TO THE VOLCANO

Elleke Boehmer

Analysis by Biancamaria Rizzardi

Short Story

Elleke Boehmer’s short story "To the Volcano" (2019) follows a group of academics travelling to the crater of a dormant volcano in South Africa. The trip turns into an uncanny experience, during which scientific logic, Indigenous belief, and suppressed desires collide. The volcano reveals tensions between Western rationality and local spiritual knowledge, showing how emotion, vulnerability and land-based wisdom unsettle detached, colonial ways of knowing.

Year of Publication	2019
Publication Place	Oxford
Editor	Myriad Editions
Collection	To The Volcano and Other Stories

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcano

LITERARY EVENT

Time	XX century [1900-2000]
Location	South Africa
Coordinates	-23.845755, 29.311673
Base/Complex	Ngona Plains
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology: Terrestrial

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Bob Savage
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Reactions	Fascination, Calm, Rationality

Name	Sid Duncan
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Reactions	Rationality, Calm

Name	Eddie Adams
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Reactions	Calm, Rationality

Name	Refile Masimong
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	South Africa
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Awareness, Caution, Awe

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	White people
Reactions	Disregard, Rationality, Calm, Fascination

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Elleke Boehmer, South Africa, Postcolonial Displacement, Uncanny, Southing, Postcolonial Encounters, Desire, Madness, Dormant Volcano

Similes	"magma pipes—they're like the volcano's plumbing" (Boehmer 37)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Locus Amoenus, Fire, Superstition, Hubris, Supernatural
Syntax	Simple Sentences, Parataxis
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

To the Volcano and Other Stories (2019) is a collection of short stories by postcolonial scholar and Durban-born writer Elleke Boehmer. Largely set in the southern hemisphere, these twelve stories delve into the fragile, yet enduring connections people maintain with the South. According to the author, *To the Volcano and Other Stories* aims to answer the question "what are the demands the south makes on perception and perspective?" (Menozzi and Boehmer 4). Indeed, many of the stories explore the themes of identity and belonging, as well as "the condition of farness, which is a condition shared by all the southern lands where the stories are set" (5).

"To the Volcano", the third story in the collection, is told by a third-person narrator with variable focalisation, and "offers a Forster-esque transformative journey undertaken by a group of mainly white academics". Indeed, "as in *A Passage to India*, the dark consequences of this sojourn change the lives of several of the characters" (Kimber). The plot is linear and quite simple: a staffroom rumour about an "old extinct volcano a few miles off the highway to the north" (Boehmer 36) leads to a cross-department field trip led by geologist Sid Duncan and attended by Bob Savage, a scholar of cultural studies, Refile Masimong, a communications officer, Eddie Adams, lecturer in environmental history, and a group of students from several departments. Once the party reaches the crater, they get separated and enter a windless, sweltering 'otherworld' where each of them experiences different visions and sensations. When Bob goes missing, Refile enters the crater and finds him sunburnt by a clump of willows. He clings to her arm, murmuring of a dream and "a most rare vision" (43), lapsing into Shakespeare. Back home, he writes a farewell to his wife and a rapturous love letter to Refile before being hospitalized, while Refile can't forget the 'dangerous beauty' of what he said in his letter. In the story, scientific description, indigenous cosmology, and reflections on human passions overlap, suggesting how, from a cultural perspective, volcanoes are not mere geological entities, but sites pervaded with symbolic meanings.

Regarding the narrative setting, the volcano's place is mentioned only at the end of the story: its extinct crater is located on the Ngona Plain, perhaps a fictional version of Ngoma Plains in Zambia's Western Province, or of the Ngamo Plains in Hwange National Park, in Zimbabwe. The term *zwifho* appearing in the story might also refer to the South Africa's northern Limpopo province, where there is "a network of sacred natural sites called *Zwifho*" (Barnwell et al.). In the story, the volcano is a "liminal space" (Menozzi and Boehmer 7) where characters remain stuck in a suspended temporal and spatial dimension, an in-betweenness where they are confronted with their ideas, beliefs, and repressed emotions.

In the first paragraphs of the short story, the characters' conversation about volcanoes unveils how cultural positioning and scientific knowledge influence the perception of geological entities. Comparing volcanoes to cultural icons and logos such as Marylin Monroe, Che Guevara, and Apple, Bob remarks that "Volcanos, though—they were something else… powerful symbols, sure, but actually the real thing, too. Magma was pretty dangerous, pretty real" (Boehmer 37). However, while he utters these words, he "scratche[s] the air with his fingers" (37), as if he were trying to mentally reconstruct the image of a real, physical object *other than* elements pertaining to a cultural, literary imagery. This gesture reflects his character's complexity and contradictions: even though he is a cultural critic, adept at reading surfaces and images, he longs for contact with what resists symbolic

containment. His metaphorical description of the inner structure of a volcano, which is coherent with his handling images and analogies rather geological principles – represents a further attempt to reduce the volcano to an rationally understandable object: "Today little of the crater is left,' said Bob, 'What we see are mainly the magma pipes—they're like the volcano's plumbing, millions upon millions of years old" (37). By likening magma pipes to "plumbing", Bob familiarizes the volcanic imagery, reducing an ancient, immense, and potentially threatening geological element into a household image of something that is manageable, knowable, even repairable. However, considering the story's development, this rhetorical choice sounds ironic. Plumbing involves flow, blockage, and pressure, namely hidden systems whose malfunction causes problems into the domestic sphere. Bob's encounter with the volcano may be read as a plumbing of his emotional depths, an exploration that ends up with a breakdown of his psychoemotional system.

