKUTHWALA is an age-old amaXhosa marriage custom. It involves the “legal abduction” of the bride-to-be where the prospective husband’s friends “abduct” the unsuspecting bride once the marriage has been negotiated between the two families (traditionally an arranged marriage without the knowledge of the bride). The presentation will introduce this custom for discussion, whilst at the same time locating the discussion within the context of the value of cultural beliefs in a changing world.

Due to socio-economic and political pressures, this tradition has changed over time. This presentation explores, through the medium of a short story entitled “Six Teaspoons of Sweetness” the types of changes that have influenced the tradition.

The presentation also involves a literary critique of the short story.



BULELWA NOSILELA

Firstly, this topic has raised so many questions in my mind, firstly I would like to ask, who am I? There are many ways of actually answering that question, the question of who am I? Who are we? Each and every individual, who are you? So who am I? I am an isiXhosa woman and I abide by the traditions and customs and the values of an Xhosa woman, and also, I am also a (Xhosa), that is my clan name, I am a (Xhosa), that's me when you are praising me, I am (Xhosa). And also who defines me, I share a language, traditions, behaviours, perceptions and beliefs with you (Xhosa). And also, what does all of this mean? What does it say to us? What does it say about me? It means that I am unique, I have an identity, it means that I have an identity which makes me unique from other people with different culture. But, is the culture that I subscribe to now, the one that was followed by my forefathers, who actually came with this culture? Who actually came with all these ways of living, the ways of life, the values that I am following right now? Surely, culture like everything else does not remain stagnant as it evolves and it's constantly revolving and it's influenced by other cultures and its influenced by the environment we live in. And now, what culture am I talking about? I've just said that I am an (Xhosa) and I abide by the rules of a (Xhosa) and abide by the rules of the clan that I belong to (Xhosa).

But now what culture am I talking about if it is no longer the one that was transferred by my ancestors, is the culture that I abide by now the same culture that was used by my ancestors and why should I question the custom now. If I start questioning the custom then people are going to start saying that (Xhosa). If I start questioning the custom, I might also be called names, I might be called (Xhosa), meaning that what's there, what will happen to me if I don't abide by the rules that I am supposed to be following, by the values that I am suppose to be following. Also I am not scared, am I sorry, am I not scared of the wrath of the ancestors if I start now questioning my culture. What will happen to me? So as with all the other cultures as with our isiXhosa culture, it is usually said that if you do not do what you are required to do, especially as a woman, something terrible will actually happen to you, does that really happen? Should I follow even if I see that I am going to be sick? Should I follow even if I see this is leading to destruction?

So what should I do? What should I abide by? So should I conform even if the tradition seems or look as if it is barbaric? So is my custom barbaric? I can not be scared of questioning this custom or this tradition if the intentions of practicing this custom are not as pure as they have been happening before.

Ukuthwala was widely practiced by amaXhosa in the olden days. The family of the groom would negotiate with the one of the bride, without the knowledge of the woman, and mostly this was done in two ways. For example the first one, it was done by abduction by force, and with this the groom or the member of the grooms family or the grooms friends, they would actually ambush the girl, when she has been sent for an errand by the family because the family would have pre-knowledge of the fact that their daughter was going to be (Xhosa) at that particular time. The two families would have planned exactly how and when this was going to take place. She was then forcibly taken to the young mans home where woman would be waiting. These women would calm her down and greet her with tenderness which is not exactly what is happening right now. Immediately the woman has been abducted, she is taken by the man, and she is taken to the bedroom of the man. Then that was not the initial thing that used to happen. She had to be calmed down first by other woman who would be telling her that we've gone through this route as well; you are going to be fine my child. But is that still happening right now? No, so, this made her to feel welcomed before she was taken to the man's hut. This was done with utmost respect especially for the family who has given them their child as a bride.

