

Memoir

“Memory is a Weapon”: Reading Under Apartheid

DEVARAKSHANAM GOVINDEN

WE ARE LIVING in a period of momentous happenings in South Africa. One of the most difficult and challenging areas in our communal life is related to bringing about change in an educational system that has been entrenched on the basis of inequality and prejudice. In the first part of this paper, I reflect in an impressionistic way on the legacy of reading literature under apartheid in my own educational journey; I weave particular personal experiences with institutional and historical realities to situate the discussion in a South African context, reading my way into theory from the bedrock of experience, and vice versa. In the second part, I extrapolate from such experience some of the challenges that we face in the sphere of cultural politics for the present and coming years.

I. Telling Our Stories

Madeleine Grumet has drawn attention to the use of the autobiographical method in education, particularly practice teaching, to explore ways of transforming objective situations through subjective, personal reflection (303). Naomi Norquay, drawing from Frigga Haug and others, speaks eloquently of “memory-work” as a political necessity in our transformative agenda. She shows the value of interrogating personal experience and personal history in the process of envisioning the future (241-51).

Telling our stories, using the “self as subject,” shows the intersection between the individual and the larger forces of our history. In telling our stories, we attempt to understand both intellectually and emotionally. We each have a story to tell, unique but shared both in itself and in its constructedness. In the

remembering (in viewing the past through the lens of the present, weaving an inter-textual fabric of narrative), we begin to realize that parts of our past are waiting to be reclaimed, “re-visited,” and told.

Engaging in “*rememory*,” to use Toni Morrison’s phrase, provides the opportunity to recall the horror as well as the joy (of intimations) of creative life that was suppressed and almost irrevocably lost. Writing of communities in the United States, Ronald Takaki states: “In the telling and retelling of their stories, they create communities of memory” (14). Memory is indeed the weapon not just to reconstruct the past, but to interpret it (Pascal 19).

Telling our stories is particularly necessary at this historical juncture in South Africa, a time when we are engaged in the building of a nation. This does not mean that we are able to set the past in clear and unambiguous terms. We are constantly creating and recreating the past, arranging and re-arranging it, drawing on individual and collective experience. V. S. Naipaul has noted the inscriptions we bear of an expansive shared memory: “But we go back and back, for-ever; we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings . . . We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves . . .” (9). Inscribed in our memory are the anecdotal, ordinary, and everyday on which we draw as we signpost our lives in the context of our history and reinterpret that very history.

II. Looking Back

I was in high school in the late 1950s and early 1960s, inheriting a legacy of reading under apartheid without realizing this. It was the time of separate education, of growing up in an all-Indian school, walking on winding footpaths past rows of Indian homes, past the gates of the school for “Coloureds,” vaguely aware that beyond those gates was a whole world quite separate from mine. (Yet my neighbours were “Coloureds,” who shared “vetkoeks,” family gossip and a common Christian faith with my mother and father, my brother, and myself.) The school for white children

was at the other end of town; we never met them, even for debates, or peace rallies. African children went to school in the distant "location" but they could have been on another planet. In my "NED"¹ classroom of those years I was safely sanitized from the realities of sharing life with my fellow South African citizens who lived in the same "home" town. It is a sad indictment of apartheid schooling that I was not afforded the opportunity to encounter students of other race groups throughout my entire formal education from primary to secondary, and even tertiary, level. My teachers at school were all Indians, and mainly males. Generations of South African students have endured this cultural impoverishment, and the processes to redress this situation has only recently begun.

In 1953, the Bantu Education Act was passed; and, in 1954, the control of black education was transferred from the provincial administration to the central government Department of Native Affairs. The Department of Bantu Education was created in 1958. H. F. Vervoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, had set the South African agenda in uncompromising terms, in his now notorious promise that when he takes control of native education, he will reform it so that natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them.

Occasionally, there were glimpses of resistant, alternative thinking. Some of our more daring teachers had invited Chief Albert Luthuli, who lived in Grootvlei, Natal, to speak to us at one of our annual speech days. Chief Luthuli, the first Nobel Peace Prize winner from South Africa, epitomized the unwavering struggle of the ANC in those days. He was later to be placed under house arrest, and the ANC itself was banned in 1960, culminating in the Rivonia Trial, in 1964. Luthuli's autobiography, *Let My People Go*, published in 1962, was a cry of anguish against apartheid, but for years that voice was suppressed. There was much discussion when, in 1960, Harold Macmillan made his famous "winds of change" speech in the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town. But those winds of change did not blow over our school. Newsworthy items we were exposed to were of the space wars between the U. S. and Russia. Our classroom talk focussed

on these phenomenal examples of the progress of “mankind,” but we hardly heard of what was happening in the other end of town or the rest of the country.