Some characters' utterances are representative of a neocolonial discourse in which Indigenous epistemologies are delegitimised and reinterpreted through a Western lens. Sid, for example, makes assumptions on the volcano, asserting that "It will be one of the few dormant volcanos we have this far south. I've never seen it, but it's in the textbooks" (37). These words highlight a disjunction between formal, book-based knowledge and lived, place-based knowledge of the environment. Furthermore, the phrasing "one of the few dormant volcanos *we* have this far south" implicitly lays claim to the land through a collective "we" that seems to exclude Indigenous presences and knowledges. Sid's confidence in textbook masks the fact that, even as a professional geologist, he has never encountered the volcano himself. His considerations underscore how settler-colonial relationships to land have usually been mediated by distance (books, maps, taxonomies and classifications) rather than the kind of intimate, experiential, or community-based knowledge that comes from living with and observing the environment over time, and which pertains to Indigenous episteme and systems of beliefs.

In line with Sid's reflections, Eddie tells "of an ancient crater far out on the savannah to the north" and adds that "[t]he locals avoided it [because] it was a bewitched place" (37). In her discourse, local traditions are reframed in terms that fit (neo)colonial bias. Indeed, she reduces what may be a sophisticated environmental or cultural understanding – for example, recognition of volcanic danger, respect for sacred space, or an environmental taboo that ensured safety and ecological balance – to something primitive or superstitious. Later, when she reports that her boyfriend Jamie "said it was where a meteor struck", and that "the crater is an impact crater, not a dormant volcano" (38), Sid replies that 'It's definitely a volcano, long extinct", dismissing her view as the fantasy of a young woman whose research field – Environmental History – is "not even a proper subject" (38). The hypothesis of meteor impact versus volcanic crater posits layered temporalities and plural causal stories coexisting in one place, creating a sense of uncertainty about the place's geological reality.

This inflamed debate inspires the idea of a trip to the volcano. It is Bob who pushes his colleagues to organise a visit, maintaining that

Most of our students don't know what field work is. They have no idea. They think geography is elsewhere and history is elsewhere. And they wouldn't be far wrong. Culture is certainly elsewhere. Even the transition feels like it happened in another country. But this history is close by, it's there for the viewing. (38)

Here, 'transition' may refer to Zimbabwe and Zambia's democratisation process, or, to a larger extent, to South African transition (1990-1994) and the end of the Apartheid. Bob's observation that students "don't know what field work is" highlights how environmental sciences are increasingly abstracted from lived, place-based inquiry, mirroring Sid's reliance on textbooks rather than direct engagement with the land. Furthermore, his discourse exposes the lack of interdisciplinarity between the sciences and the humanities. This disciplinary fragmentation is also a sign of ecocultural amnesia, a psychological and cultural condition that prevents younger generations from understanding the entanglements of environment, history, and culture. When Bob insists that "*this* history is close by, it's there for the viewing," he implicitly underscores how traditional history cannot be fully understood as it is 'knowledge' mediated by books. While the historical past is not 'visible' or 'tangible', geological history is "storied matter" (Iovino 451), namely a series of geological narratives preserved in stones. In this passage, perhaps, Boehmer focuses on the fragmentation of knowledge and the clash between STEM and Humanities to suggest that the teaching of history too should involve direct observation of

the social and environmental impact of human actions over time. Her critique extends beyond pedagogy to postcolonial criticism, showing how the estrangement of environmental sciences and historical memory from one another may contribute to obscuring the ongoing legacies of colonialism in postcolonial countries.

Refile, a Zambian woman and communications officer in the campus, joins the excursionists. Before leaving, she states: "As kids, playing, we always made sure the volcano ridge was behind us, where we couldn't see it. It weighs on you, you'll see. It's a powerful place" (Boehmer 39), and later adds: "Growing up, we never went to the volcano. It was *zwifho*, so our parents forbade it" (41). *Zwifho* are natural sacred sites within indigenous forests, mountains, lakes, and other natural features:

In South Africa's northern Limpopo province, there is a network of sacred natural sites called Zwifho. These Zwifho are integral to the order of community life and the continuity of ancestral relationships for the Vhongwaniwapo people. According to Vhongwaniwapo oral history, Nwali—the Creator or God—divinely chose clans to protect, maintain, and conduct rituals that ensure order at these sacred sites. (Barnwell et al.)