So also the second way of doing this was by fate abduction. So in this case, it's a matter of eloping but they would not like to term it eloping (Xhosa). So they would not like to call it that because the woman would be ashamed of having had to elope or he would not want to embarrass her family. So as a result, he would ask the groom to actually abduct her so in that case they would eventually, the family of the man would go to the family of the woman and say, do not look for her, she is safe. She is with us. Also, because of the woman wanting to escape from an arranged marriage, this could have been another factor whereby now the families have negotiated and the woman does not want to marry the

man, so she would go to the man that she loves and tell him that this is what is happening with her family, so can't he actually abduct her. So that was done as part of love, it was not done forcibly, and many writers have actually written about this like Professor Kaschula has done right now. So there is a book, an isiXhosa book which is called (Xhosa) in this case, the two families negotiated without the consent of both the groom and the bride. And it resulted in tragedy. And also another thing that made two parties to do the ukuthwala custom was to force the father of the girl to give approval to the marriage if the father did not want or did not like the man or to hasten matters if the girl was pregnant and also to avoid the wedding expenses. So this is still the reasons for us as to the ukuthwala custom, we need to ask ourselves those questions.

So the custom is now distorted like many other traditional practices, many a good deed is corrupted by greed, the way that it is done now makes it a form of violence against women because firstly, the man is usually much older than the woman and secondly, usually the man has HIV. And in the olden days, labola which was bought by the man to the bride's family would be paid and if the woman is not treated well by the groom, then the woman is (Xhosa) now the woman would go home and then the husband would have to go to the woman's place and then pay some counts to ask for forgiveness so most of the men they didn't want to actually treat the woman badly because they were actually weary of the fact that would have now to pay extra labola money which is now the money for forgiveness. These marriages in the olden days, they used to work, then as a woman was never submerged as she was regarded as having a higher sense of morality. Can we then blame our customs because of the greed of our people, is the culture evil or is the isiXhosa custom barbaric? Are our people barbaric? What about what is going on now with the marriage of convenience, is that more or less, you cannot put that in the same scale? More people marrying because of social positions. Why is labola a priced according to what qualifications a woman has? Something is defiantly wrong with how we are doing things and the kind of traditions that we are following these days. Who is right and who is wrong? Let us here from the story and let you be the judge.

Six Teaspoons of Sweetness

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Two old men and an entourage. They speak in quiet tones. Hunched over, sitting on the bare earth, knobkierries at their sides, they negotiate. It is a deliberate, measured, yet unsure process. They dance closer and closer then flit away, like moths to a flame. They sit aside from the thatched rondawels, under a weary old autumn-rust-leaf-clad oak-tree, near the wattle-pole fenced cattle kraal. A place for men. A place of words, fluttering softly down, disappearing into the dry, red, cracked earth, a place of *secrets*.

“It’s good to see you Bhuti,” the old man, my own Father, begins the conversation. There are other men, my older brother, Duma – *negotiators*. As for my Father, yes, my own Tata, he speaks as he drags heavily on his pipe filled with home-grown Xhosa tobacco, cured in the hot sun that beats down on the rusted chicken-coup rooftop. The tobacco smoke drifts steadily upwards, escaping the circle of men.

It is my fate that is being negotiated and sealed, but I know nothing of it. Though I can speak, I remain mute – one who does not speak, who is not spoken to. It is a debate about me, by men, for men.

I make nothing of it, for words often float about, light as feathers, meaningless.

I am Sweetness Faku, born of Mpondo royalty. I live in a village called Gcobane, not far from spiritual Port St Johns, but closer to the manic trading-town of Lusikisiki.

My Tata loves me and calls me, *mntwan’ am omncinci*, ‘my precious little one’. I love him too and do all that I can to please and respect him. Duma looks after Tata’s livestock.

The cattle are many and fat, roaming freely, grazing in the lush valleys and traversing the hills and dales, chewing their cud. They are free, but not altogether so.

Freedom, an enigma to all living things. *Cattle*. Animals that will seal my fate. Animals that dictate how we should live, how we should die, and how we should commune with the living-dead.

Mother died when I was much younger. I'm the one who now helps Tata's wife in running the household and doing the daily chores. She is like a man. I am surrounded by manly creatures. She walks like a man. She speaks like a man. Maybe that's why Tata likes her. Men stick together, like bees to a hive.

She's always chiding me:

"You lazy child, I told you that the porridge must be ready by six. You know that Tata takes his breakfast at that time."

She never knew that Tata and I drank our tea an hour earlier, tea that contained six teaspoons of sugar, stirred with teaspoon held firmly, yet oddly, between my left thumb and index finger, a finger with no tip and only half a nail (our secret) – tea sweet and lovingly brewed whilst she slept.

"The sugar's finished," she complains.

"*Kulungile...*" Tata replies. "It's okay. I'll send Sweetness to the Spaza Shop."