The South African government was growing aware that winds of change blowing over the rest of Africa would mean that it could expect little support from Britain. We were poised to leave the Commonwealth. I remember the day that the vice-principal came to our class and offered us souvenir-medals to commemorate the inauguration of South Africa as a republic. Nobody stood to receive them. Our allegiance to “The Crown” and “The Queen” was unshakeable, and there was general unease when Vervoerd grimly walked out of the Commonwealth. The irony, of course, was that Indians, like the rest of the black population, were omitted from the referendum to decide whether South Africa should become a republic or not. My relatives were loyal royalists, vying with one another about how much they knew about royal family life, enjoying the royal pomp and pageantry vicariously, and developing naturally a “nostalgia for empire,” to use Edward Said’s phrase. Yet the history of indentured labourers was hardly a happy one under the British Crown.

As I look back now, I realize that there was a curious collusion between apartheid and colonialism. This collusion came to bear especially in the literature that we studied in school. And literature was immediately synonymous with Literature (with a capital L). Raymond Williams’s critique was to come years later—only after my formal university education, when I began reading for myself. More importantly, literature was also seen as English Literature, and that which was written “long ago.” Oral and popular literatures, local and contemporary writings of black South African peoples were not considered even marginal and secondary to the metropolitan centre. It simply did not exist.

With its stress on “standards” and aesthetics, the Great Tradition of F. R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny* School was accepted unquestioningly. The Leavisites wished to bolster up a sagging society by strengthening a liberal education, as Matthew Arnold had tried to do in the late nineteenth century. They hoped that this canon would provide the “civilizing” cultural and moral values that religion failed to offer. John Higgins draws our attention to the

precarious position that English occupied historically, and the strategies that were devised to prop it up. He argues that “a part of the project of English literature was to invent a sense of Englishness at just the moment that England entered its long period of imperial decline” (n. pag.). I have learned in recent years that English literary study actually developed in the colonial context of India, and have begun to appreciate how the study of English and the growth of the Empire were inextricably bound together.

Now, when I look back on those classes in my old school, in another time and place, I see the extent to which I was immersed in “the institutional system of English Literature as an academic subject” (Bergonzi 5). Peculiar totalizing discourses were inflecting my thinking silently, implacably. I think of the many silences and denials of those learning days, those “articulated silences” to use Henry Giroux’s phrase. There was, of course, no television in those days because of the Calvinist need to protect the people from moral decay, so the “hyper-reality” came largely not from media culture but from the insidious hidden curriculum of dominant discourse—telling me who I was and shaping my identity. This was the time of entrenchment of apartheid and the growing power of the Nationalist Government. In another part of the world, Frantz Fanon was writing about the wretched of the earth, and his writings were going to contribute to resistance to apartheid in the decades to come.

I realize now those were the days of *Drum Magazine* and *Can Themba*. I recall seeing copies of *Drum* lying about the house, together with *The Farmer’s Weekly* and *Outspan*. I do not know from where my father obtained old copies. It would be years later that I would grow to appreciate that the *Drum* writers were trying to “record and create the voices, images, and values of a black urban culture which, in the aftermath of war-time industrial expansion, was struggling to assert its permanence and identity. At the same time, the newly-elected National Party government was setting out to smash any permanent African presence in the so-called white cities, and to embark on the apartheid dream of Bantu retribalisation” (Chapman 19-29). I realize now why *Drum* never appeared in our official reading in our classrooms. It was not mentioned even in passing.

Can it be true that black women were writing since the turn of the century? Yet they never made their way into my classrooms in this town on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Even Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, published in 1883, though presented to me as an exemplary model of "indigenous" writing, was not read for its singular South African perspective, for its place in feminist thinking at a time when the world was moving into the second wave of feminist thinking and writing.

