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Still Searching for the Gleam: The Unreal Realities of Joburg City in a Post-Apartheid South African Novel

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Panel: The City

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**STILL SEARCHING FOR THE GLEAM:
THE UNREAL REALITIES OF JOBURG CITY IN A POST-APARTHEID SOUTH
AFRICAN NOVEL**

NIQ MHLONGO

As my point of departure in this presentation about the influence of Johannesburg city in my writing, allow me to quote a paragraph from one of the United States' prominent scholars, James Conlon who wrote extensively about the city:

*'Cities are places where the goods of foreigners, their food, clothing, gadgets, and art, are made available for native experience...Not only does the city include museums and libraries, it is itself a vast museum, a living library of faith, tastes, styles and dreams packed densely together and available for experience in a reasonable amount of time...It will include as well the world cruelties, perversions and deficiencies...'*¹

This passage captures the essence of what many writers who have used the city as their subject have written. Now, I want us to take a little journey in our mind to the Southern tip of Africa where I come from: South Africa. I want to introduce you to Johannesburg, the biggest and the most cosmopolitan city in my country. It is in this city where I have set both of my novels, *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), as well as my short stories.

So why did I choose this city of Johannesburg to be the subject of my writing? The answer is that in addition to being born and still living there, I was motivated by the power of the gleam of the city. I'm referring to the city's ability to lure the people into believing that it can fulfill their egos, and their empty quests for a life of comfort, convenience, pleasure and fortune. If you read any novel that is set in this city today, you will see that it is given names such as Egoli, which means a place of gold or Maboneng, a place of lights. These romantic names are often used to camouflage the cruelties of this city. Of course, the names came with the discovery of gold in 1886, the year in which the city was born and the gleam of hope was created even for the man living more than six thousands miles across the ocean. But that gleam of hope has since bred what Max Weber referred to as 'the disenchantment'

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and ‘instrumental rationality’². By this he meant that life in the city is driven by a means-ends thinking, where the focus is on goals and the means to achieve them.

Perhaps it would be better to illustrate this by telling you a little story that recently happened to me and my two friends as we were driving right inside one of the Johannesburg city centre streets. Well, let me start by emphasizing that in the heart of the city of Johannesburg you will hardly see a white person. I have to say this because race and class matters in South Africa. If you come there, you will realize that most cities, except for Cape Town, are predominantly black. By this I mean that even the people of mixed race who we call colored people in South Africa hardly walk in the city centre. Both whites and colored people prefer to do their shopping in the malls that are situated in the outskirts of town since the city centre is associated with the lower-class which is mostly black.

So, a friend of mine by the name of Wonderboy, who is colored-his mother is black and his father is white-was driving an Audi car. I was sitting besides Wonderboy while a lady friend by the name of Zukiswa, a fellow scribe, was sitting in the back seat talking on her cell phone. At the traffic light we stopped and Wonderboy made a phone call from his cell phone. In two ticks, two thugs were pointing a gun at us, demanding that we give them our wallets and phones. I was still a bit shocked, and I reluctantly searched my pockets and handed them both my cell phone and wallet; which had no money anyway since I’m a writer. From the backseat, Zukiswa was still talking to someone, and I heard her concluding her call by saying callously, ‘oops, I think we’re getting robbed here, so I’ll speak to you later’

The fact that it was rush hour and the traffic was moving slowly didn’t help much because the guys just walked along the car as if they knew us. At the same time they were helping themselves to our CD’s, wallets and cell phones. Zukiswa tried to complain once she realized that it was indeed a robbery, but Wonderboy calmed her in his perfect isiZulu language, which is the most spoken language in South Africa. The thugs were so amused to hear him speak in isiZulu that they started laughing while joking that a ‘white man was speaking the language of the black people’. They then asked if Wonderboy was Zulu. He told them that his mother was a Zulu, and he didn’t know his biological white father. Then the thugs apologized to us. They said that they had made a mistake as they ‘only rob white

people and not blacks'. To cut the long story short, they returned all the items they had taken from us, and we drove off.

This little incident for me highlights another view of the city as the special embodiment of obstacles such as unequal economic relations, poverty, dislocations, unemployment, sexual transmitted disease, racism, ignorance, corruption xenophobia and crime. The search for the gleam of the Johannesburg city by the thugs had resulted in what Cornell West might call their 'spiritual impoverishment, the collapse of the meaning of life, the absence of love of others and self, the breakdown of family and communal bonds'³ that still exist in most rural setups. The gleam of the city had reduced those thugs to 'rootless and dangling people with little link to supportive networks, family, friends that sustain some sense of purpose in life'⁴ Therefore, most of the post-apartheid novels in South Africa today like *When a Man Cries* by Mahala, *Bitchies Brew* by Khumalo, *Room 207*, by Moele, and *The Day I died* by Ngenelwa, *The Madams* by Wanner, and *Some of My Best Friends Are White* by Ngcobo, and others have dug deep to explore the underbelly of the Johannesburg city to expose its challenging life.

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