With six teaspoons of sugar is how he likes to take his tea. Six teaspoons of sugar. My stepmother never takes sugar with her tea and she never wakes early. She is opposite, like a man – not on my side, opposite of woman. Strange how death can often be in the pot – *ukufa kusembizeni*, I remember Mama saying. Then she left me alone – with death, Duma, pots, pans, Tata, tea, and stepmother.

I am not tall, but short. I am not beautiful, but plain. I have a ready smile, a playful, yet diligent spirit, and for this I am loved. I am Sweetness.

“*Yho Sisi!* Your head carries the heaviest bundle of wood,” my close friends Sindi and Babalwa commend me. I never feel the weight. I am strong and big-boned. A bundle of wood surely will not get me down.

I celebrated my fifteenth birthday last month. I have reached the age for negotiations.

After all my early morning chores are complete, I attend Grade eight classes at Ntsika Secondary School not far from Gcobane.

“Education is the only way to get ahead,” Mrs Balindlela tells us. “And you are a gifted child, Sweetness – you must work hard so that you can do well at school, so that you can make something of your life.”

Mam’ Balindlela’s commitment and encouragement keeps me going.

“I will be someone one day – someone like *you*,” I tell her.

In the December holidays we hold our intonjane. Now I will be a woman.

But I, too, am not only a girl or a woman, I am also a boy and a man, herding cattle and drinking beer, sitting under the oak-tree discussing, negotiating. I can hunt in the forest, catch fish in the stream, climb monkey ropes at speed and on bended knee smooth the dung floor of Tata’s rondawel. I am everything rolled into one. I am a forest, full of strength, courage, difference. My stepmother is a man too - it is only that she hides it well.

“You silly girl, I don’t know what kind of woman you’ll make,” stepmother shouts at me after I drop a dish; clang, clang, clang. I ignore her steely coldness. I never hear her

meaningless words floating down like brown autumn leaves falling freely, for I too can be both mute and deaf, woman and man.

Faces painted white with ochre we come to know womanhood. Like the moon we are painted into a picture of who we are to be, waxing all of the time, growing into ourselves – full of the pride of womanhood bestowed on us by our elders.

Sindi and Babalwa sit with me behind the curtain, drawn across the room, shielding us from our youth, from our first bare-breasted menstruation dance.

Three weeks pass. Our intonjane complete, we emerge – *women*, hidden from fluttering words falling softly between negotiators.

“Remember, it is always the rooster that crows first,” Tata says in his welcoming speech.

“You’ll be judged by the weight of the bundle of wood you carry on your head,” another old man tells us.

“I’ll replace that bundle of wood with books”, I say softly to Sindi.

“You’re crazy, *uphambene!*” she replies sternly.

Mam’ Balindlela presents me with a beaded set of pens that she has bought at a craft centre in the nearby city of Mthatha. They are beautiful, dotted with deep, red ochre, beads that speak of who I was, who I am.

On this day of the negotiations under the old oak-tree; a tree of wisdom that knows all but says nothing, my morning begins as does any other. I wake at four and build an outside fire. I bend on one knee and blow into the ashes from last night’s cooking embers. A tiny

red coal comes to life. I place it on some dried khaki bush and blow again; gently, the coal flickers and takes hold. I place some wattle kindling on the reddening flames, they rise, higher and higher. I add a few logs to the fire. Soon it roars. I carefully position the tripod over the flames. The blackened kettle filled with water, it now rests on hot steel. The water soon bubbles and boils, almost cheerfully. I make tea for Tata, adding six teaspoons of sugar. That is how much sweetness I add.

It is funny how those who work hard sometimes end up having to pay for it. They are given even more work, I think to myself. I think of my lazy stepmother who does as little as possible, letting me take the lead with all the chores, whilst she pretends to be busy, yet chastising me whenever she can – like a man. She smokes a pipe. That is what she does well. I joke with Sindi, telling her that I think it’s dagga in that pipe.

“You, no man, *hayi bo!*” she laughs, shaking her head from side to side.

Later that day I see the men sitting under the oak-tree of knowledge. It is a common sight and I make nothing of it.

A week later whilst I am collecting firewood in the dankness of the forest, I see a group of young men approaching. They look like hunters and I wonder what it is that they are hunting. It is a beautiful day, the birds are singing, I am singing.

It happens suddenly. Strong arms embrace me, flinging my body to the ground. I scream.