I was living out my romance with English literature, moving in and out of grand old English country houses and splendid estates, learning about the way all real people lived, and formulating a distinct impression of how all good poetry and good novels should be written. My consciousness and sensitivity—my "elemental" self—were produced and "saturated" by another culture of ideas, a "politics of signification" telling me who I was and underlying my sense of being different. The books of the Great Tradition, naturalizing constructed values, held unquestioned status. This became my centre, from which I viewed the world. And all I cultivated was the grand *desire* to be like the Catherine Earnshaws waiting to be eternally united with the Heathcliffs of the world, somewhere beyond the provincial boundary of my dismal and ordinary neighbourhood. Perhaps I also dreamed of and coveted the "bluest eye," like Toni Morrison's Pecola. I was made for divine discontent and "immortal longings," far beyond the sordid reality of life in this corner of the world.

I have something to expiate—a pettiness. Why did I believe that true literature was meant to take me away from the reality of my life and place me on some transcendent plane of existence, that this was a legitimate aspiration of my lowly class, giving me visions of a better life, a better world? I read of no stories of local labourers, of life on the sugar plantations on the hills and valleys of Kearsney, the village of my growing-up days. There was no way of reflecting then on the feudal-type existence my parents accepted as privilege, with barrack-lines and weekly rations. This was not the stuff of great literature—this day-to-day living, woven with stories of families and feuds, of living and loving and struggle and small joys. The crude personal and private was only to be

lived and endured; this daily history was slighted, a politics of selection working invisibly on my colonized self.

There were stories of Pandita Ramabhai, now that I recall, of Sarojini Naidu, of Mahatma Gandhi, and of Jawaharlal Nehru; but told around large homely coal fires, they assumed the breadth of legend and unreality, the aura of distant lands and times, not of the everyday. Fragments of a pre-colonial past had merged already with colonial patterns in colonized India and were subjected to further marginalization on South African soil. The process of dispossession had begun in India and continued for a people coming to live in a strange land with its own myths and legends. Its established meanings were hardly explored, nor were there counter myths created. These were left for the real “frontiersmen”—those of the European races.

What thoughts filled the early Indian settlers in their physical and emotional encounter and confrontation with the new land, when ancestral links with a “motherland” were severed? What metaphors were deployed, to depict their translation across the Indian Ocean? What “counter-memories,” to use Paul Gilroy’s phrase, now lost to the wind? Why are these questions relevant only to the white settler’s dilemma, and not to the black races of the world? White settler literature flourished in South Africa to develop a literary and critical tradition of white writing; this did not happen with Indians in South Africa. When I look at the Indians in other parts of the Indian diaspora, I notice that they have contributed significantly to the settler literature of the different countries. What happened to those who came to South Africa? One of the sad indictments of our apartheid schooling, sufficiently well-organized to promote formal, functional education, was its insidious stranglehold on the creative imagination. The absence of a literary tradition among Indians meant that we have not been able to reflect on our psychic displacement, on its violence, on the common experience of exile in different diasporas, to experience empire “textually” (Boehmer 13). Our isolation from the rest of the Commonwealth also prevented us from gaining a sense of shared historical conditions globally. Nor were Indian experiences woven into the fabric of literary expres-

sion of other race groups that were emerging in South Africa for the better part of the century. The tendency of imagining oneself as part of discrete and homogenous cultures was both cause and effect of our separated living.

From the 1960s, there has been a growing number of writers of Indian origin, both male and female, who are writing with a distinctively South African voice, whether "at home" or in exile. Examples of these writers are Ahmed Essop, Ismail Choonara, Achmat Dangor, Essop Patel, Farouk Asvat, Ronnie Govender, Guru Pillay, Kessie Govender, Kriben Pillay, Deena Padayachee, Shabbir Banoobhai, Jayapraga Reddy, Shobna Poona, Farida Karodia, and Agnes Sam. Many have resisted narrow ethnic categories of the apartheid state, and have claimed a wider, black identity, to "harmonize / our blackness / all over Azania" (Patel 29). While this writing, mainly of a younger generation, has not directly engaged in a critique of indenture and assimilation, of the discursive violence of colonialism and racism (as found in other parts of the Indian diaspora, such as Trinidad, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia) the context from which their writings spring is unmistakably related to this history.

There is also local Arabic, Urdu, Tamil, and Hindi poetry, that need to be integrated into South African literary writings. Surendra Bhana and Joy Brain observe that pamphlet literature written by Indians in South Africa is a considerable but still hidden and not adequately explored resource (216). Their own research also shows the value of oral records, passed from generation to generation, for the uncovering of lost experiences and memories. Much work also remains to be done on extant little-known published or archival material to uncover discourses and literatures common to Indians in South Africa's past.