These sites are considered the root of life and well-being, serving as anchor points for community identity, cultural knowledge, and spiritual rituals performed by divinely appointed custodian clans. The concept of *zwifho* emphasizes the interconnectedness of life and ecosystems, where ancestral spirits are believed to reside.

The excursionists' visit to the crater is reported by Refile as a wonderful and estranging experience:

Three parties went into the crater, and four returned, in different groupings from those that went in. No one got back at the agreed time. All brought different stories. Some spoke of scrubland, others of lush grass and willows, others again of a reedy lake, a kind of vlei, you might even say billabong, yellow green in colour. But everyone spoke of a weird other world, iridescent green, windless, sweltering, silent—without birds, without cicadas, with no animal tracks in evidence at all. (Boehmer 41)

As observed by Paul Woodgate, "We could be in Conan Doyle's Lost World, peering through a jungle curtain at a barely recognisable landscape, something suspended, at odds with the outside" (*TSS Publishing*). Talking to his students, Sid describes the crater as "a great old navel in the ground" (Boehmer 42), a personification that will then be used by Rifle as title for her article on the field trip. Eddie is fascinated by "radioactive green" and "[s]ucculent plants, tangled" (44), while her boyfriend Jamie wonders whether they will "feel something, hear the ancestral spirits singing from the vlei" (44).

When he first mentioned the volcano some days before, Bob defined magma as something "dangerous". However, since the crater on Ngona Plain is dormant, none of the white characters allude to volcanic risk during the excursion. Their reckless "getting lost" in an alien environment reminds the reader of the uncanny atmosphere portrayed in the Australian novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) by Joan Lindsay. There, a group of girls from Appleyard College experiences wormholes and supernatural elements on a mountain near the dormant volcano Mount Macedon. In Boehmer's short story, too, the crater's windless heat, dense vegetation, and acoustic dampening destabilize orientation, while time seems to dilate. Questioned about the use of "magic realism", Boehmer describes her literary style as "southern realism", which involves "ask[ing] questions the nature of reality and our perception of it" (Menozzi and Boehmer 8). For example, Sid and Eddie are fascinated by the volcano, while Bob drifts from fascination to madness: his Shakespearean mutterings on the return journey and the feverish letter to Refile reshape the crater's microclimate as erotic and visionary cathexis.

In the article she writes for the college paper, Refile defines the volcano as "one of the most iconic geological formations in the world" (Boehmer 47), and describes the various steps of the excursion trying to register the impressions of the various participants. However, rereading her text, she realises that "in this article she had succeeded in communicating almost nothing—in fact less than nothing" (48); furthermore, she is doubtful whether she has made up the accounts credited to the different groups, since "she had walked in the scrubland for what felt like hours, following disembodied voices

and locating no one" (48). In her story, Boehmer uses ellipsis, creating gaps and breaks in the narration. This device, which in her view is prominent in "southern poetics" (Menozzi and Boehmer 4), allows her "to communicate an experience of strangeness and displacement" (6). What emerges in Refile's account is neither synthesis nor relativism, but braided accountability: each discourse is answerable to the others because the site itself exceeds any one vocabulary.

On the crater, Bob has "a dream and a most rare vision" (Boehmer 43) he is unable to tell as "There were no words for this fever that possessed him, this great heat coursing through his body" (45). Moreover, he begins to repeat "willow, willow", a plain reference to the willow song in Shakespeare's *Othello* (act 4, scene 3, lines 28–64), which here, however, is used to disclose the sad fate of a male character. Back home, he writes a love letter to Refile before breaching security to look for his 'vision' inside the college, where he is found with his limbs swollen with sunburnt by a guard. Later, he has a breakdown and is hospitalized. The words in his letter, "You have lit a fire in my soul, my beloved. My heart is as a bed of molten lava. My love is strong as death, its flashes are flashes of fire" (49) evoke the verses "for love is strong as death, / jealousy is fierce as the grave. / Its flashes are flashes of fire" from the *Song of Solomon* (8:6), which explore the nature of love. From an allegorical perspective, Bob's uncanny experience may be read as an extremization of the experience of *southing*, a concept used by Boehmer to refer a process of exploration of the south that "may involve more displacement than transformation" (Menozzi and Boehmer 6).

Regarding lexical choices, Boehmer merges disciplinary jargons and figurative language to gradually defamiliarize the image of the volcano. On the one hand, expressions such as "dormant volcano", "concentric fracturing", "onion-ring fracturing", "microclimate", "impact crater" and "rim", which pertain to geoscientific description, catalogue the volcano as an object that exists within the empirical world. On the other, phrases like "volcano's plumbing", "another world", "a great old navel in the ground", "bewitched places", and "radioactive green", which build on visual and spatial imagination, literalize enchantment and estrangement.

The crater is seen by the white characters as a kind of *locus amoenus* where a perpetual summer originates lush growth; by contrast, Indigenous characters (i.e. Refile's community) perceive it as a *locus horridus*, a forbidden place to beware of. The "navel" metaphor recasts the site as origin-point, an umbilicus where "earth history from above and below" (Boehmer 38) interfolds.

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