“What do you want, *nifuna ntoni?*” I cry out instinctively.

Silence holds me down. A strapping younger man looks into my eyes as I lie prostrate, pinned helplessly to the ground.

I fight – wriggling, scratching and trying to release myself from his firm grip. He is too strong.

“What’ve I done, who are you?”

Still, silence. Men silently and knowingly take a hold of me.

There is no use, I decide. The shock of what is happening to me begins to sink in. I stop struggling. Ukuthwalwa – customary marriage abduction – that is it. It is now a matter of cows, dowry – *negotiations*. I am only fifteen.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask, bewildered, betrayed.

A silence surrounds these mute men.

I always wanted to go to school in Lusikisiki.

Now I am going there to meet *him*, he who was negotiated for me from under the big old oak tree. I have abandoned my bundle of fire-wood, now silently burning inside me. We walk through the forest, perhaps I walk through this playful forest for the last time. But I am the forest; I the hunter, now the hunted. A man walks in front of me and one behind, in silence, as if a secret must be kept. They carry knobkierries. I dare not falter from the path that they’ve set for me. It is a path of destiny, a destiny that simply *is* – like bees make honey, like the butcher-bird butchers, and the stars sparkle and burn, shooting earthwards, whilst the moon waxes and wanes. There is simply no point in asking why the wind blows, or why the cuckoo bird takes over the nest of another.

We reach the main road near the Mzintlava River. I know that all hope is now lost. A taxi hailed, I am bundled into the back seat like a sack of maize, ready for grinding. Soon I am led into my new homestead on the outskirts of Lusikisiki.

Nearby is the former home of Khotso, the great diviner, the one who could see in the night. Can he see me now? I wonder. Did he, the great Khotso, the knowledgeable one, have the power, the insight to see me now from where he wandered amongst the living-dead women and men intertwined as one? Did he like what he saw?

We are left in a room alone. Silence overcomes me. There is nothing to say.

“Come and sit with me,” (my) husband orders. “Closer.” I move a little towards him.

He is old – old enough to be my Tata. He is short and rotund, with bad brandy breath. How could this be a husband, (my) husband? I think. How can my own Tata do this to me from under the old oak-tree? Leaves lost, dropped words to the ground, it now stands bare in the winter that is my saddened soul-spirit.

“Now kiss me,” he says, groping at me.

Until two in the morning I do not remember that night. I do not exist. But when I slip past this heavy, snoring man, breathing intermittently, I am wide awake like an owl, seer of the night. I know that I have to run. I move quietly, stealing away from the home where I do not belong. I feel the white ochre returning to my face, my entire body, hardening against my youth *and* my adulthood. I slip out the back door as a woman dressed in ochre, a ghost in my own world where I do not exist.

The night is pitch-dark. I move down the footpath, a spirit floating along in the whiteness of darkness, knowing that light will follow dark as it recedes back to the devil. Feet feeling their way, stones moving me along, stepping-stones across the small rivulet and then up onto the tarred road. I am away, flying like an owl, through the ghostly town of Lusikisiki and down towards the Mzintlava River.

There is a falcon ahead of me. I follow it as it swoops down onto a featherless, helpless chicken. It misses the bird and chases after a large white owl. The owl is tough and hard as stone. The falcon hits it like an egg hitting a rock-face. The falcon lands in front of me – entrails dangling between its legs. I flee after the white owl. I am the owl. I run on into the night.

I run like a woman possessed, feeling nothing and dressed in the lightest of clothing. I have left behind my long shweshwe marriage dress and black qhiya-dock with which I was forced to cover my head upon my arrival. I wear no shoes, yet I feel nothing. I fly like the white owl, running fast. Feet to earth I move along with determination. As darkness gives way to light I am approaching the Mzintlava River, then it will be past Luqoqweni village and further. As I come closer to Gcobane, morning approaches and darkness lifts like a shroud so that good people can peep out.

I know that I have to keep off the main tarred road, lest (my) husband's people find me and return me to *him*. They'll be looking for me by now. I concentrate on the tracks that are becoming more familiar. Would this still be home? I wonder. Would my ancestors accompany me to my sanctity?

I cross the river downstream as fast as I can – well aware of the monster, half-fish, half-cow. The monster craves children on their way to school. Their bodies found, drained of blood, with eyelids and lips ripped off. Many people, for generations have seen the monster with one eye. I pray that I will not see it as I cross the river, step by step on my journey. Ochre – the white ochre protecting me.