Foucault has drawn attention to the process whereby exploitation and domination are imbibed, whereby people subjugate themselves—in a process of "subjection." In the past, we were manipulated politically and economically, but we were subjected to a commodification of ourselves and our "culture," and we were externalized and exoticized; and we colluded in our own cultural oppression. As Said has noted in *Orientalism*, the modern "Orient" participates in its own Orientalizing (5). It was this

tendency that prompted Ndebele to protest against the general oppression of all colonized peoples, when he wrote:

Do not crowd my mind
with studied images of my past;
let me feel it first:
do not display my carved rituals
at the British Museum,
for little do they say;
let me feel them first. (Ndebele 27)

I feel a particular yearning to discover these “subjugated knowledges.” As we attempt to look back, think back, feel back in order to uncover the almost extinct and silenced literary expressions of the past, these as well as our present literary expression must provide the aesthetic context for participation, education, and reflection in a *single* South African literary mosaic.

Change has been taking a long time to reach our educational systems. Our schools and universities were isolated from the mainstream of global change for a long time, and have only recently become places of ferment. The discourse of decolonization was already beginning in the 1960s, in Kenya for instance; but in South Africa, “officially” we were still entrenching “grand apartheid” in that time. It took years before I heard about the Black Power movement, of the concept of Negritude, the Harlem Renaissance—concepts on the ascendant at the very time I was at school.

III. “Soweto ’76”

“Soweto ’76” was precisely a revolt against apartheid and cultural imperialism in our educational system, although there was every attempt to stifle its real effects. I am saddened now to think of the influence that the media images of “senseless violence against hallowed halls of learning” had on distorting the real value of “Soweto ’76.” The legacy of that struggle is really being claimed only now, as we try to implement those dreams of a liberatory pedagogy. “Soweto ’76” signifies that time in our history when we had to sever and extricate ourselves from the shackles of all that is related to our oppressive lives. Siphso Sepamla captures this vividly in his poem, *At the Dawn of Another Day*:

inescapable and necessary “politics of location,” was prompting us into new spaces of liberation. All this was happening as we moved into the eye of the storm (with the state of emergency beginning in the mid-1980s), and into the inevitable apocalyptic literature of this decade.

IV. Challenges For The Present And Future

My “lifelong education” is taking a new turn nowadays; it is really a re-education, sensitive to new impulses of thought, to new critical voices, and to silences. Apart from asking questions about what makes up the literary canon, I am going back to those old familiar texts and reading them for their omissions and evasions and erasures, and am claiming a reflexivity that had hitherto been suppressed. I am seeing them in all the trappings of their “locatedness.” Homi Bhabha points out that a fundamental aspect of “culture and imperialism” is that nations themselves are narrations, that those who had power, had the power to block out other narratives from forming and emerging, of screening the way representations of colonized took place. The advent of “Staffrider” also served to impress on us that this power also meant the power to produce (and publish) books and and other forms of writing.

In recent years, I have been growing attentive to the South African voices demanding the right to define, imagine, and theorize our understanding of human skin, of black and white history, and develop a sensitivity to the interstices of gender and race, to voices from the Third World. I am developing a new distinction between civilization and barbarism; and I am cultivating a new strength in rewriting, “writing back,” and writing myself. I am rediscovering the ordinary—as Ndebele has stated (37-57).

There will always be that longing to know what you have been deprived of, to strip yourself of those false identities that have been trafficked for you, and to search for your “real” identity beneath the colonial layers. The recent craze for “roots” is perfectly understandable. The West had given us, in Lewis Nkosi’s words, a “heap of broken images” of ourselves (42-51), and we have assumed the mission to recreate ourselves from the dispa-

rate elements of our cultures, as well as from the debris of our shattered precolonial past—only to realize that there is no authentic identity somewhere waiting to be found. This is why we have to be circumspect also when we prop ourselves up by our apparent “authenticity.”

We are circumspect too of the tendency for well-meaning critics, or “cultural brokers,” to specialize in scrutiny of the arts, and to become experts on black culture and aesthetics, having access to interpretive and conceptual resources, technological as well as theoretical sophistication. Then there are those (and Richard Rive has described them eloquently) involved in the literary scramble for Africa:

This time the explorer came armed with a fistful of PhDs in black literature, passed through Africa’s doors, and taught the blacks to understand Soyinka and Achebe, and discuss negritude, if not meaningfully then at least soulfully. The professional Africanist created the professional African. The former must have beamed when he saw his protégé don his beads, fuzz his hair, beat his cowhide drum, and tell whites what they in any case already knew. (Rive 61)

Indeed a new battle has to be waged. While we had grown self-conscious of the way we defined literature, there is a need now for further vigilance. Literature reflected the criteria by which we determined whether something qualified as “literature” or not, the standards by which we distinguished “good writing from bad, and reflected the means and aspirations of a particular class” (Bammer 240).

