

## Unam Wena.

Mthunzikazi A. Mbungwana.

Durban: uHlanga, 2021. 88 pp.

ISBN 9780620928144.

*Unam Wena* is a single-author collection of 37 isiXhosa poems, divided into four sections. The themes in this collection are life in general, home, dreams, love and sexuality. This poetry collection is very different from most traditional collections. It requires the reader to allow their mind to think differently, it challenges the reader to change their mind about their knowledge of poetic creativity, difference, language use, spatial organisation and orthographic conventions. These are all packaged and incorporated creatively to provide the reader with a sense of painful celebration of freedom and difference.

The title of the book, *Unam Wena*, is a phrase which invites the reader to become part of the contents, to be with the author. This title can mean 'you are with me', 'you have me', 'you are within', 'you are following what I am saying' or even 'we get along', 'we understand each other'. This array of associated meanings provides the reader with a sense of interpretative freedom. However, when a reader is provided with so many alternatives, they are forced to become uncomfortable and even confused, and perhaps even lost—the opposite of what the title presumably hopes to achieve, to be with the author, to be intimate with the author. This sense of freedom, and perhaps confusion for a rigid mind, is also expressed through various ways of writing the title and the book: 'UNAM WENA' or 'unam wEna' (emphasis added). The phrase is written as 'Unam Wena' in the table of contents and as 'UNAM WENA' (26) in the title of the titular poem. "UNAM WENA" is an explicit poem about same-sex lovemaking. This poem is written with no capital letters and no punctuation apart from a full-stop at the end of the poem. As one reads through this poem, you are drawn to the repeated use of possessive pronouns such as 'yours', 'ours', 'mine'. The use of language in this manner is aligned with the intimacy as expressed in other poems such as "Imilebe Yethu" (our lips) and "Bhospeliti wam" (which is the isiXhosa word for the English 'brooch' or Afrikaans 'borsspeld').

Another theme is ikhaya (home). The home is a very special place for many people. When life turns sour many people think about the warmth of the home and family. This theme is expressed in a form of a yearning for a place to belong. Ordinarily, home is the place of comfort and safety. However, in this book, home is expressed in terms of remembering smells, the village,

memories of grandmother, grandfather, uncles and aunts, love and pain. The poem, "Ikhaya" (59) reflects the ordinary life associated with home, however, reference to 'ikhaya' is also made in many other poems.

The third theme, pain, is expressed in many ways throughout the book. The first three poems are about the pain associated with being queer, the rejection by society and family and the violence that queer people face. The poem, "Ndicholwe ndifile" (I was found dead) is a painful expression of rape and abuse, and how society views the queer—in terms of obscenity, decay, faeces that needs to be flushed (16). This level of violence is expressed in many other ways including in the titles of some of the poems, "Ihlwili" (blood clot), "Amanxeba" (wounds), "Isilonda" (a sore) and "Ameva" (thorns).

Coupled with the theme of pain is the expression of difference. The poem "Unongayindoda" (one who is like a man), the title of which is a slur used to refer to butch women, is an example of how society views the queer woman:

*UNongayindoda akamntu*

Yinto! Akayontombi, engengofamzi, engeyondoda  
NguNongayindoda.

*(UNongayindoda is not human*

It's a thing! She is not a girl, nor a woman, or a man  
She is like a man.)

In this poem, the author painfully expresses how society justifies the abuse of queer people, because "oonongayindoda" are not seen as human, they are seen as things. This level of abuse is also expressed in the poem "UMamise/uToki". The title of the poem suggest uncertainty. Using figurative language by referring to village dogs, the author shows how a male dog (uToki) is held in high esteem, as a provider, a protector and a keeper of the house. The female dog (uMamise) is Toki's puppy. Mamise is ridiculed for having big breasts from feeding Toki's puppies while Toki is praised as a hero. The use of UMamise/uToki in this manner, depicts the vicious cycle of misogyny and abuse of women.

Finally, the spatial organisation as well as the employment and subversion of orthographic conventions in the collection must be noted. The book is divided into four sections. Each of the sections open with a poem that expresses pain and difference. Looking at the table of contents, the first two sections lure the reader into thinking that there is uniformity. The last two sections, however, create an imbalance in many ways. Whereas punctuation is used sparingly throughout the book, the last two

sections are typical of a 'freestyle' approach that is associated with performance poetry. The author uses the alignment of sentences in a way that many would consider unconventional. Some poems have embedded poems and some poems are spread over several pages, with lots of empty spaces—perhaps an expression of silence. These half empty pages force the reader to slow down and wonder why the pages are empty, when the poem is continued on the next page (“Ihambo”, which starts on page 72, is spread over 16 pages, for example). This is unconventional and unfamiliar. However, this is exactly the point: to make the unfamiliar familiar and disturb the order of the day, and to painfully celebrate in many ways the freedom to be different.

**Mantua Motinyane**

**[mmotinyane@uwc.ac.za](mailto:mmotinyane@uwc.ac.za)**

**University of the Western Cape**

**Cape Town, South Africa**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1724-5795>**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i2.14233>