As I enter the moss-clad forest that I know so well, from which I had been taken the day before, I feel embraced. The golden autumn leaves and evergreens, the monkey rope

up which we playfully climb, yellowwoods and familiar boulders come down to greet me. I am alive again; rippling, vibrating, pulsating, bouncing from branch to branch. Familiar birds fluttering, shy little creatures peeping, they cheer me along as the dawn breaks.

I will tell Tata what happened. I'll tell him that he has sent me to a man that I do not love. I'll tell him that I want to go back to school, that I want to be a teacher some day, like Mam' Balindlela.

As I approach the homestead I see stepmother scurrying into Tata's rondawel. He emerges, scowling, takes one look at me and grunts.

"I am home Tata, I'm home," I say with great relief.

"*Ikhaya lakho liseLusikisiki*, your home's in Lusikisiki, this is no longer your homestead," comes his stern reply. "It is custom for you to be married, and custom is sacred. Your lobola's been paid. You see those cattle in the kraal? I cannot send them back unless you can give me a reason..."

"But, Tata, I'm not happy. He's an old man and I want to go to school..."

"*Uthetha ntoni*, what nonsense is this you speak, child? You are now a married woman, married to a respected man. It does not look like your husband beat you. There has not even been time to show he abuses you in any way..."

Tata asks Duma to watch over me. Later the taxi arrives. Tata and Duma accompany me back to Lusikisiki. Again I wearily cross the Mzintlava River. I wish the monster had earlier swallowed me up. I sit mute in the back-seat. I do not speak.

“*Ndiyaxolisa*, I apologise for my daughter’s behaviour,” Tata says upon our arrival as we exit the car.

The other women from the homestead sit on the bare ground, legs outstretched but unseen, hidden by long shweshwe dresses, making me feel the world closing tightly in. Husband stands to one side. Both Tata and (my) husband lean on their knobkierries.

“*Hlal’ apha*, sit here,” I’m instructed, seating myself slightly apart from the other women. I am numb, as though I belong in cold-storage. Coffee and tea are brewed for the visitors. I too wish to be a visitor.

“Here’s your coffee,” one of the younger girls says, handing me a mug of black, sugarless coffee. It is customary for the newly married umakoti to be denied sweetness.

“I do not want it, *andiyifuni*,” I answer defiantly. I can see Tata and (my) husband glowing with anger, like red-hot embers. I am defiant. I will not drink it. I would rather die than drink this bitter coffee. I take the mug and gently spill the coffee onto the ground. It snakes past me, forming a small puddle on the hard earth. It will not disappear. It will not just sink into the earth and disappear.

“*Jongani*, look – she’s urinated!” one of the women exclaims in shock.

“It is not urine, it is coffee,” I correct her. They move closer to inspect.

“*Uza kuyiphunga* – you will drink it!” Tata yells. In a sudden fit of rage his knobkierrie comes down on my bare, shaven head. Blood spurts and mingles with the red earth. I pass out. My blood pools with the black coffee, it will not disappear.

When I wake I am in a dark room. My hands are tied. Before they leave, Duma enters.

“A husband is to be respected,” he concludes.

The older women in the village call me Nosipho. The name Sweetness is now gone. I am Nosipho, the gift to them. For one week I work as hard as I can and do exactly as I am told. I never once look (my) husband in the eyes. I refer to him as Bhuti, and struggle in silence to keep his name, even the sounds of his name, from my lips - ukhlonipha. In pained respect, I acquiesce.

On Saturday morning, exactly one week after my return to Lusikisiki, I am sent to the Spaza Shop a short distance away together with another woman, my guardian and keeper. It is pay-day, month-end and the shop is abuzz. As we enter I duck around the back and disappear like a mist into the throngs of people. I am gone. I run. Again, I cover myself in ghostly ochre and follow the white owl. For nine years I disappear, the nameless one, not spoken to, but only about.

If I were a spirit isiphorho from the other world, then I would hear them speaking:

“I’ve heard some news,” Duma tells Tata sometime after my disappearance.

“Your daughter’s in Cape Town. She’s run away to Cape Town where she now works as a domestic worker.”

“Who told you that?”

“She’s been seen, Tata. She’s been seen in Gugulethu Township. I’ve been told to tell you that she’s there. I know where she is,” Duma continues.