While we academics were opposed to the commercialized and mass-marketed popular culture consumed by common people, now the politically-correct view is to become self-appointed purveyors and custodians of Culture (with a capital C) as well as of the more common variety. We speak of township culture, music, and art, and still legitimate and validate our positions by deciding that the old distinctions are now spurious, proclaiming to the world our enlightenment from imperialists, elitists, and bigots (Bammer 246).

Roger Deacon and Ben Parker state in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association that “the struggle against all forms of domination, both

Western and indigenous and including those that sing the song of emancipation requires not the identification of a higher truth or a future paradise but simply [in Spivak's words] 'the persistent critique of what one must inhabit.'" Stuart Hall and Peter McLaren urge the "construction of identity grounded in memory, narrative, and history but not contained by them" (286).

V. To Counteract The Legacy Of Apartheid

To counteract the legacy of apartheid, which manifests itself at state, institutional, cultural, and individual levels of South African society and to reconstruct a new society, schools and universities here must consider radical change of their curricula. This requires a major paradigm shift, a politically-engaged perspective instead of a neutral one—a perspective that rigorously critiques the "epistemology of apartheid" and adequately addresses questions related to the production of knowledge, and to assumptions of truth and objectivity. An informed and dynamic strategy for organizational change at school level in particular is essential, and analyses and action-proposals on curriculum issues are inescapable.

Given this background, resistance to curriculum change cannot be short-term, technicist, ameliorative, additive, and piecemeal. We have to pursue developing a critique of exclusive, privileged, monopolistic "regimes of truth," the practice of cultural violation, epistemic violence and imperialism that colonized the social imagination and engaged in the process of othering "others"—in this case, those who were not Western, black, female, or middle class.

This is why we need an analysis of the deliberate exclusion of the experience of living in Africa, where such "treacheries of erasure" were designed to keep people passive, silent, and dispossessed, both intellectually and materially. Everywhere we see the stifled "political unconscious" breaking through the layers of suppression. Our schools and universities could not ever be locations of oppression. They have been transforming themselves radically into sites of struggle and resistance, and have become sites of hope and possibility. I believe that literature

study, in all its critical diversity, can be pivotal in reclaiming this in the “new” South Africa.

We realize along with this that curriculum change cannot be isolated from wider institutional transformation. We have still to engage in a proper study of the implications of “Africanizing” our schools and universities, which should include changing the composition of students, academics, and administrators, as well as the syllabus and curriculum, and establishing criteria to determine relevant research programmes and to judge excellence in our particular contexts of need and challenge. This will also include the development of ideologically-engaged academic support programmes and a major review of all prevailing assumptions that black students are inferior, that it is the students who must change, and that perceived “loss” can be made up by bridging programmes.

We will need to develop mechanisms for the on-going development and transformation of the curriculum by both teachers and students, to problematize constantly even our critical pedagogy, and to resituate our emancipatory work in the light of emerging and changing experiences and interpretations. This will also involve a study of the feasibility for disciplinary deterritorialization and dynamic interaction, in the light of existing expediences of disciplinary divisions, intractability and impermeability.

VI. Conclusion

I began this paper by noting the importance of “telling our stories.” I have presented these reflections at a particular moment in my own history. I expect to go back to the past again and again, to engage in new interrogations and new reconstructions, to be attentive to the contradictions, gaps, and silences in my story and in my telling of it. Part of reconstructing ourselves as a post-apartheid society is to dismantle and rebuild constantly as we try to understand the part that social structures have played in shaping our identities as well as our own complicity in them. Telling our stories entails risk and pain but in the reclaiming and renaming is new freedom. The struggle continues . . . *a luta continua* . . .²

NOTES

- ¹ Natal Education Department—white-controlled provincial system of education, before the Tricameral Parliament in 1983, when Indian Education came under a separate Indian chamber.
- ² I am particularly grateful to Johannes Smit and Jonathan D. Jansen for their invaluable comments and criticism on an earlier draft of this paper. A version of this paper, entitled as "Learning Myself Anew," has appeared in *Alternation* 2.2. (1995): 170-83.

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