“Then you must fetch her and bring her back,” Tata concludes.

I flee further into the safety of the ochre spirit-world, swirling through tree-tops and dense forest foliage, seeking out ancestral sanctity.

Tata sells one of his prized possessions, a young bullock. Duma is given a sizeable amount of money in order to ensure my safe passage. Two weeks later Duma returns

from Cape Town wearing a new pair of shoes and shimmering black clothes, having spent all the money, every last sent. He has a simple message.

“Sweetness, Nosipho, is dead. She died of a mysterious disease earlier this year.”

I was again the nameless one, a spirit that lived in a hole in the corner of Tata’s rondawel.

It is here that my voice could be heard threatening and gossiping – a voiceless voice.

I was now the fingers of an unknown person protruding through darkened windows. I peered in from the outside, muted were my tones. I would not let them eat. I vomited in their plates of afval and gravy. I was the real Mamjiji, the voiceless voice of women. I took what I liked - I remained the unseen. I was born not to be heard, not to be seen, to exist.

The day of my departure from (my) husband’s home – the day I disappeared around the corner from the Spaza Shop – that was a day that I had to get away as fast as I could. I had a little money which I had tucked away in my doek. I hailed a passing taxi. I, the unknown passenger, was driven at great speed through Mthatha. I arrived in the village of Mqanduli at five in the afternoon. I knew that it was school holidays and that Mam’ Balindlela would be at her family home.

“What are you doing here my child? Where have you been in the last weeks?” she asked.

“I have a story to tell you, Mam’...” and so I began my tale.

“At the end of the day all I want to do is carry on with my schooling. I do not want to be married, never.”

“I’ll help you. I’m good friends with the principal here at Mqanduli and I have an aunt with whom you can stay,” Mam’ Balindlela offered.

“It will be good if my family never finds out,” were my final words.

When I completed my teacher-training course at Cicira College near Mthatha, I yearned to return to Tata and my ancestral home. It was just the way it was – much like the clouds gathered and the rain came down, bringing green growth to the forest. I was a Faku, descended of royal blood. I could not deny my ancestral home, even though it had denied me; woman, man, forest and spirit, all one. I am the dense forest. I, the majestic yellowwood and umngquma wild-olive, rooted.

The taxi drops me at the top of the hill. I walk down through the valley and into the forest. It smells the same. Branches again bend down to greet me, towering wild strelitzia, dense bamboo and sacred wild-olive. Birds twitter in delight. Long years and much has changed. New trees have grown and there is a freshness. There is a freshness about the forest.

I skip over the stepping stones that draw me across the gurgling stream then up towards Tata’s homestead, my home. He’ll be old now, I think. There’ll be no talk of marriage and lobola. The cows have long ago been driven back to Lusikisiki. My freedom ensured I feel safe and strong enough to endure any rejection.

As I approach the village some of the women recognize me. They begin wailing and run away. I try to greet them but to no avail. They continue to wail and move away,

holding their heads and stamping their feet in dismay – as if they have seen a ghostly isiporho.

“*Ubuyile*, she’s back, she’s back,” someone yells as they pass Tata’s rondawel. “She is back from the dead.”

An old man emerges, now leaning heavily on his walking stick. His hair white and matted, jacket torn, his frame bent. Was it Tata?

“*Mntwan’ am omncinci*, my precious little one,” he says in soft tones, as if he has missed me.

I take his hand in mine. A crowd is beginning to gather. Some of the wailing women return.

“Is it really you?” they ask.

“It is Sweetness. I have returned briefly to see Tata,” I reply.

“But you’re dead – your body was never found. That’s why you are a zombie today...”

“I am not a zombie. I am a qualified teacher.”

They look at me, dumbfounded.

“Where’s my brother Duma?” I ask Tata. “And what of my stepmother?”

“Alas, my child, Duma died three years ago. He grew as thin as a river reed and died,” Tata sadly pronounces. “Your stepmother left at about the same time. It was not easy for her to do the work. She never made tea. She took what she could and simply left. I am alone. I live as a man in a forest alone. Duma was the one who told us you had died in Cape Town...”

“But I’ve never been to Cape Town, Tata... I’ve been at school. I am a teacher now.”

Everyone looks on in amazement at my ghostly appearance, unconvinced that it is *my body, my mind, my mouth* that is now speaking. Could it be that I speak, that *my* voice can be heard?

“Let me see your index finger?” Tata commands. “I want to see your left hand.”

He holds my left hand up to his face.

“This is my daughter,” he announces. “This is indeed Sweetness – she has returned from school and not from the dead. When she was a child I gave her and Duma each an HB led pencil, for school. Impatient as she was, she could not wait for her turn to have her pencil sharpened by me. I was busy with Duma’s pencil. His was to be first. She took up a razor blade lying on the table and proceeded to sharpen her own pencil, holding the blade in her right hand. In the process she sliced her left-hand index finger. And how it bled. To this day half her nail is gone and she has a scar. This is indeed Sweetness,” he concludes, holding up my hand for all to see. “There’s the scar!”

The next morning I wake at four – when the rooster is crowing. I do not wait for the cock to finish with his noisy business. I creep out of bed and go to the hearth outside. On bended knee I blow awake the coals, perhaps for the last time. The blackened kettle boiled, I make a pot of strong Teaspoon-Tips tea, delicately strained into two mugs. I add milk and sugar for myself. I carefully stir in six teaspoons of sugar for Tata.

“Thank you my Sweetness.” That’s what he says when I take him his tea.

TIM HUISAMEN

I am not going to present an anthropological reading or an Africanist reading of the story, I am a literary person and so I am going to see in the story, there are certain things to look at so what I first want to do is just to look at Russell as a writer. Russell has published about 6 or 7 short novels since 2002. These novels, in these novels Russell takes from a position where he is both an isiXhosa speaker and an English speaker, and so these works very often interpret these cultures, either to first language young people, the speakers of the language, or to second language speakers that look at cultures within our country. So in the first place, I want to say Russell is in a transgressive position there sometimes. He is moving from one culture across to another and trying to open that culture. Seemingly, this short story then, he is criticizing an aspect of that culture looking at the ukuthwala custom and how it would then affect somebody. I think there is a second transgression that happens in the story, and that is a man writing a feminist story or a female story, and we can look at that and say, if we look at the story in the end, is it not the patriarchy in a sense silencing women's voices again and reestablishing the patriarchy.

I want to add something to my knowledge of Russell's work, and say that recently Russell is beginning to write a number of short stories, he asked me to read some of them, and this is where I spoke to him about 'six teaspoons of sweetness', and this is where this event comes from. In these new stories, Russell still does what he did in the past, which is to as it were, interpret as it were, represents the scorched culture experience. But there is a second thing happening here, there is a looking at identity. There is an interesting story he gave me to read which looks at identity of him as a white colonial settler looking back at his ancestors in the 19th century and there as it were, experience of being of identity in a multi-cultural Eastern Cape setting. And it seems to me then that if you look at this story, and only see it as a story of ukuthwala; we miss something of the story. Part of what the story tells us is sweetness's experience of culture, and then it seems that she finds the abduction culture perhaps in a more negative way. But there are many other culture experiences that she accepts, for example, we explore

other culture experiences, we look for example at the (umakoti) institution, the clothes she wears, the shweshwe skirt, the black opdoek and so no, these are all culture expressions that are explored. Also the culture of (Xhosa) the respect language of wives and brides that are new to the homestead but there are other culture aspects that are also explored which are not rejected by sweetness. These are mainly spiritual elements; there is an acceptance that to be of the amaXhosa or the amaMpondo that you are in contact with and you are part of a spiritual world of the ancestors. They can look after you, that is part of your culture being and your culture identity. It also seems that she does believe in certain shall we say beings, super-natural beings for example, when she crosses the river, she fears the wide-eyed being who can consume you, this is lot of folklore or part of folk reality. She is also aware of other culture elements around her, so what I am trying to say is that this story is not a rejection of amaMpondo or amaXhosa culture, it is an exploration of a very broad, very large cultural experience but it's also a exploration of being, so as a woman then she's looking at partly at what she is.

One of the first things we would see about it being a woman is to be separate from men and to be silent, so a recurring code or theme in the story would be men speaking, men greeting each other, men negotiating for what happens to women. When we see women, female characters, they are silent, they either do not answer or their opinions are not accepted or if we see for example, the scene right there at the end of the story when she comes back, note the linguistic, the speech patterns of the women, there are explanations, there are statements. It seems that women's language would be different. And to me, one of the important things is the statement at the end, that she has a voice, so it seems to me that in escaping the sense from this unwanted marriage, what she can establish or saying there's another ideal I want, I want to be a teacher, for that I have a role model in Mam' Balindlela so in a sense the story looks at female being, at female experience. But the most important aspect of looking at identity, at looking at female experience, would be to look at the spatial construct of the story. A very simple spatial construct is to see a traditional homestead, there is the cattle kraal, there are rondawels there is a tree where the men can speak. That's one aspect and it's routed in a very real world. We're put into a geographical recognizable space, somewhere between port St Johns and Lusikisiki. But

that would simply be one space, the second space would be the space of the forest, and then we see right from the beginning of the story, and images given us of identity. An image which she strongly identifies with the reality of the land, the reality of the forest and the forest is something living. The forest reflects emotions, the moss like words falling and not meaning anything, the leaves that are lost by the trees and so on. These become part of her being, so what am I saying? I'm saying that if you look at her as a woman in that society it might be that she is voiceless. What this very strong woman is saying to us is "I have a very inclusive being; I have a very broad sense of existence and of being". And it seems to me then that what she is also saying is that "I'm allowed to be more than what you reduce me to in your language". Then you see that she has been transgressing traditional gender roles, she has been climbing the monkey ropes, she's been checking with the cattle, she has been working with the world of nature. So it seems to me that if we look at literary terms at this story and we look at that spatial construct, we get not a voiceless person but a person with a very rich sense of being of purpose.

A second element we going to find I will come back to this sense of being, the sense of fullness. A second element she discovers is that masculinity is not an exclusively male thing, like women, like her step mother would embrace aspects of masculinity. The step mother can talk; the step mother is lazy like men. So it seems to me that the step mother is already manifesting not just a stereo-typical image of what it is to be a woman. She is also manifesting a wider sense of gender. She is in a sense reflecting negative aspects of masculinity, and what sweetness tells us over and over again is that she is more than just stereo-typically female gender. That part of her being is masculinity, that's stated so often in her experience of the forest, she is also experiencing being a man. By that I am not saying that she is bisexual, I'm not saying she is an Aphrodite, I am saying that in gender terms, that what the story is stating is that we have a common humanity. That we cannot reduce men to men and women to women, it seems that there is a richness that she achieves and a knowledge that she achieves quite early that part of her ancestry is masculine and that the ancestors approve of who and what she is. That her identity is not shameful, is not transgressive, its part of being what she is in these spatial terms of the story. So it seems to me that the achievement in the end is not just getting a voice, its also

manifesting the fullness of gender elements within herself and not having to keep the voice down, not having to shut up in this world. I'm sure there are twenty other points I was going to make, but it seems to me that then, that when Russell...this is the point I want to make. Where does this masculine transgression come from? It comes from her father; he must have allowed her to work with cattle. But above all he is the man who gives her, her first pencil, and that is confirmed later by Mrs. Balindlela who gives her the beautiful seven pens, but those pens are not just western pens, they are marked with red ochre, with appropriation by Xhosa culture and Mpondo culture of the pen, of the right to learn of the right to teach. And I think that what we are seeing here as Bulelwa also clearly pointed out, it's not the rejecting of an aspect of culture, but the culture is something living, it's like a forest that grows, that sheds its leaves and which she returns in the end stands green and beautiful. This woman is aware of herself as a person, not only as a woman but also as a Mpondo person, an isiXhosa speaker who has taken possession of her own culture, is proud of it, sees her identity expressed in this culture, but is not uncritical towards this culture, who again makes this culture alive and it says, I choose, I exist, I live my culture. I think in that respect if you look at the end, it's not I think her returning meeker, mild and gentle, making tea for her tata, it's also a woman coming back and saying that we are still in the process of becoming, a process of evolving and this is my last visit to a man who loves me very much and whom I love. Is he a representative of the patriarchy? Yes indeed but then in the sense of an evolving structure, he is to me the most tragic character there. He has lost two wives, he has lost a son to AIDS, he thought he had lost a daughter and so it seems to me in the end, her gentleness, the sweetness she is.

Just a last thing, six teaspoons of sugar, the story is very cleverly divided into six parts so in a sense the six teaspoons of sugar would become a little structural element of giving us steps in her evolving of her being, of her growing up process. In a sense this is a ... story, portrait of the woman as a young girl. It is also a coming of age story.